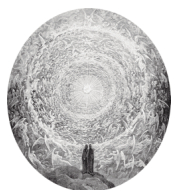


RAGS AND BONES

A FLASH FICTION ANTHOLOGY

/LIT/



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PREFACE

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

FORBIDDEN LOVE BETWEEN A MAN
AND A GHOST

Towards the end of his night shift, Enno looked through the eyepiece of the observatory telescope. It was aimed at the moon. On the surface of the moon, drawn on a hill, it seemed to say, "Hi."

Enno thought it was best to entertain the mirage than to waste time in disbelief. So he went downstairs and got a tripod laser pointer. He pointed it at the writing and signalled in morse, "Hello." He looked at the moon again, and now on the hill it said, "I am Zoe, who are you?"

"I am Enno."

"Hi Enno."

"Are you Zoe the astronaut? Or her ghost at least?"

"Yes, I'm the ghost of Zoe the astronaut."

"Sorry to hear what happened."

"I've had enough time to grieve myself."

"Was it scary?"

"Yes."

"How do you pass the time?"

"There are other ghosts here. We play games."

"That's nice. What do you play?"

“Mostly hangman. We’re playing right now. Do you want to guess the word?”

“Sure.”

“It has four letters. The second one is ‘a’, the last one is ‘e’ and it doesn’t have a ‘b’, ‘r’, ‘l’ or ‘m’.”

“Looks dire.”

“Yes. And don’t let yourself down if you can’t get it. These are expert players.”

“How many guesses do I get?”

“You have two wrong guesses left.”

“A ‘c’?”

“No ‘c’s.”

“A ‘w’?”

“Yes! The first letter is a ‘w’”

“A ‘k’? Is it ‘wake’?”

“No. No ‘k’s.”

Just then the terminator line caught up with the hill and Enno could no longer read what she wrote, but he had already found the word. So he got out of the observatory, drove to the nearest filling station, bought as much gasoline as he could and drove to Lucerne. Starting from there, he drove south spilling gasoline and kept driving south until he reached Bellinzona. And from there he drove up north, crossing the Liechtenstein border. When he arrived at Castle Vaduz, he got out of his car and lit the trail of gasoline on fire.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF A DUCK OR
GOOSE BATTLING FOR THROWN
BREAD I

From under the willow tree we waited. Motionless in the water save for the occasional ripple of the lake's current. The fools waited on the rocks of the small island about ten feet from the shore. They were the young ducks, the ones who did not know the ritual. Every day an old Asian couple came down from the lake house up the lane and distributed the bread. We did not know why they did this. We did not care. To us, they were as Gods. You do not question the will of your God. I could see several of the flock rustle their feathers in anticipation. There they were at the top of the hill. We dared not make noise or give a hint of anticipation lest those actions be taken as those of greed. We dared not anger the bread Gods.

They descended the slope agonizingly slow. The woman carried the heavy wicker basket of bread while walking arm in arm with the man who himself was supported heavily by a knobby cane. At last they reached the bench and the ritual began. The woman tore up the bread in her hands and threw it into the water so casually. It was as if she didn't realize the power over the chaos that she commanded.

A sudden flurry of wings broke out as the masses swarmed

the bread. My voice lost in the cacophony of noise that ensued. Feathers floated on the water and ducks climbed upon ducks like stepping stones to the prize. An older duck was pounced upon and kept under by a much younger one. Every time he breached for air, the beating of the young ducks wings would push him back under while it ravenously gobbled crumbs from the water. Eventually the old duck rolled from under his tormentor and made his way back to the island, no longer having the energy for the ritual.

I could feel my fellows biting at me and beating me down with their wings. I was far from the lead and the woman was far from done with her basket. I could play it safe like the older ducks and make my way to the island, to see if the madness unfolding before my eyes would cease. I knew deep in my mind that it would be a fool's play, and was too crazed for the precious bread to consider it. Instead I flew upwards above my brethren and landed before the woman, wings spread, attempting to court her to get her attention. This action was immediately met with force by the ducks who knew what I was doing. With beaks tearing at my shoulders and wings, I was pulled back into the surf, my head pecked at and beaten by wings to keep me under. A brotherhood had been formed among those whose stomachs were bloated and full and yet still crazed with a hunger unable to be sated. In a moment of clarity, I pushed away from the raft and made my way to the shade of the willow tree once more, preening my bloody feathers. The woman and the man continued as conductors of this orchestra of madness.

I wondered if our degradation into mere machines of hunger amused them and that was what made them act so. For a brief moment I hated the humans. I wanted to run to their legs and bite, to break their shins with the beat of my wings. To rob the man of his cane and watch the fall, fly high with it into the sky. To fly higher than any duck or man and declare myself the new

God, and all the bread would be mine. This hatred left me as the raft dispersed and the woman and man sat in silence for a moment. I meekly made my way to them, hoping that my wounded state would illicit pity from them. My gambit worked, as the woman nudged her husband and pointed at me waddling towards them. He patted his pockets and produced a small muffin, and tossed it towards me. I opened my mouth to catch it, and as if mocking me, it was snatched mid-air by a flying scoundrel. The man and woman laughed as if this crime was permissible and produced no more bread. They stood up and arm in arm made their way up the hill back to the lake house as the sun began to set. I watched them go. My stomach empty, but my heart full of rage.

A CITY IS BESIEGED BY AN
ENORMOUS SANDSTORM

AUG 9, 1932

Greetings from Boise City!
Steve, I believe I hit on quite the investment opportunity here, and I want you and I to be partners in it! I know this ain't my first pitch to you, so I come with my 'pencil sharpened' as they say. I was right about the duck feed, wasn't I?

This whole region is booming, yes? Folks from all over come here to stake their claim. Plenty of businesses come too, looking to fleece these simpletons, sell them loans and seed and equipment at usurious rates! (I'm not standin' in opposition to such a practice, I just come too late.) Anything an optimistic young homesteader could want is on offer here in Boise—but there seems to be no market for those fallin' on hard times. When the bad years do come, and I'm hearin' some strong whispers that they may already be nippin' at our heels, all those hope-peddlers will pull up stakes.

To cut to the chase, I propose we both go in to buy the

Cutter Broomworks on Market Street. You see, it was willed to this fellow, Freddy Cutter—but he confided in me he wants nothing to do with the broom business.

See, all these new houses got wives and all those wives need new brooms. As business heated up, a couple of the bigger companies edged Cutter out by gettin' the chain gangs to make brooms for pennies a day.

(I enclosed the price Cutter's lookin' to get. I reckon it's fair.)

Sounds like a bad investment, right? Well, keep readin':

There been a few days this summer I couldn't hardly see the noon sun, on account of the dust in the air. Talk is the same thing happened last year as well. If it keeps up—or even if people just think it will—there'll be a broom boom (haha)!! The big companies got their slave labor making these old fashioned witch's brooms: just a modern switch made of straw or broom-corn. That may rid your average New England home of some tracked-in dirt and snow, but in these parts a broom like that just scatters what's on the floor into the air—later to be deposited upon the linens and tableware.

I've attached a drawing for a new type of broom I thought up, and I'm already workin' up the patent, with a top shield to keep the dust from gettin' airborne. I've been imaginin' what a summer would look like if all days were as dusty as this last week, and I think I have a dozen ideas that would sell out in minutes should this come to pass. More to come on that, but first will you join me in this broom enterprise?

Thank you for your patience in hearing me out on this. Your brother,

Jeb

DECEMBER 1, 1934

Steve,

It's now well past Thanksgiving, and so I reflect on the year past and our hopes for the years to come.

Brooms are flying off the shelves as fast as we can make 'em—unfortunately that's not half as fast as I'd like. We're experimenting with new manufacturing methods. Once we got the trick worked out I'll send you a schematic.

Great idea sending Betty to talk to the local wives. We got tricks I'd never think of in a million years!

- Soak a sheet in water and use in place of an open window—allows a cool breeze, but keeps dust out (perhaps we could make a sheet with tacks on the corners?)

- Seems newsprint is a prized commodity to insulate houses and jam into the cracks between boards

- Didn't think about cookin', but there's plenty of sheets involved there, too, to keep a meal safe from grit. Some innovative wives cut two holes in the sheet to kneed dough through!

- Betty tells of a mix of cedar sawdust and oil that can be shook onto the floor to soak up the dust as you sweep! Have yet to verify.

More tales of whole farms just getting blown away. One more dry year and this whole state's going to need Cutter's Supply Co. I shouldn't wish bad luck on these good people, but I plan to generate enough inventory to make us both very rich men, should the worst come to pass!

Yours in business and family, Jeb

P.S. Thinking of finding a textile supplier for them sheets

APRIL 16, 1935

I'm sorry, Steve. We lost everything.

Sunday afternoon this great cloud rolls up on Boise City. I

heard of this sort striking out in the farmlands, but I tell you: seein' the heavens rise up above our factories can make a man feel mighty small b'fore God. Yessir, this is what we sinners were waitin' for all these years.

No sooner did it begin than folks start tryin' to buy our stock direct from the warehouse. I made many sales, but turn away poor types expectin' us to just be givin' it all away gratis. Soon I got to close up, as the air's so thick I can't make out the face in front of me. That's when I hear some of the folks I turnt away forcing through to the back.

I can't see a g-d- thing, but I hear the crowd pushin' and thieving'. I fib and holler that I got a shotgun trained on 'em when some twit pulls his piece out and fires my way. Don't know what it struck, but somehow that fool started a fire. Brooms, sheets, paper, cedar shavings—Steve, the whole warehouse was a giant firework!

This whole city needs brooms, and there they all go up in smoke, carried away with the very dust they were made to control.

I got out with my life, Steve, but maybe a dozen men did not. I swear to be a Godly man here out—no more wishing ill on anyone.

Please send train fare, I'm coming home.

Your humble brother,

Jeb

P.S. I think Hosea 8:7 was wrote just for us

A GYM BRO IS ACCOSTED BY A
MISCREANT RIGHT AFTER A
WORKOUT WHEN HIS MUSCLES ARE
TIRED

Ronnie was killing it. He'd been curling in the squat rack for a good hour but admittedly, he was losing steam. Ever since he read an article in a Men's Health magazine about the benefits of using dumbbells, he had almost entirely ditched the barbells at the gym. Reading was not really Ronnie's forte, so most of the words didn't make any sense to him, but he understood the gist of the article: A Guide On Utilizing Your Stabilizer Muscles.

His old routine was almost exclusively curling the Smith machine's barbell. Since ditching the mechanically assisted machine and adopting free weights, Ronnie had to learn to employ proper form. He went from curling forty-five pounds to a measly twenty-five pounds, but it was an honest twenty-five pounds, and he could feel the gains flexing in his biceps.

"Eight," Ronnie said, breathlessly curling the cast iron weights until they were tucked under his chin. He paused and exhaled deeply. In those moments of pumping iron, very seldom did he think about the act aside from keeping count. His mind wandered. Ronnie realized that when he thought about each rep he did, it exhausted him quickly, so instead he'd play out

scenarios in his head. Usually what it would be like to have a nice body. Girls would dig that. Nice.

Enough time had passed, ten reps was the goal, and only after that could he rack the weights and leave satisfied. Ronnie sucked down a deep breath and dropped his tired arms back to his sides. Across the gym mounted on the wall, old reruns of Supermarket Sweep played over a snowy TV. Mindlessly, his eyes watched the images of David Ruprecht schmoozing with contestants. Music pumping from the ceiling speakers made it too loud to hear anything he was saying though.

Ronnie's lips pushed together and he started to exhale. Veins running across both biceps bulged as the muscles contracted. Both arms reached ninety-degrees, bent at the hollow. It would be easy to quit now, but he didn't. Nice.

"Nine," Ronnie said exhaling the rest of his breath. He looked at himself in the mirror and gazed at what he saw in the reflection. Everyone in his family said that he looked more like his mom than he did his dad, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. Did that mean he looked like a housewife? Most of the guys back in high school thought his mom was hot, so maybe that was good.

Once again, the clenched dumbbells were tucked under his chin. In the reflection, he could see that he was drenched in sweat. Perhaps he looked like a sweaty housewife, and that was why he hadn't been able to get any babes yet? Ronnie drew a deep breath and lowered the weights back to his side for the last rep.

Usually, the music playing at the gym was just overplayed music piped in from KL-HOT99FM from the city, but as luck would have it, Vanilla Fudge came on over the speaker. Ronnie smiled to himself, feeling a rush of energy as he listened to the whining guitar play into an accelerating drumline that branched into bellowing organs.

“Here comes Ronnie,” Ron said as his muscles began to contract.

♪You just keep me hangin’ on!

The veins on his biceps stood up like rope wrapped around the mast of a ship. At this moment, he felt powerful. Ronnie paused his arms midway to admire the vascularity, and as he gave one last effort to complete the rep, his biceps popped and slipped up his upper arms. All of his strength was sapped and the weights slipped from his grasps. They landed with a thud against the black matting. A moment passed and the pain had not yet come.

♪You really don’t need me!

And then it came. A sudden rush of burning, stinging pain just above both elbows where the muscles had torn washed over Ronnie. He screamed, standing in place and looking at his arms. Where the bicep had connected to his elbow, the skin sagged. Below his shoulder a great knot of muscle bulged. Never before had Ron felt such tremendous pain. It was dizzying and tears began to well up. A wristwatch that Ronnie kept in his nearby backpack started chiming.

8:40pm. The bus comes at 8:45.

“Shit,” Ronnie whined with tears liberally streaming down his cheeks. Unable to lift the bag in any capacity, he started pushing it towards the front door with his feet. Outside, the bus stop was just at the end of the plaza, but the driver liked to come early. “Shit.”

Leaning into the door with his shoulder, the plate glass door swung open into the night. Every time Ronnie had gone to the gym he strictly trained his biceps, so the act of kicking his backpack along was fatiguing in its own right. However, he was in luck.

“Excuse me, sir!” Ron said, disguising the whimpering in his voice. Sitting on the curb appeared to be a bum with his face

buried in their palms. He lifted his head up. "Sir, you have to help me!"

The man rose up and wearily walked over to Ronnie. Tired eyes surveyed Ron top to bottom. "What kind of space shoes you wearin'?"

Ronnie was puzzled. They were Vibram Five Finger toe shoes. Babes loved those. "They help me keep my base when I lift weights," he explained nervously. In the distance, three minutes early, the bus pulled in with a screech. "Please sir, help me!"

The vagabond looked over his shoulder toward the glowing headlights of the bus and then back to Ronnie. "What happened to your arms," he said, paying note to the bulging knots.

Ronnie rolled his eyes. "I hurt myself getting ripped!"

The bum looked into Ronnie's eyes for a moment and made the decision to sucker punch him cold. He wanted to be the only bum at the soup kitchen with shoes from outer space.

A MONSTER DAD EXPLAINS TO HIS
SON NOT TO BE AFRAID OF THE
BRIGHT

The bowl had been made from a human skull and bleached by the sun. Now it gleamed in the firelight of Father Tusk's cave, the reflection of flame rippling along its smooth surface a halo for the clear liquor within.

"What do you see?" Father Tusk grumbled.

"Sunshine. Green and yellow hues," the child hissed and glared into the bowl from a distance.

Father Tusk stepped closer, cutting off the paths of escape with his considerable girth and forcing the child into the corner of the room. The child did not yet have a name. Whether or not he would claim one depended on how he responded. Father Tusk hadn't eaten since the darkening hour. He licked his lips and hoped the child would turn from the light—disappointed when the child stuck out his chin and snarled in defiance at the rays of light illuminating from the bowl.

Father Tusk snarled in return and willed the memory held in the liquor to be clearer, stronger than before. He was a powerful seer and the image blasted away the last of the shadows, projecting trees and a river onto the jagged rock ceiling above.

The child hissed and gnashed his teeth. He thrashed his head

and clawed his arms in anguish. But he did not step away. A long minute passed. Father Tusk growled and slowly dimmed the memory. The child panted and whimpered. Father Tusk could eat him and say the child was weak. No one would question him. But the old ways had to be preserved. He was their keeper and had taken oaths. If he broke them...

"Come," he said in a voice of stone and walked out of the room. The child stumbled after him. They travelled for a long time through caverns big and small, watchful, patient, avoiding the lurkers. Days and nights passed in silence. A breeze tickled their faces. The air turned gray. All of a sudden, they turned a corner and there was sunlight in the cave, revealing the bumpy wall and all its faults.

The child paused. "Things can see me out there," he whispered.

"Yes," said Father Tusk, "and we can see them. If it runs from you, it is prey. If it stands still, it is prey. If it comes for you, you are prey. We will eat under the sun, and then you will be Mauwgta. The one who stood firm."

A MAN IS FORCED TO KEEP A VERY
CURSED ITEM

If you're reading this, your life is effectively over. To cut to the chase, the washing machine this note is attached to is cursed. Not one of those B-Movie Black Magic curses—a really lame curse. You can't get rid of it. You can't destroy it. You can't even forget about it. This washing machine is staying with you for the rest of your life, and you better get on your knees and pray to your god of choice because if you don't like this shit, then that's tough luck. In my opinion, biggest favor you could do is offing yourself right now. It might just stop this whole thing from going from one person to another, cuz this shit can end up killing other people. If you can't see the object, it'll make a b-line to your 6, usually knocking some shit over on the way, including your best friend. I found that out pretty quickly. Another thing, you're not gonna get any sleep. You'd think since blinking doesn't make the thing move it'd be okay to sleep, but as soon as you start to drift away, bam, that fucking thing is moving around.

So, yeah. You have a week or so before you go insane. On second thought, don't do that kill yourself thing I said earlier, if you're still reading this. You probably should go to the feds or

something, have them lock this thing up in Area 51. Hell, they might have a way to save your ass. Killed my buddy Lars almost instantly with it. We were driving around, doing dumb shit. Decided to break into a garbage dump while drunk, and my buddy shouts to me he sees a fucking pristine washing machine out there, and I'm thinking, hey that'd be a good gift for my girl. So I head on over and see this fucking note, have a good laugh, and next thing you know Lars got sent flying. I'm not a skeptic, but once you see something like that, you know.

I crossed out the original writing on this note. Maybe it'll stop this curse from passing on. Sorry if this seems like rambling, cuz it is, but I didn't find the last guy who had this. Maybe he's buried in the garbage somewhere. Anyways, I'm tired of talking to a sheet of paper. I hated it when I was in school and I can't put into words how much more I hate it now. I'm leaving the pen.

I've got nothing new to add to this. You have no idea how ironic it is for this to be the thing that kills me. By the way, just sleep inside of it.

I'm 6 foot 4 how the fuck do you think I'm gonna fit inside a fucking washing machine fuck you

Well, I was at the end of the line anyway. Gonna put my life story here if I feel like it. Okay, I have literally nothing to do other than look at a dirty magazine I'm assuming one of you left here. I escaped from a death sentence. Thinking back on it, what was I gonna do? Run away from the federal government? They have cameras everyone nowadays. You can't even hide. Well, it seems I can in this thing, but it's kinda useless if I have to die

doing it. Whoever said they found this thing in a garbage dump somehow hauled this thing into a forest. Props to that? Anyways, I killed a lot of people one day. That's about it. You could probably fill in my life before that yourself. I didn't have a burdened childhood or anything. I woke up one day and decided I'm going to kill people. Now I'm writing on a death note on a washer. Crazy world. To whoever finds this thing next, use the pen to write something on the note with the space that's left. I don't want the person after you to be as bored as I was.

something on the note with the space that's left. I don't want the person after you to be as bored as I was.

Yeah, I wouldn't listen to a mass murderer most of the time but at least be a bit considerate. Like getting rid of the fucking shiv of said mass murderer.

I am giving the person who left their fucking Russian ass coat in this thing major fucking head in the afterlife.

this is a pretty long sheet of paper lol

if you were alive and said that to me id smack you across the face and say is a long sheet of paper the weirdest thing youre dealing with lol. thanks for a cigarettes and the lighter though lol. know they were for whoever Arif is but i never smoked in my life and i guess nows a good time to try lol. ill leave something for the next person lol. lol

. . .

