

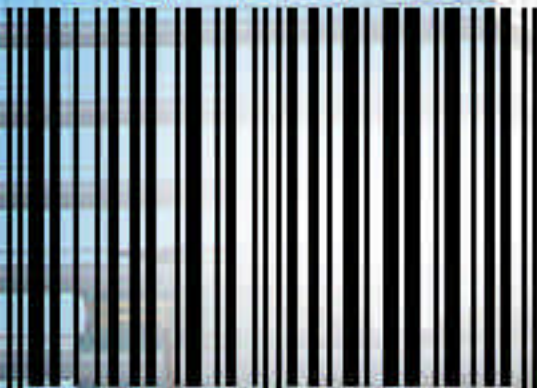
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the **UN**religious,  
**NON**family-oriented  
literary & art mag

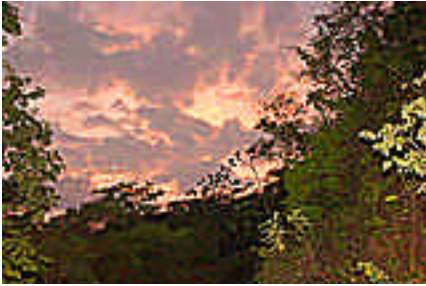
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children  
*churches*  
& daddies



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# table of contents



art by Eric bonholtzer

*from an AP article by Vanessa Arrington*

HAVANA — Iran, Syria, North Korea and more than 100 other nations are pushing to broaden the world’s definition of “terrorism” to include the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Converging on Fidel Castro’s Communist Cuba for a summit this week, members of the Nonaligned Movement complain of a double standard: powerful nations like the United States and Israel decide for the world who the terrorists are, but face no punishment for their own acts of aggression.



Clouds23, art by Tracy M. Rogers

## The Boss Lady’s Editorial

Child Molesters and JonBenet Ramsey ..2
Failure to Implement Basic Security .....4
John Yotko <i>art</i> .....5

## Poetry (the passionate stuff)

Nathan Jeffries .....	6
Michael Ceraolo .....	7
Mel Waldman .....	7
Claire Blancett .....	8
Valorie Mall .....	8
Michael Swanson .....	8
Brian Hosey <i>art</i> .....	9
Jessie Cunningham .....	9
Aaron Wilder <i>art</i> .....	9
Alex Dimitrov .....	10
Nicole Aimiee Macaluso <i>art</i> .....	10
Mark Graham <i>art</i> .....	11
John Grey .....	12
Cheryl Townsend <i>art</i> .....	12
Vince Stamey .....	12
Grace Connolly .....	13

## Prose (the meat & potatoes stuff)

Pat Dixon .....	14
Mel Waldman .....	18
Jacob Alves .....	20
Mike Hovancsek <i>art</i> .....	20
Bill DeArmond .....	21
Edward Michael O’durr Supranowicz <i>art</i> ....	28
Janet Kuypers .....	28
Curtis Glardon <i>art</i> .....	38
Kenneth DiMaggio .....	38
Nick Brazinsky <i>art</i> .....	44

## Scars Art

2-3 (Claire), 15 (iced bicycle in Champaign Illinois), 16 (bicycles in Shanghai China, and the obtom sidewalk path from Austria), 17 (bicycles in Luxembourg). Cover of a highrise in Chicago.

## Child Molesters & JonBenet Ramsey

Okay, I'm one of those people who believed that the JonBenet Ramsey's parents had something to do with their daughter's murder. Granted, all I had was circumstantial evidence to support that (unlike my beliefs in the O. J. Simpson case, where there was physical evidence everywhere pointing to O.J. as the murderer), but that circumstantial evidence said that there was no prints (including no prints in snow) around their home and no forced entry. But later I'd hear reports that there was no snow on the ground at the time (Christmas in Boulder Colorado and no snow... okay, seems a stretch, so what should I believe?), and then I heard that there was a suitcase placed under a window that was left open (then again, I also heard reports that investigators moved that suitcase there after they discovered the murder, so a killer didn't put it there... once again, what should I believe?). So yes, everything is circumstantial, so no other leads have ever come up as possibilities for solving this bizarre murder.

And looking at how this little model actress five year-old was treated — no, she wasn't sexually abused or beaten or anything like that, but she was paraded around, dressed up with more make-up and styling products that I have ever worn (and that includes my wedding day, when I paid people to do my hair and make-up), given the most flamboyant and obnoxious clothes, and made to parade around like she was a prize pedigree in a dog show. You wonder who there are such slanted views of women? Well, it's taught to kids from early childhood — just look at JonBenet Ramsey. When you see clips of footage of her in contests,



even when you're a same person, a part of you has to think that images like these are a child molester's dream. So ten years after her murder, after her mother has died from cancer, all of the instant twenty four hour cable news shows start screaming that a suspect for the JonBenet Ramsey murder is in custody. Of course you hear his middle name... All killers have to be listed with their middle name because (A) you might happened to know a John Booth and you don't want to confuse your friend with this killer, and (B) it just sounds more ominous when you hear a person's middle name, I mean, I think it's become something in this country that you have just naturally associate a name with the middle name included as a killer... But these twenty-four hour news stations all start reporting that his man, Mr. Karr (his full name is John Mark Karr, but I won't use his full name and assume he's a murderer, that's just not right is he's not a murderer), a known lover of child porn, was in Bangkok, arrested for I believe a child molestation offense, when he confessed to "being there" when JonBenet Ramsey was killed. Now listen to me carefully (because the people from every news station under the sun didn't listen to this), Mr. Karr, at the beginning, said he was there. He didn't say he killed JonBenet Ramsey.

But well after the fact, I hear the drive-by media (I mean, the 24 hour cable news stations) say he *did* say he killed her. But as far as I know, he never said those words. Once again with the JonBenet Ramsey case, I hear conflicting stories. Who am I to believe?





Now, if he's telling the truth (of even at least being there), police may be able to get information out of him. But he might not be telling the truth... But why would he lie?

The answer to that question came to me the instant I heard where he came from: he was in Bangkok, charged with a child molestation offense. Now, that doesn't sound so bad (I mean, it not as bad as murder), but keep in mind that Bangkok doesn't take too kindly to caught offenders with child molestation charges. And remember that unlike the United States, the country of Bangkok probably doesn't have the fairest or most thorough trial, so Mr. Karr could anticipate a quick sentencing and violent punishment for his charges.

That, and if he didn't kill JonBenet Ramsey, he'd be sent back to the United States, get out of sentencing in Bangkok, and eventually has U.S. charges dropped.

Okay... So, should people believe that Mr. Karr just decided to say he was there for the JonBenet Ramsey murder on a whim to get out of sentencing in a brutal country? Well, possibly, and his family even have photos (not date-stamped photos, like you find now from generic processing stations, so it's not provable, but the family says they know when the photos were taken) from the time of JonBenet Ramsey's murder, when Mr. Karr was with them for Christmas. And beyond that, it's not like this man fascinated with little kiddies never thought about little kiddies before. He even made a point to lean about JonBenet Ramsey well before he was caught in Bangkok. Shortly after the twenty four hour stations broadcasted his details, they reported that Mr. Karr was in communication with a professor in Colorado, who was able to give him lots of information about JonBenet Ramsey — and as far as I know, Mr. Karr was getting this information *after* her murder. To me (and to someone else who was listening to this story as it unfolded), it was starting to sound like Mr. Karr was having a fascination with JonBenet Ramsey's murder (as well as her beauty, and her innocence, and whatever else child molesters like about children), and wanted to learn as much as he could about her.

If he gained this knowledge to help him get out of a potential future criminal charge in an unforgiving country, well, I can't say. But if it was planned, you might think it is cruel. But in a way, I think it was deviously cunning.

I've been asked to give my editorial opinion on Mr. Karr and the JonBenet Ramsey case. Well, I think Mr. Karr the school teacher (just saying those words together can make you shudder, when he is a child molester, or at least someone who likes child porn, and a school teacher) didn't kill JonBenet Ramsey. I think his fascination with this dolled up little girl (who must have seem so deliciously succulent in his eyes, looking like a perfectly "molestable" little child, in the eyes of known child molesters), and the research he chose to do after her death, may have led him to concoct this story to get him out of a worse punishment in a worse country. Now he's just sent to another state to face child porn charges, and trust me, although that's bad, that's nothing compared to whatever punishment he would face in Bangkok. So whether what Mr. Karr did to get out of child molestation charges is right or not in your opinion is not a judgment I'm going to delve into right here. But pay attention to the news. You may not like who he is, but you shouldn't have been surprised by his almost immediate acquittal from the charges.



  
Janet Kuypers, Editor in Chief

# Failure to Implement Basic Safety (Even When Creative With Our Ideas...)

I feel strange, watching accounts after the 9/11 five year anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks, because I'm sure we as Americans have done things in the past five years to make us more safe (how can our government help but make us safer, the have allowed themselves to eavesdrop anyone legally for any information in this country now, right?). You always hear debates over whether we as Americans are safer now, or if people still feel like they are in danger from terrorist attacks.

And at the same time, some people who *do* go through any of the new screenings and deal with the new measures for safety still complain about the inconveniences they have to go through in order to be safe. Let me pose one example: some have a problem with checking shoes, after someone was caught trying to set off an explosion from materials in the heel of their shoe. Now, when I first heard of this while I was flying across the country, I thought it was a fascinating system — the first time I saw it was when I was flying *into* O'Hare airport in Chicago, so the airport I was departing from wasn't extremely busy. When they asked for my shoe and swiped it, there wasn't a line near me, so I asked the person who scanned my shoe to explain how the machine works to me, and I even walked back there with her while she scanned my shoe again so I could see how it tested for... for whatever it was testing for, I guess. But I thought it was kind of nifty, and ever since I've made a point to wear my plain slip-on black shoes with black socks to the airport, so it's easy for me to slide off my shoes and put them back on with no problem whenever I travel through an airport.

And I *can* want to draw the line at forbidding any liquids in airports. The morning they were catching terrorists at Heathrow Airport, I was flying to Seattle to marry my friend Brian to his beautiful wife Lauren, and the only when we found out about the liquids ban was because there was traffic to O'Hare and we needed to check the news & traffic station for an update. All they were playing were details about how flights starting right before our flight took off had any and all liquids banned — from lip gloss to bottled water to shampoo to nail polish. I told my husband that my carry on was filled with every liquid product imaginable to mankind (from shampoo and conditioner and hair spray to gel and toothpaste and mascara and lotion and baby oil gel, and maybe even more liquids I can't remember now), so he said, "Well, I guess your carry on is now luggage." So we packed my carry on as luggage, and before we got to the end of the line to give them our luggage, I removed all of the lipsticks and lotions from my purse, so I wouldn't have to give up more of my belongings. My husband even heard a woman complain irately (and confusedly) that she didn't want to give the people at the airport after she dropped off her luggage her \$75 nail polish.



art by John Yotko

No lie, \$75 nail polish.

I thought, if she was stupid enough to spend \$75 on nail polish in the first place, she *should* be forced to relinquish the polish.

