

down in the *dirt*

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

ISSN 1554-9166



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March '07

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03/07, Down in the Dirt, volume 044

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Scars cover art of a barn in Pennsylvania.

I DIDN'T TELL HER

Frank Kennedy

People should behave themselves in times of sadness, especially when they're sitting in a funeral parlor. It's my Dad we're burying, after all, and here's Mrs. Murphy giving me the evil eye. Here's Mrs. O'Leary staring me down like I'm a criminal. Mr. Boyle turns around and says to me, "What are you, some kinda moron? Don't you have no respect for your father? Why aren't we hearing some nice music instead of this filth?"

It all started when Mom asked me to choose the music for my step-father's service. "Jimmy," she said, "I don't know nothing about music, and you being such a music lover, your dear father'd bless you from heaven if you'd pick one of his favorites--you know, something sweet and tender like the man he was, most of the time." She dabbed her eyes. Mascara ran down her bruised and messed-up face. I knew the kind of stuff she wanted me to pick. Junk like Danny Boy. "Come to think of it, Mom," I said, "there was something he really loved. He just couldn't get enough of it."

"Jimmy, that's the piece you must play. Is it something our guests would like, something fitting?"

"Mom, it's a real classic." Now, she was never into classical music, so I felt safe telling her what I had in mind. "It's called *Bolero*."

"Is it a nice piece, Jimmy? Does it have a pretty melody?"

"It has a great melody, Mom. It's so good, the orchestra plays it several times so we can really dig it."

"Well, OK. If you think your father'd like it."

The piece had very special meaning for him, Mom. You know, he asked me to play it for him the day before yesterday, before he passed away. It gave him such happiness." I didn't tell her how I strapped him down and put masking tape over his mouth.

"You're such a considerate son, Jimmy. I'm glad he had some pleasure before he died." I didn't tell her how I placed the earphones over his head, how I revved up the amp full volume, how I played *Bolero* twenty-seven different times--all by different orchestras. I didn't tell her my fantasy headline: *Yonkers man murdered by Maurice Ravel. Found with eardrums ruptured, death caused by heart attack. Coroner's inquest suggests man addicted to piece he loved too much. Warnings go out to all music lovers: Bolero kills!*

Mom asked me how long *Bolero* would take, whether there'd be time

to play Danny Boy. "It depends on the orchestra, Mom." I didn't tell her how Dad evaluated many different interpretations that night. He heard the Boston Symphony, the Dallas Symphony, the Boston Pops, the Canadian Brass, Benny Goodman, a synthesizer and so much more. Dad actually became one of the world's greatest Bolero authorities before his unfortunate passing. The music world will certainly miss him.

"Jimmy, you said you played the piece for him before he died. I never saw him sit still for any classical stuff. He sure must've loved the piece." I didn't tell her how he'd passed out in his chair, an empty Jim Beam bottle laying on the floor. I didn't tell her that by the time he came to, he was already harnessed up, mouth taped, earphones on, all ready for his concert. I didn't tell her why I planned to kill my stepfather.

It's the Dallas Symphony the guests are hearing now. The snare drum's getting louder, dum-da-da-da-dum Mrs. O'Leary's eyes are closed, like she's having an erotic experience. I remember telling Dad that in Vaudeville days, Bolero was background for Sally Rand's striptease. I hoped this juicy tidbit had enhanced his listening pleasure.

Mrs. Murphy's still glaring at me, and Boyle's out of his chair heading for Father Mullen. Frankly, I don't care what they think. I just want to make sure Dad enjoys his favorite piece one more time, while he dances in the Devil's flames.

The music's pulsing now. Cymbals crash. Trumpets wail. Here comes the climax: Ravel modulates from C to F. Sounds like Judgment Day. And then it ends, like a heart attack.

I see Dad's face in my mind's eye, twitching and turning blue. What a great way to go, in sync with Bolero's final spasm.

Dad will never beat on Mom again. I didn't tell her of my leaping, joyous heart.

The guests sit stunned. The ladies rearrange their hats, wipe their sweaty brows. The men loosen their ties, stare embarrassedly at the floor. Boyle turns to his wife. "Well, at least the abomination, the filth, is over. Now the poor man can rest in peace." Guests arise from their seats, as if to leave. Then they sit back down as my CD player kicks in. It's my next musical tribute to Dad. The snare drum is barely audible.

MY TRAVELS ON THE WORMHOLE EXPRESS

Mel Waldman

Many years ago, probably long before you were born, I traveled on the Wormhole Express for the very first time. (It's right here—in the center of our earthly existence and whether you are human or not-of science or faith—it enriches, enlightens those who are willing to see.)

Only one other person knew what had happened to me. A guy I called friend. After he inquired, I revealed the truth to him. You see, we were together when I vanished. We were somewhere in Brooklyn, not far from Sheepshead Bay, Brighton Beach, and Coney Island. We might have been in Manhattan Beach, for we were near the ocean.

I suppose my friend was terrified when I entered the mammoth, oval mist. And I imagine the others who saw me vanish into this phantom fog within seconds, on an antediluvian Brooklyn street, suspected something horrific, incomprehensible. (In reality, the phenomenon was metaphysical, cosmological, and paradoxical.)

When I stuck my left hand into the seething, fog-like form, it disappeared. Yet when I removed it, my hand was undamaged. So I stuck my head into the sinister shape, and my head disappeared according to my friend's account. But when I stepped out of this eerie form, no longer headless, I felt absolutely divine. (I should have been suspicious. But I was too happy to contemplate any critical thoughts. Beware! As a rule of thumb, metamorphosis is freaky. And the fusion of metamorphosis with an instant, inexplicable high means danger!)

I craved the high I had experienced inside the seductive form looming nearby. So like Sherlock Holmes rushing across the misty moors, I leaped into the familiar fog again, which in reality, was quite unfamiliar and not exactly a fog. Inside the mysterious form, I discovered thousands of tiny wormholes. (Intuition told me what they were.)

Instinctively, when my fingers touched a frozen wormhole, they moved backward, away from the portal. But when they touched a warm, soothing wormhole, they moved farther into its domain before stopping. Then in one case, my fingers embraced the secret domain and suddenly, my entire body was catapulted into another universe.

On the other side, I discovered a beautiful place that looked like Brooklyn 10 years in the future. Yet there were no humans. I was deliciously elated to be alone, for people had made me a pariah long ago, ostracizing

me to an invisible existence, forcing me to feel like nothing. Yet now, emptied of my earthly pain, I was free!

I explored my new home where I felt at peace. For days it seemed, I was a King, and my kingdom was glorious, absolutely the most beautiful place in the universe. Sometimes I lay naked on a beach, beneath a majestic sun, and inhaled the golden light of love. Yes I was loved-not by humans, but by the sun and the sand, the water, and all the other beautiful things-objects in my kingdom.

Then one day my beloved objects talked to me. They told me I must return to earth to fulfill my destiny. It wasn't my time to stay. Although I protested, I searched for the wormhole that had brought me to this place uncontaminated by other humans. Perhaps guided by the things-objects of my kingdom, I found many wormholes. Reluctantly, and with deep sadness, I leaped about a foot and touched a wormhole that was almost invisible. I flew far away.

After flying across the universe, I found myself inside the mammoth, oval mist again. It spoke to me too. And I obeyed its command. Walking out of its eerie form, I returned to Brooklyn.

To my surprise, my friend was waiting there for me. I tried to hug him. But he moved away from me for some reason. Still I thanked him for waiting such a long time. But he told me I had been gone less than a minute.

Momentarily, I turned around to gaze at the mysterious mist. Looking back at the familiar form, I watched it vanish in a few seconds. Too late to leap inside its cocoon and leave this world behind.

When I revealed the truth to my friend, he didn't believe me. And after that day, we parted company. Soon, I stopped believing too.

Unloved and invisible again, I roam the streets of Brooklyn searching for a freaky form. Can't find it. I try to feel the love emitted by the objects-things around me. I can't! Try to love others. But they can't feel my love.

Maybe you think I'm mad because I claim I've traveled on the Wormhole Express. Yeah. Probably had a psychotic episode with weird delusions and lost my way. Now, I don't see any weird stuff-only humans. And if there's a tear in the fabric of the universe, I suspect it's right in the center of our soulless souls.

Still searching for the freaky form and another trip on the Wormhole Express. In the meantime, I'm the invisible man, stuck right here-in the soulless streets of Brooklyn, stripped of almost everything, especially hope, but not my childlike curiosity.

Yeah, I'm the invisible man. A ghost who walks beside you. But you don't see me.

Look closely. Try to find me. Search hard-before you look in the mirror and discover-nothing at all.

Just a Stranger on a Bus

Bill DeArmond

So I board the Metro on Pico, pay my fare, stumble my way over feet and shopping bags to the back of the bus, sit down next to God and ask, “What the hell are You doing here?”

God gazes out the window at a hooker in spandex and six-inch heels and says, **“What are you doing out of hell, Scratch?”**

I know, that’s not the greatest comeback in the world and you’d think God would have a better command of putdowns since He’s had so much practice. But it’s all in the timing.

[Okay, I gotta interrupt here for two comments. Everything God says has to be in bold, that’s His Eleventh Commandment. And I have to tell you about His pet name for me: Scratch. I’ve been called many things by humans: Lucifer, Satan, the Devil, Baal and Beelzabub—which I kind of like because it sounds so friendly. “How ya doin’ Beelzabub?” Old Nick got hijacked by some group of toy merchants who dropped in “Saint” and made me a Christmas icon. And since I’m also the Prince of Darkness, I got my own cable channel—Nick at Night. Even some guy named Anton said I had 77 names. But I like the one the Big Guy gave me best—Scratch. Just don’t ask me to tell you why I got it. Suffice it to say, it’s the result of some personal discomfort I acquired during the transformation. Back to my story.]

Really, despite how the Old Testament depicts Him, God does have a sense of humor. He created the platypus. And mirrors.

“Ha! Ha! That’s a good one Boss. But we’re in L.A. in the summer. This is hell. Anyway, I know you’re just pullin’ my leg.”

“Better than your finger.”

“Hey! The sulfur thing was your idea.”

We ride on in silence for several more blocks. An attractive black woman, maybe tired from a long day’s work as a seamstress, gets on, looks at the full bus, starts towards the back, sees us, then turns around and parks herself behind the driver.

“You understand what I’m talking about now don’t you? All you just do now every day is just ride this damned bus.”

“I have not condemned this bus. You, on the other hand...”

“Yeah! Yeah! Fire and brimstone and all that. Yada! Yada! Yada! We all know that’s just a metaphor.”

“I do not speak metaphorically. I mean what I say.”

“What? You getting all Old School on me?”

Then God is quiet for a long time. Not one-celled-amoeba-crawling-up-on-land-an-becoming-an-ape long. But long enough to recycle the passengers. I guess something I said must have hit a nerve.