Honestly, all things considered, I'm having a pretty good time. One of you left a bunch of shit in here and like, hey, I'm happy with dying like this. Running away from home ain't so bad. I wish I could meet you people. You all seem like pretty nice guys. But, I guess what you leave behind is enough to get an idea. I'll make sure to leave something special.

Person above left a picture of him and his dog. Saddest shit ever. I hope you and your dog meet up in heaven.

I don't even know how all this fits in this thing. If this many people died cuz of this... whatever. I seriously think the inside of this washer is, like, bigger than the outside. Not that it matters. I think this will be the last addition to the note. Someone left some fast food, and it keeps showing up everyday after I eat it. So all we need to survive is to get water, and I have a water bottle right here. It doesn't refill, probably cuz it's not part of this thing yet, but I'm sure my death will fix that. Yeah. That's about it. So, to the next person who finds this thing, please cherish the things people left you. It meant the world to them.

A SKEPTIC ENCOUNTERS
UNDENIABLE MAGIC I

Horace Rutter was as skeptical as they come. He did not believe in ghosts. He did not believe in God. He did not believe in anything beyond the scope of human senses, and sometimes the reliability of even his own faculties had to be questioned. He doubted for decades that something as heavy as a plane could actually take flight. He found it easier to believe the whole world was engaged in a mass hallucination than to accept the reality of a Boeing 737. When he was 70, his brother's passing necessitated that he fly to St. Lauderdale to attend the funeral. He grabbed a shell from the beach as physical proof, and that conch now sits above his Iowa mantle as concrete evidence that the world is stranger than his mind can comprehend.

This skepticism provided Horace with a very complex relationship with magic shows. He hated them, of course, but with such a passion that he sought them out just to enjoy hating a new one. Like a theater critic seeking out new shows to pan, Horace rarely missed an opportunity to scoff at the temerity of a carnival show or snicker at the tells of a birthday clown. In order to stay one step ahead of these rascals, he studied many sleights

of hand and frequented magic shops. He had only ever performed these tricks in front of a mirror, but the unforgiving eyes of that particular audience had actually made Horace a pretty decent magician in his own right.

So it was that when the annual fair came around, Horace found a way to pretend it was his grandchildren who insisted they sit on folding chairs for 45 minutes, watching The Amazing Mike Larson (he did not live up to his title). Mike flashed half the cards he managed to palm and outright dropped the rest. Rings and foam balls and handkerchiefs were, if anything, more constrained by the laws of physics in Amazing Mike's hands than in daily life. It was, nonetheless, a great act. He was a true entertainer, self-effacing and humorous throughout, but it seemed as though he just didn't have it in him to pull one over on anyone. Thanks to the awkward charity of these Midwesterners, Amazing Mike probably ended up collecting more cash in his passed hat through his earnest fumbling than he ever could have by performing true miracles.

As chairs clattered on concrete and parents groaned about bladders and sleeping appendages, Horace stayed planted, dumbfounded. Throughout the entire act, he had been entirely thrown.

The two metal rings Mike was unable to interlock had at one point passed through each other at the top only to slip through again at the bottom (a ring might hide one hole, but two would be impossible). The final load for his cups and balls was an orange larger than the cup itself. Horace had seen this done using a gaffed fruit (perhaps just the peel), but Mike had a real navel orange so jammed up inside that cup that he had to pull it out with a fork. The audience laughed, but Horace could not understand how any of the prior moves were possible with an orange taking up the full space. It was like that for all of the tricks; every time Mike tipped his hand, the method he revealed only made the trick more incredible.

Horace was still replaying each move as he wandered the midway with the kids. As they ate deep-fried something-or-other, he contemplated the geometry of Mike's flawless four ball cascade (before he spilled all the balls when adding the much easier fifth). He watched the kids do nauseating whirls on machines, while trying to picture how a quarter could have fit into a thumb tip. And so it went until the sun had set and the crowd of young families gave way to teens and couples. He waved the two grandkids goodbye as they left with their parents, and quickly shuffled back to Craft Building No. 2, where The Amazing Mike Larson was beginning his act again.

A TV GAMESHOW TAKES PLACE IN
THREE ROUNDS, IN WHICH THE
PLAYERS COMPETE FOR THE GRAND
PRIZE, AN ATOMIC BOMB

“Time to spin the wheel!” exclaimed the man on the orange stage encrusted in shiny plastic. A small, balding man, stepped up to the giant wheel facing the audience, grabbed a spoke and spun the wheel.

“Round and around it goes, where it stops, only our sponsor knows!” the announcer cried as the flashing lights blinked on and off along with the audience’s cheers. As the wheel continued, he knelt down to the man and asked, “Sir, if you win the grand prize, where do *you* plan on using it?”

“My old alma mater, TiT, the Texas Institute of Technology. They really fucked my life over with these student loans. I even got a STEM degree from them, but still can’t find a job. Absolutely worthless university.” The balding man nodded with a gleeful smile on his face.

The wheel slowed down and started to crawl. A *ponk* sound of the spokes echoed through the stage as it landed on: A bottle of Coca-Cola.

“Shoot,” grumbled the short man as he walked away. The audience let out a sad sigh.

“All right! Next! Spin the wheel!” the man exclaimed again

as he spun it. A willowy woman approached the stage. Round and round it went, as the audience cheered.

“And what do you hope to do with the grand prize ma'am?” the announcer asked.

“My ex-husband’s new city with the hussy he moved in with.” She frowned. “They left me to die in that town, so I want to pulverize their new life!”

The wheel slowed and slowed until, much to everyone’s surprise, the grand prize was selected. The woman’s face went from sadness to glee as she danced!

“Finally!” She grabbed the mic. “I hope you feel ever inch of this, Mike!”

“What do you mean?” the announcer asked.

“I... I want the bomb to get my husband! I just won it! Drop it on his city now,” she cried, her face frantic.

“No... you didn’t roll the wheel. I did.” The man smiled as the studio suddenly flashed a bright white light.

A TEENAGER TAKES UP A SUMMER
JOB AS A PROFESSIONAL SQUIRREL
CATCHER

1968, Jonas, age 9, rolling sleeves and tucking trail, arming himself in the AM. They had been nearly three days under siege, and Jonas' Castle Doctrine hung like heavy shame over the household. Jonas' brother was the worst affected: only leaving his room twice since being diagnosed "1-A". A side effect of the siege, Jonas knew.

Jonas patrolled.

Jonas kept watch.

Jonas stood vigil.

They came in the morning. Bushy-tailed rats, beady little eyes; taking from the bird feeder and giving to themselves. Squirrels had Jonas by the balls. His air rifle was ever-present, but Jonas always seemed to miss every shot. His aim was poor. He shot at hundreds, but they returned with each sunrise to steal the seed away. Jonas knew that his mother would refill it ritually, hoping for a few hours of song.

Each day passed the same. No birds, too many squirrels.

In the night, Jonas would stare out the window—looking up somewhere far away.

Young Jonas was up with the morning. He was a cold and

bitter wind descending the mountain top. He held his shoulders back, brown locks tossed out of green eyes, loading air rifle carefully, inserting metal BB into magazine, into ashy black handle; passed down from an older brother with no time to lean against balconies and take pot shots at squirrels or ruffle Jonas' hair.

Jonas popped his collar, zipped, cross tied his boots, wrapping around the back once before returning front-wise: two loops as taught. Waiting. Then, stepping outside, his breath catching and crystalizing into mist—no, like cigarette smoke: like his mother in front of the radio. Jonas pretended to puff, then the feeling of immaturity. The thought of his mother made Jonas sad. She cries all the time now.

It's a ritual. A squirrel dashes up the bird feeder.

He is a bitter wind. He is kneeling in grey morning shade. He is holding his breath. He is touching eyelash to barrel.

BANG!

The ring dies, and Jonas stands surveying the field. No squirrel. Jonas leans back, yellow glow breaking through trees, disappointed and dozing.

BANG!

Eyes open, Jonas looked up to the silhouette of his older brother, out and about, light smoke trailing over broad shoulders. Jonas walked up and stood beside his older brother.

A warm hand on his shoulder, meeting eyes far and away, looking at one very dead squirrel, twitching under the bird feeder.

"Come on, Joan," an older brother's crinkling laughter like unwrapping candy, mouth watering, "let's make an example of this one." And together, the two brothers strung the dead grey squirrel up by its tail, letting it hang from the feeder.

"Now," Jonas' older brother grinned, "the rest of 'em will think twice."

They admired their handiwork. A single bird landed on the

feeder, gave the twitching squirrel a cautious peck, then fed from the seed.

"It's only for a year or so, Joan," he said, taking the cigarette from between teeth.

"I know," said Jonas, though he did not understand.

"And when I come back," the conscript said, "I'll be the first one from around here to go to college. It's a kind of reward..." trailing off into the early morning.

The Squirrel spun slowly. Strung up by its tail, beady eyes bulging, little arms stiff with rigor mortis. When it got to be too much, his older brother told Jonas to take it down.

"After all," he smiled sadly, "Ma would freak."

Then he ruffled Jonas' hair and turned back.

Jonas leaned back and watched the morning atmosphere clear into electric blue—a single aeroplane slowly splitting the sky by longitude, white trail tight, a boat alone, crossing a river as wide as the world.

"Tomorrow," Jonas declared, "I start my new summer job as a pilot!"

Or maybe an astronaut, he dreamed.

1968, Jonas, age 9, rolling aluminum overhead, cutting eye holes out of a space helmet, and eyeing the roof as a candidate for the moon.

A GANG-STALKING GROUP MADE UP OF ORANGUTANS

Among contemporary technocapitalocene women (as, surely too, among the men), certain (arche?)types appear, even if some only dimly and atavistically: the sultry vamp, the matriarchal keeper of boys, the living wonder transmuted into pure Desire on OnlyFans, the aristocratic outsider, or the learned *plaisir de pédéraste*. Then—though so many may, God yielding, exude unique flashes, decrease though it may—then, one comes across *quelqu'une* who is wholly singular. Lucrèce d'Oursinade was no such individual, but rather, from what I could gather of the emails I intercepted of hers, an amalgamation containing a bit of them all.

Lucrèce was preparing a master's thesis in primatology, which set out to grapple with—at first (ingénue's outline) refute, later only to “problematize”—scholar Ercole Cantarella's radical orangutan hypothesis. Cantarella (2021), a Doomerzilian *pur sang*, has gone farther than those trying to expand Indo-European models the (human) world over, into Indonesia, say; largely basing himself on Harrison and Chivers (2007), he claims *orangutans* display Dumézil's sacred bipartition of sover-

eignty (cf. Dumézil 1940/1948), thus bringing back onto the table the question of the relation of sociology and biology. As such, the *flanged* and *unflanged* morphs of male orangutans with their respective mating strategies—which Harrison and Chivers describe as having evolved, due to local food scarcity, from an erstwhile sedentary and gregarious situation in which a male lorded over a harem—are mapped onto the lawful and the terrible forms of sovereignty, respectively, by Cantarella, as exemplified, also respectively, by, for example, the ancient Roman institutions of the *flamines* (grave, senior, conserving) and the exceptional *luperci* (speedy, youthful, creative-destructive).

In their long period of development, Cantarella claims, while many males, growing the large cheek pads or flanges, mature into what he calls the norm (with its attraction strategy based on calling, or as Cantarella would have it, “discourse”), some adolescents are “initiated” into semi-solitary “secret societies” akin to the *luperci*. Most characteristic of the disorderly unflanged males would then be their violence, bachelorhood, celerity, and muteness, as expressed in their “sneak-and-rape” mating rituals.

...The voracity of an arm sprigged in orange down, outstretched, uncovers heavy fronds and reveals, with only a slight rustling, a virgin at her toilette...

It was not so much the ethological findings as the, to her mind, imported baseless philosophical conjecture that Lucretia wished to contest—when, at her University’s conservation center, a pack or rather troop or band of adolescent orangutans escaped the fetters of domestication. In the months leading up to the escape, Lucretia would often visit the center and spend prolonged afternoons observing Monsanto, a young male showing signs of dominance and one who would steal away into the night. She would stare into his eyes with a deliberate swoon,

and bare her teeth to him in cheeky grins or lustful grimaces (ahooga, I believe it's called). She would receive repeated emails warning her of this, reports come from one or other bored worker from the center. She feigned ignorance. Would Monsanto have believed it? or rather have seen a cruel play in her visits?

What Lucrèce objected to above all, beneath the surface level of a binary, was the sensational bouts of violence Cantarella had so liberally poured into his writings, and a fortiori his subject, while, she esteemed, it was primarily the transgressive aesthetic of his sketched text that Cantarella really cared about. All that would change, however, a few weeks after the escape of the adolescent—and, yes, unflanged—orangutans, when she found herself become a *targeted individual*. Her inbox flooded with messages from unknown addresses, subject blank and content likewise, but with image attachments (auto-displayed) of—well... out-of-focus skies and foliages, dark nothings, an opposable thumb on the lens, a tuft of orange... Phone calls rang, only to hear silence upon answering, a stifled rough breathing perhaps.

In a succession of a week, Lucrèce received a noticeable increase of fans on her very normal OnlyFans account—fans who paid lavishly but always without a lick of discourse. (With the exception of a request in garbled prose, accepted by Lucrèce, recording a naughty TikTok-style dance in a Josephine Baker-style banana ceinture—a private privilege which, by my interception, I greatly cherish.) This seemingly positive aspect did not unsour the Lucretian palate, however; she sensed their connection, and, to her horror, soon received an email attaching the clear selfied headshot of—'twas unmistakably him: Monsanto. And then of another orange rogue, pouting his lips. And another. And a picture of her apartment building.

At the moment no new outgoing emails would show up any longer in Lucrèce d'Oursinade's institutional email address, just

then, from my tall, barren, and spiny tree, did I extend my spyglass and behold a pack or rather troop or band of naked orangutans making off on horseback, Monsanto at the front and, planted on the back of his steed, Lucrece in dishabille, a look of terror in her eyes, but also, I made out, a twinkle of ravishment.

AN OLD BOOK CAFÉ BECOMES THE
FAVORITE HANGOUT OF
UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH MAJORS

*M*s. Bourdeau slowly walked the isles of desks, placing graded papers face down, occasionally underscoring her marks with choice words of praise or disappointment.

Heather knew she did not do well. The dense archaic language of Shakespeare was so impenetrable that she gleaned what she could from half-watching a few old movie adaptations. Still, the C- and “you’re better than this” made her blush in shame.

Behind her, she overheard a rare, “I’m very impressed, great work!” as Ms. B neatly deposited a paper on Shawn’s desk. He quickly crumpled and stuffed it into his messy bag. Since when did Shawn Jessell impress anybody?

She approached him after class. They hadn’t spoken before but she found it easiest to just feign familiarity. “Hey Shawn, how’d you do?”

“Oh... uhh... All right, I guess.” He was clearly not ready for conversation. She was expecting an ‘and what about you?’ but he was already head down and on the move. She gave chase.

“It sounded better than all right. My parents are going to kill

me if I don't start bringing home A's. I don't want this to sound bad, but whatever site you're using, I need it too. I'll pay you."

Shawn slowed to a stop and looked at the time on his phone. "\$250. And it's not a site."

She knew he was a stoner, but what kind of habit required \$250?

"Trust me, that's cheap. It works on all classes. I've been hoping to show someone. You're just the only one who asked. Venmo me and I can show you now."

"Show me first."

Shawn shrugged and kept walking. She didn't know if he was walking away or leading her, so she just trailed awkwardly a few paces back. He trudged down the stairs and pushed through the double exit door without glancing back. He crossed one street and then another and eventually made it to the Bookmill, a small café and used bookshop in Horner's Market.

He turned back, not surprised to see her behind him, and opened the door for her to go inside. The first floor was full of figures hunched over laptops, nursing eccentric mugs of coffee. It was hard to walk through the clutter of chargers and book bags that spilled into the footpath, but Shawn pushed through this and made his way down the iron spiral staircase to the lower floor.

The rich, bitter smell of roasting coffee and toasted bread gave way to the musty attic smell of old books. "Your secret better not be telling me to read these. You can buy your own weed."

He pulled a small dog-eared book from between two encyclopedia volumes and turned to her with a conspiratorial grin "Who needs that shit anymore? This one's my favorite. I hide it here."

"'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe." He looked at her expectantly. "What happens next?"

She suddenly became very aware that they were the only two

people down here and he was acting very weird. “Is that more Shakespeare?”

He didn’t answer her. “You know how smells make you remember things? Cow shit makes me think of a summer working on my uncles farm. Popcorn makes me think of playing pinball in front of the movie theater. These books all have a different smell, and each one makes you remember the book, even if you never read it.”

“Here, I’ll let you smell Alice.” He fanned the yellowed cracking pages out in front of Heather’s face. She had enough of this and was about to turn to leave, but she felt a sneeze coming on and inhaled sharply.

Kittens.chessboards.mirrors.srorrim.queens.tigerlily.faster.-
faster.eighthsquare.ticketsplease.tweedledum.tweedledee.car-
pentersandwalruses.rattlebattle.crow!ohohoh.impossiblethings.sheeps.shops.e.
hundredandsevensoldiers.unicorn.lion.plumcake.mon-
ster!aknight.ahoyahoycheck!haddock’seyes.crowns.queens.-
dogs.fiddledeedee.puddingalicepudding.shakeshakesshakepurrr.wasitaljustadrea

“Achoo!”

Shawn looked at her expectantly. “All mimsy were the boro-goves...” he said in a patient voice.

Her mind was wheeling, and not just from the sneeze. It’s like her brain just rebooted and she had to recover who she was before she could speak. “And... the mome raths outgrabe.” She could hear herself saying it and only later connected that person—Heather? Alice?—with the voice.

She sat on the floor silently for a minute, then pulled out her phone. Shawn’s pocket pinged, \$250 just added to his account.

SOMEONE DRESSES AS A LITERARY
CHARACTER FOR A HALLOWEEN
PARTY AND REFUSES TO BREAK
CHARACTER

*T*he girl is lying on the floor. Around her, a bunch of drunks are dancing.

Every now and then, one of the revelers bumps into her. Sometimes crushing her ribs. Sometimes crushing her face.

Once the damage is done, some revelers apologize to her. Reciting useless formalisms. Muttering cheap excuses.

Every time this happens, the girl's face breaks into a little smile. Half on. Half off.

No matter how false their statements are, there is always at least a hint of solidarity with their gazes. Most people just choose to skip it. Ignoring her in pursuit of continuing to drown themselves in fishnet stockings and cheap drinks.

The girl is aware of the latter; but, as much as her wounds hurt, she chooses to keep quiet.

There is semen on the dance floor.

The girl disguised herself as a corpse. And, in real life, corpses don't talk.

A SCHIZOPHRENIC GETS LOST
INSIDE OF THEIR OWN
HALLUCINATIONS I

Look at the man, experience him. See the wind pass through his hair, see the snow accumulating therein. He is a stranger, his coat is thin, and he snuffles as he moves through the blizzard. See how his eyes do not stay open, how they waver and close, how the icicles pierce and bite. Still, he moves forward into the alleyway, stepping into potholes and trash in the storm's veil. Look closer and you will see a fire within his pupils. Tired, he presses on into the nothingness of the night. Shall we follow him?

Empty cars on the street, the sidewalk is empty. Preposterous words fill the man's head until he casts them out. How empty he must feel. Thousands of windows lit, not one man contained therein. Alive, he reminds himself, "I am alive." The streetlights are not alive, though they reveal the violent movement of flake.

"Oh me," sings the man. "Oh I am bound elsewhere, to the malingering sun of the south. I will ride the South Platte, I will ride far after that." The wind sang with him, and carried his voice to nobody.

He arrived on the bank of the South Platte, where the edge

of Denver meets the cold industrial north. He sets up his tent below the bridge, and sets off to sleep for the night.

A pale woman appears to him in his dreams. She calls him through the meadow, and he follows. When he reaches out for her hand, he grabs the paw of a dog. "No! No, no, no. I want the woman..." And there she appears again, this time in the compartment of a Ferris Wheel, reaching the peak of its ascent.

