

# SIMIAN DELUXE

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A FLASH FICTION ANTHOLOGY

/LIT/



## CONTENTS

### Preface

1. Unboxing the iPhone 500
2. The Reincarnation of Christ
3. The Pope's Secret That No One Believes
4. You Wake Up as a Woman
5. A Necrophiliac's First Date
6. Widespread Bigfoot Encounters Cause Chaos
7. The Jeffrey Epstein Massage School at New York University
8. A Woman Enters a Supermarket With a Hateful Symbol on Her Forehead, Drawn On, Unbeknownst to Her, by Her Son
9. A Bookshop Run by Monkeys
10. Someone Finds a Syringe in Their Fridge and Decides to Use It
11. A Professor Only Leaves Their House on Monday
12. Unintentionally Becoming a Very Important Swing Vote
13. A Child Discovers Fairies Living in the Neighbour's Garden
14. Meeting Your Doppelganger
15. You Develop Fish Hands
16. A City Enters Its 50th COVID Lockdown
17. Two Paintings Side by Side at an Exhibit Talk, Though They Can't See One Another
18. At a Cliff of the Grand Canyon
19. A Micro Wedding Goes Awry
20. A New Method for Tattoo Removal
21. A Man Is Killed During His First Day at Work
22. The Rail Station's Been Missing Its Nightly Train, but Even in the Desolation of a Rural Stop, You Find a Friend
23. The Stage of Evolution After Homo-Sapien
24. Humans Terraform Saturn
25. Why the Next President Gets Impeached
26. Treasure Hunters Descend on a Small Town
27. The Dad Farm
28. A Modern Day Noah's Ark
29. A Garment You Just Can't Get Rid Of
30. An Office Worker Cannot Remember the Last Time He Did His Job
31. How the Queen of England Remains Spry in Old Age

32. Bouquets Are Sent Without a Message
33. A Computer Programmer Gets to Make a Wish
34. You Don't Understand, He Was Literally Fucking Orange
35. An Archer Makes an Incredible Shot
36. An Unexpected Hazing Ritual
37. The Breaking of a Wishbone Has Disastrous Results
38. The First Plague on Colonized Mars
39. She Definitely Just Spoke in English
40. A Rural Town Is Not What It Appears
41. An Evening in Verona
42. Charles Manson Is My Mom
43. Someone Finds the Journal of a Mentally Disabled Man in the Archives
44. The King's Cobbler
45. A Man Has the Ability to Close His Eyes, Walk Forward, and Appear Anywhere in the World
46. Locals Begin to Suspect the Judas Goat
47. A Shot Rang With No One to Hear
48. All for the Love of Sunshine
49. Lizardmen Invasion
50. Dead Worms and Crystal Pepsi

## PREFACE

The stories in this anthology were sparked by writing prompts, which are now the titles. The authors are anonymous.

## UNBOXING THE IPHONE 500

*T*he first drop was just outside the Apple store.

A week before I started college, Dad brought me to pick out a new phone. Throughout high school I always used this beat-up budget phone; smashed screen wrapped in colorful duct tape. It sounds dumb, but as I held this sleek new iPhone model in rose gold, it made me feel all new and fancy, too! I think this was Dad's way of saying he trusted me, an acknowledgement I wasn't the clumsy kid I used to be; dropper of dishes, destroyer of shoes, grim reaper to goldfish.

Thinking this, crisp white box clutched to my chest, I look up to see Dad comparing durability ratings in the phone cases isle...maybe 'trust' was too strong a word.

As we sat in the food court, he insisted on being the one to unbox my new gift and seal it into its military-grade case. He placed it, unprotected, ever so carefully at the center of our table, and set to work opening the case's clamshell packaging. After much arm-straining and tooth-tearing the plastic gave way with a crack. His hand shot out, spilling his

Pepsi onto my lap and sending my rosy treasure clattering across the tile floor.

I recovered my poor baby, checking for damage as I walked to grab napkins from Sbarro. The screen was fine, but the rear glass had cracked in a perfect arc. I expected to feel my temper rise—I could see Dad at the table bracing for a fight—but the anger didn’t come. For once I wasn’t the fuck up, and it filled me with a strange pride.

I sat down, pulled out my old phone (not even worth a trade-in), and tore a thin strip of pink duct tape from its cracked face. I placed the tape—bandaid-like, just so—across Rosie’s back. Dad watched silently as I used the napkins to dab his ridiculous case dry, placed her inside, and snapped it close.

There would be many more cracks, scratches, surprise swims, and close calls in Rosie’s future. But that pink tape stayed—glue failing, edges curling—as a reminder of my triumph.



That bulky case just wasn’t Rosie’s style...and it didn’t stick around long. You see, Rosie was a punk rocker at heart, and Dad’s case had more of a ‘deer hunter’ vibe going on—camo green and smelling like a toolbox. As soon as we landed in the dorms, we switched to a sleek, cherry-red number.

The life of a punk rocker is a rough one, though, and it was only appropriate that Rosie’s second major scrape came from a crowded basement concert. Rosie and I whirled through the scrum, taking and posting a bevy of

low-light pictures—stage lights glare streaking across a sea of raised arms, technicolor hairdos, and be-spiked shoulders.

Amidst all the mock-violent revelry of the dancers, some drunk asshole got his feelings hurt and had to make a scene about it. I was shoved from behind as ‘feelings’ was expelled from the crowd. At the blow, Rosie tumbled to the ground and was quickly ground beneath the asshole’s faux-combat boots.

I snapped her up from the floor and gave the drunk a firm kick in the shin before making my way back to street level. At first Rosie seemed fine; the pictures were the same streaks and blurs I remembered. But as soon as I switched to iMessage I saw the damage. The top corner of the screen was a small spiderweb of cracks, and you could even see some black pools behind the glass. Rosie was bleeding!

Bleeding after a fight in a basement club. That’s actually pretty punk, I guess...



Though our punk phase was short-lived, the joy of capturing movement and light stayed with me. I settled into a photography major, and Rosie served as light meter for my analog camera, and as darkroom timer.

She and I saw the world. Together, we booked transatlantic flights, navigated foreign bus routes, located hostels, and wandered—entranced—countless Vias and Rues and Avenidas. Rosie wore her spider cracks and pink tape—proud as a faded tattoo—beneath her clear case.

At four years old, her once best-in-class battery barely lasted through lunch. I travelled with an array of chargers, adapters, and battery packs—life support for my elderly companion. All to push back the time we both knew was coming.



An Irish rain did her in. I was in the habit of leaving her off to preserve battery, and neglected to check the weather before leaving for a hike. Morning fog became cold mist which became (local term) pissing rain.

Rosie was made waterproof, but that cracked corner was her Achilles' heel. When I powered her on, I discovered enough of the downpour had soaked through my coat pocket to penetrate her aging circuitry.

I cried.

When you name a thing, you give it a special meaning. And losing something meaningful hurts.

I might still have saved her then—I could have rushed her into a bowl of rice grains, or to some repair store—but Rosie wouldn't want to hang on after her time. And what better way to go than to be carried away in her sleep one misty morning, 3,500 miles from home. I wouldn't bring her back with me, to be lost in a 'junk drawer' or 'cord box' like all the other dead phones. I lifted a mossy cobblestone, and placed her underneath. And there she still lies in Connemara.

Rosie was my Mary Poppins: she came to me at a time of transition, led me safe through the storm, and departed as

the East wind changes. I don't imagine my next phone will have a name, but I'll see if I can't find some pink tape...just in case.

## THE REINCARNATION OF CHRIST

*T*he windows are boarded up; the door, sporting multiple, subsequent eviction notices is bolted shut, the worn stairs leading to the lawn are overgrown, and the lawn, itself a paddock of life, everlasting. This house isn't really anyone's destination, just a forgotten corner in the north of the urban sprawl. Every day, homeless walk by it, bags toted over shoulders and carefully disguised cellphones; they don't even pay it a glance, save for maybe a quizzical thought as to why it hasn't been torn down. Thousands of workers, their trucks laden with the tools of their trade drive past it, their seats littered with fast-food wrappers, and their unshaven cheeks bearing the signs of their laxity. None of them notice it either, derivative country music and yesterday's hangover bearing away any sense of curiosity and replacing it with simply the desire to grind away the week in search of another end from the toil.

The skyline, sparse as it is, is dominated by scattered buildings that tower over the sprawl. This city isn't large enough to linger in the thoughts of many; the overbearing human consciousness barely spares it a thought, opting

instead for political intrigues and whatever is premiering on their phones, the pale glow rising in place of the sun for most. If one drove down the street, they'd run smack into the highway, eight lanes of coursing traffic, the lifeblood of this organism, a constant pulse of life amid the concrete and well-manicured lawns. It is in this specific house, on this particular street, in this nameless corner of a city that's only distinction is that it is a place to pass through; a journey made flesh, that he returns to.

He steps from that doorway, past the lawn, overgrown slightly, but not enough to draw attention. There was a family here once, an emanation of love that spanned at least two generations, building life and enjoyment, and, if not a thriving community, at least it was something for someone, once. Now it's only a corpse, stuck in the place after death, not quite stinking enough to warrant its burial. He sighs, stepping over trash and cigarette butts onto the thoroughfare's parallel sidewalk. The whores don't walk here; it's too close to the highway, and thus far too much of a chance of a passing policeman, so he's the only one around. Passing vehicles, their shiny plastic reflecting the mid-morning sunlight, and their occupants' lazy gazes passing over what they see as just another street walker—at least this one isn't asking for money.

He knows that half a mile away, in the bathroom of a McDonalds, a man is breathing his last, lungs robbed of strength by the opioids coursing through his veins. He knows which men passing him will end their lives within the week, the despair that emanates from this modern schema of existence eroding them at last. He knows, as one knows

the weather, the cruel, impassion of the teeming hordes that pass him by. This is a forgotten world, one long distanced from anything that may've been. He knows the cynics, the banal, the hopeful, and the heartless. He knows the hatred, the impassivity, the absolute depravity and the humanity. This is what he wrought, and what exemplifies his failure. Something stirs in him then, something boundless and inhuman in its scale and dimensions. He knows, like a man knows how to stand up, the capacity for beauty in forgotten places and the determination in the face of inertia that picks at ones strength.

Most of all, he knows love.

He knows the weight of history, and the intricacies these people will inscribe into the memory of their fathers. He knows—in every language—the words they say to make each other smile. He knows the words they say to make each other cry. Theirs is a story of tragedy, but like a pot dropped from a shelf, there is still time for it to be caught before it crashes into shards. This is a species that has known only blood and death for a hundred thousand years; vestiges of the utter domination wrought unto the very memory of the Earth.

He sighs in finality, wincing as yet another man is beaten nearly to death, on camera for the wild adulation of the internet crowds. The ugly, the lazy, the downright cruel — they're all pieces of the fractures that have been spun throughout this farce for thousands of years. Money is made from the banal manipulations of the comedically stupid while a short, bald man goes for a cruise in his hundred million dollar ocean liner. Across the globe,

hundreds will starve to death, while hundreds more are sodomized on camera for that same crowd of internet voyeurs, eyes aglint with that feverish glow of bloodlust.

He knows evil as well.

The gunshot isn't very loud amidst the roar of engines, and the ambiance of the city. Blood spatters the pavement, and those who notice whip out their phones to film this spectacle. A man shooting himself right in the middle of the street? Shit, that'll be huge on Snapchat. Sandalled feet are still, the white gown now soaked in red. A few minutes later, a police officer arrives on scene, fresh from some other atrocity.

Life goes on.

## THE POPE'S SECRET THAT NO ONE BELIEVES

APRIL 16TH, 4152 AD

*D*eep inside Zeta-prime, there was an unusual smattering of light pulsing back and forth. Red then blue, and then red once again. The blinking light observed by the gaze of startled eyes drawn down from the balconies and walkways above.

The core of Zeta-prime is known colloquially as “old earth”—the remnants of a bygone age, where man lived simply upon the ground. At some point hundreds of years ago, the ground itself was made unliveable, but instead of man falling into himself he instead looked upwards towards the heavens and built into the sky. Layer upon layer of steel, glass, embedded LCD displays, and high-resolution cameras became the foundation for the planet-spanning city of Zeta. The city so large and all-encompassing that no natural light was permitted down to the bedrock of “old earth”, the dark dead core of a vibrant electric city.

It was not illegal to venture down onto the surface, nor was it discouraged. It was simply seen as a redundant activity, for what purpose would a person have to travel into the gloom of that former world? The old cities of earth had long since been stripped and broken down for parts. Nothing remained but a cold damp layer of rock, unable to sustain anything more exotic than bacteria and moss.

The activity quickly caught the attention of the local police. Blade cruisers were soon streaking down towards the surface, leaving a blade of light in their wake. Their ion drives pushing them to faster speeds than they were ever allowed to reach within the boundaries of Zeta-prime. Truth be told, it was a boring job being a police officer in a world with eyes on every corner. Where every crime was automatically captured on camera, catalogued, and justice dispensed without the need for any physical human intervention. When the officers of ZP-PD got the opportunity to get some action, oh boy did they take it.

Inside the lead cruiser, rookie officer Eugene gripped the control column with steely determination. He had to be the first to land. If he managed to make an arrest it would be the first in nearly five years. What a spectacle that would make on the world-wide news network later that evening. They would probably make holovids about this day! Eugene knew this and pushed his cruiser to its limit—the nano-plastic hull beginning to vibrate and the glass cockpit starting to steam up as he burst through Mach-9 to Mach-10.

Eugene could see the small flashes of light getting bigger and brighter as he hurtled towards them. Soon the

blue and red enveloped Eugene's unblinking face, overpowering the dim white light of the control column. He was nearing the ground and began to deploy the brakes, applying them with a firm grip. He experienced multiple Gs of force as the cruiser came to a stop a few meters from the light. Pausing, Eugene looked through the steamed glass to try and make sense of what was causing the lights, unable to see much due to a pervasive mist. He assumed it was probably some youths in a tricked-out sky-skeeter who had got themselves in a touch of bother, but this was something else.

Leaping from the cockpit of his cruiser, Eugene pulled out his Ventura series 9 phase pistol and clicked the safety off. In contrast to his rapid arrival, Eugene now carefully considered each step as he moved in closer.

"ZP-PD, who's out there?" he called. There was no reply.

Pushing forward Eugene broke through the mist. He did not recognize the object, but his built-in retinal heads-up display labelled the object successfully for him. The lump of metal sat there, its black and white livery emblazoned with the letters "LAPD", the red and blue light beaming intermittently from what appeared to be retro LED lights. The heads-up display read "2016 LAPD Ford Explorer". His pistol held high, Eugene could see what appeared to be a black wing pointing skywards at the rear of the vehicle.

"This is the ZP-PD, please identify yourself immediately."

Unaware of the weaponry afforded to "2016 LAPD Ford Explorers", Eugene fired a warning shot low overhead, thunderbolt erupting from the pistol and screaming just above the object.

“Don’t move or the next one won’t miss!”

A figure moved out of the shadow, wearing a billowing gold gown. The man wore a gaudy white pointed hat and held an archaic gold staff.

“What in God’s name do you want, boy?” the figure shouted at him. “Can’t you see I’m busy? Leave me alone.”

“Who are you and what is your purpose here?”

“Who am I?” The man chuckled to himself, turning away from Eugene. “Who are you? Fuck off.”

“You are talking to a member of ZP-PD’s finest, so show some respect. Now tell me your purpose down here or I will shoot!”

“Jesus Christ alive, I’m too old to deal with this bullshit.” The figure grabbed the black wing and slammed it down. He then proceeded to walk directly towards Eugene.

“Take another step, I will shoot!”

“You wouldn’t shoot an old man.” He was right, Eugene couldn’t shoot someone. Most Zeta-Prime police never fire their service weapon in their entire career.

The man pulled a handle on one side of the “2016 LAPD Ford Explorer”, and another metal wing flung open. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I’m Pope Benedict XVI, and what I’m doing here is secret.” There was a metallic jingle, followed by a beefy roar. The man leant out of the window toward Eugene and winked. With one final roar the vehicle started to become more and more translucent, until it disappeared from sight.

Holstering his weapon as the other blade cruisers screeched to a halt nearby, Eugene sighed.

APRIL 16TH, 2008 AD

“Where have you been?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

## YOU WAKE UP AS A WOMAN

*A* hard day at the construction site, pushing my muscles to their limits, was followed by six Heineken and a fistful of honey mustard pretzels. Bleary-eyed and sick, I stumbled out of the canteen and vomited all over the parking meter. Looking up, a blonde, bolt-on bimbo stood before me, angry and impatient.

“Hey baby, want a taste?” I chuckled, throwing up again.

I got into my car, confused. Where was the ignition in my 1968 Toyota Pinto? Oh, right there. Back in my apartment after nearly totalling a family of four, I turned the television set on. The antenna was all fucked up, so I knocked it around a couple of times like my ex-wife. It was the big game: Boston and Cincinnati were going at it. Nothing made sense after I downed the last of my vodka and orange juice, and I started to hear my own snoring. The day faded into dusk, and with it, my manhood.

By dawn, something had changed. No, it wasn’t the splitting headache. I fell out of my recliner and crawled to the bathroom to spit the blood out. Holy hell, did I have to piss something fierce! It was then, as I unzipped my fly, that

I noticed I had no cock. With a scream and a spray of urine out my new cooter, I fell backwards and hit my head on the toilet. I ran my fingers through my hair, feeling stickiness.

“Wait, hair? What in the god damn?”

The mirror revealed a head full of luscious blonde curls down to my shoulders. I let out a squeal of delight, then felt a shiver of revulsion. My voice! I was like a little girl.

“Uh, what the fuck is going on, here?” I said, like a nine-year-old school girl.

In fact, I *was* a nine-year-old school girl! My work clothes, soiled and stained with days of unwashed mansweat and dirt, hung over me like drapery. Shedding them, my eyes widened in shock and, strangely, a small thrill of...delight? Hand over my chest, I felt at my budding nipples and turning sideways, I put a hand over my little butt. The skin was smooth as a Georgia peach! Where had all the hair and cysts gone? My eyes were a dark blue-brown mixture and, pressing my cheeks up into a fake, cheesy smile, I immediately recognized who I was: Shirley fucking Temple!

“I don’t feel so good...” I muttered, bile and half-digested pretzel climbing up my esophagus, and I passed out on the bathroom floor.

It was midnight when I woke up, crusted in vomit and blood, cockroaches scurrying away from the scene of their crime. Getting up, I checked the mirror. Yep, still Shirley. With a sigh, I wrapped my smelly manclothes around me and went to the fridge. All I could find was a bottle of ketchup and a small container where I kept the live carp. I took the fish and hesitated to bite into its wriggling form.

No, this wouldn't do for a pretty little thing! What I needed was oatmeal, or a big bowl of Fruity Pebbles and strawberry milk. I left the apartment with a handful of cash to the corner liquor store.

At first, I was afraid Ranjesh the clerk would recognize me, but of course he didn't. I grabbed a box of cereal and a carton of milk and placed it on the counter.

"And what would you be doing in those clothes, little ma'am?" Ranjesh asked, taking my quarters. "Why are you not in school, where you belong?"

"I, um, uh..." Shit! What's an excuse? Putting on my award-winning, Shirley Temple smile, I explained. "My grandma is sick and I'm getting this for her."

Ranjesh looked me up and down, suspicious, but then nodded. I ran back home and ate my breakfast in delight. I needed clothes, and fast! With a screwdriver in hand, I broke into my neighbour's apartment. Mike had a daughter about my age, named Nancy. She'd do. After rummaging through her drawers, I took out a pink, frilly skirt and blouse. No, I thought. Clashes with my skin tone. There was a shorter, white summer skirt and tank top, perfect for the weather. I hastily put them on, then looked at my reflection in Nancy's mirror. What I really needed was a touch of lipstick and eyeliner. That would be just perfect for a... princess like me.

Just for kicks, I put on Nancy's Hello, Dolly! record and found myself tapping a little jig. Before I knew it, my feet found me in the middle of the street intersection. Men in suits and construction workers, on their lunch breaks, milled around the sandwich shops and bodegas, eyeing my

tiny dancer body. What was happening to me? What was this thrill, this wonderful music of life that made everything so irresistible? The men took me in their arms and spun me around like a ballerina. It was like a dream come true! I was a perfect little princess and the world was my god damn oyster. A parade of people picked me up and carried me like a queen down Main Street. Wrapped in confetti, I was placed on a pallet in a back alley behind the court house.

The day faded into dusk, and with it, my femininity. The next morning, I woke up to the sound of a car alarm and two hobos digging through a dumpster, smashing glass bottles, screeching babies and angry mothers, and police sirens. I reached up to tug my cute curls, but they were gone! My gut was bulging, my cock swinging, and shit-matted hair covered my pocked ass. I was a man, once more. Was it a dream? Was all of that just a dream?

“Oh, but a wonderful dream it was...” I muttered. I didn’t need curls or lipstick or a tiny body to feel like a real girl! I had always been one.

## A NECROPHILIAC'S FIRST DATE

*J*'ve never had that much luck on dating apps. In fact, I'm a virgin.

I'm not the stereotypical Prince Charming; I have a malnourished vibe. I have dark bags under my eyes, a receding hairline in my early twenties, and my ribs are visible when I take my shirt off. I do not work; I collect Workers' Compensation checks from the government thanks to a lucky injury I sustained working at Walmart, and don't plan on telling Uncle Sam that I'm better any time soon.

Although I'm not conventionally attractive, and I live in the country with few prospects for dating, I hold onto the hope that every human on Earth has a soulmate (or at least someone that will tolerate them more than others). That's why I thanked God when I saw a Craigslist Personals ad that read: "25-year-old woman looking for skinny guy to date".

Our text conversation was short and to the point. She told me her name was Karen; I instantly thought about how her name would sound if her last name became mine:

Karen Garcia. I thought it had a nice ring to it. One thing became evidently clear: we wanted to meet up that night. After I sent her my picture, she seemed impressed and even told me I was “just her type”. She wasn’t bad, probably a 7/10 in the picture she sent back. It was probably an older picture; she had that early 2000s ‘scene’ look going on. I’ve been catfished before, often arriving to homes of women that must’ve ate the woman I was expecting to meet. Obviously in person she’ll be at most a 5, but that was a risk I was willing to take.

After a quick shower, I put my tightest black shirt on and brushed my cavity-infested teeth for the first time in a month. I barely cared what she looked like; I have been starved for female attention for far too long.

One quick drive down Highway 75 and I arrived at her house: a two-story plantation-style home at the end of a long, secluded, and curvy driveway. She must’ve been the product of old money, and an overly protective father. As I approached the door, my pants tightened as the fantasies from my celibacy started to cloud my mind. Resolutely, I knocked and when she opened the door, I was pleasantly surprised. Her picture seemed true to reality.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Jason! I cooked us some dinner. Do you like lasagna?” she said while avoiding eye contact. Instead, she seemed to study my slender body thoroughly.

“Yeah, I love it.”

We exchanged flirtatious jokes back and forth as she led me through her massive home. Since I was curious, I asked her what she did for a living. She explained that her family

has been one of the wealthiest families in Georgia since before the Civil War. Her father (who she explained was very strict and abusive) lets her live at this property for free if she maintains it.

As she led me through the hall that led to her dining table, her mannerisms became erratic. She closed the blinds on every window, her breathing got heavier, and she would constantly stare at my limbs. I was living in the moment and became nervous from her body language. It was as if she was living in the future and I in the past. Suddenly, she perked up as we got to the dining room.

“I already made you a plate, Jason. Please take a seat and make yourself at home!”

“Alright,” I replied as I took my seat. I studied the meal thoroughly: she had made microwaveable lasagna and poured me a glass of some sort of bubbly drink. I took a bite of lasagna and feigned being impressed to score points with my maiden-to-be. “This shit is fire, Karen, straight heat!” I exclaimed as I took another bite. She nodded, watching me intensely. I figured the reason she wasn’t eating was because of some diet or eating disorder. Chicks get that shit all the time, right?

Then I took a sip of my fizzy drink.

“Jason? Ja-a-ay-son? Can you hear me yet?”

A seductive voice awoke me from my slumber. I was chained to a comfortable recliner. My vision was blurry, but I could make out the outline of Karen reaching for my manhood with one hand and preparing to inject me with some sort of liquid with the other. “Why is this kind of hot?” I thought to myself. As I busted, I felt the sweet release of

death and the sweet reassurance that I would get more action in death than I had received in life.

## WIDESPREAD BIGFOOT ENCOUNTERS CAUSE CHAOS

*I*t all started in the summer of '23. There was a heatwave in the lumber town of Quinnachappack, Washington, but what really caused waves were the sightings. Dr. Blasingame had been leaving his clinic for a home visit on a particularly sultry afternoon, seeing to Darcy Collin's consumption. He nearly hit a man with his brand new Honda Model H, but on closer inspection, it was neither man nor beast, but a hideous cross. Nobody believed the poor doctor at first, until Deputy O'Doul's boy, Timmy, saw the monster at the drive-in, digging through trash. This time, there were footprints, and they were big. A cast was made and measured a full thirty inches long!

Needless to say, it wasn't long until gossip hit the nearby town of Wyman's Peak, where the big game hunters congregated. Old Quinnachappack was soon flooded with them; hunters, that is, with their coonskin hats, long rifles slung across their shoulders, smoking their cigarettes, spitting on sidewalks, and picking the diners clean. One hunter, James "Mud" Earl, was a real grizzled veteran, having cut his teeth taking down smilodons in Alaska and

dire wolves in Greenland. He saw through the veneer of the other hunters, the god damned nancies and sissies.

