

THE RED LINE

2013



With Stories From...

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Bear Weiter

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Cover image: "The Power of Books" by Mladen Penev, 2003

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Welcome to the Red Line Magazine Best of the Year 2013.

It was a little over a year ago when The Red Line staked out its own corner of the internet. Since then we have put out six issues, each featuring an eclectic mix of stories from around the world tackling a variety of themes. Each issue saw a winner being chosen by different handpicked, beautiful, and intelligent judges who hailed from Dublin, London, San Francisco, Denver and Nanjing.

Besides including the six winning stories in this compilation we've also included six editor's choices: stories we feel deserve a bit of the spotlight too.

From the start we wanted to put forward a global viewpoint for the magazine, drawing readers and writers from around the world. Taking us into the world of Filipino maids in Hong Kong, Sophie Monatte's *Designated Staircase No2* from the Borders issue delicately handles racial divisions while bringing the story to a conclusion that smudges the line between the discriminated and the discriminator.

One of the things that always draws us to a story is a strong voice and tangible sense of place. Both of these were evident in two selections from the Excess issue: *Rush* by Bear Weiter and H. V. Chao's *The Scene*. We loved the rich atmosphere in both stories and how a sense of desperation and hyper-activity threatens to overwhelm the central characters.

Unconventional relationships form the core of Patricia Morris's *Soon* (Time issue) and Shannon Bennett's *Touch* (Power issue). Despite both stories potential for cheap shock – Morris' cancer patients on a cruise and Bennett's supernatural necrophile – the authors display a sensitivity that elevates the stories beyond despair and nastiness.

And finally, from our most recent issue, the Urban issue, we chose Rowan Martin's *A Tenner Up* for its gutsy grittiness and powerful sense of locale.

So we hope you enjoy these tales as much as we did and don't forget to check in with us over the coming months as we unveil plans to take the magazine in new and interesting directions.

Stephen



For me this is really a highlight, where we get to celebrate the winners of a full years worth of competition, as well as to pick out some of the stories that we felt might deserve a second look with our “Editors Picks”. So, in all, we have twelve great stories for you to take away.

Stephen has talked a bit about the stories, so I have taken on the task of reviewing what we’ve managed to achieve over the last twelve months.

The magazine has paid out, in our first year, six hundred pounds in prize money. Additionally we have created online issues, one for each of the six competitions, that are now available on our site. The collation, reading, and production for these issues is done by myself and, when he can put down his Guinness for a few minutes, Stephen. We have done this without charging any of our entrants a penny/dime/yuen/euro, funding the prizes and the site ourselves.

Now, where others might follow this up with a plea for donations, we will not. 2014 will continue in exactly the same vein, with all of the themed issues remaining free to enter while offering a small cash prize.

What we would ask is that, if you know someone who might want to enter the competition, or who might be interested in judging one of the competitions, or just might be interested in reading some quality short fiction, please cease any hesitation and pass on our url/this document. That’s it.

Thank you for being part of our first year, and I hope that you’ll stay with us into 2014 and beyond. We have exciting plans for the next twelve months (interactive fiction, print tie-ins, writing tips, etc.) so keep an eye on the web site, or subscribe to our mailing list to get updated.

We’d also like to thank Mladen for letting us use his fantastic cover image, “The Power of Books”.

Now, in no particular order, and starting with the winner of our *End of the World* competition, here are the stories...

Cheers,

Josh

Snapshots of a Cold War Childhood

by Terri Favro

Snapshot number one is a black-and-white taken with a Kodak Brownie StarFlash. My three siblings are horsing around at the edge of the Niagara Gorge so, by process of elimination, that dazed looking baby stuffed into the stroller must be me. Mom waves a blurred hand in front of her face like a starlet shooing away a pesky photographer. On the picnic table beside her stands a sweating tallboy of Old Vienna beer – Dad must have set it down, mid-swig, to snap the picture. You can see the Bridal Veil Falls, better known as the American Falls, in the distance.

I was born in the middle of the big, fat fifties, a decade stuffed with lardy pie-crusts, fluffernutters and fear. With the hands of the Doomsday Clock at two minutes to midnight, I picked the wrong time to be born, and the wrong place: the Niagara Peninsula may have seemed a sleepy backwater, all fruit farms and factories, but as my father pointed out, “We’ll be the first to go.” His favourite magazine, *Popular Science*, said that nearby Niagara Falls was a first-strike target for the Soviets because the hydro generating station provided power to America’s eastern seaboard.

The possibility of death from above was a grey thundercloud on the robin’s-egg-blue sky of my childhood, starting with the basketball-sized Soviet satellite, Sputnik. We were born about a year apart: I, on October fifteenth, nineteen-fifty-six, Sputnik, on October fourth, nineteen-fifty-seven. I had barely blown out the candles on my first birthday cake when the Soviets were at it again, launching poor little Laika the dog on Sputnik II.

Down on Earth, I slept my cozy baby sleep, my capitalist cats curled in a box, safe from being blown into orbit. But the grown-ups had bigger worries than pets in space: the Soviets had the jump on us. They not only had the A-bomb, but, with Sputnik, eyes in the sky. Canada's Civil Defense Department erected air raid sirens and delivered red-and-black flyers with a checklist to help us turn our cold cellars into bomb shelters: canned goods, radio, water, first aid kit. And they explained how to brace yourself for a nuclear attack: crouch against a good, solid wall and put your arms over your head.

I enjoyed looking at the drawings of the nuclear family in the preparedness flyer, the little girl taking cover in her crinoline dress. I guessed that the Russians had attacked while she was on her way to a birthday party.

"What happens if we can't find the cats when it's time to hide?" I asked my mother as she hung laundry near the cherry tree where my grandfather sprayed pesticide from a rusting tank on his back.

My mother spat out the clothespins she held in her mouth, and answered, "We'll have to leave the cats to fend for themselves, dear."

I ran crying into our house. That was my last memory of the fifties. I awoke to the sixties like Dorothy walking out of a black-and-white Kansas into a Kodachrome Oz that promised all the future possibilities my brother and I saw in *Popular Science*. Flying cars. Jet packs. Silver jumpsuits. I was especially looking forward to the moving sidewalks because the worms couldn't slither out onto them after rainstorms.

Snapshot two, taken with a Kodak Instamatic: white cake, white candles, starched ruffles on my dress. My laughter reveals Pepsodent-perfect baby teeth. Unsmiling on either side of me, my grandparents look as weather-beaten as Roman ruins. Having left be-

hind the dangers of one homeland, they must be pondering what to do about the iron sharks swimming in the sky. Saving their family won't be as easy as boarding a ship this time.

Everyone's favourite NASA scientist, Wernher Von Braun, began appearing on *Disney's Wonderful World of Colour* to prepare us for the World of Tomorrow. In his stiff Prussian accent, he explained the challenge of escaping Earth's atmosphere -- "Und now Goofy and Pluto vill enter the Mercury rocket...but look, they are veightless!"

The space race was the happy flipside on the long-play record of the nuclear arms build-up. We knew that if the superpowers blew up the Earth, we could escape to the Moon.

Snapshot three: my brother in the cockpit of a B-52 Bomber constructed from pieces of scrap wood, hanging by a rope from the crossbar of our clothesline pole. It must have been back-to-school time: grapevines are visible in the background, the fruit almost ready for picking.

I blew out six candles on the same day U.S. spy planes spotted Soviet missile silos in Cuba. The American President waited a week to reveal this secret to the rest of us. Gathered in the TV room, we learned that the world was on the brink of total annihilation.

In a twinkling, the Americans went to DEFCON 2 — "Their highest danger level," my brother explained. "The B-52s have been scrambled. It's just a matter of time until Mutual Assured Destruction." I could see his ears pinkening up with excitement.

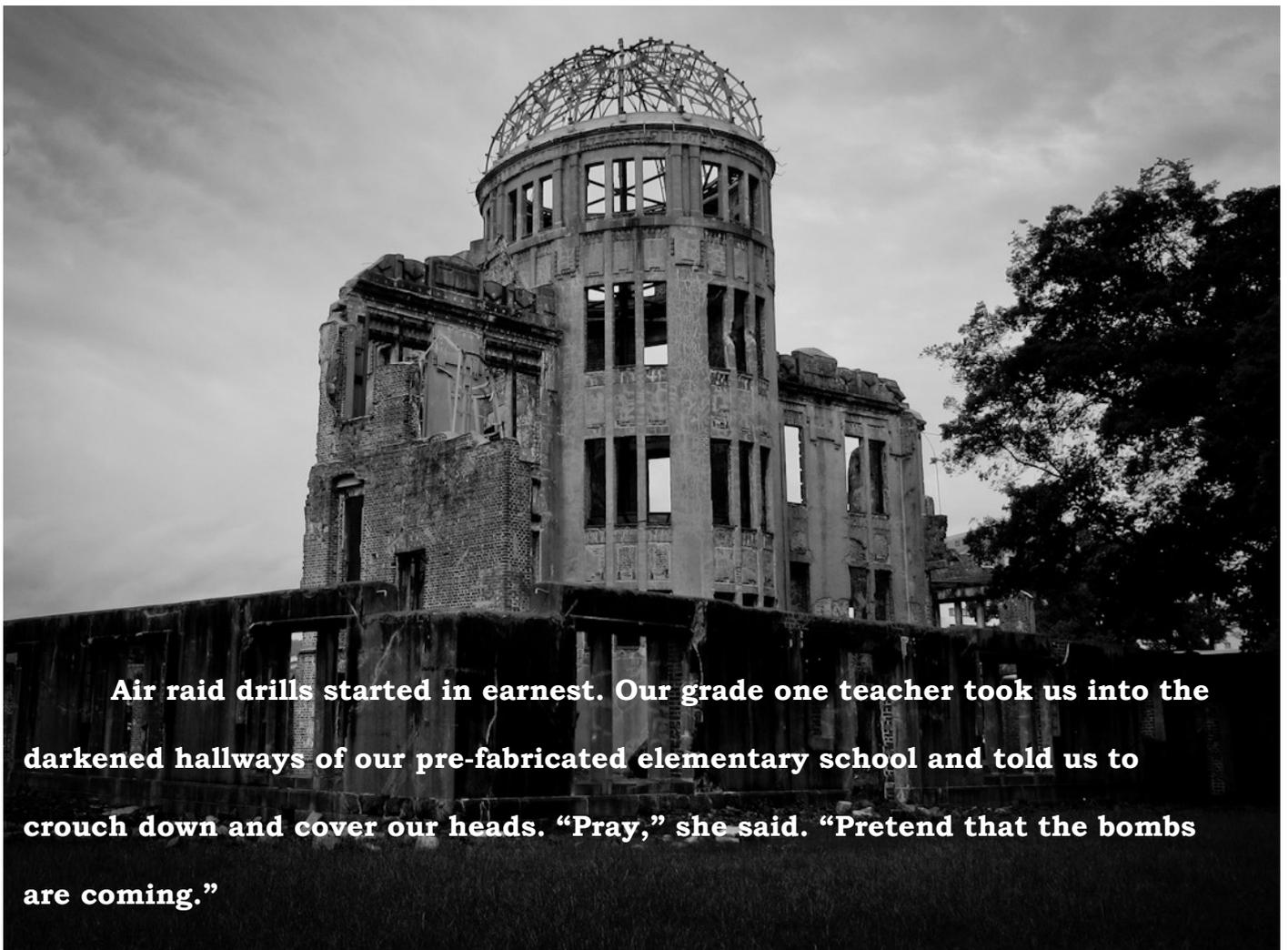
"What does that mean?" I asked.

“Everybody dies,” he answered.

I thought this sounded like a poorly plotted Action Comic until the church parking lot next door began to overflow with cars, even though it was only a Thursday. My brother and I went to the cold cellar to play board games – The Game of Life, Lie Detector, Concentration — and wait for the end of the world. Why waste time on homework if we were going to die anyway?

Our father came down and ordered us to hit the books, which turned out to be a good thing; by Sunday the Russians had backed down. On Monday morning, we were in school, the church parking lot as empty as a roller skating rink. It was the way things were in those days: we’d tiptoe up to the edge of the abyss, then dance away again.

Snapshot four: Nuns look on as my class performs the Mexican Hat Dance in the school



gymnasium, commemorating the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Air raid drills started in earnest. Our grade one teacher took us into the darkened hallways of our pre-fabricated elementary school and told us to crouch down and cover our heads. “Pray,” she said. “Pretend that the bombs are coming.”

I did as I was told, working myself into a panic, rushing through my Hail Marys. I imagined I could hear the up-down, up-down wailing of the town’s air raid siren.

I sniffed a sudden bathroom smell as one of the boys, pressed against the wall beside me, peed his pants.

Afterwards, we all went home for a hot lunch.

Snapshot five: A Yogi Bear punching bag looks on as my brother, sister and I watch TV. Dad is still using the Kodak Instamatic, a workhorse of a camera.

High-pitched as a dentist’s drill, a thirty-second tone bled into our Saturday morning cartoons, followed by a voice reassuring us that *this was a test, this was only a test. If this were a real emergency, you would receive instructions for Southern Ontario and the Niagara Frontier.*

We knew that the Emergency Broadcast System tone would be the last thing we’d hear before atomic light flooded our cellars and crawlspaces, before our retinas scorched and our irradiated skin sloughed off like wet play dough. One day, the alert would be real, but until then we could go back to laughing at the hapless Russian spies Boris and Natasha on *The Rocky & Bullwinkle Show*.

On hot summer nights, our town’s air raid siren would go off by accident — of-

ten enough, that my father told us to ignore it. I'd call out, "I'm scared!" and my father would yell: "It's a malfunction! Go back to sleep!"

I worried that the Emergency Broadcast System voice was telling us what to do. I left my bed and turned on the TV, but all I saw was the late news from Buffalo.

A concerned voice wanted to know: *It's 11 o'clock -- do you know where your children are?*

Snap six should have been a home movie of us at Wasaga Beach, shot with my father's Bolex 8-millimetre movie camera. Instead, it features unknown children (two boys, one girl) riding bikes in a naked-looking subdivision. Half-built split levels sprawl behind yards covered in bare earth. The trees are shorter than the kids.

Nuclear annihilation was not our only childhood worry. We also feared being overrun by Communists, of having to conform to their grey, uniform sameness. My brother bought second-hand comic books from the 'fifties that imagined an alternate history in which North America had fallen to Khrushchev. The stories were about teachers being brainwashed and mothers being taken away from their children and sent off to work on collective farms.

It was clear that, if Communism took hold, it was all over for our almost American way of life. Never again would we enjoy a carefree holiday at Wasaga Beach, as captured on my father's new home movie camera. But when he sent in our film for processing, instead of us at the beach, Kodak mailed back a movie of skinny kids hamming it up on bikes. We had no idea who or where they were. My father spliced it onto our vacation reel just the same; why waste film? The kids looked like us, anyway: same haircuts, same clothes, same eyeglasses. No wonder the guys in the lab got people's home movies mixed up.

Snap eight was taken with a Polaroid Land Camera by my brother-in-law, who was almost a priest but instead decided to marry my sister and write computer code. A diorama of Neil Armstrong stepping down from the Lunar Lander is set up in lobby of the brake lining plant where our father worked. Armstrong looks oddly carefree. A sign says he is on loan from Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum of Niagara Falls.

The hands of the Doomsday Clock kept moving, sometimes closer to midnight, sometimes further away. Through it all, crew-cutted angels with Texan accents rose to Heaven and fell to Earth.

Mercury. Gemini. Apollo. We never missed a mission, kneeling in the TV's yellow glow with our processed cheese sandwiches and tumblers of Tang. We would watch the familiar ritual of the booster rocket detaching itself and falling away, the men with their white shirts and pocket protectors and black glasses, applauding and hooting and throwing ballpoints in the air. Best of all, we'd see the astronauts themselves, their easy, confident voices speaking to us from the soundlessness of space.

On Christmas Eve, nineteen-sixty-eight, Apollo Eight entered lunar orbit, went around the Moon a few times, and came home. "Just a test drive," my father explained. "No fancy stuff."

Astronauts Anders, Lovell and Borman read from the Book of Genesis to let the whole world know that humans had a new home: *In the beginning, God created the Heaven and the Earth...*

As they read the familiar words, we saw cheese-shaped slices of the Moon through the pie-shaped window of the capsule, tantalizingly close.

That following summer, when Neil Armstrong's puffy foot stepped down into the

lunar dust, followed by a bouncing Buzz Aldrin, it was almost anticlimactic. Afterwards, my brother and I rushed outside to watch explosions of red-white-blue fireworks at the church next door, as if God was celebrating the dawn of an era when humans could stand a few million miles closer to Heaven and take Kodachromes of the Earth, tourists in the Sea of Tranquility. We stretched out on lawn chairs and faced the stars, talking of space stations and lunar colonies. Our enemy beaten, we knew our destiny was to get off the Earth and live on the Moon.

What a surprise, then, to be Earthbound all these years.

Our dreams of space exploration – if we dream them at all – are measured now. Cautious. Realistic. Who wants to risk the dangers of a mission to Mars when we can watch robots rove the red surface from our cellphones?

The only way for me to get back that sense of space age adventure is to look at old snapshots and home movies. They we are, flying scrap wood B-52s bombers, or space-walking through the back yard, pretending to be Shepherd or Glenn or poor dead Gus Grissom.

But as children of the cold war, that hopeful picture of life in space was scribbled over with visions of Armageddon. Having gobbled up paranoia with our breakfast cereal every morning, we grew up quietly believing that something deadly was about to fall on us out of the sky.

Not the bomb anymore, of course. Just something.

Even though the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* sets the hands of the Doomsday Clock at a slightly alarming five minutes to midnight, we no longer worry about Mutual Assured Destruction — also known as the end of the world. Our fears today are smaller and more diverse.

We're anxious about our children, who can't go exploring without an escort. They live indoor lives, isolated in the safety of climate-controlled homes. Many of them never see the stars.

We're terrified of our bodies, which betray us by growing a little bit older every day. This deterioration was never supposed to happen to us, inheritors of an ever-youthful, candy-coloured, jet-packed future.

We're afraid of our enemies – if only we knew who they were. One thing is sure: like Communists, some of them live among us, hidden in plain sight.

We're afraid of money. Not just how hard it is to make it, but how easy it is to lose it. To our surprise, it doesn't grow on trees.

And the trees are in trouble, too, the old Earth being stripped, poisoned and slowly cooked to death, like a medieval saint.

Welcome to the anxiety-ridden *World of Tomorrow*, complete with the occasional moving sidewalk, but without the lunar geodesic domes, silver jumpsuits or unflagging faith in progress.

When one lonely air raid siren was discovered on a Toronto rooftop a few summers ago, it was treated with a combination of amusement and nostalgia. A relic of a long-forgotten time.

But I haven't forgotten. Not really. Fear acquired in childhood is like muscle memory. Like playing an arpeggio, or twirling a baton. Practiced long enough, it hardens into a habit you never lose.

The Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted

By Mark Goreeph

He was never sure how long the torture lasted but it must have been months; he knew this because of the length of his hair and beard, how his wounds healed, and that his fractures mended before they were bloodied and broken again.

He'd begun by assuming that suffering and torture would unlock the secrets that his interrogators were seeking: details on the committee, its members, their terrorist activities and how they planned to overthrow the government. In the beginning, he'd tried to explain that they'd got it all wrong – it wasn't a revolutionary group, but a collective that gave aid to those who were being persecuted. After a while, he stopped trying to explain and, for the most part, kept silent.

Though he had a dim memory of his life before and of the night they had dragged him from his bed – these were all distant impressions. It was as if his life had only really begun after his arrest when he had been reborn into this world of violence and privation. There were moments of respite from this - isolated events that he momentarily interpreted as acts of kindness - like when they took him to hospital to have his leg plastered, and then the vitamin injections for his fainting spells; but he soon realized that they made him stronger so that they could break him again. The injections ceased when his fainting fits subsided and his leg was fractured again before it had healed properly.

To begin with they beat him with their fists, with metal bars; his feet were flayed with a whip of bamboo. But these were the clumsy, fledgling caresses of a lover who, gaining in confidence and inventiveness, subjected him to an endless repertoire of suffering, driving him ever onwards on a dark, pilgrimage of pain.

His worst moment was when they stripped off his clothes and made him look at himself in a full-length mirror and he saw what he had become: an emaciated, sickly-looking stranger covered in burns, cuts and scar tissue. Once he'd been proud of his looks but not anymore.

Over time, he came to the realization that there are two types of people who suffer torture: those who end up confessing and those who hold out until they die. It was strange to find himself in the latter camp; he'd never considered himself brave. Though the torturers had been careful not to kill him, he knew that his body was failing and that he was dying. About this time, he had a heart attack. As one of the guards pounded on his chest, another shouted; 'Don't let the bastard die!' Despite the pain, a part of him watched with wry amusement. He felt ready to go, and when he awoke to find himself in hospital he felt bitter disappointment.

While his body hovered between life and death, he was filled with a nagging dread: the spirit might continue to suffer after the death of the body – crippled, deranged and banished to a wandering purgatory. But he did not die and the fear passed. He was taken back to the house of pain and he met Leo for the first time.

The other interrogators had been nameless faces that he had made up nicknames for. There had been 'Scarface' – the older one with the fissured features that was so fond of electrodes – and the 'Kid,' who favoured blowtorches and pliers, and who had breathed life into him when his heart had stopped. By the time he met Leo he could barely remember his own name.