“So? Why *are* you on this bus every day?”

“I’m observing my handiwork.”

“And?”

“And I’m depressed...in a funk.”

“Over what? Some design flaw?”

“Yes...free will.”

“Don’t blame me, Boss. That’s on Your head. I warned You what giving humans a choice would do. Catholic or Jew? Liberal or Conservative? Peanut or Plain? Paper or Plastic?”

“I don’t care anymore. I expected them by now to have...evolved...into something better. More kind, intelligent, tolerant and forgiving.”

“Look, you’re making it too easy for me. I don’t even have to try. I got souls backed up waiting in Jersey. Where’s that old Miracle Worker we used to know and love?”

“I’m retired now. I’m tired of people taking up my time praying to get a hit or win the lottery or make Susie not pregnant. It got too much, dealing with all those voices in my head. So I’ve shut it down.”

“Quaaludes does that for me.”

I believe this makes him laugh, but he could just be clearing his throat.

“Okay, let’s play FSL.”

I created the Fantasy Salvation League to kill time during the World Cup since neither of us likes soccer. We’d make up teams of the Saved and the Damned. I’d give Him the name of someone still living and He’d Ebert them *up* to heaven or *down* to me.

First, I offered Bill Clinton. His thumb wavered.

“By rights he should be yours, but I’ll take him. He’ll keep the budget balanced.”

“Pat Robertson?”

“You can have him...and the horse he rode in on.”

“Falwell?”

“Him too.”

“Rush Limbaugh?”

“Ditto.”

“Britney Spears?”

“Who?”

“Madonna.”

“That’s still a coin toss.”

“Come on, Boss. Get your head back in the game. What about that guy in the aisle? The one with the thousand dollar suit and the ten buck rug. I just got him a job as a Fox News anchor.”

“Some people are beyond redemption.”

He left me with no choice. It was time for some drastic action. So I get up and approach a pretty Asian girl, maybe 20, maybe 50, you can never tell with them. Damn their luck. Sorry, I get carried away with an Asian woman. I touch her shoulder and come back to my seat and triumphantly announce, “I just gave her a malignant tumor. She doesn’t know it and she’ll be dead in six months. What are you going to do about them apples?”

God’s face turns red and I realize my word choice has brought back a painful memory. He jumps up and I know it’s showtime. He snaps his fingers and a bright spark shoots out. I love it when He does fireworks. But nobody else on the bus gives it a second glance. After all, this is the route leading to the Magic Castle. But, instead of curing the woman instantly with some divine chemo, He simply produces a business card which he hands to her.

“My dear, this is the best oncologist in the city. His name is Dr . Lazarus and he owes me a favor. Trust me. Just give him this card and he’ll take care of you. And please see him soon.”

He makes his way back and it seems the weight of ages is sagging his shoulders. He seems disinterested, tired, defeated. Nobody likes to win a big game by default. It’s as bad as kissing your sister—unless she’s Angelina Jolie.

“Seriously, Pops. What’s gotten into you? My job has been absurdly easy since the Internet and all the chat rooms and cool porn.”

“You’re responsible for the Internet?”

“No, Al Gore is. But, speaking of him, did you see that movie? What’s with all this global warming? And earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, floods and stuff? Don’t you have some control over that?”

“Oh, it’s Gaia. She’s pissed about how humanity has disrespected her and gave her hot flashes. She’s trying to remove the human melanoma off her skin before it kills her.”

“Man, give that bitch some flowers or chocolate or Bud Light before we lose our playground.”

At this moment two gangster wannabes get on carrying a boom box that would put Radio Raheem to shame. And it’s blaring out Vanilla Ice! Several passengers start to complain, but the driver seems oblivious. Finally

God leans over and says, **“This is going too far.”** He points his finger at the street furniture and the player explodes. Instantly the bus erupts in applause. He nods at me, **“Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home.”**

“So You do still care. Admit it.”

“It’s just so discouraging. Even to one with infinite patience. I started this experiment to see if, through knowledge, experience and understanding, a primitive animal could adapt and evolve into something I could hang out with on Sundays. I give them one set of suggestions on how to conduct themselves in this process and they fundamentally misinterpret it into a fiat accompli—a done deal to strictly adhere to without change.

“So then they run with it and beat others over the head with it and kill thousands of people in my name so I get the bad reputation. I create life; I don’t condone taking it. And then they won’t even give me credit for how long this process took. Six days my ass.

“Next I send down a messenger with a new guide book and they kill him and proceed to screw it all up again. I guess that’s what comes from inbreeding. I should have thought about that in the beginning. And look at the mess we’re in now, hardly a civil place on the planet. Great job you did in Florida, Scratch.”

“Hey, that’s not my fault. Clarence did it all on his own.”

“And those scientists who think they have the answer to everything. That all this just happened by natural law? It was started by the Big Bang. I’ve half a mind to pull out my Hammer of God and show them who’s the Big Banger.”

“So you think the ID people are right?”

“They got the concept right—the execution completely wrong. Right author—wrong book.”

“At least it’s more accurate than The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.”

“Hey, I inspired Bobby on that one. He got the pirate part right. What do you think revived Johnny Depp’s career? Maybe I do use allegory .”

Nearing the end of the run, the bus is now virtually empty.

“So, what’re you gonna do tonight?”

“I don’t know. Don’t want to go home yet and get chewed out. ‘Did you work any miracles today? Give anybody boils?’”

Listen, why don’t you come on a short trip with me. I’m going to a place I built that never sleeps.”

“Why not? At least whatever we do there will stay there.”

With that God laughed, and I knew there was still hope for humanity.

Mules and Mules

Ben Orlando

In the end it wasn't the heat or the sweat that dripped out of his skin from a thousand leaky faucets. It wasn't his heart or the thirst or the precarious position in which he found himself, balanced atop a wobbly mule with a thick piece of hemp wrapped around his neck.

It was his voice, nonstop and penitent, and it was my hand, my fingers pushing against the rump of the ass that silenced him for good.

I guess I'm writing this because I'm trying to perform my own sort of penance. But this way, at least, if you don't want to hear me, you don't have to listen.

We were together, he and I, for a couple of weeks, and they saw us together, at the diner, our interactions. It was only a few minutes, but it was enough for them to read the vibe, for them to learn me up and down. They knew me better than I knew myself, because I like to pretend. I like to pretend that I'm stronger than I really am, that my will is great and my resolve steadfast. I don't think he knew, but they did. They followed us home.

Home: a ten-dollar-a-night motel with stains that would crack the lens of a blue light—stains that I can feel all around me right now without any technical assistance. The last rentable shower and lumpy mattress for the next hundred miles. The closest thing to an oasis on the fringe of society.

I met him, Jackson, on the concrete, three in the afternoon with the sun burning holes in my work boots, both of us waiting under the sliver of awning on the Palo Verde Funeral Home, waiting for our first assignment. That was three weeks ago.

I don't know his deal, what he was all about, except that he was a drifter, place to place, job to job like me. But he hinted at prison time. I never pressed it, though I think he wanted me to.

His lip always curled up to the right when he got close to spilling it; curled right under that speckled orange mustache. When he said things like "But I wasn't around to see that," or "and I would have gone to the game but I was (lip curl) otherwise engaged." And his mustache, his orange eyebrows and his reddish orange hair and white, white skin were other indications of his state of mind.

He told me four or five jobs he'd had in the past, all eight to ten hour gigs busting a gut in the dry southern California sun, and there in the parking lot on our first day I could see the skin on his forearms peeling away, bubbling, minute by minute as he talked.

But he didn't talk about that. I didn't press it.

I'm the quiet type. I like to write things down. I'm a writer, I guess, but if I call myself that I'd have to attach "failed" to the front, kind of like a bunch of pallbearers leading the casket out to the hole.

It's the only thing I've ever done, and it's kept me from a steady job and a normal life, but not doing it well has kept me from security, from avoiding near-fatal jams.

I'd heard about the rackets, the rumors of the things that go down in Palo Verde, in the homes and parlors.

Something about taxes, something about drugs, but like most things you here, the words kind of died on their way to my better judgment. It was a job: digging holes, dragging bodies, dumping bodies and dumping dirt over top for twenty dollars an hour. No families present. No explanations. Who questions that? No one applying for that kind of job, that's for sure, and whether Jackson knew about it from the start I never learned. I don't think it would have mattered.

We'd always wait in the lot for the bodies, and the guys that met us that day didn't have a clue. In fact, they probably got theirs a little while after we left with the goods: a teenage Hispanic girl, pretty, and she must have been something. I mean, I don't know if it's sick to say, but they didn't spend a lot of time fixing her face like they do with some folks.

You could tell by the coloring, the droop of the eyes, the vacant expression. Yet she was still pretty, even in that state, even inside of that bag. He pulled back the plastic a little. I wouldn't have, but he was right. She was pretty, and that's what started it, when he opened that bag.

It was twenty dollars an hour because we did it all.

We loaded the bodies, we transported the cargo, we dug the hole, dropped them in and covered them up. The whole package. Only us, all alone in the middle of a dusty plot.

When we got to the site, after we dug the hole and hauled the body out of the truck, when he tore the plastic back all the way down the seam, I got kind of scared, awkward scared, like I knew nothing was going to happen to me, but I thought that if I stood there and watched, witnessed what I thought he was going to do, I'd change, become someone different, maybe, like him. But he didn't do it.

He opened the bag and ripped off her clothes, but that was it. Said he just wanted to see if the body was as good as the face. That's when I took my first breath, and that's when the white bubbles dribbled out from her lower portions. Like I said, I thought he'd spent some time behind bars. After what he did next, I had no doubt.

The finger, his right index finger, slid around inside his mouth for a

minute, like he was trying to coat every part of his gums with it. Then he smiled and looked up at me, and walked to the truck.

Another mule, this time a different sort. She'd somehow slipped the noose of her employers only to die from an internal leak. We weren't coroners, but that's what we thought happened. Or she didn't slip.

We slipped.

I helped cut her open. We used an Exacto knife from the glove compartment. A few years back I spent a summer gutting fish on the Oregon Coast. I told Jackson. He said it was the same thing.

He was good with the knife, didn't cut any of the other bags, eight in all, not counting the one that leaked. We couldn't salvage that one.

He held up each bag like the contents were sacred artifacts from the tomb of some Egyptian king. That's when I got scared. I knew he wouldn't give them up, and people like this, I told him, don't just forget about missing drugs, hundreds of thousands of dollars of missing drugs. But he wasn't worried, and his complete lack of fear steered me into his court, though I was never fully convinced. Thankfully.

They must have overheard me at the diner trying to talk him out of it, trying to get him to leave the goods near the body or at the funeral home. That's why I figure they only stabbed me, repeatedly; left me for dead under the Cottonwood tree. Under him. But they left me with some kind of chance. He was screwed from the start.

