

v.057  
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down in the dirt  
revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

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Scars Cover art of a light house on a foogy day in Maine.

# The Resurrection of Ramon Jimenez

Pat Dixon

Some enigmas of life and work sort themselves out—others never do.

When Ramon appeared last month in Two South at Hartford's Walter P. Trudeau Center for Health and Rehabilitation, the last thing any of us nurses wondered about was whether he had a last name. Instead, we were all mystified why, after two and a half years, he had suddenly replaced Doctor Marvin Silverman—whom he was identical to in every respect we could see. How it happened, of course, was completely obvious.

Doctor Marvin, as we had affectionately been calling him for the past two years or so, had suddenly appeared in our ward one day, replacing plain old Ben McCloskey, one of the most demented and most forgotten of our residents.

I would be the first to assert that Alzheimer's-like dementia is never a funny thing, yet, as my Grandmother Stoddard used to say, every aspect of our lives can be regarded from a wide array of angles, and some views are less painful than others. Helen Silverman, a very proper "lady" of the old school, the sort that never is seen in public without her make-up on and her hair fixed just so, who wears stockings and a slip and carries a purse with every outfit all year round, was brought to us by her older daughter four years ago, just when she was beginning to "go a bit funny" and was leaving the burners of her stove turned on so that her apartment was twice filled with huge clouds of smoke and her neighbors saved her life by reacting to the smoke alarms that were triggered. Helen is one of those that we sometimes call a "queen bee"—the sort that was probably the center of attention at cocktail parties during her younger years and that has to find some sort of way of taking charge of whatever situation she finds herself in at any period thereafter. Sometimes, if there are two or more queens around, this can cause daily conflicts in a place like Trudeau Center, but sometimes each queen will stake out her own turf, so to speak. Fortunately, that is what happened with Helen and our other prima donna, Naomi Sanders, who had seniority in every way and who was prepared to assert it with unladylike manners.

Ben McCloskey, it seems, was the one fellow Naomi had never cared to even speak to during her six years with us before Helen arrived—for the good reason that Ben himself never replied when anyone spoke to him, never spoke to anyone else, and never even uttered a syllable when he chanced to injure himself or was otherwise clearly in pain. Yet Ben, it turned out—and Helen's family photographs supported this—bore a very close resemblance to Doctor Marvin Silverman, her late husband. And so she sought out Ben's company from the very first week. Then, as her own dementia progressed by fits and starts, she began to lead him around by the hand, something that Ben never made any objections to. Within a year, Helen was choosing Ben's food for him and cutting it on his plate for him, and then, by the

eighteenth month, she was feeding him the way one would a little child—despite the fact that Ben is fully able to feed himself, although admittedly he does tend to spill more than he can actually get into his own mouth.

One noon, about twenty-three months after she took over the feeding of Ben, Helen was leading him from the dining hall down to her room. She stopped off at the nurse's station and told me, "Doctor Silverman and I will be having a little—nap—now—in our room. Please do not let anyone disturb us."

I kept a straight face and said, "I will pass the word along to all the aides, Helen. Will you and—he—be joining the others for dinner this evening?"

"Yes—I expect that we will—although of course one cannot be certain."

I and three aides who were nearby all craned our necks and watched her lead Ben into her room and close the door behind them.

"They're not hurting anybody," I said, "and just maybe they are going to be happier in some way than they would otherwise be." The others smiled, winked, and made a few rude gestures which I frowned at.

Shortly before dinner time, they both reappeared, she leading him by the hand.

"The doctor and I will be joining the company for dinner," she said as she passed me. "I do hope that they have prepared something nice."

I informed Sally Turnock, our staff social worker, next day, of course, and as Helen persisted in leading the newly revived Doctor Marvin Silverman around, Sally phoned Helen's older daughter and informed her. The daughter, actually, was both amused and relieved by the news, taking it as a kind of blessing that meant she would not need to visit her mother even half as often as she had been. Ben's transformation into her late father served to remove several tons of dutiful guilt from her; as for her sister, the younger of Helen's daughters, there had never been any guilt, and her reaction, we were told, was one of unalloyed mirth.

And so it went for the next thirty months: Doctor Marvin and Helen would slip off to "their" room almost every afternoon and then reappear that evening in time for dinner. Helen, who had one of the three "private" rooms on Two South, managed to get another twin bed put in it, and Doctor Marvin began sleeping over with her. As far as Ben's relatives were concerned, he had died long ago, and none of them visited, sent greeting cards, phoned, or even inquired after him. Sally Turnock opted, perhaps unprofessionally, to let things ride with them until somebody showed some interest, but I have no quarrels with that decision.

Imagine, then, how I nearly dropped my back teeth when Helen led Doctor Marvin past the nurse's station three weeks ago and announced, "Ramon and I will be having a little —nap—now—in our room. Please do not let anyone disturb us."

My head whipped around, and I'm sure I had a perplexed expression—even a concerned one—on my mug.

"Who, please, Helen? Who is with you?"

“Ramon,” she said, smiling at me; “Ramon and I will be having a little nap now.”

She seemed decidedly pleased, perhaps even proud, that I had taken this sudden new interest in her.

Two nearby aides exchanged concerned frowns, pursed their lips, and looked at me to see what I would do next. I shrugged, smiled reassuringly, and said, “Where’s the harm?” Privately, I made a mental note to speak to the M.D. who would be arriving at Trudeau Center in forty minutes, and resolved to hightail it down to our social worker’s office for a quick chat within the next ten minutes—or sooner if I could think of something for the aides to check on.

Well, Sally Turnock shared my concern and thanked me for bringing this matter to her attention. She seconded my view that Helen might be “stroking” on us and said it needed a medical look-see beyond what I was able to give it. She added that, on her end, she would pursue the question of Ramon’s identity with Helen’s family.

Dr. Gandhi also appreciated my input and told me I had been absolutely right to inform him as soon as he arrived. I neglected to inform him that Helen had given instructions that she and Ramon did not wish to be disturbed, and when Helen gave him a piece of her mind for entering without even knocking on “their” door, he rather prudently decided that any further examination of her mental and physical health could wait until after their dinner. I concurred with this judgment—without directly telling him so—and was thankful later that Helen did not recall either his interruption or my own failure to serve as gatekeeper for her.

Three of our doctors could find nothing noteworthy in Helen’s condition other than her new name for Ben McCloskey. They agreed that this didn’t seem to warrant taking her to the nearest hospital for scans of her brain, and our staff psychiatrist found it “interesting” but “not remarkable” and decided not to pursue the matter further either.

Helen’s older daughter was vacationing in New Zealand when Ramon came on the scene, and Sally, taking her cue from our doctors and from the older daughter’s tacit opinion of her sibling, chose to let the matter ride until the senior sister returned to Hartford.

Yesterday she got back from Kiwi-Land and brought a matching pair of kiwi-decorated T-shirts to the Trudeau Center this afternoon—one for her mom and one for Ben/Doctor Marvin. Neither Sally nor I saw her come in,

## Typical Friday Evening

Alan Britt

Death is in  
our yard,  
between  
cicadas  
& lilac  
rose-of-sharon.

A tractor-trailer  
groans  
through  
a distant  
artery.

A smoky dog  
paces  
the back porch,  
before  
settling  
upon yellow  
September leaves.

and we had not thought to leave word at the main desk that she should see us before visiting her mother.

Two minutes or so after she went into Helen's room, she was out again, looking for me with the help of three aides.

"Caitlin!" she said; "Caitlin—Mother is with—Ramon! Has she—has she been with him very—long? Days? Weeks?"

I replied that it had been a few weeks since Doctor Marvin had vanished and Ramon has taken over his body—which had once been Ben's body as well.

Wincing, biting her lips, and shaking her head, Helen's daughter suddenly began to giggle. I asked if she would like to sit down and if I could get her some water or a nice cup of tea or anything.

"No," she replied, relaxing and smiling at me as I gripped her hands. "No, I'm quite all right now. It was just a—a bit of a surprise. But now I'm all right, really. It's actually rather funny, you know."

I looked at her questioningly but kept my mouth tactfully silent.

"Caitlin, you don't know who Ramon is, do you? No—I don't think that Mother would tell anyone—although I don't think she's above perplexing them deliberately—and taking some pride in doing so—all the while flaunting Ramon in front of everyone—especially that Sanders woman."

She began to laugh softly to herself.

"After all these years—Ramon Jimenez is resurrected. Following my dad's—uh—prostate surgery—way back before they could 'save the nerves,' so to speak—he—uh—could no longer 'perform,' and—uh—well—Ramon Jimenez was our—he was our gardener. He—well, Mother made no secret about her affair with him—though of course she never said anything directly about it to—anyone. It lasted—oh—maybe twelve years—until Ramon had a fatal heart attack—about fifteen years ago. Do you think this means that he—that Ben—that Mr. McCloskey can—you know—do you think—?"

I have no idea—and I don't care to find out. Either way, where's the harm?

## Autumn Leaves

Alan Britt

I love how  
words  
get dragged through Autumn leaves,  
crushing  
their yellow syllables.

With my ankles submerged,  
I occasionally  
hear faint  
echoes  
from the chilly  
graves  
of these leaves.

# A Horrible Red Smear

*Steve De France*

I judiciously select salad stuff,  
vegetables, potatoes.  
Passing frozen treats,  
I fail.  
I snatch a pint of vanilla ice  
cream, rolled in crunchy Heath bar  
parts. I contemplate ice cream,  
ruminating in my soon-to-be-  
plugged-up arteries.  
My heart, my blood pressure.  
Death by dessert.  
Behind me, someone starts  
using a cart as battering ram,  
trying to shove it up my ass.  
Behind the offending cart,  
an ancient lady smiles under blue hair.  
Lots of costume jewelry & lipstick:  
blood red & lopsided. Comic, really.  
What the hell, it's the season.  
"Happy Kwanza," I say.  
"Merry Christmas," she says.  
Her teeth slip as she smiles.

We wait like lambs for the line to  
move, I stare absently through her caged  
basket. There in the middle of the  
white tile floor—cart wheels  
rolling by—barely missing him,  
sits a fat orange spider with  
long delicate looking legs.  
Waiting. Forlorn.  
Tentative. Vulnerable.

Shoes scrape past.  
Motionless it waits.

## Images Cynthia Ruth Lewis

Sitting limply next to me on the front seat,  
you still had strength enough to lick my  
face, even though I had brought you to a  
place where you wouldn't come back

Loving you more than life, I tried to  
bolster myself while slipping the key from  
the ignition, your one, unbandaged eye trained  
weakly on me, awaiting my touch on your  
now-gray fur as I sat, pushing the minutes  
away, trying to fight another outburst, finally  
pulling you roughly from the car to pretend  
I didn't care, not feeling the sun warm on  
my back, or your tangle of fur soft in my  
hands, watching the bandage loosen and fall  
free, the small patch of bloody gauze so vivid  
against the dingy pavement the only image I  
remember clearly before taking you inside to  
die

A close grinding of wheels  
—he makes a run for it.  
Straight for the *Hi-Ho Crackers*.  
God, let him make it.

The lady with loose teeth  
staggers backward & squashes  
him under foot, but regains *her* balance.

*He leaves a small red smear.*  
Across webbed-streets I drive  
reflecting on spiders & other parallel life forms  
who have tried to share this planet with us.

I hear—maybe feel a universal sound.  
It reverberates through my bones in the darkness.  
Cracking sounds of celestial wheels grinding,  
things coming apart, in a higher parallel universe.

The sky jerks—bringing a sudden faltering in the stars,  
as an indifferent step from a mighty blue-haired God  
stumbles toward us, her teeth slipping,  
her nylons falling around her veined ankles,  
and her lipstick leaving a horrible red smear.



# The Old Man in the Woods

Mike Zakrajsek

Billy Ray took a long pull from the half-empty bottle of Wild Turkey and passed it off to his cousin Chuck, who took a smaller swig. They continued to hunt, even though they were both so drunk they could not have hit anything they shot at, even if it was the broadside of a barn. They stumbled through the underbrush and made so much noise that any prey they could have fired at had heard them coming a hundred yards away and summarily vacated the area. And still they wondered why they had not seen a deer all day.

"Your sister's hot, Chuck," Billy remarked.