But it *was* aggravating on the flight back from Seattle to O'Hare, because I was cheap enough to get a layover in Denver. Well, we left for our trip at 5 in the morning, and once we got to Denver, our flight from Denver to Chicago was cancelled — so we had

to wait for hours in line at Denver airport, to get rescheduled on a flight hours later for the Las Vegas airport, which meant we only arrived at home at one in the morning, which meant I went in really dry air conditions without lip balm for 20 hours, which caused me to get a cold sore (that I tried anything to do to get rid of before I was the final feature at the 2006 Professional Journalism Expo in downtown Chicago).

Grrr. *That* wasn't fun.

But apparently a week later they decided to allow some liquids, in small quantities. And as aggravating as this can be, I don't mind having to do it to feel like some safety measures were done for my flight. I don't know the specific restrictions on baby formula, but... You'd save me the dealing with screaming children who can't get their ears to pop if we just didn't allow them on a plane in the first place.

But given all of these new restrictions they're placing on us so we can fly, we thought of ways that a terrorist could still get away with killing people (I'd mention those ideas, but if I did, Big Brother, I mean, our government, would probably have me on a watchlist if I ever wanted to take a flight). And think of any other places where we're not safe — there is no strict guard over all freight trains, and shipping or freight boats docking into any shore can carry anything hazardous and no one would be the wiser. That and el train lines or subways could be easily shut down in a major city like in Chicago or New York.

The point? I guess the point is that we'll never be safe enough, even if we do everything in our powers, including taking away our freedoms. But when you go through an insanely long line at an airport, don't fret so much. Just learn to go to the airport early (like they tell you to do), pay attention so things will go smoothly, and realize that if we want to have all of these freedoms, we have to be willing to take our time to make sure we're as safe as we possibly can be.



*Janet Kuypers*®

Janet Kuypers, Editor in Chief

## Dear Daddy

Nathan Jeffries

The sticky sweet odors rising from  
the yellow-pink Lay-Z-Boy  
remind me his sheets need changing

And I should flip his light green/  
dark green pillow:  
    Just for Good Measure.

While he sits babbling at his rattle  
an empty gin bottle—clear on clear  
with black permanent marker  
praying “Bombay Sapphire”—  
filled by 3 teeth and a day  
old piece of chewing gum  
    -Spearmint-

But this is just the prelude  
soon we will both sit while  
his memories project on the  
pock marked white walls  
guarding our bed room.

And I will eat day old popcorn  
as the movie plays on,  
scratched with scenes missing:  
    An endless loop of nonsensical  
    gunfights and confused love stories.

He remembers and remembers as  
his head bounces about like a  
plastic bag filled with ten  
dozen moths, each one breaking  
to scatter a piece of the image  
about the room

Their sepia twinged wings mirror  
the yellow sad of his corneas,  
drooping from years of mis-management

Until the lights turn sharply out,  
fast and heavy, like the power  
fell off.

Then I move in the darkness:  
    to find his blue blankie  
    still warm in the dryer

Because the man who taught  
me to read deserves to sleep on  
a clean blanket.

# Magazine Article

Michael Ceraolo

The story on rich people stated, though not in so many words, that the majority made their money the old-fashioned way: they inherited it

---

## THE TWINS

Mel Waldman

The telepathic twins go for a stroll on Chaos Highway. When they come to a fork in the road, Yin chooses the road to the left, Yang-the road to the right. “Goodbye,” they think. Not one empathic word is spoken. And in less than the blink of an eye, they go on separate journeys.

Each journey is a mythical and earthly voyage through a Labyrinth where the only exits are Death, Madness, or Miraculous Metamorphosis. (But few can tolerate the terror of transformation.)

Yet each twin exits a Labyrinth, rushes slowly across a bleak New England highway. And before the next fork in the road, they magically meet in the middle of a mystical country byway, a replica of a vast desolate road sliced from a Stephen King horror story.

Yin gazes at Yang: “Why is there evil?” Yang reflects: “Because there is good.” In the Abyss of Sadness, Yin asks: “Why must we suffer?” “In order to ask-Why? Or, to make us search for the meaning of existence. Or...” “Perhaps, it is all an illusion, Yang.”

Wearing wicked smiles, Yin and Yang enter the Trance, move unconsciously toward a fork in the road, and choose separate paths again. It’s a very long journey on Chaos Highway. Is it Chance or Destiny? Or maybe, a recycled Cosmic Joke?



# Goodbye to You, Oh Great Nobody

Claire Blancett

I tried once again  
To believe all your lies  
Yet failed once more

---

## threadbare

Michael Swanson

for every parent  
every grass blade  
is a compound fracture

in Minnesota I'm voting Hatch for Governor,  
& pulling on my too-tight collar

I'm pulling out some Target rug threads from the vacuum;  
there are some red white & blue streamers gumming up the fuselage,  
& some bird bones circulating in the turbofan

I can smell some fuel on the tarmac,  
& the interstate is a lit fuse to the suburbs

# Untitled

Valorie Mall

No eight year old  
Should have to endure  
The fear of inappropriate touch.

No eight year old  
Should have to feel  
Her body being invaded and torn.

No eight year old  
Should have to discover  
A way to send her mind somewhere else.

No eight year old  
Should feel the betrayal  
Her body inflicts upon her.

No eight year old should  
But they do  
Every day....as did I

---

art by Brian Hosey



## what feathered wings?

Jessie Cunningham

with past  
we are earth bound  
held by a lack of something  
rather than the addition  
of bonds.  
it is behind us  
but with metal and steel  
and factory smoke  
we rise,  
awoken to a form of life  
dependent on machinary.

a phantasmagorical  
dream  
ignited with oil and fueled by coal.  
god's light keeps forgetting to shine  
through our smog.



Unknown and Beyond,  
art by Aaron Wilder

# For Us

Alex Dimitrov

*Material wealth and sensual pleasure  
have a very specific function for us;  
they compensate for other forms of poverty.*

Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?*

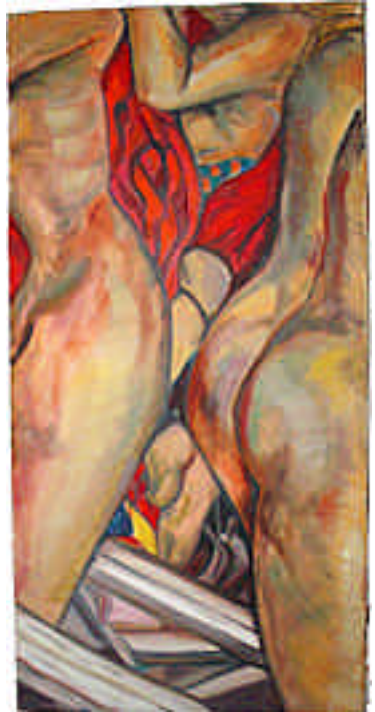
## I. Self-destruct Queen

So this girl starts dishin about  
excess *this* and over consumption *that*  
and do I care about poverty in Latin America  
or AIDS in Africa?

And so I tell her that today I don't care but  
every other day I have to, and not  
in Africa but in my bedroom.

This hag is clearly unaware that  
we invented safe sex  
so we can keep on fucking  
and keep on fucking up  
and the breeders can leave us alone  
until the next scapegoat election.

If we've survived eight years of Reagan,  
two Bushes, and don't ask because I  
will tell you the truth about Clinton;  
not poverty, AIDS, or another Holocaust  
is going to stop me from investing in  
Dior's new fall collection – as I  
walk down the street adding up  
those fabulous figures of who and how much  
of them I'm wearing.



art by Nicole  
Aimiee  
Macaluso

The Barbie dolls we missed each Christmas then  
are starting to pile up in dozens now.

## II. Rentboys

He looks like rent to me  
but he's a trade boy.

He fucks like rent  
and if he dealt off 5<sup>th</sup>  
not in a coffee shop,  
or rather in their bathrooms,  
he would surely be a rentboy.

See the difference is so slight, so miniscule.  
Rentboys are trade boys in drag,  
warehouse the new bathhouse, cottage, alley.

Only now we fuck for free because we can.  
Now we fuck because they don't bother to charge us.

Why should we charge each other?

## III. Nancy and Maryanne

I'm a married woman, honey!

I love him some days,  
others I would trade him in  
for new Manolos.

Most days he fucks me,  
rarely he makes love.

I keep the house clean circa 1952  
and the kids if kids there were  
are fast asleep by ten,  
promptly after Judy Garland has stopped singing.



Godman Frogman,  
art by Mark Graham

And girlfriend I could go on singing,  
and go on paying  
the same tax dollars they pay.

Forced to watch the movies they watch,  
listen to the music they play,  
read the news they write and fabricate.

And isn't it too bad that after all of that  
they still have the final say.

I'll be a married woman, honey!  
One day I'll get away.

# WHEN GOOD FRIENDS OF MINE DIVORCE

John Grey

It took a savage storm  
for me to understand the concept.  
The air before  
and the air after  
never seem the same.  
And I forget the storms  
but that divide...  
well that's what I breathe  
every day isn't it.  
I'd see one of them  
in one place  
and the other in another.  
I'd talk as if  
I was trying to put them back  
whereas when they spoke  
it was to make even more  
distance between them.  
In this instance,  
I was as much the tumult  
as their arguments,  
as their lawyers,  
as the bloody final settlement.  
I think that's why  
I no longer see them,  
why they don't return  
my calls.  
I'm the flash of lightning,  
the rumble of thunder  
in the one sky  
they've already paved over.  
So when they breathe  
to go forward,  
there's nothing there yet anyhow.  
And when they breathe  
to look back,  
it can only be right through me.



Tagged, art by  
Cheryl Townsend

## THE FIG

Vince Stamey

I am the fig  
at the Feast of Love—  
I melt in your mouth  
and you call me a whore.

You mewl and you  
squeak  
and you oink for more—  
You are a pig  
and you call me a whore?

# used to be a caveman

Grace Connolly

I know a man who smiles with his gums pushed out he eats turkey sandwiches on whole grain bread. he yells a lot when he is on stage is hailed a genius by a magazine. he is made.

a man like that wastes away my time.

he does a line of coke on the dresser of a too nice hotel. there is a white curtain and he has a fake name. he says, you know everything about me. and me like everyone else is informed of his sad little past.

I think he is a sad little man. I let him fuck me.

my story is I lean onto the table with the water in the clear glass, lemon squeezed all over my fingers. I am painted onto courage and painted as if he meant to hurt me.

I only question what it is that he sees in me that reminds him of himself.

he wishes he could scratch away his face. he just shoves away his pain and says he used to be a caveman.

I only question why his past defines him so. I start to think I am haunted as well, and lines on dressers suddenly seem so attractive.

I met this man on a journey to complete self destruction. I can't help but wonder if he is wasted on my thanks. sometimes I still see him while walking down the street, but I flick my head to the side, like I have a terrible headache. this way we are destined to avoid each other for at least, quite a while.

prose  
the meat and potatoes stuff

# The Cycles of Our Lives

Pat Dixon

“Look at those freakin’ creeps!” I yell, swervin’ my station wagon to the left an’ mashin’ hard onto my brakes so as not to run over any of ‘em.

Roy Baker, my passenger, my companion of the day, stares silently ahead through my windshield as if he didn’t even see one the seven skinny young men in black spandex corsets, bright red or yellow or blue knit shirts, an’ streamlined little “helmets” who just raced collectively in a pack through a red light for them, right in front of us, who have us a green one.