The sun rises over Denver, the Platte flows steady. Cars rush down the streets and boulevards, all going in the same direction. The pale woman smiles. "I'm glad you wanted to see me again, but I must be going."

"You can't go, please don't go."

The compartment shakes, and the man feels a swelling. He awakens and rushes out of the tent. Down, down, down to the river. A twenty-second long stream of piss into the Platte. All is dark but the light below the bridge. The sound of rushing water and moving rocks. Tears swell in the man's eyes. "Oh me," he sings, and stops.

"Who?" asks the pale woman.

A MAN SMILES AT THE MOON, AND
THE MOON SMILES BACK

It's a cold winter evening, in the late of February. He paces along the stone paved streets of the modern metropolis, his mind empty from the uninterrupted haste of being. As he passes the well-dressed gentlemen of his locale, busy arguing about the unjust righteousness his partner has bestowed upon herself, he looks up to the celestial body enlightening his current yet temporary home. The moon is bright and seems more detailed than ever, the longer his gaze is fixed upon it.

Many nights he's spent pondering the infinite insignificance of his existence in relation to the ever expanding, unattainable vastness of the universe. The books carried on his daily commute upon his back have left an imprint. They do not weigh him down, yet they retain him within the mundane mold that is his life. He's chosen a path and pursues the favor of his desire, yet he is so utterly disappointed in how little influence he has attained. No matter his dedication and perseverance, no matter his will or how successful he'll be, the ability to change the course of the Earth's revolution will never be within his grasp.

Despite the evening city's bustling crowd, he stands utterly

still, as if rooted upon the side of a mountain, his feet buried in the snow that is his ever-present thoughts. From this vantage point, the moon seems dwelling within a realm expanding over his horizon. Despite its immense mass, it seems almost weightless, as it hangs from the ceiling of his world. He knows this observation well, as he's made it so many times, when coming upon a silverfish in his bathroom. The seemingly unmeasurable difference in dimension between him and the arthropod has been brought to the moon, while he's adopted the role of the nocturnal insect.

He stands now in front of a choice. To sit idly by as the gravity of the moon's permanence will squash his fragile body with time, with no yield from his residence on Earth—or to follow the path of the silverfish, and seize his idle and ineffectual pondering, take the mantle of his future and search for substance through his own measures.

Every child has been faced with the decision of whether taking a life insignificant to their own existence can be justified in the name of assuagement. To judge the value of something that does not belong to them and decide upon its fate. The train of thought that lead them to consider the motives of the bug's wandering across the walkway, and the motivation this creature finds to move on among the feet of giants. "Where does it go, and why does it go there?" The juvenile reflects upon this thought. To some, ignorance truly must be a blessing.

As he considers this dead being, looking down upon him in the midst of his life's simple surroundings, it seems it's presenting to him its soul. When his ruminative thoughts halt, his perspective has changed. He makes out the protrusions and trenches of this suddenly friendlier surface and observes the glaring halo that surrounds it. Above the profile of Luna stands a crown, its radiance insuring him that she means well.

Loosened from the thoughtful prison he had locked himself within, he starts elevating his feet once again. The streetlights

move quickly by, and he compares their luminosity to that of this floating universal being. “She does shine brightest this evening.” He smiles at the moon, excited to mention her stature to his spouse. Knowing his worries are for naught, he can once again resume his pacing down the alley. As he turns a corner, the moon smiles back.

A MAN THINKS HE'S JESUS, ONLY
HE'S WINSTON CHURCHILL AT THE
PEAK OF WWII

*I*t is natural for fathers and sons to find themselves quite often in opposition. This fact requires any civilization to most vigorously defend the institution of filial devotion, lest they be racked by civil wars with the succession of every new generation. While the practice of extreme filial piety is ascendant in the East, here in the Cradle of Civilization we say only 'honor thy father.' You would think, then, that I would be held to a much lower standard than the sons of the Orient... and you would think wrong. You see, I am bound to obey my father not only by the fifth commandment, but also by the four that precede it.

My familial circumstance is an extraordinary one. I could say that I possess two fathers, and that I possess none. Joseph has raised me well, though I do suspect he harbors some resentment toward his role as history's most celebrated cuckold. The Almighty, my true progenitor—a full family tree unto himself—has ever been distant, inscrutable and at times quite cruel. Though I must trust that he acts with the best of motives, he does not always feel it necessary to share his confidences with me. I say, too, that I have no father at all, since my true sire

could also be claimed by every son on Earth. Yet they only enumerate one “Papa,” and it is not Him. And so, my pedigree both exceeds that of mighty kings, and is the equal of any bastard son or orphan beggar—a point which has outraged the former group and has pleased the latter.

I have done my level best to maintain an outward sense of peace and composure as I navigated all these contradictions. I acted as I felt an embodiment of salvation should: equal measures grace, wisdom, and humility (with a dash of righteousness as a nod to my divine parenthood). And, if the number and quality of my friends and followers was any yardstick, I feel I’ve been doing a decent job of it. Often, I asked my Father to make clear my role in all this. As is his way, I would receive either no reply or one so cryptic—such as my newfound ability to change water to wine—it was even more perplexing than the silence. Thus, I was left more-or-less rudderless the whole of my young life. I would not go as far as to say I was making it all up. Divine inspiration certainly did come to me, and I had a firm grasp of the broad arc of my life, but I was quite often required to fill in the blanks. I can’t say for sure if the Devil was in the details, but I can absolutely attest that God shows no interest at all in them.

It was in one of these moments of improvisation that I struck on a theme I rather liked. I turned and polished it my head, inspected every facet, and it made the best sense. While I was the son of God, I must also be—in at least some aspect—God himself. I imagined how generations of men would be as confused by all this as I had been, and I saw the battles, schisms, and crusades that must follow from such ambiguity. My Father made it known in the Babel incident that he does not trust man to have a universal tongue, but I foresaw the necessity to arrange some common conventions around prayer and doctrine. The number 39 comes to mind. Perhaps there would need to be some bureaucratic structure in place to keep

everyone on message. Nothing as heavy-handed as as theocracy, but maybe a dotted-line connection between the keepers of law and the keepers of faith.

Once I had every last detail worked out, I rose my arms to the heavens and called out to the paternal aspect of myself. I was sure this time I could reason with The Old Boy.

“Jesus was an Anglican!”

All eyes in the room shifted from their maps and charts to look at the speaker, who all assumed to be asleep for the last 20 minutes.

“I’m sorry sir, what did you just say?” Cripps was sore at being interrupted by such a non sequitur, but he had resigned himself to such outbursts. If Britain was to endure assaults by the Luftwaffe and U-boats, he should have the good humor to entertain this old man in a homburg rambling about... what was it again?

“Jesus Christ was a goddamn Anglican, I am certain of it. Britain is sure to...” he was starting to deflate again “...prevail with the... countrymen must have faith...”

And he was out.

The room paused for a moment to be sure the Prime Minister had fully completed his thought, and then resumed their long night of strategizing.

A SCHIZOPHRENIC GETS LOST
INSIDE OF THEIR OWN
HALLUCINATIONS II

I cannot readily describe what I have seen save by referring back to what I have seen, or rather overheard and read before, for am blind. I am not one of those who have been blind since birth. Mine is the result of self-inflicted injury—yes, injury, not willful mutilation, but self-injury all the same. This injury was inflicted gradually, and was never noticeable nor perceived until the very end, that is until it had become irreversible and self-perpetuating, no longer requiring of me any action and thus removing from me even the title of actor in my own destruction. Yes, destruction. I insist on the application of this dramatic, even epic-evoking word in describing my condition not with the aim of achieving the theatrical, but rather in pursuit of the confessional. For I mean to tell all who would deign to glance upon these pages the many truths that injury, loss, and pain have made known to me, but also the injury, loss, and pain that knowledge of certain truths has given me; agony and sorrow, and what the French call *chagrin*. These are the universal and eternal coins by which these truths, these pieces of truth, circulate. Truth and pain for me have become equivalent and inseparable, yet not identical. Before becoming blind I

had felt pain, and of course understood to differentiate between different types of pain: the pain of falling and scraping my knees, the pain of sickness, the pain of jealousy, the pain of attachment, of intimidation and humiliation, the pain of shame and self-loathing, the pain of obsession, the pain of pleasures. Yet, I only began to understand the complexity and intricacy, or rather the omnipresent quality of pain when I became blind, for from then on pain became for me a way of thinking, and I found it to be a quite necessary way of thinking if I was ever to face the truth of my own spiritually moribund condition. Pleasure, which I blindly pursued before as an escape from pain and which gradually become for me an obsession and hence a source of previously unimaginable forms of pain, has ironically compelled me to seek new sources of light and to be ever wary of new pits of darkness. And though whichever way I turn, I can expect only pain, the forms of pain offered to me are qualitatively as different as night is from day. I confirm to myself every day that I choose the pain of truth, which once discovered is supremely difficult to keep, and exists in constant yet tenuous opposition to the pain of falsity or deception, which regardless of how hard one labors to avoid is peerlessly adept at convincing one of its pretended innocence and naturalness. It seduces one into believing that it is at the essence of life by deceiving one into equating life with pleasure, i.e. with the avoidance of pain, when in truth its pursuit quickly becomes a perpetual but unconsummated intercourse with death, wherein the soul experiences in ever growing degrees the torments of its own recurring death.

—M Coromine

AN INTERNAL MONOLOGUE ABOUT A
MAN WHO KNOWS DEATH IS
IMMINENT, IT THEN BECOMES
APPARENT THE NARRATOR IS
BOMBERMAN, AND HE'S JUST
BLOCKED HIMSELF IN WITH A BOMB
BY MISTAKE

I'll be dead in five seconds. I'm not afraid. Five seconds is an eternity. There will be plenty of time for fear once I've taken care of the more pressing matters like... going through the motions. Yes, that is an important one. I have to try and move the bomb in front of me, and when that doesn't work I'll throw myself pointlessly against the three walls boxing me in with my death. I have to go through these motions or I'll be thinking about it for the rest of eternity and that won't do. There we go—as I knew, completely immovable. It was a well-documented fact after all that bombs once placed do not move. It seems so absurd now that I really have the time to sit down and think about it, but the evidence is right there in front of me, ticking away.

Four seconds? It's easier to gauge the time when you're not the one who dies at the end of the count. I should spare a moment for self-recrimination. This situation is my fault after all. I should have known better. If I had just placed my bomb one tile over, then I would've had more freedom than I'd know what to do with. I got desperate, I wanted to melt that fucker. I practically dropped the bomb at my own feet and now I'm the

one about to be melted. A rookie mistake, but I'm supposed to be a veteran. I wonder if they'll use this story to train future rookies—my life relegated to an educational anecdote about pride and overconfidence.

Three seconds. *Deja vu*. What? No, I'm not mistaken. It's there. *Deja vu*. I feel like I've been here before. In this exact situation. Innumerable times. That can't be possible of course, but it's an overwhelming feeling. Perhaps this is a panicky protestation of the mind in the moments before its imminent end. I have memories of a lifetime running through narrow hallways, placing bombs around corners, chased by flames and screams. Too many memories for one lifetime. This feeling... it's almost enough to make me afr—No! It's not time for fear yet! I still have so much time.

Two seconds. This will sting but it's time to embrace amusement. It's a fact that I've seen this happen before to countless others and... and I laughed. Screams of frustration and cries of help only purchase mirth. I am not inclined to scream, but I will make the effort out of consideration for the others. It must have worked. In fact I can hear the asshole out there cackling like a demon-possessed madman through a burnt dry, ragged throat... Oh, wait, that's me.

One second. Fuck. I guess it is time for fea—

A BLOOD-SOAKED WARRIOR
TRESPASSES IN SOMEONE'S GARDEN

*T*he warrior understood why his war leader had sent them away, and the shame of it was a burning pain within him that far exceeded the festering, stinking wounds that he wore upon his flesh. Over his skin he wore only a coat of old, sticky blood, and wrapped over that a cloak of dust and grit. But these extra layers provided no warmth against the freezing night of this interminable desert. His brother staggered alongside him, almost translucent under the combined effect of a full moon and extreme blood loss.

It had been a day and half a night since they had been separated from their war leader and even more days and nights—though he had lost count of them—since the devastating battle that had seen his people decimated. He had fought hard that day but it had not been enough, and in the end he had fought his hardest battle against the trembling that threatened his steady hand as he opened the throats of his wife and the babe suckling at her breast so that they would be spared from worse horrors. The last dozen or so warriors of the tribe then beat a fighting retreat into the desert and made a good account of themselves

against the larger force until just he, his brother, and their war leader remained.

Their war leader told them that their only hope of salvation was a wizard called the Wight Man and that his lair was across the desert towards the South. He told them that he would buy them as much time as he could. The warrior had heard stories of the Wight Man but he did not believe that there was any truth to them. He understood that their war leader had wanted to give them hope. He should have refused. He should have fought to his end at the side of his war leader. He had been afraid, and this was the true source of his shame.

The sun had begun to rise to his left by the time he caught a glimpse of a strange dwelling in the distance ahead. The growing cloud of dust in his wake told him that the enemy would soon be upon him. His brother had decided to stand against them in the night. The Wight Man's lair was impossibly verdant for this place of dry emptiness. Trees, bushes, colourful blossoms and other forms of lush vegetation flanked the red brick dwelling to the sides and against the borders of a low, presumably defensive, wall constructed of neatly spaced planks of white-painted wood. The space between the dense greenery and the brick fortress was a shimmering blanket of pure, flat green grass. Upon his approach he became aware of a terrible noise coming from somewhere behind the lair, a loud droning animal growl that seemed to grow and then fade repeatedly, and underneath the growl was a chant. He couldn't quite make out the chant except for a single word that came through over and over 'thunder'.

He came within ten paces of the castle's defensive wall when suddenly the growl grew tremendous. It enveloped him completely, and around the corner of the lair a great green beast came into view, moving slowly but steadily upon four black wheels, and from its rear it vomited masticated shreds of grass in

perfectly straight rows—and riding upon the beast was the Wight Man himself. His skin was pale and it seemed that he must be blind, for his eyes were covered by plates of obsidian, even though he seemed to have no trouble guiding his mount. His chest was bared and runes were engraved upon his skin, though many of them were obscured by hair. He carried in one hand a cylindrical silver goblet, emblazoned with a sigil of vertical grey slashes as if a three-taloned monster had carved through it. The warrior was terrified but he willed himself forward, over the low wall, and suddenly the Wight Man shouted something at him but he couldn't make it out over the beast's roar. He began to tremble as the Wight Man directed the green beast in his direction.

“Off my fucking lawn!”

The warrior didn't understand the language of the Wight Man but his violent gestures with the goblet were easy enough to understand. He stepped back over the wall and knelt respectfully before the wizard.

The Wight Man sipped from his goblet. “Go away.”

He tried to explain to the Wight Man his desperate need but the man did not seem to understand. He reached behind his back and from his strange skirt he withdrew a tool that looked like a small black and grey boomerang which he pointed at the warrior whilst shouting in his incomprehensible language. The Wight Man spat, lifted his boomerang to the sky and channelled fire and thunder through it in a burst that shamed the throat of the green beast. The warrior prostrated himself before the Wight Man, practically lying flat on his belly.

The Wight Man scowled, considering, and then cried out in alarm as a spear whistled past his head and struck the green beast on the nose. He lifted his magic stick and muttered an incantation. “Fuckin’ abo poofs.”

The warrior covered his ears and pushed his head as far into the ground as he could. Spells flew over his body and struck the pursuers. They screamed in pain and fear as the magic

enveloped them. He waited like that, unmoving, until the only sound left was the blessed growl of the green beast moving away around the back of the castle, towards that distant chanting. Eventually he dared to lift his head and stare at the aftermath of the Wight Man's sorcery. He had no words in his language to describe the scene but something instinctual within him told him that the chant coming from the castle was the most appropriate description of this experience. 'You've been thunderstruck.'

A HACKER GETS INTO GOD'S EMAIL

Jonah rubbed his temples in amazement as he stared down at the screen. The client wasn't kidding when he said this was a job of Biblical proportions. He wasn't sure what he had been shocked more by; the thought of God and Heaven existing, the fact that the Big G filtered prayers through email, or that so damn many of them were left unread. Jonah drew from his Chesterfield cigarette and scrolled through them. Countless names and requests could be shown. All of them in bold, all of them unread. This went on for pages and pages. With a sigh he typed in the search bar for Laura Martinez. The client's sister was a religious woman, so he had no doubt that she prayed for salvation every day. The brother was sure that it wouldn't get her anywhere, and her children were starving after her husband left.

Jonah groaned at the thousands of results, all unread, all different women. He wasn't sure how God distinguished the requests of his favorite creations, but looking at the formatting, it didn't seem like He did. Would He even notice if Jonah started going through and reading requests at random? Finally he found one by *his* Laura Martinez.

"Please Lord," it read, "I know that these are difficult times and you test your greatest warriors. I've held fast but Julie is sick now and needs medication we simply can't afford. Jonathan has been getting into trouble and faces a suspension. Is it wrong of me to be grateful Lord? Perhaps my prayers have been answered without me even realizing. He can help me at the café and pull in a bit of extra income. I wish I could receive a sign that I'm on the right track. The hunt for another job has not been easy, but I hold faith that you can open the door for me."

Jonah stared down at the screen in disgust. He was disgusted with the woman who was relying on blind faith to save her, while her life fell to pieces. He was disgusted with the sheer apathy of the One she had faith in. He would do what he could. The next day he would meet with the client. That would give him plenty of time to work something out. He closed the tab with God's prayers and dialed the client. He wanted Laura's social if this was going to work. Once he had it, he got into her bank and wired her twenty-five thousand dollars from some big shot executive who wouldn't even notice the money was missing. Jonah put a fake résumé together and a letter of recommendation for Laura. The client had said she had the credentials to teach. Within the week, she'd be staff at the university.

Jonah met his client at a café and shook his hand.

"I really can't thank you enough," said the client.

"You could have just told me she needed money and a job," Jonah said, lighting another cigarette. "Hell of a move to open my eyes like that."

"I wanted to confirm a suspicion," he replied, waving the smoke away from his face.

"That none of them were being read?"

"Exactly that," he said sadly. "I have to have faith that He's still there, but it gets harder every day."

"What do you do for a living?" Jonah asked him

"I'm a priest."

Jonah gave an audible laugh at the audacity of the situation he had found myself in. "A Priest, really? Explains why you couldn't give her any money, I suppose."

"It's a thankless job," he smiled wearily.

"More than you'd think," Jonah said, taking another drag from his cigarette.

"I wouldn't say that." The priest smiled again and leaned forward. "Laura has been to the moon. Of course, I didn't reveal what really happened. To her the money and phone call for the interview appeared like magic. She told me that God had answered her prayers. In a way, he did."

"How does that figure?" Jonah asked.

"Well, I don't think God would have let you into the email and solve her problem if that wasn't how he would have done that. There are no shortcuts in faith. He works mysteriously and through agents. Who are we to question it? Thank you again for your time. I'm sorry I lied about how much I could pay you."

"The job was reward enough," Jonah said, and got up to leave. "If you or your sister falls into trouble again, let me know."

When Jonah got home, he opened the laptop again. The tab with God's email was still open. He poured a fifth of bourbon and lit another cigarette and began to comb through them. Most of them were above his pay grade. Make my daughter walk. Kill my wife's cancer. Bring my son home from the war. Jonah gave a defeated sigh and typed "money" into the search bar, and spent the rest of his evening wiring money from rich accounts to these. He wasn't sure what compelled him to help them. He thought back to what the priest had said, about Him having agents of His will. He wanted the priest to be right.

He closed the laptop and made his way to bed. As he laid there in the dark, he asked the ceiling, "Why? Why aren't you stopping me?"

The next morning he had a reply on his phone, and dropped it in shock.

WHY WOULD I. WHAT COULD YOU DO?

