

Fresh Cut
CURLY FRIES

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CHEERS to CHIPS

the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag



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Scars cover art photographed
09/16/07.



Tourist Trade

Christopher Barnes, UK

Tom-toms.

In constrictor-scarred short shorts
with boa-feathered wristbands
the Witch Doctor's knees-up boy
slithers by.



Rosebud, art by Edward
Michael O'durr Supranowicz

Sunday Rituals

John T. Hitchner

My father inspects me like an interrogator.
“Stand up straight,” he says.
“You have to look nice for church.”
I stiffen,
dare not slouch.
He tugs the shoulders
and yanks the hem of my gabardine suit jacket.
“Pull your pants higher. Let the creases be sharp.”
I smell his Old Spice after-shave.
I see his black whisker specks,
his cautious eyebrows.
“There,” he says and appraises me:
“I guess you look all right.
“Behave yourself in church.”

In church
I sit beside my mother.
We watch my father march with the choir,
his hymnal held like an offering.
His throat tightens,
strains for high notes of God’s glory.
During prayers
I bow my head,
touch the sharp creases of my pants.
No blood shed.
My mother hands me an open prayer book.
I read silently,
the letters and words odd pieces of a puzzle
I have solved all the other Sundays:
If you say the right words,
you will be good, and God will be happy with you.



Everyone has a price,
art by Peter Bates

What would happen if I tore the pages from the book,
scattered them like so many coins?
Would anyone pick them up, count them,
put them back together?

Stained glass saints and martyrs stare above my head.
What would happen
if I shattered their faces with stones,
shards of eyes and mouths scattered within and without?

Can God see me?
Can He read my mind?
Would He cast me out,
or tell me to sit up straight and behave myself?

The minister makes the sign of the Cross above us:
“May the blessing of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
be amongst you and remain with you, always.”

My mother folds her hands.
My father cradles his hymnal.
My hands skim the creases of my pants,
like fingers testing blades of knives.

Something Stupid

Michael Ceraolo

His mind was like
a dryer without a lint trap:
it worked fine for a while,
until the buildup of debris
caused the motor to burn up



460, David Thompson art

Fitting the Mold

Janet Kuypers

he told them repeatedly that the government
has to get an employee into this division,
so he was willing to sit in his colleague's office
and they kept the speakerphone on
as they started conducting telephone interviews;
knowing that persona made a difference for
public speeches for this branch
of the government for this position,
Gerald sat in Stephan's office silently
as Stephan pulled the first resume sheet
dialed the number and started the interview

I

Gerald listened, and heard the first applicant
discuss that he understood government spending
in education, health care, helping the poor,
paving roads, keeping water safe to drink,
fighting pollution and the like
but he wasn't in favor of money going to
religious groups, or even helping corporations
who have previously failed so miserably

he said he was against the expansion of the
Patriot Act (that's a blow against him
for this government position), but he was
in favor of holding the military responsible
for illegal acts committed while in service

and oh, we just heard another issue that's a
strike against him: he claimed that abortion
is nobody's business but the woman (and
secondarily the man)

well, he was sounding good, but
we have to make sure some topics are not
covered when he's making public speeches
while at work

to close the phone interview, Stephan asked
what religion he was
the first applicant said confidently that
he was jewish
and after he gave his answer
Stephan thanked him and ended the interview

with the phone off the hook, Stephan said
under his breath,
"well, we'll have to find someone else,
we've got two more phone interviews"

II

when the second man answered his phone,
Stephen immediately started asking
questions, and this new candidate
had a lot of intriguing opinions

he understood that taxation existed
to secure the people view of a good society
but people who are taxed can't control
if the money is spent efficiently
but he also made a valuable point:
that nothing guarantees that people
are correct in assuming that what they want
is what they need
americans, through taxation, display
faith in the government to accomplish
what we need
government spending gauges where
our values lie
choices of spending money
to house orphans or to subsidize industry,
on education or incarceration are a direct
reflection of what the people want

Gerald listened to this interviewee, thinking
that this person could be molded into
whatever they needed for this new position

not knowing what he'd say
about the wars and combat,
Stephan guided the questions to the military.
he responded by saying that a common defense
is the most enduring and universal symbol
of all successful human societies

treaties and alliances effectively stop people
from continuing to build their arsenal

so, he's also in support of finding more allies
after the war Bush was walked us into,
to cut our costs down as well. make sense.
so Stephan closed the interview asking
what religion he ascribed to,
and he replied that he was muslim

Gerald and Stephan both looked at each other
with wide eyes when they heard that,
so Stephan asked if he was muslim
from birth

no, he replied, i was raised christian,
but i became muslim
was i was probably around twenty-five

oh, well, thank you, Stephan said,
thanks for letting us know

he then graciously said thank you
to Stephan as they ended the interview
and hung up the phone

Stephan then looked up at Gerald

well,
he finally said

yes,
Gerald answered

i don't think that would work out well
for us, Stephan said

i don't know what the ramifications
would be,
Gerald answered

well, one more interview to go
as Stephan looked at the last application
and phone number to dial

III

before Stephen dialed the last number, he said that this one's a woman, well, we should listen to her anyway Gerald pointed out that if the President can bring a black woman into his cabinet, this might not be a bad thing, so Stephen relented and dialed the phone.

after greetings, he started asking her questions, and she answered honestly, though she tried to back up every answer with facts and details that made her answer seem like the most plausible choice

she believed it was a woman's right to have an abortion since the woman is the one who has to host the fetus until it can become a life on its own, but she also felt that if people were looking to adopt, and doctors can keep premature babies alive well after their first trimester, she had less of a moral argument for late term abortions

she said that even though she was a woman and in a minority, she didn't believe in laws to assist women, or people in minorities with jobs because people should only be hired on merit and talent, not on the color of their skin or whether they're male or female

she believed taxation was appropriate to keep the society functioning, even though some are unwilling to pay higher taxes while wanting more things done for them

she then pointed out that these same people want to gamble some of their money away at casinos this made her wonder why gambling is not more prevalent, and taxed heavily, so the government could get money for work that needed to be done

Stephan asked her about the military, and she responded by saying that war is always a gruesome thing, people are realizing that now because television cameras are now on the front lines, showing them details of the gore but one thing she noted when the gulf war was going on in the early nineties (though it wasn't technically a war, people use the term "war" flippantly whenever there's a conflict or an invasion now, even though congress hasn't declared a war since world war two), but what she noted was the staggering ease America had in attacking the middle east, how casualties were low, and how a lot of amazing technology was used to fight the first gulf war. the country is filled with amazingly intelligent people, she said, and that intelligence will keep our numbers of injured or killed low when in battle again

approaching the end of their interview, Stephen remembered the first prospective employee talking about keeping the government away from religion, he asked her what she thought of the separate of church and state.

she pointed out that there is nothing
in the Constitution that declares the
separation of church and state,
but she also knows that there are
many people in this country who
aren't christian, who have to deal with
christian holidays and churchgoers
imposing their christian mentality

then all she heard was silence

she knew this christian interviewer
didn't like her non-christian answer,
so she tried to fill the silence
with justification
since this country is a melting pot,
she said,
and people have had to accommodate
differing languages of citizens
for years, people should also be able
to accommodate different religions as well,
or even atheism

i see, Stephan said

i am not saying that christianity
should be out of the government,
she said,
it's in our government's roots.
i know full well that most people
who founded this country
were christians;
they just didn't want a
government-sanctioned religion
forced down people's throats

people who complain about the
separation of church and state
don't have a problem using our money,
where every bill and coin says
"in god we trust"

Stephan noted her beliefs about
the inclusion of religious phrases
in money, so he asked
about the inclusion of "under God"
in the pledge of allegiance

well, she said,
i believed it should have remained there
if that is the way it had always been,
but then i found out
that it hadn't always been that way.
from the best i can gather,
FDR added "under god" to the pledge
to show how us Americans
were better than those godless communists.

does that mean we should
pull the added phrase out now?
she asked.

the invocation of religion in Bush's cabinet
does make this middle eastern attack
more like a holy war,
whether or not anyone wants to
believe it,
but instead of pulling those two words,
which would anger a lot of americans,
i don't see why children
who are opposed to saying "under god"
can't just not say those two words
while reciting the pledge
and leave it at that

i wouldn't say we *should* remove
those two added words to the pledge,
but i also don't see why so many people
in america want to search for problem
to complain about
if i didn't like something
when i was growing up,
i didn't try to uproot the system,
because the systems' often
far too powerful to overcome,
i'd just found a way around the problem
for myself
and didn't make any waves

we can't get along as a country
if everyone is complaining about
little details they can just work around.
people have different beliefs in this country,
and one of our saving graces
is that we've allowed those differences
to help us thrive

Stephan was coming around
to what she was saying,
and when he looked up at Gerald,
he saw him smirking
at the sense in her comments

well, thank you very much
for your opinions in this interview,
Stephan finally said
just out of curiosity,
what religion are you

do you need that,
she asked

well, we—
Stephan was cut off

you're not allowed to hire
based on religion,
she cut in

we're not,
Stephan answered,
we've just been talking about religion,
that's all

she knew he was expecting her to answer

she panicked

she knew he was a christian,
she knew they wanted a christian
in this job

everyone in the government
has to fit what they see
as the perfect American mold

she knew she'd be flat-out rejected
for a job
if she told them she was an atheist
her mind started reeling
she was born catholic,
but she learned to think for herself
as she grew older
so she knew better

her morals were very christian,
and she was told more than once
that she was a good gnostic christian

all of this flashed through her head
in about one and a half seconds
and she finally answered,
i'm a christian

oh, Stephan answered,
what denomination?

excuse me?
she asked, to steal herself a little more time

oh, what denomination,
catholic, protestant, lutheran, baptist,
just wondering what church you went to

she gulped

IV

after she hung up the phone
she thought about how the cards
are stacked against woman

then again, they're stacked against you
if you are anything other than
an anglo-saxon male

people have told me
i'm a good gnostic christian
but
 i was born a catholic

sorry blacks
sorry latinos
sorry asians
sorry native americans

ah, keeping company with the
president, Stephan said

but now she was seeing that
the cards could be stacked against you
if you're not a christian

no, i'm not a roman catholic
but catholicism does make
a good portion of christianity
in this country

sorry jews
sorry hindus
sorry muslims
sorry atheists

they both laughed in agreement
as Stephan started to close
the interview

you're screwed too
if you don't fit into the perfect mold

she almost felt like she needed
to take a shower,
to clean herself off
from having to lie —
wait, she didn't lie,
she just didn't reveal
the entire truth

then she realized
that if she got the job
she'd have to get used to
covering up the truth all the time

We Are Not Alone

Tom Deiker

Surely somewhere out there
In that endless brew of gas and goo
Must be another intelligent life form
--Sexually abusing its offspring

Strange Dreams

J. Neff Lind

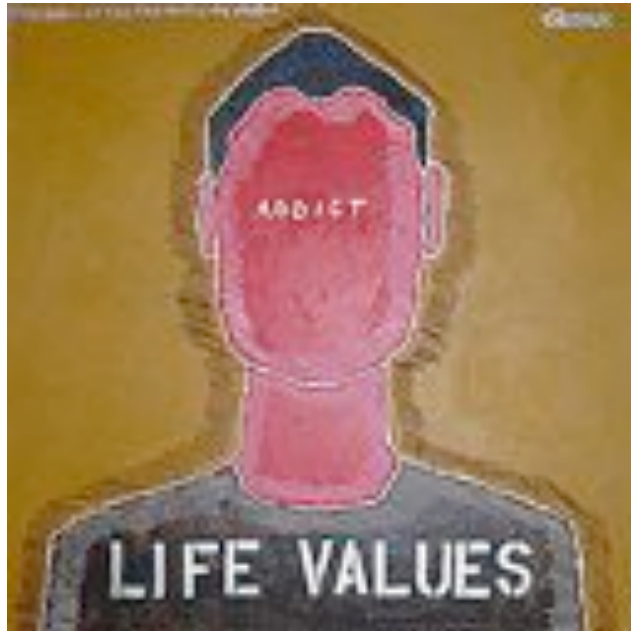
Instead
of dreaming about
loving you
last night
I dreamt
that I was chasing you
wearing
heavy boots
that dragged across
the floor
and made my
feet
sweat
and swell
and stumble.