The wagon has stalled out in the middle of the intersection because I didn’t mash down on my clutch pedal when brakin’, an’ as I try restartin’ her while I still have a green light, another pack of five more skinny cyclists, decked out in the same gear, approach us from the right an’ similarly race through on their red light.

“Roy,” I say, “I don’t care if it is a nice sunny Sunday mornin’. An’ I don’t care if these are back-country roads with only two traffic lights in twenty-five square miles. Those kinds o’ bike riders are a freakin’ menace. An’, worse still, they’re inconsiderate. No sense of whose rights they’re violatin’. Or, more likely, they do know full well what they’re doin’ an’ just do it to aggravate decent people. Like me an’ you, Roy.”

Roy still says nothin’. I flip a glance over at him as the engine catches, an’ I put her in first. Ol’ Roy is still starin’ forward, expressionlessly, slowly movin’ his lips the way he usually does, with no sounds comin’ out.

I’ve been takin’ Roy out for Sunday drives about thirty times a year for the past six years, even since his stroke, partly so he could get out to garage sales to look for vintage radios that he collects an’ partly so he could spend half an hour or so with an ol’ gal friend that is crippled an’ lives with her niece way out in the wooded wilds of central Connecticut. On some days, Roy is fairly talkative, but he often hardly says five or six words, an’ I wonder if he is off in some corner of his head an’ not listenin’ to me while I try to chatter away. Funny thing is, sometimes he’ll suddenly make a comment about somethin’ I mentioned an hour before, as if he had to mull it over an’ look at all fifty-seven sides of the issue before deliverin’ me his views.



At the next intersection I stop an' consult my road map again. I can hear a woodpecker off to the left, possibly up in one of the huge oaks that overhang the blacktop road.

"Sure is a pretty day, Roy, huh?" I say, lookin' over at him. Roy still stares

ahead an' says nothin'.

I determine from the map that our next garage sale is down the left-hand road about a mile an' get ready to roll.

"Can you hear that ol' woodpecker up there, Roy? 'Minds me of the hours I spent pokin' 'round the woods about thirty miles from here when I was a kid. Just me an' my little beagle, all by our lonesomes, a-walkin' through the second-growth woods an' findin' new things each time, even in the same ol' places. Iron tires from ol' farm wagons with spoked wooden wheels an' glass bottles an' broken dishes an' ol' wells. Yeah, Roy, ol' wells that had stone sides an' were all filled in with rotten tree limbs an' crud for the past hundred years. Or maybe two hundred. An' once we saw a doe with a fawn—which drove ol' Freddy, my dog, nuts. The neatest thing I ever found was an ol' ox yoke, which I lugged a quarter mile out o' the woods an' almost four miles down a country road to my home. An' the neatest place, Roy, was an ol' stone crypt for storin' dead folks' bodies over the winter till the ground thawed out."

I glance over at Roy, but he seems to be deaf to everythin' I've just told him.

As I start to mash down on the gas an' let off the clutch, about a dozen more of those punky cyclists come whippin' 'round the bend an' zip on through a stop sign.

This time I push in my clutch an' don't stall, but I give 'em a good blast on my horn, an' four of 'em reply by signalin' their I.Q.s with their middle fingers.

"There go another batch of 'em, Roy. Little snots! Those aren't even ten-speed bikes, either! Look to be those new twenty-five gear thingies I've heard about! I wonder if their mommies 'at bought 'em for 'em know how they're breakin' the damn law at ev'ry crossroad, eh, Roy? What's your thought on this?"

Roy stares straight ahead as I make my turn an' follow the same route as the bikes. I expect that when we get to the sale, he'll need to pee again, so



I mentally go through my patented explanation which I've given a couple hundred times to the people who run these things—incontinence, stroke, elderly, not a threat, nice ol' guy, no family, etcetera, etcetera. It's been about half an hour since we left Nadine, his ol' gal friend, an' I think he peed just before we left, though I never ask.



Ahead about three hundred yards, I see another bevy of cyclists runnin' a stop sign, but this time it doesn't get under my skin, so I say nothin'. I just glance over at Roy, who also says nothin'.

It's a four-way stop, so I stop, an' as I do, Roy speaks for the first time since we left Nadine's place.

"Don't be so judgmental, Albert," he says.

I let out a surprised laugh. What? Me?

"Bout what, Roy?" I say.

"When I first met Nadine, it was when she came into my TV repair shop about forty, forty-five years ago," he says.



"Okay," I say. "I'm not judgin' her—nor you either, Roy. What d'y' mean?"

I pull off onto the shoulder of the road so we can talk, now that Roy has a mind to. For a few seconds he sucks on his lips, an' then begins again.

"She was a real beauty when she came in with her little TV set. Sort of like some Italian paintin' done in Florence or somewhere four, five hundred years ago. Flirted with me a bit an' asked my name while I wrote up the ticket an' told her it'd be ready in two days. An' when she came back for her TV, she was wearin' an open-neck white blouse, an' she smiled an' said, 'Roy, I'm a bit short o' cash today. Can we work it out in trade somehow?' An' she undid a couple more buttons on her little white blouse."

Here Roy pauses as if to savor the memory.

"Nadine an' I went back into my workroom, an' she taught me a few things that I an' Martha, my wife, had never known about, an' I an' Nadine agreed that four more o' those would cover the parts an' labor for fixin' her TV. An' she came back twice more, an' I admit I was gettin' real' fond o' her."



I hadn't even known that Roy was ever married, let alone involved with Nadine in this way, an' I'm lookin' at him with new eyes. Roy'd been old when I met him, about twenty-five years older'n I am, an' then he'd had his stroke, an' so I began drivin' him around on Sundays, but I'd never asked an' he'd never told me much about his earlier life.

"So, Albert," Roy says, "it was the greatest thing I'd ever experienced, an' then Martha walked into





my workroom an' caught us that third time. So there never was a fourth time or a fifth time, though o' course I let her, Nadine, take her TV set home anyways."

Again Roy pauses.



"Never was a fourth time—or a fifth. O' course, Martha got the house an' our car. An' I put up a canvass cot in my workroom an' lived there with a little two-burner hot-plate. After the divorce, what with legal expenses for the both of us an' then her alimony payments, it took me over seven years to get to where I could buy another car, so mean time I just bought me a cheap bike an' rode around with that for my transportation."

A half dozen more bikes whizz past us even as he speaks. I nod once, slowly, to encourage Roy to continue.

"Nadine got married durin' that first year to a guy who'd beat her.



After two years o' that, they got separated, though I hear he's still alive somewheres, an' they're still legally married. An' I've stayed in touch with her all these years," he says.

Roy shrugs an' looks straight ahead.

"Albert," he says impatiently, "are we goin' to set here all day? Some times a fella needs to heed the calls o' nature! Can we just get a damn' move-on here, young man?"

"Sure, Roy," I say. "You're the boss."

As we pull out onto the blacktop, Roy adds one more thing.

"Albert, be less judgmental! Even though you're a sheltered academic that's livin' in an ivory tower most o' the week, you've at least heard o' the real world, right? An' you've heard about how more'n half the marriages in the U.S. today break up within a couple o' years? Who amongst us can ever say what terrible stresses the other folks are sufferin' from? I could see that all them fellas 'at just went by on their bikes've just been cleaned out by their wives."



I suspect from long past experience that there will be more, so I bite my lips to keep from grinnin' an' just stay focused on the road.

Roy pauses for a good half a minute before layin' the last brick of his logical conclusion on me: "Albert, e'cept for walkin' or thumbin', this bikin' is the only way any one o' them fellas can get around anywheres now! Be less judgmental!"



I shoot Roy a quick side glance. He is still starin' straight ahead, an' I cannot tell if he is spoofin' me or not. An' I do not ask.

# A LOVE STORY

Mel Waldman

“I was molested by my stepfather for years,” my new patient confessed.

“Did anyone know?”

“I told my mother. She didn’t believe me.”

I sat on a reclining leather chair in my Greenwich Village office and waited. My patient sat across from me. He had refused to lie on the couch.

“I was a victim until I ran away from home last year at the age of 15.”

“Where did you go?”

“The Streets.”

Silence. (My office is small and rectangular. There’s no place to hide except in the anguished silence that sometimes surrounds us, engulfing us in a claustrophobic universe. If the Void is not filled with sound, from time to time, my office is a tomb of silence. Still, I wait for my patients. They choose when they wish to communicate.)

“Got high, drinking and drugging. Sold my body. Blacked out. Broke down. OD’d. Flunked at that too. Didn’t die. Woke up in rehab. Ran away. Freaked out. Went to the funny farm.”

Silence.

“The shrinks played with my brain. Shrunk my madness. Straightened me out against my will.”

He glared at me.

“Released me to you. Here I am.”

Silence.

“What do you want?”

“To die.”

“Do you plan to kill yourself?”

“No. I’m HIV Positive. Don’t have to do nothing.”

“You’re young. You can fight...”

“Don’t want to live.”

“So what do you want from therapy?”

“Yes, what do I want?” my patient whispered.

Silence.

Waiting for the boy to speak, I studied him. He was at least 6 feet tall, thin and muscular-perfectly sculpted with blond hair and azure eyes. He didn’t look sick. Although he wore a white T-Shirt, jeans and white sneakers, he still looked like an all-American model from GQ. But he was only a boy.

“I want to tell my girl,” he announced, grinning wickedly, revealing movie star-white teeth.

“You haven’t?”

“Never got the guts.”

“So why now?”

“Therapy’s a lot of B.S. Garbage. But maybe I can accomplish this one thing.”

“When do you want to do it?”

“Now. She’s in the waiting room.”

“Okay. Bring her in.”

She looked about 14 or 15. And she was short, about five-three even with high heels. Her jet black hair cascaded down her shoulders. She wore a black mini dress and a see-through tight silk blouse. She was bra-less, revealing small breasts. Her eyes were turquoise, covered with thick lashes. And if I had to rate her, I’d say she was drop-dead gorgeous. Yet I suspected she was a man in transition, with the help of an underground doctor, searching for an elusive identity.

I sat with them. And he told her he was HIV Positive. Didn’t know what to expect. But what happened next shook me a little. She grabbed him unexpectedly. I thought she was going to assault him. Then she kissed him passionately. And he responded.

“I love you!” she shouted. “And now we are the same. Now we are one!”

“What do you mean?” he asked, wearing a quizzical look.

“I’m HIV Positive too. Found out last month. Wanted to tell you. But I couldn’t. Prayed you were too. So we could be close.”

“Now we are one!”

They were on Cloud 9, high with an inexplicable joy of sharing a death sentence. And they were deeply in love, sharing an intimacy few lovers ever experience.

I met them over 20 years ago. After our first session, they came to see me once a week as a couple for 6 months. And then they died of full-blown AIDS at Beth Israel Hospital in Manhattan. I spoke to a few big shots who bent the rules and let them stay in the same room.

Too weak to hold hands, they gazed at each other, their lusty eyes swallowing their last moments together in a visual caress. I saw their deep love. I felt it. And then I watched them pass away.

