

Nocturne

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Table of Contents

Art

St. Agnus by E.E. King.....	37
Welcome to the Funhouse by Mark Slauter.....	99

Fiction

Emptynesters by Emily delaCruz.....	9
The Water Jar by Kemal Onor.....	29
The Hidden Women by Ellen Meny.....	38
Fortunate Son by Aaron Menzel.....	72
The Teddy Thing by John WM Thompson.....	77
Spinal Seeds by Josh Sippie.....	95
House Hunting by Kathryn Ordiway.....	100
Eros + Ions by Pascale Potvin.....	119
Reawakenings by Arlen Feldman.....	121
As Long as She Remains by Chuck Augello.....	151

Poetry

For a Delirious Child by Judith Skillman.....	26
Denial is a Simple Matter of Tuberculosis by David Arroyo.....	36
3:37 a.m. by Chris A. Smith.....	149

Emptynesters

Emily delaCruz

The Smiths exit the interstate. They follow county roads through smaller and smaller towns until there is no civilization left and the land falls away at broken cliffs.

"Oh my god," Betty says to Walt. "What is this?"

"Well, Betty, this is the Pacific."

Betty lightly punches Walt's shoulder. He's driving. She's passenger. Along the horizon, gray water disappears into gray sky, every vista an inverted soup bowl. Clotted clouds shrink the sun to a hide-and-seek marble.

"Seriously. Did you think the ocean would be so . . . cold?"

"Sure it's cold. It's big. Huge. It stretches from here to the other side of the world," Walt says, waving vaguely, unperturbed by the gloom.

Betty can feel the weight of Walt's side-eyed regard, his anticipation of her reaction. She wants to rise to the moment and say, Yes, Walt, I do love the ocean! Just as you said I would. Thank you for bringing me. I've waited my whole landlocked life for this.

Instead, she says, "Please don't ask me how I feel yet," and closes her eyes.

"Alright, Bets."

The valley where they camped the previous night had pulsed with unseasonable heat and wine-drunk tourists when they set out for the coast, but ever since they departed the interstate, nothing had been as Betty imagined: no blue sky, no white sand, no palm trees, no people. She hadn't expected a crowd so late in the season, but this rim of land is deserted and unwelcoming.

She grips the armrests, queasy, hoping for carsickness, suspecting vertigo.

She knows that Walt knows. That's the way it is in a long marriage.

The road to the campground wanders. Behind the Smiths' truck rumbles their new camper in which everything has been miniaturized—from the two-person table to the single-burner stove with a tiny kettle to the curved elfin door with a porthole window covered by a gingham curtain—although the couch is its most delightful curiosity. Taking up the back end of the camper, by day the couch is neat and prim but at night unfolds into the smallest bed that Betty and Walt have ever shared. At home, they sleep in a king-sized bed, oceanic so they can sprawl without ever touching while tides of pillows wash up from their sea of sheets. On the camper's sparse couch-bed

they curl together, two wrinkled cashews under a thin wool blanket, their feet and their hands and the pale sagging bits of their underarms meeting the sharp edges of each other's elbows and knees in the night.

When Betty opens her eyes again she is staring at the sun.

Don't look at the sun, she scolded Henry when he was little. This sun is harmless. Far and cold. No danger at all, drained of its power by the ghosting fog. Betty thinks petulantly that she doesn't want fog and a harmless sun. She wants powder-sugar beaches, cotton-candy sunsets, a nuclear green margarita, a blazing sunburn on her shoulders.

On the first day of their trip, passing harvested cornfields under circles of wheeling blackbirds, Betty had said to Walt, "It was a beautiful wedding, wasn't it?"

Walt said, "Yup."

She said, "Henry looked happy, didn't he?"

"Yup."

Then, finding Walt's tone to be an opening, Betty assessed details of the wedding from the taco bar—"I can't even imagine starting a cruise with a stomach full of beans!"—to the bridesmaids' dresses—"And why-oh-why pair cowboy boots with a chiffon dress?"—to the wildflower bunches in mason jars—"Apparently, organic means watch out for bees."

When she finally grew breathless over the cost of the open bar, Walt said, "Let's not talk about the wedding anymore, okay, Bets?"

"Well, I—," Betty said, then stopped, stung. Until that moment she had assumed she and Walt would remain companions in opposition to Henry's marriage.

"Walt!" Betty said, recovering from the reproach. "He's so young. He barely even knows her."

"Yup," Walt said. He kept his eyes on the road unspooling beneath their tires.

"Oh, I wish we'd never left home. What if he needs us?"

Walt sighed. "Then he'll call us, Betty. He'll call us." He paused. "No more talk about it. I'm done."

After that, Betty and Walt fell into a routine of waking, breaking camp, driving to a new site, napping, sitting by a fire, then going to sleep with the moonrise, drowsy and fluid. Moving from campground to campground steadily westward, they quickly discovered that they had very little to say to each other if the subject of Henry was forbidden. Betty wondered, early on in the trip, if she might miss her home, the bright leaves falling, the reaping bonfires burning. Eventually, road-lulled, she began to realize rather that she might like never to return home at all.

Home where Henry's empty bedroom waits with his discarded childhood flotsam.

Home where Walt's long retirement stretches in front of them.

Home where Betty has empty birthdays and joyless holidays to plan.

Betty and Walt don't speak as the cliffside road narrows to a single lane then dissolves to a dead end at the campground entrance.

"So here we are," Walt says, gravel clattering.

"Wow," Betty says. "Why did you pick this? It's so far from everything." Even to herself she sounds disappointed. The campground is simple—bare dirt and a pit bathroom. On three sides coastal pines cower from the constant onshore wind. The fourth side is exposed. Packed dirt disintegrating into sand dunes disappearing into the surfline.

"I wanted to find a place where we could really see the night sky. You know, a dark place. Far from city lights," Walt says. The truck engine pings dissonantly as if cooling grudgingly under lowering skies. He continues after a moment, "But I don't think we'll see much of anything tonight."

While Walt pays for two nights by dropping money into a metal box attached to a bulletin board, Betty studies the official signs reminding them of campfire safety and crumb abatement.

Stapled paper corners are all that remains of older flyers torn away.

Of the four campsites here only one other is occupied. There is a whiff of neglect: scattered campfire ashes, drab corduroy pants drooping over a clothesline, a deflating yellow dome tent. Betty and Walt select the site farthest away from it.

He's just waiting for me to crack, Betty thinks and forces a smile. *I won't. I won't.*

Unhooking their camper and setting up camp requires only a minimum of conversation. Then the Smiths follow a narrow path through the dunes to the beach. Planted in the sand is a sign.

Dangerous Surf/Surfing

Swimming, Wading Prohibited

Shark Area

Strong Undertows, Currents

Sneaker Waves

Enter At Your Own Risk

I won't. I won't.

“Whelp, that sounds pleasant,” Walt says and walks to the tideline, stopping to test the water temperature with his fingertips. He doesn’t seem to mind that Betty isn’t walking beside him. She sits on a spine of boulder jutting from the sand. Just offshore a massive wing of rock the size of a house rises out of the ocean. The waves split against it. A grove of bent trees grips the top, arrow-sharp waterbirds huddling in their branches. Midway up the rock is a long vertical fissure like a scab. Betty sees movement inside the darkness of the fissure.

Birds, she thinks. Birds in a cave. How much tenacity a living thing must possess to survive here! Gross.

When Henry was very young they took their first family camping trip to a lake in a northern forest. Betty soaked her son in layers of aerosol sunscreen and bug spray. She watched him swim in the placid water, pacing the shore, worrying about cramps and infections and floating hypodermic needles. She followed Henry to the public restroom and stood outside the door, sure a flasher, or worse, always worse, hid inside. Later, back at home, Walt confided that she had nearly ruined the vacation with her constant worrying. Much later she read that aerosol sunscreen was poisonous to children’s lungs and she felt she had failed Henry.

As newlyweds, the Smiths had fantasized a houseful of children, but Betty’s pregnancy with Henry had been so troublesome that she wouldn’t bear a second child. She hadn’t been too old or too narrow or too frail, instead she had struggled

each moment of the pregnancy with a terrible creeping anxiety. Would the baby be stillborn? Ill? Would she drop him? Forget him? Someday back the car down the driveway and crush him?

When she finally gave birth, from behind a claret curtain of pain and fear, she looked to Walt for support but, it seemed to her, that the delivery room was peopled with strangers, each shrouded—blue gloves, white gowns, flashing goggles—as though in anticipation of her messy rupture. The only difference between these alien strangers was the small stretch of their pants, peeking below the hem of their gowns. Looking down at those hems to find Walt, Betty's gaze landed upon a large plain mirror set up by her stirrups. She hadn't wanted the mirror, had even been a little revolted when the nurse suggested seeing her own body opening to reveal another body inside. But once Betty looked into the mirror, she couldn't look away. She'd never seen herself from that strange angle and she wasn't sure if it was the mirror or the horrible magic of childbirth, but, in that final pushing moment, she had seen her body as a cave and something essentially *her* was slipping away, even as the startled baby emerged.

Ever after, Betty avoided thinking about the mirror, even in a glancing way. She tucked the memory deep. Soon she gave up her job as a payroll clerk to stay home. It seemed to her important, vital, to stay meticulously vigilant in her mothering. When Henry was a baby she had hovered over his every cough, rash, stuffy nose, her anxiety a noose. When he was

an uncontrollable boy she kissed and bandaged his smallest cuts, fretting about gangrene and septicemia. She tended his faintest bruises, worrying about deep invisible trauma. When he was a petulant teenager, she returned his overdue library books, stayed up until dawn on science projects, hired tutors and argued with his teachers over cheating, and paid the fines when he vandalized stop signs. She lost sleep over college placement and felony sentences and meningitis and bad drugs.

Walt always said, "Stop worrying, Betty."

Walt said, "Nothing bad is going to happen."

Walt told Betty a hundred times, "Let him be."

Walt told Betty, "You're spoiling him."

Walt said, "Leave him alone," barely glancing up to watch as Henry stood on high jumbled rocks in his red swim trunks ready to jump into the blue lake.

Walt said, "Stop, Betty. Just fucking stop," and, gradually, Betty did stop. She learned to swallow her worries, to choke back her desire to intercede, to allow the injuries of mistakes to accrue, but each new fear always lived there, quietly and deeply, in the back of her throat.

A premature twilight settles over the campground. The fog insists now, streaming onshore with a feral ferocity. Walt pours drinks. Betty, wrapped in a blanket, sketches in her chair by the campfire. She tries to capture the moody landscape but her drawing turns abstract, two gray rectangles—one lighter for the beach and one darker for the sea—with a black slash in the rock. It's impossible to capture the hunkered birds that seem poised to erupt from the top of the rock but never do. Betty crumples the sketch and throws it into the flames.

"Walt?" She says. "Can we head south tomorrow morning? I'm trying to be brave, but I just don't like it here." Betty practiced her argument while she sketched: the fog, the ceaseless waves, the quiet campsite opposite theirs where a fine layer of sand swirls over everything.

To her amazement, Walt says, "Yeah. Let's leave tomorrow. This isn't what I expected either."

"Really? Oh, thank you. I thought you'd want to stay."

"It's not bad," Walt says, looking over the gloaming beach. Then he adds, "But I should have known."

"Known what?"

"It would be too much for you." He says it kindly but Betty knows she's being scolded.

They cap the evening with a silent cocktail. Neither is hungry.

The campfire burns low, consuming the last of their wood. Something rank mingles with the woodsmoke, not salt or pelagic decay, but something funkier, musky. Something a little metallic. Betty imagines half-eaten whales, belly-up lantern fish, suicide birds. She faces the flames, not wanting to know, not wanting to feed her imagination further.

Tomorrow, Betty thinks, we drive south. Someplace nice. Nuclear margaritas.

Betty wakes. She knows immediately that it is not yet late, although the night is absolute.

She's tired, tired.

So tired.

She wakes again and knows now that it is very late.

Something woke her? The memory slides away. Her hair is tight against her scalp. Her pajama pants twist painfully into her gut. She holds her hands up but barely sees them. The porthole window gives a flimsy circle of lighter darkness.

Betty rolls over. She reaches for the curtain, and—

There!

A faint sound coming from the beach.

Something more than the waves.

A voice?

A voice that rises in pitch and blends into the wind so that she can't tell whether it was a song or a cry or whether it is even there at all. Betty holds absolutely still, hand at the hem of the curtain. Waiting.

Nothing.

Long silent seconds pass.

She releases the curtain and sinks back onto the bed. She pulls the wool blanket up to her chin. Over her arms. Perhaps there had been no sound at all. Nothing unusual beyond the wind and the constant tidal susurrations. Cramps begin in her feet so she forces her body to relax, starting with her toes and working up her feet to her ankles and then to her calves and then past her knees to her thighs and then something scrapes along the ground just outside the camper.

"No," she breathes. Her heart feels huge in her chest. "Walt. Wake up."

But he doesn't wake and the sound doesn't return.

Perhaps the sound was a branch pushed by the wind or a small creature foraging for crumbs. Or corduroy pant legs whisking across each other.

Betty holds her breath, listening, about to reach over to shake Walt, when she hears her name called so clearly it can't be the wind.

(Mom)

Henry's voice!

(Mom, mom)

She says, "Oh!" before realizing she opened her mouth.

(Mommeeee)

"Oh," Betty says again. "Henry." A disorientation, a sweet warmth, a buoyant lightness carries her up and out of the bed to stand by the camper's elfin door. Is she awake? Is she ill? She is muddled and unsure of herself, as though hungover, but with a bright thread of clarity that something dreadful has happened on Henry's honeymoon. Why didn't she make a bigger fuss? She should have stopped him. A cruise! Think of the perils—the storms, the sea-slicked floors, the great long fall from the ship's deck to the abyss below! he knows plainly that Henry is in danger and calling her. She feels the sureness of it from the top of her tingling scalp to the soles of her sweating feet.

(Mommy)

She must call back to Henry!

But Walt will stop me, she thinks. She won't wake Walt. He'll laugh at her worry and pull her back to bed. Betty quietly opens the camper's door and steps into the night.

While they slept, the fog slid away from the coast like a white comforter peeled off dark sheets. For the first time the sky above is clear. The moonglow catches on the foaming crests of water. Disoriented, Betty thinks the moon is trying to clamor down out of the sky.

And then again, Henry! (Mother. Oh, Mother)

This time so urgent that Betty called back, "Darling!"

She surges forward to be closer to the water, to where Henry is calling from—the waves. Yes, the waves that lead to the cruise ship! A cruise ship in faraway blue water!

Only the smallest alarm rings in her mind, telling her to look away from the rock and the sea and the moon, asking her to stop. To stop. To stop. Stop. Stop walking down the path through the dunes to the sand and then into the salt-spray of the surf climbing up her pant legs but the alarm is nothing and the warmth and Henry's voice drive her forward into the tide.

(Here, Mother)

(I've been waiting for you)

And all at once the wind rises up afresh, pulling the streams of the muffling fog back over the land, covering the needle-pointed stars, silencing the bright moon. Fingers brush past Betty and she can't hear Henry's voice as plainly anymore. She hears the surf and the clatter of underwater rocks and her own galloping heart. Betty comes to herself.

Brutal cold sea on her legs.

A sting in her heel where she cut herself on the rocks.

Has she really walked down to the beach in the dark?

She stumbles out of the water, a cold press where sodden pajama hems stick to her legs. The alarm in the far corner of her mind shrieks. She was in the ocean! At night! An ocean of undertow and sharks and rip currents!

(Mother)

Henry!

No.

Not Henry.

In the patchworked moonlight, Betty hears the voice more clearly. Hears it with her mind over her ears. And it isn't Henry.

Not Henry. Not at all. The voice is cavernous and horrible and—she realizes with a skipped beat of her heart—issuing from the dark scab on the fissured rock just offshore. Arrows of waterbirds rise from the tree branches there, catching moonlight in stabs there. Bent trees tremble there, their arm branches waving, and among the tree's frantic limbs is a figure there, also waving. To Betty. Beckoning. To her. The figure is torn blackness against a chromatic white and black sky. But certainly a human shape.

Betty closes her eyes, thinking it must be a nightmare and she'll wake at home, snug in her comfy king bed. But when she opens her eyes again, the figure is still there and she is still here and the voice that is not-Henry is still calling to her.

This is insanity.

Everything is in black and white, a negative of itself in the moonlight. Betty feels her fear creeping up inside her throat, the way it always starts.

I can't be afraid. I must be brave.

Bite down the fear.

Swallow the worry.

"Back to the camper," she says aloud. "Get Walt. He'll know what to do." And with a force of will that she marvels at as she turns, as she feels the insistent tug of the voice, she pulls

herself away from the roiling ocean and flees up the dunes.

Be brave.

Be brave.

“Walt! Wake up!” She starts yelling even before reaching the camper, still yelling as she crashes through the door, tumbling toward the bed, banging her shins and bruising her elbow, gasping as if emerging from a drowning. In the meager light coming through the open door, she sees there is no Walt, only a nest of pillows and a thin woolen blanket heaped upon itself. Betty might start screaming. But what would she scream? And to whom? There is the cell phone but who will she call? Henry? The fucking Coast Guard? And that is Betty’s last sane moment because what she hears next reduces her to her most basic core.

(Father.)

(Oh, Father. I’m so glad you’ve come.)

For a Delirious Child

Judith Skillman

Nothing I can give you
beyond this portrait of yourself
subsumed in fever,
in a room too big and cold,
rocking and swaying
while the world moved too slowly
and your arms weighed in
as the arms of a figure cast in bronze,
your neck too heavy to lift.

The helpless always take such poses
around a sickbed, kneeling
or half sitting, doomed as statues,
holding clay hands against the forehead
of the one who burns in a vision
so stark it might be

the length of a moment
arrested in progress, caught
in the valley between breaths.

When you thought you screamed
it was only a word that left
your lips, and you must believe
that we never left your side
until we believed you asleep.

Whatever comes between you
and health in the hallway of the future
let it be brief as that pose
the hummingbird holds
beside what it takes for summer
and red water.

May you never be sick alone,
far from home
deserted by the melodies
of rain that rose and fell
all night the night you were
possessed by one
who wears your body
with different eyes,
flesh too perfect
for those quilts and blankets
we kept laying on
despite your protests of warmth.

The Water Jar

Kemal Onor

The two boys shook pinkies behind the swing set.

"You know what this means, don't ya?"

"O'course I do, what do you think I am?"

"Swear on your mother's grave? And cross your heart." The ritual was long, but at last Billy Skern nodded to his friend.

"Let's go then." And with that the two boys started the walk home to Billy Skern's house. At the door, Billy turned about and looked a long while down either side of the street before opening the door just enough for Jack and himself to fit through. Once inside, Billy seemed to ease up a little. The tension left his throat. The house looked normal enough, and there didn't look to be anything out of place. The walls were lined with various photographs of Billy, his parents, and his older sister Helen. She was about ten years older than Billy, and had decided to move out and live in Montana. Billy remembered her saying, *They have a place named after me there*. He supposed it was for the best. Though, if she had been around, perhaps he would have someone to help him through, or even to tell him what to do in the current situation.

Billy led Jack into the kitchen. There was an object placed on the counter with a towel draped over it. Billy pointed to the item on the counter.

"What is it?" asked Jack. Billy went to the object, and took the towel in his hands, but he froze there. He drew back the covering, and revealed a tall, rounded jar. It was full of some kind of orange-colored water with what appeared to be food particles floating around inside it.