"Yeah, I know," Chuck answered.

"I know we cousins and all, but would mind too much if I took her out?" Billy asked. He was only asking to be polite. Billy had already screwed Chuck's sister five times.

"I don't give a shit. She's a whore. Go ahead and fuck her. She's already told me she wants to."

"Wants to what?" Billy Ray asked, trying to sound innocent.

"You know," Chuck replied, and left it at that.

This was the intellectual and emotional limit of Billy Ray and Chuck's conversation. They were hunting in the forests of the Sierra mountains, taking a brief vacation from their menial jobs and trailer park existences. Billy Ray was a substandard welder, and Chuck subsidized his social security disability check with odd jobs. Chuck received \$540.00 from the government every month because he had the I.Q. of an eggplant. Billy Ray was only slightly smarter, but was still the brains of their redneck operation.

They continued staggering through the forest, drinking, cursing, spitting, farting, and yelling the whole way. Rather abruptly, the forest opened up into a clearing. In the center of the clearing was a small ramshackle cabin with a crooked porch. Dreamcatchers dangled from the overhang. Lush green grass surrounded the house. Mountains and forest rose up behind it.

Billy Ray took another drink from the bottle of Wild Turkey and passed it to his feeble-minded cousin. "Who the hell's livin' way out here in B.F.E.?" Billy asked.

"What's B.F.E.?" Chuck asked, his simian-like forehead wrinkled in consternation.

"Butt-fucked Egypt," Billy Ray answered. Chuck began giggling like a little girl.

"Butt-fucked Egypt," Chuck repeated, and giggled again.

Billy unshouldered his shotgun and held it ominously. "Must be some kinda hermit or something, livin' out here," he deduced. "Must be crazier than a shit-house rat."

"Let's check it out," Chuck suggested, only because he could tell that Billy Ray was thinking the same thing.

“Cuz, I was just thinking the same thing,” Billy said.

They each took another long pull from the bottle of whiskey, then started walking towards the cabin. Their shotguns were slung over their shoulders as if they were a woman’s purse. Billy was in the lead, Chuck a few paces behind.

They stomped up the rickety wooden stairs to the front door. Chuck gave a cursory glance at the intricate, beautiful dreamcatchers suspended around his head. Billy Ray took no notice. He raised his leg and kicked in the door.

Billy half-staggered into the rickety shack, nearly losing his balance on the uneven floorboards. There was an old man sitting in a shabby recliner. He looked at the intruder and frowned. The old man’s hair was long and white, and his skin was the color of old, brown leather. He looked as old as the mountains that surrounded them. He slowly eased himself out of his chair and walked over to his small television and turned off the fuzzy picture it displayed. He stood slightly stoop-shouldered, and regarded the intruders with a look of pity. His Native-American ethnicity was unmistakable.

Billy Ray paused for a moment, struck by the appearance of the old man. Chuck came in behind him and stood there, transfixed, staring like the moron he was. The sight of the decrepid old man and his shabby quarters infuriated Billy Ray in the recesses of his Neanderthal mind. Chuck’s mind, as usual, was basically blank.

Billy Ray was overwhelmed with disgust for the old man in his broken-down shack. The whiskey in his blood intensified his hatred. What little rationality he possessed disappeared like feces down a toilet.

“I’m going to kick your dirty ass, you old injun motherfucker,” he said, dead-ly serious.

“Um, Billy,” Chuck said, with his usual timidity.

“Shut the fuck up,” Billy snapped, and Chuck shut his mouth on command. Billy approached the old man until their faces were only inches apart.

“You’re about to have a very shitty day, old man,” Billy said. The old man said nothing.

Billy Ray punched him in the jaw as hard as he could. The old man fell like a trap door had been opened beneath him. Billy unshouldered his shotgun and held it by its long black barrel. He raised it above his head and brought it down on the old man’s skull, butt first. The crack was sickening, but Billy was just getting started. He swung the rifle again and again, with all his drunken strength. With each blow there was another cracking sound, like squeezing a bag of potato chips. Each blow brought another copious splatter of blood. Chuck, not wanting to be left out, came over and began kicking the corpse in the ribs. In two minutes, it was over, and Billy and Chuck were out of breath. The old man lay dead on the wooden floor of his home. An expanding pool of blood and brain matter surrounded him. As the cousins turned to leave, Chuck slipped in the blood and Billy Ray grabbed his arm, saving him a fall. Billy held onto his arm and led him out of the shack.

They did their best to wipe the blood off of their clothes, hands, and faces. Neither of them said a word. They walked back to their pickup truck and began the drive home. Billy Ray had no conscious; he was a born killer, and did not think at all about what they had just done. Chuck's brain was too retarded to comprehend what had just happened. He felt sick, and there was the slightest inkling of guilt in his heart.

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The old Indian's brains leaked out onto the wooden floorboards of his house, but his spirit had not yet departed his ravaged body. The lips of the corpse began to move. The corpse muttered an ancient, incomprehensible incantation, handed down to him from times before white men ever walked on the continent. The words uttered, the old man's spirit left its earthly vessel.

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Billy Ray drove his pickup truck slowly down the bumpy forest road. He was extremely drunk and did not want to crash his truck into a tree. Neither he nor Chuck had spoken a word about their murder. They passed the nearly empty bottle of whiskey between them at regular intervals. In Billy Ray's mind, it had been a successful hunting trip.

Billy Ray's blurred vision suddenly spied a large object in the road. He shook his head, still saw it, and slammed on the brakes. Chuck was vaulted forward and slammed into the dashboard. The bottle of whiskey flew out of his hands and landed on the floorboard. Billy Ray's chest impacted the steering wheel hard enough to knock the wind out of him for a few seconds.

"What the fuck is that?" Billy Ray asked when he had found his breath again. He was enraged.

"It's a tree," Chuck said.

"No shit," Billy Ray replied, and got out of the truck. Chuck followed. A large tree lay across the dirt road, its roots pulled out of the earth. There was no way for the truck to maneuver around it. "Motherfucker!" Billy Ray cursed after assessing the situation.

"This wasn't here when we drove in," Chuck said.

"No shit, Sherlock," Billy Ray said.

"Maybe the wind blew it down?" Chuck ventured.

Billy Ray rolled his eyes. "What wind, you dipshit? There ain't been a breeze stronger than a fart all day," he said.

"Well, maybe it was just rotten," Chuck suggested. Billy Ray looked at the thick healthy trunk and lush foliage of the tree, and did not bother to reply. He had no idea why the tree had fallen (at least, no idea he would admit to himself). He just knew they had to move it, and something told him they better do it fast.

"Help me get this bitch outta the way," he ordered Chuck. They began to strain against the huge fallen tree, but they could not even shift it an inch. They kept trying, in vain, until a sound from the forest stopped them dead in their struggle. A horrible growl emanated from the woods. It sounded like a starving,

psychotic lion.

“What the holy fuck was that?” Chuck asked, terrified.

Billy Ray did not answer him. He scanned the shadowy forest intently. Something was out there, watching them, stalking them. He felt it as surely as he felt his own rapid breathing.

“Billy, what was that?” Chuck asked again.

“Shhhh!” Billy Ray hissed.

They stood frozen by the inexplicably fallen tree in silence. They stared into the woods around them. The growl came again, low and guttural, and closer. They heard twigs snapping, as if under the feet of—something. Suddenly Chuck glimpsed a shadow charging towards them out of the thick woods. His brain was too slow to process a reaction. He stood, ice cold, in utter stupidity. He stared at what was bearing down on him.

Then Billy Ray saw it, and it wasn't just a shadow anymore. It was gargantuan, and covered in long brown hair. Its eyes were wild with rage and its mouth was open in a gaping snarl. Billy had seen a Laker's game once, and this monster made Shaquille O'Neal look like an average-sized man. It galloped towards them at superhuman speed. Billy Ray did not freeze up. He jumped over the fallen tree and took off running down the dirt road. He heard Chuck scream, but did not look back.

The beast reached Chuck, who was still locked in motionless, dumbfounded fear. It laid its hairy hands on his body and tore off his left arm in an effortless motion, as if it were attached with Velcro. It tossed the arm aside and plunged its huge, clawed hand into Chuck's stomach. It ripped out a giant handful of vital organs and stuffed them into its fanged mouth. It swallowed the mess in one gulp. Chuck's dead eyes stared blankly into the beast's satanic, simian face. The beast held Chuck's lifeless, disemboweled body in one hand and wrenched the head off the body with its other hand. Chuck's head popped off, and blood rained down on the monster like a geyser, soaking its thick fur. It dropped the mutilated corpse and ran off into the woods, still carrying the decapitated head like a football.

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Billy Ray had been running as fast as he could down the forest road for over twenty minutes, and adrenaline and whisky could carry him no further. His body gave up. He collapsed to his knees, lungs burning, muscles screaming, stomach churning. He did not give a single thought to the fate of his friend. He simply wondered how long it would take to regain his breath and start running again. His only thought was to survive. What he had seen coming out of the woods defied everything else.

After several minutes, he staggered to his feet and began to jog slowly down the dirt road on wobbly legs, like a newborn giraffe trying to run. He started to feel safer as he jogged. Whatever that thing was, whatever it had done to Chuck, he had a good head start on it. The first hopes of escaping alive began to slith-

er into Billy Ray's mind.

Something heavy hit him in the head. It knocked him down and sent him rolling down the road. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but the packed dirt he had been running on. He laid on the ground and cautiously scanned his surroundings, and then he saw it. Chuck's head lay across the road, its dead eyes staring into his black soul. Everything became clear to Billy Ray as he stared into Chuck's lifeless, petrified eyes. He knew he had been beamed in the head by the skull of his cousin. He knew his pathetic life was about to come to a violent end.

## Prometheus Unbound

*Aneela Khalid*

He loves me, he loves me not.  
He hates me, he hates me not.  
Two wrong people trapped by vows  
Two wrong people together bound  
By blood and tears and heartaches pointless  
United by shackles of a cruel tradition  
Like Prometheus the titan chained to a rock,  
Torn to pieces by vultures of rituals  
Held together by invisible cords  
Of love and hate, indifference and more  
Can one cut invisible cords?  
Invisible knots fused by God?  
God or man, or issues of control?  
Traditions, values, distorted views  
Misleading humanity with warped reality  
Binding the spirit born to be free  
When freedom the greatest gift of all  
Is snatched in the name of virtue and ethics  
The concept of sin we shudder from  
Gripes like the fiend of rights and wrongs  
Freedom, from pain is all I ask,  
Unbind Prometheus he's suffered enough,  
Ignite the fire, spread its light  
Banish the nightmares convulsing in the night  
Break the chains of sorrow and pain  
Reach for the sky and take your dreams.

He rolled over onto his back, his head throbbing, his heart pounding. He saw what he expected to see. An eight-foot beast was walking slowly and purposefully out of the woods toward him. Its long hair was matted down and rust-colored from Chuck's blood. It roared as it stomped toward his prone body.

Billy Ray did not even bother to scream. The mountain of muscle and hair picked him up and held him horizontally in its massive arms. Billy Ray squeezed his eyes shut and cursed God. The beast pulled him apart at the waist and tossed each half aside. It fed on the top half of Billy Ray for a few minutes. It snacked on his liver and lungs. It dug out his heart with its massive, clawed hand and ate it like an apple. It knew the intestines were filled with shit, and left them lying in the road.

It's hunger satisfied and its calling fulfilled, the Sasquatch loped off into the dark forest and disappeared.

# Civic Duty

Adrian Ludens

Calvin had once complained that there were not enough playgrounds in the world. Now here he was, helping take one away.

Calvin eased his pickup truck to a stop at the red light. He flicked his cigarette out the window into the gutter. Today was a miserable day. People on the sidewalks either stared with open disgust or averted their eyes, pretending not to see him. Calvin felt like the man who was forced to carry the cross down the street in front of everyone when Jesus couldn't hack it. What was his name? Calvin closed his eyes and concentrated. Simon the Cyrenian; that was it.

Calvin felt guilty by association behind the wheel, his cargo jutting like a missile toward the sky. I'm not the one who made this happen, Calvin defended himself, mentally addressing the crowds of people all around him.

