



down in the *di*
revealing all your
dirty little secrets

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Scars art, pages 39 (Teenage Dreams).

Cover art of a lawn mower suspended in space; photographed in Pennsylvania.

THE COLLECTOR

Mel Waldman

Recently, my patient stopped cutting himself after three years of therapy. He used to tell me: "Cutting my skin makes me feel real!" Still, he was able to stop his self-mutilations. Then he missed three sessions in a row. I received the following letter today:

Dear Dr. F:

I wish to inform you that I am terminating treatment. I am also moving out of state. Thanks for all your help. Finally, I've stopped cutting myself. This achievement is a miracle. Yet it leaves me empty-absolutely null and void and terrified. Seems I've lost a big chunk of my identity. Suffering can be very comforting and familiar. Who am I? And what's left of me?

I love you! I hate you! I'm in mourning. But I've got a temporary solution. I've studied bizarre behaviors during the course of my treatment. And now, I am a collector.

What do I collect? First, I collected a vast list of bizarre behaviors and syndromes, including hundreds of obscure psychopathological conditions. Then, I read about each condition, exploring the infinite possibilities of self-destruction. In other words, I collected a massive amount of information, perhaps thousands of facts, symptoms, and data. Now, I've randomly selected six syndromes. (Actually seven.)

My current mathematically determined collection includes: erotomania, frottage, vampirism (and lycanthropy), sex slavery and the Stockholm syndrome, autoerotic asphyxia, and necrophilia. I will stay up all night to explore the intricate labyrinths of the bizarre. Tomorrow, I will randomly choose one syndrome to embrace, explore, and become. It will be my sudden cure for emptiness. A hollow man without an identity is merely a black hole, you see!

But before I say adieu, let us briefly examine my mini-universe of possibilities. First, there is erotomania. Some call it obsessive love or *psychose passionelle* (passionate insanity). In its pure form, there is obsessive love at first sight. At the core of the disorder, the individual believes that he or she is loved madly by a person of higher status. The individual who suffers from erotomania may eventually become a stalker. Ultimately, there is the possibility of violent erotomania. How interesting, Dr F. How interesting.

Second, there is *frottage*. In *frottage* or *frotteurism*, an individual rubs against strangers in public places. The *frotteur* experiences sexual gratification. Will he become a frictionist who rubs against a woman's buttocks or legs? Will he experience an orgasm with the unknown woman? In any case, both are fully clothed. Will *frotteurism* lead to *toucheurism*, in which the *frotteur* touches a stranger? If so, *toucheurism* can be perceived as a physical assault—a criminal act. Will *frotteurism* lead to *voyeurism* or rape? The potentiality for violence is definitely there. How exciting, Dr. F!

Third, there is vampirism. Related to vampirism is lycanthropy, the delusional belief that a person has been changed into a wolf. Individuals who believe they have been transformed into a wolf may commit violent acts such as cannibalism, mutilation, or murder. How delightful, Dr. F!

Fourth, there is sex slavery and the Stockholm syndrome, pertaining to people who have been kidnapped and held hostage for long periods of time. These victims have been held for sexual exploitation or political reasons. In the Stockholm syndrome, the victim experiences positive feelings toward his captor, but negative feelings toward his rescuers. And the captor entertains positive feelings toward the victim. How wonderful it would be to reclaim my status as victim! And feel all that love! What about you, Dr. F? Want some of that submissive love, Doc? Confess and cleanse yourself! I won't tell! I mean, it's truly delicious! Right, Sir Shrink?

Fifth, there is autoerotic asphyxia in which the individual induces oxygen deprivation to heighten the experience of orgasm. This breathless sex is also called “headrushing,” “huffing,” “fantasy,” “flying to the moon,” “scarfing,” and “ecstasy.” Hanging is the most popular method of autoerotic asphyxia. But there are numerous methods of suffocation for those seeking heightened sexual excitement. How sweet and dangerous, Dr F!

Sixth, there is necrophilia, in which individuals are sexually aroused by contact with corpses. Necrophiles may commit murder to have sex with a corpse. Or, without committing murder, they may have sexual intercourse with a dead body. Necrophiles perform all kinds of horrific acts, Dr. F! They are deliciously obscene! There are three kinds of necrophiles: violent necrophiles, fantasy necrophiles, and romantic necrophiles. What kind of necrophile would I be, Dr. F? And you?

Tomorrow, I will choose one of these disorders which I will embrace with all my heart and soul. Goodbye, Dr. F!

Sincerely,
The Collector

P.S. Perhaps, we will meet again. And by the way, what disorder would you choose?

I suppose I am a collector too. A cauldron of my patients’ seething emotions, I also hold and contain their thoughts, dreams, and nightmares. And of course, I contain my personal history too, having collected a cornucopia of psychological shards, anguished memories of loss, death, and violence, fragmented and forgotten traumas, buried traumas, and visions of Heaven and Hell.

Perhaps, the Collector will return one day and slice me with his rage and love. He may be a frotteur or frictionist or wannabe rapist, wolf or vampire, or sex slave and victim, oxygen-deprived, breathless “headrusher” or necrophile. The Collector may be all of the above or none. Always, he will shriek emptiness and crave to be filled up.

We are collectors. But not the Collector. Thanatos, it seems, is our

Collector, the original Necrophile, waiting for us, feeding on our dead bodies. Yet some might argue that Eros is at the very least, our Co-Collector or the only genuine Collector, collecting our souls when we give our love, transforming us into mysterious beings, filling up our wasteland with infinite possibilities.

POSTSCRIPT 1

A CANNIBALISTIC LETTER

Dear Collector:

I am the Wolf! I devour your flesh. In this brutal act of cannibalism, I embrace your soul and we are one. In the act of mutilation, when I cut your skin, you become perfect. You become real. In the act of murder, you are killed and resurrected too. I am the Wolf! I contain both Thanatos and Eros. I am the mysterious Collector! (And I am not this unknowable Source!)

Sincerely,
Dr. F

POSTSCRIPT 2

A PARADOX

We exist inside the universe. And the universe exists within us. The Collector is all, including the Void, especially each human who collects thoughts and emotions, sometimes stealing them from others, and storing them in primitive caverns of the brain-microscopic holding cells which will eventually release them as pure energy to fuel Life or Death forces. Always, there will be the ultimate choice-creation or destruction. And if the latter is clutched, there will be an atomic explosion/implosion. The Collector is all, especially the Void.

POSTSCRIPT 3

THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM

The Collector may wish to kill me. And my life may truly be in danger. I may have only seconds left. Yet I will not fear. I will read the twenty-third psalm, eat his brains, and sing hallelujah! I'm perched on a white birch tree, way up high, ready to swing toward the Heavens, but wanting to return real soon, an old man and a boy at the end of life (and the very beginning), Collector of all things, especially dark dreams.

DOCTOR HOLY

Mel Waldman

Doctor Holy speaks to the discarded creatures of Hell, divulging truths they can't conceive, revealing gems like—"I believe Heaven is nearby. An evolutionary thought will take you to the Gate;" "Peace of Mind is nestled in the Third Eye;" and "A revolutionary vision will take you inside."

The subterranean beings banish Doctor Holy from their Kingdom, for they crave only the music of chaos and destruction. Telepathically, they dramatically increase the volume on Radio Station H-A-D-E-S, shriek cacophony, and with their anguished visions, drill an invisible dark Void across the universe.

ON THAT DAY

Mel Waldman

The old city is gone.
And the person I was before it happened
is buried in a distant place on that day.
I say kaddish.

And now, the city rushes across space and time,
but sometimes it is a
frozen landscape in my mind,
unkind to human eyes on that day,

still moments intruding upon my peace
in a reign of terror,
trapped in crevices of my brain,
and a flood of death-rain
pouring human debris in my face.

I suppose I'll never erase that day.
I'll never get away.
Even with the laughter and joy of new creations
and the birth of babies, evoking hope,
the past intrudes, like a
sprawling shadow of a lamppost in my mind,
unkind to human eyes on that day,
metastasizing trauma to every part of me.

You see, I'm not supposed to forget.
To love life, I believe, is to move ahead
while rushing toward the past too,
acknowledging evil-all sins, losses and horrific truths,
but knowing that beauty is the
Tree of Life,
coming forth from a magical seed,
created in a secret moment of design.

This is what I conceive.
If only I face this death and taste it too,
and look beyond and within,
droplets of faith will cover me like the
invisible skin of soul
I've never seen but
sometimes feel.
Then I will be more than a
cave dweller trapped in a
cave of rock and darkness
on that day.
Bathed by a distant and immanent light,
I will be free,
even when I revisit the old city
on that day.
Free

When help is not on it's way

David Van Bebber Jr.

Sweat dampens my back
the hot carpet I lay on.
Above me the fan wobbles slowly
as it pounds the ceiling with it's off balance momentum
rocking like an out of balance wheel on a rusted out station wagon.
Somehow it limps its way along.

I attempt to calm this inner storm.
But it's just as attempting peace in a war ravaged country
where bodies are spread through the streets,
amongst the buildings scattered remains.