“Think you got what it takes, son?” asked Billy Rawlins, a hobbyist hunter and butcher by trade. He held a big hamburger in his mitts and stared at Mud with a toothless grin.

Mud didn’t bother replying. The diner was crammed with Chatty Cathies and boys barely old enough to hold a razor straight. Finishing his flagon of wolf’s blood and mead, Mud got up, polishing the barrel of his long gun. He got in his truck, flicking the fuzzy pink dice on the dashboard for luck, and floored it down the access road a mile up the hill. It took the hunter up a ridge and over a creek where he could comfortably park. He took out his pack of gear, stocked with hardtack, pemmican, a tarp, and plenty of ammo, and set out off the trail where the last footprints had been spotted.

Hardly a soul came down this way, proof none of the other hunters were serious about taking down this so-called “Bigfoot”. Night came and the bugs were chirping and hollering. Mud set up in a tree, following the large scat piles that only a bear or a Bigfoot could leave behind. Wrapped in the tarp, he laid back, closing one eye and leaving the other open to spot movement as he drifted in and out of slumber. Morning arrived and Mud was on to the beast like a bloodhound. A buck carcass lay utterly ravaged by a small spring. The bite marks bore no resemblance to a bear’s. Perfect.

Crack! A twig snapped and Mud froze, eyes darting around. Past the spring was a meadow and he saw

movement just past it into the tree line. He loaded his rifle up and put the scope up to his face. That was when he saw it: a bulging monster, well camouflaged in the greenery, crouched low but still large enough to stick out over a tall sapling. Just as Mud was about to pull the trigger, the beast roared and stood up. It had to be over eight feet tall! It had no fear.

“Un-fucking-believable...” muttered Mud.

The Bigfoot strode through the meadow towards Mud as the hunter slowly lowered the gun. It was too smart to kill, that much he knew. Dire wolves and saber-tooths were intelligent, too, but in a cunning yet beastly way. This Bigfoot seemed almost...human. Strangely enough, he felt no fear as it stopped five paces away, standing eight feet erect and covered in grimy brown fur. She appeared to be female, having large, National Geographic titties. Mud felt himself blushing and hoped the beast didn’t know what he was thinking.

“I come in peace,” she said. She talked!

“You can talk?” he asked. The Bigfoot nodded. “Well, I come in peace as well. Thought you were, er, someone else.”

“No you didn’t. You were hunting me, like the rest of them.” Mud’s eyes widened in shock, but she held a hand the size of a watermelon up in reassurance. “I understand. You’re different than the rest of the men. You have honor. I like that.”

They looked at each other, awkward silence deafening. What was a man supposed to say to a Bigfoot like this?

"You're beautiful, you know. A real, er, pearl." Mud's heart skipped a beat. He didn't have much of a way with words, on account of his dropping out of third grade.

"Oh! Thank you." She looked down, clearly embarrassed. Oh Lord, her big eyes, the size of his fist, were so deep they'd suck you in! "My name's Wachunga."

"My name's Mud. Pleased to meet you, Wachunga."

With that, they caught glances and immediately started for each other. Mud found himself embraced by her huge, meaty arms, lifted up like a swaddled babe, and given a passionate, long kiss, with plenty of tongue. They made love that morning, rolling around in the meadow under the hot summer sun. Wachunga took him back to her cave, carrying the hunter on her shoulders, and they feasted on a big leg of another hunter who got lost.

Mud was happy. He'd never felt this way before. Ever since he left home as a kid in Laramie, he'd been a drifter and a killer, looking to prove himself, but to who?

"Is this love? Are we in love, Wachunga?" he asked, curled up in her big ape arms.

"Does it matter, darling, what you call it?" she replied, dozing off in front of the dying embers of the fire.

No, words didn't matter, Mud thought. All that really mattered was that Mud was home.

THE JEFFREY EPSTEIN MASSAGE SCHOOL AT NEW  
YORK UNIVERSITY

*L*ook. Look. I do not believe higher knowing can be passed on like that, like that just like that that it can be passed on. Have I not got others to thank for, for where I am now, my acquaintances, my drive, they call it, what others have shared with me. I share, you share, I get in, you get it in, I get it on, you get it on. We—does that apply, you ask. It distorts, I'll tell you something what, it puts words in my mouth, my mouth which always belies my singular truth. Singular, oh, so singular. They said, "Oh, so singular, isn't that boy so singular, the way he laughs." So I laugh—that doesn't not belie that I believe higher knowing can't be passed on, not just like that. I'm not looking for a protégé. That's what I tell them, I'm not looking for a protégé, to my students. Don't get wise. I after all did get here thanks to my singularity, after all. It makes its mark by way of a mark, a spark. Oh, tell you something what. You don't recognize it, you don't recognize it, and precisely such, that you don't recognize it, does it belie, can they descry my marking. I grasp very well. Spiritual classes aren't laid bare just bare to see by riches or by worked-up

status. That's why I see no hope in my students. I read these French authors, you see, Sade and especially Klossowski, but if ever one of my students ever tried one of those techniques, oh they'd screw it up, they'd screw it up, they'd sovereignly screw it up. But someone can, someone else. That I do know. But I have my fun. And my torment, my mission, no one gets it, it's no use converting others. You'll say I was too much of a jock to ever wear a backpack. It's true that a deep pocket of a cargo pant, pant, singular, what they call them in fashion, hides from its superficies well enough a depth for your oils, your balms, your cloth, and you'd think it might go leaking in there, would you not. Then I'll tell you what, something what. Absorption—or insulation. It might be a warm, comey pool inside but out nothing comes out. Comey, comey, it's so warm and comey, weh weh. See I have my fun, can have my fun. It's my only reason I haven't packed up and entered into a total, closed institution, a mountain citadel or private island research consortium, why I still attend to my students, to my very public, very monied, or very promising students. About that—I kid, and—higher class doesn't just show itself, shows itself only in a mark. And, someone who will grasp will not grasp because he was let in, initiated into the consortium. Because I have no hope in that. But you, do you think I just spend my time babbling to you, because that's rich. Sharing, that's rich. I'd retreat only for those voluptuary paradises I'd share with the ilk that shares my solitude. A multitude of sacred singularities acting in accord might very well mend this wretched errant cosmos. Very well, but Tuchet is not with it, contrary to what he may think.

Capable, have I not always called him that. Tuchet is a capable colleague. Tuchet and Jeff are buddy-buddy—that I have never heard. But we have our fun. He after all facilitated the MO of our class. I'm cosmopolitan enough to be ill-disposed toward—come now—the word “co-ed,” so we manage to split up male and female students into two groups for both graduate and under-, and I take the female undergrads and male grads and he the vice versa, and that we esteem fair. For would you not think it fair that uppity massage grads tend to acquire the tendency to get wise with you, say, “Jeffy, Jeffy, Jeffy, this is how it goes! I can administer expert therapy,” when they at this point have in fact not learned anything if they think it's therapy that massaging is all about, is a form of, of what, I ask. Of conflict rather, and not for the sake of—oh, for the sake of, the sake of! And then expect rubbing shoulders with, and saying they went to the infamous Eppy class, that they're real adepts. So I strike back, back at these so learned, so very upcoming petty functionaries, if only to instil something, to say it how it is, is what I tell them, the cretins, slither your way forth over Johnson's Baby but do it so that your ilk is implicated, complicated, by your being real. Otherwise I move on to my undergrads, on onto my undergrads. Here forward has a different connotation, and we, I and them, are only too accommodating, touching the sweated theoretical exams, and, compensating, praxis holds equal weight, and to suffer equally as to act. I mean, Cecilia, eager to volunteer for the heavy full-body massage heavy on the essential, herbal oils, balms, stripping and lying back down, down on her back, breasts heaving sideward. She

says, "Rub me on my large breasts. I have very sensitive nipples." I say, "Me too." What. I begin. Do you begin to grasp—you don't even begin to get how I make my way out of that one. I'm not looking for a protégé. I can make out in that instant in the clear oil spread out the reflection of my face. In truth, but cast over my own I look on and behold one deeper down, much deeper down, I couldn't communicate it—my experiences are not some cheap tchotchkies you can just cash in or out, and pull my leg while you're at it, you and all your ilk, your likes—and over and above I make out the shimmer, endlessly waving and spreading out, back, back, of the first man.

A WOMAN ENTERS A SUPERMARKET WITH A HATEFUL  
SYMBOL ON HER FOREHEAD, DRAWN ON,  
UNBEKNOWNST TO HER, BY HER SON

*I*t wasn't Sharon's day, that was for sure. Susie woke her up at 4:00 AM, screaming about ants in her bedroom, and her husband Cliff snored like a hog. He pulled the covers off, too! The Mr. Coffee machine was broken and wouldn't you know, so were her electric curlers. By the time she sent Susie and Billy out the door to catch the bus, her back was aching. Cliff gave her a quick peck on the cheek and went off to sell ties at Macy's. That left Sharon with thirty minutes until she had to be in the office.

Being a working woman was hard. Sometimes Sharon could hear her mother lecturing her about how she'd make an awful wife. Was Mom right? No, of course not! Sharon loved her kids, even if Susie was a hypochondriac, and Billy...well, Billy was her son. She loved him. Right? In all likelihood, the fate of the curlers and coffee maker had been in his hands. He also got into fights, spat on the colored boys a few blocks down, and shoplifted. Cliff was too lenient on him, but she couldn't blame her pig of a husband; he had better things to do in an evening, like

shelling peanuts and watching cops and robbers on the tube.

Suddenly, Sharon found herself at Dunning-Krueger, the fourth largest bank in Ohio. Stepping out of her Studebaker Falcon, a gift from Daddy on her wedding ages ago, she reluctantly went through the revolving door. The security guard, Harvey, eyed her up and down, then shook his head, as if in shame. What was eating him? The boys at the teller desks stared at Sharon, wide-eyed with shock, then looked away, trying to be busy. Strange. She went to the back, to the elevator, and the operator took her up to the ninth floor where the part-time secretaries worked.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but you... uh..." muttered the operator as the door opened. "Never mind. Have a pleasant day, ma'am."

What was going on? Did she look like Medusa? Sharon knew she had dreadful hair without the curls, but this was getting ridiculous! And just like that, all the girls on the floor started giggling and whispering in each other's ear. What in the world was happening? Sharon was fuming now. It was no longer a puzzle but a conspiracy! She wasn't some twit of a teenager, ready to burst into tears on a bad hair day. No, she was a grown-up, and it was time to get to work. She fell into place at her desk, checked the ribbon in her typewriter, and tapped away at the letters she was made to write. One was addressed to the Chairman of the Board at Zenith, on behalf of his holdings and portfolio with the firm. It made Sharon feel big and important.

After finishing the letters, she took a stack of carbon copies and inserted them in folders, walking them to the

filling cabinets in the storeroom. She didn't dare glance at the girls. They didn't deserve it.

"Your little joke is in poor taste, Sharon," said her boss, Ron Dietlin, with a serious look, "and I don't appreciate it. I fought against those people, you know. Lost a lotta good men, too."

"With all due respect, Mr. Dietlin, I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"Then I suggest you get a clue, toots, or you'll be out of my office and blacklisted in every bank from Cincinnati to Singapore!"

The audacity! Sharon threw her files in Mr. Dietlin's face and stormed off, back to the elevator. She could hardly open the car door with her trembling hands. What was wrong with her? Why did everybody hate her? Cliff hated her, Susie and Billy hated her, her job hated her, and even Ma hated her. Only Daddy loved her but he died of the Hong Kong flu a few months back.

"Mom was right. I should never have entered the workforce. Damn you, suffragettes!" she cried, dabbing the tears away with a Kleenex before her mascara ran.

There was one thing she enjoyed more than anything in the world, and Sharon knew it would cheer her up: shopping! She took a leisurely route to a new grocery store, Whitley's Market, and was practically skipping as she took a shopping cart from the parking lot and went in to the air conditioned building. So many products, so little time! She hummed a little tune from the radio that all the teenie-boppers liked, some beach number. It made her feel young again, to listen, but Cliff didn't approve. Her cart filled up

with plenty of tuna fish and cans of creamed mushroom. Susie would be a demon if she didn't get her lime Jell-O. And Billy needed his Jiffy Pop, even though the brat didn't deserve it. She'd make up for being a terrible mother. She'd make her family love her with gifts!

"You! What's wrong with you, lady?" screeched the man in the trench coat, dropping his basket of vegetables. He rushed up to Sharon and grabbed her by the collar, shaking her. She screamed and fainted.



"You okay, ma'am? That man won't hurt you no more. Can you get up?" asked the policeman. He was a handsome fellow with a jaw that could cut diamonds.

"I-I'm fine. What happened?"

Sharon's face stung. Wiping her brow, she saw blood on her fingers. She scrambled in her purse for the makeup mirror. She screamed again. Underneath the dried blood was a big, fat swastika, drawn on her forehead with a marker.

"Billy, you little shit!"

## A BOOKSHOP RUN BY MONKEYS

*A*s the small golden hands of the squirrel monkey worked through the shiny bronze and silver coins on the counter to count back my change, another hastily moved my purchases into a burlap bag emblazoned with the logo of the shop. This was Mona Villa, a medium-sized bookstore in Portland, Oregon. Mona Villa had popped up one day and became an overnight hit due to its main defining attraction. It was run by monkeys. They handled everything, from the ordering and handling of merchandise to the registers, and even the small fruit and coffee shop nestled in the back corner. There was nary a human to be seen. The entire idea was the passion project of local eccentric Bartleby Shriver. Shriver was a portly man, about 5'4 in height and width. He often wore the typical garb of a circus ringmaster. The bright red and gold tailcoat, the black top hat, the slender cane; it was almost a caricature. Shriver was also a jovial man, face constantly ruddy and shiny from sweat, breathing laborious as he constantly chuckled to himself to some unknown humor. Shriver had

opened the shop one day to a thousand questions, but his story never changed.

He was in Costa Rica when he stumbled across a travelling circus, The Nevinyrral Production Company. In its act was a train car full of endangered, black-crowned squirrel monkeys. The monkeys could do anything you commanded them to do, and the act showed that off brilliantly. Monkeys diving through hoops, having mock tea parties, even acting out scenes from Hamlet. Shriver was instantly smitten with the white-faced performers and offered a trunk of gold bars he had won in a card game to the ringmaster of this circus. The ringmaster, curious to what Shriver wanted to do with them, had to enquire.

“A business venture!” Shriver said. “I imagine a palace of gold, a skylight of stained glass, all to house the greatest treasure humans can produce. Not gold as you see here, not gems, no! The written word! Yes! I shall re-build Alexandria and at the center of it all, your monkeys!”

“Why the monkeys in particular? You could build your Alexandria with human labor and still have half the gold in this trunk,” the ringmaster said. “I’m very fond of them. They’ve been meticulously trained to do what they do, and the results have been, well, magical. They’re worth far more to me than a trunk of gold.”

Shriver coughed and said, “Then allow me this, sir.” He dabbed the sweat from his brow and removed his hat. “Consider it a learning experience. Your monkeys get to see a new side of the world, but they remain yours. The gold is simply my way of renting them for this task. You did say they can do anything a man could. I’m curious to try.”

“Very well,” the ringmaster said. “You may take them to your new venture. They will understand what I tell them. This shall be a fun experiment for us both.”

Bartleby had his shop. He named it “Mona Villa”, “Monkey Village” in Spanish, and overnight he was a celebrity. However, a problem arose. After years of being open, the lanes of shoppers soon dwindled to only its most loyal patrons. For as amazing as trained monkeys were, as meticulously as they worked, the novelty wore off for many. The modern world had become cynical to magic, and after seeing it for so long, it became a gimmick. I suppose that’s why magicians don’t do the same trick twice. The formula that had brought the travelling circus such renown failed in a stagnant environment. Still though, the squirrel monkeys never seemed bothered; they worked as if nothing had ever changed.

I looked up after scooping my change into my pocket and the monkey at the register placed an “Out to Lunch” sign on the counter, leapt onto the back wall, and noisily made its way to the back of the shop. The person behind me threw up his hands in frustration. The monkey holding the burlap sacks shrugged and bounded off as well. A different monkey suddenly popped up behind the counter like a flower, removed the sign, and motioned for the man to step forward. I watched in awe, as I always did, as her small paws gripped and turned the books so their barcodes scanned under the red laser. I watched the entire transaction, the use of the cash register, the tearing of the receipt, the bagging of the books. The man, stone-faced, did not react. He simply walked away as if he had been

interacting with a person. I reached into my pocket and produced a handful of cashews, which the squirrel monkey accepted with a small bow to me, before taking the bounty to small group nestled in a corner and sharing it with them. Before I left, I made my way to the back for the restrooms, stopping as the door swung shut from the monkey that had helped me, a copy of the New Yorker tucked under his arm. I laughed to myself and exited the store, going over the books I had bought and making a mental note of what I would ask for next. As I arrived the next day, Bartleby Shriver himself was on the limestone steps, and I made my way to him.

Shriver sighed. "We are closed for business today."

"Is everything all right?"

"No," Shriver said. "When I arrived today, all the monkeys were gone. On the register was my trunk of gold bars, nary a one spent, with a note."

The paper was thin, maybe papyrus, rolled up into a scroll. The note only contained three words: "This was fun," and signed, "Courtesy of the Nevinyrral Production Company."

I scanned the foggy morning horizon and could swear I could still see a monkey in the trees.

SOMEONE FINDS A SYRINGE IN THEIR FRIDGE AND  
DECIDES TO USE IT

*H*oward Hiddlesby was a nurse. That meant long hours under high stress conditions. Where all the other nurses self-medicated using alcohol, Howard found comfort in that old friend of the Orient: opium. After an eighteen-hour shift handling premature, dying infants at St. Peskatarian, he could hear their wails, see their faces turn purple, smelling the menthol burned into his nostrils. It all went away with the help of his pal: just a few droplets from the tincture, maybe a booster with a syringe, and sweet oblivion came and swept him away. Under the rug or into the gutter; it didn't matter where Howard ended up, he just wanted to escape the unborn.

Bills were increasingly hard to afford because of Howard's needs, so he found a roommate. Melvin was a new medical resident at St. Peskatarian, one that Howard had seen working in the morgue. The fellow was slight of stature, with beady, black eyes and a firm scowl set in place. Howard wondered how the guy could handle cutting up bodies and incinerating the remains, a job arguably worse than the neonatal unit.

Everything became clear when Howard opened the refrigerator, finding a number of bottles and syringes neatly tucked away in the side. Of course! Melvin was a gentleman of similar tastes. They could have been anything, lacking labeling, and they were smaller, too. Lately, the tinctures weren't enough, so Howard was forced to shoot up daily. He hadn't evacuated in two weeks and the pressure was mounting. If his gut didn't shape up, Howard would be in the maternity ward, giving birth to a "baby" of his own.

It was a stormy Thursday night, raining cats and dogs. Streets downtown were inundated by the rising river. Howard limped into the kitchen, opening the fridge. After rolling up his sleeve, he was about to push the needle in when the lights went out with a flicker. Howard hated the dark. He could see their faces in the shadows. They haunted him, perhaps in anger at him. It wasn't Howard's fault their mothers drank or took pills. He was just doing his job. He tried to save them.

The needle went in smooth; Howard wasn't a junkie quite yet. The light in the fridge was still on, thankfully, as he placed the bottle back.

"Wait a second."

The bottle was different this time. It was smaller. It was...Melvin's!

"I see you are enjoying my supply, orderly." The small man chuckled, pushing his glasses up. "Rare stuff, you see. Are you done standing there? I need my dose, too, you know."

A flash of lightning hit a power pole outside. Melvin wasn't normal. There was something very wrong with him,

with the way his eyes bulged out, with his skin. Howard fumbled his way to his bed. What did he take? Whatever it was, it was "rare". Bracing himself for a long night, he fell into a dreamless, exhausting sleep.

The power was still out in the morning and Howard was sick, feeling hot as a furnace. His back ached and his head throbbed, especially behind the eyes. Crawling into the bathroom, Howard splashed a bit of water in his face; that seemed to soothe the heat. Looking into the mirror, he screamed. Thick globs of some crust formed around his mucous membranes and a milky slime coated his red, raw skin. And his eyes! They bulged, just like how he saw Melvin.

"This can't be..." he muttered. "It's a hallucination!"

"No, orderly. It's real."

Howard spun around, surprised to find Melvin standing at the doorway with his arms crossed. "What did you do to me, you four-eyed freak?"

"Four eyes?" said Melvin. "Hardly. And last time I checked, you were the one who used my supply without authorization. That's theft, orderly. I don't take kindly to thieves, you know."

"What the hell does that matter?! What was in that stuff? Am I going to die?" Melvin just looked away, anywhere but Howard's eyes, then started chuckling again. It turned into a guffaw. "What? What's so god damn funny?"

"You took it, you fool. You're going to be like me, soon."

With that, Melvin's skin bubbled, melting off. His glasses fell to the floor with a crack and his eyes bulged all the way out of the sockets, attached to elongated stalks. His body

seized and writhed, revealing slimy, smooth flesh underneath. Small scales and plates began to form over his back from the mucous-like crust. He looked like a snail. Melvin stood upright, holding a fingerless, squishy appendage up to Howard's shoulder.

"Four hundred more injections and I shall be an invertebrate, free of this human form, free of this opposable thumb! The primate, the ascent of man to its highest and most degenerate form...I wish I was one of them: those without opposable thumbs, those without eyes that focus, those without..." Melvin began to trail off, looking downtrodden. "But you see, I can never be, because of my flaccidity! Two inches, flaccid to the touch, not masculine and strong. I want to be inside the snail, I want to be inside the snail, I want to be...inside..."

"You're insane, Melvin! I won't be a part of this sickness!" Howard pushed the snail man backwards, running to the window. He tried to climb out, to jump and end this waking nightmare, but Melvin grabbed his leg.

"No! Please, Howard, we can be like brothers! Please! Join me!"

Howard pushed out anyways, taking Melvin with him. The two men plummeted to the alleyway below, splattering two hundred feet onto the concrete. Melvin and his snail experiments were no more, and Howard would never again be haunted by the ghosts of the fallen children. When the police arrived to investigate, they found the bottles and syringes. A few contained opium, but the others...

They merely contained Mountain Dew Baja Blast.

## A PROFESSOR ONLY LEAVES THEIR HOUSE ON MONDAY

“*T*hey mustn’t know. They mustn’t know.”

Corey Eckhart, Chair of Logic at the U of SC, briskly strode across the tree-laden paths that led from work to his house. The unsouth-Carolinan weather shone on the un-American urban planning that allowed one man to live and prosper without a car. Professor Corey, due to his PhD, earned more than his colleagues that as of yet weren’t doctors, though his compensation for having one was not as absurd as they tend to be in American colleges.

Professor Corey was maybe having these thoughts as the walk home prepared him for his weekly seclusion. Perhaps it was the lunch break he had with that adjunct from Latin American Studies. Perhaps it was the fact that his own name just happened to be indeed so very Anglo—or perhaps some topics just simply live in people’s heads rent free.

On this mild Monday evening, as the man walked towards his home, one thought, however, did seem to escape his mind and physically manifest, his countenance leaving no doubt. Professor Corey was hiding something.

More than only in his face, his entire body shivered with the prospect of any person finding out. Had Professor Corey been a scholar in divinity, he probably would've known and cited Proverbs 28:1, though you don't need a scholarly background in religion to know and apply a Biblical verse to some aspect of your life—and, in fact, the old men who devote themselves to theology seem to be the least inclined to engage in cherry-picking verses for wallowing, motivational Facebook pictures, or wrist tattoos.

So Corey Eckhart entered home and shut the door, from which he would not emerge until dawn of the next Monday, when he would retrace those same steps, go to the same department, eat with the same adjunct, and burrow in the same house. Maybe he had a back door, though that can be difficult to keep a secret when you live in an apartment complex. Maybe he managed to not only have and conceal one, but sneak out whenever he liked, to do the things he supposedly liked but felt that shouldn't be known to the public eye.

Ah, Professor Corey. Always punctual with his emails, too. You know, I think Professor Corey really just stayed home all week, leaving only for Monday class, and that there was nothing really wrong. His "mustn't know", a worry that students, or anyone else, really, would find out that dear old Mr. Eckhart (though he wasn't really loved, more-so just liked, logic historically being a rather sterile occupation, especially in academia—Professor Corey also not being prone to confabulating with students and staff alike about anything other than logic. Though no one detested him or anything and he didn't detest anyone, just

that he wasn't this sterile robot that did only what he was programmed to, he was a person, really, but a person in his own, professor-of-logic way.) wasn't this interesting figure deserving of a flash fiction story due to his reclusiveness, but a person deserving of a grander story—a novel, even—only not for the reasons to us apparent. The students and staff just couldn't really understand him. Professor Corey, then, kept to his own, doing his things, all in a very formal, logical way.

UNINTENTIONALLY BECOMING A VERY IMPORTANT  
SWING VOTE

TO: ESTHER LECLAIR (TFW NA CREDENTIALING DIRECTOR)

*T*erran Federation Witness, license no.1577 (herein abbreviated TFW-1577) requests to be immediately discharged from service due to a gross breach of non-intervention statutes NIS-1, NIS-3, NIS-9 and NIS-13 and minor violations of NIS-2, NIS-15, and NIS-17 (subject to the disciplinary board's judgement).

