



children  
*churches*  
& daddies

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## Scars art

5 (molecules used for the Carbon Credits editorial 02/08), 43 ("Kill the Police" graffiti, photographed in Austria May 2003), 44 (Kuypers 2078 oil painting of a night sky). Cover art of snow on a tree and the ground.



Untitled, painting by Jay Marvin

## Date

### Sarah Hoffman

You ask me to leave my clothes  
at the door. You fold them  
and stack them in a metal bucket;  
you drop a match in.  
The blouse goes acridly in seconds.  
The jeans are slow  
and you worry aloud about the smoke alarm.  
For a moment, when the pocket  
catches, we see my keys  
silhouetted; a frayed  
watchband; change.  
When it's ashes and blackened metal  
you lead me by both hands  
into the kitchen, where you've set  
two places. High hardwood chairs.  
I sit with my legs crossed,  
uncrossed, tucked.  
You pour white wine; you watch me.

poetry  
the passionate stuff

## Song of Childhood

Paula Ray

Sarah pounded  
a snaggle-toothed xylophone,  
rainbow paint chipped away,  
aluminum flesh--exposed.

*Mary Had a Little Lamb.*

Sarah had a brittle dog  
and voodoo baby dolls.

She followed me home  
from school one day,  
which was against the rules.

I offered her an apple.

She dropped it when she saw me  
pick up the phone to call her mother.

When I asked her mom to come get her,  
I noticed Sarah  
get on her knees  
and begin picking the bruise  
on the apple,  
digging her nails deeper into the wound.

Oaxaca  
image  
from  
Brian  
Hosey &  
Lauren  
Braden



## Desire

Je'free

It can make us either -  
The puppet or the puppeteer

What ever it is we desire  
Dissolves like a salt in the sea

It becomes the sculpture  
As we are the sculptors

Each pain caused by it ought to be  
One rung up the ladder of wisdom

It is the secret password  
That made us enter the door of life,

The golden key to the heart  
Of humankind

It is a spark from God  
Fueled to form a fervent prayer,

And transform us like alchemy  
Transmutes copper to gold

broken only by the perfunctory  
shit smile  
we all keep a stiff upper lip  
at work. occasionally

it gets just too over bearing  
just too much. we

go stark raving mad. tell

everybody  
boss & all  
just how the fuck  
we really feel. go

running roaring  
out the door  
down the street  
kicking cans  
fingering traffic  
screaming  
all the way. till

at last  
exhausted  
finally

we are speaking  
softly (the rain  
in our face)

&  
for the first time in  
our career  
we have caught

god's ear.

# when the glass ceiling cracks on little you-who's head

normal

---

## America Loves Big Brother

Brandi S. Henderson

America loves Big Brother,  
no choices. They decide  
what's right and wrong.  
How they belittle the human mind.  
You lose another freedom  
every day.  
How do they expect  
this country to survive?  
The day you realize  
your fate is not based  
on your actions that is  
the day you should spread  
your reactions and take  
actions, any actions against  
what will silence you.

# Getting Naked at Work and Reciting Shakespeare

Newamba

Sitting in desolate isolation entrapped by a cubicle  
My boredom melancholy counted by ticking clocks  
Water coolers burping passing time like hour glasses  
Co-workers gossiping about the celebrity couple that punched a nun in the face  
And adopted a one legged orphan from Sri Lanka with rabies named Pujuma

I can no longer bear the monotony  
So I jump onto a table in the middle of the room  
And begin to scream out a Shakespearean sonnet  
Tearing off my work clothes with each stanza  
Instead of an English accent,  
I recite it with the voice of Tony Danza

Now totally nude and completed all verse,  
I tie my necktie around my head  
And strap on running shoes with no socks  
No socks, not now, not today

I yell out...  
"I am Ezra Pound, and this is my lost Canto!"

Jumping down from the table, colleagues point and yell  
Some laugh, some gasp  
A lady faints, a man spits out coffee and drops things  
My frightened turtle shrivels in the cool air-con  
But I care not  
For today I am free

I run into my bosses office  
Turning around and bending over,  
I sing "Don't worry, Be Happy" in B Flat and slap on my buttcheeks for rhythm  
Not even exiting his conference call, I don't think he notices the intrusion  
I wave "ta-ta" and run down the hall to the elevator  
A woman had been standing there but took off running when she saw me

Once in the elevator, I hum to musak that sounds like “Kokomo”  
“Aruba, Bahama” “Key Largo, Montego”

I love that song and it sounds much better when you’re naked and in an elevator  
Getting out, I dodge a security guard trying to capture me  
“To be or not to be!” I yell and run out into the street

As I run down the street, I sing Christmas Carols and put quarters into  
vacant parking meters

(I keep a roll of quarters inserted in my rectum at all times just in case a  
situation like this develops)

Stopping and saluting a leashed dog,

I revoltingly recant Walt Whitman and have sex with a street sign

Now smoking a cigarette I picked up off the street,

I begin running and singing again, even more out of key

People scream and point and cover their children’s eyes

It’s amazing the reactions that a naked man running down the street smoking,  
bellowing out “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” elicits

I point to the sky and proclaim wildly:

“Today, and only today, I am the antique’s teeth from ‘The Waste Land’  
without the cockney accent, and they are me!”

I run into a tumultuous shopping mall

Crawling with suburban zombies and credit crunchiness

Climbing up the escalator, I begin to give the Gettysburg Address

Suddenly I’m shot in the back of the head by a deranged Burger King  
employee on a homicidal rampage

I die instantly

I’m still naked



**Atom**

Chris Butler

To split  
a single  
atomic  
particle,  
is to splice  
open and  
reveal the  
contents of  
the human  
soul to the  
world, just  
to nuke it.

# Trying to Change Fate

Janet Kuypers

the way a weight on a stretched elastic cloth  
can move and distort the fabric of the cloth  
everything in existence  
can distort space in the universe

i've been wrapping my head around this,  
that gravity isn't the strong one  
but gravity's a consequence  
of the distortion of space and time

the larger the distortion of space and time  
the bigger effect you see in gravity

so as sci-fi media talks of warp travel  
all they're really talking about  
is producing the energy to warp space-time  
so you instantly arrive  
at the other end of the universe

because with all that energy,  
the other end of the universe  
comes to you

i've been wrapping my head around this,  
using dark energy to bend time and space  
and i keep wondering what i could do  
if i knew when and where  
to get away from where  
i was, get to where i need to be

would i have learned my lesson  
and not come to you  
when you, the ex-gang member  
strangled me

would i have come to you  
in the middle of the night  
called an ambulance  
before your heart attack  
keeping you alive

would i instantly arrive  
that one fateful saturday  
to go swimming  
instead of waiting in traffic,  
being almost killed  
while stopped on the road

would I come to you  
despite the hurricane  
to hold you once  
before you let death consume you

wait, i know us,  
i was your daughter,  
but i was never close enough to you  
to hold you

i should know better  
than to contemplate bending space-time  
trying to change fate



Clouds 43, art by  
Tracy M. Rogers

## Untitled

Jane Stuart

Dark winds  
cross the dunes  
blowing sand into seas  
in galaxies west of the moon  
tonight



# Dreams 08/24/08

Janet Kuypers

I had a dream that I had a dream  
what I wanted to learn so speak Spanish fluently,  
and the one guy said the only way to do that  
would be to intensively study with him for two months  
and otherwise have no connection to the outside world.  
Well, it sounds strange that I would do this  
in this dream I was having in my dream,  
but I did, and I jumped to the end of the two months  
and I was sitting with this guy:  
he asked me a question in Spanish, and  
(by the way, I was really fat after these two months,  
I don't know how I gained like eighty pounds that fast,  
but I did)  
and I answered him in Spanish,  
and it sounded like I lived in Mexico all my life,  
I spoke so fluently and comfortably.

Well, this was the dream I had in my dream,  
so after my dream in my dream I called my sister  
to explain to her the dream I just had.

Then I called Darryl while he was at the lab working,  
to ask him about recording his voice  
for use in my upcoming performance art show,  
and after I got off the phone with him  
my phone rang again,  
and I answered it the way I usually do.  
The voice at the other end said,  
"You're in a lower voice than you were before."  
And... I was a bit put off by this comment,  
so I asked, "Who is this?"  
and he said,  
"You're talking in a lower voice than you were before."  
And I got the feeling this was someone else  
from the Lab Daryl was working at,  
and that this guy was listening to our conversation.  
This really kind of freaked me out,  
so I woke up.

# You'll Never Outlaw It, You Know

CEE

I love this lanternlamp  
A priceless antique, you know  
No, siree, I'd never part with this lovely  
Dot of Americana  
I treasure this treasure  
It's a treasure  
After all, it holds my butts and dead ashes  
And that's empowering



Standing, art by  
the HA!man of  
South Africa  
(<http://www.hamanworld.com>)

## Hard as a Rock

Janet Kuypers

you left me a hard as a rock  
no one'll ever hurt me like that again

and you know,  
screw that whole rock-paper-scissors thing  
because i don't care what's on that paper  
i can still bury it  
    hide it form the world  
    destroy it  
because i'm as hard as a rock  
and i can get rid of whatever that peper says  
press it down before scissors can even cut it up

you see, you've done that to me  
made me as hard as a rock  
you've made me close myself off to the world  
and now all i can do  
is use my new power  
to silence everyone else

## The City

TJ Streett

If I ever loved  
it was out of fear

If I ever gave  
it was because I took  
more than I could carry

I assure you  
I've harmed  
because I could not heal  
but I have faith  
my pride will deliver me  
from the city  
of my transgressions



I Died  
For  
Nothing  
art by  
Peter  
Bates

## Saving Lives

Erek Smith

the old man that delivers the newspapers at work looks a lot like Santa Claus & after dropping off the papers he asks to use the bathroom so i show him where it is	ARE YOU SAVED? it reads  i take a shit & before leaving inspired by his desire to help and save people i do the same & pick up the pamphlet & drop it in the garbage on my way out.
ten minutes later i see him leave so i go to the bathroom to use it myself and i see a church pamphlet on the counter of the sink	

## No Vacancy

Debra A. Suba

Eyes tired  
Mind on meltdown  
T.V. blaring  
Lights too dim to read by  
I find hotel rooms friendly  
Unknown to who you really are  
No familiar faces or pictures on the wall  
An undesirable clunky bed  
With the middle sunk in from previous one night stands  
Funny how I sleep better here than in my own bed  
These blank beige walls with their canvas texture and bland looks  
Impress and inspire me  
I must be crazy to be taken back by cheap tapestry and tattered carpet  
To be inspired by used up avenues and trampled on hallways  
Is by far an intangible feeling  
Perhaps I am hallucinating  
I am fooling myself to think that this better  
Compared to my own one room living arrangement  
Ha ha ha  
It's laughable isn't it  
You can't help but crack a smile thinking about it can you?  
Neither can I

# Blood Burns Like H

Jim Coppoc

I hear you ask how much  
of this blood  
is yours

how much  
mine

how much  
stabbed and plunged  
into your veins  
like a man you can't help  
but part for

I watch you melt  
fill strap pierce plunge  
this metal into your body

blood in the syringe means  
you've got a hit

hits are hard anymore  
the veins shrink and roll  
they are wary

I consider fucking you  
but light a cigarette instead  
tell you I only smoke  
when I'm drinking you in

I tug at your tourniquet  
satisfy myself with the snap  
of its release

touch my lips to your ear  
and whisper that you are beautiful

you are beautiful

I don't ask what you are thinking  
only hold my cigarette steady  
and watch as the paper turns  
to ash

---

## Wash Away

Richard King Perkins II

Where does it hurt  
when cardboard walls collapse  
in a sodden pile around you,  
snuffing the Sterno  
soaking a scrounged meal  
and your only change of rags?