A SKEPTIC ENCOUNTERS REAL
MAGIC II

Briggs had been a skeptic of the paranormal for the last decade. He had written papers, gained renown, and had made so much ground in his field that he felt unbeatable. He had been to conventions, debates, talk shows. So many people had come to him with dreams of breaking his streak, and he had crushed them with the same effort it would have taken him to roll lint from his coat. His shelf was lined with awards from both the Skeptic Societies and academia in paper and in bronze. This is why the object before him filled him with vitriol so foul you could smell it in the air.

He stood, knuckles white from pressing on the table, before a small coin. A British sixpence, minted in 1962, in fantastic condition, hovering an inch off the table and spinning slowly. It had come in a black satin box with red silk interior, spinning slowly even then. With it was a note:

For Mssr. Briggs,

For your consideration, a miracle.

Courtesy of; the Nevinyrral Production Co.

Briggs had not allowed anyone else to see the coin. He had spent the last week examining it. There were no magnets in the box, no wire, and the coin was ordinary. Flowers on the back and “*Dei Gratia Regina Elizabeth II*” on its front with a portrait of the Queen. These images slowly rotated into focus, about three turns a second. He had counted; he had done the math. He thought surely there was something he was missing, until one day he scoffed at the coin and slammed his hand down upon it. Vibrations had gone up his arm and started to shake him and the table. Releasing the coin, it righted itself from its flat position and began to spin once more.

Briggs immediately went to his study for a drink and when he returned, the coin was still spinning. Briggs was a man of honor and was now conflicted in that his life’s work, which he had made millions from, was only worth sixpence. He began to lose sleep. He wasn’t eating. He knew as a man of honor, he would have to reveal the coin to the world.

Laughing mad, he decided he would have to dispose of the coin. He grabbed it and, ignoring the vibrations, crumpled it into a piece of paper, walked it to the garbage, and threw it in.

Let it spin in a landfill, he thought. Or at the bottom of the sea. Let it be smashed by grinders and rendered into nothing.

He turned back round to find the coin slowly spinning at the exact spot he had snatched it up. He ran from the room laughing. He returned in the evening and the coin still span. He went into the garage and found a blowtorch and mask. He took the flame to the coin, but it wouldn’t melt. His desk below it was scored black and set ablaze, his correspondence became embers. He stopped and patted his desk out with frustration, but the coin still span. He touched it and found it cool.

Briggs threw his equipment down and stormed out of the room. He pulled his curtains and locked all the windows and doors. He avoided the room with the coin until one night it showed up on his nightstand. Briggs awoke in a start and ran for

his telephone, telling his agent that he would be making no appearances public or private as he was gravely ill. He watched the coin wild-eyed while he did so. His torment finally ended when he went to check the mail. The coin was there, on the ground, not spinning. He picked it up with a letter. Fingers shaking, he opened the envelope.

For Mssr. Briggs,

You do not have to reveal the coin. Your reaction has been, shall we say, magical. We will watch your career with great interest.

Keep the coin. Consider it payment for your service.

Courtesy of; the Nevinyrral Production Co.

Briggs laid his head against the door and began to laugh. He smiled down at the coin and pocketed it before unlatching his door and stepping out into the fresh air.

A GUY WITH A TOILET HEAD
NARRATES HIS DAY TO DAY

Well, I wake up pretty tired. You know how it is in this day and age. No one's getting enough sleep, and no one's gonna do anything about it. Well, I don't actually need to sleep. I just do it because it's supposed to be healthy for normal people. Doctors say the only thing I need to do is drink water, but it's kind of weird to only drink water, y'know? Anyways, I wake up, I tend to myself, and I get ready for work. I don't really need to eat anything in the morning since I get water from showering, but, you know what they say, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." Though, I guess there's some upsides to having a toilet for a head, like not having to wash my hair, since, y'know, I don't have any, and I don't have to be worry about being ugly, though a toilet isn't probably the most attractive thing to most people anyway.

I, uh, get looks from people most of the time. Usually they just shrug and go about the rest of their day, and obviously there's the occasional group of teens who can't help but laugh. I can't blame them, my head's a—you get the point.

So, I'm a detective. Not one of the ones on you used to see on TV. They'd never let me do that kind of stuff. I sit at a desk

and organize information for the department. Some days are really slow, some days I don't have time to go to the bathroom. I mean, I like the job and all. My boss isn't the worst person I've had to deal with, and there are some pretty nice people there, but I wish I could doing something more... I dunno... I guess, different. You'd think I could get a job at some traveling circus or as some really weird mascot, but with how the world is now? This is the best I can get. And, hey, maybe that's a good thing. Not everyone can deal with betting their lives everyday, and I'd rather not end up like the people the department goes after. Sorry, I, uh, went off on a bit of tangent there. Whoops.

Anyways, my job. Yeah, it's pretty good. People don't point out the whole head thing for the most part, except the really rowdy types they bring in sometimes, but that's a really different story. But, uh, other than my job, I'm really just a normal guy, save for the head. I live alone, I paint as a hobby, and I really don't like doctors. Hell, some older guys I've talked to have said I'm the closest thing to a normal person from the world before, y'know, that whole thing happened. Yeah. That's really it. Honestly, there's a lot more interesting people out there, people who could literally be out of this world, but I guess everyone deserves a chance to tell their story.

A GUY KILLS HIMSELF AND WAKES
UP IN A WORLD DOMINATED BY
GIANT HUMAN-EATING KILLER
CRABS

I don't care what comes after death, I only care that I die. If it's void, then I won't care; if it's heaven, then good; if it's hell, I think I was going there anyway. Plus, after being in pain for an eternity, I'm sure at one point you get used to it, so it becomes a neutral state of jadedness, similar to normal life. Everything is fine right now, and this calm moment is all the heaven I need.

And then I wake up.

And I don't remember when I pulled the trigger, but I'm sure I've died, and now I'm here.

"Here" being somewhere that looks and feels normal. "Normal" in the sense that it doesn't feel "dreamy", or like something I wouldn't see in say, Arizona, or any other place full of sand and yellow-ish lifeless colors everywhere.

Soon—to my joy—I see giant crabs, which I wish can talk or are man-eating, because otherwise I'm doomed to exist in the most boring afterlife I'm glad no one ever thought of. And I hope that I'm at least half right as one very slowly comes towards me, as if it knew that I wasn't going anywhere. I tried

talking to it, but it didn't talk back. Instead, it picked me up with its claws.

"It's man-eating, it seems," was my first thought, but then I thought that perhaps I had failed some sort of cosmic test, which led to me being eaten. I thought that maybe asking him for his favorite character of obscure Japanese media had not been a wise choice, but that's fine. I've never made good choices—plus, I don't even know what is happening. So maybe I did nothing wrong, and I had this coming no matter what.

And being eaten alive felt painful, but not as much as I thought it would

As I was being eaten, I thought that maybe the afterlife had layers, and that maybe I was going to die over and over again, every time to come into a different afterlife, until I'd eventually reach "the real one."

And so I woke up. And around me, there was sand, with the sandy-boring colors that come with it, and there also was a scorching sun which reminded me of Arizona or other places like that. Soon after, I saw a giant crab, which I knew was man-eating, walking towards me. And I felt great boredom and disappointment, but not that much. I'll get used to it.

Plus, this one crab was blue, while the other was red, so maybe it could be fun to count the crabs.

And I'm not in a panic or fear, for everything is too dull, obvious, and predictable for that. I'm glad I'm dead.

A BOY FINDS OUT HIS DOG CAN
TALK, BUT ONLY TO HIM

“So you can talk to him now?”
“Yeah. Sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

“A dog and a human talking civilly... Those things just don’t happen. Are you sure it’s not just a figment of your imagination?”

“No. I know it’s hard to believe, but I can really talk to him. I swear to you.”

“That’s what you said about the plague of giant locusts, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. But this time it’s different. I just don’t know how to explain it.”

At such a statement, Spike just stared at him.

“Don’t look at me like that. I swear it’s true.”

“I was in the kitchen, minding my own business,” Dick continued, “when suddenly Tracy approached me. And I heard his words. I heard them loud and clear.”

“And what did she say to you?”

“He asked me if I was hungry.”

“Did you answer her?”

“Did I answer him? Of course I answered him.” Dick grinned

from ear to ear and then continued his story. “I stared at him. I gave him a little smirk and, without a second thought, I said, ‘Of course I’m hungry, you flea-ridden bastard. Can’t you see I’m a bag of bones?’”

“Wow, that was tough. Did he say anything back?”

“Yes, but no. He just stared at me and after a while he said, and I quote, ‘Damn, I should have bought a fucking Poodle.’”

A SLEEPWALKER GOES AROUND THE WORLD

The night had gone by and with it its momentary grip on our world. But just before the night had given away the world to dawn, a night-long march had concluded and a body was transferred. Night and day, instinct and rationality. The rational had awoken once more. Awoken in the gigantic shadow of a black rock.

As he let his view wander, smiling became necessary. Once more his instinct, and only it had ensured his survival. Sand mixed with dirt and some small half-rotten bushes was all that seemed to surround him and the rock. 'Not today Sun, not today!'

As he stared into the unforgivable nature, remembering the burning sun was merely held at bay by this lonely rock, he again was befallen by great guilt. Wasn't his once-so-miserable existence not only liberated, but kept alive as well, by nothing but nature's generosity?

At least for such matters, his instinct and rationality could agree on the same solution. After removing his bag from his back, the sole obstacle remaining was the question, what to eat?

For most, such a question would hardly count as an obstacle, but as it came in the form of a choice, his rationality would have to consider it quite a while before the decision could be made. Even as he was still pondering his choices, his mind couldn't be stopped from wandering, not unlike his body at night. He recalled all the places his instinct had led him. He had sat in the ancient bathing houses of Bagdad, on top of the pyramids and in the shadows of the Obelisk of Axum. Constantinople, Damascus and even more places that he didn't dare to imagine came to his mind again. In his thoughts he relived what he had experienced while sitting in all these towns, cities and monuments.

It almost made him forget where he was. Almost. A crackle somewhere, somewhere too close. He had to get up, had to see—had to, but could not. His old masters had made sure of it. Made sure that he couldn't walk, at least not consciously. Why should someone who was only supposed to spin yarn be able to walk, after all? Physical chains would become unnecessary for someone who lacked the very ability to flee.

His rationality willingly accepted these artificial and inhuman boundaries, but his instinct did not allow itself to be chained down. It wanted to be free no matter what his rationality may command. It ran away, a task impossible to fail at. Who would guard those who cannot run away? When he had awakened the morning after his escape, a prolonged dream seemed to be the sole way to explain. But he soon learned that only at night, where it could not be interrupted, his instinct would awake. An instinct driven by the desire to explore. Still, his instinct had to rely on his rationality when the sun would rise. Leaving him to awake at the marketplace soon proved itself as the right decision. At least there he could still make use of his skills as a yarn spinner. But then why, why, why did his instinct venture into this untampered wilderness? Did it want him to die? And then he realized—realized all too well.

He began to rise, began to limp, to stagger and finally to run. He ran, jumped and somehow managed to climb up the black rock. And then he stood in the morning sun facing it head on, on his own two feet. No longer would he have to sleep to wander the world. He was truly free at last.

A TEAM OF TEENAGE
INVESTIGATORS AND A TALKING
DOG TRY TO SOLVE A MYSTERY

Under a full southern Kentucky moon, off the banks of the Cumberland River and among the soybean fields, a creaking two-tone peppermint Volkswagen bus rolled to a halt. The stirring dust settled around the vehicle and the headlights flicked off. The side door swung open and the gang filed out.

First out of the van was Chet, the sort-of-leader of the group. He had dropped out of school three summers ago to work at the bowling alley in town on account of high school being for squares. His twentieth birthday was next week, but he still hung out with a bunch of sophomores and freshmen, and they hung out with him because he bought them cigarettes and gave them rides.

Behind him, Kelsey hopped out. She had just turned 15 and told her parents a white lie that she was going to an after-school function. Mom and dad, who were quite keen on the idea of being alone, insisted that if she go, she ought to bring her kid brother Stanley. And so Stanley was quietly in attendance as well.

Jack, who sat behind Kelsey in geography class, was behind Kelsey and Stanley getting out of the van. On weekends, Jack

busted suds and took out the trash in the kitchen at Alley Cat Lane. That was the bowling alley, and how he knew Chet. Chet had mentioned to him something about a scarecrow that haunted the fields, or maybe it was a Sasquatch. Admittedly, Chet had been very vague about the details, but Jack couldn't resist! He had quite an affinity for the occult.

Finally, the last one out was Kevin, and Kevin was the real reason why Chet had talked Jack out into this rural spat of farmland. He knew that if he could get Jack, Kevin would come along, and Kev was a real sleuth. He had put at least a dozen mysteries to rest and testified twice in court! There wasn't a mystery in town this old gumshoe couldn't solve. Only this gumshoe didn't chew gum or wear shoes. He had a tail and liked to sniff trash cans. Kevin was a dog.

"Can we go home?" Stanley said, holding on to his sister's hand.

"Go home? We just got here!" Jack said excitedly. Kelsey reassured her brother but it fell on deaf ears. Chet slid the door shut behind Kevin and locked the door. "So, you think the scare-squatch is somewhere in this field?" Jack said pryingly.

Chet turned to face Jack. "Yeah, I saw it somewhere around there, I think."

"A scare-squatch..." Kelsey said quietly. "Whoa."

Stan started complaining to his sister.

"I've read about scarecrows being cross-bred with sasquatch many times," Kevin said confidently. His tail began to wag. "It was a provision of Operation Paperclip. The United States government sought to design such a beast to combat the Soviet peasantry and disrupt the food supply for the Kremlin. I called every expert on the matter that I knew after Jack told me about what you'd seen, Chet."

Chet had never heard of Operation Paperclip, and he didn't understand the implications of deploying an agrarian beast against farmers. Frankly, Chet had made up everything and

kept purposefully quiet during the ride. "Right," he said cautiously.

"What's a Soviet?" Stanley asked.

Kevin walked near the edge of the road and looked out across the flat soybean fields. In the distance, frogs were croaking along the muddy bank of the Cumberland River that flowed silently towards Tennessee. "If you're right about this, Chet, we could have our own show on the History Channel."

Jack approached his golden lab and stroked his head, "You think so Kevin?"

Kevin nodded, "I do. All the data I saw suggests so, but it's a crepuscular beast, so we don't have all night, Chet!"

The group formed a semi-circle around Chet and awaited his direction. Jack had produced chunky flash lights for everyone from an adventure backpack. Chet looked back at them all then turned towards the field and began walking through the soil of the soybean crops. "This way," he said meekly.

Dropping out of school had been the best decision Chet made, at the time. There were no more teachers or tests. However, time lurched along and his cool grown-up friends he would pal around with eventually left for city jobs that he was too young for. Chet was alone, and life began setting in. His old man made him get a job, and then three years later he was still working at the bowling alley handing out shoes. It was honest work, but it was dead work, and he felt as if he was dying. Jack's dog seemed to have all the answers though. Maybe if he could get Kevin alone, he could make off with him and start a new life. Surely the golden lab would know what to do.

"We must be getting close. I smell skunk ape," Kevin said with his snout to the earth. The rest of the group excitedly chattered amongst themselves.

"I heard the scare-squatch eats paper clips and Soviets just for fun!" Jack said, misunderstanding his trusty dog. Stanley moaned in protest.

"I heard he collects paper clips!" Kelsey cluelessly added.

Kevin might not like it at first, as a dog is man's best friend, and his master was Jack, but surely the idea was not as bad as it seemed, now they were out walking through farmland. Sure, the idea seemed idiotic, but Kevin in time would have to come around. Wouldn't he? What if Kevin didn't? What if Kevin didn't know what to tell Chet to do with his life? What if he just ended up handing out shoes at some other town's bowling alley?

"Dear God," Kevin said sharply.

The group stopped dead in their tracks. Chet, consumed by his thoughts, continued on several more paces into the beast.

A PAIR OF HAWKS GUIDE A FLOCK
OF SHEEP

“How much farther must we go, hawk?” Ram asked. They had been walking for hours. The lambs cried and the ewes consoled, but there was no end in sight.

“It’s not much farther,” the clever hawk said. He landed on the lowermost branch of a nearby tree at the forest’s edge. “Once we pass through this wood, it will be green, rolling hills for as far as the eye can see!” The trees were tall and dense, and Ram could not see far past them.

“How long will that take us?” Ram asked.

“Perhaps another hour,” said the clever hawk. “We are nearly there!”

It was at this moment that another hawk, larger and stronger than the first, came to rest on a stone beside the mountain pass. He let out a shrill cry that drew the flock’s attention.

“Do not cross these woods!” the strong hawk shouted. “There is only danger ahead.”

Ram stepped forward. “The hawk guiding us says there are green pastures on the other side. We must find somewhere to bed down soon. The young and old have grown weary of travel.”

The two hawks eyed each other cautiously. “He lies,” the

strong hawk said with an indignant flap of his wings. "These woods are home to wolves and trolls, and it stretches on for many miles."

The clever hawk leaped down from his perch and hopped toward his accuser. "What reason would I have to lie?" he chirped, looking from the strong hawk to the flock. "Have I led you astray thus far?" The sheep murmured amongst themselves.

"You mean to let the wood take them. That way you can pick their bones clean once the trolls are finished," the strong hawk said. The flock stirred anxiously. "If you follow me over the mountain, there are pastures you could graze."

"How far is that?" Ram asked.

"About three hours," the strong hawk said. The flock protested at the sound of this. One hour had seemed hard enough, but three was out of the question. However, Ram hushed the flock. He was the most discerning of the lot, and his opinion was respected.

"I will settle this matter," he said, looking to each hawk. "Do you each know the henweed? It grows thick and plentifully on every hill and is the first to put up its pale-yellow flowers at the start of each spring." The hawks both knew the henweed. "Let each of you fly as fast as he may to these pastures. The first to return with a sprig of henweed will lead us."

"So it will be!" the clever hawk chirped, lighting off the branch and soaring into the trees. In truth, the strong hawk had guessed his intent correctly. However, he was not nearly as cunning. The clever hawk knew of a patch of marrib that grew in a clearing not far from the flock. The flowers were gone in anticipation of the coming autumn, and it would look very nearly like henweed.

He drifted down to the clearing and began to pick through the brush for a few sprigs of marrib. The clever hawk hadn't been there for more than a minute when a silent shadow moved, and a firm hand grabbed him. "Who's there?" he squawked.

“What do you want?” He craned back his head and saw the hands belonged to a troll. He was flanked on either side by two other trolls, one large and the other small.

“A good catch!” said the large one. “What should we do with it?”

“Not much meat on it,” grumbled the smaller.

“It’s got to be good for something,” said the third with a twinkle of mischief in his eye.

“There’s a flock of sheep!” the clever hawk said. “Right on the forest’s edge. Let me go and I’ll bring them here.”

“Hear that? He wants us to let him go!” the troll said. “A whole flock of sheep!”

A wicked grin crept across the face of the larger troll. “Be a good sport and let him go,” he said.

“Into the bog! Into the bog!” cheered the smaller one.

The troll pinched his fingers around the hawk’s beak and spun it about with tremendous force. Devilish laughter rose from the other two. With a mighty heave, the clever hawk went careening into the murky black muck of a nearby bog. The hawk rose, sputtering and hacking in an awful cawing noise. His beak was long and straight, and his feathers were an inky black. Without looking back, the bird fled to the edge of the forest on foot, unable to fly on account of the muck that clung to his body.

By the time the clever hawk reached the sheep, the strong hawk had already returned with the henweed. Furthermore, the delay had given the flock ample time to rest before crossing the mountain. Ram and the strong hawk led the flock to greener pastures. The clever hawk, who is now called raven, was left to skulk about the woods alone.

It is for this reason that to this day, the hawk is a welcomed sight by travelers. The raven, however, roosts in fell places among the dead. He sings his harsh song as he soars on black wings, looking for bones to pick.

TWO LESBIANS EATING PIZZA

*M*y girlfriend G had been called in by the school because of the bruises on her face. I am holding her and touching her cheek. She assures me she assured the school, and we fall to the floor. I tell her how much I love her and give her extra chances to practice her foundation. We don't use protection because I can never achieve an orgasm without my hand. G is slender, soft, and weak, and I am leaving her behind for university when summer ends. I have promised to call.