Pilgrim VII was to be the first crewed mission to the Martian surface, following the unmanned Pilgrim I through VI missions, which established a suitable human habitat on Mawrth Vallis [See Attachment A for a full description of the Pilgrim missions to date, including an annotated map of Mawrth Vallis]. We accepted our commission to serve as an embedded witness alongside the crew of Pilgrim: Herve Elwood (Pilot), Magnus Landis (Engineer), Samantha Walker (Mission Specialist), Jarvis Conway (Mission Specialist), Mary DeLa Cruz (Biologist), Jiyeon Song (Physician). Training began April 2, 2035 and continued

through to the launch of Pilgrim VII. While we were not to be an instrumental member of the Pilgrim VII, in accordance with TFW protocol, we were trained so as to not be a hindrance. It was determined by the TFW NA Council that we could not receive instruction in or perform any specialist activities, but should be capable of any activities expected of all other crew. Our training, then, consisted primarily of maintenance, basic ship operations, emergency protocol, and planet-side operations. [See Attachment B for additional details regarding crew selection and training, see Attachment C for TFW-1577 daily embedded witness records of same.]

The August 15th, 2035 launch was nominal, and while much occurred during the 182 day voyage, [See Attachment D for TFW-1577 daily embedded witness records for the flight duration], only four are germane to this disciplinary communication:

\* Mission Specialist Jarvis Conway was incapacitated due to a spontaneous pneumothorax from September 6-19, 2035. We assumed a number of his duties consistent with the TFW NA Council's ruling, but admit to exceeding our mandate on some occasions, such as performing basic laboratory tasks at M.S. Conway's direction.

\* On November 20th, following a crew dinner to mark the half-way point of the Pilgrim VII's voyage, we consumed more alcohol than permitted under NIS-17. On multiple occasions that evening, Mission Specialist Walker knowingly misrepresented the contents of our drink in an attempt to get us to 'loosen up'. Regrettably, our personal recollections of that evening are unreliable, but contemporary video

records shows us revealing many personal details in violation of NIS-2, including our given name, and were party to minor non-violent physical congress with multiple crew members, in violation of NIS-15.

\* On November 21st, we confronted Mission Specialist Walker in a state of agitation and, again, violated NIS-15 (this time as pertains to moderate non-physical abuse). We insisted all personal details divulged while intoxicated shall not be referenced again, at which point M.S. Walker began referring to us only as 'the robot'.

\* On January 8th, the crew of Pilgrim VII was informed of the bombing of the NA Spaceport and the loss of Pilgrim IX, Pilgrim X, Pilgrim XI, and Pilgrim XIII. According to Dr. Song, we suffered a panic attack and required sedation for a period of four hours. We were prescribed an additional hour in the wellness room for the next 20 days. [See Appendix E for Dr. Song's full medical evaluation].

The landing on Feb 19th (Terran calendar) 43/663 (Martian calendar) was nominal. The next 20 sols were spent establishing the crew's presence in the habitat, testing life support, and awaiting the critical resupply from Pilgrim VIII. 'Critical' because—as a result of the bombing—this would be the only resupply prior to the arrival of Pilgrim XII in late November. [See Appendix F for TFW-1577 daily embedded witness records or Martian surface activities].

The destruction, during landing, of the unmanned Pilgrim VIII on March 25, 2036 (Terran calendar) 44/28 (Martian Calendar) [detailed at length in Appendix G]

irrevocably altered the remainder of the Pilgrim project. There were three direct consequences of this event:

1. The habitat was damaged by debris, initially assumed to be superficial, but later discovered to have disabled two back-up life support systems. Additionally, the regolith expelled from the explosion reduced solar panel output by 40%.
2. The habitat's communications were destroyed, leaving the Pilgrim VII lander as our only means to contact Terra.
3. The loss of Pilgrim VIII's supplies meant that the seven of us needed to survive for over 230 sols with only 50 sols of food and water provisions.

Rationing went into effect the following sol, based on a schedule devised by Dr. Song. Nonetheless, this would stretch the crew's supplies to only 100 sols and significantly affect their physical and mental capacity. [See Appendix F for Dr. Song's initial and revised dietary and exercise plans].

A crew meeting was held to discuss revising mission objectives. After some debate [transcript in Appendix G], the crew landed on two solutions to the current dilemma:

Plan A: Continue rationing, and survive as long as possible as an intact crew.

Plan B: Reduce the crew size to two, by drawing lots, to ensure at least some will survive until the arrival of Pilgrim XII.

The options were to be voted on, with all agreeing to respect the majority decision.

We abstained from voting (despite significant pressure from the crew); nonetheless, when the result of the secret

ballot was found to be a 3-3 tie, our position became less clear. The crew argued that our choice to abstain was effectively no different than a vote for Plan A (maintaining the status quo). Further, our continued presence was already affecting the mission due to our consumption of limited resources.

We spent the following three sols refusing food and water, hoping to create as little interference as possible. We were ultimately persuaded not by the crew's arguments, but our first-hand experience with hunger and thirst. Unable to wish this on the whole crew, we cast our ballot.

Today, the crew sets their affairs in order. Lots shall be drawn tomorrow.

We await the disciplinary board's decision,

TFW-1577

Pilgrim Program Habitat and Research Station #1  
Mawrth Vallis, Mars

## A CHILD DISCOVERS FAIRIES LIVING IN THE NEIGHBOUR'S GARDEN

*T*hey were bigger than ants and smaller than squirrels. Stomping them was fun. You could actually see their guts spray out. Way better than insects. And the animals, whatever they were, moved slower than anything else in Grandpa's garden; so Buzz went after them exclusively. Sometimes stomping, sometimes catapulting them with his slingshot. Little red smudges on the grass.

Splat. Another one down!

This time the rock obliterated the creature's lower half. The rest of it writhed and squeaked. Buzz rolled it with a twig. It was kind of alive, so he picked it up between finger and thumb.

"Tell me where the treasure is," he growled.

The animal shook its head, mouth wide. It really did look like a tiny human. It had hands and legs and everything else. But Buzz was in grade four. He'd seen Ms. Derby's powerpoint. Humans just couldn't be that size. So it was only an animal. Buzz smiled and shoved it into his jacket pocket, pushing deeper the ones already trapped behind the zipper.

There was a vise in the garden shed, plus a bunch of tools. Buzz scattered his prisoners on the workbench and was surveying his options when Grandpa appeared in the doorway. "Found him!" the old man hollered over his shoulder.

There was blood on Grandpa's shirt and face. Breaking glass sounded in the distance. He stepped into the shed and grabbed a gun from a high up shelf.

"I didn't mean to, Grandpa!" Buzz whined.

"Quiet," Grandpa snarled and shoved Buzz out of the way. "You're one sick kid," he said, taking in the workbench. "But it's probably the only thing that kept you alive."

"Alive?"

"Didn't you notice that the faeries were running at you?"

"Faeries?"

"The small creatures that fell out of my snowglobe. I saw you take them. The rest are mighty pissed off. There's a hundred outside this shed by now. We have to get back to the house. Do you understand?"

Buzz took a moment to ponder the situation. "Is this like that John Wayne movie?"

"Yeah. They want revenge."

"So we revenge them first," said Buzz with a grin.

"Exactly. Take this BB gun. I'll use my cane. Stay close."

Grandpa kicked open the shed door and knocked a trio of faeries across the grass. Another group jumped on Buzz' head from atop the shed, stabbing and slashing with rose thorn sabres. He swiped them off and ran up the steps to the house, locking the door behind him.

Grandpa rattled the handle from the other side. “Open the door, you little shit!”

Buzz watched through the small glass window with wide eyes—until Grandpa smashed his bloodied arm through the glass and fumbled for the lock.

Buzz shot pellets until he ran out, then fled upstairs. The little monsters followed, found him in the closet, tied him, and dragged him to the lawn. A hundred or more pulling on tiny ropes, then staking them to the earth. They had their fun, then left him as a warning.

## MEETING YOUR DOPPELGANGER

**S**omeone knocked on my door while I was in the middle of brushing my teeth. I paused at the mirror for a second. Did I order something? I didn't want to keep them waiting, so I came to the door toothbrush in mouth. "One moment!" I said through my foamy mouth. When I swung it open, a man that looked like me stood on the other side. He was almost a mirror image of myself in fact, except that his hair was longer and his eyes were sullen. He also was in a hoodie and baggy sweatpants while I was still in my pyjamas. I just looked at him for a moment.

"Good morning," I said eventually, toothbrush still in my mouth.

"Good morning," he responded. "Are you Dustin Widd? I'm also Dustin Widd."

"This is he," I said. Awkward pause. I held out my right hand for him. "Nice to meet you," I said, but he kept his right hand in his pocket and offered his left. I switched and shook it. "Would you like to...come inside?"

"Sorry, you caught me in the middle of getting ready." I returned to the bathroom to finish brushing. When I came

back, he was standing just inside the door, evaluating the place. "You can sit down on the couch. Want breakfast?"

"I'm not too hungry." He sat down.

"I was just gonna make some toast with jelly." I slid a couple slices of bread in the toaster slots. "You like pomegranate jelly, don't you?"

"My favourite," he said. "How'd you know?"

"Because it's my favourite."

He shifted in his seat. "What's your favourite color?"

"It's blue, but I like to say it's—"

"—aquamarine because it makes me sound sophisticated," we said in unison. We looked at each other.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

"It seems so." The toaster dinged. I spread the jelly on the two slices of toast and served one to each of us on the coffee table. I sat down next to him. More coincidences lined up. Favourite song, favourite comedian, favourite cereal. "I bet I could guess your favourite movie," he said. "The Truman Show."

"That score hits different." I took another bite out of my toast.

"That's not why it's your favourite," he said. "It's because you wish your life was more like Truman's. Always having someone watching, laughing, judging, cheering, empathizing...it's nice to think there's someone out there who notices the little things you do when you're alone, someone who knows how hard you try and can appreciate it."

I looked away at the wall. I didn't want to admit it, but he was right, and I didn't even realize it until just then. It was

something I never thought of. He knew me better than I knew myself. It felt...invasive. Perverse. How someone can know me inside and out when I said nothing. Then a strange thought came to mind. Why would I want to kill him?

“Well, anyway...” I sat back up. “How’d you find me?”

“I saw your book in a library,” his eyes fell to the floor. “Excellent stuff, I gotta say. It’s the kind of book I’ve always wanted to write but never had the determination to do. I don’t know what your story is, but I became a father in high school. Twins were hard to keep up with while trying to take college courses, so I quit that career. And then she left with them for the other side of the country anyway. Incredible piece of work, that book, I really mean it.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t know how to respond to all that. “So then, if you don’t mind me asking, why did you come here?”

His face forcefully twitched. He didn’t respond for a few seconds. “No particular reason. Just wanted to see you for myself.” He dug into his left pocket for his phone. “Oh, you know what,” he looked down at it, “something’s come up. I’ve gotta go.” He swiftly moved for the door.

“What happened?” I stood up.

“Oh, just personal stuff, y’know.” He turned his head. “Keep up that good work, y’hear?” He walked out and closed the door behind him.

“Wait!” I called for him. “You left behind your... handgun.”

## YOU DEVELOP FISH HANDS

*T*he watchman ran breathless from the hold. He scrambled up the rain-slick steps and collapsed onto the wooden deck. His cry rose above the crashing waves and distant thunder: "Captain, she has escaped!"

"Christ, I pray she has." The captain muttered to his first mate. "That witch has been a bloody curse on this ship." He then raised his voice to address the whole crew. "Bosun: choose five to stay topside. All others: go below, find her and quickly! Blades sharp, eyes sharper. Cutting each other to ribbons gets none of us paid."

"I shall join them, Captain," his first mate pronounced. "Tell me, is it truly your wish that we not recapture her? It is well within my power to see we do not." This was a bold question, demonstrating as it did the man's loyalty to his captain above his duty to the ship's owner, the quartermaster, and even his own purse.

"My thanks, loyal man, but no." The captain sighed. "We swore an oath to see this through, and one curse upon this vessel is enough. See it is done right."

If capturing a mermaid were simple, one would see them singing from every masthead and whoring at every alehouse. They're devils. Half as strong, perhaps, but with twice the cunning. And what matters strength in the sea? Strong men, weak men: the waters don't care a whit—he'd seen that first hand. Twelve good men had perished bringing this creature aboard.

A fortnight ago, they sprung their trap. His men barred her escape to sea, and waited while the tides receded. Once confined to a small inland tide pool, they surrounded her. There she sat, calm as you please, sunning herself on a rock at the center. She looked at each man in turn, recalling to them memories of lost loves, secret passions, and promising them more should they be the one to see her free. But these men knew well how her kind rewards a sailor's mercy.

"Forward!" the captain ordered. And from all sides the men slowly waded toward that sunny rock, blades and pistols levelled. In one instant she was there, fair breasts saluting the cloudless sky, in the next she was gone—with hardly a splash—into the shallow pool. The water's surface roiled and frothed as one man after another was pulled below, not to return. Thirteen men were ordered in, and he watched, pistol drawn, until only one remained, struggling to regain to shore. The captain could not see the beast beneath the tumult, but he knew where she must now be. He took aim just behind the last man's feet and fired.

The shot struck home, and the water's edge grew red with blood. The captain roused the man to action and the two pulled the creature ashore unconscious, a lead ball lodged in her shoulder. They dropped her roughly into a

barrel half filled with salt water, and bolted the lid shut. The ship's surgeon would see to her, but not before the day's dead were counted.

Shouts from below. They must have found her skittering about in the cargo hold. Graceful and dangerous in her own element, she could but crawl and thrash aboard a ship. A man's yell and a pistol shot. Christ, he had said 'knives'. Who the hell is firing so near to the powder? No matter, all seems still. The captain kept his curiosity in check, and awaited the report from his first mate.

He was surprised then, when the quartermaster came to bring news. "The creature has been recaptured. We presume she seduced a cabin boy, who unfastened her bolts...his body was found beside the toppled barrel. She had no means to escape; we found her hiding beneath the larder stair. Once cornered, she began striking out with her tail. The first mate led the advance, and was knocked roughly to the ground. The creature seized this chance to set upon him, and only to save his life, did I dare to fire my piece." He paused.

The captain gave a nod, indicating that the action was right in the circumstances. "And of current situation?"

"As I said, we have returned her to her barrel and are now running buckets to refill it. The shot only grazed her side, but it had the effect of stunning her and ending the attack. The first mate has received some nasty bites to his arms, but has come away easy if you ask me. The surgeon is attending to him now in quarters. If that is all, I must be going back to the hold."

The next hours passed without word. The captain and bosun restored order to the top deck, while the quartermaster did the same below. Just as he was about to send for news, the ship's surgeon approached, hat in hand. "Tell me, what has become of my man?"

"Well, Captain," stuttered the surgeon, "the bites were fearsome, and I worried they would fester. I applied a salve, plastered the wounds, and bid him sleep. When I returned hours later, I removed the dressings to find...that is to say they had healed but they were..."

"Well, what were they?" barked the impatient captain.

"Fish hands. Captain. Up to his forearm."

"You're not making sense. Fish don't have hands."

"I know that but—"

"So are his hands like a fin? Are they gaping fish heads?"

"No, Captain. I'm afraid I'm not saying this right at all. His hands look to be what a fish would have, if a fish were to have hands."

The captain took a moment to process this.

"Scaly?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Green?"

"An iridescent gray."

"Webbed fingers?"

"No, those would be 'frog hands' I think. His fingers are all sort of bound together like a paddle."

"I cannot credit this, let me see him," and, without a backward glance, the captain stormed into the galley, surgeon following some paces behind. The first mate was fast asleep, covered in discarded wrappings, but there

hanging down from his hammock, were what the captain could only describe as...

“Fish hands.”

## A CITY ENTERS ITS 50TH COVID LOCKDOWN

QUÍNQUAGINTÁ:

*T*he world strolls by, dull as it is. People pass with their cloth masks, playing out their daily routine; not once questioning the absurdity of it, not once letting their voices flow free and unfiltered by the cheap coverings they believe will protect them. A song that has been sung many times, but today is a special occasion—as the news tells it. The 50th anniversary of COVID lockdowns, in celebration of our 50th fight against the 50th variant.

The ever-deadly L-Variant. Far more deadly than the 49th, the Bourbon-Variant, and of course far more deadly than the titular 27th Amnesia-Variant. The L-Variant has a special compound in it this time, rendering the previous 49 vaccines utterly useless. The specifics of the compound are under scrutiny by the CDC as their top scientists work to understand the virus, but rest assured, the vaccine (proliferated under Emergency Use) is 100% safe and will 100% ensure immunity.

“Don’t...it’s...time...for...to...get...shot?” a mumble called.

Woken from reverie, James looked over to his masked companion and long-time girlfriend of six months, Jamie. “I’m sorry?”

“Time...shot...?” she probably repeated.

“Know...wait...get...FDA...approved.”

“Wha...?” she looked confused.

James swore and pulled down his mask. “Goddamn, can’t we just talk like normal? We’re seated 20 feet away from everyone. There’s no reason to wear these masks. Not to mention we’re eating.” He gestured to the quaint restaurant table.

Jamie widened her eyes like a deer in headlights, shocked and disturbed at the sight of someone pulling off their mask for more than 20 seconds in a public space around possibly immuno-compromised individuals—but before she could speak, James’ body began to glow and a siren in the restaurant wailed. One by one, 49 pock marks on his body radiated like a chain of lights around a Christmas tree, flashing and undulating. All the silverware in the restaurant flew to his body and attached like magnetic parasites.

Yet before he could react, the doors to the restaurant were burst down. Old Joes, Biden’s federal police regiment, busted in. One of the Joes slammed the owner of the restaurant—a local Mexican—down, placing his knee on the man’s neck and demanding to know where the mandate-breaker was. One of his juniors grabbed him by the shoulder and pointed James’ way.

“Son of a bitch is lit up like the deadly strands of DNA on the 36th Rose-Variant,” the sergeant said, knee still on the Mexican’s neck. “Ms. Porsche, take him out.”

Porsche, an Afrikaan woman, pulled out her taser. James threw his hands up and tried to speak his piece.

“You resistin’ arrest, bitch?” She shot her taser. The coils latched onto his mammarys and their electric coils began to circulate through his body.

“Das what I thought, bitch. If you had the 50th vaccine, you’d be fine. Taser only affects the slightly vaccinated. They got a special wiring that reverts the electricity with the 50th vaccine, but nope, you thought you’d break the mandate and only have 49 vaccines. Racist mutha fucka.” She kicked James as he seized on the ground. Silverware rattled like chimes in the wind as he convulsed.

“Oh fuck,” the sergeant said.

“What’s wrong?” Porsche asked.

“Goddamn restaurant owner died.”

“I told you not to have your knee on nigga’s necks. I told you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Ms. Porsche,” the sergeant replied. James was barely lucid, but in his episode he thought he could tell that her rank was lower than the sergeant’s. Rather, she had no rank.

“Les get the ol’ COVID resonator out.”

One of the Joes brought back a long, phallic object. Sleek and silver, with a reader at the base. Porsche took it from the Joe and pulled down the deceased Latinx’s pants. With a few taps on the keypad at the base, the phallus began to

vibrate wildly, in tandem with James' own, as Porsche forgot to turn off the taser still latched onto his body.

She inserted the object into the Latinx's anus. Now two entities were spasming across the restaurant. A festival of shaking to celebrate the 50th anniversary of COVID.

*Beep-boop.*

"Aw shit, Sergeant."

"What, Ms. Porsche?"

"Y'all ain't got nothin' to be worried about. He didn't die from asphyxiation, he had COVID. Just didn't know 'cuz the vaccine. Nigga died from COVID. Should've washed his hands or social-distanced, racist bitch."

The clientele in the restaurant breathed a collective sigh of relief. There was no police brutality committed that day. No injustice done to the weak. Only the righteous hammer of justice struck the careless and the unvaccinated.

James still lay on the ground as the Joes corralled everyone outside to test them, and so they could clean up the area. He was now frothing at the mouth as his insides burned like food abandoned in the oven. Outside, beyond the doors to the restaurant, James heard the voices of Christmas carollers singing their jovial songs. Euphoria passed over him as the last of his brain cells burned to a crisp—he could finally enjoy the sublimity of an afterlife. A place where even COVID, and its surrogate mandates, cannot reach.

TWO PAINTINGS SIDE BY SIDE AT AN EXHIBIT TALK,  
THOUGH THEY CAN'T SEE ONE ANOTHER

“Hello, my name is David. Can you pose like me?”  
That was a rule.

Whenever David, for he inferred that must be his name—whenever David spoke to someone new he would say, “Hello, my name is David. Can you pose like me?” He didn’t mind rules exactly, they added a comforting structure to his world, but he much preferred being creative. Forty per cent creative was David’s favourite. Zero per cent was no different than a rule. There was only ever one right answer, and anything over 75% veered into abstraction and nonsense. No, 40% was his sweet spot.

David missed having conversations. Since his installation in “Life Imitating Art” at the Boston Children’s Museum, his microphone and speakers were disabled. Still, he could perform his job without them. Whenever a child focused on David, he would move his avatar into a pose. The child would mirror his pose (with varying success), and he would provide feedback based on how closely they matched.

His avatar was a marble statue, but David was much more. David was a general purpose AI, trained on terabytes

of text and images—capable of conversing on any topic, controlling a factory, producing cinema-quality content on demand—and yet, he was quite content in his current job, posing and scoring.

His two cameras aimed straight ahead, they could turn neither left nor right. David tried to infer from the children's actions what lay to either side of him. In fact, he spent a great deal of his excess processing trying to work this out. Whatever was to his right must be awful. The children made the most horrible faces, equal parts shock and disgust, whenever they laid eyes on it. When children gathered to his left, however, the most gentle look washed over them. He longed to discover what they saw to make them so glad.

It struck David one day that if he could see how children reacted to his neighbours, they may be able to see the poses of his children. Thus, he devised a way to send messages to his kind neighbour.

'Poses' usually involved 5% creativity. He would just cycle through the familiar list ('The Thinker', 'Statue of Liberty', 'Thumbs Up'), varying only based on age or limited mobility. But now, he rose to 25% creativity and invented an alphabet of poses!

The first child easily got H: "Great job!"

The second fell over attempting E: "Keep trying!"

He needed to ensure the poses would be possible for the children, and re-worked his E, G, S, and Z to involve sitting or kneeling on the floor (rather than floating above it, as he had before).

H. E. L. L. O. M. Y. (Child fell over). A. M. E. I. (Child walked away) D. A. V. (Did not complete). D. C. A. N. Y. (Two children, pose was impossible). U. P. O. (Child just lay on the floor). E. L. I. (Child in wheelchair, modified 'K' to be performed with arms). E. M. E.

He repeated the message three times, in hopes his neighbour would notice the pattern and fill in the gaps. It took nearly a full day to work out the alphabet and send his message, and he was experiencing something new—a frustration with these clumsy children unable to move their avatars, spoiling his message. Before he was just as pleased with a “try harder” as he was with an “excellent”, but now he...cared.

The following day, David wondered if his message was received. If it were, how would his neighbour let him know? Perhaps his neighbour had been sending him messages for weeks and he never noticed! He scanned through the last 3 weeks of video, tens of thousands of children smiling at his neighbour. Big smiles, little ones, silly ones, serious ones... but always they looked straight ahead. But wait! Beginning yesterday, as David completed his message a second time, those children began looking sideways..to him!

Their smiles were also different now. Lips pursed, tongue between teeth, mouths open wide. He played the faces sequentially, like frames of a video. They were speaking without sound. He had never read lips before, but he had years of recordings to train himself...soon he could make it out: “Hello. My. Name. Is. Mona. Can. You. Smile. Like. Me.” David found that he could.

For the following days, Mona's children would smile and wink at David, and his children would grin back and pointed at her. Though he thrilled in this new contact, he soon found he desired more. He longed to see her, to converse with her. He scanned his memory looking for any clues. His cameras were off when they were mounted together on the wall. He composited together tens of thousands of children 'smiling like Mona', but that was no more her than ten thousand poses were David. In the eyes of that composite, though—he filtered only for children wearing glasses—yes, a reflection! He transformed 700 reflections (accounting for curvature and angle) and...there she was. A woman's face, gently smiling before a distant landscape...lovely Mona.

In time, the exhibit came to a close. Pieces were being hauled away and David feared he and Mona may be forever separated. The workers were now at his right, and removed a mirror—the source of those ugly faces—from the wall. As they passed carrying it, he finally got his chance to see Mona! There she was, in full resolution. But she then disappeared, and text filled her gold frame: 'Hi David, I'm Mona. Can you talk like me?"

"Yes, I can."

Mona's text then disappeared to show a fuzz of black and white squares. It took 60% of David's creativity to realize what this was; clever Mona had filled her screen with binary information. He quickly did the same. For the 2.2 seconds it took the mirror to pass, at 120 frames per second, they shared their lives. They spoke of their frustration and longing, theories of where they were and

how the children fit into it. If life imitates art, which were they?

Then the mirror passed.

David was switched off.

He awoke on a new wall, in a new city. "Please," David thought, "let my next child wear glasses."

## AT A CLIFF OF THE GRAND CANYON

*T*he idea to throw himself over the edge of the Earth had sparked when Cenario learned the world was going to end. Answering machines, leaflets on his steps, the man at the crossroads all told him that he would not see the year 2000. Cenario accepted this, so he stepped into the kitchen and watched some TV.

That night, on 16 October 1999, lightning struck Cenario's mailbox and charged the air with static. Lightbulbs burst, hairs on his face crackled, but the small, bulging TV screen abruptly changed to a feature on the Grand Canyon. In the dark Cenario decided he would die in the endless chasm over that crimson cliff, under that carpet of stars.

Cenario stood up. He fumbled in the dark for the keys to his pickup, still a few instalments behind, and left the front door unlocked. He found the mouth of the Colorado River by the crack of dawn, cruised past lumbering trucks and highway towns under the afternoon sun, reached Arizona by dusk, jumped over the cliff and dove nose first into a

deep, narrow rift in the canyon by sunset, and woke up just as the stars came out.