Where does it hurt  
when city rain is the cleanest thing  
that's happened to you  
in seventeen months on the street  
and lovers on the sidewalk laugh,  
swinging arms together,  
catching droplets on their tongues  
while you cart your chosen scraps  
through blind alleyways  
seeking semi-permanent shelter?

Why is someone's pleasure  
always another's pain  
and some things so easily washed away  
while other diseases remain

which the clearest of mountain waters  
will never penetrate?

# cesar

## Vanessa Leigh Watters

for seven years  
cesar has been  
pouring the coffee  
to the night owls  
at the round the clock diner

curly black hair  
slicked back into place  
he keeps stoic watch –  
pouring afresh  
the hot liquid salvation  
before the white  
porcelain bottom  
is revealed

a gaggle of girls  
beckons him over



Obstacle,  
art by Edward Michael  
O'Durr Supranowicz

these gringas have  
been teasing  
and tormenting him  
for years  
forcing upon him  
their burgeoning  
nymphic sexuality  
their desire to exert  
power and control  
their need to feel  
craved

the ringleader  
leans forward  
a spaghetti strap  
falls aside  
revealing her pert  
creamy breasts –  
“mas cafe, por favor”

cesar glances down  
at her body  
remembering his role  
he raises his head  
stares into her eyes  
nods and smiles  
revealing a glimmering  
gold upper bicuspid

he pours the coffee  
and walks away

“pervert”  
they giggle

cesar's face  
turns red  
and he reflects-  
how did he come  
to this small town  
on the windswept plains?  
when will he see  
his family again?

prose  
the meat and potatoes stuff

## Nowhere Home

Bill Ecenbarger

Rafael was crouched against the interior wall of the barn watching the dog tend to her litter of pups. Earlier that night, he had knelt next to the dog while she was in labor. She was Rafael's favorite animal on the farm. He didn't know how she became pregnant because she didn't come in contact with any other dogs that he knew of. She was free to wander off the farm, but, as far as he knew, she never did.

From the look of the pups, Rafael thought the father might be a wolf or a coyote. But, really, they were too small to tell at this point. They were pinkish-white and looked like little larvae, but with short bristled hair. None of them could open its eyes. They were blind to the world around them. Only their mother existed. There was nothing else to know.

There were six pups. Rafael had watched each be born. One after the other. Now the mother lay on her side nestled into one of the corners of the barn in the straw on the dirt floor, panting, while the pups jostled for position around her swollen nipples. All of them except one. During the night, just after they were born, Rafael had watched the mother carry one pup by the scruff of its neck to the center of the barn floor and drop it there. She then returned to the other five pups in the corner to feed them.

The one carried away by the mother was the smallest. Rafael shone the flashlight beam on it, and the pup raised its head, eyes still unopened and rheumy, toward the light. It began moving toward the source of the light. Rafael sat quietly in the midnight stillness of the barn and watched the pup struggle toward him. It did not yet know how to use its legs properly. It could not raise itself up completely. It put its front paws out and used them to drag its body toward the light, toward Rafael. Its progress was excruciatingly slow, but Rafael marveled at its determination. It struggled and faltered and struggled some more.

Rafael stood and walked over to where the panting mother lay with the other pups. He set the flashlight down near the mother with the beam pointed toward the struggling pup. A beacon. He returned to his spot against the wall and watched. He resisted his urge to pick the pup up and carry it over to the mother. He resisted the urge to go into the house and get some of the goat or cow milk that would be in the pails on the table in the kitchen.

He sat and watched the pup, amazed and intrigued by the giant blind force contained in that tiny body. It was bigger than anything he had ever seen.

At some point Camilo came out to the barn carrying an oil lamp. He saw Rafael and saw the flashlight by the mother and he saw the pup struggling toward it.

“What’re you doing, Rafa? If she doesn’t want him he can’t live. It happens all the time. Let him die. It’s what’s supposed to happen.”

“....”

“You’re just going to ignore me, Rafa?”

“I’m not ignoring. I’m listening. I just don’t have anything to say.”

“It’s time for bed. It’s late. Come in. Either it will be alive in the morning or it won’t. There are five other pups.”

“....”

“You can’t interfere with this, Rafael. No matter how much you want it to be some other way, this is the way it is. If you interfere, you’ll just make the mother want it even less. She might even kill it.”

“....”

“If you touch that pup, the mother will smell you all over it.”

“I didn’t touch it.”

“Well, you’re trying to lure it to her with the flashlight. But if she doesn’t want it, she doesn’t want it.”

“....”

“Look. I’m going to bed. If you want to stay out here and waste those batteries, be my guest. But you’ll buy new ones from your own money.”

“....”

“Fine. Maybe you’ll learn a lesson tonight.”

“....”

Rafael saw Camilo turn and leave the barn. The light from Camilo’s lantern swung out across the yard toward the house and a deeper darkness remained in the barn in its wake.

The pup continued to drag itself toward the light, toward its mother. It had traveled less than a half a meter in all this time and still had nearly four meters to go.

Rafael leaned his head back until it came to rest on one of the worn vertical wood boards that comprised the wall of the barn. He could feel the cracked dry grain of the board at the point where the back of his head met it. He closed his eyes. With them closed, he listened.

He heard the soft clucking of chickens. He heard an occasional clomp from the hoof of one of the horses as it fidgeted in its stall. He heard the squeals of the pups as they nuzzled at their mother’s nipples. He heard the steady panting of the mother. And he heard the sound of the lone pup’s small body inching its way through the straw and dirt on the floor. He also heard the sound of his own breathing and the rhythmic thump of his own heart.

He must have fallen asleep at some point. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the pup had reached the area near the mother and was trying to push through the squirming bodies of its siblings to find a nipple. Its movements had a certain urgency now that Rafael had not seen as it crossed the barn floor earlier. Each time it got close to one of the nipples, it would be knocked aside by one of the other pups.

But Rafael felt hopeful now. It was there at the threshold.

Suddenly the mother pushed the other pups off of her. She stood and shook herself three times, her back twitching after each shake. Drops of milk from her nipples fell to the straw and dirt. The mother picked the pup up in her mouth by the scruff of its neck. Again she carried it over to the middle of the barn floor and dropped it, and then returned to the same spot in the corner where she lay back down and the other pups continued their feeding.

Rafael was devastated. Once again he considered taking the pup into the kitchen to drink the goat or cow milk, if there was any left over.

He estimated it would be light in only a few hours. Then his cousin Elena would be up and would come to the barn to milk the cows. Camilo would be up too, and then it would be time for breakfast. And after breakfast, he would have to workBfirst feeding and watering all of the animals and then helping Camilo with whatever other work needs to be done.

He watched the pup once again laboriously drag itself toward the light. He noticed that the flashlight beam was weaker than it had been earlier. The pup's progress was slower as well, but it moved with the same determination it had shown all along. Rafael was profoundly moved by the fierce will that resided in that tiny creature.

He closed his eyes again and waited. Maybe ten minutes passed and then he noticed, even through his closed eyelids, a change in the quality of the light in the barn. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the flashlight beam was gone. The batteries had finally died. He did not stir. He closed his eyes again to allow them to adjust. When he opened them a few minutes later, he could see the pup still struggling toward its mother, undeterred.

The pup continued its grueling journey across the floor, covering the same ground it had covered earlier that night. Again Rafael's eyes grew heavy, and again he fell asleep. This time he was awakened by the sound of the barn door opening. He looked up and saw that the sun was beginning to rise. He saw his cousin Elena carrying the milk pail from the kitchen. She looked at him, then at the dogs in the corner. Then, without a word, she walked to the far side of the barn to milk the cow.

A few minutes later, Camilo came in.

"Come on, let's go. It's time for breakfast. Leave them alone. What's meant to be will be."

"...."

"I see you ran the batteries out on the flashlight. I told you, you're just interfering."

"I'm not interfering anymore. I'm just watching."

"Well, watch later. Right now it's time to eat. They'll still be here when you get back."

"I can't eat yet. I won't."

"Fine. But you'll do your chores just like everyday. I'll take grandma's switch to you if you don't."

"I'll do my chores. I just won't eat."

Camilo made a sound of exasperation and left the barn. The pup had again reached the mother. It was desperate now to reach one of the nipples. It nuzzled its



way past one of the others and reached a nipple. This time it was able to latch on. Rafael could see it excitedly tug on the nipple with its mouth. The rest of its body did not cease moving. It squirmed and rolled.

Rafael stood up and stretched. He was exhausted and his neck ached. His legs were cramped. He walked over to the bin where the feed for the chickens and pigs was kept. He used the plastic scoop to fill up a bucket. Then he carried the bucket over to the area of the chicken coops. He opened the coops and spread the feed on the ground. The chickens clucked and bobbed and pecked at the feed. Next he walked down to the well and filled up two large plastic buckets. He carried them back to the barn and filled the horses' water buckets. Then he returned to the well and filled them again. He carried those buckets back up to the barn and filled the trough by the pigs. He watered the cows and then brought a little water for the goat tethered in the yard by the house. After he fed the pigs their slop, he returned to the area of the barn where he had spent the previous night.

He looked over at the mother dog as she lay there, still panting. He had brought some of the extra water with him to give to her. But as he approached he saw the still form of the pup. It was there, not far from the nipple where he had last seen it. He knew right away that it was dead. He was not surprised. Not even disappointed. But he was overcome with sadness.

He walked over and picked up the pup's body. That incredible force was gone from it now. He could feel the tiny bones of its ribs under the spongy skin and bristling hair. He lifted it up to his face. He wept into the limp dead form he held in his hands.

He carried the body out behind the house along with a small shovel. He dug a two-foot hole and laid the body inside. He covered it. Then he went in and ate breakfast.



Sow Your Seeds, art by Aaron Wilder

# The New Millennium Aphrodisiac

Dave S. Shearer

Artie had closed the door to the bedroom most of the ways, leaving it open just a small crack so that if Tanya were to get curious and come peeking in he would have an extra moment to close out all the browser windows on the computer before she could see. He listened very carefully for footsteps or any noise that would have alerted him to any impending intrusion. He was as alert as a soldier in defense of a post, waiting for the strike and hoping that if and when it came he would be as ready as he planned to be.

Below the keyboard that sat on the desk his pants were unbuttoned and his fly lay open, and in the fist of his left hand he clenched himself firmly. His right hand moved the mouse along the pad on the desk as above on the screen the little white arrow cursor raced rapidly around, opening windows and clicking on various images to see them in larger format.

On the screen at that moment was a picture of a naked girl of about 20 years old, her firm large breasts openly displayed. Her brown hair was long and fell in layers upon her tanned shoulders. Her neck and head were stretched back and in her eyes was a mischievous look complemented by a devilish smile. She looked straight at the camera and Artie could almost hear her say, *“Do you like what you see? I know you do. Oh, the things I would do to you...”*

Excited by the picture, Artie’s hand began to go to work below the keyboard. He listened closely, making sure his girlfriend was still obliviously strewn across the couch of the living room in the small New York City apartment that they shared. He could faintly hear the television in the other room, Jerry Seinfeld carrying on some hilarious banter with Jason Alexander to the music of a canned studio manufactured laughter soundtrack.

