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April '07

down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets

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04/07, Down in the Dirt, volume 045

Scars art: pages 16,
22, 30. Cover art of
the Puget Sound in
Washington state.

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\$Λrinking
√i°1ε+

Robert Dunn

People tell me the world is shrinking.
Well, of course the world is shrinking.
It says right there on the label right there—
World Washing Instructions: LAUNDER
IN COLD WATER ONLY. Says that
Right there in big black and white letters.
I might also add, thanks to my camping
Experience: Never bang the planet on a rock
While washing it in a steam ... it is fragile,
After all, and you never know just what
You are going to bang loose if you do...

©@NDØM F£@\$†:
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G.A. Scheinoha

I've often wondered about President Bush. Perhaps now more than ever. It goes way beyond the mispronunciation of simple words. Or the sheer stubborn, gonna stay the course spite. Even the aw shucks, he's just a good ol' red neck country boy mentality.

While schools across the nation are struggling to come to grips with the violence erupting in their hallways, the president is considering cutting \$300 million earmarked for just that purpose, making them safer.

I realize he has an ill-conceived war to fund. Which has meant slashing many social programs, a pinch here, there, everywhere but corporate welfare for oil companies and tax breaks for the wealthy.

Still, this flies in the face of logic. He boasts about his achievements on behalf of education, then has the gumption to cripple our already beleaguered school system. Makes you wonder if they forgot to finish the thought: No child left behind. . . alive.

Besides, it's just basic reasoning. If the students kill each other today, who will be left to send to Iraq tomorrow once he's slaughtered our troops there needlessly? Even a Yale graduate should understand that.

Oh well, guess he'll have to start drafting his rich friends' kids.

AS IF!

1 2 : 0 0

Karla Ungurean

Black sky and midnight yellow
Moon without stars
Me without you
And colors we've never seen before,
Like heaven in September-
And God in you
And you in me,
We will be blinded by the boom
Of earth crashing down
With heads spinning and children
Howling at night
And mothers unable to quiet them
With the blue light.
You are blind and so am I
Here in this hypoallergenic mind-fuck
Of a thankless and deserted tunnel.
It's not all about the timing
Here in la la land where God is lost too
And the rest of us just
Look up.

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A. Frank Bower

Synesthesia. Did you happen to see ABC's *Primetime* show about it? I have been living with it for forty-two years. One week after my tenth birthday, I discovered I have a *condition*. Google it if you want details. Odds are low to have it at all; for a man, much less. It's a left-brain thing; no wonder I give left-handed compliments. (I'm trying to lighten it a little.)

I was in fifth grade when I celebrated that particular birthday. My teacher observed me take my lunch out of a paper bag. When I took a sandwich out of its baggie, I said to a classmate, "This is the best part." I closed my eyes, touched my sandwich and tasted it. Most people just thought I had a bizarre sense of humor. For example, later in life, if I wanted to know what a girl was drinking, I'd lift her glass and touch the top of the fluid. I'd say, "Smells like a Seabreeze". It was; I tasted it. Folks laughed. Ha-ha; Art's a funny guy. Anyway, that *schtick* is what my teacher witnessed and asked me about. The sandwich routine, not the Seabreeze.

"Why was unwrapping your lunch the best part?" he asked.

Not knowing any better, I said, "That's when I taste it."

He looked me square in the eyes and saw I was not pulling his leg.

"Arthur, what about when you bite into it?"

"Well," I hesitated, *then*. "I get some taste, but it's best when I touch it."

"Art...you do know it's not normal, right?"

Art; that's me. Arthur Moore. I've always loved the arts. I dabble in most of them. When I think of my name, I also consider the chicken-egg thing. I can't recall a time when I did not like the smell of *A Sharp*, the aroma of a woman's voice. *Art Moore*—what could be more appropriate? *And* I was born in the mid-nineteen-sixties! In that era, acid-heads saw trails; I *smell* them. It was impossible for me to avoid esthetics.

In the eighties, I went to college. I asked my first psychology professor about my perceptual mechanisms. He researched it and was enthusiastic about synesthesia.

When the prof told me my condition's name, it also made sense. We discussed how my brain is wired wrong. Not that I minded; I wouldn't have it any other way. I was glad to find out I am different. It delighted me to hear other synesthesiacs have been productive artists for about three centuries. I'm not alone in this.

I wish you could smell Beethoven's *Fifth*. There is no greater symphony on Earth. Except, women's voices. Some of them. When I touch a woman's hair, I taste it. When she speaks, I smell it.

By now, you're probably wondering where I'm going with all this. Be patient; I will get to the point. I've always believed my senses are gifts—especially when I realized how they differ from the norm. I didn't feel I suffered from a condition. Don't get me wrong; there have been more difficult moments in my life than I could count. The sheer *joy* of perception always outweighed them.

Last year I met Sari-Dawn Mongillo. It wasn't love at first sight; it was love at first whiff. Her voice was a floral garden unto itself. No other lady ever took my breath away; the moment was new. We met at a supermarket—never mind which one. She was with her roommate, another attractive woman. (I'm not blind.) They talked to each other while fondling produce. I wheeled my cart past potatoes and onions; I thought, *What is that symphony of smells?* I followed my nose. Like radar, it took me to Sari-Dawn. I stood there in awe, slack-jawed, reveling in the aromatic bouquet. Of course, I also made sure her hands were free of *that* kind of jewelry. I had to meet her. I approached her; I tried to control the outward signs of my excitement.

"Excuse me," I said, "but can you tell me how to tell a good cantaloupe?"

The two women looked at me. The *other one* answered.

"Sure. See the green spot on the end? Push it in with a fingertip. If it's springy, it's good."

Going through the motions, I picked one up and followed her instructions.

"This one feels hard," I said.

"Not ripe yet. Try another one."

I tried one with little green on the outside. "Ah; that's better." Inside, I scrambled for an opening. I settled for, "Do you ladies shop here often?" My helpless act must have aided me. She appeared interested enough to pursue a conversation.

"All the time," she said, "so, if you need help again, just ask."

I fought the urge to flare my nostrils to take it more voice.

"Thank you. By the way, my name is Art."

"I'm Sari-Dawn. This is my friend, Maria."

I thought, *Thank God she answered; I'm still alive.*

"Nice to meet you both. You ladies have been helpful. Can I do something for you, now? Dinner, perhaps?"

Maria was sharp; she said, "Both of us?" Before I could cover, she smiled and went on. "Let's be real. It's obvious you're interested in Sari. I'm out."

I saw Sari's blush. Next came the aroma I hoped for.

She said, "Dinner would be nice."

My level of excitement was tremendous. My nostrils flared; I couldn't stop them. So I took a deep breath to cover their movement.

"Tonight?"

Sari looked at Maria, who shook her head.

Sari said, "Sorry, I have a commitment tonight. Is tomorrow good?"

Oh, boy, is tomorrow good.

I regained some composure. "Tomorrow? Fine. Where can I pick you up?" Maria already had pen and paper from her purse; she wrote the necessary information and handed it to me. *You've got to love Maria.*

"Thank you, Maria." I looked at Sari. "Seven?"

"It's a date."

Music to my ears...well, to my nose.

"Then, ladies, have a great day."

"You, too, Art," said Maria.

Sari said, "Be good. Or whatever."

What an open-ended comment. I got away—not too fast, just fast enough to avoid making a mistake. I was in heaven. My anticipation grew minute-by-minute.

The next day was the longest of my life. I awoke from a dream in which I saw Sari's face smiling; I tasted her flawless skin. Most of all, I smelled her voice—that marvelous medley of melodies sent me to another plane of existence. My first thought was that I wanted to continue to dream. The mundane day was difficult to tolerate; I knew I would hear her later. I found busy-work to pass the time.

I arrived at their apartment at 6:58 p.m.; not too early—I didn't want to appear too excited—but punctual. Of course, I *was* excited. Self-containment has never been one of my strong suits. Maria answered the door.

"Good evening, Art."

"Yes, it is, Maria," I said. "I trust you're well."

She smiled. "Not as well as you are. Can I get you a drink while you wait for the princess?"

I felt like having a drink, but decided I would rather postpone bathroom breaks.

"No, thanks."

Maria invited me to have a seat. Their living room was...soft. Its *ambience* was unmistakably feminine. Plants hung in front of windows, throw pillows graced the couch, chairs and love seat—how I love *those*. Doilies accented end tables. The window curtains were sheer, wispy and lavender in color.

I said, "You have such a lovely place."

"Thank you," said Maria. "Sari-Dawn and I have been roomies for three years, so we've both put it together."

I nodded and smiled, all the while appreciating her voice being pleasant. Not aturn-on like Sari's, but enjoyable. My reverie was interrupted by the most amazing aroma: Sari, from another room, was *singing*. I thought I was in heaven before...hah. That sensation was nothing compared to this. I felt my self-control wane. I looked at Maria; she saw my discomfort.

"Is something wrong, Art?"

Without thought, I said, "Something is incredibly right."

Maria smiled and said, "Oh, she sings all the time."

Beethoven, you've been replaced, I thought. The sounds of Sari's voice were wonderful—I assumed Maria thought I was responding to sounds—but they

were so over-powered by aromatic blends of rose, Opium perfume and Cajun blackened sea scallops. Those were the earliest odors to waft into my nostrils. Others followed, of course. I reveled in them all, one at a time and in combinations. Sautéed onion with gardenia, tulip with thyme, fried shrimp with basil and coriander—they just kept flowing.

Sari entered the living room. Her song ended, but her speaking voice maintained the odorific moment. She complemented the montage of fragrances by being visually stunning. Sari could have been a model if she was less perfect. Five-foot-seven, auburn hair to her shoulders—silky-smooth—high cheekbones, deep brown eyes and a complexion to die for. Her figure was classic hourglass, modified to accent the bottom and moderate the top. She didn't quite walk; Sari glided with ever-so-slight figure-eight swivels of her hips.

Sari reeked class. Subtlety, style, seductiveness; she had it all. And no need to flaunt her attributes; they were obvious beneath her conservative white blouse and black skirt. Watching her flow into the room was almost unbearable.