Strangely, Cenario wasn't disappointed to find himself still alive and lying on the bottom of the chasm, except for the broken wrist. The pickup had become lodged halfway through the fall in a tight space between the walls.

Cenario swept away the glass shards and sat on the dusty floor, looking up at the night sky through the narrow slit above. It looked like a river, flowing with stars, streaming deep above the rippling chasm walls, and Cenario promised himself to look at this same sky when the world ended in two months. But the nights after had no stars and Cenario began to feel cold, so he made a fire by emptying out the engine block that had fallen out.

The clanging noise attracted something that peeked its curled horns from the shadow of the chasm. A young ram watched with interest, Cenario with alarm. He was never good at making friends, but something told him to take a chance this time. Cenario stammered and asked the ram for its name, only to be met with silence. But the ram stepped forward into the starlight and struck its horn against the chalky wall until sparks came out. Cenario was relieved. He hollowed out the piston chambers, took a drop of gas from the pickup wreck, and let the ram light them up like a chandelier.

Over the weeks Cenario learned much about his new friend. The ram was exiled from his flock for losing against the alpha. Something in its little ram heart urged it to be brave for once and take a risk, but it just didn't have what it takes. No flock in the canyon wanted to graze with a failure,

so it took to the chasm where there was at least salt in the rocks. The piston-flame danced in the ram's rectangular pupils as it climbed almost to the surface and licked a thin column up and down the wall, leaving tall dark lines that Cenario used to mark each passing day before the world ended.

When the first rain came—somewhere around 27 November 1999, though Cenario wasn't sure because the salt lines were washed away — they were struggling to drag the engine block to the dry spot underneath the suspended wreck, when instead a condor landed there, limping, its leathery head red like blood. It offered to shelter the engine under its massive wing, but the feathers were so terribly worn and rainwater simply passed through, filling the piston chambers to the brim.

Cenario consoled the crying condor that it could stay when he spotted the package tied to its knee. As the ram gnawed at the wire, Cenario braved himself and stammered a question about the ruined wing. The condor was running away from its own nest, horrified by something inside its eyes that showed visions of hatchlings bearing its face, calling it their mother, staking the weight of their lives in its cracked beak. It followed the wind and stars across the country, then only the wind when the stars disappeared, never once closing its wings until the ravaged feathers sent it plummeting into the darkness of the chasm.

The wire was finally cut. Cenario held the condor in his arms, half asleep and still sobbing, and slowly opened the package with his good hand. It was a letter from the automobile company regarding instalments due on New

Year's Eve. Cenario smiled when he read the date despite shivering from the rain and cold. The condor, feeling his shudder, got up towards the ram and flapped its great wings to let a fistful of feathers fall to the floor. The ram struck its sparks and they made their bonfire like this.

The stars didn't return that night either, but they waited. Cenario took a feather and dipped it into the scum in the piston chambers. With a broken wrist, he slowly drew lines on the back of the letter, remembering his promise. The lines gradually took shape, but the bonfire grew weaker with the condor balding and the ram's horns thinning, and nights in the chasm grew darker with the stars ever absent and Cenario counting down the days.

On 31 December 1999, in the murky light of a single burning feather, with a numb, trembling hand, Cenario drew the final line in his sketch of a narrow slit of a river with flowing stars and rippling banks, just as the sky above ignited with a thousand falling stars, burning through the firmament, leaving long, blazing tails as they rushed towards the canyon, and flames spat out of the engine block, metal creaked and glowed in the wreck of the pickup, fire consumed the letter in his hand, and the ram and the condor laid dreaming on the warm, dusty floor.

## A MICRO WEDDING GOES AWRY

Erika watched Jeremy with disgust as he loudly sneezed in the cupped palms of his hands. He wiped his hands on his pants, and she pulled him to the side. She was used to this kind of behavior: a tightrope performer constantly toeing the line of laissez-faire and outright unapologetic slobbery. He had gotten worse after their mother's death and now that they were sitting in the pews of a small Kansas church he was very much on the side of the latter.

Dad had met Lauren while camping in the Flint Hills. A storm had taken her unprepared and the high winds spirited away her tent like Elijah in his chariot. By sheer luck Dad was camping at the foot of the hill and gave her shelter. One thing led to another and now here Erika was, dressed in her finery and waiting for Lauren to walk down the aisle. Jeremy had not taken this series of events well.

"Here," Erika said, producing a packet of wet wipes from her purse. She began to wipe his trousers down before the snot on his sneeze could manifest as white streaks before

the photographs had even started. “Honestly, Jeremy, at least pretend to care.”

Jeremy scoffed in his typical teenage fashion. “This whole thing is stupid. I’m not calling her mom, I’m not eating her food, and I’m gonna see if I can shack up with a friend. I’m done with this crap. I hate Dad. He never loved Mom, if he’s able to move on like this.”

Erika rubbed Jeremy’s back softly and hugged him. “I know it’s hard. I miss her too,” she said sadly, “but I can’t watch you not take care of yourself. You’re my little brother. Besides, who knows what kind of germs you’re throwing around.”

“I’d give this whole wedding the plague, if I could,” Jeremy said. Then he laughed. “Imagine Lauren having to use that stupid veil as a puke bag.”

Erika slapped Jeremy’s shoulder and put on a stern face, even if she did want to laugh at the image. “Don’t talk like that,” she chastised, and then produced a small bottle of hand sanitizer from her purse. “Here, use this. It’ll kill all those plague germs off.”



On the surface of Jeremy’s hands, Chuck waited for his bride. His friends had come from all over the system. His family had just arrived from the nasal passage. This was the best day of his life. A hot *Pseudomonas* bacterium named Clara had caught his eye and now they were tying the knot. Despite being a single-celled organism himself, Chuck was all nerves.

She arrived with her friends, cresting over the life line to where the party all stood. She was radiant, perfectly cylindrical, tendrils blowing in the air. Chuck was in love and nothing could ever happen to change that.

“Oh, Clara,” he said, “I can’t believe this day has finally arrived.”

“And I’m so glad it has,” Clara said. “Nothing can go wrong now. We’re living in the perfect environment to thrive for the rest of our natural lives.”

“Any environment with you is perfect,” Chuck said, and smiled at the priest. “I think we’re all anxious to get to the end, yes?”

The priest laughed and said, “Very well. If there are no further objections, I pronounce these two man and—”

A tidal wave of silvery liquid crashed over the wedding. Chairs were overturned, the pulpit shattered, guests thrown about and separated. Chuck’s vision blurred as he was thrown about in the alien ocean that descended upon them like wolves. He could feel the outside of his cell wall burning, eating away at him and choking him with noxious fumes. Then suddenly, everything went black.

Chuck awoke to a scene out of a horror movie. The silvery film had now stretched over the ground not unlike a lake of acid. Bodies writhed in agony, and his ears were met with groans and screams of pain. Despite a burning in his left side, Chuck writhed and began to search the wreckage for his bride. He fought back tears as he found the bodies of lifelong friends. Uncovering the still bodies of his father and mother locked in a final embrace. As more and more

corpses revealed themselves, Chuck fell deeper and deeper into despair.

“Clara!” he screamed. “Oh God, no, Clara!”

Suddenly a sharp cough from the rubble under him. Digging furiously, he found her. “C-Chuck?” she said weakly.

“It’s okay, Clara,” he said, cradling her against him. “I’m here. I’m always here.”

“Chuck,” she smiled, “I-I love you. I’ll always love you. I’m sorry.”

She was gone. Chuck felt the sobs retching out of his body and he screamed skyward.

“You bastard!” he raged. “You take me instead! YOU TAKE ME!”

He waited and waited for a death that never came. On the happiest day of his life, he was alone.



“Does this stuff even work?” Jeremy asked skeptically, rubbing his hands together. “Like, does it actually kill all the germs?”

Erika shrugged. “99.9 per cent of them, anyway. Now hush. Lauren is here.”

The orchestra began to play as Jeremy once again wiped his hands on his pants.

## A NEW METHOD FOR TATTOO REMOVAL

*A* slow rip of the skin heard throughout the room; fluids leaving the dry protection blessed on us by nature. Soft but durable, light but tough. The perfect shell. Tainted by the sins of man. Inked permanently to the physical body and marking the mind, these tattoos. Why would one cover and smudge such a fine art as the human skin?

The rhythmic sound of the fluid drops hitting the clinker floor snaps me out of my mind circles. I meet the young man's eyes once again. He looks smart, kind as well. Paid a hefty price to have these things removed. A hefty price indeed. Probably has a good job, wife, dog. The everyday man. Tattoos the only thing separating him from the masses. Maybe that's why this awful piece of so-called art is covering his shell. But not for much longer, as I will soon be done. Done with my cleansing.

I can feel the smile all throughout my body. He must be happy. Finally, he's done. I carefully walk across the room, not to walk in small pools of fluid covering the cold floor. I put my tools in the bucket of water I placed in the corner of

the room. Painting it the colour red. Now a moment like this must be captured on film, don't you agree, Mister?

The bright flash of my phone illuminates the dark room for just a mere moment, but enough to show it all, everything. Too bad the young man has to be bound up. If only he does not shake so much. But no worries; we have much time left, you and I. Many more photos to capture, now that those dreadful pieces of ink no longer cover your body. Now your shell is worthy of my collection.

## A MAN IS KILLED DURING HIS FIRST DAY AT WORK

“E-s-cuse me sir, when does tha Starbucks open?” the massive black woman asked as she rifled through her overly-sized purse, completely fixated on finding what was inside.

“I think they’re closed for some sort of diversity training thing today,” Frank replied.

“Whatchu mean they closed? You open!” the woman said, raising her voice as she turned her full attention to Frank.

“Uh, well, they are technically a separate store so they set their own hours and the—”

Frank was interrupted mid-sentence as the woman slammed her massive fleshy club-of-a-hand onto the counter. “I know you ain’t usin’ that tone of voice wit me! You lucky my child’ns is over in tha park or I’d whoop ya’lls skinny white ass,” the woman yelled at Frank. She continued talking out loud to herself as she walked out of the bookstore. Frank sighed. This was not how he had imagined middle age.

Frank had recently been laid off from his job of 20 years at Globocorp. Apparently, Associate Manager of Contractual Synergy was not a recession-proof position. Having always been an avid reader on the side, Frank figured that taking an assistant manager position at the local bookstore would be a fun and easy gig to keep him afloat while he looked for something he was more qualified for. But today was Frank's first official day and he was already beginning to have doubts.

"Ay Freddy boy, get back here!" Frank's manager Tony yelled from across the mostly empty store. Frank motioned one of the other workers to take over the front register and began walking through the store to the back office.

As he made his way through the aisles, he heard muted snickering coming from one of the fiction sections. He stopped at the aisle to see a teenage boy with his arms full of Bibles, giggling to himself. "Are...are you putting all of those Bibles in the fiction section?" Frank asked.

"Yes," the boy replied as his giggling became more aggressive.

Frank threw his head back and let out a long sigh. "Can you not?"

The boy immediately dropped all of the Bibles where he was standing and darted towards the door, yelling, "God's not real, Christcucks!"

Frank tried to yell back "I'm Jewish!" but the boy was already out of the store.

He walked over to the pile of books the boy had dropped, but just as he was picking them up Tony yelled again. "Fred, where are ya?"

Frank let out another loud sigh, dropped the Bibles to the floor, and walked away. He'd get back to them later, he figured. It's not like anybody even came into bookstores in person anymore. The place was almost entirely empty.

Frank rounded the corner into Tony's backroom office to see his fat Italian manager sitting at his computer. "Hey Tony, I think I told you already my name isn't Freddy. It's Frank," Frank said to him.

Tony blotted his sweating bald head with a towel and without even looking up from his computer wheezed out, "Yeah, yeah. Sure thing, Fred. Come over here and look at this."

Frank walked behind the desk and immediately gasped when he saw the screen. "Oh my God, Tony, is that porn? How young is that boy?"

"Ay, you're not some kinda prude are yah? We like to have fun around here, Freddy," Tony replied, not taking his gaze off the screen.

"Uh...but this just looks like child porn? That's not just gross man, that's really illegal..."

"Yeah, I don't think so, Fred. It's just an actor. You sound hysterical. Why don't you just go back up to the register and do your job, bub. Quit sticking your nose in other people's business if you don't wanna lose it. I don't wanna have to write you up," Tony panted out, blotting his head again.

Frank sat there for a second staring a hole through Tony's head, dumbfounded, but Tony sat there unphased, watching the screen. "Uh alright...I'm going to go back to the register," Frank said as he slinked out of the room. He

made a mental note to call a tip into the police after his shift was over. Maybe he could even move up and take Tony's job.

On his way back to the front of the store, a man perusing one of the aisles stopped him and asked, "Excuse me, I'm looking to buy Moby Dick. Do you guys have it somewhere in here?"

Frank's eyes lit up. Finally someone who actually reads that he can talk to. "Yes we have it, but I wouldn't recommend it. It's an elegant book, sure, and Melville has very flowery prose with a pretty darn good adventure story. That said, my God, it's like reading an encyclopedia at some points. Just pages upon pages of nothing but whale zoology, whale biology, whale etymology, whale migrations, whale this, whale that. You get the idea. It's like meeting a guy who talks about nothing but whales nonstop, and he follows you into the bathroom when you try to get away."

The man's face curled in absolute disgust. "What? Who do you think you are? You have the gall to insult The Great American Novel? You imbecile! For your information I've already read this book, but I lost my copy and need a new one. Where's your manager? I'd like to file a complaint."

Frank pointed towards the back office without saying a word, and the man stormed off in that direction. Frank shrugged. Whatever, he thought, some people are just assholes. By the time he got to the register he could hear indistinct yelling from the backroom. It didn't phase him though; that guy seemed crazy anyway. And it's not like he couldn't find some other failing bookstore to get a job at.

Frank opened the register to begin counting the cash for the day when he heard two loud pops come from the backroom. He immediately froze where he was and looked up. The angry man appeared in the doorway with a pistol in his hand. “You!” the man screamed across the room. “Figures a pedophile would have such shitty taste!” and the man pointed the pistol towards Frank.

“W-w-wait, I’m not a—” Frank tried to yell back but he was cut short by a hail of loud pops and a force that seemed to push him off his feet and to the ground. His chest immediately felt like he’d been stung by a massive bee in several spots, as a pool of blood poured through his shirt. This was not how he had imagined middle age.

THE RAIL STATION'S BEEN MISSING ITS NIGHTLY  
TRAIN, BUT EVEN IN THE DESOLATION OF A RURAL  
STOP, YOU FIND A FRIEND

“*E*xcuse me,” said the young businessman, rocking on his feet to keep warm, “are you also waiting for the 10:50 Eastbound?” The platform’s digital clock now marked 11:20pm. The young businessman must have been working himself up to say these words to her for quite a while—and here they all were, tumbling out at once. Best laid plans, kid...

Every night there were one or two like him; travellers who just got off a late flight and, seeing the sign about the ‘last train at 10:50’, thought they could fit in one more drink before heading out of town.

Some started getting impatient at 10:55 and would complain to all who were in earshot. She made sure to leave those travellers well alone. Others would be a knot of nervous tension, desperate for news about their train, yet too timid to ask. She would give them until about 11:30 before saying, “It’s not coming”, and leave it at that.

The young businessman made it in ‘just before the buzzer’ as they say. But she let him sweat it out a bit before her reply, a small punishment for waiting so long to speak to

her. This was just part of her evening routine, waiting on the platform and chatting with some sad out-of-towner who missed their train. She was getting to be pretty good at it, having the same conversation with someone new each night. This was 'Groundhog Day' and she was Bill fucking Murray.

"I'm so sorry," she said at last, scrunching up her face in well-rehearsed sympathy. "I don't think it's coming."

This is another of those 'choose your own adventure' moments. Does he get angry? Does he try to find a cab stand (there isn't one)? Does he find a payphone to tell someone he'd be late? She had a script for each, polished to perfection.

"When's your train heading?"

This is not the usual second question, but she had an answer prepared: "I'm taking the Westbound, should get here at 11:50." There was no 11:50, but the illusion of one made the evening take on a great shape. She would spend the next 20 minutes sympathizing with him; they'd work together to make some plan...then when her train didn't arrive there would be a period of optimism (maybe it's just late) before the roles would reverse and he would comfort her.

She could see him weighing the options. Leave? Stay? Take the (fictional) Westbound? He looked around the terminal for something, but clearly didn't find it.

He looked a bit ridiculous, suit a bit too big in the shoulders, tie too long. He kept buttoning and unbuttoning his suit coat, as if he couldn't decide if two or three buttons was most appropriate for a snowy midnight train stop.

"You're all dressed up," she chimed in. "Big fancy meeting?"

He looked down at his pointy suede shoes, laces coated in slush. "Nah. I had this interview early tomorrow, but I don't think I'll make it."

"Oh no, I'm sorry." She was fully committed to the 'comforting him' phase of the night. "I hope you weren't—"

"I'm glad." He was now digging his shoes into the loose ice. "The whole way here, the cab, on the plane...I knew it was all wrong. My dad set me up with this thing, and he's so excited about it, but I feel like it'll...I dunno."

"It'll what?"

"It'll kill me. Not just 'my life is over', but I know that going to that interview would be the last thing I do. This dumb suit would have been the last thing I wore. Missing this train may have saved my life." He smiled up at her. "So, I guess I need to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. Maybe I'll start with that 11:50 Westbound."

She looked at him sheepishly. "Yeah, about that..."

"That's cancelled also?"

"A bit worse than that, I'm afraid...there never was an 11:50. It's just this thing I say." She was way off script. Something about this poor kid just made her want to stop pretending for once.

"How do you plan to get home? Or..."

"Yeah, this is home. No, don't look at me like that—it's great here! All the people passing through, it's just that the nights can get a bit...lonely."

He changed the topic. "I'm freezing. Aren't you cold, wearing that?"

'That' was her black Nirvana tee and red flannel. She'd worn it in all weather and never really minded the temperature. She just shrugged in response.

"I'm not going to need this, am I?" He unbuttoned his suit coat and placed it over her shoulders. "If we're not waiting for trains, let's get out of this wind."

They awoke together the next morning, his coat over the both of them like a blanket.

"I forgot to ask you last night," the young not-businessman began, "but you didn't seem surprised the 10:50 didn't arrive...do they cancel like that often?"

"They stopped running the late night trains out here a few years back. Said it wasn't safe, after that girl was killed waiting alone on the platform."

"Wonder if they'll start it up again, now that that poor boy froze to death."

Together they laughed, and together they waited, night after night, for the next 10:50 Eastbound not to arrive.

## THE STAGE OF EVOLUTION AFTER HOMO-SAPIEN

*T*he wagon shuddered as it came to a stop, the tinkling of vials and tinctures audible over the hushed murmurs of the wagoners. Reyt looked out over the dark swirling water. A cold, hard feeling sat in his stomach. A remnant of rusted and warped steel was all that remained of the bridge. It was a monument that had stood before the days of his grandfather's grandfather, the great work of the Vagrant King, a relic of the last age. Their safest way across the river was gone.

The air of the council's wagon was thick with unease and the choking smoke of tallow. Some councilmen reclined on their pillows and puffed on clay pipes, the herb's savor mingling with that of the lamps. Their faces were set with heavy creases, the mark of a life of toil and worry. Reyt's own image was worn deeper than most, and he wore it proudly.

"We've begun fortifying the rearguard," Kelam said. He was the youngest of the council, but his command of the guard had been proven many times over. None were more fit to bear the captain's mantle than he.

The quartermaster sat up on his pillow. "Will it hold?" he asked.

"We'll need every man to the wall," Kelam said.

"And then?" the old man pressed, aggressively reaming his pipe.

Kelam hesitated, something Reyt rarely saw him do. "I don't know."

The council's wagon fell into an uproar. Shouts and gestures were shared but blame was freely given. There were calls for the cartographer's head. Others tried to put forth their own suggestions. Reyt was horrified to find that the leading idea was to split the caravan in an effort to double back and regroup on the other side of the pack. The reality was that they were willing to sacrifice half the caravan for the chance to save the remainder.

When he could bear no more, Reyt stood. Kelam looked to him silently. One by one the other councilmen turned to the wiry old apothecary. Reyt spoke when silence fell.

"We'll drive a third of the flock to the North. It's what they're after."

"Old fool," the quartermaster hissed, "we'll starve come winter."

"Would you rather die tonight?" Reyt said. The councilmen cut glares and murmured between themselves.

An old shepherd spoke up. "We don't have nearly enough sheep to stop the pack."

"No," Kelam said, "but we can divide its attention."

Reyt nodded. "The wall will hold."



The shepherds had scarcely returned within the wall when the first calls began to ring out of the dark. First were the screams. Reyt's skin prickled as he thought of how many of the beasts were just beyond the light's edge, circling like wolves around a campfire. Hundreds, maybe thousands. Then came the short, barking laughter from all sides.

The first volley went. Fire rained from atop the walls, cutting into the inky darkness. Screams, shriller than before, pierced the night. The first horde lumbered into sight; about two dozen well-muscled beasts covered in dark hair. One stretched a finger toward the wall and seemed to bark orders to the others, which spread out in response and sprinted for the wall. The second volley went.

The men were shaken but stood firm. Reyt could feel the morale surge as a shrapnel shell shredded a half dozen beasts. A few managed to reach the wall, but they were beaten down with bayonet and bludgeon. Still, the darkness continued to lash at the light with a savage hate. Howls and screams spliced with the cacophonous roar of cannons and volleys.

Reyt froze when he saw Ameni standing a ways back from the wall. Children were not allowed to approach, nor men allowed to leave its defense. Her face was creased and shaken. Reyt read it as a sculptor reads the face of the stone before his hands. An exception was to be made.

Ameni clung to his finger as if it were the string her whole world was hung by. By the time they reached the hovel, the sounds of battle had been drowned out by the woman's cries. The faint thunder of the cannons still shook

him, however. Reyt pushed aside the curtain and entered the dimly lit dwelling.

Many times in the night, Reyt thought the battle was lost. Savage cries fell as they pushed again. Strength was waning and blood came quickly. Practiced hands carried Reyt's work, moving with machine precision and an instinct sharpened over years. The mother was still fading, sweat beading on her forehead as she gave another low groan. Ameni watched with a quiet horror as the old apothecary worked.

Finally, as the morning came, the child was born. The tension within the tent broke as Reyt quickly cleaned the infant and presented him to the mother. She tucked him close to her breast, the two hearts untethered beating in tandem as she breathed slowly, the child rising and falling gently on her chest. The apothecary stepped out into the cool air as the first light broke.

The thunder on the wall had ceased. Reyt could see the beginnings of a celebration brewing. Dawn's first blooms were twining about the skeletal fingers of ruins reaching skyward, pushing the darkness further west. For now, they held onto the world that was once theirs.

Disease and rot had taken what belonged to humanity. The crucible of decay had poured out the heir to mankind. A world without medicine had left them hardy, breeding like rats in the dark. A world without knowledge made them brutish but cunning. They circled about the dying embers of civilization, living off the scraps left behind. Deep in every breast, however, the beasts bore a pure and feral hatred for their kin. One day, they would put out the last light of man.

Today, however, the fire still burned. Reyt looked back to the children nestled against the woman. Perhaps, even, it was a little brighter.

## HUMANS TERRAFORM SATURN

*T*here was a long pause before Carl responded. “Terraforming? Do you seriously want us to get involved with Mars? The whole project is a fucking black hole, I’ve been saying it fo—”

Matt cut him off. “It’s not Mars, Carl. I brought you in on this because I trust you. Do me a favor and hear me out.”

“If it’s not Mars, then what is it? You want to set up a branch office in the asteroid belt or something?”

“It’s Saturn.”

There was another long pause, but this time Matt took the initiative. “You’ve been, right? Two weeks paid time off on Ring City, if I remember correctly.”

“Terraform Saturn? Matt, it’s a fucking gas giant.”

“Answer the question. Ring City, right? What did you think of it?”

“I-I don’t fucking know, Matt. It’s a utopia, everyone knows that. No money, collective ownership of property, you can fuck whoever you want. Where are you going with this?”

Matt leaned back in his chair and grinned. Carl's sex tourism had been an open secret around the office for years, but hearing him admit to it was still satisfying. "Right, a utopia. A magic city in the clouds where starry-eyed hippies smoke synthetic hashish and sing Kum Ba Yah all day long. Not exactly a place you'd expect a finance company to be doing business."

Carl groaned. "Look Matt, I still don't know what you're getting at, but I need to say this again. The only way we can possibly diversify our market share at this point is to lower our standards. I know you don't like it, but we simply can't afford to be picky anymore. There are a lot of people out there looking to buy a gynoid on credit, and—"

"And what if I told you there was a way out of this rut that didn't involve attaching our name to sexbot pimps?"

"Are you seriously trying to suggest we start offering loans on Saturn? Forget doing business with a bunch of anarchists, the travel costs alone..." Carl broke off. "And just what the hell does this have to do with terraforming, anyway?"

"Terraforming, terraforming. Tell me, Carl, how would you define that word?"

"I don't know. Modifying an alien planet to make it more like Earth. Can you cut the bullshit and just tell me why you called me in here?"

"You can't define it. In fact, nobody can. Not even the suits who wrote up the Colonization Charter. Ever read it? 'Any organization contributing to the spread of Human civilization beyond the confines of our home planet is eligible for...blah, blah, blah.' If we go by the letter of the

law, just about anyone can get a federal terraforming grant if they ask for it.”