"You wanted to show me a dirty jar?" said Jack.

"No, look. You don't see it?" said Billy. He pointed to the jar.

"You lying?" said Jack.

"Just look." Billy kept his finger pointed against the side of the jar. Jack bent over and leaned close to it; he took a few sniffs then stood up.

"You're right, Bill, this is the best water jar I've ever seen," said Jack.

"Don't be stupid. It's not the jar. Look inside it, dummy." Billy took the jar in both hands now, and gave it the lightest shake possible. The bits of food swirled.

"Here, let me shake it," said Jack, reaching for the jar.

"No!" said Billy, holding the jar out of Jack's reach.

"Why not?" said Jack.

Billy paused, and, still holding the jar away from Jack, looked him sternly in the face and said, "Cause my parents are stuck inside."

"Your parents aren't stuck inside. You're crazy if you think so," said Jack.

"I'm not. I saw them in it this morning when I woke up for school. Came into the kitchen and there they were, both trapped like goldfish. Their faces pressed against the glass," said Billy.

"Well where are they now then?" asked Jack.

Billy looked at the jar. "I dunno, maybe they got out somehow."

"But how'd they get in there?" he said.

"I dunno that either," said Billy.

"And why's the water all orange?" said Jack.

"I thought they might get hungry, so I put some crackers in the jar, like fish," he said.

"Well, what'd they look like?" Asked Jack, leaning forward to peer into the murky water.

"They were all small and tiny, but their faces were huge. Like this." He used his hands to show how big the heads were. "All puffed up like they'd been stung by bees."

"Did you try and get them out?"

"You know I did, but then they started screaming and yelling, so I put this towel over it, and they seemed to settle down."

Jack looked at the jar with his eyebrow raised. He half expected to see the faces of Billy's parents plastered against the inside.

"You sure?" asked Jack.

"Of course I'm sure, their faces were all huge. I thought their eyes were going to explode." Billy used his hands to describe the immensity of his parents' eyes. Jack continued to look at the jar, his head cocked to one side, like an investigator at a murder scene, which is likely where he got much of his personality. Jack's father was a police officer. Crime was rare in their small town, so Jack was always coming up with new villains that his father was really fighting.

But the whole matter with the water jar baffled him.

"You don't suppose if we break it with a hammer it would get them out of there?" asked Jack.

"No, not with how they were when I shook it," said Billy.

"Well, what else have you tried?"

"Nothing. I don't know what to do,"

"Did you try calling the cops?"

"And tell them my folks are stuck in a jar? They'd call me crazy and hang up."

"It's worth a shot."

"What about your parents? Yeah, I'm sure your dad knows exactly what to do."

There was excitement in Billy's voice. He had already pulled the phone up next to the jar and was halfway done dialing Jack's number when Jack said, "He ain't gonna know."

"How do you know?" Billy continued to dial the last numbers. The phone rang once, then Jack stole the receiver from Billy and tossed it down.

"Now what'd you do that for?"

"My dad don't know I'm here."

"What?"

"He got mad at me and started yelling."

“What do you think you’ll do?”

“Nothing. I was just hoping I could wait it out here. You know, you might be the luckiest kid ever! Your folks get mad at you, and wham! Into the jar!” He was excited, and reached for the jar. Billy held it back.

“I don’t know how they got in there, and I’ve got no clue how to get them out.”

“Then leave them in it.” Jack had gone from excited to spiteful all in a single moment. Then, they both caught two faces at the side of the jar. Billy almost dropped it, but managed to set it on the counter. The two faces were pressed against the glass, their eyes swollen and watery. The rest of his parents’ bodies were there too, contorted and shrunk, to fit the jar. They more closely resembled balloons, or some puff fish.

Jack jumped back from the jar. “Wow, they’re in there!” he said.

“I told you they were.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t believe you!”

The faces of Billy’s parents didn’t look to be in pain, and they didn’t look to be drowning at the moment.

“Well, break ‘em out.” Jack lunged for the jar, but Billy pulled it away. They each had a hand on the jar, Jack was attempting

to pry Billy's fingers from it. They were on the ground now, the jar still in Billy's control. It fell from his grasp, and rolled along the kitchen tiles. Both were after it, and Jack got it first.

"Just let me use it on my folks!" he exclaimed, threatening to smash the jar unless Billy backed away. From the height of their friendship, they had fallen to this. Across the small kitchen the two boys stared at one another. Like the final showdown in some western film, but neither of them owned a revolver. Billy felt a surge of rage. Jack caught the flicker in Billy's eye. Billy charged. Everything happened in seconds.

Jack threw the jar high into the air, Billy tried to catch it, but it flew out of his reach. In the final seconds, Billy saw the faces of his parents pressed to the glass. They were screaming, and they continued screaming until the jar broke.

Denial Is A Simple Matter of Tuberculosis

David Arroyo

I was a dog, standing in a blond prairie covered
in bodies stacked in piles of four by four divided
by a barbed wire grid. In the distance, a single plume,
gray and wet as fresh paint clung to the sky, a helix
entwined with a lightning bolt jagged as broken glass.
Two cats dressed like salarymen noted my horror
“It’s just tuberculosis,” they laughed, “don’t worry friend.”
Smiling, their slit eyes glowed neon yellow and they laughed
And laughed and laughed and Laughed and LAughed and
LAUGHEDLA LAAAAA — The vision
seized in a screech. *Paralysis*
hissed the lizard depths of me. Dream shifts to my dog house.
In my bed on my back, salary cats on my chest,
scratching, hissing, insisting, tuberculosis.

St. Agnus

E.E. King



The Hidden Women

Ellen Meny

When I kissed my husband, I tasted blood.

It was metallic on my tongue, bright and alive in the growing darkness of the carriage. Outside, I saw mist clinging to the jagged cliffside as we drove towards his—and my soon-to-be—home, after a quick engagement and an even quicker marriage.

“You will make,” the Artist said, leaning back from our kiss, “a beautiful portrait.”

The fading day cut dark shadows across his face. I had seen him in newspaper photos before we were wed, but he was all the more striking in person, with hooded dark eyes and a sharp, angular jaw that caught the light like a knife. As he lifted my hand to his lips, I appreciated his long, graceful fingers. A painter’s fingers.

A *rich* painter’s fingers.

My mother made me swear I wouldn’t tell a soul, but of course I was honest with my friends about the engagement. Father’s gambling debts were racking up, and mother wouldn’t have us

destitute. Not when she had a young, beautiful daughter, ripe for marriage.

Beauty is what saved me, really, because that's how the Artist made his living. He was famous for a series of portraits called *the Hidden Women*. Each painting depicted a young woman dressed in an elegant, black gown, head enshrouded in a dark-red silk veil, face hidden from sight. I had seen a few in museums, and their blank, sightless forms sent a chill through me.

He had painted eleven already, and I was to be his twelfth. His last.

My husband never used famous models. It was always gorgeous young nobodies who were barely even mentioned in the newspaper articles—unknown before and forgotten afterwards. Two of the portraits had been of his past wives, but both had left him after their paintings were complete. Ran off to Paris or Spain or some other more inviting place than the Artist's home, with its dark stone and gray mist and kitchen filled with the carcasses of small birds.

My husband, the famous artist, tasted of blood because he enjoyed devouring small birds.

A painter could afford to be eccentric, could afford to have cruel habits. The Artist enjoyed a particular delicacy—ortolan buntings, birds infamous for their unique method of culinary preparation. The tiny finches are captured and kept in a

dark cage, the illusion of night compelling them to gorge themselves on seeds and millet. They fatten in the darkness, swelling to twice their size before they are killed. Drowned, specifically, in a barrel of brandy.

Normally, they are then roasted and eaten whole, a cloth covering the head of the indulger to hide their cruel act from God. At least, that's how the legend goes.

The Artist, however, preferred his ortolans straight from the brandy. He would bite down on them, feathers and all, with a sharp crack of tiny bone splintering under teeth. The blood and brandy would stain his lips, and despite the handkerchief he kept in his breast pocket, I had still seen photographs of him with a slight redness around his mouth. The ghost of a decadent sin.

As the carriage rolled, he lifted the matted carcass of another bird to his lips. When I heard the familiar crunch, I turned to the window to view my new home.

The Hanged Castle.

A massive, dark stone castle that hugged the cliffs above the churning ocean, desperately clinging to sheer rock. Part of it jutted out from above, suspended over the water. It looked as if a particularly strong gust of wind might tumble it into the waves. A feat of architecture. A hanging castle.

I felt my stomach churn at the sight of it.

I didn't blame the Artist's other two wives for running off. The thought of peering from my window and knowing there was nothing between myself and the water below made hot terror rise up my throat. I absolutely dreaded heights.

"Where will our room be?" I asked, trying not to let panic creep into my voice.

"You'll have your own quarters for the first few months," he replied.

It was a statement rather than a suggestion, one that dragged horror through me. Alone in that castle. High, high above the earth. I breathed deeply, trying to hold back my growing panic. I knew if I didn't gather myself, I would be overcome.

"I must remain untouched as I paint. Unspoiled," my husband continued, as my dread turned to shock. He took his handkerchief from his pocket, dabbing at a bit of brandy on his lips. "It's a necessary part of my process. And I'll need my sleep during that time."

I need my sleep too, and I certainly won't be getting it dangling over the ocean, I thought, but of course I didn't say anything out loud. I only smiled and nodded like a good little wife, which was very much against my temperament. Mother and father always bemoaned my unladylike rebellion, but I wasn't stupid. This was my family's last chance at any semblance of stability in the world, and I certainly wasn't going to waste it by revealing a silly fear of heights or bemoaning my eccentric

husband's temporary chastity. Especially after Father's last trip to the casinos. You would think a man who couldn't play cards if his life depended on it would stop at some point.

"Painting will begin immediately," he said, tucking his handkerchief away. "Tomorrow morning."

If I survived the night, of course. If the castle didn't tip over with me in it.

The carriage pulled up to the entrance of the Hanged Castle, two dark, wooden doors so large I thought they might spook the horses. A group of people awaited our arrival, men and women and others in crisp black uniforms. I assumed they were hired servants, judging by their attire. As the Artist helped me from the carriage and I stepped into fog so thick it was almost opaque, I put on my brightest smile. I had more in common with the servants than my husband, and if he turned out to be a beastly bore, I would need allies.

"My bride, Marjorie." The Artist introduced me to his employees with a sweep of his arm.

I held out my hand to the nearest person, an austere-looking woman. "Wonderful to meet you all."

The woman did not take my hand, nor did she care to smile. She stared at me as if I were a piece of furniture, face impassive. After what felt like a lifetime, she nodded.

Well, that went swimmingly.

I caught the Artist fighting a smile, and I had to battle my own. He touched the small of my back, an involuntary shiver of pleasure going up my spine. His home may have been dreadful, but at least my husband was handsome.

He showed me into the dark foyer of the Hanged Castle, employees following us. The air was damp and earthen, like walking into the stomach of a great beast. Two stone staircases led up from the foyer to impossible heights, while hallways lit with oil lamps branched off from the room like arteries. I was even more sympathetic towards the Artist's two past wives—of course they left this dreadful place. I would've darted off to Paris myself, if I could stomach abandoning my family to poverty.

I steeled myself, thinking of Mother and Father as we toured the castle. A spacious kitchen that was the maids' domain, a courtyard at the back of the castle that overlooked the gray ocean. As the Artist led me towards what would be my room, a bright red door caught my eye, almost garish in the dimness.

"My private studio," he said, as if he sensed the question on my tongue.

As we continued past it, I could feel us walking towards the hanging part of the castle, even if nothing had visibly changed. The air felt thin, and although I might have imagined it, I felt a tremor below my feet in the old stone.

“Your bedroom is just this way,” the Artist said, and I felt my heart plummet. “I thought you might enjoy the view.”

I wanted to respond, but my breath was trapped in the snare of my chest. My fingers dug into my palms. I would not reveal my instability. I simply would not.

My room was lavish and ancient, rich with heavy draperies and a four-poster bed of dark mahogany. Two windows framed my bed, and even as I moved towards them like a ghost, my skin buzzing, I knew what I would see.

There was no castle below us, no cliff to which the building clung. My bedroom hung directly over the ocean, a monstrosity of architecture that made my palms sweat. Now would be the time to ask the Artist for a different room—to reveal my shameful, silly fear.

No. I bit my tongue to stop the swelling panic, turning to him. I was his wife. I would not have him see me as a cowardly young girl scared of heights.

We were alone now, the maids and servants gone somewhere in the bowels of the castle. In the growing evening light, I could see the raised veins in his hands, the dark dusting of hair on his forearms.

He came closer to me, close enough that I felt the heat of him as he cupped my chin in his calloused hand.

"I'll admit," he said, deep voice making me shiver. "I wish I could have you in my bed."

My smile was hungry. "My wish is the same."

"My final hidden woman." His thumb brushed my cheek.

Women weren't supposed to want, to be wanted, but I was never one to follow rules.

When he kissed me again and I tasted blood, I wanted to drown in it.

I tried to sleep.

I really did. But as soon as I slipped under lavish sheets, the castle seemed to move beneath me like a living thing. It shifted like a great beast, the rush of the ocean below me serving as its heaving, roaring breath. The animal panic in my heart told me that if I breathed too deeply, the castle would plunge into the ocean below.

My skin itched. My terror crescendoed.

I needed to escape.

As if in a trance, I lurched from bed and rushed from my room in just my dressing gown, stumbling down the dark, cold

hallway. I fantasized about knocking on the Artist's door. He would think it a vain excuse to slip under his covers, but all I wanted was someone to take this strange madness away, to rip this fear from me.

I moved down the hallway like a drunk, trying to flee the roar of the ocean, but it followed me like a hunter. I sunk to the stone floor, wrapping my arms around my knees. I was falling, falling, falling—

Someone touched my shoulder, and I almost screamed.

I whipped around to see a woman standing above me, a woman who hadn't been there seconds before. A breathtaking creature, with high cheekbones and soft eyes and short, tousled, dark hair. She wore a gown of black lace and brocade, strangely formal attire for a maid. She looked like a doe, I realized blearily, moving gracefully through the night.

"I'm sorry," I stammered, barely coherent. "I didn't mean—I didn't know—"

I was drowning, dipping into a buzzing panic that would not release me. I wanted to scream, to curl up in a corner and die. To disappear entirely.

Before I could do any of those things, the woman crouched next to me and took my hands in her own. Her fingers were cold against my palm, touch as light as a feather, but so comforting.

For the first time since I'd arrived at the Hanged Castle, I felt safe.

She held my hands as my breath gradually slowed, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "Thank you," I managed.

Her response was a cocked head and a frown that only made my cheeks flush harder.

"I'm terribly sorry." I hated being seen like this, especially by a woman with a face that made me stutter like a schoolgirl. "It's my first night here, and it takes some getting used to. Dreadful place, isn't it? A bit too high in the air for my tastes, you know?"

I hoped she might laugh—I *wanted* to make her laugh, I realized—but she only stared at me. *God*. She pitied me. Pitied the scared wife who had just arrived at this god-awful castle.

"Well." I gave her a brisk nod. "I should get back to bed. Goodnight."

I turned and hurried back to my quarters. But even as I slipped back into bed, I could still picture her doe eyes. Sad. Quiet. Haunted.

As I slipped into oblivion, I dreamed of only them.

The next morning, the Artist painted me.

Maids dressed me in a sleek black gown with sumptuous sleeves, similar to the style his other subjects had worn. I looked for my doe-eyed savior in the bustling group of women, but her haunted gaze was absent. I wished I could thank her.

It was an innocent desire, I told myself. Purely innocent.

When I arrived in his studio and perched on the stool the maids led me to, the Artist kneeled down in front of me, a key ring jangling on his belt loop. His sharp jaw was wicked in the dawn, and for a strange moment I wished it would slice me. There was a bit of brandy at the corner of his mouth.

“Look towards the light,” he said. His fingertips guided my face towards the gray light of the window, and I was reminded of the maid’s touch on my hands the night before.

I waited for a veil to drape over my head, but when the Artist returned to his easel, I grew worried. I thought of my puffy eyes and haggard face from a mostly sleepless night.

“Aren’t I to be a hidden woman?” I asked, hoping to sound joking rather than vain. Which I was. “I slept dreadfully last night. My face is horrendous. A veil would be welcome.”

“Not yet.” His full lips quirked. “Soon. But speaking honestly, I wish a face like yours could remain unveiled.”

"Then perhaps I married the wrong artist." I lifted my chin in challenge.

"It pains me to know you have doubts about our partnership. Perhaps I could convince you otherwise after I've done your portraits."

"Oh?"

He offered a decadent smile in response, one that made my cheeks flush hot. I knew exactly what he meant by that.

Having successfully flustered me, the Artist turned back to his work. "I paint two portraits. One with the veil, one without. The ones without are kept in my private collection." He looked up at me briefly, eyes dark. "I enjoy having work all my own."

I could understand that. The pain of putting hours into something so rich and detailed, and then selling it away only to never see it again.

"May I see your private collection?" I asked.

He smiled. "One day."

The answer stung. Here I was, living in his castle. The least he could do, my artist husband, was show me his art.

"I assume this means I won't have a veil today?" I asked, resigning myself to a slightly homely portrait.

"Not today. The veil comes last."

The veil comes last.

And then, whatever would happen afterwards. Mistress of a dark, damp castle hanging over the angry ocean, with a sharp-jawed husband and a maid who haunted my dreams.

Eager to fall.

Eager to swallow me up.

Of course, I couldn't sleep again.

The castle rumbled, a great stirring that drove me from my bed once more. My eyes burned as I slipped down the hallway, drawing my silk robe around me. I told myself I needed a nighttime walk, a sip of water, but both were weak lies meant to cool my guilt. When I found her again in one of the dark alcoves, the sight of her dark hair and graceful neck made my heart pound.

"I missed you today," I said, almost losing my breath as she turned to me. "My husband has begun to paint what will no doubt be a horrible portrait, and I could've used some emotional fortitude."

I smiled as if it was a joke, but her gaze grew troubled.

Silently, she took my hand again. Sparks raced up my spine as she led me to the massive front doors, pressing her hand against the rough wood of one. Her lips moved as if trying to speak.

"You need to leave?" I asked, sensing her urgency.

She shook her head before gently touching my breastbone. As if saying, *no. You do.*

A chill went through me before I remembered my callous comment from the night before. *Dreadful place, isn't it?* She thought I wanted to leave.

"Oh, no," I said, cursing my flippant mouth. Mother always said I spoke carelessly. "I don't want to leave. I'm perfectly happy here, I really am."

She only stared at me, and I wondered if I had hurt her. She was trapped here as much as I was.

I sighed, running a hand through my tangled hair. "I'm sorry. I just didn't expect to end up here. I always thought I'd be cavorting around Paris by now, eating bonbons and taking lovers."

She wore a sad smile that made her all the more achingly beautiful. Delicate, like snow in the forest. The sight of her brought down my walls, made words I would never dare speak to the Artist run easily from my lips.

"Of course, that won't happen." I laughed, a bitter, low sound. "My father ruined us, and now I'm the one picking up the pieces. Using my beauty before it runs out. Because when that happens, I'll be useless."

My cheeks burned hot. I usually hated talking about my family, hated what a mess we were, but her eyes held no judgement.

"It can be frustrating, sometimes, to realize your life isn't entirely your own," I said softly. "Do you ever feel that?"

She looked away, fingertips grazing the base of her throat. She did not want to speak or could not speak, and either way I felt like a fool.