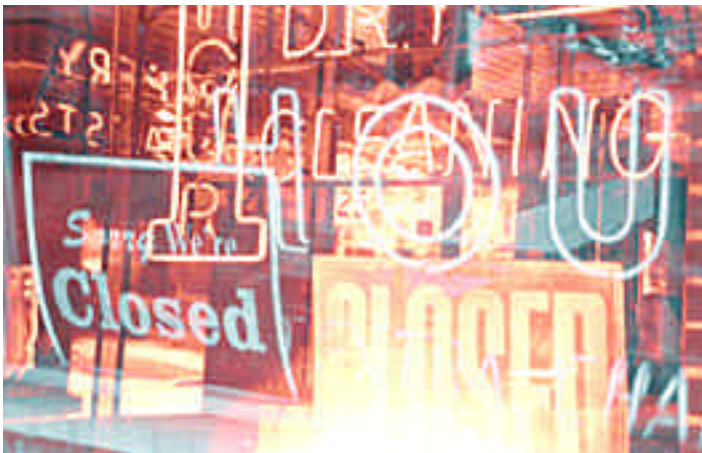
They taught me a lot, especially about love. I still remember.

# The Rotting Knot

Jacob Alves

I pumped hard on top, almost as if it was rape. My right arm held her left leg up, she liked it. The muscle relaxers, uppers, and alcohol were getting in the way of me finishing but I kept slamming my thin hips into hers. I begin to slow down then I finally stopped, “Fuck.” I said, “I can’t, it must be the pills or something.” I collapsed on top of her, wheezing and craving a cigarette. Our bodies were hot and her heart was protruding from her breast. I rolled over leaving the condom on and pulled up my shorts. She reached over to grab her phone, “Amber just told me she has something important to tell me, it’s about you,” she said. “What the fuck, I didn’t even do any thing.” Amber hated me and hated the fact that I was dating her friend pissed her off. “Did she say what it was?” “No she’s at work.” Right then is what set the mood for the rest of the night. Silent, both of our minds were racing, trying to predict what Amber was going to spill. The worst part was I knew it was something from about ex-girlfriend, another one of Amber’s friend who’d I done wrong a number of times. We laid side by side not touching, listening to our thoughts. The mental distance between was so obvious it was almost visible in that dark tiny room.

I woke up before the alarm went off and sat still until it did. My stomach was in a rotting knot from all the pills and my head pulsating from the alcohol, the sun beating down on the bed wasn’t helping either. She woke up and reached over me to stop the obnoxious buzzing then stood up and checked her phone. It took her a couple seconds to read the new message. “I better go,” I said, “fuckin traffic and shit.” “Yeah,” she softly replied looking down. I stood up and moved my head towards hers, I kissed her on the lips. She didn’t kiss back, her lips tasted dead and lacked fire.



Closed, art  
by Mike  
Hovancsek

# Simon's Last Trick

Bill DeArmond

So you want to know about that last day? What did you say your name was? Hippopotamus? It's been so long ago and my mind's not so clear anymore. But, yes, I do clearly remember Simon's last trick. How could I forget the worst day of my life?

I have to take you back fifty years when Simon and I first met. I'm still a little ashamed about it. But Simon always said I shouldn't look back, only forward. I did what I had to do to survive, then Simon saved me. From that time to now I have lived a new life as a whole person. You will see what that means.

I had been working in this brothel for about a year, maybe more, selling or trading the only asset I had for whatever I could get to keep myself going. One night in walks this fairly handsome guy, but kind of scary, you know, with these really vibrant, intense eyes. Eyes that could look right through you straight into your soul. But he was interesting, not like the low-life clients I usually have to put up with. He didn't look like he had much money, but there was a cocky air of mystery about him that said "This guy is a Mister!" And he had these smooth hands, not like these farmers, carpenters, and such. And these penetrating eyes.

He came around almost every night for a couple of weeks. We got to know each other pretty well. He'd pay to stay. Talk's not cheap, you know. But he had a deepness about him I'd never known before. But it was maybe the third time before he asked me my name. And of course, as you know, it's Helena. So he gets all rhapsodic-like...I know what the word means. He told me he used to spend all his time in this library and he remembered some stories by a guy named Homer, a rhapsode, and he used to... I've forgotten my point.

Oh, so he said I was as beautiful as Helen of Troy. So I said I've heard of a Troy around here but no special Helen. So that's why he told me about the Trojan War and how she started it because she had a face to launch ships, and that's what he got from this library.

So, anyway, he started calling me his Helen of Troy, and since my name was Helena, I didn't mind that much. But later he wanted to change my name to Sophia and he'd call himself Logos but I thought those names were pretty dumb, so that didn't stick. But he explains to me his "philosophy" and how those names were important, so I tolerated it for a while.

So he tells me that he's working up this act he's going to take on the road, sort of a traveling spiritual magic show, and he needed a lovely assistant and would I run off with him. Well, he was sort of cute and dark and I'd get to travel and perform, so I said sure. And that's how it all began.

Like I told you, Simon didn't have any money, but he was really ambitious. He grew up in Alexandria and got a job cleaning out the library, dusting the scrolls, doing errands for the scholars in exchange for lessons. He learned to read and speak four languages. They let him hang around their discussions and tolerated his questions, although even then he had these ideas that they thought naïve.

So Simon, who'd never known his real father, grew up surrounded by all these surrogates. Remember, these were the greatest minds in the known world. Great astronomers and mathematicians, theologians and artists. So while the others looked at the night sky to determine the luminescence of distance of a star, Simon was more interested in what "caused" them to be there in the first place. The scholars said nothing caused them to be there, they just were. Or they gave him some creation mythology he felt was condescending. In all the time he had lived in the Library, Simon never thought of himself as a spiritual person. That was all soon to change.

Her close friends called her Maggie, and Simon soon became one of them. He first met her while just into his 20s, she in her 30's. He felt a strange attraction/aversion toward her. There was a tremendous sadness about her that smothered him. She had lost so much—her husband, her homeland. Forced to flee and live her life under a false identity. Constantly afraid that those who framed and executed her husband would one day come knocking on her door. But Alexandria was inviting, friendly, full of those who felt her disenfranchisement, finding themselves in a strange world ruled by an alien god.

She tantalized and teased Simon for years. Telling him her story one fragment at a time. She talked about that last moment with her husband. What his last words were to her before he passed. And the morning they came and took his body away—"for safe-keeping," they said. "So it can't be defiled or used for political or religious propaganda. There is great power in this body."

"How ironic," she told Simon. "I have no idea where they buried him but his power is with me every day. I will share that secret knowledge with you someday...when you are ready."

That day came sooner than anyone had anticipated. For the word went out to Alexandria that "they" knew where she was...she and her children...his children. They could not be allowed to survive.

So the decision was made to pile into a small, leaky old boat and head for the coast of France. I mean, France? Why would anyone in his or her right mind go to France?

The night before they set sail, Maggie found Simon alone on the beach staring out into the blackness of the sea. She took his hand as they sat on the sand, listening to the water bringing change upon the world, one wave at a time. They could see the great lighthouse standing majestically in the harbor, a pale sentinel of the last vestige of the free spirit.

Maggie told Simon that they would probably not meet again in this life, but that Simon should continue to spread the “word” if he should feel the calling. She had this Greek word for it...gnus...gnos...I could never pronounce it correctly. Simon said it meant “knowledge,” so I said why don’t they just call it that. Simon just shook his head.

I’m going to try to remember as much of what she told Simon as I can. It’s been a while and Simon would change it around a bit depending on the temperament of the crowd. I may have to paraphrase some of it, but this is what Simon says she told to him that final night.

“These are the secret sayings which my husband spoke. If you understand them, then you will never experience death. I will give you what no eye has ever seen and what no hand has ever touched and what has never occurred to the human mind.”

“Most people live their lives in oblivion and they experience this as terror and confusion, pain and suffering, doubt and division. They are caught in the many illusions of this world. If you remain ignorant and a creature of this oblivion, you will never experience fulfillment. Self-ignorance is a form of self-destruction.”

“The secret to life, to God, to knowledge is simple, but the path is hard.”

“Live according to your mind. Acquire strength, for the mind is strong. Enlighten your mind. If you do not know yourself, then you know nothing. But he who does know himself already has achieved knowledge about the depths of all things.”

“There is a light within a man of light, and he lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, he is darkness. Light the lamp within you.”

“Do not look for God above you, nor in the temple, nor the church. The kingdom is inside you, and it is outside you. When you come to know yourself then you will realize that you are the son of a living father.”

“And so, my dear Simon, this is what I leave with you. If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

And then she was gone, swept by the morning tide. But she had



touched him and changed the direction of his life forever. And so Simon spent the next four years in diligent application of every bit of knowledge he could glean from the scrolls about philosophy, mysticism, alchemy and magic, and every gem of wisdom he could squeeze from his fathers.

And then he met me. He said I was the last piece of his puzzle, Sophia to his Logos. And so began our journey together—Simon the Magician and His Amazing Miracles of the Spirit. With, of course, his lovely assistant Helena.

Simon used magic like lightning to gather the crowds to hear the thunder, the fires burning in his eyes. He could mesmerize a crowd, hold them in a trance, caught in the power of his words until, drained beyond continuing, he would let them go.

He did put on a great show but, you know, I think deep in his heart he sincerely believed in what he was saying. The power to save the poor, the weak, those who cared for no one for no one cared for them. How much he burned to share “the secret” with them, to make them see with new eyes, to live fully for the first time—a rebirth of their spirit, a connection with the divine.

For the first few years nobody really bothered Simon—just another itinerant zealot wandering the back roads scratching out a living. But as more people began to listen and ask, “Why is my life like this?” the more Simon’s fame began to grow. We thought it was time to take our show to the center of the empire—Rome. That’s when Peter came into our lives.

Simon had this idea that since we were touring Greece and Italy, he’d spice things up by billing himself as Faustus, the Magician. Yeah, I know it sounds strange but he said it meant “the favored one” so he thought maybe the crowds would think somebody anointed him. But really, it was just Simon showing off again.

I can’t remember in which town Paul first showed up, but it was right after we entered Italy. Paul was one of these exponents of “the way” or “the wave” or something like that. He would watch politely as Simon did his act. Secretly, I think Paul was fascinated by it and a bit jealous. But just as soon as Simon started into his message, Paul would begin to heckle him, shouting taunts and jeers until either Simon shut up or the crowd beat Paul into submission. But you know, towards the end Paul and Simon became, well, not really friends, but respectful of each other.

Paul maintained the current orthodox theology when it came to omnipotence and the all-powerful Creator God, and thought Simon’s revisionist attitude was absurd.

See, Simon had this idea that we are all created with two brains. I know that sounds like a hoot—two brains! He called one of the brains a

“nous,” or a Thinking Mind, and the other was an “epinoia,” or The Thought. That’s where he got this idea to call us Logos and Sophia. But, like I said, I killed that one.

So we’ve got this one male brain and this one female both in our heads and neither brain is complete without the other one. Well, I can kind of see that, because you have the man who is logical, most of the time, and the female who is emotional, some of the time. So the goal in your life is to strike a balance between them.

Where Simon and Paul got into it was over this story about Adam and Eve. So Paul contends that Eve was the bad apple, so to speak, because she used her sex-thing to tempt Adam into disobeying God because this was his special tree. So God got mad that they turned their back on him and called this the Original Sin, and we all have to spend our lives doing *mea culpa* trying to get back into God’s grace.

Simon believed that the Creator God was originally like this two-brain thing I told you about, both male and female, which is a good thing, you know. When Adam and Eve ate from this sacred tree of knowledge, then WHAM! They got hit with this brilliant light and they realized that they were part of God—both contained his Godly spirit. So they got tired of being treated like God’s pets, and they wanted their own individual identity. So, like all children do, they rebelled and God kicked them out of the house.