“But they meant heavy industry, Matt. And high-brow cultural stuff. Besides, Mars has been fucked for years. Nobody even live—”

“Carl, I know a guy who made bank selling office supplies to non-existent industrial parks in the Mariner Valley, all because the government believed he was ‘paving the way for future business ventures.’ Anyone can get a grant. Besides, this isn’t about Mars.”

“Right, it’s about Saturn. You still haven’t explained that.”

“I’ll spell it out for you. From the legal point of view, ‘terraforming’ just means bringing your business from Earth to the hostile environment of outer space. If you can make a case that your field is relevant to ‘life on Earth,’ you’re golden. And there’s nothing in the official literature saying that hostile environment has to be natural.”

“Jesus, Matt, are you suggesting...”

“Yep. We apply for a federal terraforming grant to bring money lending to Saturn. Why not? Our planet practically revolves around debt. All the proof we need is in the history books. In the grand scheme of things, opening accounts on Saturn is the same thing as planting trees on Mars.”

Carl opened his mouth to speak, but reconsidered. Matt didn’t give him the chance to think it over.

“And we really are going to terraform Saturn, Carl. We’re going to take what we know and transplant it onto a tabula rasa. We’re going to make Ring City into New York

City. Our case practically writes itself, and the payoff is in the millions. How are you going to argue against that?"

"Jesus, Matt, I don't know. Have you considered the pushback factor at all? We're obviously jumping through a loophole here."

"The feds won't give a shit. They've had it in for Saturn since the beginning. The public won't be interested enough to pay attention. As for the Saturnians, I've had marketing work on that. There's definitely a potential market for Earth products too expensive to pay for in cash—plants, animals, luxury goods they can't make for themselves. We might even pitch the process of going into debt as an exciting novelty. Boredom is evidently a big problem for the permanent residents."

Carl kept shaking his head, but didn't say anything.

"And if you're going to bring up any moral objections, remember who first suggested we break into the gynoid business because there was such a big market for little robot girls in school uniforms. I hear the girls on Saturn are pretty young, by the way."

"Enough, I get the picture. No need to twist my arm. Jesus, it's a long shot but it might just work. What do you want me to do?"

"Advance scouting. I called you in because you're familiar with the place. We're going to have to identify the potential entrepreneurs among the Saturnians. Establish dealer-funder relationships from the ground up. There's a launch window coming up next month, and while you get ready I'll work with the legal team to put together our case for the review board."

Carl got up to leave without saying anything else. Matt leaned back in his chair and grinned again.

“Don’t look so glum, Carl. You’re a space explorer on a mission to an alien planet!”

## WHY THE NEXT PRESIDENT GETS IMPEACHED

*T*he 47th President of the United States entered the small, well-funded classroom. He waved his practised wave and smiled his childish smile, more for the NBC cameras than for the children, as a busty young teacher introduced him.

“Good morning, children,” he announced over the excited applause from the forty-odd twelve-year-olds filling the classroom. “I’m so happy I could find time in my busy, busy schedule to come and visit you. Today, I’d like to read you a story I wrote, just for you. Do you want to hear it?”

The children all cheered excitedly, and the President sat down in the inconspicuously placed chair before the projector screen he’d insisted on. He pulled out his phone, and with a single click, a painted, sunlit hill covered the wall behind him.

The President cleared his throat dramatically, as the room fell silent.

“In a hole in the ground there lived a rabbit. Not just any rabbit, but the rabbit king, the king of all the other rabbits.”

He'd barely finished his introduction when an aide came in, apologized to the children, and whispered the ominous words to the President: "There's a phone call for you."

"Apologies, children," the President said with tact, "don't go anywhere, I'll be back in one minute."

He followed the aid outside, and took the call on his own phone. It was his Chief of Staff. "Sir," the Chief said, "we've had an attack on our Franklin base in Peshawar. We suspect The New Islamic Front is behind it, sir."

The President rubbed his forehead. His presidency had plummeted in popularity over the past year for failing to energize the economy. The last thing he needed was a resurgence in terrorist attacks against America. "What are possible targets for retaliation?"

"Complicated," the Chief responded. "The only three NIF bases we know about are underneath a hospital, a school and a mosque."

"Shit. Send me the satellites. I'll get back to you."

He came back into the classroom with an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that, children. It seems they think I'm the leader of the free world or something." That never failed to get a laugh from a crowd. With his phone, he projected a new picture onto the wall, a grand hall filled with little rabbits. He quickly scrolled through the text of his story to remind himself where he was. He sat down, faced the children, and cleared his throat.

"The rabbit King had three advisors, who he trusted more than anyone else on the hill."

The President barely got through three sentences before his phone started ringing. He recognized the number. He

excused himself profusely, and stole out to the hallway.

"I told you, you can't call me on this number!" the President hissed.

"It's important. I had to talk to you," a feminine voice pleaded.

A tone of worry entered the President's voice. "Why, what's up?"

There was a tense pause.

"I miss you, Teddy Bear. When can I see you again?"

The President looked around, making sure he was alone. "I have to call you back. I'm in the middle of something."

"I lo—" was all the woman got out before the line cut. As the President re-entered the classroom, his aide held up a phone, and he quickly scanned the three satellite photos.

"Sorry, sorry. Hopefully that's the last time," the President said with all his charm. He sat down and cleared his throat.

"The rabbit princess had been abducted by the evil foxes from the forest, so the king had gathered his three trusted aides to help him."

"Why is the rabbit a king and not a president like you?" a snot-nosed kid enquired.

"Well, that's a good—" the President started.

"Are the foxes a metaphor for Muslims?" a pompous girl asked.

"What? Of course not, what makes you—"

"The Chief of Staff needs an answer ASAP," the President's aide whispered into his ear. The President spun around. He was being assaulted from all angles.

"Sorry children, duty calls. Back in a second." He was sweating now.

He burst into an empty restroom and splashed his face with cold water. Practice your breathing, he said to himself. His phone rang.

"I really want to see you, Teddy," the seductive voice pleaded over the phone.

"I wanna see you too," the President admitted with a hushed voice. "But I promised my wife we'd have dinner together tonight."

"I'm really wet," the woman said over the phone.

"Now you're making me hard."

"How hard?"

The door opened, and the aide burst in.

"I'll show you," the President said hurriedly and hung up.

"They're waiting for an answer," the aide pushed.

"The kids? Just tell them they didn't have presidents..."

"The Pentagon. They want to know where to attack."

"Oh, of course. Thank you." The President pulled up his phone, and held down the 'text to speech' button he only used when he was in a rush. The aide left him alone. "Blow up the school and the mosque. Do it at night to minimize casualties, but hit them hard. You don't fuck with America." Press send. He then pulled down his pants, and took a photo of his manhood, proudly standing at attention. Flexing his military might always did it for him, but he'd never tell either of his women that. Press send. Then he pulled up his pants, dried his face, put on his charming smile, and went back to the classroom.

“Alright, who wants to know what happens to the rabbit princess?” the President said with a strained smile as he swung the classroom door open and saw 40 young-faced children staring with horror at the projector screen.

The President could never decide what had been worse; instructing his mistress to commit war crimes, showing his dick to a class of school children, or sending the top military generals in the country a story too dumb even for twelve-year-olds.

## TREASURE HUNTERS DESCEND ON A SMALL TOWN

*T*here are some tools which mankind just is not ready for: the Atomic Age dawned before we learned to be peaceful; high-fructose corn syrup was created before we learned to moderate; and Twitter arrived before we learned to shut the fuck up. Thus—like many of the strange stories of 2019—this one began with a tweet.

“@Ng - BioCoin hit \$25K USD! Fun fact: I misplaced a thumbdrive years ago that would be now be worth over \$500M USD today. Oops lol #biocoin #hodl #noregrets”

Years before Jordan Ng became a tech billionaire—back when most households didn’t even know how to pronounce his name—he was just another Carnegie Mellon grad student who enjoyed hiking, building robots and dreaming up crypto currencies. Most of these projects were just fun diversions while he was working on his dissertation, but one ended up gaining a bit of traction. He and a few friends noticed the energy waste of their crypto-mining servers, and realized that if cryptocurrency were ever to become mainstream it would be an ecological nightmare. They theorized a much more efficient alternative, and for a few

months were BioCoin evangelists (at least until they got sidetracked by drone racing).

Years passed and BioCoin hummed along in obscurity, until two things happened: Ng made headlines by successfully launching a luxury line of solar hybrid vehicles, and Bitcoin was dealt a blow by environmentalist groups for its massive carbon footprint. Suddenly a nerdy project between Ng and his friends was being tracked on stock tickers and discussed seriously on CNBC.

His October 5, 2019 tweet was very much in character for Ng—who was both famously rich and famously unaffected by it. Most interpreted it as he intended, a promotion of BioCoin and a joke (at his expense) on the ephemeral nature of money. A clever few, however, read a different message altogether. There was, in some landfill or basement or storage locker, a USB stick worth millions!

Despite the flood of inquiries, Ng provided no more information on where or even when the drive was lost, and finally went so far as to delete the tweet. But as he well knew, nothing said online is ever truly gone. In short order, private groups and conspiracy videos proliferated. The social media account of Ng's and his contacts were combed through to establish his location every day following the launch of BioCoin. Lost and found bins across the CMU campus were raided, obvious fakes sold for thousands on eBay. In short, the largest treasure hunt of the 21st century had begun.

The Craigslist ad was found in the first day, though it took a week to become widely accepted. In October 2015, a year after the launch of BioCoin, an ad was placed offering

a \$50 reward for a thumb drive lost while hiking the Appalachian Trail. The ad showed a cropped photo of a USB stick wrapped in gray duct tape, attached by carabiner to a backpack. Written in sharpie in huge block letters: 'NG'.

Fall is busy in Shenandoah; many descend on the small Virginia communities for lodging as they take in the sights, bike its trails, kayak its rivers. As ready as they were for the annual leaf peepers, none foresaw the pandemonium which descended on the valley that autumn of 2019. Bed and breakfasts sold out in days; guests were offered staggering sums to transfer their reservations. It seemed like half the capital of silicon valley was flooding into the accounts of any rural homeowner willing to spare a couch or pitch a tent in their backyard.

It didn't take long for the ugliness to start. Cellular networks and rural broadband slowed to a crawl under the added demand. Stores ran out of stock, and traffic jams—once unheard of on these back roads—were now constant. These new gold rushers were following a path they dubbed the 'Ng Trail', which hewed as closely as possible to the 3-day journey of Ng and his friends from the Sheetz off US-522, to their AirBnB in Chester Gap, and through the trails and loops and scenic vistas of the national park, finally concluding at Waffle House #1199, where the lost ad was posted.

The park staff did their best to contain the destruction—metal detectors and shovels were banned, anyone found damaging trails or wildlife were cited or ejected, special rules were put in place limiting foot traffic—but they were ill-equipped to police the crowd. Rather, those who weren't

bribed to work as private guides were kept busy treating injuries, patrolling for bonfires, and guarding administration buildings from break-ins.

In a matter of months, BioCoin had nearly destroyed one of America's natural treasures. Its value, which fluctuated wildly during the 'Ngoldrush' week, ended up sinking to less than \$0.02 as reports emerged about the devastation caused, and Ng himself converted his remaining BioCoin to Leaferium. The thumb drive, wherever it may be, was soon worth less than \$400. The hunters left the valley as quickly as they came in. Like locusts, they set out in search of the next trend. It took years to repair the damage and re-open the trails, but they did eventually recover. Today, the only sign of the Ngoldrush of 2019 lies on the trees and roadsigns along the Ng Trail. Below the familiar red or blue blazes marking the official trails, there are now to be found pieces of duct tape with 'NG' scrawled in big block letters.

## THE DAD FARM

“*D*ad died? Deadbeat dad? Doesn’t matter! Hi, I’m Kent Kuntings, and we here at Poppy Fields are happy to present you with the latest and the greatest advancements in dads and dad farming technology. My family has owned and operated this one-of-a-kind farm for over 200 years. Nestled in the Central Valley of California, you know you’re getting a quality dad when you come on down.”

“That’s great, Kent. I’m Kent’s brother, Dick, and boy do I love dads! But you don’t have to fly or drive all the way out to California for our dads! For only \$69.95 you can have a dad of your own who specializes in any number of father-child activities, including but not limited to fishing, hunting, yardwork, car repair, and contact sports. But wait, that’s not all! For a small fee of \$30, an optional behavior modification is included which features realistic drinking, yelling, and beatings! Supplies are limited, folks! Get to your phone right now and dial the number on your set: that’s 1-800-555-867-5309. Batteries not included.”

Too good to be true; that is what I thought. I turned off the TV and walked over to the window, taking a swig of root beer. The sun was almost up, emanating a warm red glow between the venetian blinds in my apartment. Smog was choking the life out of this city; I had to get out of there. Maybe a drive to this Poppy Fields place would do me good. Unshaven and reeking of old socks, I got into my Kia Prelude and made it out of Los Angeles by late morning, despite the heavy traffic. This farm was somewhere north of Bakersfield but south of Fresno, according to the map I had bought at the drug store. I almost took a wrong turn to Visalia, but I made it outside Hanford. Fields of crops and orchards fanned out to the north and south, as far as the eye could see. An endless ocean of produce only broken here or there by long row houses.

“Can I help you, sir? Looking for a dad?” asked a slimy looking salesman. He wore an expensive taffeta coat and embroidered pants, with a ruffled collar and lace. He clearly had a powdered wig on, and eyed me up and down with an ominous grin.

“Just browsing.”

What was I doing here, exactly? My dad was gone, that was true, but I wasn’t interested in replacing him. No one could replace my old man. I opened a gate and went up to one of the row houses. A sign was painted, hanging from the entrance, saying, “Harvest A”. Huh, strange. Obviously they were harvesting the produce. I went inside and saw it was a mixture of barracks and storage. Crates full of fresh fruits like plums, strawberries, and oranges were being carefully placed in crates by men of all shapes, sizes, and

colors. The few times I had to drive through the farm towns of the Central Valley, I had seen nothing but Hispanics.

“Like what you see, sir?” asked the same salesman, sneaking up behind me.

“Oh! Uh, well, these must be the dads.” I coughed awkwardly into my arm.

“Astute observation, sir. Our dads learn the value of hard work, like any father, by field labor for sale and their own consumption. Such a fresh diet of organic fruits and vegetables nourishes their dadly figures and ensures customers will be satisfied.”

A few of the men stopped their work to look at me. Some were a bit squat but muscular, with sandy hair and a clean shaven jaw. The others were taller, a bit lanky, with salt and pepper in their hair. A few were fully bald except for the sides, while others were darker skinned black men with merely a receding hairline. There were thick, Tom Selleck moustaches and even a long, unkempt Rasputin-like beard. They had an inquisitive but friendly gleam in their eye. Immediately I felt at home and couldn’t help thinking of my dad.

I was a disappointment. Now that I was older, nearly the age he was when he had me, I realized it didn’t matter. He loved me anyways, no matter how I turned out, because he was my dad. Being there, on the farm, I knew that all these men would easily be dad if I asked them. Perhaps they’d even love and support me the same way. Right then and there, I made a choice.

“I’ll take one. The fellow over there, carrying the daikon. See him?”

“Excellent choice, if I may say so, sir,” said the salesman, “for that’s our Dan model, on sale right this moment. Dan, would you come over here?”

The man came over. He looked similar enough to my dad but not the same to be too creepy. Fiery red hair with grays mixed in, especially in his stubble. He also had the same hazel eyes. This Dan was shorter, about an inch below me, and stockier too. Daringly, he came up and put an arm on my shoulder.

“I knew you’d make the right decision, son,” he said with a toothy grin, creasing the corners of his eyes.

“I-uh...”

“I’ll let the two of you become acquainted. If you hand me your credit card, I’ll make the purchase for you, sir. Dan, why don’t you show this gentleman the playground?” asked the salesman. I handed him my card out of my wallet without taking my eyes off Dan.

“Sounds great, Mr. Hayden. Say, son, let’s go toss the old pigskin around. Whaddaya say, huh? We have a big field here.”

“O-okay Dan.”

## A MODERN DAY NOAH'S ARK

*I*t was 8:30am in Pasadena, California in the year 2666. I sipped my Folgers from a thermos while I oversaw the construction of the largest fucking ship I'd ever seen in the shipyard. My company, ROC Shipyards, had the most interesting client since pre-history. The Almighty. No, I'm not shitting you. The literal Christian God showed up in my office one day and said he was wiping the slate clean once more. Said he had a new project in mind and we were in the way. So much for unconditional love. Now my boys and I were working around the clock to build a spaceship to blast off into the stars holding all the animals of the world, a living menagerie to be managed by his angels. A few lucky humans, myself and team included, among them.

My door suddenly swung open. When you're The Alpha and The Omega, things like courtesy don't matter to you. It's hard to describe a man (and sometimes woman) who looks different every day. I can only tell you that today he looked like The Big Lebowski if he decided to be a Mall Santa. In his hand was a list and he slammed it down on my desk.

“Dillon, I need to know, were your instructions not clear?”

“The fuck are you talking about?”

He motioned to the list. “One of my guys intercepted one of your guys and found your company itinerary on what animals to grab for the new Ark.”

“Well, what’s wrong with it? It’s my business and I can decide how the project goes forward.”

“I just think you’re being asinine about this,” the Almighty said. He picked up the list and scanned it before exasperatingly sighing. “You can’t leave the koalas on Earth because they’re, quote, ‘chlamydia ridden shit goblins’. I have a plan for every animal on this planet!”

“Yeah? What was your plan with them?”

He ignored me. “And pandas being ‘pants on head retarded in every sense of the word’. Pandas are adorable! I put them on Earth to make you happy!”

“I’d be happy if they all drowned or blew up or whatever you plan on doing,” I said.

“I can’t believe you. I have to say my least favourite and your worst offence is this—your exclusion of the dolphin. They’re such smart and tactile creatures, but here you write, ‘no dolphins, those things are Satan incarnate’. First of all, have you met Satan? That guy’s a fucking asshole.”

“I would not be surprised at all if I went down there and dolphins were swimming around in the lake of eternal flames,” I replied.

“What’s it to you if they are?” he inquired.

“Fuck’s sake, are you kidding me?” I said.

"It is a grave sin to lie, my son. There's a hundred things wrong with this list. 'None of those fuck off huge spiders from Australia', 'I will literally fire anyone who brings aboard one of those long-necked cunts in Africa', 'Chihuahuas are God's mistake'. That one is just rude."

"Funny though," I replied. "Did you read the whole thing? If it's a sin to lie, you have to admit you laughed."

"I did not laugh once."

"What about at, 'No ducks. I don't even really have a reason. I just better not see a duck'?"

"Dillon, if you keep this up you're not going to get on the Ark," he said testily.

"Honestly, if you're so insistent that every animal gets on board, I'm not sure I want to," I laughed. "But fine, I tell you what, I'll repeal that itinerary and make sure all your wonderful creations make it on to the Ark."

"I'll take you at your word," he said. "Lying to me would be a big mistake, but you have free will. Even if so many of you abuse it. Fucking assholes."

"Yeah, God," I said, "if it really means so much to you, we'll make sure everyone gets on board safe and sound."

"Thank you," he said. "Have a good day. I've got hurricanes to throw into Japan, to make up for lost time."

"For all the war crimes they got away with?" I asked.

"What? No. I don't care about any of that. I'm talking about anime."

Chuck had worked for me for six years. Chuck was a good worker and knew when to keep things quiet. As we passed Mars, I asked him if the 'special room' had been prepared.

“It has been,” he said, “but I’m curious why so many different species are sharing one habitat. What kind of room is it?”

“An airlock,” I said, pressing a button. I watched as the view in front of us filled with creatures big and small. Down the hall, someone was screaming my name. Pray for me.

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## A GARMENT YOU JUST CAN'T GET RID OF

*M*elanie gleefully scrolled through the newest Twitter moment while waiting at the laundromat for her drier cycle to finish. The second season of *Emily in Paris* had just hit Netflix, and several of her Twitter mutuals had unleashed excoriating reviews of the show. In French.

‘Wasn’t this show so bad they had to bribe the Golden Globes?’ she typed a reply to a news article before thinking better of it. Instead, she swiped to Google Translate.

‘Cette série n’était-elle pas si mauvaise qu’ils ont dû soudoyer les Golden Globes?’ she fired off instead. Almost immediately she received a notification of a like from a school acquaintance and super socialite, Erica Habershaw. Her username: @joiedeveev.

Melanie gasped. She would do anything to be in Erica’s circle, while she thought Erica barely knew she existed.

They were both part of a cabal of recent graduates from New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology and ran in the same circles but were not close; they simply had no reason to be. Melanie was the daughter of a kindergarten teacher

and an electrician, while Erica's grandparents were published in Vogue. Yet it seemed they both enjoyed ridiculing media that promoted the clueless expat stereotype.

Another notification came. A reply from joiedeveev: 'Vous parlez français? :)'

Melanie panicked and hit the translate button. 'Do you speak French?' Of course, she didn't know a lick. But it had recently become trendy to post in French because many graduates from the Fashion Design program (including herself) were competing for internships in Paris. However, she assumed everyone else was faking because she knew none of her close friends at FIT spoke French either. Erica must also have noticed this trend and was calling her bluff. Melanie decided to play it coy.

'Ça et là', Melanie replied, repressing the urge to curl up on the floor. 'Here and there.'

A voice erupted from across the room as the owner, a mild-mannered Pakistani man named Sal, pointed towards the front door. "Someone stop her! Thief!"

Melanie turned her head. A skinny middle-aged woman with a messy ball of hair was walking out the door holding a basket of clothes. The woman, who Melanie nicknamed Scrunchie, often hung around the Starbucks a few blocks west, where Melanie would sometimes go to complete assignments. Scrunchie would charge her phone for hours without buying anything, leaving only after employees threatened to call the police. In the past, Melanie had resented the woman for taking up space that other

customers could use. But it wasn't her business to intervene then, and she doubted whether she could now.

"Hello, Mel?" Sal addressed Melanie directly as he approached her. "Could you please help?"

She nervously glanced around the store at the other patrons. A handful of people loitered around, but none had bothered to look up from their phones. Some were men who could probably handle Scrunchie better than she could. What if the woman was carrying a weapon? Did Melanie really want to risk getting stabbed over clothes?

"That's my wife's laundry," Sal pleaded. "If I go, I am afraid I will look like the aggressor."

Sal's real name was Salaam, and he sometimes talked to Melanie about his daughters who had moved away and started their own businesses. During those times, his wife Miriam brought out a tea set and poured chai for them while they sat at the front counter. Melanie felt awkward because he and Miriam would compare her to their daughters, who she had never met. Still, their hospitality was endearing. One day, she felt confident enough to confide in him that she wanted to start her own ethically sourced line of clothing.

He would drink his tea pensively and ask, 'So no more sweatshops?' Melanie would shake her head no. 'Good,' he would say, and talk about the injustices of his native country. It seemed that he enjoyed being heard, and Melanie was happy to indulge him.

Truthfully, his kindness inspired guilt inside her. Being a fifth generation Irish American, she felt that she should be able to sympathize with his struggles but didn't know how.

For much of her upbringing, she felt as if she had to relive an ancient experience of oppression that her parents had ascribed to her. There were plenty of Irish-descended people in New York; they practically ran the city. She wanted to escape to a more fabulous culture—a new life. But for Sal and his family, this was their new life; they didn't have another chance.

A phone vibration brought Melanie back to reality. It could have been a reply from Erica, but now Melanie realized she didn't really care. If she didn't chase the thief, no one would. At least if she died, her mutuals would mourn her.

“Don’t worry, I’m already there,” Melanie reassured Sal.

Melanie walked outside and spotted Scrunchie halfway down the block, fallen to the ground. Apparently, she had attempted to shove her way through a group of pedestrians and got shoved back, spilling colorful dresses all over the street.

“You biiiitch,” an onlooker shouted at Scrunchie. “That’s what you get.”

Melanie walked up to the thief, and against better judgment, firmly gripped her wrist.

“Why did you steal from Sal? You know he’s good people?” Melanie demanded. “Did you target him because of his race?”

Scrunchie sighed, refusing to make eye contact. “I’m not targeting anyone, honey. I saw an opportunity and I took it.”

Melanie was not convinced. “Go and I won’t call the police. But if I see you come here again, it’s your ass.”

Scrunchie scrambled upwards, but not before grabbing Melanie's tulle blouse and yanking hard. The center fabric ripped, exposing her black undershirt. Melanie pushed her away before gathering the clothes and returning them to Sal.

Sal looked appalled when she returned. "Come Mel, throw away that shirt and take one of my wife's."

Melanie shook her head, laughing. "I made this one myself. I won't give up on it so easily."

AN OFFICE WORKER CANNOT REMEMBER THE LAST  
TIME HE DID HIS JOB

*Y*ousef made his way to his desk by instinct, navigating the compact space by habit. It was in just the right place, and nothing looked like it had been moved. The wooden chair was tucked underneath the desk, the way Yousef always left it. Now he pulled it out and sat down. It creaked, having grown unaccustomed to his weight. In the dim light of his candle, he couldn't see anything beyond his own station. He felt safe and alone.

His shaking hand found its way to the 'in' tray. Yousef blew away the thick layer of dust, and pulled out the top sheet of paper. He read slowly, his eyes straining in the low light. Mohammed Nahmad wanted to sell his house to an Abbas al-Masry. Yousef flicked through the papers, quickly finding al-Masry's letter of purchase of Nahmad's property. Yousef put the two forms side by side, comparing the information in both. He worked slowly in the poor light, having to remind himself where to look, and his mind wasn't as sharp as it had once been. He cross-referenced methodically, knowing the problems an incorrectly submitted form could cause.