"I'm sorry." I stared at the cold stone floor. "The man of the house is quite handsome, but he's not much for conversation. I apologize for babbling on."

A gentle touch on my cheek. I looked up in shock, the maid's palm cupping my face like a bird's wing. A warmth pulled deep in me, an urge to take her hand and softly kiss the palm, feel her skin on my lips.

She took my face in her hands, drew me close enough to feel the soft movement of her chest as she breathed. My heart roared in my ears, heat spreading through me like wildfire. I was a fool, an evil fool for feeling like this the second night in my husband's home, for wanting this strange woman, for giving in to such shameless lust—

Before my thoughts could stop me, I kissed her.

Soft lips and soft tongues. The graze of teeth on my throat. Her breath twinning with mine, passed between mouths like whispered secrets. The night seemed to wrap around us, a blanket that entwined our souls, decadent, and rich, and—

Wrong.

I pulled back with a sudden gasp. “No. No.”

She reached out to me, eyes dark with guilt. Even then, her gentle gaze threatened to pull me back in, swallow me up like the ocean frothing below us.

“I shouldn’t,” I whispered.

I was married. I wasn’t religious, and I was no stranger to romps in the dark with willing boys and girls and others—but I had made a commitment to a man who held my future in his hands. And if I broke that, my family would be ruined. I would be ruined.

“I value your company, but we can’t.” I clasped her hands in mine, taking a shaking breath. “We can’t.”

But even as those words left my lips, even as I returned to my bedroom, I knew they were a lie. Because I have always been drawn to ruin, drinking it in at every opportunity, running for it like a mare in a broad field. When life is so tautly controlled

by others, when someone is directed exactly how to act and what to do for so long, ruin becomes a drug.

And I knew my maid, my doe, would ruin me.

I continued to see her.

Each day, the Artist painted me. We flirted as he did, the maids and servants around us quiet and uncaring. And each night, I stole from my bedroom and to my doe.

I told myself it was the sway of the Hanged Castle, the buzzing fear at the thought of being perched so high over the ocean—but as weeks went by, I understood what it truly was. What my flushed face, my pounding heart, the heat pooling low in my belly meant.

Sometimes we spoke—/ spoke—for hours. Sometimes we kissed, having long given up any excuses that kept me from her lips. Sometimes we sat in silence, resting in the presence of each other. All things the Artist eschewed, too consumed by his furious work.

One night, we stole away to the courtyard. It was lush and haunted in the moonlight, naked trees like skeletons in the winter air. My fingers drifted over her lips in the darkness, my body giving in to what had been building for so long.

"You ensnare me," I murmured to her. "You bewitch me."

My fingers found the clasps at the back of her dress. Her hands roamed under my nightgown. We slipped behind a crumbling stone wall, hidden by shadows, intertwining like snakes.

"I fancy a visit to Paris soon," I said, trailing kisses up her spine. "Or Spain. Barcelona. Perhaps I'll run off like my husband's other wives. Shall you accompany me?"

Her eyes, closed in bliss, opened suddenly. She looked at me, seemingly troubled.

"A joke," I said, touching her cheek with my chilled hand. She didn't seem to mind the cold. "I'll ask him if I can travel after he finishes my portrait. He'll soon be done, you know."

My doe jerked up as if shot. Her lips trembled, and she opened her mouth as though she would speak.

"Madame?"

I shrieked, hugging my robe around myself as I turned. It was another maid, staring at me with wide eyes. Oh, hells. The first time any of the Artist's employees noticed me, and I was half-naked with another woman.

My blood roared in my ears as I fumbled for an excuse.

"Dear me, I apologize. I'm sure I gave you a fright, didn't I? My friend rushed outside, stark naked, and I followed after to help her."

The maid watched me, her expression one of polite confusion.

"Madame," she asked, "are you well?"

"I'm perfectly fine." I straightened with a hint of indigence. I knew I looked a fright, cheeks flushed, hair tangled. "Just a bit cold. My friend and I, we—"

I turned to gesture to my doe, but I was alone in the courtyard.

She was gone. I twisted around, looking behind trees, peering over the cliff's edge with a sinking heart, but there was no sign of her. I felt the maid approach me, her steps careful as if I were some wild beast.

"Madame," she said for a third and final time. She gingerly touched my shoulder. "Perhaps you should return to bed."

I took a shaky breath. Nausea bubbled under my skin.

"Yes," I said faintly. "I don't believe I'm well."

The next morning, I waited for the Artist to burst into my bedroom. To smell the guilt on me and call me a whore and banish me from his home. No doubt that maid had told him about my little nighttime romp. I could only assume my doe had flitted away before the maid had gotten a good enough look at her.

But the maids arrived to dress me as usual, and when I perched on my stool like a good little muse, hands shaking, the Artist continued to paint me as if nothing was wrong. As if I hadn't broken our marriage.

As if I still wasn't thinking about her lips, her fingers, her body.

"Almost done." My husband's voice floated from behind the twin easels. He had completed the first painting a few weeks ago, the one for his private collection. And now the second one—the veiled woman—was almost complete.

"And the veil?" I asked.

"Tomorrow." I heard the smile in his voice. "You're quite eager for it, aren't you?"

"If only to hide my ghastly face," I managed, mouth dry.

And what afterwards, I wondered? Would the Artist finally bring me into his bed, thinking he had a faithful wife? My doe had enraptured my soul, but I still burned for his cut jaw, his dark eyes.

As we finished the morning's painting session, he offered me his hand. It was calloused beneath my fingers, and as I rose to meet his gaze, his eyes were soft. Concerned. The maids filed from the room, leaving us alone.

"A maid told me she saw you in the courtyard last night," he said quietly.

My breath seized in my lungs. This was it. He knew, and would divorce me, and my family would be destitute, and it was all my fault, it was always my fault—

"She saw you talking to yourself," he said. "As if someone else was there."

I stilled. "What?"

He brushed an errant curl from my face, his fingers stained red-brown from his ortolan buntings. "Is something wrong, Marjorie?"

My mind was as sluggish as tar, trying in vain to understand what the Artist had just said. That was impossible, my doe had been next to me, her head on my shoulder. My doe, who did not speak. Who only appeared at night. Who disappeared in anyone else's presence.

A chill ran down my spine. I went as still as a rabbit facing a wolf, realizing the unfathomable. I had lain with a ghost.

That night, I steeled myself.

My hands shook as I slipped from my bedroom, returning to our familiar meeting place.

She was there, my doe, and oh, gods, she was as beautiful as ever—but there was a strain to her full lips, a pain in her dark eyes. She must have known.

“Tell me,” I said, trembling voice betraying me. “What are you?”

She reached towards me, plaintive, but I snatched my hand back.

“Speak to me. Break your silence.” I swallowed. “I deserve to know.”

She clasped her hands together, wrung them as if in agony. Tears clouded her eyes. Even now, the sight of her plucked a string of guilt in my heart.

“I fear you,” I whispered, my own eyes swimming. “I fear what you do to me. And my husband, I—”

My words died. I couldn't say I loved him. That was untrue. I lusted after him, hungered for his graceful fingers, but I didn't feel the swelling pain in my heart that comes with love, the ache of something beautiful and beyond human comprehension. I didn't feel that way for him.

I felt that way for her.

"I fear you," I said, "because I'm falling in love with you."

There they were, those words that had chased me down hallways, lingered on my tongue in the dark. Words that would never grow, never bloom, because I knew I had to leave my doe, my ghost. For my future, for my family.

"We can't see each other anymore." Each word out of my mouth was like a knife to my heart. "My husband will finish my portraits tomorrow. And then, I will ask him to leave this haunted place."

Her mouth opened wide as if she was going to scream, eyes bright with shock. Her hands fluttered at her face like panicked birds.

I was struck by her agony, something deep inside of my chest stirring. I remembered reading an occult book with my friends, terrified and elated by the tales. The book stated that ghosts only rose because something tethered them to our world. Something was keeping my doe here. Even though I had to leave her, perhaps I could help her.

I took her hands, looking into her depthless eyes. "What is trapping you here?"

Something like relief passed over her face, and then she was pulling me down the hallway. As we turned a corner, she

slowed at the ornate red door I had passed by so many times.

“This room?” I asked breathlessly.

I tried the doorknob, but it was locked. When I looked up at her, she was crying again. Silent tears, streaming down her face.

“No, oh no—” I cooed at her like a mother, reaching up to brush the wetness from her cheeks. “We’ll sort this out, I’ll ask my husband for a key—”

She grabbed my arm then, cool grip squeezing so hard I thought it might bruise, and shook her head violently. Fear plunged through me.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

I had no idea what she needed, only that I wanted to give it to her. I sucked in a quick breath, my mind racing. The gleaming keys on the Artist’s belt loop. No doubt he kept them in his room at night. Hopefully someone who consumed that much brandy was a relatively deep sleeper.

I gave her a soft, quick kiss. “Stay here. I’ll be back before you know it.”

I hurried towards the Artist’s room, heart pounding. If my doe was to be believed, if I was to put my faith in a ghost, then I couldn’t trust the Artist.

And I could not wake him.

His door was cracked open, and I listened through the gap to ensure he was asleep before I slipped into the darkness. Just as I predicted, the keys were on his bedside table, glinting in the moonlight from the window. I would have to be quiet, hold them tightly so they wouldn't make a sound.

The Artist's face was turned away from me in sleep. His soft breathing was steady, but even so my ears strained for any hitching breath. *Peace*, I thought to myself, as if calming a horse.

I reached towards the keys, heart pounding.

And that's when the Artist's graceful fingers closed around my arm.

He shot up from the pillow, grip almost snapping the tiny bones in my wrist as he pulled me towards him. His eyes were wild, mouth stained with blood and brandy.

"Curious, aren't you?" he asked in his low voice that would've enticed me any other time. But now it made me realize I was just a little mouse, and he was a very large cat.

"Sleeping pills," I babbled, trying to come up with some kind of excuse. "I couldn't sleep, and—"

"You're all so curious." His breath stank of meat. "And you're right on time. So, let me indulge you like the others."

He viciously dragged me from his bedroom by the wrist, pain splintering up my arm. I screamed, wrestling in his grip, but no servants came to my aid, no shouts of alarm in response. Horror took me as I realized something. They were used to this.

"IT'S TIME," the Artist announced suddenly, hoarse voice echoing through the walls.

Doors opened. Faces appeared in the hallways. My panic crescendoed as dozens of servants surged towards us, their faces resolute and blank. They took me from the Artist, an ocean of hands and arms holding me fast despite my wild thrashing. A hand clamped over my mouth and I bit down on it, tasting blood, but still the mass pulled me forward, a twisted prison of people.

As we neared the locked red door, I saw my doe was gone. A choked sob escaped my throat.

The Artist jammed a key into the door's lock. "You asked to see my private collection," he said. "Now, you'll get the opportunity."

The door opened. I was thrust into a room the color of dried blood, floor and walls rust-red. And all around me, huge and beautiful and framed in ornate gold, were *the Hidden Women*.

The versions with their faces visible, the paintings the Artist kept for himself. Eleven women immortalized in oil paint, each one flaring bright with life. Red hair, dark skin, blue eyes, full lips, round breasts. As the servants pulled me forward, my eyes caught on one portrait. My already splintering mind struggled to grasp what I saw.

My doe.

My doe, radiant in the silk black gown that fell from her shoulders. Eyes soft and kind, lips achingly full in shades of pink and plum. A small tear marred the canvas, a tiny rip in her shoulder. Just above where I had kissed her days before.

The servants dragged me deeper into the room. They shifted me so that I lay on their mass like a table, wrists and ankles bound by hands. I struggled still, head thrashing, and that's when I looked up and saw my double.

Two almost identical portraits hung side-by-side on the wall above me. The curve of my shoulder, pale against black. My fierce eyes. My cruel mouth. *So naive*, I thought, tears swimming in my eyes. *So damned naive*.

"As I said," the Artist's voice echoed around me, "the veil comes last."

His steps were languid as he approached me with a gleaming knife, a cat stalking a caged bird.

The veil, I thought with splintering horror. Rust-red. Just like the walls of this room. Just like the stains on his handkerchief. Just like dried blood.

"Your beauty will die for my art," he said. "Just like all of the others."

I spat at him like a wildcat. "You *killed* them," I gasped. "For nothing. For your mediocre work."

His eyes flashed with rage. "My work is far from mediocre. *This* is why I am revered, why my talent reaches across the world. My work has lifeblood in it. It enriches it, infuses it. Makes it whole." His spread his arms wide. "My *home* has lifeblood in it. Nothing is wasted. Bones in the walls, blood in the paint, fortifying this space of passion and creation."

Human remains, built into the Hanged Castle. Eleven women, killed for my husband's art. And that meant my doe, the woman who had spent so many nights with me, was one of his victims.

The Artist drew nearer, a rictus grin darkening his face. I struggled against the dozens of hands holding me, feeling wetness on my left ankle as I moved. The servant whose hand I had bitten. No doubt they were in pain. Weakened.

The Artist took my chin in his hand, looming above me. He pressed the knife to my throat.

“You will complete,” he purred, “my greatest work.”

I kicked out my left leg, hard. The servant’s hand ripped from my ankle, and then I drove my foot directly into the Artist’s crotch.

He dropped to the floor, howling, the knife flying from his hand. The servants flinched in shock, and I kicked again, splitting a maid’s lip with my heel. I ripped my wrists free, clawing and spitting, fighting through a sea of bodies until I dove to the floor and snatched the knife up in the chaos.

The servants and maids backed away when I brandished the knife, and in that fleeting moment I darted for the exit.

The Artist charged me like a bull. I felt the breath choke from my lungs as his body slammed against me and I fell against the wall, the knife flailing in my hand. I heard something *rip*, and looked up to see a gash in the painting above me, the knife slicing through the woman’s dark shoulder. Through *Amare*’s shoulder, her name gleaming on a plaque just below the painting.

“NO!”

The Artist pushed me back against the painting, ripping it further, hands around my throat. My lungs screamed. My vision wavered. This was my end—

White light blinded me. A shriek pierced the air, higher than the Artist's roars of anger. His hands ripped away from my throat, and I gasped as my knees hit the floor.

When my vision cleared, I saw her.

Amare, whole and alive.

And tearing the Artist's eyes out.

Her clawed fingers were bright and bloody, her handsome face twisted in furious rage as she clung to him, digging into his sockets despite the Artist's escalating screams of pain. But she was not whole, I realized, not alive. Her form was faintly luminescent, glowing with an eerie white light. The servants fled in panic at the sight of her, pouring through the door like scattered mice.

A shuddering gasp escaped me. The rip in the painting.

I knew what I needed to do.

I sprang up from the floor and darted to the next painting, a cold-eyed woman with a full brown face and short hair. Kashvi, her soul trapped in a canvas prison. I ripped my knife through the painting.

Another flash of white light, a furious scream, and Kashvi was upon the Artist, joining Amare to bite down on his throat and crunch the tiny bones of his collarbone as if he was an

Ortolan bunting. Drinking in their revenge after this evil man had ruined them.

“*STOP*,” the Artist screeched, fruitlessly trying to beat back the ghosts scratching at his eyes, pulling at his hair, feasting at his throat. “*STOP IT!*”

My knife slashed through paintings. Elsie, Hetty, Udo, Terese, Rose, Derya. They tore at him, hungry for his pain. I would not stop, not until all of them were free. An insane laugh bubbled up my throat as I tore into the chest of Briar, a young girl with wide eyes and flaming red hair. The floor beneath my feet trembled. The air was filled with screams of rage, the voices of women torturing their torturer. Taking back their power. Tasting blood.

I bared my teeth like a wolf at the thought of it.

As I liberated rosy-cheeked Xiang from her painting and the castle gave a horrible, stony groan, I saw I had one portrait left.

One portrait that already had a small rip in it. And that rip had given her just enough freedom to warn me.

I stopped, running my bloodied fingers over the nameplate below her painting.

Ada.

I met her mournful eyes and sliced the knife into her throat.

Another flash of white light, and when my vision cleared I was face-to-face with my doe. My Ada. She stood in front of me, glowing like the moon, burning like a star. My eyes bloomed with tears.

“Ada,” I said, voice hoarse from screaming. I swallowed.

“Ada.”

She touched my cheek, fingers warm against my skin. “Thank you, my love.”

The floor suddenly lurched, a horrible, violent movement like a body preparing to vomit. I screamed, finally aware enough to understand what was happening. One of my terrors, come to life.

The castle was falling apart.

“We have to leave!” I tried to take Ada’s hand, but my fingers passed through her as if she was air. A frustrated cry escaped me.

“Marjorie.” Her voice was calm despite the groaning castle, the dying screams of the Artist as his victims ripped him to shreds.

“Life is waiting for you.”

“No,” I sobbed. I grappled for her hand again. “Not without you. Never.”

"You must. I'm bound to this castle. My bones are in its very foundation. When it falls, I will be released. And I long for that."

My heart split as I realized I couldn't deny her the freedom she had spent so long wanting. I would have to leave her.

As tears filled my eyes, she kissed me. Her lips burned against mine, her light warmed me like no one else ever could. When she broke away, she was smiling a soft, sad smile.

"I love you, Marjorie," she said, "but it's time for you to go."

And because I loved her, I did as she said.

I ran from the room, streaking past the Artist's bloodied lump of a body as the women ate him alive like beasts. He reached one fingerless hand towards me, his destroyed eye wide with rage. Savage joy intertwined with my horror.

The hallways lurched as I sprinted through the castle, arches splitting apart over my head, oil lamps crashing from the walls. As I reached the front doors, I felt the floor begin to tip backwards.

I heaved open the doors and burst into cold night air just as the Hanged Castle gave a horrible, shuttering death rattle. And then, it fell.

Piece by damned piece it collapsed into the ocean, dark rock raining down into the crashing waves. A sob ripped from me as I saw a flash of gold descend into the swell—one of the portrait frames from the Artist's gallery. Perhaps Amare, perhaps Xiang, perhaps Ada. One of the women whose lives had been so selfishly ended.

The cold wind, sharp with salt, cooled my heated face. I looked up to the night sky, the moon and her stars radiant in the winter darkness. One star seemed brighter than the others, glowing with a warmth that made my hardened heart soften.

An evil man was dead, a man who had ruined so many women for his art. And while I did not know what the future held, I was free from him, and breathless, and *alive*. Bright and aching with it. And that was enough.

It was then, on the cliffs, I decided my fate. I needed to live a life worthy of those hidden women, because they were robbed so violently of theirs. I would honor them. Make them proud. Live richly, and kindly, and greatly.

And then, I would meet my love in the beyond.

Fortunate Son

Aaron Menzel

"We're getting close, right?"

"Dunno. What'd the last sign say?"

"Fifty-two miles."

"Well Buck-o, there's your answer."

Arthur fiddled with the radio, one hand over the wheel. Country music filtered through the static, but the lyrics were lost in the hum of tires. Beside him, Gabo stared at the moon.

"Why is Uncle Rennie arriving in Charleston? He always makes land in New York."

"Cheaper. International travel gets expensive."

"Can we eat when we pick him up?"

Arthur nodded. "You bet. I'm sure he'll be hungry. Then we'll hole up for the day."

"Good. Cause I'm starvin'"

Arthur guided the car around a sinister-looking pothole. The front wheel dipped onto the gravel that bordered the road. In the backseat, their luggage bounced: two duffels filled with all they'd need to combat the powerful eastern sun.