Tears come when hope doesn't.

Unworthy

David Van Bebber Jr.

I run from my misery
Fleeing my shame
I hide from you

when you call my name.

untitled

Umesh Ghoshdastider

The very little gain that I have in
My whole life mentioning everything
But so much gain I achieved
In the opposite direction...

AN UNLIKELY PLACE FOR DAISIES

Allan Jzen

As always, Thurston led the way. A shambling bear of a man in his bulky Irish sweater, he tramped resolutely through the forest, footfalls chuffing in the litter.

Rebecca came plodding behind, fending off whippy branches, skating on pine cones and stumbling on roots. At home in the early-morning darkness she had pulled on her *lederhosen* imagining that their trek up the forested flanks of the Cascades would be a lighthearted stroll on grassy avenues in a sunny sea of flowers and bird song. *O sure*, she thought as she slogged on, *yodeling 'Valdaree Valdarah' maybe.*

The woods were dark when they started. Gossamer mist floated in the shadows. *Beautiful*, thought Becky, *like a calendar painting.* But her glasses kept fogging up and a clammy chill crept under her clothes. the beauty of the woods was the last thing on her mind.

Soon Eventually smoky shafts of sunlight pierced the olivine gloom. Trees began ticking and steaming in the warmth of the coming day.

"Well, dear?"

The lusty shout came from Thurston. He was up the trail, standing with his fists on his hips, frowning back at her as if her inability to keep up were a deliberate attempt to annoy him.

She jogged clumsily up to him and was rewarded with his famous eye-crinkling smile. "I think we're looking at the last of the serviceberry, my dear. I'd be surprised if it ventured any higher than this." He held out a handful of small, brownish berries. "Have some. They're good."

"Thank you, Thurston."

She scratched them out of his palm.

"I hope it's not boring you, sweetheart. Do you find these outings tedious?"

"Oh, no," she smiled gamely, "I knew you were a botanist when I took up with you."

"When you *took up with --'* Ho, that's funny, you know. As if I were a jazz musician and you were a chorine.

"And your legs, my dear? Are they any better?" he asked. "Is the lotion helping?"

"I don't think so."

"Poor Becky. You've certainly made your nutritional contribution to

the mosquito population, haven't you?"

"I'm okay," she said.

"Well," he rumbled, "you won't have to worry about mosquitoes much longer. Getting too high for 'em. " He started off as if commencing a long march. With ponderous jauntiness, he held his finger in the air and bel-lowed, "Come on Becky. Try to keep up. We've got a lot of ground to cover. Fix the pole star over your shoulder and it's straight on 'til morning."

Rebecca lost no time falling behind. She trudged doggedly up track, scanning the trail for slick patches, rocks, roots and pine cones.

They'd been underway for more than an hour when Rebecca looked up and was surprised to find herself in a meadow. She shielded her eyes with a salute and surveyed miles of grassland tilting up to a peacock-blue sky and a billowy cloud resting on the horizon. Breezes combed the tall grass. In the distance, Thurston beckoned impatiently.

Rebecca tried to catch up, but she was exhausted and simply couldn't work her legs any faster.

How long had it been? she wondered. Two years? Two and a half? Had they been married that long? As she pushed through the meadow, she returned in memory to her first sight of Thurston. She had been a first year graduate student and Thurston von Bredow was a legend.

The rumpled, pipe-smoking old gentleman with his wild tangle of gray hair, leprechaun's eyebrows and twinkling eyes had been principle author of nearly sixty journal articles. He received the Knowlton medal at fifty. He was a botanist's botanist, a legend.

Late one evening, while searching for a journal in the archives, Becky turned a corner and nearly fainted. There he was. She'd been flustered and embarrassed.

He recognized her; greeted her cordially and told her he was impressed to find her in the stacks at such a late hour. His nearness had been like an anesthetic. Becky couldn't manage a single word. She smiled, feeling like a fool.

She found him intimidating; was never at her best around him. She recalled the morning in plant anatomy lab; she had been preparing slides. Dr. Von Bredow bent over her shoulder to inspect the work at hand and she had gone soft inside at the scent of his bitter cologne, the whistle of breath in his nose.

She was teased by her roommates about romantic designs they imputed to Dr. Von Bredow. Rebecca laughed along with them, but she had to admit that Dr. Von Bredow *did* seem fond of her. He paid a lot of attention to her,

especially at the teas. Working her way up the meadow, Rebecca's lips twisted in a bittersweet smile as she reflected on those damned teas. She hated them. Everyone did. Ghastly fireside affairs where attendance was de rigueur for any graduate student wishing to demonstrate her seriousness of purpose. Quiet, turgid, affairs they were, where the smiles were rictuses of pain, where youngsters barely out of their teens balanced teacups on their knees, spoke in low tones and sprinkled their conversation with mature locutions like "quite frankly" and "notwithstanding."

Dr. Von Bredow held the gatherings at his house and he was the only one who ever seemed at ease. Draped in his trademarked cardigan, he ensconced himself in the room's single Regency chair like an avuncular lion and in his rumbling *basso profundo*, regaled them with anecdotes. He had a way of guffawing with his lips pressed together that some of the more ambitious male students were already starting to imitate. It was at one of the teas, in a moment of genteel laughter at one of Dr. Von Bredow's mordant stories, that Rebecca caught him staring at her with an odd, whimsical smile. As if his anecdote had been for her alone.

When it came time to assemble a thesis committee, she summoned the courage to ask Dr. Von Bredow to preside over it. He gave her an eye-wrinkling smile of pure pleasure and said he'd be honored. As chairman of her committee, Dr. Von Bredow met with her regularly to discuss her progress. Eventually she felt less shy. She began to relax and there were moments when she had the temerity to believe they were actually becoming friends despite their ages and stations in life.

She found Dr. Von Bredow remarkably easy to talk to. He actually listened, he responded. He was attentive and sympathetic, so unlike the younger, unformed males of her acquaintance. She found him to be, in his way, quite youthful.

And there was something else. Rebecca could hardly help noticing his occasional hungry glance at her chest. She knew the look; what woman didn't?

One morning in his office, he settled back in his crushed leather chair, steepled his hands and gave her a forlorn look. In a soft, mumbling whisper, he awkwardly revealed to Becky that he was interested in her as a woman as well as a graduate student.

She slowly realized he was proposing marriage.

To say Becky was stunned wouldn't begin to describe it. No man had ever shown the slightest romantic interest in her. She had thrown herself into botany fully expecting a career that would supplant marriage and

family, a profession that would sustain the focus of her active years and provide for her dotage.

There was no denying that Thurston was a fascinating companion. And there were any number of solid reasons for accepting his proposal. But love, she reluctantly admitted, wasn't one of them.

Rebecca always tried to see a thing from many angles. She reminded herself that marrying for love was a recent innovation. Throughout most of human history, men and women had teamed up to fend off wild animals and hostile neighbors and to breed children for security in their old age. If love grew from such an alliance, so much the better, but it had never been the main reason to marry.

And why should it be? Especially when the odds on connubial success were no better than flipping a coin? Surely their mutual passion for the plant sciences provided Thurston and her with a strong foundation. Love could be learned, she was certain of it.

And Rebecca had always been a good learner.

Rebecca Fetzer Von Bredow.

She lay in bed that night, blotting her eyes with a forearm, weeping soundlessly.

#

In late August, Rebecca Fetzer Von Bredow stepped into the hush of Thurston's fieldstone house to stay. There were Turkish carpets on polished oak floors, mahogany book cases, oil landscapes under track lighting. There were cloisonne bowls, credenzas, shady nooks and cool Spanish arches.

It didn't take long for Mrs. Von Bredow to realize that for all Thurston's cordial bonhomie and boyish charm in the lecture hall, he was a tired man, more elderly than she'd thought, heavier, and his hands were like ice.

He was unfailingly charming and solicitous, but there was a distracted air about his attentions, as if she were an amusing child who had come to live with him.

He made few demands on her. He spent his days at the botany department and most of his time at home was spent in the lath house.

Life with Thurston, if not brimming with warmth and affection was, at least, secure, stable and quiet, Rebecca thought. And when she was visited by the occasional beacon-flash of her future as a faculty wife -- teas and committees, somber afternoons caring for a distracted, elderly man -- she swallowed hard and tried to count her blessings.

Afternoon found them in a conifer forest. They had stopped for lunch and a rest. Rebecca had was walking easily again, under the tall pines on springy carpets of matted needles. They entered a glade spangled with blue daisies the size of dimes.

“Look darling,” Thurston cried, “Cog’s Eye daisies. Just where Gunderson said they’d be. Who would have thought Bellis glabrous could eke out a living up here in this acid litter?”

He slipped his pack off, propped it against a moss-covered log. He hunkered down unfastened the plant press. “He needs twenty specimens for his Taxonomy 400 class,” he explained.

Rebecca set her pack next to Thurston’s. She swung her arms a little to loosen up and then got down and began troweling up cog’s-eye daisies.