His right hand moved the mouse along again, clicking here and there and now there was a video playing of the same girl posing and touching herself. She reached up and jiggled her sizeable assets for the camera before turning and bending over so the viewer could get a closer and more personal look at her backside. She did these things seemingly at the behest of the cameraman, who coached her on with enthusiastic cheers like, “Nice, I like that,” and “Good, now smack it.”

With another click the video changed to show the girl on her knees using her mouth to pleasure a skinny guy who was naked except for a side turned red baseball cap. The camera zoomed in and out on her face as she moved her head back and forth.

Artie clicked away and over the next few minutes watched several similar videos of a variety of different girls. He was jerked suddenly from his intense concentration when the voice of his girlfriend called to him from the living room. “Artie, are we going to watch this movie?” she said in her thick Northern Floridian accent. “I

thought you said you just wanted to check your email?”

“I am!” he called back, annoyed at having been disturbed. “Just give me a couple of minutes. I’ll be right out and then we can watch it.”

“Alright, hurry up!”

*“Always so impatient!”* he thought. *“She’s lucky I put up with her. I ought to tell her to march her fat ass back to Tallahassee that’s what I out to do. She can go back to living with that muscle head douchebag who used to beat her all the time if she wants!”* He turned his attention back to the screen. He realized that he would have to make this quick and needed something that was going to really get him going. He was getting bored of these videos anyway and clicked the mouse to bring up a search bar into which he typed the words “Asian twins”.

*“Yeah, this is some good shit,”* Artie said to himself as the screen displayed a new medley of naked oriental girls who looked as though they may or may not be sisters performing an assortment of sexual acts. His hand went back to work as he looked at the pictures and watched the videos. He imagined what it would be like to be there with the girls, letting them run their hands over his body and pleasure him with their tongues. When he imagined himself he was loose and confident, his flabby white gut and pasty loose skin being of no consequence to the lustful attention of the girls. Sluts didn’t care about stuff like that anyway. All they wanted was sex. If he were there Artie would have made them scream with pleasure, he would have made them beg like a bunch of starved dogs.

There was a noise from the other room and it took Artie a second to recognize it as the sound of clinking glassware in the kitchen. He had jolted again and involuntarily hastened to cover himself and block the screen, fearing his girlfriend would storm the room and find him there touching himself and gorging on the pornographic content. She had already caught him once several months ago and the argument that had ensued had been so bitter it had instilled in him a healthy fear of her prying eyes “Disgusting,” was the word she’d used to describe what he’d been doing. He had tried to turn it around, saying she was physically neglectful. A huge battle ensued and in the end he’d promised to never look at anything like that again, a promise he had quickly broken the very next day.

*“She’s just getting a drink,”* he told himself. *“She’ll start yelling about the movie again soon though.”*

He opened back up the search bar and into the line typed “Fetish.” The computer did a search and brought up a new set of colorful images. Artie fixed his eyes on the sordid feast. There were pictures of domination and S&M, transsexuals, cross dressers, people urinating on each other, and girls having sex with animals. He began to click on random links that got him really excited.

He watched a video of a man dressed as a girl getting slapped and pinched by a huge breasted blonde woman in black leather boots and lingerie. He watched a girl bend over a fence behind what looked like a rural farmhouse and waited for a large grey horse to come and mount her while she screamed and gritted her teeth. He watched a beautiful girl with startling green eyes and a firm body masturbate while a man urinated on her chest. His hand flew furiously and Artie could feel the

moment building in him.

Again he envisioned himself there participating in all those images. He gave himself freely to his imagination and as such became a man who possessed an infinite prowess and command over desire. A man who would never know the awkwardness in which he himself usually felt during sex, those laborious, nervous, and difficult experiences of his life of which there had been precious few before he had met Tanya. He had been with only two other women in his life. The first was a drunken one night stand with skinny busted-faced Gloria Hetton in eleventh grade at a friend's party after junior prom, the second with tortured Dana Flaherty who he had met in college. He'd found out that Dana was a cutter the second week they were hanging out when she showed him the scars on her legs and arms and even though he'd been freaked out he needed someone so bad he had stuck around. Eventually he fell desperately and madly in love with her and when she had ironically dumped him after only seven weeks it was he who was the one crying and acting like a psycho.

He hadn't had sex again until he started hanging out with Tanya nearly two years later after a friend introduced them while he was in his last semester of college. Even now, after nearly a year, when they were intimate he felt as if he were somehow being judged. He wondered if she was truly enjoying it, if the moans and sounds of pleasure she made were real or fake. Even though she was as fat as he was he still felt that when they were together she were looking at his gut and chest and criticizing him within the clandestine recesses of her mind. The computer didn't look at his man boobs, it didn't buy him running shoes for Christmas, it didn't bring home whole wheat bread and baked potato chips from the supermarket. In each image he saw the man he was meant to be as he fulfilled all of his wanton and impious desires.

"Artie," called his girlfriend from the living room again. "Hurry up!"

"I'm coming!" he shouted, and this time his words were literal. He reached up and grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on the desktop and released himself into them. When he was done he felt his heart beating with the quickness of a cheetah in his chest and sweat broken out on his forehead and along the back of his neck. Satisfied, he closed the browser windows and threw the tissues deep into the waste pail of the bedroom, zipped back up his pants and walked back out to the living room.

Tanya was on the couch waiting for him and she smiled when he came into the room. On the coffee table was a bowl of popcorn and a glass of soda. She hopped up and popped in the DVD and waited for him to sit down on the couch so she could snuggle up to him. She moved her thick frame onto his on the couch and hit the play button on the remote, then lay her head on his chest and draped her arm across his sizeable belly. On the screen the FBI warning against piracy began to scroll vertically across a bright green background. He looked down at the top of her head and saw her roots showing beneath the dye of her hair and his eyes trailed down the meaty pudginess of her back. He reached up and with his hand removed her arm from off of his stomach and pushed it over to her side. He shrugged his shoulder so she wouldn't lean so close to him. She looked up at him with a confused angry expression but he was oblivious to her gaze, instead fixing his vision on the television. The green screen held on for a moment or two longer before turning black as the movie began to play.

# Heart of a Tightrope Dancer

Elide Bors

For a while, things were looking up for us, though until then only faith had kept us going. After months of starvation right after the war, and after living in a one room house along with a whole family dying of consumption, the simple life we now had seemed like paradise on earth. My mother had found a solid job – and she liked it too – and my grandmother took care of us all. Within two months, my daughter and I had regained all our strength. Ana was five months old now, and she was a beautiful, plump girl. Everyone who saw her fell in love with her sweet face. Only her father had forgotten all about her – but how could he not, since he had his own family to worry about. They lived close by and our paths crossed many times, but even when he saw little Ana he remained cold as ice, so I gave up trying to make him care. It took all my strength to wrench him out of my heart.

Soon, my baby was fifteen months old and she ate well on her own, so she was growing even plumper and more beautiful. It had been more than two years now since I had left the circus, and as I was free to work and I felt strong again, I decided to go back. At least, that was a job where I already knew all the ropes, so to speak. My grandmother offered to take care of Ana while I was gone, so I returned to my training routine and quickly caught up. One couldn't even tell I had stopped for so long. Come spring, we were on the road again. I was ecstatic, because that was my world, that was my passion, and everyone adored me. It was as if I had finally come out of my imprisonment, and I could dedicate my life to my art again. All the pain, the poverty, and the humiliation of the last two years had been erased, and I could hardly believe I was the same person. Life was bright again – or at least I was sure I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. I also knew that my little Ana was in good hands.

We were performing in a little town, and every night the circus tent was overflowing with people eager to watch us. I was one of the favorites, especially for my loping number – a very hard one because I had to seesaw on a plank, high above on the tightrope. Every night, my trailer was filled with flowers from unknown admirers.

One evening, I found a note in one of the bouquets. Intrigued, I opened it and read it, but all it said was “I'll be waiting for you after the show.” I was in no mood for romance, but I wanted to see who the secret admirer was, so after the show I waited for him, though I was quite weary of the director, who was also our ring leader. True enough, this time I was not bound to the circus by a contract, but since he had even beaten me in the past, I couldn't tell what he would do or say if I acted against his will.

I didn't have to wait long: a gorgeous, svelte silhouette stepped toward me. He was tall and handsome, nothing less than my dream man. His eyes intensely staring into mine, he shook my hand and introduced himself as Tony. He told me he had watched every show, and that he was simply in love with me. We talked for a while, and he said his intentions were sincere and his passion unquenched: he wanted to marry me. He was an ambitious young man, already a law functionary, and he would not take no for an answer. I said I couldn't decide so quickly, and he begged to see me the next day. In

truth, I was smitten, and I could hardly believe what was happening. We talked a lot about Ana, my beautiful baby, and he wanted her to live with us too. In the end, I told him I might decide to stay there with him and not follow the circus, trying with all my might to believe that my destiny would be kind for once in my life.

Knowing that the ring leader would not conceive of having a show without my popular tightrope number, I decided to elope right after the last performance. Tony would wait for me to finish, and whisk me away to my new, wonderful life.

I waited for that day thinking of nothing else, and barely eating with excitement. Finally, the last night was upon us, and the circus was packed – no room even for standing. That was quite common on final nights. I had promised myself to be flawless and charming, so my last number would be remembered forever.

The drums beat, and the sound of music drowned the arena. I marched to the middle, happier than I had ever been. I felt invincible and full of life. They say love conquers all, and that night I was sure of it. I climbed the apparatus, to perform on the fragile aerial lyra. I started my number. Loping, the hardest part, came at the end – and with it the spinning in place on the tightrope. I had so much momentum that, instead of the twenty spins I had to do, I was already past thirty, until I heard the desperate voice of the ring leader: “Stop, Ellie, stop!!”

I didn't stop right away, and I couldn't tell what was going on. The rope was coming unhooked where it connected to the ground, so before I could see what happened, I found myself flying toward the public. I hit the ground. Everyone was up on their feet, certain that I wouldn't get up again. The director ran toward me. He grabbed me by the arm and forced me to stand up on my one good leg – since the other was horribly sprained. I curtsied and left the arena hopping, while the public applauded in wild amazement.

The circus director wouldn't allow a doctor from the audience to look at me, claiming it wasn't serious. Yet the pain was unbearable. Of course, reaching Tony in any way was out of the question, for I couldn't move at all. He had been there, and he had seen it happen. All our plans had flown out the window. That night was the closest to a nightmare that I'd ever thought I'd live through. I was carried around, loaded up in the wagon, among the costumes trunks. Our caravan was on its way, and no one could hear my screams. To make things worse, a lamp went off and my wagon fell into a ditch, throwing all the trunks on top of me, crushing my throbbing leg. I screamed so hard that even some villagers came running. A bed was made for me among the trunks, and I was to lie in there for hours, with no one to even check on me.

The following day, a village woman who had birthed twins came to step on my leg three times – to heal me, she said. I wasn't one to believe much in miracle healings, but I went along with it, and she came three days to do the same. She'd always wash my leg with soap and water afterward, and the massage felt better than the white magic ever could. The pain subsided within a week, but I still could not put any pressure on the leg.