Gabo peered out the window. "Whaddaya think grows in those fields?"

"Alfalfa? Soybeans? Can't say I know much about South Carolina agriculture."

Gabo made a face. "Whatever it is, I bet it's gross. I don't know how people can eat stuff like that. Too green for me."

Arthur laughed. "If that's what you're raised on, that's what you eat. Different strokes." He reached over and ruffled Gabo's hair, and Gabo leaned into his father. The radio crackled as the radio signal wavered. Arthur gently twisted the knob, trying to sift through sound to find meaning. His eyes focused on the red bar that passed the illuminated tick marks. The voice of a pastor preaching the midnight gospel, the twang of a steel guitar, the rantings of a DJ high on caffeine and coke—he almost had a clear channel. Gabo burrowed under his father's arm, inhaling the scent of permanence.

When the deer hit the car, the pair moved together. Their heads crunched against the steering wheel. The radio static stopped, and the night took over.

Arthur woke first. He wiggled his fingers and felt grass damp with dew. A few stars glimmered faintly overhead. He'd been thrown from the car. White sparks clouded his vision as he surveyed the area. The car had slid from the road; the crumpled hood smoked. Twin holes in the windshield, like eyes wide with shock, stared back. Gabo lay a few feet away, and Arthur crawled over, patted the boy on the cheek until he woke.

"Huh?" Gabo stirred. Blood dripped into his eyes.

"We hit something." Arthur shook his head, trying to clear the fog. "Can you move? How do you feel?"

"Like garbage." He propped himself up on his elbows.

"We hit something," Arthur repeated as he pressed a hand to his throbbing temple.

"An animal," Gabo said, and slowly stood. "A deer. I saw it running toward us. There." He pointed into the field where a shape lay still. "Can I?"

"What?"

"Can I... you know?"

"No. You'll get sick. Leave it be."

"But it's still alive. It's in pain."

“Leave it, Gabo. We’re in pain. Plus, it’s... ” he checked his watch, and his pale face turned to ash. *“It’s almost morning.”*

Gabo turned one way, then another. Fields. Crops. No cover except a strand of trees far away. *“Dad?”* Gabo’s voice was tight, like his throat had been staked shut.

“Stay away from the car. I’ll get our things.” Arthur limped toward the ruined vehicle. Burnt rubber, plastic, and fabric formed a wall of stink. He wrapped a sleeve around his hand and pulled at the scalding handle, but the door wouldn’t open. Arthur could feel the heat seeping through the clouded glass. He could see the metal springs in the charred, skeletal back-seat. Their luggage had disappeared, along with the upholstery. The car was little more than a metal shell.

“Dad?”

“It’s fine.” Arthur steadied his breathing. *“We’ve been in tight spots before.”*

“I think I can see it.”

“Impossible. Not yet.” But Arthur looked east and froze. It was coming up. He hobbled around to the front and wrenched open the passenger door. Smoke billowed out. Beads of plastic dripped from the dash to the floor mats, and tongues of fire grew as oxygen gave it life. Arthur ignored the heat as he pried open the glove compartment. A bottle had been tucked behind the owner’s manual and Arthur fished it out.

He reached Gabo as the first rays of light broke through. Gabo screamed and Arthur worked. He ripped the top from the bottle and slathered sunscreen over every inch of his son. The bottle was bloated and disfigured, and Arthur almost dropped it as his hands became greasy and slick. Gabo squirmed as his skin, hair, and clothes were doused in white. The rays increased, and Arthur clenched his teeth, his fangs biting into his lips as he focused on completing his task. Gabo watched the sun rise, a foreign object he'd heard about but never seen.

"Go," said Arthur, his skin blistered and cracked in the heat. "The trees. Shield your eyes. You can make it if you run. Take the bottle. There's still a little left. Use it all. Your face and hands first." He pushed Gabo away.

"No. Dad, come with me."

"My leg—"

"I'll help you!"

"Can't. Too slow. Go."

And Gabo did.

And the sun rose.

And Arthur burned.

The Teddy Thing

John WM Thompson

We set out everything precisely as Teddy had instructed, the salt circle and requisite trinkets as perfectly arranged as they could have been in that corner of the cabin. Anne and I sat together and waited for it to appear. It had been a few hours already. I went out to smoke, then we picked up our argument. After that, when we'd gotten sick of the silence, I'd retreated to the kitchenette, putting space between us and trying all the while to keep the corner in my field of vision. Sometime between when I'd topped off my coffee and turned to retrieve the sugar, it materialized.

I supposed that it hadn't had time to decide what it wanted to look like, so it took Teddy's face in a pinch, probably because it knew him. It was harder to explain why it looked so precisely like Teddy as I had seen him the day before: knit cap, bright orange shirt spilling over the waistline of his jeans. What he'd been wearing when he'd (reluctantly) given me the list of things I would need to finally give this calling-over thing a shot.

Maybe it looked into me and came out with the picture before I noticed it was there. It stood stock-still, slack-jawed and glassy-eyed in the middle of that circle.

From the small couch on the far side of the cabin, Anne looked up from her paperback with an expectant eye toward me.

“Well?” She said, and tilted her head toward our new guest.

This was not helpful. In fact she had not been helpful during this ordeal, our entire year of sliding fortunes. I decided that I had to ignore her, go into negotiations with my best foot forward, if I was to get any succor from the thing. Rather than answer Anne, I turned toward it and looked it in its borrowed face.

“What are you called?” I said.

I received no response from it. Looking directly at the thing was harder than I expected. It was utterly still, not even breathing, and yet I felt a faint and icy draft from it, like an unsealed window. Its eyes, not focused but contorted into an expression not unlike a dog’s when caught in a shameful act, seemed uncomprehending. Gazing into them I felt like I was falling forward; I felt a pressure at my temples and a dizziness, to the point where the feeling of Anne’s glare on the back of my neck was a welcome distraction.

I turned back to Anne feeling small, not the commanding presence I’d hoped to embody.

“It’s not ready,” I said to her.

She sat there, made an “mmm” sound, and gave me a puzzling look, some look of shame or disappointment that rattled my determination to have this exchange done. She looked harsh in the dim glow of the lamps we’d hung from the ceiling, in her green corduroy dress. Her brown hair was pulled up into a high knot, the bags below her eyes spoke to the strain of the past year.

“You don’t think it’s possibly meaningful, this thing looking exactly like your brother?” I said.

“I know it’s not Teddy. And besides, they know each other.” She was nonchalant. Like Teddy himself, she’d considered this a bad idea.

“Well fuck Anne, what does he call it?”

She shrugged, “Don’t know. You’re the one who called it, you figure it out.”

My dad would have laughed at this, at Anne and me. Most people in the valley celebrated when two cunning houses intermarried, but it was dad’s contention, frequently issued from the porch of that same cabin, that he and I were the Igors, secretaries and enablers of the real work of securing luck, which my wife and her kin had always done.

He was right on that. He also felt Anne had married beneath her. He might have been right about that too. By that night I don’t think either Anne or I could remember what she had

seen in me when we were young.

In any event, she was telling the truth about the exchange; calling across, inviting an outsider like the stock-still and dumbfounded thing in the circle, was my idea. What she might not have appreciated was that this was something her kin did, and whatever our arrangements, I wasn't nor would I ever be considered of a kind with them. I was not supposed to be setting the circle, placing the offerings, bargaining. Teddy had only allowed it because... why? Pity for his sister and her dolt husband? The thought lit a fire under me.

At the time I thought I was doing it for her, as though it were her poor judgment that had led us to that point. Behind me, it spoke.

"Where am I?" it said.

I turned to face it and whatever disoriented quality it arrived with was gone. Its eyes regarded me with a contained and aware otherness, like a wild animal's. I flinched at the intensity of it. It was only when it turned toward Anne that I noticed how its eyes were fixed in its skull, like a hawk's eyes. It—the Teddy Thing—turned the entirety of its head to face my wife. Anne was looking at me as it looked at her, and I realized that it had been a stretch of unaccountable seconds since it had asked its question. So much for a best foot forward.

"I have summoned you to the material," I said, with a cough. "I brought you here for an exchange."

This was, as I understood it, what I was supposed to say to an invited guest. It turned its entire head—face frozen but for the life in its eyes—to me.

“What are you called?” It said.

I still remembered my name, so I shared it.

“I like that name,” it said.

There was a cheer in its voice though Teddy’s face was, as before, a mask of stillness, even the lips. I continued.

“I asked you that question earlier: What are you called?” I said.

It ignored or did not hear me.

“I am here for an exchange,” it said.

Anne was looking at me with concern, brow raised.

“You know what you’re doing,” my name, “don’t you?”

I told her that I did. I would establish terms and shake on the deal, Teddy would come by in the morning and we’d go about fulfilling our end of the bargain as agreed, whatever that amounted to. Deals with the things from across usually required minor acts of strangeness—a tree in a certain place cut down, retrieving a certain coin from a certain fountain, a silhouette cut from paper with a carving knife, folded into a

sandwich and fed to a dog. Small and easy things in exchange for good luck, good harvest, all the things that we're supposed to be powerless over. Nothing that we couldn't handle.

Anne was unimpressed.

"This isn't a luck exchange," my name, "You don't ask for specific people."

Our parents and their parents and their parents' parents, all the way back to the first, had been cunning men and women of the valley and our town, and they maintained good fortune in aggregate, siphoning it off from the outsiders, letting it filter through the town like invisible irrigation to saturate and maintain the good life, for however long it lasted.

It was easy for me then to imagine no one in our families *needing* in the way I thought I did. How could we? We were feared and important people. Or Anne's people were, at least.

Were my forebears never sick of doing strange things? Living on canned food the valley folk left at our door, never calling, never facing them? And not even calling the shots, but doing the work, plumbers deep in the walls maintaining pipes the people didn't even know were there, not really. So many strange things to do to ensure things went right.

But Teddy and Anne and their ilk were not strange to anyone, because they were ostentatious people doing ostentatious things. They brought the things in—spirits, guests, whatever—

spoke to them, sent them back, and when the luck showered down it was they who were seen to have done the delivering.

I wanted to deliver. I wanted to deliver something to myself.

“Trust me on this, would you? Teddy told me everything I need to know,” I said to Anne, and her expression hardened, then faltered. “We need this,” I said, with as much certainty as I could muster in the moment.

“No, we don’t. You haven’t been listening to me,” she replied.

But I had been. She just hadn’t been trying to help.

The Teddy Thing let out a high, halting whine from its frozen mask.

I admit that it had started with some resentment on my part. My father, second last to my line, died in the winter. And though it was expected, though he was as coarse and mean as ever on his way out, I fell into a sort of crisis. For a week or two I hadn’t picked up the phone when Teddy called with an errand (which is what they were, errands), slept in my father’s cabin when Anne tried to sniff me out, just stayed away from the work that he thought I was only good enough for.

When I’d had my tantrum, come to my senses, and come back home, I was told that I’d caused some difficulties.

"We racked a deficit," is how Teddy put it.

What did that actually mean? No one had told me, nothing seemed much worse than it had been, except that there was more of everything to do. But Anne looked at me differently, and though I'd come back to the fold ready to return to the day to day life of being strange, an intemperate and sullen streak had stuck to me. I kept dreaming of other things and other places, some other life. I kept running errands, but I started to drink, then started getting dealt into hands at the roadhouse.

The thing about the work is that nobody pays you, nobody looks you in the eye and acknowledges how critical you are to every possibility they enjoy. The money simply finds its way to people, in a scratch ticket or a sterling brooch turning up in the corner of a drawer. Vaguely there was a sense that whatever I did was necessary. But did they believe that? I was tired. I stopped seeing, or thinking I could see, the ways I mattered to the world.

It was like breaking into a run and finding, in yourself, more and more strength as you went along. The hands dealt to me at the roadhouse were good. Somehow, that was precisely the problem. I wanted to see them change. So I kept going, and eventually, they did.

Anne and Teddy got round to calling the dealer, got me barred from the premises. But by that time the money was gone,

so gone that they'd started to discuss selling the cabin, and that was too real a consequence. So I decided we needed luck enough to go and get my money back at the tables.

"I have listened," I said.

We stood there for a time, the three of us. I studied my hands, the yellowed tips from the cigarettes, all the gnarled and tired skin. I could tell the Teddy Thing was looking at me, trapped behind the salt circle. Anne's lack of confidence frustrated me, but she had to see how all of this would get the ground back under us. What was the point if she didn't?

Without saying anything she got up from the couch and strode to the kitchenette, squatted down, and pulled a bottle of white wine from under a counter. The Teddy Thing watched her impassively, but she didn't seem perturbed. With the long neck of the bottle she pointed at it.

"Did you come with a bottle opener?" She paused, then turned to me. "Was a bottle opener on the list?"

It was, gone now to wherever the thing had come from.

"Fuck it," She put the bottle back, retrieving another one, the cork stuffed roughly in its aperture. "I'm leaving."

She took a long pull from the bottle, looked at the label, took another long pull, then left the bottle on the counter. "You can split this."

"Anne," I said with far less authority than I meant to project, "Anne, wait," but she was already headed for the door. I followed her out.

It was almost midnight outside the cabin, and quiet save for the cicadas, out even as the leaves were turning. Anne was trudging to the parked sedan on the far side of the gravel lot, near the edge of a stream that had waned all through the years my father had brought me there as a child. It was now a steady trickle through a bed of wet clay, and it made no sound over the crunch of gravel from Anne's fast pace to the car. From the steps of the cabin I called out to her again, and finally she turned halfway to the sedan, looked at me. Her voice echoed in the air.

"What do you want out of this? What do you really want?"

Should it have been obvious? Was it obvious? I didn't know how to answer.

"Is that it?" She gestured toward the cabin, and repeated louder, "That's it? Do you even realize why I agreed to come here in the first place?"

"To support me? I want to make right all the things I've done, I thought you'd understand that," I replied. She bristled.

"That is not how you make things right," my name, "You just have to work on not letting us down again." Us. Her brother, her people.

"I'm not cut out for this kind of pressure, Annie. I don't know what I'm doing or why and I'm falling behind." And if I'm not getting the credit, I'd at least get something. "And if it's just going to keep piling up, I need some sort of assistance or else—"

"So ask Teddy to help you out for a while," she said.

"No, I can handle it personally, I just need a little bit of outside help."

"Why don't you ask me?" she said, throwing her hands up (exasperated? Pleading?). "Do you have any idea what you're doing? Any idea at all?"

Even when she was a silhouette in the night she was so solid.

"This doesn't change anything," my name, "This is the same thing. This is the same thing you always do."

"I can do this, Anne. I'm going to make things easier from now on."

"Nothing gets easier if you don't let things go."

"I don't accept that."

Then Anne walked toward me, then past me, and into the cabin, to the Teddy Thing that was still there, twitching. She leaned in close to it for a moment, seemed to regard it, then turned back to me.

"I don't care about the cabin," my name, "I don't believe you do either. Calling this thing..." I started to protest but she held up her hand and I fell silent.

"People fail," my name, "They fail and they lose all the time. I know you want to prove something, but you don't have to," my name, "You don't. You don't. You made some bad decisions, but so does everyone. They fuck up and they lose. I know you didn't mean for anything bad to happen, Teddy knows too. We haven't and we won't judge you for how you've acted, there's been a lot bearing on you. We can go home, you know? We'll work it out. We can go home and leave this place and this... Thing. Let Teddy handle it in the morning."

I thought about caving, just letting the cabin go, sending the Teddy Thing back across and trying to hack it again with Anne and her people. But I'd already called it, hadn't I? Just as I'd already pissed away our luck and our money. The precipice was behind us, not before us.

I opened my mouth but just shook my head heavily, avoiding her gaze.

"Fine. Fine, so be it." She stepped back from the Teddy Thing, took her paperback, and walked out.

I made as though to follow her, but when I reached the porch, I realized that the car had already started. The beams from the headlights painted the far side of the muddy creek. A family of foxes skirted past, casting thin and arcing shadows. Anne was standing behind the open door of the sedan, clutching it.

"It's going to be alright," she said. "I just wish you'd tried."

We stood far apart and I said nothing until I realized she was waiting for me, so I simply kissed the yellow-stained fingers of my hand and splayed them out in her direction. After a moment she did the same for me, then got back into the car without another word.

In the darkness, I thought I could see her bunch herself up against the steering wheel, but then the car kicked into gear and sped away down the creek, past the trees, leaving only the sound of the cicadas. I lit a cigarette, my fingers trembling slightly, the feel of paper numbed by the cold. At that moment I had regarded Anne's demeanor in our last parting as one of coming to terms with my will.

Above me, the night was a dark shade of ochre. No stars shone. In nearly every direction the lights of towns and cities, even from miles and miles away, masked them. I felt more trapped than I ever had.

I went inside to where the Teddy Thing was waiting. But when I crossed the threshold of the door I realized that it was my own face now, peering steadily and still at me. My clothes, my mussed and thinning air. I was overcome by revulsion at this reflection.

In my stunned silence I noticed the fingers of its hands lacked the yellow-brown cigarette stains that had always marked my own. And the essential tremor of those hands, which my father had attributed to some like-essential weakness, was gone. The thing in the circle was as the work of a sculptor more careful than any other, but too proud to reproduce the real. There too I noticed the absence of lines around the eyes, an upturn at the corners of the mouth, so unlike me for so long.

With Anne gone I was already feeling sore around the heart, and this unexpected mimicry aggravated my mood. Here was, for all anyone knew, an immaculate me. Not just immaculate: unsullied. It was alive but looking at it I knew that it had not lived, that it showed no signs of having experienced the ordeal of living.

The observation of this let a boldness into me that I welcomed. It put me on more even ground, the real living man—feeling more and more himself. I resolved to continue referring to my reflection as the Teddy Thing, faces be damned.

“I’m here for the exchange,” It said to me, the face now clearly moving, if too smoothly, fluidly, like the traveling wave of a whip, sculpting the expression from bottom to top.

I decided it was playing dumb.

"I know you are," I said.

Then the face changed to a broad grin that sent me shivering, another uncanny *not-ness* of me in that face, as though it were erasing me. But the animal otherness of the eyes remained.

"I have listened." The voice was both singsong and stiff, like reciting a language learned phonetically. A flash of anger ran through me.

"We haven't even talked terms. I'm not ready," I said. The dog-like incomprehension surged into its face for an instant, then dissipated into the rictus grin.

"Terms," it said.

I didn't know what that meant. But I decided it was something, a permission to continue. In my chest there was a rollicking, sloshing feeling of precarity, like I was at the helm of an engine I didn't understand, had never understood, was not controlling, had never controlled.

"If I'm not getting the credit, I'd at least like to get something," it said.

I did what I would have never done for a real person and begged.

"Listen, I just... I need to get back on track, okay? I got lost. I need to get back, I need to erase all this shit that I've caused. Do you understand that? Can you do that?"

In response to this, the Thing turned, and I noticed that the eyes were no longer fixed, that it was moving—it swayed its head back and forth as if feeling its weight for the first time. It blinked asynchronously at me—left then right, right then left, then normally, then closing its eyes. It breathed and rolled its tongue over its teeth.

"I would like to see the stars. Can I see the stars?" It said, its voice quiet as though half-asleep. For the first time the sound it made was coming identifiably from its throat.

"You can't see them from here," I said. I felt so forlorn, for the thing at which I had so recently been livid. "There are too many cities and they're too close to us. You can't see them."

Then I remembered, and added, "Besides, you have to stay here, behind the circle. I can't control what happens if you leave it."