Tearing down the municipal playground had been a desperation measure. The number of missing children had risen into the double digits and the city was in a panic. No matter how many parents patrolled the park, or how early the curfew was, the disappearances continued. Someone was stealing the children.

Finally, at a town meeting, a city councilman suggested tearing down the playground where all of the children had been taken. No playground; no missing kids. That had been the flimsy reasoning behind the idea. It had been enough.

Calvin wasn't sure it would actually work, but he did what he thought was his civic duty and volunteered to help. Now here he was, stuck in traffic, with one of those giant slides precariously balanced in the bed of his pickup. A rocket slide, the kids called it.

When the light finally turned green, Calvin pressed down on the gas pedal. In his impatience, he pressed the gas too fast, and the pickup jerked forward.

A sharp ping sound came from the back as one of the chains snapped. A shrieking metallic groan assaulted Calvin's ears and he shuddered.

"Sonuva—" he began, then grimaced and closed his eyes as he heard the awful crunch of metal on metal. Glass popped and broke. Someone yelled. A dog barked. Calvin heard it all with amazing clarity.

He jumped from the cab of his pickup and hurried to survey the damage.

The rocket slide had been too heavy for its anchoring chains and had tipped over onto the gray sedan that had been waiting directly behind Calvin's pickup. The cone-shaped tip of the slide had shattered the windshield and the driver of the sedan was pinned to his seat. He was yelling for help. Calvin realized the man would be all right, but for now was stuck fast.

Calvin noticed that the sedan had slid back and collided with the third vehicle at the light, a white minivan. The force of the collision had popped the sedan's trunk lid open. When the lady driving the minivan began to scream, Calvin ran back to take a look.

There were bodies in the trunk of the sedan. Little bodies. Calvin's heart broke.

Head hanging in sorrow, Calvin walked slowly past the shouting driver and back to his pickup. He climbed into the cab. Never one to shirk what he felt was his civic duty, Calvin decided the best course of action was to put his pickup truck into reverse and let the rocket slide finish the job.

BIOPSY  
EROS  
THANATOS

Mel Waldman

Before I arrived at this critical moment,  
I had to rage against the Bureaucracy

and my PCP (Primary Care Physician)  
to get an emergency appointment.

Had to threaten 2 lawsuits.

Now, the Doc removes the ugly growth  
and orders a biopsy.

“Except for the bleeding, I’d say it’s  
probably benign. But...  
Come back in 2 weeks for the biopsy  
results. If it still bleeds later, use a dry,  
clean towel and apply pressure on the  
area for 5 minutes.”

My wounded mind meanders in my wild  
dreamscape of uncertainty/ambiguity, and  
frenzied thoughts and fears metastasize  
within my private wilderness.

In 2 weeks, I’ll see the Doc again. In the  
meantime, I pray.

Yet what do I pray for?

I’m weary of the crazy chaotic world we live  
in. Don’t feel at home anymore.

It’s an alien universe where a man must roar  
and rage like a wild beast to be heard.

Eros or Thanatos?  
Life or Death?

What do I wish for?

# DuhGloved Lady

Oscar Crawford

Washington, D. C. is duh land of big time politics, big time corruption, and big time crime. You got to love duh place. It is duh seat of power. Dat's a crock. Dere were more murders here last year dan in 20 uttah states. How's dat for life in duh fast lane?

Duh power is not in all duh pencil necks. Duh power in duh guns killing everybody and in duh corporations putting money in everybody's pocket. Dere are more crooks in D. C. per square mile dan any place in duh country. I'm right about dis.

I never come here unless I have to. If I wasn't here for my good friend, I wouldn't be here now. He asked me to come. Said he needed me to look out for him. A small reception is being held in his honor dis evening at duh Memorial Center.

He won dis little national raffle last November and had to move here for a few years. His life and mine will probably never be duh same.

My name is Z. It's not really my name. I am called Z because Z is duh end of duh alphabet and when I am called, tings pretty much end wit me.

You got issues. You call Z. Issues end wit me.

My friend has security around him 24 - 7. I don't know why he believes he needs me. It's duh trust ting, I tink. He only really trusts me. It's been dat way since we was kids.

I remember duh first time we officially met. I was already his friend and he didn't even know it yet.

Bullies were givin him a hard time. Dey was harassing him about being a show off cause he was smart an all. Dey was getting ready to hurt him until I cleared my throat. Unh - Unhmmm.

Hey, how do you guys like my good friend? Is he duh coolest, or what? You would even tink he was a stuff shirt an all as smart as he is. Yeah, he sure got em all fooled alright.

Did ja know he was duh one who knocked over duh principle's statue duh uttah night? Wouldn't thought it was in him, would you?

Dat ain't all. You know duh quarterback jerk who tink he is good with all duh girls? He's duh one walkin around wit duh busted lip and two black eyes.

You guessed it. My guy did dat, too. I know you not thinking about ruffin him up for fun. If you do, life will never be duh same cause you won't see him comin when he hits you one at duh time when you leas lookin out. My friend's smart like dat.

Den dey went into a little cute song and dance so quick about how dey was just trying to make friends an all. Dey all started laughing and telling him he could hang out wit dem anytime he wanted to.

After duh bums split, I told him to never speak about it. All he said was dat he wanted me to be his friend for life. I don't know why but I took him up on it. I had.

Dat's why I'm in D. C. I'm still looking out for my guy because I am duh only person he really trusts. He's proven himself to be my good friend over duh



years. Most of it, I can't even talk about. So, I'll just have to take duh fifth, a fifth of Cognac if you got it.

His new team had received a tip there would be an attempt on his life at duh reception. I'm good with bullies when I know who dey are. Dis was going to be a little different. Dis game was out of my league and yet, if he has sent for me, he must believe I have something to offer. It has to be important.

I had barely reached my hotel room and hung up my clothes when an envelope was delivered. Strange duh deliverer didn't even wait for a tip. Stranger still was how anyone knew where I was dat quick. I gave no one my itinerary.

Not even my guy knew where I would be. Somebody did know and I didn't like dat.

I pitched duh envelope on duh bed while I finished settling in. This looked like a pretty good joint. For \$500 a night, it just ought to be.

I believed my four girls would like it here. I never left home without my four favorite girls. There was Jessie, Jennie, Joycie, and Betty.

Jessie is always at my right hand. Jennie is always at my right ankle. Joycie is always up under my left arm. If my hand is in my right pants leg pocket, I am holding on to Betty and you don't want me to bring her out unless I am peeling an apple or someting. Wit du girls close, life is good. I feel naked when I am without them.

Betty opens all my letters. She does her ting on this one like its hot melted butter.

It's time to see what's inside waiting for me. Duh envelope felt light. There couldn't be much in it.

At first, I didn't see anything in duh envelope. Then I held it upside down and shook it.

A card fell out. It was a plain little business card. There was something on it.

Keep your eyes on La "G" Heart "D" Circle Plus.

Glad Dove Ethyl

I wasn't sure whether my ole friend was playing games wit me or not. He certainly knew I was intrigued by mystery. Now I got someting to wrap my mind around.

I just didn't know what it was yet. I took it serious.

While I showered, I thought about it. La could mean anything from Los Angeles to Lovely Atlanta to Lower Alabama to duh feminine article "the" in French and Spanish.

Duh most common thing duh heart as a symbol stands for is love. While dis is a picture of a human blood pump, I'm betting it means duh same ting.

De G LOVE D, what is duh g love d?

It is duh gloved, but duh gloved what? We are not talking about a gloved Los Angeles. Go for duh feminine gloved what.

What do duh circle and duh plus mean? Oh, whoever did dis is good. Dis is good!

Dis is about duh feminine. A circle with a plus connected to it means woman. It all means duh gloved woman.

Duh shower so far had been productive. I didn't tink Glad Dove Ethyl would come as easy.

I finished duh shower determined to figure it out. It was time for a drink to

get it going on in my head.

I ordered room service. I had a few hours before I needed to arrive for duh reception.

I ordered a double cognac straight up with duh biggest lobster they had in duh joint wit some carrot cake and coffee.

I kept writing over and over Glad Dove Ethyl. I couldn't see anything.

When my food arrived, this time I was going to leave a tip. I asked duh young lady who brought duh food what was going on in her life.

She spoke like a true hustler when she said, "Why would I want to do anything else when I can hustle old guys like you for big tips?"

She smiled as she joked. I liked her smile.

She told me she liked her job. It helped her put money together for school. She had a plan. She was a young muttah with a little one at home to take care of. I wanted to ask about duh dad but I didn't.

She had a four year old son. Working duh room service hustle at duh hotel made more money than regular jobs so she hung on to it.

I liked what I was hearing. She seemed like a good kid.

"Hey kid, wanna join me for a bite," I asked her?

I told her I was willing to share everyting but duh cognac.

She told me, "You are my last service for the day. I can stay for a while if you like."

She asked me, "Should I get my tip now or will it grow interest while I stay?"

I said, "It's your choice kid. Let's see how you play it."

For a minute, I thought I had brought out the angry Latina in her.

She spoke a little louder, "You keep it for now on one condition. I'm no kid. I'm a grown woman as you can see and I have a name. My name is Aquila."

She was right. What Aquila was packing didn't belong to no kid.

I said to her, "Forgive me, Ms. Aquila. I apologize. You are right. You are a grown woman. I see that. My name is Z. Please, forgive an ole guy. What do you say?"

"We're cool Z," she said. "Offer me a chair so I can help you get at this lobster. I'll be fine. What are you working on with all that scratching you're doing on the paper?"

I told her, "I am working on a puzzle. I haven't figured out what it means."

"Can I see?" she asked.

"Of course you can. Let me get you duh whole thing as I got it. Maybe you will see it different," I said.

Aquila dips some lobster in duh hot butter as she looks at duh card. When she puts it in her mouth, duh butter drips from her lip and Z reaches his napkin to catch it. They make a brief eye contact.

Aquila laughs.

"Z, Look," she says. "Baby, I'm not laughing at you. I was into the eye thing too. I felt us, but look. It's the same message. Show me what you got so far."

"I got duh gloved woman" I said.

"That's it," Aquila said. "Have you done scrambled word puzzles where the letters are mixed up and you have to figure it all out? That is what's going on here. Only the second time, Glad Dove Ethyl doesn't become the gloved woman

like the first part. It becomes the gloved lady.”

“Are you sure,” I asked?

Aquila responds, “Yes, I’m very sure. Check the letters. Glad Dove Ethyl is an anagram for The Gloved Lady.”

I could have kissed her right den and dere.

“Aquila, you get lobster for a month, on Z,” I said.

“Is that my tip,” she asked?

“No, dis is your tip,” said Z.

Z slides her a C - Note.

Aquila looks at Z and asks, “Are you for real?”

“Yeah, it’s for real. You wuz gonna get duh hundred whetter you stayed two minutes or two hours,” said Z.

“Thank you, Z. Are you sure?” she asked again.

“I’m very sure and for what you have just done for a very important friend of mine and me, it should be more. Can I see you again,” Z asked?

“Do you mean like on a date,” Aquila asked?

“You can call it whatever you want,” Z said. “Can I see you again?”

“Yes, you can see me again. I’d like that,” said Aquila.

I finished my drink and told Aquila to take her time finishing duh lobster. Duh carrot cake was hers, too. I needed to get dressed and on my way. I had information I could work wit now.

I dressed so quickly. She was still doing her ting with duh lobster and some butter. I told her to just close up for me when she left and to please leave a number where I could call her later.

I got a cab to duh Memorial Center. Duh reception was three hours away. It would give me time to go over duh details. I needed to know how many servants dere would be. What would dey be wearing? How many would be women wearing gloves?

I wanted to see duh guest list. I also needed to connect with duh one person who could authenticate everyone as dey showed up.

Duh future would make my work so much easier. Dey will have stuff that will identify everyone as they walk into duh room by hitting der eyes wit an invisible beam. Tonight, I got to do it de old fashioned way wit only my eyes.

I even wanted duh list of duh uttah security personnel working for my buddy, especially duh women. Someone could be disguised as a woman to throw dis whole ting off. Dis whole ting could be one big distraction for sumtin else.

When I arrived at duh gated entrance, I offered my credentials. You would have thought I was somebody special for duh treatment I received.