“Good evening, Art.”

Sage and salmon.

I managed to talk. “Yes. You are lovelier than a Japanese garden.”

Maria said, “Oh, Jesus. *Schmaltz*. I'm out of here.”

“And what,” said Sari, “is wrong with compliments?”

“Nothing. It's how they're put.”

Sari said, “Tsk-tsk; do I hear jealousy?”

Maria looked from me to Sari. “Actually, yes. I'll get over it.”

I thought one good turn deserved another; I said, “Maria, if Sari wasn't so stunning, you'd be in trouble.”

“Nice cover,” said Maria. “You two have fun.”

Before Maria could get out of the room, Sari said to me, “Oh, so I'm in trouble?”

Maria turned around and said, “Sounds good to me.”

I really looked at Maria. To that point, Sari overshadowed her so completely I was oblivious to any other woman. Both women recognized my visual appraisal. Briefly, I blushed. I had been caught being...untrue to my...intended. I tried to think of a good comment, but my mind wasn't fast enough. I was still catching up to Maria's, ‘Sounds good to me’. I saw I was not in control of the situation.

Sari showed me she was. She went to Maria and embraced her.

“I'll see you tonight,” she said. Sari *kissed* Maria. It was not sisterly.

Surprise, Art. I had not seen it coming. I stood there, unable to think.

They ended their embrace and looked at me.

Sari said, “Art, do you have a problem?”

How could I answer *that*?

I stammered, “No,” wondering where I was in this new relationship. The word *les-bian* leapt into my head. I asked myself why Sari had agreed to go out with me. My face showed my confusion.

Maria said, "Art, don't over-react. Remember, there's a difference between love and love-making."

I felt defensive. "I didn't say anything about love-making."

Sari said, "Not in words."

My mind spun as the concept sank into it. I thought, *We communicate in so many ways.*

"Art," said Sari, "if you don't want to go out with me, it's okay."

I said, "Are you kidding? You're all I've thought about since yesterday."

I heard the plea in my voice. So did they.

Maria smiled, subtly, like the Mona Lisa. "Then nothing's changed."

I had to admit, "No, not really."

Sari smiled. "I'm pleased I turn you on so intensely."

"But," I said, "it's much more than...sensation's quest."

"Is it?" asked Sari. "I'm not so sure. Even if it is, Maria is my partner. You have to know that up front. The rest is up to you."

I had no response. I *wanted* to be cool. Fat chance. Given the situation, I was tremendously torn. I knew Sari aroused me beyond all prior experiences. I had hoped a relationship could develop. With that potential out of the picture, should I pursue *the rest*? Mentally, I slapped myself. *Idiot; you're a man. How the hell can you even think of passing on this?*

I composed myself and said, "Now that I grasp the...parameters, if you will, I see that I may be the luckiest man on Earth."

"We will see," said Maria. *Not Sari.*

My sense of smell blasted. Newness is itself a turn-on. *This newness blew all else away.* I didn't know if I could deal with dinner.

The women were staring at me.

Sari said, "I believe dinner is no longer an option. I think Art's hunger isn't for food."

Gardenias, gladiolas, old-fashioned spice cake.

Maria came to me and removed my sport jacket. Sari joined us and unbuttoned my shirt. I felt like a tripod already. Each of them took one of my hands and placed it onto a breast. *Taste of Opium perfume.* I leaned into Sari and brushed my lips against hers. *Tumeric and cherry blossoms.* Maria's mouth, in turn: *strawberries and cloves.*

They stepped back, kissed and started to undress each other. Maria touched Sari's blouse; they both *cooed*. My nose filled with floral scents. *Could anything be more intense?* Yes. Those wise women knew well the visual orientation of men. They let me stand there, still clothed, and continued to undress each other, slowly, gracefully and completely. My senses intensified when they softly moaned and breathed. So many aromas hit me I lost track, closed my eyes and let them increase my heart rate.

I opened my eyes just as they returned to me. It was my turn to become naked. My shirt hit the floor first. Maria unbuckled my belt; her movements

made her breasts jig-gle, enticing me to touch them. Sari kissed me, open-mouthed; my trousers joined my shirt. *Mint and casaba melon*. Maria eased downward onto her knees in front of me and hesitated in front of Mister Johnson, breathing even more life into him. She knew my first release would be quick. My hands were in their hair: Sari's *apricot and honey*, Maria's *cinnamon and sugar*. Sari's hand was behind my neck; we tongued; her other hand caressed my belly. Maria had one hand on my buttock and one cradling my scrotum. They both knew *precisely* what they were doing. My secret was that smells were throwing me over the top.

Maria did *not* suck me. Expertly, she ran her lips around my head, inviting an entry that never happened. Four seconds of that, followed by three licks of my underhead tendon: I exploded into her patient mouth. My nostrils flared; my heart pounded. Maria stood and kissed Sari, sharing my gift.

They were warmed up.

Sari saw the spent look in my eyes.

"Art, sit on the love seat and watch us for a while."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I sat. I had accepted they, not I, were in control. Strangely, I found surrender to be both relaxing and exciting. Sari and Maria moved to the sofa, where they sprawled out; their intertwined bodies stretched the length of it. I watched them make love with each other, languishing in caressing limbs. For a second—just—I said to myself, *Awww*; the way I would have if I just saw a kitten do something cute. That's when it hit me: I was witnessing more than sex. I was honored to see two lovers express their love in this heightened way. I was along for the ride; a wonderful experience.

When the touching moment passed, I realized I was again ready to participate. I waited for an opportune time. Maria sat upright on the couch and urged Sari to rise. Sari stood. They both looked at me, smiling a smile I had never seen before—norsince. Sari stepped up onto the sofa, eased her knees onto the back of it and her honey-pot into Maria's eager mouth. The room breathed raw sexuality.

My excitement level was off the meter. Mister Johnson throbbed and felt like he wanted to burst at the seams. With all the visual excitation, it became work for me to breathe. *Their* heavy breathing, moans, coos and occasional verbal encouragements sent songs of sensual scents into me. I watched them writhe in pleasure. Again their eyes checked on me. They eased downward, so Maria's love center became available to me.

I didn't know if Maria wanted me inside of her. It was irrelevant to me. At that moment I had to bury my face between her silky thighs. So I did. Feeling woman-flesh all around me...indescribable! Sari, writhing above my head, began to *hum*. Maria, squirming with my head, joined Sari in humming. They added a new meaning to the cliché: hummer. *Jasmine, juniper, lilac, lily, rhododendron, rose...* I lost track.

Intense doesn't come close to describing the plane of existence I felt. I was a joyful addendum to *them*. I no longer acted, just reacted. Sari and Maria

changed positions; Sari eased me out of the way, lowered herself onto Maria. Their privates met. Their legs *exed*, Maria still on the bottom, Sari straddling her, but within face-to-face reach. As they ground into each other, they looked at me for the third time.

Sari said, "Art, come here."

Here could only be where their faces were. I knelt toward them to join in three-way kissing, but Maria pushed me upward with one hand, letting me know they wanted Mister Johnson. I couldn't argue—not that I would have. It was Sari's turn to taste me. She popped my head into her mouth, but *did not move*.

Maria sang. Another new experience. Sari's singing voice was incredibly beautiful, floral. Maria's was sensual, sexual. It engulfed me in saline muskiness. I stared into Maria's face; I was engulfed in a new reality. She sang louder: tomato, onion, garlic, roasted peppers, clams...more musk. I forced my gaze away from her, to Sari, still immobile, still with me in her mouth. I don't know how she could do it, but Sari was smiling. Under Maria's song, Sari *hummed*.

That was *it*. I felt I would peak—and end. I was wrong. *They*, again, knew exactly what they were doing. That's why they didn't touch me or caress me or stroke me. I was literally held in suspense. Their voices got louder. My ecstasy level rose. *And watermelon, allspice, musk*. My entire body tingled. I felt prickly warmth spreading from my gonads to my legs and belly. I lost awareness of breathing. It was almost...spiritual.

I had never felt *building* like that. I was near orgasm for *minutes*. Somehow, I saw that the women had stopped grinding each other. They were concentrating on *me*. I saw joy on their faces. I was in some numb limbo where only release mattered. Not *final* release, though. This...getting there was beyond my experience.

When I finally *did* erupt, I couldn't tell by feeling. It wasn't the abrupt eruption I had always known. It was a continuation of the intensity these wonderful women had given me. I vaguely recall Sari smiling and swallowing; I blacked out.

I was unconscious for a few seconds. When I came around, we were all in the same positions. I stepped back so they could untangle, if they chose to. They did. I stood in the middle of their living room, once again slack-jawed; I watched Sari and Maria sit up, kiss each other and return their attention to me.

"Now," said Maria, "you have a rough idea how a woman feels."

Sari agreed, "A *rough* idea."

My brain gradually returned to functionality.

I said, "I...didn't know *that* was possible. I don't mean what you just said. I mean, what I just experienced."

They laughed, pleasantly. *Poppies*.

Maria said, "Most men will never know the potential they have. Most *can't*. They weren't born with your equipment."

I was no longer wrestling inside to come to reality. I was struggling with comprehension.

I asked, "What equipment?"

Sari said, "You know," with her beatific smile..

Maria chuckled. They looked at each other.

I said, now suspicious, "What's up with the humming and singing?"

They laughed more heartily.

With more emphasis, Sari repeated, "*You know.*"

Maria took over. "That's what made it all possible for you."

"*You knew?*" I said.

Maria continued, "Sari had such a profound effect on you, you didn't pay much attention to me yesterday. So, you didn't remember me."

"From where?" I said, but I looked at her and my memory worked. "Holy shit. You were in my psych class."

"Bingo. And, more than once, you tasted my Seabreeze. With your finger."

"But...how did you piece it together, back then?"

Sari responded for her, "It's not rocket science, Art. Maria just watched you. She knew."

I thought a moment. "That was a long time ago. Why were you so into it yesterday?"

"You should have seen yourself yesterday," said Maria. "You were so stoned on Sari it brought back my fantasy."

"Yours?" I asked.