I wondered
as I woke
if this could
be a sign.
If somehow
we were doomed
(as a 'we')
until I realized
I had been
so preoccupied
with thoughts of you
that I had climbed
into bed without
taking off my shoes.

The Only Way

David J. Thompson

The photos tell the truth, the ones friends email from the class reunions you didn't attend. You barely recognize the guys anymore, just see the stretch waistbands, the gray in what's left of everyone's hair, and the beer bottles held naturally at their sides. You know their stories without having to hear them. They're the same as yours - the divorces, the parents with cancer or Alzheimer's down in Florida, your own surgeries and meds, the college bills to pay. You don't know how to tell them to stop sending the pictures, just want to grow old without noticing; the only way you know how.



Portrait of the Artist's Life Values,
art by Aaron Wilder

The Boy and the Box

Connie Beresin

The Boy

He locks the door and walks away
leaves no trace
no letter, no e-mail, no call to say he's safe

I still see him
walking down the street
as I drive to work.

I still see him
behind the wheel of the car
next to me at a light.

Before he shipped out
he caught a fly.
A highlight in his life
for a boy who never
missed a Yankee game.

And the Box

I wasn't sure
what was in that box.
I couldn't look.

So many pieces,
no one could look.
They checked his teeth.
They were his.

I Think About These Things

Janet Kuypers

it's strange,
but one thing i've noticed
is that my butt seems to be cold a lot of the time
which seems odd,
you wouldn't think your butt would be cold,
but it is

i've also realized
is that whenever i'm cold
i'll take something,
you know, like my gloves,
and i'll sit on them for a while
and they'll get warm

hmmm

i think about these things

On Butchering a Pregnant Feral Goat

Tanya Rucosky Noakes

Our Earth's peppered with tiny graves.
Under hooves of caribou, camels, cows,
death's fallen faster than a falcon's wing
across her green hummocks and shallow pans,
'til no place is forsaken by loss...

Downwind, goat kids thought they played alone,
below Armageddon's casual aim.
Nor do the hunters return unmarked,
ritual scars of knowing; her child, our child,
are all the same cast in a careless land.

We do not slip in the first skinning slice
deep through the soft rank fur of her hock
without thought of this world's carnivory,
more savage, ceaseless than even our own.
Our penance to her is paid with
our own small loved bundles, planted in Earth's soil.

Yearning for Simplicity

Adam McGavin

Snowflakes perch on the passerby's eyelashes.
Winter's prettier indoors; the air's so cold out there
it hurts to breathe. Everything's scribbled
with a steel crayon. My coloring book
has a lot of pages torn out, my memory hides them from me.

The rearview reveals an awkward, chubby boy.
He doesn't start in little league,
or win over the girl with ribbons in her hair.
His life is not beautiful. But, he savors every second
of Saturday morning cartoons. And life is perfect.

I'd trade this car and every plastic card in my back pocket
for all the shoulder-top sunburns in the world.
Give me a drippy chocolate ice cream cone
and I'll give you every penny in my bank account.
I used to hit fireflies with a whiffle ball bat,
now I'm out every other weekend
with a new girl who doesn't want to know the real me,
watching the deep-freezer, bricks-all-around-me season.

I work too much to get a tan and sleep too much
to drink the tie-dyed milk from my cereal bowl
on weekend mornings, nestled in my footie PJs.
The brick buildings and the innocuous mannerisms
of suburbia, yellow on the roads tell us where to go.

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

The House of Escher

Joshua Copeland

Most of them, they didn't believe him. He told the kids he didn't masturbate. They said 99% do it, 1% lie. He didn't know how to convince them that, *No*, he really did not do it. Maybe if he had done it, as his former friend Stephanie had suggested, he wouldn't have taken it out on his little sister.

But he did. Six sessions of Doctor. She told mom: "Hey mom, did you know what this is for, right here? Chip showed me last month." The Castle Valley cops arrested him. Because of his mental health record, they shipped him off to Provo Regional for an evaluation. And the doctors' verdict? Chip didn't know right from wrong: They recommended the state hospital, not the Grand County Jail. At his commitment hearing the public defender told Chip sentences to state came down as usually three or six months. The judge sentenced him to more than six months. The word they used to designate his sentence, he forgot that word. But he knew what it meant: there would be no cap on his time at state. They had custody of him until they decided him not to be a threat.

Chip was anxious about the Utah State Hospital. At fifteen he had run away to Florida on a Greyhound bus. He had fantasized an easy, carefree life there. And at first it was okay. The palm trees were "kind of cool." Then two thick-mustached cops pulled up to him on one of the many crowded boulevards. They smiled like dads and said, "We'll help you, kid. Trust us. Don't put up a fight." He didn't. They arrested him as homeless and in the squad car they both shoved their hands down his khaki shorts and fondled him and then dropped him off at Valley Southern, the Florida State Hospital, located in Bolivar—what looked to Chip to be a pretty bad hick town.

"You know why the cops took you here, don't you?" the blonde boy asked, the patient who always talked about surfing and wave tunnels.

"No. Why?"

"Destroys your credibility. You bitch to the techs here, 'Hey, these two five-ohs, they yanked on my shlong,' and the cops can just shoo it away. They'll say, 'Aw, he's nutty. We didn't do dick.' No one will believe you. And apparently they did 'do dick.'"

"Oh. I didn't really tell anyone anyway. No big deal."

Valley Southern was awful. The fights were constant, the techs were apathetic, the doctors were aloof. The hospital left the radiators at full blast, making the bedrooms and halls and TV room way too hot and way too humid. Chip sweated from sunup to sundown and always felt nauseated. House centipedes ran circles in the

bathrooms and water bugs scurried over the food in the cafeteria. The grimy tile floors soaked your skimpy hospital-issued socks and slippers. The siren-red suits they made you wear were too rough and rubbed rashes into your skin. You could see through all the towels. The mattresses were rock hard. An unlaced black Doc Martin—someone had scribbled names and symbols all over it in white—hung out of the shattered TV, the only TV. There was nothing to do except play Sorry and Dominoes and read children's books.

His mother flew down to pick him up after three weeks and four days.

"I would have picked you up sooner," she said, "but I wanted to give you time to *languish*. Madonna's brother, when they arrested him on a DUI, she didn't pay him out of there, she let him *languish*."

So he was not looking forward to his time at state. Two Grand County deputies slung a leather belt around his waist and cuffed his hands to the front of the belt. Hard to carry my suitcase like this, Chip said. Just following transport procedure, they said back. The gates to State groaned with finality as they shut behind him. The deputies walked him up the main desk, uncuffed him, made some small talk with a chubby security guard, and passed him off to two muscle bound orderlies. One orderly had a narrow head with Mickey Mouse ears, the other had thick, brown, sandy hair—basically like an afro, but he was Caucasian—with a Pinocchio nose. Like a penis, Chip thought.

They shepherd him into a roomy elevator and the doors closed loudly like falling timber.

"Wow. These are big elevators," he said.

"For the stretchers," the Mickey Mouse orderly said. "Get used to 'em while you can, kid. You'll only seem them once more."

"Really? When's that?"

"When you're discharged," the Pinocchio orderly said. Then, to his partner: "Isn't he a Chomo?"

"Yeah. See, it says right there. They're starting to put it in capitals on all the Chomos' files." He said the word loudly and distinctly: "CHOMO. An R suffix."

"What's a Chomo?" Chip asked.

"Child molester," Mickey Mouse said.

"Oh."

Pinocchio sighed. "How old are you, kid?"

"Eighteen."

"Damn. Comin' in younger and younger these days," Mickey Mouse said.

"Who's that?"

He looked at Chip. "You guys. The Chomos." Then he frowned. "Stop fidgeting. You're making me nervous."

"Sorry. I was in a state hospital once before. In Florida. It was bad. I'm worried."

"Eh..." Pinocchio mused, "We get a good chunk of the state budget here. I've heard a lot of our patients say this is the best state hospital they ever been in."

The elevator opened and the orderlies walked him up to a set of double doors made thick like a vault. Pinocchio opened them with a key pulled from a tangle of keys and they escorted him down a hall—bedrooms lining both sides—up to a

shoulder-high counter shaped like a horseshoe around a desk. A pretty woman behind the desk stood up and grinned at Chip.

"Hello there," she said. "You must be Chip Roderick. I'm Beatrice." He noticed she was squeezing a purple racquetball.

Beatrice nodded the orderlies off. "Thanks, guys."

"He's all yours," Mickey Mouse said. "Good luck kid."

She put down the ball and walked around the counter and held out her hand, still smiling. Chip gave her the once-over: mid-30's, hair auburn and cut short, glossy red lipstick, petite swan neck. Her cheek bones V'd into her chin like the girls on "America's Next Top Model." He saw the large breasts under the tight brown sweater as two exclamation points. "Your chest doesn't match your figure," he wanted to say. "You've got a narrow waist. Girls like you are pretty rare." She smelled of suntan lotion. They shook hands.

"I'm the head tech here. Follow me. I'll give you a quick tour so you can get set up."

The place was nothing like Valley Southern. A set of thick brown leathery sofas sat huddled up to the tech desk. There was an exercise room with two treadmills and two exercise bikes ("Only one treadmill and one bike work," she said) and a lounge—blue dandelions painted on the walls—with a big screen TV surrounded by loveseats, all lit by a skylight. The bedroom carpet was cushiony. When he threw his suitcase down on the bed it bounced pretty high: soft mattress. He unpacked and hummed as he left the room.

He plopped down on the brown sofas by the tech desk and looked around. So this was his new home: not bad. Through the glass walls of the exercise room he saw a boy in his early 20's on a bike. His hair was dark and spiked and shiny with sweat. His gray T-shirt was soaked. The boy looked up, noticed Chip, something registered, and the boy winked. Chip raised his hand and waved back, unsure how to reply since he knew the boy couldn't hear him.

Eventually the boy got off the bike and sat down loudly next to Chip, breathing hard. "Whew! My endorphins are kicking in!" He looked Chip over and smiled. "Aren't you a little young to be on an adult male unit?" The boy's left eye lagged behind the right; the two didn't coordinate.

"Why? I'm eighteen?"

"You look fourteen."

"Yeah, that's true. I only shave like every four days, not every day."

Beatrice yelled from the tech desk. "Kenny, please get off the sofa! You know you're not allowed to sit there when you're all sweaty! Go to your room and change!"

"Cool. I hear ya." He stood up. "What's your name, dude?"

"Chip."

"Follow me Chip."

...In Kenny's room a black banner bearing the name "GG Alin" in red lightning hung over the bed. Next to that was a framed and autographed photo of Timothy McVeigh, handcuffed and strapped into a bulletproof vest, armed deputies leading him. A medal—two swords enclosing a statue—lay on the dresser. By the door was a huge black and white poster of a stairwell. The staircases angled in different direc-

tions, contradicting each other and ignoring gravity. People with faces and bodies wrapped in bandages like mummies walked up and down them and into doors.

Chip leaned up against the wall. "That's a neat poster," he said.

"It's Escher."

"What?"

"MC Escher. He made it." Kenny began to undress. "Many people, they live in houses like that. With the lights out. I used to. Lots of tripping and falling and broken shins and broken ankles."

"Oh. Okay. Whatever." He pointed to the medal. "Your medal. What did you do to win it?"

"Iraqi Campaign medal." Kenny frowned. "Chip, I've only known you for about a minute and ten seconds and you're already getting on my nerves. Does your mouth always hang open like that? I can hear you breathing through it."

"I'm sorry. The orthodontist said that's why my lips are always chapped, cause I don't ever breathe through my nose. The kids back home teased me about it."

"Good for them." Kenny pulled off his boxers and was naked. "What are you in here for?"

"I played Doctor with my little sister."

"Really?" Kenny raised his eyebrows and grinned. "Is she hot?"