He tried to brace himself as he was taken into the interrogation room and was shocked that his escorts handled him so gently as they ushered him into carpeted office with comfortable chairs where a man sat at a desk talking quietly into a mobile phone. When the man finished his call and looked up, he could see that he was in his sixties with salt and pepper hair and that, unlike the others, he wore no uniform.

‘Hallo Michael,’ the man said. ‘Please sit down.’ He smiled warmly and extended his hand. ‘I’m Leo.’

It was strange to hear his name after such a long time and it evoked painful, disturbing images of others who had called him Michael. Shaking his head, he tried to clear his mind of the memory of these people and sat down heavily in the chair. He ignored the outstretched hand.

‘You won’t shake hands with me?’ Leo asked his tone still mild. ‘No, I don’t suppose you would given the circumstances. But maybe in time you’ll learn to trust me just a little.’

There was something in his tone that disconcerted Michael because he detected no hint of menace or irony behind the benignly-spoken words, just a tangible sense of wistfulness. He decided that it was best to keep quiet, till he understood a little more of this man’s methods.

Leo dismissed the escorts and offered him first a cigarette, a cup of coffee, and then a glass of spirits but Michael shook his head. The older man shrugged, then pushed a button on his desk and piped music issued from speakers in the wall.

‘Turn it off.’ Michael muttered.

Leo’s hand hovered over his desk for a moment. ‘As you wish but I’m surprised. I thought you liked Handel.’ Then he turned off the music.

Michael began to tremble and the sweat poured out of him in rivulets. He’d never allowed his torturers the satisfaction of hearing him beg or seeing him weep but when the first strains of the music had flooded over him, he had known that he was close to tears. He tried to dig his fingers into the palms of his hands but the nails had been uprooted long ago; so instead he took deep breaths to distract himself.

‘Sorry about the music,’ Leo told him. ‘You see, I get a little lonely here. The others

are hardly a cultured bunch – sport, drink and porn mostly. I was looking forward to meeting you, to talking about-

‘The Committee? My revolutionary activities?’ he demanded disdainfully.

‘No, not that. I was hoping to talk about books, plays, films, music. They are my interests; my passions. Yours too, I believe.’

Michael was silent for a moment. ‘They were once.’

‘Maybe they can be again,’ Leo said and he gave him a warm, friendly smile.

Up until then, Michael had assumed that the man in front of him was a very good actor but suddenly it came to him that this man wasn’t faking. He felt something shift inside him and he was filled with sudden apprehension; he was pitted against his most formidable and dangerous adversary. If he wasn’t careful, Leo would bring him down where all else had failed by employing the most devious weapon of all.

Over the next few weeks, Leo became his constant companion. To begin with Michael resisted his advances by hurling insults at him or stubbornly remaining silent but Leo was impervious to all of this and would merely look at him with kindly eyes as he continued his one-way conversations. He was tactile and Michael found this the hardest to bear; a friendly squeeze of the shoulder was infinitely harder to endure than a thousand electric shocks.

For a while, it seemed as if the confessional had been reversed, so that Leo was the one who confided the secrets of his heart to Michael telling him that, though he loved his country, he hated the government. Later he spoke of his sorrow, at how the army had taken his son, that his wife was now a stranger to him but most of all how he longed for death, particularly between midnight and dawn when he couldn’t sleep and the future seemed hopeless.

‘I try to blot it all out,’ he told Michael. ‘I get drunk every night, otherwise I can’t

sleep. I've sacrificed everything and now there's nothing left to give.'

Michael was shocked to see the streak of tears on the older man's face. Feeling a lump in his own throat, he looked quickly away.

'I'm sorry,' Leo muttered. 'I know that I'm embarrassing you but I can't help myself. You remind me so much of my son.'

The words hung between them for a long, terrible moment and then Leo reached over and grasped his hand. He tried to wrestle his fingers free but the other man hung on doggedly. 'Please,' Michael pleaded. 'Let go of me.'

'It's okay,' Leo told him, his voice rasping with emotion. 'I know how you feel. It's unbearable to live without love.'

He pulled Michael to him then, locking him in a gentle but firm embrace. Michael felt the older man's stubble grate against his cheek and felt Leo trembling against him. He tried to push him away but his captor was stronger and hung tightly to him, like a drowning man. Michael struggled mightily against this loving treachery, fighting for his very soul it seemed, but he was caught fast. Finally, sweating, exhausted, he could resist no longer and it was then that he felt a shard of pain cutting deep inside him as a torrent of tears flooded out of him.

Michael wept bitterly, mourning for his old life as well as the new. He saw himself signing confessions, naming names and standing before a judge as he received his sentence. His only hope was that it would all be over quickly and that they would execute him.

'I'll look after you,' Leo told him. 'As if you were my own darling son.' He kissed Michael's head. 'You're safe now. Daddy's here.'

Touch

By Shannon Bennett

“How long will this last?”

I shrugged as my hand continued to skim over his cool skin. Even without applying pressure I could feel the grooves of his ribs under my palm. “As long as I keep touching you.”

“And if you stop?”

“Then you go back to the way you were.”

“You mean I *die* again.”

He spat it out like he was convicting me of some nefarious plot against him. It wasn't the first time I'd encountered that response. I suppose it was natural. I didn't call him on it. “Can you die if you aren't really alive?” I asked instead. “I think you just slip back into it. Like sleep.”

With a ragged gasp his chest inflated, sucking in his already gaunt abdomen and forcing my hand to scramble for purchase. “Careful,” I warned. “If I lose the connection, I can't get it back.” I felt him still beneath me.

“You mean it only works once?” His gaze was intent on my face, monitoring my response. Watching for the slightest hint of deception.

I nodded. “One time deal. Keeps things in check, I guess.”

“How do you know?” he demanded.

“Trial and error.”

“Oh.” He looked away and exhaled slowly. Careful to maintain contact, I slid my hand to his face and traced the dark rings under his impossibly large eyes. He twitched

but didn't try to escape my fingers. "How do I look?"

"Tired."

"Better than looking dead, I suppose."

"You're beautiful," I said honestly. "But I think you already know that." I shifted him over slightly on the table. "Do you mind?" I queried, gesturing to myself and indicating the empty space next to him.

"Go ahead."

I clambered up onto the stainless steel surface and settled down next to him.

"Thanks."

"You didn't have to ask, you know. This is your palace, after all."

I ignored the sardonic tone. "I don't like to make assumptions. Some people don't want me in their personal space."

"Do you do this often?"

"Often enough, I suppose." I propped up my head with my free arm and continued studying his face. He really was terribly pretty – all sharp lines and shadowed hollows, framed with honeyed curls that had been dark and lank before I washed them. "It's not always like this, though." I felt my cheeks warm. "I mean, it's different with each person."

"You're blushing," he observed. "Why are you embarrassed? I'm the one who's lying here naked after being found dead in a bathroom with a needle in my arm."

"Covered in vomit. Don't forget the vomit."

Unease flashed across his features before disappearing behind a self-deprecating smirk. "See? The embarrassment is all mine."

"I've seen worse." I scooted over the remaining few inches and curled my body

around his, tucking my cheek against his shoulder. We lay in silence for a few minutes, saying nothing. It wasn't a problem. No one was going to disturb us.

"Have you always been able to do this?" he asked finally.

"Yeah. Well, I assume so at least. I didn't spend a lot of time around the deceased when I was an infant."

"How did you find out you could do it? Did you just... know?"

"I picked up my hamster." The memory made me grimace even after thirty-some years. "I didn't realise she had died. She was hard and cold in my hand, and then suddenly she wasn't. I freaked out and dropped her. When I could bring myself to look at her again, she was dead as anything. I thought I'd just imagined it."

"Eww."

I thought he was going to leave it at that, a single one-syllable comment on something that would have blown someone else's mind, but I was wrong.

"When did you discover you hadn't?"

"When my mom died."

"I'm sorry." It was an apology for prying, not an offered condolence. The dead rarely seem disturbed by others dying. I guess it comes with discovering death itself is nothing to fear. Or so I've been told.

"It's okay. She'd been sick for a long time." I felt as though I'd spent a lifetime holding vigil by her hospital bed. "I was alone with her one afternoon. My dad had taken my brothers down to the cafeteria, but I wasn't hungry. I was reading my book when I heard the cardiac monitor go off. I ran over and grabbed her, and suddenly she was there again. We just looked at each other. When we heard someone coming in to check the alarm, she told me to let go."

"Did you?"

“Yes.”

He shifted uncomfortably against the hard surface underneath us. Rigor mortis broke the instant I placed my hands on a body, but it took time for people to regain feeling in their limbs. For the nerves to start relaying status reports back to the brain again.

“We can change positions,” I offered. “You don’t need to stay laid out flat like that.”

“No need,” he declined with a note of impatience. “I’m fine. Why did you go into this line of work? Doesn’t it cause problems?”

I shook my head again. “After my mom, I experimented a little. I found out that when I wear gloves it doesn’t work.”

“But why work in a funeral home in the first place?” he pressed. “Isn’t that just asking for trouble?”

“I can’t picture doing anything else. Maybe being a coroner, I suppose, but that’s more of the same.” I smiled into his skin. “I can commune with the dead. It’s my gift, for lack of a better term. Would you expect someone with a brilliant voice to avoid a career in music?”

“That’s different,” he said dismissively. I wasn’t sure if he was vilipending my skill or that of the hypothetical musician. I don’t think he even realised he was doing it.

“You’re being rather judgmental for someone who just died of a heroin overdose,” I pointed out. “What exactly makes you comfortable conjecturing about my life choices?”

“True. True,” he repeated. “But maybe the fact I wasted my life makes me uniquely able to offer advice to others on how not to do the same.”

“What makes you think I’m wasting my life?” I asked mildly. I try not to argue

with people when I do this. It feels wrong, like I'm sending them on with strife in their souls.

"Well, you're here. Lying on a table in a funeral home with a dead man, instead of spending time with someone real."

"You're real."

"Debatable. And regardless, I'm a flash in the pan." He cocked his head. "Wait. Is that it? Is this a fear of commitment thing? Are you only giving me your time because I can't demand it of you?" I could hear the sneer of incredulity in his words. "Do you feel safer telling your secrets to people who have no choice but to literally take them to the grave?"

"I'm an embalmer. I'd be here regardless of if you were sentient or not."

"You know what I mean."

I counted to ten and considered what he was asking. This wasn't the first time I'd had those accusations leveled against me. Maybe they were true, maybe they weren't. It didn't make much difference. "Perhaps. I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything, though."

He snorted. "Are you kidding me? I can think of a few obvious examples."

"You mean like having sex?" Of course he did. I rolled onto my back but kept my hand firm against his stomach. "I'm not. I mean, I am. Having it. Sometimes. If the person is interested."

He raised himself up for the first time and stared at me. "So you..."

"So I occasionally have sex with people I bring back? Yes."

"You're a necrophiliac?" His nose crinkled slightly in disgust despite his obvious fascination with the possibility. Old habits. Old habits, snobbery, and a *souçon* of hypocrisy.

“I don’t think so. I don’t consider you dead. Rest assured I won’t be pleasuring myself with your corpse after this is over.”

A smile spread across his face, revealing teeth so perfect it would be a crime to seal his mouth later. “But in the interim?”

I looked at him steadily.

His eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Only if you want.”

“Oh, I do. I mean, it’s been a while. I couldn’t, for the last bit, because of... I didn’t really care at the time, but-” He stopped tripping over his words long enough to draw air. “Wait. How does it work?”

“Same as it always does.” I sat up and pressed my lips against his before he could ask any more questions. When I pulled away, his eyes were closed and his breathing was heavy. “See? I just need to make sure to keep a hand somewhere on you. Otherwise it could be a bit gross. For me, at least. You wouldn’t notice.”

“So it has to be your hands?”

“Mmhmm. Do you notice how it tingles where my hands are, but not in the other parts where we’re touching?”

“I think my whole body is tingling right now. But I’ll take your word for it.” The promise of sexual gratification had erased all hint of maliciousness from his voice, replacing it with an eager desire to please. It always did.

When our lips parted again, I slid to the floor, slipping off my shoes and stepping out of my pants before climbing back into his lap. “Help me,” I whispered, tugging at the hem of my shirt. We maneuvered the fabric over my head and off one wrist and then the other.

His hands moved up my chest and onto my breasts, cradling them like they were

something precious. “You’re gorgeous.”

“Not really. But I suppose to you, right now, I am.” I shifted to my knees and sank down onto him, effectively ending the discussion. He groaned, burrowing into my neck until I nudged his chin upward. “I want to see you.”

It didn’t take long, and when he came I found myself transfixed by the expression on his face. They always looked beautiful, the men and women I brought back; so much more alive than the living I had done this with. He was beyond that, though. He was impossible to look away from. I stayed perched over him, waiting to see his eyes again.

“Is it time?” He spoke before opening them, and even then it was just a crack. It wasn’t enough. I wanted them unobstructed, visible for as long as possible before I closed them forever.

“Soon.” I rubbed my hand over his thin chest. “There isn’t exactly an expiry date, but this is as good a time as any.”

He smiled, the first completely genuine smile I’d seen all night. “I’m still not convinced this isn’t some strange hallucination.”

“It isn’t. But even if it were, it wouldn’t matter.” I crawled down and stood next to the table, my palm still planted firmly on his sternum. With the fingers of my free hand I brushed through the soft curls that framed his face. “Reality is subjective.”

“How very philosophically pompous of you.” His grin turned sheepish. Sincerely repentant in his post-orgasmic bliss. “I’m sorry. I just feel comfortable with you. I don’t mean to be insulting.”

“I wasn’t. Insulted.” Dying brought a frankness to people that was missing in the living. Even in those who hadn’t gone through life with the sense of entitlement he had. I wasn’t sure how authentic it was, but I enjoyed it nonetheless. “But I think I’m al-

lowed to spend time navel-gazing. I brought you back to life, didn't I? Imagine what Nietzsche would do with this. Is what I'm doing the embodiment of nihilism, or the antithesis of it? I have a lot of time to ponder these things when I'm down here alone, you know."

He reached up and brushed my brow with his fingertips before tucking a few mousy strands behind my ear. "How often are you alone?"

"You mean how often do I do this? Bring someone back?"

"Yes."

"Depends. On my mood. On the person I'm working on. On how much I feel like playing God when I wake up in the morning."

"How do you decide?"

"Who I touch?" He nodded. "Curiosity."

"About what?"

"Oh, anything. I have no particular requirements," I admitted, studying the infinitesimal movement of his eyelids. The constant interplay between *Orbicularis oculi* and *Levator palpebrae superioris*. "Sometimes I'm curious about how they died, or about the life they led before. Sometimes I'm sad for them and want to make things better. Some people repulse me, but I want to hear them speak, hear their side. Some people I just like the look of. They look fun, or exotic, or beautiful. There aren't any hard and fast rules."

"Why did you pick me?"

They always wonder. Actually, that's a lie. Everyone thinks they're something special and that, by extension, their selection was never up for debate. What they wonder about is the specific reason I was drawn to them. What exactly it is that makes them special.

“You want to hear that I picked you for something other than your looks, but at the same time you assume that’s why.”

I watched as he fought the urge to look away, shrugging insolently against the stainless steel below him instead. “Is that so wrong of me?”

“No. No, it isn’t. Not at all.” I abandoned the curl I was playing with and ran my fingers over the contours of his face, dipping into the hollows of his cheeks and along the length of his nose before following the philtrum to the soft curve of his lips. The features I had seen in pictures long prior to seeing them under the fluorescent lights of my cave. “I suppose you just made me sad.”

“Thank you.” He studied my face for a minute more before taking a deep breath. “I think I’m ready now.”

I hated this part. “I’m glad I got to meet you.”

“Me too.”

When I lifted my hand, the effect was immediate. His body relaxed into the metal underneath as the eyes that had been fixed on mine dulled, no longer capable of taking in the world around them. Gone beyond my reach this time around.

I blinked back the sting in my eyes before collecting my clothing off the floor and redressing.

My subterranean enclave was as stark and sterile as an operating room, with the added charm of being located in the basement of a mortuary. A very expensive mortuary, but a mortuary nonetheless. All the accoutrements in the world couldn’t disguise the fact this was a place constructed around death. Music helped, a little. And so I cued up Arcade Fire and prepared my work station, laying the tools out with efficiency born of experience. Pulled on gloves, erecting the barrier now required by regulation before I could touch the skin I had caressed so recently. Thin latex only. Greater divi-

sion wasn't necessary for this part. The most intimate part.

Like a barber to the dead, I lathered his face and brought out my straight razor, meticulously stripping his skin of stubble even as I remembered the way it felt scraping against me. It was meditative, being forced to slow down and focus on every stroke of my blade. It centred me. I needed centring after tonight. Needed it to be able to bring myself to do the next steps. Capping the eyes that had just been staring into my own. Disinfecting and suturing shut the mouth that had just been speaking to me. The lips I'd just been kissing. It was difficult, really, to seal a lover away so permanently. Sometimes I wished my touch could dole out more than single servings. That I could take out my favourites on special occasions, like the good dishes.

What came after the face was easier, somehow, despite how much more invasive it was. I was cloistered behind my apron, my glasses, my respirator. It made things impersonal when I sliced through to his carotid to place the cannula. When I cut the drainage tube into his jugular. I stepped back and assessed the body in front of me. An addict who had been found dead with a needle still firmly in his arm. Collapsed veins, then. While my machine indifferently replaced blood with formaldehyde, I prepared my hypodermic and started working on his hands. Careful not to dwell on how they had felt on my skin.

Careful.

My sutures are a point of pride, but I have never put as much care into a set as I did on his. Once I was done, his neck was a work of art. So were the stitches above his navel after I finished the dirty work of embalming his cavity, as if being delicate with my needle would make up for running through his organs with my trocar like a scared soldier brandishing a bayonet.

When I bathed him, I didn't think about the fact I was washing off the sweat that had accumulated during sex, or the faint hint of my scent that remained on his skin,

masked behind formaldehyde. I focused on cleaning away the blood, the chemicals. I dried his hair, finger combing it under my diffuser until it fell away from his face in perfect waves. Touched lip wax to the already indistinguishable neck sutures. Blended them away to nothing before doing the same to the track marks that littered his inner arms despite the fact no one would ever see them again. With bottles and brushes I painstakingly brought him back to life for a second time, making his skin glow with artificial vitality before fitting him in the suit his family had provided. The label I saw as I cut down the back reminded me just how different his life could have turned out.

“Instead you became a junkie,” I said aloud as I began strapping him into the body lift, my voice rough from hours of silence. “You had the whole world available to you, you beautiful man, and instead you wound up down here with me. Getting in a post-mortem quickie with the lonely little embalmer who knows all your secrets.” I secured the head sling and stepped back, reaching for the remote. With a touch of a button, he was moving toward the sleek stainless steel casket his parents had paid a small fortune for the day prior. The lift track was set up so the body went into the casket neatly every time, but I still guided him in, setting him down perfectly centre on the lilac interior before unfastening the straps.

His mother had insisted on the lilac. She’d calmly explained that it was his favorite colour even as tears ran unchecked down her face. The slate of his suit looked striking against the light purple hue. “Good choice, Mom.” I straightened the knot on the skinny black silk tie and adjusted his collar like we were standing in our bedroom before a big night out. “You look dashing, if I do say so myself,” I teased, smoothing out his lapels.

When I was sure nothing remained for me to do, I carefully lowered the lid.

Some Go Dancing

By Michael J. Davis

It got dark and they fell in. The water was cold. They turned together under the surface, Janelle's hair twisting like smoke, her eyes closed. Blaine could barely see her face in the dim moonglow through the high gym windows. He thought again about his own death, how easy it would be to drown, to let go. But then he inhaled, choked. It hurt and he panicked, pulling her up with him.

He coughed while Janelle vomited water. Then she rolled on her back, looked at him, and grinned.

"Your eyes are fucking crazy," he said. He was flat on his back. Janelle was beside him, her pale shoulder glittering with droplets.

"Your eyes are fucking crazy. Along with the rest of you. Where's my shirt?"

The water slapped against the tile. The pool filters gulped. Somewhere, far above in the dark, a wall clock thunked one minute forward. Blaine had a dim memory of boosting her up through one of the men's room windows. They were in the Women's Gymnasium, CSU Fresno. What the fuck.

"You put it on that kid's head. The one who grabbed your ass."

"He shouldn't have done that." Janelle sat up and raked her wet hair back. "Gimmie your shirt. Did I burn the place down this time?"

He could see her ribs in the moonlight, the bumps of her spine, the goat's head pentagram on the back of her neck. Blaine sat up beside her and started unbuttoning his soaked short-sleeve. "You tried."

"No shit? Well, that's what happens when you smoke K."

The kid hadn't been smoking K. That had been Janelle. They took the elevator up to the second floor and climbed back out the bathroom window, slower this time.

On that side of the building, it was only a short drop to a closed dumpster. Then they walked across campus toward the sirens.

The kid's only crime had been being drunk and horny. He'd done what any loaded 19-year-old will do when a woman takes off her shirt in the middle of the frat party and grinds on him. He didn't deserve a front kick to the sternum.

"Holy shit," Janelle said.