It was still light out when they jumped us at the motel, but nobody cared—a few eyes on the other side of the glass distracted for a moment from their cable TV. Nobody cared. We were outside of that part of the world.

I don't know where they got the mule, the real mule, but on the way there I was more concerned with the turnout, bitter at the score, my four wounds to his none. But then I got it. I felt better, if you can feel any better, propped up against the cottonwood with a little more hope than the man teetering a few feet above me. As it turned out, I was almost as strong as I believed. But my patience was a bit lacking, and he was a big pussy.

I couldn't have helped him if I'd wanted to, but after ten minutes of gapless dialogue he cleared up any internal conflict I might've been feeling. And twenty minutes after that, with the last of my strength, I leaned over as far as I could, buried the pain in my side and, with as much force as I could generate, slapped the back of the mule. And that was that, and fifteen minutes later a beet farmer, the only resident within eighty miles, spotted us from his brown Cherokee. He got a mule and I got my life back.

I guess I could have held out for a few more minutes. But then he might have lived, and feel-good's not my kind of ending.

Shadowman

Dave Benneman

Ted pulled off the blacktop surface onto a dirt track. He downshifted to slow the Jeep here - the track was difficult to see in the dark. On the horizon some light was just starting to show. The sun will be here soon he thought to himself. On the northern edge of the Sonoran Dessert the daytime temperature can reach one hundred fifteen degrees on a clear day in August. Ted drove the Jeep Wrangler he always wanted around the scruffy desert growth with care. Maybe someone will find it and take good care of it. He filled it with gas the night before and checked the ten gallon can strapped on the back. He had as much fuel as he could carry. He should get to wherever he was going and still leave a little fuel for the lucky soul who found it abandoned in the desert.

Ted drove east into the sunrise. The sun was cresting the horizon in all of its unforgiving glory now. The track he had been following disappeared some miles back and Ted picked his way through the desert floor trying to do as little damage as he could to his Jeep and the environment. With the terrain getting increasingly rocky he had to slow down even further. He stopped to take a look around. Walking ten feet away he unzipped his fly and took a leak. When he walked back to the Jeep he grabbed a jug of water and quenched his thirst.

“This is the perfect metaphor for my life.” He thought. “You pour it in one end and let it out the other; nothing much seems to change in the middle. I’m just going through the motions of living without actually doing it. This day will be like any other, but by tomorrow one thing will change for old Ted.” He caught himself speaking out loud. When he looked around to see if he had been heard he laughed harshly.

“Well Ted, no one ever heard you before. There’s no chance that’s going to change out here in the middle of east bumfuck. You can talk as much or as little as you like.” Feeling a little silly Ted started the Jeep up and continued driving. His shirt stuck to his body now like a second layer of skin. The early morning temperatures were giving way to the brutal heat of the afternoon. Ted thought he had prepared himself for the trek that lay ahead of him, but you could not second guess nature in this desolate part of the world. Ted had driven the Jeep up into the foothills of a mountain range of which he had forgotten name. When he decided the Jeep had taken him about as far as it could he turned it off and listened to the absolute quiet. The gentle clicking sound of the engine cooling was all he heard. He had an urge to scream. It took real willpower to stop himself from bellowing something stupid. When that passed he reached into the jeep and pulled out his day pack. There was a sleeping bag, two one gallon jugs of water, matches, a bottle

of Captain Morgan's spiced rum, and his Glock. He pushed the hand gun into the waist of his jeans at the small of his back. Ted was comforted, feeling the weight of the hand gun there. It felt like a hand pushing him forward to finish the job he had come here to do. In a panic Ted suddenly pulled the gun from his waist and checked to see if he remembered to load it before he left. A sigh escaped his lips when he saw everything was in order - the magazine was loaded and there was an extra round in the chamber. Shoving the gun back in his waistband he drank what was left of the gallon of water sitting on the passenger seat.

"That's more than enough ammo for this job." He said out loud again. Wiping the sweat from his brow he shouldered the pack and started the climb. The sun was now right overhead and there was very little shade to be found. Ted paused for a drink. Whenever he stopped moving he became aware of the stillness. Man was the only animal stupid enough to travel through this terrain in the heat of the day. Even the scorpions and snakes stayed out of sight when it got this hot. Ted pushed the pack onto his shoulder and continued walking. It's only two steps he told himself, one, two, one, two, and so on. Ted counted to himself through the worst part of the day. The ball of fire bearing down on him felt like the weight of a hundred lifetimes. He was looking forward to easing his burden. He reached the ridge of this mountain as the shadows started to stretch out in front of him. He plodded on sensing he was a little delirious. He neglected to keep himself properly hydrated even though he knew better. He was only taking a drink when he stumbled, or if he stopped to check his bearings. He didn't want to be walking in a circle and it was easy enough to do out here. He raised his head to look for his current landmark when his feet slid on some loose rock and he fell on his ass, not as gracefully as he would have liked. The jolt snapped his mouth shut and he bit the inside of his cheek. Sitting there a little dazed he started to giggle. The taste of blood flooded his mouth from the bite and the giggle turned into a belly laugh that shook his whole body. He noticed a large rock sitting on the edge of the incline as though it should be rolling down the side of this mountain any minute. It would be taking no prisoners when it decided to do just that. But right now it was making a small pocket of shade on the downhill side and Ted decided to take advantage of it. Sipping the last of the water from his first jug he tossed it aside and opened the second one. He sat and slowly sipped the hot water in the shade of this benevolent rock.

When Ted awoke he was surprised to see the sun was on the horizon and sinking fast. He got up with a start but the stiffness in his back and legs put him right back down. Moaning he stretched a little and stood up more slowly this time. He had to get moving.

He treated himself to a large swallow of water and moved on. The sun and low clouds combined to paint as beautiful a sunset as Ted could remember. When was the last time he actually watched a sunset? He spent his adult life thinking things like this to be frivolous. "It happens everyday, what's the big

deal?" He was fond of saying.

Approaching a section of flat ground where mesquite trees hovered above scrubby green cloud sage bushes Ted paused. "Promising." He pointed his boots into the setting sun and counted. "One, two, one, two, it's just two steps." The light played with the shadows around the trees. Ted made it a point not to watch his feet as Mother Nature performed act two of her daily theater solely for Ted's enjoyment.

The twilight faded as Ted walked into the little oasis. He was able to make out a valley stretching out in front him that took his breath away. This beautiful panorama held his gaze until the light faded to black. Drinking what was left of his water he threw down his pack and started to scavenge around for firewood. With his sleeping bag spread out he sat down for the second time in twelve hours. The fire started to catch and the flames pushed the darkness back a bit. The darkness outside his small circle of light seemed more intense. Ted was completely blind to what lay beyond it. He opened the bottle of rum now and took a hearty swallow.

"Arrg, now thars a man size swallar of grog. Let's drink to that matey." He said in his best pirate voice, throwing the jug up to his lips again, he took another large drink. Removing the Glock from its place in the small of his back, Ted felt the weight and balance of the handgun. It wasn't a good looking gun. It was downright ugly in fact. He thought he should have bought a piece more suitable for the job at hand, something a little sexier, something with a sense of beauty; and purpose. The man at the gun shop said, the Glock was absolutely reliable. "One hundred percent reliable," were his exact words. That's what convinced Ted to purchase this particular hand gun. He knew he only had one chance at this. He would lose his nerve if somehow the gun only clicked when he pulled the trigger. He *was*, a coward after all. Taking another pull from the bottle he heard a noise. Hastily he stuffed the gun back in his waistband and listened hard.

"Didn't mean to startle you there, young fellow. It's just that I don't get many visitors out here, if you know what I mean."

The voice sounded like gravel sliding down a wooden chute. Ted's heart raced at the sound when a tall figure stepped into the light being cast by his campfire. Ted shook his head when he realized how close the man must have been when he spoke. How long had he been standing out here watching me Ted wondered?

"I wouldn't mind a little sip of that there hooch if you could spare a little. Names Mitch but folks mostly calls me Shadowman these days." He extended his hand toward Ted.

"I reckon my manners have slipped some, what with being out here alone most of the time."

Ted realized the stranger's hand was still waiting out there in mid air. He stood and shook the hand that had been offered. It was a solid handshake. Working man's hand for sure. "Sorry I ah, well I thought you might be an illu-

sion at first. My name is Ted nice to meet you.” Looking around for a seat to offer the man, Ted turned red. “Pull up a piece of desert and help yourself to a drink. I’m afraid I can’t offer you a glass.”

Mitch squatted down on his haunches. He took up the bottle wiped the top with his dirty shirt sleeve and took a long pull. “That’ll kick your ass when you don’t par-take in the Devil’s brew much. It goes down a little too easy.” Mitch hefted the bottle up and took another long drink. “Here’s to knew friends then.” He passed the bottle over to Ted.

“To knew friends.” Ted took a short drink this time.

“Well Ted, folks don’t come out here to make new friends so if I’m wearing out my welcome you just say so.”

“Well I have to say I certainly didn’t expect to have company tonight.”

“Don’t imagine you did. It don’t look like you plan on staying long either.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t want to be rude but you don’t strike me as a guy who can survive long in the desert on your wits and you didn’t bring many provisions - I mean what I’m seeing there. An empty gallon of water, a bottle of hooch, a sleeping bag, and that pea shooter won’t keep you alive very long out *here*.”

“Well you’re right Mitch, I wasn’t planning on staying long. Are there any more folks around here? I walked most of the day and didn’t see anything. Then right out of nowhere you walk up like I’m standing in the checkout line in the middle of a Circle K.” Ted said passing the bottle back.

“I would say you just got lucky, or maybe unlucky depending on your point of view. There isn’t another soul for hundreds of square miles. You know this stuff will kill on an empty stomach.” Ted smiled wryly at this as Mitch took another drink. “I’ve got some beans and coffee on the fire. Why don’t you come over to my place? Whatever it is you are doing out here can wait a couple hours can’t it?” Mitch said passing the bottle back.

Ted smiled genuinely this time. “This stuff will kill you on a full stomach too, but a dish of beans and some coffee sounds pretty good to me. How far is it? I’m not in much shape for a long trek?” Ted stumbled a little as he stood up again.

“Just lean on old Mitch there, it’s just up ahead a piece.” Mitch scattered the remains of Ted’s fire in the sand with one foot while steadying Ted. He grabbed the few items Ted brought with him and they walked together into the dark.