Dey knew I was working for duh guest of honor. My anonymity was gone. I suppose it worked out just as well. I got everybody’s cooperation.

With less dan an hour to go, I had all my ducks in a row. If dere was to be a special gloved lady at this affair, I was looking forward to meeting her. Even more, I’m going to invite her to take her gloves off. I need to know if she knows how to play rough.

Guests began to arrive around 6:30 PM. This is duh Who's Who of everybody who tink dey are somebody in D. C. and even around de country. Many are guests from uttah countries.

My friend arrived around 8 PM. We had earlier agreed not to acknowledge each other. Neiter of us needs everybody to know we know each uttah.

A special dance is scheduled at 9 PM. It is duh Waltz of Triumph.

Duh guest of honor and his number one lady will take center floor to lead duh assembled into an up and down back and fort. How those moves became a mark of sophisticated civilization is beyond me.

Duh lights will go dim as duh Maestro takes duh stage and raises his baton. Duh dance begins on duh very first note. For this tribal exercise, duh leading man must be as skilled as de maestro and de musicians.

A stunna arrives minutes before duh dance. She's tall wit legs for days. Mink covers her shoulders. When it is taken, she is bare to duh depth of an amazing cleft.

I don't have time for dis demon dressed in shiny black velvet, like undertakers line caskets wit, down to a bare glimpse of her ankles. A portion of her gown follows behind her.

Damn! She's wearing gloves.

She is confirmed as a guest but I don't like duh timing of her arrival. Duh evening has gone smooth so far.

She works duh crowd immediately. Maybe dere working her. All duh men want to touch her and be noticed of her. They look like they are ready to drink muddy water out of her slipper. Oh, she's not wearing slippers. I think those are duh highest heels I've ever seen. All duh women wit men now drooling are hissing an ugly name on dere unopened lips.

Duh Gloved Lady positions herself in plain view for all to see. I am watching her as are all uttah security teams.

It is time for duh dance. Duh maestro assumes his station and so does my friend. Duh lights dim. Duh first note and steps are made.

Duh dimming lights go off. It is black in duh ballroom. Dere is a single shot.

I yelled, "Nobody move. Stay where you are until duh lights are back on. I repeat. Don't nobody move."

17 seconds later, duh lights are back on. Duh gloved lady is gone and duh Austrian Attache' lies on duh floor in a forming pool of blood.

Nearest women scream. Duh on site medical team is allowed access.

Everyone is stunned. My friend and his wife are quickly removed. All uttachs are sealed wit me in dis monument until I know what has happened.

No one is allowed to move. Witness statements are taken. Duh Attache' is dead.

One shot had severed his spinal cord at duh brain stem. His body didn't know it yet. His brain didn't know eiter. His body would give up soon because he was dead.

I learned later that while duh deceased credentials had been in order, he was a fake. He was a ringer on a mission to kill an Eagle. I had no clue. It seems I owe duh gloved lady my tanks for saving my friend.

She had done my work for me. I didn't really like dat. How'd she know who to hit? In D. C., wit everyting on a need to know basis, I would likely never know. She had backed a bully into a corner. He never saw her coming. When he wouldn't back off, she had taken him out of duh game.

Staff had been accounted for. Guests were accounted for except duh gloved lady. No one had seen her leave. Wherever she is, who ever she is, I wish her well. Duh girl is good.

It's time for me to dump dis joint. My work is finished here. I've got a number waiting for me back in my room I am ready to dial.

On my way out, a server approached me and asked if I was Z.

I said, "Who wants to know?"

"I don't know," the server said. "All I know is that we found this envelope marked for you if you are Z."

I couldn't pull out Betty. It would have scared duh server. I asked for a butter knife to open it.

I opened it and returned duh knife. I thanked duh server and said, "Dat will be all, tanks."

Inside duh envelope was ladies' gloves wit a note dat said, "I thought you might like a souvenir. Until next time."

Damn, she's not only good. She's cocky, too, but I don't have time to tink about dis right now. I have to get back to duh hotel. Dere is a number waiting for me.

From behind me someone yells, "Mr. Z. Mr. Z. There is a phone call for you in duh Director's Office on his private line. The person on the line says it is urgent."

What now, I tought to myself? I followed to duh phone. When I picked it up, I said, "Dis better be good."

It was my friend. He told me everyting had gone according to plan. De Gloved Lady was working for him too and we would be working togeter from time to time on other projects in duh future as our special talents needs might be required.

"Whatever you say man. You always were duh smart one. I'm your friend. Dat's all. Always have been. Always will be," I said.

"Do you need anything, anything at all," he asked?

"Yeah," I said. "I need you to let me go. I kinda got a date."

"Have a good time Z," he said.

"You, too, Mr. President," I said. "It was good to be here for you."

When I put the phone, I got de fastest cab I could to get back to de hotel. It was late but I didn't care. I was calling Aquila.

When I got back to my room, I looked everywhere for a phone number. Dere wasn't one to be found anywhere.

I was getting ready to call it a day, sit down, and sulk. I would call for a double cognac and some carrot cake. Dis time I would get around to eating it.

Dat's when I saw it. Dere it was just like I hoped. Dere was the number.

A beautiful arm was reaching out of my closet. On it was written, Aquila's number is 202 - 555 - 444Z.

# The Perfect Girl

Victor Phan

I.

The room was dark and silent. A small boy lied trembling as he listened to the sounds of the footsteps approaching. Each footfall made his heart beat faster. Johnny retreated into his sheet cocoon as the stomps got louder and louder. His tears left wet tracks down his cheeks, pooling into his pillow. The fear was intense. He begged for someone to save him, but he knew deep down no one ever does. Little Johnny had suffered through this many times over the past two years. This was one of those things he would never get used to, no matter how many times it happened.

The sound of the footsteps became deafening. Johnny's eyes were glued to the band of light creeping in under the doorway. The footsteps then became shadows in the doorway light. They paused at the door—and—walked on down the hall. Suddenly the footsteps stopped. Johnny heard the scrape the shoes made as they turned around. Two shadows appeared below Johnny's door. He could hear the doorknob turn. The door slowly crept open and Johnny instinctively pulled the covers over his head in an attempt at protection.

Johnny peaked out from underneath the sheet. Standing in the doorway was Johnny's foster father's shadowy figure. He was backlit by the hallway light. The man's face was featureless except for the glassy lit eyes from drinking, and a set of rotting teeth as he smiled. Swaying, he had hit a few bars after his graveyard shift at the rendering plant. Johnny could smell the stench of animal blood and rotting meat fill the room. What Johnny didn't know was his foster father was handing down the tradition of abuse he suffered when he was Johnny's age.

At the bottom of Johnny's view he could see the belt waiting for him. Johnny looked down to see the belt unravel from the fist and slap against the stained and tattered butcher's apron. Johnny shut his eyes in acceptance and submission to what was to come.

"Get up, boy," said the butcher. His voice slurred and his breath stank of the house whisky from the last bar.

"I said get up, ungrateful bastard! Don't pretend that you didn't hear me!" The next thing Johnny knew, he was kicking and screaming as his drunken foster father was dragging him out of bed by the ankles. The carpet burned his face as he was dragged and dumped in the living room.

"Suck it up and take your medicine like a man!" the Butcher raged. The alcohol only intensified the rage as he swung the belt in a high arc whipping the boy. The well-worn leather split his back, reopening old wounds and making new ones. Johnny closed up into a fetal position. The butcher's labored breathing was the last thing he heard before everything went black.

Johnny snapped awake at the scent of ammonia salts. Suddenly he aware

of his own vomit, urine, and blood on the floor. He became aware of three adults sitting on a filthy couch. They were thin to the point of emaciation, their faces grey and skinny, wiry to the brink of shadowy death. They took turns passing around a glass pipe, and smoked out of it using a torch. He saw one sucking on the glass pipe waving a butane lighter underneath.

It is said the mind bends and twists to deal with the traumas of life. In an instant Johnny's brain transported him to a room lit with only a bare bulb. The walls were wet and it stank of earth. He seemed a little bit older and with different foster parents. He huddled in a fetal position in the corner, while his foster parents lustfully indulged in the sins of the flesh. The young boy's sobs could not keep out the sounds of their well-worn soft springs keeping time with their rutting. Bottles of *Night Train* and *Black Velvet* littered the putrescent floor.

Johnny shut his eyes hard and prayed to be taken away to a better place. He wanted to be free of the pains he was forced to endure. He wanted liberation from the imprisonment he never asked for. Every night, before he went to sleep, he would ask himself where his *real mother* was. Surely she would care for him and nurture him. Surely she would give him the love he needed to grow.

When Johnny reopened his eyes he was locked inside of a dark place. He couldn't see his hands before him. He reached out and felt the walls closing him in. Claustrophobia made his breaths sparse. Suddenly the door burst open and there was light, but even the light bore no safety for Johnny. Standing in the light wasn't an angel to liberate him, far from it. There stood yet a different foster mother. This one was stern, with ragged hair and wrinkles, and a bible in her hand.

She yanked Johnny out of the closet and used the bible to bring the rapture upon the crying youth. Hard leather pounded against his young skull. Obscenities like "child of sin" projected from her crusted lips. The hard cover book repeatedly bashed into Johnny's head. The cover became red with blood and Johnny lost consciousness.

Johnny awoke in a cold sweat. He could taste the salt of his tears. He looked into the mirror and didn't see a little boy. In the child's place stood a young man. He gazed around his dark dorm room and realized where he was. He took comfort in the fact that it was all a dream. The scars that were left in his mind from his childhood would never leave him, but at least he wasn't still enduring the physical pains. Tomorrow would be a new day.

## II.

The halls of the university campus were tremendously crowded. It was as though the embodiment of the educational facility somehow gave its inhabitants life. Johnny trod alone down the long corridor. Though many surrounded him, deep down he was truly alone. Johnny watched all the people around him from the safety of his psyche. These new people, with their constant jabbering, were odd to him. Their completely superficial interactions astounded him.

He watched how they smiled when exchanging words with one another.

Theirs were false smiles with real intentions. He became enthralled by the dances of the social. From his blind spot, a rock hard shoulder slammed into his face and knocked him on his ass. Johnny looked up to see what juggernaut could have relentlessly impeded him from his path. There he saw a young goliath, and on his arm was a sexy, but angry blonde.

“Watch it, loser!” said the blonde. The couple laughed as they pranced away. Other students simply stared at Johnny sitting there on the floor like an idiot. Not a single one offered a helping hand.

When Johnny stepped into the university classroom, he was taken back by its vastness. He had never been inside such a large confinement before. Slow and shy, he took his seat in the back of class. The students around him continued their mindless banter. Johnny could not for the life of him understand what made them so happy to exchange trivial information. Their grins and chuckles began to sicken him.

Somewhere deep in his heart, he knew he truly yearned to be one of them. He imagined the bliss of being one of the laughing idiots in the group, but something held him back. He didn’t know what it was, but he knew it made him different. And for this same reason others could sense how different he genuinely was. Why else would they not greet him like they did one another? They all seemed to ignore him as though he was completely invisible.

The heavy door flung open as a large man entered the classroom. The class settled down in unison. The man’s authority was sensed in the air with a single spoken word. The man removed a dry erase marker from his bag and wrote on the board. His carefully scrawled words read, *Psychology 101*.

“Hello. I am Dr. Harris and you are in psych 101, introduction to psychology,” his voice echoed. Dr. Harris grabbed a stack of syllabi from his bag and passed them to the students in front. Students took one and passed the remainder to those behind them. Johnny became really eager to accept his syllabus. This minuscule bit of human interaction would be his chance for some kind of connection, no matter how obscure. He watched the stack get smaller-and-smaller as it approached him.

His moment was finally upon him as the student sitting in front of him handed the syllabus back. Johnny reached out for it but the student was too eager to let go. Like all of his hopes, the syllabus dropped to the cold hard concrete. Johnny bent over to pick up what was left of his aspirations. He quickly grabbed the grimy sheets of paper and sat back up. He then felt piercing gazes upon him. When he glanced up every single eye in the classroom was concentrated on him. He was startled by the silent admonitions.

Within a blink of an eye everything was back to normal. The professor was still giving his lecture up front as the students jotted their notes. Johnny, glad to not be the center of attention, breathed a sigh of relief. He reasoned his imagination was getting the best of him again. This wasn’t the first time his daydreams had seem too real, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last.

“We are going to be discussing the theory and application of psychology,” Dr.



Harris read off the syllabus. Johnny didn't pay the good professor any mind, instead he just watched the girls from his seat. Their flowing hair, soft skin, enticing smiles, and thong underwear straps enticed him. Johnny felt an erection growing in his jeans.

Many hours after class, with the moon out bright in the black clear sky, Johnny locked himself in his dorm room. Johnny was busy at his computer with all of the lights turned off. The only source of illumination came from the monitor. Johnny leaned back in the chair and loosened up. Now in the privacy of his room and no longer being able to resist the urge, Johnny clicked onto porn sites. He pulled out his already erected member and began stroking it with his free hand.

Johnny gripped the mouse with his other hand and clicked away. The first site he went to had plain nudity. There was not enough depravity for Johnny to have any real fun with himself. Bored with the site he surfed onto more porn sites. Finally he found the one that enticed his little cock. The page was littered with sodomy, hypoxiphilia, sadism, and other acts that were barely legal in most states. Unable to hold his excitement any longer, Johnny came in his hand. The explosion left Johnny utterly breathless.

After Johnny's masturbation ritual, he sat onto his bed and gazed out of the blinds. The campus grounds were dark, but there were enough lampposts for him to make out the figures beneath. He scoped out the girls strutting their stuff on the quad below. How he yearned to be able to penetrate some real flesh instead of his boring hand.

Out of the corner of his view he saw a sassy blond walk towards the parking structure. Rachel crossed the quad alone with books clutched to her breasts. Her hair had highlights and she wore low-rider jeans. He recognized her as the girl who had called him "loser" earlier that morning. Though anger filled him, lust was the victor above all. He watched as her ass swayed from side-to-side as she disappeared from his vision.

Johnny moved away from the window, and sat onto his bed with arms crossed. Sitting there alone in the dark brought back memories of his childhood. Images of his own torment shot through his mind like a sixteen-millimeter projector in fast forward. Johnny leaned over the nightstand and found his trusty model knife. He stared at it with admiration and remembered how this little blade, his best friend, had gotten him through so many of the hard times. He held the knife with his right hand and rose up his opposite forearm. The self-inflicted scars had given him escape from the pains of reality on so many other occasions.

But tonight, in a brand new home, why deny the inevitable? He knew the reason why he was set up in a dorm room in some suburban Orange County university. His latest foster parents had sent him here so they could be with their *Real Family*. Of course, they never told him that, but he could tell by their willingness to wisp him off to college. Tears filled his eyes and he finally accepted his fate. Without hesitation he slashed his wrist open vertically. The pain was intense, but not as intense as the pain of knowing the family that was supposed

to love him had cast him aside.

Suddenly a knock at the door brought Johnny out of his suicidal trance. The sight that he had not cut his wrist open startled him. It had been twice that same day that his imagination had taken hold. That was more times in one day than he could remember. The loud knock came again.

"Hey, Johnny! Mail's here! Can I come in?" said Daniel from the other side of the door.

"Uh. Yeah. Come in," Johnny replied.

Daniel entered with a stack of letters. Daniel was a young man in his late teens. His blood shot eyes and excessively dried mouth gave away his state of mind. He took a look around the room before he turned on the lights. With adequate illumination in the room, Daniel saw Johnny mesmerized by the knife.

"Johnny, are you psycho or somethin'? The hell you doin'?"

"Just thinking. So whatcha got for me, man?"

Daniel shuffled through the stack of envelopes. Each one was addressed to the stoner. He finally found one addressed to Johnny. "You only got one, dude. Looks like it's from your hometown of Riverside."

Rudy, a big jock, entered the doorway with a bong in his hand. He blew out smoke and commented with the same breath, "Riverside? That's the meth capital of the world!"

Johnny, offended, stared at the behemoth. Rudy smirked back and said, "Figures."

Johnny remembered that face. That was the jerk who had knocked him down in the morning. The sworn enemies acknowledged each other. Rudy passed Daniel the bong and went back over to the living room. After the hulk exited the room, Johnny let out the words he had kept inside, "Fuck you!"

Johnny grabbed the letter from Daniel's grasp and opened it with the model knife. Daniel left Johnny's lair and shut the door behind him.

"Psycho . . ." Daniel expelled in disbelief.

Johnny got up and pulled out the letter. He threw the written page on the computer desk without perusal. A picture slid from the opened envelope and fell to the floor. Johnny bent over to retrieve it. He studied the glossy photograph. There was a girl standing against some shrubbery. The picture entranced him. The girl was young, seventeen maybe, and very beautiful. She had shimmering blonde hair and emerald green eyes. She had the look of someone who was soft spoken and nurturing. The girl in the photo mesmerized him. She was his fantasy, *The Perfect Girl*.

"You're gorgeous," said Johnny as he gently touched the smooth surface of the photograph. He plopped down into the chair and stared intently at the picture. This photograph displayed the girl he had been searching his entire life for. "You're perfect."

Those were the last words Johnny would utter for hours. Johnny stared at the picture without movement long into the night. Then he closed his eyes and let sleep take him off to the world of dreams.

When he reopened his eyes, he was sitting on a blanket on a hillside. The

bright California sun warmed the back of his neck. When he looked up he saw his *Dreamgirl* in front of him. If beautiful was the word to describe her in the picture, then there were no words that could describe her in motion. Her deep mysterious eyes graced him with enchanting embrace. She was smiling, but not too much, just enough to give a hint of the joy she felt inside.

Unlike the previous episodes in the past day, this time Johnny knew he was dreaming. Johnny picked up a glass of champagne and took a sip, never for a moment taking his eyes off of her; afraid she would vanish if he blinked. There was a china plate next to him with ripe strawberries. He picked one up and offered it to her. She took a nibble out of it, ever so slowly, ever so gracefully.

“I’m so glad we could be together today,” said the beauty before him.

“Who would of thought? You and me together, it’s perfect.” The words just flowed from him without control.

“I love you.” The words coming from her soft voice made his heart melt. He had never felt the joy and warmth he felt at that moment. If he had died right then and there, he would have been completely content. This affection, he was sure, was what he had been missing his entire life. He glanced down to retrieve *Dreamgirl* another strawberry. As he reached out his finger, blood began dripping onto the white plate.

Johnny followed the dripping to its origin. There, blood was dripping from *Dreamgirl*’s eyes.

“You’re bleeding,” Johnny said apathetically.

Johnny turned around to reach for a rag. When he came back around to face her, she was gone. Once again Johnny was alone in a world that was alien to him. Then the dream was over.

### III.

Johnny slumped in the back row of his psychology class. Like his first day, he made no attempt to communicate with those around him. Again he was amazed by how alive the students were. Everyone simmered down when Dr. Harris entered the classroom. The good professor wrote the day’s discussion topics on the board, but Johnny couldn’t care less about psychology. Absolutely bored, he fished for the picture of *Dreamgirl* from his bag. He held it under the desk so no one else could see. Dr. Harris faced the class and spotted Johnny daydreaming.

Looking directly at Johnny, the professor bellowed with his thunderous voice, “Students who sit in front tend to do better than those in the back of class.” With all eyes on Johnny, only this time in actuality, Johnny hid the picture and gave the professor his undivided attention. Johnny thought to himself, *fucking asshole!*

A girl stumbled into class late and broke the silence. Johnny wanted to scope her goods, but she was all the way in front with her back towards him. He couldn’t see her face but it didn’t matter, what he could see he liked very much. She offered apologies to the professor and took a seat in the front row. Johnny kept on gazing at her arousing figure. She was slender but had voluptuous qual-

ities where they mattered. Her blonde hair shone in the fluorescent lights.

“And another tip. Students who get to class on time tend to do better too,” Dr. Harris jested. Johnny and the tardy girl were the only ones who didn’t laugh. Johnny gazed at the other person who didn’t find humor in the professor’s words. The girl leaned over and fished for a pen from her purse. She felt Johnny’s eyes on her, so she looked up and locked eyes with him for an instant.

Johnny felt his heart wanting to bleed again upon seeing those mesmerizing eyes. The vivid scene from his dream flashed through his mind. *Could it really be her?* She had turned to face the professor before Johnny could get a good look. Johnny clumsily fished for the picture again. He held it up and examined the back of her head. Had his dreamgirl really waltzed into his life? Did some angel send her for him? These were the thoughts that were racing through his mind, as well as his heart.

Johnny decided to follow Dreamgirl after class. He shadowed her from a safe distance. The crowded campus provided him with adequate cover. Dreamgirl talked on her cellular phone the whole way to the main quad. Once at the main quad, she stopped and circled around. She asked her phone, “Hey, where are you?”

Before she could spot him, Johnny darted towards a stairway and hid. Johnny watched from the protection of the shadows.

“I’m waiting in the quad. See yah.” Dreamgirl put her phone back into her purse. She waited there in the bright sunlight. Gazing at her reminded Johnny even more of his dream. Then the warmth came back into heart, the warmth of hearing her say, *I love you*. Johnny couldn’t bear staying apart any longer. If this truly was the love of his life he had to take action now. Johnny mustered enough courage to take a single step. He then saw Rudy and Rachel coming over to greet Dreamgirl. Quickly, Johnny retreated to the comfort of the shadows.

“What took you guys so long?” asked Dreamgirl as she approached the two.

“Sorry,” Rachel responded. “We were all the way across campus.”

Rudy, smirking, came over and wrapped his arms around Dreamgirl. Johnny’s anger rose. Rudy planted a kiss on her lips. This was the ultimate insult. Johnny stormed away and retreated to his dorm room.

The temperature in Johnny’s room was unbearably hot. The air was stale and stagnant. Johnny sat at his desk aggressively masturbating to net porn. He released all of his furies onto his member. Sweat dripped from his brow. Tears ran from his eyes. His breaths came in short spurts and were in unison with his rapid heartbeat.

He began losing his erection. Johnny panicked and started jerking off with greater intensity. His member was still going limp. He shut his eyes and tried to escape to a better place, a place for just him and her. He imagined her lying naked on satin white sheets. She beckoned him to come to her. He saw himself naked and nervous as he approached her. He leaned over and gently kissed her soft lips. She breathed slowly along his skin, sending goose bumps all over.

Johnny kissed her more passionately. She began to moan. He got on top of her and spread her legs. She shyly opened them, as if to say, what was in between

was only for him. He rubbed his hardened self against her entrance, begging to get in. She squinted in ecstasy by the little teasing poke. He felt her fluid coming and wetting the head of his member.

So warm, so smooth, and so slippery, he had to enter. He slowly slid himself all the way in. She gave out a passionate cry of acceptance as he pushed to full extent. He kissed her neck. He thrust his hips ever so slowly. Her hands tightened around his back. Each one of Johnny's thrusts was met with a loving pant. He increased his tempo. She looked into his eyes. Her passionate stare was more than Johnny could bear. He then came inside of her warm womb.

Johnny was still breathing profusely as he opened his eyes. He was in sitting in his chair with his hand around his limp penis. He felt the hot cum dripping out from between his fingers, but something was different. He felt there was more fluid than usual. When he looked down and opened his hand, he saw only blood.

#### IV.

In the next class session, Johnny sat in the back as accustomed. Dr. Harris paced back-and-forward giving his lecture. Johnny remained oblivious to the teachings and only focused on Dreamgirl. The professor explained, "Today's lecture is going to be about psychopathology, or as better known, abnormal psychology."

Johnny was hypnotized by Dreamgirl. She sat in the front row taking notes. Every move she made was in slow motion to him. He became lost in her beauty and grace. Dr. Harris continued his lessons, "a fair amount of the cases we're going to discuss involve psychosis. In contrary to what the media has portrayed, psychosis, or rather being psychotic, does not mean to be overly violent. Psychosis is a disconnect with reality. Patients who suffer from psychosis are unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy, and have difficulty meeting the demands of daily life."

Johnny extracted his cell phone from his pocket. Furtively, he snapped pictures of Dreamgirl.

Dreamgirl headed towards the quad after class. Johnny trailed from behind at first, but this time something inside him told him to *go for it*. The voice could have been courage, foolishness, or a mixture of the two. He resisted the urge, but when he caught the grace of her movement, he couldn't resist it any longer. He upped the tempo of his tread and approached her.

He stopped, right in front of her, forcing her to stop too. She smiled at him puzzled. To Johnny's misfortune, approaching her was the extent of his plan. He didn't know what to do from there. All he knew was he had to say something. *Anything!*

"Hi," the nervous words barely escaped his lips. There was an awkward silence. He had to follow up with something. "My name is Johnny."

"Hi," she responded with a confused grin.

That was all Johnny could figure to do. He just stared at her and searched for the words to release the passion that he felt burning inside for her. She didn't know how to react to the situation either. So they both just stood there, smiling at one another, like idiots.

“We have class together. Would you like to . . .” Johnny was interrupted by an annoying ring tone.

Dreamgirl reached into her purse and retrieved her cell phone. Johnny saw the name, *Rudy*, lit up on the LCD screen. Dreamgirl answered, “Hi, honey. I’ll be right there.”

She hung up the phone. With no further words to say to one another, she ended the odd first impression. “See you in class.”

Dreamgirl strolled away as Johnny’s eyes and heart followed. Johnny couldn’t just let her get away. So he ran as hard as he could to the top of building. He had to see where she was going. He reached the roof and got a clear view of the quad.

It’s amazing how many students could fill a quad on a hot summer day. Bodies of students flowed together in giant masses like schools of fish. Rudy and Rachel were on a bench all over each other. They shared sloppy kisses and pressed their pelvises against one another. Rudy’s hands were rubbing and grabbing Rachel’s tits and ass. Rachel disengaged from the carnal display, “So when you gonna dump her?”

“Soon.” Those were only words Rudy would offer her. She wasn’t satisfied with his answer so she gave him her *bitch-face*.

“Telling your girlfriend that you’re banging her best friend isn’t something you just can bring up,” Rudy replied cockily. He looked through the mazes of students and saw his actual *girlfriend* coming from the distance.

“Shit. She’s almost here,” he said as he pushed Rachel off his lap.

Offended, Rachel had to come back with a rebuttal. She rubbed his leg and said, “You don’t get any until you break up with up her.”

Rudy wasn’t fazed, “We’ll see about that.”

Dreamgirl approached her *long-time lover* and *childhood friend*. Rudy got off the bench and kissed her. Rachel’s countenance filled with disgust. From up above on top of the building, Johnny watched the betrayal happen right before him. He knew it was up to him to save Dreamgirl from the traitors.

Night fell onto the Southern Californian campus. The air carried a bitter-warm breeze. On a night like this, most students would go run amok at the downtown pubs. They would unleash wild frenzies of aggressive behavior and promiscuous sexuality, and blame alcohol as the culprit. Johnny wasn’t like most other students, or most other people in fact. Instead of enjoying the warm embrace of the summer night, Johnny stayed locked inside his tiny room.

Johnny shuffled around his belongings on his desk, looking for his data cable. The picture that started this wild obsession sat against the monitor. Johnny became agitated because he knew he had left the cable on his desk, but for some reason he couldn’t find it. Maybe it was underneath something. Sitting in the center of his desk was the letter that had originally come with the picture. To this day the picture was all he indulged, so why read it now? He lifted up the letter and found the cable underneath.

He tossed the letter back onto his desk and connected the cable into his

computer. He connected the other end into his cell phone. Johnny then uploaded the pictures onto the desktop of his computer. There were many shots of Dreamgirl, each one capturing her mesmerizing qualities, but not doing them the justice they deserved.

Johnny took a seat and set the pictures as his wallpaper. He gazed at his collection of beauty shots. He became lost in her eyes and felt the love pour out from his heart. Ever so gently, he touched the monitor with his fingertips. Suddenly, knocks at the door brought him out of his moment.

"Johnny? You okay, dude? You've been in there for a while," asked Daniel from the other side.

"Get the fuck outta here! I'm busy!" Johnny shouted with murderous rage.

"Okay, dude! Sorry!" Daniel left Johnny to worship his newfound shrine.

Johnny prayed to Dreamgirl for hours before sleep caught him. Johnny put up a good fight before his eyes became too heavy. What dreams awaited him?

Johnny found himself inside of Rudy and Dreamgirl's apartment. Once again he knew he was in a dream. It was rare for him to know when he was dreaming. In most cases, he was not able to distinguish the separate stages of consciousness between the different worlds of sleep.

Johnny was startled by loud shouts. Rudy and Dreamgirl were in the middle of a late night lovers' quarrel.

"I know you're cheating on me!" Dreamgirl confronted Rudy.

"I don't know what you're talking about," replied Rudy. He was a liar to the bitter end.

"Don't lie to me! I know you've been sleeping around!"

"You're crazy! I'm not dealing with this shit right now!" Rudy bent over to retrieve his keys.

Dreamgirl quickly swiped the keys off the table. She quipped, "You're not leaving without these!"

Anger shone in Rudy's face. He growled, "Give me those!"

"No!" She dangled the keys in his face mockingly. Rudy swiped for the keys but she moved them away.

"I said give me my fucking keys!" This was the final warning.

"No!" This was the final act of defiance.

Rudy cranked back his fist and threw it into her jaw.

Within a blink of an eye Johnny found himself committing an act of voyeurism at Rachel's place. Rudy and Rachel were fornicating on the dirty couch. Johnny watched the two going at it like wild chimpanzees. They were all over each other, rubbing lips and hands everywhere. Usually a scene like this would elicit an erection from Johnny. Arousal was the furthest emotion from what Johnny felt inside. This display of animal lust was their celebration of a battle won over Johnny's precious dreamgirl. *They can't get away with this!*

Johnny awoke in his chair. It took a few seconds before all the rage from the dream came back to him. Something had to be done. Only he could stop the

betrayal. With pure animal ferocity, he got off his chair and grabbed something sitting on his lamp stand on his way out.

V.

Rachel walked alone across campus towards her car. She passed the library that stood still and silent as a sentinel. Her busy work schedule made it impossible for her to take all morning classes. It wasn't the night classes that bothered her though; it was the long walk to the parking structure that she didn't particularly enjoy. As secure as the officials made the campus seem, who truly knew what could happen at night?

She always held her books squeezed across her breasts when she walked at night. It wasn't that she was cold; it was the fact that she was scared. Holding her books like that was like an adult version of hiding under the covers. To Rachel, psychotic knife wielders on campus were just as plausible as monsters hiding under the bed. But in the realm of adulthood, the bedroom is the open world, and the monsters are murderers and rapists.

Feeling the paranoia and fear kick in, she accelerated her stride. She was determined to get to the structure faster before something or someone would come hungry for her. Even then she could swear she felt eyes prying on her, waiting for her to walk into an unseen trap.

The monolithic parking structure waited for her. She moved towards it like it was her sanctuary from the wicked that waited silently in the open. Its walls of glass and stone would certainly protect her. She sensed something was behind her. Goose flesh grew on the nape her neck, so she did the only thing she could think of, she ran. As she reached the stairs at the base of the structure, she decided to give someone a call just in case something did happen to her. At least there would be someone to call for help. If this fear were indeed just her imagination, hearing someone's voice would alleviate some of her tensions.

She removed her phone from her bag and dialed Rudy. She could hear the sound of the phone being activated as Rudy pulled it from his pocket. She knew she couldn't let him know she was scared, so she tried to play it cool. "So what you up to tonight?"

"I'm watching a movie with my girlfriend," Rudy whispered.

Hearing Rudy's strong voice made her fears dissipate. She completely forgot her fears and only remembered her libido.

"Any way you can get out of it and pay me a visit?"

"Not tonight," Rudy sternly replied.

Her car was only a few feet away. Rachel shuffled through her purse for the keys. Her inaccurate fingers slipped and the keys fell onto the hard concrete of the structure. Apparently talking on the phone and taking out keys were too difficult of tasks to be completed simultaneously. She bent down for them. When she got down she discovered her tire had been slashed.

"What the fuck?" She looked around. No one was there.



“Don’t get pissed at me. You know how it is.”

“I’m not talking to you. I gotta call a tow truck. Can I call you back?”

“Don’t call back. I’ll be with my girl all night.”

“Whatever,” Rachel said with her infamous *bitch-face*. She hung up and dialed another number.

Johnny stepped out from behind one of the pillars. Ever so gently, as not to make a sound, he came closer from behind. Step-by-step he closed in on his prey. Feeling Johnny’s eyes on her, Rachel turned and screamed.

Seeing that it was only a little nerd and not some raving psychopath, Rachel let out a sigh of relief.

“You scared the living shit outta me!”

Johnny didn’t respond. All he did was study her movements. He focused on the task at hand. Rachel misunderstood Johnny’s silence with shyness. She thought that this was her lucky break. She could manipulate this little nerd into giving her a ride home. Why not? She was sure she had absolute control over anything with a penis. If her plan succeeded she wouldn’t have to pay for a tow truck.

“Hey, can you give me a ride?” she asked in a manipulative tone with eyes fluttering.

Johnny looked down at the cell phone in her hand. He saw that the phone call was still pending. He quickly slapped the small device out of her hand. The screen went black as the phone hit the cold concrete.

“What the fuck?” Rachel didn’t understand what was going on. How could someone this pathetic resist her? No man has ever refused this modern succubus. Rachel took a step back and took in the whole picture. She finally saw the hungry pocketknife wielded in Johnny’s hand. She glanced back over to her tires. As slow as she was, she still could put the two-and-two together. She backed away slowly as Johnny kept approaching.

Johnny came towards her with his eyes locked onto hers. Rachel could feel his ravenous contempt wanting to take a piece of her. He meant business. She needed some kind of diversion to buy her some time to flee. She made a fist with the keys in her grasp. She lunged forward and caught Johnny off guard. With a quick slash, copper etchings carved into the smooth flesh of Johnny’s face. Johnny whelped out loud in pain and held onto his bleeding cheek. Rachel used this time efficiently by turning and running at full speed.

Johnny held onto his wounds with both hands. He felt the torn flesh hot with blood. His anger intensified. He would not be stripped of his prey. Johnny chased Rachel using all of his fury to power him. The adrenaline burned as red-hot blood coursed in his veins. Rachel ran as hard as she could but she had too many physical limitations. She was smaller in stature and wasn’t wearing shoes equipped for sprinting. Johnny, the hunter, had all of the advantages. Within a few seconds he caught up to the little mouse. He reached out, grabbed her by the hair, and swung with all of his might. The back of her head slammed hard against the glass of the structure.

Dazed but still conscious, Rachel began to panic. Johnny pinned her up

against the glass.

“Oh my god! Help! Help!” Rachel screamed.

Johnny pulled her close to him with the pocketknife pointed to her face. His eyes, full of fury, were streaming with his murderous intent.

“Please don’t hurt me.” The pleading had officially begun. Watching her induced memories of when Johnny was a child. He remembered the unanswered prayers. Johnny lowered the weapon. Rachel saw her pleas working, so she begged even more.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she begged with tears flowing. Johnny remembered how he used to beg. Images of the predators in his life manifested themselves to Johnny. He remembered how they ignored all of his entreaties and carried away with his torment. He looked onto Rachel expecting to see the child in her wanting escape, the way he used to be, but when he gazed upon her all he saw was the filth. He saw the too much make up, the highlighted hair, and the bra that squeezed her breasts together. She wasn’t an innocent like he was. She was one of them. She was one of the predators. She was a siren who would lure sailors to their doom in the depths of the ocean.

“Please don’t . . .” her final plea never escaped her lips. Johnny’s eyes were locked onto hers as she squirmed. He wouldn’t miss a moment of it. She panted with faces of agony. The other side of the glass smeared with blood spilling to the ground. Johnny’s blade wielded hand moved slowly but accurately across her abdomen. Her precious life innards were being carved up like a turkey at a ceremonial feast. Her face lost all of its color and her breaths came in rapid spurts. Johnny’s eyes remained locked onto hers as the remainder of her life slipped away.