Thurston arranged each specimen for best display on a square of herbarium cardboard, covered it with a sheet of absorbent paper and stacked it in the press.

When they had twenty good ones, he placed the top of the press on the herbarium sheets, threaded the canvass belts, stepped heavily on the top and yanked the belts tight.

Rebecca sat on a log, tipping her face to the sun. She closed her eyes and let herself be warmed. Thurston sat beside her. He scooted close and whispered, “You really are quite lovely with a sheen of perspiration on your skin, you know.”

She opened an eye and peered at him. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Oh no, my dear, I mean it, I really do.”

He astounded her by draping an arm over her shoulders. “You know something?” he murmured in low, intimate tones, “I feel like, hm, perpetuating the species.”

“Sweat makes you feel like -- Thurston, you’re not serious.”

He pressed fervent lips to her temple and planted a line of hot little kisses down her neck.

She turned away and laughed helplessly. “Thurston,” she whickered, “Thurston, this is too much.”

He pulled her roughly to him and petted the front of her lederhosen.

“Thurston,” she grabbed his wrist with both hands, “what is wrong with you?”

“We’re married, aren’t we? Rebecca, for God’s sake, we’re alone here, free -- *really* free; free to do whatever we like.” He stood up, pulled his

sweater over his head and let it fall to the ground. He began undoing his trousers. "Free to love," he croaked dryly. "Free to... *make* love."

"Oh, Thurston, please --" She averted her eyes from the sight of something red protruding from his shirttails.

He held his arms out, displaying himself in a sort of Falstaffian glory, belly and breast shining in the glade's watery light.

"Rebecca," he whispered.

Oddly comical with his wagging erection, he came up to her and tried to unfasten her *lederhosen*. There was a struggle, and then, like a bad dream, Rebecca was in her brassiere, doughy flesh bulging over the tight leather waist.

Thurston pirouetted in front of her, doing a strange dance with her blouse. She hugged herself. "Give it back, Thurston. Please. I'm cold."

Urgently he kissed her chest, fumbled with her brassiere fastenings. "You'll be warm, I promise. Warm-warm-warm."

"Don't, Thurston, please..."

"What?" he asked crossly. "What are you afraid of? Aren't you the girl who told me she wanted to do it more often?"

"Not here."

"And why not here? There's power here Rebecca, the power of wilderness, the sky, the earth, the forest. This is where we were *designed* to make love."

She stiffened as he yanked impatiently at her brassiere fastenings. She never dreamed Thurston would be capable of anything like this. . and yet, perhaps if she could think of him as a stranger. . maybe if she imagined herself to be someone else, all this might be sort of . .

She drew a sharp breath and folded her arms as Thurston lifted away her brassier. He clapped his large hands over her breasts, palpating them ardently, kissing her everywhere, wet and sloppy.

"I don't want to."

"Please, Rebecca, *please*."

"I'm not clean."

"That's how I want you."

"What if someone comes?"

"No one will come."

He worked her *lederhosen* down to her knees, then her underwear. Finally, she sat naked on the log, knees tightly together, eyes squeezed shut. He moved in close, held her and suddenly there was no place for Becky to put her arms, except around Thurston.

He threw their clothes on the ground, flattened them and gently twisted her off the log. Rebecca fled down a tunnel deep into the mind of her mind, trying desperately to ignore Thurston's rough, dog-like muzzling.

But in her sphere of silence, a voice whispered: *Isn't this what you wanted? More energy? More pggision? Well. look at him. Rebecca. let him in . . .*

His hands were leaving warm trails on her skin as he caressed her.

Timidly, she pecked the corner of his mouth. His tongue spilled into her mouth and his other tongue spilled into her other mouth and they groaned.

Rebecca flushed crimson, her muscles tightened and a growl crawled out of her, a sound she hadn't known she could make.

#

Pine boughs plashed gently in the breeze. Peeps and soft warbles floated out of the woods.

Rebecca lay on her back staring torpidly into the pine boughs. Thurston sprawled across her breast like a sleeping baby. She massaged him tenderly. For the first time in her life, trite as sounded, she felt like Fat little Becky Fetzer from the Bronx. a woman. had been well-fucked.

She liked the sound of that, the freedom of saying it (even if only to herself) and best of all, having it be true. *Becky Fetzer. you've been well fucked.*

Her wantonness made her smile.

"Thurston," she whispered, "that was wonderful." She eased out from under him, tugged her clothes free and when she was dressed, she knelt beside him and said, "Hey, sleepyhead."

She kneaded his shoulders affectionately. "Thurston, darling," she whispered, "it's getting late."

She nudged him and tipped him over onto his back. He had an enormous erection.

"Oh, my," the new Becky vamped.

Thurston's eyes opened, but he didn't look at her. He gazed fixedly into the pines.

A deer fly spiraled down to land on his forehead.

Thurston didn't move.

The fly walked crookedly toward his eye.

Thurston didn't move.

Thurston was a noisy sleeper. So where were his usual snorts and muttering? *And why isn't he shooing that fly?*

Because the man is sleeping, that's why, Rebecca told herself. He's an old man, he's been hiking since sun-up and then all this. . . rolling

around. He's having a post-coital sleep.

The fly waded into his eyelashes.

#

Thurston's face was gray and jowly. Large bruises mottled his chest and belly and the muscles on the backs of his hands contracted, spreading his fingers like talons.

Rebecca sat on a log, face in her hands.

Suddenly Thurston farted.

Rebecca looked up, laughed. "Say, 'excuse me,' Thurston. "

Thurston said nothing. She expelled a burst of hissing, hysterical laughter that ended in strangled sob.

"You scared the hell out of me, you know. . Thurston, say something. . . *anything*."

#

In the powder blue evening, she hunched over a small fire heating coffee. She had wrapped Thurston in a canvass half-shelter. He was a dark, brooding cocoon in the firelight.

"Can you hear me, Thurston?" she whispered. "Thurston, darling, are you here? I want you to know how sorry I am. What did you ever see in me, anyway? Just a dumb little grad student . . ." She put her face in her hands and mewled.

She lowered herself to the ground, her chin fell to her chest and in spite of everything, sleep enrobed her.

#

Cold, gray morning light seeped into the sky.

Rebecca climbed to her feet, her stiff muscles making an agonizing *tai chi* demonstration of it. She rummaged through a deadfall until she found a couple of branches, thick enough, dry and reasonably straight. She snapped off the side growth and dragged them back to the glade. She used rope and canvass straps to lash together a sledge. She rolled Thurston onto it and secured him with webbed belts from the plant press.

She lifted the handles of the sledge to her shoulders and started down the mountain.

#

Decades later, time brought an end to Rebecca.

Her daughter Naomi flew in to make the arrangements. She stayed in her mother's townhouse, sifting through the place, cleaning and straightening up and assigning everything to one of four categories: Keep, sell, donate or discard.

two poems (in Spanish) by J. J. Brearton

EL POEMA MÁS GRANDE ESCRITO SIEMPRE

No hay animales carnívoros en Estambul
y si hubiera no los reconocería igual en traje.
Para actualmente,
las ceremonias se funcionan
en ninguna manera menos
que ceremonious.

Como, digamos,
las reglas parlamentarias.

La etiqueta puede no existir
y las buenas maneras pueden no ser fuertes
pero adornan un partido
con las señoras elegantes
finas y los hombres
y yo que atan con correa
altos nos excusaremos,
por excelencia,
esto debemos ser el extremo.

B SQUEDA PARA EL SUPERBODY

Viviendo mil años sería duro continuar
con carne como el nuestros.

Los cuerpos plásticos
son lo que necesitamos
y un poco preservativo
para el cerebro.

Before Visiting

Colin Fleming

So much for shifts. That was our plan, like we were on a stakeout or something. But my wife, because she is my wife, is home sick in bed. She's supposed to be here tonight. Last night was my turn and here I was. Right here. Same as now. I never even lost my couch. My father did not have a couch when he was doing this with my mother because he was bedside. I am officially waiting to visit. After it happened I never asked my father what his time was like because he would have just stared at me and I think you can practically choke on those kinds of looks. And I don't go asking a lot besides.

I have not and won't call to ask my wife just how sick she thinks she is. I cannot use the laugh. Hardly anyone says anything here except if they whisper. Some people try and sleep the whole time. I watch the television.

You can watch one show turn into another and sometimes you don't even know they're different. I like the commercials if there's a few in a row and you look at the clock on the wall and see the next show is about to start because I have had enough of all of the free magazines you can read. I can almost get sick off of them by now. They don't have any medical magazines. But there's some coloring books on the table with everything else even though hardly any kids come in here. I've only seen the two that were here yesterday. They sat at the table by the vending machine and didn't say a word, just colored. I do not know why I was watching. Like their parents couldn't have left them at home like the rest of them. Grandchildren scribbling their cards and writing Get Well like that's all anyone has to do and somebody's going to get better. Just dry your eyes love. Stroke it children. I could never think like that. The rooms in here must be covered with little hopscotch drawings and smiley faces. Our kids are in school. Thank God for that. We just aborted one of them. Right here in this same place. It was down a floor though. One of the pamphlets they had downstairs at the nurses' station was nice enough to tell me that there is love even in loss. And to think I was wasting my time doing crossword puzzles.