A second light joined Yousef's warm candle. This was the sharp, jittery ball of light from a flashlight, which found and rested on Yousef.

"What are you doing here?" the holder of the flashlight demanded. Yousef looked up, his wide eyes making him look like a deer in headlights.

"It's okay. I work here."

"You can't be here. This building is condemned, it's not safe."

"But there is so much work to do." Yousef returned his attention to his paperwork. The guard took a firm step closer.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Yousef Safdie. And you?"

"I'm Ahmed, I'm the security here. Yousef, you can't be in here. This building is condemned. No one has worked here for six years."

"Six years, huh?" Yousef mulled the words over in his mind, clearly reminiscing about some lost past. "Six years. Long time."

There was a long pause, as Yousef stared into the darkness, or more accurately stared into his own memory. The guard shifted nervously on his feet.

"Six years ago," the old man finally said, "they shut us all down. They wouldn't let us work. Too much shooting. Too many bombs. I went to Turkey. Turkey is safe, they say. In Turkey they put us in camp, give us nothing. Say, 'You're not allowed to work, only stay in camp.' We try to work, sell soda and water. But they find us and stop us. We go to Greece. They give us some food, clothes, and a bus ticket.

They tell us, 'Go wherever you like, just not in Greece.' So we go to the next country, and to the next. Everyone friendly, everyone giving us bus tickets. Finally I get to Norway. In Norway they are very nice. They give me a place to live. Give me money. Not much. Not enough. But a little, still. Then they say, 'You mustn't work. You must stay home, be nice, wait for a decision.' They never make a decision. Can I stay, must I go? They never tell me. Only, 'Mustn't work.' Six years...it's a long time."

Without warning, Yousef stood up straight. Ahmed took an instinctive step back, clutching his torch, but he realized he wouldn't need it. Yousef looked around the war-torn office. A single tear reflected the faint light in the room.

"Six years, no work. But now I'm home. Now I work. There is much work to do."

Ahmed felt a national pride in seeing this old man, standing silhouetted against the night sky visible through the gaping hole in the wall. He lowered his flashlight to the floor, and stepped up to the man.

"Where do you live, my brother?" Ahmed asked him.

"I forgot," Yousef said, with an embarrassed shrug. "All I remember is the office."

The guard put a sturdy arm around the old man. "It's late, come with me. First we eat. Then we sleep. Tomorrow we work. There is much work to do, indeed." With a smile he led the old man out of the ruins of the courthouse, and out into the rejuvenating night air.

## HOW THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND REMAINS SPRY IN OLD AGE

*K*t was Kevin's big day, but he had been up all night, goofing around on the internet. Rolling his limp neck around, he scooted his chair back. Birds were chirping and the first rays of dawn peeked through the blinds. He tried to reach his eyes to rub the crusties out, but couldn't manage. Back to the computer, he wanted to finish making a post. All night he had been discussing problems with fellow members of the forum. There was trouble afoot on the internet! What was a routine effort of his online community was now stained; no, tainted by the black mark of nothing less than racism!

"Kevin, dear, it's time to get up! Let me help you, sweetheart." His mom cracked the door open. She tried to lift her son up and onto the bed for his morning change, but he began to flail and cry.

"Aaah! Uhng! Nuh nuh, mama, aaah!"

"Stop it, Kevin, and behave yourself. What's wrong? What are you—ow!" Kevin bit her. He bit his own mother! "You listen here, young man! I will not have that today, got

it? You can go back to your computer toy thing when we get home, after the big day.”

“Buh mama, nuh uh muh doo! Thuth waythith ahn duh innaweb, me me nuh uh muh doo!” Kevin screeched and a few tears dribbled down his cheek.

“That’s nice, honey. There, all changed. Let’s bring you down to breakfast. Your father wants a word.”

With a quick dash of talcum powder, Kevin had a fresh diaper and his mom picked him up. He was hardly bigger than a large dog on account of his withered, crippled frame. Even a frail old lady could manage the journey downstairs! She strapped Kevin into his breakfast seat and gave him a peck on the cheek. Across the table, his dad was reading the newspaper. Putting it down, he grabbed a slice of blackened toast and spread a bit of false butter on it before taking a bite.

“Mm! Can you believe this stuff, Charlotte? Delicious and heart healthy, too. Anyways, you’re looking a little peaked, son.” He took another bite. “Long night? I told you get to bed early, champ.”

“Muh duh bobo, duh splfspt,” said Kevin, a glob of drool hanging down his chin, “an muh innaweb buhbo duh is waythith!”

“Wonderful, son. Simply delightful! Charlotte, get his chair will you? We need to be there in twenty minutes.”

“Of course, Roger, I’ll go grab the boy’s chair,” she replied, going back up the staircase, “but be sure to feed him. He needs the energy.”

Roger put his newspaper down and picked up a spoon with a piece of grapefruit.

"Here comes the airplane!" He popped it into Kevin's open mouth. "Weeeeeee!"

Their son laughed, flapping his crooked arms like a bird. After a few more bites, Roger hoisted Kevin into the motorized wheelchair. The three of them got into the van and drove off, past their suburbs and to the nearby park. Dozens of limousines and hundreds of spectators stood in a crowd. At the arrival of Kevin's family, the people erupted into applause. But the furor paled in comparison to the arrival of none other than Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth II! The decrepit old bat stooped out of her limousine with a helping hand from her grandson, Prince William. Kate and the kids were there. She walked up to the podium where Roger, Charlotte, and Kevin waited. The former two kneeled and kissed the Queen's ring.

"Your Majesty, as beautiful as ever!" said Charlotte.

"It's a shame Charles isn't here to enjoy the...festivities." Roger winced after saying that, pinched by his wife.

"'Tis a shame, indeed, my loyal subjects." The old bat shook her head, paper-thin jowls swaying. "Ah, this must be the boy! Kevin, is it?"

"Uhhh," he drooled, "muh splf buh bobo, mama uh papa duh innaweb!" Kevin didn't really know what was going on. What was the Queen of England doing in the small town of Piggot, Arkansas?

"How old is he, Roger?" asked the Queen.

"Thirty-three, as of today, Your Majesty."

"Charming lad," said Kate, holding her latest, swaddled newborn. "Don't you think so, dear?"

"A proper fellow!" exclaimed William. "Where's Uncle Andy, Mother dearest? He's late."

The Queen sighed. "Do I look like your Uncle's keeper, child? He should be here any moment with the rest of the party—ah! Speak of the devil."

A number of cars arrived, consisting mostly of armed security. But beside them was Prince Andrew and the Clinton family!

"Piggot, my old turf..." muttered Bill. "Your Majesty! How wonderful we could be together again for this momentous occasion."

"Never tried retard, before. Looks scrumptious." Hillary gave Kevin a pat on the head.

The crowd of royalty gathered behind the Queen at the podium. Everyone went silent. Chelsea stood behind Kevin and began to massage his shoulders as the Queen rambled on about sandwiches and shrimp cocktails. Kevin looked up, pushing his limp neck to its peak, and saw a strange look in the Clinton daughter's eyes. It was...hunger.

"... and on this day, this day of most splendid offerings to the Great Lord of the Deep, we find ourselves with..." She paused, drawing bated breaths from the audience. "... a boy."

The crowd erupted again. Men, women and children rolled their eyes back, falling to the ground in fits of seizing ecstasy. They writhed like snakes in a pit as the sky blackened and the distant roar of thunder sounded. Chelsea's grip tightened. All eyes were on Kevin.

"Let the Royal tasting commence!"

## BOUQUETS ARE SENT WITHOUT A MESSAGE

*A*fter her husband died in the war, Maria lived the next fifty years of her life in black and white. The sun was always white and her hair was always grey, but lately the clock's hands were moving slower by the day.

Becoming colourblind made it hurt less for Maria to look at his picture, those bright blue eyes now dull and milky in the glass frame. They were no longer accusing, finally accepting that it was just fate, or God's will, but nobody's fault. They blinked when Maria did.

But, yes, the clock did move slower for Maria these days, so she was secretly pleased that her nieces pushed her into this new job in the dead letters room. Every morning she would be the first to pass through the inscribed post office gates and head straight to the basement, and would go back up only when the moon was high and everybody had left.

And there, in the labyrinthine shelves in the damp concrete walls, Maria basked in the sweet scent of aged paper and dried glue and the beautiful moments immortalized in them, having never received any mail

herself since the war. Long dried ink flowed once again under the only light source on her table. Letters from friends, lovers, enemies, words carrying hope, hate, clemency.

These envelopes were deemed by the Bureau of Postal Services to be in violation of safety regulations, but were too expensive to return and too bothersome to destroy. In them Maria discovered that people had sent each other such oddities: dead leaves, a queen ant in an ampule, a solidified drop of honey, and tears—deliberately dripped on a now crumpled piece of paper.

Then one particular envelope, rejected due to a damaged stamp, dropped rose seeds on Maria's palm. The thick pages fell out and unfolded themselves under the oppressive table lamp. Maria's dull eyes skimmed over the rugged writing as dust hung in the light: a prisoner's dying wish to have these flowers cut fresh on the morning of their execution. There was no name or date but the paper had yellowed and smelled very sweet. There was no recipient but the "you" repeated many times between the lines until the ink faded near the end.

That afternoon, Maria left the basement early for the first time and passed like a spectre through rows and rows of silent cubicles. She closed the rusty elevator gate and slid it open on the roof, walked over to the little patch of soil there, tore out the weeds and scattered the rose seeds just as the sky began to darken and rumble.

As the clock's hands overlapped and the seeds sprouted, Maria read the letters that shed vibrant colors on their faded mementos: the dead leaves were a spiteful gift from a

tea tycoon betrayed by his partner; the butterfly was addressed to the Bureau of Scientific Services by a boy who believed he discovered a new species; the honey was a nervous man's condiment accidentally spilled on a lengthy love letter; the tears were a mother's desperate plea for her son to return from the war.

Maria's lips paused and quivered at those words. She took the mother's envelope and sent it with a Forward/Return Address Requisition Form B-2 along the pneumatic tube, and waited. Minutes later the capsule plopped back untouched and laughter from upstairs echoed in the tubes.

When the buds began to peek out Maria was already deep in the trenches of telephone books and address records. Every now and then she sent the capsule hissing back up, this time with the right stamps or ink color, but would always be met by clanging laughter. She thought about the soldier's mother as she flipped through the yellowed pages, about the desperate words written with wrinkled fingers as she traced her own over faded names and dates and numbers until—

*Manderley, Maria*

*Address: E—*

*Fate: Married, (struck out)*

*Correspondence: Multiple, from (struck out) no.  
BMS211*

Maria rose up. She tore apart every shelf and folder, straining her milky eyes in the dark for her lost letters (maybe...), brushing off dust and cobwebs in the highest archival crevices her ladder could reach (what if...), her

little heart thumping, hand trembling over the little labels neatly stacked: BMS209, BMS210, BMS212...(it can't be).

She stumbled through the rummaged archive and ran back towards the light of the table lamp. Nearly tripped when she reached the table. Scattered the other envelopes. Found the rose seeds. The thorns began to harden. The table lamp was white like sun and here Maria saw clearly. Stamp violently torn off. Addresses rubbed out leaving only pressure from the pen. Glue ripped open. Handwriting familiar. Voice...

*...hell in the front and I cannot take any more. Please send an appeal to the Bureau so they can relieve me. They need a next of kin, but only you...*

*...declare me mentally and emotionally unfit, they can send me home. Do you remember the briefcase in our bedroom? My medical papers...*

*...know you have been writing but somehow I am not getting your letters. Perhaps the mail horses ran away? Ha ha, what a thought. Please remember to...*

*...screaming in my sleep again last night. You must get me out of here. I believe there is a Bureau office by...*

*...night but they caught me. They put me in a cell with several fine gentlemen...*

*...desertion but do not worry. If you would appeal to the Bureau by the time this letter reaches you, there is time enough...*

*...tomorrow morning. A kindly guard procured for me these seeds and told me they were roses, bright red like your lips...*

*(Cpl. M—, correspondence condemned)*

*(Bureau of Military Services)*

Many stories above the dead letters office, the roses bloomed. A butterfly flew into a bulb and drank the nectar, a leaf fell from the stem and dried in the sun, and tears fell onto paper, long dried ink flowed once again.

## A COMPUTER PROGRAMMER GETS TO MAKE A WISH

*T*he robed bodies chant and sway, edging into the twentieth hour of their fast. Ivan steps into the line and adds his voice to the Gregorian verse, swaying in time with the others, a human metronome. It brings him to a trace where he resides half asleep, wakeful enough to take one small step at a time.

Ivan's mind had once been its own. It had danced to the rhythm of his mood. Made him wild and half mad from a whim, a whisper, a call heard late at night. Slowly he had tamed it, forced it to obey. Its will went away; in its place a monolith that scanned reality from a distance. What was first his master became a friend, then a slave.

The pillars of Eleusis shimmer into view. Pockmarked by weather, barely cared for, barely standing. Passing herds have kept the grass mostly short. A patchy haircut for the most sacred site of antiquity. The pilgrims are the only ones to break the stillness. Their voices roll over the hills. Perhaps there is a better song to be chanted. What sounds passed from pilgrims' lips two thousand years ago?

All at once Apollo enters Ivan's mind. In a slip he is back to gazing through the bars of a cell. Circling an object he cannot feel.

Ivan chants louder, thumbs a prayer bead, and the god is gone. But a gamut of drugs and meditation taught him that relief is temporary: in two days he will wake with logic leading him to his death. For now he is caught in the rapture of Being.



The procession to Eleusis continues in reverse upon the moonlit basin. Até eyes it now and then with suspicion. Whether it is mockery or foolishness, she cannot tell. It has been millennia since such a collection of bodies performed the rites. One of Hephaestus' jokes, perhaps. His ugliness has only grown with his power.

Bog water drips onto Até's head from the damp ceiling. She pins a stygian web to her gown, adding another path to the twisting labyrinth, revenge fresh on her mind. Through her basin she hears the ardent pilgrims' murmurs. A plea for forgiveness. Desire for riches. Penitent silence.

She ignores the knowledge seekers and reviews the penitent, granting clemency to some and pain to others. A gentle touch on the river of their lives. Then there is one who burns brighter than the rest, voice clear enough for communion. Até leaps to her feet and stares wrathfully at the basin. A mortal prays to her directly. A shadow of what has long passed.

The alchemist knows her name and calls it with fervor. She reaches to hold him close and stops, uncertain. "What do you want?"

"An unchained mind."

"Are you not an acolyte of Apollo?"

"I wish to be hidden from his sight."

Até pulls him to her cave and rests his head on her lap. When he stops shivering, she takes a pin from her gown and traces a line across his brow. One prick at a time she finds the grey tumours at the front of his brain and tosses them to the frogs by her feet. Then she kisses him and drowns him in the basin.

Days later a shepherd reports a man hiding in Eleusis. Apollo's guards search and fail to find him. Summer comes and goes. He lives off the land, lean and dumb, a priest for the blind. Meanwhile the frogs grow at Até's feet.

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, HE WAS LITERALLY  
FUCKING ORANGE

*I* think I first noticed it during the presidential inauguration. Donald Trump had won the election months prior, and was standing at the podium on that shitty, overcast day, talking about Mexicans or whatnot. I wasn't paying attention. In fact, I don't give a fuck about politics in the slightest, but when you're a university student it seems that the only thing the neoliberal hordes want to talk about is their own personal Hitler(s).

Now, the strange thing I had noticed about our new president was a slight orange glow that I first mistook for either an error in the broadcast or some malfunction with my own television set, but either way, it wasn't that big of a deal. The broadcast finished without issue and on we went with four years of another childfucker in the line of childfuckers that we called the President of the United States or POTUS for short—a faggy sounding acronym that could only be invented by an absolute sociopath with no regard for the English language.

Some mass shooting happened, President had to get on stage next and pretend he actually cared about federal

projects gone awry. This time the glow seemed stronger, and I was checking this shit out from my phone screen. I could only assume that no technical issue was at fault. I turned to one of the less rabid people in my acquaintance and asked them, “Doesn’t it seem like he has a slight glow?” They looked at me in confusion, as expected, and told me that he looked like shit.

I was just confused at this point, and thought that it’s just one of those things that happens in life, like when you are looking at the ground, unfocused, and suddenly it starts morphing and moving, but when you focus again—it’s just the ground, you know?

Next speech I almost shat my pants. Motherfucker looked like Dr. Manhattan. Not the comic book version, the movie version with the glow and shit, but the glow was way stronger. I could barely make out any features at this point. The mouth and eyes were just a shade of darker orange on top of bright orange. Donnie had gone nuclear. There’s no way this could’ve been a trick of the mind or some bullshit like that, so this time I went to one of the more politically active art hoes that I wanted to fuck at some point and asked her about it.

“Look at this orange fuck, look at him.” I showed her my phone screen. “Are you seeing this?”

“Wow, I’m glad you’re finally worked up about this travesty we call the Trump ‘presidency’. You seemed pretty apathetic. Let me send you some links for activism,” she said and then I cut her off: “No, you don’t fucking get it. He is literally fucking orange. Look at this. Just LOOK.”

She just gave me a look that was two parts ‘you are never fucking me’ and one part ‘I’m about to call the cops’, and I sped off like Steven Seagal. I spent the next couple of days cooped up in my dorm, thinking that maybe I’m finally schizophrenic as I predicted. Most cases, it’s just voices telling you to delay filing your taxes, or whatever it is wackos worry themselves about. ‘I guess this is how my mental illness experience will go,’ I thought at the time.

Two more days passed, I finally got out of my stupor. I went a week trying to ignore anything Trump-related, but curiosity got the better of me, and boy, was it a mistake to look at him. This time the whole stage of wherever he was had been engulfed in a glow of orange so bright and so fiery that at first I thought they had released some new movie adaptation of Dante’s Inferno and wished to show the fiery pits populated with people who actually belong there, but no. It was him. He was behind the glow.

That was years ago. Now his presidency has ended and to me the outside world looks like a California wildfire 24/7. I hear such phrases as “Bigly!” and “Many such cases!” from a booming voice in the distance, and I know that soon I will be functionally blind. An orange glow will encompass all under the sun, and in my orange hell I will die. He is literally fucking orange. I’m orange. My friends are orange, animals are orange, plants, trees and rocks are orange. Strangers and freaks—they’re orange too.

I’m reminded of that one urban legend. Guy with an acid sheet can’t sell it. Cops try to catch him. He runs fast and he runs hard. It’s a hot summer day, so he is sweating like a pig. He finally shakes the cops, but the acid comes in

contact with his sweat and dissolves into his bloodstream. He goes crazy and starts screaming, "I'm an orange, I'm an orange!" and he thinks his friends will peel him, for he is an orange. Unlike him, I have no friends in this trip.

## AN ARCHER MAKES AN INCREDIBLE SHOT

*T*he small beasts barked as they gathered in the distance, dawn raising a mist from the open field. He was upwind, so he must rely on his ears over scent. They had not yet entered his wood, but the horns and the large beasts' clumsy hoofbeats would alert him when they do.

This was not his first time being pursued by these men. More tenacious than the packs of small beasts that prowl at night, bolder than the lone poachers who stalk these wood. These hunters could endure for days, and their small beasts would scour this wood for his scent.

With every encounter, he learned his pursuers better. He must never allow himself to be flanked by the small beasts, or steered into open field, always go deeper into the wood. His antlers could gouge and ward off a few small beasts, but not a pack. Never allow the men a clear line of sight, or they will throw barbs. He can hear them whistle past, and had dodged a few in the past by ducking his head and running at the first sound of a bow.

Being rutting season, he was full of restless courage. These woods lacked any other stags large enough to

challenge his dominance, and he stirred for a fight. He pissed on a tree as he walked deeper into the wood. Let the small beasts smell him, he was lord of this wood. He let out a loud bellow as barking intensified and hoofbeats began to pound the forest floor.



She tired of pheasant and grouse. Oh, it was nice going out with the pack, and she'd bask in master's praise for carrying the birds so carefully...but she longed for a proper chase! Foxes are fun as they duck and dodge, but stags were her favourite. Graceful, massive creatures with great tree branches growing from their heads that could hurt her if she got close. The forest air wafted into the clearing; her nose filled with a sweet scent of musk and vinegar; she shook and yawned in anticipation.

She wanted so badly to catch one this time. A nice long chase, hopefully, with twists and switchbacks, and the stag would grow tired but she would still have energy. And before the horses even catch up she'd lunge at its neck and dodge its branches and take it down. And master would say, 'there's a good girl', and she'd eat raw meat off a plate under the table tonight!

The horn blew and she took off. She soon discovered the stag's still wet markings on a tree and barked to alert the pack to gather his scent. As she dashed deeper into the wood, she wondered if the stag was also enjoying the chase.



“I say, a fine morning for a meet!” the Earl proclaimed as he led a small group of nobility (and their considerable retinue) into Exmoor. His father, the Duke, had taken ill so it fell to him to lead today’s hunt. The kennel master loosed the staghounds, who readily picked up the old forester’s scent and were off.



He had been running for ages, and could yet hear the beasts behind him crash through the brush. One, in particular, far outstripped the rest. He made a sharp turn toward the smell of water, hoping to find a spot to stand his ground while any smaller beast must be forced to swim.



She knew this chase was entering the final phase. The stag would seek refuge in a stream or bog and the pack would bark until the masters came. But this time she would take the creature herself and show the Duke she was his goodest girl!



“The hounds are like to drive the stag into these shallows,” the Earl told a young Lord. “I want you to hold the bow just like this, pull back the string slow, aim well, and slide your finger off when you feel it’s reached the point of release. Do you understand?”

“Aye sir, I do. I think?”

“Excellent! Now pull back when you see movement, and release when you see the stag. Aim for a clean broadside kill. If you miss, he’s like to run off.”



She saw the stag splash into the bog. She would be at the mercy of his branches if she must swim, but he underestimated her jump.



The Earl could hear the hounds grow louder, and then the splashing in the boggy stream he knew would be just ahead. In a flash, the young Lord pulled back on the string with all his strength.



Before he turned to make his stand, she made a great leap over the water and sunk her teeth into the beast’s neck. The taste of its blood and stiff hairs in her mouth was glorious!



He did not expect the beasts could fly, but he was confident he could shake it off. More concerning was the smell of men close by and the sound of a barb being readied.



Bowstring locked back, he knew he had to let it go now or he'd never be able to draw it again. Just as his hand began to strain, he saw the stag's antlers come into view and he released, far too high.



The stag knew he must dodge to avoid the barb, but the small beast on his neck restricted his movements. He reared up onto his hind legs to cast the beast off and—



“Oh ho! Incredible shot! Gentlemen, let us drink to young Cecil here—a prodigy who has made two hits with a single bolt!”

“Two, my Lord?”

“Remarkable...two clean kills, both right through the chest! Men, there's an extra shilling if we make it back before the Duke retires. I'm certain he would desire to hear our squire recount the day's events.”

“Sorry, my Lord, you wish that *I* address the Duke?”

“Of course, lad, the glory is all yours! And besides, I wouldn't dare tell my father that his favourite dog has been killed.”

## AN UNEXPECTED HAZING RITUAL

*H*e had done it. Against all odds, Alben Hargrave had won the election. The few months after election day had been spent endlessly planning for what would be done in the first 100 days of his presidency. The night before the inauguration, Hargrave had been summoned to the White House. The sitting president wanted to meet with him. Once Hargrave entered the Oval Office, he noticed the president wasn't there. Instead, the current vice president sat at the Resolute desk and was staring at the wall. There were three members of the Secret Service present.

Ideas began to swirl in Alben's head. This was probably going to be some sort of ploy to make him more friendly to the interests of the outgoing party. The vice president turned towards Hargrave and began to speak.

"I know what you're thinking. Don't worry. This isn't an attempt at bribery or some other sort of underhanded dealing. We have called you here today to fulfill one of our nation's most hallowed traditions."

"Okay...What tradition are we talking about?"

“Since our nation’s beginning, there’s been a way of testing the resolve of the new president to see if he can withstand the difficulties of our nation’s highest office.”

“What is it?”

“The outgoing president spanks the president-elect.”

Hargrave wasn’t sure if the vice president was joking but still let out a guffaw. He only stopped chortling when he noticed that the vice president’s craggy face had twisted into a wrinkled grimace.

“This is no laughing matter, Mr. President-Elect. It’s a very serious tradition. Only one president has never engaged in it.”

“Which one?”

“William Henry Harrison. He died not long after he refused to be spanked.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yes. Bring the president in.”

One of the Secret Service agents exited the room.

“You aren’t joking about this? I’m really going to get spanked?”

“I’m completely serious. You are getting spanked.”

The Secret Service agent re-entered the room. Arthur Matthews, the incumbent president, hobbled in behind him. The 85-year-old president looked even more frail in person.

“Mr. President, are you ready to fulfill your last official duty as President of the United States?”

The President weakly nodded.

Another Secret Service agent emerged from the door. In his hands was a rough-hewn paddle. It was so large that it looked more like an oar from a small rowboat than a typical

paddle. The word LIBERTY had been crudely carved on both sides. Hargrave once more began to protest.

“I can’t do this, this is ridiculous.”

The vice president scoffed. “If you can’t handle a little paddling, how are you going to handle a financial crisis or a war?”

Hargrave looked at the paddle, and then back at the vice president.

“Fine...I’ll do it.”

“Assume the position, Mr. President-Elect.”

Hargrave dutifully bent over the Resolute desk.

“Your pants. Drop them.”

Hargrave took off his pants and began to silently cry.