When I met her father he tried to crush my hand. I am smiling at her house for dinner, glum and care-free. Her father asks all about my family and school and how the football season is, and never looks at G's face. When it is over I thank them and leave with G so I can touch her cheek.

She is working over the summer now, at some position given not earned. She tells me she will start after school, take a few years and work before going to university. She will start as a secretary. I will start as an afterthought. Then I am extra gentle, to show her how much she means to me.

The final stretch is now here: I leave in just a few days for

university. We are sitting on my roof, and it is the last hour of sunlight. August in Virginia is grey grass and green crickets and water air. She is holding her legs close, arms wrapped around knees, light mud hair, eyes puffed and leaning. I am stretched, flashed up over and around her.

She starts talking about the future again and then she is gone, replaced by a monstrous little spider curled up against my chest. Whispering shy and low metallic clicks, like minimum wage summons at department stores, only child names and living arrangements. I try to look past her hair-covered exoskeleton, but I still only see the spider: all angles and hooks. She whispers, prophesying our future, shivering.

She has become so excellent at applying makeup, and I tell her so. I smile and charm and love, but it doesn't work. She still wants my answer.

I go inside and she follows, pestering for one, crawling through the windowsill, eight legs and eight eyes, feet sticking to the wall, never touching the carpet—the carpet!—which now twists beneath me, rolling like the sea in sound, my thoughts sliding into heaps after a quake. A great seven-headed beast rising out of the sea and a lifetime of holding bras in department stores and having my hand crushed and being forced to mind myself.

The cold fronts are crossing the continent, closing in, and I have no answer.

But I call her from university, and she sounds happy. I make it clear I would kill her if she saw any boys. "Oh love," she laughs, "I only had pizza with Julia. You're going to love her when you visit." I cut the call short. Payphone costs a dollar a minute.

A METAPHYSICALLY LOST DOG

As the master closed the front door behind him, the dog heard the lock click just before the car door opened and the engine started. This noise engendered distress more powerful than any other emotion the dog was capable of, so he laid in his doggy bed to ponder the nature of his existence.

Why has my master abandoned me? This is the question of most significance, the dog started out. *I am clearly being punished,* he continued, *and because the master is fair and just, I can be sure that I am being punished fairly and justly. This can only mean—but* before the dog could continue his discourse, he noticed a strip of sunlight that shot through the cloud above, and beamed through the sliding glass door. Dust floated inside the wide laser and the dog stepped over to enter the light, look up towards its source, and sneeze. He then laid down inside the light and took a nap.

I am surely being punished for my actions, the dog thought while lapping up water from his bowl. *And it stands to reason that if I am penitent, the master will take mercy on me. But what is it that I could have done?* the dog asked himself as he walked past the tattered back of the couch. *I cannot put a paw on anything I could have done*

that would warrant the master's anger, he continued as he stepped over the muddy footprints tracked in this morning after his run in the rain. He ducked through the dog door and surveyed his domain. The grass was torn up in several places, and much dark mud was visible within the glistening emerald grass. *Since I have clearly done nothing wrong, and the master is both just and fair, then the only possible explanation for my punishment is that the master is testing me*, the dog realized triumphantly. *A test, a test—how could I have been so foolish as to think I was being punished for my behavior? It is now exceedingly clear to me*—the dog adjusted his stance and lowered his squared shoulders. Snarling, he faced the squirrel head on, waiting for his opening. The squirrel flinched first and the dog took his opportunity and pounded towards it, barreling half way up the tree before falling back to the ground, keeping his balance against the tree, and bouncing on his back legs. The squirrel danced with the leaves of the tree and soared across the fence to safety. Feeling content with his home defense, the dog laid down on the grass under the shade offered by the tree.

Since the master is testing me, the only way for him to return is to prove my devotion to him, the dog realized in that moment. *Something as simple as preparing dinner for him would surely propel me into his good graces, and allow for his expedient return*. While the dog theorized the meal his master would approve of most, he heard the car pull up to the house, the engine click off, and the door open. As the dog trotted back inside through the dog door to greet his master, he forgot all about the silly idea of making dinner. *How foolish I was to think the master was testing me*, the dog chided himself, *when it is all so obvious that no action he or I have ever taken has had any significance whatsoever!*

A TOWN PLAGUED BY BLIZZARDS
DISCOVERS THEY'RE IN A
SNOWGLOBE OWNED BY A CHILD

*B*uzz lifted the lid of his grandfather's chest—and then there was light, bending through the scratched and time-worn glass, shattering the vision of the once-human inhabitants within. An unsustainable cycle of incest and cannibalism had kept them alive through the long dark. Now there were only three. They writhed and drove their faces into the snow. It was as the prophets foretold. The sun had returned—God was alive. In the flash of light he saw their sins, what they had allowed themselves to become. And the wretched survivors would feel his wrath.

They had been alive far too long already. The globe should have broken decades ago. Somehow it had survived. A torture chamber of souls either forgotten or punished. Neither purgatory nor hell. Only pain.

The light washed out their vision. They were truly blind; ancient feuds forgotten; they crawled from their quadrants to the castle for shelter. It was in the middle of their world and most deeply cursed. People had laughed there once, worn colorful clothes and danced. Their pictures were still painted on

walls now darkened with blood graffiti and the frozen remnants of feces. A triumph of boredom.

The three clutched bannisters and drove their thin toes into cracks between flagstones. They grinded their teeth and snarled when they smelt another come near. They trembled and shat and shivered. Ecstasy of the end times running through their veins. A piercing áchos. Sublime.

Their God was a cruel God. He smiled and shook. The world turned upside down. Freezing, cutting shards of snow became a tempest. The castle filled with them, and the three were sliced a thousand times but not killed. Never killed. Screams bouncing off their thick protective shell. God did not want to listen.

But then there was another. A larger God, a looming God—reaching to smite their tormenter!

Buzz sneered, and just before justice was served, he let the globe drop.

Spinning.

Cutting.

Smash.

The castle broke apart, scattering the three among the shards of snow. Light blossomed a thousand times brighter than before. The expanse of the universe opened up to them. They curled into balls and waited in silence for God's final punishment. But he had already forgotten them. The punishment was over.

TWO TIME CRIMINALS ARE
BANISHED TO THE ISRAEL OF THE
NEW TESTAMENT

*A*ll that was in sight was a blonde, kind of girly-looking winged man...

...in the center of a wrestling ring.

In a packed modern-day stadium.

Right as one was going to turn to the other to confirm that what they were seeing wasn't some form of hallucination, a voice came from every direction at an earsplitting volume.

"...and competing for the title of Israel is..."

That was enough for the longer-haired one of the duo to figure out what was going on, or at least what was going on in front of her. The short-haired one, on the other hand, was thinking way too hard about what "the title of Israel" could mean.

Right then, fire erupted from the west side of the stadium, creating a passage of flame to the ring, and encroaching out of the shadows of the stage, revealed the man known as...

"...JJJJJJAAAAAAAAAACCCCCCOOOOOOOOOBBBBBB!"

And to articulate the reveal of the challenger, through speakers that had way too much bass on them, played Burn the Priest's Cover of Ministry's "Jesus Built My Hotrod". That was

enough for the short-haired girl to catch on to some idea of what was happening. Turning her head around frantically, analyzing the stadium around her, another out-of-place detail became apparent. When Jacob was barely over halfway to the ring, she turned to her longer-haired companion with a revelation.

This was the 1990 Royal Rumble Set. Which meant they were in Miami, not Israel—and Jesus Built my Hotrod was a 1991 single in an album that came out in 1992, but this was a cover of the song that came out in 2018, so...

“This isn’t Israel!”

“Oh, really?” The long-haired one said, responding like an enraged Tim Allen. “What gave it away?”

The short-haired girl began counting her fingers. “Well, this is the 1990 Royal Rumble Set, which is in Miami, and Jesus Built my Hotrod was a—”

Like a judge bringing their gavel down, the long-haired girl’s balled up fist met the top of the short-haired girl’s head. “Does any of that help us?”

“...Hulk Hogan won?”

“Do either of those people look like Hulk Hogan?”

They stared at each other before looking back at the ring. The long-haired one didn’t know anything about WWE, but she could tell if someone was dressed up as Hulk Hogan on Halloween. Even though it wasn’t Halloween, Jacob of the New Testament looked like he was about to go trick-or-treating. The short-haired one didn’t know anything about what was happening—but, yeah, the dude getting on the ring right now looked kind of like Hulk Hogan.

The long-haired one, mentally exhausted, sighed hard and slouched back in her seat, crossing her arms, fueling the engine to her train of thought...

Obviously, this was an anomaly caused by the two’s activities, and they got sent to the fruits of their labor. But this

seems... stupid. The punishments for messing around with time travel should be extreme, not some weird timeout corner.

The train was derailed by a tapping on her shoulder. She turned her head to her right. Her companion was holding out a white bag with red stripes almost overflowing with popcorn.

The thought of how she got popcorn didn't even cross the long-haired girl's mind, but she asked a question out of habit.

"Where'd you get that?"

"They were selling it."

After staring at the bag, she grabbed a handful of popcorn and shoved it in her mouth, defeated.

"...might as well enjoy this. Biblical wrestling might be interesting."

A GASTRONOMIC EVENT CAUSES A
MISHAP OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

*M*axentius had returned from another successful harvest when he discovered cockroaches in the granary, feasting on the stockpile of the city of Arcadia. Incensed by this base insult to his craft, of which his rival Gaius was likely responsible, Maxentius was driven to cruelty. He mixed lime with vinegar and stuffed the holes and cracks whence the vermin came. The acid boiled the cockroaches in a slow, agonizing death as Maxentius grew rich from his harvest. The sole survivor of the colony limped over its dead kin and escaped under the cover of night into the senator's empty villa.

That summer, the senator returned to Arcadia from a victorious campaign over the barbarian tribes and held a banquet with Maxentius' acclaimed produce. When he and his generals fell ill by morning, the physicians cried poison and the guards found lime in the granary. Maxentius was condemned to the lions and Gaius was appointed the city's new head agrarian. But as Gaius reaped the profits of his sabotage, dysentery claimed the lives of the senator and his generals. No grain or coin could defend him when the barbarians crossed the border with their armies, raping, pillaging, scorching the earth, leaving

only bitter memory in the few who escaped their terrible vengeance.

Generations later, the fall of Arcadia had become a popular legend among the sailors who carried the blood of its original people. They made the sea their home and never left their galleons out of inexplicable fear of the ground. As they lived off the ocean, they spread legend of the fall to the privateers of the West and the pirates of the East. Thus the descendants of Arcadia ensured the survival of their story, long after they themselves were lost to sea.

When the pirates were finally captured by the Eastern Court, the fall of Arcadia was the only thing they would confess to under the sword. The bloody end of the ancient city gave the emperor such shock at the savagery of foreigners that he willed an edict of total isolation. The Eastern Empire grew strong alone, but some believed that cowardly withdrawal made them weak. The secret society of Gai-Tsun, named after the shrewd legendary farmer who seized fortune with bravery, vowed to end this isolation and seize glory for the empire beyond its borders.

In the West, a privateer returned from a decade's service to find the graves of his wife and son where their house once stood. He dropped his rapier and fell on his knees.

Why? he wondered, Why have You punished me so? For the merchant ships we fed to the sea? Or the treasure we plundered from their floating corpses?

With trembling hands, he tore away vines from the tombstones, kneeling in tears for days until a priest found him, emaciated and hopeless, and took him in. The priest, inspired by the privateer's tales of Arcadia and his revelation before the graves, founded the Holy Order of St. Maximilian, named after the martyr who fed his people and was killed by the greedy.

Though decades of revolutions left the church powerless, the Holy Order survived at the hands of increasingly entrepreneurial priests and bishops, who turned charity farming activities into

profitable ventures. So profitable, in fact, that they established the Maxim Farming Co. independent from the Order and the church. The company grew to be the largest in the West, the only one who could afford and introduce the first mechanized tractors from the East.

The successful coup by the Gai-Tsun Society opened the eyes of its people. In isolation, they had made powerful tools and new technologies, but nowhere to use them. As the hermit empire gave way to a free republic, they shocked the world with wonders of machinery, electricity, and chemistry. The new government was quick to adapt and seize opportunity—like Gai-Tsun himself—and established the Kaiten Machines Enterprise as their foothold in the world.

The two great companies had made their deals through letters, then telegram, then international phone calls. In a secret video conference encrypted by Kaiten's digital security division, and after Maxim Co. paid off the right judges and officials of both nations, the Great Merger took place at 00:00 GMT. Maxim-Kaiten AgriTech emerged as the single most financially powerful entity in the world.

No government could check such an overwhelming force that commanded the world's most vital resource: food. There was no land, farm, plantation, factory, or slaughterhouse that didn't bear the Maxim-Kaiten logo. The markets were bent and sicked at the board's will. MKAT shot through the roofs of stock exchanges across the globe, dwarfing other acronyms that disappeared by each closing day. The corporation controlled the food and thus the world. But nobody could control hunger and greed.

At 14:38, field specialists from MK Archeology Solutions discovered graffiti in the ruins of an ancient city. At 14:44, they found a skull pierced by a lion's tooth. At 14:49, they found the powdered remains of burnt human bone among gold coins. At 14:52, the MK Translate software had fully deciphered the true chronicles of the fall of Arcadia.

At 14:53, the bubble burst.

MKAT was worth less than paper. Riots erupted in the streets. Maxim-Kaiten offices worldwide imploded as employee-citizens rebelled against the headquarters, which burned down from gasoline bombs with no survivors. News stations broadcasted kangaroo courts and factional killings, suicide cults and missing people. Police turned lawless, soldiers turned rogue, people turned to animals, and governments turned their true colors. In that moment of desperation, a call from MK Defense Systems offered a solution—a clean slate. “Press the button,” the voice said, calming and hypnotic. “We will rise again from the ashes. Press the button.”

In the ruins of civilization, against the backdrop of nuclear winter, a single cockroach emerged from the ashes and rubble. It tasted the air and took a step forward, spreading its wings.

A MAN TRIES TO CONNECT
UNRELATED STORIES THROUGH A
RIDICULOUS THEORY

Gilbert rolled a half-smoked Lucky Strike between his index finger and thumb while he stared at the cork board that he had thumbtacked up the previous night. The whole room smelled like tobacco, old paper, and that funky odor that stink bugs give off in self defense, or when you smash one. During the fall months of New England, you find that stink bugs crawl up the corner boards of homes and nest in the attic until spring, and that's just where Gilbert had set up.

Gil brought the cigarette to his chapped lips and took a deep pull. "This just doesn't make any sense," he said, exhaling the smoke which floated to the rafters where cobwebs lazily hung. "Make sense to you?"

Next to Gilbert, tied to a chair, was Lance. About fifteen hours ago, Lance was an Amazon Prime delivery driver. Gil had more-or-less kidnapped Lance and proclaimed he was his research assistant now.

"Lance?" Gil said.

Lance turned his head up and looked at the cork board, then at Gil. Having been the driver on this route for about three months, Lance was somewhat familiar with Gilbert, and he

always looked the same. Well manicured, but at the same time, tired and sleepless. He always had a cigarette in his mouth too. Sometimes it wasn't even lit.

"Sir, can you please let me go? I swear I won't tell anyone. I think I might even have a package for you," Lance said.

"Nonsense, my boy, your place is here now," Gilbert said.

"The Prime trucks are equipped with GPS," Lance said, perhaps making a vague threat.

"You aren't. Now listen," Gilbert continued as he rose to his feet, "Coca-Cola is a multinational beverage company. We've gone over this—but Lance, riddle me this," Gil said, staring at his cork board with red eyes that hadn't slept a full night in weeks. "Coke, or Pepsi?"

"Pepsi," Lance said.

"Right! I myself am a Pepsi man. The Wilsons next door—you know them, right?"

"Sure."

"I asked them the same thing. Can you guess what they prefer?"

"No."

"Frank Wilson and his wife, Sarah, both took the Pepsi Challenge back in 92. They never went back." Lance sighed deeply. "Yes, I was thinking the same thing. Incredible that a carbonated beverage giant such as Coca-Cola can still wield such a large domestic market share despite the collective opinion of the people that say otherwise..." Gil finished the statement by grabbing another Lucky Strike. He took a long dry pull on it with his eyes closed tightly. "Smoke?"

"No."

Gilbert usually chain-smoked Newports. The menthol made his mouth tingle and kept him awake at night. Before taking a sabbatical from his position at Quincy Community College, teaching humanities, he'd often burn through a pack at night, making last-minute alterations to his lesson plan and lectures.

When he needed to look at something with fresh eyes, he'd reach for Lucky Strikes. Gil thought they made him think differently.

"41-33, Eagles upset the Patriots in Super Bowl LII," Gilbert said, going over his notes. "Malcom Butler is benched for some reason or another. A week later Pepsi loses a massive contract in Asian markets. Total market share is reduced to 23% from 39%. Estimated losses, sixty million dollars."

"Can I please go home? I have a family."

"I know, Lance. I'm right here," Gil said, before lighting the cigarette he'd been chewing on. "Lance, Asian markets were quiet on this, totally radio silent. No one said anything. Totally caught all the guys at Pepsi off guard, I read. None of the sales guys could reach their contacts on the mainland."

Lance said nothing, he rested his chin back onto his chest.

"We've all seen the commercial Coca-Cola ran during that Super Bowl. It was terrible, just terrible—wasn't it, Lance?"

"Awful," he replied absently.

"Want to live in a yurt—yurt it up! Who writes shit like that, and how could something so dumb not be met with backlash?"

Lance quietly laughed at the insanity of the Coca-Cola tagline. "What's a yurt, anyway?"

"Yurt it up—awful! A yurt is a sort of tent you might find in the steppes of Mongolia or in, say, Northern China," Gil said, pondering the last two words. "Northern China."

"Yurt it up," Lance said.

Gil excitedly started flipping through his notes, cross-referencing his cork board. The cigarette rested in the corner of his mouth with a long tube of ash developing on the end of it. "Lance, do you know what's in Northern China," Gil asked, tracing a line on the board with his finger from Beijing to Xinjiang.

"No," Lance said, looking up.

"There is not a soda that can compete with the refreshing

taste of an ice cold Pepsi—we both know this. Pepsi, despite selling fewer Pepsis than Coca-Cola does Cokes, has a larger and more diverse brand. Thus, Pepsi has more to offer than just soda to an emerging market. Coke was surely intimidated by this.”

“Uh-huh,” Lance said.

“Cornered, even—and what does a cornered animal do, Lance? It strikes back, it fights tooth and nail, or in this case, can and bottle,” Gilbert said, amused at his own joke. After a pause to see if Lance shared the same amusement—he did not—Gil continued, “Coca-Cola ran that commercial, not as an ad, but as a threat, a shot across the bow. Not at Pepsi, but at China. Lance, what is in Northern China?” Gil asked, circling back to his original question.

Lance shrugged.

“Uyghurs. Coke purchased a commercial during Super Bowl LII and threatened to blow the lid on the human rights violations taking place in the steppes. Coca-Cola persuaded China with three little words that could have brought UN Peacekeepers to Xinjiang and up Xi Jinping’s ass.”

“Can you untie me, please?” Lance asked.

“Yurt it up.”

A GIRL FINDS A SKIRT THAT LETS
HER TRAVEL THROUGH TIME

*I*t was the ugliest skirt I had ever seen. A poodle skirt, one I had only seen in movies up until this point. Offensively pink, it was the perfect accessory for the retro Halloween party I'd be attending that night. I took it to the counter where there was a hunched-over old man. He wore yellow checkered plaid pants, a purple shirt, orange suspenders, half-moon glasses, and a forest green felt bowler hat. He didn't look familiar to me, which was strange for our small town. His thrift store must have just opened.

"Find everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Just this, please."

"Seems everyone finds just what they're looking for," he chuckled. I smiled at him politely as his bony fingers handled the transaction and slipped the skirt into the bag. "You're gonna have the time of your life with this."