Moments later Johnny was sitting inside of Rachel’s car. He was in the driver’s seat searching through her phone’s directory. He had a lot of difficulty operating the simple device, being that his whole entire body was slippery with blood. The remains of Rachel’s were slumped in the passenger seat. A long and gruesome trail of blood led from the point of her demise to where she lied. It was ironic that if she had just gotten into the car, locked the doors, and used the cell phone to call for help she would still be alive. Instead, both she and her murderer were in the car together, while he operated the device that could have saved her, and she lied there completely dead.

Johnny wiped his hand on the clean part of his shirt and finally got enough grip to turn the device on. With dry fingers, he easily searched through the menu commands and looked up the last numbers dialed on her phone. The last one was some towing company. That wasn’t what he was searching for. He pressed the up button. A little screen popped up saying *Rudy* with a heart next to it. He hit the ‘option’ command and found the address on the tiny-lit LCD screen. A maniacal grin grew across his mad countenance.

VI.

The apartment complex that Rudy and Dreamgirl lived in wasn’t your average

college dwelling. It was a large luxury apartment with a full sized kitchen and patio. Most college students found themselves scraping by in the slums to survive, but not Rudy. His parents had paid for his apartment and his athletic scholarship paid for his tuition and expenses. Life can be nice when you have a full ride.

Rudy and Dreamgirl were on the couch watching a slasher movie. Dreamgirl was appalled by the amount of gratuitous sex and violence in the film. Rudy, on the other hand, completely loved the display of fake blood and prosthetic organs. On the screen there was girl with ridiculously huge breasts, being chased by a mask madman, armed with a never-ending arsenal of gardening tools. Suddenly Rudy's cell phone rang out loud startling both of them.

"Who is it?" Dreamgirl inquired. Rudy looked at the screen and saw Rachel's number. The screen read 'Rachel' with a pornographic image next to it.

"Sorry, babe. I gotta take this," Rudy answered. He got up and walked a safe enough distance away so Dreamgirl couldn't hear him. Annoyance filled his voice as he answered the phone, "I thought I told you not to call me back."

"Tell her about the other girl," the malicious voice demanded.

Shocked, Rudy responded, "What? Who the hell is this?"

"I said tell her. This is your last chance." This was the final warning.

"I don't know who you are but I'm gonna fuck you up." The fear and worry was eminent in Rudy's tone. The line went dead.

As Rudy paced back over to the couch, Dreamgirl could see the worry painted all over his countenance.

"Who was it?" she asked.

"Um . . . it's one of my friends. He said his car broke down and needs a jump." His words were sparse. To anyone who wasn't as trusting, that would have been obvious sign of a liar.

"Are you serious? What do you expect me to do?"

"Just stay here, babe. It can't take too long."

Dreamgirl nodded and Rudy grabbed his jacket and made his way to the door. As the door opened, a figure revealed itself from behind the threshold. The aperture was dark, but not dark enough to make the deep red blood no longer visible. Johnny, silent but waiting to explode in fury, stood there like a sentinel of death.

"What the fuck?" Those were Rudy's brilliant and equally meaningful last words. Within a split second Johnny's hand whipped through the air. Rudy held onto his throat to stop the blood from flowing out of the open torrent. His vision became hazy but he could still see the glint from the blade Johnny carried underhand. Rudy turned around to Dreamgirl and fell face forward. He crawled towards her as the vital life fluid spilled from his second smile. Dreamgirl screamed and ran into the hall.

"Wait! Don't go!" Johnny pleaded.

The panic and adrenaline coursing through Dreamgirl's veins made her lose control of her body. All she wanted to do was escape, but escape doesn't work so

well when one isn't thinking straight and fails to conceive his or her surroundings. A contusion in the rug caught her toes and the top of her foot, causing her to fall and hit her head onto the wooden base of the couch. Everything went black.

When Dreamgirl awoke, she came to the realization that her arms and legs have been bound. A series of clumsily strewn rope coiled around her to a semen-stained mattress. The room was dark and musty. She was dripping with what she prayed was only sweat. The air was thick and smelled putrid, causing her to swallow back her reflex to vomit. She did not know where she was. She did not know why she was there. All she knew was this was a place she didn't want to be. The blankets draped over the windows kept out the warmth of the sun.

"Where am I?" Her head was still woozy from the harsh blow it had taken.

She fully opened her eyes and found Johnny worshiping her from his chair.

"Let me out of here! Someone please help! Help! Help!" The sense of panic and instinctual fear came back to her.

Johnny rushed to her with his finger to her lips. "Shhh. Shhh. Don't scream. I'm not gonna hurt you. Please don't scream."

"What do you want from me?" Fear painted her face.

"I want us to be together. I want us to be one. I want to make you happy."

The words came with genuine sincerity.

"Why?"

"Because you love me." The words coming from Johnny's own lips summoned tears.

"What? I don't love you. I don't even know you. Why would I love you?"

Johnny became confused. He remembered the day they were at the picnic together. Where he had fed her strawberries. When she told him the three words no one has ever uttered to him, *I love you*.

"You love me. You told me you love me." The desperation in his tone was evident.

"No I didn't. I don't love you! I love my boyfriend." The hard blow to her head had shaken memories right before the impact. She shook her head from side-to-side searching for her lover. "Where is he? Did you do something to my . . ."

"He was an obstacle. He had to be removed. Your slut friend was in the way too. She's gone. We can be together now." Johnny tried his best to make her understand with the least words possible. Dreamgirl looked into his eyes. Johnny felt joy because finally someone saw things the way he had seen them. Slowly tears began to flow from Dreamgirl's delicate eyes.

"We're gonna be happy! There's nothing in the way! You're free!" Mistaking her tears as tears of joy, Johnny let out his victory cry. This was the greatest moment in his life, but this victory would be very short lived.

"You killed the two people I love most in my life and I'm free?" The agony she showed on her face could not be mistaken as anything else, no matter how naive the spectator. She cried with such angst and fury. The words came with much difficulty, but nothing could hold them back. She would let them out if they were the last words she would speak. "I don't love you. I fucking hate you!"

Johnny couldn't understand what was happening. He was in complete disbelief. Dreamgirl made it so he understood crystal clear. She stared into his eyes with the full fury of a broken heart and yelled, "I fucking hate you!"

After her catharsis, she resumed her mourning. She put her beautiful face to her shoulder and sobbed. Johnny felt his mind giving. After all these years of agony and torment he thought he had finally found love. She was supposed to love him. She was his destiny. Why else would he have mysteriously received her picture? She was supposed to be his, but she was before him denying his love.

He grasped his head with both hands and began crying out loud. The tormented child inside of him was set free. He fell to the ground and writhed all over it like he was being scourged to death. He had known the polar opposite of love his entire life and thought that this was finally his turn, but he was wrong. He had been lying to himself the entire time, and now he knew it.

Johnny found the way back to his feet and screamed into Dreamgirl's face, "You hate me? I killed them! I did it for you! I did it for us!"

He bellowed with all his might and pain. If heaven and hell existed, both of them would tremble by the sounds of his agony.

"I did it for us!"

Dreamgirl cried even harder. Johnny breathed in and tried to regain his composure. He had already done the deeds. There was no turning back. Rudy and Rachel were dead. He was a murderer and a kidnapper as well. There was only one thing left to do.

"You're right. You're right." These were the words of a broken man.

"Are you going to set me free?" She felt a sense of relief. Had he truly regained his senses? Will she step back into the warm nurturing sunlight that awaited her outside of these cold walls?

Then the cold reply, "No."

"What?" She didn't understand what was happening.

Johnny reached back and grabbed the model knife off of his desk. Tears flooded his eyes. He really didn't want to perform the next task, but it had to be done. He mounted on top of Dreamgirl and held her head still with his left hand. She screamed for her life but no one came to her aid.

"Noooooo! Someone please help me! Help!" The walls shook with her final pleas.

Too emotional to stop himself from shaking, Johnny started slashing whatever was before him. The blade met flesh and gave birth to blood. Pain was very much alive inside of Johnny's little dorm room. He looked down at her wiggling trying to escape.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Johnny cried and kept on cutting. The noises she was making were the most horrible sounds he ever heard. Even in his darkest nightmares he had never heard the sounds that were now echoing his room, but he kept on slicing. Dreamgirl, face cut up beyond all recognition, finally got a lucky break. Johnny's frantic slashes finally opened her throat. She was going to die soon, and no longer had to suffer at the hands of this creation of man, this child of society.

“I love you! I love you so much! I love you!” Johnny repeated the words as he faced up. Tears were streaming down from his eyes to his neck and chest. Dreamgirl lied lifeless under him, but he couldn’t stop cutting. He just kept swiping the blade through flesh as blood sprayed and splashed onto his face. When he looked back down there was no Dreamgirl underneath him. The blood was coming from him slashing up his own arm.

Suddenly the door was kicked open. Two bulking police officers rushed into the room and tackled Johnny down. One officer pried the little knife from Johnny’s fingers and tossed it across the room. Paramedics burst in and began keeping pressure on Johnny’s slashed arteries. One paramedic tried to communicate with Johnny to keep him from going into shock. Johnny just kept on screaming the same three words over-and-over again until his consciousness gave way. *I love you.*

## VII.

Students from all over the campus came to see what was the commotion. The flashing lights of the ambulance and police units drew much attention. Their morbid curiosity got the best of them and they needed to know the matter of the situation. Daniel, completely shaken by the current events, stood in front of the dorm building. Students everywhere gathered around to watch the scene unfold. Rudy and Rachel saw Daniel in the crowd and ran up to him.

“Hey, Daniel! What the hell happened?” Rudy asked his pale friend.

It took Daniel a lot of effort to muster enough strength to try to speak, but somewhere he found that strength. “I dunno. He locked himself up in his room. He didn’t even answer when I knocked on his door.”

Rudy envisioned a glassy-eyed Johnny staring at his computer screen in the dark, completely oblivious to the sounds of Daniel pounding on the door.

Daniel began to cry. Rudy motioned him it was fine to stop, but he continued. The torrent could not be stopped.

“He fucking locked himself in his room for a week, man!”

“Dude, you don’t have to . . .”

“I called the cops when I heard him screaming crazy shit!” Daniel’s cried into his hands.

The paramedics came through the entrance and pushed students out of their way. They carried Johnny off in a stretcher. Johnny was white with eyes completely somewhere else. Johnny’s mind was still in another world. A nightmare world he had created for himself. The very sight of the psychotic youth horrified the students. The paramedics lifted him up into the ambulance. Rudy could hear Johnny repeating to himself over-and-over, “I love you.”

The campus was a scene of absolute commotion. The only place that had any peace and quiet was Johnny’s little room. Johnny’s room was a place of absolute tranquility. The room was still dark due to the blanket drapes. The blood that seeped into the dirty mattress was still warm and red. The wallpaper that Johnny had loaded was still on his computer screen. It was filled with ran-

dom pictures of the inside his room. No *Perfect Girl* could be found anywhere on his monitor, but just a little below it was the picture of the girl he had received in the mail. And beside the picture was the unread letter.

*Dear Johnny,*

*I've been the social worker on your case since you were born. For reasons outside of my control you have lived a very hard life, but I hope this picture gives you some sort of closure. She requested I give this to you when you turned eighteen. Johnny, this is your biological mother.*

*Anne Sullivan  
Department of Child Services  
Riverside, CA*

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god-like      by Rob Plath

once when i was  
10 years old  
one of the many  
times i was forced  
to go to church  
early in the morning  
on sunday  
i was in the front  
row & when the priest  
came to shake  
hands to offer peace  
i shot mine back  
and ran it  
through  
my hair  
to my surprise  
he laughed  
taking it very  
gracefully  
looking back  
i think that  
deceiving

gesture of mine  
was actually  
very god-like  
just think  
of the countless  
hands]  
throughout  
history that  
reached out  
& how that  
all-knowing  
motherfucker  
dissed them  
& whipped back  
his hand  
& pushing it  
through the  
strands of  
his cosmic  
locks  
cackled

“Fuck the bitch, man! She knew fucking well what she was getting into when she married me. Fuck her and her high fucking horse and her fucking family, too.”

You nod sympathetically, gently petting his back beneath the jacket he wears despite the warmth of the summer day. The air conditioning has run non-stop since you arrived on his doorstep not even twenty-four hours ago now; if you close your eyes, you might be able to trick yourself into believing you’re at home.

“I ain’t going to fucking *rehab*, dude.”