When this Logos, the patriarchal, hateful side of God, did this, he unknowingly alienated his own Sophia, his feminine wisdom. He turned into what Simon called a demiurge, or this demon of wrath and vengeance. Sophia knew that Adam and Eve weren’t prepared to go it alone and would need a guide. So she went along as a spirit hidden inside them. So when they found themselves in some trouble, usually caused by Logos, they could turn inward and Sophia would come out to help.

So our entire history has been trying to get the family back together again. But this was impossible before this guy Jesus, because Judaism was still following the Torah, or the Rule of Law from this vengeful demiurge. And the pagans, don’t let me get started on them. Anyway they were too busy paganizing to think much about any God, except Dionysus maybe.

It was this Jesus who became the Great Healer, the Arbitrator, the Reconciler. He was the first to recognize that he truly had the way to access both Logos AND Sophia—the original spirit of creation.

Well, you can bet the nasty demiurge God was ready for this to take place. He had been spouting wrath and vengeance for so long it didn’t excite him any more. He had been lonely and fragmented for a long time. He gave one of his enlightened creatures, one of his sons, the power to lead him to a

reunion with Sophia once again. And so they reside for eternity in the Christ within, so that all the sons and daughters might look deep into their souls with the candle of enlightenment and find their way back home.

That's a nice story, don't you think? Nothing to get someone killed over is it? Because it's just a fable. Kind of hard to believe. Us needing TWO brains. I have enough trouble making the one I got work. I guess I could have used a spare one. But that still doesn't seem like something that would make two grown men resort to fighting words. Words was all it was. Until that last day.

Simon had this way of stirring up a crowd. Oh, you should have seen him, the way he'd taunt them, but in a good way, just to get them interested in his message about the two brains. So here we are in Rome about to do our first show and he started making this noise on the steps of the senate no less. He got the attention of all those in the market and he railed at them: "Tomorrow I shall leave you impious and wicked ones and shall repair above to God whose power I am. Whereas ye have fallen, behold, I am He-who-stands."

He had a great way with the language. Could have been an actor...well, I guess in a way he was. So I knew he was going to try that disastrous levitation trick again the next day at the Castle of Cagliostro.

I'm not going to tell you everything but it involved a harness, a rope painted the color of the roof and a weighted bag, which would be attached to one end and I'd toss it down the other side. This couldn't be seen, you know, by those watching the show. Simon would give his speech about the two brains and then strike this pose for dramatic effect. That was my signal to roll the weight off the roof and he'd slowly ascend into the air. When he'd get to the top of the roof he'd duck down or hide behind a turret or chimney, untie the rope and we'd be gone before anybody thought about looking on the other side of the building.

Only this time something went terribly wrong. Simon did his thing, made his gesture, and I heaved the sack over the cornice. He started slowly upward for five stories, but then I heard this SNAP! If he'd had just a few more seconds he'd been able to grab onto the roof, but he fell into the courtyard below. I didn't need to look down. I could tell from the crowd's reaction that Simon was gone.

The strangest thing was right before the rope broke, I heard someone who sounded like Peter yell, "Burn in hell, you old devil."

Nobody came forward to help Simon, to even see if he were still alive. They were merely staring at him in his shame—a charlatan caught in his own trick. When I finally got to him and covered him with my cloak, I

noticed the slack end of the rope about twenty feet from his body. Only half the strands were frayed from the weight of Simon's body. The rest were neatly cut through.

So that's the story of my Simon's last trick. Not a day goes by that I don't think of him. I don't guess it will be long before I see him again.

What's the point? What do I want people to remember about Simon Magus? He was just a man who wanted to talk to his God on his terms. He was the kindest, more spiritual person I've ever known. Funniest, too. He was a man of Truth, but most didn't take him seriously. Somewhere it got lost in all the magic. And his reputation suffered from that last trick. It was a killer, you know.

Because you've been so patient with an old woman's ramblings, I'm going to tell you one last final secret. Simon never told another living soul save me the last words Maggie heard her husband whisper to her at the moment of his death: "I am never far away from you. You hold me forever in you heart. I loved you before; I love you now, and forever. I will come to you in your dreams."

I am ready tonight to embrace Simon...again.

One final thing, young man. I said earlier that Simon rescued me from my life of sin and saved my soul. But really, our love redeemed each other, made us whole, for that is the way it is always meant to be. Sophia and Logos. Two brains. Huh.

Write this about Simon if you must. He was a gentle soul with a tormented spirit. Good man. Bad magician.

But...oh...those eyes...

## A word to the reader:

This story is purely fiction but it is based on historical fact and scholarly speculation. Simon Magus is considered the Father of Gnosticism. Historians believe he grew up in Alexandria and was educated in the shadow of the Great Library. He left Alexandria and began his traveling mix of magic and mysticism 17 years after the crucifixion. His constant companion until the end was Helena, a redeemed prostitute.

In Rome he billed himself as Faustus, the Magician, thus serving as the model for plays by Marlowe and Goethe. He died under unusual circumstances while performing a feat of levitation.

Nobody knows who tampered with the rope.

There is historical speculation (most notably in *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The DaVinci Code*) that a very pregnant Mary Magdalene, Mother Mary, Joseph of Arimathea, and others in their entourage, fled Jerusalem within a year after the death of Jesus. Mary gave birth to a daughter named Sarah. They remained there in the shadow of the Great Library for a dozen years before they set sail for France.

It is possible Mary Magdalene and Simon Magus crossed paths.

If they did, it is likely they talked...

# the book of Helena

Janet Kuypers

**time:** 26 CE

**place:** Alexandria, Egypt

Helena only passively kept interest in Antony, the man who had once courted her in Greece, though he kept his eye on her. Her state treated her and other women on very unequal footing with men, but she knew that her country thought she had some value, even if her value could only be through raising children or tending a home for a future husband.

Knowing she wanted to tell the world about injustices she had seen in society as she was raised in Greece, she looked forward to her chance at further education and reading through the extensive libraries in Egypt. Thinking about chances to learn in new lecture amphitheatres and study in exquisite libraries and museums, Helena was sure her future would be strong and bright, finding fascinating new people to interact with and experiencing new elements in her society for her potential new loves of life.

Her awakening was after her moving out of her parent's house to live and study. There were great libraries in Alexandria, and her friend was moving there to work and study with Helena.

Everything was going to be different for her once she got out on her own.

Haimon and Rheia, Helena's parents, worried that it was not a good idea to let Helena to move to another country and live without a man, they worried she may be thought of as a loose woman and she would not find a man to marry and would resort to prostitution. But Helena's pleas were unrelenting; they knew of the greater chances she would have by working and studying in Alexandria versus their small town in Greece, and they understood that her intelligence and strength would help her through her life, and she could always come home if things on her own did not work well quickly. They wondered how she would be able to study in libraries to learn while there; but after Helena and her future roommate relented, Helena's parents were able to pay for her half of paying for Helena and Lana's home for one year. After a tearful



Disdain, art by Edward  
Michael O'durr Supranowicz

good-bye with her parents just after she turned eighteen, Helena left with a carriage full of belongings with her friend Lana.

Lana and Helena were close friends, but they had their differences. Lana liked different music styles and had different interests from Helena. Lana was even thrilled with watching the colosseum attacks in Greece - but Helena wasn't interested in Lana's interests and realized their differences when she was so much more interested in studying at the Library of Alexandria than Lana.

Either way, they were both happy to be on their own and were ready to celebrate their new home on their own.

Antony had worked the previous year for the State in Alexandria, and he was thrilled that Helena and Lana were moving to his city to study and work. He would live less than one mile from them; knowing they would be unfamiliar with customs and styles in their new town in this new country to them, he arrived at their home on the Sunday afternoon they arrived at their new home to help them move in.

When they first walked into the rooms where they were staying, Helena saw the area first as she carried her belongings in. As Lana and Helena scanned the space for where their belongings could go, they had to quickly decide where they would sleep and where their clothing would belong. Because of a lack of money and the difficulty in getting places to live in Alexandria, their home was one large room, so they shared the same area for sleeping, working and eating. They even just knew which side of the room each of them would sleep in - Helena liked being near where their book cases would be for her work; Lana liked being closer to spaces she can clean herself up to make herself beautiful for going out of having company over.

They knew they had more unpacking and rearranging to do of their things, but they were getting tired - and hungry - and they wanted to just take a breath and enjoy the fact that they were in their home - and in a new land - for the first time in their lives. Although they had moved most everything into their home, sunset was approaching and they had not considered food. After Antony explained to them that there are so many people from different countries in Alexandria they would not have to worry at all about learning another language to fit in, Antony then offered food and drink that he would bring to their new place a little later in the day.

The sun started to hide behind an adjacent building, so Helena pulled their candles out and placed them in lamps so they would have light for the evening. Lana grabbed one of the candles and went to a mirror to brush her hair. "Helena, you should be getting ready for Antony coming Over," Lana said.

"I'm just trying to clean up as much as we can tonight, so we can find our way through here more easily when we wake up tomorrow," Helena called back as she searched through boxes she was trying to still unpack.

"Well, he's your boyfriend, I'd think you'd want to look nice for him."

"Lana, I..." Helena tried to come up with the rest of her sentence before she finally knew what she wanted to say. "I - I'm not his girlfriend, we dated before, but we're just hanging out now."

"You still date though, right?"

"...Yes, but he's not courting me for a wife."

“You don’t think. He still likes you, girl, and you could think of liking him back. He’s could be a stable man for a good home for you -”

“I’ll worry about making sure I’m stable first, but thanks, Lana...” Helena turned back to the stack of books to start putting them on shelves so there was less to step over in the morning. she heard Lana yelling from the other side of their home, “Why did the two of you break up anyway?”

“Lana, he moved. He’s been in Alexandria for almost a year working. He would come back to our town to visit his family, and that’s why we still saw each other occasionally. Besides, I don’t know, he may have spent time courting others and dating women since he’s moved, and it doesn’t break my heart that we’re not dating - I don’t think we were meant for each other.”

Just as Helena finished her last words, they heard a loud thumping on their door. Because Lana was near the door, Lana ran to the door and asked through the wall, “Who is it?”

She could hear a muffled voice from outside. “It’s Antony. Is that Lana?”

Lana laughed as she opened her door and saw Antony standing there with his arms filled with cloth bags for food and his fingers wrapped around a few bottles of wine and liquor. “Do you need any help carrying anything?” Lana asked as Antony made his first step toward to the doorway and Helena started to walk toward the front door.

“No, I’m fine, but thanks. Where is the table so I -”

“That table is right back here, before the cooking area,” Helena said. She looked at what he brought in and asked, “Did you get all this food for us?”

“I know that cooking is done earlier in the day and you two wouldn’t have a chance to go to a market right away, so there are a lot of fruits and nuts that can keep in this bag.”

“And you brought lots of wine!” Lana said as she walked toward them after closing the door and joining them.

“One container is of water, because you won’t be able to get water until tomorrow. And the wine is drink for us to celebrate your moving tonight into your new home.”

“I’m excited ... and nervous,” Helena said. “I hope I’ll be able to leave the house enough to read or get books from the main library.”