I looked at the frumpled, moth-eaten skirt in the bag and smiled. The old man was odd but sincere. He reminded me of a grandfather. I thanked him for his time and made my way home, opening the door to the rainy cobblestone streets. I looked

behind me at the red door with the marquee “Nevinyrral Production Co.” embossed on the front.

The night of the party, I pulled the skirt from the bag and showed it to my friend. She laughed at how ridiculous it would be to see me in it and demanded I try it on. I went to a mirror and turned to get a better look at the back before doing a twirl.

“Back so soon?” the old man asked. I wasn’t sure what was going on and asked as such. He laughed and just said, “Taking it for a spin, eh?”

I looked past his cat smile and saw the calendar. October 30th, yesterday, was not crossed off. Realizing, I apologized and ran home. If this was real, if I wasn’t dreaming, there was something I had to try. I ran to my room and began to spin in circles. I span and span and span until the walls of my room blurred and I collapsed from exhaustion. I went out to the living room where my mom was just about to leave. I threw my arms around her.

“Oh my!” she laughed. “What are you wearing?”

“The greatest skirt ever, Mom,” I laughed. “Please stay home tonight. I have a bad feeling. Let’s rent a movie or something from Blockbuster.”

She shut the door. “I suppose I can call work. With your instincts, if you’re nervous, I am too.”

I collapsed into sobs as she held me and pet my hair. She didn’t understand what was wrong, what had just happened and how great it was. She just held me and I felt silly, crying in that poodle skirt, but I also never felt more alive.

A few days later I had the urge to dig the skirt from the laundry. The gaudy piece of thrift store clothing had changed my life. I held it in front of me and admired it before neatly folding it, hugging it to my chest, and walking for the door. The weather was the same as it was the first day I had encountered the shop—rain. Almost as if he were waiting on me, the old man was just opening for the day, key in the lock. He turned to me and smiled.

“Something I can help you with, miss?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, holding out the skirt. “I was wondering if I could leave this with you?”

“I suppose I could take donations,” he said, reaching for the skirt. “But what if you regret it and come back for it, and I’ve already sold it?”

“I’m sure I’ll find something like it one day,” I smiled.

“Indeed,” he chuckled. “Here, everyone finds just what they’re looking for.”

As if in on some cosmic joke together, we began to laugh, and I could feel the sunshine coming through the clouds.

SKATEBOARDING FOR THE FATE OF THE UNIVERSE

This was it. The wheels on my board spun faster than they had ever gone. The crowd watched with bated breath. If I could pull this trick off, I would be a legend. I flew down the ramp and back upwards, launching into the air.

Focus. I practiced this so many times, but even so, I never landed it. But this was all the marbles. The fate of everything rested on this. I grabbed the base of my skateboard and flipped backwards. Using fancy footwork, I spun while completely upside-down, with my board at my feet. To the outsider, it looked like I had just become a helicopter.

Now my only goal was to not break my neck. The floor came ever closer. I waited till the last possible moment... I stopped my rotation, grabbing my board and clipping the side of the ramp. I skated back down, my heart thumping.

“Never before has anyone attempted such a trick in the history of the Universe Skatepark! Judges, what are your assessments?” the announcer boomed.

The three judges muttered to one another. I held my breath. Come on... Please, I did the impossible! I'd like to see Tony Hawk even try what I just did!

After a moment, they seem to have come to a consensus. The first judge lifted a sign with a number on it: ten. The second: ten. And finally the third.

Ten.

“Did you see that? It looks like for the closing final of the Universe Skate Off, our winner is this young lad! One million dolllllaaaaaars!”

The crowd erupted into cheers. I felt as if my eardrums were going to break. I couldn’t believe it. I really did it. Reporters came crashing towards me, lights flashing and almost blinding me.

“How does it feel being the very last winner of the famous Universe Skate Off?”

“Is your skating career going to continue past this point?”

“What are you gonna do with the money?”

Questions came flying towards me. Still, none of them matter. I grabbed the mic of the nearest reporter and looked right into the camera.

“I don’t want the money.”

Shocked gasps rang out. I ignored them and continued.

“At least, not in the way you’d expect. I’ve been skating at Universe my entire life. I was heartbroken to find out it was closing its doors forever. So I decided to win this skate off for one purpose. And that’s to keep these doors open for a very long time!”

A silence fell, followed by a defeating cheer. I smiled. I did it. I saved the Universe.

THE ENTRANCE OF THE SANDMAN

The door bowed inward. Over the groan of the wood, shouts and hurried voices could be heard from the other side. Looks like they found the mess he'd made of the treasury guards. Azif kicked himself for being spotted, he was getting sloppy. This impromptu barricade wasn't going to last long.

"You came all the way up here with no idea how you'd get us out?" Rasha hissed. The way she cocked her head reminded him of how his mother would scold him as a boy. Planning was never his strong suit. "How did you even get in?"

"There," Azif said. He pointed to the eastern wall of her chambers. A thin shaft of light peered through the narrow space between two bricks where the mortar had been carefully stripped away. A few grains of sand were scattered across the colorful tilework of the floor.

"You're one of the Mirad? The Sandmen?" She laughed dryly. "I expected more. Father puts too much faith in your order."

"Relax, I've been in worse scrapes," Azif said. A lie, but a convincing one if you knew anything about the Mirad. Still,

playing escort drastically limited his options. He couldn't come back empty-handed if he wanted to keep his head, either.

He looked back at the crack in the wall and back at her. There was definitely no way she was getting through there. He watched how the silk gown fell about her hips and found himself less upset, however. The pounding on the door was more incessant now.

Azif darted out onto the balcony and looked over the ornately carved railing. The entrance to the palace was decorated with all manner of festive awnings in preparation for tomorrow. Below the balcony, the gate guards were inspecting a wagon he recognized as belonging to a rug merchant. He'd passed it on his way inside. His luck hadn't run out—yet.

"Hey, come here," Azif said. Rasha was clearly hesitant. "Quickly, please, we're on something of a tight schedule." Wagons aside, the wedding ceremony was in a matter of hours and the Sultan was actively locking down the city.

"What are you scheming, Mirad?" she said, stepping forward. "Put me on your back and scale down the wa—"

He clapped his hand over her mouth and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her close. "Don't scream," he said as they tipped over the side.

She was squirming as they fell, but he did his best to direct them towards a large awning over the wagon. It wouldn't support both of them, but she should be fine. A couple broken bones at most. Azif slowly breathed out and let everything go, slipping between her fingers.

Rasha hit the colorful cloth and rolled down it before being unceremoniously dumped into the back of the wagon. She landed, sputtering, in a mess of sand and cloth. The wagon bucked as the horses took off in a panic. The guards tried to give pursuit before, having failed there, desperately struggled to raise an alarm.

She would have tumbled out the back had it not been for the

firm grip and quick jerk on her arm. "Neat trick, no?" Azif said, slinking from the sand. It receded as his body came into view, imperceivable as to where one ended and the other began. He pulled her back before seating himself among the rugs.

"You are a fiend!" she said. Rasha slapped him, knocking away the cloth covering and revealing a young, tanned face with a wolfish grin.

"You can tell your dad all about it once we're out of this," he said. He caught the eye of the bewildered merchant who was frantically trying to slow the horses. With the flick of his wrist, Azif tossed the man a sizeable coin purse. "Don't stop until we're beyond the city walls. There's more where that came from." He turned back to Rasha and winked. "It's courtesy of the Sultan."

Rasha's cool exterior finally cracked. The indignation fell away and gave rise to laughter. "Maybe you are what you say you are, Sandman." She leaned back on an expensive-looking rug and watched the tower of the palace fade into the distance. The moonlight shimmered on her gown.

"All that and more!" Azif cackled back. He tossed a pile of linens her way. "Now quick, cover yourself up," he said, "and nothing too ostentatious! We can't have you looking like that."

TWO THIEVES HAVE TO CARRY OUT
A ROBBERY IN A BUDDHIST TEMPLE

“*I*f it was as easy as all that, though, why have me at all?”

“Keep your bloody voice down!” Rob hissed. The odds that any of the monks could overhear them here was minuscule, but Barney’s incessant questions were truly starting to rub on his nerves. “It has just got to be a two-person job, okay? Believe me, if I had the remotest option to leave you back in Patpong, I absolutely would’ve done. Now shut up.”

As the sun set behind them, the two continued pushing their motorcycle through the thick vegetation. The box welded onto the back kept getting snagged on vines and low bamboo shoots.

“But if it’s small enough to fit in that little box, one person can carry it easy!”

Rob stopped pushing the bike and ran his clenched fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. “Barney, have you ever held gold—proper gold?”

“Sure I have. Me mom had this ring once—”

“No, you haven’t. See this little rock?” Rob pulled a stone from the muddy path with one hand. “If this was made of solid gold it would weigh over 3 stone. And what we’re taking home

tonight is a great deal bigger than this rock. It'll look like a ship's wheel about 18 inches tall, at it will be so heavy we're each going to have to take a side and crab-walk that tiny thing back to the bike."

"All right, Jesus..." Barney put his hands up in surrender. "I was just askin'. No need to give a science lesson." As a matter of fact, Barney did not really believe his companion. He was certain he could carry the trinket one-handed if he wanted. He'd seen the pictures of it there on the altar. Rob was just being Rob—prickly and over-cautious as always.

Rob was still talking. Shit what did he miss? "—lay low in these trees for a few hours. The monks usually turn in early for bed. We get in and out unseen, load the bike, walk it back down the path. At daybreak while they're all having breakfast, we're off this mountain and halfway to Bangkok."

As the dark of night settled in on them, they reached a shelf of land well above the main path. Rob had warned Barney to stay close to him just in case they stumbled across a monk wandering the forest, but the coast was clear. The distant sound of chanting and drums have long since faded and the final lights were out in the windows of the monastery.

"If they's so rich, why they always out beggin' people for food?"

Rob ignored the question and gestured for Barney to follow him. The two figures left the grove and traced along a rocky outcropping toward the rear of the temple. The entire complex was made of sprawling low white buildings where the monks and novices slept and went about their ascetic duties. At the center stood a grand temple with a sloping multi-tiered golden roof and ornate statuary. This one looked like the many others you see on postcards and travel posters.

There was no cover between here and the inner temple—they'd have to just hope no one could see them. "Here, throw this over you and walk slow like me." Rob handed Barney a red

rain poncho. At a distance, at least, they might pass for two monks on an evening stroll.

Heads bowed, they slowly made their way across the moonlit courtyard and up the shallow steps. It was impossible to see anything, and Barney stumbled more than once over the steps, each time earning him a severe glare.

Rob flicked on a dim torch as they got to the inner room. The shrine glistened with statues, bowls, and colored cloth, but behind it all on a low pedestal sat the golden wheel he was told about. "Here it is!" he whispered.

"Barney? Where are you?"

Barney was messing with the table of knick-knacks and straightened up when he heard his name called. The crinkling sound of his vinyl poncho filled Rob's ears. "Is it your sacred mission to wake everyone in this place?"

Barney smiled inside his hood as he came over. He had stuffed a couple of the smallest golden bowls in his back pocket, and had a Buddha figurine half hanging out his front. Rob was right about one thing, gold is much heavier than it looks!

As planned, they each hefted the wheel off its base and shuffled it back toward the stairs. They had to set it down every few minutes to stretch their sore arms and backs.

"Hey, Rob?"

Another glare.

"Are these the kind of monks that are like, you know, ninjas?"

"Get ready to lift again." Rob wanted to tell him off, but to be honest he wasn't sure himself if there was any martial art associated with this temple. He researched only about the artifacts and knew fuck all about their practices. As long as they remained unseen, it wouldn't matter.

They were now in the courtyard, doing their best to avoid the patchy light when Rob froze. He caught the silhouette of a lone monk on a night stroll.

Barney, not looking, assumed they just stopped to set down their burden again. He was caught a bit off balance when Rob didn't also lower his end, and had to quickly reset his footing. As he did so, one of the bowls slipped from his rear pocket.

The monk caught the two unfamiliar shadows out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly the stillness of the night was cut by the loud resonant call of a singing bowl as it struck the stone floor and bounced down the stairs. He turned to see the two men in raincoats struggling to hold the Dharmachakra between them, unsure whether to set it down or attempt to run with it.

The monk smiled to himself as he continued his walk, reflecting on the symbolic irony of this midnight tableau and wondering which path the two will choose. He'll know in the morning.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF A DUCK OR
GOOSE BATTLING FOR THROWN
BREAD II

Still to this day, I remember it vividly. Back then, all days were alike. I was but a gosling at the age of five. I was never prepared for it, neither did I want to participate. “But the impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.”

Like floating assassins, we preserved our resources the best we could: barely moving an inch, always awaiting a target. Knowing every ounce of energy must be spent at the oncoming battlefield, not a single calorie was wasted. Every day was a nightmare about to unfold, as I dreaded the disastrous tumult and quarrel of the fight for pastry. You never knew when they’d come by—these tall dark figures walking along the lakeshore on their clunky brightly colored feet, which stuck out beneath an immense collection of pelts, in which they’d wrapped themselves for the winter. Anyone could be for whom we laid in wait, yet few would happen to provide us with a meal, and most were simply passersby.

Not a day I went from dawn till dusk uneasy. My gaggle were my family and closest companions, but none of them could I call upon as a brother in arms. The very moment a tiny offspring of

the feeders would signal for the larger ones to bring along the pastry, a chill, like the first drops of a fall rain, ran across the plume of my crown, back along the nape of my scalp, and trickled down the infinite length of my neck. That very instant, not one of us would sit still, despite most of us situated within their immediate periphery. It was a dance of uncertainty, a feeble attempt at approximating the point at which their handouts would strike the water's surface. Looking up, I would see their eerie grin, revealing the pleasure they took in watching us fight for food. Like Emperor Caligula at the *Damnatio ad Bestias*, their amusement was fueled by the violent nature of our struggle.

I've never let myself forget the impact those days left upon me. During winters we were forced to fare south for warmth. While we could locate new sources of food in more temperate surroundings, the ponds and marshes were not ours alone. On a winter's day in the late of December, the hoarfrost upon the cattails of our pond shone in the gleam of the noon sun. As I lay there drifting, with my beak tucked tightly between the feathers of my breast, the undulating flutter of wings lowered itself upon us, and before we knew it, a band of Canadian geese had invaded our territory, hoping to scour our newfound home of nourishment. They too had arrived for the winter. Migrating all the way from the northern fringes of the land, they weren't planning on moving on to another body of water simply from our presence there. Touching down not far from us, they intentionally alluded us to their arrival, perhaps in hopes of intimidating our flock.

The bannerman of their group approached with head held high, pointing its beak downwards and revealing the oblong nostrils of the upper mandible. This was my first encounter with this strange, yet oddly similar, relative of mine. Our eyes interlocked, as his company followed suit. Having moved within our immediate proximity, following him, who could only be consid-

ered their general, they circulated between themselves, as if they'd reached their destination and were now preparing to partake in our silent poach.

The feeders had gathered by the outer edges of our battlefield and were now eagerly watching our two gaggles facing each other with contempt. Knowing the hour of feeding had struck, we stood face to face, like the legionnaires of Rome stood before the Carthaginian army at the Battle of Cannae. Not a single ripple spread across the open surface. A larger gander among them, dressed in darker plumes along his neck with pale white down across his breast, rose his stygian-crested mug and lowered his beak, showing only the upper mandible for a split second, before letting out a resounding honk signifying his self-imposed superiority. At this moment, one among the tall figures spread its featherless wing, and let the first barrage of bread strike down in our midst. The drums of war had sounded, and at once every goose fought for themselves.

The bystanders cackled as they watched us fight for supper, stretching our necks forward in almost futile attempts at conquering a sole piece of bread. Not a single crumb was left to float, not even for a second, and while the audience caught the sight of Romans and Canadians at once aggressively intermingling, the sounds of hissing and snapping rung within the pond, as I was pushed from left to right by brother and foe alike. I felt the detestable desperation of my brethren that day, but despite falling asleep on an empty stomach, I had shared the same desire as them, and felt at ease having seen the Canadian gaggle scatter off empty-handed.

These large beings that I once looked to in hopes of a grain of feed are now my daily servants. In exchange for their food, I stay within this cage they've built, where I rest all day along the goslings of other geese. I remain confined solely for their amusement, equipped with a bright orange ring around my right

shank, and with no pastime to occupy my mind. Come to think of it, not much goes on around here. Not much at all.

While I look back upon those days with detest, I used to have a purpose in being—perhaps I shall look for a hole in the fence tomorrow?

A VERY DRAMATIC DRIVE-THROUGH
ORDER I

The truck rumbled beneath Brunhilde like a 200-year-old dragon. She slammed the gas, commanding it to belch poison fumes and smash aside a Smart Car delaying her entry to the IHOP parking lot. The puny vehicle spun in circles like a Looney Tunes character and stopped on a lamppost. Pathetic—but not as pathetic as Sigurd.

The memory of his smiling face framed with golden locks once again came unbidden to Brunhilde's mind. She screamed and broke her steering wheel with the palm of her hand. The limp-wristed maiden he left behind on a Sunday sex-stained bed wasn't her anymore. Five years ago he saved her from a pimp and turned her life around. Then he used her and left her, just like all the others. But not before making sure she loved him first.

She shrieked and the windows on her F-350 shattered glass onto the pavement. Anavar pumped through her veins, sweet as summer rain. She was juiced from a four-hour gym session. A self-help guru blasted affirmations through her speakers loud enough to enlighten the kid selling ice cream across the street.

If you want it, take it. The universe is a box that must be opened. Demand respect, and respect shall be given.

Brunhilde grunted and drove over the puny IHOP intercom system. No one was going to ‘take her order’. She was the one doing the taking from now on.

“Uh, may I help you?” an overweight kid asked through the half-opened takeout window.

“Pancakes. Five of them. Waffle family feast and buttermilk crispy chicken.”

He shut the window and ran to his manager: Sigurd. He was six years younger than Brunhilde, still had his life ahead of him. Unlike her. She was an emotional wreck, but her body was a palace of delights. Her thighs could squeeze the juice from a watermelon. She smiled as Sigurd approached the window and went pale as a ghost.

He ran, she followed, breaking the frame of the takeout window as she slammed her bulk into the restaurant proper.

It went just as the guru said it would. First Sigurd fought, then he denied. He cried and pleaded. The puny customers didn’t try to help him. The universe knew she was right. She threw him into her truck and drove off into the night.

A TALKING PINK ANIMAL GOES INTO
A BRIEF ADVENTURE THAT HE
ENJOYS VERY, VERY MUCH

Nelly is a pink elephant. He wears a beige overcoat, which he scuffs slightly on the elbows as he struggles to fit down the alleyway. He's walking behind a block of flats on the other side of town. He waddles halfway down the alley and toots his trunk at a cardboard box on the floor.

"Prooohp. Wake up, Barnaby."

"I'm up, I'm up. One second."

Barnaby is a fox. He lives in a box. Barnaby has a £50-a-day crack cocaine addiction. A metallic clunk is heard, then the flushing of a toilet. Barnaby steps out of his box.

"I fucking love Crocburger. Man, I'm starving. Right, let's go," chirps Barnaby cheerfully.

"I'm starving too. Been a few weeks since I had a Crocburger," says Nelly.

As they leave the alleyway, they turn and head to the end of the road, then turn at the corner.

"What you been up to then, Nelly?"

"Same old thing really. How about you?"

"Smoking vast expanses of crack, and also stealing crates of spirits from pubs to sell for crack. So, yeah, same old same old."

Nelly and Barnaby cross the street. Bump, bump, bump go Nelly's big elephant feet. They turn the corner and carry on.

"I can smell it from here."

At the end of this road is Crocburger. Crocburger is Barnaby's favorite. As they get closer, the fanged face of Croc Hoskins smiles down at them from the big sign, the neon edge of his top hat flashing on and off with a hot pink buzz. They walk into the drive-thru lane.

"Hello there, can I take your order?" crackled the speaker in the menu sign.