The circus tent was set up right away, and the show started without me – as I had a swollen, bandaged leg. Yet the director would not accept that it hadn't been my fault, so he was furious with me: I had deprived them of their best number. One day he could no longer tolerate the insult, and came to talk to me:

“You will start working now,” he said. “Just the way you are.”

“But I can't even walk properly, and my leg is still swollen. How can I walk on the tightrope? I can't hop on one leg can I?” I replied.

“I said, just the way you are,” he barked. “If you persist, I'm leaving you in the street, with

no money and no job. See if you'd prefer starving to death. Whether you can or you can't, that's irrelevant," he ended in a thundering voice.

I started crying, and asked the other performers what they thought. They didn't think much, however, for they too suffered if the public didn't get what they wanted. I had no choice but do what I was told. All I had left was praying that I would come out of it alive.

I prayed hard before the first show. I could not comprehend the sadism with which the ring leader had pursued his decision. I came out with my bandages on, and climbed my way to the rope. The public murmured in protest, looking at each other. I did my best not to fall, stepping lightly on the painful leg. It was hard when I had to step through a hoop, but I did that too. I almost fell a few times, and even now I wonder how I managed not to. The loping number was taken out of the program, for even the circus director had felt that that could end up killing me. Yet he did not spare me my other duties during the show, and made me dance and jump on my bad leg, with the pain shooting all the way to the top of my head. I danced with tears in my eyes, biting my tongue.

After a week of torture, the leg was just a little better and now I could walk pretty well. One night after the show, a little boy came to me and whispered in my ear that somebody was waiting for me outside. I snuck out of the arena, convinced no one had seen me – completely unaware that someone was indeed watching. In the dark, I saw the dear silhouette I was hoping to see. It was Tony. I ran to him, arms open wide, and we embraced and kissed in a hurry.

"I have a car waiting. Let's go," he said, barely containing himself.

"Just like this, in my circus clothes?"

"That doesn't matter now. Quick, let's go before somebody notices," he replied.

I had barely taken one step when I felt a hand grab my skirt, pulling me hard, and then the person grabbed my arm. It was a woman.

"Where do you think you're going? He'll be here in a second if you don't come right back," she said. "You'll be in more trouble than you can dream of."

She was the circus director's sister, and she had always hated me. When her brother had beaten me in the past, she had merely watched. Others were gathering around her, motioning me to come in.

Tony had frozen in place. I looked at him pleadingly, waiting for him to say something.

"Tony, tell them, please. We're going to marry..." I said turning to the others, as if I was answering to a jury.

Tony looked at me, shaking his head. What I thought was love was still there, in his eyes, but I could see that he was already giving up. He took a step back. My heart sank, and I stopped resisting. With my head still turned toward Tony, I let them pull me inside. The last image of my dream man was that of his back, as he walked away. This was the last time I ever saw him.

How could I have realized then, with the enthusiasm of my youth, that it had all been too good to be true? From then on, I became convinced that the hand of destiny is much stronger than the frail human heart. I was seventeen, and another train in my life had left the station.

# I Am Sorry I Can't Help You

Randall W. Pretzer

“You should get married and have kids. It is your duty in life,” Rosa’s Father said. They were sitting next to each other on his bed. The room had pictures of her mom and dad when they were first married and from the times they traveled. Rosa listened to her father intently. She had forgotten how the subject had come up or why her dad was telling her this now but she listened like an obedient daughter should as she was told.

“The man works and brings home the money. The woman takes care of the kids. I don’t want you to ever forget that, darling. It works fine in our family and I don’t see why it shouldn’t work in your future family.”

“Yes daddy.”

“I know you are only 18. I don’t want you to feel rushed. You take your time and remember the right man will come along.”

Rosa and her parents as a family gathering watched the news together and political commentary shows. They also watched talk shows and etc. The message was the same from most. The women belonged home and the men belonged at work. Rosa absorbed it all and her father reinforced it. Her mother went along with her father. They would then send Rosa to bed early. They fed her right with just vegetables and with water and milk etc. This was what they considered to be the right way to eat. They had her wear long dresses and sometimes pants. She was always wearing blouses. They didn’t want her to wear anything that really revealed her skin except for her hands and face. They could tolerate that. There were no men allowed in her life up until she turned 18 and then they opened the door a little bit. However, the father conducted an interview of all the men she brought home and if they didn’t meet his expectations she would not be permitted to see them anymore. She accepted this. It was what she came to know and understand.

It was her 19th birthday and her parents finally had approved of a man she had brought home. They were married shortly afterwards. They moved out of state and they had two kids together. The man was an accountant, a political moderate and came from a middle class family. His name was Howard Rogue. He dressed in a suit all the time and he was very romantic. He was great with the kids. Howard was the all around good guy. Rosa told herself her parents were right. She had a great life with this man Howard and their kids were adorable. They had a boy and girl. They named them K.C. and Nick.

Eric was sitting on a bench at his favorite park. He was reading a newspaper. The front page. The only part of the paper he read. He loved the editorial section. He finished up the paper and put it down. He just sat there and watched all the different people walk by. He loved it. He liked watching life in progress or in its process however one wished to describe it. It was about noon and he was early. He normally went to the park around 2 pm but it felt right to come earlier. Eric didn’t know why or where he got such feelings but he did. He went with them. He was currently homeless and didn’t care to have a job. He liked the freedom being homeless afforded him. He got his food from hunting in the wilderness in the park. He would go late at night and kill deer with his bare hands. He hated killing them but he would apolo-



gize right before he took their lives to explain he needed them to survive. He would the deer late at night in the park and then he would sleep near the area he ate his food. Eric would then come to his favorite bench once he woke up and watch the people. He would then wander the streets of the city nearby and then come back again late at night. He would hunt, eat and then sleep. It was his daily routine and he liked. He was able to read at the local library and no one disturbed him. It was one of the few places besides the park that he found true peace.

It was supposed to be a normal day for Eric in the park despite the fact that he had shown up at the bench two hours earlier than usual. Rosa and her two kids walked by and stopped a few feet in front of Eric. He only noticed them because they had stopped. He had not seen anyone else stop in front of him or the bench since he first started staying at the park. Rose turned to look at him and walked over to him. Her kids followed slowly behind her.

“Excuse me, may I sit down?” Rosa said.

“Sure.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Rosa sat down and her two kids sat up on her lap.

“You have two beautiful children.”

“Thank you.”

Eric was not use to this. He had not been in the presence of the company of another human being since he had graduated from college at least in such close contact as this. He had not spoken to anyone since he graduated from college. His parents had been killed in a car accident a little bit after he graduated and he wanted to kill himself. He refused to take his own life for he remembered what his dad had told him before he died. He was holding his father in his arms at the local hospital. His mother had all ready passed away the day before.

“Look, son, I know it will be hard without mom and I...I know what you will be feeling but please...as a promise to your mother and I...continue with life...we will be with you in spirit always...my son...” his father died in his arms right after those last words. Eric cried and put his head down on his fathers chest. The funeral for his parents took place a week later. Eric sold his apartment, his car and all of his belongings except his clothes. He would wash them in the lake at the park late at night and then visit his parents grave afterwards. Rose addressed him again.

“I couldn’t help but notice that you are always alone each time I walk by.”

“It is peaceful.”

“You never get lonely?”

“I am at peace.”

“I wish I was like you.”

“You can be.”

“No. I need someone. I always will.”

“I never needed anyone except my family and friends. I am in peace now.”

Rosa’s kids had fallen asleep and Rose stroked their hair. They each sat on either side of her and had rested their heads on each of her laps. Eric found it to be a beautiful site.

"That is cute." Eric said.

"What is?" Rose said smiling.

"Your kids look so cute resting on you like that. I don't see that every day."

"It doesn't seem to happen much anymore. I am lucky I get to spend any time with them."

"What do you mean?"

"I am working three jobs. I have to keep my kids in daycare. I get to see them maybe on weekends...but I have joint custody with my ex husband Howard. He sometimes wants to see them on weekends...every weekend...so I never see them for a month sometimes."

"I am sorry to hear that...do they live with you?"

"No...they share my house and Howard's...they go back and forth."

"I am sorry."

"It works fine."

"I am glad it works to your liking."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I am sorry I better get going. I forgot that Howard wanted them for the weekend today. I am running late. He said he would be around my house at 1:30. It is 1 now. It was nice talking with you."

"It was nice talking with you and it is okay. I am here usually around 2 pm every day in case you want to do this again."

"I will when I have time. I'd like that."

"I would to."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Rosa slowly woke up her kids. The three got up and Rosa waved goodbye to Eric. She motioned for her kids to say goodbye and they did and waved. Eric waved back and smiled. What was the world coming to? Why did anyone have to work three jobs just to get by? This was unfair. Eric couldn't believe it. He didn't remember life being this hard. He was living okay and his parents did fine. Why was Rosa made to suffer? What happened? What went wrong? There was no answer. She was missing out on the most important part of her...the lives of her kids. She would see them in diapers one day and then they would be off to college. This was not right.

It was about 12 midnight and he had just gotten back from wandering the city as he always did. It was time for his meal. He went in search of deer and killed one. He ate his meal and went to sleep nearby where he always ate the deer. He woke up around 12 noon.

Rosa and Eric were sitting at the same bench the next day. Her kids were with Howard. It was about 1 pm.

"I didn't want a divorce. He filed for it."

"Why did he file for it?"

"He said he didn't love me. He thought he did but he told me he never really did."

"I am sorry."

"It is not the fault of anyone. He couldn't help it. I can't help that I still love

him. I have just been trying to figure where I need to be going. It is just hard to focus when I am working so much. There are so many bills and so much work at my jobs. I just don't have time to even think."

"I am sorry."

"It is okay. I can't believe it has been ten years since the divorce."

"As we get older I noticed the years feel like months...months like weeks...you get the picture?" They both laughed.

"Yes...it all seems so much shorter...months...the years...I will figure it out some day."

"I am sorry."

"Stop saying sorry." They both laughed.

"Okay."

"What about you?" Rosa asked.

"I never been married and I don't have any kids. I did graduate from college a few years ago. I have not done much since."

"I wish I could have gone to college now. I could be working less and making more money at least that is what some have told me."

"It is true depending on the profession some have said."

"Yeah...some have said this...or some have said that...they said this and this...I am tired of listening to everyone telling us what our lives should be."

"It is why I have pretty much lived life as simply as I can."

"I want to but my kids are my life. I just wish I could give them everything...the world...instead I am lucky I can give them food."

"You do what you can. It counts the most that you give them all you can."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I am sorry I have to get work soon. Thank you for the time. I enjoy your company."

"You're welcome. I enjoy yours too. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I will be around some other time."

"I will be here this time."

They both laughed and waved goodbye.

Eric was doing his daily tour of the city as he always did and he came across the electronics store. The television sets were on. He thought he might see if the television programming had gotten any better. He noticed one show showed a man speaking at a podium. Eric could hear it through the window to his surprise. He stopped to listen.

"There was a woman who came up to me once as I was on the campaign trail and she asked why do I not propose to give people like her a leg up? I told her that it was up to us to help ourselves. She told me she was divorced with two kids. I told her why did she feel it necessary to get divorced and she told me her husband asked for it. I told her she didn't try hard enough to keep her man by her side. We argued a little back and forth. I told her I had to leave. She walked away angrily. We have all been through rough times but we don't need the government to give us anything. We have to do it ourselves. This woman wanted my pity and sympathy. She wanted to blame others for her own shortcomings. The situation she found herself she had no one to blame but herself. The divorce rate in this country and in this town is far too high but we have to leave couples and people to work out their own problems. I

will bring this to our city council in your town.”