I've read every magazine here dog-eared and I won't watch the news. The news is on I think six times a day or maybe eight. You should have heard that doctor though. "She's going to be extra emotional," he said. "For I don't rightly know how long," he said. That rightly. Like he had just come out of someone's barn. When he said what he did I swear I thought he was talking about one of those vacuum cleaners you use for your pool, only smaller. So maybe I'd be home sick in bed too. But why wonder. They shut the television down late at night and there is not much to see. I do

not want to look at the woman who says she's been here since Wednesday because when I look at the woman from Wednesday all I hear is her voice saying the same thing she always says. She says she's been here since last Wednesday to be with her husband. I don't know how she thinks she's with him sitting out here. She didn't ask about me so I didn't tell her about my wife's mother and of course not about my wife. But she did say I was a dear because I got her some bottled water out of the vending machine. She offered me change but I paid myself. People make the biggest deals out of the smallest things. By the looks of her she is about my father-in-law's age and she dyes her hair, but my wife dyes her's too, and she isn't nearly so old.

My father-in-law is not here right now and I do not think that he will be. I have argued about him. I talk to my wife once a day when I call out on the wall phone. I call to tell her that the only news I have is that I have no news and that the doctors still don't know how this could be going on for so long and I am sorry. I say I am sorry because I am and I remember how it was for me afterwards even if I didn't ask my father what it was like for him having to be there and watch. And I ask my wife about my father-in-law. She asks me how I would feel if I were him and I tell her the best I can. I tell her I would feel like a prick who wouldn't know a ticking clock if it bit him on the ass. Those are not my exact words. But I am only answering her question. I think he should be here and I cannot believe that he's home with my wife. I should not need to tell my wife this but this really is their thing much more than it is mine. Then my wife sounds horrible and she tells me that she will talk to me later.

The last time we were on the phone my wife told me about the arrangements and that she has a suit pressed for me and I haven't talked to her since. My wife told me Friday if it happens tonight, Saturday if it's tomorrow, but if it's the next day everyone waits until Monday. You'd think some things would be above having to wait for Monday. You'd think after you waited for a long time you'd be done waiting and I get tired thinking about all of this and I am not even supposed to be here. I don't sleep at night, but I have a hard time staying awake during the day. I walk blocks sometimes going around this floor.

I go by where I think the operating rooms are and I run my hand along the wall.

My right one for awhile, then my left the other way, because I like to mix things up and turn around after a few blocks. The woman from Wednesday is up at night too. There is always the sound of her moving in her chair like she is reaching for something or can't get comfortable. She has everything she has here in a black cloth bag and she puts her feet up on a hassock that is cracked down the middle and beige. Late at night she

twists her mouth into an ugly shape and looks up at the ceiling and breathes hard, but only when everyone else is asleep. She has no idea I am looking at her now and I am sure that if she did she would not say anything. I feel bad for her when she goes to get chips and candy out of the vending machine because she coughs all of the time and I wonder if she is sick or just a smoker, and eating out of a vending machine can't help. I do not eat out of the vending machine but I have made a game for myself. My game is to count with the clock. I swear the only reason you can't hear the clock in this room is because it's digital. Each number is made up of little red bars that are notched on the end to fit into other red bars. They are small, too small to see from here. Whenever I want I can look at the clock on the wall and try and guess how many bars there are altogether in all of the digits in any time it says. Then I walk across the room and get up close to see if I am right. It is not the greatest game. The woman from Wednesday sometimes stares at the clock like me, but I do not think she is playing. And I know my wife would want no part of my game, even if she was here. I can tell you that eight past twelve has the most tiny bars in all, twenty to be exact, but my game gets old and it doesn't take long. I can watch the woman from Wednesday in her chair rubbing her eyes and I move on to that. Sometimes I feel like I am inside of her head with her and we have an agreement. All I have to do is cough when she turns in her chair and we start from there every time. We have it so she will tell me how she thinks she is with her husband when I go by to walk another block, and I'll give her the same look that says nothing each time I come back. Right up until the morning and she's still staring at the ceiling.

Are You Coming?

David Berthiaume

“Are you coming?”

It is the question that is keeping him awake tonight. He stares at the empty space next to him in the bed, and rubs his hand along the pillow that once held her resting head. It still smells like her.

“It’s not your fault,” his psychiatrist told him

“Stop blaming yourself,” said his friends. It is no use. Tonight, just like every night since it happened, he cannot help but feel the guilt that washes over him, drowning him in a sea of what-ifs.

At long last, he decides that he can’t take it anymore. He sloughs off the blanket, and climbs out of his bed, placing his bare feet on the cold, hard-wood floor. If she was here, she would ask him what he was doing.

“Nothing dear,” he tells the empty bed.

The floor creaks with each new step he takes. As he exits the bedroom, he looks down the hallway and notices the light leaking from beneath the bathroom door. For a brief moment, he sees her. It is an image he has seen many times on the many mornings before it happened. She stands there, in her long flowing nightgown to welcome him into the waking world with a cup of coffee and a smile. Then she is gone.

He takes a deep breath, rubs the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger for a moment, then continues down the hallway. Pictures of her stare at him from the wall as he passes by.

He stops at his office door. Part of him expects he will open the door and see her doing as she had so often done, rearranging his books in alphabetical order. It is a trait he finds annoying and yet, endearing at the same time. He would explain to her again that he preferred his books in chronological order. Then she would smile and gently shake her head at his oddness. When he opens the door, his office is painfully empty. His books line the shelves just as he had left them. His heart falls.

He enters the office, leaving behind the cold, wooden floor, for the warm softness of the carpet. It is the very same carpet he had fought so hard against getting. The small trace of a smile appears on his unshaven face. The battle had lasted a week, but in the end, as always, she had won.

He walks to his desk. It is cluttered with coffee cups and old cigarette butts. She had begged him to quit smoking and he had always promised he would. His promise was fulfilled the day of the accident. Since that day, he hadn’t even felt the craving for a cigarette. He only wishes he

had quit sooner.

He pulls his chair out from under the desk and sits down. The cold leather sends chills up his naked back. Her radiant face peers at him from behind an empty coffee cup. He reaches out and gently pushes the cup aside, revealing the whole picture. It was taken the morning he had surprised her with a new car. Now the car is gone, smashed to oblivion in the middle of some junk pile, and so is she.

He feels burning tears coming to the surface but like all the times before, he fails to cry. Everything about the room reminds him of her. All of her “feminine touches” as she liked to call them, the bowl of potpourri that sits on the corner of his desk, the red ribbon hanging from the doorknob in a little bow. At first these and other items bring to mind loving memories, but the memories always seem to turn into daggers that cut right into his soul.

He turns and opens the top drawer on the side of the desk. He looks inside at the mess of disheveled papers and pens. None of this interests him anymore. He pushes the bulk of the papers aside, and uncovers what he is looking for.

The shining metal surface glimmers in the darkness of the drawer. He grabs hold of the item by its black handle. The color reminds him of death, and the inside of her coffin.

He bought the device for protection. He had never needed to use it before. It wasn't much help when the drunk driver behind the wheel of a semi truck, crossed the median and plowed headlong into oncoming traffic, but perhaps it could serve a purpose now.

He places the device on top of the desk. He sees her picture again, but this time she is staring at him imploringly. He reaches over and places the photo face down. She shouldn't see what he is about to do.

“Is it time?” He hears her ask.

“Time is an old bald cheater,” he answers. He can't remember where he has heard this, but it's true. Time tends to make you think it will last forever. It leads you down the road, dancing merrily along, until you cross at the wrong intersection, or meet the wrong person after you have taken a wrong turn, and then WHAM. Time is no more. Does time care? Does it shed a single tear? No. Time is cold, heartless, and unforgiving. When you're gone time goes on without you, leading others to their same grisly demise.

He reaches forward and picks up the gun. All of a sudden it is heavier than he remembers. It's as if all of his hopes, dreams, doubts, and fears were all concentrated into a single bullet, but in a moment they will all be released. With one tiny, deliberate action, the pain will go away. He pulls the gun toward him, and looks into the eye of this creature of solace. He welcomes it. He places the nozzle of the gun into his mouth, and lets it rest

on his tongue. The taste of gun-oil is a little off-putting, but that will be of no consequence. His thumb gently pulls back the hammer, which registers a soft click when it is locked into place.

As he places his thumb on the trigger, she appears in the doorway. "Are you coming?" She asks. Those words, spoken by such an angelic voice, summon up the most painful memory of all. He doesn't remember where she was going, or why. All he can remember was that she had wanted him to go with her. It would have taken an hour at the most, nothing compared to a lifetime. He had told her that he was busy working. She asked once more. He said no.