"Sure. I've always been open to sensual exploration. But you ignored me. Well; let's say I wasn't aromatically exciting. And we didn't have any other classes together. But I wanted to do what we just did. It took Sari to make it happen."

I took my turn to laugh.

Sari said, "What's funny?"

"I just put it together. You told me you had plans for last night and had me wait for today. You needed time to plan."

Maria said, "It was worth it, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yeah." I said.

Another thought hit me. I was afraid to ask, but I had to.

"Now what?"

Sari said, without vindictiveness, "Now, nothing. We've given you a gift you can use for the rest of your life—if you're lucky enough to find the right partner."

"As we have," said Maria. "We were up front with you about it."

I said, "I know. I'm not bitching. It's just that...God, I envy you two."

Sari fielded that one, "Thank you; we envy you, too."

Maria picked up the ball, "Like we said, few men ever had your equipment. Use it. Always—and wisely."

I laughed.

"What's funny about that?" asked Maria.

I said, "It's not that. I just realized we're still naked."

"And we're still able to have a conversation," said Sari. "Isn't it cool?"

I felt myself slowing; nicely. I took a deep breath and sighed.

"I'll never forget either of you. No thanks is big enough."

Maria said, "Our pleasure. Trust me."

Part of me wanted to request a replay. Out of respect for them, I couldn't. Not to mention, I doubted I would be able to. So, I reluctantly dressed and readied myself to say my good-byes.

They didn't dress. I guessed why. At that point, it was none of my business. I loved their love. I wanted to find *that*. I still do.

Fully clothed, I approached Sari and kissed her a last time, tenderly.

"God bless you, Sari. I mean it. Keep having your great life."

She nodded. "I will. Good luck to you. You know how I mean."

My turn to nod. I moved to Maria.

"Bless you, too." I kissed her. "Thanks for...everything."

"You're welcome."

They beamed at me, radiating a warmth new to me. With my head high, I left.

Since that marvelous day last year, I've been more devoted than ever to my synesthetic senses. I've been painting and sculpting. I *always* play music—which makes my apartment feel soft and fragrant.

I've dated a few women, but...well, with little luck. So far.

Whenever I'm out in a public place, I listen for gardens. However, *now* I pay close attention to other options, whether seafood, spices or any scents. I always was a good student.

Besides, the nose knows.

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N | G#†M@R£

Luis Cuauhtemoc
Berriozabal

In all truth
there are no brides
to cut a rug with.
But there are plenty of crows.

They stand on
branches shrouded
in mystery. Their
black feathers flop in the wind.

The sky turns
gray and the crows
disperse like mad
brides running from the church.

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Christopher A. Clark

Sam opened the door, meeting recognition filled eyes. The unshaven man, wearing soiled dark blue coveralls, tilted his ball cap back onto his thick sweat soaked hair and cleared his throat before speaking.

“Uh, Mr. Vandenberg,” he said, not even glancing at his clipboard.

Sam wasn’t surprised since he’d probably memorized the address as well by now.

“I know the office made the appointment for us to go ahead and clean out your septic tank, but I wouldn’t feel honest if I didn’t tell you it’s not needed. We just did it six months ago and another time eight months before that. Hell, you’re good for another-“

“I know,” Sam said, raising a shaking hand to interrupt. He looked back over his shoulder and stepped out onto the front porch, closing the door softly behind him.

“Your office told me the same thing on the phone,” Sam explained. His eyes struggled to meet the Septic Man’s. “But you see, my wife needs it done. It’s ah... important to her.”

“Gee Mr. Vandenberg, I don’t have a problem doing it for you. I appreciate the business, but like I said, I wouldn’t feel right about ripping you off.”

“Thank you,” Sam said. “You can find your way to the backyard ok?”

“Sure, sure. We remember.”

With that, Sam returned inside while the Septic Man strolled to his idling truck blocking the driveway. He climbed up into the passenger side and the truck roared into gear when it rumbled around the corner to the cul-de-sac where the back yard was more accessible over the chain link fence. All the dogs of the neighborhood barked at the rumbling truck as it parked and the two men unloaded the giant suction hose.

Sam went into the kitchen and poured a stiff glass of whiskey. Though only 11 a.m., he knew the day would be rough. Living on the other side of a locked bedroom door was the hardest thing Sam ever experienced while married. He was actually surprised she was still home. The last two times the tank was cleaned she had fled long before the truck arrived. He hoped it was a sign she was adjusting, but he wouldn’t put too much stock in that wish. She’d probably not say more than two words to him for the next several weeks when they could try again.

Thankfully, it was over again. Sam gave God kudos for making six weeks pass so quickly. He buried that thought because he worried six weeks of silence from his wife was something he had almost grown accustomed to. Nevertheless,

hope returned anew and she was already marking the last day on her calendar with a smile, an expression he hadn't seen her do since their last failure.

"We can start tomorrow," she said in the morning while he sipped his coffee. She said it again when he got out of the shower, even winking at his nakedness. She said it during lunch and also after dinner. She said it two or three times when they lay in the dark for sleep. Part of Sam was excited at the idea of once again consummating with his wife, but the other part knew the wonderful passion would subside and turn into a borderline chore.

The last time they had tried, he had been mowing the lawn when she stepped out onto the deck, frantically waving his attention. When he strolled closer, she had announced, "I'm ovulating!" The gigantic smile on her face had reminded Sam why he found her so irresistible those five years ago when they met. Sam had looked over his shoulder to see if the neighbors heard, but soon forgot all about them when she grasped his hand and led him into the house. Intertwined in bed, her excitement of possible motherhood surpassed her lust and Sam had asked her to stop talking about possible names and dirty diapers so he could at least concentrate on his husbandly duty of planting the seed. When they were done, she lay on her back, arms holding the back of her knees so that her feet pointed to the ceiling. Sam had fallen to sleep with her murmuring about trimesters and doctor visits.

Sam fiddled with the latest empty specimen jar, knowing he'd have to make another trip to the hospital with a few ounces of sperm tucked under his arm to keep them as warm as possible, and then he'd hand the miniscule evidence of his manhood to the smirking nurse who couldn't let him leave without some clever comment. Every last one of them needed to be counted so he wouldn't have to endure more tests, more questions from doctors. He was about to adjourn to the bathroom to complete the task when the doorbell rang. Sighing, he left the jar on the kitchen counter and answered the door.

"Mr. Vandenberg," said the familiar Septic Man. "I don't know what is going on, but this has become ridiculous. Now, as a good Christian, I absolutely do NOT feel comfortable taking your money again. Hell, it's only been five months since we were here last. There won't be hardly anything in that tank."

"I don't care," said Sam, hoping they'd be done before his wife came home from another round of God-knew-what tests. "My wife wants it done, so we called you. Please, make her happy, which will make me happy. Just pump the tank, please."

"Well, I just don't understand this at all. This will be the fourth time in less than 2 years. It's unheard of."

"Just think of it as easy money," Sam said, trying to ease the man's conscience.

"Is there something going on?" asked the Septic Man.

Sam's eyes widened. He thought about telling him everything. The pressure of dealing with his wife's apparent insanity had worn him out. Their marriage had become bouts of sterile sex between bouts of depression. Sam wanted to hug

the man, weep on his shoulder and tell him he did the best he could. He wanted to punch the man for butting into his personal business. He wanted to scream, 'It's none of your business!'

Instead, he thanked him for his patience and directed them to clean out the tank once again and then he went back inside the house. Sam leaned against the door and slid down so he sat on the floor. Head between his knees, he closed his eyes and prayed for a miracle while he heard footsteps leave the front porch followed by the rumble of the truck when it went around the corner. An hour later, they were gone and Sam was left alone with his whiskey and specimen jar.

Three months later, his wife barged into the living room during a football game.

"I'm ovulating," she announced, voice absent of cheer despite being naked from the waist up. Sam thought her tone of voice sounded remarkably like when she asked him to take the garbage out.

Sam turned off the TV and soon accomplished his husbandly chore. While his wife lay on the bed, knees up in the air, angling her vaginal tract so Sam's swimmers could get a little extra help, Sam dressed, washed his hands, and returned to watching the football game.

Answering the door, Sam's face drooped and his shoulders hung low. Despite being a Monday, Sam hadn't shaved or even put on clean clothes. Friday night, when it had happened again, his wife locked herself in the bedroom and had even locked the bathroom door as well. When she had come out only to order him to call the septic company, he looked at her and said simply, "No." Uncomprehending, she stared at him a full five seconds before she exploded. She had attacked him with her nails, frothy spittle spraying from her mouth as she hurled every horrible insult she knew at him. Sam raised his arms to keep her away from his face. Frustrated, she bullied past him down the hall, destroying anything on the walls and the kitchen counter as she whirled like a cyclone to the patio. She bolted outside and down the steps. Sam hesitantly followed and found her clawing the earth where the septic tank was buried. Her arms dug in crazed windmill motions, sending dirt against the house.

"I will not live here knowing it's there!" she shrieked, her fists pounding the sod. "I can't live here knowing my baby is... oh God!"

As fast as she had come, she returned to the house, disappearing behind the slamming bedroom door. Sam hadn't seen her the rest of the weekend.

And now, once again he was on the porch, begging the Septic Man to clean out his tank.

"It's for my wife," Sam mumbled. "She can't live here unless it's clean. She just can't."

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J. J. Brearton

I

Canarsie Smoochings knew he had to see a psychiatrist. He just knew. It was about time. Now, he was on the front step of the offices of Dr. Warren Bollinks. There were two steps actually, but you aren't interested in how many steps Dr. Bollinks has, right?

How about the weather? Well, it was a nice sunny day, unusual for Seattle. It was mid-October, and the leaves had changed.

The sun dappled the enclosed front porch of Dr. Bollinks's two-story house, converted to offices, across the street from the parking garage for the Seattle Psychiatric Center. Oh, no, Smoochings had never been in the SPC. He wanted to stay out of there. That's why he was here, at Dr. Bollinks's office, to keep himself from going totally out of his mind.

He pulled open the storm door and stepped onto the nice wood floor of the porch. It was painted gray. Is this too much detail? I'll speed it up.