Eric turned away from the television in disgust. It was easy to blame her, he thought. It was easy to blame her. He remembered what his parents had told his sister. She had to take care of herself once their parents were not around for no one else would. She had told us that other parents told their daughters that getting married was the solution to all their problems and she had seen other women get married and see their husbands divorce them and the women found themselves with nothing. They did what they were told and they got nothing for it but a divorce. Rosa had to work three jobs and hardly got to see her kids. It is what she got for doing what society told her to do. This could not stand. Something had to be done. Eric had heard about people writing to their city council members and even trying the police. They asked for help from neighbors but it was to no avail.

Eric for the first time in his life decided to attend a city council meeting. It was a few weeks after the election and the candidate he had seen on television had won one of the seats. Eric didn't know what difference he could make or what impact he would have but he thought it was a worth a try. He had studied law in college and had a JD in Law. He would have become a lawyer but his parents passing away proved to be too much. He found himself more at peace living the life he had now. He thought maybe he could make a difference. The place was filled with mostly elderly people. He was the only young person there. It was a little odd but he couldn't think about that right now. The city councilmen who he had seen on tv was the first to speak.

“I am honored to be here today.”

He must have been the lead councilmen or something. Eric was not sure how it worked. He listened and waited.

“This city has been too much about government handouts. It has bordered on being some kind of a nanny state and now it is time we turn that around. It will be the first order of business.”

“I don't see how it is the nanny state. There have been plenty of single parents my sister told me once and they received no help from anyone.” Eric said.

“You are a very naïve young man.”

“I have seen it first hand. A friend of mine recently told me she tried everything. She is working three jobs instead thanks to a do nothing city.”

“How dare you attack the community.”

“How dare the community allow others to suffer...to do nothing...letting your neighbors children starve?”

“Mr. Planet of the Apes here...”

“It is the truth.”

“The way to happiness is to work on improving your own life.”

“You tell women to get married and they do...their husbands walk out on them and you leave the women to rot... This is what they get for doing what you told them to.”

“It is not our problem. We all make bad decisions in life and the government can't pick up the tab...”

Eric had had enough of the rhetoric of this councilmen. He got up from his seat and left the building.

# Walls Settle Nothing

Terry Sanville

The merchants were engaged in their normal haggling. Children darted amongst the dusty stalls, their laughter ringing out in the morning heat. At the edge of the marketplace, three Israeli soldiers relaxed and gossiped. When Tariq pulled the assault rifle from his tunic, it took them a few moments to notice. He wanted them to notice. They looked surprised, then afraid. The light-haired one with blue eyes stared through him, across the Jordan Valley toward the river, his lips moving, as if in prayer.

The spray of bullets from Tariq's gun shredded them. The rest of his militia unit opened fire, taking apart the checkpoint. An armored personnel carrier exploded into flames. From inside the fenced settlement of No'omi, dust roiled up from a charging Israeli Defense Force platoon. Tariq and the dozen al-Aqsa fighters piled into vans and fled southward across the desert, toward the palm-studded city of Arisa. *If we can reach it and blend in, they'll never catch us*, he thought.

At the outskirts of town they flew down a straight road bordered by orchards then bobbed and weaved along crowded lanes, horns blaring, the Israelis sliding in and out of vision in their mirrors, but closing.

Near the arched entry to a high-walled compound, Tariq pointed. "There."

The driver yanked the steering wheel and they shot through the opening and into an interior yard.

"Close that gate," he ordered.

Hamir and Sohaib jumped out and ran to the heavy wooden structure as robed men fled into the streets outside. The iron-sheathed door was pushed shut and heavy bolts thrown.

"Get up on the walls," Tariq commanded. The Martyrs Brigade unit spread out and climbed onto the roofs of brick huts built against the old fortification. Their refuge formed a rectangle, maybe 50 meters on its longest side, fully enclosed by thick walls and surrounded by narrow lanes and adjoining apartment blocks.

The Israelis pulled up along a bordering street and opened fire with 50-caliber machineguns. The rattle of guns and death shook the morning.

*They will call in air support soon enough*, Tariq thought and remembered with anger how his brother and father had disintegrated in a blistering explosion that had rocked their West Bank village. *It is easy to murder from the clouds. Let us see how these devils handle real fighting.*

The Israeli infantry unit hunkered down in the narrow lane, exchanging machine-gun and rocket-propelled grenade fire with the militia. Two of their vehicles were ablaze, three men dead and a fourth badly wounded. Clouds of black smoke billowed up, drifting over the cinderblock apartments that surrounded the compound.

“What do you think?” Second Lieutenant Rozen asked.

Staff Sergeant Shimon shook his head. “This is going to be a tough one. I’m sure their vans were stuffed full of ammunition and weapons.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, sergeant.”

“Well, sir, since you’re new to the West Bank, we’re inside Area A.”

“So?”

“The Palestinian Authority controls here. We can’t use air support. Too much collateral damage.”

“Says who?”

“Came straight from Headquarters last month, sir.”

“We can use armor.”

“Yes, sir. We could try ramming the gate or the wall...”

“Get on the radio to HQ and request –”

“...but I’m sure they’ve got B-300s and a tank would be an easy target.”

The lieutenant sighed. “Call in the sniper squad. They’ll take positions on the roofs of those buildings.”

“Yes sir. But that wall is too high and...”

The lieutenant glared at his sergeant. “They’ll keep them pinned down until I figure things out.”

“Yes sir. You...you realize the Palestinian Authority will be furious if we don’t leave.”

“Fuck ‘em. It’s not their dead that need avenging.”

As the gunfire slacked off, Lieutenant Rozen scanned his surroundings. Faces peered from behind screened second-floor windows. *Shit, al-Aqsa could be in any one of those houses. We’ll need to watch our backs, use the APCs to patrol the perimeter...at least once a day. But not until the snipers are in position.*

Sergeant Shimon reported. “Sir, a squad will be here in 30 minutes.”

“We must get our men on all sides to contain them. What is this place?”

“Some kind of storage yard, a piece of the ancient Canaanite city. We’ve been here before.”

“Simply fucking great,” Rozen muttered. “Here we go again.”

Days of back and forth firefights left five of Tariq’s men wounded, weak from loss of blood, but still manning the wall. As the afternoon of the sixth day wore on, he peeked over the thick parapet. Something moved on the roof of a nearby apartment and he lobbed a grenade across the narrow gap. With a scream, an Israeli fell into the side alley, his rifle spitting fire all the way down.

“They keep trying to catch us out,” Tariq said. “When are they going to learn?”

Hamir grinned and wiped the breach of his weapon with an oily cloth. “I still think we should blow up those APCs...and that infidel music they play during prayers is...is blasphemy.”

“Relax, Allah still hears us. And that’s what they want...keep us on edge...expose our positions when we try using the rockets. Their snipers would kill us easily.”

Hamir scowled. “So are we to just sit here and grow old?”

“You and I will never grow old, Hamir.”

“Well, I wish they’d stop that racket. What is that foul noise anyway?”

Tariq grinned. “They call it hip hop.”

“I’m surprised the Israelis haven’t slit their own throats after listening to it.”

The sun dropped behind the western hills and the city’s golden glow turned gray as sunset drew near. Tariq and Hamir unrolled their prayer rugs in preparation for Maghrib. The call to prayer echoed throughout the city. The Israelis were quiet at their posts. The savory smell of their food cooking over camp stoves infuriated Tariq. *They’re having a proper meal while we’re ready to eat the cats and dogs. Where is the justice? This is our city. Why should we be the captives?*

A flare illuminated the darkening sky just as Tariq and Hamir bowed toward the west. *Allah, you are our light. Show us the way to cast these devils from our midst.*

A sliver of a moon hung over the quiet, stifling city. Lights glowed from interior rooms, but blinked out after night prayers were finished. Lieutenant Rozen sucked on a cigarette and exhaled slowly. *Two years to go with the Tsahal...it will be strange returning to Tel Aviv...to life without uniforms, without this...this hateful...*

Sergeant Shimon joined him in the front seat of the Humvee. “Everything is set, sir.”

“Do our men on the roofs have enough RPGs?”

“Yes, sir. At first light they will be ready.”

“And the Humvees?”

“All seven are ready.”

“When will the armor units arrive?”

“0600 hours, sir. They’re sending a single Merkeva...should have a good shot at the gate, if we can keep the enemy pinned.”

“What about the 50-cals?”

“They’re ready, sir.”

Rozen sighed. “I want to hit them hard, break down that gate, kill every last one of them...no prisoners.”

“I suspect they feel the same,” Sergeant Shimon said.

“We will never win if we keep fighting like this.”

“Well, sir, it is *their* city...”

Rozen scowled and flicked his cigarette butt across the road. “One smart bomb from an F-16 and you could have been fucking your girlfriend a week ago.”

“I’m all for that, sir.”

Rozen passed a cigarette to the sergeant and they watched the sky lighten in the east. The morning call to prayer echoed through the streets. They waited, murmuring their own invocations. Sergeant Shimon stepped from the Humvee and gave the signal. Engines rattled and coughed to life.

Tariq watched the seven enemy vehicles pull from a side street and accelerate. He motioned for his men to take cover. The chuffing of the 50-calibers destroyed the quiet. The top of the eastern wall disintegrated into a rain of mud shards. Sohaib and the others tossed grenades over the parapet and scrambled down. Muffled explosions followed, but the vehicles continued circling.

“Order the men to stay down,” he told Hamir. “These devils will pick us off if we stand and fight.”

A rocket-propelled grenade shattered the wall close by. Hamir fell backward. "I'm... I'm just grazed. We need to use our rockets."

"Not yet. They will not bring in armor until they are sure we are pinned. Have Sohaib and Hamdi set up the B-300s over the front gate."

Tariq caught sight of a sniper on an adjoining roof and blindly fired his assault rifle as the parapet crumbled around him. He jumped to the ground, crushing an ankle.

The Humvees continued circling, all the while spraying the compound with heavy machine guns. Sohaib and Hamdi crouched behind the parapet and assembled their shoulder-launched rockets.

"Not yet, Sohiab," Tariq yelled. "Wait till you see their tanks."

"I see one, I see one."

In that instant, the machine guns went silent. The Humvees' horns blared. A shout arose from the Israeli soldiers. The first 120-mm round shattered the front gate. Three more destroyed the wall where Sohaib and Hamdi had crouched. The ground shook as the tank advanced. The shaking increased. Tiles fell from the roofs of nearby buildings. A cloud of dust rose from the compound. Tariq dragged himself to the center of the yard as the walls collapsed into the streets, onto the Israelis. The guns and engines went strangely quiet. But the shaking continued. Balconies sheared from buildings, power poles toppled, the very ground rolled like the Dead Sea under him. Then it was over. The distant cries of women and terrified children filled the hot morning.

Tariq tore off a piece of his tunic and bound his ankle. Hamir lay in the ruins, half buried but alive. Tariq pulled him free and, supporting each other, they scrambled through the rubble and disappeared into that most ancient city.