"I don't know. Everyone's like, 'Why did you do that? Why did you do that?' I honestly can't think of an answer. I guess she just happened to be around."

Kenny stayed naked while he talked. He wiped himself with a towel, paced around the room, sprayed Tag body spray on his chest and arms, shuffled letters and envelopes on his desk, combed back his hair in the metal mirror, straightened the Timothy McVeigh photo, took a long swig from a can of Diet Coke, shuffled the letters and envelopes on his desk again, and dried himself with the towel a second time. His build was museum statue-perfect: well defined pecs, hairless chest, hairless legs, contoured arm and thigh muscles. Like the way mountains look on maps, Chip thought.

"You Mormon?" Kenny asked. "You got the haircut."

"Yeah."

"Wonderful. You believe there's a God, don't drink caffeine, not allowed to watch 'South Park,' straight A's, all book smarts and no life experience, the whole package?"

"Yeah."

Kenny rolled his eyes.

"Aren't you going to put some clothes on? Are all your clothes dirty? Where do we do our laundry?"

Kenny walked up to him and looked him eye to eye and said, "I'd like to give you a blowjob."

Chip's heart upped its beat. His eyes widened. "But I'm not gay."

"No you're not. You're bi...Don't you know? Sex offenders, their libido is across the board. They're into all kinds of things, not just children."

"No. No thank you. *The Book of Mormon* is against it. And I don't think I'm a sex offender anyway. It was my sister. It's not like I kidnapped some random girl. And she didn't put up a fight."

"Oh yeah? What's your sister's name?"

"Maddy."

How old is Maddy?"

"She'll be six in March."

"Yep. That counts." He traced an R with his forefinger on Chip's forehead. "You've got an R Suffix. You're a Chomo."

He placed his hand on the wall just above Chip's head, leaning into him, lowering his voice. Chip looked away. "You'll like it here. Beat on the techs all you want. The DA won't press charges. She said it comes with the job, getting worked over. And the patients, it's open season on them too. You stomp the shit out of some retard or gimp here, yeah, they can make a report to Security, and Security is supposed to hand the reports over to the Provo police, but they never do...ASAP they throw it in the trash. Too many reports coming from the hospital, it looks bad. So they'll cover it up, you know?" He opened his arms wide. "No repercussions, thus no laws. State of Nature, we are in. I bit Beatrice on the wrist like a month ago. All the way down to the radial artery. You know how much muscle you have to gnash through to get to that? The blood pumped everywhere. All over the walls." Kenny grabbed the can of Diet Coke and jerked it at the wall, splashing it. "Kind of looked like that. I'll show you the stains. Jackson Pollock on crystal meth. She squeezes that ball to get her wrist muscles back in working order." He giggled. "They hate me here. They want me out so bad." He moved away and began to get dressed. Chip's shoulders fell.

"About that BJ," Kenny said, pulling up his boxers. "Give it some thought, kid. You won't regret it."

"Hey: Lester the Molester...Want to know why TNT shows this movie unedited?" They were in the TV lounge, sunk into the loveseats.

"Why, Kenny?"

"Guantanamo. All those CIA secret prisons. Abu Ghraib."

"What about them?"

"The moral of the movie is that it pays to break the Geneva Conventions. That was a dirty business. When Upham breaks the Law of Land Warfare and shoots the Wehrmacht soldier at the end, you're supposed to say, 'Wow! He's a real soldier now!'"

Chip shrugged his shoulders. "So?"

"So, you can find World War II Japanese soldiers who are still alive and unrepentant. When you ask them why they treated American POWs the way they did, they'll say..." Kenny pulled his eyes into tight slits with his forefingers, "'War is dirty business. It no pay to be nice. Thank God Emperor did not ratify Geneva Conventions.'"

Chip scratched his lip. "But...I really like this movie. It's got a lot of action. And you, you fought for us."

Kenny shook his head and stared at the floor. "The military lied to me," he said quietly. "That Nam Vet recruiting officer said the Core'd make a better man out of me. 'Maggot to man' were his words. Why did the recruiter lie to me? Why do they lie, Les?"

"I don't know. Why?"

“Don’t know either. Liars control reality. Your church tells you blowjobs are evil.”

Chip nodded. “Yes. Gay oral sex. Well, not evil. More like unnatural.”

“Hmmm...Interesting. You know, in a few hundred years people won’t have to put up with goody goody two shoes dipshits like yourself. Religion, all religion, is losing its hold. Science is pushing it out of the way. We’ve gone from animism to exobiology. I can’t wait.”

“One of your eyes...Did that happen in Iraq?”

Kenny tapped his slow eye. “Want to know how I got this? My StationaryOcclua?”

“How?”

“In Fallujah. Me and two of my buddies—Tommy C and Eduardo—we were trapped in this one room house minus the roof, cookie cutter shrapnel all over the furniture and floor, and there were these—I think four or five of them, but I could be wrong—scrawny, malnourished 14 year olds throwing shit over the wall at us: smoked over chunks of concrete, chunks of porch, table legs, garbage cans, glass bottles, anything sharp or heavy you can think of.” Chip squinted and nodded his head to show he was listening intently. “None of us wants to shoot, right? We’re screaming, *“Abdeck Hulus! Abdeck Hulus Habel!”*

“What does that mean?”

“Curfew! Go home!” It was midday, but that was like the only thing we could think of to yell.

“So over the wall pops a Diet Pepsi bottle. But there’s no Diet Pepsi in it. Just, apparently, gun powder, old twisted rusty nails, glass, pieces of barb wire, shit like that. A tow for a fuse. A lit fuse.

“TV babies like yourself think grenade tossing is a simple art. You guys think you throw it at the enemy, Boom! He dies. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ed dives for it and lobs it back over the wall. Those little bitches throw it over again. I dive for it and toss it back. It was like tennis. A third time, the bottle falls right in the middle of the place, on all the rubble. We dove for cover. I wasn’t fast enough. Knocked the bejesus out of me. Woke up seeing out only one eye. A tiny, tiny slice of shrapnel, bull’s-eye in my iris.”

Chip sat forward. “Wow! That’s cool! You were wounded for our country! You’re a hero!”

Kenny lit up. “Let’s go to my room,” he said.

...Kenny sat down on the bed. Chip stayed standing.

“Yep. That’s what they call me here. A war hero. Now if this was Nam, the citizenry would be spitting on me. But those days are over. Now we get laid. It’s all about sperm, not spit. Speaking of the former, you ever reconsider that hummer I offered you?”

“What’s a hummer?”

“Suck your dick.”

“No thank you.”

“Aw, come on Les...Don’t you ever get tired of jerking off under your covers every night?”

“I don’t masturbate.”

Kenny laughed and stomped his feet. "Bullshit!"

"No, I never had any girlfriends, no one, nothing, My—"

"Well, there was your little sister. Sit down. You're making me nervous."

"But she doesn't count. My shrink on the outside had been prescribing me Luvox since the third grade. It's impossible to have an orgasm on Luvox."

"Ha!"

"She convinced my mom it was the best anti-depressant around."

"Luvox? Yeah, it's an anti-depressant, but they also use it to chemically castrate sex offenders. Kind of ironic. Or coincidental. Or whatever."

Chip began to pace. "Kenny, I've never even had a wet dream."

Kenny laid back on his bed and stared at the ceiling, his feet still on the floor. "How can you go through life like that? You've never had an orgasm? Never? Never ever ever? Not even with your pretty kiddie sister?"

"No. No orgasm. A lot of the time, I do actually get, you know, uh...erect."

Kenny looked at Chip and winced. "Okay. I see the problem now. No wonder you're so anxious all the time. We have to fix this. Ask Dr. Elkind to put you on something else, like Wellbutrin."

"I already have. He won't do it. He talked with my mom, and they both say Luvox is best for me. Dr. Elkind says it might be best to curb my sex drive for now, anyway."

"Can't you ask daddy to intervene?"

"I live with my mom. She has say over him."

"Alright. No problem. Do you know how to fake taking your meds?"

Chip stopped pacing and faced Kenny and gulped. "No."

"It's easy as cake. Cheek them. At the nurse's station, when they give you your Luvox, push it under your tongue, walk back to the bathroom, spit it out in the sink. I don't think Luvox has any withdrawal symptoms, so you should be okay."

"But Kenny, my brain will go bad."

Kenny sat up. "*Go* bad? Dude, your brain *is* bad. You're at rock bottom. All your friends are out there going on with their lives, getting laid, moving from point A to point B. But *you*," Kenny pointed at him with his forefinger, "*are here*." Kenny pointed at the floor. "When do you think you'll see the inside of those elevators, hmm? When shit sticks to the moon. Chippy, you don't have much else to lose."

"I don't know..."

"You'll be able to do it yourself! Hey, nothing beats a good jerk off." Kenny grabbed at his own crotch and shook it. "Soon you learn to milk this baby for all it's worth. Did you know that semen still moves once it's out of your dick?"

"Yes. It swims to the egg to fertilize—"

"No. Like if you wank yourself. I tried an experiment once. Back home I spermed on my carpet and circled the sperm blots with a red magic marker. I went to the 7-11 and when I got back, you know what? The gobs of sperm had moved! Like four and five centimeters! What made it really weird is that they moved towards the radiator. You know how the vagina is supposed to be all warm and wet?"

"No."

"Well, that's what they say. So I guess sperm's got the instinct to swim its way

towards warm and wet places. Isn't that interesting?" Chip didn't answer. He just looked at Kenny nervously.

"For loners like yourself, masturbation will become the favorite past time. Your life will revolve around it. So what say you, Chippy? You gonna cheek the Luvox?"

Chip looked around the room.

"Well?" Kenny asked.

"Okay," he said.

Kenny stood up. "Alright then. It's settled." He sighed and walked over to Chip.

"Chip. Don't look at the floor. Look *at me*." Chip looked up. Kenny flat handed him just above his stomach. Chip blew out and hunched over. Kenny yanked him up by his hair, slid a leg behind him, and knife-handed him in the neck. He fell back over Kenny's leg and slammed rear end first onto the floor. Kenny dropped onto him and pinned him—Chip smelled the Tag—and with his thumb and forefinger literally pulled Chip's wind pipe out of place. Chip saw his own eyes bulge in Kenny's bright irises. Kenny let go and Chip's trachea snapped back into place like a rubber band.

"Don't panic. Take deep breaths, evenly spaced, from the stomach...That's it..." Kenny stood, offered Chip his hand, and hoisted him up.

"That was really uncomfortable, having my trachea pulled. I couldn't breathe. Wow, they taught you a lot in the Marines."

"Ha. I could have killed you."

"Cool." Chip smoothed down his shirt, retucked it, and pushed his hair into place. Kenny relaxed against the wall and stared at the ceiling.

"You know why I was committed?" he asked. "I broke some hick-bouncer's shoulder blade up in Ogden. Barroom brawl." He laughed. "That DA had love handles. Usually the female DAs keep in good shape. They're razor thin. 'Elegant.' But not Jessica Pechersky. Love handles, tree trunk thighs, faux-pregnancy gut, etc. etc. etc. Anyway, she was really sympathetic toward me. She agreed with my attorney I had PTSD. Gave me three months here instead of jail time."

"PTSD..."

"Post Traumatic Stress Disorder."

"But you seem normal. Kind of."

"Duh. Of course I am. Just a bit uppity. There's me pre-Fallujah and me post-Fallujah. That's all. And that hick..." Kenny was far away, in a happier place... "He'll have arthritis in his shoulder blade for the rest of his life. Oh well oh well oh well." He patted Chip on the shoulder. "Come on. Let's get out of here. It's time for me to ride."

"I'll ride next to you on the broken one to keep you company. You tell neat stories."

He squeezed Chip's paunch and said, "Might do you some good. Get rid of this flab. You got a Woody Allen build. Short, a thin frame, and a gut, although a not too big gut. Still, it makes you look weak."

Kenny motioned to the TV with his face. "Lookie, Chip: Lindsay Lohan was only fourteen when she did this movie. Find her attractive? Probably not. Too developed for you."