"Can I help you?" a portly woman behind a computer screen asked, as Smoochings closed the heavy front door, and listened to the window rattle. She was in a small room to his left, just beyond the foyer.

"I'm here to see Dr. Bollinks," Smoochings said. "I've got an appointment."

"Mister Smoochings?"

"That's me."

"You're right on time."

She got up and went across the room to a door with a sign on it that said, Dr. Bollinks.

"You can hang your coat up right there," she said, pointing to a coat tree.

Smoochings took off his green raincoat and a Buffalo Bills Baseball cap, and hung them up.

"How do you do?" Dr. Bollinks said, as the door closed. Smoochings was now in Dr. Bollinks's private office. Maybe you guessed that. I wanted to be absolutely clear about it, just in case you were confused.

"Fine, thank you," Smoochings said.

They sat for a moment. Dr. Bollinks got together some papers and a pen.

“What brings you here, Mister Smoochings?”

“To be honest,” Smoochings said. “It’s my cat.”

“Your cat?”

“Yes. I know this sounds ridiculous, but my cat is driving me crazy.”

“How so?”

“She keeps yelling and screaming at me.”

“Yelling and screaming at you?”

“Right. Night and day.”

“Night and Day?”

“At the top of her lungs.”

“Name?”

“What, you want my name?”

“No, I know your name. I mean the cat.”

“Oh, the cat. Milli. With an ‘i.’”

“An ‘i’?”

“Right. We named her after that music group, Milli Vanilli. We named her Milli and the other cat Vanilli, because Milli was black and the other cat was white, you know, kind of vanilla color. Then Vanilli ran away. It was the wife’s idea, to name them that. Now she’s gone too, and my daughter. I never see them that much. It’s just me and Milli, and she’s driving me nuts.”

“She yells at you?”

“Right.”

“What does she say?”

“She doesn’t say anything really, just kind of yells. I don’t know cat language that well, you know. She pushes me around. Do this. Do that. She bangs on my door in the morning--pounding, just pounding on the door.”

“That bothers you?”

“Sure does. Can’t get any sleep. She gets up real early. That is, if she ever sleeps at night. It’s hard to explain. In the morning she pounds on the door to my bedroom. I know what that means. She wants to go out. Then I hear her outside, yelling. She’s hardly been out five minutes, and she’s yelling and screaming.”

“You mean meowing?”

“Oh, no, this cat doesn’t meow. She yells.”

“She yells? What else does she do?”

“Pretty much, when she’s not yelling at me, she’s sleep-



ing, eating, drinking out of the toilet, staring at her bowl—she does that a lot—and if she’s outside, she’s ripping the heads off mice, killing birds, eating little bunny rabbits--you know, whatever regular cats do--then she jumps up on the screen. I can see her yelling at me, so that means she wants to come in. I have to let her in. The neighbors complain about her, you know.”

“Why don’t you get rid of her if you don’t like her?”

“What do you mean, get rid of her?”

“Take her to an animal shelter. Say that you’re having a problem, and can’t live with her any more.”

“Really? I can do that?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Gee, thanks, doc.”

Smoochings got up and shook Dr. Bollinks’s hand.

“Thanks a lot,” he said. “I’ll try that.”

II

The next day, Smoochings was at work at his job at Blandly Labs. He was a research assistant there, doing calculations on polar drift. He had to leave work early in order to get Milli over to the animal shelter before it closed. He left a note up on the computer screen inside his cubicle. “Had to leave early, personal business,” was the explanation.

So, there he was, after his ten-minute drive home from the lab, in his garage, getting on his heavy work gloves. Yes, these would work, he said to himself. The gloves reached almost to his elbows, needed protection against Milli’s claws. Back in the house, he looked around and found her on the upstairs landing. Quickly grabbing the startled cat, he rushed through the house and back into the garage. There, in the middle of the floor was the cat carrier box, somewhat ripped apart from the feline’s previous travels. As soon as Milli saw the box, she knew she was in for it, and tried to run over Smoochings shoulder. It felt like he was getting run over by spinning, studded snow tires, with little daggers thrown in, for good measure. He thrust her in the box and closed it up as soon as he could. Her black and white paws started coming out the holes in the box, ripping it apart. He knew he had to make a fast run to the animal shelter before she got out.

He had the motor running. It was a fairly short drive, through Sycaway, down Hoosick Street, over the Collar City Bridge and down 787 to Menands. He held the box lid down with his right hand as he drove. He didn’t have time to put on his seat belt.

There was a screech of tires on pavement as the car came to a rest in the parking lot outside the animal shelter. Grabbing the box, he scurried in the front door. Down the hall, he stood before the counter, panting.

“I’ve got a cat here. I’ve got to get rid of her.”

“You can’t get rid of cats here,” the woman said. “We’re trying to find homes

for cats. This isn't some type of dumping ground."

"She's driving me crazy. My psychiatrist said I have to get rid of her."

"Your psychiatrist?"

Now the woman appeared concerned.

"Wait a minute. I'll get the director."

She then went into a back room.

No time for this, Smoochings decided. He put the box on the counter, and scampered out the front door.

As he hightailed it out of the parking lot, he could see the woman and an older man yelling at him from the opened front door.

Back in Sycaway, Smoochings sat on his couch for a few minutes, feeling quite satisfied.

He decided to call in to work, to see if there were any messages.

"Lab fire," Debby said, when asked to explain why he didn't need to come in the next day.

Wow, Smoochings said to himself, this is turning out great. That psychiatrist really knew what he was talking about.

He sat back down on the couch. What to do now?

The lights were all on.

The electric meter. He'd check that out. That's what he'd do.

He turned out all the lights and headed outside. Rounding the right side of the house he went to the meter. Still the wheel turned.

Something's on.

Back in the house he searched. The clock. Yes. Should he pull the plug?

He thought he'd lie down and think about it.

Soon asleep, he dreamed of a lion in the back yard.

He awoke perspiring. What was that he heard? There's someone at the door.

He ran downstairs. Sure enough, there were some kids in costumes on the front step.

He'd forgotten. It was Halloween!

Opening the door, he heard the three kids assembled there announce, "Trick or treat!"

"Hold on," he said, and turned to go to search in the darkened house for candy. There, on the table next to the door was a big bowl. But no candy was in it. Where did she hide it?

He hurried to the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets. Finally, over the refrigerator, he hit pay dirt.

Back to the front door, tearing open a bag, he gave each kid two tiny candy bars. "Nice costumes," he said, handing out the candy. "Very scary."

Watching carefully, they evaluated the candy as it dropped into their bags. It looked like they were happy.

"Thanks," one of them said. They turned and ran away.

He looked around the darkened house. It sure seemed spooky. He turned on a few lights and sat down on the couch, next to the door.

Every Halloween it was like this. He'd sit near the door, waiting for the kids to run up and ring the bell. Problem was, the bell didn't work. He had to listen for the sound of the button being pushed in.

The last thing he wanted was for some kids to come to the door, and not get any candy. He knew that that's when you'd get a trick.

There was a good crowd that afternoon, and after a while, he had to stop giving each kid two candy bars, as he knew he was getting low. It was a bit boring sitting there in the absolute silence, waiting for the doorbell to be pushed in, but what could he do? If he put the TV set on, he couldn't hear the kids.

A car pulled in the driveway. Doors slammed. The front door of the house swung open.

"Ahoy!" Jill yelled, showing him her bag full of candy. It was his 9-year old daughter, dressed up as Snow White.

"You look great, sweetie bunch!" he exclaimed.

"Hi!" Darcy chirped, as she quickly followed Jill in the house. It was the lovely wife.

"Did you miss us?" she added.

"Sure did," he replied sincerely.

Darcy had shopping bags under her arms. Every year on Halloween, she took Jill to see Darcy's mother to show off her costume, and take pictures.

"Where's the cat?" was Darcy's next question.

"The cat?" he said.

"You didn't let her out, did you?"

Her instructions had been not to let the cat out on Halloween. Darcy was afraid that kids would play tricks on Milli, since she was a black cat.

Yeah, Smoochings said to himself, as if kids could play tricks on Milli. It would more likely be the other way around.

The phone rang and Darcy answered it.

Smoochings heard her side of the conversation.

"Who's driving you crazy? Our cat? Milli? What's she doing there? You tracked us down with his license plate?" Darcy's eyes were wide with amazement. "We'll be right over. What do you mean she keeps yelling at you? Never mind, we'll be right over."

Oh, boy, Smoochings said. Now I'm in for it. Darcy and Jill loved the cat. When, Smoochings said to himself—when, God--when will I ever learn?

III

"She's back," were Smoochings first words, when he sat down again before Dr. Bollinks.

"Who's back?"

"Milli. She's back. I took your advice, brought her to an animal shelter, every-

thing was great, then my wife and daughter came in and all hell broke loose.”

“I’m not clear on your wife and daughter. Have they been gone?”

“Well, yes. The wife, Darcy, got an apartment in the mountains. Closer to work. A temporary assignment, supposedly. She’s an astronomer, you know.”

“Really, I didn’t know that. How come she didn’t take the cat with her?”

“Good question. She said she couldn’t find a place that would allow pets.”

“So, how does she get along with the cat?”

“Fine, just fine.”

“The cat doesn’t yell at her?”

“No, just me.”

“How about your daughter.”

“Nope, just yells at me.”

“So, how’s it been going? Is your wife back now?”

“Well, yes. She says she needs to keep an eye on me. Afraid I’ll take the cat to the shelter again. She says she can’t trust me. That she doesn’t trust me any more.”

“Gee, I’m sorry Mr. Smoochings. I hope I didn’t cause any problems with my suggestion.”

“Your suggestion? Heck no. It’s worked out great. The wife and daughter are back, you know. Except for the cat. I mean, I really didn’t realize how much I missed them, the wife and daughter that is.”

“But you said except for the cat.”

“Yes, except for the cat. When they left, I noticed how much, how intensely, the cat was running my life. Now that they’re back, the cat seems to have to yell louder.”

“Louder? How come?”