“I see all the beautiful veils over by your beds,” Antony said. And I know a few people who work in the libraries near here, and I think you can go to the library for work and stay in a corner where you can remove your veil and read. I’ve told my friends that you’ll be moving in today, so you should be fine to read and study there. And you know, Helena,” Antony said as he reached for her hand so he could pull her toward him to embrace her, “my friends didn’t understand why you moved away to study.”

“They haven’t lives where we came from, Antony, and they must be too used to living here in Alexandria. It is amazing here.”

“But Helena, I think they thought it was strange that a woman was so interested in reading and learning instead of finding a suitor and taking care of a home.” Antony gave her a look to let her know that she would be thought of as an improper woman for wanting something more than what women are supposed to normally ever want.

“Well, if I’m supposed to be a proper girl and meet a future husband, this would be the place for me to go, no?” She said, smiling after glancing at Lana. “And where would I find a proper man? Well, libraries would hold men of intellect, so -”

Lana cut in. "You've come up with quite the system, Helena..."

"I had to convince my parents there was a good reason for my coming here to study, Lana..." Helena said.

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to acclimate yourselves here," Antony said, "and - do you have money for food from the market? Because -"

"My parents gave us a set amount of money for this home for a year," Helena said, "but I found the place, and I know it's small, but it's much cheaper than what we had for money for this house, so we should have plenty of money for food."

Lana laughed and reached for the wine. "That's why Helena does the negotiating with money - it saved us..."

Antony cut in when he saw Lana getting the bottle of wine. "Where are any glasses for the wine? You two should be celebrating." Helena got up to get glasses and Antony saw her head looking toward one wall, So she got up to get glasses for the three of them. Antony came back with three cups and said, "I also have wine at home and I don't live far and my neighbors are going out tonight, so they might stop by with additional wine I had at my home, so we should have plenty for the evening."

"There's plenty here," Helena said, "I don't usually drink." Lana looked over at her when she said that to Antony, because Lana wanted to drink, and she wanted Antony to allow them to celebrate their new home together.

They only snacked on the fruits and nuts Antony brought them; after not eating most of the day they weren't hungry for a lot of food to fill them up. Antony kept refilling their drinks for them.

"It's a good thing my neighbors Senbi and Pamiu were going out this evening," Antony said as he finished pouring the last of his original bottles of wine into a glass for Lana. "If they didn't bring any more liquor, we'd have to call it an evening."

"But the night is young," Lana said.

Helena put on a mocking tone, saying, "Lana Kiya, what would your mother think..."

"My mother's not here," she retorted. "Are you going to be my mother now?"

Helena laughed. "Of course not. It's just fun to see you so excited to be on your own..." She thought in the back of her mind that it was strange that Antony was pushing so much liquor on Lana, but not as much on her. She eventually decided that he was probably just being nice to her because she said she didn't drink.

Helena was having a good evening, and it was nice to talk with someone other than Lana on her first night in Alexandria. Antony was there to bring food, though they didn't eat much of it that night, and he was like a servant bringing drinks for anyone who wanted it. "You know, it is usually the woman's job to cater to the group with food and drink pouring."

"I know, but I'm right here," Antony said, "and it's your first night here and you should enjoy yourselves. And you don't know how good it is to see the two of you," he said, as he moved over two feet so he could hug her. "It's nice to have people from my home town here, people I have memories with and stories from our past."

"Well, I'm glad you're here too, it's nice to have a sort of welcoming party here."



"I wish we came earlier in the weekend," Lana said. "Then I might have places to go to celebrate our arrival."

"You have plenty of time for that," Antony said. "Besides, now you have all week to look around and see where you'd like to go next weekend when there are more people out and about."

Another hour or two passed, it was getting very late, and Lana looked like she was about to pass out. Helena was drunk from the evening of drinking too; she was having a hard time holding her head straight up and her speech was getting slurred. Antony finally spoke. "Lana, if you want to lay down, that's fine," and he turned to Helena and said more softly, "I can go home in the morning to get ready for work, so I can stay here." He then leaned over and kissed Helena.

"Um, if you want to, you can," Helena said, "but there's not a lot of room here." She looked over at their two beds, not five feet apart.

Antony glanced at Lana Passed out, still sitting at the corner of her bed. He looked back at Helena and put his arms around here. "I can find room."

Helena had to wake Lana from her sleeping sitting position in case she wanted to get ready for sleeping on her reed mat for the night, but Lana didn't even want to bother changing into clothes to sleep in. Lana just groaned, giggled a little when she saw that Antony was still there, and started to move her body so she could just rest there and get to sleep. When she found a blanket from one end of the mat, she dragged it up her body and turned her head to face the wall.

Turning around to walk back toward where Antony was sitting, she watched him pick up his glass of wine, then extend it out to her. "What? That's yours," Helena said about the drink he handed her, but Antony answered with "We still have some left to go through, and Lana won't mind."

"We shouldn't wake her."

Antony didn't even lower his voice, because nothing woke her. "Of course not. But I don't think she's moving anywhere." Antony looked over at her sleeping on the mat, and it seemed that she moved her body and the linen cloths over her so nothing would disturb her.

They talked for a few minutes; Antony then leaned over and ran his hand along the side of her face and said, "I've missed you," before moving to kiss her.

"...I've missed you, too," she said, though he wondered if she just appreciated there being someone she knew in this new town and new country more than missing him specifically. She didn't know what to think, but they were there together, and Lana wasn't waking up. She kissed him back. But Antony kept being more physical with her, and although she wanted him to go home, and although she didn't want to disturb her new roommate, passed out only feet away from her, she didn't think to say anything to him.

The next morning Antony was still there, and Lana still wasn't waking up. Helena saw that he was there and knew he had to go so she curled up into a ball at the far end

of the mat before waking him. “Antony, wake up. You have to go to work.”

When Antony came to and saw that it was daylight, he sprung up to get his things together. He went over to Helena to embrace her and kiss her, but she moved herself away and whispered that he shouldn’t be late for his work.

His running out woke Lana, but only hearing the noises, she did not see him as he left. “Helena... how long have I been sleeping?”

“It’s morning, you’re fine, Lana.”

“Did...” Lana looked around their home and saw they were alone, “Did Antony stay over?”

Helena knew Lana wanted Antony to have stayed over, and if he did Lana would think Antony would be obliged to marry Helena. Helena knew she did not want to be with Antony, but she feared anyone knowing what he did to her.

“Do you see him here?” she asked, hoping that would be enough of an explanation and Lana would not ask any more questions. Helena used most of what little water they had to try to scrub her skin and clean off from him, but she needed to take buckets to the nearby stream to get more water. “Oh, I’m sorry, Lana, but I used most of the water we had,” Helena said. “I was going to get water before you woke up.”

“We’ve got extra barrels,” Lana replied, “so I can go with you and we can get a lot of water so we don’t run out right away,” she said as she moved off her mat to find walking shoes before she brushed her hair for going out. Helena and Lana got their belongings together to make the trip to get water for themselves.

As they got to the stream, there were only a few women there; Helena figures that most of the women probably already got their water from the stream earlier in the morning. Lana walked to the water with a cup and bucket, crouched down at the edge of the water and started scooping up water for the first bucket. She was working for a while because the buckets were relatively large, and she hoped that if she filled the buckets separately, Helena could walk back and forth with the water because of their weight once filled. Lana was almost finished filling the first bucket when she looked up to see where Helena was, so she could get the water and take it back to their home. In the distance, she saw Helena standing in the stream, with her knees into the water, dipping her hands repeatedly into the stream and splashing water onto her face.

Lana didn’t know what she was doing; no one else was getting into the water the way Helena was, and she started to worry. “Helena,” she yelled, and saw her silhouette turn to face Lana. “What are you doing?”

Helena didn’t have an answer, and waited a moment before yelling back her answer. “I had to do this after our move, Lana.”

Lana knew the almost full bucket of water wasn’t going to move, but instead of walking over to where Helena was, she thought about switching their roles and said, “I’ll bring the water back to the home if you’ll stay here to fill the buckets with water. Is that okay?”

Helena knew she couldn’t walk back and forth to and from the house repeatedly if she was soaking wet, so she started walking toward Lana. “Sure,” she said as she got closer. “I’m sorry I got drenched like this. I can fill the water buckets if you don’t mind the walking.”

“That’s fine, I’ve got this first huge bucket almost filled, so I’ll just take it now. You start filling the other ones here and I’ll be back.”

Lana reached down to get the large bucket filled with water for her trip back to their house. As she started to walk away, Helena took a bucket and saucer, then said, "Thanks, Lana," before starting to collect more water for them for their home.

Helena spent the rest of the morning working with Lana on getting food from the market they could keep for a week's worth of food, and they finished trying to rearrange their belongings in their new home. Lana wanted to go back to the market to see if there is anyone she could meet there; Helena wanted to head straight to the library to collect information.

Walking into the library, she tried to see where she'd need to go for books for the word she decided she wanted to do. As she turned a corner to go to a wing that contained Greek fiction and nonfiction, a gentleman walked up to her. "Pardon me, are you Helena -"

"Do I know you?" Helena answered, wondering who knew her name and wondering if she was not allowed there.

"I'm sorry, I'm a friend of Antony's, and he told me that his girl Helena is in town and would be coming to the library today."

She let a moment of silence pass before she answered. "I'm not his girl, but I am Helena."

"Oh," he answered. "Well, if you need anything at all, please feel free to track me down. My name is Pedibastet, and there are a few other people working here who knew of you being here, so I'm sure anyone can help you out."

"Thank you, I was just going to pull some books from authors like Sophocles and Socrates, or even some of Plato's writings."

"Helena, this section back here," the gentleman said as he walked further forward and turned right into a new wing with Helena following, "has Greek work from writers as far back in time as Homer. Do you need help finding anything in particular?"

"No, I'd like to just do some reading and take some notes," she answered, holding her tablet.

"There are extra ink wells at the tables over there, so good luck with your work."

"Thank you, Pedibastet," Helena said, as she started walking toward the aisles of books to see what her choices were.

She turned one corner and started reading titles of authors in the books set in rows on the shelves, listed in order of the dates of the writings.

	Theognis	Aristophanes
Homer	Thespis	Plato
Hesiod	Aeschylus	Herodotus
Alcaeus	Bacchylides b. c	Thucydides
Sappho	Pindar	Xenophon
Archilochus	Hecataeus	Demosthenes
Aesop	Sophocles	Aristotle
Thales	Euripides	Menander
Anacreon	Socrates	Dyskolos
Simonides	Lysias	

Helena grabbed two volumes from Plato's work and was about to grab a book from Socrates, when Pedibastet walked from aisle to aisle to find her. "Helena, we just received a copied set of books from the philosopher/mathematician Aristotle. I don't know what you're looking for, but there -"

"What do you have. I want to see them."

Pedibastet saw Helena's eyes turn to saucers when he mentioned Aristotle. "Yes, these books were apparently in a vault until about 100 years ago, and they have been in a library in Athens. Before they were taken and brought to Rome, a scribe made a copy of the writings, and we were just able to get a copy of the volumes. So we have around 25 books."

Where are they? I'd like to look them over, please. And thank you."

They walked over to where the collection of books was held, and Helena immediately grabbed **Nicomachean Ethics**. "I might take **Magna Moralia** after I look over this one."