"Hi, can I have one smiley meal please, with an extra small coke?"

"Alllllright. Anything else?"

"Yes, can I have 40 big bite supreme boxes and a barrel of coke please?"

"Oh, hello Mr. Tuskford. We'll bring it out to your table in a moment."

After a few minutes, two members of staff appear with a wheelbarrow full of burgers, and a blue plastic barrel of coke on some trolley wheels. Barnaby grabs his paper bag from the top of the burger pyramid.

"The fries are underneath the burgers, Mr. Tuskford."

"Thanks."

Nelly grabs a burger with his trunk and pops it into his mouth.

"You gonna take the paper off of those, big man?"

"Erm... no."

Nelly then sticks his trunk under the lid of the barrel, and through the plastic Barnaby faintly sees the level decrease by ten inches or so.

"So, the other day right, me and Pete were in the back of that fancy bar in town, The Enclosure. We're loading all these twenty-four boxes of beers bottles into his van." The barrel drops by another ten inches. "We must have put like thirty

boxes in there, right? I go to find the toilet, I open the bloody door to the next room, and it's full of crates of whiskey and vodka and that. So I'm like, for fuck sake, that's worth a lot more. So I show Pete, and we unload the whole fucking van to start again with the crates. Nightmare."

Nelly chuckles at the thought of such a scene, and scoops up five burgers with his trunk.

"Do you wanna buy a crate of whiskey later? It's nice stuff."

"Hmm," *munch-munch*, "I fink so, yerr." He takes another ten-inch sip from the barrel. "I'm really not much of a drinker, but I like a few bottles of whiskey now and then." He grabs another wad of burgers.

"He's a funny bloke, that Pete. I mean, he's sound and that, just he's got no teeth."

"Hno teef?"

"Yeah, he's just all gums."

"You mean he's an ostrich?"

"Nah, he's a ginger cat. He's just got no teeth from smoking crack and he's mental."

"Oh."

"Yeah, he's been to the loony bin and everything. He's all right though."

Nelly shoves a pile of fries in his mouth.

"His mum's got loads of money and that, but she's mental as well."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, he was telling me his grandad had a massive house and owned a big hotel. He sold it all and had a fair bit left to his kids when he died."

munch-munch

"He can play the piano pretty good."

"This Pete guy?"

"Yeah, he used to have lessons when he was a kid. You wouldn't think so to look at him, but yeah. He was playing the

keyboard round our mate Steve's house. He was so pissed he could barely stand up, but he could still play all right."

"That's funny."

"Haha, yeah."

Nelly eats his last two burgers. "I'd like to play an instrument, but I'm not sure I have the perseverance." He finishes the last few inches of coke in the barrel. "Also, I would probably smash them all to pieces by accident."

"Yeah, there is that. You can play the trumpet already though."

"Haha. PROOoooOOOHPH."

"Stay still for a sec." Barnaby hides behind Nelly as he eats his fries, and huffs a rock of crack through a small jar with a tube sticking out of it.

"See, the thing is, I smoke loads of crack. And that's not good." He blew the smoke out. "But that doesn't compare to the evil of Croc Hoskins. This shit here is an illicit habit-forming substance, and he dares smile down at us as he peddles his wares to the enslaved masses."

"He is the master of puppets," replies Nelly as he inhales his final kilogram of fries.

"Fucking delicious bastard."

Nelly stands up and adjusts his coat. "Alrighty."

"You want a box of whiskey then?"

"Yes, yes."

And Nelly and Barnaby stroll back the way they came. Bump, bump, bump go Nelly's big elephant feet.

AN OUTLAW IS LAUGHED OUT
OF TOWN

I reckon things were liable to get hairy, so I made sure to pack a spare six-gun inside my duster with a speed loader loose in my breast pocket. No one would raise an eye at the pistol on my hip, but the teller might not take kindly to the cocked long gun I had tucked in my waistband running down my pants leg. If I didn't have to use it, they'd never know it was there, and I had no intention of using it. Bank robbin' has been a risky business ever since it was a business, but I was outstanding in my field and took precautions. Last dent I pulled, I made sure to get real friendly with the deputy. He was sleeping like a baby with a bottle in his mouth by the afternoon. The sheriff was out breaking up some cattle rustlers in the badlands, so ain't nobody round to say I couldn't rob the place.

From Flagstaff to Prescott, to Phoenix, to Tucson, and now all the way down to the southern Arizonan town of Tubac, I had stuck up every bank that was worth stickin' up on the way down to ol' Mexico. Frankly, I had more than enough loot to make off to some cantina across the border and spend the rest of my days with a pair of señoritas. Now, I ain't conflating the two, but I

had an uncle, a real bronc fighter. He lived at some ranch in Oklahoma as a cowboy breakin' horses in. He told me a couple years before I started making my own luck that he was obsessed with getting tossed by broncos. He never said much else about it, but I reckon it was the thrill of it. Now that I'd pulled guns on lawmen and they'd pulled guns on me, I reckon I feel like how Uncle Dave did gettin' tossed. In the summer of 83, Dave got his chest caved in by a stud that rolled over on its back.

Tubac had a real nice bank for being so close to the border. It was a single-story cream plaster building with orange tile shingles at a nice little pitch to deflect the rain when it came. Inside was just as nice with a bunch of pretty young girls counting money and fiddling with the telegram. One of those pretty girls looked over at me and smiled a big toothy smile.

"Hello, sir," she said politely, "what can I do ya for?"

I approached the booth and folded my arms across the counter. "Missy, what do they call you? You got a name?" I asked.

Her brow gently furrowed. "Why, my name is Ethel," she said.

"Ethel, now that is a lovely name."

Her eyes looked down towards the counter. "Thank you, mister." She paused for a second and looked back up at me. "So, is there anything I can do for you?"

I leaned close to the reed divider that separated us. The bank I hit in Phoenix was real fancy and had bars and glass that caged in the girls. Nothing like that here. "Ethel, I want everything you got in that fuckin' vault, sweetheart."

What little color Ethel had in that sweet face drained until it was white as a cloud. "S-Sir..."

I slid the six-gun from the leather holster I wore low by my side onto the counter. "Eyes on me. Don't look at the guard, sweetheart. You get his attention, and I'll splatter your face

against the ceiling. Play nice, Ethel, and fill up one of those lockboxes.”

I was still talking pleasantly to her. There wasn’t much danger; even if the Pinkerton boy saw what was going on, he wouldn’t shoot. Our sweet Ethel being behind me and all would have put her in the direct crossfire.

She stared at the Colt in my hand, “Sir...” Ethel said again.

“Go on,” I said, pulling back the hammer with my thumb.

Sure as shit, Ethel vanished and reappeared with a sack of loot in her trembling hands. “Easy, girl,” I said to her, “You don’t want any of those girls back there getting hurt now, do you?”

“No sir,” Ethel said, subduing tears.

She filled a tin lockbox with shiny gold coinage, with paper, and whatever else looked valuable she had on the counter within each. She wordlessly shoved the box under the slot of the reed divider and stared at me with wide eyes. My thumb played with the hammer of the Colt, and I leaned in even closer. “You like what you see? That could be you,” I said, winking as I rubbed the top of the hammer in a circular motion. A tear slipped out of her eye and rushed down her pale cheek. “Well, Ethel, I’ll be seeing you,” I said, stealing a glance over my shoulder to check on the guard before I holstered my pistol.

The lockbox felt good and heavy in my palms. Ethel had done good. Giving Ethel one more wink, I turned towards the door, but an impatient little old lady about three heads shorter than I bumped into me. A sudden ringing filled my ears, and the smell of burning flesh filled my nostrils. I looked down towards my leg and saw a piece of fabric on my pants smoldering orange. Blood rushed from my pant leg and I collapsed to the floor. Coins from the lock box exploded onto the floor. All of the girls were screaming.

“He’s got a gun!” I heard the Pinkerton scream. “Gun!”

Sure enough, I did. In fact, I had three, but the guard could

only see the long rifle that evidently severed my lower leg and now protruded out of the scraps of my pant leg.

“Hershel!” The Pinkerton hollered, aiming his gun at me.

“You all right, Virgil?” a frantic voice called.

“I’m good, Hersh, but get in here!” he screamed. “He blew his leg off!”

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A FISHING BOAT

The salt stung strong as it clamped down on the throats of the crew. The air crisp and cold against the shivering February waters. They had woken, debauched and swollen, as they sailed at the crack of dawn, hoping to catch better waves. Better puddles and valleys of shrimp the further adrift towards the sun. The floorboards creaked and groaned. The heavy thundering footsteps of weary bloodshot men moaned in bleary symphony. The salt had stung thick, but it did little to deter their greedy and growling souls. Restless and unforgiving in their hopes of granted bounty for their troubled woes.

The old and weathered men knew their risks. Knew the tale of the luring sea. Knew that as one spent longer on the water, would they sooner submit to the fate of the black abyss below. The slow chug of the motors drew out large lazy ripples of the sun. The rust ran deep past their knuckles. They had only kid themselves to think they wouldn't get swallowed whole.

For the sea was unrelenting.

The net sent, lowered, clunky and large as it sank past the

waterbed. They waited in tired silence. Dreams of nets engorged and bleeding lulled through their minds. Hopes for waves of red and orange flowing the deck with shrimp gnawed at their feet in rapacious eager.

The net came up.

Empty.

Silence held them still for a moment.

With the sputtering tug of the ship, waves of creaking and groaning and muffled moans broke out in unison. The boat started up again. Its humming roared against the waves. Gloom pushed its way past the throats of the crew, making its way heavy, full and fat in their bellies. They would have to go further out. Further out past the rocks. Past a brush with death if they wanted to feed their families plump and bursting with pink shrimp. They only need be willing to wage a bargain and take their heavy chances with misfortune.

The captain howled against the muddy skies. Slammed against the splintering wind. The crew held their ground in anticipation, fear trickling down the nape of their necks. The waves crashed harder and the sea sang louder. Until the vast empty mountains of water gave way to jagged grey clamping teeth. The wind whipped, the ocean roared. Water thrashed and throwed until every passenger left drenched to their bones. Left musty, cold and bloated.

The ship cried out in agony as it slammed amongst another clawed pillar. Jagged, worn and unrelenting in its strength and ferocity. If they could steer past the treacherous waves a little further it would be worth it.

But the sea swallows all that it lures.

They would feel no joy for their pain.

Another crash. Another groan. This time jagged rocks pierced metal. Water drank down the boat. Filling to burst. The crew roared in shame. The rafts thrown out. A flair lit the sky.

With possessions stored and towed to safety, the boat left an empty swollen casket. The waters opened their large welcoming arms. The abyss caressed the rusted tomb to its grave. The sea lures all, and every one of them submitted to its cold unrelenting fate.

A VERY DRAMATIC DRIVE-THROUGH ORDER II

Edwin Dutton was soon to be enjoying his favorite meal from his favorite fast-food restaurant, and God willing, it would be the last time. He ordered a triple patty Bacon Blitzer with a large order of curly fries and a large chocolate shake from the Dallas-based burger joint Tony Tolbert's, the one place you can always go to... Get a sack!

"Thank you, have a nice day, sir," a young woman said with a soft Southern drawl as she handed Edwin a sack of grub.

"Yup," Edwin quickly replied. His paw snatched the warm food, and his car was rolling away before his arm was back inside. Not one to risk stuffing himself while he drove, Edwin rode the throttle of his car into a parking spot straight ahead of the drive-through lane and shifted into park. He left the motor running with the air conditioner on full blast, but the window remained cracked for fresh air, of course.

Edwin Dutton fished a few of the golden curly fries from the bag, which rebounded like greasy springs before he slipped them into his mouth. With his other hand, he adjusted the radio to 105.3 THE FAN. There wasn't a more bliss experience to Edwin than this; fast-food and football, and boy were the

Cowboys looking good this year. Sure, the previous year they were 8-8, but quarterback Dak Prescott looked like he was hitting his stride as a passer, and nothing could stop them this year! Edwin listened and nodded in agreement with the sports radio pundits as he smacked on the curly fries. This would be the last time.

A month prior, Frank Dutton, Edwin's father, died of a massive heart attack. The doctor said that Frank was probably dead before he hit the floor. His father's massive heart attack had been brought on by his massive weight, which had been brought on by the massive consumption of Tony Tolbert's, which had been a tradition before Cowboy games for the better part of twenty years.

They buried Frank under an August sun, and the pallbearers were all red in the face and drenched with sweat. Edwin knew what they were thinking. More than likely, they'd end up having to heft him up on their shoulders, and it would be sooner than later. Like father, like son.

After the service, once the dirt filled in his father's grave, Edwin vowed in a moment of clarity that he wouldn't go out the same way. Everything seemed to make so much sense, and his resolve was unbending. He'd just get Tony Tolbert's one last time, for his dad. But one last time turned into several one last times, and a month later, Edwin was in the drive through at least five days a week.

The Bacon Blitzzer was now out of the bag and warmly resting on Edwin's thighs, though still wrapped in the sandwich paper. As he finished the rest of the curly fries and discarded the bag under his seat, he reached out towards the cup holder without looking over. Empty. His eyes glanced down and then over to the passenger seat. Empty.

Edwin wasn't a picky eater, but he'd established a routine to eating: fries, milkshake, burger. It had been like that since before Frank died, and so it had to be like that. He moved the

hamburger to the passenger seat and reversed the car out of park and filed back into the drive-through.

“People these days! Can’t even get your order right,” Edwin said, shaking his head. He found himself at the end of the line that extended around Tony Tolbert’s. By his measure, it would take a good ten minutes in the drive-through queue. Unacceptable.

Heat waves rolled off the hood of Edwin’s car. Slowly, all the vehicles lurched forward, inching towards the drive-through speaker. Maybe if he chewed out the young woman that handed off his food, they would just bring it out to him instead of having to wait to get to the window. He hadn’t gotten a receipt. Maybe he forgot to order the shake? No, nonsense! Certainly when they saw his car back in line, they would know something was wrong. Edwin was a regular, and they would know that they had botched his order.

Bet the shake is just sittin’ on the counter next to the window. Bet they feel real stupid, Edwin thought. The shake would be soupy, it would be runny. He would demonstrate to the woman her error and remove the lid from the cup and hold it upside down... But that would be wasteful—perhaps he could have two? Edwin was in a caloric trance.

A child in front of his car snapped him out of it. His eyes tracked the young boy as he ran across the hot, wavy blacktop and towards Tony Tolbert’s. Edwin noticed that as the boy ran, he held the bottom of his shirt down. Edwin remembered running the same way as a kid. It was to keep his stomach from poking out and to keep his breasts from bouncing. As an adult, though he didn’t run, he was suddenly aware of the weight his body carried. He was aware of the folds and pockets and rashes his body now had, and of the vow that he’d made after Frank died. The vow that he’d broken many times over. That thought made him tighten his grip on his steering wheel. Soon, the boy disappeared inside. His parents schlepped along behind them.

They looked hot, and they looked uncomfortable. And their son, at such a young age, already harboring insecurities that Edwin never grew out of.

Just if I had another chance, Edwin thought, his eyes glazed over. His nostrils flared and his chest rose as he breathed deeply. He looked at the burger next to him. *I can still change*.

In front of him, the line of cars lurched forward. After a pause, Edwin followed.

Like father, like son.

THE DAILY LIFE OF A JAPANESE
COMPANY MAN

*H*e pulled the trigger, and it felt ephemeral.

He could see his dead body, but the more he looked at it, the more indifferent became that putrid envelope that was gradually fading away. Disintegrating, while his whole being melted into black.

When the darkness—at last—took over his universe, he contemplated the emptiness. And he felt happy, for the first time in a long time.

Overtime and pay cuts are over. The screams of his wife and the inquisitive glances of his companions were a things of the past. They no longer echoed in his brain.

By a quirk of fate, the peace he had sought so much in life could only be found after his death.

Formless, he smiled. Or, at least, he thought he did.

Wrapped in such thoughts, he cared little or nothing if he had to spend a million years submerged in the deepest of silences. He was one with the abyss... But, to his misfortune, that union would not hesitate for long.

From one moment to the next, the poor devil was sucked by an inexplicable force that, for no apparent reason, dragged him

far, far away from the eternal void. Guiding him towards a mysterious light, whose origin seemed to go back to the beginning of time.

At first, the man tried to resist. Clinging to the nothingness with the memory of his former members. When the wretch realized that his body had completely abandoned him, he wanted to cry. But his eyes were a thing of another time.

Defeated, he was forced to abandon any kind of resistance. Resigning himself to be dragged into that enigmatic light that slowly consuming everything around him. Transforming the surroundings of his non-existence into what can only be described as an endless tunnel of fire.

As the darkness dissipated, out of the incandescence, voices from another time began to emerge. The suicidal could not understand what they were saying. Nor could he remember having heard them before. But there was something about them that he found strangely comforting.

In his delirium, the unfortunate thought he heard things like: "Calm down; take a deep breath; you're doing it right; you have nothing to worry about."

As the words became more intelligible, little by little, the man began to relax. The tunnel became narrower and narrower. The darkness, finally, was evaporating.

When the poor man began to decipher the whole of the sentences, the darkness had completely disappeared. Light was nowhere and, at the same time, it was everywhere.

When he woke up, he realized that the hospital lights were pointed directly at his eyes. With difficulty, he looked away. His eyes hurt. His head was spinning round and round. His whole being felt like a useless piece of shit but, in general lines, he could still make out what was cooking in the horizon.

Around him, a man dressed as a doctor was reviewing what appeared to be a medical file. Unconcernedly, a couple of nurses were whispering to each other. Everything seemed relatively

normal until the poor bastard noticed the bulge growing out of his navel...

And his eyes fixed on the stupid face of his new father; in the retarded glances of the nurses; in the stilted smile of his new mother.

When his feeble ears heard the doctor's routine congratulations to his new parents, the reborn frowned...

And began to cry.

A FORMER VIRAL STAR STRUGGLES
TO EXTEND THEIR 15 MINUTES
OF FAME

Aiden unlocked the screen. It said 14:47—eight hours of sleep. He didn't remember when exactly he had stopped coming up with sketch ideas and gone to bed. Worse still, he didn't remember any of the sketches being funny, but he really wanted to post something to his Quikie today. He hadn't uploaded in twenty-five days, and not uploading for a long time was dangerous. The Quikie algorithm rewarded uploading frequently, and he remembered his stats from last night—they weren't looking too good.

He figured that it was best to record a new sketch today. He opened Notes, and last night's list appeared. As he remembered, none of the ideas were funny.

- When your friend says he doesn't want fries but eats them all on the way home.
- White dads when they see black people playing basketball
- Explaining to your mom that you and a girl are really just friends

Aiden was unsatisfied with these sketch ideas, but the sense of urgency and pressure to make content bothered him too much for him to scrap them all. “Shit, I guess I’m gonna make the fries sketch,” Aiden mumbled to himself, and he started on the script.

The pressure of writing a good sketch to give his Quikie account a necessary boost overtook him. It blocked his thought process and he spent more time distracting himself than writing. He only managed to get the script done by about half past seven. He knew it wasn’t the best or longest script, but he rolled with it.

The Quikie sketch involved a friend, so Aiden looked for actors to play that friend. He opened his contact list and quickly realised that most of his friends weren’t in LA but at the convention in Austin. He did have one friend back in LA though, his buddy Carlos. Aiden might be able to record with him. He selected Carlos from his contact list, and after a couple seconds, Carlos picked up.

“Hey, my man, Carlos. What’s up?”

“I’m just chilling, dude. How’re you, man?”

“Yeah I’m fine. I was thinking we can collab or something, you know? I have this great video idea. It’ll—”

“Ah, shit. Sorry my dude but I’m... you know, like super busy right now. Maybe we can collab later?”

“Ai-Aight, sure thing. See you later.”

“Aight.”

Aiden understood. Carlos saw no benefit in collabing with Aiden and had decided to abandon him. *I’ll show that fucking snake*, he thought.

After scrolling some more through his contact list, he realised there was no one to record the Quikie with and decided to film alone. He consoled himself by thinking that at least the shittiness to filming the sketch alone would make it funny, and he pressed on.