“I know.”

“Rehab’s for fucking losers. *Bitches*.”

“And quitters.”

He glances sharply at you, then smirks a little when he realizes you’re teasing. He’s obviously been on the defensive for far too long. An uncharacteristic uncertainty appears on his face, clouding his clear blue eyes for a split second, and you know he’s going to ask you what *you* think as if you’re qualified to make that determination. You’re not an expert, a doctor, or even an addict, unless, of course, you count your daily two or three (or more) cocktails; you’re just his *friend*, and that’s all you intend to be, at least as far as this conversation is concerned.

That doesn’t, of course, mean you’re any less concerned about *him*.

Before he can pose the question, though, you reach over and brush a damp lock of hair off his forehead, smiling reassuringly into his eyes and wilting a little with relief when you see his uncertainty melting away as surely as a sliver of ice on a steaming hot sidewalk. You don’t want to have to say it, because you know he already knows you’re here for him now, you’ve always been, and you’ll always be, at least until your dying day and probably beyond. Many things change, but some never do.

Before your hand can fall completely away, he places his own over it, pinning your palm – gently – against his cheek. There’s something else in his eyes now, something his greasy hair and three days’ stubble and slightly vacant expression can’t camouflage, because it’s something only you have been trained to find there. You’ve been looking for it – and *at* it – for a lot of years, after all. It’s something he has obviously tried to suppress ever since he got married – and, to a lesser degree, even since he got engaged – but that he’s never quite succeeded in putting away entirely. It’s that vulnerability he reserves only for you, allows only you to see.

You don’t need to say anything, because anything you could possibly say now would sound too “after school special” to be appropriate anyway. He doesn’t need life lessons or lectures from your lips; what he needs from you is inaudible and intangible, except in the most literal sense.

He needs *you*, and you both know it.

There’s one other thing he needs first, however, and when you lean over to ghost your lips over the stubble on his throat, you take the opportunity to inform



# Inverted Nothing

(Nothing Backwards  
Is Almost The Same)

*Benjamin Giddings*

him of exactly what that is.  
“You need a shower,” you whisper, smiling against the warmth and inimitable scent of his skin.

“No shit.” He’s quick with a reply, which is usually a good sign that he’s willing to comply with whatever request you’ve made.

You pull him to his feet, and he reaches inside the pocket of his jacket, withdrawing a prescription bottle and preparing to thumb off the cap, but you shake your head minutely, taking the bottle from his surprisingly lax fingers and tossing it over your shoulder into the corner of the room.

“I’ll give you something else to swallow,” you assure him, and you’re relieved to see a smile spreading across his face as you turn and lead him toward the bathroom. You always know just what he needs.

eyelashes are prison bars  
contentment in a cell  
for the only thing beyond  
is a cube of white  
six walls of blinding light  
or the flat world

of the blank page  
the area of potential travel  
already lined off  
with flashing police tape  
colored cherry and blueberry

an enemy triclops, skin painted  
to resemble cement blocks  
for a ritual of confrontation  
behind the eyelids of the self  
arms half bent and pushing  
back leans forward  
and feet slide backward  
dirt and sand gather  
behind the heels  
at least take something with it  
in the gradual slip  
of the nothingness  
of a contented self  
locked in a cell  
bars are eyelashes  
coarse and shining  
from the blinding light  
beyond them  
coming from the distance  
somewhere along  
the freedom of the horizon

# Runway Zero-Three

*Benjamin Green*

Brilliant blue-white light split the night. The pair of headlights behind them were the more conventional halogen bulbs. After the xenon lights, they lacked the same dazzling effects. The two cars crunched down the gravel road, toward the cyclone fence.

Jimmy saw the Honda's taillights glowing ahead, and tapped the brakes. The Mustang skidded a little, but didn't get close to Hector's car. His breathing was harsh in his ears. He tried telling him that it was put up or shut up time, but he knew better than that.

They were at the El Verona training base. It was built as an air base to train new pilots that were pouring into the Army Air Force at the time. It was closed and fenced off in 1943 without a word of explanation.

When the Southern California drag scene exploded into existence in the Fifties, there were repeated attempts to buy or lease the property. While the Federal government had abandoned the property, they refused to let anybody else use the property.

After several years of refusals, the airfield was allowed to mold away. That was the official story. However, the place had developed a mystique somewhat akin to Dead Man's Curve.

There were whispers of surreptitious races held on Runway Zero-Three. The stories always involved the Big Three automakers, going back to the days when American cars brawled amongst themselves for street supremacy.

Those that were mentioned were spoken of in hushed awe. Nobody could name names, and nobody would admit having done it. However, to do so would confer instant respectability. Those that did had the cojones to defy the Man.

Tonight, Jimmy would be upholding that fine tradition. He would be taking part in an outlaw race, defending American pride against Japanese usurpers. He just wished he felt heroic, rather than about to unload in his jeans.

A small crowd had already gathered, and the gates were open. They drove in, cheered by their partisans. They were being careful to keep lights to a minimum, and not attract attention. The threat was it was a Federal crime to trespass here.

The atmosphere was electric, a combination of sex, excitement, and fear. The half-dozen women present would be presented to the winner, to use as he saw fit, a foretaste of the fruits of victory. They were here to watch what promised to be a grudge-match race.

Unspoken, but also there was a dark, voyeuristic impulse. Everyone there was aware of the other half of the legend. Many of those who went racing on Runway Zero-Three had ended up meeting violent ends.

The legend wasn't clear on what happened. Some could be attributed to things like brake failure, and being unable to stop when they ran out of runway. Still, there was the threat of some kind of horrible fate awaiting those that dared ignore the warnings.

Jimmy was sweating, wondering about all the stories he'd heard. It was easy to disbelieve when he was talking smack on Century Boulevard. Now that he was staring at the runway, he was no longer so self-assured. The air seemed to be alive with waves of malevolence.

They drove to the edge of the runway, and got out of their cars. The spectators gathered around them, whispering amongst themselves. Something about this place made it like a cathedral, and all the supplicants who came must whisper.

Hector showed no sign of picking up on the subtle nuances. He threw back his head, and let out a loud laugh. "It's a great night for a race, eh 'mano'?"

Jimmy nodded. He was struck dumb by the sight. There was a two mile runway, with two smaller runways bisecting it at an angle. The big one had a big zero-three painted on one end. The others were painted one-one, and one-two.

Tufts of grass were forcing their way up through the concrete at intervals, but it was wide enough to accommodate three or four cars abreast. It was a drag racer's dream. Then why did it make his heart palpitate, and his palms sweat?

The women began to cluster in between the two of them, able to fawn over both of them at once. Hector grinned, and spread out his hands. "No use wasting your time on him, girls. I'm going to be your daddy in a few minutes."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Those that can't do, boast."

The women oohed over that, and began to turn his way. Hector started snorting fire. "Your face, my ass!"

Jimmy grinned. "Are you asking to be my little butt buddy?"

The women giggled. Hector went brick red, and raised his fists. Just then, Arnie came bustling up, looking very self-important. "Gentlemen, get ready. Ramon is ready with the signal."

Jimmy grinned. "Scuse me, but that's my cue. Hector is just going to have to wait."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Say what you will, gringo. I'm going to be the one getting all the pussy. You don't need none, because you're already a puto."

This time, it was Jimmy who reddened, while the women oohed at him. He had one shot that would pay back with interest, and he decided to use it. "Oh yeah? Later this evening, I'm going to sleep with your sister Rosalind, and teach her what it's like to sleep with a real winner."

The crowd erupted into laughter. Even Hector's partisans had turned against him for a moment. He stared at Jimmy, his finger pointing, and his mouth open to say something. He stood there a moment, trembling on the cusp

of words. It was as if the mute button had been pushed. At last he shook his head, and said nothing.

Jimmy knew that he'd done it this time. This was supposed to be a grudge match, but the gloves were off now. No quarter would be given. Hector stopped just shy of his car, and pointed at him.

"Just remember our terms. You have to come down to the barrio tomorrow, and admit to my homies that American cars are second best, after I win tonight."

Part of the crowd hooted, and cheered. Jimmy smirked, and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll be down there, just so you can kiss my ass."

That caused several cheers and catcalls. He ignored all of them as he got into the car. Then he flipped down his sun visor, and began looking at his CD collection.

He needed something to bug Hector. There was the old standby, Slayer. They were from Los Angeles, and heavy metal enough to really annoy. Then his eyes fell on Pantera's 'Cowboys from Hell'. A huge grin spread across his face. That would really get under Hector's skin!

Chuckling, he dropped the CD into the tray. Then he looked up at the control tower. Sixty years of neglect had not left many scars on it. However, a couple panes of glass were now missing, giving it a gap-toothed smile.

Both men started their cars, and began revving their engines. A bass rumble came from Hector's car. Jimmy rolled down his window, and Hector lowered the passenger side window of his car. "Fifty Cent. You like it, gringo?"

Jimmy's response was to hit the Play button on his CD player. The title track began pounding out of the stereo speakers. Hector gave him the finger, then raised his window. Laughing, Jimmy rolled his back up.

Then a shadowy figure appeared in one of the dark spaces of the control tower. Both of them tensed up, one hand on the shifter, and one hand on the steering wheel. Then there was a flash of light, and a streak of fire began climbing into the sky.

Both cars took off with a roar, and a cloud of tire smoke. The Honda wobbled to the right, the Hector corrected for the torque steer. Jimmy had gotten holeshot coming off the line, but he was gaining.

He guesstimated his position relative to the end of the runway, and tried figuring if he would have enough room to pass. It would be close, but he could do it. The real margin of victory would be who chickened first in using their brakes.

Suddenly, a man appeared in the middle of the runway. He looked military, but his uniform was all wrong. Instead of jungle print, it was olive drab, and looked like a jumpsuit. Even his helmet looked odd. Though he couldn't hear what the man was saying, the arms said it all. Get off the runway.

Hector lurched to the right, to run him down. However, he disappeared before he could. Jimmy didn't take long to contemplate that. Lights in his rearview mirror caused new waves of terror.

It was hard to make out the dark shape in the inky blackness. The landing lights were on though, and Jimmy could make out an airplane with a boatlike fuselage, high wings, and our propeller-driven engines. That thing was huge, and unless he got off the runway, it was going to run him down.

Up ahead, Runway One-One crossed. It would be a one hundred thirty-five degree turn, but he didn't have a lot of options. Jimmy jerked the wheel right, and hit the brakes. The rising screech drowned out the CD player, and an acrid smell filled the passenger compartment.

Jimmy jammed his foot down on the clutch, and stabbed the car into Reverse. He was trying to avoid a spinout. Gears ground, and tires howled as he blipped the gas a couple of times.

The front end swung back and forth, like a pendulum, each swing diminishing, until the car stopped. Jimmy took a deep breath, then his hands began shaking.

Hector saw Jimmy's radical maneuver, and laughed. The white boy talked big, but he chickened in the end. His laughter didn't last long. He saw the bomber coming up on him. Then, in his peripheral vision, he saw another set of lights coming his way.

The action happened so fast, there almost wasn't time to register it. The B-24 was now down on the runway. Even though it was bleeding off airspeed, it was still gaining on the Honda.

On Runway One-Two, a P-40 Tomahawk was coming in for a landing. It had only one wheel down, and it was wobbling in the air. The fighter hopped on one wheel, then its left wing dipped, digging into the ground.

That caused the airplane to cartwheel, and disintegrate into a pinwheel of fire. Some of the burning wreckage hit the bomber near the tail section. The rear end skidded to the left, causing the right wing to rise, and the left wing to sink.

The tip skidded on the ground, and half the wing ripped away. Flying gasoline was ignited. The right wing dipped, and the leading edge caught the ground. Then the nose wheel snapped, and the nose smashed into the ground.

The stricken bomber flipped onto its back, landing on top of the Honda. Then the wreckage disappeared in a bright yellow ball of fire. When Jimmy lowered his arms, there was no sign of anything.

He jumped from his car, and ran to the runway. There was no wreckage, no scorch marks, nothing. Even Hector and his Honda were gone. Just the crickets, and a pocket of cold air.

Jimmy thought, Forget who won this race. Whose going to believe this? I doubt the spectators will believe it.

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