Although Ted was a little unsteady on his feet he wasn’t so drunk that he didn’t recognize Mitch’s camp was in fact very close. Ted wondered what the odds makers in Vegas would make of him walking blindly in the desert for twelve hours and landing on the doorstep of the only living soul for hundreds of square miles. The camp was a simple affair but it was lived in. There were paths worn in the hard pack of the desert surface between the campfire and a small tent. The fire was inside a ring of stones that supported a rusted metal grate. There

were pots hanging from wire looped over the low branches of a mesquite tree. Ted watched as Mitch untied a rope that went high into the tree. He lowered a burlap sack. A dented pot missing its handle sat over the fire. The lid which was also dented let a wisp of steam escape from it. The aroma of real cowboy beans that had been cooking all day drifted to Ted and made his stomach growl. On the corner of the grate sat an old fashion coffee pot. It was the kind that would percolate the coffee when you put it on the stove. Mitch poured the dark liquid from the pot into two tin cups.

“There you go partner, it ain’t Starbucks but it will keep you up until you find one; and grow a little hair on your chest while you’re looking too.” Mitch touched the side of his cup to Ted’s.

Ted took a small sip of the brew and shuttered. “I’m not sure I can call it coffee but it does chase away the chill.”

“I learned how to make coffee in the Coast Guard. I worked off the coast of Maine. We mostly rescued fisherman trying to scratch out a living in the cold Atlantic Ocean. That’s why I came out here when I got my pension.” Mitch looked off into the distance. “Too many memories in that ice cold water, thirty foot swells washing over the deck. Me tied off to the railing searching for the over eager crew of fishing trawler bobbing around in another Atlantic storm.”

“Are you ok Mitch?”

“Huh, yeah, just reminiscing.”

“Don’t you miss the sea?”

“Sometimes I get a little homesick but then I start counting my scars, some of them you can see but, most of them no one can see but me. That’s when I remember why I’m as far away from that she devil as I can get.” Mitch shook his head and dished out beans onto two tin plates with a piece of crusty bread. The plates matched the well used cups.

Ted accepted his plate and sat down on a large piece of mesquite. Mitch held out a fork, then sat next to Ted on the log. Ted lifted a forkful of beans to his mouth, the steam still rising off them. Now that Mitch was no longer banging around tin plates and cups Ted could hear nothing. The desert was very still. The beans hit the bottom of Ted’s empty stomach with an audible thump, and before he knew what hit him he was using the bread to mop up the liquid left on the plate.

“I could say you was a might hungry there Teddy.”

No one ever called Ted “Teddy”. He didn’t like it. It sounded too cute or something. But coming from this tall weathered man with a drawl that must be a montage of accents from the many places Mitch had lived - it didn’t bother him. “I guess I was pretty hungry.”

Mitch cleared the plates, poured more coffee and topped the cups off with a gen-

erous dollop of rum. Sitting back Mitch let out a contented sigh. “Well Teddy this has been a very pleasant evening so far. How’s about I roll us up a couple smokes.” He dug into the pocket of his dusty overalls until he produced a leather pouch.

“I don’t smoke.”

“You don’t drink either but I see you’re indulging yourself tonight. You might as well do it up right. This here is the best tobacco you can buy. It’s better than anything you might get in a store bought cigarette.” While Mitch spoke, his nimble fingers rolled two of the smoothest looking smokes Ted had ever seen. They were perfect.

“How do you know I don’t drink?”

“You would be surprised at what I know about you my friend. Try one of these. If that don’t make you want to take up smoking again than nothing will.” Ted lit the end of the cigarette with a piece of wood from the fire and inhaled deeply. He lit the end of Mitch’s next. It was a very mellow smoke and he felt a little dizzy after the first taste. It had been many years since Ted smoked. He was surprised he didn’t go into a coughing fit.

“For an old man I guess it doesn’t get much better than this. My skipper used to say he believed in the teachings of the three Kings. *Smoking, drinking, and fucking*, two out of three’s not bad. What do *you* say Teddy?”

“I guess you’re right there. We shouldn’t be greedy.”

Refilling the cups with coffee and rum Mitch grinned at Ted. His face was lined with life’s experiences. “So, do you want to talk about it?”

Ted tilted his head like a dog waiting for a treat. “Talk about what?”

“Teddy, Teddy, Teddy. Something brought you out here. I came out here to escape from the things I saw on board that Coast Guard cutter. You’re running from something. If you don’t want to talk about it, just say so. I can do enough talking for the both of us.”

“I think it sounds trite when I say it out loud. So I won’t, but you’re right. I’m running from something and I mean to stay ahead of it too.”

“I knew you were a serious fellow when I first spotted you; but are you sure this is the best answer you can come up with? You seem like a smart guy. Have you thought this through?”

Ted sat quiet now wishing he hadn’t accepted the invitation to join Mitch for dinner. He drew patterns in the earth with the stick he used to light his smoke earlier. “Maybe I should head out now.”

“Don’t be so sensitive. You do what you came out here to do. No man can stop you. Surely you can let an old man prattle on for a couple hours first can’t you?”

“I guess I can do that. How about you roll us another one of those smokes while you’re prattling then.”

“That a boy. That’s the spirit I was hoping for. Pour us a little more coffee while I whip these together.”

Ted poured more coffee from a pot he thought should be empty by now. He topped off each cup with more rum. There seemed to be about half the bottle left. Ted thought at the rate they were drinking it the rum should be about gone by now also. Mitch fished out his tobacco pouch and rolled two more perfect smokes. The desert was cooling down so fast Ted shivered when a light breeze stirred. He went over to a large pile of firewood and threw a couple more logs on the fire.

“That’s a good size pile of wood you’ve got there. It can’t be easy to come by out here.”

“I’ve got lots of time on my hands Teddy. What about you? Do you think that you’re running out of time? I can tell you, it only seems that way. You have more time than you can imagine. You just need to weather the storm. It’s not easy you know.”

“What’s not easy?”

“*Life* my young friend, life! Folks grow up thinking life gets easier as you get older for some reason. It doesn’t. It keeps getting harder. The older you get the harder it gets. I think that might be by design. It keeps us interested. If things got too easy you might just go off to sleep and not wake up again. No reason to wake up. Nothing new, no challenges, nothing to fix. I think our Maker knows we need a reason to wake up. Maybe that’s what happens when you hear, so and so died peacefully in their sleep. They couldn’t think of a reason to wake up. Did you ever think of it that way? There has to be a reason.”

“What’s your challenge? What’s the reason you got up today in the middle of nowhere? No one would know if you got up out here or not. No one will know when you don’t get up either. How does that work in your universal picture of how it works?”

“I think I struck a raw nerve my friend. Maybe the reason I got up this morning was to meet you and keep you company tonight. Maybe I won’t get up tomorrow. Maybe you’re the last reason I have to wake up. If it is, I have to say I’ll be disappointed.” Mitch unrolled the tobacco pouch and started on two more smokes.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Maybe that didn’t come out just right; but that’s how life is. Things don’t always come out just right. Sometimes your wife files for divorce. Sometime those corporate meetings accomplish nothing but creating work for a guy who already works sixty hours a week. You have to make the best of what you get and keep getting up to see what doesn’t come out right tomorrow. You mind pouring again? My coffee never tasted this good.”

Ted absently poured more coffee and rum in each of their mugs. The smoke from the fire mingled with the tobacco smoke and drifted lazily into the night sky. The smell mixed with the scents of the sage and creosote bushes. Ted gazed up for the first time that evening and knew he was seeing stars he never saw before. How many times had he been under these very stars and failed to see them. The fire crackled in his ears. When Mitch took a breath Ted felt a little peace pass through him. The old man could talk, that was certain. A smile danced across Ted’s face for an instant.

“You want to share the joke with me?” Mitch said as he wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, looking at Ted.

“I think I’ll keep that one to myself for tonight. Maybe it’ll give you a reason to get up tomorrow.” His smile danced again, this time for a little longer.

“Never you mind about me getting up tomorrow. What about you? What will get you up tomorrow?”

“I think I might get up to see if you get up. I’ll take it minute by minute after that.”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Mitch said slapping his meaty hand on Ted’s back. You get up to see if I’m getting up. I’ll get up to check on you and so on and so on. You have to remember though, after you weather this storm, there is another one brewing somewhere. When it crosses your bow it’s going to blow worse than the last one did. That’s ok because you know nothing gets easier. You are a good man and I know you’ll do the right thing. But it won’t be the last right thing that you have to do. The right thing is never the easy thing. That’s how you can tell what’s right and what’s not.”

“You don’t exactly predict great weather do you Mitch?”

“The storms are what we need to keep us waking up. The calm between the storms help us to build the strength to meet the next one.” Mitch yawned and shook out his long grizzled face. “I think I’m going to turn in now. Make yourself at home next to the fire and take care.”

“Goodnight.” Ted said as he laid down on his sleeping bag next to the fire looking up at the stars. He noticed the Glock was not pressing against his back and he didn’t have the energy to look for it. Sleep took Ted down the way the ocean takes it’s victims down.

When Ted awoke the sun was bright in his eyes. He was stiff and a little groggy. “Where am I?” Rolling over he felt the hard surface of the desert. An empty bottle of rum laid on the ground next him. It started to come back to him now. “I walked out here. When, yesterday? How long have I been sleeping? Where’s the old guy?”

Ted sat up right and looked around. There was nothing. He stood up and recognized the spot where the old man had his camp. The tree he remembered leaning against when he took a leak still stood there. The ashes from a fire were still warm to the touch. But there was no stone ring around it. The tent was gone and nothing hung from the tree. The pile of firewood was gone. Ted sat down now and tried to remember details. He could remember what the old man had said to him word for word - but not what he looked like so much. “Was I dreaming?” He didn’t think so. “This doesn’t make any sense.” He thought about the reason he had come out here in the first place. Where was the Glock? He grabbed his sleeping bag and shook it out. “Not there. What the hell is going on?” He sat down and took some deep breaths to get control. He looked down to his right and scratched in to the hard surface were two words.

WAKE UP

Next to the words were several cigarette butts without filters. He picked one up and knew it had been hand rolled. “Shit. If it wasn’t a dream then where was the old philosopher?” He kicked at his daypack. It was heavy. Alarmed he poked at it with a stick. Out tumbled two gallons of cool water and the Glock. It was unloaded and the magazine was empty. The sun was on the western end of its journey getting ready to clock out for the day. Ted decided this would be a good time to head back to find the Jeep. He was awake *now*. He marveled at the beauty of the sunset as he walked. “That’s two sunsets in a row. How long can I keep the string alive?”

A voice spoke softly in his head. “As long as you keep waking up Teddy.”

Rebel

Karla Ungurean

I want to be more rebellious, like Janis Joplin meets Joan of Arc.
I want to sip martinis in the park and laugh at the corporate
sludge wolfing down stale fries and cold coffee.
I want to bare my soul and my ass and take care of myself for a change.
I want to stop the war and paint my toenails before happy hour.
I want to corrupt the youth of America and teach them that independ-
ence is a lost art; I am Picasso.
I want to tell every housewife to confess that her neck massager spends
more time between her legs than her husband.
I want to rally in the streets about the irony of the Nazi- Feminists who
campaign all day for freedom and rush home to vacuum.
I want to steal mass quantities of stilettos and wear just the shoes to
church.
I want to run away to some place hot, like Fiji and sleep with the
cabana boys.
I want to smoke a carton of cigarettes because I’ve been told they are
bad for me.
I want to stop a revolution and start a riot, all for the sake of saving the
world from itself.
I want to get the hell away from everyone and be my own queen-
And I will.