It sighed, a beautiful sound, a warm sound.

"I just need a little bit of outside help," it said.

In the back of my mind, something that was so familiar began to thrash, sending cold chills along the back of my neck.

But the turmoil diminished with every waking moment, giving way to a weariness, a feeling of being adrift. Anne had left, and she'd given me a choice, hadn't she? For my sake. And I'd gone and run off again. But the reproach within me was fleeting, on a shoreline that receded from my mind's eye.

It felt as though I had half woken up. I dragged my focus out from within myself and into my perceptions, in time to see the figure in the circle—which I then recognized as myself—step over it. The line of it had been scuffed at the margins. I wondered idly who had opened it. Me, or Anne on her way out. Or maybe the I who stepped out from the circle had done it.

"Lay down and look at the stars," one of me said to the other. I was so tired, and I held on to so much. I saw that the ballast I meant to cut was vital to me in ways I hadn't recognized. I had given it away. It didn't belong to me anymore.

"Lay down and look at the stars and you'll be fine." I walked away from myself, out the door. And then there was something, a glimmering light, just on the inside of the broken circle, fading as I watched. The once-familiar impulse in me didn't want to go towards it, but I desperately needed to.

When I moved forward, gnarled ugly hands extended to grasp that glimmer, it took shape into a bulbous, twinkling ball of light. It was breathtaking to behold. The circle on the wooden floor was gone—the wood itself seemed vibrant, alive.

I walk through the door and, for an infinitesimally small moment, I think that it's morning already. Teddy's car is not there. Anne is very far away, I realize. I do not see myself anywhere. There is a beautiful and eternal glow about everything. I look out and see the green of the way and the river beside it, but it's not gurgling, it rushes, sighing softly and continuously and shimmering in the light. I look up to see the light. A vast mirror, a silver stream of stars lays across the sky and glitters, no, teems with burning life and awareness, like the ones I'd known had been softly dozed behind the glare.

A wonderful calm feeling presses against the last squirming remnants of anger, anger from some faraway place that I'm losing. The knots of memory of Anne and Teddy and my own wants and my own actions and my own name shudder and untwist themselves. Now I lay myself flat on my back here next to the stream and look up at the lights shining, which are not shining down on the thing that they made or on Anne or on Teddy, but on me. I have crossed over to a new understanding and a new place.

I lay flat and wonder if the sun or city lights will rise to swallow the stream, but they do not. Here there is no light to intervene against the stars. I forget everything. Nothing comes but the stars looking into me. Long-shot hopes and bitter disappointments and the deepest regrets down in the pulp of me, I forget. The night, the cabin, the valley, my father, the outsider, Teddy, Anne, I forget. I look up to the silver stream as it bends to me, passes through my lifted arms into my eyes, into me, forgetting.

Spinal Seeds

Josh Sippie

The seeds the man at the farmers' market sold me looked like any ordinary seeds, but when what looked like a vertebra popped out of the terra cotta pot two days after planting, I had to question his source material. Regardless, I watered it, never once thinking that what was contained in my terra cotta pot was anything but a plant.

This theory was soon disproven.

From the dirt came three, and then four vertebrae, and out from those, what looked like the beginnings of a ribcage, pale white, extending outwards like arms seeking a hug before curling back towards each other.

I returned to the farmers' market the following week and found the man's stall replaced by gluten-free baked goods.

"There was a stall here last week. He sold me some seeds; do you know where he went?"

She looked at me oddly, like she knew what I was unintentionally growing back home. "This has been my booth for sixteen straight weeks, stranger. Can I interest you in a gluten-free orange loaf?"

I didn't answer her. I visited every stall and asked about the man with the planters, but no one knew what I was talking about. I even went so far as to consult Google maps, reaffirm that I was indeed at Patriot's Park in Tarrytown. I walked home, trying to remember the face of the man who sold me the seeds, but my brain sputtered to recollect. Like he'd gone back in time and altered the occurrence so that I could never track him down. I considered that it was all a dream, that the spinal column growing out of the top soil back home wasn't actually there, and for the briefest of moments, relief swarmed over me.

But then I opened the door, and found that the spinal column had broken out of the pot, spilling soil across my table. It now had the beginnings of arms, legs, a bottom jaw. To the police, I would look like a mash-up between a murderer and a mad scientist. I went to the bathroom, locked the door, and listened to the creaking of the bones growing in the other room. The thought hit me that maybe there was nothing nefarious about this. Maybe it was growing me a butler or a maid. I deserve nice things, too, and this man, this mystery man who no one else knew, saw that in me. His divine ordinance, perhaps.

I cracked open the door and peeked out.

Flesh had begun to cover the bone, with muscle and sinew. Teeth poked out of bare gums as lips hadn't grown yet.

The head turned slowly to face me—a wretched, twisting sound—as he rotated. He tried to say something, but without

lips, there was nothing I could do to understand him. I would have fled if my body would unlock itself, but it stood rooted to the spot.

Gradually, my fear released and I pulled my jaw back shut.

“Can you hear me?” I asked.

The head rotated just slightly in a jolting, jerking motion. His jaw, hung cockeyed, motioned as if speaking. Guttural noises, like hawking up vital organs, spewed dirt that nearly reached my feet. I stepped backwards right as I heard a *pop* sound. He’d sprouted one eye—*pop*—and another.

Those eyes found me and, when they did, a sense of familiarity. I had seen the eyes before, though with lids. I looked down at his feet now, which stirred, and found that in my distract-edness, he had gained skin and toes, clean as a newborn baby’s. He wriggled from his seated position on the table and stood up, though his body wobbled such that he raised his unskinned hand and steadied himself on the wall, leaving a bloody handprint that would be forever ingrained in my mind.

“Are you... are you a threat to my wellbeing?” It sounded stupid even as I asked it, but his laughter put me back in fear mode. As he laughed, dirt and saliva erupted out of his chest like a pustule popping pus. His lips began to form and I waited with bated anticipation as he seemed to do the same, enunciating grotesque sounds that gradually formed words.

“...wahn baah sah...” he paused, reached up and popped his jaw into place. “Want to buy some seeds?”

Welcome to the Funhouse

Mark Slauter



House Hunting

Kathryn Ordiway

There was no canyon, nor any estates, at Blue Canyon Estates, but there was a creek—which was more than most new developments had—and a purple playground, and tight plots of land hosting homes in varying stages of completion.

The houses rose from the ground in subtle neutral shades. Everywhere were balloons beating against each other in the spring winds, large signs reading OWN FOR LESS THAN YOU RENT!!!!, children on scooters and bikes and rollerblades darting in and out of lazy, conscientious traffic.

Em stood in front of Indigo Cottage, which was snuggled between Belleville Vista and Oasis House and looked no more like a cottage than its cookie-cutter neighbors. It had been an easy trip: south out of the metro area, slicing through the faintly rolling hills, Jasper complaining the whole time about her driving. Blue Canyon Estates was the last vestige of urban sprawl, a final community after a long stretch of low-slung shopping plazas and fast-food restaurants. Once the last McDonald's had zoomed out of sight the trip was shockingly green, all bright trees and fresh grass, brilliant and stomach-turning in color.

The realtor—Larissa or Marissa or Karissa—was running behind schedule. She had called ahead to let them know they should wander throughout the development to get a sense of the place while she wrestled traffic further north. The couple strolled along the gridwork of the community, chuckling at street names, commenting on how easy it was to navigate, far nicer than the crowded street they lived on. No one parked on the road at Blue Canyon Estates; everything was a nice right angle. It took only three turns to get from the main road to their prospective home. All pluses, said Jasper.

They were touring because it had become the thing to do. The migration from apartments seemed to happen all at once with the coming of spring. When they shed their heavy coats and joined their friends at the usual patio bars, the pair was shocked to find the other couples talking about open houses and down payments, utterly changed. Gone were the tall glasses of foaming, dark beer, the handfuls of peanuts, the fingers tacky with queso and sea salt. Gone were the occasional lemon-bright shots coughed back in cheers to anything in the world. All of their public rituals had been replaced. Their friends leaned back in their chairs instead of hunching forward. Their friends swirled vodka and waters and made offhand remarks about how to keep the weight off. Their friends offered tight political statements where once they had pounded clenched fists on tables and cried.

And so Jasper broke, never one to rock the social boat, and he casually slid a page of newspaper across the breakfast table, a modest house listing circled in purple ink. Affordable.

In a style Em knew Jasper wanted her to like. And she was too tired from everything else to argue, so she agreed. They could see this house, and the next, and the next.

Marissa arrived at Indigo Cottage with a slam of her car door and the violent staccato of stilettos on cement.

"I'm so sorry about that," she said a hundred times on the walk between the mailbox and the front door. "I always forget how deliciously remote this development is. Never give myself enough time to get here." She patted her hair and shoulders as if to assure herself she was completely there, then threw out her arm for strong handshakes. "I imagine you've already seen everything out here. Wrap around porch, built-in swing. Fenced-in backyard with that darling little gate. Gorgeous landscaping. West facing."

She walked as she pointed and pointed as she spoke, guiding their eyes from selling point to selling point as she herded them inside. "They spare no expense here. Really top quality. You get all the best light at all the times of the day. And the roof is so unique."

But they were beyond seeing the roof, passing right through the front door and into the bright foyer.

She marched them through the home: two bathrooms, three bedrooms, wide white kitchen, hardwood floors. She indicated an attic in the two-stall garage and the tool storage already mounted on the walls. She stood in the living room and

recited a list of buzzwords. Right when Em thought she might start screaming, Marissa said she'd give them space to talk and walked through the front door, leaving it open just a crack.

"It smells like cinnamon and vanilla, don't you think," whispered Em as she opened the oven. "I don't know where it's coming from. Did you see a candle or a plug-in somewhere?"

But Jasper wasn't listening. His fingers rested on the granite island as he stared through the back windows. The intense green of spring covered the soft sloping hills beyond the neighborhood. His eyes darted to the living room, the fireplace. She could see him considering a roaring fire in winter, snow on the front lawn, twinkling lights strung up along the peaks and valleys of the roof. And in the summer, lawn chairs in the backyard, patio parties, a fire pit of their own, friends spilling out of the house and into the grass, gushing about the view and the development and the way she decorated the space. She knew what he wanted: her hosting, barefoot in the kitchen, flouncy skirt, apron.

"Don't you think it's awfully close to the neighbors?" she asked, trying to break his reverie.

"Hm?"

"The house? Isn't it close to the neighbors?"

"Not any closer than we'd be in any other neighborhood."

He rested his cheek against the refrigerator, stroking the handle. "Wouldn't you love cooking in this kitchen?"

She shrugged.

"It's our house, Em."

"We should look at other houses before jumping to that conclusion."

"A house is like a wedding dress. When it's right, you know."

She cringed at the comparison. Jasper, who would have vomited over the word wedding just a year ago.

"I forgot to mention the upcoming amenities!" Karissa stood by the fireplace, her long teeth flashing, her vivid nails clicking against the mantle. "There are plans to have a kind of club house area built on site. A little cafe type deal, a pool for residents and guests only, a convenience store, I think."

The sound of her nails echoed in the empty space. Her mouth hung open slightly—thick, creamy lipstick parting to reveal long white teeth—and Em realized she could hear her breathing. A wet, labored sound.

"Yes, thanks, Marissa," she replied.

"Just wanted to let you know!" Karissa clacked back out the open door.

"A pool." It came out of Jasper's mouth as a moan. "And look at this."

Em shook the sound out of her head and followed Jasper to the center of the living room. "Crown molding." He pointed upward. "And, and—" he pulled her sleeve until they were kneeling on the ground, "—real hardwood." He pressed her hands against the floor.

A tiny giggle escaped her throat and she flinched, betrayed by her body. "Higher ceilings than we have," she responded, unaware that this had ever mattered to her.

"We don't even have to paint. Cool neutrals."

"But we can paint any time we want."

"Granite countertops."

"Rain shower head."

"A bay window."

"Ceiling fans."

"Farmhouse sink."

"Central air."

"Shiplap." She brought her face close to his. Their eyes

traveled to each other's lips. "An extra oven, stainless steel appliances." Their noses were touching. "The garden, the guest room, the walk-in closets."

"The two-stall garage, the outdoor patio, the porch swing."

"The fireplace," they chanted. "The clawfoot bathtub. The pool and the convenience store and the on-site cafe."

Their fingers dug into each other's forearms, their knees almost one with the wood. Karissa peeked through the window, her breath fogging the glass, watching as they quivered in their litany.

When they exited the house, the sun was hot and blinding. Em took a moment to close her eyes, soak in the warmth after how chilly it had been inside. She gave a little shiver, tried to put the spectacle she'd made behind her. Here, it smelled of pollen; there was a hint of leather in the air. She could hear a game of hide-and-seek beginning close by, saw a pair of blonde children dart from one backyard to the next.

Karissa gave a vague explanation of how they could own for less than they currently rented while birds chirped in time with her words.

"We have these really great landlords," said Jasper.

"Old couple, really sweet. It's going to be hard to leave them after all these years."

"Jazz." Larissa placed her hand on his wrist. "Can I call you Jazz?"

He scowled, opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off.

"Jazz, listen to me. Imagine those landlords, won't you? Imagine that landlord and landlady, and imagine Thanksgiving, and imagine having it right in there." She over-announced the last three words, bred space between them. With the hand on his wrist she manipulated him around, with the other she grabbed Em and directed her toward the wide window.

For a second, a glimmer of a long table and candlelight wavered before their eyes. Em watched herself popping champagne. The elderly couple gushing about how proud they were to see their almost-children living so well. There was the cranberry sauce, there was a golden, glimmering gravy boat. She didn't recognize the china, but oh, how it sparkled in the holiday glow. And there Jasper was placing a long, thick blade into the turkey. Slicing slowly, methodically, his face stretched into an unfamiliar grin.

"We were thinking of grabbing lunch to talk it over, if that's okay." Em couldn't find any air, her chest was tight.

"We what?" Jasper blinked back to reality. Then glared.

Em tapped the face of her watch. It was 2. Their appointment had begun at 10.

Larissa herded them again, this time toward their car. "If only that cafe was already built! You could get a true taste of this community! There's a diner just down the road, maybe two miles the opposite direction of town. You have my number, but here's my card again just in case." She pressed her hand against Em's. "And you call me at any time, dear. I really think this is the place for you."

She stood there waving as Jasper fumbled the car into drive and pulled onto the road.

"I thought you wanted it."

Em flicked through the radio stations. There was more static than not. "I'm starving."

"Does Herringbone get to the highway?"

"No, I don't think so." Without looking, she rummaged in the back seat. "My GPS is here somewhere."

"Your phone."

She snorted, disentangled her arm from a pile of scarves on the floor, pulling out her catch. "The reception out here is less than ideal. Do you suppose we're looking for Hardy Harry's? Is that the diner?"

"It sounds fine. Look, we should probably call her back today. That house is meant for us."

"God, I just didn't realize how big this place was when we drove in."

"Stop redirecting, Emmaline."

Herringbone ended at a perpendicular with Plaid.

"You know," said Em, "I was fine with Herringbone, but Plaid? Seriously?"

All around them were signs reminding them that they could own. They could own, own, own for less than they were renting.

"I think it's just because it's so old," said Em, holding up the GPS. The little blue car was driving about in beige nothingness. "It really didn't seem this big at first."

The radio finally picked up signal and began playing a tinny pop song.

"Good place to settle and have kids, probably, in the future, when everyone starts and what not." Jasper slowed to nod at a man mowing a small patch of lawn.

"Do you know him?"

"Seems nice." Jasper chewed on a dead piece of skin hanging from his lip. "Kids, Em. The kitchen."

Em rolled down the window to let the smell of grass flood the car.

"I think this is the turn," Jasper said. He had no choice but to make it. Plaid had come to an end at its corner with Liberty.

Ahead of them, standing in front of Indigo Cottage, Karissa waved, her eyes bright. Jasper stopped the car beside her.

"Glad to see you're back!" Her teeth glinted in the sunlight. "How was lunch? Did you have the Reubens? Have you made a decision? It's such a gorgeous corner lot."

"Oh, not yet," Em called over Jasper, "we're still trying to find the highway."

Marissa wrinkled her nose and gestured forward. "You just want to follow Liberty all the way down to Jefferson. I know, it's confusing. Right on Jefferson, take the roundabout onto Lincoln, then it's just a quick turn onto Ford and you should be right on the highway."

The car revved but did not move as Jasper pressed on the gas.

"Even the car knows you belong here," Marissa giggled.

They lurched forward.

It seemed as if Liberty would not end. Jasper clicked his tongue, Em picked at her nails.

"Why don't we just turn around and buy it?" he blurted out.
"It's really great."

"Why don't we get lunch and discuss it?"

"It's less than our rent," said Jasper.

"Not that much less," said Em.

"There's Marissa," said Jasper.

"Just ignore her," said Em.

"Have you made a decision?" asked Karissa.

"We're still trying to find the highway," said Em.

A wrinkled nose, a wave down the road. "You'll make one soon," said Larissa.

Every two minutes, one of them sighed, usually in time with a new, pointless turn.

There was Herringbone Street and Plaid Avenue, and Em was sure they passed Tartan Trail. There was Truman Drive and Roosevelt Drive and Lincoln Drive, all off Liberty Lane. From Lincoln came Ford and came Dodge, and from Dodge came Dart and came Duck and came Dive, and to their left and their right were still more streets, all with almost identical homes fading pink in the setting sun.

The streets were lined by yearning saplings. The streets were lined by strong oaks. The trees were lined by men mowing small patches of grass, small patches of green grass turning brown. On the right was a lemonade stand, unattended, empty pitchers lined in a row. To their left was a sandwich stand manned by the hide-and-seek-playing blondes.

"Let's just stop there," said Em.

"Let's just stop here," said Jasper.

"I think the thing is," said Jasper, a speck of lettuce stuck on his incisor, "this neighborhood is a grid in the center of a very large circle, and whenever we get to the circle, we keep reentering the grid instead of just going around until we find the highway."

"It might be." Em balled up her leftover crusts and threw the glob out the window.

"We should probably go back and pick up that bread you threw out the window. I imagine the homeowners' association would have a fit."

"Do you know them?"

"The guy who waved, I'm sure."

"One of the ducks will get the bread, anyway."

Jasper took a quick glance at her. "What ducks?"

"The ducks in the ponds."

"The ponds?"

"I thought—" But there were no ponds in sight, only rows and rows of one-story houses with fake second-floor windows and lawns peppered with toys and balls and bikes.

"Duck was a street, I think."

A cold blast of air rushed through their still-open windows. The premature heat was fading. Jasper navigated the car around another turn, and another, and another yet, landing them on Mallard Lane.

Larissa was waving in front of Indigo Cottage. "I've just had another showing, but they didn't seem too interested; they found the highway easy," she said, leaning her forearms on the car, poking her head through the window. "I'm serious, guys, I can feel it. This house is meant for you. I can hear it speaking to you. I can hear it screaming." Her breath filled the car with heat and the smell of eggs.

Em stared through the windshield at the darkening sky. "We really should get dinner and talk it over. Would it be alright if we called you tomorrow?"

"If you follow Mallard straight you'll end up on the highway. There's this fabulous little French bistro a mile up the road. There's even a walking path from the neighborhood park if you'd like to see more of the land out here. Take the path, it's so inviting!"

They thanked her and thanked her again as Jasper slowly eased the car into drive and inched it forward. She trotted along with them, smiling and clicking her nails, then waving and smiling and smiling and walking back to the house and standing in front of the house and waving and smiling and clicking her nails and entering the house and smiling.

"I don't think we can trust the car anymore," said Em. "Let's just walk."

"Right. The path is so inviting."

The path was gravel, easy on the knees, good for walking or running together. There were trees, nice trees, grass, of course, and the creek slicing through a whisper of valley between two faint hills. The bistro would be quiet—romantic—by the time they got there, Em thought. The path wove round and round. Perhaps there would be wine.

The path crested at the top of a low hill, and from it they could see the glittering brightness of Blue Canyon Estates.

"Ooh," said Jasper.

"Aah," said Em.

"Oh, it's perfect," said the blonde twins as they skipped down the path. "Would you like to buy more sandwiches? The bistro's getting farther away." Their smiles inched toward their ears trying to house all their teeth.

On a purple bench in the purple park, Jasper closed his mouth around egg salad, watercress, and avocado on wheat. Em dabbed at her lips after devouring a croque madame with the most delightful fried egg.

"Those silly twins," said Jasper.

Their watches did not match the skies.

Before them, the path looked so inviting. The gravel shone in the moonlight, and shadows danced. Jasper slipped his hand into Em's and smiled. "Come on," he whispered. "Let me show you."

Somewhere, a single lawnmower cried out. Em was sure the lawnmower was the president of the homeowners' association. And how noble, she thought, to be so dedicated to the beautification of the community.

A breeze stirred their hair. The path looked so inviting, more inviting than before because it had crawled to the left, where it clearly belonged. The purple swings creaked with the wind.

"Let's," said Jasper, with a smile, and the two of them clambered up the purple playground and tumbled down the purple slide.

In the purple sand at the bottom—the path looked so inviting—they laughed and embraced and kissed with purple abandon.

"I love us like this," said Jasper. "Aren't you tired of resisting?"

“The path looks so inviting,” said Em, gazing into his eyes, admittedly very tired from having been gone and confused for so long.

And the path did look so inviting. It looked so inviting. The path looked so inviting that they all but threw each other aside to get to it first.

And wasn't it so inviting, the way it slithered and snuck and slunk? The way it weaved between the houses, from park to park, street to street? Wasn't it so inviting by the saplings, then the oaks, with the leaves on and with the leaves falling, in the rain and the sun and the snow? Wasn't it so inviting how the path led to a gate, how the gate led to a yard, and how the yard was lush and spacious enough for a set of blonde twins and a dog and all those friends whose names the wind had swallowed whole?

The yard led to the back porch. The back porch led to the kitchen. The kitchen led to a hall, which led to some doors, which opened to bedrooms and bathrooms and linen closets, so expansive and perfectly placed and already lined with all the cleaning supplies Em would ever need. The door at the far end of the hall was ajar and there was light and there was a bed and they crawled in together. Never mind their clothes. Never mind that the sun was rising, that their bellies were gurgling. Never mind that they couldn't get out, that there wasn't a dresser, that it hadn't been furnished, that they'd forgotten

the car, that they seemed to be staying, that Marissa was in the corner, that Em's earrings were in and her makeup was on, that the air was filled with panting and the twins were at the window and they'd forgotten to brush their teeth or use the toilet or even to take off their shoes and the sheets were so tight and she couldn't get out and she couldn't get out and she couldn't get out.

Eros + ions

Pascale Potvin

She kept reading this book about a narrator who kept reading about having an affair. She told me she liked the *alliteration*.

Once she did cheat, she told me she'd accidentally fallen asleep next to the novel and that it had gotten too close to her head, that it'd infected her brain with microscopic worms unconfirmed by science. She said that as a result which she couldn't control, she hadn't acquired any real *human* interests, really, but instead a fetish for the love interest's very specific eye color. She hadn't connected with the man she'd slept with; she hadn't even given him her number afterwards; she'd only been aroused by that very special almond brown.

With regret, she further explained, she'd swiped left until she'd found that very perfect shade—it was a new, desperate fetish, distinct to interpersonal attractions. All, of course, because of that one book and its worms.

But she promised me she'd have her skull temporarily cut open (*they can do that now—make your skin alone strong enough to support everything else*), and to schedule several 'brain cleaning' appointments to rid herself of the slippery compulsion. It would ensure that no similar incident would occur, she told me (alongside a very noteworthy, "I never flirted," flavor of plea).

Yet as we were lying down to sleep, one misaligned autumn night, I did notice her staring slantedly—familiarily—at my t-shirted arm.

“What is it?” I asked her, with a comparably cottony chuckle.

“Nothing,” she only said, facing the bumpy ceiling once again.

However, based on the way her eyes had resented my skin, I was left wondering if she was bothered by something new—something else within me—that wasn’t up to par. The shape of my arm, not close enough to her fictional beau’s, perhaps? Or was it this time just not the right shade?

Thankfully, her second promise had been that she’d altogether stop reading, which did give me more rest. I told myself that she’d stared out of boredom before bed; sadly, she didn’t like watching TV with me (the adaptation of her favorite book—the lead actor’s arrangement of pores—had once gathered her sweating rage), and she never did without distraction keeping her brain moving. It was why she’d read with music, too; her brain needed its exercise, especially now, the doctor had said.

So, I wasn’t too surprised when I found an embroidery kit on the kitchen table one sour, pulpy morning. I *was* surprised when I found the little voodoo doll.

Reawakenings

Arlen Feldman

The dot on the screen hadn't moved in a month.

The doctors and scientists had given up after ten days, and the equipment—the parts not physically implanted in David's body—would be going back in another week or two.

But Zoe could barely take her eyes off the dot, even as she held David's hand. She'd talk to him until she ran out of words. He, of course, never said anything.

The nurses came in to clean David up and she decided that was as good a time as any to leave for the day. She thanked them, kissed David on the forehead, and headed out.

The dot quivered and then settled back into position.

When Zoe came in the following morning, they hadn't shut the machine off—the dot was still there, a bright white pixel floating in the middle of the screen—but there was a moving dolly parked ominously next to it. It was only a matter of time.

The machine was the size of a washing machine, with a monitor sitting on top. A cable ran from the machine to the smaller Rubik's Cube-sized box physically attached to David's head and wrapped with protective netting. From this box, gold wires ran to a microchip embedded one-and-a-half millimeters into the cortex of David's brain.

"Hey, David," she said, taking her normal spot in the uncomfortable visitor's chair. "I spoke to your mother last night. She still hates me."

Zoe uncurled David's hand and wrapped it around her own. His nails needed clipping.

"What's amazing is how she manages to express her contempt while still saying perfectly ordinary things. It's all in the pauses, I think. She could teach a master class."

She squeezed his hand. He did not squeeze back. The dot was rock-steady on the display.

"I'm starting to feel like a bit of a cliché here. I don't get on with my mother-in-law, and when we talk, I don't let you get a word in. Not really fair."

Through the door, Zoe could hear multiple doorbell chimes, the sound made when a patient hit the call button. It was better than the alarms from the first hospital, but still maddening when it went on and on. There was also the bubbling from

the water in the oxygen feed, the slight hum from the compression leggings that prevented blood clots, the random beeps from the monitor, the hiss from the air conditioning, the rising and falling hum from the computer's fans, and a dozen other sounds calculated to drive you crazy. She could tune it all out for a while, but then it would suddenly come crashing back. She couldn't even put on music because they'd banned all non-approved electronics from the room, in case they interfered with the sensing equipment.

"You know, you're not making this easy, right?" She brushed away a tear. "I think they are going to take the equipment away soon, so if you want to prove to them that you're still in there, now would be a really good time."

She squirmed in the chair, trying to find any sort of comfortable position. The dot wavered in her vision, but that was nothing new—her eyes created the illusion. She used a Kleenex to wipe her eyes properly, and the dot was back in its accustomed place. Whether David couldn't figure out how to move it or whether he really, truly wasn't in there at all, she didn't know.

Zoe blinked, then blinked again. The dot was moving. It moved an inch to the left, shuddered, then moved past center and then an inch to the right. Barely daring to breathe, she reached out and hit the nurse call button.

Zoe sighed. The last two weeks had been incredible, as David had demonstrated more and more control of the system. He could now type messages—slowly—by moving a cursor over an alphabet on the screen and pausing.

Some of the other patients with the same setup had a whole lot more control—could even operate robotic devices and control wheelchairs. But they were mostly people with degenerative diseases or spinal cord injuries, not a traumatic brain injury.

The surgical and technical teams had been over the moon at David's progress. Even Doctor Revitti, the one in charge, had cracked a bit of a smile before reverting to his usual look of unruffled superiority.

David was in there. And he remembered numbers, the alphabet, how to spell, colors, the current president, and the names of the states.

But he didn't remember the accident. He didn't remember his job, his parents, or his childhood.

He didn't remember Zoe.

The screen cleared, ready for the next question, and she looked down at the long list the doctors had provided. Just simple questions—nothing open-ended. Nothing that might cause strong emotions.

She reached for David's hand, then stopped. She was a stranger to him. She had no right to hold his hand.

"David. What was your dog's name?"

The cursor wavered for a minute, then started moving. She expected another "I DNT REMBR" but instead, the cursor moved to the S and then the A.

SAMSON

Zoe stared. David had only ever had one dog, and it had been called Humphrey.

"David. What type of dog was it?"

GRMN SHEPRD

Humphrey had been a golden retriever. What the hell?

"I'll be back in a minute, David," she said, getting out of the chair and heading into the hallway, carefully closing the door behind her.

She dialed David's sister on her cell. "Hey, Shelly," Zoe said when she picked up. "Weird question for you. When you were kids, you didn't have a dog, did you? A German shepherd named Samson?"

"Not a chance. Mom hates dogs. And cats. Animals in general, really. David once won a goldfish at a fair and she made him give it away."

"What about a friend or neighbor with a dog?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Nothing. It's just...well, it's the first thing that he's remembered, and it's...not real."

There was a pause. "Well, David is older than me. Maybe it was before I was born, or when I was too young to remember."

"Yeah."

"Listen, I've got a few days off next week. I was thinking of flying down. If that's all right?"

"That would be wonderful," she said. Zoe felt lighter just at the thought of having someone else there with her, even for a little while.

Shelly had none of Zoe's reticence about physical contact. She kissed David on the forehead and then rubbed her hand over the little bit of hair that had grown back after surgery.

"Hey, Stinky. You look like a pin cushion."

THNK U

"No problem," she said, climbing on to the end of the bed and curling her feet underneath her. She looked a lot like David—gray eyes and sandy hair, and the same dimples. A lot like David had used to look.

"Did you really used to call him Stinky?"

"Well, let's just say that he wasn't fond of showers—at least until he discovered girls." She grinned, and Zoe grinned back. She handed Shelly the clipboard with the list of questions from the doctors. She barely glanced at it, instead she stared directly into David's eyes.

"Zoe says you don't remember me, but that was just from pictures. Now that you can see me in all my glory, do you recognize me?" Shelly's tone was light and playful, but Zoe could hear a very slight edge to the words.

EVRYTHNG FZZY

"Not much of a surprise, Davie boy. You tried to bury your head in a tree. Turns out your head was harder, though."

Zoe half stood up to warn her. One thing the doctors had absolutely forbidden was any talk of the accident.

Shelly caught Zoe's eye for a moment. She knew—she just thought they were wrong. Zoe dropped back into the chair.

DNT RMBR TREE

"Well, it remembers you." She paused. "What do you remember?"

Another thing they were supposed to avoid—open-ended questions.

FIRE. PAIN. SCREAMING

"Oh, Davie." Shelly reached out and rested her hand on David's arm. Without realizing it, Zoe had crossed the distance between them and had taken David's hand.

They stayed like that for a while. Eventually, Shelly caught my eye and mouthed "I didn't know there was a fire."

Zoe shook her head. "No fire," she mouthed back.

The words on the screen flickered, and new words started to appear.

SHLDNT HVE AGRD. GREEDY

The two women looked at each other. Shelly shrugged. It didn't mean anything to her either.

“Agreed, Davie? Agreed to what? What are you talking about?”

TRD. VERY TRD

David’s eyes drooped closed.

“Doctor Revitti is apparently writing a paper about you. You’ll be famous.”

David didn’t respond. His eyes were half-open, but he might have been dozing. They’d operated again, this time inserting a new sensor in something called the *striate cortex*. The idea, they’d told her, was to try and capture images directly from his mind—get a glimpse of what he did remember. So far, it hadn’t picked up anything. But given how long it had taken for him to communicate with the first sensor, they were apparently willing to be a bit more patient.

“Well, famous among brain surgeons, anyway. Still, better than nothing.”

It had taken her months to finally realize that she could put a pillow on the chair to make it—well—not comfortable, but bearable. She leaned back and stared at one of the pictures she’d put up on the wall. David on the beach on Maui. He was just wearing a pair of shorts, and was grinning at the camera, a sparkle of mischief in his eyes. That David was gone.

DNT CRY ZOE

The movement of the cursor on the screen caught her by surprise. She hadn't realized that David had woken up. She hadn't realized she was crying.

"Sorry," she said, wiping her eyes against her sleeve. "I was just daydreaming. How are you today?"

HD HRTS

"Do you want me to call the nurse?"

NO. WHT DYDRMNG ABT

"Nothing. Maui."

HONYMN

Zoe gasped in surprise. "You remember?"

NO. SRY

"That's okay. It's not your fault." She tried to sound like she meant it.

The crosshairs wavered for a bit, then started to move—faster than she'd ever seen.

I RMBR MRCHNG. DYS N DYS OF RDS N MUD. LWYS
HNGRY. LWYS TRD. NO HRSS. NO SWRDS. WE USD
SPEARS N STCKS N NIVES. I RMBR SCREAMING. CHLDRN
SCREAMING. WMN SCREAMING. MSTLY I RMBR MRCHNG.

She couldn't get air into her lungs. Her legs had tangled with the chair behind her as she tried to get further away from the screen and from the man in the bed. There must have been some sort of mistake. The wasted figure looked somewhat like David, but maybe—somehow—what?

She slumped back into the chair. She was being silly. He was just remembering a dream or a movie, and with all the head trauma, he was having trouble telling it apart from a memory.

The nurse came in to change bedding and Zoe took the opportunity to escape.

"Square."

A fuzzy square appeared on the screen.

"Triangle."

A lopsided triangle appeared.

"Very good, David," said the doctor. He was a youngish man,

and had told Zoe his name, but she'd forgotten it and couldn't think of a graceful way to ask again. "Let's try something a bit more challenging. How about a rabbit?"

There was a pause, then an image appeared on the screen and she couldn't figure out what it was.

"Was David a hunter?" the doctor asked her, his eyebrows raised.

"No. He was super-squeamish. I had to carry spiders outside for him." She noticed that she had started using the past tense to describe David.

Zoe stared at the picture, tilting her head, and she suddenly realized what she was looking at. It was a rabbit, upside down, hanging from a string. Skinned, with the head removed.

She ought to have been horrified, but she wasn't particularly squeamish. Besides, it wasn't that different from seeing a dead chicken. She should also have been horrified about the false memories and images that David was bringing up, but she was numb to that as well. She couldn't explain how, but she was sure that the person lying in the bed wasn't David.

The doctor seemed more bothered by the image. He gestured for her to follow him into the hallway.

"Do you know why he is remembering things that aren't real?" she asked.

"It is not uncommon for brain trauma to change people's memory and personality. Dr. Revitti thinks that David is slowly constructing a new personality."

That caught her attention, and was a better answer than her own. "So, even if he recovers, he won't be David anymore?"

The doctor bit his lower lip and sighed. "Look, the brain is a complicated thing, and our understanding of it is...still pretty primitive. People have literally lost half of their brain and been perfectly fine, while others have had a minor injury that completely changed them. If Dr. Revitti is right, then maybe the new identity will be an amalgam. Some of David, some bits of random memories from tv shows and books, some completely new."

"But so far, there's no sign of the old David." She looked away to avoid seeing the pity and compassion in the doctor's eyes.

"Just...keep asking him questions. Keep talking to him about shared experiences. Maybe..."

The still picture on the screen was of a rocky cove, frozen waves from a rough sea pounding against the shore under thick gray clouds. A single beam of sunlight had broken through, drawing a line of white fire against the water.

"It's beautiful. Where is it?"

I DNT REMBR

David had grown up in Minnesota. He'd never seen the ocean until she'd dragged him to California and then to Maui. She'd never seen this place, which meant that David had never seen it. It *could* have been from some movie or TV show, but she didn't believe it.

"Who are you really?"

DNT REMBR

"I don't believe you. What's your name?"

The screen stayed blank for so long that she was sure that he wasn't going to answer, but then the cursor wavered and then moved.

ALWIN

Zoe ran out of the room, leaving her coat and purse behind.

It was funny, really. David had always insisted that they keep a spare key hidden outside the house. If they hadn't, she would have had to go back to the hospital that night. Instead, she stayed home for a week.

But she needed her purse with her license and credit cards. The nurse she'd spoken to on the phone had promised to

keep it safe. She could pick it up without ever going into the room.

Once there, though, she couldn't stop herself. David's—no *Alwin's* eyes followed her across the room.

IM SRRY

"Is David... Is David gone?"

DNT KNOW

On automatic pilot, she moved over to the chair and stared at the photos on the wall. Her and David dancing. Her and David laughing at a barbeque. David standing with his mother.

She'd not called David's mother in a while. The last time there'd been a big argument. She refused to come and see him, insisted that he was gone, that no fancy technology was going to change that.

Apparently she'd been right.

"Who are you?"

SOLDR. FGHT NDR ARIOVISTUS

Zoe pulled her phone out of her back pocket. She hadn't remembered to shut it off before coming in. The first google result for Ariovistus listed him as a Germanic leader who had

been defeated by *Julius Caesar* of all people, in 58 BC.

"Well, at least you're not claiming to *be* Julius Caesar."

FNNY

"I've never believed in all that past-life crap. David didn't either."

SHLLY BLVS

"Yeah, well Shelly believes in all sorts of crazy things," she said. Then stopped. "Wait. How do you know what Shelly believes? Come to that, if you are some Roman or German or whatever soldier, how come you know English?"

The screen went blank and stayed that way for a long moment. Then words appeared.

WELL, AREN'T YOU A CLEVER LITTLE BITCH

Zoe froze. A jolt of ice shot up her spine.

The screen went blank, and then the image of the rocky cove appeared, but now it was moving. The waves, no longer frozen, crashed against the shore and she was sure that she could hear the thunder of the impact, smell the salt air, even though it was impossible. The beam of sunlight, so pretty before, now was a stark finger, alighting on a solitary stone platform she'd not noticed, standing alone on the little beach.

Zoe couldn't tear her eyes away from the screen. The image shifted. The same place, but much closer to the stone platform. There were ugly organic-looking stains on it. The sound of the waves was getting louder. A figure walked into the image. He was large, wearing a monk's robes, and he was carrying something. No, carrying *someone*, but she couldn't see any details.

And then she could. The man placed the woman on the platform—the altar—and stepped back. It was Zoe, completely naked—the same image she saw in her own mirror. Zoe jumped to her feet. She instinctively tried to cover herself with her arms, but it did nothing to the figure on the screen.

"You son-of-a..."

Then she saw the knife.

The robed man was holding an ugly serrated blade. As Zoe watched, he slashed it across the belly of the woman on the altar.

Two women screamed: the woman on the screen and Zoe. Fire burned across her stomach and she grasped at it, then looked in horror as her hands came away bloody. There was the sound of running feet and a nurse pushed into the room then stopped, her mouth open.

Everything was moving in slow motion. The screen had gone black, and as she collapsed, Zoe looked at David.

She saw his hand twitch.

Then everything faded away.

Zoe forced her way upwards through waves of tiredness. A dirty white ceiling came into uncertain view.

"Welcome back, stranger."

"Shelly?"

Shelly reached over and took her hand. It was only then that Zoe realized that she was lying in a hospital bed. She looked around frantically, suddenly terrified that she was in bed next to David. But she was alone in her own narrow little bed.

"Shelly. Listen, this is important. Whatever you do, don't go into David's room."

She expected surprise or shock, but Shelly just looked sad, and nodded.

"You already told me that. This is the third time we've had this conversation. The drugs mess with your memory."

Zoe relaxed slightly. Her belly hurt and she ran her hand over it. Bandages.

"You were stabbed. No one saw who did it, but the police searched the hospital. They're sure that he must be gone."

"It was him. David."

Another sad little nod.

"Doctor says that the meds are responsible for that too—mixed up your memories of the attack with what was going on around you. David can't move, remember? David hasn't moved."

"That's not David," she said bitterly, and then drifted back to sleep.

Through the crack in the doorway, Zoe saw Shelly talking to a cop, but she couldn't hear anything. She was more awake now, but she ached everywhere. The pain killers were wearing off and the nurse hadn't brought in the next batch yet.

"What's going on?" she asked when Shelly finally came into the room and sat down.

"The doctor says you are going to be fine," she said. "They had to remove a very short section of your small intestine, but it shouldn't cause you any problems so long as you don't get an infection."

“You told me that already. What did the cop want?”

Shelly sighed. “He wanted to question you about the attack. I told him he’d have to wait, and that you didn’t remember anything.”

“Not true.”

“Anything that he’d *believe*.”

Zoe closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Sorry I’m being so snarky. Everything hurts.”

Shelly didn’t say anything. Just took her hand and held it. They stayed like that for a while.

The nurse came in, fussed with various connections, scanned the barcode on Zoe’s hospital bracelet, then gave Zoe her meds. With the door open, she saw the cop walk by, and then another cop, talking on his radio.

“What’s going on?” she asked Shelly when the nurse had gone.

Shelly blinked twice. “Nothing.”

“David did that too—used to blink when he was lying. That’s how I always beat him at poker.”

Shelly laughed, but sobered up quickly.

“A nurse has gone missing. They’re worried that it might be the same person who attacked you. That’s why you have a guard.”

Zoe felt like her blood had frozen.

Her time-sense was all messed up. She couldn’t remember how long it had been since she hit the call button for the nurse, but it seemed like a really long time. She desperately needed to pee, but if she climbed off of the bed by herself, the fall alarm would go off.

Finally, she decided she couldn’t wait. Holding a hand tightly over her stomach, she gingerly climbed down onto the cold floor. As expected, the alarm went off, but she couldn’t do anything about that now. She made her way to the little bathroom.

When she came out, the alarm was still going. She leaned against the visitor chair to take a breath. Shelly’s coat was still there. When had she left? When was she coming back?

There was a button by the door to cancel the alarm—she’d seen the nurse hit it a number of times. Steeling herself for the half-dozen steps, she straightened and covered the distance. It was a relief to shut off the damned alarm, although she could hear a dozen of the “doorbell” call alerts going off.

She should get back into bed, but instead she opened the door and looked out into the hallway.

No one was there. That wasn't unusual—the staff was stretched pretty thin, and she was used to the place seeming to be deserted, only to suddenly burst into life when an alarm went off. An alarm like the one from her bed.

Had they found the missing nurse? Is that why the cop was gone? And where was Shelly? Zoe took another step into the hallway.

There was a drop of blood on the floor in front of the room and, six feet away, there was another.

The only thing she wanted to do was to turn around and climb back under the warm sheets of her bed. Instead, leaning on the wall, she headed down the hallway. Toward David's room.

Zoe stood outside of David's room for a good ten minutes. Catching her breath, she told herself. In that time, she'd not seen anyone—not seen anyone on her trip to the room either.

Finally, she pulled up on the door handle and pushed the door open.

David was lying there as unmoving as he'd been for the past year. Shelly was curled up in the visitor's chair. Zoe watched

until she saw the slight rising and falling of Shelly's chest that indicated she was still breathing. Zoe sighed with relief and forced herself to step over the threshold and into the room.

There were all the usual sounds, the hissing, beeping cacophony of medical equipment, but there were other sounds as well—sounds coming from the machine. Waves crashing against rock and something else—someone quietly chanting in a language she didn't recognize.

She had to get fully into the room before she could see the screen and the image of the rocky cove. She immediately recognized the figure on the stone altar—Shelly, looking tiny and vulnerable.

Without quite knowing what she was going to do, she stormed towards David's figure and reached out.

His hand moved, grabbed her wrist. She tried to pull away, but couldn't—the hand was atrophied from disuse but unnaturally strong.

"Let me go!"

David remained still, staring off into nothing as ever, but the grip tightened. She felt the bones in her wrist scraping together. Heard the pop as the bone snapped several moments before she felt it. She screamed.

David let go, and she backed away, tripping backwards into the machine, trying desperately to support her injured limb. The machine moved an inch or two, scraping against the floor, and she saw the power cord twitch. She managed to stop herself from falling, then, using her good arm, she yanked the cord out of its socket.

There was a bright white flash from the screen, and an alarm started ringing. The screen flickered, went black. Then the image of the cove reappeared. The chanting was louder now, the words melding with the crashing waves.

Standing on a rocky outcropping above the altar, the robed figure was staring out to sea. He turned slowly and looked directly at her through the screen.

She recognized David's sandy hair. David's gray eyes. But David had never had that expression on his face. That predatory smile.

"Shelly," she screamed. "Shelly, wake up."

She shook Shelly's shoulder roughly, ignoring the pain in her other arm, but the other woman didn't respond at all. With a strength she didn't know she had, Zoe grabbed Shelly with one hand and dragged her bodily onto the floor and out of the room.

"Please wake up. Please," Zoe whispered. She was down on the floor herself, crying with pain and horror. Something had

given in her belly and a line of red was seeping through her hospital gown.

Shelly didn't move.

The chanting was now loud enough to overcome the alarm. The chanter's voice was strong and clear, but the words were somehow repulsive. She could hear the growing excitement.

She was going to have to go back in there.

There was no way she could go back in there.

She got to her feet, screaming in pain as her broken wrist brushed against the wall. She leaned her head against the doorframe. It was cool, blessedly cool.

Closing her eyes, Zoe forced herself to slow her breathing, counting each breath in her head. Strangely, the sharp pain from her wrist, the dull ache from her stomach—they both helped as a distraction.

She forced herself to go back into the room, grabbed the framed picture of her and David in Maui, started to swing it and froze. David was sitting up, watching her.

"Zoe?"

"David?"

"It's me. I'm back."

He looked and sounded like David. She desperately wanted to believe that it was him, but there was a leaden weight in her gut. "What's happening to Shelly?"

David glanced towards the screen. The robed figure was standing right in front of Shelly, knife raised. "I need power to come back. Don't you want me to come back?"

Zoe looked at David's gaunt face, so similar and yet so different from the image in the photograph. She hesitated, and hated herself for hesitating. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the knife starting to plunge towards Shelly's chest. In a second it would all be over.

Zoe pulled back with the picture frame and swung it as hard as she could. David raised his arm, but too late. The frame smashed against the box attached to his head.

There was a bright flash. Red flame shot from the box as it came half-free from his skull. A fiery circle appeared in the air. It grew as big as the room, crackling and hissing, then faded to nothing.

Another alarm went off—one of the devices monitoring David's life signs. Then another.

"We've got to get out of here." It was Shelly, standing outside the room, looking tired but stubborn. Relief flooded into Zoe,

and she nodded.

Shelly had to half-carry Zoe, but they managed to get out of the room and down the hallway before the sound of running feet could be heard. The sound of people filled her with relief.

David's mother glared at her from across the church. She'd been furious that Zoe had opted for cremation instead of burial in the family plot, but Zoe didn't care. Shelly was sitting next to her mother, and winked. Zoe stifled a smile.

After the service, she stood greeting people and accepting condolences. Even the cop on guard duty came by. Three nurses were still missing, and Shelly had somehow convinced the police that the attacker had come back and broken Zoe's wrist. So she was still officially under their protection.

Doctor Revitti came up to her and held out his hand to shake, which she did awkwardly with her left hand.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said with no particular emotion. "You'll be pleased to know, though, that thanks to David, my research will be expanding."

"What?"

“Yes. We will be working with a dozen patients with traumatic brain injuries in the next few months. We are hopeful that they will be even more successful than David was.”

3:37 a.m.

Chris A. Smith

3:37 a.m.,

the well of the night,

and I'm pulled from the depths of sleep

by the sound of laughter.

It's far-off at first,

coppery and hollow,

an echo of itself,

and I wonder if I'm dreaming.

But it grows louder,

then peters out,

then louder again,

filling the empty space above the bed,

and I know I'm awake.

I turn over,

the pillow cool on my cheek,

and wait for it, listening,

holding my breath.

One-one-thousand,

two-one-thousand,

and there it is:

she's laughing in her sleep.

It's her voice,

recognizably so,

but also rougher, deeper,

mixed with mud and rocks,

the voice of her shadow

next to me in the night.

As Long as She Remains

Chuck Augello

The attraction was immediate, and for three months their relationship was everything Jason had hoped for when he moved to the city. Brittany was educated and quick-witted, confident, and pretty, equally at home at posh wine bars in the Museum District and dive punk clubs under the bridge. She took him shopping, upgraded his wardrobe and his music and his tech, brought him to open mic nights in basement clubs only the right people knew, the audience captivated by her angry free verse about bodies and the end of the world. One night she led him to the roof of his building, where they made love under the full moon, Brittany howling like a wolf when he touched her where she needed it. It was silly and playful, yet her howling turned every hair on his body electric, her sweat and the heat of her skin clinging to him like a caul. While the social rules of the city precluded words like “girlfriend” or synonyms for “love,” every vision of his future included the two of them linked.

And then she disappeared.

Overnight he was dropped from her social media, his phone calls and texts blocked. Since he’d never been to her apartment, he didn’t know her address; he haunted the clubs and the special spots in the park where they had once talked for

hoping to find her. After a week he contacted the police to report her missing, but the desk sergeant laughed and dismissed him.

“Sounds like you’ve been ghosted,” his co-worker Andy said with a no-big-deal shrug.

Ghosted. It was common in the city, the easiest way to end things. Life was casual and impermanent, and no one had a claim on anyone else. To think otherwise was oppression.

His friends urged the typical remedies: heavy drinking and random hook-ups, grab the phone and start swiping. Ghost someone else. He tried it a few times, met a woman who seemed to like him, but he didn’t have the heart for it, and Brittany occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of all else. His job performance suffered; though only twenty-seven, he felt pains in his chest after two flights of stairs, saw clumps of hair in the shower drain. His thumbs bled from incessant picking.

For distraction he hit the gym every night, walked homeless dogs for the local shelter, baked intricate pastries and delivered them to friends, but Brittany lingered in his consciousness. At night, in bed, he’d feel her hands on his body—not the memory of her hands, but real sensations of human touch. Instead of fading, her hold grew stronger. One day at work, on his way to another mind-numbing project meeting on the third floor, Jason saw her stepping into the elevator next to Bart from Finance. He rushed down the corridor, the elevator doors

closing just as he arrived. Was it possible they'd shared a workplace the whole time? All she had ever said was that she worked with numbers. He ran the stairs, three flights to the top, but when he reached the elevator, it was empty, the doors still open but no sign of Brittany.

Don't do it, he thought, but did it anyway, blowing off the meeting to stalk each floor and check every cubicle. No Brittany. Had he imagined it?

Perhaps, but three days later he saw her—this time for real—waiting in line at Café Moon for her morning caffeine, stunning in a short black skirt and powder blue blouse, her dark hair glistening under the fluorescent lights. Her red Michael Kors bag hung over her shoulder, zipped shut.

Play it cool, Jason thought, desire and anger and a fierce longing shooting tremors through his spine.

"Hey," he said, approaching from her left. "It's been a while. It's good to see you."

"Oh, hey Jason," she said, the surprise on her face turning fast to inconvenience. She tucked her bag beneath her arm. "It's good to see you, too."

"I've been thinking about you. We never got to talk..."

"I've been crazy busy," she said, moving up in line, typing on her phone. "I'm on a new assignment and..."

She stopped, as if the lie wasn't worth the effort.

"Maybe we could meet up later," Jason said, conscious of the other patrons, everyone eager for a scene, something ugly that they could capture with their iPhones and post on social media. *Loser Stalker Guy Goes Mad in Coffee Shop*. A million hits in an hour, his distraught face a viral meme. "It wasn't really fair how you—"

"Stop right there," Brittany said. "Don't put your patriarchal bullshit on me. Just go away."

"At least tell me what I did wrong. You owe me . . ."

She raised her phone, weaponized it, pointed it at his face and started filming. The other customers did the same, encircling him, his pain sucked in by a dozen screens.

"I don't owe you a single word, a single breath," she said.

He looked at the different faces, the anticipation of his meltdown, how badly they wanted his dignity stripped and proffered as content.

"Here are the last four words you'll get from me," she said.

"We're done. Go away."

Someone applauded. He held it together long enough to reach the bathroom stall, where he vomited his breakfast and globs of green bile, his knees screaming against the hard tile floor.

Thinking it was over, he reclined against the door, breathing hard, until a final spasm wracked his abdomen. He lurched toward the toilet but was too late. Clutching his stomach, he threw up a round substance the size of his thumbnail. At first it resembled an undigested chunk of hard-boiled egg white, but as Jason's eyes returned to focus, he saw that whatever it was had started growing, the white mass taking shape, its color changing to a fleshy pink, and like a flower blooming in rapid time-lapse, within seconds it had achieved its form.

In the center of the vomit-pile stood a six-inch replica of Brittany.

A customer banged on the door, and Jason flushed twice, bunching up toilet paper and scooping up the mess. He held the miniature Brittany, rubbing her clean with a paper towel, taking extra care to clear the traces of spittle from her face. She wore the same black skirt and blue blouse, the same heels; she had an identical white dove tattooed on the back of her calf, her body in perfect scale. The hair and skin both felt real, her tiny lips pink and plush. It was an exact replica, as if hand-crafted by a master doll maker. The only thing missing was her Michael Kors bag.

"Hey Buddy, let's go!" a customer barked through the door, and Jason gave a final check, making sure he hadn't missed any stray vomit before tucking the Brittany figurine into his pocket and exiting the restroom.

A few patrons eyed him carefully, phones at the ready, anticipating a freak-out, but Brittany was gone, and Jason had neither the time nor the taste for coffee. He was late for work, not that it mattered. He caught the subway home, his left hand in his pocket the whole ride, his fingers wrapped around the miniature Brittany, her long hair so soft against his raw, bloody cuticles.

*

After two weeks, and fourteen miniature Brittannies vomited out with his breakfast, he made an appointment with a psychiatrist, an MD who could write a prescription to fix his weary brain.

For days he had scoured social media for any hint of similar experiences. Wasn't there a Facebook group for everything? But there was no mention of vomited up exes of any gender or orientation. At night he'd line up his collection of mini-Brittannies at the head of his bed and sleep with his favorite, the one from the café, tucked in his palm, its head resting on the back of his thumb. Even after fasting for a day, thinking he could end the cycle with an empty stomach, he still felt nauseous within an hour of waking, a perverse morning sickness sending him rushing to the bathroom, one more tiny chunk metamorphosing in the vomit pile, another beautiful miniature Brittany expelled from his guts. The spasms were painful, but everything good came with a cost. Their daily arrival, no matter how grotesque, confirmed her power and charm, validation for his attachment. When leaving the mini-Brittannies for work each

day proved too difficult, he gathered them in a messenger bag; now the replicas were always with him, and at work, where he struggled to recover his reputation as a smart, reliable worker, he'd keep a mini-Brittany in both of his pants pockets, his thumb never far from her face.

Dr. Raymond's office was on the fourth floor of a professional building two blocks from Jason's workplace. According to an online search, he specialized in attachment disorders, a poor descriptor for Jason's condition yet still the closest match. Jason ditched an afternoon meeting and snuck out early, his messenger bag of mini-Brittanies on one side, his laptop bag on the other. The waiting room was empty, and Dr. Raymond had no receptionist. Though the appointment was for 2:00 PM, Jason waited twenty minutes before the door opened and the doctor waved him through, saying simply, "We begin," as he lumbered to his desk. Dressed in corduroy pants and a plaid sweater, he smelled of menthol and carried a pen, which he started clicking the moment Jason entered.

"So what brings you here?" Dr. Raymond asked. "Depression and anxiety, I assume? It's the new common cold. And you hate yourself, of course. All my patients do."

Jason set the messenger bag on his lap, eyeing the doctor cautiously.

"You're lonely and alienated, emotionally stunted and sexually frustrated," Dr. Raymond continued. "You struggle to concentrate, and you're addicted to screens. You refuse to accept

responsibility for your actions. But that's true of everyone, and thankfully we have medications that hide our failings. I'll write a prescription, you'll take a pill every day, and within two weeks you'll improve thirty percent, enough to justify the side effects of the meds. But I still need a personal history for the file, in case of an Ethics Board audit. It's Jason, right? Tell me about yourself, Jason."

Dr. Raymond's smile was fabricated and officious, but Jason felt drawn to it anyway, smiles being rare in his life unless a tip was involved. As Dr. Raymond asked the usual questions about family and schoolyard traumas, Jason opened up, sharing about the time he found his grandfather dead in the backyard hammock, about his college girlfriend Anna, who'd cheated on him with both his roommates, and even confessed to stealing money from his mother's purse during high school to buy bootleg Ritalin to impress a girl. Despite the odd beginning, Dr. Raymond responded with compassion, assuring Jason that we all lived imperfect lives and urging self-forgiveness as a prerequisite for healing. As their hour session drew toward its end, Jason discussed how Brittany had made him feel special and wanted and alive, and how it all had collapsed the moment she ghosted him.

"She hurt you deeply," Dr. Raymond said. "You can't get her out of your system."

"Yes," Jason said, debating how much to tell. *He'll think I'm crazy*, he fretted, yet he couldn't spend the rest of his life vomiting up an old girlfriend.

He told the doctor everything.

When Jason finished, the doctor put down his pen. "Interesting. And do you have one of these miniature Brittannies with you today?"

Jason opened the bag and removed the Brittany he'd thrown up that morning. Like the others, she was dressed in the same skirt and blouse the real Brittany had been wearing the last time he'd seen her, though after cleaning her up Jason always removed the shoes. She was sexier barefoot, her feet the size of a vitamin pill.

"I assume the bag is filled with them?"

"Yes, doctor."

For a moment Jason worried it was all a delusion, that Dr. Raymond couldn't see her. The doctor's face remained placid, both hands flat on his desk.

"Do you ever induce vomiting to collect more of them?"

"No. That's...disgusting."

"Many of my clients engage in recreational vomiting. If I were able to produce something so precious by simply puking, I'm not sure I'd ever stop. But we all have our preferences. May I see her?"

Reluctantly he placed the mini-Brittany on the doctor's desk. Dr. Raymond admired its beauty, picking it up to examine her soft, graceful features, the alluring blue of her eyes, the plush texture of her hair and skin. "Quite lovely," the doctor said, his thumb moving in circles beneath her breasts. "I understand why you're so enamored."

Jason reached to take her back, but the doctor ignored him. He fumbled with the tiny zipper and pulled down her skirt.

"What the hell!" Jason yelled.

"I was curious if she had on any panties."

She did, a simple pair of pink underpants laying snug against her hips and bottom.

"Pervert." Jason grabbed the mini-Brittany, turning his back so Raymond wouldn't see him fixing her skirt. "I should kick your ass."

"I'll write a prescription to temper your aggression," Dr. Raymond said, but Jason was already at the door, the mini-Brittany back in the messenger bag with the others as Jason reached for the knob.

"Shall we meet again next week?" the doctor asked.

Jason flipped him the finger before slamming the door, the doctor shouting after him about billing his insurance.

In the hallway the elevator was slow to arrive. Jason's legs trembled, his heart racing. How dare that son of a bitch violate Brittany like that! He was so shaken that he barely noticed when the stairwell door opened and an elderly man entered the hall, a black suitcase on wheels rolling behind him. Jason pressed the down button and didn't let go, his thumb turning red from the pressure, the elevator doors like eyelids tightly shut.

"It's a slow one all right," the old man said. "It's why I take the stairs."

He was over seventy with a mop of grey hair, his face covered in stubble. Jason watched as the old man approached Raymond's office.

"Don't waste your time."

The old man turned. "Do you mean Dr. Raymond? I've been seeing him for thirteen years. He's wonderful."

"He's a quack, a pervert."

The old man leaned the suitcase against the wall and walked toward Jason, who hit the down button twice more before kicking the elevator door.

"It doesn't respond to violence," the old man chuckled.

"Mind your own business," Jason said, but a sudden spasm wracked his gut and he staggered back against the wall, an acid taste in his mouth. *Please God, not here*, he thought, but by the third spasm he knew what was coming. Doubled over, he cupped his hands beneath his chin, his face and neck slick with sweat.

"Young man, it's okay," the old man said, his hand on Jason's shoulder. A final spasm hit, bile rising toward his throat, and any chance to hold it back dissolved, Jason's torso contracting as waves of vomit exploded from his gut. He'd had a light lunch, but it was still a mess, and from the middle of it all grew another mini-Brittany.

The old man stepped away as Jason pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and plucked his tiny ex-girlfriend out of the puke. He held her close to his stomach, hoping his torso might provide cover, but the old man had clearly seen her.

"She's a pretty one," the old man said. "Almost as beautiful as my Susan."

"It was 1969, the summer of Woodstock, though we never made it to that glorious mud fest," Bob said. The old man was a retired auto worker with three grandchildren, a widower, and an active member of three bowling leagues. "Susie and I met at a Happening off-campus. Can you believe it? There were actual events called Happenings. If you ask me, we could use a few right now instead of people staring at screens all day."

They shared the back booth at a pizzeria, Jason sipping from a cup of ice water while Bob enjoyed a calzone. With his stomach still queasy, Jason kept his eyes from the food. On his lap, wrapped in a napkin, was the latest mini-Brittany.

“What can I say? You know how it goes,” Bob said. “A woman enters your heart and puts down roots that stick even after she leaves. The first time it happened, I swore someone had spiked my orange juice with LSD, but I stayed clean for a month and still vomited a new little Susie each morning. It’s tough, but like anything else, you adapt.”

On the elevator ride from Raymond’s office Bob had unzipped his suitcase and showed Jason his collection. There had to be hundreds of them, his beloved Susie, six-inch replicas of a pretty hippie girl in a fringe jacket and flowered skirt, a daisy in her straight blonde hair, a tie-dye headband and love beads, her feet earthy and bare.

“Trust me, it won’t keep you from living a full, rich life. My wife Donna was a lovely woman. We were married for thirty-seven years before the cancer took her. We definitely had our rough patches—she didn’t *like* my vomiting up another woman every day—but she accepted it because she loved me.”

“You’ve been doing this for—?”

“Fifty-one years.” He took a final bite of the calzone and laughed. “We put an addition on the house to make room

for them all. When my daughters reached a certain age, they wanted to play with them, but you know how it is...you don't want anyone touching her."

If he hadn't seen the suitcase full of mini-Susies, Jason wouldn't have believed it, but the evidence was irrefutable. So this was his fate: a lifetime of vomiting up a woman he could never have for real.

"If Susie is still with you after fifty years, why do you see Raymond?"

"I need my prescriptions renewed, and it helps to talk about it, about other things, too. Throwing up Susie every morning isn't my *only* problem. Hell, it's not even a problem anymore. But I like to talk to the doc."

Fifty-one years. Jason's apartment was one-bedroom, 750 square feet. How long before the mini-Brittanies would be spread across the floor, piled to the top of his closet?

"Did you ever tell Susie about it?"

"It didn't start until after she moved to Oregon and I never saw her again. Over the years I tried to keep track of her—that wasn't easy before the internet—but we never spoke, and it's too late now. She died six years ago."

"And it didn't stop?"

"You don't forget someone just because they're gone," Bob said. "Only once did I skip a day: when my oldest daughter was born. I thought that was it, that fatherhood was the difference maker, but the next morning, sure enough, I was back in the bathroom. Susie hadn't left me."

They spoke for another ten minutes, but Bob's advice was sparse beyond the need for acceptance and the futility of letting go.

"People spout all kinds of nonsense about it, but if it's deep inside you, you never let go."

Beneath the table his hands caressed his six-inch Susie. "Oh, one thing: if you drink a warm glass of milk before bed, your throat burns less when you throw up the next morning."

Three months later, nearly a hundred mini-Brittanies puked from his guts later, Jason was at a party when the real Brittany and a female friend entered the apartment. The adrenaline rush was immediate, his attention like metal to a magnet, the nearby conversations turning to mush. She and her friend grabbed beers and headed toward the kitchen for the snacks. Blocked by a circle of casual acquaintances, Jason was certain she hadn't yet seen him. Should he leave? He'd been careful to avoid her since their encounter at Café Moon. Everyone was so quick to cancel and condemn. He'd wait for

the hostess to reappear, give his apologies, and slip out before Brittany realized he was there.

But the apartment was small, and Brittany, standing behind two women outside the closed bathroom door, saw him as he moved toward the exit. Jason froze, unsure if he should run.

"Jason, hey," she said, the music of her voice so wonderful to hear after all those weeks with her silent replicas.

"I was just leaving," he said, grabbing his jacket from the closet, turning toward the door.

"Wait."

She left her red cup on a table and followed him outside the apartment.

"I didn't know you'd be here," he said. "If Jess had told me, I wouldn't have come."

"No, it's all good, I'm happy to see you." She touched his shoulder lightly. "I feel rotten about how things ended. Totally my fault. My ex came back to town and we started up again. I handled it poorly. I'm sorry. It wasn't you. We had fun together, right?"

His eye began to twitch. "Good times, definitely."

"Great. Anyway, my ex, that bastard, is out of the picture again, so if you'd like to hang out sometime, text me."

Jesus God, was this really happening? Her smile was more radiant than he remembered, the spark in her eyes the one thing the mini-Brittanies could never duplicate.

"I can't. You blocked me."

She pulled her phone from her back pocket, her pink-tipped fingers swiping screens. "Unblocked," she said, reading a few texts before lowering the phone. "I'd better go pee, but this is good, right? You'll text?"

Jason smiled, nodding, his throat too tight to speak. Brittany stood on her toes and kissed him, more than a peck, her tongue playful and quick.

"See you!"

She slipped back into the apartment as Jason leaned against the wall, his heart racing, his lips buzzing from the pressure of her kiss.

The next morning, instead of the usual one, he vomited two mini-Brittanies followed by a bout of the dry heaves. He missed an hour of work, but with the real Brittany back in his life, the future, again, seemed bright.

Only it wasn't. Over the next three weeks they saw each other most nights, their time together as fun and sexy and invigorating as before. Worried that his previous rush toward commitment had caused their break, Jason struggled to keep it casual. Even when she invited him to spend the night—a first—he kissed her goodbye and headed home, determined to play it cool, but also knowing she could never see what still happened every morning.

This must stop, he thought. How could they be a couple if each day started with him throwing up a doll-sized version of her? The old man, Bob, had said his wife eventually understood, but in no world could Jason imagine Brittany's acceptance; it was too grotesque, too possessive.

In any large city, in most small towns too, there's a subculture dedicated to the occult. Jason had never believed in it, but desperation had a way of making any belief negotiable. Discarding his skepticism, he began exploring new age bookstores and crystal shops and the dingy storefronts with second-story psychics. Wherever he went, one name kept repeating: Sandra Solatano. According to some she was a white witch; others called her a mystic, a shaman, an intuitive, a medium or a ghost talker, but all agreed she was credible and never trafficked in bullshit. It cost \$500 just to get her phone number, but even the Jamaican voodoo priestess who lived behind his dry cleaner recommended that he call her. Jason plunked ten fifty-dollar bills on the priestess's table, the bills all face down, the priestess insisting it was bad mojo to have a dead white man's face looking at you, even on money.

It took a week before Sandra Solatano returned his call, a week in which he saw Brittany four times and vomited her up daily, his collection outgrowing the bookcase shelf on which he stored them.

"I don't make any promises," Sandra said. "If I can't help you, I won't. But if I do help, you'll get what you ask for, so make sure you know what you want."

When he finished explaining, she waited nearly a minute before responding, the faint sound of flipping pages whispering over the line.

"Any ancestors from Slovakia?"

"My mother's side."

"This phenomenon originated from that region. My guess is that one of your ancestors experienced it, too."

He thought briefly of a spinster great-aunt who kept her attic double-locked. They agreed on a price, and Sandra reassured him he'd soon be clear.

"Now here's what we need to do."

The next day he met her in a Taco Bell outside the city. He expected a dark-eyed, willowy woman draped in scarves and gaudy jewelry instead of the soccer mom who greeted him in the parking lot. Sandra Solatano rolled down the window

of her minivan and called Jason over from his car. She was in her late-thirties, light-haired, dressed in a sports jersey (Jefferson Eagles) and Mom jeans. In the passenger seat sat a thirteen-year-old girl in yellow shorts and a matching tank, a soccer ball on her lap.

"Follow my car," Sandra told him. "It's about an hour drive, but I need to drop Madison at practice first."

The daughter, Madison, leaned forward and called through the window. "Are you the guy who's vomiting up his ex-girlfriend? Gross!"

"Madison, keep quiet." Sandra shrugged apologetically. "What can you do? She hears things."

Jason returned to his car and followed her for ninety minutes, traffic from road construction extending the drive longer than planned. In the backseat was a cloth laundry bag stuffed with his collection of mini-Brittanies. Though tight-lipped about the details, Sandra had stressed the importance of bringing them all, even the one he'd vomited that morning.

Eventually they left the highway for a series of winding country roads, the final turn yielding to an unmarked, unpaved route. After a quarter-mile Sandra parked her van in a dirt clearing, and Jason pulled beside her. He tried calling Brittany, but they were too deep into the boonies to get reception. He settled for a voicemail he'd never deleted, her message, as always, ending with the sound of smooching lips.

Whatever happens, it's worth it, he thought. Once the vomiting stopped, there would be no need for secrets, nothing to stop them from being permanent and special.

Sandra carried a backpack and gestured for him to follow. They walked downhill for five minutes until they came to a clearing, a beautiful blue lake appearing through the trees. At the end of the path a wooden platform led to the water. Sandra's pace was quick, and Jason struggled to keep up, his feet unsteady on the rocky path. By the time he reached the platform, Sandra had already unzipped her bag. Two rolls of duct tape lay on the wooden planks.

"The water in this lake has a spiritual energy. I use it for most of my healings. It's a long story how I found it, and frankly we don't have time. Madison's practice will be over in—" She checked her watch. "Shit. That traffic really screwed us. We'd better hurry."

Jason held the laundry bag close to his chest. He assumed he'd need to drop the mini-Brittanies into the water while the two of them recited incantations to the higher spirits.

Instead she told him to strip.

"Keep your underpants on until the last minute. I don't need to see your thing," she said, "but otherwise everything goes."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a ritual of rebirth. You weren't born wearing clothes, were you?"

He looked at the duct tape and got a bad feeling.

"Hey, you called me, I didn't call you," she said. "If you don't want to do it, let's go home. I'm not forcing you."

He almost walked, but wasn't this his last chance? Did he want to end up like Bob, an old man dragging a suitcase stuffed with his lost love? He pulled off his shoes and undressed.

"You'll start to panic—everyone does—but you're not going to drown. I've never lost anyone, and you won't be the first."

When he was naked except for his shorts, she handed him the laundry bag and picked up the duct tape. "Hold it tight," she said, and circled him with the tape, strapping the bag to his torso. Next came his hands; she bound them together, pulling the tape tight over his wrists. Standing behind him, she yanked down his briefs before tearing a final swatch of the tape.

"What's that for?" he asked. She answered by pressing the tape over his mouth.

"It won't be easy, but the struggle is part of the cleansing. The water will eventually dissolve the adhesive. You'll need to open the bag underwater and make sure they all shake out.

Once they're gone, count to ten, then pull off the tape and come back up."

He tried to speak, but the tape smothered his lips.

"I wish we could wait until you're ready, but Madison's coach will give me hell if I'm late. These coaches never realize that people have jobs. But don't worry, you're almost a free man. Good luck."

She shoved him off the platform and he sank into the lake. The shock was immediate, the temperature frigid, his nostrils and ears filling with water. Kicking his legs kept him from plunging too deep as his hands struggled against the tape, the adhesive loosening as Sandra had predicted. Above the surface he saw her dark outline watching from the platform's edge. His hands now free, he ripped the tape from his mouth, a mistake, as instinctively his jaw opened and water rushed into his throat, gagging him, his lungs burning.

No time, he thought, and undid the tie of the laundry bag, turning it over and shaking out the mini-Brittanies. *They're so beautiful*, he thought, the floating dolls forming a cylinder around him, and wouldn't it be great to stay inside that circle forever, the dolls spinning as the funnel swirled, a cyclone of dolls closing in, Jason suddenly calm and sleepy, his fear of drowning surrendering to the bliss of being enveloped by his love. He began to sink, but it was okay, there were hundreds of Brittannies near him, the floor of the lake so welcoming. He and his Brittannies could float forever in the dark endless water.

Suddenly an arm clasped around his neck; Sandra pulled him from the cyclone, the collision of her body against his chest clearing his brain, and he watched the mini-Brittanies drop deeper into the lake. Sandra Solatano pulled him to the surface, their faces breaking the water, their lungs gasping for breath.

"Goddamn it, did you *want* to drown?" Sandra said. "Shit. I wasn't supposed to get wet."

She'd been a lifeguard in college and knew what to do, paddling them back toward the dock. Jason hoped for a last glimpse of the mini-Brittanies, but the water's plane offered only the reflection of the sun and his own sorry face.

His nerves settled as the oxygen replenished his brain. Sandra climbed onto the platform first, then offered her hand, Jason unembarrassed by his nudity as he stood beside her on the dock, a foul, salty taste lingering in his mouth. He toweled himself dry as Sandra wrung the water from her jersey, wet jeans clinging to her thighs.

"It's over, right?" he asked.

"They're at the bottom of the lake. Don't come back here, and it will never happen again."

A single brown leaf floated where he had almost drowned, a sudden breeze throwing ripples across the water.

Halfway home, he pulled to the shoulder and called Brittany but went straight to voicemail. He texted, waited, texted again. *No worries*, he thought. Sometimes at work she muted her phone. Soon enough he would see her.

But he didn't hear from her for the rest of the day, his insecurities resurfacing. He busied himself, cleaning the bathroom twice, dusting the shelves and reorganizing the cans in the pantry. Every ten minutes he checked her social media, taking comfort knowing that he wasn't blocked.

The next morning, for the first time in weeks, he didn't vomit. Though she hadn't returned his messages, he felt refreshed by eight hours of sleep. Jason shaved, showered, and headed to Café Moon, eager to catch her as she grabbed her morning coffee.

Brittany was already out the door, cup in hand, when Jason arrived at the café. As always, she looked flawless in her skirt and heels, her red Michael Kors bag slung over her shoulder.

"Oh, Jason, hey," she said, clearly not expecting him. "I'm in a rush..."

"Right," he said, staying cool. "We can talk later. Text me."

"Yeah...about that..."

His intestines tightened like pulled shoelaces.

"Look, you're a great guy, but my ex and I hooked up again last night, and this time I think it's for real. We're gonna make it work. We *have* to make it work."

For the first time he saw something desperate in her eyes.

"I *like* you, Jason, but Derek is ...you know... in my bones. It's like he's part of me. I feel him deep in my gut." She pecked his cheek.

"Don't take it personally, okay?"

A part of her. Deep in her gut.

Suddenly it made sense.

"He's in your bag, isn't he?" Jason said. "Every morning you throw up, and there's a miniature version of him covered in puke."

Her face did a 360 from pity to disgust.

"It's okay, I know all about it. You vomit him up every morning. You keep the mini-Dereks in your bag. Let me see..."

Jason reached for the Michael Kors bag, Brittany turning her shoulder, stepping away, both hands clutching the bag.

"Get away from me!"

"I understand now! We can fix it. We'll drive up to this lake, you'll strip naked, and I'll use duct tape—"

“Duct tape? What’s *wrong* with you? Back off or I’m calling the cops.”

Jason lunged for the bag, but she was already running, two pedestrians blocking his way, big guys in sleeveless t-shirts on the way to the gym. “Hey buddy, back off. Don’t make this ugly.”

“I know how to help her,” Jason said. “Her ex-boyfriend...I know how to end him.”

“Just keep walking, pal. Okay?”

They each grabbed an arm and dragged Jason toward the curb, Brittany turning the corner and disappearing into the subway.

The next morning Jason waited for it, certain he would vomit her up again, but his stomach, even when filled with a mushroom and peppers omelet, bacon and sausage, extra grease, remained strangely settled. For the rest of the day he kept waiting, stuffing himself in his apartment as he checked Brittany’s social media (blocked), called and texted (blocked). At night he hid outside her apartment building and followed her to her favorite wine bar. Through the window he saw her at a table holding hands with some bearded dude vaping an e-cigarette. Back at his apartment Jason stuck two fingers down his throat to induce vomiting, and finally it worked. He threw up thick red chunks in the kitchen sink, but there was no mini-Brittany.

After a week he gave up, unable to puke anything but food. At least before he'd had the comfort of his mini-Brittanies; now he had nothing.

Sandra Solatano refused to help, but Jason's memory was strong, and that weekend he left the city and drove to the lake. Three times he passed the turn-off road and had to circle back, but once his tires hit the dirt road, he knew that he'd found it. He ran through the woods, tripping twice, gashing his forehead on a low-hanging branch. A black bear spotted him and ran. When Jason finally reached the platform, he stripped off his clothes and dove into the lake.

All he could think was, *I can't let her go*. He would find her at the bottom, pull her from the kelp and wash the algae from her beautiful face. He would find *all* of them; he'd reclaim the laundry bag he'd carelessly discarded and, one by one, he would salvage his true love.

In one world she might be gone from him, but there were other worlds, *his* world, the world at the bottom of the lake where his mini-Brittanies waited.

Deep in the water, he was shocked at how quickly they came to him, surrounded him with their tiny open mouths, their teeth so sharp and life-like.

Jason closed his eyes and waited for their kiss.

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