Yes, thought Blaine, holy shit. Across Shaw Avenue, the Zeta Beta Tau house was on fire. Red-orange flames licked out of the windows. A crowd had formed. A wilted group of sorority girls in tiny shorts and sweatshirts sat on the curb, crying and holding hands. A few people still had plastic cups full of beer. The police had set up a perimeter and two water trucks were spraying the third floor. Then a deep thud came from within and a green fireball busted out towards the sky, raining hot glass on the firemen. They immediately turned away and dropped to one knee like synchronized swimmers or medieval soldiers when a volley of arrows comes down.

"I guess you succeeded," Blaine said. The air smelled like smoke and melted plastic. The heat had already dried his T-shirt.

"Maybe it wasn't me. I don't remember a thing."

"It was you. It's always you."

Five campuses this spring and three fires. Deaths? Blaine didn't know. Why would he want to know something like that? And yet he felt he *should* know. He should find out. So when they got caught and someone threw them both in a dark hole, at least Blaine would know why. Someone was tracking them. Someone had to be.

"Shit," Janelle said. "Look."

Two sorority girls and a frat brother with a ball cap on sideways talking to a cop and pointing.

"Go," Blaine said. They walked. They didn't look back. When they got a block

away, they started running—silently, simultaneously, the way the firefighters had knelt, perfectly synchronized, as if the two of them had also been trained. Some mad dance: arson, fire, and blame.

“You gonna hit it or what?” she said when the Dodge Monaco wouldn’t turn over. Blaine touched the screwdriver to the top of the solenoid inside the mangled steering column—nothing.

“It’s dead, babe. We have to go. Get something else.”

Janelle sighed. She’d found some black lipstick in her duffle bag, but she was still wearing his short-sleeved button-up. She was a beautiful woman, no doubt about it. Fair skin, long raven hair, blue eyes. She’d even look good when all she had to wear was a prison jumpsuit. The yellow-white streetlight made her jawline and cheekbones look extra severe. Her hair framed her face in graceful arcs. She looked well put together, as if she hadn’t just gotten high on horse tranquilizer, burned down a house, and almost drowned.

“Give it here.” Janelle slid over to him and planted a black kiss on his cheek. When she used the screwdriver to cross the terminals on the solenoid, the Monaco lurched and started up with a high keening deep in the engine. She kissed him on the lips, made the heavy metal horns with her right hand, and said, “Love me.”

“Listen to that. It won’t last.”

“Nothing does, Blaine.” She winked, then slouched against the passenger door and shut her eyes. It started to rain. They went down several tree-lined streets to the squeak of the wipers and the death cry of the engine. Blaine headed for what he thought might be the direction of the 5 North. He rolled down the window and lit a cigarette, listening to the sirens in the distance.

It was dangerous, life. He was falling. Always in his dreams, falling or burning or screaming. Not so different from when he was awake. He’d done too many drugs.

That was one thing. Ketamine. Meth. Rock. Hash. Shit Janelle cooked up on the way. How did they both still have their original teeth? Blaine didn't know. Cancer was probably locked in. Arthritis for sure. He creaked when he walked. He'd turned 37 four days ago and hadn't said a thing about it. What would Janelle have done if he had? Bake him a cake?

Now she'd gotten the portable lab stuff, the hot plate, their tiny generator and some ingredients. She was over in the woods doing her thing. You could make meth from lots of substances. And you could make it anywhere. All it took were a few household products, a heat source, and patience. He'd taught her how, at first, but now it was all Janelle. Maybe it was bullshit, the patience part. But they were careful. They hadn't had a cooking explosion in a long time. Still, what did he know? These days, he waited by the car. She never let him watch.

Maybe she was cooking down another batch of that liquid K they'd bought in Arizona. Or something else. They could make more in the long run selling meth to hillbillies in trailer parks, but that was dangerous. So they stuck to universities. And the college crowd liked K just fine. Dissociative. Hallucinogenic. Snort a bump of ketamine and you go outside your body. Tastes like oven cleaner if you smoke it. But it's good for the nervous high-maintenance types. Blaine had seen it all. Rich kids with suitcases of dope. Wheezing trailer trash rednecks in wife beaters, no teeth and orange hair. Secretaries with death in their eyes. Fun-loving idiots who had no idea. Addicts. Future captains of industry. Future guests of the state. Kids on fire, feverish, drowning, disintegrating, disconnected, coming down, shot up, strung out, freezing in the heat, melting in the cold. Kids headed for the gutter, jail, the grave. Everything.

Pop the trunk. There it was. A shit-ton of meth in two lady's handbags. Three more 12oz. cylinders of liquid ketamine. His usual bag of travelling hash. A cardboard box of lab equipment, solvents, a folded tent. A crate of cold pills in individual

boxes. A box of powdered rat poison. All that special goodness.

Janelle came back grinning, armpit rings and a V of sweat on her T-shirt between her breasts. She smelled like cleaning supplies and burned hair.

“We’re good.” She took the cigarette from his lips.

“How good?”

Janelle sat on the bumper of the Monaco, smiled, smoked. “Just wait.”

Four hours later, after dumping the chemical remains in an orchard and getting a filthy dinner at Denny’s, they drove through downtown Chico, looking for the state college. She had directions written on a ripped piece of graph paper. 11:30 PM on a Friday. Packed sidewalks. All bars wide open. Drunk blondes in glittery dresses. Subwoofer thumps at the stoplights. A ten-year-old with a mohawk in front of a lit-up laundromat breakdancing on a piece of linoleum, black silhouettes around him in the bonelight.

“Go left,” she said. And there it was. Chico State. Dark as a crypt. The place looked like Atlantis sunk beneath the waves. Blaine imagined a shark snaking between the red-brick buildings. They went around a field to the other side of the campus, then went left again and rolled down another quiet tree-lined street. It looked just like the one in Fresno where they’d parked the car before selling the first batch of K to the ZBTs and then ruining everyone’s night. Every campus in the country had neighborhoods like that around it. Quiet old houses. Not too much money, but clean and neat. Window boxes with geraniums. Cats. It was the sort of area Blaine used to live in when he worked at Chemical Dynamics in San Diego. But that was more than five years ago—when he had a job, a wife, a life. Ancient history. Before he failed his drug test three times in a row. Before Janelle.

“Here,” she said. “Yeah. This.” Small two-bedroom house. Peach stucco. The rust-colored drapes everybody had in the 70s tied to the sides of the front window. Dark inside. He went by, did a three-point turn, and parked across the street from

the house. Janelle opened the trunk and wrapped something in a plastic grocery bag. Then they were ready. They walked down the driveway past a minivan and a Subaru with a CSUC Faculty Parking sticker in the corner of the windshield. The backyard was a small rectangle of flat grass surrounded by trees and walled with fix-foot trellises. The neighbor's floodlight shined around the spikes of a wrought iron spite fence, striping half the yard and house with fat bars of light. More bonelight. Pale. Spectral. Ghost city. Dead light.

Nothing on in the house, but they didn't have to knock. He came out immediately and shut the door quietly behind himself. Fat guy. Round belly and a double chin. Early forties. Brown hair down to his shoulders, parted in the middle. Khakis. *Lionel Richie* concert shirt. *Hello*, it said across the bottom, *is it me you're looking for?* He had a long face, small full lips, and the expression that people get at graveside funerals—mournful, a bit uncomfortable, a bit like he thought he should be somewhere else, like maybe he'd killed the person in the casket and was afraid people might catch on. He stood on the cement step just below his backdoor and frowned at them.

“What do you want?”

“Who else comes up to your backdoor at midnight?” Blaine said.

“That's not what I asked you.”

“We're here to sell you illegal drugs.” Janelle smirked and held up the bag.

He looked at her for a long moment. His frown got deeper, brows pushed together. Then he laughed. “Well good.” He looked Blaine up and down. “And what are *you* here for?”

“What the fuck does it look like?” There was something about this guy that seemed extra wrong. Not the usual wrong drug shit, but reptile wrong. The kind of guy who goes to AA meetings to find a date. That sick vibe. *He* was a college teacher? Of what?

“Wait here.” He went back inside, taking care not to make a sound. When he

turned, they could see the handle of a gun in his pants pocket. Blaine looked at Janelle. She shrugged.

The fat man slipped back out with a yellow plastic bong in his hand. "Let's see it. And keep your voice down. My wife's asleep."

Janelle unwrapped the plastic grocery bag and took out a large Ziploc full of white powder. The K. She held the bag in the light. It cast a gauzy spider web on the back of the house. Bonelight, boneweb, thought Blaine, everything dead or dying, falling apart, falling away.

The man's mournful expression had returned. He offered the bong to Janelle. "Go ahead. Do the honors."

She looked at it and shook her head. "Sorry, Nate, I don't feel like it tonight."

"You serious? How do I know it's for real? How do I know it won't tear a thousand little holes in my lungs on the first bowl?"

"Killing customers is bad for business," Blaine said.

Nate turned his head slowly and raised his eyebrows. "Was I speaking to you?"

"I was speaking to you. If you want the shit, pay us. Otherwise, we're out."

Nate looked at Janelle. "I think *he's* bad for business."

"He's my boyfriend."

"Oh really. Well tell him to relax. And at least pack one for me."

She put the bag on the ground. "Why don't you do it?"

He sighed. "Because of this." He took the gun out and pointed it at Blaine. It was a little gun, the kind women keep in their purses. Dull black metal. Not a movie gun. Not an ego gun. A gun people buy along with shooting lessons because they're planning on using it and afraid of it at the same time. A gun you get shot with in a parking lot or in someone's living room or in a dark backyard.

"What is this?" Blaine said. "You're robbing us?"

"Lower your voice. My wife needs her sleep."

“You’ll wake her up if you fire that thing,” Janelle said.

“Aw, shit,” he smiled and tossed the bong to her with his free hand. “You got me there. Then I guess I’ll have to shoot her, too.”

It’s not even his place, thought Blaine. He broke in and killed everybody. He’s a psychopath.

“Hurry it up,” Nate said. Then he looked at Blaine and winked.

Janelle carefully loaded and tamped the bowl with her thumb. Then she got out her lighter and offered it to him.

“No way,” he said. “You first.”

She gave him a look of pure hate but took a hit. The smoke was thick and unnaturally white when she exhaled. Cartoon dragon smoke. She made a face and blinked a few times. It smelled the way the house fire had—hot chemicals, melted plastic.

“That good, huh?”

“Always tastes like that.” She croaked the words out and spat on the grass.

Nate nodded and sighed. “Okay,” he said. “I’m satisfied.” Then he unzipped and took out his limp penis, a small pale tongue hanging out the mouth of his fly. “Now you can blow me.”

“Fuck you,” said Blaine.

“Right.” Nate shrugged and fired into the ground. The gun made a pop no louder than a balloon. Lines of gray smoke came out of the barrel and flowed up around his hand like tiny serpents. “I can do you and then pick up with her. It’s all the same to me.”

Blaine looked at Janelle. She had dead eyes. She put down the bong. “It’s cool,” she said. “Just be cool. Blaine, why don’t you go sit in the car.”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Nate said. “Now get with it.”

She wobbled as she walked over to him. She knelt down and took his penis in

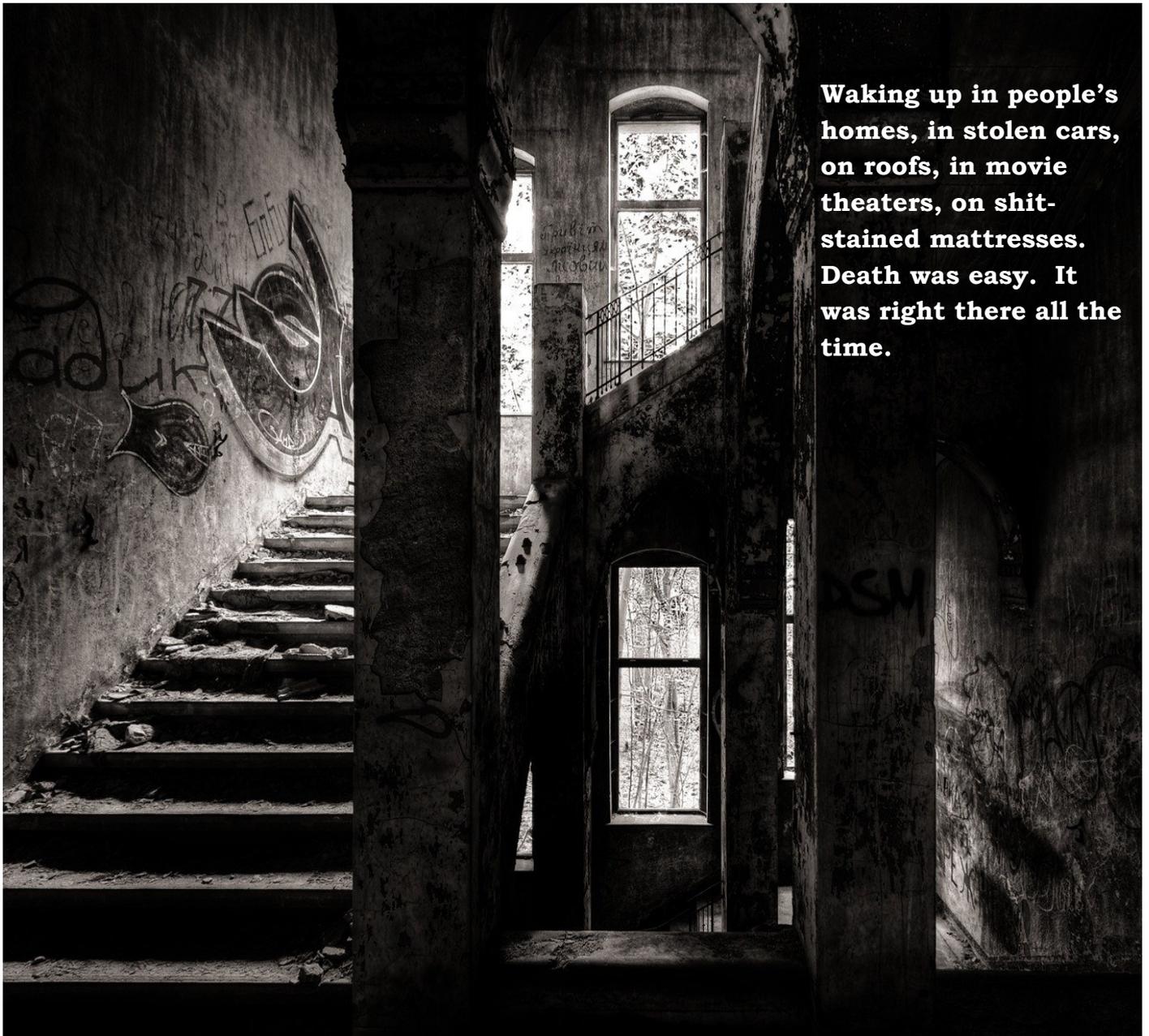
her mouth the way she sometimes did with Blaine, then started bobbing her head.

Blaine's throat tightened up. He was breathing hard. He stared at the gun still pointed at him. He was maybe five, six feet away. He started to sweat.

But Nate was looking straight at him, grinning. Nate didn't look away, even when he slapped the side of Janelle's head. "Slower" he said. "Take your time."

She slowed down.

The wind rose in the leaves above the backyard. Black branches waved in the starless sky. It took a long time for Nate to come. He made a little sound and told Janelle to swallow. And then Blaine thought they were both going to die. And he thought about falling in the pool; the time they were both shitfaced and Janelle drove



Waking up in people's homes, in stolen cars, on roofs, in movie theaters, on shit-stained mattresses. Death was easy. It was right there all the time.

them off the freeway into a canyon; the time he came home high and his wife Sarah started screaming because he'd gotten cut to the bone and was covered in blood and didn't realize it; the time Janelle tried to burn a Hummer and it had a locking gas cap and wouldn't burn and she kept pouring gas over it from a can and then, when she finally gave up, it exploded and they were both deaf for a week. A hundred other times. Waking up in the hospital. Waking up in a ditch with blood in his hair. Waking up on an enormous concrete pipe in a construction site. Waking up in people's homes, in stolen cars, on roofs, in movie theaters, on shit-stained mattresses. Death was easy. It was right there all the time. It was drugs. It was that bullet in the ground. It was Janelle. It was Blaine himself, his own mind. Maybe it didn't matter whether you tried to live or die. Sometimes you lived. Other times you died.

"That was real sweet," Nate said. Then he gestured with the gun. "Now get lost before I change my mind."

They backed away from Nate, the bong, the bag of K, his erect penis sticking up out of his fly, glistening in the light. They walked up the driveway in silence, past the Subaru with its faculty parking sticker, past the minivan with a plastic Goofy on the dash.

Janelle got halfway to the car before she started vomiting. Blaine tried to put his arm around her, but she staggered up, almost fell, and ran down the middle of the street. He watched her go. She went across the intersection at the end of the block and almost got hit by a truck. She didn't even look.

He started searching for her about an hour later. The Monaco wouldn't turn over. Blaine worked the screwdriver across the solenoid from ten or twelve different angles before the current connected in the steering column. Meanwhile, the house across the street stayed dark.

Blaine drove around the neighborhood, smoking cigarette after cigarette. He

was thinking about guns. He was thinking about handcuffs and about injecting oven cleaner into Nate's balls and letting him stay like that until he died. He was thinking maybe Janelle was going to kill herself—because she'd tried to before. But he was also thinking she'd want to burn one more house down first, that she wouldn't go out so easy once she got angry. And he knew she was angry.

So he cruised the gas stations in the area. Janelle knew a hundred ways to start a fire, but gas was her favorite. It was her thing. She loved the smell of it. She loved the way it burned, the way it made a fire breathe. She said a gas fire was better than a poem or getting high. It *got* her high. Just the sight of it.

But he couldn't find her. He went down the same streets twenty, thirty times. Not knowing where else to look, he drove back to Nate's house. It was almost 2:00 AM. He parked in exactly the same place, got out, and leaned against the car.

There was Nate in the front room, sitting in a recliner, watching T.V. He had a beer resting on his belly. A woman came in. She was wearing a pink bathrobe and she had a baby on her shoulder. She was patting it on the back, doing a little rock-a-bye dance. Nate said something to her, then looked at the T.V. and started to laugh. Then she started to laugh. They laughed for a long time.

Something was real funny. But the baby was crying. It was wearing one of those animal pajama suits, all one piece with little rabbit ears on the hood. She held the baby at arm's length and said something, then she started patting it more rapidly on the back, doing that rock-a-bye dance. She and Nate were still laughing. He got up and put his arms around them both and they started waltzing across the living room. Waltzing and laughing. The woman did a one-handed pirouette. And he bowed like an 18th century lord.

That's when Blaine looked around and noticed Janelle sitting on the porch steps of the house behind him. She had two red metal gas cans beside her, the sort you see strapped to the backs of Jeeps. She'd been crying. Maybe she'd cried out all her tears.

He walked up and sat next to her.

“There’s a baby over there,” she said. “He’s got a baby. They’re dancing.”

“He’s got a wife, too, from the look of it.”

Janelle nodded slowly. “I guess she woke up.”

Now Nate was back in the recliner, holding the baby on his belly where the bottle had been. He pointed at the television and said something to the kid. The wife had disappeared.

“I can’t do this.” Janelle looked down at the gas cans, rested her hand on them. “I want to, but I can’t.”

It started to rain. They stared through it at Nate until his wife came back and took the baby. Then it was just him. He turned off the lights. The blue-white flicker of the television flashed on his face like lightning.

“We could get him now,” Blaine said. “Get the crowbar from the trunk. Throw a rock through the window. Go straight in at him. Beat him in front of his wife and kid. He fucking deserves it.”

Janelle thought about it. But she shook her head. “He’s got a baby. The baby’s innocent.”

“So we don’t beat on the baby.”

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s see if the heater works in the car.”

Blaine drove to a 7-11 and they bought doughnuts and coffee. Then he got on the 5 going south this time. Neither of them felt like spending the night in Chico. They hadn’t talked about where they were going to go next. It didn’t matter. After an hour, she looked at him.

“You know,” she said, “some people lead their whole lives and never go dancing.”

Blaine remembered the kid with the mohawk breakdancing outside the laundromat in that dead bonelight. Maybe that kid was high. Maybe he was just a normal kid. Maybe he had no home. Maybe he was some kind of genius. Maybe he’d grow up to be

a rapist like Nate. It made no difference. Blaine would never know him.

“But then maybe they do dance. Maybe they just decide to and they do it,” he said.

She coughed, nodded. “Yeah. I mean, it doesn’t cost anything. No one can stop you. You say, I’m going dancing. You just make the decision and you go.” Her voice wobbled a little. She looked very young to Blaine right then.

He smiled. “Anybody can.”

“Yeah.” She looked at the rain being pushed along the passenger’s side window. “Even us. We could go dancing.”

“We could. I like dancing.”

“I like it, too. It’s better than dying.”

The keening from the engine had gotten worse—like an animal caught in a cruel trap, screaming in pain. The wipers squeaked. The steering column made an electrical *zap* sound and smelled like hot metal.

“Blaine, can we go to San Francisco? I think my mom lives there.”

“We could go down there,” he said. “There’s nothing stopping us. San Francisco’s better than dying.”

“I think I need some help.” She slid over and put her head on his shoulder. “Can we stay there for a while?”

He said yes, okay, if that’s what she wanted.

“Yes,” she said. “And I want to go dancing someplace like normal people.”

Blaine thought about it. Normal might be good. They could try normal. So he said he might like that, too. The night was almost over. The bonelight had faded back to the drug world, the world of the dead, the lost, the dreaming. Ahead there was only sunrise and the mad dance of the sober, daylit world.