Back to Boys

Hannah Martin

Surrounded by the smells of sin, Danny and three other sailors wandered the streets of Hong Kong. Gawking at street vendors selling live chickens, Danny was almost glad that he wasn't traveling the streets alone. He looked the other guys, marveling that he would be hanging out with such a strange mixture; they were completely different from his friends back home. But with the four of them sticking together, no one was going to get mugged or even just lost; Danny knew he should be glad for their company.

It was Danny's first visit to Hong Kong. All he knew was what he had been told about the city: once a harbor of independence and a freedom that frequently crossed the border into excess, it was now a bastion of Red China, Communism, and the embodiment of everything abhorrent all good freedom-loving people. Or perhaps not. Looking around, Danny couldn't see how the city's decadence and commercialism could have been curbed at all. Buying and selling was going on everywhere, huge signs advertising everything from socks to sex to "authentic" knock-off Rolex watches, many in a pidginized English that kept the young men chortling:

SHOOS CHEEP
FOOD GOOD, VERY SHEEP
HAPPY SALE

Of course, there were the numerous signs in bright red or black characters, or storeowners standing out front calling out their wares in Chinese. When they saw the four obviously-American men walking towards them, they would switch to English (with varying degrees of success), or just gesture widely, nodding and smiling, and say, "Come, come. Very cheap."

In some ways, Danny was living the dream, seeing the world—just like all the recruitment ads. His ex, John, had told him he was crazy when he started talking about the military. "Are you fucking insane?" had been the terminal question, but Danny had been sure it would be like the movies. You know, men with perky butts in tight bell bottoms, combined with the type of male bonding that can only be found in high-stress close-quarters situations. Plus, he could use the college money. Dad wasn't exactly clamoring to chip in and pay for his faggot son's education, and Mom could barely pay her own rent.

The Navy had seemed like the best choice back then; safest, at least. None of that hiding behind bushes while people shoot at you. Looking back on it, the Air Force might have been wiser, but his cousin Josie was an Air Force officer, and about the biggest bitch he had ever known. So the Navy it was: boot camp, followed by 'A' school, and then on to his first ship. Boot camp hadn't been too bad and 'A' school had been a blast; they only spent a few hours a day training, and then were expected

to “go study,” which of course meant doing whatever the hell you wanted. Danny had looked forward to getting to his first ship: based in Japan, USS Blue Ridge had a good reputation as a relaxed ‘party’ ship. Good port visits, a cushy lifestyle since it was the flagship of an Admiral, and the exotic Orient at his fingertips.

He first got to the ship late on an overcast February afternoon. It had felt like a week since he had left the states, and although it had been only 14 hours in real time, it had taken over a day and a half by the clock. The trip was exhausting, and Danny had felt grimy, like little lice were wriggling all over his body. The wind wasn’t strong, but it cut through the thick fabric of his Dress Blues like a steel pick. It wasn’t even five o’clock, but it was already beginning to get dark. Danny had stood on the pier, his seabag at his feet, shivering, just staring at his life for the next three years. The ship looked like a massive beached whale, huge harpoons sticking out of its head. Or perhaps an obese gray-painted porcupine. He had known that there wouldn’t be a lot of weapons—it was a far cry from a destroyer, after all—but Danny hadn’t realized just how many antennas would mar its clean lines. He had enough time to check in, get his rack, a meal, and a short night’s sleep before the ship got underway the next morning. Now, just four months later, Danny was in Hong Kong, the pearl of the East, and he couldn’t even relax or enjoy it properly.

The ship’s Bos’n had taken Danny aside that first full day, right after the hustle and organized chaos of leaving port. Danny hadn’t had any duties for the evolution—being brand-new gave him some measure of slacking-off time—and had been pointed to a quiet corner on the oh-three level where he could watch the land drift slowly away. Sailors were starting to disappear from their ‘sea and anchor detail’ positions when a man with a craggy face came up the ladderwell. He smelled like stale cigarettes and coffee. The Bos’n gave Danny a heavy-handed clap on the shoulder and Danny winced, but as the ship leaned suddenly, catching the first full wave of the trip, the old sailor’s hand turned from a painful shock to a welcome anchor.

“Wanted to welcome you aboard and make sure you know the way things are ‘round here. That way when you screw up, I can punish you with a clear conscience.” His voice was anything other than welcoming. Despite his southern drawl, which should have made him sound warm and friendly, the Bos’n’s voice was hard-edged, flinty.

“There are only two things the Navy won’t tolerate: drugs and faggotry. But I’ll tell you now, that bein’ stupid should be put on the list. Be on time, work hard, and don’t go rapin’ none of them native women.” Danny couldn’t figure out how to respond, but luckily the old guy just kept going.

“And wrap your pecker. You won’t go to mast for breakin’ that rule, but you’ll sure as hell regret it.” And with that, a curt nod, and one more stout clap on the shoulder, the salty sailor was gone, hatch clanging behind him.

After that warning, it hadn’t taken Danny long to discover that the pornos had it all wrong. Navy boys didn’t start fucking each other as soon as they got out to sea, hot steamy sex in the engine room or on the main deck under the stars. Quite the opposite, in fact. In passing, he had heard stories about things that had been done to guys who had been suspected of being gay, on this ship and on other ones. One guy

in his berthing had bragged about a fag he had helped give a brillo bath. Most guys told stories about beating the shit out of fags, or wishing they had. So Danny had learned quickly to be very careful.

Perhaps the worst part was that he was good at it. Danny was handsome, but not a pretty-boy, and he could talk a good talk. He could brag about his dick size and his “ex-girlfriend” back home. He said her name was Jackie, that he had broken up with her right before he joined the navy; Danny was really talking about John, but changing the pronoun worked well, and then he didn’t have to remember an intricate lie. Providence had also given him a little help. Someone had started a rumor about Danny making it with one of the chicks who worked in CIC, which helped establish his place as the perfect mid-western, all-American white boy. He suspected that the petite blonde in question had started the rumor. With a ‘hot babe’ like her chasing him around and spreading rumors about varied sexual exploits, Danny had a safety net better than anything he could have created on his own.

He also made sure to cultivate friends who would help with his smoke screen. Looking at them as they walked down the streets of Hong Kong, he couldn’t help but to miss his friends at home. He had traded a bunch of wanna-be queens for a pack of rednecks; they were nice guys underneath it all, but rednecks nonetheless. Kevin was short and exceptionally lean, sporting an ‘everyone else can eat shit’ attitude. Bill loved wearing his backpack in every foreign port because it had a huge Confederate flag embroidered on it. Mike was the quietest of the three, but his vocabulary consisted primarily of cuss words. Bill turned and looked at Danny.

“You’re the only one who hasn’t been to this great city before – whatcha wanna do?” In gawking at the live-chicken street-fair, apparently Danny had missed a heated debate on what to do next.

“I’d like to get some jade. I’ve heard it’s pretty cheap here.” In his mind, Danny substituted “cheap” with “cheep” and got a great amount of satisfaction out of it, but it wasn’t a joke these guys would appreciate.

The four of them turned around to walk back to the public transportation depot, Kevin complaining without malice because he had wanted to go to some museum. Danny wished he had been listening to the earlier argument; a museum trip might have been nice. But it was too late for changing his mind, and the four of them ended up spending hours at the jade market, haggling over trinkets to send home as birthday and Christmas presents. Never too early to plan for Christmas when you’re in the navy. It was hot and humid, with a constant haze of fine light-brown dust that stuck to every drop of sweat. Danny could feel the dust gathering in the pores of his skin, along his hairline, and under his fingernails. They decided to have a late lunch at a Thai restaurant overlooking the water. It was a relief to finally find a cool spot to sit and have a beer, a welcome light breeze coming from the shore.

No sooner had they gotten their first beers than a certain blonde female from the ship showed up with her friends. At the sound of her voice, Danny’s head jerked around, his body suffused with horror. He should have known she would find them somehow; she wanted to make her rumor reality. The worst of it was, he couldn’t even

remember her fucking name. The trio of giggling girls finally found an empty table across the restaurant.

“I can’t believe you fucked her, dude.”

“Fuck man, I didn’t know she was a complete fucking hoe-bag when I first got here.”

“It’s alright, man. I fucked her my first week onboard too.”

Finally, Mike changed the topic. “So, what are we gonna to do tonight?”

“Drink!” “Drink!”

“Nah man, we’ve gotta take Danny out to see the *real* sights of the city.” The other two enthusiastically toasted Bill’s suggestion, and Danny was left to wonder what the hell he was in for. Perhaps a strip club? Roll with the punches, Danny, just roll with the punches. Don’t seem worried, just pretend to be happy. Don’t worry be happy. The tune floated into his mind before he had a chance to stop it; now he was stuck with it wallowing around in his head for hours.

There was no hurry to leave their beers, and so the late lunch turned into dinner and several more mugs; the night sky was already showing a few stars when the four of them headed out.

“So what are we doing, anyway?” Danny couldn’t help but ask.

“Karaoke, man. Best karaoke around.” Sweet. He could sing badly and drink; hopefully the other three guys didn’t wail too terribly. If they did, he’d just drink more. They picked up two bottles of Jack Daniels on the way. What was the saying? Liquor before beer never fear, beer before liquor never sicker. Shit.

There was quite a bit of wandering around, looking for exactly the right karaoke place. From the talk, Danny had finally figured out that it was karaoke-slash-strip club, or something along those lines. Finally they found it, leaving the neon-lit main drag for a more sedate back street. It was a tall narrow building, nine stories high against the four-story buildings around. Short compared to the monolithic glass-filled high-rises along the main drag, though. The four young men squeezed into a tiny elevator, and by the time it had dragged them up one floor, groaning, Danny realized that his arm was pressed against pictures of naked Asian women, legs wide open, in an amazing variety of poses. In fact, the entire interior of the elevator was covered with 3x5 pictures of naked women in vulnerable positions. Except the top of the elevator, which had a mirror. Danny, his stomach churning, didn’t know where to look.

With a dull ding, the elevator doors opened on the seventh floor. There was a large crowd of Chinese businessmen, coats unbuttoned, sitting around a table singing a raucous song. One of them was standing, karaoke words in character against a blue backscreen and a microphone in his hand. They sounded like cats fighting on the back porch, thought Danny. Bill went to the main desk, and within a few moments the sailors were escorted to one of the many private karaoke rooms lining the nearby hallway, most filled with men singing. The doors were shut, but sounds of singing in Chinese could be faintly heard in the hallway. Each door had an eye-level window from which an observer could easily survey the entire room at a glance. The hallway was filled with larger versions of the pictures from the elevator.