The ambulance bounced northward, passing through groves of olive trees and date palms. Lieutenant Rozen groaned and rolled onto his back. But the broken ribs would give him no rest. His breath caught as the pain shot downward to his groin.

"I'm glad you're awake, sir." Sergeant Shimon's bloodied face hovered above him.

"Where...what..."

"We got caught in an earthquake, sir."

"The men...how many..."

"Don't know. Our vehicle was only partly crushed. But the others..."

"And those bastards inside?"

"Gone or dead."

"Shit...wasn't supposed...to happen...that way."

"What do you mean? The walls did come tumbling down."

Rozen tried grinning back but his face stuck in a grimace. "My...my parents... always told me...to stay clear of Jericho."

Sergeant Shimon shrugged. "Then they shouldn't have named you Joshua."

A medic reached forward and adjusted the morphine drip. Rozen felt the world slip away, but not before feeling the weight of millennia wash over him, just one more futile soldier who fought in that ancient city that never seems to die.



# The Last One

Mark Novom

“I don’t want you to ever get married,” Jessie’s mother told her. “A man will only get in your way.”

Rachel had always wanted her daughter to be a doctor. For her daughter’s eleventh birthday, she bought her a stethoscope; for her fourteenth, a Special Edition Gray’s Anatomy; for her sixteenth, a list of the best undergraduate programs in pre-med and a private college counselor; and for her eighteenth, she gave her some advice.

“Mom, what are you talking about?”

“He won’t understand. He won’t let you be your own woman.”

“Why are you telling me this,” Jessie was wearing her prom dress and applying her make-up.

“Because you’ve worked too hard.”

“Mom, stop being crazy.” Jessie looked at her mother standing at the doorway of the bathroom, but she wasn’t smiling. “Mom?” Jessie put down her eye-liner.

Her mother was crying.

Jessie remembered this every time before she went out with a man. This time it was Steve Jefferson, a vascular surgeon who worked in the same hospital as Jessie. Jessie lived near the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, CA. She loved the fact that the ocean was a mere five blocks from her one bedroom apartment on Fifth Street. She loved the street performers that tantalize people in the midst of a shopping spree or date. She loved Los Angeles.

Jessie, clad in a white bra and panties, stood in front of her lighted mirror in her tiled bathroom. Her college roommate told her that you only wear black bras and panties if you want your date to eventually to see them. She wasn’t sure if she wanted Steve to see them. Her cat walked figure eights between her legs, crying.

“Stop it.”

The cat cried.

“You can’t go out.”

Jessie finished putting on her face. She prays Steve #2 wouldn’t be like the last one, or like Frank, Tom, Steve #1, Anthony, and Paul. All doctors. All within the last six years. Tom lasted the longest: eighteen months. He was Jessie’s senior by ten years and a widower with two kids. On a night she thought he was going to ask her to marry her, he told her that he still wasn’t over the loss of his wife to colon cancer; he told her that he thought he may never be. She cried for three weeks. Her mother sighed in relief.

She stared at herself in the mirror and cursed at a pimple to the right of her chin and wondered if at 32 she still had acne, when wouldn’t she. For a moment, she saw herself back in high-school with her nose. For graduation (one of the only presents she received that had nothing to do with getting into medical school), her parents bought her a new nose. They took her to Dr. Weinstein, one of the best nose-men in Los Angeles.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Dr. Weinstein asked Jessie while her parents

waited in the other room.

“You have no idea,” Jessie told him. They shook hands, the appointment was made, and two weeks after graduation, Jessie walked out of the hospital smiling brightly under heavy bandages.

She hated high school. She envied her good-looking classmates and felt that she just was a nose away from being a part of them. She did have her own group of friends, though, and they helped each other get through the most awkward four years of anyone’s life. They did everything together: ate lunch, joined after-school activities, spent their weekends watching movies or studying, and sometimes even vacationed with each others families. For prom, she went with fellow group member Jason Ross, who got contact lenses for this specific occasion. He neglected to practice putting them in, and on the night of prom spent almost an hour in front of the mirror trying to pry his eyes open. His mother even tried to help, but she underestimated the strength of an eyelid. By the time he gave up and decided to wear his signature giant U-shaped slightly tinted glasses, his eyes were bloodshot. And by the time he showed up at Jessie’s door, he had drenched his eyes with so many eye-drops, that Jessie thought he was crying.

Jessie had a good time in college. So good, in fact, that she lost touch with her friends from high school—even with Stephanie who went to Brown with Jessie. She was too busy getting acquainted with her new nose. For the first time in her life, Jessie felt what it was like to be one of the pretty girls. She attended parties, went out on Saturday nights, hung out with girls that were most definitely in the popular crowd back in their high schools. It wasn’t that her new nose made her a knockout (but it was a definite improvement), but it gave her the confidence she needed to push her over her shyness. And what was wrong with a little plastic surgery if it helped one’s confidence? At least, that’s how she convinced herself to do it in the first place.

“This is the last one.” Her cat cried. “Right, Seymour?” Cry. “Then the internet.”

Her best friend from medical school had just been married to a man she met on the internet. She has been trying to get Jessie to join for the past year. At their wedding, Sarah and David had giant-sized copies of their internet dating profiles gallantly displayed at the entrance of the reception. Next to the two tripods a beautifully decorated table housed a little velvet book with their emails transcribed. Phrases like “This message is to confirm that I must meet you for coffee quite soon as your emails are absolutely charming!” and “Wow, so now when I meet you I have to smile, look pretty & act charming; what pressure!” and “Last night was wonderful...can’t wait for tomorrow” were being read by guests in suits and dresses while eating finger foods and drinking wine. While Sarah and David loved to share their history with their friends and family, Jessie stared in disbelief at family members reading about their sexual escapades.

By the time Seymour completed his twenty-sixth figure eight, Jessie, still in her underwear, stood in front of her closet.

“Tomorrow, we go shopping,” she told Seymour.

Seymour cried.

“For now, Steve #2 will have to settle for something old.” She let the dress fall onto her body, scratched her cat on the head, and put on her shoes.

Seymour cried.

“I know, but mommy’s got to go out. I gotta at least try.”

Steve was already five minutes late, and Jessie was uncharacteristically ready before her date arrived. Sometimes, when she already knows the guy fairly well, Jessie purposely isn’t ready before her date arrives. She answers the door in her pajama pants and an old t-shirt that

is a couple of sizes too small and so worn and thin that you could not only see the curve of her breasts but also the shape of her nipples. With Paul, the effect was so successful that they missed their dinner reservation and almost missed the play at eight because they took a little longer than expected in the shower.

She did know Steve #2 fairly well and definitely wanted to have sex with him, but for some reason (she couldn't explain it, just an intuition), she didn't want to play that game with him. She walked into her kitchen and opened the refrigerator and then quickly closed it. She slipped her dress over her head, found a hanger, and let it hang from the kitchen doorway—something else she learned from her best friend in college so that the dress wouldn't wrinkle before her date arrives. In her underwear, she sat at the kitchen table and looked at the newspaper. The front page had a story about an eighteen year-old boy who beat his sixteen year-old girlfriend and killed his unborn child.

Steve drove his new luxury car fast, but Jessie was comfortable. She knew and trusted him. She's never owned a new car and envied the smell. Combined, they were close to a half a million dollars in debt. However, unlike Steve, Jessie was still a surgical resident and only making forty per year; Steve, on the other hand, was well into six figures.

“Where are we going?”

Steve looked at her and smiled. The first time he smiled like that at a girl was 1985.

Valentino's was crowded and entirely filled with couples—in twos or fours.

Jessie objected to his choice, stating that it was unnecessary to take her to such an expensive restaurant. Steve's reply? “It's completely and totally necessary.” Jessie held her peace.

The day before in the hospital's cafeteria, Jessie sat with her friend and fellow resident Samantha. They sat alone, eating lunch, overlooking a gridlocked Sunset Blvd.

“I heard he's taking you to Valentino's,” Samantha said seductively.

“Heard? From whom?”

“Dr. McClure.”

“Jesus, does everyone know?”

“Of course. The nurses hate you.”

“Well, they hate me for other reasons, I guess one more won't hurt. If he takes me there, it's going to be over before it begins,” Jessie put a fork-full of macaroni and cheese in her mouth.

“What? Why?”

Jessie finished chewing. Then: “I can't stand men who have to show off how much money they have on a first date. A fifth or sixth fine, but not a first.”

Samantha didn't understand Jessie's reason. Samantha wished a doctor would take her to Valentino's on a first date. Samantha wished Steve Jefferson would take her to Valentino's on a first date. Jessie didn't know this, and Samantha was scared she would see it in her face.

“Well, if he takes me there, you can have him,” she winked.

“Deal,” Samantha held out her Diet Coke to Jessie who in turn held hers up. “That's if he'll ask.”

“Oh, he will. He's just working his way down the female residents year-by-year, alphabetically,” she joked. “They say that after he's done with the residents, he'll move on to nurses.” They both laughed.

Dr. Jefferson transferred to Kaiser Santa Monica two years ago and had already dated three residents. Jessie doesn't know why she's going out with him. Perhaps it's something to

do. Perhaps she still thought it possible to meet and date a sensible man who would respect her career choice. Of course, her mother objected.

“But mother,” she would always say before going out with a fellow physician, “he’s a doctor, too.”

“All the better to ask you to put your career on hold. He can afford to support the two of you.”

“So are you saying I should date a poor man?” she asked snidely.

“I’m saying you shouldn’t date period.”

“Mother, I’m not, not going to date. I like sex too much.”

“You can have sex without dating.”

That would be the end of the conversation. The daughter would get tired of the mother trying to run her life, and the mother would get tired of the daughter’s inability to see the future. Jessie’s mother had an uncanny sense of things to come. Rachel’s other daughter, Margaret, who was six years Jessie’s minor, owes her life to Rachel’s sixth sense. All Jessie owes is a career she fears she no longer wants and an inability to keep a man.

What had bothered Jessie more than Steve’s asking her what she wanted and ordering for her was the fact that she would agree with her mother that that is an antecedent to how Steve would treat his wife. (Steve was a romantic-traditionalist. He didn’t realize that his treating women as if he was courting them at the turn of the century—the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup>, that is—was completely insulting to the woman of today. Women didn’t want to be held up on a pedestal. They merely wanted to be held up as equals. And while our poor Steve thought he was being a gentleman, the women he dated merely thought him annoying.) No matter how often Jessie and her mother bickered, she feared that she was on the inevitable path of the realization that her mother had been right all along.

“Is the duck not to your satisfaction?” Steve asked with a forkful of veal an inch from his mouth.

Jessie wanted to say, “No, the duck is fine. What I’m having a problem with is your snobbishness.” But all she managed was (which was the truth), “no, it’s wonderful.” And she ended it there, with no explanation of her apparent boredom.

Steve didn’t think twice. He continued, “Would you agree?”

For the past twenty-five minutes, Steve had been ambushing Jessie about the administration at the hospital and comparing it unfavorably to the hospital he had transferred from. It seemed to Jessie that every sentence began with, “Back at St. Joseph’s...” and would end with a diatribe of Kaiser Santa Monica, a hospital and staff Jessie had grown quite fond of in her five years of surgical residency.

“Steven? Can we stop talking about work, please?”

“I’m sorry, of course.” He put another forkful of veal in his mouth. Still chewing: “what would you like to talk about?”

Jessie was glad that she wore her white underwear. It was now that Jessie understood that Steven wasn’t in control. It seemed that his ability to win people over, which he had up until medical school graduation, seemed to be no longer with him.

He was no longer charming and he had no idea how it happened. He didn't know what he was doing wrong. He was still himself. He did everything the same. What was different now than it was ten years ago? He had no idea.

He still had women during his residency, that didn't change—he was only getting better looking as he aged. What changed was that they left him; they seemed to get bored with him. This didn't hurt his reputation as a ladies man, however. Actually, on the contrary, it only helped. And actually, he began to enjoy it. It saved him from the guilt of having to break up with them. *The sex was great*, his latest escapade would say. *It was greater than great. It was amazing. But he's just so...I don't know.* And they wouldn't be able to complete the sentence.

By the time his residency had finished and he moved to Los Angeles, he was tired of sleeping around and started to want a family. So he made a vow not to sleep with anyone until the tenth date. He was going to be a new man. He didn't want that reputation anymore; however, unbeknownst to him, his plan fell apart before he could even implement it. Sally Michaels, one of his many women during his residency, knew a surgeon at Kaiser Santa Monica and told her about him. It wasn't a warning, but an encouragement. So, this surgeon sought him out. When, after six dates, she didn't get to experience “the fuck of her life” as Sally put it, and had to put up with the now annoying Steve Jefferson, she ended it quickly. And to top it all off, to avoid embarrassment, she lied to Sally and told her that, indeed, he was the fuck of her life.

The ride home was surprisingly more bearable than dinner, and to her surprise she agreed to a quick stop for ice-cream. Jessie didn't know if it was because she had already made up her mind that she wouldn't see Steven socially again or if he actually became more tolerable. Whichever reason it was, Jessie found herself actually involved in a conversation she enjoyed. Apparently, Steven was fond of classical music, which Jessie appreciated because of her sister. Jessie suddenly feared that he might ask her to see a concert in the future. He never will.

When they got back to her apartment building, luckily for Jessie, there were no free parking spaces. Steven offered to double-park, but Jessie (telling the truth) told him that police frequent the street for just that offense.

“So, I had a good time,” he said after he turned off the engine.

“I did too,” which wasn't a total lie.

“Would I be out of line if I said that I would like to do this again sometime?”

“Steven, I don't think that would be such a good idea.”

“I kind of felt that coming.”

“It's...I think I've realized that I can't or shouldn't date physicians.”

“I see.”

“I'm sorry. I hope we can stay professional.”

“Of course.”

Jessie, for the first time, was seeing a side of Steven she actually liked. He was pathetic. He was totally vulnerable. For a moment, she thought she might want to see Steven again.

“I'm sorry. I just don't think it's a good idea.”

He couldn't look at her. "No you're right. I always get myself into these things. I should stop, too." He was talking about dating other physicians. Jessie understood.

"Maybe you should."

There was a silence in the car where both of its occupants didn't know what to do. Jessie unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Jessie?" He finally looked at her again.

"Yes?"

"What do others say about me? I mean, the other female physicians and residents."

But she knew what he meant.

"What do they think of me?" He was a new student at a new school without any friends. She loved it.

Jessie knew she shouldn't or even couldn't lie. She knew that he wanted to hear the truth. "Steven, honestly, you've created quite a reputation for yourself...of someone who sleeps around."

"But I don't," he said with a finality of defending his honor.

"Have you with any?" The second she said this she wished she didn't.

"No, not one."

She believed him.

"Do they say I do?"

"Some do, yes."

"Why would they do that?"

She hated being a woman at this very moment. "I don't know." But she remembered a story about her college roommate (the same that told her about wearing black bras and panties) that would explain things pretty well. "I'm sorry, Steven," is all she could muster up.

"It's my own fault, I suppose. I should leave my personal life and my professional life separate."

Jessie immediately wondered if she had a similar reputation. She has dated a number of physicians and residents in her time at the hospital. She didn't dare ask.

"It's not your fault. Women can just be— Especially female physicians, they can be—" She couldn't explain how women can be.

Jessie put the key into door at the top of the stairs. During the past year (her last year in Los Angeles), she has been making an effort to remember every time she comes home that she won't be coming back to this home soon. It made her feel empty, but she liked that feeling sometimes. It comforted her. She heard Seymour through the door. Before she could turn on the light, she saw Seymour's flashlight eyes. She turned on the light and surveyed her apartment like she does every time she opens the door.

She looked down at him. He looked up at her. He cried.

"Seymour, this is Steven."

She closed the door.

# Godmother

Joan Steffens

When I was a child, God loomed before me as a huge, omnivorous, omnipresent Being, ready at any given moment to swoop down upon me, gobble me alive, and spit me into the fires of hell. He possessed a gigantic, all-seeing eye that missed seeing absolutely nothing I ever did, however secret it may have been.

There existed Satan, too, of course, but about him I worried very little. God was the one to fear. It was He who was all-powerful, all-wise, and all-seeing. The devil, who paled by comparison, was so inconsequential as to be almost non-existent. It was God, after all, who made the decision as to who would and would not be thrown into the fiery pit. I used to wonder what the Devil did with all his free time.

I loved God dearly, of course. Who could afford not to! When I was very small, I was so completely loyal to God that I proclaimed to a friend one day that there was NOT and had NEVER been a devil! My friend vehemently denied this allegation and insisted that there was indeed a devil and that he lived underneath the very ground on which we stood. I, who happened to be holding a stick at the time, shouted that indeed there was NOT a devil, and to prove it I gouged a hole in the ground with my stick. My friend peered fearfully at the hole and fled. I turned to leave also, but as an afterthought, I turned back and covered the hole over with dirt. I was ever a cautious child.

As I grew older I loved God more and liked Him less. He interfered with my life dreadfully and made my teenage years a misery. One day while in the midst of a terrible argument with God, I made a most curious discovery. God looked a lot like my mother. Upon closer observation, I found that He was definitely, and without a doubt, the spitting image of her. I wondered why I had never noticed it before. I was quite shocked and sat down to think things over.

The situation was perplexing and quite distressing. I found I could not possibly discuss this with my mother, for by now she looked exactly like God. She was overbearing, overly critical, found me quite sinful, and by no means could she see a place for me in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I did not react well to this state of affairs. I had borne for years the over-powering presence of God, and I had managed fairly well to live with my mother's mind-stifling religion. But there was no way I could cope with both at the same time.

I puzzled as to the course of action I should take. Should I try to separate God and my mother? Alas, it was impossible, for by now they looked so much alike I could no longer tell them apart. Could I continue to live with them in our not-so-peaceful abode? Alack! I could not. It was too painful for all three of us.

And so we went our separate ways. I, out into the wide wonderful world, to live in stupendous, unbelievable freedom. And they, God and my mother? Why, they lived happily ever after. And that, after all, is the way all good stories should end.

# Graffiti

Galia Binder

I know I got fucked over. It's the second time they put me as a regular at Venice this year, and God knows who is cut out for it. I guess the slime balls back at the station are. These are the guys whose testing officer back at the academy was probably their cousin, and they know everyone in the streets by first name. The murder rates are off the chart and they pretend they don't have anywhere to be! I can't do a thing about it, but I just wish the chief of police could see it. This morning, one of the guys told me it's been months since his units have been here. I can't wait for the day when they get what they deserve. In the meantime, I avoid the station as much as possible. Me, sitting at my desk probably looking like something is stuck in my throat, while they brag about the women they scored the night before.

I know the real story behind it: after their shift is done they hit a bar around Vine, show up in the big blue uniform, scaring the bartender into giving them extra drinks, and a sloppy drunk girl into coming home with them. When we get calls, they sniff a lot, and react slower than they should. If they're in a good mood, they ass-slap, as if they're going on a buck hunt instead of going out to shoot a man.

They think I'm a stiff, a candy-ass. They probably gave me this shift as a joke, just to get me to lighten up. Maybe they think I'll hire a stripper down here and they'll catch us in the patrol car together, and they can have a go at her. Maybe they think I'll take a bong from one of the street people and I'll pass out at the station, like some kind of idiot. Then they'll draw all over me in permanent marker like the time at that party in college, but I promised to forget that time and I know I should.

I don't belong here anyhow. I never have, even though I was born here, which surprises everyone I tell. The people here are always covering something up or showing too much. They can never sit still, because they're trying to get an angle, to act like they know something you don't. The something is waiting up there in the Hollywood hills, where the blondes sit in mansions with sunglasses on, waiting for their executive husbands to come home and do God knows what to them. Its in the bullets exploding in the barrio streets. Maybe the bullets have been paid for by the husbands. Maybe the man sits with his wife on the balcony when he gets home. They watch the small boys with black hair gun each other down in the streets, who are always shocked by each others' blood, I know because I've seen it. The blonde gets nervous or bored, and suggests they go inside and have some drinks. The husband agrees after watching for a few more minutes, without a smile, or anything on his face.

These thoughts are starting to make me feel depressed ... but it's nothing. I guess I just really want my shift to be over. I have to focus on the road so I don't run over any of the slobs lying in the gutter. Once I would have felt horrible if that had happened...I wouldn't have been able to live with myself. I like to think I've been working as an officer for too long and that I've seen too much, because now, I don't know if I would care. They ask for it, lying in the middle of the street, getting up again and fainting, killing themselves with drugs.



The bearded men and tiny women with dark glasses, all they talk about is death, carrying around notebooks that are probably filled with pages of stupid made up words. And the ratty girls with their long hippie skirts and bony hips, shoving incense in your face, skipping and twirling as if no one was watching them! I get so embarrassed watching them, sometimes my stomach turns. The fat, lazy ones glaring at you in their sweatpants like roosters fattened up big so they could fight, but the farmer didn't choose them so they spend the rest of their lives getting lazy in the same old coop. They have red eyes and they talk as if they have to sneeze, and when they do sneeze blood comes out of their nose.

Going there is like walking into a zoo, where a weird chemical got into the animals' food and mixed everyone up...it's like being in a dream, probably one I could never even think of myself. I start to sweat, not because I'm afraid, but because I can't stand them and I can't do anything about it, I just have to keep walking. They always ask me where I'm going and coming from and would I like this, or that, or do I like anything at all! It's indecent and inappropriate. Of course I *like* things, but why would I tell any of them about it?

The worst thing is, they're all a bunch of fakes. That's what I can't stand. They're just losers that couldn't stick with their natural place in society. I bet none of them were poor or messed up to begin with. They got that way because they didn't have the guts to make an honest living like any normal person. Some are bums who messed up their opportunities, and some are weirdos just trying to get attention for their sob stories. It's indecent. There are people starving in Africa every day while these freaks are trying to draw attention to themselves. I'd rather have them die than those poor people in Africa.

Sometimes I think about arresting all of them, or beating one of them up against the wall, with all the others watching. I take a satisfaction in these thoughts that is probably bad. But I'll never do it, and they know it. Besides, they all have lawyers up their sleeves, and what do they have to laugh about, I should be the one laughing, I have a job and self-respect and they sit there with snot running down to their mouths and flirting with everyone and death. I've seen some of the other officers out here, the new guys, take out their frustration on them, but they learn pretty fast that it doesn't help anyone. It's obvious that they're looking for a reaction anyway, because people like that are always looking for a reaction.

Me, I don't like to call myself "different", but I guess I'm what an officer's supposed to be. It doesn't make me better, but sometimes, in the moment right after I make an arrest, when I am sitting up front and the guy is in the back, I feel like I've found a special place. There is a little special place in me that feels calm in the middle of the flashing lights and the squawking radio. It's as if I didn't even have to steer the car anymore, as if a horse shoe magnet was hidden inside the wall at the holding center, all secret and gleaming and beautiful, and it is there to pull me alone. The magnet would take me anywhere I wanted, I could go to the moon, but I tell it to go back to the station, because I know the meaning of honor and duty in this job. I get this swell of pride, and also this weird feeling that I am the only man on earth. I always wonder if any of the other guys feel it too, but I wouldn't ask them about it in a million years.

I don't know what makes me do it, but I have to look back through the divider. I wish I could paint how the window looks behind me, the way the light comes in all around it, as if it's a tunnel in the midst of all the chaos, a tunnel leading to me and my calmness. But then I get this awful bubbling feeling in my stomach, a mixture of sad and angry and maybe something else, when I see the sneering bastard sitting back there and ruining the whole thing. As if he can tell what I'm thinking and is laughing at me in his head.

God, if I just had a wife and kids I could think in times like these. All I've ever hoped for since I was 17 years old was someone to settle down with, just to have pictures in the picture frames of places we've gone. We could have outings and picnics. I would never mind going to the zoo or sitting for hours at parent teacher conferences and violin concerts, the things I've heard a couple of other guys complain about. Her hair would smell like vanilla and they would be messy eaters. For vacations nothing fancy, just some place green, with lawns for the kids to run around on and cool air in the morning. Maybe, when we're a lot older, she'd decide that we had to go somewhere like Paris. Europe has never appealed to me, because it seems snobby and un-American, but I would save up my money and take her. I don't know the first thing about Europe, but she wouldn't be the type of woman to mind.

Well, I guess I know one thing. About France, actually, which is probably why I thought it's the place she would want to go. I know some painters, the names of them. Renoir, Monet, Matisse. It's the type of thing I always thought I could use at a dinner party, but I haven't gotten around to it. In high school I took an art class ... everyone had to, to graduate. I would go to the corner table every day so I could look at a book with the names and the artwork they did. I could have looked at it for hours. I want to go to France with my wife and we will come back with a painting in one arm and the other arm around each other.

I like paintings of fields and rivers, men and women, done in gold and blue. It reminds me of looking at the valley during the day, driving, with all the purple flowers along the sides of the highway, not all lit up at night looking like it does in the 21<sup>st</sup> century blurb they always show before movies. It reminds me of swimming on the hottest day of the year and the way a woman's hair should feel between my fingertips ... God. Please, help me. I'm stuck in this fucking car and none of it is true. If I can ever find a woman, she'll be a bald hag who is blind so that she can't even see the pictures are done in dull shades of gray.

The truth is, I've never been invited to a dinner party in my life. But my job is to protect and serve, which is why I'm here instead of on a date, and probably the reason why I haven't gotten one anyway. I'm better than the rest of them. Anyway, they would laugh at me if they knew. They're all laughing now: the dicks back at the station and the low lifes in the street, laughing at me and hoping I'll run myself and my annoying patrol car off a cliff on the PCH and be done with it. So I might as well do my duty and to hell with it all.

I've got to get away from this car, it'll only be for a little while. I'll take a walk on the beach...I know they've got a few guys on there, but no one will miss me, and backup would probably do them some good, come to think of it. There are a lot of suicides at night ... people overdosing and walking into the ocean, or just staying on

the shore, letting the tide go over them.

The sky is cloudy black, and you can still see everything. It's probably darker inside the apartments than it is out here. I almost wish I couldn't see anything...it gets even worse at night. The tourists aren't here, so none of the street people are putting on a show. They're more desperate, frightened. If they weren't such pathetic assholes, I might even feel bad for them, like you'd feel bad for a little kid who's having a nightmare and can't wake up. I start thinking about how glad I am to be alone right now, when I trip over something hard, and it moves with me as I catch myself.

I hear a weird squealing noise, maybe someone laughing, and then a man's voice, lazy sounding, but scornful, too, like he's having a hard time holding back his anger... "Shit honey...why you always make that noise for? I told you ...". He is breathing hard, and I think he's listening, so I try to hold my breath. I don't want him to hear me just yet. He starts again, even slower than before, like he's saving his breaths for something else. "...Well shit, honey...you got yourself another customer... *Isn't* that fine...". I don't like the way he said "isn't". It doesn't feel right, so I take out the flash light before he can say more and shine it to where I think he is. The beam comes out right on his stomach, and her hand is there too. He is a black naked man, scary thin, and he seems relaxed while he covers her face. She is naked too, the face moving beneath his hands, struggling, and I'm not sure if she wants to get away from him or me. He starts laughing. ... "Ain't that right honey...the officer *is going* to get you next...hooweee..." He tries hard to keep laughing while he talks. "...Ain't the both of you all *lucky?*" I switch the flashlight off and walk away. Maybe he doesn't want to test me, because he keeps talking to her... "Ain't it? Ain't it so, honey?" Her squealing starts again.

I am still walking and thinking, let the patrol car be stolen. Let them take a shit on it. Let the man I just saw lay there against the shivering woman on its roof. Let it be an example...and example of what? Every step that I take seems strange and impossible, like my legs are moving through a liquid I have never touched before and I don't know what it will do to me.

The fact is, I have just seen a rape. And now I am walking off onto the beach like a street person. But he called himself a customer, and she was just shivering because of the drugs. She was asking for it, anyway, I mean what are any of them doing on this street out at night, they should know it's dangerous. She just wanted some attention, and she got it, so the bitch can't complain about something she asked for. I mean doesn't everyone, isn't that why we're here at all!

It doesn't matter, because the point is, the pimps and their whores will eventually mash themselves into the dirt, burying deep down when they get sick of breathing, and more crack addicts will grow out of them like weeds, growing as tall as orange trees until Venice starts sinking.

I'm laughing again, feeling the power of laughter that I've watched everyone else keep for themselves, well now I'm having mine, but I'm not laughing at my own expense. I'm laughing at all of them, the good ones, the evil ones, with their schemes and plans, the way they care, the things that link them. They feel and know and I do not, so I can laugh. I feel like I could leave everyone behind and just keep walking into the sea like one of those junkies, and stay there. It is a lonely place, visited from time to time by a bit of sunlight or a piece of seaweed, but I don't try to make it stay.

I will be the rock, the reject, the unlikely. While the rest of them spend time making new societies and crying over the old ones and trying to save each other with guns, I will not move. I'll have my house and car and refrigerator full of food, and money for movies if I want it. I will be the example of the good life, the life we all want. I'll sleep enough, eat enough, talk just enough to get by, go to the movies alone, but I won't be embarrassed. I won't have to judge between right and wrong, because there will be no black and white. I will let the sea bring me its blues and greens, like memories of something beautiful a man lost a long time ago.



I think they will come to me eventually and get down at my feet. They'll ask me again and again, what have I seen all this time, and what is the answer to their universe. I'll wait a while, because it's all the same to me, and then I'll laugh and tell them nothing. They will feel despair, the despair of learning to accept. Then comes the nothing. They will have the nothing that now my life is full of. The moon is out. I'm not embarrassed to nod to it like it understands me.

I am in the big graffiti area, coming up from the beach, when I hear a noise in one of the dumpsters that hold the spray paint cans. I am sure it sounds like the pimp. I get another surge of crazy, nauseous energy that makes me move. I don't know what I'll do if I find them.... I am only about 2 feet away now. I decide I will play a little joke. Maybe handcuff them to each other and leave them naked for someone else to find in the morning... nothing too serious. I am surprised at how calm I am when I lift the lid.

I close it and step back, turning away so I don't have to look at the dumpster. What I have seen makes me think of some drugged out dream, like I fell asleep on the beach. I think about what it will be like to be crazy. I had to have suspected it was going to happen, I guess, after everything going on tonight. I've already started seeing things, so soon I will wake up lying on my back staring at hospital lights that will hurt my eyes while a doctor who is just in it for the money will be listing off all the things that went wrong in my brain. Maybe a couple of guys from the station will be standing there and then maybe I will no longer feel so much like laughing. I stop thinking about it. I go back to the dumpster. What else is there to do?

The breathing noises have stopped, because the woman, creature, thing, whatever she is, inside the dumpster has closed her mouth and instead is making sharp little sniffing movements with her nose. Now she is thrashing through the cans, almost like she's trying to swim. She can't be any bigger than a couple of salmon, or maybe she's the size of a teenage girl, I can't tell when she keeps moving like that.

Something awful has happened to her. This idea is mixed up in my mind, because a minute ago, I decided that pain was not real. I could watch a woman getting raped like it was a play so bad you can't pay attention to what's happening in it. You feel embarrassed for the author sitting in a small closed up room and staring at the world

outside, trying to catch it and put it on the page, and wondering if he was right.

She seems trapped, but she wants to stay. She is looking for something, but I don't think it's in there, not like she lost an earring. It's inside *her*. The sniffing makes me nervous. It's as if her nose controls her, because the rest of her body is so limp and soft, like it has surrendered. The nose is looking for something. It is not strong, but it is trying, and it is getting underneath everything. No one would suspect it, but one day it will come through all our walls and windows, and what it is looking for, God knows.



The back of her bald head is bruised. I don't know if it's the moonlight or if her skin is always grayish green. She is like a barnacle, wrapped in a blanket stained with paint from the cans, with scrapes on her neck. She is naked underneath the blanket, but looking at her body is like when my grandmother came to visit and fell asleep in her clothes, and I put a nightgown on her. I looked at all her wrinkles and wondered how anyone could be so old. I tried to be careful when I touched her, as if my youth could somehow destroy all the soft pieces of skin just staying in place.

She sorts through the bin of mismatched colors. Her eyes are closed but blinking very fast. Her neck is covered in blood. I want to tell her that the cans are toys, that they won't hurt her. I'm glad she can't read what people write with them on the walls. I try not to panic. Who knows if they know that we are here tonight or if they set this up themselves. Who knows if happiness exists for us. I hope we're free or that we have time. There are so many hours left in the night, and I want them to come. Maybe tomorrow I'll listen to someone else's idea of what the world has always been, but for now, I think it was probably built by people like us.

I will give her all that I can, whatever food and possessions I have, and more. I give her my hands, as if I want her to cuff them. I lean all the way over into her pit. I want her to stand above the rim of the dumpster and see the sky. Her lips are moving in and out, like she is blowing a bubble underwater. It looks like she is balancing the air between them. My tongue is tasting spit, like saltwater, and my mouth fills with it. I let her sniff my hands, but I don't ask her if I can do what I will do next.

Slowly I lift her to a standing position, like the priest who lifted me out of the waters of the Santa Rosa Street Pump as a baby. I keep my hands on her, feeling their strength, not thinking about whether or not she'd fall if they weren't there, but just keeping them there.

I feel her ribs in my hands and wonder how heavy she would be if the moon were not pulling her up. Right now, with my vision all blurred, I am thinking that this is what an artist must feel like when he touches the canvas. There is fire engine red and yellow green, some swatches of dark blue. I keep holding her there, trying to feel out the rest of the painting, changing my grip when it becomes too difficult. There is nothing but the sky, always falling, always rising, no matter how you look at it. And my hands.