Chip yanked at the crotch of his sweatpants, making room. "No, she is *fine*. Her

shirt is so *tight*. She takes the biscuit.”

“All the girls on the ABC Family channel—not just the afternoon movies, but, like, on every one of its TV shows, every one of its cheesy sitcoms—you think they’re all nice and sweet and pink with virginity? FUCK NO! All the kids on this channel, boys and girls, they’re having sex at like twelve and thirteen and fourteen. On ABC Family you get an early start. These kids on TV,” Kenny motioned again to the television, “They got it made. Sex in the dressing rooms between scenes, sex all Ex’d out at their underage parties, sex in restrooms at their techno clubs with the power drinks. I heard their parents even encourage the shenanigans cause it alleviates the ‘stress’ of their show biz work schedules.” He shook his head. “Fuck...”

Chip pulled at his sweatpants again.

Kenny walked over to the TV, shut it off, and sat down. “Back to what’s real: Lester, if I tell you something, you have to promise not to tell anyone, not the patients, not the techs, not Dr. Elkind, no one.”

“No way man. I’ll keep my mouth shut. What is it?”

“Come on to my room. And this time *sit*. Sit in the damn chair. Don’t stand, don’t pace, don’t fidget.”

...Chip sat in the chair at the desk. Kenny sat on the bed. He spoke quietly.

“For my Stationary Occula sometimes they’ll throw me in the white van and transport me to the VA hospital in St. George for a couple of days. It’s really nice there. The food tastes so much better. *And* you can have seconds. *And* the nurses aren’t cunts like here, they treat you with respect. But it can get boring there, nothing to do but read Genet or Burroughs or Gertie Stein. So one day I was sick of reading, I was wandering the halls, I decided to take the stairs down to the basement.

“I walked out into this dark room, only a few bare light bulbs hung off the ceiling. Stacks and stacks of pallets, all in this dark green slimy puddle of something, looked like kelp, but couldn’t have been. There were these contraptions lined up in a row, don’t know what they were, they looked like R2D2. What else?...The smell of mildew and rust. A furnace over in the corner, it rumbled and creaked and banged, a maze of pipes all along the ceiling shook in time with it and dripped hot water. Constant banging, like a hammer against steel. Hot. Wet. Loud and hot and wet. Ten seconds down there and I was sweating.”

“That puddle: a puddle of what?”

“Dunno. Just listen. There were these things on the floor by the furnace. I walked over to take a look. Rodent traps. Like ten or twelve of them. Big rat skeletons in each one, you could see the splits of the backbones. But there was one, the rat was whole, *and* it was alive and moving and this mini-wheeze came from it, the chest moved up and down. I undid the latch and it took off.

“So I was about to get out of there—with that furnace going you could hardly hear yourself think—when I saw this one door behind the furnace. What the hell, I decided, nothing better to do, so I walked over, lifted up the iron latch, and shoved it open. It creaked loudly, like my granddad’s fingers. I felt for a light switch, found it, and clicked it on. House centipedes scattered. The room was small, but just as loud and hot and dirty. Rivers of brown water streamed down the walls, mold grew

in the corners, the furnace outside shook the whole place. And—you'll never fucking believe this—there was this bed with this, well, this *object* on it. All these tubes were attached to the object, and even though it was under blankets, you could tell the thing was bulging intermittently, like it was breathing. There was an IV stand, with IV tubes strung under the covers.

"At the top of this, this thing, I'll call it, there was what looked like a head, but without a face, just white and stained bandages taped over it. Then the head kind of rolled a bit, and the thing sighed, and I realized it wasn't a 'thing' at all, but a *human being*. Or what was left of one."

"No way!" Chip's mouth dropped.

"I shit you not. No arms, no legs, no face, no ears, just a chest and a head!"

"And it was alive? Oh no!"

"Oh yes. So I walked over and it perked up and lifted its head, like it knew I was there—I guess from the vibrations of my footsteps—and it started to make this noise like when you sandpaper rough wood, or when you drive on gravel, almost like a gurgle, coming out where the air tube entered the trachea. It was excited I was there."

"So it was a soldier! It had to be a soldier!"

"I'm getting there. So I stood over it while it got all fidgety and did that gurgling sound. You could see the tiny arm and leg stumps going crazy under the covers. Then it began to bang its head up and down on the pillow in this rhythm and—"

"Aw, man. That sucks they keep him down there away from everyone! I hope he hadn't been down there that long."

"Well, I wondered the same thing. On the covers, by the neck, there was a silver Victory medal. It was of this winged lady holding a sword and shield. I thought back to my USMC days and tried to remember which war the military gave out that particular medal. Wanna know what war it's from?"

"No! What war?"

"World fucking War I."

"Oh my God!" Chip put his hand over his mouth.

"Shhh. Keep your voice down!"

"Sorry. He must have been old. Like, real old."

"Don't talk. Just sit there and shut up. But yeah, man, was he old. His neck was all scraggily and withered and scrawny. When I pulled the covers off him—"

"You pulled the covers off him?"

"Hell yeah. When I pulled them off you could tell he was at least a hundred. His pec and crotch hair were white. Like Antarctica white. The stomach was all caved in. You could count the ribs. He was really out of shape. And the skin looked tough, like a lamp shade, and it was mottled."

"What's 'mottled.'"

"It's not important. But anyway, the torso rocked back and forth, banging its head like James Hetfield on the pillow, going batty. I noticed a pattern to the head banging. Then the idea hit me: Morse code."

"He was trying to communicate!"

"He was trying to communicate. So I tapped on the forehead, 'What is your

name?’ and we sat there having a fucking conversation!”

“Holy frigging crap! Good Gravy!”

“His name was, uh, Joe. Joe...Birnam.” Kenny shook his head. “It was rough in there. The heat was like a sauna, just totally nauseating. But I stayed. Joe said he’d been down there for decades. I was like, ‘This is 2008. You’ve missed quite a lot.’ It asked if the US had gone to war again. ‘Yeah, like four or five times.’ He sounded a bit incoherent, like he was fucked in the head, and I told him so. Then again, I’d be fucked in the head too if they made me a torso for that long.

“It asked where it was. I lied. I tapped, ‘Hell.’ And Joe freaked. He started gurgling again, flailing his stumps, all that shit. It tapped, ‘What did I do wrong? I lived my life like a good Christian! I was a good soldier! Nooo!’ It—or he, he or it—asked who I was. I tapped back the letters B E E L Z E B U B.

“Now he was more frantic. He bangs out, ‘I don’t belong here! Take me away!’ I tap, ‘Well, I can’t help you with that, but I can help you with your mood...Want a blowjob?’

“Kenny, you didn’t.”

“Don’t go pale Les. You’re weak. But yeah, I asked him that. He didn’t know what I meant. So I tapped, ‘I’ll show you.’ This house centipede skeleton hung in the cobwebs that strung from the catheter to the guy’s dick. I slowly pulled the catheter out—quit wincing—and that made him bounce up and down like a Mexican jumping bean, gurgling, making me sick. But after a bit I got it out and got to sucking, and...the son of a bitch came. Fast. The spunk tasted a bit funny, but I guess that’s to be expected.”

“Ew. Wasn’t it disgusting to suck a guy’s penis that old?”

“There was a bit of lint. But, you sucked one, you sucked them all. And he was big.” Kenny held his hands apart—palms facing each other—as measurement.

“I’m supposed to go back there to see the ophthalmologist tomorrow. Be there till Friday. Maybe I’ll sneak downstairs and see how ole Joe is doing.” Kenny grinned, pushed his legs straight out, clasped his hands behind his head, and lay down flat on the bed, crossing his ankles.

“Judas Priest! Why did you have to tell him he was in hell? That was mean.”

“Maybe I’ll let him know you said hi. ‘My buddy Lester at State, he sends his regards.’”

Chip ran his hands through his hair. “You’ve got to get him out of there. I know I’m going to have trouble getting to sleep tonight.”

“I asked my nurse about him. She’s like, ‘You have no business going down there.’ She said he was brain dead. But the way she said it, it’s like she knew he wasn’t.”

“Tell them he’s not!”

“Why should I do anything for you? You won’t even get undressed in front of me...Hey! Wanna make a deal?” Kenny sat up, reached over, and drummed his fingers on Chip’s thigh.

“Well, it depends. I mean...What kind of deal?”

“You do something for me, I do something for you.”

“Like what?...No, not that.”

“Yeah. *That!* And I’ll tell the staff the dude’s alive and kicking. I free the torso,

you let me blow you.”

Chip felt his stomach upset. He put his head to his legs. “Okay...” he said into his knees, “You get him out of there, I’ll let you do oral sex on me. Oh man...” He lifted up and faced Kenny. “What makes you think I’ll even get aroused?”

“You’ve been cheeking your Luvox, right? So you’re all primed, kid. Cocked and ready. An M67 minus the pin. You smoke? I’ll even throw in some rolling papers.”

“I don’t smoke. Smoking’s bad for you.”

Later that night Chip wrestled around in bed, the sheets between his fists. Dr. Elkind had ordered him on fifteens since he arrived. Every fifteen minutes a tech had to look in on him. Around midnight Beatrice opened the door and peered in. “Can’t sleep yet, hon? You want a PRN of Trazadone?”

“No...Um, do you have time to talk?”

“Sure I do.” She sat down on his bed. Her gray and white wool sweater wound tight around her chest.

“You ever watch “Sabrina: The Teenage Witch” on the ABC Family channel, Beatrice?”

“Ah ah.”

“You look just like the mom.” He smelled her perfume and was instantly hard.

“Why can’t you sleep?”

“Something Ken told me. He said at the Veterans Hospital in St. George he found a patient with no arms, legs, or face. From World War I. Over 100 years old. The hospital kept him hidden in the basement. Kenny blew him.”

“What?” Beatrice laughed loudly, then frowned. “Hon, he shouldn’t be telling you those things. Kenny is an out and out frigging liar.”

“He’s making it up?”

“The military would never treat one of their own that way.” She smiled. “Plus, last I heard, orgasms are extremely rare at that age. That’s Kenny for you.” She sighed and shook her head. “He lies all the time. Like *all* the time.”

“Well, like what has he said?”

“Oh Lord, let’s see...” she shrugged and looked around the room. “...He told Miriam he was boss over his cube at the Montana State Penitentiary. He told her he raped an inmate. All that’s well and good, except he’s never been in prison. Only County. It would have been in his file. What else...He told Joshua the cops arrested him after they found Sally Mann’s jpegs on his computer. Another lie. Again, it would have been in his file. Plus, her stuff is legal. Evil, but legal. He told Dr. Elkind that his dad’s a famous author and was best friends with Allen Ginsburg. Kenny’s first memories—according to Kenny—are of sitting in Allen Ginsburg’s lap.” She checked her watch.

“Well what if it’s true?”

“We’ve met his dad. We see him every Tuesday night. He’s no author. He owns a construction company. Kenny’s going to work for him when he’s discharged next month.”

She brushed his forehead, instigating a rush of lust in him. And he looked at her hands: beautiful fingers, piano fingers. “Hey, is that your wedding ring?”

“Yep. Been married fourteen years now. Knock on wood.” She knocked three times on his dresser.

“I hope I can get married some day, Beatrice.”

She stifled a yawn and smiled again. "There's some lucky girl out there with your name autographed on her heart. But for now just concentrate on getting better. And stop hanging out with Kenny. He's a bad influence." She ruffled his hair.

"Yeah."

"On you, on the other patients, on the Southwest Unit as a whole. I can't count the number of times we've had to call the posse on him. All of the techs, we want him out." She shook her head again. "He sucks the life out of us."

Into his dreams: "Wakey wakey." Someone nudged him. Chip opened his eyes. Kenny was sitting on the bed. "I'm baaaaaack," he said, like the little girl in *Poltergeist*. "Miss me, Les?"