If he had gone, maybe she would still be alive. Maybe they would still be able to have the children she had always wanted. Maybe they would have lived a long and happy life, growing old together. Maybe, maybe, maybe, his mind is swimming in them. His mind is too bombarded to tell him to stop, his burning heart, urging him on.

Suddenly, the tempest that has been tearing his soul apart stops. He sees her as clear as day, And she asks one question.

"Are you coming?"

A tear forms. The warmth of it flowing down his cheek provokes more. The nozzle of the gun is pulled away, and the gun falls to the floor. Although she is blurred by the torrent of long-repressed tears, she is still there.

He answers, "Not yet."

He then leans forward with his face in his hands, and does what he has been unable to do for far too long. With the light of the rising sun peeking in through the window behind him, he cries.

untitled

Dr. Dick Nixon

I may drown
in a shallow
puddle

very far away
from home

where I was raised
to believe
that buoys would save me from harm

I may drown
in a deeper
puddle

called a lake
or a pond

forced into
subjugation

by a lovers
bitter bond

I may drown
in a river
merely wanting for a drink
a woefully strong current
forcing me to sink

I will drown in the ocean
if I survive
all these
only because
my passion
doth override my needs

LISBON'S LOST ANGELS

Michael S. Morris

... it was a decaying place
ruled by a king who sired
bastard sons
by comely nuns
until he lost his mind

Lisbon was dying...

It was
the Los Angeles of the past
and all at once at bay
it was two hundred thirty nine years ago
nine-thirty
All Saint's Day...

when the morning streets began to heave
and toss
darkening the city under a Raven cloud
of burling dust

Church bells clanged themselves
as tho Mystified at first

until they fell out of their towers

Freemen Sedgewards
As far away as Scotland felt
the tremors move the earth

Fires broke out
Some doused by the tidal wave
which reared and crashed

drowning survivors who had not,
luckily,
been burned or crushed

the waters receded as the looters came
plundering anything worth saving
killing anyone who interfered

Voltaire, overwhelmed
wrote of the horror

“What a wretched gamble
is the game of human life –
why not in the midst

of an uninhabited desert?
Why Lisbon engulfed
while, Paris, no less
wicked dances?”

Burning, Lisbon in 1755,
was the Los Angeles of its day –
a decaying place –
made rich by trade...

My Mother Wore Rabbit Ears

Noreen McAllister-Bifulco

This should have seemed strange to someone as straight-laced as my father, a grown woman sporting bunny ears, but he was in love. And although most would have considered him a bore, a responsible doctor who ran his own family practice, I think he understood that we all have moments when we misplace our sanity. He had his when he met my mother.

She was, in our suburban village a coast away from the real mansion, our version of a “Playboy Bunny.” Although here, they were called “Playful Rabbits;” the change of the name safely protected them from any copyright suits. Everything else was much the same: high stilettos, small leotard, enticing bunny tail and ears. She had been wearing it all for over eight years. Although it was tighter than her skin, she was used to it.

She met my father during her first month on the job and remained a Rabbit ever since due largely to his encouragement. And when I would whine to have her home in the evenings he’d insist, ironically, that work gave people a sense of respect. And although we didn’t need the second income, my mother, as you can imagine, having no formal education except for a dance class or two taken down at the community center, never disagreed with her husband. Knowing my effort was futile, I tried anyway to plead with my mother nightly, as she dipped in a bath before work. She would tell the same story as I half listened. I didn’t want to hear any more about responsibility, so I occupied my focus by tracing the zigzag pattern of the fishnets now tattooed upon her skin. I didn’t want to hear of responsibility, as I located the beginning of the pattern, or the desire to be the best, hoping to realize the aforementioned respect my father preached of, as I searched for the end.

Instead, she sacrificed what she could to find moments of time for me opting, unfortunately, not to waste any of it in the changing room. Unwittingly, my mother ripped the innocence away from many a wide eyed boy or girl as she picked me up from school, shattering their once younger ideas of cuddly, soft bunnies. And after seeing the principal at least once a month, during my third year in grade school, about my insatiable lack of respect for him and his school, we would share a malted shake and I would go without punishment. He was one of her best customers, so clarity was lacking in the knowing of whose naughtiness he really wanted to discuss.

Indubitably, I would tell my father of what sparked our outings to the malt shop hoping the heat would make him demand his wife to quit her job.

But according to him, I was lucky to have such a playful mother. He was unknowing yet of the regret to come a quick year later when he returned home from work to find me, alone, painting the whites of his walls with the red of my mother's lipstick. I was eight then and probably old enough to know not to paint on the walls, but it was my way of coping. It had all become too much, my mother being lusted by middle aged men thinking she was there for only their pleasures and my father having to share her beauty with these men who were slowly ripping it from her being. Similar my parents were in their desires for success, but success in my mother's field came with a heavy burden, one she tried to scour off in the heat of the shower.

She surprised me that lipstick day, pulling me out of school early. She had been there most of the morning meeting with Mr. A. on my behalf (My own presence was not necessary, I was told.) Excited I was to see her, I sensed a difference. Her eyes, usually hidden by the dark shades of her eye shadow, seemed accidentally aware and clear as she grabbed my face towards her own. I felt as if she knew of something I would never. She had missed me terribly; she declared applying ruby stained crescents upon my cheeks with her kisses. These were the stains I later traced upon the walls trying to connect the spaces where the kiss had not pressed its shape. I was desperate to make her presence permanent.

Raging by my marks, my father searched for her through our split level ranch eventually finding her in the garden stripped of her nightly costume, stripped of everything. Mesmerized by the sight, he halted in his tramp. On his heels, lipstick in hand, I stumbled popping the waxy scarlet stick from the applicator, leaving blood colored smudges upon the pale tiled floor. Past my father, I saw her. Her skin which habitually mocked tautness in her corseted suit now hung loosely; her breasts, once ripened by life, sank; and the dark of her hair between her legs, damp with matted curl, made it appear as if her sex was missing. She was hollow. Imperfectly, I wanted to remember her the way I should — untouched. But bare in that garden she revealed the truth.

For what happened next, I'm ashamed to say, I understood. Even at the time, even being eight, I knew what my father was feeling because I felt it too. Unbridled emotion poisoned my father's sagacity. He pulled the screened door from its hinges and tossed it into the yard startling my mother. Like an animal of prey; she remained still, not having too many other options. She hadn't met this beast yet, silent in words but roaring with action. It wasn't until his large hand clenched the hair from the back of her head and he began to drag her across the patio towards the house did he start to speak. A contradiction to his erratic manner, his voice was eerily calm. I'm not too sure what all was said. I was too young, I think.

Everything is exaggerated today, or maybe its things are exaggerated when you're a child. Which ever the case, my father's discontent was real.

My mother didn't fight back, as my father yanked her closer to our home. Her hands just clutched her shoulders forming an X across her heart with her arms. Her eyes remained opened, unfocused. It wasn't until after he slapped her across the face and she looked at me did she start to cry. Aware finally of my presence, my father sent me to my room.

I remained, waiting for my mother.

Ring Smarts

Mark Scott

Some nights you get in there and feel your legs weighing fifty pounds each even though you made the welterweight limit at one-four-seven without sweating yourself out the day before. That's how it was in Vegas when I fought this big bull-necked Mexican dude who broke my nose and shut my eye before I realized he had no punch.

They got theories on why you feel all of a sudden like your legs are in quick-sand. Fear, over-training, dehydration, and other things they talk about when you got no zip in your legs. I say this guy couldn't punch on account of he just heaved his fists at you like he was throwing a bowling ball. He was clumsy as hell but you couldn't get the son-of-a-bitch off of you. I'm a guy that likes to use the whole ring and not stand toe-to-toe trading bombs. But before the bell clanged to end the first I knew this fight was going down at close quarters.

There were nine goddamned rounds to go and I already felt like I fought six guys. So the next round I figure to fight my own way in the middle of the ring. I'm on my toes throwing combinations faster and prettier than Sugar Ray fucking-Robinson only this big dumb bastard don't give a shit because his head is made of tungsten steel. A guy like him, he's got scar tissue on his eyeballs and looks like he'd kill a house full of people just because they're home. You hit him in the head enough and something will break all right, that's every bone in your hand.

So Louie is telling me "go to the body" and by the fifth round he tells me it's even-up. I can still win this thing if I got balls and use my head instead of letting this guy kick the shit out of me in there. I'm thinking Louie hadn't been hit all night and it was easy for him to talk. But I also know he fought two decades, all those fights in Madison Square Garden and those title fights against Kid This-and-That. They get my nose and eye to stop bleeding and I'm thinking, fuck it, I'll do what Louie says. I still feel like I got these cement

shoes on so I ain't going to be dancing tonight.

Six comes and this guy's head don't even exist any more as far as I care, except as something to grab when he gets too close. I'm looking at his steel-belted radial gut and digging hooks right in his solar-plexus. Getting hit there hurts like a mother-fucker no matter how good a shape you're in.