Lucy's Train

By Dina Katnelson

The music lesson is an hour long. Lucy's mother is sitting straight-backed and her fingers move up and down their old piano. It stands in the light of the living room window and Lucy is watching her mother play, sunlit and swaying with her music. The notes jump and tremble. They cascade and Lucy wants to hold them as her mother does, to toss them about the room in wild bursts and reel them in softly. But now her bum is sore on the wooden bench. Her own fingers are slow to learn; their notes strike sharp and ugly. Outside, Peter has gotten a new bike for his birthday, a two-wheeler, and Lucy watches him struggle to mount it on the sidewalk in front of his house. She watches him swing one stubby leg over and lift himself into the seat, his knuckles white on the dark blue handlebars.

"Lucille! Are you paying attention?"

Her mother's voice, how did it sound? Did it carry at a higher pitch then, in her younger years? Had it been musical, a sing-song voice, or had it already grown into the rough, low tones of her mother's last years? Lucy couldn't recall, couldn't fill the gap in her memory. She remembered the blue handlebars, the wooden piano, the slanted sunlight.

Lucy opened her eyes.

The North-bound train hurtled into her line of vision, and she took a step back on the platform. The doors opened to a stream of commuters bumping past, and she squeezed her way inside. She found a seat next to a dozing man in a crumpled business suit, her eyes falling on the window, on the ochre-lit sky. The sun hung low enough to

brush the brink of evening. She heard the mechanical sounds of the train starting up again, the floor humming and the plastic seat vibrating beneath her. She wiggled her toes inside the hot confines of her shoes. Remnants of the office clung to her brain – an early meeting with Wyatt, neat rows of Post-its lined up like army men on the left side of her desk. Lucy sighed, scratching her hosiery.

The train platform shrank into the distance. Sunlight blazed in her eyes and bounced off glass, bringing out the dusty rain stains. The train stopped again, and students crowded inside, jostling each other with bulky backpacks.

Lucy could see their school across the street. It was a brown building with small, square windows. There was a courtyard of matted gray grass and a winding chain-link fence. Cigarette butts floated in rain muck. Stragglers clustered in small groups, blowing smoke into each others' pink faces, laughing into the autumn air. Lucy got wind of a memory, smiled. The sun blinked, and-

-and it's snowing again. She and Annabelle Fisher walk ten brisk paces from the doors until they are both hugging the corner, beyond the school's gaping windows. It's cold. She pulls a pack of du Maurier from her bag, handing Annabelle a cigarette and taking one for herself. Annabelle holds hers like a pro. The first match sparks and dies in the wind.

"Oh damn. Sorry." Lucy tries again. Her face is numb, and her heart has a jittery, rapid beat. The second match catches.

Annabelle's cheeks are pale, splotched windblown red. She grins. "Lucy, how do I look?" She strikes a pose with her smoke dangling lazily from her long white fingers, puckers her lips and tosses her scarf over one shoulder like a runway model.

Lucy laughs, but she is distracted with her own cigarette. She tries to hold it like Annabelle does, as if it were a natural extension of her body. She inhales, but the taste

and texture of the thing are unclear. She never really got into smoking.

“So, you gonna be around next year?” Annabelle asks.

“Don’t know yet, maybe I’ll be traveling or something.” She is bouncing in place to keep warm, blinking away the too-bright sunlight. Their voices stutter in the cold. “Or maybe I’ll get a job somewhere, save up some cash. Hey, what if we go touring with the Dead? Wouldn’t that be so amazing?” She pauses for another drag. “Or, you know, maybe I’ll start college right away. That’s what my parents are pushing for. But, then I’m definitely leaving the city. I can’t stand living at home anymore. I can’t *stand* it.”

“You’re parents aren’t so bad.”

“You don’t even *know*.” Her eyes are wet in the wind, cheeks burnt raw. She looks down at the cigarette, twirls it. Her fingers are curiously alien in their numbness.

“Hey, Lucy-

Lucy opened her eyes. Someone was saying her name.

“Imagine running into you here, of all places!” Sandra Rees loomed over her, a loose smile pulling at her heavily made-up lips. Outside, the school had fallen beyond her sight. The school kids had dispersed throughout the train and stood hunched over their cell phones. “Sandra,” said Lucy. “Wow, it’s been a long time. It’s good to see you. I didn’t know you took the train?”

“Oh, well, I don’t normally, but Brady needed the car for his new job. I was just catching up on some errands, stopped by the mall. The fall sales are really good right now. I bought some things for the grandkids.”

Lucy tugged again at her hosiery. “Oh, really?” The train swayed to a stop, and she stood up to let the crumpled business man out. Sandra squeezed-in to take his place. Her thighs came flush against Lucy’s, her shopping bags piling onto both of their

laps.

“It’s so crowded!” she said.

“The rush is just getting started,” said Lucy. When was the last time she’d seen Sandra? Over a year ago. Maybe more.

“It must be later than I thought,” Sandra said. She shuffled her bags around, and something sharp prodded Lucy in the leg.

“The time always gets away from me too.” Lucy watched a skinny kid next to Sandra play with his iPhone. His backpack bobbed an inch from the other woman’s face. Sandra, unaware, had begun to talk about her kid’s new job. Lucy’s gaze wandered toward the window, and-

- it’s still snowing.

“Your parents aren’t bad,” Annabelle says. She has light brown hair. A red backpack.

Lucy is frowning. “You don’t even *know*. I feel like I’ve been in high school forever. I just wish time would go faster, you know? I wish I was in university right now. I wish I had my own place already.”

“Yeah? So Stephen could come over?” Annabelle grins, smooches the wind with a moist-sounding kiss.

“I’m serious, Anna. Everything is going to be different when we’re free of this...” She gestures generally at the red-brick building. Lucy leans against the fence and lets her head fall back, blowing smoke into the sky. It’s white and broad with a distant sun beyond the clouds. Looking up to watch the snowflakes rush down, Lucy can’t feel them on her face. “I’m so sick of wasting my time here. I want to start *living*.”

The wind roars and carries Annabelle’s reply far above the ro-oftops. Lucy

breathes in too deeply and the air tastes like bee stings. Her friend begins to laugh at something, and-

Lucy opened her eyes. The sunlight had shifted, blinding her momentarily. She forced herself to see Sandra sitting beside her, and she smiled awkwardly at this woman, her friend. Sandra's youngest boy, Brady, had been at daycare with Tom years ago. They met for coffee sometimes, saw each other at community events. These were not the friendships of her youth, Lucy thought. There was no heart in them. She checked her watch; her stop was still a long way off. Lucy's mouth felt dry, and she wished she'd remembered to buy a bottle of water before getting on the train. She had always been awful at making small talk. "The weather is very mild for fall, isn't it?" she said finally.

"Yes, it's wonderful!" Sandra said. "Remember last year, with all that hail?"

"Oh, it was horrible!"

Houses flashed by, strip malls and parking lots and empty fields, and then the train plunged underground. Muffled rock music escaped from somebody's headphones.

"So, Lucy, how is Tom these days?" Sandra asked. "It's too bad he and Brady lost touch."

Tom lived in Toronto. He was twenty-six now. He had Lucy's dark blond hair and his father's pale eyes. He had some of her restlessness too, but generally he was quiet and distant like Robert and looked like a young, lanky version of her husband. "He's still in Toronto, just started his apprenticeship."

"What kind of apprenticeship?" asked Sandra with her loose, lipsticky smile.

"He wants to be a welder. It's a construction job. It's a huge industry in Toronto right now."

"Oh yes," said Sandra, "Oh, I know. But I thought he wanted to be an artist or

something. Was it a painter? Didn't he go to art school?"

"He did for a few years, but he wants to be a welder now. That's probably for the best, unless he changes his mind again in a couple years." Lucy shrugged as if to say, "What can you do?" and Sandra kept on nodding, bobbing her head up and down like a mechanical toy.

A shrill pop song erupted between them, and Sandra jumped in her seat. "My phone!" she said, and began to rummage through her bags.

Lucy stared at her without really seeing her: Tom in Toronto, a grown man and still a little boy. Lucy remembered when he was just a little boy, a tiny person with fat knees and soft, wet eyes. Their first house, the house of Tom's childhood, had had two bedrooms and a kitchen that opened into the living room. It had a small yard where tulips grew every year and where Tommy would play in a plastic pool on the dried-up summer grass. They spent weeks renovating the place by themselves before moving in, terrible weeks that stretched on and on until it seemed the work would never be finished. But they did finish eventually, and they moved everything in without any trouble, and they lived there for twelve years.

The train stopped again and Sandra was talking quickly into her phone. A splash of sunlight warmed Lucy's face, and it felt-

- her skin feels heavy and loose, her hair always matted, always sweaty and in her eyes. The cellophane is drawn out like a lake over the pale blue carpeting, dotted with paint and strewn with stained rags, dirty brushes, paint-caked cans. Warm on bare feet from the sunshine, it crinkles and bunches, catches between her toes.

They shout at each other from the empty rooms and their voices echo off periwinkle walls. Soon it is too hot to yell. She makes Lemonade. She makes Iced Tea from powder in a tall can. She gives Tommy an orange Popsicle, a red Popsicle - he always

loved the cherry-flavoured ones best.

Now it's twilight and the room is made of grays. The summer air is blossom sweet, slippery warm. It clings to skin, to upper lips, to eyelashes. Robert is leaning in, hot breath pooling between them. And she is laughing.

They are cross-legged on a mattress with the comforter squashed into a corner. The floor is made of long bare wooden planks streaked blue with shadow. They listen for Tommy, alone in his new nursery, and hear Lucy's new wind chimes clinking in the late breeze. There are cards in chaos scattered between them. Later, they will discover the Queen of Hearts is missing. Right now they are in the middle of Crazy Eights. The cards won't lie still on the mattress, they twitch and spill over.

"Pick up two cards."

"Huh? Why?"

"I just put down the Seven of Clubs; that means you pick up two."

"You're thinking of Six, Robert. You do that with Sixes."

"Can't be." He pauses, his forehead bright with sweat. "This game is kind of stupid." He sounds like Tom, or Tom sounds like him. What happens next?

The cards: she throws them at his head and one managed to nick the side of his nose.

"Now, now. There's no need to get violent, Lucy." He is leaning in, reaching out, and the corner of his pink mouth twitches. Their shadows are long trembling things that stretch up and down the twilight hallway.

"Wait." Lucy listens. "Is that the baby?" They are quiet, breaths suspended.

But now it's morning, and the sun flashes.

Tommy is crawling on the bright prickling grass, falling and rolling with chubby arms thrown wide as if to grab the whole of the broad blue sky into his chest. She lifts

him high, high above her, and he is air in her arms. Sponge-skinned and noisy, he's overjoyed. She inhales deeply into his fine hair and the smell of sunscreen is dense in her nostrils, clinging to his jumpsuit.

"Tum-Tum-Tommy!"

The sun makes yellow streaks on her sandals, and it is the hottest summer in all her wide memory.

Her mother is there too. She comes every weekend and most weeknights to help with Tommy while they are painting and sanding and hauling the furniture around. She stands in the doorway and shouts advice about where to put the bookshelves, what direction to face the crib. She is smaller now and her hair is cut short, in a kind of dark-brown bob. She wants them to take her old piano. "For Tommy," she says. "Maybe I can teach him to play when he's older."

Her mother's voice. What does it sound like?

Lucy opened her eyes. They plunged deep into a tunnel and the lights flickered. She watched the high-beam underground lamps dart between patches of blackness, like days and nights whizzing past her window. She could see her own reflection in the dark glass. Had her voice changed in all that time? No. It had always been the same; she had always been the same.

When her mother was dying she did it slowly; her life did not snuff out like a candle flame. It seeped out gradually in little bits, seeped down somewhere into a faraway time until her present-day body was left grey, brittle and empty. Lucy knew this because her mother began to speak exclusively of the past. Later, when her voice became hoarse and inaudible, she said nothing at all. But Lucy could see that her eyes did not look out at her, or at Tom, or Robert, or at any of the people who came to sit by her bedside. Perhaps they had all faded and grown grey in her eyes, just as she was fading

in front of theirs. Perhaps it was the other faces, the ones lost in her mind, that grew more vibrant and pulled her slowly back to them.

“Sorry about that!” chirped Sandra. She was off the phone and gathering her bags in an effort to stand up. “My stop’s coming up. It was good running into you, Lucy. We should make plans to catch-up.”

“That sounds nice,” said Lucy, and her voice sounded strange, like it was coming from outside herself. She watched Sandra wave, then cross the threshold of the sliding doors. She saw her shrinking figure walk down the train platform until she disappeared entirely.

The train lurched forward. The crowd had thinned, and Lucy’s own stop was just down the line. Swaying gently with the motion of the train, she gazed out the window at the passing scenery, at the houses and people, the schools and the parents and the rolling sky, at the wind sweeping up the fall leaves into whirlwinds.

Her eyes struggled to linger on a particular object or face, but the train pushed on too quickly. The scenery blurred and vanished behind her, and all that was left was a shadow of the thing in her memory.

The Scene

H.V. Chao

You always see the same types at the scene. For months, it's been somewhere in the shipbreaking yards—the farangi riviera—most recently, a box boat with its gaping hold where moonlight sinks in shafts through blowtorch holes to catch raised arms, glow bracelets garish in the dark. By ten on Friday night, Connell's sent his ESL cram course of addled kids back to their nagging parents fresh off call-center shifts. He's grabbed dinner in the basement food court of the high-rise where he teaches and, in his souped-up polaambo, a seven-seater sharecab all his own, is on the coast road, Ahmedabad miles behind. His second year here, he and three roommates threw in for these wheels, and now that he's the only one in country, it's all his. The sea breeze brings the fuel reek of the breaking yards past the straw huts and the paddies. On the shoulder a pristine fridge waits for two men sharing a beer beneath a palm to resume their bearer's duties. The dark fronds stir above with sovereign indifference. Then, to either roadside, the salvage bazaar starts: a five mile corridor of sheds still busy, at this hour, with glare and shouts. It's like a tent settlement outside a shelled city, except the refugees are things: doors, dishwashers, pillows, bathtubs, fans, fire extinguishers, styrofoam, row on row of mauve chairs from a hundred staterooms. *Give us your huddled, your poor,* Connell thinks, and then, *this is what it will be like after the bomb.* These eager vendors, these men whom no clothes seem to fit. Their wifebeaters droop from bowed brown shoulders; their sweats balloon below the waist. A dented truck picks up a fleet of brand new used dishwashers. A rickshaw wallah pedals past a line of exercise bikes. Connell's a connoisseur of these exquisite incongruities, which the third world tosses up with such fecundity. Just beyond the bare bulbs, boys in men's shirts and house

slippers sprawl asleep on rubber cables in piles broad as toppled baobabs, ends snaking off rootlike into the dark. In the distance looms the graveyard of discarded ships. By chain link fences and at wooden booths, palms are greased and smiles flashed, gates opened for Connell's vehicle. In back, the padded cases of his speakers, mixer, CDJ clack as he jostles down the cinder drive.

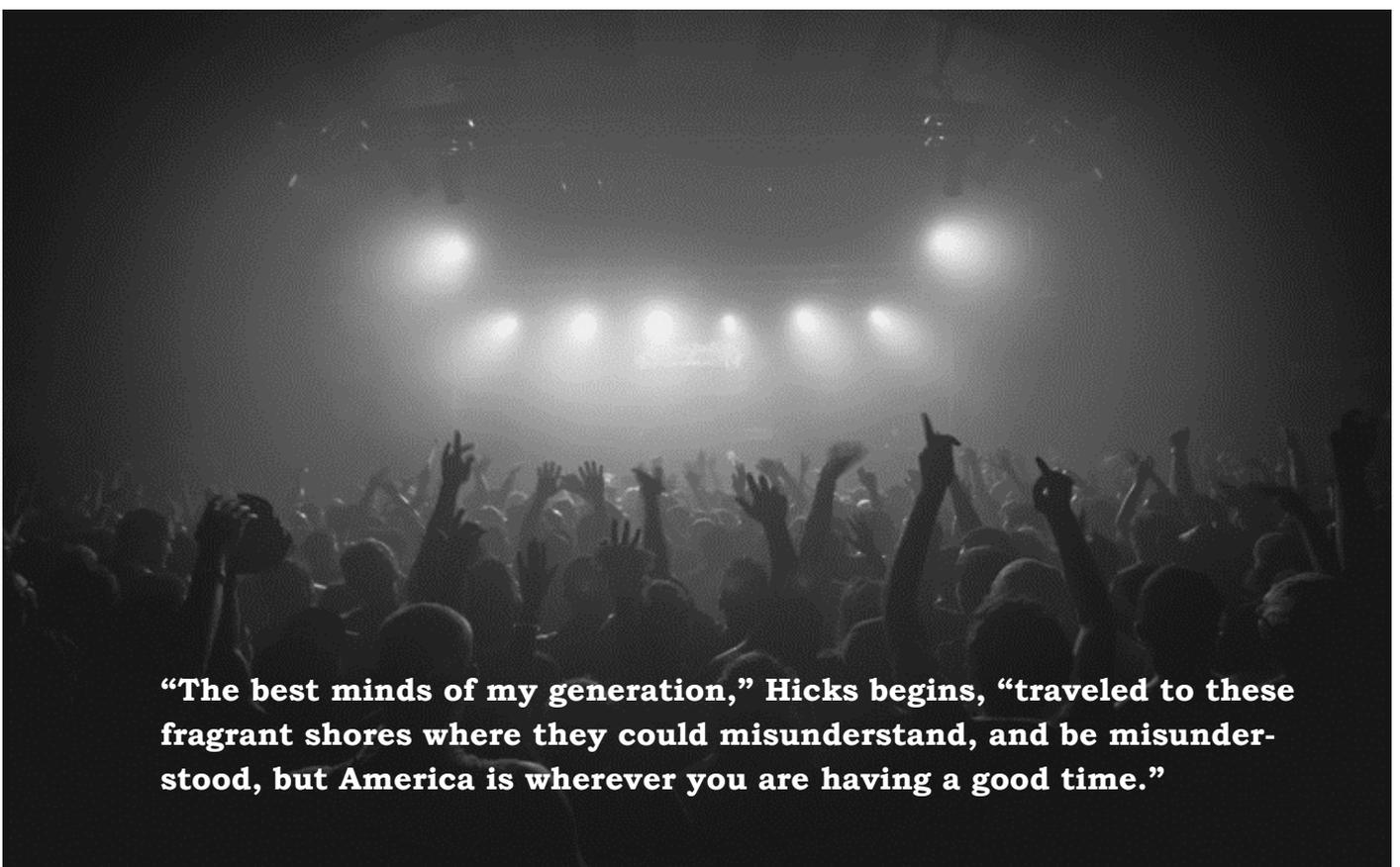
As usual, Julio is early, with his van of handpicked beauties. *Destination ¡Fiesta!*, reads the bumper sticker on his windshield; out tumble, too, the on-again off-again Sarah and Becker, and that grizzled fixture of the scene, Hicks. Hicks, junkie mascot, ersatz Kurtz of the expatriates, with his long hair and German army jacket. No one knows his story, or how long he's been in country. Becker says that on Hicks' torso those are *fishhook* scars, man; that back home he headlined in a circus of pain whose website has disappeared; that he came to India to learn how to pull a Volkswagen with a rope tied to his dick. Julio's heard nine different figures for how many girls he's laid by pretending to be Iggy Pop. Sarah's heard Becker whisper how one time, ransacking a hostel and jonesing for a fix, Hicks got his ass handed to him by a pair of Danish backpackers, one of whom was a five foot blonde. "Ladies," Julio says, "ladies." In lucite pumps and lamé miniskirts, this week's girls are milling on the greasy sand, between the massive tomb of the container ship and the crumbled headstone of the bow. He herds them up a stretch of gangplank that rises past the ballast tanks into the cavernous hold, Becker following with a generator, Sara bringing up the rear with strobes. Hicks breaks into a wild sprint inside, hurling LED throwies at the walls. Every night, another piece is missing from the rotting hulk—scar tissue from torch cutting along all the edges—and the scene pulls further back into the unlit depths. It won't be long before they have to move on down the shore and find another boat. Connell's setting up shop against the far bulkhead when a new girl wanders in: torn jeans, jutting chin, tomboy ponytail pulled through a baseball cap. Connell's seen her kind before. She's waiting on her LSAT scores, or is it MCAT? The year her parents ordered her to spend

here, getting to know her own roots, is—already? not even?—half over, and she’s afraid she’s getting too used to her surroundings, losing her ironic delectation for English, for outrageous Bollywoodiana, but worse yet, losing touch with the wonder of first contact. Where’s that thrilling alien feeling, that *xenosensation*, the assault and fascination of walking down a crowded street bewildered, without a filter for the noise, the smells, the color? She’s gone looking for that feeling everywhere... Now he watches as she glances around. The hold’s still empty. She bites her lip, like maybe she’s too early. “Doesn’t it remind you of—” Connell searches for some sculptor’s name another girl once dropped, “Richard Serra?” She says, “I’m Anjali.” He nods, and starts the music. He’s never gotten over the spooky acoustics.