Later, Aiden arrived at the McDonalds, got his fries, then stopped in the enormous parking lot. He now faced the question of how to record his sketch. After some thinking, he settled on recording the sketch line-to-line while alternating seats, then editing the lines together.

He got into the driver's seat and leaned back, then started the recording. "Hey man, could you pass me the fries?"

He got into the back seat. "No, we'll eat when we get home."

"Why not now? Did you eat the fries already?"

After uttering that line, Aiden nearly broke down. He really wanted to abandon this terribly dull Quikie. But he recalled looking at his analytics yesterday. They were hardly impressive. His follower count had plateaued just below the 700,000 mark weeks ago. Lately he seemed to get no new followers at all. The stagnation wasn't just present in his subscriber count either. His recent Quikies had low engagement across the board.

"Maybe uploading again could reverse the trend," he said to himself, knowing it wasn't true. He had no other choice. He put the fries in his mouth and carried on.

"No, I—" and he burst into laughter, some of the fries launching from his mouth. Was it the tension that had built up and forced a reaction? Was the line actually funny to him? Was he just laughing at the absurdity of the situation? He wasn't sure. He tried again, but he didn't succeed. He failed the third time too. After composing himself a bit, he said, "No, I didn't," with a straight face. He then tacked a punchline onto the sketch, and he was done recording. Aiden checked again that it was filmed right and felt relieved when it was. He could leave the dreadful parking lot.

It was about 9 o'clock when he got back from filming. He decided to rest for thirty minutes. Then he grabbed his laptop right away and got on the couch. Despite how bad Aiden thought the premise of his sketch was, he couldn't help but feel that the execution wasn't too bad. And he felt that, perhaps, this

wasn't going to turn him into the laughing stock of Quikie—though, being a laughing stock would at least make his fame come back briefly.

The editing process went without a hitch, and he almost enjoyed it. At half past 1, he was finished. He felt somewhat content with himself but also exhausted from all the work he did that day. So he decided to go to bed and discover the fruits of his labour the next day.

The following morning, Aiden woke up, unlocked his phone screen, and opened Quikie. His fries sketch barely got any views. He read some of the comments then shrugged back into his sheets and regretted ever feeling good about himself.

SOMETIMES, DOING THE EXACT
OPPOSITE IS THE ANSWER

She buried the proof in a pile of leaves, desperate to erase the evidence from her troubled, weary mind. She hadn't meant to, not really. But perhaps in the back of her sunken, depraved brain, it was what she had wanted.

The lump, now tucked neat and tidy and away, sat beneath her feet. It gleamed back at her shamed eyes. The pile looked a little too orderly for her liking. A mound of organized debris would draw more attention than intended. With breaths laboured and fearful, a brisk glance and sharp looks, she bent down. Two clammy, trembling hands shoved deep in the dirt. She gagged at the grimy slick muck which tugged at her senses. Arms soon pulled back, textured and stained black and brown. A putrid fume hung over the air around her. Standing upright, she admired her work.

Now the leaves looked perfect. Ruffled, loose. They looked back up at her as if to scream that, yes, they were regularly frequented by nature and undisturbed by humans, how could you tell?

With washed-out eyes, she surveyed the rest of the backyard as she made her way out. Brambled bushes lined the fence

behind her. It wasn't until she found herself halfway through the yard that she caught the gaze of a neighbor.

A much too curious and over-eager neighbor.

Miss Frindlebottom was a large lady with a large booming voice to match. Currently she sat, hard at work, tending her tomato garden. Or, she had been, until she caught sight of the frazzled girl whose hair was littered with twigs.

"And what might you be up to?" Miss Frindlebottom asked, nose held high and unrelenting. "You've gone and mucked up your dress. Does your mother know you're out here?"

Pale with fright, the girl stepped back at the implication of her mother. Steel eyes looked over her small frail frame with discrete indignation. "No doubt you'll be set straight once she's seen the mess you've made," Miss Frindlebottom sniffed, head lifted higher, nose pointed higher. "Better get cleaned up before she sees."

Anger began to welt at her skin, bruised purple and bright with shame.

She never did like Miss Frindlebottom. Neither her nosey indignation nor snide judgment, but most of all the perverse pleasure of authority she clawed after. Though the other two were close contenders.

As quick as fear had swallowed her, it spat itself out. Wrenched itself from her bowels, leaving the little girl covered in sticks and mud with a bright red face. Heated and angry. Her fists clenched as the fury boiled from the bottom of her belly.

Who was Miss Frindlebottom to tell her mother what she had been up to? Who was anyone to say what she had done? Accuse her for doing wrong?

She'd done nothing wrong. Only what she had wanted. Her reaction at the time might have left her scared and confused. But she knew better now. Was better now.

As the steam rose and the bubbles boiled over, she found her

resolve. No longer ashamed, she took a step forward, head held high. Eyes unabating. A promise. A threat.

“You’ll be next.”

Miss Frindlebottom met her gaze with frightened confusion. Then, after a moment, shook her head whilst making a *tut-tut* sound as she busied back to the tomato garden. The girl made her way inside to watch some television. The strangled rabbit a mess in the bushes.

SANTA'S SLEIGH ENTERS A NO-FLY
ZONE AND IS SHOT DOWN DEEP
BEHIND ENEMY LINES

*H*e should've been dead or at least mortally wounded, but when Santa came to, all he felt was a vague sense of confusion, as if he overslept on a subway and woke up at the wrong station.

"Well, I'll be damned... Jango! Looks like he's gonna make it!"

After confusion left his eyes, Santa saw a shirtless man sitting cross-legged on the desert floor. His curly white hair glowed with the same hue as the moonlight illuminating the cloudless night sky.

"See? I told you he'd make it through." A different voice came from Santa's left. Another shirtless man with short hair was rummaging through Santa's sack. He made a quick movement to stop him but found he was standing with his back to a pole, his arms and legs bound.

"What do you think you're doing?" Santa roared. "Those are precious Christmas presents for the good boys and girls. Put tha—"

"We know what they are, Santa. Jango is taking real good care of your presents, aren't you, Jango?"

"That's right, Jocko," the man said, still opening up boxes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Santa asked indignantly.

"Come on, old man. Don't play a fool. We knew you delivered toys, but who would've thought Santa was keepin' the really good gifts to himself?"

Santa was quiet.

"I mean," the man continued, "there's enough cocaine here to make it snow year round. Gives a whole new meaning to 'White Christmas', don't it, Jango?"

"It sure does, Jocko," the other man said, still going through his stuff.

"And that's not all we've found. What else we got, Jango?"

"Molly. Percocet. Weed. Xannies. And a whole lotta cash in different currencies."

"Goddamn Santa... are you wrappin' or rappin'? Hahahaha! You like that one, Jango?"

"That sure is clever, Jocko."

Jocko was slapping his knee and laughing uncontrollably. "Hahaha! Santa! When you said 'girls' and 'boys', were you talkin' about Casey and Harry or cocaine and heroin? Hahaha! Jango! I'm on a roll!"

"You sure are rollin', Jocko."

"So, Santa," he began seriously, "help us understand something. Jango here has it that you've been flying around all night moving product and taking a nice chunk of change as a service fee. Now, I think that's an obvious conclusion given this here evidence. I mean, we shot you out the sky from just outside Sin City. There ain't nothin' in this area but titties and test tubes."

"And sand," added Jango.

"Well, I suppose there's that too, but I doubt he would come here for the shit version of snow. I figure you're not only moving the stuff, but using it too. A drug dealer that doesn't test his inventory is like a butcher that don't eat meat."

Santa remained quiet.

"And by using, I ain't just talking drugs." Jocko pointed his bony finger at Santa. "You like to get your dick wet, don't you Santa? Hell, you probably get tired of deckin' Mrs. Claus' dusty-ass halls 364 days a year that you feel a young piece of ass is well deserved. I know I would."

"I wouldn't," said Jango. "Wouldn't be honorable." He stopped looking through the sack and sat down next to his brother. Santa noticed his feet shifted soundlessly in the sand.

"Well, you aren't as human as the rest of us, brother. But Santa knows what I'm talking about, don't you Santa?"

Santa had begun to slip his hands out of the rope. He could feel the Glock he kept for sticky situations like these hidden in his right boot. He needed to buy some time. "Who are you boys?"

"We're some of your biggest fans, aren't we Jango?"

"Were some of his biggest fans," corrected Jango.

"I stand corrected. We were some of your biggest fans. You see, when we were younger, we wrote a letter every year, usually just asking for water or warm blankets because it gets real cold in the desert and water is hard to come by. But you never did come, Santa. Why do you think that is, Jango?"

"Well, Jocko, I suppose it's because we were homeless. We didn't have a chimney, let alone an address. He probably didn't get the letters we buried in the sand, either."

"Hmm... logical as always, Jango. But I figure the benevolent ol' Saint Nick wouldn't let something like that stop him from helping a pair of homeless children, would it Santa?"

Santa played along. "Maybe it's because you were naughty children. Tying me up like this sure isn't nice."

"Well, you're not wrong there, Santa. After we grew a little, we realized you were never coming. And if you weren't going to help us, well, we were just gonna have to help ourselves. But here you are now, and I'm gettin' to thinkin'..."

"What are you thinking, brother?" asked Jango.

“Brother, I’m thinking hell, maybe *I* could be Santa. I mean, the reindeer aren’t gonna do much flying being dead and all, but I figure I’ll just walk the earth handing out gifts.”

Santa burst out laughing. “Hahaha! Young man, you couldn’t be Santa even if you legally changed your name. Look at you. Who would believe such a skinny stick like you could be jolly Saint Nick?” His hands were almost free. “You must be blind! Hahaha!”

Finishing his staged guffaw, Santa felt the air shift.

“Well it’s funny you say that...” said Jocko.

Santa felt the night go dark, as if the moonlight was dimming.

“W-what the hell?” Santa’s body convulsed. His vision started to fade. All he could see was a figure coming towards him, like a train slowly pulling in a tunnel. The figure’s face met Santa’s. His eyes had no whites, just two dusty sand-colored marbles. He couldn’t avert his eyes. He felt stranded in a duneless wasteland, oppressed by a heavy sun. The heat had seeped into his pupils and burned within. He tried to scream, but his throat was rough as sandpaper. There was no death, only suffering.

A BOUNCER AT A BUSY NIGHTCLUB
HAS AN UNUSUAL NIGHT

“*I*D,” he says, more muscle memory than conscious effort. He looks more at the person handing it to him than the date on the laminated card anymore. Red dreads and some heavily cut yeyo in his pants, judging by how runny and red his nose is. “All right, step through metal detector. You will be able to pay the door fee after.”

He’s been working this job and jobs like it for the past five years. At first he found it enjoyable; there were plenty of opportunities to expand his social network. In some ways, the job itself could be held accountable for how outgoing and confident he had grown to be. On his birthday about six months ago, he decided he would try a year sober.

It had been an enlightening period so far, but not particularly enjoyable. He quickly discovered many of his friends from the past five years were little more than bar acquaintances and drug addicts. The time he used to love at his job started to be stretched by repetition and mediocrity. Each shift feeling longer than the last.

“ID,” as Tarquin’s Hyperglycemia blasted through the doors to the club. Black hair, a crop top and a choker. All these outfits

blend together. "Step through the metal detector. You can pay your door fee after."

He forgot why he got sober, sometimes. Then he thinks of the stick-and-poke tattoo on his pelvis that says "EMILY WAS HERE" next to a red heart. A permanent mark from what he hoped to be the last in a long line of terrible relationships with alcoholic, schizophrenic women. The relationships were more of a side effect than a cause of his bottle-to-mouth lifestyle. Spending so much time under the influence seems to have left his brain emotionally catatonic. He hopes it will go away someday.

"ID." He looks up and almost as if his thoughts had conjured her, Emily is standing right there. She looks at him desperately; he looks right through her. "Step through the metal detector. You can pay your door fee on the other side."

"I've been doing better since I moved out and taking care of myself. I need to talk to you about something," she says.

"Step through the metal detector please," he says, and she does.

He asks himself why he has kept this job. So often it is a constant parade of ghosts from his former life. He is a creature of habit, though, even if he has left his habits behind.

As the night drags along, he and his coworker have to break up one fight, and throw out two drunkards for throwing up. That's about par for course for a Friday night though. Closing time is finally here and it's time to clean up.

One of the bartenders finds someone cold and blue on a couch in the back in the club. The doctors will later say she had cocaine and fentanyl in their blood. He sees that it's Emily and he feels very little. He wonders what she wanted to talk about, but not with much conviction. Would he have always reacted this way? Was he built to feel like a numb bastard, or did his decisions turn him into one? He doesn't believe the answer will offer any closure.

A COCKROACH WISHES TO BECOME
HUMAN

Zgnytny grazed his antenna against the rough edge of the paper. “My love, my love, my love,” he whispered in his tiny ultrasonic voice. “Today is not just another day my love, my true love.” His life was a teeter-totter, impending death on one seat and infinite largesse on the other, a hoard of crushed husks that had been his relatives among piles of moldy Oreos, pizza crusts and sugary liquid.

He pulled his foreleg against the paperback’s binding. The light of the room shifted and he froze, sniffing the air. The mist of rotten food stirred around a ribbon of aerosolized semen. Zgnytny tasted the huge sour breath oozing through the bookshelf. His envy surged blood through his shiny pronotum. The obese shadow receded among booming footfalls.

Zgnytny sighed and craned his head towards the yawning room. “My love, my truth, my savior,” he creaked. “I must explore you. Forgive my impatience.” He gripped the yellowing spine and pulled himself upward with a dry ripping noise. The room shuddered into life. The air resonated a cacophony of odors and motion. A flash of light, a stinking shadow and then

Zgnytny fell towards oblivion. He landed on his back and blinked out of consciousness.

Gregory inspected the book in his left hand, a greasy controller in his right. "Someday I'm going to turn into a fucking roach."

A POLITICIAN FANTASIZES ABOUT
WORLD DOMINATION

“*M*y rule will be brilliant. Like a flash of lighting, I’ll conquer the entire earth. My armies will swarm out in the motion of a hurricane and swallow all that comes before them. The magnificence of my strategic mind will guide my generals to victory against China, Russia, and America. With them gone, nothing will stand in front of my power, not even Finland. Many might die, but it’s fine as long as it doesn’t damage my voting base. Hehe, it’s perfect. My voters will increase proportionately while the opposition’s die for my glory. Then, when all the oceans and the lands bow before me, I’ll declare myself emperor of the world, the first of my kind.

Or, there’s the subversive option, but that isn’t grand at all. Oh, how disheartening it would have to be to lurk in the shadows, pulling the strings of paper mâché representatives of the multitudes. What’s the point, if not my own glory? I haven’t an agenda to achieve. I desire the Earth for glory!

But then, even worse, the hated economic route is available. I could squirm my way into international trade and manipulate the world economy to my whims, but to what end?

No, none of that is any good.

I've got it! The ultimate option. With my political influence I will gain a stranglehold over all the world's shipyards. Then, my commandos will destroy all the cargo ships in their ports, putting a cork into the bottleneck of international shipping. Planes will never be enough to move all those goods around. Thus, the entire world shall beg for my shipyards to produce cargo ships, but I won't. Not until the world grants me the power and glory I crave. First one nation will starve and beg, then they will make me king, then another, and I will enforce my rule on resisting nations with the power of the earlier and most loyal nation's combined military might and my economic stranglehold. Hahahaha HAHAAHAHA! Oh, my glory shall be known forever. I'll be greater than the Great Khan!"

"Your magnificence, there's a phone call here."

"Thank you, Bridgett," I told my campaign manager.

"Yes, this is Thomas."

"Congratulations Mr. Thomas, you've been elected to the Tipperary City Council."

"Hehe, all according to plan."

A BOUTIQUE PERFUME DESIGNER
NEEDS A BREAK

Catherine, Rose, Therese, Philomena. She sits at her work bench—her husband had been the first to call the black Ikea desk that, and she'd caught on—and stares into their incomprehensible amber innards. Bridget, Abigail, Josephine. A bold move in today's political climate, launching a line of fragrances based on Christian saints. There were corresponding scents planned for men, most of them vaguely homoerotic; like Sergius and Bacchus, or the inevitable Sebastian. But only women fall into her realm, and, although the whole project reeks to her of a declining company's tacky desperation, she's done her due diligence. There are twenty tabs relating to these mystical women open on her computer at any given time, which frustrates her tech-savvy son to no end. "What the hell's all this, Mom?" he chides every time he leaves his office at PC Matic for his quarterly inspection of the family's electronics. Inspiration, is what she'll tell him. She laughs, shakes her head, and kneads her eye sockets with the heels of her hands. She picks up an Abigail, still in its generic 12ml glass vial like all the others, and swallows the contents all at once.

It's more bitter than she'd imagined. She gags, retches,

scrubs her lips and tongue with her sleeve. Propolis and heather explode around her. Abigail is the name of her daughter, and she'd immediately thought of sweet pastries, something like a medieval Irish birthday party, if such a thing had ever existed. Honey was only natural for this saint with a penchant for beekeeping, but she'd also wanted an underbelly of milk. She'd wavered for weeks between milk lactone and peach lactone; she'd even created a spreadsheet to track the exact quantities of each in two evolving batches of an otherwise identical formulation, and after all this she can't detect milk at all. Abigail doesn't eat pastries anymore either. Abigail owns three Fitbits, wears Burberry Sport, and is married to a cardiologist in California. She spits out a string of drool, and knocks back a Josephine.

This one's just as bitter, and she wonders how much perfumer's alcohol one would need to consume in order to suffer permanent ill effects. Perhaps she should've looked this up on the Internet beforehand. It seems cruel, this denaturing of ethanol with toxic and unpalatable additives to prevent recreational use—after all, who are we to judge another's vices—cruel like the scarification that poor Josephine Bakhita had undergone. There had been some discussion on omitting potentially controversial saints from the collection (Kateri Tekakwitha, while conceptually interesting, might raise accusations of colonialism and cultural appropriation, and even someone entirely uninformed on contemporary issues could see that Agnes would be in poor taste), but Josephine's slavery and emancipation were deemed benign enough to stay. She recalled she'd had trouble sourcing the African hyraceum for this one, as there were many poor quality products on the market, and she'd fought with her superiors to let her have the good stuff, the good rock hyrax piss. She bursts out laughing, downs a bombastic Catherine, and vomits.

Beneath the top notes of gastric secretions, Irish heather and African myrrh blend languidly with neoclassical orris and

myrtle. She drinks a Therese chased with a Rose and vomits twice in rapid succession, adding heart notes of Indian chai and a base of Peruvian balsam. It occurs to her that she's made her way through four continents and about 250 dollars. But her voyage has made her sleepy, and her intercostal muscles are starting to cramp. An austere Bridget slips through her fingers. She lets her head sink down onto the Ikea work bench and laps at the contents, watching the marbling of vomit and ethanol out of the corner of her eye.

In an hour's time, her husband will come home from work. She debates whether he will weep when he finds his silly, drooling little wife. Her experiences within and without their twelve years of marriage tell her that he most likely will. He will also demand answers, probably in the interim between lifting her out of her vomit and calling the ambulance. He'll shout at her, and she'll be a little frightened, but really, when was the last time she felt frightened of him? She has no real reason to think so—he'd been kind, and she placid—but she's certain, somehow, that her mother had been afraid of her father.

Regardless, the ambulance will come, and the paramedics will prize her out of whatever domestic awkwardness might ensue. Perhaps her arrival at the ER might even jolt some boy-faced intern out of his chronic fatigue. Surely she'll have an impression on him, she thinks, surely she'll be enfleuraged in his psychic tallow as the Lady of a Thousand Botanicals, or something equally romantic. "It was a stupid thing to do," he'll tell his girlfriend's parents over Bud Lights and grilled hotdogs, "but she'll live." And he'll laugh with all the gravity afforded to him by their daughter's love for medical dramas.

She stretches, somnolent and satisfied, and, like a dark continent, awaits discovery.