“The noise. My God, the noise is deafening. With the wife around, all the TV sets are on, the clothes dryer and washer are going, the dishwasher is running, either she or my daughter, Jill, talking on the phone, and the cat screaming at me at the top of her lungs. You should see the electric meter.”

“The electric meter?”

“It’s like a blur, it’s spinning around so fast. Right back to where it was before.”

“Now, the cat, she seems to focus on you, is that right?”

“Just me.”

“Maybe you need to deflect the attention. Get her focus off you. Have you thought of getting another cat?”

“What, you mean have two cats banging on the door in the morning?”

“Well, perhaps the other cat would distract Milli. Deflect the attention.”

“Deflect the attention? You know, you just might have something there, doc. I think I’ll try it.”

Smoochings stood up, appearing cheerful all of a sudden. “Thanks, doc. That’s a good idea.”

Smoochings opened the front door of his house and entered the foyer. The

large cardboard cat box was in his hand. It was about 6:45 PM on a Thursday evening. No, wait a minute, maybe it was ten of seven. Hold on, I'll check my notes. What did I do with them? Ah, the hell with it. It was a little bit before seven. You don't have to know the exact time, do you?

Anyway, that's when the interrogation began.

"What are you doing with that box?" Darcy asked.

"Bob?"

"You're calling the box Bob now?"

"No, Bob's not the box. Bob is what's in the box."

Smoochings put down the box and pulled out a bright yellow cat.

"It's Bob. Bob, meet the family. This is Darcy, your great grandmother."

Smoochings put the cat on the floor. It yawned.

"Where's Jill? I want her to meet Bob."

"Basketball practice."

"Oh, great. Well, let me tell you about Bob. He's had a vasectomy, so we're both kind of alike. Battlefield casualties. Purple hearts."

"Bob, what kind of a name is that?" Jill said.

"Bob Cat is his full name. I thought that would sound tough. Kind of like a Bobcat."

At that moment, Milli rounded a corner of the kitchen and looked in at Bob. Her back arched, her hair stood on end and she hissed.

"Ah," Smoochings said. "Seems to be working perfectly."

"What?" Darcy said. "What's working perfectly?"

"Nothing. Never mind. I'll just get Bob a bowl."

In the kitchen cabinets, Smoochings found an old plastic bowl and put some dry cat food in it. He sat Bob down before it, and the little yellow beast dug in, but not for long. Once Milli caught the act, she quickly swatted Bob away, and started eating out of the bowl herself. Looking on with concern, Smoochings filled up Milli's half eaten bowl. Now, Milli headed over to that. When Bob went back to the unoccupied bowl, Milli swatted him away. So, there Bob stood, the little gentleman that he was, watching Milli eat out of one bowl, then the other. Finally, gorged, Milli sauntered away. Reader, maybe you could have skipped this part. Are you unconscious now?

What was life like for Smoochings?

Milli continued her tyrannical behavior, but now it had a new dimension, torturing Bob. Poor guy, just when he'd settle in for a nice nap, Milli would covet the place, and swat him away.

Despite all this, Bob quickly put on pounds, somehow furtively getting enough to eat, but whenever Ms. Milli was around, he politely backed off. He knew who was the boss.

Now, two cats climbed the screens and yelled to get in. Two cats pounded on his bedroom door. The backyard patio was littered with the entrails they ripped out of the moles and mice they each captured.

Yes, there Mr. Smoochings was, with his lovely wife, Darcy, and daughter, Jill, while being bossed around by those cute little kitties.

Smoochings set the box down on the chair next to him.

“What’s that?” Dr. Bollinks asked.

“It’s Bob,” Smoochings said, and pulled the yellow cat out of the box by the scruff of the neck. He then put the box on the floor and Bob on the chair.

Bob stared at Dr. Bollinks and yawned.

“Why did you bring him here?” Bollinks asked.

“He’s concerned. Involved. He feels he’s involved.”

“You know his feelings?”

“Well, I can get the drift. Molly is beating the crap out of him. Treats him like hell.”

“She’s the top cat.”

“The what?”

“Top cat. That’s standard operating procedure. She’s older, right?”

“Yes, sure. She’s older.”

“Well, she’ll be calling the shots. You’re not disturbed that she’s calling the shots just because she’s a female, are you?”

“Me? Disturbed? Heck no.”

There was a pounding noise behind Dr. Bollinks. Smoochings now noticed a door that apparently led to a porch behind Dr. Bollinks.

Bollinks turned slightly, then back to Smoochings.

“Just the wind rattling the door,” he said.

“So,” Smoochings said, “you think it’s normal? Nothing to worry about?”

“Normal. Seems okay.”

“Do you think I’m okay, Doc? I mean, generally?”

“Yes, sure. You’re fine.”

“Great, Doc. I’m so glad to hear that.”

Smoochings got up and shook Dr. Bollinks’ hand vigorously. He then put Bob back in the box and departed.

Bollinks waited to be sure Smoochings was gone. He then turned and opened the door to the porch.

“Damn it! Could you just relax! Don’t you realize I’ve got patients in here?”

Martha could care less what he said. She strode in on all fours, in all her calico black and white slinkiness. She knew another cat had been there. After all, she was a cat herself. What business did Bollinks have bringing other cats around?



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Laine Hissett-Bonard

Joel

I woke up with the sun blaring in my eyes, and I immediately squeezed them shut again and rolled onto my side, grimacing. I generally didn't get hangovers, but it was never pleasant after a long night of excessive alcohol consumption to awaken with a billion watts baking into one's retinas. My grimace lasted only as long as it took my hand to drop back to the mattress, because as it did so, my knuckles brushed against something warm, firm, and breathing, and I pried my eyes open again to see exactly whom I'd dragged into my bed the night before, mildly concerned that I had no memory whatsoever of having any kind of sex the previous night, but the answer to that made itself abundantly clear as soon as my eyes cracked open far enough for me to determine the identity of the party lying passed out beside me.

Sammiekins.

A slow, sleepy smile spread over my lips, morphing into a yawn in the middle, and I sighed happily, allowing my knuckles to brush gently over Sam's t-shirt-clad ribs. *Of course* nothing sexual took place in my bed the night before — Sam was as straight as they came, and one of my best friends in the world to boot — but that didn't stop my mind from wandering a little as I lay there, slowly dragging myself from the lingering depths of sleep, my eyes meandering over Sam's sleeping form.

Even the victim of a booze-induced coma, he was a vision of deliciousness. His hair was longer than usual — whether he was experimenting in fashion or simply too lazy to get an actual haircut, I had no idea, but either way, he looked adorable — and fanned out over the rumpled red pillowcase beneath his head in a spray of dark, lazy curls. His perfect cupid's bow lips were parted to allow his slow, even breaths passage, and a faint dampness at the near corner indicated that he'd been drooling not long before, a realization that made me grin.

Straight or no, that boy could drool in my bed any day.

As I watched him, Sam started a little, grunted softly, screwed up his face, and groaned without even opening his mouth, and I chuckled when one brilliant blue eye slit open just enough to peer through his dark lashes before squeezing shut again.

**

Sam

"Good morning, sunshine!"

"Ungh..." I covered my face with my hand, pouting against my palm. I tried

to say something, but it came out as a mishmash of random consonants, so I cleared my throat, removed my hand, and tried again, my eyes squeezed tightly shut all the while. “How the hell are you so wide awake already?”

“I don’t get hung over,” Joel said, and I felt the bed shift as he moved closer to me, trailing his fingertips up and down my incredibly ticklish ribcage. I started to laugh, but it hurt my head too badly, so I merely groaned instead, and he repented and just placed his hand on my belly instead.

“You drank *way* more than me.” I knew I was whining, but I couldn’t help myself; nothing made me complainier than a ripping hangover. “No fair.”

Joel chuckled, his low, decidedly incredible voice washing over me like trails of silk, and I sank deeper into the cushy pillow beneath my head, smiling a little. To hell with what anyone else thought; there was something *damn* funny about waking up in bed next to my favorite singer — tight friend or not — no matter how gay it might seem. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, babydoll, you look remarkably good for someone who’ll probably do a good job of keeping Tylenol in business today.”

I grinned, finally making an effort to force open my eyes and only regretting it for a moment when the late morning — or early afternoon, who could tell? — sunlight invaded my eyes. At least it was only momentary, because suddenly and characteristically thoughtfully, Joel inserted his head between my face and the window, and I sighed with relief as the welcome shade fell over my eyes. “And how the hell do *you* look so good?” I asked, blinking up at him where he rested beside me on his elbow, smiling down at me in amusement, his big green eyes wide and clear and just as infuriatingly pretty as ever. “Your fucking eyes aren’t even bloodshot. Christ, you don’t even look like you need a shave. Were you up already and showered and everything?”

Joel shook his head, loose waves of dark hair tumbling around his shoulders. *Damn, he’d make a pretty chick.* That thought put a weird feeling in my stomach, so I pushed it down, concentrating instead on watching his full, red lips as he spoke. “Nope,” he said, reaching up and gently brushing my hair off my forehead. “Just lucky, I guess. I can drink like a sailor and still wake up ready to run a marathon. That is, if I was into that kind of thing.” He shuddered prettily. “Ugh — the thought of physical activity that doesn’t involve sex just makes my skin crawl.”

I laughed, grimacing when a bolt of pain shot through my head as a result. “That’s my Joelsie.”

“Mmm-hmm,” he said vehemently, lightly tweaking the sparse patch of hair I’d started to grow on my chin. “Now, Sammy-boy, how about I make us breakfast while you grab a shower? I bet you’ll even start to feel human again once you’re up and moving.”

**

“Fuck that — I ain’t getting up until at least five o’clock tonight.” Sam’s head lolled to the side, and I moved my own head slightly to keep the sun out of his eyes.

“Oh, come on,” I said, grinning and running my fingers over his faintly stubbled jaw. Even prickly with overnight growth, the feeling of his young skin beneath my fingertips was intoxicating, and my fingers itched to explore further, but I squashed the urge and placed my hand on the bed between us instead. “You’re only back in Cali for a few more days, and you’re telling me you want to spend a whole day in bed instead of letting me lavish attention on you and treat you like my own personal princess?”