Chip sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"It's done," Kenny said. "I told the heads of the hospital. They smacked their foreheads." Kenny smacked Chip's forehead like he was healing him. "They're like, 'We got to get him out of there!' So now they push Joe around the hospital grounds in a wheelchair. Out of that musty room, enjoying the cool dry mountain air, all the nurses patting him. There's always a chaplain with him too, tapping on his forehead in Morse, talking to him, getting him up to date on world events. The dude, he can't believe the cocaine is gone from Coca-Cola! Oh, and the generals that put him down in that room are in big trouble. The military's going to court martial the shit out of them!"

Chip regarded him. "You know, I talked with Beatrice about you. She said you're a bull crapper. She said the military would never do anything like that."

No pauses, Kenny replied right away, that smile grilled into his face: "Are you kidding me? You know how corrupt these people are? You ever hear of collateral damage?"

"Ah ah."

"That's right. Cause they keep it to themselves. It's where they bomb the fuck out of civilians and cover it up." He snickered.

"Yeah, well, okay, but Beatrice said most 100-year-old guys can't sperm."

"Beatrice is a stuck up cunt. There's something those of us in the know call *Spermaculus Lingerus*."

Chip knitted his brows. "Sperma-what? What's that?"

He spelled it out. "Men who spend most of their lives immobile, their metabolism slows down, and they retain the ability to ejaculate late into their life. I'll show you in my medical dictionary one time." He raised his right hand. "Swear to God, dude."

"Well, Beatrice says you get your lies mixed up. Beatrice says—"

"Beatrice says Beatrice says Beatrice says yeah yeah yeah. Chippy, look at the quick work I make of the techs here. Of course they hate me. They'll lie about me to ruin my rep. *They* are the liars. You saw Beatrice squeezing that racquetball, didn't you?"

Chip collapsed back onto the pillow and sighed. "Yes, Kenny."

"So you know I wasn't lying about nibbling into her radial artery. Now come on. You owe me. A deal's a deal. You were brought up to be a man of your word, right?"

"But, but you...Okay...I'll let you do this to me." He sat up and grabbed Kenny's arm. "But you can't tell anyone! Please! No one will like me!"

"Lips sealed," Kenny said, running his forefinger across Chip's lips.

“So when do you want to do it, Kenny? How about—”

“Now. How about *now*. Kenny ruffled Chip’s hair and stood up. “Let’s do this.” He pulled a light blue pill out of his pocket and dropped it in Chip’s hand. “Swallow that. It’s Viagra. It’ll help. And gulp down a whole lot of water at the water fountain. Chug till you can’t chug anymore. It’s easier to stay hard if you’re bladder’s about to explode.” He looked at his watch. “It’s ten after eight now. In fifty minutes come to my room.” His eyebrows arched. “And I’ll take it from there.” He left.

Chip stared at the pill. He dropped it onto the dresser next to the envelope, *the* envelope, the one he hadn’t opened in weeks because of the name on the return address.

He ripped at it and pulled out a letter. The page was inked in dark crimson. Green and blue orchids spangled the four corners. The paper itself was lemon yellow.

So, My Dear Chipper:

I’ve thought a lot about you. (And not in a good way, heh heh). What to say, what to say, what to say? Molestation stays with you for life. FOR LIFE!!! I can show you 40-year-old women who have never had an orgasm, ever! That’s what it does! So, because you are the Antichrist, I decided every month I’ll write you to let you know all the cool stuff you’re missing out on. Well, to start with, I got into Duke!!!! I’m kind of jealous Philly got accepted to Cornell, but I guess he deserved it. He did get 1450 on his SATs. PROM IS COMING UP!!! Misha Kapler and Jess Franco are still going out. I saw them at Davey Solin’s kegger last Saturday. WE ALL HAD A BLAST AND GOT SUPER PLASTERED!!! Marcy and Smakoz were ALL OVER EACH OTHER in Davey’s brother’s tree house and...

He looked in the envelope and pulled out four more pages, writing on both sides. At the bottom of the last page was a pink kiss imprint—Bubblegum lipstick?—and under that:

Sincerely, With Hugs and Kisses and All,

Your friend Steph

Someone yelled down the hall, “Hey! Southwest! It is 8:15! Vending machines are now open!”

Chip popped the Viagra.

...The AC in Kenny’s room gave Chip goose bumps. Kenny was sitting on the bed looking intense, breathing quickly. A towel sat neatly folded up next to him. Out his window morning snow fell like shredded cotton. Chip stood in the doorway feeling like he was about to take a test he didn’t study for. He self consciously covered his groin.

“You know, you’re not going to be able to do that once I start in on you.”

Chip pursed his mouth. Kenny patted the spot on the bed next to him. “Sit down next to me, Les.” He did.

“I don’t want to kiss, Kenny.”

“Who does? I hate kissing, man.” Kenny got up, shut the door, knelt in front of Chip, and untied his sweatpants. Chip felt the loosening around his waist. He lifted himself off the bed a bit so Kenny—his face fire engine red—could pull down his pants and boxers, peppered with Donald Ducks.

“Try and relax, Les. Pretend I’m a girl if that’ll help. I mean, this isn’t that big a deal.” Kenny shook him by the thighs. “Eject that performance anxiety, cadet! It’s just oral sex, nothing major, everyone does it. At least all of us ‘liberated’ types. To

most of us this is like picking up the daily paper, or taking a leak, or washing the dishes. Forget your dinky church.” He put his hand up under Chip’s shirt and felt his heart. “Chill out.”

Kenny began. For a while, nothing. “Chip? What the fuck? Don’t sweat the small stuff. *This is not a big deal!*”

He continued.

All wet and slippery and random, Chip noticed—and almost said, like being inside a fish or a Jacuzzi: not bad, getting better. And he saw there was a rhythm: the guy’s head goes up and down. “Hey, this isn’t bad,” Chip said. Then he giggled: “You’re breathing through your nose like a horse! Ha Ha Ha!”

Kenny stopped. It was the first time Chip had seen him look even a little embarrassed. “Etiquette, Les. Don’t make me mad. I’ll rake.”

“Um, what? Rake?”

“With my teeth. Rake.” Kenny bared his teeth.

“Sorry sorry sorry!”

Kenny went back at it.

Chip sagged like a marionette let go. It—the whole thing, everything—almost felt “right.”

“Judas Priest! You mean to most people this is like nothing? Like an every day event?”

Chip paced in an elevator. He didn’t know it was an elevator. He didn’t know he was in a skyscraper. He didn’t know he was stuck at the top of it on the 115th floor. All he knew was he was trapped in a small room. The Muzak grated. Mangy rats gnawed at the elevator cable above him. Their mouths wrought the tiny din of incisors against braided steel. He paced as the rats ate away, ate away, and...The G Forces pancaked Chip into the ceiling, squeezing him literally into it, turning him flat. He was TV. Not flesh, not blood, not bone, but pixels. An ABC Family sitcom. Uproarious laughter. Cheering. The elevator’s control panel blinked furiously. Chip spread wide his arms and legs, making an X. His stomach was up in his throat: a rollercoaster. From point A to point B. He was moving.



MOTIF288 H KUCUK,
art by
Üzeyir Lokman ÇAYCI

The Pastor Priest Sexton, and the Man in Green

Jim Meirose

The church arched solidly over the Sexton as he dragged his mop and pail to the end of the marble-floored aisle and headed toward the vestibule. Father Barnes, the associate pastor, came through the door thumbing a black leather breviary. The Sexton came up to him.

Father, excuse me, said the Sexton. There is something I need to report.

Pausing, the priest looked up, sighing deeply.

What is it?

The Sexton took a deep breath, then answered.

Every day a man in green comes in the church, goes up to the altar rail and is calm for a short while, but then he starts acting like he's fighting with himself—

What do you mean, fighting with himself, interrupted the priest, lowering his narrow eyed dark-browed face.

He wraps and unwraps his arms from around himself, replied the Sexton, and grips his hands together and writhes and half-kneels, then stands, then kneels—like he's having some kind of a convulsion, and then he calms and takes a mass book out from the pocket under the front pew and tears out the pages and scatters them on the floor, and then he turns around goes up the aisle and out the front of the church.

Father Barnes rubbed at his sharp chin and tapped the breviary against his hip.

This is clearly a troubled man, he told the Sexton. He needs our prayers—but he shouldn't be destroying church property.

I know. And its me who has to clean up after him—

Then confront him, said the priest. The next time he does it, confront him and tell him he should not rip up mass books and make a mess of things.

The sexton shuffled a foot uneasily.

It's mine to tell him this?

I think so, said Father Barnes. Put a stop to it. Talk to him. After all, said the priest gravely, as sexton the order of the church at all times is in your hands.

Yes Father, said the Sexton, nodding. The priest returned the nod and stepped past and slowly went on out a side door of the church. The Sexton pushed the mop and bucket through to a utility closet hidden in a corner of the vestibule and wrung out the mop and emptied the bucket and came out and closed the door. He went back to the wide door at the head of the main aisle, and looked out over the tall long vaulted space of statues, crucifixes, laces and linens and solid stone and wide dark polished pews. The light slanted in through the high stained windows, purples and rose colors and yellows greens and blues.

What a responsibility, he thought.

Yes. I will confront him.

The next day dawned brightly. The Sexton started early as was his habit. He

dusted his way one by one along the ornately carved stations of the cross that lined the side aisles of the church. Lowering his dustmop at a sudden sound from the rear of the church, he turned. The man in green came down the center aisle, went straight to the altar rail, and looked up at the high altar, which stood before a great wide arched stained glass window of Jesus and Mary. The Sexton squeezed the dustmop handle as the man stood quietly for a moment before raising one arm and gripping it with the other, twisting around wrapping and unwrapping his arms about himself and going down on one knee on the hard marble. He brought one hand up to his throat, then struggled to pull it away with the other—he shuffled and writhed and bumped against the smoothly polished altar rail, then stopped dead in mid-struggle, and stood quiet. The colored light played down from the windows over him as he slowly turned to the nearest pew, leaned down, got out a mass book, and started ripping page after page out of the book and dropping them on the marble floor in the center of the main aisle. The Sexton tensed his grip on the dustrag.

—*Confront him*, had said the priest with a harsh tone. *The order of the church, at all times, is in your hands.*

The Sexton stepped out from between the pews, went down the aisle with his hand raised, and spoke.

You should not be destroying church property. You should not do this any more.

The man in green's sharp face fell pale. He clasped his hands together before him and half bowed to the Sexton, his eyes shining.

I know, he said. Forgive me, please, though, I can't help myself, oh, I don't want to do it but I must, I must—

He fell to one knee and gripped the Sexton's pant leg.

Please forgive me. Please, he said, head bowed.

The Sexton spoke gently to the pitiful man.

Its all right, its all right—just don't do it anymore.

Placing his hand over his face, the man spoke.

But I can't promise that. I can't help myself. But I may stop if you pray for me, Father—please pray for me and maybe some day I can stop.

Father, thought the Sexton, standing before the bowed man. *He called me Father.*

The order of the church, at all times, is in my hands.

The Sexton stepped back, gently pulling his pant leg away from the man in green's light grip.

I'll pray for you, said the Sexton. The man in green rose, his face ashen. Darkness lay in the hollows of his cheeks.

Thank you Father.

The Sexton nodded, his mouth set.

Father, he called me Father—

The man rose and pushed past and rushed from the church. The Sexton went on with his dusting and polishing, row after row, through the morning, rubbing strongly with long broad strokes, a tyhin smile on his face.

Father. What if I was really Father—

Power.

Late that afternoon Father Barnes appeared, coming in through the sacristy and down the main aisle where the Sexton leaned polishing the last of the pews. The priest paused.

Did that man you told me about come here today?

Yes he did, said the Sexton, standing straight. And I had words with him—as you suggested.

Well—did you take care of things? Did he promise to not come back and tear up mass books any more?

The Sexton looked down, then up, before speaking softly.

No, he didn't promise. He's clearly a troubled man—he asked me to pray for him and I said I would—

The priest cut the air before him with his breviary.

Prayer, no, don't talk about prayer—what exactly did he say? Will he be coming back to do it again, or not?

He might, said the Sexton.

Then I will take care of this problem myself. Does he come here every day?