The room the boys were given was larger than most, and they quickly got com-

fortable. Three sides of the room were lined by low maroon booth-like seats, with a round fake wood coffee table in the middle and a large screen on the same wall as the door. It smelled like salt and pea-green mildew. Danny opened the karaoke book lying on the table, but couldn't find anything he knew; most of the book was in characters, but even the English section didn't have any songs he had ever heard of. Not even any Elvis songs.

About the time Danny ascertained that the karaoke choices were crap, a Chinese man entered the room.

"You want girls, yes?" Two young women filed in, dressed in tight jeans, pretty blouses, and spiked high heels. One had tried to dye her hair blonde; the other sat next to Danny. Danny decided he needed a drink. Mike had already opened one of the bottles, so he took a swig. He took another one as Kevin cuddled up with the girl next to him.

Mike chose some song at random, and the karaoke machine started belting out the background music for an unknown ballad. The screen showed snapshots of couples holding hands while walking through the park, couples kissing at the beach as the sun set behind them. Straight couples, of course. Chinese couples. On the other side of the room, the dyed-blonde had decided that she liked Bill quite a bit. Danny looked at the screen. A couple was holding hands walking down a downtown city sidewalk. Danny realized this might not be just a strip club.

"Have you had an Asian chick yet, man?" It was Kevin. He had one arm around the girl between them, the other arm up her frilly blue blouse. She was giggling.

"Back in the states, yeah." Danny took another sip from the bottle.

"Nah man, he's talking about a real Asian chick, an Oriental — one from here." Bill didn't wait for a response, just started nuzzling the bleach-blonde's neck, quickly moving up for a deep kiss. Mike chose another song at random. Same type of music, different tune. This one just had close-up pictures of people smiling.

"Oh my god, man, you wouldn't believe how tight her pussy is." Kevin had her pants unbuttoned. She was still giggling, now fiddling with his hair in a slightly abstract manner. "Here man, check this out." Kevin took his hand out of her pants.

"Nah, it's OK."

"No man, you've gotta feel how tight she is." Kevin turned to the girl. "You like Danny, too, right?" At his gesture, the girl turned and smiled at Danny. "Give him a kiss to show how much you like him, ok?"

So she kissed him. Her teeth weren't the best; as she pulled away, Danny could smell the ass-smell of early tooth rot. She giggled.

"C'mon, man, feel how tight her pussy is." Danny did, then had another swig of JD, trying to ignore the smell on his fingers. Mike chose another song from the karaoke machine, and then scooted over to make room for Bill and the blonde. Pretty soon the sounds of grunting punctuated yet another strange tune, and Danny wished with all his might that he wasn't there. His vision was beginning to get fuzzy, and all of the random pictures accompanying the song looked the same. After a few songs that flowed seamlessly together, Kevin gave his arm a hard nudge.

“You want firsts with her? First Oriental and all?” Kevin’s question was in earnest; he really wanted Danny to fuck this girl, right here on the plastic vinyl seat, in front of them all.

“Nah man, it’s all good. I didn’t even bring a condom with me or anything.”

“No prob. I brought extras.”

The latest song came to an end. In the silence the condom sat in front of him, staring up at him with its shiny blue wrapper. Mike chose a new song, this one more upbeat, kind of a Chinese version of a gospel song.

“It’s all right, man, it’s for a good cause. You’re working your way through college, right honey?” She nodded. “Go ahead and be nice to Danny now. It’s his first time.”

Her eyebrows rose. “First time?” she queried.

Kevin nodded. “First time.” The girl giggled in response.

She turned to Danny and started to unbuckle his belt, sliding her cool fingers under his boxers. He closed his eyes as she put her mouth around his flaccid cock, moist, warm and sure. Danny wished again he were somewhere else. With someone else. With ‘Jackie,’ perhaps; John could give really good blowjobs. With the sounds of male grunting, punctuated only occasionally by faked-female-orgasm moans, Danny could almost imagine a completely different scenario; a combo of any of those fun pornos about spunky navy boys. About then, Bill finished up with a final shudder. Danny could feel himself get hard. The girl stopped, and he opened his eyes. She was looking at him.

“Fuck me now?” she said. Danny looked around; Kevin gave him a thumbs-up, then looked away, giving Danny some ‘privacy.’

Impotent in the face of pressure but hard in body, Danny put the condom on as the girl shimmied out of her jeans. He rolled her onto her back and entered her in one swift motion. Better to get this over with sooner rather than later. Push. I wish I wasn’t here. Push. Should’ve pretended I was really really religious or something. Push. Off to the side, there was a moan from Mike. Push. Bill must’ve handed the blonde off to Mike. Push. The girl gave a fake high-pitch whimper of enjoyment. Push. At least she isn’t giggling. Push. Why did I do this to myself? Push. The smell of cum and sweat, of sweaty plastic. Push. I wonder how many people have fucked on this bench. Push. I hate the navy. Push. I hate my job. Push. I hate hiding. Push. God damn it. Push. Fuck. Push.

He finished, and as he pulled himself out, the girl giggled.

Danny grabbed another swig of whisky before he zipped up. Glancing toward the door, he saw a face looking through the window. It was pushed aside and another pretty face took its place. Danny felt sick and woozy.

“I’m going to go find a bathroom.” No one was paying attention; Mike was hot and heavy with the fake blonde, Kevin was enjoying a blowjob of his own, and Bill looked like he might be passed out. The second bottle of liquor had been opened sometime during the gospel song, and now there was another ballad playing. The song finished, and it was quiet as Danny walked out the door.

Three girls were standing outside. One of them giggled as he came out. “Big boy.”

“Bathroom?” he asked, ignoring the giggle.

One of them led him to a small bathroom. He locked the door behind him and promptly threw up in the sink. He kept retching, scenes from moments before on quick-time replay in his head, retching until blood flecked the bile he was puking forth, retching until his throat was raw and sore. You’ve gotta do what you’ve gotta do, Danny, he told himself. Just roll with the punches. He washed his mouth out and took a piss.

The worst of his inebriation had gone with the puke, but Danny plodded down the hallway, in no hurry to get back to the karaoke room. A slim figure was coming down the hall toward him, silhouetted against backlight. When she got close, Danny realized with a shock that it was the girl with whom he’d just had sex. His now-empty stomach gurgled. She was just about to pass him without even looking up when he stopped her.

“What’s your name?” The question was out of his mouth before he had really thought about it.

“Baby.” Her voice was flat, a flatness resulting from more than just accent. She didn’t look at his face, her attention focused at a spot on the far wall.

“Baby?”

“Yes. I youngest. Youngest here.”

How young was she? Danny didn’t want to think about it.

“Are you really working your way through college?” Baby nodded. “What are you studying?” She shrugged. Her hair was stringy, flat and dry, the antithesis of stereotypically silky Asian locks. Faint blue light reflected off her cheekbones. Her eyes were blank, passive, her face emaciated. On impulse, Danny grabbed her hands.

“You’ll be OK, right?” He hunched over to look her in the eyes, but she still wouldn’t make eye contact. He was sure that there was a person in there somewhere, buried under the whore. Her eyes showed not even a flicker of emotion. Danny wondered how long she had been here.

The girl pulled her hands away from him and scratched her neck abstractedly. Danny rubbed his arms, a sudden chill. The girl turned and resumed her journey down the hall. There was no hint of any sort of sexy roll in her hips; from behind she was nearly androgynous. The hallway smelled of old grease, tobacco, and disease. As he scratched his neck, Danny’s hand shook; over the course of the day, his fingernails had gathered dark grime under them, and in the violet-blue light it looked like blood. From his pocket, he pulled out his tiny red Swiss Army knife, with its all-purpose tool assortment. He sat for a minute in the hallway, digging under his fingernails, trying to clean away the grime. His nails wouldn’t come completely clean, so Danny gave it up for the moment. He would have to get back to the ship to finish the job. He stood, feeling the eyes of the pictures on the wall watching.

Danny turned back toward the door he knew he needed to go through. He took a deep breath, inhaling the scents of decay, feeling them swirl into his lungs, into his veins, before he expelled them with force.

Time to get back to the boys.

Out of the Haze

Veda Nayak

Yeah, I came back to kill her. But it wasn't because I'm evil or that I have a sick mind or a religious frenzy or something retarded like that. These damn authors are always coming up with such stupid shit.

I first met her in the hotel. The Hotel Triumph. Two letters in the sign had blinked out, and it now read *Hoe Triumph*. A seedy place, like all the joints I had stayed in during twenty years of beating the road.

The guy behind the desk was old, but he had these sharp, beady kind of eyes. Like squirrels, only more ratty. He twitched. I don't like people who twitch. He looked at me, and he looked at my dusty bag. The one that held the insurance papers and my camera. 'Fitty'fi' bucks a pop.' he said. And his cheek twitched.

I dug out my wallet. I had exactly sixty dollars in there, most of it in crumpled bills. All my cash was in my other wallet. You didn't want to pay by card or show a wad of cash at a place like this.

It's all the same. No matter where you go. The town has a different name; maybe the people got a little more twang to their speech. But they still curl up at night, in their mortgaged beds in their mortgaged house living their mortgaged lives – and just before they fall asleep they have that same momentary pang of despair. *Just what difference did I make today? Absolutely none.* They fight for their existence and agonize over Jenny Aniston's love life, but damn me to hell if the world wouldn't still move and the clocks still tick if they were to just fade away. As they start to think of who would miss them, sleep slithers up, and they awake to another meaningless day. It's all the same.

I trudged over to the elevator. There was a handwritten sign hanging to it by one yellowed piece of cello tape. Temporarily out of order.

She was lounging near the potted plant at the base of the stairs.

She looked me up and down, with a curl to her lip. I knew what she saw, and it didn't please me any more than it did her. She was attractive. Beyond attractive, really. She was young, but her eyes were old. So old that I flinched when I looked into them. She was the kind of girl you just had to bend over and ream. None of that foreplay crap. You'd have to fuck her up the ass, just to teach her some respect. She ignited that in you.

I feel old. Every morning when I look into the mirror. It's not about the lines on your face, but the way you stand, the way you walk. When I drudge out of these dumps and head into the unmerciful sunlight, toward my beat-up Plymouth, wearing my cheap suit and carrying my dusty bag, I feel old. Old and tired, though the day has hardly begun. I'm always tired. Not even my camera can relieve me, like it used to. Jaded, I'm sure they call people like me, but it's more than that. It's the haze. I awake before my alarm goes off and I stare up at the ceiling and I think to myself: what now? And what makes me feel so old and tired is that I know. I know what then. And I swing myself out of bed and get to it.

She asked me if I had a cigarette. I said yes, and lit it for her. As I bent close to her I could smell her unwashed hair, the deo-spray she used, the jalapenos she had

eaten not too long ago. It turned me on. That smell, more than anything else. I think my eyes brightened. I knew how this would play out, but I wasn't as tired any more.

She looked up at me. 'Long day, huh.'

'Yeah.' I set down my bag and decided I would have a smoke, too.

We smoked in silence for a while. 'So what do you do anyway, pops?' she sounded like she didn't really care, but I answered her anyway.

'I sell insurance.'

I could see the beady-eyed guy looking over at us and twitching. He wore a smirk, as if to say – you ain't the first geezer to be led by his cock, and you won't be the last. I can't tell if it was right then that I knew what I was going to do, but I was aware of a little voice warning me that he had registered us together, and that I'd have to work around that.

'I'm tryin' to get back to New York.' She said.

'You live there?' I asked, even though I knew what she was going to say.

'My mum's up there,' she said. 'Ain't seen her in a long time. Figure I'll go back home, get a job or somethin'.'

'Good, good.' I muttered. Took another drag.

She smoked the cancer stick down to the filter, then pitched it into the plant, blowing smoke out of her pinched nostrils. 'Got twenty bucks you can spare to help me out?' She looked straight at me, and there was that sly all-knowing look in her eye.

'No.' I said. I didn't leer at her or anything that clichéd. Same script, different players. No need to dramatize it. 'But I've put aside twenty-five for extra expenses on this trip. I'll give it to you for a night's fucking.'

Maybe that was a bit rude. Maybe by implying she was for sale I had blown it. But it meant little to me. If she walked away, I was out one cigarette.

She looked at me with something like surprise in her eyes. Like she knew I had guessed her game and was wondering why I was playing it. Then the cocky look returned. She knew why.

'Give me another smoke.'

'No.'

She looked surprised again. The look on my face didn't change as I picked up my bag. I turned and started walking up the stairs.

'Yo, pops.' She called.

I stopped.

She looked up at me. 'Fifty.'

I kept walking up the stairs.

She climbed three steps. 'Fifty and you'll have a night like never before.'

I didn't look back. 'I said twenty-five.'

She cursed me, then followed me up the stairs.

Everyone has a routine. So did I. I'd get up to my room, take off my dusty clothes. Place the bag under my bed. If there was a TV, I'd sit on the edge of the bed and watch it, feeling my bony ribs rise and fall. Then I would open the side pouch of my bag and

get out the picture and the story. Spin the hot water tap and leave it running. I liked the water steaming hot. I'd tape the worn, well handled picture and story to the mirror as the bathroom fogged up around me. I had ripped both out of a porn mag years ago. I knew the story by heart, and every line of the picture was etched into my head. Still, routine is religion, and pay per view costs too much these days. I'd look at the picture and read the story and start masturbating. I'd always cum at the same point in the story. Where he makes her suck his cock after he has reamed her ass. I don't know why. I think it may make me a sick person. I don't care.

I found my room, unlocked it. She walked in after me and sat down on the bed. I knew she had been in here before. From my bag I withdrew a locking bar, which ensured the door would stay shut. Short of smashing the door around it, you couldn't get in. I couldn't keep the nasty smirk off my face as I began to take off my clothes. I can't be sure, but I think her face fell just a little bit.

'Straight to business, honey?' she asked caustically. 'I want a smoke.'

'And I want a shower, but I'm going to screw you instead.' I kicked my pants away.

'Why don't you get that shower, and I'll have my smoke.'

'Why don't you stop talking.' I couldn't help being mean to her, but if this was going to play out, I wanted at least a part of my money's worth.

She stared stonily at me for several seconds, then she began shrugging out of her clothes.

My heart rate shot up as her firm breasts tumbled out. She wriggled out of her tight jeans, and her voice was mocking. 'Grab your rubber and come get it, pops.'

I didn't carry condoms anymore. I had given up on getting lucky a long time ago. I told her so and she balked. 'Not without a rubber.' She insisted.

'Works for me.' I said as I walked over to her. She gave me some head – her skill belied her age – then I told her to turn over. She started hedging. 'I'm not gonna let you do that to me.' she said.

'All right.' I said. 'Thanks for the free blow job, close the door on your way out.'

She scowled up at me. I think she was really starting to hate me. I had a feeling she would enjoy ripping me off. She got on her hands and knees on the bed, and I fucked her just like I had wanted to when I first saw her. She took it with not more than a few grunts. Nothing remarkable about that, really. It was then that I began to think seriously about killing her.

I could still call the whole thing off. Give her the money and kick her out. But I couldn't. I was out of the haze, I was flying. You need to understand that I'm not a villain or anything. I wasn't repressed as a kid, my father didn't abuse me (well, he did kick me around, but that was perfectly normal in my neck of the woods), I have no desire to hurt people. It's just about feeling alive. When you live in the haze, and every day is the same as the last, it's all about that spark. I wanted to know if, by extinguishing her miserable, sordid little life, I could be released from that despair. Could this bitch free me?

I made her suck me off after I had fucked her. She pulled a disgusted face (bet she didn't see herself doing this when she had started her little game downstairs), and she hated me then, with all the strength of her dirty little soul. And I hated her, too. She was so alive, this damn slut, with her know-it-all smirk and cunning, malicious eyes.

We hated each other.

She was going to rob me; I was going to kill her.

I went into the bathroom. She heard the water running and dressed hurriedly. And pulled my bag out from under the bed. Through the crack in the door, I watched her sift through it. Quickly but efficiently.

She found my camera. I felt a dull flash of anger as she put it around her neck. That camera had been through a lot with me. She found the album with my pictures, and flipped through it to see if I had left any bills between the pages. I heard her laugh scornfully as she looked at the snapshots, and I really wanted to break her neck.

She took my camera, my other wallet and my watch. I think she expected to find more, but she was disappointed. Serves you right, I thought viciously.

She gathered the loot up, flipped a finger in the bathroom door's direction, and took off.

I leaped out of the bathroom as soon as I heard the door close. I had a towel around my waist, but if I ran out into the hall dressed as I was, I would stick out like a redneck in Manhattan. My bag was open on the bed, and I dragged out a pair of jeans, which I struggled into as fast as I could. I snatched up a T-shirt and dashed at the door, yanking it over my head.

I was just in time to see her vanish around the L in the hallway, toward the stairs. The pain in her rear slowed her down a good deal, I dare say. I followed her. I heard her cheap heels click-clacking up the stairs, and I counted till I heard a landing door slam.

I was grimly satisfied. She did have a lair in this sordid place, as I had suspected.

I found myself on the fifth floor. I peeked through the small window set in the stairs access door and saw my slut unlock and enter a room.

Room 516.

I went back to my room. Waited fifteen minutes, then called the front desk. Said my stuff had been stolen, and I wanted the police brought in. The cops were most unhelpful. They'd probably get a cut out of my three thousand dollar camera.

The camera wasn't a smart thing for a struggling salesman to carry. But it was more than just a camera to me. It was my window to the world, my glimpse of a sane world that made sense. What I saw through the lens was free of the haze.

I left the hotel the next morning, leaving a forwarding number in case my stuff showed up. The clerk twitched and pocketed my card. I knew I'd never receive a call.

I had this author friend who tried for the longest time to get a novel published before he gave up and started pounding the road. He tried selling short stories too, and he used to tell me, 'Bernie, I just don't get it. I mean; look at all the crap that does sell. Eclectic rubbish is all. Some random mumblings, weird ass shit that has no point...I mean, doesn't anyone believe in telling a straight forward goddamn story any more? One that actually goes somewhere and tells you something! Is telling a story really that outdated?'

I got in my Plymouth and drove. I think I even managed some sales, but I was more excited than ever in my life. For those glorious hours the haze was but a memory.

In the glove compartment I had a gun. It was a small thing, just a .22, and I knew I wasn't going to use it on her, but I loaded it and stuck it in my pocket anyway.

I checked into another flea bag hotel fifty miles away, then drove back after midnight, and parked three blocks away. Paid a buck fifty for a night's parking, and set off on foot. I had bought a tall cane, and used it to pull down the rickety fire escape ladder. I climbed up to the third floor. The entrance wasn't wired, and I had left it unlocked before I had left. It was still unlocked.

My heart was pounding, my face was flushed, my hands were trembling. I stuck them in my pocket and felt them sweat as I walked nonchalantly toward the stairwell. At this hour no one was out and about. Up to the fifth floor, and I could hardly contain my excitement. I knew it was stupid, but I had to.

I stopped in the stairwell and masturbated. I spilled onto my hand almost as soon as I began jerking myself.

I had never been more alive. In that second I thought I could write one of those eclectic short stories my author buddy hated so much, about the excitement of the hunt.

I know this sounds weird. Perhaps you've already labeled me as a sicko. But if you've felt the haze, felt the despair, maybe you can understand. I could only imagine what it would be like after she was dead. I would never see the haze again. I wouldn't have to kill again, either. Once would be enough. Once the haze was gone it would take another twenty years to come back, and by then, hopefully, I would be long dead.

I paused as my hand touched the door handle. I was here now, but just how was I going to get into her room without creating a commotion? I hadn't thought about this at all, and as I did, I could feel myself deflate. There was no way to do it. I couldn't pick locks, I was not ready to try and shoulder her door down.

It was then that I realized what I had been about to do. Murder her. Take her life. The gravity of what I was about to do hit me. I sank to the floor as all my bones seemed to turn to jelly.

I curse my life all the time, but I'm smart enough to know it could be a whole lot worse. I have my freedom. Freedom is so important. Without it a man would go insane in no time.

There was the ex-wife in Nevada. I could go and see her. She always said I was distant. I could transfer out to Nevada, start a new beat...maybe try with her again. I was up for retirement benefits in two years. I put my head in my hands, suddenly thankful this realization had come to me before I had done something which would have screwed my life forever.

Footsteps were coming up the stairs. I looked up and there she was. My slut. Staring at me with her jaw open. Rather unattractively.

I stood up slowly.

She had my camera.

I couldn't go to Nevada without my camera.

in propria persona

William Emmett

The thick red curtain opens. It rises smoothly, stopping occasionally while the small stagehand, dressed all in black, regains composure. In my mind, it's warm on the stage, flowers blooming, trees swaying in the gentle breeze.

"No it's not," she interrupts. "It's cold. Feel my hands." Our cards are dealt. Five to both of us. We've placed our wages in the pot. I have a ten of spades, a jack, a four and a pair of eights.

I look at the scene; the small stagehand replaces green leaves with dormant branches. He shivers in the bitter October cold while we walks offstage, arms full of green leaves.

"That's better," she says.

I look towards the voice, offstage, my brow furrowed, limiting half my vision. I try to explain with merely a look that this is my story. Not hers. I would like it warm.

"Well, get on with it." She leans forward in her chair, a move which in cards indicates great power, a great hand. A full house or royal flush.

A woman walks onto stage. She's short. She turns towards the front of the stage, smiles and waves. Her teeth are stained from too much coffee, her hair in an untidy bun. She holds a book in her hand; when she gets bored, it opens. Her hands and arms are covered in pen marks, personality traits. "Funny." "Loving." "Yearning for commitment."

A name appears above her head. "Tara."

"That's Tara, with a long 'a,'" the voice says as she leans closer to me.

Again my furrowed brow.

Tara looks around and thinks about the story she's in. She shivers in the cold, appearing to me as if she doesn't particularly like the bitter October wind.

I turn and smile as the voice leans back. The small stagehand dressed all in black sighs and carries the loose leaves back towards the stage. I have won this battle and started to regain control.

"No," says the voice. "Feel my hands."

The stagehand stops, looks at Tara, looks out hoping to see me, then walks offstage again.

We hear a dog whimper somewhere in the real world.

"Go get your dog. She misses Daddy." She leans forward, holding a flush draw, smelling my weakness.

I turn towards the voice placing one finger gently over my mouth. I feel the beard starting to form after days of not shaving.

"Fine, fine. I'll be quiet."

Tara, with a long "a," looks around the cold. A figure walks into view. It

has no face and is transparent. Nothing is written on its body. A translucent hand rises and waves.

Tara looks above its head, searching for a name.

An “N” slowly appears, fuzzy.

“You’re not going to do that are you?” The voice looks at me, most likely holding an Ace, King, Queen, and Jack of hearts. “I mean he’s a perfect match, but once you publish this and he sees it, he’ll know.”

I look back at her. I try to tell her this is fiction. It’s not based on reality. But she’s right.

She knows I’m lying. Everything is based in reality. Ten of hearts.

A dog barks in the real world.

“You still haven’t dealt with that dog. You’re cruel.”

I turn my head away. I look at my cards. I only have one pair. Eights.

“You’re tempting fate by writing this.”

I try to block her voice out of my head but I can’t. I love her.

The figure next to Tara, indistinguishable, stops waving. No name appears above its head.

“Why do you keep using the pronoun ‘it?’ We both know he’s a man.”

I try to tell her, without using words, that I don’t have a character yet. Therefore without a character, I have no gender. There is no him. Only it.

I throw my ten and four into the discard pile. She’s right. It has to be a man. Without that the story would not work. Love is the most common conflict and plot. Tara, with a long “a,” needs a man.

And the man, thus far, named “N,” should be that man.

But he’s not.

Tara looks at the man, transparent. She paints a face on him and draws in fingers. She looks at the space above his head and frowns.

His eyes are bright and his hair spiky. He looks like the man named “N.” The letter slowly appears.

“Stop that!”

The N disappears from above his head. His eyes turn down. An engine revs just outside my real window. Tara and the unnamed man turn towards the sound, unsure of its origin.

“They’re home.”

I sit and stare at my characters. I start to concentrate on Tara and the unnamed man. I forget about real life, disconnecting myself from the barking dog, the cold, and the car. I pick up a Jack of spades and an eight of diamonds. She throws two cards. What does she have?

Is she bluffing?

Small tulips sprout on stage as Tara, with a long “a,” turns back to the yet unnamed man. With only her index finger, in one continuous movement, she paints a small “N” in the air.

“No!” She’s a little quieter now, somehow.

I explain, without using words, that I'm losing control of the characters. They're becoming real. They're almost finished, authentic.

The letter hangs for a moment, weightless, before falling onto the thawing ground and shattering, like a balloon steeped in dry ice.

The front door opens and we hear a bark.

"Where are you going with this?" the voice asks. "And why are you writing me like this? You know I'm not like this. You love me." She picks up her two cards and bets twice the pot, trying to scare me.

I do love her. I don't know where I am headed. I am at the bridge, the part of the story or song near the end at which I halt and regroup. Where am I going? It's possible I had to stop at this point and make a sandwich or pour a cup of English Breakfast. Once I return, I tread water, trying to regain my train of thought.

Where am I—

I call her bet. Soon this will all be over.

Tara, with a long "a," looks out and smiles. She's waiting. We are all waiting. She hopes I know where I am going. The man, yet unnamed, tries to smile. Tara did not draw a smile.

Tara and the man look to their left. A woman walks onto the stage, a test. She is slightly taller than Tara. The woman's long sandy blond hair is pulled into a tight bun, showing off her long, tan neck. Her smile is bright and her teeth white. On her arms is written: "Outgoing." "Funny." "Everything he ever wanted."

"Who's that?" the voice asks, quieter, impressed I called her bet.

I don't respond.

"I don't recognize her."

I do, but I don't respond. I don't realize I can no longer hear the barking dog.

Tara, with a long "a," stares at the woman, unsmiling. She doesn't recognize this newcomer either. The unnamed man does not take notice, only concerned of Tara's distress.

The small stagehand runs out on stage, grabs the unnamed woman and pulls her back offstage.

"That's better." I'm barely able to hear her.

I show my hand. A Jack of diamonds, a Jack of spades, a Jack of clubs and two eights.

Tara turns, startled at the disappearance of the newcomer. She smiles again. She would rather be alone with the unnamed anyway.

"Have you found where you're going yet?" Barely a whisper as she shows her cards. A Queen of hearts, a four of diamonds, an eight of spades, a three of hearts and a six of hearts.

Tara, with a long "a," turns towards the man and grabs hold of his newly formed hand and fingers. With her other hand she repaints the "N" above his head. She slowly writes on his arm, "Everything I want," "My love."

The stagehand dressed all in black, walks onto stage and starts reattaching green leaves.

I hear no objections as the “N” holds firmly in place above the man’s head.
He turns towards Tara and smiles. An “i” slowly appears after the “N.”

Like the rev of an engine. Like the bark of a dog. Like the screech of tires.
The moment is finished.

TIMES CHANGE

David Lawrence

Americans are under attack all over the world.
The Democrats think we are back in 1969
When we were isolated.
There were no suitcase bombs.
We were so strong that we could insult ourselves
And gawk at Hanoi Jane.
We could pretend we were the enemy and
Criticize the American industrial-
Military complex.
Who cared?
We were never at risk.
The threat of the atomic bomb was too bloated
To take personally.
We were an island.
We were rock.
You were paper.
Choose.
Now it is 2006.
In Iraq the insurgents hear the American
Psychobabble and cut off our heads
To see if the lips still move.

The Mouth That Destroyed Civilization

Jerry Erwin

She really knew how to kiss.

How to open her mouth just enough, purse her full, warm lips as she moved her tongue and all of those moist, fleshy parts like some luxuriant, inhaling entity that was apart yet very much a part of her, until . . .

Afterwards, in the aftermath of our deep kissing encounter high atop Mulholland drive in an old lovers' lane motif, overlooking a billion San Fernando Valley lights of our first and very encouraging date, she said . . .

"I believe that people choose to be gay. That it's a lifestyle and not genetic, and . . ."

She went on and on with all of that disruptive social issue waste, because her sister, who was a lesbian back in Texas, came up in the conversation. As much as I just wanted to go back to kissing her wonderfully succulent African American mouth, which in itself was more satisfying than the full sexual act with many other women (regardless of race) giving me a most promising vision of consummation with her pliant, deliciously moaning black body . . .

I was distracted.

Right wing, fundamentalist, religious shit. Coming so fluidly, so obscenely from that previously luscious mouth of magnificent possibilities, and I just wanted her to shut the fuck up, recalibrate, then open it again and--

She kept yapping away. Like a disease. Relentless with no known cure and all I could do was sit there in her jeep, regretting I asked if she had any siblings, as by now we'd be further along (like a couple of hormonal besieged teenagers) in our heavy necking and petting mode, and man, what a gloriously retrograde feeling it was, but . . .

"I believe that people don't have to be gay if they don't want to be. It's a lifestyle like any other choice a person makes in their life, and--"

She wouldn't stop. I inadvertently hit her moralizing button. It was hard to believe that only moments ago that same mouth, so desirous with its perfect smooching technique, giving every indication of a burning world of pure eroticism and yes, even hope itself, was now spewing out

the most cold hearted ignorance of the lowest form of religious mentality, that had as much to do with God or Jesus as my pitifully horny and hopeful white ass on that cold leather seat on a warm San Fernando Valley night, and . . .

I abruptly, as if it were a 357 magnum, stuck the barrel of my tongue down her throat with conviction and a hint of vengeance, nearly gagging her with the sudden, semi-violent assault. Initially, I thought I had succeeded, getting her to shut up so we could get back to where we belonged, to where true passion, and who the fuck knows, maybe even love resides, and--

Forget it. Although she was silent and once again sucking so deeply on my tongue and all the rest, it was not the same. Something (everything) had been lost. Me. I was suddenly removed from the moment, the heat of passion and all the possibilities of a naturally erotic black woman offering me something beyond my usually constricted caucasian passion, and--back to the high school metaphor--feeling as if I had been misled then led on by a more sensually advanced and astute woman who proceeded to feel me up (psychologically, philosophically, and sociologically) against my wishes on our most promising first date, when all I wanted was some healthy, within reason nooky of a nonjudgmental, purely physical, humanitarian nature, and--

“You okay, baby?” she moaned through our mouths, sensing my disconnect, and though I moaned along, I was thinking . . .

A black woman of all women. Someone who, one would think, wouldn't be so judgmental of another persecuted segment of humanity. Particularly this black woman, who's own sexuality suggested the most voracious and boundless appetite, crossing all cultural, racial, and worthless religious boundaries of civilization, yet . . .

She would continue, in all her misguided, uneducated, sanctimonious mentality, to destroy whatever hope lie in that contaminated mouth.

I disengaged from the kiss, straightened my clothes, and told her to put the key in the Jeep's ignition and drive me home. After all, despite what she may have thought . . .

I was a good boy.

Y-Shaped Cigarette

10/24/06

“you want vengeance? fine.

I want to have a y-shaped cigarette so I can burn both of your eyes out at once.”

Moonstruck

Chris Major

'Pull your socks up'
and herbal teas,
therapy and pound
a pill Prozac-
nothing bloody helped.

"Hopeless."
"And in this day and age,
it's like asking for the moon."
She moaned.

I wonder if peace
was found that night ?
Purposefully stepping
in to the road,
leaving tarmac puddles
showing pieces of sky,
a gutter of glass
glinting its stars.....

Two Not Mute Haikus

Janet Kuypers

I
Just sit quietly.
Rapes, beatings, torture and pain.
We can beat you down.

II
You can't be quiet.
Try to fight the world's evils —
Even with just words.

down in the dirt

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

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• **Down in the Dirt** is published by **Scars Publications and Design**, 829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA; attn: Alexandria Rand. Contact us via snail-mail or e-mail (AlexRand@scars.tv) for subscription rates or prices for annual collection books.

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ISSN 1554-9666



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March '07