Davie and Donnie show up, slap hands all around, shout out, “Hicks, you’re still kicking!”—the customary greeting. “Where’s Gunther?” they are asked. The lovers shrug, identical in white sportcoats and gold chains. He said he was getting a ride with Maria and Cunha, but when the Brazilians roll in, they say they waited for him half an hour at the place with the best jalebi—you know the one. They picture him, gangly in camos, plucking at his lip ring and checking his watch. Everyone laughs. From the edge of the hold, Anjali eyes a man wheeling his moped past the spotted barrels, the frayed ends of snapped steel cable. He’s caught a flat. “*O homem do terno,*” Maria observes. Another regular, always in a suit. Sometimes a woman will be perched behind him, sometimes not. He always wears a pale green shirt and never speaks. Over the beach shingled in scrap steel plate, crisscrossed by rivulets of leaked fuel, they come: Euro students, Ozzie expats, Japan teens with plaid skirts and day-glo fright wigs, pothead Canadian career English teachers like Connell himself. Headphones on, Connell scans the faces in the crowd. His first roommate’s ex-girlfriend, other wage slaves from the ESL academies, the Lithuanian au pair he met last month at karaoke, the bodybuilder, the liquor-pushing hostesses from the hookah dive, off-shift but still in company mini-skirts and tight tees that say Jack Daniels, Johnnie Walker. The flooring booms and

flexes to the bass, the thump and shuffle of a hundred feet at midnight. They come to breathe disease, to inhale ruin: paint flakes, heavy metals, liberated insulation. They come because they'll scrape themselves on frayed hull walls and curled steel shavings. They come because they know someday that science in a white gown will whisper in their ear that gentlest of annunciations, *you have a tumor*. They come because that day is too far off; they come because that day was yesterday. They come because cigarettes won't kill you fast enough; they come because just living will. They come to have some mute postfatalist longing consumed by bass pounding in the bulkheads and their bones. They come to dance.

Outside, Gujarati pushers slouch in twos and threes, lighting pipes for NGO interns, the wall behind a mural of rust and barnacle to the waterline above. Surfers paddle up in wetsuits, shake droplets from their frosted hair. Pushcart vendors from the breaking yards are selling beer from homemade coolers. By flashlight and by kerosene lamp, skewered meats glisten on a dented grill, turned over now and then with brand-new tongs from a galley. Men with bandaged heads, men missing hands, men with one



“The best minds of my generation,” Hicks begins, “traveled to these fragrant shores where they could misunderstand, and be misunderstood, but America is wherever you are having a good time.”

leg cut off at the knee, beg for change. "It's a freakin' sexual Disneyland," Hicks is saying to Cunha. Hicks was in Gulf One, Hicks was in the Peace Corps but went AWOL, the Red Cross flew him in for some disaster and he ripped them off: two thousand dollars of laptops and sedatives. An old lifeboat bobs in the high tide shallows, lights blinking, full of Filipinos in factory second cowboy shirts. The night is young and someone's already heaving off the side. "To America." Hicks raises his beer. "Fuck that," Cunha replies. A couch lands in the shallows of high tide with a magnificent splash. People look up. Davey and Donnie, tiny figures in white, wave from on deck way overhead.

In the hold, it smells of sweat. It smells like rapture. It smells like the last night of the world. Bits of glass wink from the floor, where a mirrorball gets kicked around. The man in the suit has, as usual, jacked his laptop to his projector. Ghostly men in clunky robot costumes trade blows on the numbered bulkheads. The Japanese teenagers bounce in sneakers with six-inch soles. Anjali sways alone, eyes closed, biding time. Connell beckons to her. "C'mon," he says, headphones round his shoulders, "I want to show you something cool."

It's almost silent in the sterncastle. The scene is only a distant throbbing in the ship's depths. "So what are you looking for?" asks Connell. He checks over his shoulder, shines his flashlight back, catches Anjali running her fingertips along the cool wall. "I'm looking... for the last word on youth," she says. They're in the museum of leftovers from suddenly deserted lives, farther than the salvagers have penetrated. In room after room, his flashlight plays across stopped clocks, unmade beds, chairs drawn out from desks. Old *Playboys* and, in refrigerators, unopened sodas. Connell corners her under a stairwell and leans in for a kiss. She hooks her fingers in the safety treads above her head and swings back, away from him. When she runs up the stairs into the dark, he's still standing there; her footfalls shower his hair with grit and dust through the perforated metal. The bridge is so old school, its lights and buttons like a 60s TV spaceship's, or a missile silo console, Connell thinks. "... 40,000 tons," Anjali is saying.

The ship's weight is pure abstraction, means nothing to him. They start heading back downstairs. "Tell me the truth," he says, "after all those the-day-after movies from grade school, all that prep and paranoia, aren't you kind of disappointed the world didn't end?" Anjali says, "I was two when the wall came down. When were you born?" In the dank gym, among the broken mirrors, she finally kisses him back.

They're surrounded by white armatures, black padding, stacks of numbered weights on pulleys: strange, purposeful evidence of a civilization quite suddenly consigned to exquisite irrelevance. "I'll tell you a secret you already know," he says, drawing her down onto a bench. "It doesn't matter what you do here. It never matters. Nothing you do here ever matters." It takes his breath away, the otherworldly beauty of these creatures beyond consequence, armored by their promised future, by that ordered progress mapped out by parents and admissions. As they fuck his mind expands; he wonders if, in some tiny eatery, he's ever checked himself out in a mirror originally from a ship's berth; he wonders if the rebar skeleton of his ratty apartment building is rolled from melted freighters. Outside, Hicks has torn his shirt off. He's howling at the stars. The man in the suit, pants rolled up around his shins, is wading with his laptop case in hand, entranced by the propeller: four times his height and, even with one blade mired in the sand, suave as calculus. Julio and the Brazilians are sitting on the waterlogged sofa like stranded conquistadors, like scions of the governors of Goa, passing around a massive blunt. "The best minds of my generation," Hicks begins, "traveled to these fragrant shores where they could misunderstand, and be misunderstood, but America is wherever you are having a good time." He pitches face first into the sand. "Fucking Gunther," Maria says. "He never showed up."

First light finds Connell staring his slashed tires. Fucking Filipinos, he thinks. He remembers when he could sleep anywhere and wake up unaching, kinks shaken out or

shrugged off, with no memory the night before and ready to do it all again. He turns around, looking out to sea. Hicks is snoring almost gently in the shallows. A shipbreaker in a hard hat and plaid shirt prods him with a gumboot, and he groans, rolls over. The man in the suit flips up his kickstand and guns his moped. Connell starts running, leaving his black cases in the sand. "Wait!" he shouts. "Wait!"

In the gray damp, the barest stirring of the palm fronds. The man in the suit weaves his moped stop-and-start through the morning bazaar, behind backfiring trucks and ox-drawn carts. Despite the oil slick, the black sand, the smell of fuel and first smoke rising from the steel rerolling mill, there's a cleanliness to dawn over the marsh that makes Connell feel an invalid. A stork takes flight over the silver water. In a few months he'll be going home to Vancouver. He'll see his high school friends and live in his parents' basement for his annual two months' vacation.

The traffic comes to a halt. The moped idles by the stall with rows of mauve chairs. They remind Connell of work, of the class he has to teach at noon, the chattering, expectant faces. He looks away. Down the beach, a ship has come in. It must have been there last night. It must be a few days old already. Connell squints as, high up on deck, two men hoist a goat bound by the legs. Another man bends over it. His arm moves, three quick flashes, and blood spurts from its throat.

Connell blinks. It takes a moment for the pieces to click, for Connell to recall a story Hicks once told. Tradition, Hicks had said, windmilling his arms, then they butcher it and give the meat to the first wave of men in, the cutters. On deck, the men are showering the blood about to bless every part of the ship. Connell looks away. His eyes meet those of a boy sitting in the front row of chairs, watching. The boy wears a white shirt that reaches to his knees. His dark eyes are unkind to Connell; they say, *tourist*.

Soon

By Patricia L. Morris

“I was happiest on the cruise. I told stories —fairy tales for grownups. I swam. Even rescued the Captain’s watch from the bottom of the pool.” Her shoulders slide as if the weight of wings pull them back. “Later, after my expiry date, the Captain wouldn’t help. He puffed and puffed on his cigar. He said it was because I beat his boss in a chess game.” Snowflakes stick on her plaid jacket and now her torso collapses in on itself and my body slumps in sync.

These are her first words in the seven weeks, six days, five hours and four-three minutes that I have known her. This pixyish octogenarian Ms. Lucy Gauge is the only one ever to leave the luxury liner *Luminous Liminality* alive, and now she is finally telling me about it. This must be progress towards my own cruise.

You see I’m on God’s hit list with pancreatic cancer. I’m not willing to die like my partner Art in a landlocked hospital with medical deities calling the shots. My only choice is to put something between me and death. Something proactive, something novel. Last night in bed Lucy’s grey hair unfolded in the bottom of my pyjama pocket affirming my wish to play my last game of pool on the over-the-top cruise for the terminally ill. In today’s snow luminescence I am a hopeful yet fearful lone wolf, still irritated at my tumour and uneasy about sea legs.

I ask, “Should I go for it?”

“Boris, you have one life.” She walks away with blue heron grace leaving bird-sized footprints in the snow.

Across the inlet, in this late morning light the North Shore mountains rise flat behind the encroaching cityscape. They make the city look like a pop-out postcard of

glass and concrete, a vertical village with twirling snowflakes. I catch up to Lucy and wave my cane making the mark of Zorro for comic relief.

She says, “The feasts delight all six senses.”

She has a sixth sense. Her account of the surreal cruise is what fiction is: it’s a life stamped with imagined meaning. There’s conflict, an impossible room tacked on a ship, and an extra moon. She can prepare me for the uncanny if anyone can.

Lucy coaxes my reluctant doctor to reveal my expiry date and sign the necessary papers. My brother orchestrates the purchase of my own stateroom and alters the itinerary to stop at *SGang Gwaay*, the remarkable heavenly-forested settlement off Canada’s west coast. I almost drowned there fifty years ago and secretly believe the place belongs to me. Lucy promises to meet me there on April 14, 2016, my expiry date.

Life delivers but with Mad Hatter urgency. By the time I finalized my affairs, I only have eight and a half weeks on the cruise.

Once aboard the *Luminous Liminality* in Australia life turns into full room service. I can scarcely fathom this situation steeped in the sea’s fragrance surrounded with my wants and other dying souls. Straightaway I’m attracted to Patrick’s proud spirit. He’s a clever forty-something black man who lived his entire adult years with the same expiry date as me. He tours me through the ship. In the massive aluminum kitchen he expands his arms to expose his well-defined pecs through an open shirt. In the glass elevator his solid butt grazes my squishy paunch. Poolside as he pours me a drink the promise in his voice when he says ‘soon’ makes me woozy. Such form and substance. He shows me the ropes as he doesn’t want me to fall prey to ‘*my Captain*’, who rules this floating kingdom. From what I have heard about the Captain from Lucy, my brother and now Patrick he seems like the sort of megalomaniac guy that I go out-of-

my-way to avoid.

On the deck the fresh winds are electric on my pale thin saggy skin. Spirited elders are pampered to death and the ocean dazzles cerulean. I flinch at the shattering sound of the ship's horn bellows as it signifies another exit.

At my first dinner at sea the Captain slinks into the room with a slimy expression. His diamond ring on his pinkie catches the candlelight, his fingers tuck a Cuban cigar into his right breast pocket. As he approaches our table he pulls a watch from his heart pocket, and positions himself on my right. I stand up and the fringe of his epaulette scrapes my nose. He sniffs and offers a cursory handclasp like a dog pat. "Welcome. Just a reminder —I'll need your luggage tag and passport ASAP."

The twist in his mouth suggests my hands are not up to snuff. I knead my skull with a twill of nervousness. He says, "It's good to eat light on your first night. Boris, isn't it? I leave you in this capable company." Every strand of his greasy hair is arranged to produce effect. The fringe on his broad shoulders leaves me with an unfilled impulse to prostrate. He strolls toward the distant corner where he greets his faithfuls including Patrick, at Poseidon's Table.

The first port-of-call is Papua New Guinea and I plan a canoe trip up the Sepik River. This adventure is a nod to my dead partner Art, who'd always wanted to visit the vanilla gardens of our insolvent dream. Organizing the tour I have my first tangle with the Captain. The fellow flexes his damn apparatus of power by limiting my trip's food ration. I go anyway. For three days my guide paddles me through the mud river. My mettle is tested by sleeping outside, bushwhacking through the jungle, and eating Maggi noodles morning, noon, and night. I'm clearly not the wimp Art pegged me. Still, in my heart of hearts I know I deserve the refusal my never-seen son and his mom dealt me.

On board my nephew messages that he will meet me at the upcoming stop with a birthday surprise. Enlivened, I invite Patrick to join the Bali excursion. The Captain

claims our passports have been “stolen” and we cannot leave the ship. I calibrate my response. Like the little engine that could, I think I can keep it together. My competitor is ‘the man who doesn’t die’ while all around him do.

When Patrick takes me into his stateroom after yet another memorial, the smell of his spicy body tickles me. Sitting on his bed, I swell under my chinos. White noise from the air conditioner whirls and he concentrates on his computer screen under the porthole. I get up, move to him; my penis brushes his left arm. Electricity transfers through my body. He swivels his desk chair around, and catches my swell in his hands. He unzips me. His tongue laps my shaft; his lips are a drawstring. Then he takes me out of his mouth and kisses up my belly. He puts his wide palm on my shoulder and squeezes. With a sigh he gets up. I can’t breathe. Why is he leaving? Is this the end?

He floats to the head and returns with a condom. I feign passive but on the inside I have overpowering bolts of pure hunger. This is appetite I haven’t felt in decades. I disrobe. He takes possession. His bold sucking mesmerizes my mind with rushing tones. His fingers greedy to fondle my stomach and grasp my thighs. There is no free will. Our dance slides into frantic flinging, dripping, pouring, and spattering, swirling blacks and blues Jackson Pollock with bits of white teeth, with the sound of a breaking shot...I explode.

The world slows. Now it is a sensuous De Kooning painting when I touch. Hands brush, stroke, and crush. He takes me with him into myself. Our bodies press and release, shove and squeeze. Genital kisses and finger fucks. Touch abstracts sight; body trumps mind. The gutters between us intoxicates. I unroll a condom on Patrick’s cock. He thrusts and rams me and I yelp with his dominance.

We lie satiated. Patrick exposes the netting of his hand. A dried riverbed sits at the extremity of this juicy man.

We ferret each other’s sexual grounds over the next couple of weeks. I under-

stand that I share him with the Captain alternate nights.

I don't want to picture what Patrick has to do in order for the Captain to allow us to visit my brother when the ship docks in Kolkata. Whatever it took, I'm the winner — rewarded with a precious visit to India and the chance to introduce my love to my brother.

When we return back to ship opulence Patrick goes directly to the Captain to appease him. The Captain gives him a package, and Patrick delivers my nephew's already-opened DVD to me. It shows that the birthday surprise was to have been a visit with my son. My son whom I have never laid eyes on. Now as I watch him on the screen over and over again, alone in my stateroom there is crushed glass in my chest. He's a vital twenty-seven year-old man who looks like his mom did at that age. My son wanted to see me and the Captain ruined it. I'll never see my legacy. I'd like to (*you fill in the blank*) him. But if I do anything to make him madder he'd bring my expiry date forward. I hide out in my room.

Now, Patrick spends most of his time with his Captain, checking in with me daily always promising he'll be back soon. The covetous Captain challenges Patrick to an April Fools Day pool game. There's an ultimatum. If the Captain wins he'll capsize the ship. If Patrick wins, the ship survives and we will die together as scheduled. His round ass leaves me salivating as he walks out my stateroom.

The wager gets me to decamp from my stateroom dressed in a rabbit costume. Why am I dressed as Presto the magician who looks like a rabbit? I was feeling so time crunched before I left for the cruise I brought a Mad Hatter costume for the masquerade ball. So I wear it. I surprise the twosome on the Captain's balcony at his pool table and luckily the Captain is so absorbed in his cigar and his game, he ignores me. My tail repositions the eight ball unnoticed. Patrick cues his winning shot. *Yahoo!* The good guys won.

Two weeks later my expiry date and destination *SGang Gwaay* arrive. When I wake up I tremble. The air is heavier. The sky duller. The Captain never wanted to travel this far north and fellow passengers fidget in the cold. With up to thirteen hours to go before my death, I want to take Patrick to meet Lucy but he is too ill for the Zodiac ride. I summon the energy to go meet her at my special place by myself.

Aged cedar totems, Lucy and her family welcome me as I land. It feels right to return to this landmark beach where I almost drowned. It is the authentic home of all those misappropriated totems and me. Time is tenseless. Something's different, my body sluggish and my mind precarious. But Lucy's here. She is willing to face her own dread of the Captain and revisit the *Luminous Liminality* to meet Patrick and attend my memorial.

In sixty minutes we're back on the ship. I uncouple from Lucy and search for Patrick. I can't find him. I can't locate him anywhere. I am frenzied. I become a tightrope walker who will fall if somebody screams. I panic and trip. The ship is an unending nightmare stretching the sea. Finally I unearth him on his balcony. He is naked, facedown, and dead on the lounge. A weight of stone drops into my heart and ripples. I seek out Lucy only to crumple in her arms. Patrick had the beauty to "totally eclipse" my liminal heart and an identical expiry date. Our end was to be beside each other. I want to lie down next to him.

My death coach speaks softly, "Patrick was ready. Let's turn his body and you can use your camera to say goodbye."

I spend hours inspecting him through the viewfinder. My skin feels how each part of his body felt against me. Each click is a celebration and a loss. When the Captain appears I ask, "Did he cry out for me?"

He is solemn, "Everyone is alone in the final Velcro rip."

I ask, "Were you with him?"

“It’s business.” The Captain looks down at the floor as he moves backwards toward the door. “My reward?” he raises his shoulders. “More work.”

Lucy approaches the Captain who waits at the door.

I ask, “Did Patrick know you?”

No answer. I insist, “Did he?”

Droplets roll down the Captain’s cheeks. “We were both there for my boss. These are the rules. No one wins.”

Lucy removes her reading glasses. “Captain, why’d you turn my friends against me?”

“That’s what you think?”

“After midnight you realized your mistake too late and then they started throwing things at me. I replayed it over and over. I was content on the ship. Ready to die. You created the scene. All of us in costume dancing.” Lucy says.

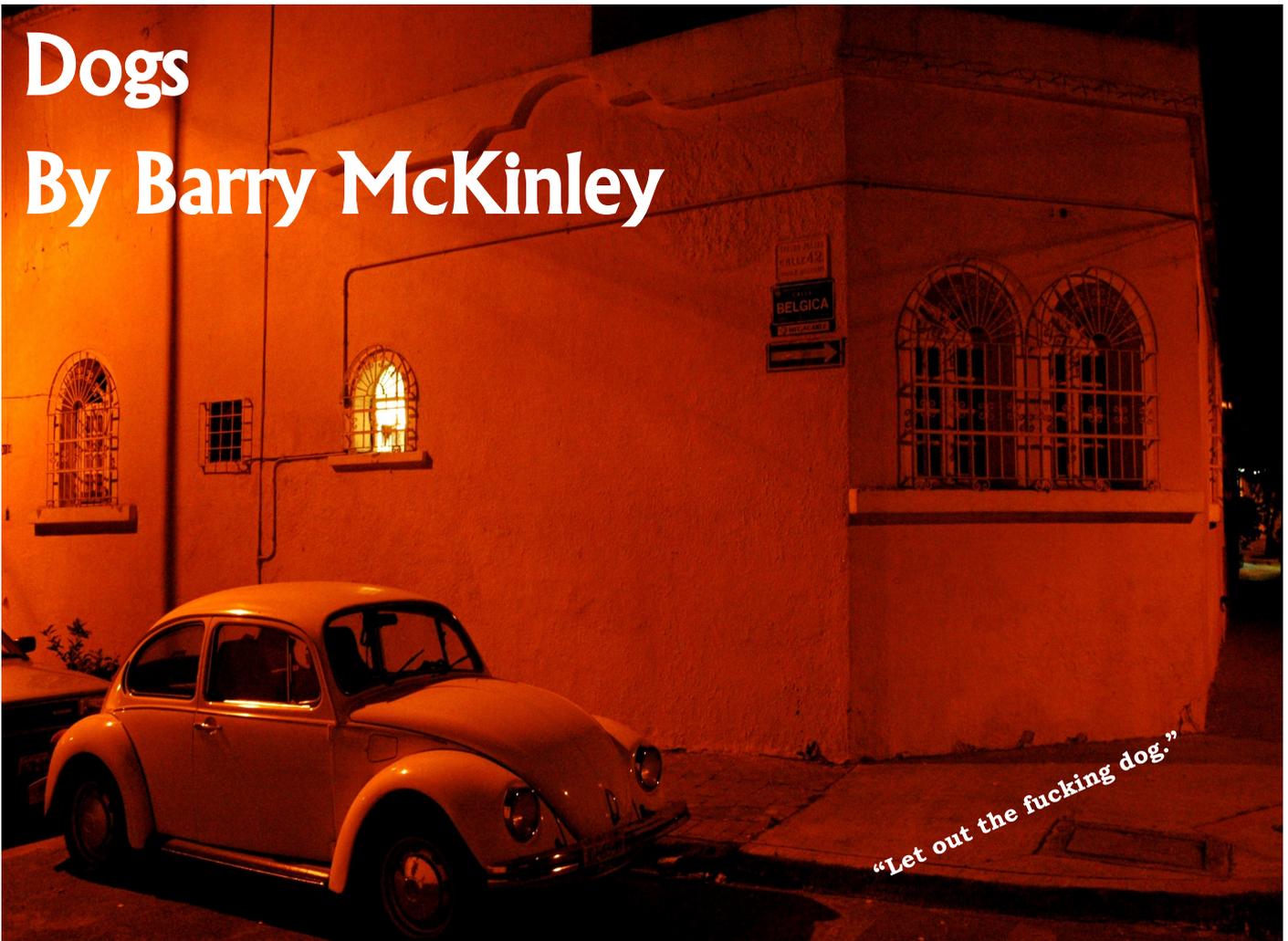
“Not true. I’m not director, or writer. I carry the suitcase.” His wink at Lucy insinuates, ‘I’ll see you in private.’