Every day or two—

Then I will wait here tomorrow and confront him myself. Go on with your work, Sexton. I'll be back tomorrow.

Nodding, the Sexton returned to his dusting. He moved more slowly than before.

Sexton, not Father—

Only Sexton.

Father Barnes turned and went up the marble floored aisle to the back of the church and opened the door of the confessional booth he had come to ready for that night's services. The door creaked open and he looked out a moment over the wide expanse of the church, with the Sexton stooping slowly rubbing the pew backs with his rag.

The poor man, he thought. Good to clean the church, clean the dirt and the dust and mop the floors and keep the candles fresh and to keep the altar linens clean but—there are problems he can't deal with. And those would be mine to deal with. And he thought prayer would solve this—if only. The poor man. If only it were all that simple—

Quickly turning toward the confessional, Father Barnes arranged the white curtain over the small square opening and pushed the oak kneeler tight against the wall.

Clearly the order of the church is in my hands. Not his.

The next morning dawned cloudy with a light drizzle. The church filled with dim colors from the stained glass as Father Barnes sat reading his breviary in the last pew at the back, in the corner. Raindrops lightly pattered on the glass. The priest struggled to keep from nodding off in the cool and quiet until the back doors tapped open and the man in green came in. He strode down the aisle to the altar rail and quickly knelt, head bowed and hands clasped. Father Barnes pulled himself down into himself to make himself smaller in the pew, closed the breviary, and waited. The man knelt quietly, then half-rose, grabbing himself by the collar and shaking himself savagely, then pulling that arm away with the other—his pale face shone in the dim colored light as he tore at the front of his shirt and wrapped and unwrapped his arms

around himself several times before going down on one knee with his hands gripped together. Bending further, he went on all fours, then pulled himself to the ground by the throat and lay stretched out in the aisle a moment—then he leapt up rod-straight and stood still a second before leaning into the nearest pew, getting a mass book, and starting to tear the pages out one by one letting them flutter to the floor. The priest rose in the pew and made his way to the center aisle. The man stood facing away from him. The pages fell. The priest went up and spoke.

Stop this now.

The man turned holding the torn mass book in his hands.

Stop? he said. Says who—you?

The man leered in the stained glass light. The priest put one hand on his stomach and gestured with the other.

Yes. I say so. I'm responsible for this place.

Then, said the man, screwing up his face, here's what I think of you and your damned place.

He spat heavily into the spot where the pews met the floor. Smiling, he raised the torn up mass book in front of the priest.

I go where I want, he said, and I do what I want.

The priest stood open-mouthed.

But I am responsible for the—

The man pushed his face close to the priest, smelling dirty unshaven and unwashed.

Are you going to stop me?

You should not do this—

But you're not going to stop me. Now here, he said, throwing the mass book to the side. Let me by.

The man pushed past the priest and scuffed heavily along the marble aisle and left. The priest stood blankly at the altar rail, hands trembling.

But clearly the order of the church is in my hands—

The Sexton came out the door of the sacristy with a dust mop in his hands, and came toward Father Barnes.

Clearly—

What's wrong, asked the Sexton. Is something wrong—you're white as a sheet.

No, said the priest, drawing himself up to full height. Nothing is wrong. Go on with your work—clean up this mess.

He left the Sexton standing in the circle of torn pages as he clasped his shaking hands together and went up the main aisle to leave.

No wonder the Sexton could not get that man to promise. That man has no regard for anyone—anyone at all.

Father Barnes rubbed his silver ring as he walked.

I must discuss this with the Pastor. I can't allow it to go on.

That evening Father Barnes sat across the plain wooden dinner table from the Pastor and slowly ate his meal of sausages and mashed potatoes. He ate slower than usual and more quietly.

What's wrong, Father Barnes, said the Pastor, wiping his tall forehead. You haven't said a word since dinner started.

Father Barnes' fork hung in mid-air.

I've something on my mind, he told the Pastor. I need to tell you about it.

What is it, said the Pastor, lightly chewing a piece of sausage and tapping the fork against the plate.

Each day a disturbed man comes into the church and tears up a mass book and leaves. For no good reason.

What makes you think he is disturbed?

Father Barnes described the man's struggles with himself that always led up to the destruction of the mass book. The Pastor swallowed heavily, then leaned forward.

Well—it is wrong for him to destroy church property. You need to confront him about this.

I have.

You have—so where's the problem?

He was offensive to me. He said he'd do what he wants when he wants and then he spat on the floor—

What, said the Pastor, putting down his fork and half- rising. He spat on the floor of the church? In front of you?

Yes.

And you stood there and let him?

Yes, said father Barnes. But—

But nothing, said the Pastor, rising to full height. You will confront this man again and see to it that he does not come back. It's your duty as a priest to safeguard the church, said the Pastor, wagging his finger and sitting heavily down. The meal ended in silence with both avoiding eye contact and when it was over Father Barnes walked slowly down the dark hallway and went up the narrow stairs toward his room with his hands clasped loosely before him.

I will confront him again. I must be stronger this time.

What a responsibility it is to be a priest.

The next day Father Barnes once more sat in the last pew of the church in the damp cool of the early morning and read his breviary slowly, waiting. The man did not come in that day, or the next, or the next.

Maybe he will not come back—maybe he has changed his ways— He smiled walking across the sunny garden to the rectory.

Yes. That one time was enough, I made him change his ways—

Idly turning to the left, he saw the man in green out on the sidewalk heading toward the front steps of the church. Heart sinking, he turned back toward the church and went in the side door. As he entered, he drew a deep breath.

I will put a stop to this. It is my responsibility.

Father Barnes stood in the shadows to the side as the man in green came down the center aisle, reached the altar rail, leant on it a moment, then slapped himself hard across the face again and again with one hand while strangling himself until he was blue in the face with the other—then he fell to his knees and bent forward and,

gripping himself by his thinning hair, he slammed his forehead down against the marble floor and knelt silently motionless with his head on the floor before he slowly rose, went to the front pew and got out a mass book and once more tore the pages out and let them flutter to the floor.

The priest solidly stepped forward from the shadows.

I told you before, he said. And I'm telling you now. You must stop this, and leave, and not come back.

The man in green froze and focused his pale eyes into Father Barnes' before dropping the mass book and falling to his knees.

Father—oh, Father, I am sorry, so sorry, I can't help myself—I am sorry for it all—

Father Barnes blinked.

Please, said the man, leaning forward gripping Father Barnes' limp hand. Please forgive me.

The hand was cold. Father Barnes' mouth set into a hard line.

What to say—

Father Barnes spoke softly.

Then you will not do this any more?

I must keep doing it. I can't help myself. But if you pray for me, maybe, maybe some day I can stop—

Father Barnes' eyes narrowed.

Yes, go on say what you're taught to say what you're taught to believe let it come—

You should pray also, said Father Barnes, squeezing the man's hand. If we both pray, then things are sure to turn out for the best.

Lord God, thank you, said the man. Quickly rising, he turned and went quickly down the aisle and left the church. The wide doors closed over him. Father Barnes stood in the center of the circle of torn out pages.

Prayer will solve this. Both his prayers and mine—

Lord God let prayer work.

Just this one time.

That evening, Father Barnes sat eating his bean soup across the table from the Pastor. The Pastor took a spoonful, licked his thin lips, and asked a question.

Has that man been in the church any more?

What man?

The man that tears up the books.

Oh—yes he has, said Father Barnes, spooning up the soup.

And have you seen to it that he will not be tearing up any more?

He told me he was sorry, said Father Barnes. We decided together to both pray for him to stop—

Then he said he'd stop?

Father Barnes slowly stirred the soup.

No—he didn't. He didn't say that—

Then what did he say? Did he spit on the floor again?

No—he said he was sorry, that he couldn't help himself—

Did he tear up a mass book?

Yes he did—

And will he come back?

He might—but we are both praying that he might stop—

Enough!

The Pastor rose, his face reddened. He ran his wide white hand down the front of his black robe, then pointed into the face of Father Barnes.

I can see I will have to take care of this myself, said the Pastor. You were to have gotten his promise not to do it any more but you did not so I will just have to take care of it myself. Leave the table, Father. Go to your room and think on this failure.

Yes Father, nodded Father Barnes, dropping his eyes and slowly rising. The Pastor stood holding his spoon as the priest pushed by heading for the narrow dining room door, his head bowed. When the priest was gone, the Pastor sat down and slowly finished the last of his soup.

The poor man, he thought. Good to say mass, hand out communion, hear confessions and say his daily office, pray for people, but—there are problems he can't deal with. And those would be mine to deal with. The poor man.

Pushing away his empty bowl, the Pastor dabbed a napkin at his lips before rising and slowly moving from the room.

Clearly the order of the church is in my hands. Not his.

The next day the Pastor went across the garden through the rain into the side door of the church. He sat in a pew about halfway back. The oily waxy acrid smoky smell of snuffed out candles from this morning's mass still hung in the air now, hours later. Mother Mary and St. Peter and St. Joseph looked down from their niches in the tall stone walls. The Pastor rubbed at his eyes.

It's so closed in in here, the air's stuffy, always stuffy—

Fighting to stay awake in the heavy air, the Pastor remained about an hour, then left. He came into the church each morning for three days and sat in the same pew running a black rosary through his fingers to stay awake.

When will this man come, maybe Father Barnes did the job after all—maybe he will not come back—

The doors banged open and the man in green shuffled quickly past, long thin hair waving, rubbing his arms and hands together again and again as he walked. He went by the Pastor as though he weren't there. The Pastor leaned forward as the man reached the altar rail and heavily knelt with his head in his hands. The Pastor sat gaping as the man slowly ran his hands back through his hair, then half-rose and hit himself in the stomach once, twice as hard as he could, then bent and slammed his forehead on the pink veined marble altar rail three or four times before sliding down onto the floor and lying there on his back, his great eyes popped out toward the high dark ceiling as he choked himself with both hands, then lay there motionless. The Pastor sat frozen.

He's killed himself—lord God, he's killed himself—

Suddenly the man drew himself to his feet, calmly stepped to the closest pew, got out a mass book, and stood over the spot where he'd lain tearing pages from the book and letting them flutter slowly to the floor.

The Pastor rose and stepped down the aisle, hand out.

You. Now listen here. Stop this now!

The man turned quickly with great wide pale eyes.

Who says I should stop, he snapped sharply. You?

Yes. I am Pastor here and what you are doing is wrong. Put down the mass book and leave, and don't come back unless you promise to behave yourself—

The man stepped forward, gripped the Pastor by his shirt, looked him closely in the face, and spoke.

I do what I want! You're nothing but a bastard to me. Pastor. Shit. I spit on the Pastor—

He spat with great volume into the pastor's face.

Lord God—

He let go the Pastor's shirt as though throwing him backward. The Pastor half-fell stumbling against the pew, rubbing his wet face with his sleeve. The church seemed to spin.

He pushed me, he spit on me—he called me bastard—

The man pointed into the Pastor's face and shouted, his voice echoing among the candles statues lace linen and crucifixes and coming down off the high vaulted ceiling.

I do what I want! I'll come here as often as I want. As a matter of fact, every day from now on! Every day at this same time! And no one can stop me. Especially not you, you little bastard!

Bastard—he keeps calling me bastard I am no bastard—

The man threw the torn mass book to the floor and pushed past stomping heavily up the aisle and went out the wide front doors of the church. The Pastor stood there, trembling, gagging. The Sexton came in the side door with a mop. Alarmed, he rushed to the Pastor.

Father, he said. What's wrong. Why are you leaning there like that—can I help you—

The Pastor struggled to gain his breath.

Father—there, see, I am a priest, not a bastard—

Pastor—pastor, answer me, said the Sexton, placing a hand gently on the Pastor's shoulder. Are you all right? What has happened?

See. Pastor. Pastor. Not just any priest. Not a bastard. Pastor.

Nothing, said the Pastor, pushing away from leaning on the pew and running a hand down his damp sleeve. Nothing at all, he said. Go on with your work—clean up this mess. I need to go to my office. There's a phone call I must make.

There was no reason for him to treat me so brutally—

Rubbing a hand on the side of his neck he went out the door through the rain in the garden, into the rectory and down the narrow dark paneled hall to his office.

There is no reason ever for anyone to be as brutal as that to anyone else—

Raising the phone to his ear, he dialed quickly.

Police? he said. I'm the Pastor at St. Stephen's church on Walnut Street. I've got to report something outrageous—

The next day the Pastor, the Sexton, Father Barnes and a policeman stood near the back of the church by the heavily carved confessional boxes, waiting for the man

in green. The stocky policeman stood tall with his hand hooked into his wide black belt and glanced more and more often at his watch.

Are you sure he'll show, asked the policeman. Its nearly ten o'clock.

He said he would, said the Pastor, running his white hand through his greying hair. The Sexton and Father Barnes stood blank-faced. The policeman leaned back on the confessional box chewing lightly at his lip.

What nonsense is this—someone beating themselves up then ripping up books, grabbing the priests, spitting in their faces—nonsense all nonsense but this is the kind of thing that goes along with my job. Listening to ridiculous things. Waiting and waiting for nothing to happen with screwball people like these, day in, day out—

But dealing with it. I end up dealing with it.

The Sexton, Priest and Pastor lightly shuffled their feet on the marble flooring.

People like these need someone like me. To keep their lives straight. To clean up after them. To keep order—

The back doors of the church banged wide open, startling them. The man in green went straight up the aisle to the altar rail, and stood gazing up with hands folded at the golden tabernacle in the altar. The Pastor leaned at the policeman.

That's him, he whispered.

You sure?

As the Pastor nodded, the man stepped back sharply and wrapped his arms around himself and twisting at the waist, sank to his knees on the floor by the marble rail. Grabbing himself by a fistful of hair, he slammed his head three times into the railing and went down backward onto the floor. As the policeman started down the aisle toward him he rose and got a mass book from a front pew and slowly started tearing out pages and dropping them. The policeman came up to him, followed by the Pastor, Sexton, and Father Barnes.

What's your problem fella? asked the policeman.

The man looked up, crushed the mass book in his hands and sank to his knees, head bowed.

I'm sorry, he said. I know I shouldn't do this. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry but I can't help myself—

Thumbs hooked in his belt, the policeman turned to the Pastor.

This the man grabbed you and spit in your face? he asked.

The Pastor nodded.

—please pray for me, continued the man, rocking back and forth on his knees. I can't help it—I can't help myself. I need help—

Get up and turn around and put your hands behind your back, barked the policeman.

But I need help. These men of God must pray for me. I need help—these men of God must pray for me and I must pray also—

Moving quickly, the policeman gripped the man strongly by the collar, forced him to the floor on his stomach, pressed a knee down on his head with all his weight and pulled a set of chrome plated handcuffs from his belt. The man in green moaned, his face crushed against the hard floor.

No, no! Pray for me! You said you'd pray for me—

Shut up! You're under arrest—

The policeman twisted the man's hands behind his back and tightly clamped the handcuffs on and pulled the man to his feet by his hair and began dragging him roughly down the aisle. The Pastor, Sexton, and Priest stood back as the man was dragged past them, yelling with his face set upward toward a large statue in a niche far above.

Mother Mary—help me! Mother Mary—help me!

The Pastor smiled harshly in the dim light and felt his face where the man had spat.

The policeman is being much too brutal—But he should be brutal even more brutal for what that man has done to me.

Mary! Help Me! cried the man in green as the policeman jerked him forward by the hair. The Sexton pressed a hand to his mouth as the man was roughly dragged past.

No one should have such power over another. No one, never, ever, for any reason—

Father Barnes paled and clasped his hands together as the policeman dragged the man further up the aisle, shaking him savagely. It hurts, cried the man in green. Mary Mother of God, it hurts—

Father Barnes' hands twisted nervously before him.

I prayed, he said he would pray—and it end up like this. Oh, my faith, shaken again—I must say it, again I must say it, I don't want to say it but I must, yes, yes, let the thought come—

Dropping his eyes, Father Barnes closed them down.

There is no God.

The policeman and man in green reached the front doors of the church. The policeman gripped the man's cuffed wrists with one hand and pushed the doors open with the other. The three watched unsteadily from the altar rail. The sun from outside came around the man and the policeman and pulled them out through the door into the light and the door closed back over becoming once more a broad dark-grained oaken panel closing in a great solemn silent empty space.



Santa Domingo
church in Oaxaca,
art by Brian Hosey
and Lauren Braden

Accent On the Root

Zhanna Rohalska

The wrinkled light green dollar bills were lying on the table. They needed to be spent, wasted or given away. She could not bear seeing money on her table anymore, it was diminishing her in her own eyes. How could she dedicate more and more of her precious and unbounded time to this really pragmatic and down-to-earth idea of making money? It was not her nature, she was a social human being and she wanted to communicate with people rather than talking business with them all the time. Or maybe it was just her Russian Slavic slovenly blood talking in her.

Russian and nobody else. Yes, at least it was her answer to those who wondered which country she was from. If she said "Ukraine", there was a very tiny chance that some of the people actually knew such a country existed. So, generalizing by using "Russia" in her reply, she was securing herself from tedious and cliché explanations such as: "Oh, yes, you are right, it used to be a part of Soviet Union but now it has its own independence and the official language is Ukrainian, though Russian still prevails for sure". And so on, and so far... She likes when people grant her with the privilege of not reciting her background ode over and over again. But unfortunately the opposite happens all the time because her accent is still present in its pristine form and stands out wherever and whenever it is possible. Maybe if she tried harder she would get rid of it. There are all kinds of courses: online and live ones which help one to lose one's native accent. For her it was similar or at least close to undergoing a sex change surgery (she would never even consider such a type of procedure). Her accent was one of those not numerous things, which composed her fragile and susceptible to even minor spitefulness national identity. It was a big deed and a great achievement of a strong-willed individual in this modern globalization-infected world to preserve your true native roots. But again it was not a big deal, if you did not have it at the very beginning or if you lost it either on purpose or by the unlucky circumstances such as being really gifted with languages and adopting local pronunciation.

Well, her level of English was actually cryopreserved in its primary phase of development for an indefinite period of time. Her grammar was better than that of some local people and that is the fundamental factor by which people judge of your intelligence. So, she felt completely comfortable and confident expressing herself most of the times. Unless she was in a situation where her foreign background could expose her to sly tricks of businesses preying on those who were fresh off the boat. Let us say, you are buying a new cell phone and are talking over the terms of the annual contract and a sales representative takes advantage of you in some way because you did not hear or misunderstood some phrase. And that is exactly how you wind up tied up and stuck with the company for two years instead of a desired one.

The accent though was a big advantage and attraction for men. It sounded so exotic and estrange for them that they would call her up just in order to hear her

beautiful highly accented voice. When she was getting angry, her English suddenly would become all messed up and she would forget the simplest grammar axioms and formulas. And that is when a lot of her adversaries used a good chance of mocking her and criticizing her English in such a way winning the verbal fight in no time because after reaching the peak of anger she would grow mute and speechless. That was a weakness of hers, which not a lot people were aware of since it would take time to discover it. On the other side, when being affectionate, she would use certain Ukrainian words understandable only to her and him (surely being translated prior to usage). One of those words was “malenkyi” which meant “little, tiny” in Ukrainian. She would whisper it while rubbing the hair of her boy-friend at the time with a deeply built-in and heavily accumulated motherly instinct, which was begging to be channeled in a right direction. This word was part of her baggage, which she was carrying from one relationship into another just inserting a different first name each time. Some things in life are unchangeable as they say. At first it was difficult and tiring for her to remember to use a new name of a lover, she would always stumble and close her mouth right on time in order not to blip out the wrong one. Especially it was hard in the middle of the night when everything was piled up among the sheets: words, legs, smells and emotions. She would gasp for air and a chance of repeating the past but the reality was ungrateful and she had to adapt to a “moving on” script of New York dating scene.

Once she even answered the job ad where women with strong accents were in demand. But she never got any response. Maybe her accent was gradually fading away and becoming not so striking as before?

As you probably can guess she was a language person and was earning her daily bread and butter teaching languages to all hungry and thirsty of knowledge. Thanks God, she chose the right path and entered the Faculty of Foreign Languages. So, now operating fluently with three languages: English, Russian and Ukrainian she did not have to worry about tomorrow and even about preparing herself to her lessons. She would never invest any time into reading her teaching materials before meeting with a student even for the first couple of lectures. It was one of those inner hard to explain principles she would set for herself. She was improvising and looking up chapters while the student was absorbingly writing or pronouncing a new word with his eyes sunk downwards. In short, she was cheating on her professionalism status. But risk was an essential part of her life, so she had to add a bit of challenge into her job, otherwise she would get too bored and then what would she do? Boredom in her vision was a dooming element for everything in her world.

At first she would stick only to teaching Russian/Ukrainian but later, realizing that there were not a lot of Polish tutors in New York, started putting one more ad: “Painless Polish with a Professional Tutor”. Besides this, she tried instructing French but it did not work out because of the huge competition formed by the wide availability of native French speakers. The first and vital priority of any tutor was the fact if he or she was a native speaker of the language he or she taught. I completely agree with this choice of primary requirement- I would never take language classes from somebody for whom the

tongue of his instruction was not native. Everybody is chasing purity and authenticity in this second-hand recycled and pretentious world. But it is easy to pretend. Even our heroine pretended that Polish was her second speaking language when in reality it was not even close to that. In this case, however, in opposition to the previously described teaching negligence, she had to do a decent amount of preparing for her lessons because she did not want to lose the client. That's why she would diligently rent Polish books and movies from the library and limit her service only to beginners and intermediate students. Once she met a man who aggressively self-taught himself Polish just in order to read the private correspondence of Chopin. He was doubtlessly at an advanced level and she had to admit awkwardly her inability to give him the knowledge he would need at this moment. She stoically and with the fading dignity in voice recommended him to find a native Polish speaker for the purpose of teaching him.

Sometimes during the sessions she would watch herself from above as if she were a spirit or a person with depersonalization disorder. The fact that she was teaching and that somebody was listening to her attentively and trustfully made her shiver with spasmodic strangled laugh. It was so surreal and fragile: she was admiring her own patience and articulation. She was almost enamored with her own reflection as if looking into the clear water of a forest pond. She was always very friendly and supportive, she knew that even one wrong look or too criticizing of a remark and there would probably be no student any more. Though appearance in general did not matter a lot. Only once she had an unfortunate encounter with a potential student who made a fast and bitter remark that she did not look like a teacher. Saying this, he stepped away from her looking with suspicion and restless doubt in his eyes. Maybe he expected a frowning woman with dyed black hair, in glasses and in a strict business outfit. Our character was a complete opposite of that image: straight natural untrimmed hair, T-shirt with a trendy logo on it and Puma sneakers. The way a normal person enjoying his or her early twenties should look. She did not want to burden herself with any extra teaching luggage except for textbooks, which quite often she tended not to bring to the lessons as well. What she usually would do was that she would lend them around one by one to her students and then explain to others the reason of not having her manual by giving it to another of them. There was one special textbook, which was weighing probably up to 10 Lb. The girl would make all believable excuses only to be able to leave it behind. All the time while teaching she felt like passing a test in front of herself. She could do this for a long while but it was not challenging and creative enough since she was just guiding the people along the book and not producing anything new or planting any provocative and rebellious ideas in their minds.

She was filled with all the angst and frustration that took roots in her foreign background and a feeling of rootless existence. She was trying to divert her miserable haunting thoughts by cheering herself up looking at the amount of green wrinkled bills piling up on her table. But eventually they just started making her sick and shaky. She was in physical pain. Who could teach HER how to lead a Painless Life?

From now on she would always tell her students that she could not make their lives easier but she could always teach them painless Polish or Russian for a reasonable price.