Sam grinned. “I don’t know if I like the sound of that, but then again, maybe I do.”

“So get up, baby!” I bounced a little on the mattress, making Sam groan and swing at me, his loose fist connecting with my chest, but I captured his fingers in mine and kissed them. “Come on — I’ll make you breakfast and then we’ll go shopping. Or catch a movie, or even just cuddle on the couch and watch TV all day. Okay?”

“Why you gotta be so goddamn convincing?”

“The word is persistent, sweet pea, and I’m only trying to milk every last second out of my time with you that I can before you run off to have your cheeks pinched by all your crusty old great-aunties.” I bestowed a huge smile on him. “Now I’m getting up to cook, as scary a prospect as that might be, so you get your adorable ass out of this bed and into the shower. Got it?”

“Yes, Mommy.” Sam stuck out his tongue at me, and I had to fight the urge to bite it.

“Fabulous!” I abruptly rolled over on my way off the bed, conveniently rolling in Sam’s direction and ending up straddling his thighs with my hands braced on either side of his pretty little head. He laughed, his eyes squinching up in that adorable way he had, and I wanted *so* badly to just bend down and kiss him, to meet those precious lips with mine and kiss him like he’d never been kissed before... but both prudence and morning breath made me rethink it. Instead, I merely dipped down to nuzzle at his vaguely stubbled throat, making him giggle just before I realized I was beginning to grow hard and pulled back, mouthing him a kiss before I rolled off on the opposite side, allowing my hand to skate down his shoulder as I pushed myself up from the bed and paused in the doorway, glancing back at him over my shoulder.

“Don’t keep me waiting, Sammy-boy,” I purred, dropping him an exaggerated wink, and Sam flipped me the finger just as I slipped around the doorjamb and disappeared down the hallway, hoping like hell he hadn’t noticed I was half-hard, and all because of him.

As usual.

You fell down here many years ago in a swirling hurricane of fire. You remember falling for a long time, and you were horrified of this endless fall but knew no way of stopping it. It seemed to you as though there was a bottomless abyss through which you would be falling forever. In many ways, you are still falling, only the surroundings changed...Anyway, that was how it all began for you.

It's tough not being able to speak, to ask questions. Adults never consider this fact. They take it for granted that since you can't speak, you can't possibly understand. Yet, you want to know what certain words mean. For instance the word "flu," as in when your dad came to visit for the last time and he picked you up, then handed you back to your mom, saying he had to go because of the flu. For them, for the adults, that conversation was finished, and everything was clear. The father simply fell away. He was not in the picture anymore, and the adults knew that.

Still, what about you who couldn't ask questions yet, but really needed to know what was the "flu" and why it was so important that your father needed to leave because of it. Didn't they know that you were wondering about this? They were the adults, and it was assumed that they knew everything about everything. Why couldn't they explain this to you?

Because you couldn't ask, that's why. That was when you began to realize one very important thing. Words. They connected you to the outside world. Without words, you didn't really exist, you were just a shell. They already knew this, and you were finally beginning to understand it, too. You had to learn fast, before you faded into nothingness, and so, you began to learn. At first, the words came out very awkward and confused, but the adults were delighted, and so, encouraged, you continued to learn.

Very soon, you were able to ask all sorts of questions. For instance, was the Earth really round? And how could it be that the universe was endless? You finally figured out what the "flu" was, and that only made you more confused, because it didn't seem so awful that your dad had to leave because of it. That was when you realized the second very important thing about words. Knowing them did not make the confusion and the questions go away: it only increased them. You began to hate words, because they made the fall so much faster. Yet, you knew from experience that if you denied them, then you would cease to exist. Thus, it continued. During the day, you leaned about words. At night, you continued to fall. Or maybe, it was all the same: just one long fall that never stopped...

Now, it is several years later and you have mastered the words as well as any of them have, as well as you ever will. You are sitting on the carpeted floor in a dimly lit room. He is there too, the one who is falling with you at the moment. You are separated by the coffee table, and across this space he is looking at you pensively. His look is impossible to read: is he upset, angry, annoyed? There is no way to know for sure unless he tells you, so you are simply waiting for him to

speak. He takes a deep breath, and then tells you the thing you least expect.

“You are not communicating with me,” he says, “and that is my biggest problem with this relationship.”

You say nothing, and just give him a quizzical raised-eyebrow look. Elaborate please. He continues.

“We talk about things and we discuss things, but that’s as far as it goes. You have a wall around you and I can’t get through it. Our relationship could be a lot different if you could just let me in.”

You stare at the carpet now and you remain silent, but inwardly you begin to get angry. What is he talking about? Doesn’t he understand that words are all we have? It is the only thing that connects us, and without it, we are completely separate from each other.

Only through words do we know who they are, those strange bodies around us, and only through words do we know that they are alive at all. He waits for you to say something, and when you don’t, he asks you.

“What are you thinking right now? Don’t you have anything to say to me?”

You have no idea what he wants from you, and you know that it is pointless to ask, because he doesn’t know it either, he only thinks he knows. In reality there is nothing more that he can say to explain this void between the two of you. It is there because you are two separate bodies, and you will never be one, no matter what either of you may have learned. One plus one does not make one: you learned this lesson a long time ago - it came soon after your lesson in words.

This one, sitting across from you, he is falling just as fast as you are. That’s why he is so worried; he needs to hold on to you, because he is afraid of the fall. We’re all in the process of falling, but once in a while, someone else will fall parallel to us for some time, and then we begin to think that if we hold on to them tight enough, then somehow the fall will stop. But the hurricane continues to rage, and we only begin to fall faster, until we realize that the fall will never stop. This is why you refuse to respond to his questions.

You tell him that there is no point discussing your problems anymore and that you just want to go to bed, and he agrees, though grudgingly. But as soon as you lay down, you sense a familiar feeling grip you. It is fear - it comes crawling out of the darkness in which you are submerged. It hovers over you at first, and then plunges down to devour you whole. You grip the corners of the pillow, feeling your limbs, and every part of you become rigid and numb with this fear. At the same time, however, you know that it is better this way. In the darkness, the fall gains its reality. It is no longer obscured by daylight, and by the illusory presence of others who seem to be like you. In the darkness, the illusion fades, and their presence is erased from memory. You finally abandon yourself to the fall, and then you open your eyes...

You find yourself in an enormous field. There’s no telling where it ends. Everywhere you look, all the way to the horizon, not a house, not a single tree, just strangely grey, empty land. You are completely alone out here. You make a step forward, and nearly trip over something soft. You look down and gasp. You

are not completely alone after all, because you are standing in the midst of dead bodies. Thousands of them, they cover the field in a bluish-grey carpet...You start to run forward, but it's not easy to run. Rather, you scramble over the bodies, trying to find spaces between them to step. They are so tightly packed. Just don't touch them...don't touch them...no matter what, don't look at their faces...Don't look down at all. That's better.

You look up and notice a silhouette in the distance. A man; he is just standing there, not moving, as though he is waiting for you. As you come nearer, you see that he is tall and dark-haired. Older than you are. He's probably in his early thirties. He simply stands there, and looks at you. You can see his eyes now. They are very dark, almost black. Piercing eyes. You are now within a few feet of him, and he still hasn't moved a muscle, so you are forced to speak first.

"Who are you?"

You wait, but he doesn't answer. He is simply looking at you with a strange expression. Perhaps, he's also not a fan of words. Suddenly, he begins to walk away. You panic.

"Where're you going? Stay!"

He half-turns around and fixes you with his eyes again. "I want to show you something," he says and motions you to come over to where he is standing.

A possibility of disobeying never even occurs to you. Some people are simply meant to be obeyed. Once again, you begin to wade your way through the bodies. As you get closer, you can see that he is standing next to the body of a young woman; she is lying on her side. Dark hair, still young. She looks so peaceful, as though she just lay down to rest for awhile and fell asleep. You feel strangely drawn to this face, and you begin to wonder who she was when she was alive. Did she find peace in life, or only in death.

"She is pretty."

"Look closer," he says.

Then he bends over her, cradles her head in his hands, and lifts it up. The lower part of her face becomes separated and slides toward the ground, exposing a red mess of flesh and bone. You turn your head away, and shut your eyes. Not fast enough, though, because the image stays with you. In your mind's eye it grows to enormous proportions; fills up the entire space.

"Why did you have to show me this?"

"You know very well why," he says. "This is what happens when..."

But he doesn't get to finish. Suddenly, a strange loud ringing fills the space around the two of you, and his voice fades. You open your eyes, and find yourself in your own bed again. It is morning, and the alarm clock is rudely letting you know this.

You turn your head sideways to say "good-morning," but the other part of the bed is empty. You know instantly that it will remain that way from now on. It all makes perfect sense to you now, and you have always known it, because this knowledge is in your blood, and with every flicker of the dying fire in your veins, it whispers: "There is no amount of words that can fill the void between two falling bodies."

ON FUNDAMENTALISM

David Lawrence

These familiarities are distant wounds in others' ambitions.
We fall into direct thrombosis when our lungs
Don't equal our affirmations.

How do you distinguish Mohamed from Marquise de Sade?
Mohamed didn't have the courage
To push his cruelty forward without
Religion?
All de Sade needed was the whip
And chains.

Mohamaed shames Allah,
Allah can no longer look at his cruel
Worshippers.
He dresses them in robes
Inappropriate to the sands.

It is easier for a camel to pass through a Muslem's fundamentalism
Than for Mohamed to get into the heaven of consort
With a Jew or a Christian.

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David Thornbrugh

The people who see	most fears are not irrational
flying saucers	I don't know if
Big Foot	Big Foot
the Virgin Mary	or the Virgin Mary exist
are not lying	but I believe people believe
I believe	they've seen them
at least the first ones	which is more interesting
later come the copy cats	than none of the above
wanna bes	existing at all
needy nut cases	don't you think?

Gyrations of the
Universe

Michael Levy



Mammoth supernovas spew storms of heavenly fire,
Celestial music simmers in a vacuum of mystical melodies,
Stratospheric fountains flare galactic gasses,
Mountains of nothingness erupt from voids of abundance.