“It was because I won the chess game, wasn’t it?”

His eyes shine, “Take your time.” My throat tightens.

“You’re here for us?” Lucy asks the question that I couldn’t.

The Captain looks at Patrick, presses his thumb to his watch, glances at the message, and murmurs, “Soon, very soon.” I remember Patrick’s first smooth ‘soon’ with our first drink together.



London, 1979.

Three years ago, Nicky D'Arcy was in a seminary. There are different accounts as to why he never made it to holy orders, but the one I like the best is the one he dispenses himself:

“I broke a blackboard over a priest’s back.”

“Why?”

“Because I liked the sound it made”.

Everything about Nicky D'Arcy is two sizes too big. His hair is a wild mane; a rope unravelled and dipped in teak oil. The gold hoop earrings swinging from his lobes are heavier than stirrups. His shoulders are wider than doorways, and the doorknobs themselves get lost in his fist. Plus, he’s crazy. It’s like you took two madmen and rolled them into one. It shines in his eyes when he swaggers on the King’s Road or Ox-

ford Street. It cuts a path through pedestrians. It stops traffic when he crosses, so he never has to break his stride.

Nicky travels with an associate known as The Madra, a low voltage hippy who soaks up porter like a man-sized sponge. Nicky and The Madra commute regularly to Berlin, Paris and Amsterdam, but they never appear in public bearing luggage. Their movements are secret. They sleep in the long grass or crash in a houseboat squat on the Amstel River. They are dealers of dangerous substances.

By arrangement, I meet them in a small pub in Fulham. Three middle-aged men, illuminated like Apollo controllers at Cape Canaveral, sit at the bar and watch television. We take our drinks to the lounge area where a video game flicks a square dot against a wall of bricks; it's like watching sperm attacking an ovum. We sit in an alcove, beneath a framed Union Jack inscribed "To Gerry the Landlord OC, from the boys of 1st Para."

The Madra keeps looking at his watch

"We have a midnight bus to catch," Nicky asks me, probably in jest, whether I would like to join them on their travails, but I tell him I would prefer to sleep on a mattress stuffed with live rats, which, come to think of it, is probably what you would get in a Dutch riverboat.

A packet of Dum tobacco is produced and Nicky rolls a massive cigarette. He offers me the packet, but I decline; if I wanted to pick tobacco off my tongue, I'd eat it with a spoon. The conversation, mostly conducted by The Madra, is largely about people back home in Ireland, stragglers and misfits, pricks in the bramble bush of life.

"You remember Big Dermot?" asks The Madra, "He rode his bike into the river. He thought he could cycle on water. It was a Jesus thing."

"Even Jesus didn't try it on a bicycle," I reply.

The Madra drones on for a while, and then falls obstinately silent. He goes to the juke-box and lights it up with a ten-penny piece; The House of the Rising Sun bawls out from the big speaker behind the metal grille.

“I love this song,” he says.

The whine of the Vox Continental and Eric Burdon’s immensely annoying squeal combine and fill the bar with an echo of falsetto regret. The Madra plays imaginary piano keys on the beer-wet table and the three men on their stools swivel as one to show disapproval. Halfway through the first wailing chorus, Gerry the Landlord comes out from behind the counter, reaches to the back of the machine and turns down the volume.

Way down.

“I was listening to that,” says The Madra.

“There are men here at the counter,” says Gerry the Landlord, returning to his spot behind the taps. “Men!”

I look to the three men at the bar and realise something I should have caught before; they are all ex-soldiers, as is Gerry the Landlord.

Nicky throws a massive, evil smile in Gerry the Landlords direction, and then produces a brown pill bottle from the flapped pocket of his Wrangler jacket.

“Take a free sample,” he says, “and pass it back.”

The bottle is old and discoloured; the name of the original patient and pharmacy scratched away. Benzedrine from the 1950’s, antique narcotics, I take two pills and swallow.

The Madra talks about a cat he owned called Fur Suit, an animal the size of a small stuffed sofa, with eyes as big as saucers. “The women cuddled him first, and then they cuddled me. I was nothing without that cat. He got me into bed with ladies who wouldn’t have normally touched me.”

“A pussy-magnet,” I suggest.

The Madra laughs.

“You’re a dry bastard,” he says, slapping me on the knee.

The Queen appears on the TV screen, reading a prepared speech, her lips tremble but we pay her no attention. Then The Madra barks: “Raaaaaawruff!”

I’ve heard he does this sometimes. I’ve heard he just can’t help himself.

Gerry the Landlord bangs a glass ashtray on the counter.

“Raaaaaawruff!” goes The Madra.

Gerry the Landlord looks to his television Queen and promises loyal protection. The three ex-soldiers turn on their stools and sizzle like revolving chunks of kebab meat, but they are no longer young, no longer the regimented boys from Aden and Suez; they have become nothing more than mechanisms for sucking the cancer out of un-tipped cigarettes. Only in their dreams will they ever fight again.

The TV cuts to wreckage on an Irish beach. A plum chap from the BBC talks about a bomb in Sligo and I hear the name Mountbatten mentioned. Cut to the Queen, a tear in her eye for the loss of her cousin.

“Raaaaaawruff!” shouts The Madra, and he almost seems embarrassed by the fact he can’t stop.

Gerry the Landlord approaches, enraged.

“You three...Time to leave”.

“It isn’t closing time,” says The Madra.

“For you, it is.”

Ice forms around Nicky’s eyes; he looks at Gerry the Landlord and says, “We’re not going anywhere.”

“You’re leaving here, now.”

Nicky’s eyes glitter in amusement. The three old soldiers inflate themselves inside their Oxfam jackets, but all they really want is peace in our time.

“I’m going to count to three.”

“Don’t do that,” Nicky says, “you’ll just look foolish when we’re still here.”

“Think you’re funny, do you mate?”

Back in Ireland, I once saw Nicky D’Arcy fight and it was like watching a ballet where people got hurt. The pub was a long, windowless cavern, painted black and lit with ultra violet lights; the punters huddled around low tables, looking like ghosts with tuberculosis. Voices were raised, stools overturned and large brown bottles swept from a table. A rugby scrum rumbled on the floor, gobbling recruits and spitting out the wounded. For a moment, it hovered, then lurched and collapsed. Only Nicky D’Arcy emerged unscathed from the ruck. He rose triumphantly, shaking off the twisted confusion of damaged humanity. He waved a fist in the air and roared, “I’m going to kill...”

And every man around him paused in fear, expecting to hear his name called, but Nicky D’Arcy was neither selective nor specific. He finished his sentence with the word “somebody!” With that, he dived into the trembling mass of bodies and smacked at everything that moved.

“Right,” says Gerry the Landlord. “Get out of here, bloody NOW!”

The Madra looks nervous, but Nicky puts his hands behind his head, like a man preparing for slumber. To reinforce the image, he leans back and closes his eyes.

Give him a blanket; we might be here for the night.

“Right,” says Gerry the Landlord, “You wouldn’t do it the easy way...”

He goes to a door on the closed-in staircase, bangs it with his fist and in the upstairs distance something stirs: Not human, something claw footed and heavy boned. It moves quickly over linoleum flooring and, when it reaches the stairs, comes tumbling down like a careless delivery of lumber. It hurls itself against the door, scratching and yelping. Gerry the Landlord turns to us; a lusty beam of victory lights up his face.

“You want a dog? I’ll give you a dog.”

The claws rip at the woodwork, pulling nails and knots from the planking.

The Queen puts down her prepared speech, crumples it into a ball and tosses it over her shoulder. This may be another one of those dire moments, when British firepower triumphs over the pure guts of a lesser nation. This might be the battles of Crécy, Blenheim and Waterloo, rolled into one.

Nicky opens his eyes and something dangerous awakens, something deadly, instantly recognized by the old soldiers. The dog barking intensifies. Gerry the Landlord puts his hand on the old brass knob and starts to twist. The howling grows louder.

“Will you leave, or must we let out the dog?” purrs the Queen.

Nicky stands, slowly, and Gerry the Landlord is surprised by the height, width and sheer muscle of this Pat, this Psycho-Pat. His hand trembles on the knob as he turns it another few degrees. Nicky reaches down, plucks the three-legged stool from the floor and holds it up by one leg. He looks straight through Gerry and into the Queen’s watery eyes and says, “Let out the fucking dog.”

“LET-OUT-THE-FUCKING-DOG!”

Suddenly, I love this giant of a man. Suddenly, eight hundred years of calamitous and humiliating defeats are wiped from the slate of history. It does not matter what happened under Cromwell’s whip or Cornwallis’s hoof, this is a victory of historic

proportion.

In Selma, Alabama, it was “We shall overcome.” For the French it was “liberté, égalité, fraternité”; the Cubans, “La lucha continua” and the Israelis, “Kadima!” Finally, the Irish have their own battle cry, an instantly recognizable call to arms.

“Let out the fucking dog.”

Gerry the Landlord drops his hand from the doorknob in abject defeat, and the three old military kit bags turn away, back towards the carnage on the television. The Queen looks vanquished; not even God can save her. We hold our ground. Nicky passes around the pack of Drum tobacco and we all roll up and luxuriate in the thick smoke of the battlefield. We relax and let the clock tick away until closing time. Then, on the stroke of eleven, we stand. We march towards the exit with heads held high. We pause once, at the Bal-Ami Jukebox, and The Madra inserts another ten-penny piece. He reaches behind the machine and turns up the volume. Way up.

We leave. The air outside is warm and muggy. I pocket the pill bottle and slip a ten-pound note into Nicky’s massive hand. The darkness separates us. A bus is waiting somewhere to take them through listless hours and heaving sea, into the heart of a foreign land. I should go with them, I should, but something keeps me rooted here, in this moment, in this city, in this England. I feel my lips moving and I realise I am singing along to the music coming from inside the pub.

...It’s been the ruin of many a poor

And God, I know

I’m one.

Rush

by Bear Weiter

The shit's called G.Rush, and it's the bomb—a rush of euphoria that slowly slips into a mellow transcendence. The period's silent I guess, but everyone knows it's there. Like gee, watch my life rush away from me. It's a drug, a glittering dust you inhale, and the more often you do it, the longer the rush lasts. They say eventually you don't have to do it at all, it just takes over, and we all rush to get there as soon as we can.

Except, it's not a drug at all. It's a neurostim nanotech cerebral cortex hugger. Something like that. Just starting to show up in the clubs.

Not that I knew any of that when I first sought it out. Had I known, I would have said *no fucking way*.

I'm a guy that's done too much and been busted too often. When the cops offered to make the worst disappear if I'd go undercover—sniff it out so to speak, find the guys behind the petty dealers, see what they're up to, that kind of thing—I said sure.

I was working on that, and then I was just working on having fun, and now all I want is more G.Rush.

See, you forget yourself, and everything else, when you're on it.

He called himself Jones, though no one knew if it was a first or last name—probably neither. He wore a black and white plaid vest over some colored shirt; the shirt color would change, but never the vest, nor the fedora with the same plaid band around it. Besides the loud clothes the guy looked a little run down—hollow eyes, scruffy face, some scabs on his knuckles. But he was the man at the club, and you

had to seek him out.

I did just that.

He put the pill in the palm of my hand, gentle like it could break easily. It was a small thing, slightly transparent, a capsule that you could pull apart. One half of the pill was blue, the other red.

“What’s this,” I asked, “a Matrix joke?” I had to shout over the thumping bass of the club music.

He ignored that. “Open it, and quickly inhale what comes out. But not here, someplace by yourself.”

“Where’s it come from?” I left it vague, just to see where it might lead.

He gave me a dull look, then shrugged.

Drugs and I have a history, but I never cared for the ones that left me out of control. Happy, yeah. Running a thousand miles an hour, you bet. But I got wiggy when it came to control. I didn’t like falling-down drunk. I had to be in charge, free, which was probably why I was here—jail time would have definitely made me wiggy.

“So,” I said, bouncing the thing in my palm, “how much?”

He grabbed my hand, stopping the bouncing. “Nothing.”

“Nothing as in ‘you’re cool, no charge’ or more like ‘the first taste is free, but then it costs you?’” I asked.

He shrugged again—meaning, the latter.

I nodded and patted him on the arm. I had been given some cash just in case, and I now considered that money mine. Get high and be paid for it? Who’s going to say no to that?

My friend lingered near the bathroom across the hall—we called him Sonic, be-

cause of the hair. He had hooked me up with Jones, whom he had dealt with before, but kept his distance now. *Everyone has to ask for themselves*, Sonic had said. He had done just that before me, and I could see his impatience.

He twitched his head toward the bathroom as I neared—in *here* the gesture said. Back here in the john, the music melted down to the bass beat, a regular *thump thump thump* that you could talk over. We entered the bathroom; it was still early, so only a small menagerie of guys, gals, and others lingered or groped each other. I almost followed Sonic into a stall before he stuck his hand out. “Grab your own.”

I took the one next to his. Sonic gave directions over the thin metal wall. “Cup your hands together, and carefully pull it part. Spill the contents into your cupped hands and get that up to your face quick. You want to inhale it all.”

The pill had remained cool and smooth in my hand, not tacky at all even though my palm was damp with sweat. This was no gelatin capsule—plastic. I heard a deep breath next to me, like inhaling before getting to a graveyard, a long pause, then a slow deflating sigh. I think he said *yeah* while breathing out. I didn’t have to take it, my narc contact had said so—just get in good with the dealer, try to find the next guy up on the chain. But I did have it here, and I didn’t have to do any more if I didn’t like it. There was no cost to me...

I pulled it apart like Sonic had instructed. I expected powder, or fine pellets, but only a fine fog emerged—almost colorless, with glints of bronze winking in and out of existence. Covering my nose and mouth, I sucked deeply.

As it rolled through my nose it danced along each hair, vibrating from the tip down into the follicle like tiny swarms of butterflies. It caressed my sinuses, the back of my throat, and continued spreading from there. It smelled floral, tasted sweet, and left just the faintest metallic tinge on my tongue. Even before I had finishing breathing in, swirling happiness coursed over me. I kept inhaling, deeper, deeper, seeking out every

last bit clinging to my palms. When I could take no more I held it, squeezing my face tight to keep it in. I don't know if it mattered, if it was like a bong hit or something, but I followed Sonic's lead. Besides, it tasted too good to let out any sooner than needed.

Finally my breath leaked out in wheezy gasps. There was no fog, no glints, not even a hint of taste. I had taken it all in, and it was mine.

Sonic spoke from outside the stall door. "You do it yet?" His words piped directly into my brain. He knocked on the door—thump thump thump—beating in time with the music, interlacing into the beating of my heart.

"Yeah," I said, though maybe it was more like his *yeah*, sighed out, agreeing to whatever was asked. Because it was good, is good, everything shines, and everything is worth doing.

We're on the dance floor, though I don't remember going there, nor ever really dancing. But we are here, bouncing and writhing with the best music I've ever heard, like my brain's part of the synthesizers, turning my own thoughts to music. Everything glitters, shines with an inner life. The girls are plentiful, with weightless boobs, skirts flying high, and they laugh at anything I say. Not that they can hear me, nor I them. But it doesn't matter, because we dance, then we don't, now walking one of the girls along a street, our skin sending signals through our clenched hands, now stripping her out of the clothes in a bedroom that's not mine, now fucking to a *thump thump thump* of music that I'm not sure I actually hear, but it doesn't matter because it's all good, perfect, and everything shines.

I woke early, with the nameless girl sprawled out naked next to me. Morning is never flattering, but this girl is far different than I remember. Before I sound like a dick, let's just say the details don't matter—and it's not the first time anyway. Hind-sight can be a picky bastard, and without further tainting my memory of a great night

I got the hell out of there.

We repeated this nightly—the club, the dancing, the girls—always with G.Rush, always getting one capsule at a time. Jones wouldn't give any more out, even when I offered money. I didn't tell my narc it was free, and got another wad of cash for more. I offered the whole chunk of bills, but Jones just shook his head—one dose at a time, only after asking. And I saw plenty of others being turned away, so I wasn't going to complain.

Time between the nights and days fragment—the nights are all about the moment, while the days become efforts at looking back. There's gaps, both between these two time periods as well as during each. I sleep longer, I wake more often—even when I was not sleeping—but it's all magical and sparkling, and even if the girls don't look the same in the morning they're abundant and willing and all I want is more.

Sonic is right there with me, floating on G.Rush, dancing into the night, disappearing with a girl. I catch glimpses of his own black outs, moments when his eyes glaze over, and I wonder if this is what my gaps look like.

I don't really care, or maybe I'm unable to.

I drift awake, my mouth is already moving, saying “no no, it's cool man.” I'm sitting at my kitchen table, with a bunch of trash and food waste before me. Standing on the other side of the table is Officer Capeletti, the narc cop I report to, with his partner looking through my stuff in the other room. “I...uh...” What was I saying?

“Go on,” Capeletti says, like I had been making sense.

“What were we talking about?” I ask.

He grabs the back of the chair nearest him and gets down in my face. “Are you fucking high right now?” He's a big guy, but soft, and I'm bigger. I could take him, except fighting's not my thing, and I know there's nothing to win against a cop. I stay in

my seat.

“No, I’m good,” I say. *I’ve been fucking good for weeks*, I think, but I keep that to myself.

His partner pulls out the roll of cash from the box I keep by the TV. He shines a black light on the bills as he flips through them, then looks at both of us. “It’s ours,” he says.

Capeletti sighs, lets the chair fall to the ground. “If you don’t pay, we can’t trace it.” He looks back at his partner. “Take it all, he doesn’t need it.”

I don’t remember buying anything recently, and I’m still getting my shit for free so what do I care.

“Here,” Capeletti says, putting a small black disc on the table—a tracker, a snitch. “One side’s sticky, just peel the backing off. Get it on your dealer, his car, in a pocket, something. Do that and you can remain free for a while longer.”

I might have agreed, but I’m back in the club, hours—or days—later. Sonic’s talking out of the side of his mouth, as if the other side of him has fully succumbed. I don’t hear him, I don’t hear anything at all besides the pounding bass, but I nod just the same.

We all nod, agreeing to whatever might have been said. It never matters anyway, does it?

Sonic disappears, but I barely notice. My moments of awareness are few now, like bronze glints winking in and out of existence, random experiences flashing on my personal big screen. Dancing, walking, fucking, eating, and always more G.Rush.

Jones can’t be found, and this I do notice. Later, I find Sonic in the back halls, wearing the plaid vest and fedora.

“Sonic, you’re dealing now?” I ask.

“Jones,” he says, like I’m meeting him for the first time.

“Okay,” I say, and ask for one. He drops it in my hand, and I lean in closer. “Any more for a buddy?” I ask.

No smile, no nodding. He gives me the same dull look as the previous Jones.

Whatever. Like everything else, I don’t care. I got my G.Rush. I pat him on the back and head for the bathroom.

In front of the mirror, I see myself for the first time in...I don’t know. I look gaunt for one, but not bad—leaner in certain ways. In others, I’ve definitely filled out. Like I said, I’m a big guy, and I’ve never been fat but now I’m toned. Muscles have defined themselves in places I can see—my neck, forearms—as if I’ve been hitting the gym with intensity. I have no memory of this, but that means little now. My eyes are clear, no redness anywhere. If I’m a junkie, I wear it well.

But am I a junkie? I’m not taking more, and maybe even less than I had. If, you know, I could remember much. And what do I care about my memory anyway? If things were so great before I wouldn’t be doing this for the cops. As far as I can tell, things are better now—I hear the music of the club nonstop, and I’ve never been happier. Yeah, okay, maybe I’m a bit out of control, but there isn’t that wiggy feeling I’d get if it was bad. At least I’m not sticking up the corner store for one more hit, nor am I sucking dick...

Except...

I wake, behind a girl, pounding like there’s no tomorrow. She’s hyper blonde, with a spiked collar around her neck and black leather cuffs around her wrists, chained to the bed posts. She’s moaning like a porn star. Someone behind me says “I told you he was good,” but it all goes away before I can turn around.

I wake just as my fist slams into someone's face. I feel nothing. The guy—I don't know who he is—puts his hands up, pleading through gurgles of blood. I hesitate, with a small part of me hoping this is just a dream. But mostly I hear the *thump thump thump* of the club music, or maybe it's my blood pulsing in my ear drum, and before I know how it ends it all fades to black.

All you remember are the moments of waking, and the surprises: hands covered in sticky red, or burnt hair, or no clothes. There's also the locations: under a bridge, in a bathtub, or the trunk of a car. But in truth nothing's really a surprise because you don't have the capacity for it—it's just a thing that somehow has to do with you, if you only cared to figure it out, or really cared at all.

I wake, standing, a gun in my outstretched hands. Booming words yell things like “stay down” and “faster with the money” and “shut the fuck up!” although the only voice I hear is my own. All the while, the bass kick thumps in my ears, and I fall back into the groove.

The next time I wake, my cock's in one hand and someone else's is in my other. A few more naked people squirm nearby, making squelchy or slurpy sounds. Several others stand around us, either holding a camera or a mic. Someone says “why's he stopping?” but all I can think of is my hair—it feels clumpy, matted, lopsided, and I wonder when I last washed it.

And these brief flirts with lucidity become shorter each time.

My waking moments have become flashes of nightmare, short insane scenes with no beginning or ending. They're quickly forgotten, but...

Sonic's sitting against a car tire, unlocking the shiny cuffs around his wrists. The plaid vest is twisted awkwardly, and his hat is no where to be seen. Officer Capeletti and his partner sprawl on either side of him, red stains blooming on their clothing.

Smoke traces out of the matte black pistol in my hand, like the vapor of a freshly opened capsule. The slide is locked open and the magazine is empty. Sonic pulls a black disc from his vest pocket—the same tracker the cops had given me and, apparently, I had planted on Sonic.

No, *Jones*—his name is Jones.

I wake.

The shit's before me, the small blue-and-red capsule to break open and sniff up.

“Come on, Jonesy, this should be your last hit.”

I don't see the speaker, but I know they're talking to me. All I see are my hands, dirty and bruised, and in the middle of one palm the small touch of red and blue, the colors pulsing in time with the heart beat in my ears. Such a little thing, this capsule, this G.Rush, and he says I only need to take it once more. One more hit, no more wakey wakey—all party, all the time.

And then they own you for good.

If only I cared at all.

“Designated Staircase Number Two”

Sophie Monatte

Wilma Parker, born Arellano—pronounced ah-ray-YAH-no—is about to walk up the first step of the concrete staircase when a disparaging whistling sound makes her flinch, less a startle reflex than the expression of a dreadful anticipation. She stands still as beads of sweat run down the nape of her neck; just another June afternoon in Hong Kong—sweaty steamy sticky Hong Kong.

A sigh of despair fills her throat as she listens to drawling footsteps approaching behind her. Even though she reads it every day—well, she even dreams of it—her eyes are still masochistically drawn to the dauntingly large sign right next to her at the bottom of the stairs, *Designated staircase number one for regular People. Dogs and helpers, proceed to Designated staircase number two on the other side of the shopping plaza.* Even dogs are entitled to their uppercase letter.

Wilma glances at her watch, four minutes before the end of class. Her daughter Marie is frantically frog hopping in the Kids in Motion classroom.

The second longer whistle blast makes Wilma swivel around with resignation. She faces the security guard, a young Chinese man she has never seen before, with eyes so narrow they look like clam shells, waving his finger at her as if to say, *Nice try, lady!*

He spits his whistle in his right hand and tucks it inside his pants pocket. “Ma’am? Ma’am?” Where did the *d* vanish? “You go where?” He has the revengeful air of a scapegoat who’s been waiting since kindergarten for his turn to lash out. Well not today, young man! By now, Wilma has learnt her lesson: Never ever step out of the house without your Hong Kong identity card. Not when you’re Filipino, anyway.

“I’m going to Sunshine House. The preschool.” Wilma indicates the second floor of the building with a nod. “To pick up my daughter. Marie.” She adds in an exaggerated tone, “*Parker.*”

“OK, You go other staircase.” The guard extends his left arm in the direction of the plaza’s west wing. Five minutes walk. Five more to run up the stairs two by two and stride past the bakery selling the stale pineapple buns Marie devours in one bite, the local *cha chaan teng* restaurant, the foot massage place, then all the way through the suspicious-smelling Wellcome supermarket to finally access the school premises. There’s not enough time, yet Wilma can’t resolve to say it out loud. *I am not a helper.* She’s about to ask what’s wrong with this staircase when a sharp drilling sound coming from the back of the mall silences her. Hopefully they are building a *Designated staircase for Filipino-born women married to Western expatriates*; after all, it does happen occasionally.

Three minutes before the end of class. Marie collects her painting, a purple goofy-faced stegosaurus. She puts it carefully inside her schoolbag, her treasure, just as precious as Mommy’s diamond wedding ring.

Another wheatish-skinned woman dragging a wailing dog heavier than her on a leash walks towards the West wing, chatting animatedly on her cell phone in what sounds like an Indonesian dialect. The reddish-brown and white fur ball belongs more to Siberia than hot and humid Hong Kong judging by the distraught way its tongue is lolling out of its mouth. The woman’s gaze is fixed on Wilma and the guard. It’s unclear if her head is outrageously shaking at the injustice of the scene or at a *colleague’s* arrogant presumption.

“Ma’am. Please. You go number two staircase.” After each sentence the guard emits a kind of snorty grunt, a taste for savory phlegm or a lingering cold, it’s hard to tell.

“What number two staircase?” Wilma dares him to say it out loud. *The one for maids. You look like a maid.*

“Yes! Number two staircase,” he repeats. The man is an automated voice message system all by himself.

Wilma is only one floor below her daughter. Marie. Ends with a *e*, not a *a*. The guard reaches out, as if ready to grab her elbow and guide her in the right direction. Wilma doesn't budge, a freedom fighter.

“What's wrong with this staircase?” she asks.

Two minutes. Marie puts her shoes on by herself for the first time, smiling proudly at her teacher. The whole school is cheering.

The security guard remains silent, swaying on his heels. When Wilma turns towards the stairs, he starts anxiously looking in his pants pocket for his whistle, lost among a soft pack of menthol cigarettes, a mucus-soaked Kleenex, his latest Galaxy smartphone and an Octopus card with 4.60\$ credit remaining, twenty cents short of his bus ride home.

“I have the right to use this staircase,” she says.

He shakes his head. “You break law, I call police.”

She refrains from smiling upon hearing the grotesque threat. She refrains from smiling because it reminds her of childhood friends, those girls from her village, now here in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Taiwan, those girls not as blessed as Wilma, who would never laugh at such a warning. She thinks about Maggie, whose employers called the police when they discovered she was pregnant, sweet Maggie, who was immediately deported home after refusing to have an abortion. She thinks about Freya, who was accused wrongly of stealing a necklace, and was still immediately fired once the precious pearls were found, the whole situation making her employers feel un-

comfortable. She thinks about Nina, whose employers called the police when they discovered she was sending text messages and pictures of herself to the man she loved, God forbid! Silly Nina—behaving like a person.

“You break law?” the guard asks again.

“I am not breaking any law.”

A yellow stray dog approaches sniffing around, its eyes roaming over the ground, unconcerned. It pauses at the infamous sign, one leg up, a few drops of urine spurting against the pole, and then starts lazily climbing up the steps. Halfway through the staircase, the mongrel sits for a second as if worn-out from the hike, then slowly retraces its way back down the stairs and walks away in the direction it came from. As if the security guard suspected the dog’s disruption was in fact a diversion attempt orchestrated by Wilma, he takes a walkie-talkie out of his shirt’s pocket and with the voice of someone who’s been watching his share of law enforcement television shows, he starts speaking in Cantonese. Wilma makes up her own translation, “This is Staircase Number One. We have a situation here. A helper who refuses to proceed to the other wing.”

“I am not a helper,” she finally shouts in a quivering tone—rage, shame, a bit of both.

“You can prove?” He asks, his eyebrows teasingly wiggling at her.

“Is this a joke?” She raises her hands to her head, nervously shuffling along. How many times is she going to have to present her Hong Kong identity card, how many times? With an exacerbated sigh, she opens her designer purse, searching for her wallet. Her wallet? She did remind her helper to replace it inside her bag after tipping the delivery guy, right?

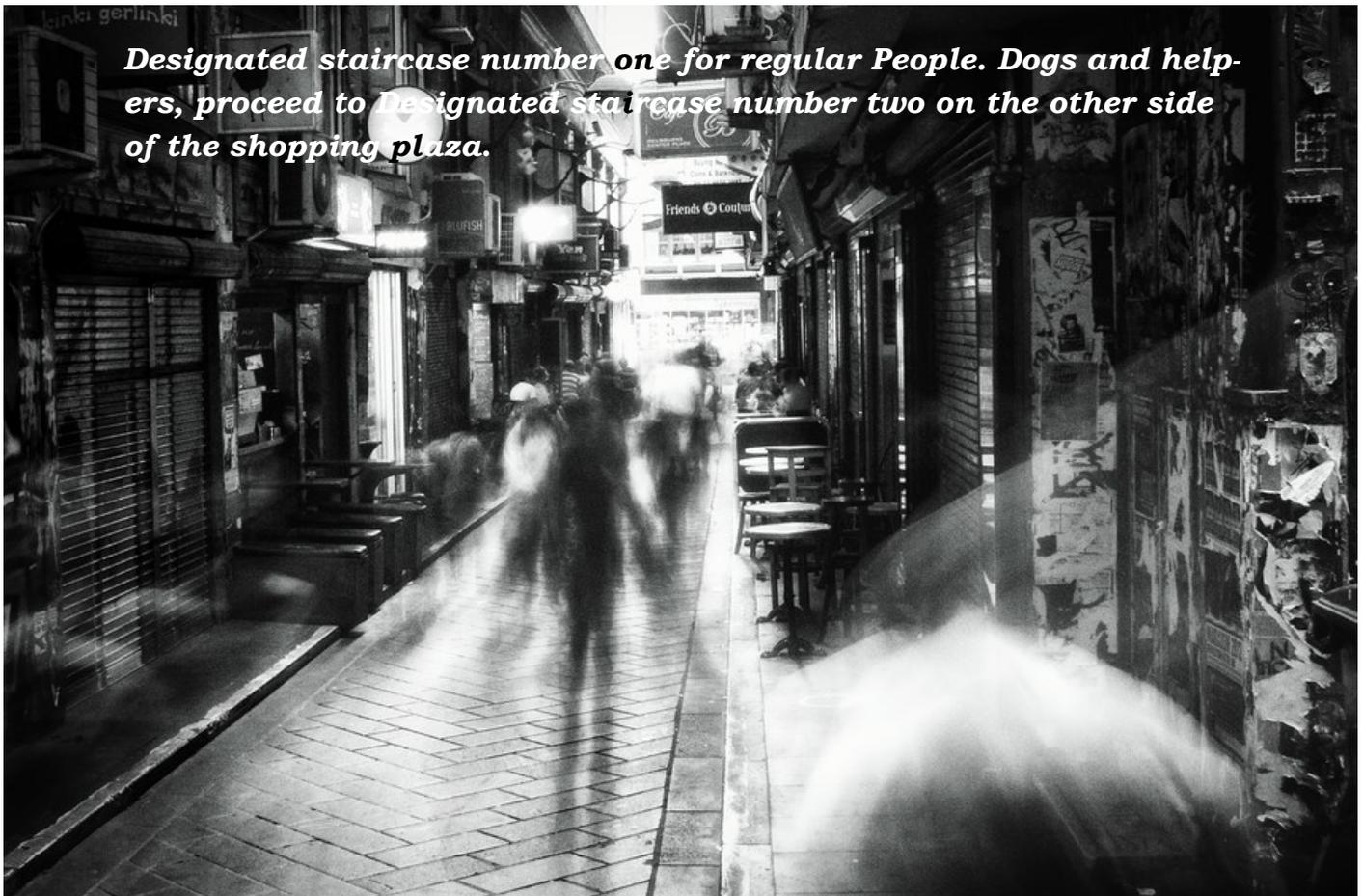
One minute. Marie is singing the Good-Bye Teachers song at the top of her

lungs. Proud mothers are taking turns to peep inside the classroom through a little hole designed for that purpose.

“You Filipino Ma’am?” the guard quizzes in a ridiculous bad cop kind of tone.

She can explain; it’s all right. “Well, I was born in the Philippines, but—”

“Ha, see!” Upon hearing this self-incrimination, the guard almost starts jumping up and down victoriously.



“*But* it doesn’t mean I’m a maid. Filipino is not a synonym for maid.”

He frowns in confusion, mouthing a silent “*What?*” but recovers immediately. “Right,” he chuckles. “You show me employment contract?”

“What—No!”

He gives a brisk crack of his knuckles. “You illegal in *Heung Gong?*” His eyes actually do shiver with excitement.

“What—No, I don’t have to work. Listen, I’m not a maid. Not a worker. Just a housewife, my husband’s American. American. *Meigwok yan.*”

“Oh, of course!” he warbles sarcastically.

“Look at me,” she pleads. “My clothes, my necklace, my wedding ring. It’s obvious I’m not in the domestic helper’s income group.”

“Don’t know, don’t know,” he replies, waving his hands in front of her, as if his company policy forbids him from judging people openly from their accessories, only from the oiliness of their skin and the thickness of their hair.

As Wilma takes her phone out of her handbag and starts urgently looking for family pictures, she hears the sharp clicking sound of high heels on concrete stairs. A pretty brunette in her late thirties appears, holding hands with a sulky little boy. The guard greets them with an elaborate nod resembling something of a royal bow. Wilma’s grin as she recognizes her daughter’s classmate rapidly turns into a panicky wince when she realizes she’s late.

Marie is waiting in the entrance hall, crammed between an oversized aquarium and a coat rack. Teachers shake their heads. The secretary rummages through her files for Wilma’s cell phone number. A Peppa Pig sticker is solemnly brought over.

Fifty-eight steps below, the attractive mother is returning Wilma’s greeting, her eyes widen attentively, like she’s expecting to be asked for directions.

“This is ridiculous but could you please confirm that I am Marie’s mother?” Wilma snickers at the absurdity of her own question, as if saying, *I know, right? Some people!*

The brunette darts a quick worried glance at Wilma and the man then without a word pulls her kid closer to her and quickly walks away like someone escaping from a beggar.

Exasperated, Wilma puts her hands up and yells, “Please! You know I’m not a helper. We see each other every day at school!” She stomps her feet in rage. “Your son peed in his pants yesterday.” She lets out a loud frustrated grunt and without a final glance at the security guard, she starts sprinting towards designated staircase number two.

While running away she could be reflecting on the injustice of blood heritage or shedding tears for entire generations of Filipino women who bravely yet vainly sacrificed their lives, their youths, their marriages, their self-esteem and any chance of happiness they had just to ensure Wilma would never have to suffer the same discriminations and humiliations. She could be thinking about her mother, who had not been allowed to go back home to attend her father’s funeral; she could be thinking about her grandmother, who had spent her career sleeping on a sweaty kitchen floor like a dog; she could be thinking about Maggie, Freya, and Nina, who got punished for behaving like women, in a society, which expects them to be maids, and that only; she could be thinking about all of them and many others. But no, what occurs to Wilma at this exact moment is that the designer sunglasses now hiding her sobs of anger and frustration cost exactly twice her Indonesian helper’s monthly salary.

I would never find out what she said
or why the doll came flying towards
me in the first place.

A Tenner Up

By Rowan Martin

I shat it, initially, because it looked like she had thrown a baby at me. It was a grotty doll, with one of those cloth bodies, plastic limbs and half-shut eyes, manky, but that did not explain why a young woman – she was definitely a woman, not a lassie - was running towards me, pushing an empty toy pram with no doll in it.

Allison Street is a midden. The pavements, at any time, are ankle-deep in shite. I ducked to avoid the flying baby, didn't totally succeed and somehow crumbled. Balance is no longer my strong point.

Sorry.

She was bending over me and had both her hands clasped between her knees, and she was wearing brightly coloured – very red, in fact - tight jeans. She repeated herself, agitated - *Sorry. Sorry.* The way she rolled her r's told me lots of things at once – she didn't speak much English, she was not from here, and she was worried. Apart from that I wasn't listening as I was certain other folk, probably swarthy big strong men,

would be along soon to kick my cunt in. Plus, the doll, which looked like it would never be the source of any innocent fun, was staring at me from the ground, about two feet in front of me. Totally still, with those half-shut eyes.

I supposed she realised that I was an old man when she saw me on the ground; while keeling over I'd aimed to twist onto my backside, but hadn't managed it entirely, so my hip and thigh took the brunt of it. I was about 80% convinced that I was in for a doing of epic proportions, hence why I was in a foetal position. Instead I was being apologised to by a woman in stretch jeans who kept speaking words which seemed to have no vowels. I complained. I made no sense. I could tell by the furrowed brow and the yelling she was on the verge of. Did this woman just throw a doll at me? Did she mean to?

Okay, okay... okay. I politely stopped using so many words which might confuse her. I flapped a hand. Next to her bony kneecap, my hand looked enormous. I made use of a concrete step, an overgrown bush and a metal railing to regain my footing, and I could feel her tiny, useless hands on my elbow and back. I said thankyou, which is what you have to do, although those gentle touches you get from passersby when you're righting yourself don't amount to much in the way of actual help. I brushed a couple of fag ends from my knees. She scabbled around on the ground. *No, no, I haven't dropped anything, it's fine, I'm fine...*

I spoke as clearly as I could. I said the t's and the ends of my words.

She looked up at me and said something I didn't understand. I gave her a thumbs up to show I was really, genuinely, totally fine. She said another thing I didn't understand, nodded, and kept looking around on the ground. She held up a CD to me, scratched, which reflected a street light dully.

Naw, no, no... I'm fine. That's not my... She threw it to one side, reached towards the kerb and then picked up a packet of instant noodles, which were burst at one end.

Naw, hen. No, you stand up now... I began to kneel again, although it was costing me pain and time and hassle, anything to stop this conveyor belt of rubbish that was not mine. Then she held up a twenty-pound-note. And she said something else, and like her it was a total mystery, and she waved it at me.

It wasn't mine. I was sure of it. She looked like she could do with it. We were both on our knees now, looking at the twenty. I had to stop a second and get my breath. And I was already thinking in my head, ibuprofen. Codeine. Tramadol. Treat myself to a whisky. Tonight. Fuck tomorrow and the empty head it'll bring. Twice on the ground in a day!

I flapped my hand at her again to make her stop speaking. She did stop, she understood this time, but then replaced it with a smile when I brought out a ten. I would give her the ten and she would give me the twenty. She'd worked it out. Her smile stretched, she looked at the ten, and I saw the chipped front tooth and the missing incisor and the gaps at the back where a couple of molars should have been. We swapped notes and I repeated my routine from earlier earlier (concrete step, metal railing, fucking knees and thigh and hip) and thanked her again. A tenner up, and I had a new limp, too. She rattled past me with her toy pram, and I saw her put the cheap doll in the seat, and she was waving the tenner. Cheery things were shouted at me, which I didn't understand, which might have been thanks.

I would never find out what she said or why the doll came flying towards me in the first place.

Neeson's is where I've been going since the dawn of time. I was leaving Neeson's when I was smacked by the doll and got a tenner. Next day, I decided Neeson's was where I was going to spend that tenner, just in case there was some kind of luck there, that I could get into a pattern of going home, getting dolls thrown at me, getting ten-

ners from foreign women in tight jeans. It took me a wee while to get going; I slept in, stayed up later than I wanted to last night, sometimes that happens with whisky and painkillers. Last night I was watching nature programs, late.

It was beautiful. There was a shark. A shoal of tiny, shiny fish darting about. A red octopus-type creature who gave birth, fed her children until she starved to death, then lay there as a lifeless grey lump. I went to my bed after that. It depressed me.

I was thinking of the red octopus when I was at the corner of Allison Street and Langside Road. There's a camera there, a tall tower of a camera that looks down towards Toryglen. To me, it looks like a frowning eye. It has a very disapproving look to it. Normally that CCTV is what points towards you, uselessly, when you're forcing your way through a group of teens or men who stare. There's a wee ledge at the base of the camera, big enough to sit on. Two men sat on it and nearby, three men stood. They were spitting parts of something they were eating and they were not speaking, which made passing more nervewracking than it ought to have been.

The only hing you nee'tae be scared ay is that wumman wi the rid jeans an a scabby doll, I said out loud to the pavement. It felt like they were staring at me. But I didn't feel right after last night, so. So.

8 halves, I could afford with my tenner. I didn't know if I would drink it all there and then, and I didn't know how much of that I would spend on other people, but I deserved all of them.

It was busy. I couldn't work out why and then I saw there was football on the telly. A seat nobody liked, the one nearest the toilets and furthest from the bar, was empty. I put my paper there and then saw Joy was on, she looked busy and was laughing at a joke and pouring two pints at the same time. She'd see me soon, she always did. By virtue of her being older than her daughter who also worked there, who dealt with the younger men, she had a tendency to make sure the old men got served first.

When Joy wasn't on I sometimes just went away back home. I speak to her so often I don't remember, a lot of the time, what I actually say to her. When I got back to my seat with the half, I realised we'd said a fair few sentences, but I couldn't remember what any of them were. We were both smiling and nodding. I usually held the tenner up high and out of her reach, so I probably did that. She usually said, *wee double for me, aye?* And I usually said, *you can have whatever ye want, Joy, anytime.* And she usually said, *naw I canny, you're too old.* And then we both laughed. But I don't actually know what we said that time. I couldn't be bothered trying to remember the words or even the sounds.

Joy's lassie was also on, she was bringing through boxes of flavoured cider – strawberry and lime, for fuck's sake. She also wore stretch jeans but hers were pale blue – grey? White? - and had holes in them, which looked like she'd made them herself by scraping a brillo pad back and forth. Her skin was a nuclear shade of mahogany. I laughed at my own joke and remembered that I liked Joy, that I should keep my opinions on Courtney to myself.