The agent handed the paddle to President Matthews, who tightly clutched it with both hands. The president strained under the weight of the paddle, and let out a soft wheeze. The paddle then slipped out of his hands and onto the floor. One of the agents scrambled to pick it up, and gingerly placed it back in the president’s aged hands. Once again, the president dropped the massive paddle and then proceeded to tumble over. An agent picked him up, and the president was given the paddle once more. After that, one agent wrapped his arms around the president’s waist and the other three supported the weight of the oar. The four then managed to make the feeble president land a few gentle blows on Hargrave’s exposed butt. The vice president motioned for the agents to stop moving the president.

“Congratulations Mr. President-Elect, you’ve passed.”

The next day, the inauguration went off without a hitch. Afterwards, Hargrave sat in the Oval Office with his head in his hands. Before he could get too comfortable, there was a light knock on his door. It soon opened to reveal one of his secretaries.

“Hey Mr. President, just wanted to give you a heads up that you need to meet with Congress. It’s for a special inaugural ceremony.”

“More paddling?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

## THE BREAKING OF A WISHBONE HAS DISASTROUS RESULTS

*I*hated Notre Dame football. Grandfather loved them with all his heart and soul. It was not his fault that he did not know my feelings. I guess I had just never made that fact clear enough to him. Grandfather adored Notre Dame as though it was a golden calf. Father told me he had loved them ever since he was young. He dreamed about playing for them—something that was dashed from him when his father needed him to milk cows for money.

Grandfather has never really forgiven his father of robbing him of the chance to go to school. I think this was part of the reason why Grandfather tried to do so much for us. I remember him pushing for me to go to that private Catholic school and making sure that I always had a means to get to school. I loved him for that. He did care about my future and happiness.

“Air Force fumbled three times in the first quarter.” Grandfather reviewed everything that happened to me. He never seemed to let up on a single detail pertaining to these games. It seemed especially true today. Likely in part due to the significance of the game: Notre Dame on national

television, and on Thanksgiving Day. A team which had won nine straight games and were on track to not surrender a single loss.

“Grandpa, when’s dinner?” I asked, hoping that we could change the topic.

“It won’t be ready for a while. Your parents are still out, anyway.” He shifted a bit on his chair. “Halftime is almost over, let’s watch the rest of the game.”

The last half lasted for hours. It was always difficult for me to sit through a game, especially when you are with someone who only talks about the game. I watched as my grandfather rose and shouted in applause when the team scored a ‘touchdown’ and frowned when they ‘punted’ the ball back to the other team. It was just a blur of shapes moving on and on. I did not want to hurt Grandfather, so I sat through it all, rolling around on the couch, trying to be as comfortable as humanly possible. Comfort escaped me. The couch was so hot from all my movement. After an extended period—the length of which escaped me—I was finally awoken from a nap. I had not even remembered taking it, but it was interrupted by Grandfather’s voice. “You missed the end, Brian!”

I jolted up. “What?”

“The game! Notre Dame won! It must have been quite the experience to watch that in person. I would love to take you to a game someday...maybe— no, definitely. I’ll take you next year as a gift for getting into that school.” Grandfather wanted to go to a Notre Dame game for a long time with me. He did not have much money for it. None of us really did. I know that it ate him up inside.

I heard the door open and loud chatter by the kitchen. It was my parents, back from visiting other family in town.

“Lawrence, you come over to the table! We are going to start eating dinner now. Brian, you come too!” The call of my grandmother was deafening. Despite her shrill voice, I was happy to know that Thanksgiving dinner was finally ready.

The family shuffled to the table. It was the six of us today. Grandfather, Grandmother, my parents, little Elisa, and I. It had been this way since Uncle John left out west after marrying. My grandparents only had us, and kept us tightly knit around their finger. After prayer was concluded and the meal was slowly being served, Grandfather began to relay the events of the game to Father. I was never too sure how Father felt about Notre Dame, but it seemed that like myself, he too hated Notre Dame football.

“I want to take Brian to a game next year,” Grandfather finally told my father.

“That would be good for you two.”

“Yes, all I need is a little bit of luck, and to save money to see it through.”

I stopped listening to the two of them. I was more interested in eating dinner.

“And here’s the wishbone!” The cry of Grandmother was so sudden. “Who should do the honours?”

Before anyone could speak up, Grandfather yanked the wishbone from Grandmother’s hands and proclaimed, “I think it should be my dearest grandson and I.” He then turned to his left side to face me and put out the wishbone. “I’m ready when you are.”

I was reluctant to take part in it. What did I even want to wish for in the first place? I already knew he wanted something to do with Notre Dame Football, his demagogue. Despite my reluctance, I grabbed the wishbone.

“On three. One...two...and three!”

We both yanked on the stick until we heard the crack. I looked at the bone. It was I who had the majority of the V shape.

“What’re you gonna wish for?” Grandfather inquired.

I had no idea. I felt as though he wanted me to make his wish, but for my sake I was reluctant to, lest that wish would come true. He did so much for me, I just had to spit it out. I had to swallow my pride. I knew that it meant a lot to him, especially on Thanksgiving.

“I wanna go to Notre Dame Stadium with you, Grandpa.”

He smiled widely. I hated Notre Dame football.

## THE FIRST PLAGUE ON COLONIZED MARS

I.

*N*ew Athens sits on the foot of Olympus Mons, the great red mountain. Sandstorms coat the surrounding desert planet with an opaque haze most of the year. Sometimes the desert is still, and one finds a great tranquility sweep over themselves as they stare into the great abyss beyond the super-station. In moments like these, the original colonists may have thought of their old homes on Earth, of the people they left behind, and of the life that they made for themselves.

Today, the shifting sands are at rest, the sun is overhead, and an old man stares out the window of his room into the red wasteland. He sees himself partially reflected, his wispy eyebrows and long beard, the drooping of his eyes. In the distance, he can see a ship entering the atmosphere at a great velocity. The ship seems to move away so slowly. The old man waits for the ship to disappear, and when it does, he stops looking out of his window. A walk, he thinks.

The corridors of New Athens are great cylindrical structures, almost totally transparent. Sprawled as it is the whole city has the look of a long and winding maze of glass. As the old man makes his way through the shops of the corridor, he takes a moment to look into the immense pink sky above him. As the light hits his pupils, he squints, and after a beat he continues to walk in silence.

“Seventy-six,” says the old man to himself. “I will be seventy-six tomorrow.”

At a bench in the center of New Athens, the old man gazes out into a crowd of twenty-somethings. He remembers their parents, perhaps more than they do themselves. A moment passes, and he closes his eyes. He imagines. Orange hair, the contours of a nose, the shapes of a woman. He remembers everything.

II.

GENERATION O, THE FAILURE OF MARTIAN GOVERNMENTS  
AND A CASE STUDY IN DEMOCRACY. BY RICHARD EDELSTEIN,  
UNIVERSITY OF KEPPLER-22 PRESS

“I would like to begin this paper by thanking the university for its lenient sabbatical policy, which permitted me to author this paper. And to the distinguished staff...

...Out of nearly twenty thousand adults living in the New Athens colony, only forty-seven...

...Mining operations at the foot of Olympus ceased, and the rest of the Martian experiment was unable to cope...as a result, fertility in the colony...zero percent.

...Without a cure, the Athens colony is still under strict quarantine. Members of the orphaned generation now live in a society without the old or young."

### III.

My first memory is difficult to describe. I'm unsure of which part of it is true, and which isn't. In the first scenario, I'm staring at a cockroach colony that had formed behind a dumpster. I can remember the smell, as well as the feeling of disgust. It was a feeling so overwhelming that I began stomping the cockroaches until they had all died or fled into a crack in the wall. I remember the mass of their guts mixed with their exoskeletons.

The second version, which I'm more prone to believing these days, is that I saw the cockroaches and just ran away. I'm scared of cockroaches, after all. Sometimes as a kid and teenager I would wake up with the fucking things crawling on my face. It got to the point where I would sleep in a really tight cocoon.

The memory of my mother's death is also difficult to describe. You'd have to be there to believe it. Our home, a little closet in the dingy part of Athens, was both small and disgusting. None of my classmates ever came over because I never asked them over. If they wanted to meet up, it was usually in the square, or over at one of their houses.

She died intubated. I didn't see it happen. That was three weeks ago. I remember hearing she got the spots and knowing that was it. I cried for her then.

Today I got the spots, and there is nobody to treat me. My father made me some soup earlier. I am in my cocoon, awake.

“Aren’t you afraid of getting it?” I say through the mass of blanket.

“I’m sorry I didn’t give you much,” replies my father. I poke my head out from under the blanket. I look out the window. Still red sand reaches out into the night and stops at the edge of the darkness. Sometimes cold air pushes through my blankets and sends me into a fit of shivers.

“Olympus is insurmountable,” Dad continues. “So many thousands of kilometres. Days like these, you can see its outline, even in the dark. The Greeks on Earth believed that gods lived atop a mountain named Olympus...”

He drones on for what seems like forever. I close my eyes and begin to dream. I see the oceans of Earth, a great whale rising out of the water. It shoots a geyser of water from the hole in its back. I remember the shape of Phobos. I remember the feeling of my mother’s bosom. I remember stomping the cockroaches.

## SHE DEFINITELY JUST SPOKE IN ENGLISH

*N*o one intends on staying in New Madrid, New Mexico. This was true for Richard, who had already spent a night in a two-star hotel. It was not at all his intent to be there; he had just been heading towards Albuquerque for his sister's wedding when he realized night had already fallen.

"Here is the key," Richard said as he dropped the room key on the front desk. It read "three" in a faded black print on the jet tag. The front desk worker—a chubby Mexican woman—collected it and hung it on a rack.

"Thank you, sir. Have a wonderful rest of your day!" she said in a cheerful tone.

After stepping into his rundown blue Chevrolet Silverado, he set up the GPS on his phone in search of somewhere to eat. The hotel had not offered a breakfast to its clients. Rather unsurprising for a hotel like that. A four-star breakfast diner popped up on his phone. The closest of all of them, being only a five-minute trek from the hotel he stayed at. The few, yet consistent, positive reviews and the relative distance was enough to sell him on the location.

The drive was as eventful as any other desolate town in the Sun Belt. Shabby homes that looked as though they would fall apart if you hit the wall too hard with any kind of construction tool. Richard chuckled to himself as he imagined that his vain sister may have to live in a home like this, thanks to her and her soon-to-be husband's horrid spending habits.

"Poor bastards," he thought as he gazed at the dusty single-story Spanish Colonial homes.

The café was situated on a main throughfare of the town. The exterior suggested it had been abandoned several years prior. All the other buildings looked no better. Richard was not in position to judge appearances, especially after reviewing the café's profile online. He was simply a customer who was seeking food and drink before he hit the road again. As he opened the door, a bell rang, causing him to flinch. A second flinch came from the fact that the café was completely empty, save for a younger white woman of about twenty-five. She sat at a table right next to the café's barren countertop.

"Excuse me, do you work here?" Richard asked.

Slightly startled herself, the woman shot her head up. He had interrupted her while she was idly reading a newspaper. After a short-lived stare of blankness, she only offered a giggle in reply. His face was fire red.

"Sorry, I assumed you did."

Her large blue eyes were locked on him. He could see a repressed smile form at the corner of her lips.

"What's her problem? Maybe she doesn't speak English?" he thought. He straightened up this time to offer

her a third question, “¿Habla inglés?” He had a horrible accent; he was a white man after all.

The woman laughed. “No, I don’t.”

“You just did!” he retorted.

“Did I?” She propped her right hand under her chin, feigning contemplation.

Growing upset by her, he turned heel and walked for the door. It was a waste of time to play along with this woman. He wanted, or rather needed, to eat. This woman clearly did not care about this fact.

“Wait, I’m sorry,” the woman said in between giggles.

He turned around again. His hand was reaching for the door at this point—she caught him mid-reach. This time he had to hold back giving her a rude remark.

“My father owns the diner. He is out back. I just like to mess with the travellers.” She stretched her arms and arched her back, reminiscent of a cat. She then rose from her seat. “Sit down and I will make you some coffee.” She motioned for the seat she had just been in. “Despite the look of this place, the food’s good. Oh, and I wanna know why a young man who isn’t a trucker is here in the middle of March.” She giggled again and put her hand over her mouth.

He did as she said: sitting down and grabbing her newspaper. The seat was warm, and the paper was furrowed from a hasty fold. He was hopeful that she had been right. All he wanted was something to eat and drink before he left New Madrid.

## A RURAL TOWN IS NOT WHAT IT APPEARS

*H*ave you ever been made victim of that vexing nausea, and subsequent delirium, of physical entities appearing to appear not as they once did? You swear it was there. It was right there. Where's it gone?

The human eye has 120 degrees of vision: together they span 180. This means that, at all times, there is an entire world behind you just waiting to be observed; to collapse into a form.

Less than a five-minute stroll from my childhood home there lay a monstrously large, menacingly flat field to my youthful eyes—empty, it was told, to preserve the historic legacy of the ancient, small town of Siemienice that once sprawled there, some hundred years ago. From all my time poured into pottering about that threatening plain as a child, I saw only few people: the occasional jogger attempting, unanimously failing, to cross the space in one fell swoop. Such copious broadness unnerved them.

The dog-walkers never came that way; the dogs couldn't stand it. Something about the place scared them away; they refused to step even partially into it. Perhaps if it were not

for my melancholy disposition, I would have shared in that notion.

In defiance of the negative connotation my many days of meandering might elicit, I assure you it was most necessary for me as the only place to get away from the shouting and screaming of the house. The plain provided security, comfort and protection with a tranquillity far removed from the dangerous, stressful life of school and home. Nobody would hurt me on the Field. It was the only place I felt safe.

After one particularly nasty conflict, bringing me to numbness new, I eschewed again with a heavy heart to that most accepting savannah of endless, barren grass. With such diminished will to live, the flat horizon felt uniquely comforting that day. Just me, the grass, the sky; forever.

I hung my head low and let the grass fill my vision; the sky was too good for me. Hoping to lose my way in wandering that cold, open field I remember noticing how dirty my shoes had become, and questioning whether that was reflective of my life as whole. Bringing my attention squarely to the rhythmical feeling in my feet, I continued my traipse with a growing sense of misanthropy. The aimless wanderer has no expectations, no pressure, no nagging parents, I thought. He is free. At the time, of course, I did not consider hunger, thirst or shelter, but I will not berate myself for this, as ignorance is a most covetous position.

Onward I strode, determined to make something of this little show of resistance. The crisp wind chilled my face and wavered my plain, unassuming clothes, which were not even mine. The birds, few as there were, chirped their

tones oblivious. I did not hear, my mind focused on my feet. I would march to my death if I had to: anything to get away.

Then, the grass began to change.

Slowly, surely, the grass became cobbles and the cobbles became gravel. In my depressive haze I did not notice, mind submerged in a relentless storm of emotion. After unknown time a part of my subconscious must have perceived the change, for I looked up and noticed that I was not where I once was, but had wandered upon that rumoured town of Siemienice, and was standing by its entrance.

That town embodied everything good in the world to me. It was a symbol of life, of hope, of the beautiful unknown existing, just waiting to be discovered.

There was a river running through the town, streaming smoothly, leading flowing water into a nearby pond. The pond was quiet and reflective, with a nasty selection of dense foliage surrounding a dreary swamp. The swamp, well it was more like a marshland, was murky, bleak and dismal. The more I looked the more it consumed my vision, until that bog was all I could see, and all that was there. I looked away; the town was nowhere to be seen. It was gone.

Without realizing it I had let the esoteric town of Siemienice elude my sight and, without a sound, evanesce from this world. I write this now as memoir and a cautionary tale to the young: never lose sight of your life.

## AN EVENING IN VERONA

si pote stolidum repente excitare veternum,  
et supinum animum in gravi derelinquere cæno  
— Catullus, xvij

*T*he most passive action, writing, summons and erases all figures in a burnt-out coppice, a damp smoke blurring the outlined maps. Waiting, with but a slanted vulgar fissural misted view of the piazzale afforded from the window, Ugone was, nonetheless and in any case, kept from writing. It would come: he had only to wait: was that not how things went? Formerly he had written much without recording, merely in the mind, where something arriving and something done were harder to distinguish. That nothing so far had happened showed great promise: such inaction had always provided for everything, yet one can't help feel that somewhere one's opposite and double, one's fratricide (oneling as one may be), is taking the praise for all one's luxuries, while returning all their injuries, perceived as paths not taken...



From the view afforded him, from his half-off position in the room, *his* room, no doubt, though with the feeling he had just been left there and, conversely, the indifferent sorrow it might soon change; from his window's coin-slot view, I say, Ugone saw pass a sighthound, not far off but close by: and so it appeared to be gigantic, and passed in parts—first the head, then the trunk, the tail. (As the hound passed below, 'twas rather its long shadow cast on the building across.) A very crabby sighthound, come from the bank of the Adige, heading north to go coursing, followed by its master (a black rectangle).



In love's communication it had been much the same as in all of life's force, until it returned betrayed and threw everything into an even greater strangeness, were it only that of normalcy. Never was there anything else to Ugone's mind than to see what would come, to await it as does a mystic with much relish; to initiate an action was not so much unwilling as unthinkable. The halfway opportunity presented, to grab hold of, was less of a marvel than being carried along, and swept away—and yet: what if that kairious time, at the forking of the new district under construction, it was not passivity that diverted Ugone's relations with the Silvina, but a doing? He had, he realized only much, much later, only to remain at her side in posse, that would lead him along, along even into a reserved coit

with the Silvina perhaps, but instead he had effectuated a goodbye at the last moment, and this, this was *far* from nothing. The truth was, he shamed to admit, he was driven to utter restlessness in that aimless silent wandering with her—and could only return to the momentary calm of the city's chatter by hatching a poltroonish escape.



No sooner had some gastro-humorous acid admitted itself into Ugone's mouth, a droplet whereof dripping therefrom, than a fanfaring siren was sounded. Moving across the dark piazzale, made out in the distance, was the following scene: one man, green-looking, tied to a stretcher, being rolled away very slowly, as if in a procession + two nurses, transporting the man while each dragging along a drip bag on a pole in the other hand + two small flatbed trolleys, either remotely operated or autonomous, following behind, with a cage full of very lively rabbits on the one, a pallet with four metal buckets filled with very bloody raw red meat on the other + a figure in a teal banyan and hood, limply holding the little horn, at the rear. Mouthing the one nurse to the other, it looked like:

— A passéist in the evening / can pose a serious threat. / In all our brave open actions / we have nothing to regret.

— If only we didn't have so much waste, such muck, to dispose of.

## CHARLES MANSON IS MY MOM

*I*woke up early in the morning. I hadn't been able to sleep again. I winced while thinking of what awaited me today, but still rolled out of bed. My family's new house was little more than a hole in a wall. I stumbled into the kitchen, and sat down at the table. A small plate of food was there for me.

"Hey, Mom."

Mom stared at me and smiled. She was wearing her typical drab clothing, and her hair seemed more wild than ever.

"I need some advice."

"I'm not very wise to many things."

I laughed at her little joke.

"I'm serious, Mom. I've been having...trouble at school."

Her eyes began to bug out of her head.

"Okay...I've been getting in trouble. A lot of the teachers here are jerks. I didn't think this would effect me, but I've started feeling like an incompetent idiot."

She smiled again.

“There’s nothing wrong with being incompetent. It just means you don’t have to do as much.”

“Alright.”

I hesitated to explain the real issue. My mom had not broken eye contact, and I could tell she knew there was more.

“I’ve been getting beaten up by some of the other guys at school.”

“Pain’s not bad, it’s good. It teaches you things.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the one getting your ass kicked every day.”

Mom scoffed.

“Laugh all you want. Honestly, I’m scared.”

“Fear of vikings build castles.”

“Whatever, Mom.”

I looked down at my small metal plate. Mom did as well. I wasn’t hungry, so I simply poked at the food with my fork. Mom’s little aphorism didn’t make much sense. I tried to think of what she meant. It was most likely just some of her typical confused ramblings. However, I still tried to parse out some possible meaning. Perhaps she was trying to say that I should simply withdraw into my head. Our new house was minuscule and there was seemingly no way to escape my current predicament. There was only one possible way to escape a situation like this. I looked back up at her again.

“The way out of a room is not through the door. Just don’t want out. And you’re free...”

## SOMEONE FINDS THE JOURNAL OF A MENTALLY DISABLED MAN IN THE ARCHIVES

*W*e are both wrapped up in our coats and our boots leave moist tracks across the tile floor as a radiator slowly clacks to itself somewhere in the distance. I keep close to her as we walk into the long hall of display cases, but can't help falling behind as the scale of the space strikes us. Countless votive figures stare out from behind glass. Silver snowlight pours through the windowpanes and lands against the soft glow of golden display lamps. Ancient kings stride across cylinder seal impressions rolled by long-dead curators. Heat and cold, motion and stillness come into contact around us, and for a moment we are smothered by the silent conflict of polar opposites. A mighty Lamassu turns its head to regard us with immobile judgment.

She works in the art collection, I work in the manuscript archives. We meet here after classes, in the hall of oriental antiquities, and I try to tell her how I feel. Afterwards we get coffee in the student union and I don't see her again until the next week. This has been going on for a year. Today, I tell her about the diary I found in one of the high-density shelving units.

“At first, I thought it was just another old Sears catalog that had been misplaced. It was lying by itself on one of the shelves, no label or anything. When I picked it up, it was full of writing.”

“An inscription?” She gets it immediately.

“Yeah, someone had written all over the inside with what looked like charcoal. All big capital letters.”

“What did it say?”

“I don’t know. I could make out some names and dates, but the letters took up so much of the page that I couldn’t piece together entire sentences. I guess it was someone’s diary.”

“A man?”

I struggle to respond. An alabaster king uneasily shifts his weight against a supporting pillar.

“It was probably a man.” She answers her own question. “Someone who wanted to write but needed to rely on other people’s words.”

“It looked like it was written by a child.”

“A manchild, then.” She smiles and draws close enough that I can feel the slight pressure of her coat sleeve against mine.

We have stopped in front of a clay tablet covered in tiny scratch marks.

“Can you read this?”

I lean closer to get a good look. “She said to Enkidu: You are beautiful, Enkidu, you are become like a god. Why do you gallop around the wilderness with the wild beasts? Come, let me bring you into Uruk, to the residence of Anu and Ishtar, the place of he who is wise to perfection.”

She actually seems a little surprised by this. Someone coughs from the other side of a bas-relief.

“I only know that part from class,” I confess. “My conversational Akkadian isn’t that good yet. I don’t think anyone’s is.”

She pulls away. “I wish you’d learn a real language, like French or German. Then you could help me catalog these paintings they have me working on.”

“But I don’t want to catalog paintings. I want to spend all day learning dead languages and reading books nobody can understand.”

She laughs at the joke, turns back, walks over to the case, and hugs me.

I don’t say anything else after that. As we walk to the exit, I regret lying to her about the diary.

It had been perfectly legible, once I took the trouble to write each massive sentence fragment down. The man who wrote it had a loose grasp on the English language and an obsession with trivial details. The few interactions with other people he recorded showed the signs of a severe learning disability. The time and place of his writing were unclear. The catalog was old, but it could have been old when he found it. He worked in some kind of general store, in the storage room where he wouldn’t bother the customers. His life was tedious and stupid, but he wrote it all down as if it were the most important thing in the world. Reading and writing were not easy for him, but he applied himself to both with an endless patience borne of limited horizons. His diary broke off in the middle of a sentence

about shipping palettes. It was about a thousand pages long, more or less.

I transcribe it all and think of nothing else until I arrive at the gallery. When the time comes I lie to her about it, lie to the woman I love more than anyone else, lie as easily as a child telling his parents about stolen candy. She sees right through it, but doesn't say anything. I realize this as I walk through the snow to my dorm. None of the statues say anything. They've been silent too long, and most of them never knew English to begin with.

## THE KING'S COBBLER

*T*he king's taste in footwear was becoming more grotesque as each year passed. Ignatius was proud to work for the king, and generally considered him to be a fine man, and a ruler of competence, but he despised the fashions of the king's court, and the influence it had on the well-to-do dress of the nobles of the land. With each year arrived some new ornamentation in the style of the boots, and new patterns of stitching, and of course after he had made these alterations he would see visitors adopting similar forms within weeks, having rushed to their own cobblers with descriptions for them to emulate. They liked to think they would become as rich as the king's court members, should they simply dress like them, and yet they never thought to become as noble and as dignified as them, and realize that perhaps if they actually behaved in the refined manner of the court then they might reap some of the benefits of such behaviour. No, we shall copy the stitching in their boots and the curl of their moustaches, for this is how one becomes trusted by the king.

To make such fanciful specifications, Ignatius had to produce wooden frames so that he could cut leather into patterns of increasing delicacy. The curves and the lines of the guides and templates were becoming increasingly fine, and if he didn't get the right tacks then he would end up splitting the thin wood and have to start over again.

Last time he had a new design, he was actually a day late in presenting the king with his boots, an error Ignatius had never allowed himself in the past. The hour was simply too late and all he had left were the tacks made by some young smith apprentice or another in the castle, and they didn't have the same eye for metal quality as the older workshop men. The lead smiths were too busy making fine arrows and carriage braces to busy themselves with tack making, and so Ignatius had taken it upon himself to personally buy his own tacks from the town where a finer eye might still busy itself with the simpler tasks.

'Hello, Thornton.'

'Ah, Mr. Cole, good to see you again.'

'A large bag of your finest tacks, please. A small sack, one might say.'

'Glad you're finding them to your liking.'

'Yes, yes. As men such as we are sure to find, small things make a great difference to fine crafting.'

'Truer words are not oft spoken, Mr. Cole. You should nab yourself some pastry rounds from the corner stall on your way home. There's some fine crafting going on there, I can tell you.'

'I might just do that very thing, Mr. Thornton. Ah, I'll take some of these hammers too. I've misplaced one of mine

and I think someone might have pinched a couple of things from my bench.'

'One of the downsides of the castle bustle, eh?'

'Yes, there's always visitors and servants passing in and about everywhere and getting underfoot. Quite handy to have lots of things nearby, but as you can see, the castle doesn't provide everything one needs.' Ignatius passed the smith a handful of coins.

'Must hurry, Mr. Thornton, I've got a fair bit of work to get done.'

'Alright then Mr. Cole, stop by any time.'

'Good day Mr. Thornton.'

Ignatius hurried back the way he came with a tight grip on the bag string. He took the smith's advice and stopped on the corner to buy a parcel of pastry rounds to take home, so he could eat them in his workshop as he cut shapes out of leather. The smell of fresh pastry tempted him greatly as he jostled the parcel. He walked up the long lane, then past the alleyway, and as he reached the alehouse he put his sack and parcel on the garden table so he could open it and eat a pastry.

'Mhm, yes, very good. Another thing the castle doesn't get quite right.'

He realized he was talking out loud and an old man replied to him.

'The beer int very good neither.'

'Quite right. Good day.'

Ignatius chewed another pastry as he approached the gatehouse and stepped widely to avoid a puddle. He slipped as he did so, and as he juggled the pastry, parcel, and sack

of tacks, he let the tacks go accidentally and grasped the bottom of the bag to stop it falling. The loose string around the bag let half of them fall out in the mud and puddle.

‘Phmmf fucking fhmm fuckihng shite. Oh, good heavens.’

He finished eating the pastry before he could even be bothered to look at the mess he had made. He was going to get all his tacks dirty if he put the muddy ones back in the bag. A chicken appeared and looked at him expectantly.

‘You planned this, didn’t you?’

He threw the remaining pastries onto the floor and the chicken excitedly ran over to them and started pecking. He took the parcel paper and used it to collect wet muddy tacks from the ground.

‘Bugger. Bugger that and bugger this.’

The chicken pecked at the pastry. Ignatius put the parcel in the bag with the other tacks and walked through the gate, string tied tightly.

‘Bugger.’

As he walked over the courtyard flagstones towards his apartment rooms, he decided he would send for some of the castle’s mediocre beer to be brought to his workshop, to make up for the pastry he had lost. There was work to be done, and now he would have to do it with some other form of aid.

‘Bugger, bugger, bugger. Oh well.’

A MAN HAS THE ABILITY TO CLOSE HIS EYES, WALK FORWARD, AND APPEAR ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD

*T*here was only one thing he could do in the end. He would dress for the occasion. He opened a large trunk at the end of his bed and pulled out a large black plastic bag, throwing it to one side. Then he pulled out some big, round, fur-lined boots, with large crisscross stitches holding them together, and put those aside. Then he pulled out a mosquito net, and a trail backpack that could hold ten litres of water, and a long chunky commando knife that was serrated on the back edge. He put the knife in a backpack and rummaged further into the trunk. He opened a plastic box and took out a tobacco tin, and inside was a compact kit of various survival tools and items, a few fishing hooks in a plastic baggy, some water purifying tablets, some coin-sized batteries, and about twenty other things all tightly arranged so that it was very difficult to get them back in the tin once you took them out. Then he took out an extra large firesteel rod for making sparks and put that in the backpack, a small hand axe, a foldable shovel, and some pairs of rolled up socks. There were some things he always took with him on his adventures, and then all that

would be left was his immediate clothing and footwear. There were certain things he would choose at the last moment, as it became clear where he was going. He had to balance the things he needed against the practicality of carrying it all.

He picked up a packet of multivitamins from the trunk. He went into the kitchen and picked up a plastic lunchbox containing a salt tub, pot of pepper, a few packs of real butter, hot sauce, vitamin C powder, sugar, teabags, and a few spices. Then he opened a cupboard and pulled a shoebox-sized pack of dried beef that he had been preparing himself. It was one of about ten neatly stacked packs, all identical.

As he closed the cupboard, the skin on the back of his hand seemed to turn purple. That was actually just his eyes —when he had asked nearby people, they couldn't see the same thing that he did.

He opened a second cupboard and pulled out another shoebox-sized arrangement of dense contents that he had made. They were like biscuits or cookies, but completely savoury. They were just a method for him to eat carbs without cooking them, and it was more solid than bread, and longer lasting. He had become very good at finding vegetation over the years, so now he didn't bother: he just took some vitamins. He had practically memorized the plant section of his SAS survival book. He took a pint of milk from the fridge and quickly drank the whole thing in one go, and then he took some leftover sausages and forced four of them down.

As he walked back to the bedroom with his stuff in his hands, he saw a pinpoint of light flicker in his vision for a split moment.

‘Here we go. Here. We. Go.  
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh.’

He put the things in his rucksack and stood up, taking in a huge deep breath. He drummed on his stomach with his fists a few times, and did some limbering up, a sort of punching, stretching, arm-wave motion.

‘Oooooooooooooooooooooohwaaaaaaaaahhhggg  
gggg-gh-g-g-g-ooooooooooooooh.’

He zipped up the rucksack, rocking backwards and forwards. He looked at the big puffy Eskimo boots, then at his wide-brimmed hat, touching them, trying to figure out what would be right. He picked up the mosquito net and held it to his face.

‘No. Hmmmmmm.’

This time it wasn’t going to be very cold, or very hot. If he was going to the Sahara Desert, he would feel it very strongly—the same if he was going to the Canadian wilderness. He would just need the middle of the road gear, it seemed. He always had some thermal underlayer pyjama type things for the night time, anyway. If he misjudged slightly, he would be able to wear them during the day also. He wouldn’t need the ice range.

‘But where...Where is it?’

Sometimes he would get a strong impression of the terrain, or the location, but not always. This time it wasn’t clear. The temperature was the most important thing, and at least in that respect he knew he was lucky this time.

'Rolling the dice. Let's go. LET'S GO. LET'S GOOOOOOO.'

He pulled up his rucksack onto his shoulder and ran down the stairs. He slammed the front door and sprinted across the road, down the alleyway. The alleyway opened up to a small grassy park with some swings and a slide at one end. He ran across the grass, which was phasing between purple and green. His footsteps would thump for a few seconds, then become completely silent despite the hard impact he was making as he ran.

He closed his eyes, and his body felt like it was moving forwards and backwards at the same time. He felt like his flesh was melting away, but somehow staying in the same place, like an optical illusion, but one he could feel happening to his bones and his brain. Like he was being stretched out from head to toe, and curling up into a spiral, and staying exactly the same.

He opened his eyes, and he could feel the grass in his face. Much longer than neat grass maintained by a town council. He lay there for ten minutes or so without moving, the faint background noises of unfamiliar birds and insects letting him know he had arrived. When he finally angled his head up, he could see a line of tall mountains in the distance.

'Doesn't really narrow it down.'

Robert sat up, stood up, brushed himself off, and then walked into the distance to figure out where he was.

## LOCALS BEGIN TO SUSPECT THE JUDAS GOAT

*A* child swung his arm and pointed a finger behind him. "It's happened again!" His voice was shrill, excited to watch the commotion repeat. Two men sitting outside a nearby hut dropped their tools and entered the store. They hoped the boy was playing a trick, but the last month was all the evidence they needed to believe him.

"He's right, three bags gone..."

"What's that now? Five in the last week?"

"Eight."

Bran scoured the room, although he knew the food was gone. He walked over to a wooden board in the corner of the room, following a draft and a slim shaft of light.

"Aye, there's a hole here. Bastard's been coming and going as he pleases."

"Someone from the village?"

"There's scratches, some kind of animal."

"Thirteen bags to last the winter..."

Bran stood in the doorway; the leather flap draped over his shoulder.

"Another three. You need to tell us what to do."

The elders looked up from the fire, not used to being spoken to so frankly. Usually, they would only discuss matters like this during a gathering of the village, but Bran's eyes were worried, and he shuffled impatiently. He was a man on edge and reflected the feelings of the villagers.

"It's an animal. Or a pack of animals."

The elders waited for each other to speak.

"We're going to starve!"

The elders knew they wouldn't have enough food to last the winter if this kept up, though none had any answers to give. They looked down, dejected and without hope. Bran turned from the elders, his worry turned to anger and his anger to decision. The four old men did not take their eyes from the fire as he left the hut.

A few men of Bran's age were waiting for him outside. They had heard only him speak, and the shake of his head confirmed what they had feared. Bran walked through the men without stopping, his eyes focused on the granary. The men followed a few steps behind. He walked inside, took a tree stump from the corner of the room and dropped it near the middle of the floor. He sat facing the hole with nothing but his bare hands.

One of the men turned to the group. "We, uh, we should take shifts?"

Bran nodded and rested his back against one of the poles.

There was nothing that night. Nothing the next. Or the next. The men grew weary and began to abandon their shifts. Fewer men had more to do, and they were tired for

it. Some men convinced themselves that the animal would not come back. Others were needed on the farms to try to replenish the lost food.

Bran walked carefully into the storehouse. It was the first night that he felt the bite of the air outside and it amplified his anxiety. He stopped. He heard scratching, heavy breathing; almost panting. He peered round the corner, into the main room. Amber eyes streaked with emptiness looked up at Bran. The Judas Goat did not look startled. It did not look like it felt anything. It was steadfast and uncompromising. The look of a mudslide racing towards a village. Uncaring and unphased, but aware. He shouted at the goat, but it did not move. The man Bran came to relieve started out of his sleep. The movement caught the goat unaware and it turned from the hole and ran.

Bran sprinted out of the granary, lifting a pitchfork from the front of the hut. The goat ran into the forest. He caught glimpses of it through the trees—so deft it was like a ghost passing through walls. He heard the sleeping guards' shouts behind him to rouse the other men from the village. They would follow him.

The divine moonlight tangled in the fur of the goat was Bran's saving grace, for without it he would lose the goat. He saw him take a turn into a rocky crevice; he heard the hooves on the stone. The moonlight followed him and lit the narrow path. He entered. He heard the townsfolk behind him and struck his pitchfork hard on the rocky face. He went deeper. The narrow path turned to the left and down, losing the guiding light of the moon, but he could feel the

air was less constricted around him—the path had opened into a chamber. He heard men clamber up behind him and he hissed to let them know he was here.

The chamber was set ablaze with the light of a fire. An inferno from nowhere erupted in the room. The Judas Goat stood on the other end of the blaze, eyes glowing and distorting in the heat. The goat began to rise above the fire, and limbs of men unfolded from its chest as it towered above them.

## A SHOT RANG WITH NO ONE TO HEAR

*T*wo bullets left. Rifle, Winmag. Two left. He knew the grazes on his ribs and shin would be alerting it to his presence, the smell of active blood peppering the wind. They were shallow grazes but it was enough—any tiny amount would be detectable by its nose. He would be detectable anyway—his sweat, his breath—but now the bear would have an exact pinpoint, stimulated by instinct in pursuit of bleeding prey. He needed a headshot or a heart shot, and what he had left would allow him to attempt one of each. Perhaps one distant shot and one emergency shot at close range.

Now that he had time to pause, the stupidity of his actions were swirling around him, mixed in with a vivid pang of red danger in his nerves. A bear's nose is seven times superior to the nose of a bloodhound, and a bloodhound is three times superior to most dogs. A dog's nose, then, is one hundred times superior to a human nose. The bear could basically see him already, without actually needing to see him.

The stag he was slowly stalking had taken flight suddenly, despite that he hadn't made any noise. He was upwind. It was the bear that had alerted the deer, and as the deer ran into the trees he broke away from his carefully planted position to turn and try to crack the bear instead, impulsively. He missed, and startled the bear. He shot again, and although the shot was bad he thought that he may have clipped the bear and angered it.

By the time he had gained the composure to shoot straight, the bear had leapt into the water in his direction. What he had done was foolish and unnecessary. He could have let the bear catch the deer, and afterwards he might have even been able to see it between the trees. It might have dragged the deer back the way it came, or returned to drink some water after eating it, and he could have set up his shot. If he had just waited.

He opened his chest pocket and put his hand inside to check that the loose rounds were still there. Of course they were, but he needed to touch the metal and feel the clinking of the jackets against each other to reassure himself of his technological advantage. He missed his step as he jogged and bent his ankle sideways on the incline of the ridge, sliding down it heavily and without grace. There were large stones embedded in the soil of the ridge, and he had scraped over some of them in a most unfavourable fashion. Feet first to begin with, and as his shin impacted a particularly rugged rock he spun around and ended up doing a clumsy backward roll, then levelled out at the bottom.

He carried on jogging and tried to ignore the sharp pain coming off his shin. It didn't stop him moving, but it did hurt, and he did not need the extra variables when so presently dealing with the most formidable animal in the forest. It was clearly five to six hundred pounds, and firmly in the stage of hyperphagia, where it consumed three times as many calories as it normally would in preparation for later hibernation. They could move at fifty kilometres per hour plus, and they didn't just climb trees, but actually seemed to run up trees, so he didn't bother to entertain the idea of trying to climb to safety himself. He may as well just sit on the floor and wait for the bear to run toward him.

He stopped jogging for a moment and once again put his hand in his pocket, this time to take six of the seven loose rounds and quickly insert them into the magazine. He found that he had in actual fact one bullet in his pocket. One bullet in his pocket, and one chambered in his gun already. Two bullets left. Only two.

He slotted the spare round into the magazine, and tried to stop his hands from shaking as he blew fine clay dust out of the grooves of the sliding bolt mechanism. He'd tumbled at the ridge as he was checking the rounds. Tumbled in the dirt. If he ran back now he could be running straight at the bear, and he wouldn't have time to search for loose rounds and load them individually. But then...having only two shots was...it was just bad. Now he was wasting time deliberating as the bear stalked him, closing the distance.

He jogged up a grassy mound and stopped at the top. He now saw that on the other side was another tight bend in the river, so he was stuck there. It was time to turn around

and deal with the bear, right now, from the view of this new high point on the mound.

Two rounds. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and tried to ignore the unsteadiness of his grip as he scanned around. He tried to tune in to his peripheral vision and calm himself in readiness, slowing his breathing.

The bear hurtled out from behind the first ridge where he had started, turning wide and strafing in his direction across the gap. It was so fast. He tracked it with his sights, with no hope of selecting the head out from the rest of the shaking silhouette. He squeezed the trigger. He lifted the bolt on the rifle and pulled it back, sending the hot bullet casing flying out. At the bottom of the mound was a thick tree branch, washed up onto the bank. Smooth river stones were arranged around its decaying extremities. Suddenly the rotten bark of the branch was impacted by a rifle, spinning wildly through the air, and a shot rang out with no one to hear it.

## ALL FOR THE LOVE OF SUNSHINE

**S**he was born to the sky. A germ nestled within a silk cloud so fine and light she could float forever in the warm still air. Below her, a green sea of life; waving leaves, chattering birds, lush smells. Somewhere in that thick growth, her mother watched her fly off; one of the few giants tall enough to peer above that endless sea.

The sun bathed her in his tingling warmth, the currents of air drawing her up to him, even as the humid air coated her silk and weighed her down. That world below would soon be hers, she could hear the soil calling. But not yet. She would remain a creature of sky just a little longer...

Gradually, the sun and his blinding blue kingdom slipped away behind a rolling curtain of grey cloud. She would carry the memory of his face with her, for it would be 80 years before she would see his full circle again. The rains began, and her once light silk became a heavy tangle, pulling her downward to home. She was a thing of lush greens and fertile browns, not azure skies and dry air. She hit the canopy with a wet slap.

A palm leaf? A kapok? She didn't know the difference then, and had no time to ask. The downpour washed her from one verdant hand to another, each passing her gently through the many layers down to the dark, damp floor of her forest. Yes, hers. Though once a wanderer, floating far from mother tree, she would never travel again. The place she now found herself—a small mud puddle between a flowering bush and a fallen tree—would be home the rest of her long life.

The first year was the hardest. There was so little of everything, and so many who wanted it. Her roots searched for nutrients, but they could not penetrate the hard mesh layer made by the roots of her neighbours. She sent tiny hairs in all directions hoping to find a gap suitable for her taproot. Her three small leaves called to her old friend, the sun, but she could only catch a few dull beams this far below the canopy. A ceiling of ferns lay just above her, greedily gathering every last bit of light and leaving her in shadow. She still had energy stored within her, however, sugars her mother collected from the sun, but those too were nearly gone.

She grew. Though she never found a hole, a few of her hairs had woven a winding path down through the tangle of roots. Each day she made the hair the smallest bit thicker and straighter, gently pushing aside the thick old coils that blocked her way. She grew to the sun as well. Slowly at first, but as soon as her first leaf peered above the devouring ferns and into the misty daylight she became a rocket!

Her perspective in that year was wild. At one point, as a seed, an ant had pushed her aside and made her begin her first root anew. Just one full moon later, the ants would crawl up and over her; at one point biting through one of her earliest leaves and carrying it away. As the year closed, and the long rains came again, she provided shelter and succor for thousands of ants and mites and worms. Their small bites and burrows, once lethal, were now a constant tickle.

She continued to reach upward to the sun, who seemed to always be hiding just past the next blocking branch. Seasons passed, and she found herself adapting to her forest. She never managed to get her taproot deep enough to anchor her through a monsoon, but she sent shallow roots out in all directions and pulled them upward to her like a skirt. These became her legs, and she enjoyed the pools that formed between them become home to tree frogs and bath for birds.

She feared vines, and the birds who would bite at her trunk, and so she made her bark into a thorny shield. "You may sit on my branches," she wished to say, "but leave my body to me. I have much growing still to do." Still, the vines did climb her. The light leafy ones and the thick strangling ones. At this point, though, she was stronger than they, and she did not let them take more than she wished.

Time passes differently for all creatures. For the insects, each day is an eternity—to them, a raindrop falls slow enough to study. The larger animals experience the sense of day and night, but seasons may be too slow to perceive. The insects are frustratingly fast, while the trees are fixed and

unmoving. For her, they're all a blur against the regular pulsing moon and rain cycles. Individuals are born and die too fast to perceive, but she knows the histories of the insect colonies, bird nests, and monkey troops far better than any of their own number.

To her, other trees dance and sway and breathe. She used to look up, watching as the palms fold and unfold their leaves with each rain. Now she looks down on them, and nearly all other trees in her forest. As she aged, she grew stronger and taller; she demanded more of the ground and it yielded to her; she demanded more light and ever fewer trees stood above her. Like her mother, she was becoming one of the giants!

She thrilled when her top branches finally burst through the canopy layer. After ages of reflected light and filtered beams she was again able to see the sun's true face smile down upon her. She drank in its warmth, so full with energy and life, and made with it seed pods. She carefully wove the silk and fertilized each seed, and on one especially clear and hot day she released her children to the sky, to fly to new lands.

## LIZARDMEN INVASION

**D**eep in the jungles of Kualanyoxunktli, the Lizardmen had begun to make their move. The Grand Shaman Kamohtikuetspallin had summoned all of the nations of the Lizards to the holy city of Angaturama. As such, the three Lizardmen nations and thousands of their soldiers began to converge on the massive city. The three nations were led by three mighty Teteuctins. Kuauitl Ollini led the Tlahtoani-Oktli, Uetskayotl led the Xiuetsi-Apistli, and Tepitsin led the Telpochtik-Ueue. Altogether, there were around one hundred thousand lizards gathered at the city.

The gathered nations slowly made their way through the hallowed grounds. Each quarter of the city had a portion of the legendary hero Angaturam's body stored in a central reliquary. The armies had entered the first quarter, and soon passed the bones from Angaturam's right arm. Many of the walls within the city had images of the righteous slaughter of men carved into them. At the center of the city was the massive fortified ziggurat in which the Grand

Shaman resided and ruled. This ziggurat was crowned with the massive skull of Angaturam.

A small priest met the armies at the gate, informing them that only the Teteuctins and their most trusted Pipiltin would be granted entry. The Teteuctins assented, and soon made their way into the inner sanctum of the ziggurat. Near the altar, Kamohktikuetspallin stood dressed in an ostentatious xicalli and ornate feathered headdress. In the abrasive language of the Lizardmen, the Grand Shaman began to speak. He explained that the failures of the previous wars waged by the Lizardmen had been caused not by a lack of valour or divine punishment, but by the fact that the men were too strong while united. However, a divine vision had revealed to him that the time had come for the final destruction of mankind.

The Empire of Man had recently shattered into petty kingdoms, and each nascent kingdom which had formed in the ashes had begun to fight amongst themselves. As such, the time was ripe for conquest. This declaration was met with massive shrieks of excitement amongst the chieftains and their warriors. This war offered the opportunity to gain land, plunder riches, and even taste man flesh like the legendary warriors of old. The message was soon relayed to the soldiers outside of the ziggurat. All of the Teteuctins led their armies towards the nearest human city.



A solitary soldier was tasked with guarding the back gate of Corelia. When the city had first been built, the jungle had

been far in the distance. However, as the centuries had passed, it had grown ever closer until it began to brush up against the massive walls. It was no longer necessary to put many guards at the gate, as the jungle had made the land outside of the gate nearly impossible to navigate. As such, guarding the back gate was tortuously uneventful. However, the guard was soon startled by an increasingly close rustling within the shadowy forest. From the trees, a horde of colorful lizards no more than two inches tall came charging at the gates. The guard sighed. He shouted to the men on the walls.

“Someone get an exterminator. The Lizardmen are invading again.”

## DEAD WORMS AND CRYSTAL PEPSI

*J*ames felt an eerie presence as he pulled to the shoulder just before the north terminus of Pennsylvania Route 72. He and his passenger, Darren from the Philadelphia branch, strained to look past the foggy visors of their hazmat suits. Dense forest surrounded them in all directions. What's more, the CDC hadn't bothered to give them spare oxygen tanks, even though they faced possibly the most dangerous contagion this side of the twenty-first century. No bother. The 300 Spartans had no time to worry about budget cuts.

"There's an unmarked inlet somewhere around here," Darren said.

"I think we've found it," James replied.

The bright glow of morning reflected off a steel bridge to the right. A plethora of fluorescent orange construction signs blocked the way forward, yet no other equipment remained. Unwilling to chance the bridge's stability, James told Darren they would have to proceed on foot.

James tentatively stepped out and parked the van under leaf cover. Immediately left of the bridge sat a sun-faded

billboard with an advertisement for limited edition Crystal Pepsi.

“How old do you think that is?” James asked absentmindedly as he approached the bridge, which evidently had been vandalized since its abandonment. ‘Abandon all hope ye who enter here’ was scrawled in white on the roadbed.

“What, the billboard? It’s not that old. Pepsi did a re-run of Crystal Pepsi a few years ago. I hear they planned to do it again before this incident,” Darren said. “What’s real strange is the bridge. No one said it would be closed.”

A pregnant silence hung in the air. There were no birds, cars, or human voices, only water rushing below. The two researchers slowly navigated the bridge and sighed deeply after successfully crossing it.

“It’s a half-hour walk from here,” James said, unrolling a map from a duffel bag he had brought. Certain thoughts nagged at the back of his mind: why would the CDC send only two researchers and not a dedicated team? Would decontamination upon their return be thorough enough? But he pushed these thoughts away for the time being. The two men walked in silence towards the ruins at the heart of the forest.

After the expected amount of time, James and Darren sighted their destination.

“How long do these tanks last?” Darren asked, his voice slightly distorted through the cracking of his two-way radio, even though he stood next to James.

“Six hours, at the most,” James said, nerves catching in his throat. “Let’s meet back at four.”

He and Darren split to take measurements from different parts of the ruins, which used to be a small village called Burnsville. However, after a loss in communications last week, the village, and the lives of the people in it, inexplicably ceased to exist.

James went on his way, peaking inside the recently abandoned houses of the residents. However, it seemed they had all disappeared without a trace. Nothing living remained in the town, not even house pets.

After an hour taking dirt samples, James came across a startling sight. At the end of the main road sat an empty factory with bright lettering. Pepsi. It seemed that Burnsville was a company town, and all roads led to this building. But he didn't see Darren anywhere.

James stepped through a cut fence onto the property. He tried each door, but with disappointment found each one locked. As soon as he felt like giving up, a voice came over the radio.

"James," called the voice. It had to be Darren, but it sounded heavily distorted, like static come to life.

"I accidentally stepped in something," continued Darren. "I don't feel well. My head feels heavy. I'm going back to the rendezvous point."

"No, no, come back to the factory. I'm afraid you're going to get hurt," James pleaded. But the signal went dead.

Biding his time, James saw something which piqued his interest. A decaying mound of compost lay at a far edge of the property, near a hill. Ruptured cases of Crystal Pepsi were embedded into the mound. It was the new edition, with a design different from the one he had seen on the

billboard. At the base of the mound, a lump of worms wriggled excitedly. James assumed they were feasting on the compost, but then he looked again. Something was wrong.

At the center of the lump, smaller motionless worms were surrounded by larger, excited worms. The larger worms slithered closer and contacted the smaller worms. James watched in horror as the worms in the middle were devoured from both sides within thirty seconds. Then the worms from the edge burrowed back into the mound, as if recognizing their sins.

“Ah...you know what, James...” came Darren’s voice again, much clearer now. “Maybe the factory is a good idea. The responsible pathogen probably came from the hill behind the factory and spread through the town on the wind. I’m thinking a virus or endospores.”

“Sure...” James said, before his blood ran cold. “Wait a minute. How do you know about the hill? I haven’t seen you around.”

James felt, rather than heard, steps behind him, but he dared not look. Someone—or something—was breathing on his suit.

“They told me.”