What I said earlier, that this dude don't have no punch. I stand by that. A guy that really can whack can take your ass out in the late rounds just as likely as the first, because his shots still have the snap, the crackle and pop. If not for my legs going out on me, this guy was nothing from seven on. If you ever had one of those dreams where you see a car coming to run you over, but you can't move out of the way, then you know what I'm talking about. He was hitting me on top of my head, which it ain't bragging for me to say is pretty damned hard, because I had my chin glued on my chest. That's the best you can do when you're too slow to get out of the way.

So Louie's pissed because I'm doing just what he says and still getting beat. I know what he's thinking. It's like, just out of contrariness, I would do what he says and then on-purpose go lose the fight just to make him look bad. Guys in the fight game are funny that way. Splat. Splat. That's how his punches sound when they land, and so the crowd thinks it's really something. But these shots I'm digging in under his ribs hurt a lot more and he's starting to breath heavy and hold his arms down to protect his ribs.

One thing about them bull-necked sons-a-bitches with granite chins is that when they start sucking wind from body-shots you can knock them out just like any other guy. He keeps walking in to me because he only has one gear and that's forward.

So in nine everything I throw is landing and making his eyes roll back and he gets this dead look on his face. I seen dead men standing in the ring taking head shots. They're dead only their legs don't know it yet. Like I said I'm not much of a banger but I'm teeing off with hooks and right crosses and I swear to God I thought I would kill him right there in the ring, but the referee jumps in and raises my hand. I'm the winner, technical knockout.

Funny thing happened after the fight. The Mexican is okay only it turns out he ain't Mexican at all. He calls himself an Argentine, being as how he's from Argentina, that country Madonna sang about. And he's got this high-brow attitude on account of he's a banker in his fatherland, as he calls it, down near Rio de Janeiro.

I go in to tell him he fought a helluva a fight and he gives me the brush. Turns out he's from this rich family, that ain't too happy about him being a fighter. But he makes good dough so they have to put up with it. So anyway he don't associate with fighters, gave me a total snub. Go figure.

ANOTHER SATISFIED CLIENT

Tim Dodge

Sometimes in business, you meet someone who's either going to make you a lot of money or ruin you, and you're not sure which. There's plenty of good insurance business to sell in my town. I can afford to be choosy about my clients. But the sound of someone offering a large amount of money in cash has a way of distorting my thinking. It makes me more apt to take my chances.

Kate, one of the veteran customer service reps in the agency I worked for, took the phone call that day. She e-mailed me as soon as she hung up. "A Mr. Everett Abbott wants you to call ASAP. Needs coverage today for a warehouse he's buying on Kirkpatrick St. Says he's prepared to pay full premium upfront." She ended with the phone number.

I received the e-mail on my Blackberry after a successful appointment with an old client. The news of an unsolicited prospect asking for me and offering to pay a whole year's premium in advance lightened my mood further. I made a mental note to find out who referred him so I could send a bottle of wine or something as a thank-you.

Mr. Abbott was direct when I reached him on the phone a few minutes later. "I require coverage on my building in the amount of \$5,000,000, effective tomorrow," he intoned. His voice had a snobbish tone that rubbed me the wrong way.

"That's a pretty tall order on short notice," I said, trying to manage his expectations.

"I've been assured that you can handle it," he replied. "Was I misinformed?"

"Not at all." I bit my tongue, and we arranged to meet at an Italian place for lunch to do the application.

I arrived ten minutes early and waited at the bar. I had just sent a second e-mail when a tall man in a black suit entered and walked straight toward me. "Mr. Coates?" he said, unsmiling. "I am Everett Abbott." He pronounced his first name *Ev-a-rett*.

He extended a cold, bony hand. I shook it and withdrew from his firm grip as quickly as I could without appearing rude. The hostess escorted us to a table in the back away from the windows, a waiter took our drink orders, and Mr. Abbott got down to business. "I have a great many details to attend to with this purchase," he said, "so I would prefer that we dispense with the application now."

“Of course.” I opened my briefcase and withdrew a blank application and a pen. “I’ll need to get some information from you about the property, starting with the name that should go on the policy.”

“The policy shall be issued in the name of Kane Enterprises, Inc.” Kane Enterprises, he explained, was an importer of electronic components from companies in South America. I knew the building he was buying, though I had never been inside. It was a very old warehouse in a row of old, decrepit factories. “Most insurance companies won’t want a place like this,” I warned him when we had finished. “I’ll probably have to use a specialty market. The premium will be very high.”

“The price does not concern me,” he said. His blue eyes bore into me from behind dark-framed glasses. “I trust that the coverage will be satisfactory and the premium will be fair. If you treat us well in this transaction, you and your agency stand to obtain a great deal of business. I will know whether we have been treated well or not.”

“I can assure you, we place our customers’ interests first, Mr. Abbott.” This man was irritating me. I also felt intimidated by him, and that irritated me even more.

“Excellent.” He withdrew a pen from his inner jacket pocket and signed the application. Replacing the pen in his pocket, he produced a card bearing the name of a bank in Miami. “Once you have determined the premium, call this number and ask for Mr. Warner. He has been authorized to transfer the necessary funds to your bank.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. Most customers pay a deposit by check. “I must admit, this is a bit unusual,” I said.

His expression had not changed during the entire meeting, nor had a strand of his gray hair moved. “Is there a problem?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” I said, a little too quickly. *Down, boy*, I told myself. “That will be fine.”

“Good. If you will excuse me, I’m afraid I cannot stay for lunch.” He stood. “I look forward to receiving the policy.”

I shook his cold hand. “Thank you for your confidence in us,” I said.

He gave a slight nod, turned and strode out of the restaurant. I watched the door close behind him. *What a whack job*, I thought, and paid for our drinks.

Back at the office, I gave the application to Carl, who did marketing with insurance companies for us. I was in my office returning phone calls two hours later when he knocked on the door. In his early thirties, only six or so years younger than me, his hair already showed streaks of gray. It contrasted with his baby face. “There’s a broker on Long Island who says

she can put the Kane account with Lloyds,” he said.

I leaned back in my swivel chair. “Lloyds. How much is that gonna be?”
“A little over \$50,000.”

I chewed my lip for a second. “Can’t we do any better than that?” I asked.

As usual, Carl looked stressed. He sighed. “The first two I called just laughed. As you may have noticed, the place is a dump.” He paused, thinking. “I could run a quote from the New York state program.”

I shook my head. “No, they won’t do a building that’s been vacant all these years. Try one or two more markets. If they don’t want it, take the Lloyds quote and get me the exact number. I have to call this guy’s bank.” With a brisk, “Okay,” Carl left. I put the card Abbott had given me in my briefcase.

Carl called as I was driving to a late afternoon appointment. He informed me that Lloyds was the only option, and the broker had bound coverage effective at one minute after midnight that night. “I’ve e-mailed the quote to you,” he said. I pulled into the parking lot for my appointment, downloaded the e-mail, and dialed my phone.

It took a little wandering in the automated voice messaging system before I was connected to Mr. Warner. “Yes, Mr. Coates, I’ve been expecting your call,” the voice at the other end said. His voice was even less warm than Abbott’s had been. I gave him the price and our bank’s name and account number. “Very good,” he said. “The funds will be wired to your account in 15 minutes.”

I thanked him and was about to hang up when he said, “After you receive the funds, call the following number – “ he recited a number in an unfamiliar area code “ – and ask for Mr. Smith. He will give you further instructions. Follow them without deviation.”

The line went dead. This was getting weirder by the second. Regardless, I made a quick call to our accounting department and asked Doris to confirm the transfer. When I emerged from my meeting at 5:30, I had a voice mail message from her – the money was in our account. I dialed the number Warner had given me. Smith answered on the second ring. He talked; I listened.

I didn’t pay much attention to Kane Enterprises after that. The market was brutal; keeping my other accounts occupied 110 percent of my time. Aside from one quick visit at Smith’s request, I never went to the warehouse they’d bought.

The old warehouse burned to the ground on a Thursday in October, a couple of weeks before Halloween. A photo of the inferno was on the

front page of the next day's newspaper. Sam Stein, our claims manager, called me that morning and asked me to come to his office. "I got a call from an attorney who said he's representing Kane Enterprises," he told me. "He wanted to submit a formal notice of loss." Sam snapped a rubber band between his fingers.

"Good," I said. "You notified the broker?"

"Yup." He continued snapping the rubber band and looking at me.

I waited. When nothing was forthcoming, I asked, "Uh, is there something you need from me?"

He stopped snapping. "Do you have any idea what you've gotten yourself into?"

I stared at him. Sam and I didn't like each other. "I'm afraid I don't understand your question."

He snorted and shook his head. I wanted to knock that smirk off his face with his stapler. "Expect a call shortly from the police," he said. "I imagine you'll be having some long conversations with them."

My patience had run out. "Sam, what are you talking about?"

"Coke," he said. "Tons of it. That's what they found in the warehouse. That's what your client was doing. That's the kind of business you brought into this agency."

"Coke?" I echoed. "*That's* what they were importing?"

"Looks that way," he said, snapping the rubber band again. "Congratulations."

"I had no idea," I said.