It didn't seem much time had passed but I was done my half already. Another half was gotten and I went on with my paper, which was a satisfying read, as I like the news and the tone of the Herald. In the Herald, nearly everything in the world happens inside Glasgow. I remembered being gripped by the polis murders on Allison Street a few years ago. I loved looking for the coded references to the Catholics ruling Glasgow City Council. Now it was a wee bit more vague and general, it was almost entirely like the magazine section you get on a Sunday now, but that dry tone was still there. And the crime, if anything, was worse. A young boy was being tried for murder, for example. Allegedly he'd murdered his own sister. She was only 10 and he said she was seen with a lad. Just a lad. I wasn't sure if I should think of it as a Romeo and Juliet or if it was just another terrible thing that had happened.

I was looking at the telly briefly when I noticed Courtney. She suddenly became still looking at her phone behind the bar. She shook her head and stared up at the optics, turned to the queue and then said to some lad that she'd be back in a bit, went towards the ladies. Joy looked after her and shook her head. When Courtney was near me she said, *alright, Jack?* And went past – and then, *and then*, she came back and asked if I was after another half.

Table service! Never before. What a treat! She went and got a half for me, wouldn't take money, said *naw, want tae ask ye a question*. She sat down my half and then sat down herself and said, *You're auld*. I laughed but she didn't so I stopped. *How old were ye when ye stopped bein a total dick?*

Whit?

I mean, look at this.

She held up her phone. It was a pair of tits. Well, just the cleavage, but it was definitely tits. And they were an even deeper mahogany shade. I frowned. Then she sort of pushed the picture up and showed me the text. In capital letters there were the words SUNNY DELIGHTS and then a sort of poem about how brilliant big tanned breasts were. I recognised the name of the sender. Her man.

Aff, doll, you're better than that piece ay shite.

Aye, I know that, he doesnae though. He's on a stag.

When's he back?

Two more days.

Where is he?

Budapest.

Ah. Brothels. I looked down and then up again. Well, in answer to your question, I was never a dick. A gent fae birth. I said it with a smile. She smiled back, but put her

hands up to her temples and shut her eyes. *Here*, I said, passed her two tramadol.

Thanks, she said, with a wee watery smile. Then her hand went to her pocket and she passed me a wee white pill with a diamond on it.

Two poond pill, she said. *They're no strong*.

Then she was up and behind the bar. I took it as my turn to get back in the queue and did so, for another half, which I enjoyed immensely. Then I thought, *fuck it*, and I took the pill.

FUCKIN HELL AYE THERE WIS NAE WAY THAT THE DOLL WUS GONNAE HIT ME
AYE I DON'T KNOW SHE MIGHT AY BEEN ROMA WHIT'S ROMA HERE I'LL BUY YES A
DRINK AYE IT FUCKIN DESTROYED ME AYE AH HUD TAE GO HOME N SELF MEDI-
CATE NAW MAH LEGS ARE AWRITE NAW WHO'S PLAYING I DON'T FOLLOW ANY
TEAMS AYE I WAS INTAE FORMULA ONE AGES AGO AYE SENNA AYE NAW I GREW
UP ON CALDER STREET NAW SHE DIED NAE ONE ELSE LIKE HER NAE ONE ELSE
LIKE HER IN THE WORLD AYE WE DID AYE YOU REMEMBER MAH WEE GIRL AYE
YOU REMEMBER MAH WEE GIRL NAW SHE LIVES IN AMERICA SHE EMIGRATED
SHE SAYS I SHOULD GO OVER BUT I HAVNAE THE MONEY AND NEITHER'S SHE
NAW AYE MAH DOCTOR SAYS I'M DAEN FINE BUT WHIT ELSE IS HE GONNAE SAY
WHIT IS HE GONNAE SAY THAT I HAVNAE MUCH TIME NAW HE'LL JUST FUCKIN
FEED ME WHATEVER HE HUS TAE TAE GET RID AY ME AYE. NAW. AYE.

The football had been switched off hours ago and my voice was hoarse. I'd never done so much talking. Sometimes I'd talked when I wasn't sure anyone was actually listening. I was tired but not tired. I saw Courtney and Joy pass a look to each other – *how're we gonnae get him oot ay here?* - when I stood up to go. I gave them hugs, and a wee guy who smelled of sick, I gave him a heavy pat on the back, and then I was out.

Out into the sweet Govanhill night air. And it went from very noisy to very silent, all of a sudden, so I started singing to fill the silence. I went straight down Langside Road towards the park. It felt like the direction the park was in, at least. Things kept wobbling – I realised it was my head, that I could hold it up only for a couple of seconds before I dropped it again, but I couldn't stop it.

At the CCTV, the one with the ledge beneath it, just near where I was almost struck by a flying baby, I could hear sounds of talking. I could see red, too. Red jeans! The doll woman. She was sitting, I think. I could see three men around her in a semicircle but lifting my head up to get a proper look was too difficult. I was looking at the ground to keep my balance and not fall. She was the cause of the fall, though, the flying doll and the tenner. Now she was sitting down so I was in no danger. Safe. No dolls. Tramadols. No danger.

She was sitting very close to those three men, though. She was sitting down in front of those three men and they were looking down on her, at the top of her head, and they were shouting at her. Lads shouldn't be shouting at a lassie. Lads should never shout at lassies.

I got my balance on a corner, there was a wall painted blue. I got my head up, managed a quick look before I had to take some deep breaths. Those three men were very close to her. She must have been talking but I couldn't hear her. Her head was moving. The men were shouting – jeering? She wasn't making any sounds. Her head was moving quickly and regularly. The three men were standing around her in a very close semicircle and shouting. And jeering.

My head got heavy again. I had to look down. The three men were still there and I heard them laughing. All of them were looking at me, it felt like, but I couldn't lift my head, it was too heavy and I worried I might be too heavy, too, that I would hit the ground and then I probably wouldn't get up. I thought then that I wouldn't mind it,

passing away now, but somehow that thought became a laugh and I spluttered a noise. I meant to say, *hey*, but it came out *hah*.

I said it again, louder. *Haaaah*. And again, *hah*. My face was up against that blue wall. And my hands were on the corner. The laughing had stopped and it was all very quiet. Some steps, maybe some shuffling. Those guys coming to help me? My head felt light, very light. I blinked and then I was sitting down and I felt my head smack off the blue wall and then there were hands in my coat. In my pockets. *Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah*. I had nothing. I had my key and my paper. They looked at them and threw them away.

They didn't want those so they took my wedding ring instead. I felt them wiggle it over my knuckle. I felt wetness on my hand. They must have spat on me to get the ring off. It's not worth much. A plain band, not even engraved, though we meant to. We meant to. We meant to. I saw her red legs. She was still sitting there. She was patiently waiting for these men to come back. Her knee wobbled as though she was bouncing her leg, fidgeting. Fingers went into my trouser pockets and they took the rest of the tramadol. They weren't talking at all, businesslike. My head was too heavy to lift. They went back over to the girl, one of them put his hand to the back of her head and I blinked. I think it was deliberate. I shut my eyes and it felt like my body thought that was it and my ears shut closed.

I blinked again, and the sky had changed colour, and it was two polis looking down at me. One woman, one man. They looked at me sympathetically. I looked like an old man to them. To them, I looked like a real live man. A man. I put my hands up to my face and covered my eyes.

They asked me, a shape of a man, if I was alright.

Fuel for the Fire

By Geraldine Creed

Harburg is a small industrial town on the Southern shores of the River Elbe. It's only a short train ride from the city of Hamburg where every morning, at exactly fourteen minutes past five we'd board a train that would take us to this hinterland of German manufacturing. For twelve long weeks, that train was never early, never late, just bang on time. Steve and I would split up then, on the steps of Harburg station.

We'd both found summer jobs in the 'Gummiwerks' that overshadowed the town.

Each day we'd slave over conveyor belts of hot rubber that would later be used in the cooling systems of German cars.

I'd never had a desire to be in Germany, that was Steve's idea. He'd sent off the application forms. It had suited me to let him do all the organizing, I was swotting Chomsky and F.R Lewis and big into access television and the great new global village. When the offers came back, Steve was excited and talked about us getting a flat together with the money we'd earn.

'But what about my fees,' I said. 'I'll need that money for college.'

'There'll be plenty over Katie, the overtime is massive.' Steve assured me so

I wasn't thinking about the pure slog until I found myself there, slap bang in the middle of it all. Living in a flat, meant for two - but sleeping eight of us Irish - and waking at five in the morning to catch our train to work.

The women's shift started fifteen minutes after the men's' - a small compensation for the extra bus ride we women had to take once we arrived at Harburg station. We worked in an annex about three miles out of town, in a real wasteland where the shadows of tall buildings blocked the sun even when it did shine. I was disgusted on my first

day on the job when Ramu, the foreman told me that there was no overtime on offer at the annex.

‘Only the men get overtime.’ He said twiddling his long handlebar moustache.

‘Why couldn’t you have gotten us jobs on a tulip farm or picking gherkins or something?’ I balked at Steve as we journeyed back to Hamburg that first day.

‘You didn’t have to come Katie, nobody twisted your arm.’ He was pissed with me complaining, he closed his eyes and pretended to go to sleep. And much as I hated it, it was true, I’d just drifted along because it was convenient and besides, Steve was cool and I liked the way his jeans didn’t fit and the cute mark above his left eyebrow that turned red when he got mad.

There were twenty-four of us working on the fifteenth floor of the annex, twenty-three women and Ramu, the Turkish foreman with the big moustache. The women had little or no English. There were some Portuguese and Spanish, two or three Greeks, several Poles and the rest were Croatian. Most of the women lived in Harburg – it was cheaper than the city - so I’d meet them when I boarded the bus to the annex every morning. They’d ride that bus out of town with eyes closed and heads down, saving every ounce of energy for the long day that lay ahead. We changed quietly in the locker rooms too, transforming ourselves into an army of rubber clad yetis with white boots and gloves and aprons and masks across our faces. Once the hooter blasted and the machines cranked up it was full steam ahead – Clankety clank clank, clankety clank clank - the tubes came sailing down the conveyor belt and we’d sprinkle powder on them so they wouldn’t stick together and then pack them ten to a box. And when Ramu protested at someone he saw out of rhythm with the rest, (which was usually me), he would march up close and personal and roar, ‘Schnell, Schnell,’ I always thought I’d faint from the stink of his breath. He’d get so close that parts of his body would be pressed against mine and I’d see stale bits of food in his moustache.

Weekends were hard work for Steve and I: we drank in the nightclubs along the Reeperbahn and went straight to work from there, bombed out on pills and beer and loud music. On Saturdays like that, I'd always volunteer to work the manual machine, where I could at least rest my feet while I loaded and chopped. Rosa worked with me, powdering the tubes and stacking them into boxes. She was a small, squat Croatian with saucer brown eyes and a bun of jet-black hair. I took her to be in her forties and I think she took to me on account of my bandaged hands. I had developed a rash from the powder we used on the rubber and each morning before we'd start, Rosa would help me bandage my red raw hands with fresh lint before putting them into my oversized gloves. We had a fifteen-minute break in our eight-hour shift and as there was no canteen, we ate our soggy sandwiches at the barred windows where we could at least feel the breeze on our faces and observe the treeless road through the industrial estate that would take us home again at two. The women smuggled in korn schnapps on these Saturdays, to break the curse of our six-day week. I hated the stuff but drank it anyway as a 'hair of the dog'.

Rosa and I conversed in Germenglish – a kind of cross-speak we'd developed while cutting and stacking the rubber tubes all day.

'How many kinder?' I asked and she held the fingers of one hand up.

'My mother.....Mutti.' I said as I held up eight fingers.

'Me Mutti

 And she pointed to her chest and then held the fingers of both hands up.

'Ten!' I said, ' Now that's arbeit.'

She'd tug my sleeve when she got excited, 'Drie. ' She held three fingers up and then said the word in English, 'Tree ...in tree years I go.'

'Where?' I asked.

‘Money gud here, I buy land in tree years.’

‘Great.’ I said. And her face beamed at the thought, like she was at home in that very moment, looking at her land. She pointed to her wedding ring, ‘Husband?’ I guessed and she nodded.

‘Husband make haus.’

‘Cool.’ I said and she repeated the word and laughed and then the whirr of the cutting machines drowned out our chat and she was pulling my sleeve again as we got up to go back to work,

‘Careful’. She said pointing to the manual cutter, ‘Nix gud.’ She put a hand out and made a motion across her splayed fingers.

‘Last voman...kaput’ She said shaking her head as Ramu, like a demented sheepdog, got in and around us and drove our quota up and up with his whip-like cries.

‘SCHNELL, SCHNELL.’

When the siren sang for the end of our shift, we women would peel off our protective gloves and boots and masks and hang our heavy aprons on pegs before stumbling into the showers. Jets of hot water stung my blistered hands as I listened to these big blue veined women shouting to each other, happy to be finished their shift, sharing their news of home and how their children were doing. Children they were sending money to so that they could go to school and learn to read and write and not have to work like mules all their lives . I could imagine these children rushing home from schools in Greece and Portugal, Spain and Croatia to watch flat screen TV’s bought for them by their absent mothers. I wondered if these children would see these mothers as strangers when they saw them again and if, for them, the grass would always be greener some place else.

It didn’t matter how hard we’d scrubbed, the smell of rubber remained under our nails

and in our hair when we boarded the bus that would take us back to Harburg.

I usually hooked up with Steve at the station or later that evening in Hamburg if he was doing overtime. Our last week in Germany was busy for Steve; he was getting double shifts and raking in the money. I was bored riding back to Hamburg on my own. One afternoon, as we left the annex, it began to rain and Rosa insisted I come back to her flat for tea. She lived in an attic room high above the market square in Harburg. The tiny flat had views of Paris, London and New York on its walls, postcards from Rosa's sisters and brothers who, like her, had all left Croatia. Our Germenglish had advanced at that stage, we were getting good at conversing, telling each other about our lives. Rosa told me she'd first worked in a cocktail bar down the Reeperbahn but when she realised she wasn't employed to serve drinks she complained. The manager felt her tits and stuck his tongue in her ear and told her she was hired to be an LBFM and if she didn't like it she could walk.

'L B F M?' I had never heard the word.

'Little brown fucking machine', Rosa said. She had been sixteen when she first came to Germany.

Rosa kept a biscuit tin under her bed; it was full of cakes from Zagreb. She made tea and we sat on the small windowsill of the attic room, looking down over the now empty market, eating diamond and heart shaped cakes that had - like fortune cookies - things inside; peas for under your mattress and little wooden figures in striped shawls for under your pillow to ward off bad dreams. She kept her savings in the biscuit tin with the cakes, hidden under layers of tissue paper. She had photos of her kids in there too. She showed me them, one by one, listing the names and ages of all five children, 'Big, they are all big now.' I said.

'Yes and when I go, it's me, me to mind ...their babies.' Her laugh was bright after she said this; there was no hint of regret. Things were as they were and that was just a

matter of fact for Rosa.

On our last weekend in Hamburg, Steve and I bought some acid. It was our going away celebration. We took it in the early hours of Sunday after an all night session and stepping over crashed-out bodies in our dark two-roomed flat we took off to see the sunrise. As we crossed Mockenstrasse I saw the brightness of the day reflected on the bonnets of cars gliding by. I imagined the rubber tubes that I had cut and stacked each day with my rotting hands were now living under the bonnets of those cars, cooling the expensive engines and I waved to each and every car as if they were my children.

We rode the escalator from the street down into the bowels of the station three times that morning. The sound of the stairs became for me the clankety clank clank of the cutting machines. We had wanted to get a train to somewhere nice in the country but once we arrived into the bustle and noise it was hard to find our way out again.

All the faces we saw were blurry, walking by us or staring out at us from buffet bars, distanced by glass and mouthing words we couldn't catch. We clapped our hands like two year olds whenever someone ran for a train, their bodies leaving a trail of colour behind them. We watched the 'Polizei' as they jerked the leads of Alsatian dogs and saw the glint of weapons when they brushed their free hands past their belts to show who was in command. We must have queued up ten times to use the photo booth. I didn't want to have my picture taken but Steve insisted, he wanted to get rid of the change in his pocket, it was weighing him down, he said. Once, while waiting for our third set of photos, we recognized a group of men from the 'gummiwerks', they tipped their hats and smiled as we waved like there was no tomorrow. It felt nice and warm to recognize faces and be recognized in return.

Later, when we started to come down from our trip, we sat in a coffee bar watching these same men through the glass. They stood in three's and four's against a bar counter, smoking and chatting. Like us, they didn't seem to be going anywhere in particular.

I could tell they were Turkish by their tight moustaches and the gold in their mouths when they opened them to speak. Those on their own, stood with hands deep inside their pockets, watching the trains come and go. I wondered if they were watching like I was? Secure in the knowledge that some day soon they would be leaving. Boarding a train from this station and never looking back.

‘My Gawd Katie, your so sappy.’ Steve said when I tried to explain what I was thinking.

‘They won’t take trains home. They’ll buy big station wagons and second hand Mercedes and drive home to Istanbul or wherever.’

‘Now you’re talking sappy,’ I accused.

‘No, I ‘m not. They bring home a bit of Vorsprung durch technik,’ he clicked his fingers at me then, I hated when Steve clicked his fingers at me, ‘And all of a sudden everyone in the village wants to go away and make their fortune. Its fuel for the fires of Capitalism, Katie and we’re all cogs in the great big Imperialist dream.....’

The waitress moved towards us with her cloth and I noticed my cup was empty but I couldn’t move my lips. My tongue was dry as timber and my teeth grinding from the strychnine in the acid. I sat and thought of my four uncles – my mother’s brothers – who had left Ireland in the fifties to find work in Canada. The waitress scooped the cup from under me and rubbed the spot where it had been. Did my uncles know they were leaving for good the day they went? Would they have called themselves emigrants? I let my hands rest on the table and felt the warmth of the coffee that had been there. None of my uncles returned to Ireland.

Steve and I bumped into Rosa and some of the other women on the train to Harburg next morning. It was to be our last day of work and the women insisted we join them so we squeezed into the seats beside them as they sat on each other’s laps and told us how they’d spent the night in Hamburg, as a treat. A famous group from Croatia had played at the university and the women had ended their night with a fireworks celebra-

tion on the river. They showed us the images they had grabbed on their phones. I was happy to introduce Rosa to Steve. I even showed her the photos we had taken at the station. She seemed sad. I couldn't see the sense in that. I put the photos away when the polizei came down the carriage to check our tickets. For once Steve and I had bought one.

I worked on the manual cutter with Rosa all that day. We worked at a comfortable pace, but I was wasted and every clackety clack clack of the machine drilled a hole through my brain. I spent our fifteen-minute break with my head stuck as far between the bars of the window as I could get it. Rosa fed me korn schnapps to keep me awake.

'You be careful on machine okay.'

'I'll be fine.' I said. 'It's my last day.'

'That's why I say,' Rosa put a finger to her eyes like she had done the first time she explained the danger to me, 'Be careful.'

'You don't smile today Rosa?'

'Your photo make me sick for home.'

Rosa couldn't stop talking on that last day. She told me she'd been in Germany for over twenty years. Her children had mostly been conceived on holidays home. When she first left her town she paid the equivalent of a years wages to get safely across the Austrian and German borders. Her father had told her what to do to ensure the guide who brought her did not lead her up a stray mountain path and cheat her of her hard earned savings. The villagers had devised a system, he said. Rosa had her photo taken in a booth like the one me and Steve had used. She cut the strip of photos in half, giving one half to the man who was taking her group across the borders and keeping the other. When Rosa reached Hamburg safely she sent her half back home to her family and it was only then that her guide got paid. The breeze from the barred window felt good on our faces as we stood together one last time. Below, I could make out the

crossing gates and the curved line of the track to the main factory.

It was all I knew of the surrounding countryside in the whole twelve weeks I'd been there.

Steve and I left Germany five days later. We travelled by rail, down through Germany and France and then across to England. It was mid September and raining heavily as we stood on the dart platform in Dun Laoghaire last week. Now, I'm sitting in a café off Grafton Street writing to Rosa as I wait for Steve to show up. He's been partying since we got back last week but we're supposed to be going flat hunting today. I'm using a dictionary to write my message to Rosa. As I see Steve wave and come towards me, I hide the letter under my bag. Its only when he sits down that I notice the new leather jacket and spiv haircut. I wonder where that puts us with the flat hunting, him splashing out when we're meant to be pooling our money, making it last. I'm not really listening as Steve's tells me about the apartment he's found. I want to get my own biscuit tin, leave it under my own bed 'cos I know its my wedge of the our rubber money that'll end up paying the rent on this pad he's motoring on about. I tell Steve straight out, while he's in mid sentence, I tell him I've changed my mind about moving in together.

I stay on in the café after he leaves, part of me sad, the other part relieved. I think of Rosa's tear stained face that last day in the factory when I gave her one half of the photos of Steve and I. I am sending her the other half now, in an envelope with this silly card. A sheep sits in an armchair, drinking beer and watching a TV weather report. The dialogue bubble above the weatherman's head says, 'Apparently the grass is greener on the other side'. I don't know if Rosa will get the joke but I'm sending her all my wishes, hoping she makes it home soon to buy her piece of land.

THE END OF THE LINE