Snuff

A. McIntyre

The years go by, and Johnny Scotland and I settle in Kabul. We see the city grow. Gone is the pile of rubble we moved into after the war. Now there's a financial district, the stock exchange is power housing Central Asia, and former Talibs in Ralph Lauren T shirts and pleated pants are mowing their lawns, cleaning their SUVs on Sunday. Tourists come, for the climbing, the pot, the archaeological ruins, the porn. That's how Johnny and I made our money, we got in there early. Johnny was Mayor for two terms, he helped renovate the streetcars. We meet for a game of golf, we're members of the Armed Forces Club, and sometimes we sit with our Highballs talking about old times.

We both married local women, several of them actually. Our wives still wear burkas, for their own safety and ours, because they are so incredibly gorgeous underneath all that cloth that, if they didn't wear these garments, society would go mad. Like looking at the Shield of Athena. First time we ever saw them Johnny and I looked at each other and whistled. At that moment, we knew why the Taliban fought so hard. They didn't want outsiders shooting their muck into these broads.

And another thing, no-one could ever understand why the women didn't struggle to be liberated. We had gender experts, lesbian theorists, female cops, people from San Francisco working day and night to liberate these women to no avail. They simply did not want to be liberated. We began to understand when we started hanging out with the Talibs, the guys we were fighting, these guys told us everything. Finally, when we're hooked up with some of these gals, we understand even more. The women never go out because they like to stay at home. And when you marry a whole bunch of them, you suddenly find you are not the head of the household, the broads are. They run everything. They shop, cook, control the money, they argue you to a standstill because they never let up. You try arguing with seven or eight broads in burkas.

So the wealthier you are the less powerful you are because you have more wives than any man. It's a trap you're in before you know it. The average Joe thinks, Hey, I can have lots of women, therefore I'm a real man, so he goes out and gets himself a harem. But lo and behold, he has to satisfy them too, and that ain't easy, and if he doesn't, well, they never leave him alone, or they'll find other men and destroy his life. Then there are feuds, duels, it's happened between harem endowed Americans here, but isn't Texas like that, or Utah? Hasn't it always been like that pretty much anywhere? But there's a sweet side too. The more powerful you become the more women you have, the more you can be a little boy in shorts again.

Hey, welcome to the history of Afghanistan. We've been absorbed, we're living it, the history of the country in a nutshell. Who's conquered who? It might explain why Afghan men have always been happier in the mountains killing each other. And these broads, they hang out together smoking hashish in the cool of the house, lounging about listening to the peacocks and the mina birds, watching the fountain. They don't have to go through all the shit of having to go to the mosque. And who's out there doing all the work in the cauldron of midday? Who has to go to the mosque all the time? The guys of course, the losers in this whole damn thing. Maybe we should have been liberating them. Tell that to the Army boys in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi. When I realized this, I shed tears. We'd been fighting people for nothing. And why were the

Taliban so tough? Well, they had nowhere to go, nothing to do, except loose off their guns and get rid of all the anger either because they didn't have any women, or else they had too many. Johnny and I woke up to this way late, when we both had harems. Now we seldom go home except to fuck, eat, and sleep. And we've got so many kids I only know the names of a dozen. And yeah, Johnny and I like to roam around with machine guns shooting at stuff now and then.

The movies are what made us rich. We cornered the market, got into niches at the right time, porn, all types, fetish, regular, teen. We did other stuff too, ads for soap, cars, shaving cream, you name it. But the snuff movies made us the big bucks. With our background in torture, we were poised to dive into the perfect market. Here's how it goes. Real snuff movies are, for obvious reasons, hard to come by. The true connoisseur knows the genuine article, they horde them like gems. And when you encounter a really good one, a work of art, as opposed to the crap the Russians produce, it will cost you a hell of a lot. Making them's easy enough. Especially with a war. People are free, you just go out in a limo, find someone you like, feed them, coax them with dollars and a story about Hollywood, take them back to the studio, get the camera ready, do the biz. Now it's a tad harder, with all the peace. You have to look around, and we only do beautiful people.

Johnny and I work for some high rollers who want their snuff movies tailor made. We get an order from one of our regulars. He stipulates, I want you to make me a snuff movie with a 1920s setting, nice young French girl, then he specifies the statistics he wants, blonde, nice titties, bobbed hair. And the background, It has to be in a hotel, he continues, Plush, she has to be dressed as a maid, she has to be murdered with a cutthroat razor, a slick of arterial blood has to be in her hair etc. Or whatever the punter wants. Johnny and I get on our merry way to seek out the fair maid and put the whole shebang together. Down the line we get it right, no second chances, you only get one chance at killing, and the experts can spot a duff snuff movie like jewelers can tell a fugazi diamond. There are duffs out there who fluff it, they try to kill a corpse twice, then it's just comedy. No escaping the punters, they get wind of this and the duffs get snuffed. When it's all set up, the customer gets the movie with rights of copy, we keep another for the archives. Johnny and me, we're the top of the Pyramid, but there's one eye.

One of our best customers is the General. He's the guy who won the war here. He got his five stars, he went into politics, now he is a big shot in the National Security Council. Forget the President, he's the patsy, if he doesn't behave he'll get snuffed. It's the NSC boys who run the show. The General never forgot us. We get Christmas cards from him, occasionally he'll visit for a little R and R, play a game of golf, indulge himself in some live stuff. He loves to kill little girls, after having his way with them. Nothing under the age of eleven, mind, he abides by his codes. Everyone respects his restraint. Boys, he drawls, If it weren't for you, I'd still be living in a barracks in some far place, Guantanamo Bay maybe, yearning for the big time, longing for home. I'll never forget you, any time you need something, just give me a call. Johnny always jumps straight to attention when the General says this. Stiff as a ramrod, Johnny's kept himself in shape, it's a wonder to see. Yes sir, General, sir, he snaps, saluting. At ease, soldier, says the General.

Oh, the time goes by, easy street, and Central Asia's ours, we're the first people to control the region since Alexander the Great. The money rolls in, everything as good as it could ever be, the years pass. Investments grow, the USA is the biggest empire the world has ever known, the people are happy. Too damn happy, complains the General, If anything ever goes wrong they'll be too damn soft to defend themselves. This country's starting to remind me of a pond

in summer. We need violence godammit, some evolution. Not like the old days. I remember when . . . and he goes into a monologue that can last for hours, seems like the General lived the entirety of US history. People drop off to sleep, or fetch themselves another whiskey, JJS of course, like medieval England where all day Sunday church attendance was obligatory, but you could slip out for a pint now and then, why so many pubs are within walking distance of a church. I found this out when Johnny and I were based in East Anglia during the Cold War. We were working on East Germans using tricks their fathers taught us . . . And that's how this country became the greatest country on earth, the General concludes, having compared the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, lambasting the British, lampooning the Turks, diminishing the French and the Germans, ridiculing the Spanish and the Italians, let alone the Russians, the Portuguese, and the Chinese. How the Red Indians were a bunch of primitives who needed to be wiped from the face of the earth, My great great Granddaddy was a sergeant under George Armstrong Custer at the Little Big Horn, he drones, Tragedy we didn't finish them off, godammit, the sons of bitches, I could use for hunting some of that prime reservation land those alcoholic savages own. The General pauses for a sip of JJS. Yes sir, General, sir, everyone shouts, Absolutely sir.

Then one day on the edges of the empire, in a distant land named Balustan, the natives topple the king. We see shaky footage of the mob invading the palace, the king seized along with his family. We see the mob setting fire to the palace, lynching the royal family, dancing in the streets. Naturally, some of the natives do not agree with these procedures, very soon a civil war erupts. Johnny and I watch events with mild interest, more for entertainment than anything else. The royalists are put to death, the revolution is complete. The revolutionary government builds a new palace, enforces new codes of behavior, new dress codes, everyone has to wear pajamas, not Maoist pajamas, rather striped pajamas from British styles of the 1920s, the trousers with drawstrings. They start to rebuild. These people are hostile to us, but they pose no immediate threat. However, I'm starting to think, and I feel Johnny's on the same radio channel, we start to look at each other in strange ways. He looks away and simpers, I wonder what's up. I blush. We get confused, down the line both of us admit that we suspected we were going gay. Then the General calls, and puts us straight.

Boys, he says, I've got a job for you. We sit in the VIP room of the Kabul Hilton sipping our whiskey, and the General starts to explain. We need this country, boys, Balustan I believe it's called, a fine god fearing country and we're gonna get it. Hell, we could go in right now, take it in a few weeks. We need it because if we don't get it, the Russians will, or the Chinese, who knows even the British. We're going to do these monkeys a favor, invade them before they get invaded by someone else. I heard they have to wear 1920s striped British pajamas, with the drawstring. Isn't that reason enough, fer chrissake? Donate them everything American, all the trimmings, all our values, everything free of charge. Problem is, how do we get the great American people to support the project? I don't know what the hell's wrong with everybody. He stares, one eye twitching.

The General is right. This has got to be the laziest goddamn empire in history. But why should the American people want to participate in such a project? The problems are thousands of miles away. Things are going fine, everyone's rich, who wants fine young sons going off to fight in some lousy swamp, when they could be going to college to study business, maybe even get an MBA? But if we don't get this country, someone else will, and that's how empires start to collapse. General, sir, says Johnny Scotland, Excuse me for interrupting sir,

I'm thinking Czechoslovakia, 1938.

Shaking, the General ejaculates, Exactly, exactly, you took the words right out of my mouth, son. And that's where you boys come in. You're going to make a movie. A movie, sir? asks Johnny. A movie, the General repeats grinning, What you boys do best, a snuff movie. With a star cast of select US military personnel. Special Forces dressed as Balustanis. They attack our borders, you film the action, we show it to the American people, they get mad enough to support our project, we invade. As simple as that. Just like the Germans with Czechoslovakia. You hit the nail, Johnny Scotland. Get working boys, we need results fast before those goldarned liberals get the upper hand in Congress.

The mechanism starts rolling, the cameras in the exact same spots we'd place machine guns, we know our terrain Johnny and I, we capture events. It's always odd to see our own people getting blown to smithereens, machine gunned, bombed, but it's all on film, it's a movie after all. Hey, it's not the first time we did this, it sure won't be the last. One of the oldest tricks in the book, and it works, part of the game. The Great Game, the Brits called it. And these martyrs will be heroes, they'll be immortalized, like the boys at Pearl Harbor, the folks in the Twin Towers. Every year their names will be honored, we'll have shaped another keystone of the great American myth.

Headlines around the world explode. The liberals fade into the background, they go into exile in Holland, or they jump onto the roller coaster of war. The American people are motivated all right. Furious grandpas try to enlist, flexing biceps, dying their hair, thousands of young men rally to the flag, girls only date a fellow if he's wearing a uniform. Sports stars motivate the masses. Oh there are pockets of protest, the usual places, San Francisco, New York, the peaceniks forgetting, as usual, that they are just as invested in this as we are. It's in our interests to leave them alone. They have the joy of their illusions because we're so fucking strong the barbarians are very far from the gates. I mean, how many people in history had the luxury of voting, and protesting, and planning their retirement?

"Evolution Not Revolution," is the General's motto, and he's content. The USA is strong in its resolve, we're worth many millions more. It's going to be a long war. We've got stakes in companies linked to military supply, we'll make a killing. And we're directing The Movie. Along with the General, Johnny and I are among the most powerful people on the planet, the Eye in the Triangle. E Pluribus Unum. Reform school boys made good, Johnny and I are living the dream. We meet the General in his New England retreat. The butler takes us down the long polished corridors of the labyrinthine manor to the parlor where, as he is accustomed in his leisure time, the General is dressed as a 17th Century English Civil War cavalier. He offers us JJS, on the rocks of course. With boys like you, the General enunciates, This country will always be great. We salute, shouting, Yes sir, General, sir. At ease, soldiers, he growls. He takes a little silver box from his pocket, opens it and, placing white powder between his thumb and his forefinger, he sniffs it up one nostril then the other. Johnny and I look at each other amazed. We haven't seen the General doing coke for more than twenty years, not since the Central America business. He observes us then, in Queen's English, with a touch of Old Etonian, he says, Snuff, old chap, snuff. Fancy a pinch?



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