"I believe it came as something of a surprise to Herb, too," he said. Herb was the founder and president of the agency. "He's probably anxious to discuss it with you." He still had that smirk on his face. I left his office without saying another word.

Before I could return to my office, the receptionist told me I was needed in the conference room. I found a scowling Herb waiting there with two police officers. He told the officers to expect my full cooperation, and for the next hour I answered dozens of questions about Kane Enterprises and Everett Abbott. At one point, I began to loosen my tie, but a sharp look from Herb stopped me.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency was working with the local police on the case. Apparently, Kane Enterprises was a front for a drug smuggling operation on the eastern seaboard. The Syracuse warehouse served as a stopping point for shipments en route to Canada. The DEA suspected that a rival group had started the fire in the warehouse. Kane

could buy insurance on the building, but they couldn't insure the illicit contents. A fire would devastate Kane's business.

The police ran out of questions after about an hour. They advised me not to leave town, gave me their cards, and left. Herb directed Carl and me to his office and fired us both on the spot. Carl looked like he would either faint or throw up. I took a different approach. "Are you for real?" I snarled. "You think I would intentionally jeopardize my reputation and my license for a few dollars' commission? If you do, then I guess I over-estimated you."

"Your carelessness," he said, his face growing dark, "has placed this agency in a very bad position. This will be all over the newspapers. Thanks to you, we are now the agency that insured a drug dealer. That's not the kind of business we do here, and if you can't select better accounts than that, you're not the kind of producer we want here."

"So that's it?" I shouted. "Eight years of making money for you, and I get no benefit of the doubt? You heard my side of the story in there. None of that matters?"

He looked down at a document on his antique desk. "I want you out of here in 30 minutes."

I looked at Carl, who appeared to be on the verge of tears. "For the love of God, Carl, suck it up," I said as I brushed past him and out into the hallway.

Twenty minutes later, I threw the last box of my belongings into the trunk of my car. My tires squealed as I whipped out of the parking lot and turned onto the four-lane road. There was a convenience store with gas pumps ahead on the right, about a half-mile from the office. I pulled into a parking spot at the store, stopped the car, and dialed a number on my phone. A man's voice answered. "Smith here."

Like that's his real name, I thought. "This is Fetterman," I said.

"You got news for me?"

"The operation has been carried out successfully."

Smith didn't say anything right away. "Hello?" I said.

"Anybody suspicious?" he said.

"Two cops were at my office asking about the insurance. I think they bought the story. My idiot boss fired me."

"That's so sad." There was a burst of static as the connection broke up for a second. "Wait 'til he finds out about the wire transfer."

"Serves the old scumbag right," I said. "Now, about my compensation..."

"You'll be taken care of."

"I want it in cash. I know what you can do with a wire transfer."

“Of course.” He gave me an address on the north side. “Go there alone. You’ll find a suitcase containing the agreed upon amount.”

I wrote it down. “How do I know Abbott won’t come after me?” I asked.

“You let me worry about Mr. Abbott.” His voice had a sinister edge. “We may need your services in the future. You’ll be protected.” He paused. “Now, I suggest you dispose of anything that might be troublesome, collect your fee, relax and enjoy it. Do not call this number again unless you receive instructions otherwise.” Then he clicked off the line.

I snapped the phone shut and slid it into my pocket. It was late morning, and traffic was picking up with people running errands on their lunch hours. I swung out onto the road and headed for the interstate.

Minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of a fast food place that was under construction. Two guys were walking out of the building shell as I pulled in. “Hey,” I called to them. “Is there any scrap wood in that dumpster back there for the taking?”

One of them, a big-muscled guy with several tattoos, grunted and said, “Help yourself.”

“Thanks.” I drove behind the structure and parked next to the dumpster. There was no one in the back, but I took a quick look around to make sure. Satisfied, I popped open my trunk, grabbed the empty gas can, and carried it to the dumpster. There was indeed a lot of wood. For appearances, I took three or four boards, then reached up and dropped the gas can in. Again I looked around, but no one was watching. I grabbed one more board for good measure, tossed them into the trunk, closed it up and drove away. Next stop: The north side and my service fee.

WASH AND DRY

Judith F. Blee-Ramsey

Into the washer I throw
all the words I could have said,
should have said and
would have said.

Hot water, cold rinse; I add
soap, bleach and fabric softener,
slam the door closed
and turn the machine on.

Inside I hear the drone of the
agitator pumping and churning,
driving the water down and up
washing away the possibilities.

After the spin cycle stops,
I pull out every missed opportunity,
wrung out, and toss into
the empty dryer drum.

The gentle heat evaporates
any lingering regrets
over words not spoken
when it mattered most.

No Escape

Magan S. Edinger

The voices of children, the cries of babies,
the explosions, the farewell scream of a good friend,
and the blood curdling cry of a woman being raped...no escape.

Bullets flying, explosions all around,
Shots fired, say goodbye to the enemy.
Till your fellow brother lay dead on the ground,
do you realize that it was an illusion.

What began as a love for the country, a war of pride,
ended in a never ending emotional battle,
filled with tears that rip you apart inside.
A war that can never be won.

What began as a war of duty and pride,
ended in a war made of lies.
Being in the wrong place at the wrong time,
thousands crucified.

The voices of children, the cries of babies,
the explosions, the farewell scream of a good friend,
and the blood curdling cry of a woman being raped...no escape.

BURN

Aimee Nance

My eyes burn red hot.
Lava seeps from my pupils
Gushing down my cheeks
In blistering streams.
Searing drops fall to my chest
Turning my T-shirt to ash.
Anger fuels the bubbling rock.
It will lie dormant again.
Smoldering until the next eruption.
Glowing magma and hate.
I wait.

Disconnected

Michael Levy

People have the awkward habit
of talking while he is interrupting
he believes it is the
only way of reminding
them he is still alive
dwelling as a wearisome mortal
for forty years
each day he
drifts somewhere near
the outside edges of hell
craving to be elsewhere

Drunk Trip to the Kentucky Derby with the Sleaze Men

Linda Webb Aceto

Shall I tell the story?
How I came to with
stagnant fumes pooled around me,
stale beer,
cee-gar smoke,
and gaseous wastes
spurned from their over-wrought bellies,
balding heads, fat soaked
and glistening
from that slick back grease they all used.
And what with one of them humping away on me
like tomorrow might never come.
(God, I hoped he hadn't.)
I thought I might puke from the stink heaved up,
still stewing from the night before.

Playing it out

Vida Ayitah

Had you asked me
On the night you sinned
I would have – maybe
Found a way
To forgive you

Had you not been
So imaginative
So assuming
You'd have realized
I had a forgiving soul

But you waited
Waited so long
My heart is weary from waiting
Tired of wanting you to be
Human
And ask
For forgiveness

STEP INTO THE FUTURE

Gerald Zipper

Times were hard back then choices scarce like peacock feathers in the desert
he was called Pinky because he was small
saw his way as a lawyer
the Great Depression savaged hopes
left skeletons scattered on the shore
we called Eugene Hoppy
it was the way he walked on his toes
explained how he. could make it as a dentist
everybody's teeth had to be fixed
George saw himself master of a fancy restaurant
blondes and music like a Hollywood movie
we called him Studs
he served us tales of lush women
saw himself in a suave black tuxedo
snow white carnation in his lapel
so sure of himself
but the war came
Then another war and another
tipping the earth this way
and then that way my father said working for the government was safe
never saw how things could change
some of us became soldiers willing and unwilling
we came back to a new world and new ways
ready to be stockbrokers and advertising stars
congressmen and statesmen
money managers and big-time entrepreneurs
pushing new ways and better gimmicks
sometimes recalling the old dreams
the narrow pathways
wanting to be lawyers and dentists and elegant hosts
clasping the one-time restless and the long-ago ambitions
barely noticing those filtering through the shadows
the new restless and ambitious
those seeming and sounding different
still eager and desperate to get their foot into the future.

Regulars

Anna Call



I was drinking with an old skeleton at the bar last Saturday when she found me. “Come,” She ordered, grabbing my collar. I left my beer on a napkin and let her drag me to a shadowed concrete room in the back, a place covered with soot marks in the shapes of hands and faces. The reek of fuel oil there nearly choked me.

When she lit me I blazed like a flare. Smoke billowed from my throat as I howled and twisted in agony, throwing myself at the cement. But there was nothing left to scrape or bruise. Heat consumed me and my embers scattered to the floor.

The procedure was over quickly. With a yellow whisk she swept my ashes into the wastebasket as I fidgeted awkwardly with the remains of my hands. I suddenly noticed the new smell and the new stains upon the walls - my smell, my stains. The place where I had last hit the cement bore a perfect ashen outline of my pelvis. I wanted to talk to her, but her duty was done. She didn't even look at me when she finally said, “You're dismissed.”

At the bar I sat back down to my beer but I didn't bother trying to drink it. Mingled with the ashes of my mouth, I knew it would it would taste foul. So I sat and tipped my mug until the beer had run over my bony fingers and soaked into the napkin below. It washed some of the back room's vile soot from my bones. I smeared what was left onto the thick glass. The skeleton next to me, the one I'd been talking to before, snapped his teeth together loudly and asked, “What keeps you coming back?”

My beer foamed impotently. It looked exactly like fire retardant. I put my skull down in my hands and sighed.

LIPS

Scott A. Russell

Crooked curling around
a Camel non-filter

a lurid smear of
high gloss crimson

whose ghost haunts the rim
of an empty old-fashioned-

I can hear you from here,
telling me what I need,
how long I have forgotten

(and I know)
you can help me.

Appeal to my prurient interest
babe, drink and smoke and swear.
Sizzle like neon in a fog.

Remind me of how life
reeks of scotch and perfume,
spills its smiling blood
about cigarette butts and barware,

advances quietly laughing,
scarlet from hip to hip.

a poem for W the gr8

Pat Dixon

back when the vietnam war was going brisk-
ly, a yale preppie from CT
pulled daddy's strings, & then he got
bumped 2 the head of the long, long line
for the TX Ere Nat. Guard.
tho' those (who'd had 2 w8) thought him a slimey jerk,
he said, "g, george, th@ wasn't 2 hard!
i'll just stay on coke & skip the other flyin'!"
& he did--religiously: while other folk were dyin'
W "knew" God pl& 2 save him 4 "higher" work--
so 4thwith he heeded th@ call divine
& never once put his own *.

[translation of last line: and never once
put his own ass t' risk]

Empty

Magan S. Edinger

I drink to forget the pain.
I drink to stop the questions.
I drink to fill the emptiness.
I do not understand
why you do not touch me
as if I was a disease
it makes me feel small and dirty
I do not understand why
others make me feel better
about myself then you
I am starved for attention
as if I was a lost puppy
craving human touch
I get angry because I am hurt
and I do not understand
I drink more and just hurt myself more
I put my trust where it does not belong
I lay where I should not lay
Now I sit next to a stranger on the couch
a stranger I have lived with for 5 years
who I know no better now then I did 5 years ago
I am exhausted
I am a shell of myself
I am hurt
I am confused
I am angry
I am lonely
I am empty

in the air

Janet Kuypers
from the chapbook "Dual"

Part One

Over Las Vegas with my family, my sister and myself in one row, my parents in the other across the way. We're nearing the end of our flight; mother tells me to sit in her seat and look out the window as we fly over the Hoover dam. Sitting next to father, I watch him lean out the window saying, just think of all that concrete. I look over his shoulder, the dam no larger than a thumbnail, the water, like cracks in a sidewalk, like the wrinkles in the palm of my hand.

Over Phoenix, preparing for another descent at 8:50 p.m., but it's usually fifteen minutes late, as it is now, I'm getting used to the schedule now. The mountains look like the little mountains you see on topographically correct globes, little ridges, as if they're made of sand, if you just lean your head down a little bit, your exhaling can make them all blow away in the breeze. And I know that what I'm looking for is out there, somewhere, I think this is where it is, I better not be wrong, I just have to search a little harder and find it. I love the city lights from above at night. Have you ever thought of how much power it takes to light all those buildings? All that energy. And every time I look, look out that little window with rounded corners, I see strings of yellow Italian Christmas lights strung across the ground.

And little Champaign, Illinois, and those little airplanes that 25 people fit in. The airport there is really nice, actually, it's made for a bigger city, a city of dreams and tall buildings, that's what I think. The roar of the planes are so loud, though, not like those 747's where you can sleep during the flight. But they fly low enough so that I can see the building I live in from the sky. And where I work. There's the store. Neil Street. Assembly Hall. The bars.

Over Fort Myers, the city always looks different from any other place, all those palm trees, the marshes. Like you've just landed somewhere foreign, and pretty soon the big tour will begin. You can feel the heat, the humidity sticking your shirt to your back between your shoulder blades, and your neck, sticking to your neck too, from inside your cabin, before you even land.

Chicago looks grand from the sky with this huge expanse of lake next

to it, like civilization crept up as far as it could but finally had to stop. The power of nature stopping the power of man kind, for once. And I cannot decide which one looks more evil. The lake does, looks evil I mean, at least at night, at night it looks like two spheres: a string of lights and a huge void. Daylight, and the snow on the ground looks dirty, too many cars have splashed mud on it as they drove by. And the sky always matches the shade of grey of the snow: fitting for the city of the Blues. Maybe the snow is already that color, that perfect shade of grey, when it falls from the sky in this city.

Part Two

Have you ever noticed that the air isn't normal air in an airplane? I mean, I know they have to pump in the air, and pressurize it and all in order to keep us alive up there, but there's just something about the air in the cabin that's different. It's got a smell to it, that's the only way I can describe it. A smell of all these people, going places, running to something, or running away from it.

When I go on vacation and I promise people I'll write, I usually write from the plane, just so I don't have to worry about it for the rest of my trip. And I write their letter on an airsick bag. It's more interesting than paper.

I like the window seat, I like to look out the window. Clouds look like cotton balls when you're above them, and when you're landing cars look like little ants, on a mission, bringing food back to their hill. Little soldiers, back and forth, back and forth. And the streets look like veins, capillaries in some massive, monstrous body. And the farmland looks like little squares of colors. I wonder why each plot of land is a different color, what's growing there that makes them different. Or maybe it's that some of them are turning shades of red and brown because some of them are dying.

Once I was bumped from my flight, but on the next available flight they gave me first class. And I sat there, feeling underdressed. And afraid to order a drink.

And it always seems that you're stuck sitting next to someone that is either too wide for their seat, or is a businessman with his newspaper stretched out and his lap top computer on his little fold out table. Once, when I was on a flight back from D. C., a flight attendant walked by, stack of magazines in her hand, Time, Newsweek, Businessweek, and I stopped her, asking what magazines she had. And she replied, "Oh, these magazines are for men." This is a true story. And I asked her again what she had. I had already read Time, so I took Newsweek.

Get The Idea

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I hate having to be the voice of reason, but here goes... you have to do nice things.

okay, you knew that, but you don't think about the nice things, and maybe that could be part of the solution.

You think, "I can take a girl out to dinner," but have you ever cleaned up the living room so you could have dinner there, and it would seem like a restaurant?

You could give her flowers, but if it's near Valentine's Day, don't bother, but give them on a weekday when she doesn't expect it, and tell her you got them for her because you thought of her and you thought she deserved them.

Well, there are other examples, but I won't get into them now. I think you get the idea.

Dreams 01-14-04

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

In the dream I had last night, I woke up and you had gone to work already; I had slept in and you were already gone. I got up and walked to the office to start working, because this is all that I do now, walk across the hall and turn on the computer and start working, but when I walked into the office I saw that... I think it was my computer monitor, but it could have been the little television right next to my monitor, I can't remember which it was, but I saw that a monitor was replaced by the large monitor that is downstairs (the one we use for Ms. Pac Man). And Ms. Pac Man was playing on this large monitor (you know, just the sample game was running), and it was at 640 x 480 because you couldn't even use the whole screen, and I wondered why it was there. I guessed that you had to switch the monitrs because you needed something for work, and I guessed that you set this as this was, and that this was how I was supposed to work now.

And you didn't even leave me a note to explain why you did what you did.

transcribing dreams three

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I was walking into your living room and there was a ten-gallon fish tank there. You just bought it. You were looking at the fish, that's when I walked over. And I saw a shark fish in the tank, one about eight inches long, and he was at the bottom, killing and eating a four-inch fish. There were other one-inch fish swimming at the top, neon tetras, small things. And I walked over and the shark was just eating the four-inch fish, and soon he was completely gone. And you were just looking, you could do nothing to save the fish. And then another four-inch fish came out of hiding from behind a plant on the left side of the tank, and he darted around. It looked like he was in a state of panic, maybe he breathed the blood of the other four-inch fish, his ally, his family. And he started darting around the tank, and the shark was just sitting at the bottom of the tank, and the other four-inch fish darted more. And then the shark opened his mouth, and in a darting panic, the four-inch fish swim straight into the shark's mouth. All the shark had to do was close his mouth and swallow the fish whole. There was no fight, like with the first one. There was no struggle. And I looked over at you, and you were amazed that this shark just ate your two fish, which were probably over ten dollars each, and that they didn't just get along in the tank together. And I looked at the tank, and I saw the one-inch neon tetras darting around along the top of the water. They knew they would be victims later, trapped in this little cage, and that the shark would just wait until he was bored until he administered his punishment. I wanted to ask you why you bought all of these different-sized fish and expected them to live together peacefully. Maybe you didn't even realize that the shark would need more food than he was prepared to buy him. Besides, a shark that size shouldn't even be alone in a tank as small as ten gallons. He needs room to grow. But before I could say anything, I saw the shark swim to the top of the water, push his head and nose out of the water, open the lid to the top of the aquarium. You weren't looking, so I told you to look to the top, and not to get too close. And the shark just sat there, looking at you, and it looked as if he wanted to show you what a good eater he was. It was almost as if he was looking to you for approval.

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