Unfamiliar planets snowball from exotic dust,
Orbiting eccentric suns, appearing as monumental gods,
Pulsating forces dance to the gravitational beat of celestial violins,
Each note forms figments of heroic luminescent chaos.

Light spectrums expel voluminous electromagnetic wave bands,
Marching parades of exquisite grace, costumes of ultra-violet radiance,
Casts of a billion stars join the gyrations of the universal wheel,
Reeling in deep space, until the moment life is discovered.

An encore is requested by the standing ovulation of vibrating gravity,
A Sun is born awaiting children of earth to evolve,
Fed by a milky way, ascending from of a black hole,
A race of cosmic particles will develop as earthlings,
Viewed through time/space lens of astronomical candidates.



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Dawn Miller

Tessa sent up a hasty prayer for forgiveness as she slipped on the dress Mama had brought her in exchange for a promise not to marry Al. Admiring her slim, muscular form in the full length mirror, a look of approval came into her eyes. The little black number hugged her curves in all the right places. The dark color complimented the thick auburn curls which hung loosely about her shoulders. There wasn't anyone in Cape County, Georgia who could hold a candle to her and that fact was immensely satisfying.

While touching up the make-up she'd applied earlier in the day, Tessa could almost see the image of her mother in the mirror. Mama was dead set against her marrying into the Lambert clan. She said they were all poison and when Mama dangled the expensive carrot under her nose, Tessa just had to agree. The dress was after all a designer original. Mama couldn't say Tessa didn't keep the promise. In the end, she didn't marry Al. She'd just killed him.

Sheriff Carl Jacobs eased his patrol car up in front of Tessa Turner's beat up track house and sat for a moment, waiting for the dust to settle before getting out. The extra few minutes would give him time to decide what to do next. It sounded silly now but a plan of action hadn't really crossed his mind until the car stopped. Running his fingers slowly through his sweat soaked graying hair he forced his mind to focus.

Tessa Turner had never been an easy fish to catch except in bed. She was nothing like the good old boys that ran moonshine over to Boone County. They usually broke down as soon as the flashing lights came into the rearview mirror. Not Tessa, she could sweet talk a snake charmer out of his oil and then stab him in the back while kissing him goodbye. Nevertheless, the arrest had to be made. The line had been crossed and they had her dead bang this time. Murder was murder whether he'd slept with her or not.

The hard evidence wasn't much of a comfort and the only thing that made his job any easier was the thought that the women of Cape County would be breathing a sigh of relief once Tessa was behind bars. Now it would be simpler to keep their husbands on a short leash. Tessa could probably help the police close a couple of open cases she was a suspect in. That is if you caught her in the right mood.

The hollow sound his leather boots made on the rotted front porch steps echoed back as he finally took the walk from the car to the house. Two hard knocks went unanswered. On the third, some rustle of movement came from inside. Obviously Tessa wasn't in any hurry to answer the door, probably admiring her traffic stopping figure in the mirror. After a couple of agonizingly slow

minutes, the tarnished knob finally turned.

“Well, well, well Sheriff Jacobs,” Tessa cooed, running her tongue seductively along her bright red lips. “To what do I owe this pleasure? I’m afraid I don’t have time for a little afternoon refreshment. I am on my way to poor Al’s funeral.”

“Little late aren’t you?”

“A lady has to make an entrance.”

“That you do,” Jacobs remarked, trying hard to maintain eye contact instead of staring at the full breasts which were laid out in front of him like a prized Thanksgiving turkey. “This isn’t a social call. I’m here on official police business.”

“It’s always official police business with you honey. That’s why you like the cuffs.”

Carl reached for a crumpled up handkerchief in his pocket and wiped at his brow. The sweat was beginning to run down his temples. “Tessa we can do this the easy way or the hard way,” he said, feeling his cheeks color at the memory of Tessa naked and hand-cuffed to the refrigerator. The image was forever etched in his mind and that was why he kept coming back for more. She’d made him feel like a man and shamed him all at the same time. Sex with his dearly departed Alice had been proper and nice. With Tessa it was dirty and nasty. She did things to him he never knew were possible and after twenty years of nice it was what he needed.

Tessa reached through the open screen door and placed her hands on his broad shoulders. Carl was hoping the strong smell of perspiration and Old Spice would repulse her but instead she was all over him like butter on hot grits.

“You know I like it the hard way.”

A trail of discarded clothing led from the front door to the bedroom. The black dress dangled from the frame that held up the sagging mattress. It was the last thing he pulled off of her voluptuous body. Leaning his head against the worn out headboard, Carl rubbed his aching temples. His flushed cheeks grew hotter as he thought of how miserably he’d failed. The job had been to come here and arrest Tessa for the murder of Al Lambert and here he was lying in her bed, the bed of a killer. Regret turned quickly to disgust as his eyes focused on the aging incompetent image looking back at him in the mirror. Memories of the years with Alice came flooding through. Alice, smiling in her wedding gown, cradling their children in her arms and finally Alice being laid to rest in her coffin wearing her Sunday best. What would she think of the shell of a man he had become? It hadn’t even been a year since he buried her. The downward spiral had been quick. Maybe that was why the kids had been ducking his calls for months.

Rolling over to avoid the bitter pill of reality, he took the sweat soaked sheets with him. He was just about to drag his unworthy carcass from the bed when Tessa appeared. The rhythmic movement of her perfectly sculptured form sashaying across the room hypnotized him. His hungry eyes moved up to her glistening breasts as he took the glass from her outstretched hand. The lemonade was halfway finished when he pulled it away. An intense wave of nausea hit him. The glass shattered

on the floor. Dizziness impaired his vision. He looked up in desperation, holding his hand out towards the spot where Tessa had been. She was gone.

Tessa grabbed the black dress and left the room before Carl had swallowed the first sip. She didn't need to see it. With Al the arsenic in his after sex pick me up had done the trick, with the final dose putting him over the edge last week. Poison was so clean. It didn't dirty your clothes, only your conscience and that was so much better. Who cared about your conscience? She hadn't bothered with that since she was a little girl.

With a hard tug, Tessa pulled the bedroom door closed to shut out some of the painful moans. It would be over soon. Cyanide was quick and effective. Men were such babies when it came to pain even during sex. They only knew how to give it not how to take it.

Once again she slipped on the treasured dress and admired the outcome. Carefully she touched up her make-up. The rough tumble with Carl had given her skin an even rosier glow. Checking her watch, she grabbed her keys and headed out the door. Reverend George loved to drone on when he had a full house. There was probably still time to catch the end of the service.

When she arrived at the church, the lot was packed. Al had been a pillar of the community. Just about everybody in Cape County and then some were here to mourn dear Al's passing. Before exiting the bright red pick-up, Tessa pushed up her already full breasts and stepped out as if she had just arrived at the country music awards. She hiked up the dress a little more and quickly walked into the church.

As soon as her spiked heels hit the tiled floor, she could hear the jealous whispers fluttering through the masses. Ignoring them, Tessa made her way to one of the pews and squeezed in on the end.

Reverend George had just finished up the service. The church was filled with the somber music of the choir as the pall bearers picked up the mahogany coffin and stepped down from the altar. The Lambert Family followed. As the coffin moved past her, Tessa slipped out of the pew and took the honored spot directly behind the dearly departed. Why shouldn't she? She was after all Al's former fiancée. The spiteful snarls of Al's cow of a sister echoed loudly in her ears. When they reached the doorway, Tessa turned and hugged Al's mother.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," she said loud enough for everyone to hear. "Al was one of the good ones."

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," Reverend George said as the mourners lined up to toss a shovelful of dirt on top of the coffin. Tessa elbowed her way into the front. Those closest to her glared when she'd laughed out loud. The fools couldn't see the irony of the dated ritual. Al could shovel it with the best of them.

The hugging and hand-shaking quickly came to an end after the last person paid their final respects. Dark clouds had replaced the glowing sun and most

were anxious to start the walk back to the church to get into their cars. Tessa was leading the exodus when two police cars turned down the dirt path which led from the church to the cemetery. Many stopped to gawk but Tessa kept on walking. She hadn't figured they would find Carl's body so soon. Cape County's finest were not known for their brains.

The lead car came to a halt a few feet in front of her. A door opened. "That will be far enough Ms. Turner," said a firm voice from within the vehicle. When he stepped out, the wind began to pick up. The scene reminded Tessa of THE WIZARD OF OZ but instead of the wicked witch of the west there stood Earl Mullins, police chief extraordinaire, in all his glory.

Tessa turned to glare at the balding, over-weight, sorry excuse for a man holding court. All eyes were on him for the moment and he loved every minute of it. He had to be one of only a small handful of men in Cape County she hadn't slept with and that was because the mere thought nauseated her.

"Can't this wait, Earl," Tessa hissed. "I'm in mourning here."

"Is that what you call it," he asked stepping forward. Chief Mullins made a motion with his hand and three officers exited the cars, drawing their weapons. "Stand still Ms. Turner and keep your hands where we can see them."

Most of the congregation including Reverend George had caught up and Tessa found herself surrounded by what seemed like the entire town and then some. She should have felt the walls closing in on her but oddly she was aroused at their misconception. They thought they had her cornered but this was her moment to shine not Al's and certainly not Earl Mullin's.

"What is this about," she said innocently.

"You know what it's about, Ms. Turner. No need for the drama, just come along with us."

"I'm afraid I don't."

Mullins sighed. "We found poor Carl."

Tessa smiled coldly. "The sex killed Carl." Several gasps came up from the crowd and the grin broadened.

"Not sex, poison, same as Al," Mullins said. "Killing Carl is going to get you the death penalty."

"I don't think so but you can dream." Tessa took two steps but stopped when Chief Mullins came toward her and wrapped his chubby hand around her thin wrist. He pulled Tessa roughly and handed her over to Deputy Sheriff Lonnie Tompkins.

"Put her in the car," Mullins ordered. "We've all had enough of you." He gestured to the crowd and the murmurs grew louder.