"Good first choice. I've heard people say that **Nicomachean Ethics** is usually favored over **Eudemian Ethics**."

"I've got plenty of work to do right now, with these other two books I first took. But thank you for letting me know about Aristotle's writings here in the library."

"Not a problem at all. What are you studying for?"

"I..." Helena didn't know what to answer, because the ideas she just created in her head was that she wanted to write, but she knew that as a woman her writings would be ignored. "I'm collecting writings and data for future work on a book."

"Does the writer have anything in the library?" Pedibastet asked.

"He doesn't, as of yet, I think he has just been collecting essays."

Oh. Maybe I know of his writings. What's his name?"

Helena had to quickly think of her pen name. "Agathangelos Alcaeus is his full writing name."

"Strength, and an angelic messenger - wonderful name for his work. I've never heard of the name, but I'll keep an eye out for it."

"Well, I should get to work for him, but thank you for everything."

Pedibastet smiled and went back to the other hall where he was originally working, and Helena turned to the row of tables so she could read and starting taking notes on her tablet for future work. As soon as she sat down, she pulled the pen from the holder and gave it some ink so she could write down her first thing in her notes. At the top and center on the page, she wrote 'Agathangelos Alcaeus', because she just gave herself a name for her future work.

The first thing she did was start reading over **Nicomachean Ethics**. She scribbled notes, and started immediately generating theories of moral and sound treatments for women who have been abused by men.

"...and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influ-

ence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?"

*Aristotle, **Nicomachean Ethics**, book 1 chapter 2*

Helena knew that women were taught to be there for men, and they were taught to not fight back; she knew that women would not want to stand up for themselves, but something would have to be done if women would not be hurt from men in the future.

She had to stop and pull back from the table. She put her hand over her mouth. All she thought about was a forceful attack by a man to a woman, but this didn't happen to her. He just gave her liquor. "I know I don't drink," Helena thought, but there is no crime in drinking the way she did. Or the way Lana did, who drank more than her.

Wait, she thought, Antony was pushing the wine of Lana more than her, she remembered that much. But why was he doing that? Helena thought all along it was because he wanted the two of them to have fun, but then it occurred to her that Antony didn't have to worry about making any noises to wake Lana because she had passed out on the other mat.

It then clicked in Helena's mind. It was his intentional effort to make her roommate pass out so no one would stop him from doing what he thought he could do to Helena.

When she realized this, the thought made her sick.

Then she realized there were many ways people could be using their power to gain more power, but she was sure that there'd be no allowance for hurting others to achieve your own happiness. She happened to have **Nicomachean Ethics** in front of her, and this would only be one more scrap of evidence she would need to know that what was done to her was wrong.

She knew she couldn't tell anyone about it, she'd be forced to marry him - which she did not want. Maybe her writing would be her only way to win her rights back.

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Days after their arrival, Helena let Antony know that she did not want to see him; although he did not understand why, Antony had no choice but to let her go. During the next three months Helena worked in the library feverishly with help from Pedibastet and other men who worked at the library like Eutropius and Paramonos, and especially Ariston, a transcriber for book printings. After reading extensively from Aristotle, Pythagoras, a little writing from Parmenides. She tried to find writings from Anaxagoras and Anaximander, and during this time she learned to match writing styles to these philosophers and construct a number of essays on philosophy in reaction to non-violent behavior.

She made a point to make sure her references were not focused on treatment specifically, but underlying these readings, they could be used to help women as well. She managed through circulars to post smaller portions of some of her essays in common

places so people could view them, and she even heard people talking about seeing the notes and reading them when they were in market near the postings.

One mid-week day in the library Helena found Ariston and asked him about his press capabilities.

"I don't work at a printer and declare what gets printed and distributed, but I transcribe things for those who need the type before printing," Ariston said.

"Oh," Helena said almost under her breath.

"What do you need it for?"

Helena looked up at him and asked, "Have you heard of Agathangelos Alcaeus?"

"...Yeah, I've seen postings of his around town. Alcaeus is a good writer, but I - wait - why did you ask me about him?"

"I've been taking notes for him and he has been writing in his spare time."

"Why doesn't he take the notes?"

"I don't think he has the time, Ariston. Besides, I don't mind doing the work and helping him out."

Ariston leaned back, and then moved forward to ask Helena his next question more personally. "You know, I do know people at the presses, and I think they'd like to get a hold of his works - especially the presses that do textbook printings. They might like his work. I can talk to them to see if they want his writing, or if they want to meet with him."

Helena couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "I ... I'm sure he'd be thrilled ... He likes to lead a solitary life and he doesn't get out to talk to people, I'm sure I can talk to him about this, but he might want me to do his representing, but I can give you anything of his writings and do anything I can to help."

"Sure, that would be great."

"I could get rough copies of his writings for you, but I may only have one copy of some of the essays."

"Helena, I can transcribe anything, so I could probably make duplicates of everything so he doesn't have to lose his copy."

"Oh Ariston, that's wonderful. When would you like the writings?"

Ariston smiled. "Whenever you would like to give them to me."

Helena was too thrilled and said, "Name your time and place."

"...I can take you out to dinner and get these papers for transcribing."

"Let me give you notes to show you where I live," she answered, as she kept smiling and turned to a blank page to place directions on.

part seven (the November 2006 installment) of

# THE DRIVE

Kenneth DiMaggio



art by Curtis Glardon

Well, we still needed to eat. Or at least I did. She seemed content to be smoking her cigarette. She was drawn to cigarettes the way I was to coffee: it was a religious and mystical experience. Okay, let her have her epiphany, her thoughts, or whatever private cigarette moment she was wrapped in as she ostensibly looked out the window and was more focused on some meditation within. We were almost at the diner now any way. We were back on a semi-main drag and one that had already been slowly dying—for the past twenty years and would have died were it not for the stores that still pumped some neon blood into this street with signs that said: “Checks Cashed” and “24-hour bail Bondsman.” A few other servicing establishments kept this street as alive as well, such as a Laundromat that was overseered by a small corps of refrigerator thick, kerchief headed Slavic women. Sometimes they folded clothes but most of the time (as they did now) they sat in fold out lounge chairs in front of the mat, and gabbed away in some language from the Steppes and peppered with woeful prophecy. Next to the laundry, was a smoke shop, an institution that had just about vanished: the only thing keeping this one going was a paneled off area in back that sold pornographic magazines, books, videos, and sex toys. The sign noted how you had to be 21 years old to enter and how there was a “15 minute time limit! No exceptions!” Yes, I went in, but only once: it was some pretty depressing pornography. The woman had fifties semi bee hive hair dos, or sixties mod go go boots and slimy silver G-string like space outfits. If I sometimes stopped in this store, it was for the ambience it evoked from a dying era for which there were few people left living to remember. The sign above the counter said “Sundries, notions, and novelties” and it was your guess what was a sundry, what was a notion, and what was a novelty. From my last stop in to buy one of the New York City tabloids (if nothing else for the ‘poetry’ of their headlines) the sundries were the pipe cleaners, rabbits foot key chains, and pipes named after a “Dr Grabow”; the notions were flashlight tipped pens, and elastic girdle like belts that let you strengthen and slim down your “tummy” muscles while sitting down at work, (and as the advertisement showed it, before an old manual typewriter). And the novelties were the hula skirted girl bobble head dolls, and the Virgin Mary shaped nite lights. I also had another reason for sometimes going to this smoke shop; the “bus station” was right next door. It was in a sliver of space next door to the shop, a space large enough to hold four, fixed, plastic seats; two chrome cylinder ash trays, and a wall that featured posters that no United States based Greyhound bus could ever get to, like “Krakovia Poland” and “San Juan, Puerto Rico.” The most interesting feature about this small station, was “the passenger”. She was an old, dowager-like woman (always wearing the same ratty once elegant fur coat,

tarnished bracelets, and other pieces of jewelry that seemed to get bigger around her shrinking limbs). Ever since I had taken the bus, she was always in that little station. One day I finally asked her: “Did you just get off the bus?” to which she replied: “I got off the bus fifty years ago.”

And was she still there today?

“What are you looking for?” The Young Artist said. “The diner is on this corner.”

“Yeah, it is.”

But the old passenger was not sitting in the bus station.

The diner was still in an alley squeezed between two buildings. One building was an old bank whose stone corners were fluted and had the carved in reliefs of eagles with raised wings. The other building was a sandstone colored, stucco-textured apartment complex, a place that is not quite a single room only, but the last stop for transients, recovering addicts, and other live failures before becoming homeless.

The chrome steel ribbon with glass rectangles was squeezed into a space slightly smaller than one lane of a highway. Thus, also the reason why I always made a squinchy look when I pulled in to park in a lane that could take a vehicle entering or exiting in only one direction. On top of this silver diner was a metal flag pole and an oval shaped sign that had the red lettered words, “Diner”. It reminded me of the name tags sewn above the right side pockets of the shirts worn by gas station attendants.

After negotiating a lot of mini turns and then stops (with a lot of short pulls and stops in between; don’t drive to this diner when you’re drunk) I was finally able to park.

The diner itself looked like some elegant piece of silverware—a fancy fluted butter knife mounted on a slab of petrified rotting butter; after an old Pullman dining car was towed to this ally, it was hoisted on a concrete wedge that was fraught with hundreds of veins and fractures. Attached to the rear of the diner like a small caboose, was a red shack. Its screen door and windows were always open. Riffs of steam always wafted out from the mesh or through the tin pipe on top: the vapors from suds, grease, dead spirit. This small parcel of limbo was where the dishwasher slaved away: a figure that was always stopped over; a shadow behind a gray window screen, regardless of what time of day or night it was.

The Young Artist was admiring this rare and dying piece of American architecture. I was glad to see that she was keen to our ugly originals: I’d like to see an alley like this in Paris. I don’t think so!

She paused at the old Pac Man game in the diner entrance way. It looked like one of the first damn video games ever to come out; where the pie mouthed circles moved across the screen like a marble being drawn through a pan thick with gravy. I was not just being poetical—I was hungry!

“Alright!” she playfully said back! “We’ll get your cup of coffee! But I have to play one game on the way out. This has gotta be one of the last operating Pac Man machines in the world.”

Which did not enter once you stepped into this diner proper. Oh, the last time the world came in to spruce things up a bit was probably nineteen seventy. That was what the era of this diner evoked in its chrome rimmed linoleum topped counter, lined with green swivel stools. Across from the counter were several mint green vinyl booths. Between the two, large bench-like seats was a chrome rimmed Formica-topped table. Best of all, each



booth table had its own bubble-topped miniature juke box with about two dozen 45 rpm singles. Each song cost a quarter to play. From the way the Young Artist slid towards the machine while happily whispering: "Yes!" this cup of coffee was going to be fun.

We had claimed the middle booth. All the booths were empty except for the one at the end, towards the rest rooms. In it sat an old man with a knit stocking cap on his head. His pale face was covered with grizzly white stubble; his hands were slightly raised but folded before him: the fingers slowly kneading or wiggling in on each other. There was neither food nor silverware before him. His face was locked in profile and a stare that fixed itself at what seemed some old memory, now playing on the screen that had become this diner window. The two or three men sitting at the counter, seemed to be in a similar frozen state, although not enough to fail at noticing the oddly gothic beauty that just walked in. It was seldom that beauty in a more conventional wardrobe stepped inside. This was the first time that beauty dressed for a funeral, made its appearance.

The notion of time itself seemed to be loose, if non-existent. Diners can have this strange sense of "non" or "off-time" about them. Breakfast can be five o'clock in the evening—and a strong black cup of coffee—well, that could be anytime, which is what I liked about this diner.

For that matter, the "shadows" at the counter: the frizzy-haired Greek tooth pick chewing owner leaning with one hand behind the register, the pear-shaped waitress half-slumped against the large glass door of a cooler displaying bowls of rice pudding (best thing to go with black coffee), also seemed to be living in "diner time." Or do you become lost in such a world? For this diner, it long ago derailed from the main engine that pulls most of us along. No, I was not trying to find a way to live in another dimension (which I tried: it is called LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs. It did not work too well when the WALK/DON'T WALK traffic light turned into an angry blinking eye that froze the hell out of me for the next hour). But could I find a more healthier and saner way to leave the main engine? Was there a way to secede from a culture that was always coming up with a better way to re-package an idea or product that is made for a coffin? In spite of all the sophistication, wiring, and circuitry, I still had to be convinced that something of IMPORTANCE was moving through such a system. Say what you will about the diner; it may just be a lost, sad, hopeless, and pathetic world, but at least it serves great coffee and rice pudding.

"That's it? That's what you're going to eat?" The Young Artist said in surprise after I gave the waitress my order.

"Honey, I've never known him to order anything else, and I've tried," the waitress said.

Ugh, I thought as I momentarily dipped my head in embarrassment. Why? I then asked myself. It was just a waitress at the diner. I didn't even know her name; the only time she spoke to me: if I ever wanted anything else besides rice pudding and coffee. If she was wearing a name tag, I never noticed it. Once again though, I sneaked a peak at her hands. I always did whenever she began to write down my order. I started doing it when I had first come to this diner—heck, I was just a kid! My old man would sometimes bring me here after work. I was so small, barely able to sit in the booth; small enough to forget about—and also small enough to get away at impolitely staring at things, which for one, were these waitress's hands. Ever since, I always looked at them; one of those things I

could not shake from when I was a “kid.” And now, her hands were gnarled. Her fingers were so twisted that her pen almost pointed at the person whose order she was taking.

“I’ll have the same,” I heard The Young Artist say. They had been talking for a minute or two; maybe even laughing.

After the waitress left, The Young Artist slightly frowned at me.

“Rude,” she said to me.

“I—I—nevermind,” I finally said. The Young Artist mockingly smiled at me and said: “You’re right. Never mind.”

What the fuck, I thought. I’ve been coming to this diner all these years, and this nineteen or twenty year old woman who I only met this morning, practically has a heart-to-heart talk with my diner waitress. If that ain’t a pisser.

“Neat,” she said. She had just picked up the paper place mat. She seemed to enjoy what was on it too.

I picked up my placement and looked at it.

“You’re right,” I said.

The place mat had a “fill in your own adventure” designed on it. Supposedly, little kids would have something to do while waiting for their food.

“See if you can answer all of Mrs. Maple’s quiz questions,” The Young Artist read from the placemat. “Answer all ten correctly and win a free dessert! Come on! We can get our rice pudding for free!”

“Aw, you don’t think they’re actually going to give us a free dessert, do you?”

“I don’t care—I want to play.”

“Here?” I asked, and then looked over my shoulder.

“What’s wrong with here? This is where you brought me—and you better play with me—”

“Wha—?” I started to say.

“You’ve been a real brat!”

“What!”

“And whoever finishes last has to pay for the other’s coffee and rice pudding!”

“The hell!” I said as I now put down the place mat and went to pick up—

“Damn it!” I said. “No pen!”

She giggled. She had one.

“Well, no fair!” I said. “If I don’t have a pen, I don’t have to buy you the rice pudd—”

She put up a finger for me to stop, then dug into her bag. She then gave me a—

“What? A crayon?” I said. A cherry red one too.

“I ain’t playing with no crayon!”

“I’ve already got number one,” she said.

“Goddam—” I started to swear, but then stopped; knowing that I had the crayon in my hand made me self conscious of little kids being around; crayons always seemed to come before little kids; when this was the last place in the world to have little kids except maybe, her. She smiled and giggled and nodded her head when she came up with an answer for a riddle on the place mat. You would think that she was a precocious fourth or fifth grade brat who was always showing off how smart she was. Once she did, she would enquire about your progress, only to finish you off by saying something even

more obnoxious and precious like: “Oh, do you need more time? Do you have *special needs*?” Well, I was not exactly a troglodyte, and I worked enough boring jobs for which I needed a lot of mental escape. And so when question #1 asked: “The planet earth has one satellite. What is it?” I knew right away that the answer was “The Pentagon,” because –trick question! There are a lot of satellites up there spying on us and the only place that could assemble them all together is The Pentagon, so there!

—Um, not quite; I think that placemat company meant “the moon”, but I was already preparing my creative answers ahead of time. And what the hell. I should get some nice steam blowing through the ears of the young woman who probably won every spelling bee in grammar school. But riddle number four or five was going to be next to impossible to answer; (what is the speed of light—hell, less than a few seconds if your light switch was working, but I don’t think that was the answer). Well, you had to have some tough questions, or else how were you going to keep the kids occupied until the food arrived and the grown ups from committing infanticide? That is why I sped ahead to number seven: she was already on eight or nine. From the way she now cutely bit her lower lip in as she paused over the problem. She had to be towards the end—where the harder questions were—but she would not be there for long. This kid most likely was a whiz at the college entrance tests like the SATS (and in spite of her being an Art major). She knew that you don’t spend too long on a hard question: you take an educated guess at it, and then go back to it, which she already seemed to be doing as she started penciling in an answer—yikes! Better get back to question number seven—or was it eight?

What city and year was the Declaration of Independence written in? You gotta be kidding me! Who the hell outside of a history professor is going to know the answer to a question like that? So to be safe, I’ll put down, ‘Fourth of July,’ and then ‘Washington DC’ because that’s where the government is, and the government wrote the Declaration of Independence—not the people. That’s the problem—ah ha! Thought you could trick me on question number ten: what is the oldest city in North America? Well, that’s simple, St. Augustine Florida. Why? Because that is one of the things that I remember learning from St. Augustine Grammar school before I got kicked out, and also it makes sense that it would be in Florida, because it is the retirement capital of North America.

Smack! As The Artist slapped the pencil down on the table and announced like a happy little brat:

“Finished!”

Smack! As I slapped down my crayon and um, uh—rather awkwardly announced: “Finished...”

“Did you break my crayon?”

“Well, you could glue it back together...”

She indignantly raised an index finger.

“Just remember, you’re paying for my rice pudding and coffee.”

“Oh yeah? Well you could be buying the rice pudding and coffee for me!”

She smirked and then said: “I doubt it!”

“Okay, what did you get for number one!”

“Duhhh! If you did not get ‘the moon’ then you’ve been smoking too much of that green stuff!”

“Well, have I got some new information for you!”

She slowly started to shake her head.

“I knew it...a nice guy, but a real pot head...”

“Alright, let’s cut to the chase! Number ten! What did you get for number ten? Don’t shake your head at me like I’m some idiot! I want to know what the oldest city in North America is!”

“Alright, if you must know then it is Jamestown, Virginia!”

I smiled. Within the time it took me to do so, her haughty look started to melt into near tearful panic.

“Fraid not,” I said, “it’s St. Augustine, Florida.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about? It’s Jamestown where there was a lost colony—some think that they all died because of a bad winter crop. Others think that they might have joined up with one of the local native American tribes!”

I shook my head and smiled.

“Fraid not,” I said as the waitress brought over our rice puddings along with an aluminum pot of coffee.

“Right?” I asked her.

“Depends what it is,” she said. “Not if it means picking men as husbands. I’ve always been wrong at that.”

“But about St. Augustine Florida being the oldest city in America?”

The waitress made a slight frown and spread her hands apart and said:

“It’s one of the few things I remember learning from St. Augustine Grammar School.”

I took me almost a minute to say the next two words:

“Hol-e-e-e-e shit.....”

During which I failed to blink.

“Are you alright?” I heard The Young Artist finally say, (the same time I felt her tug my shoulder.)

“I can pay for my rice pudding,” she said.

“No, that’s okay. I can pay. Up until yesterday, I had a job.”

“Well then do you have a quarter? I want to play something on the juke box.”

“She must be about seventy,” I said as I dug into my pocket.

“Who?” she said as she began inspecting the selections on the jukebox.

I slapped down some change on the table.

“Damn, that’s like a cosmic coincidence,” I said.

“A what?” she asked as she continued to inspect the song titles on the juke box.

“Ahhh, but the coffee’s here,” I warmly noted.

I poured her a cup and then one for myself and then took a sip. A few seconds later the wattage went up behind my eyes.

“If only I could have had coffee in the first grade,” I delightfully imagined. “I would have written a lot more than ‘see Dick run.’”

“I can’t believe these songs,” she happily remarked.

I scooted down to the edge of the booth where the juke box was. I soon dragged my coffee and rice pudding. We were probably going to be here awhile. Her rice pudding and coffee were already at that end.

Looking through the song titles on this toaster oven size juke box was also one of the delights of this diner. These booth table jukeboxes were like museums for old songs, some which I had not heard for years, like Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Were Made for Walking" and some that I had not heard of at all, like "Little Shirley Beans"—no artist listed. There was just so much copy to choose from, as well as so many classics, but nothing classic from our era. No, REM, no Nirvana, no Public Enemy, Tupac, or even Madonna (Thank God for the latter). The latest song on this juke box was produced from the eighties—but from a singer from another era—Frank Sinatra's "New York New York."

"Look—your song," The Young Artist pointed.

"Um, I don't mean to be critical, but if you want to hear the real Frank Sinatra, you've got to go back a couple of decades before he sang this tune," I said.

"Well, it's that way for Elvis," she said. "How often do you think of him singing a song called, 'That's Alright Mama'?"

It was not one of his Vegas tunes, I knew that much. And from what I know about Elvis, Vegas and those bad movies is what really killed him; the drugs, yeah, but an artist has to fear two deaths: the physical, like everyone else, and what he or she hopes is never the spiritual death. Oh, I don't want to be elitist here; maybe others fear the same kind of death, but for me at least, unpublished writer that I am—I don't ever want to be a sell out. If I have to die on a couch or a futon I am trying to get to, but as an unknown artist, well, at least let me be an artist who did not sell out; an artist who may not have been brilliant like Jacqueline Susann or profound like Kahil Gibran, but what the hell, I'll be an artist who did not sell out in order to become a professor of creative writing at a university whose education hardly lives up to the school's reputation. Elvis may have had a slow death after his move to the movies and Vegas, but hell, give him credit for finishing up as a well-paid but clownish Vegas act: he did not take the easy way out by—I don't know—the equivalent of Elvis selling out as a creative writing professor would be as a permanent game show contestant or a late nite info-commercial host. If I ever do make it—which means I will have to take a fall (this is America—it loves to shoot its artists) well then, let me end my days as—let's see, my equivalent of a slow dying Vegas act would be—writing for a sleazy, shameless, piss-yellow scandal-creating tabloid. For no other reason than to end my days as a low life, literary papparrazi, is why I hope to become famous.

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Lake Shore Cars, art by Nick Brazinsky

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