Tessa ignored them and smiled up into the baby face of Lonnie Tompkins, Cape County's newest officer. He was as tall as a weed and with looks to die for. He would have been the perfect catch if he hadn't been dumber than dirt. Lonnie took her arm and guided her over to a waiting squad car as if he were escorting her to dinner in a fancy restaurant. Obviously, Lonnie didn't figure she was much of a threat since he didn't even bother with the cuffs, his mistake.

After putting Tessa into the backseat, he slid in along side her. Mullins got into the front with another officer she didn't recognize. Tessa grinned broadly. Lonnie couldn't take his eyes off of her tanned legs. Lonnie was probably wondering if she was wearing panties under the form fitting black dress. Seductively Tessa glided her perfectly manicured hand down her side.

Lonnie's eyes had drifted up to her breasts. Tessa licked her thick lips and put on her best Marilyn Monroe pout as she reached across Lonnie's thighs to grab his gun. A menacing laugh escaped when the cold barrel touched her breasts. Lonnie's surprised look was reward enough. The shot rang out long before his lips began to form a warning.

An early morning rain didn't keep the curiosity seekers and the gossip mongers from packing the pews of the small Baptist church once again. Most sat silently, not wanting to speak ill of the dead, while others spread their vicious tales. Reverend George did his best to talk kindly of the deceased but it was difficult given the situation. In the end there was only one thing everyone could agree on. No one in Cape County, Georgia could hold a candle to Tessa Turner, not even in death.

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Mel Waldman

Out there-in the skies and at sea, and in foreign lands, we search for them, although there are strong suspicions that sleepers have already arrived, perhaps years ago, waiting to be called, praying to hear the shibboleth and to begin jihad.

Yet here-at home-over half-a-century ago, almost every night, a war of terror began again and again, when Father, a product of the old generation, came home from work, with raw rage and the threat of a hard black leather belt to teach character, especially respect, in the privacy of our home.

In the good old days, through a secret culture of terror, I learned, as did the other children of my generation, to obey.

Our Fathers created us in their image. And we recognize the face of terrorism. Do you?

Fading Dreams

Raud Kennedy

His fingertips slowly turn the bottle of beer
in its pool of condensation on the bar.
He should be home with Kylie and the kids
but he's poisoned with the routine of it all.
He sits in the bar waiting for that call
so he can fight with his wife.
Then when he goes home, chastised,
he won't feel so trapped, 27, a father
and not who he once dreamed of being.

NUMB£®\$

Story Rhinehart

Orange crosses in the field
Desert bones
arranged & catagorized
Flattened skeletons
laid out on table tops
How long shall we
turn our heritage into shame
How long shall we
let these numbers escalate
Temperatures rise
Fevers break
Poverty earthquakes
Genocide war & rape.
The stench of callousness
hovers above
A carpet of skulls
where a wooden Mother Mary prays
Amidst a cacophony of moans
Like a lonely dragon winding in the wake
People form a train & march
covering themselves with tarps towards
Deaths like a thousand marigolds
melting in the rain

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Ken Dean

Julie Stokes was driving North on Route 101 about 2 am towards her apartment in Santa Barbara when she decided to pull off in the North Oxnard area. She was returning from a Halloween party in Camarillo and was beginning to feel the full effect of having a little too much to drink. There was a park along the beach close by where she could wait a while until driving wouldn't be so dangerous.

She parked the car and decided to go down close to the beach where there were some benches facing out towards the surf. There was no one else around, which is the way she preferred it right now. The night air was mild and comfortable with a slight breeze coming in off the ocean. She sat down on a bench with her purse alongside, her head throbbing a little along with that slightly disoriented, drunk feeling.

The view of the ocean with a full moon shining helped to get her mind off how she was feeling, although a couple of Tylenol might help too. She usually carried some with her, but had forgotten to bring any in her purse tonight. The waves coming against the shore were soothing and might have the same effect as some aspirin.

Julie was wondering how long she would have to sit until her mind cleared enough to drive, but was feeling so relaxed just sitting there with her hands in her lap that she really didn't feel like moving. Everything was relaxing; the sound of the surf, moonlight reflecting off the water, and the waves as they came rolling onto the beach like a constant spilling of a frosty vanilla milkshake.

Suddenly the moon was gone and there a hint of sunlight peeking around from behind her. With the sun rising there were some long shadows becoming noticeable of her, the bench, and some trees nearby; all pointing westward towards the surf. She noticed a couple of early morning runners jogging their way along the path near the beach. Her gaze wanted to follow the joggers as they passed, but she was still feeling too relaxed to move. Her hearing seemed to be more acute, as she was able to hear their labored breathing. The male sounded almost asthmatic, while the female seemed to have more of a healthy pace to her breathing. Better be careful there, buddy. Don't want to overdo it, fall over and wake up dead.

Was she breathing? Julie couldn't tell at this point and didn't care. Her excellent view of the ocean was still there.

Everything seemed to fast-forward to midday. It must be around noon, with the shadows almost perpendicular with sky. Funny; she didn't feel the sunlight.

The beach had filled up with more people now, chairs and umbrellas were everywhere. Some of the beachers were safely under their umbrellas, out of the

sun's reach, while others were laying out on blankets and chairs braving the harsh noon-day rays of sunshine. There were also the children building sand castles, looking for shells, or just running in and out of the surf screaming like little pygmies on crack.

One little boy with an ice cream cone was ambling his way towards her, unaware of it melting in the heat and running down his hand. He must have been around two years old by the way he was trying to clumsily make his footing through the sand. He fell about ten feet in front of her, spilling the cone. Naturally he started bawling as most kids would do since we all know the universe revolves around them.

A tan, blonde mother rushed over to pick him up.

"Charlie, what's the matter?"

"Drop ice cream," he answered through sobs.

"We'll get you some more."

"Mommy, lady staring."

"That's okay, we'll just leave her alone." She gave Julie a quick, furtive glance.

The sun was now just visible in her range of vision in the West. Someone must have called the police since she would occasionally see one or two of them in her line of sight, looking her over.

Two police cruisers were in the beach parking lot with lights flashing but no noise. A detectives' car pulled up beside them. Detective Reese wasn't very happy about being brought out on a call just before his shift was over. The dispatcher relayed the info about a possible body on the beach near North Oxnard. 'Now why would I want to see a body before dinner?' he laughed to himself. He saw Sergeant Malco approaching his car as he was getting out.

"Sergeant Malco, fill me in please." Malco had a funny look on his face that Reese wasn't used to seeing, at least on a seasoned police officer.

He made his way towards the beach park area with Malco while donning the standard crime scene gloves that the two police officers were already wearing. Didn't want to compromise any evidence.

"Dispatch had a call from a citizen who noticed a woman sitting on one of the park benches, not moving or responding to questions."

"Was there any ID?"

"Yeah. She had her purse beside her and luckily no one did a grab on it. Her name is Julie Stokes and she lives in Santa Barbara. The way she's dressed I would guess she was either on her way to or from a Halloween party last night."

"Did you check for a pulse?"

"No, I wanted to let you get a good look at her first. We just went through her purse."

"Good man."

They walked together towards the back of the park bench where Officer Brady was keeping an eye on things and keeping the curious away.

Reese noticed that a hood and mask were pulled back from her head and was

hanging down her back. She had beautiful blonde hair, even though it was tied back in a ponytail to fit into the costume. There was a slight breeze blowing, enough to gently move his own hair. When he had gotten closer he noticed that the ends of her ponytail weren't moving at all, although they should have been loose enough to move in the breeze. Reese walked around to the front of the bench and took off his sunglasses to get a good look at her. She was beautiful, and totally normal looking. He felt he could reach out and touch soft, pliable skin.

Reaching in his jacket pocket, he pulled out a ball point pen. He then took the pen and tapped very gently on one of the hands in her lap. The feedback he got was solid, as if her hand was stone. He gently touched her face with the pen also and it was the same, hard as a rock. Touching her cheek with his gloved hand gave the feeling of touching fine porcelain.

Julie could see the detective taking the pen and reaching out to places outside her range of vision to do something. Then he took the pen and seemed to touch her face with it, though she couldn't feel it. The same with his hand, he seemed to be stroking her cheek, but once again there wasn't any feeling.

"Gentlemen, we really have one for the books here. We have to get her back to the lab and find out what caused this. Do you think she will fit in back of one of the cruisers for the trip?"

"Yeah, I can make sure there is room in mine for her to fit in the back seat," answered Malco.

He went back to his cruiser to make sure the back seat didn't have any junk laying in it.

Reese bent down and looked Julie in the eyes.

"What happened to you, Julie?" he whispered under his breath.

Julie looked back at him. 'Please don't move me!' she screamed. 'I love the view here and I want to stay.'

Of course Reese heard nothing.

Malco returned. "Ready Detective."

"Okay, we are all three going to have to lift her up to be able to get her to the cruiser; I would imagine she is heavy. And be very careful not to break anything."

All three lifted her up with some effort and began carrying her towards the cruisers back seat.

"Detective, just what kind of costume is this anyway?"

"It's the mask and headpiece of snakes representing the mythical Gorgon Medusa."

"Greek mythology?"

"Yeah."

They reached the cruiser and gently sat her in the back seat like a heavy mannequin.

None of them noticed the glistening tear that had formed at the corner of her eye and was running down her cheek.

~µ+§ λε 11

Cara Cristina Losier

Girl, you will always
be branded by the time
you wore a halter top
in ninth grade, before
you got your bellybutton
pierced by Wade, who
had a red-rimmed
fresh tattoo that wound
around his neck, like the snake
you wanted junior year of college
before you found out that
snakes eat mice,
after which you adopted Phineas,
the orange mouse named
after a John Knowles character,
whose work you've loved
since you were six,
and still wore overalls with no t-shirt
and later that year
kissed your kindergarten sweetheart
who grew up to wear heavy black hoodies
and love the band Disturbed,
and dated a girl who was
later indicted in a grade-school vandalism,
and had fewer piercings than you've had
as I write this,
although you currently have none
and now your stomach
is as smooth as on that defining day
during which you chose to bear yourself.

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Alexandria Rand, editor
AlexRand@scars.tv
<http://scars.tv>

Scars Publications and Design
829 Brian Court
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

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down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets