

down in the dirt

v.061

August '08

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets



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08/08, **Down in the Dirt**, volume 061

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a gazebo and palm  
tree in Florida.

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## sin for favors (a Tanka)

rsscheerer

Do not speak to me  
of punishment or reward  
that is not my God  
who wreaks havoc with our souls  
my faith does not rest in fear.

# Guiding Light

Robert Mitchell

The motor refused to start. Mary adjusted the fuel mixture and tried again. The engine sputtered for a few seconds, and then quit.

She looked up at the sky. It was getting late, and a light fog was rolling in. Worse, in her efforts to get the engine started, the boat had turned, and Mary grew confused about the direction of land.

Normally, this wasn't a problem, as the Cape Horn was clearly visible for miles. But now, every direction she looked appeared the same. Mary saw no land, and heard no crashing of the waves to indicate the direction of shore.

She knew the currents in these waters could quickly carry a boat out to sea, but she had told no one of what she planned for this afternoon. It might be sometime before a search would be made for her.

Mary's husband, an older man recently retired from the Navy after WWII, had purchased her their beach house as a wedding gift. It included a nice little dock with a small sturdy looking boat named the *Sea Slipper*. Since her husband was not due to arrive for three days, she had thought it would be fun to take it out for an afternoon cruise. Mary was beginning to believe that was a mistake.

Looking at the sky, she began to worry. The engine would not start and the weather now changed for the worse. The seas became rougher and a light rain began to fall.

Her clothes became wet, and the water pooled in the bottom of the boat. Mary found a pan under the seat, and scooped some over the side, then thought better of it. She might need fresh water later on.

However, the rain continued to come down, and the seas grew rougher. Lost in the open water, Mary decided she must take a chance, choose a direction, and hope her selection was a good one. She readied the oars. Mary thought she might have heard waves crashing onto a beach on the port side, and so she turned the boat in that direction and started rowing.

She rowed for twenty minutes and became exhausted. Her clothes stuck to her like a second skin, and she shivered. Without any rain gear, Mary grew concerned

the n.y.  
public  
library

Joseph Reich

"my fiddle has shattered!"  
they lift up the blinds of  
the stained stained-glass  
cathedral and like a miracle  
a band of sunlight breaks  
through bathing the long  
honey-mahogany tables  
while wino naturally lifts  
weary eyes to sunlight  
providing a long sigh  
of relief from life  
breaking up  
the miserable  
everyday rituals.  
your light comes on on  
the big scoreboard and  
you get all excited like  
you have been chosen  
after countless years  
of being ignored  
like you're  
the big  
winner  
at bingo.

about exposure, especially since the temperature appeared to be dropping.

But presently she heard a distant horn to her left, cutting through the wind and misty rain. It was low and melodious. Mary turned her boat in that direction, and rowed in earnest. Soon she saw a beacon break through the gloom, the blessed light from a lighthouse. The horn sounded again.

Mary thought that it must be the Cape Horn lighthouse. She had heard about it, but had never visited the site.

She kept rowing, seemingly tireless now that the horn and periodic light guided her way to shore. In fact, she now knew where she was, less than a half mile from her very own boat dock.

So, Mary turned in that direction and rowed earnestly with depleted strength, shivering, and then saw her own house on the shore and thanked the lighthouse for sending her in the right direction. Though looking back, she now saw no light in the distance at all, nor heard any horn.

Finally, an exhausted Mary rowed up to the dock, tied off the boat, and trudged up the long steps to the beach house for a hot shower, and a full meal. She slept soundly that night, and dreamed of a lighthouse in the distance that pointed the way towards home.

Three days later her husband arrived at their beach home, and Mary told him her story.

"Mary, that couldn't have been the lighthouse," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Here, get in the car and I'll show you."

They drove up to Cape Horn and parked in front of the old lighthouse made with native stone. The building was surrounded by a wire fence and posted with no trespassing signs. It was obvious that the lighthouse had not been used in years. But, a plaque readable from the gate commemorated the last keeper, a Mr. John T. Fisher.

"Mary, you're not going to believe this," said her husband.

"What?"

"Last year I went to an estate sale, and bought our little boat, the *Sea Slipper* for our dock."

"So?"

"It was the estate sale of a Mr. J. T. Fisher."

## The Night is King

Roger A. Singer

The language  
Of darkness  
Lay half exposed  
On fallowed fields,  
Where cold smoke  
Circles ankles.

Breezes fall humble  
Without a high sun  
To twist the sky,  
Like strong hands  
Strangling water  
From a thick cloth.

A death of quiet  
Settles on the  
Stars open stage,  
As a slivered moon  
Melts in silence,  
Pleasing the night.

# Hal's Eyes

Vickie Clasby

Charlotte walked slowly toward the neighborhood pool to staple the last of the posters to the fence. She carefully stapled the color poster, laminated to protect it from the rain, between the hand drawn and colored WANTED poster for Barney, a yellow tabby, missing since last Tuesday, and a black and white REWARD poster for Jiggles, an ancient looking black Lab, who NEEDS MEDICATION. She stood back to inspect her work, noting the superiority of her poster to the others. She was certain the vivid color of Hal's auburn coat and the glisten in his amber eyes would catch the attention of the summer pool goers. She felt the tears stinging her swollen eyes and threatening to stream down her face for the umpteenth time in the last day, and dabbed them away with the crinkly tissue she had in her shorts pocket.

She dreaded going home to the empty house yet naively hoped someone might have already seen one of the posters and left a message on her answering machine. She walked the three blocks home, ignoring the neighbors she had never met and their children playing along the way. As she walked in the front door and hung the leash she'd carried, just in case she found him, on it's designated peg, she noted with disappointment the message light was dark – no calls. What to do now? She'd placed a lost dog ad in the local paper, posted a message and picture on several websites, and stapled posters in every conceivable spot in a five mile radius. She felt lost.

Hal had been her companion, her friend, her family for three years. She had happened upon the Adoption Day at the local animal rescue organization quite by accident. It had never occurred to her to adopt a pet of any sort, much less a shedding, pooping, unruly hulking brute of a dog. She had stopped at the art supply store to buy some new brushes and had to walk past the pens and crates in the parking lot where the adoption event was held. She stepped up her pace to quickly get past the barking, whining and the unpleasant odor when she noticed a dog in a large crate looking intensely at her. Not just at her but into her. His fur was the most incredible auburn color she had ever seen, and his eyes were yellowish amber and rimmed with black. Compelled to come closer, she peered into the pen at him. His bushy tail gently thumped and he raised his head slightly to get a better look at her, as if sizing her up.

A lady wearing an ADOPTION DAY t-shirt noticed her, and said, "That's Hal. He's a good boy, kinda wild. Do you have a fence?"

"Oh, I can't take him. I'm just walking in to get something."

"That's too bad. We've had Hal a couple of years. Can't seem to find a good match for him. Don't know why. He's great with kids, and he's housetrained. You have kids?"

"No, no kids."

The woman, knowing a sucker when she saw one, opened the door to the pen and snapped a leash onto Hal's collar. Before she knew what was happening, Hal bolted out of the pen and immediately jumped and placed his huge feet on Charlotte's shoulders and licked her face.

“Seems to like you,” she said.

Charlotte was overwhelmed. She'd never had a dog, didn't have a clue what dogs were like except that this one was big and friendly.

The lady in the t-shirt said, “Would you like to fill out an application?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Charlotte sat in the quiet study, looking at Hal's bed in the corner. The shape of his sleeping body was imprinted on the soft, worn fabric, and a coating of red fur completed the outline. His well worn tennis ball peeked out from under his bed. She closed her eyes and imagined him there, sleeping his peaceful yet active sleep, full of dreams of chasing squirrels, catching the ball, barking at birds, and perhaps all sorts of dog things he remembered from before her time.

She had often wondered what his life had been like before she found him. Today she remembered too well what her life had been like before he had found her. The loneliness washed over her like a sudden rogue wave, knocking her from her tenuous perch and into a sea of sadness. She felt as if she would die, having never experienced such powerful feelings. She'd played over every scenario in her mind, panicking at the thought of him hurt or even dead. If he was lost, what would happen to him on his own? Now she wondered what would happen to her without him. She lay down on Hal's bed, smelling his smell, and sobbed until her burning eyes could no longer cry, until merciful sleep allowed some respite.

Awaking an hour or so later, she felt oddly calm. The intense sadness was not gone, but augmented by a feeling of numbness, a feeling she assumed would be considered despair. Having never suffered any loss, she was not sure of the proper terminology. She wandered around the house, not knowing what to do with her time. She hadn't eaten today, but could not imagine eating. She hadn't painted or sketched, but there were no images she could reproduce. She simply felt alone. For the first time in three years, she felt absolutely alone. Popular psychology would suggest she confide in good friends to console her and help her work through her grief. Hal had been her only friend and he was gone. She had no one to talk to, no friends, and certainly no family who would care to hear her sad story or comfort her.

Remembering her reaction to the atmosphere in the study, she sat at the kitchen table, trying to ignore the shiny aluminum bowls by the back door that held Hal's food and water, fearing another round of tears. Yet it seemed the tear factory had closed. The numbness seemed even worse. She tried to think rationally, tried to craft a plan of action for the 'next phase,' now that the immediate tasks of newspaper ad, internet posting and distributing laminated posters had been completed.

In a moment of clarity, she'd remembered the list of animal shelters. She had called them all last night to ask them if they had taken in an auburn Husky mix, sixty pounds, amber eyes, wearing a blue collar with a heart shaped name tag engraved with “Hal” and her phone number. Explaining that she'd left to go to the grocery, and didn't know the gate to the fence was open. She'd only been gone a half an hour but when she got home, Hal was not in the yard. He couldn't have gotten very far. She felt awkward explaining, telling the same story over



and over on each phone call, but strangely relieved to be able to tell her story to someone, to hear a friendly, sympathetic voice. She hastily grabbed the list from the notepad by the phone. After ten minutes she had called them all again, and none of them had taken in a dog resembling Hal. In each call, she could hear the cacophony of dogs barking in the background and her heart ached to think of all those misplaced or discarded dogs. No tears this time, just emptiness.

She could stand the barren house no longer, and grabbed the leash from the peg, slid her cell phone in the pocket of her shorts, and headed out the front door. She could do no good just sitting around the house feeling sorry for herself. She turned right after leaving the house, and realized she had not been on this section of her street in the five years she had lived here. She always drove into the neighborhood, turned right onto her street, and pulled in her driveway four houses on the right. She'd never had a reason to drive past her house.

She walked briskly, feeling better just for doing something. The heat of the day was intense, yet the feel of the sun baking her skin was immeasurably better than the hollowness she had been feeling. She looked from side to side as she walked thinking maybe Hal would just appear from nowhere and this nightmare would be over. She called, "Hal! Come Hal!" now and again as she walked, clapping her hands and whistling. She continued down the street, and turned left onto another street she had never known was there. Several children were playing in the street, and when they heard her calling "Hal!" they all ran up to her.

A small, blonde haired girl, maybe six or seven years old, said, "Is that your dog on the poster at the pool?"

Charlotte stopped and surveyed the troop of children, and said, "Yes, that's my dog. His name is Hal."

The little girl said, "He's pretty. Is he a nice dog?"

"Yes, he's a very nice dog. He's the best dog." She didn't expect it, but the tears were back, in force. Thankfully she still had the crinkly tissue, still damp from this morning. She dabbed her eyes, and tried not to cry in front of these children who she'd never met.

"Can we help you find him?" The other kids chimed in "We can help! We know all the secret places!"

Charlotte was overcome again with tears, and sat down on the curb, all the children crowded around her. The blonde girl said, "I lost my kitty last winter and I cried so hard! We looked everywhere and it was cold and I thought she would freeze to death. But we found her under the house and she is just fine. So don't cry."

Charlotte wiped her eyes and nose and for a brief moment wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of the scene – a grown woman crying like a baby in front of a bunch of little children. But after she'd spent the last day without a friend in the world, after losing the only friend she had – the one who didn't judge her, couldn't lie to her, never let her down, and loved her completely- these children had offered her help and hope.

She stood up and said, "Go ask your moms if you can help."

# The Old Red Barn

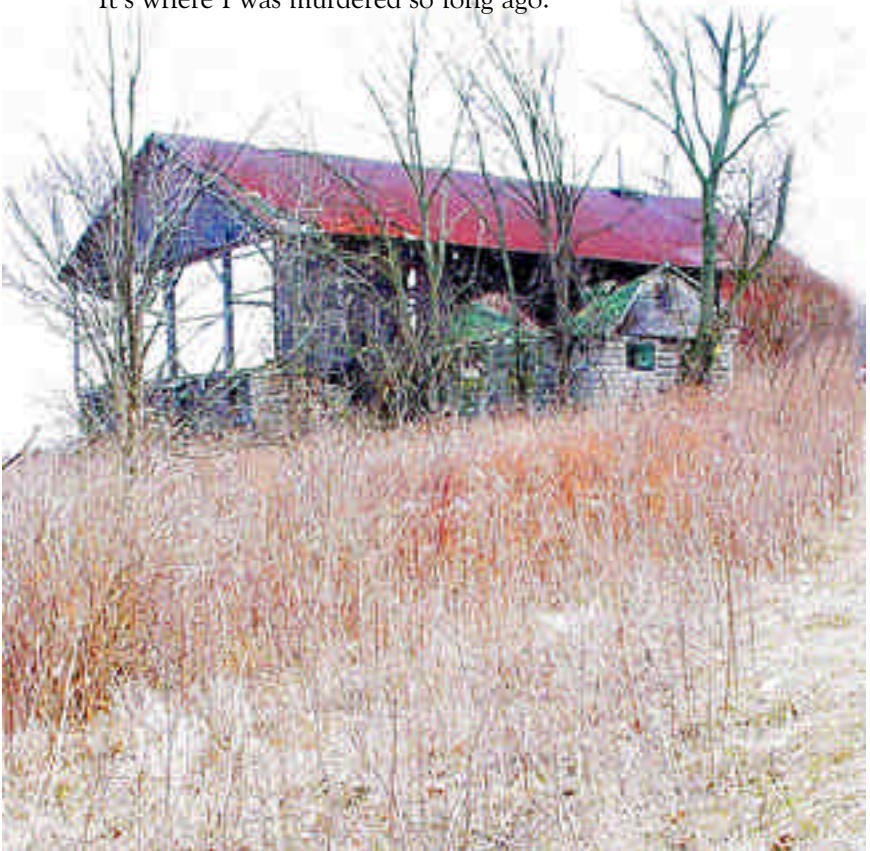
Mel Waldman

I've been traveling for days, searching for the familiar landscape-  
the little house nestled in the wilderness &

the old red barn in the back-a hundred yards south of the quaint  
dwelling I used to call home.

Now, I see the old red barn in the distance. I am drawn to it-  
compelled to go there & not to the little house where I was born.

You see, I belong in the old red barn.  
It's where I was murdered so long ago.





# A Girl Running

Kate LaDew

It was louder than he expected and Elijah sat up straight, a crease of surprise over his eyes. A little girl killed in a roadside bombing and the news was manic with victory. Video fuzzy and shaking with tiny earthquakes, exclusives declared and red bars warning sensitive viewers to turn away. It was a stamp flashing watch watch, and Elijah watched, space between his back and the sofa. The little girl ran, black hair a slab of negative against the white of concrete until a powder of light made the screen blank. The camera dipped once, twice, refocusing and blurring, a landscape with nothing but white. Elijah looked for the negative, the slab of black. The TV told him to watch closely, and it came again, again. Elijah waited for more, for a resolution. And what next? What happened after? The girl was dead and it seemed enough for the TV as it zagged graphics, ripping them across the screen and ricocheting into steadier pictures.

Elijah was holding his breath. He exhaled, confusion tapping. Expectant. Anxious. What was missing? He concentrated. Concentrated on keeping still, remembering everything he felt. What he felt. He was still waiting. Sadness had a timeline and Elijah was waiting. He went through a checklist of tragedy. A little girl. She had been afraid. There was helplessness in her limbs, a toughness not made for children. Rocks pelting her and she died with a suddenness only seen in movies. It was a little girl and she was dead and Elijah waited. The waiting shocked him, lack of response a grief in itself, startling shame and repulsion, a feeling remembered when the cause was forgotten. Elijah wanted racking sobs to double him over, to burn behind his eyes and claw at his throat. He wanted pity and horror. And outrage and.

Every element was in place and Elijah knew he would not cry. It was all there, and it had been before, and before that, and before that. Dead little girls, polaroids stacked in piles, no identifiers, no letters scrawled in black, nothing to distinguish one from another. Dead little girls with smiles and white teeth. Elijah caught a spark of red across the TV. He watched the little girl silently and felt a compulsion to warn her, the predetermined flash right on time. A dead little girl, running, fear visible on her skin. Elijah blinked once, twice, closed his eyes without opening them again. The yellow on red image of the TV faded behind his lids and his ears picked up the slack. Replayed in fifteen minutes, the top of the hour, played in intervals, high definition if anyone forgot what a dead little girl looked like. Until tomorrow. Replacements. So many, he thought crudely, they must be running out. What will they do when they run out?

Black, a flash. Black, a flash. Elijah watched it in his head. What he was missing. He would hold. Hold on to this feeling, this lack of feeling and keep it close, punish his chest 'til it drained tears. He would remember. He would remember, memorize, trace the pattern of shapes that formed a face. He would wait. Not forget the little girl, the little girl with hair thick as rope, teeth for smiling, adult legs running and running. Elijah told himself with violent words, hating himself for knowing they would not come true. The moment would not be remembered. It would fill up the space outside him where things vanished, never existing at all. He would wait and it would be tomorrow and again and again, only a twinge of guilt left he could not place, a tickle of sadness earned and unused, writhing at the tips of his fingers, untouched. Elijah knew this with a certainty that exhausted him. He wanted something. Did the wanting forgive him? Did the knowing forgive him the neglect of empathy? He would believe it, true or not, Elijah decided he would believe it until tomorrow, believe it as long as it mattered.

Elijah wondered how much he had forgotten. He wondered just how sanctimonious he would allow himself to be. A stranger in a strange land, the only one who resolved to question. A moment of worry and a lifetime of complacency. Top stories changed every 24 hours. Dead little girls, enough for every station, enough to fill a day.

Elijah was tired. Had no right to be. Made a decision not to care. He wanted. He wanted at least and it was enough. He kept his eyes closed until he was asleep and tiny blurs of black hair skipped across his vision, alive and thick as rope, a whiplash tripping him until he doubled over, until an ocean rose up and he watched through blue water, a girl running.

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## At My Little House In The Village

Martha Deborah Hall

Red, white and blue waves on the porch,  
a gentle man arrives home by five.  
In the fridge a twelve-pack of Coke cools.

My children shuck corn out back,  
catch fireflies on clear, summer nights.

A weed-filled wooden cart lists by the shed.  
A smoke roaster barbecues beer-can- chicken.  
The fireplace works on chilly days  
and a teapot whistles on the kitchen stove.

One pawn remains on the den chess board.  
Our barn is home to the lame horse "Sparky"  
and to a chicken with a broken wing.

Salt of the earth neighbors live to each side.

In a field beyond our granite property marker,  
random bouquets adorn nearby gravesites,  
some, off to the right, with white crosses.

# Game On

Ken Dean

*The bedroom was quiet and still. There was just the right touch of coolness for a perfect night's sleep. Moonlight was streaming in the window, playing across the beauty of Andrea's face. She was dreaming, reliving an old childhood trauma where she fell off the backyard swing and broke her arm. Up she went, higher and higher. She was nearing the height of her swing; her grip beginning to loosen on the chain just before she tumbled to the ground. A hand slowly came out of the shadows into the moonlight. It was a black-gloved hand, holding a pistol. The silencer pressed up against her left temple. Andrea startled awake from the pressure, her eyes snapping open. Two flashes, two bullets. Andrea dreamt no more.*

Hans Stryker was waiting in the shadows. He knew stepping out into Victoria Square meant risking exposure. There was a certain person he was looking for in the passing crowd, one dressed a certain way. There, a man just passing by. Hans stepped out and quickly caught up with him. Moving up from behind, Hans slipped his hand into the man's black overcoat pocket and switched cell phones. The man felt a small pressure on his side and turned his head quickly to see what was going on. Hans brushed it off as an accidental bump, saying 'Sorry.' He seemed to accept this and turned around to continue walking. Hans quickly went back to an alleyway where he could watch the square. There had to be operatives looking for him in the crowd. What he was more concerned with were snipers. Most operations had a sniper on watch.

Nicholas was on the roof of the Zorbas Hotel, peering down on the square through his sniper scope. This assignment had come too suddenly, cutting into his personal life. Plus it was damn cold on this roof. But he was considered an asset in this region, so he had to answer the agencies call. His earpiece crackled for a second, and then a voice came to life.

"Nicholas, do you have the target yet?"

He replied in a thick, Greek accent, "I'm scanning the square, Larkins, just a moment. I think I found Stryker."

He thumbed a switch on his scope, bringing an aiming reticle to life. It was black until he scanned across who he thought was Stryker, when it began to flash red.

"I'm picking up his cell phone identification in my scope. Do I have an authorization for the shot?"

"Yes...make it a wound shot only, there's still some intel and the drive that we need to get from him."

"Copy authority for shot."

Nicholas lined up the reticle and shot the target in the right shoulder. The rifle was silenced, so the sound was minimal. The target spun around halfway and fell to the pavement.

“Stryker is down.”

Three operatives rushed over as soon as the man fell. They checked him for identification. One of them blared into his mic, “It’s not Stryker. You’ve shot a civilian.”

The operatives quickly pulled the wounded man into an alleyway. A crowd was gathering. They hadn’t heard the shot, but they had seen the man fall. One operative clipped a doctor’s ID to his jacket and began to address the crowd.

“It’s okay people, I’m a doctor. This man has had a heart attack. We’re taking care of him.”

The crowd seemed to buy the explanation and slowly dispersed.

“Nicholas, did you copy that? You’ve shot a civilian!”

“Yes, Larkins,” He responded sarcastically. “I heard.”

He felt something cold on the back of his neck.

A whisper in his left ear. “Turn it off.”

“Nicholas out.” He switched off the mic. “Is that you, Hans?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Only you could pull this off,” Nicholas chuckled.

“Right...only me.”

“Listen...sorry about trying to snipe you,” Nicholas pleaded.

Hans sneered, “Say goodnight, Nick.”

“Wait...”

The silencer automatic jumped, a bullet buried itself in Nicholas’ skull.

Stryker snorted, “Amateur.”

Stryker went through Nicholas’ blood-spattered jacket and removed his communication gear. He plugged the equipment into the input of the rifle scope. If he was right, the other end of the communications link would show in the scope. With the rifle to his shoulder, he slowly scanned all the windows facing the square.

The aiming reticle turned red. There, an apartment building across the square.

Alexis Larkins was manning the operations command room and didn’t care for the sudden turn of events. He was used to always being in control of the situation. It was an obsession for him.

“Has anyone heard from Nicholas in the last minute? He signed off and didn’t recover communications.”

The two operatives monitoring the laptop communications shook their heads.

“I may have to use one of you to put eyes on the situation, figure out what’s...”

The door jamb suddenly came to life, four silenced rounds smashing through, splintering the wood. A foot kicked the door in. The two operatives

were fumbling for their weapons. Hans was quicker, shooting them both in the head. Larkins dove for his jacket which held his automatic. Stryker shot him in the knee. Larkins went down, howling in pain. Stryker strolled over, resting his silencer on Larkins forehead.

"Listen, I know you're in pain. But you need to shut the noise. And don't pass out on me."

"Go to hell!" he winced, clutching his shattered knee.

"Whatever, just keep the noise down. We've made enough already."

Larkins began to quiet down. Pain had a funny way of subsiding after an injury, making a comeback with a vengeance later.

"We were supposed to be taking you down, Stryker. Not the other way around."

"Well, things work out funny sometimes."

"We heard you were coming to Greece and the flash drive would be on you. We had to get that from you; it had information that could be damaging to the agency."

Hans chuckled, "I don't have it, Larkins. I leaked that information so that I could get it from you."

Larkins sputtered, "From me?"

"Yes, from you," he said sarcastically. "I knew you wouldn't feel secure unless you brought your copy of the drive with you."

Hans put the silencer back on Larkins forehead.

"So hand it over."

Larkins knew when he was outmaneuvered. He stuck a bloodied hand into his pocket, pulled out the flash drive and handed it to Hans.

"Thanks. With the information on this, I can bring your whole corrupt agency down."

"Why?"

"Just for principle sake. I was hoping I could flush you out on this operation. I've got a personal score to settle with you as well."

"And what score is that?" Larkins asked, feigning surprise.

"My partner, remember? You had Andrea killed. Just because of a perceived security threat, of which Andrea had nothing to do with. But you still had to make sure that your own ass was safe and dry."

"Hans, that was..."

"Save your breath." Hans pointed the pistol at Larkins.

"Hans, Listen; is there any chance I can walk away from this?" Larkins pleaded. "We were friends once."

Two flashes, two bullets. Larkin's game days were over.

"And don't call me friend."

# The Down Payment

Peter Kwiatkowski

John poured the Ramon noodles into the boiling water and waited for the noodles to turn from crisp to tender. He added spices and then a little salt and pepper from the kitchen cabinet.

His girlfriend watched him carefully.

“Is that dinner?” Joanne said.

“Yes it is.” He smiled and scooped a spoon of hot soup up to his lips.

“You gonna tell me what’s going?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh I *don’t* know.” She shrugged. “The fifteen cent Ramon noodle soup. Your broken turn signal light. All of a sudden you pack lunch to work. Have you declared bankruptcy or are you just too cheap and too lazy to eat something that takes time to cook?”

He laughed. “It’s very nutritious and satisfying to the soul. The package says so right here—,”

“Sure.”

“Try some. Chicken or Beef?”

“I’ll take a rain check.” Joanne said. “You know that’s just some hot water mixed with spice and God knows what kind of animal disguised into tiny specks of meat.”

“Well if I had to choose between cat and dog—I think I would go with the cat meat,”

She slapped his arm. “Stop it. You know I love cats.”

He laughed. “Yummm. Me too.” He made satisfying chewing noises and sucked the noodles into the tiny o of his closed lips.

“Cats are good.”

“Ha-Ha—Ha.” She said sarcastically. “*Someone* is in a good humor tonight.”

He said, “You and your Atkins diet. I’m going to buy you a calculator for Christmas so you can stop adding all those calories up in your head.”

“Not *funny*.” She said. “Can you be serious with me for a moment?”

“I am serious.” He blew on the steam, put the spoon up to his lips and ate with slow slurps. “I can’t imagine what would happen if you didn’t carry the one and ruined the diet by eating an extra cookie or brownie,”

“John—,” She gave him a look. *That* look. He had to stop.

“Okay. Okay.” He said.

She breathed deeply for effect. “Tell me what’s going on. I know you’re hiding something.”



“I told you. Nothing’s going on. Everything’s completely fine.”

“I can always tell when you’re lying to me—,”

He rolled his eyes and finished the sentence for her, “—*and you’re doing it right now.*”

“John—,”

He put the spoon down and wiped his face with a napkin. “Alright. Fine.”

“Yes?”

“I’m saving up for a down payment.”

She frowned. “Don’t be ridiculous. Your car isn’t even that old. You just have to fix that blinker, get new tires and rub on a few coats of wax. I thought we went over this.”

“It’s not the car.” He said. “I made the down payment on a ring.”

“A ring?” She squinted her eyes, lost in deep thought. “*The ring?* John are you saying that—,”

“Yes baby. I didn’t mean for it to come out like this—but what can I do about it now.” He slowed his breathing down. “Will you marry me?”

She smiled. And then laughed. “Of course I will.” She said. “Of course John.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek on the lips and then back on the cheek again.

“Here,” he said and brushed her aside. “I’ll be right back.”

~\*~

He came out of the bedroom carrying a small black jewelry box and a bouquet of flowers behind his back. “Here honey,” He kissed her on the lips and said, “Close your eyes.”

She closed her eyes and arched her back up straight like a little girl, anxious and ready to open the first gifts of a sweet-sixteen birthday party. She felt him slide something cold and metallic up her finger. It felt heavy. Full. Not like the other rings she was used to. “Can I open my eyes now?” she said.

“Not yet.” John said. “Just a while longer.”

He adjusted the ring. Twisted it. He walked back into the bedroom and shouted, “Keep them closed!”

“They *are* closed!” She shouted back.

When he finally said she could open them—he was kneeling on the floor—dressed up in a suit and tie.

“I can’t believe you got all dressed up for this.” She laughed. “You are so cute.”

He took her hand into his.

She noticed the ring. “Oh.” She said. “My God it’s so beautiful. John—,”

“Baby look at me.” He said. “You know you mean everything to me, right?”

She nodded. Her face flushed red. The living room started blurring in her eyes.

“You have done so much for me. We’ve been together for five years and I have been so lucky for that.”

She nodded quickly. She put her right hand on her chest, and felt clumsy for some reason, she had always imagined how their relationship would play out up to this moment but tonight it had all felt so different.

“I want you to be mine forever. I want to be the luckiest. I want you to be my wife.” He squeezed her hand.

“Yes John. I want that too. I will—,” She smeared a tear away from her eye. “I will be your wife.”

They hugged and kissed. He held her in his arms. She brushed her fingers through his hair. Minutes later they were in the bedroom, making passionate love as if it was their first wedding night, and after they had satisfied each other they both laid silently on the bed, staring off into space and each thinking about their new future that would soon be tied together by marriage.

An hour later Joanne turned the nightstand lamp on and looked at the ring, “I can’t believe you.” She said. “It’s completely gorgeous.”

He kissed her forehead and said, “I love you.”

She admired the ring turning it every possible angle against the light.

“John,” she said.

“Yes dear?” he said.

“How much?”

“Joanne, you know I can’t tell you that—,”

“How much was it? I’m just curious.”

“I won’t tell you.”

“John,” she smiled. “I’m going to get you.” She made hand gestures up in the air.

“If you tickle me—,”

She was already moving on top of him, tickling him all over his chest and arms.

He laughed. “Stop. Please Joanne.”

“Tell me how much you paid and I’ll stop.”

“I’ll get depressed if I tell you. I’ll start to think about all the cups of Ramon noodle soup I’ll have to eat to pay it off. How many cat lives I’m going to be forced to take.”

“John—,” She said. “You’re *not* funny. How much?”

He grunted. He was annoyed. “Fine.” He said. “I paid eleven hundred.”

“What? How much?”

“Eleven hundred.”

“You know that’s way out of our budget.” She said. “I’m sorry, it’s not that

that I'm being ungrateful or anything—but John you know that's a lot of money. You know we can't afford that right now."

"Well I had some help. I donated—," he said. "—you know what forget it."

"What did you donate?"

"Can we not talk about this now?"

"I just care honey. That's all. What did you donate?"

John closed his eyes. He was silently debating with himself in his mind.

Choosing the right words.

"Sperm." He said.

"You *donated* sperm?" Joanne said.

He nodded.

She bowed her head and rubbed her thumb and index finger against her temples. "When did this happen?"

"Yesterday." he said.

"I want you to go back," she said.

"I can't." he said.

"I want you to go back and tell them you've changed your mind,"

"I signed the papers, I can't do anything now."

"Tell them you're sorry and that it was a mistake and you'll give them the money back.

"You're not listening honey to what I'm saying—,"

"Jesus," she said. "How much did they pay you?"

"Honey—,"

"You're going to tell me how much they paid you."

He grunted. "One thousand five-hundred."

She took a deep breath and got up out of bed and sat on the edge. "You know money doesn't mean much to me." She said. "An expensive ring is not going to win me over."

"Baby it's not like that. You know it's not." He felt sick to his stomach. Why did she pick moments like these? It really wasn't a good time.

"I don't think you have any idea how serious this is."

"Let's talk tomorrow. I'm tired I have to get up early in the morning."

"No. We're going to talk right now. This doesn't really faze you? Does it?" Her voice became high pitched. "That you could just go off and do something like this."

He exhaled. "I'm sorry baby." He looked at his watch. "It's ten o'clock. I know a good place that's open late. We can still catch dinner and relax tonight. Just me and you."

"No. I am not going anywhere tonight. I am staying right here." She pointed at the bed with her index finger, "—and you're going to answer my question."

She made a face of disgust and said, "Are you really okay with this?"

He shook his head and folded his arms. “Honey you know I love you. I wouldn’t have done it if I knew this would be the way you’d react,”

“The way I would *react*?” she said. “I guess I should be *perfectly* fine with it. Maybe I should say—John since you in your consideration took care of the ring let me be so generous also and put the down payment on our honeymoon to Tahiti. I’ll suck some cock on a corner for a hundred bucks. Whoo-hoo I can make some extra cash with my body too.”

“Don’t talk like that.” He said. “Please.”

“Do you *even* know anything about sperm banks?”

“I’ve had it on my mind for awhile.”

“I thought *we were supposed* to talk about things like this together. John we were supposed to make these kind of decisions together.”

“It was *my* choice.” He said sharply.

“Your choice? *Bullshit* it was your choice. Some kid is going to be running around in a few years with *your* genes, looking like *you* and never even having the chance to know his real father who was just looking out to make a quick buck in the name of technology. You don’t create life to just give it away—,”

“The kid’s going to grow up in family. Nobody said anything about giving anything away. Christ honey, you’re making it sound like this is some kind of experiment, the child is going to grow up just like you and me in a caring environment with two parents.”

“How do you know that?” she said. “Technology doesn’t make it okay.”

“I never said that. Can you please stop twisting what I say?”

Joanne started putting her clothes on. “I can’t believe you—John—I don’t even know— where to start—I wanted to bare your child. I wanted to be the mother. You know I realize that might sound weird to you, but it means a lot to me.”

“Honey I know. *I know*.” He touched her arm.

“Don’t try to calm me down.” She shouted. “Don’t *fucking* try to calm me down.”

“Maybe I made a mistake, maybe you’re right I should’ve talked it over—,”

“It’s too fucking late John.” She said. She got up and brushed her hair back with her fingers. Her hands were shaking. “I *never* knew my dad. You know what *I would give* just to find *out* what he looked like? Who he *was*? This kid—in a few years when he grows up and realizes that his real father traded a part of him for a diamond ring to a sperm lab just so that his girlfriend would marry him—you think he’ll understand *that*?”

“Sweetie you’re pouting. You’re not thinking straight.”

“How’s this for pouting John,” She screamed. “Fuck *you*, fuck *your ring*, and fuck *your future bastard child*.” She stormed out and slammed the door hard enough for the white paint to chip off the wall and fall to the carpet.

# On a New York subway

*Benjamin Green*

Hhhiiiiissss. Air hissed out of the airbrakes like dragon's breath. Steel wheels screeched on the rail as the subway train came to a stop. The doors flew open, and people began pushing to get in or get out.

Eldon Miller pushed his way past a sea of sharp elbows, and cursing passengers. He ignored them all. None of it was personal. Inside, a smile lit up his face.

Sitting in one seat was Norma Britt. She was intent on her knitting, until he cleared his throat. She looked up, and her face brightened up. "Why hello, Eldon!" She gestured with an elbow. "Sit down, sit down!"

He looked around, but nobody moved to take the seat. So he sat down as she began bubbling like a teakettle. Eldon was a recent transplant from Missouri, and he had been looking to go back home.

He didn't care for the hectic pace of New York City, and the subway system as a lousy place to meet people. He didn't go out unless he had a reason, because he'd heard so many hair-raising stories of what happened on the streets. Consequently, he hadn't met many people.

He had been counting the days until he could go back to Missouri. Until he met Norma. Now, he was still looking forward to going home, but she made his time in exile more bearable.

They would discuss everything under the sun, and there were no sacred cows. Sometimes, they found themselves on the opposite sides of an issue, but she was such a sweet old lady that he found himself unable to stay mad at her. He would kibitz with her until his stop came up.

The next day, Eldon wasn't as pacific as he usually was in the crowd on the platform. He snarled at people a couple of times, and came close to completely losing his temper. People looked at him as if to ask what his problem was.

A dark cloud had been hanging over him all day. He didn't have a clue what it was about, but he had a nagging sense that everything was about to change. Plus, he'd had a rough day at the office, and he was looking forward to getting back to his apartment. Just lock the door, and shut the insanity out.

Inside the car, Norma was waiting for him. As usual, the seat next to her was empty. What was different was she had a book in her hands, rather than her knitting. It was a book about the supernatural.

Eldon looked at the book, and sneered. Norma arched an eyebrow, and asked, "Is something the matter?"

He nodded toward the book, and asked, "Do you actually believe in that nonsense?"

"Do you?"

That started an argument that grew more heated by the minute. Their fel-

low passengers began watching with increasing interest. He was aware he was creating a scene, but he couldn't help himself.

At last, he stated, "There is no scientific evidence that ghosts or other so-called 'supernatural' events occur. If somebody could show me some empirical evidence to the contrary, I might change my tune."

Norma's lips pursed, and her eyebrows lowered in challenge. "Oh, really? What about the field of parapsychology?"

He made a rude noise, and waved his hand, as if brushing away a bothersome fly. "I said real science. Parapsychologists tend to be either crackpots, or wishful dreamers, with only a patina of scientific objectivity."

She peered him in the eye. "So you don't believe in ghosts?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "There is no evidence for them, no."

She asked, "Are you sure?" Then she disappeared.

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## Memorial

Ashok Niyogi

what struck me first  
is how far away  
the firing positions were  
from the walls with bullet-holes

which now need preserving in wooden frames  
rather innocuous  
as a backdrop for tourists with digital cameras

such mayhem  
must have required good aim

and then I am engulfed in shame

all my life I have tirelessly endeavored  
to teach myself and train  
that I could pick up the guns  
of those that massacred  
and learn their language  
so that I could write to them



# Cake Burn

Micah Arroyo

Clarence knew everything had gone to hell when the walked into the liquor store. The little bell clanged like a siren in his head. Troy looked at him, his eyes asking what they were going to do now. Clarence could see the white fog of the man's rapid breathing through his gray ski mask, forming little clouds in the stuffy air.

The Asian manager, a chubby squat faced man was still sweating torrents from the time Troy stuck the .44 Magnum at his head moments ago. Clarence could smell the sickening odor of the man's piss that he was undoubtedly standing in, the cash register out, wads of crumpled bills lying on the scratchy counter. Snapshots of a pair of smiling Asian boys holding a fish, looking proud, taped to the wall next to a phone, its cord ripped out. A static ridden talk show song droned out of a battered radio. Flies buzzed around their heads, bounced off the drawn shades over the plate glass windows. The woman glanced at a wine rack, oblivious.

This was supposed to have been simple. Walk in, grab the cash and go. But nothing ever worked out that way, Clarence thought.

The woman turned to him, wine bottle in her hands.

How long had they planned this? Clarence thought, waiting for the terror to bloom in the woman's face. Weeks, maybe a month. Going over it at Troy's place, a little, ramshackle house downtown, his wife hiding in the kitchen or the bedroom whenever Clarence came over. Casing the little mart, watching the flow of traffic, taking note of the manager's hours, the old guy that came to mop the place. "It'll be easy," Troy had said, "Piece of cake."

The woman looked at him, eyes blank.

He had developed a theory he carried since when he was a kid growing up in San Diego: Everything will screw up when you don't want it to at least once. He knew. He had tested it.

In high school when he hot-wired Mr. Gozole's Honda for the fifth time, someone saw him. When he cut the purse straps of the this woman in a Cosco parking lot after he had done it a hundred times, he got blindsided by baton happy security guard. After moving on up from joyrides and purse snatching to burglaries, Clarence had nearly got his head blown off as he was slipping on a backpack full of jewelry and computer equipment. Now it was the hold ups. After four of these, Clarence was getting pretty damn good.

The woman's mouth opened slowly, eyes widening, Troy with the gun in the manger's face and Clarence calmly observing her holding the throw down gun at his side. The bottle fell from her open hand, cracked on the floor at her feet, the white wine dribbling out. She was a petite woman, her ash brown hair done up with worthless barrettes. A black T shirt and bleached out jeans over a well built body, little gold earrings in her ears and a thin gold chain around her smooth neck. She was carrying a purse.

Her head shook slightly as she backed slowly toward the greasy door, blue eyes flicking to the both of them. Clarence noted that Troy had forgotten to lock the

door, the cheap plastic sign was flipped to CLOSED but the door wasn't locked. Shit, Troy. Clarence wanted to punch him, but he raised the gun at the woman instead. He'd deal with Troy later, wasn't the first time he screwed up either.

She squeaked, scrambled backward, the little bell rattling.

"Get away from the door," Clarence said, his voice muffled. Strange, how he wasn't panicking. Maybe it's just the shock. Or maybe because he knew it would happen. Troy studied the woman, looked at Clarence, dark eyes alive, glinting in the fizzing lights on the low ceiling. Clarence shook his head: No.

Troy's eyes turned to blades, cutting out pieces of Clarence's face.

Clarence had this rule to go along with the theory: never hurt anyone, just get the goods and go. He didn't consider himself a bad man. A criminal yes, there was no denying that, but a *bad* criminal, no. In all of his robberies he had committed or participated in, he had never once hurt anyone. At least not too bad. That gave him some level of comfort in his choice of making a living.

And Troy... Jesus, Troy *loved* to hurt people. It was like a game to him. Deciding where to hit and when, what to break and how, how long to beat on someone and when to stop which usually was when the poor bastard was maimed or it was difficult to recognize him. Clarence could imagine the guy rolling a pair of dice on the grimy floor of liquor store. Troy hadn't been his partner of choice, but the other guys were moving on to car jackings or armed house burglaries, Clarence didn't want to get into that mess. The time was so much more longer. None of the others wanted to go along as a backup man, except sociopath Troy who said he had a wife and a kid to feed. Clarence thought that was unlikely, given the way Troy was quick with his fist, imagined the purplish bruises on his wife. Probably booze money or for crack.

Troy was a handful and Clarence got the urge for the second time that night to put a bullet in the man's head.

The manager was crying as he stared at the barrel, "Don't shoot. Please, no shoot."

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" Troy growled.

Clarence's mind spun. First the manager, now the girl. *God, what's next?*

"Get out here," Clarence said.

The man looked at him. Clarence waved the gun around the desk, "Come on, come on. Out."

The man shuffled out, head down, eyes squeezed tight every now and then, expecting the worst. He cowered in front of them, face tear stained. Clarence saw the flash of the wedding band around the manager's chunky finger. Clarence glanced at the photo of the two boys, looked away. Laughing, Troy slapped the man across the head with the pistol. The manager gave a little yip and held his head with a hand, the other in front of his face.

"Please," he said.

"Please what?" Troy shot back, slapped him again, hard, leaving a red welt on the side of his face. Troy swung the gun back again, the man's face had turned white, his pants wet.

“Enough,” Clarence said, grabbing Troy’s wrist.

His partner shook him off, Clarence stared him in the eyes. Shaking his head, Troy stalked behind the desk, pulling out all the other bills along with the hundreds.

Clarence motioned with the gun at the man, “You. Over there with the woman, now.”

The manager obeyed and the two of them crouched beside a winery display like being closer to the ground would keep them safe from harm. Clarence’s eyes roved over the woman, still clutching her purse to herself. She’s a looker all right, he thought. But he’d wager she didn’t think she was. She didn’t have that confidence, the kind you can taste, smell it when lights dim. Like Jen.

Not wanting to think about how long it had been since he had been with a woman, with Jen, Clarence focused his thoughts on the purse. *Not much, but hell.* He’d leave her credit cards, license and the like. He strode across the white linoleum, the woman staring at him, fear melting into despair. Her arms fell beside her, like she was already dead.

“Shit!” Troy exclaimed suddenly.

Clarence turned. Troy already had his gun on the manager.

“Little pissant! Think I’m stupid! Think I’ve got a brain for shit huh?”

Clarence tried to stop him, “Calm down! Let’s go. We’re done.”

“Yeah, we’re fucking done. The maggot!” Troy raged, the gun trembling.

The room seemed to grind against the walls and ceiling, to bend at wrong angles. The pieces of his thoughts, getting jammed, lost. Something was wrong. Clarence could feel it kicking in his chest.

“What? The hell you talking about?”

He stepped halfway into Troy. The man shoved him aside, jamming the barrel into the manager’s forehead.

“Think you’re smart! Think you could get away!”

“What?” Clarence yelled, “What the hell is going-”

“He had a silent alarm!” Troy retorted.

Ice water ran through Clarence’s veins. Alarm? *There’s no way. We didn’t give him enough time. It couldn’t be.*

Troy slashed the pistol across the man’s head, shouting incoherently. The manager’s eyes rolled. Clarence didn’t stop him this time, his eyes moved up to the ceiling, then almost as if he sensed it, they moved to the air vent above the drinks. The camera stared down at him, its little red eye glaring at him. That hadn’t been there the last time they had looked the place over.

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Sergeant Dunning picked the crust out of the corners of his eyes as he keyed the mike, kept the other hand on the wheel of his cruiser. Dirt and sand pinged off the hood and windshield angrily, the cruiser bouncing every time it hit a pit in the rough dirt road. Lenny turned up that goddamn okie music of his. It was bad enough Dunning felt like a hick cop with a hick deputy in a hick department in a hick town, but Lenny had to stick the thorn in his ear with his hick country music.

“Say again,” Dunning said, glared at the deputy.

Lenny turned the dial back down, resumed his watch out the window into the cold, dark Nevada air. Pinpoints of light sparsely thrown in the blackness overhead.

The sergeant knew his frustration was uncalled for. Even if Rigdment could have passed for Mayberry, it was still overkill. No, he was angry because of Beth’s test results. They didn’t come back positive, but the hospital had ordered more. Even after the initial blood tests. That was always a bad sign. And then she told him. Goddamn. The sheriff swallowed the rising lump back down. He could have killed for a cigarette.

“Wan just buzzed us,” Carol said, “You know the liquor store by the-”

“I know what liquor store Carol. And I know Wan,” Dunning sighed.

She couldn’t even use dispatch codes over the radio, give the place a real police feel.

“Just thought you should know,” she said.

“I *already* know,” Dunning said, “Now, is that all you have for me?”

She huffed, “Jed called up a minute or two ago. Said he heard a lot of yelling and shouting from inside.”

Jed was a retarded kid who lived with his aunt in a trailer out by the gas station and Wan’s. At eighteen years old Jed was a nine year old boy in his mind. Much of the time it was Wan who reported to Jed for little odds and ends. If there was one thing Wan couldn’t stand it was Jed. So Dunning would get called in. Half the time it was something stupid, Jed didn’t want to use the restroom at the liquor store because it was too dirty or too smelly. Or Wan got in a rack full of swimsuit magazines and Jed wouldn’t go home. He’d stay all day in Wan’s staring at the airbrushed women. But there was one thing Jed always did. He always told the truth. Dunning could have sworn if Jed had to lie to save his life the kid wouldn’t.

Dunning cursed silently. Wan was a quiet man, kept to himself and mistrusted any form of law enforcement, for him to send in a silent alarm... For Jed to call in...

Lenny was looking at him, grim faced, his blue eyes set in a mask of stone.

“And?” Dunning asked.

“That’s it,” Carol said.

Dunning let the switch go and reset the mike on the dash.

“Well?” Lenny asked.

The white beams of the cruiser cut through the enveloping darkness over the road. To Dunning they reminded him of knives. The knives that would go through his wife’s body to get to the tumors. The ones that were slowly killing her every day. And Dunning had to watch.

“Looks like it’s going to be a long night, Len,” Dunning said.

---

It was too dark, Jed thought, shutting the trailer door behind him, quietly so Auntee would hear. He shook his head, no. So Auntee won’t hear. The dark was cold too. Cold like ice. Sticky too. Cold and sticky. Sticky like leeches. Leeches that suck your blood out. Jed knew all about leeches. He knew because he read

them in a book, a book about leeches. Aunty had given it to him one day after breakfast with yucky beans and yummy muffins. Aunty said beans were good for him. Jed didn't believe her. Muffins are good, Jed thought, pulling his fluffy blue jacket around him, Not bad like leeches. Like dark.

Jed could see Wan's shop ahead, the shades were down so it made the windows glow like big eyes in the cold, sticky dark.

Shivering, Jed shuffled across the big lot, around thorny weeds that looked like balls. Balls that rolled around, poked you with their thorns, hurt you. Jed didn't read about the weeds. Or the thorns. He got poked. That's how he knew. He knew he knew things not like those mean kids in town. Those one that called him names. Said bad words to him. Jed was smart. He read. And he knew he was smart. He shoved his cold hands into his warm pockets, trotted toward the big eyes that had gotten big. Jed told himself that they were not eyes. Eyes were things in people, in animals, in monsters. A shop could not have eyes. But Jed looked at the glowing windows, the windows he had heard yelling out of. *They look like eyes.* But Jed couldn't think of that. He couldn't be afraid. He had to help Mr. Wan. Help him from whoever was yelling in his shop. Yelling was bad. Yelling meant you get hurt. Like the mean boy who yelled at him a long time ago, hit him in the head with the brick. Hit him hard that boy did. Jed didn't want Mr. Wan to get hurt. That's why he was going to help him. Help him in case the police were too late.

Mr. Wan is a nice man, Jed thought running toward the eyes, running through the sticky dark that wanted to suck his blood. The yelling had started again.

They are not eyes, he reminded himself.

But they look like it.

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"Stop it dammit!" Clarence shouted, pulling Troy away from the bloodied manager.

The little man's face looked like it had been ripped off and glued backed on, the nose and mouth set wrong. His white shirt drenched red, a low keening sound came from his mouth like a broken radio.

Troy swung furiously, but Clarence wrestled him to the grimy floor.

"Stop it! You're killing him!"

His partner's ski mask was damp with sweat and spit. Hatred spilled from his eyes, burning Clarence.

"I don't fucking care!," Troy raged, "The fucking gook!"

Shaking him, Clarence slapped him across the face.

Troy bucked furiously, "You-

Clarence slapped him again, wanting to drive his head into the tile.

"Shutup! Shutup! Listen to me!"

Waiting until Troy stopped thrashing around, Clarence lowered his voice, "You kill him and that's it. For the both of us. Lets get the money and get out."

"That fucking-

"I don't care," Clarence hissed, "You already fucked up."

For an instant, Troy's eyes went wide than shrank to slits, "Me? I fucked up Clarence? What about you? What about the camera? What about silent alarm huh?"

Clarence was silent. *He could have sworn I didn't give him enough time.*

"Go in, get the money, yeah sure," Troy mocked underneath him, "We do it my way, go in, beat the shit out of him. Or better yet, shoot him! Then we get the money!"

Disgusted, Clarence got to his feet, scooped the cash off the counter and out of the cashier tray that Troy had popped. It felt wrinkled and dry like his uncle Mark's skin, after that thing with Mr. Gozole's Honda. To straighten you out, Mom had told him after speaking with the officers that had picked him up after he ran the red light with Gonzole's car.

He had begged, he had pleaded. Sixteen year old Clarence even resorted to, "Dad would have never done that." She just stared at him, arms crossed. San Diego was his city: Beaches, girls, cars, money, freedom. Upstate?, he had thought, Farmer Mark? Fuck.

At first, Clarence hated Mark and his crappy farm, hated the way he read his Bible every night, hated how he dragged Clarence to church every Sunday. He hated the smell of pigs and the moan of cows. Pig shit, cow shit. But after awhile he got used to it.

The woman hunkered behind the shelves of food, twisted the straps of her purse. The manager made little animal noises and bled. The blurry talk show host still droned. A fly bounced off his mask. It was not unlike the flies down at Mark's. Big, black, loud creatures that looked like mini bumble bees to Clarence. There had a bunch of them when Uncle Mark brought out the cake after the basket of fried chicken.

Clarence, beginning to warm up to his relative, was relieved the quiet man didn't order him back to work. Clarence was worn out from pitching hay, stacking feed for chicken, and chasing them around when they had been spooked by a weasel. Secretly, he imagined that he had eaten some of the little bastards in the basket. But he didn't ask. He didn't want to be disappointed.

To make the day worse, his uncle's cantankerous tractor decide to break it's radiator as well. So there he was when that cake was set in front of him, arms like water, hands blistered, and oil stained, his neck and back sunburned from trying to fix the damn tractor.

A sweating glass of water followed the cake along with a paper plate and a fork. The cake was white, pink and red frosting. It was a girly cake, like the ones made up for Valentines day. Clarence assumed it had something do with Mark's wife, the pictures of the delicate woman on the fireplace mantle. The one's that never gathered dust. But he didn't ask.

His uncle motioned at the cake, "Dig in."

He cut himself a fairly large slice, took a bite, swallowed. His face absolutely still. Ever watchful, Clarence took a bigger piece and a bigger bite. Then a second later, he wished he hadn't.



“Shit,” he gasped, clamoring for the glass of water, gulping it down to cool the inferno in his mouth.

Swallowing the water, caused him to swallow the mouthful of cake, burning down his throat like acid. The thing was worse than a dozen jalopenos. He drained the glass, looking around for more. His uncle hadn't said anything, the man watched him with a calm distance as if Clarence's situation was a movie on a screen. Clarence reached for Mark's full glass, but his uncle pulled it out of his reach. And in that moment, burnt, tired, weak, angry, Clarence hated him. Mark had done this on purpose. Made him work his ass off all day long, only to trick him into burning his mouth on a fucking cake. Clarence was going to strip the man's house down to nothing, take every piece of shit out, trash what he couldn't carry. He was going to tear up those pictures on the mantle too.

His uncle watched him for another moment.

“Hurt's don't it?” he said.

Fuck you. The opening of his throat stung whenever he tried to breathe.

Mark took a sip of water, kept the glass outside of his nephews reach.

“Hurts almost as much as people do after they've been robbed. House in shambles,” he watched a bumble bee land on the table, “Lying in the street, social gone, credit cards, life insurance. They were going to send their children to college, take a cruise with their family maybe. Buy a new car.”

His uncle looked at him.

“But it doesn't hurt as bad as what's pounding around inside you.”

Clarence would have laughed, if he could have. That's what this was about. He should have guessed.

“Never mugged anyone,” Clarence said, hoarsely.

Mark raised an eyebrow, “No?”

Silence. The bumble bee crawled across the table.

“You thought about working me over when you took a bite of that cake,” he said, “Still thinking.”

Clarence didn't say anything.

His uncle leaned back in chair, took another sip of water, his eyes never leaving Clarence's.

“Cake burn, my daddy used to call it. Did the same thing that I did to you, a week after I stole some kid's lunch money. Said that some things look good-money, relationships, stuff on shelves, whatever someone else has- but bite into them Mark and they're going to burn you. Not only you, but other people.”

Clarence smirked. He wasn't going to let this old timer fuck with him.

No way.

“But I didn't listen,” his uncle said, watched the bumble bee, sadness settling into his eyes.

Clarence pretended he wasn't listening, curious about what happened to this wholesome farmer.

“Did some time in the juvenile center. For breaking into the cash box of my

high school. Fund-raiser effort.”

“When I was released, I paid back everything I took. To the last penny. Found out later that fund-raiser was for a pair of orphans. Brother and sister. Mother had AIDs. Father’s out of the picture. I didn’t know. Didn’t know who I was taking from. Know why?”

Clarence looked at him.

“Because I was so full of myself. Me, me, me.”

Mark got up, stretched, passed the glass to Clarence.

“Got pretty mad for just a cake burn. Sure you’re not a mugger?”

He walked away. Clarence waited until he was out of sight before gulping the water down. The heat ebbed away, Clarence wiped his mouth with his shirt, watched the crawling bumblebee, thought about what a rotten trick the man had played one him. Clarence wanted to smash that damn bee. He could feel its thin armor crushing under the power of his fist. He watched it crawl past him oblivious, content. With an angry sigh, he got up, let it go. He let it live.

Clarence looked at the terrified woman. She probably thought he was going to rape her. It took him awhile after that summer to realize what an asshole he had been that summer. He thought he understood it now, what Uncle Mark had been trying to say. But Clarence was good at what he did. He couldn’t give that up. He changed his tactics through the years, developed a code, his own set of ethics. Mark was a good guy, and what he had said had made a difference. Not right away. But it did. Clarence never took from places of charity, never took from churches, never hurt anyone. The world wouldn’t give, so he took a little. Nothing wrong with that.

Nobody was going to die.

The sudden clanging of the front door startled him out of the memories. He pivoted toward the door to see angry, crying young man barreling toward him.

“You hurt mister Wan! You hurt mister Wan!” the kid cried.

---

Dunning skidded to a stop as Jed ran out of their headlights and into the squat liquor store. The two masked men turning. Dammit.

“Jed!” Dunning shouted, jumping out of the cruiser, knees cracking.

Lenny grabbed the shotgun, crouched behind the open passenger door.

The sheriff thumbed the snap off his holster, pulled his service pistol free. If he shot through the window the flying glasses would injure the kid.

If he didn’t...

Dunning raised his gun.

The kid tackled one of the men, the two crashing to the floor out of sight, beer ads in the way. The glare of Dunning’s head lights on the windows disoriented him. Shouting. Jed was crying and yelling.

The other man, much bigger, started forward.

The sheriff felt his stomach twist, he knew that kind of walk.

“Back door,” Dunning said to his deputy, “Now.”

Lenny hunkered down and sprinted behind the building, into the darkness

of the night. Dunning found the mega phone on the back seat.

Hickish.

He turned it on, fought the flare of embarrassment.

“This is the police,” he shouted into the megaphone, “Come out with your hands behind your head.”

The bigger man turned.

Jed and the other robber were no were to be seen. Neither was Wan.

From behind the door of the squad car, he lined up his pistol’s sights on the man’s chest. “The second you see that piece,” his training officer had drawled, spit a wad of “tobaccee” on the dirt, “You give that bastard some lead.”

The cold wind numbed Dunning’s perspiring face. Raised the hackles on his neck.

The masked man raised his arm.

The second you see...

*Is he? Is he going to? Is he? Is he?*

Dunning’s eyes ached, straining. The sights blurring. Slowly, he tightened his finger around the trigger. All he could think of was those knives cutting into his Beth  
She had such soft skin.

---

Clarence shoved the crying man off him, the headlights of the cop car muted against the black glass, the lights of the store. Troy raising his gun.

The manager groaning. The woman curling into a ball on the floor.

The kid whined, “You hurt-”

“Down, dammit! Get down!” Clarence shouted.

His head was buzzing, ears pounding so fucking loud.

“You hurt mister-”

Clarence hit the kid. He could have swore he’d heard a crunch.

“Shutup! Shutup!” he shouted, blood squirting from the kid’s nose.

The woman shrieked.

Fear clawed up his throat, talons tickling his lungs, “Troy! Troy don’t!”

Troy ignored him, blood lust steaming off him, choking the air.

Fuck it. Clarence aimed his gun at the back of Troy’s head.

The woman’s screams died, her eyes wide.

The kid rose to his feet.

Something banged behind Clarence.

Troy spun, a light in his eyes. The gunshot deafening in the little store. It tore through the stuffy air, the air spiked Clarence’s ears. Everything thing was soundless and ringing. All but the pounding in his head.

---

Jed wondered who had hit him. Who had hit him after the skinny bad man did. The floor reached up and hit him again. That wasn’t fair. He got hit too

much. Must be that mean kid. The one with the brick, he thought, when he hit him on the head a long time ago. And it was hard to...

To think. Yes. That was hard.

Jed felt funny, not funny like before. Before there were leeches. Before there was monster's eyes and cold, sticky dark. He couldn't feel something. Something that he was supposed to feel. What?

He was on the floor. The floor was cold and sticky like dark. He didn't like the floor. He wished it was warm like Auntiny's muffins. Muffins are good, he thought.

One of the bad men was saying something. The skinny one. That's not right. You're supposed to hear people when they talk. You're supposed to.

Somebody was turning the lights off. He wished they wouldn't do that. He didn't like it when the lights were off. Didn't like the dark.

Cold. He felt cold. And itchy. His neck was itchy. Itchy and cold. He thought that that was worse than sticky and cold. He hoped Mr. Wan didn't feel itchy and cold. He liked Mr. Wan. Mr. Wan had pretty magazines with nice ladies on them. Jed wanted to make sure Mr. Wan was okay. He'd kiss Mr. Wan. Kiss his head. Aunteny used to kiss his head when he got hurt. It didn't stop the hurt. But it made it better. Some else use to do that. Someone good. Someone Jed was supposed to remember. But he couldn't. Maybe if the bad men turned on the light, then I could remember. His neck itched, it was wet. Wet, itchy. Itchy and....

---

"Fuck!" Troy shouted, crouching fast.

The kid was gone. His neck torn open from Troy's bullet, his eyes glazed, blood pooling underneath him. Clarence felt sick. *Goddamn you Troy!* His partner turned, "Fucking kid-" saw Clarence, his gun aimed at him.

"Don't!" Troy yelled, trained his gun on Clarence, still on the floor.

The kid's blood flowed toward him, silent and gentle, like the tide.

"I knew it! I fucking knew it," Troy raged, "Gonna shoot me in the back!"

Clarence stared into his partner's gray, shaking eyes, saw whatever existed in them jump out, beat him, choke him, snap his elbows, and kick his teeth out. Clarence knew he had to end this. Had to do it now before Troy did anything else.

"Put the gun down," Clarence said, trying to keep calm.

Wait... Wait until he lowers it.

Clarence could imagine Troy grinding his teeth away through the mask.

You're on the camera anyway. Probally get life anyway.

"Think I'm stupid," Troy laughed, hard and raw, "You think I'm that dumb?"

"Put it down," Clarence repeated.

Another bang came from behind them.

"This is the police," another voice yelled, "There's no way out!"

Troy's eyes flicked to the back door, then back to Clarence, straight, locked, and defiant. Clarence couldn't have stopped it if he wanted to.

With speed he hadn't known Troy to have, the man grabbed the woman's

hair, yanked her up. He shoved the muzzle into her jaw. Clarence didn't have to see his face to know that Troy was smiling at him. The eyes said everything.

Clarence lowered his gun.

---

Dunning couldn't see a damn thing. The glare and the ads blocking his view. If he stepped out from behind the door...

The sheriff had heard Lenny yelling. Why he hadn't told Dunning he had a shot was unbelievable. Dammit Lenny!

Silence came from the store, quiet, still silence. And Dunning, in all his twenty years as a cop, was never more afraid then when he listened to the silence. He hadn't been that afraid when Carlos, high on speed, rushed at him inside his trailer, bread knife held high. He hadn't been that afraid when his squad car rolled, after trying to avoid a coyote. Hadn't been that afraid as a rookie, making his first DUI stop. A fat Otis character, hands off the wheel, drunk as hell, started to throw a fit.

He was afraid because of Beth. That's what it was. Beth and those tumors. Beth and the look in her eyes, when everything he loved fell out of them at the doctor's words.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Dunning," the doctor had sighed, clipboard in hand.

Dunning took a deep breath, something fluttered against his ribs. And stepped out from behind the door.

---

Troy started to laugh. He cursed in Clarence's face, shoved the woman away from him and just laughed, slapping his knees.

Clarence's blood froze, numbed his head. Jesus.

Even the manager was quiet, staring at the big man. The kid continued to bleed out before them. And Troy laughed, everything funny as hell.

"You're so fucking *stupid!*" the man chortled.

Clarence glanced at his gun on the floor. Troy had made him toss it. But he could still get it. Troy would shoot him, but in the rush, Clarence was sure he'd miss. Then Clarence would light him up, take that crazy bastard out before he killed anyone else.

Troy walked over to him, giddy.

Clarence closed his eyes, saw Jen, her hair shaking about her shoulders. He was Uncle Mark watching him, calm, quiet.

If Clarence got out alive, he would stop. He would stop everything. Stop robbing, stop thieving. He would make a clean sweep of his life. He'd even take his Uncle up on going to church. Maybe going back to the farm. If the man was still around. Clarence was pretty sure he was. Mark had always came off as a survivor. Clarence would be too. He had too be.

Troy pressed the gun into his head, mashed his face into the tile. He clucked

his tongue, “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

He laughed and tapped Clarence with the barrel. Then stood up and walked over to the woman.

Get it now dammit! Run! Shoot him!

But Clarence saw the woman look at Troy and knew something was wrong. Knew something was very wrong. He saw her stand, straighten, brush her the hair out of her face.

Troy handed her the gun and Clarence felt sick.

“Take care of him baby,” Troy said to her.

He looked back at Clarence, “This one’s so goddamn dumb I don’t have the heart to do it.”

The woman walked over Clarence, her foot falls so loud in his ears, the gun held awkwardly in her two small hands. Clarence searched for her eyes, tried to find something, anything in them.

Please...

Please, don’t. Please, oh, please.

The woman raised the gun at him.

Troy leaned against the manager’s counter, sighed contentedly.

And she turned and shot Troy in the chest. Clarence watched him stumble sideways, eyes wide. She shot him again and then again. The big man, lurched forward toward her, “You, you...”

Her hands shook as she shot him again, one last time as he keeled over. The thump of his body on the floor sent a flood of relief through Clarence’s.

He got to his feet. The cops were running to the front door, shouting.

He was alive! Alive, God! Clarence was so happy he just breathed. Breathed in the air, felt it expanded his lungs. He was-

Clarence turned, saw the woman, the gun pointed at him.

“I’m sorry,” she said and she shot him.

---

Dunning led the crying woman out of the liquor store. Lenny called an ambulance for Wan, stayed with the manager, binding the man’s head with his own shirt. The poor guy kept moaning, something about Chan, fish or something, Dunning didn’t understand.

“It’s gonna be okay, honey,” Dunning said, squeezed her trembling shoulder, “It’s gonna be okay. Ambulance will be here soon. Look you over.”

She looked at him and the sheriff saw the wet shine in her eyes. He smiled and dug his handkerchief out of his breast pocket, handed it to her.

“Never use it,” he resurred her.

She gave him a weak smile and wiped her eyes.

Dunning led her to the squad car, radioed in to Carol, doubled checked on that ambulance. She curled up on the driver’s side, held her knees, rocked.

Dunning crouched, his knees cracking.

“Now,” he said softly, “Could you tell me again what happened?”

She nodded, wiped her eyes again, and said in a shaky, beaten voice, “They started to argue. After the kid, the one in the jacket was shot. The two men. They pointed those guns at each other,” she squeezed her eyes shut, her mouth twisting, “It was so awful...”

---

They were taking her away, the paramedics. She smiled to herself, wiped the tears from her face, those tears of joy. She had ran out, into the dark where the police officers couldn't see her and stuffed as many bills as she could into gopher holes. Maybe they were snake holes, she didn't know. She didn't really care. She'd be back later.

The paramedic woman asked her if she wanted her to call anyone, let them know. Nikki Deverport shook her head. Wait, make that Nikki Marel. Troy was dead.

Nikki recalled the way her husband had looked when she shot him. Shot that cruel bastard. Shot him dead. The look in his eyes was worth the years of abuse she put up with, worth all the slaps, the shoving around, the cruel, cruel things he said and did to her for ten miserable years.

He must have been so shocked. Thought she hadn't heard a thing, from the kitchen, from her room listening to him and Clarence plot how to rob the liquor store. Troy didn't know that the vents carried his voice to her ears.

Nikki lay still and felt the bumps and jolts in the road, taking her to freedom. She'd talk to the doctor, get a clean bill of health, and be on her way. She had never felt so free, so light. It was as if the stars, flashing by the ambulance's windows, winked at her, congratulated her.

She felt a twinge of remorse. She didn't want to have to shoot Clarence. He didn't strike her as a very bad man. Not at all like Troy had been. She had wished Troy had done it. She wished he had gotten away. That was Jeff's original idea when he coached her on how to play the victim when he and Clarence held up the store. It came easy, she had lived as one. Troy had told her that, they'd split the money, go to Canada, Mexico, someplace where Clarence couldn't follow and neither could the law. “Besides, Troy had told her, Clarence wouldn't follow them. He didn't like to hurt people.”

But then Troy had gotten angry and when he got angry somebody always had to pay.

The paramedic woman was saying something to the other medic, a short, stocky man. They laughed and smiled.

Nikki hadn't been worried about the camera. It was a fake anyway. The manager had told her one time she came. She had asked about it.

She was upset that the man had to get hurt. The kid dead too, that was bad. But Nikki knew that sometimes life wasn't fair.

Sometimes you just got burned.

# Tour Guide

Pat Dixon

If thou beest born to strange sights,  
    Things impossible to see,  
Ride ten thousand days and nights  
    Till age snow white hairs on thee. . . .  
    —“Song,” John Donne

Speaking as an expert who has lived and worked in the Big Apple for over thirty-five years, let me reassure all of you that the danger of being mugged here is far slimmer for people of our ethnicity than for literally any other group. Yes, go ahead and smile if you like. I should caution you, however, that there is a slight but very real danger in stores and restaurants, in hotels, especially in elevators, and out on the sidewalks and streets. Furthermore, very very rarely, some of us have been deliberately run down by nut cases in their cars. Rarely, I say, because the state officials have taken some precautions to keep such folks off the road. However, as you'll appreciate, no system is perfect—they miss some, are bought off by others, and a few will drive cars even if their licenses have been revoked. Realistically, though, you're far more likely to get a few bruises simply because somebody bumps into you inadvertently, especially during what they call the rush hour here.

I will be taking all twenty-three of you out for a stroll from here in about half an hour. Please feel free to eat from your box lunches while I give you this orientation. This office overlooks Penn Station and what is now called Madison Square Garden—although for some quirky reasons I will explain during our tour it is nowhere near Madison Square. In case you would like to look out the windows and compare what you see with the street maps you were given or the skyline photo on the wall here, this window is facing west, and that one, of course, is facing north.

As you were told in our brochures before you came here, we will not be making any comfort stops during any segments of the tour, so please, if you have any needs of that kind, take care of them before we leave. The facilities are through that door there. Please do not wander off, however, to explore. Although we do “own” this entire floor, and indeed have done so since the building was constructed sixty-three years ago, most of the rooms are unoccupied and contain nothing but thin drapes and lamps set on timers. When we return after today's outing, my assistants and I will show you where your bunks are. The accommodations are quite Spartan here, but no worse than you've encountered elsewhere if you've traveled before. One of our economies, of course, is we've hired no bell hops because none of you brought any luggage or changes of clothing. Yes, thank you for smiling at that, ma'am. Usually at least one person laughs aloud. Seriously, one more thing: let me



emphasize that the elevator on which you came up is to be operated only—for reasons connected vitally with the safety of you all—by our *official* personnel.

The chief danger in New York City, as some of you no doubt already know, is down in the subways which I'll be guiding you through personally tomorrow in groups of five or six. I don't recommend that any of you go down there alone while you're visiting the city. Always take at least two adults with you who know their way around. This sounds like an augmented version of the buddy system, but it has been found to be effective. Make no mistake: this is especially true at night when the Menace Quotient or M. Q. goes up by roughly 37 percent!

I'll get back to the dangers of subways and subway stations in a few moments, but first I want to remind you that New York is hazardous to your health because of its sheer filth. Other places you've lived or visited no doubt have their own problems including a little litter on the ground, but this will be like nothing you've ever seen before. You folks who came down here from Quebec and Toronto are especially going to be in for a real shock. People here seem to consider it their constitutional right to discard whatever is in their hands wherever they please.

To digress briefly, I was leading a tour of our people from Munich around last autumn, and one elderly chap was so outraged each time he saw a New Yorker toss a newspaper or food wrapper on the sidewalk that he strode over and punched them in the side of the face and yelled "Schweinhund!" in a gruff voice. He was fairly frail, so he didn't hurt them much, but, as you can well imagine, it startled them plenty. Now, I did have to restrain him, and I will restrain any of you who get out of hand like that. Just remember where you are and who you are, please. As for the litter and filth, be aware that it is all around you, and that the wind is often blowing it about. You do not, for obvious reasons, wish to become "papered" even briefly, and I would strongly recommend that you brush off yourselves fairly thoroughly at half-hour intervals. I find that even with such brushing I need to wipe myself down with a damp cloth every four hours on a normal work day here—and the whole cloth is totally black with grit, grim, dirt, soot, whatever. I wish I could provide you with breathing filters, too, because the local saying here is that a day's worth of city air is as noxious as smoking two packs of Camels. Little joke—because I know that none of you smoke.

Do any of you have questions so far? All right then . . . oh, you do. Are you going to Times Square? No. No, it isn't one of the places we'll be going to even though it's fairly well known around the world. We will be circling it tomorrow night about a block or two away from its center just so you can see its lights, and the reason is the high risk factor you would be experiencing if we were to walk right through it, whether singly or in groups. I know this from experience. There are just too many weapons in the wrong hands there, which makes it dangerous in ways that the famous subway system is not.

Any other questions? Have *I* ever been shot at or personally injured? Yes. Yes, I have. Three times I've been slightly slashed by people in the subways—people like those we'll be seeing tomorrow. And once near Times Square some

user or dealer or user-dealer fired off a burst from an automatic pistol—aimed directly at me, I am certain—and parted the hair of my buttocks and left me with that two-inch scar you seem to be staring at with such fixation. Just minor scratches, so to speak, and I've never been badly hurt yet.

Other questions? No, we won't be seeing the home of Mr. Lovecraft—chiefly because it would be in Providence, Rhode Island, if it is still standing, which I don't know it is, but even if it were here in New York it would be too chancy to visit because of the unbalanced cultist mindset of most of his fans. A lot of 'em are borderline cases, but they have far more credibility than a bunch of junkies or "subbies" do. Not *really* high, mind you, but why look for trouble with a group of five or six of 'em? No, we *didn't* have anything to do with his death, at least so far as I've heard.

What am I talking about? All right, this young man was just asking about the American author H. P. Lovecraft, one of the sighted kind, who is best known to us for his story "The Dunwich Horror," which he based partly on three sightings he made in Brooklyn back in the mid-1920s. He was what we call an F. P. or Functional Psycho, who lived chiefly in the capital of Rhode Island most of his life and even mailed his shirts and shoes back there whenever they needed a button replaced or a sole fixed. This youngster was wondering whether we were responsible for offing him, and I said no, probably not. I *am* in a position to have heard, and I'm sure we didn't bother. If you ever take the time to look up his story, you'll see that he got only the germ of an idea from his observations and, as the raven quoth, nothing more.

Whoa, now! One at a time! You heard that we killed a crazy Frenchman named Maupassant in the 1890s for writing "The Horla"? What is *your* evidence? I've heard that, though he was one of the sighted people, that particular story "proved" he'd gone 'round the bend completely and led to his being put into an asylum—where he died of syphilis or some other perfectly natural cause. Whom *did* we do, then? All right, give me a few seconds to collect and sort out my thoughts on this. Don't press me: "You can't push a chain," as they say. Let's see . . . This is just off the top of my head, because nobody has ever asked me about this before, and I don't have anything prepared in a formal way.

All right—so far as I can recall, we *did* kill an Irish immigrant writer named Fitz-James O'Brien. He wrote a little piece of fiction called "What Was It?" based on a personal sighting in the late 1850s, and we got him during the American Civil War and destroyed his background notes and diary. And there was another fellow named Ambrose Bierce, who published "That Damned Thing"—no, "*The* Damned Thing"—in the 1890s, based on a sighting made by an F. P. aunt of his. He never did see anything himself for another twenty years or so, but he was compiling legends about us in the southwest and was experimenting with peyote, and when he suddenly saw four of us one afternoon in Mexico and reached for his rifle, we finished him off, burned his notebooks, and buried him where he lay.

No, no, no, we *didn't* do in Judge Crater or Amelia Earhart—or Buddy Holly! Nor even Elvis. At least *I* haven't heard about it. I *did* hear, however, that

Rudolph Diesel, the fellow who invented the engine, you know, suddenly began beating on one of us with his walking stick while crossing the English Channel and had to be summarily pitched over the side of the boat.

Usually, of course, we don't need to do anything. Let me give you a modern footnote, so to speak, about one of the 1992 presidential candidates who reported seeing would-be assassins in his yard. That was just a couple of our Texas teenagers, larking around. Since no one else saw them, and this fellow—a congenitally sighted F. P.—already had a credibility problem, there was no threat to us at all. Besides, most of the folks we've eliminated have been comparative nobodies—most of them are like the people I'll be pointing out tomorrow, and they simply end up on the third rail or under some wheels in a very prosaic way. There's just too much bogus, melodramatic folklore about celebrities being spread around, and some people seem willing to believe nearly *anything!* My personal rule of thumb is to maintain a skeptical attitude. Let's have a different, more relevant topic, please.

Yes, we will be going to the Tibetan Museum in Manhattan—as well as the one on Staten Island. You'll all enjoy the ferry ride, I'm sure, and the price is right, as the saying goes. Just so we're all “up to speed,” as they say, and “reading from the same sheet music,” let me confirm that the paintings, the statuary, and the descriptions in *The Book of the Dead* are indeed based on mystics' close encounters with our ancestors. Incidentally, the parallel sightings of the so-called “Yeti” by Himalayan lay people are indicators of what inbreeding and/or high altitudes will do to folks' brains over an extended period of time. Of course, because their mindset is peaceful, indeed even reverent—unlike that of the majority of people in this city if not the whole country—we've never been concerned about sightings or even close encounters there. You will no doubt be amused to see these paintings and sculptures first hand and full size. I've found that there is something totally charming about them that never fails to bring mistiness to the eyes of most tourists I show them to.

Unfortunately, we don't have any Tibetan monks doing a sand mandala in the city at this time, but I will be playing several videos for you tonight to prep you for the uptown museum tomorrow. I actually attended the “painting” of one of these mandalas last year and was quite touched by several of the monks, and I purchased a video of them at work just last month after viewing it on a local PBS program. One old monk in particular, who was in charge, looked up at me and, without a single word, beamed me the sweetest, most loving smile I have ever seen. He said nothing to the others, but each of them, independently, glanced up briefly from time to time and smiled to signify that I was completely welcome there. Of course, I am not on the video, but I will point out the smiles directed at me as they occur.

All right, now. I see that it's almost time we got started. Again, does anyone need to visit the facilities one more time before we leave? We will all wait. No? Then I'll just lead the way to our elevator and will finish my orientation about the New Yorkers we call “subbies” as we descend. Keep together, please. Oh, as you board, notice that the number thirteen is above the door there. This will

probably be the only time during your stay in New York that you'll see that number for a floor. In the lobby, which I'll be leading you through in a couple minutes, you'll note that both of the elevators there have dials over them which read 11, 12, 14, 15. It's based on some sort of irrational holdover of a pagan superstition, or so I've been told.

Down, please—basement. Just another little joke: this elevator only runs between the basement and this floor. We'll have a short flight of steps up to the lobby, and after that I will be "signing" my commentary to you. I don't know how much longer we can continue tours like these—perhaps only another two decades unless something changes the direction of this society. In the past dozen years, apparently because of greed-polluted water and air, job stress, bad diet, and the snowballing homelessness—especially when the "care-giving system" dumps non-functionals into the streets—the number of Threat People or T. P. has made a quantum jump. Their brain chemistry is changed somehow—that's all we know.

I have glanced over three or four medical books and a dozen or so articles about schizophrenics and drug users, not for the details, of course, but for the general bottom line. And the bottom line is that their bodies, because of heredity and environment both, put out greater and greater amounts of perception-altering enzymes. As you've all probably heard or guessed, like dogs, some of 'em can hear sounds that their kin are deaf to, and, like butterflies, some can see light far beyond their kin's normal spectrum.

Most of these, of course, don't impact on us at all, one way or the other. But when I take you into the subways tomorrow, you'll be amazed at the dozens of people down there who will suddenly look up at you and shout at you and even scream in terror at you. Some will even rush at you and try to touch or hit you. Most of them are harmless—malnourished and pretty weak—so there isn't much danger of getting more than a scratch like these on my chest and shoulder and thigh—just fly bites, comparatively speaking, as you can see. A few are more aggressive and will have to be dealt with by me or one of my two assistants here.

The amusing thing which will surprise you even though you've been told about it, however, is that the present majority of "normals" will at first totally ignore these screamers, then they will move away from them because the screamers are deranged and defective in their view—shouting as it were into empty air—and finally they will often summon one of their transit police officers to deal with these loud public nuisances. They see their own sighted kind as the menaces and, for now at least, look straight through us large "demons," who are invisible to their "sane" eyes.

# Tiny Satisfaction Valerie Goodwine

“Damn it all Meg, I can’t find the TV guide”, Fred grumbled. Grabbing the remote he flipped frantically through the channels and found the football game he had been looking forward to.

“Damn it to hell and back”, he muttered. He had missed the kickoff!

As the dull roar of the crowds poured through the television, Fred wriggled his butt deeper into his chair and took a swig of cold beer. He could feel his shoulders and entire back starting to relax.

“Hey Meg, how ‘bout you making up some popcorn?” he called out.

“Sure thing Honey, just let me get these potatoes on cooking”, replied Meg.

In the kitchen Fred’s girlfriend Meg had already begun supper. A tasty

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## Sharp Practice

*Gary McGee*

I have a fever from the commotion  
Of elbows and brain stems.  
Too many miscalculations.

I am the obsolete philosopher,  
Spearheading the man-ear,  
But somehow coming out the other side.

My fingers, blind as piano keys,  
Type white-black, ignorant to the themes  
Tattooing themselves to the page.

But the history of the world is burning.  
Cognitive dissonance is God.  
There is no use chagrining what hasn’t come.

There is only the twilight of wisdom.  
The dawn of the dumb.  
If ignorance is bliss, knowledge is pain.

But I will continue to fight.  
I will wrestle gods until I have blackholes for eyes.

roast was cooking slowly in the oven giving the whole house a heavenly smell. Meg had started peeling potatoes. Fred had to have “real” mashed potatoes with a roast. According to Fred, instant potatoes tasted like paste, and were not fit for pigs to eat. Fred wanted what he wanted and that was good home cooking.

Under the potato peelings, serving as a plate, was a wet smeared newspaper section. “College Bowl Guide” was barely readable through the peelings. Carefully Meg wrapped the potato peelings in the newspaper and tossed it into the trash.

Meg started searching in the cupboard for the popcorn.

# Painted Windows

Nicholas Trutenko

She was selling trinkets at funerals  
While wiping the brows of weeping children  
With a small lime green sponge  
Which she would later use to wring the tears  
Over the dying plants in her apartment  
Next to the shrine of Elvis  
Surrounded by dimly lit candles in jars  
In a room papered in red velvet

On the table, newspapers strewn  
From a dozen yesterdays  
All open to the obituaries  
Circled systematically in red marker  
While this fucking hag  
Used the blood of unknown poets  
To update her resume

All the while, the windows –  
Painted shut through the many years  
And various shades of gray  
And alabaster silhouettes of dead soldiers,  
Protected her from the outside world  
And the truth

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George Bush is a  
Punk Ass Chump

Shaun Millard

Values set standards  
by chewing fat  
Standards lodge crumbs  
in the bud of tongues

# Rite of Passage in Brighton, Illinois

*Scott E. Selliers*

As far as he could tell nearly a week had passed, basing his assumption solely on his neck scruff, bodily odor, and the amount of beer he noted to be left in the refrigerator last night as he half-heartedly searched for a miraculously un-raided morsel of something edible. Today, he thought, was as good a day as any to bathe and begin experimenting with his newly discovered attitude. He felt the hard floor beneath his feet as he sat up in bed, lazily allowing his feet to fall to the sole clear patch on the floor, a floor otherwise covered in a hodge-podge assortment of abandoned books, papers, and clothing that even he couldn't remember when had been actually worn. The weight of his body seemed more than he was accustomed to, partly due to the amount of pot left in his blood and partly due to the fact that he hadn't been completely prostrate for an unknown number of hours. Sleep, while a welcomed change in his recent life, did have its way of exacting a toll after all, he thought.

The trip to the shower took him on a guided tour of the house that he was having a harder time feeling at home in. An eclectic assortment of ill-gotten yard ornaments mingled throughout with empty sacks of snack foods. A cat sat in the middle of the galley-style kitchen, lazily licking its ass as though it was a pre-requisite to living another day. The smell seemed different in the house this morning (little did he know it was approaching two o'clock), something he attributed to some form of late-night cleaning binge that had been embarked upon by one of the other residents of the house, most likely out of the desire to present the resemblance of responsibility for the special audience of a newly found, and completely un-initiated, girl from one of the nameless neighboring rural towns that seemed to orbit Brighton in the same way a moth spirals fatally into a flame. Dishes were done and trash had been, for the most part, placed into the open garbage bag that hung on the pantry door handle. But despite the noble attempt at bringing order into the house on Edwin Street, the familiar chaos still sat front and center.

He cautiously crept down the basement stairs, using only the diffuse daylight that filtered through the sheets used as curtains to navigate the empty beer cans and ash trays, ever careful not to wake any would-be hangover that could very well be sleeping on the pile of dirty clothes at the landing of the open staircase. Such had his friends become to him, he thought; angry obstacles on his way to bathe. He couldn't risk the possibility of having to talk to anyone that would be found in the house now. The survival of the new outlook he was trying to foster depended on avoidance at this point. He knew, as was always the case, any attempt at bringing about any kind of personal change would be sniffed out by

the residents of this house through the most subtle of clues. Bathing without having to actually go to work; removing used party paraphernalia from one's room; watching news on the television; listening to music that was not on the approved list of drinking music; requesting silence throughout the house to attempt to receive a good night's sleep — all were signs of some form of inner existence that could foster an end to how things had become.

What saddened him more was the fact that he knew his resolve to change could not survive any conversation. He knew that as long as he could avoid the life in the house he had a chance. Even the briefest encounter with any of them would erase it. A simple comment about the night prior; a confused question regarding the day of the week; a brief commentary critiquing the strength of the pot brought into the house recently and the attempt at remembering just how long it had been since the likes of it had been had — any such offering would detract his thoughts. The mere act of hearing any such platitude would end up in his losing the scent of the life he suspected existed. All he needed was time and some random unforeseen event to solidify his new attitude, akin to the process of adding water to concrete, which would remain a fine dust that could be easily blown away with the slightest breeze without the necessary ingredient of water. What was this event going to be? He wondered as he stepped into the shower stall. And less important, but mysterious none the less, where did this anticipation for change come from in the first place? He thought that it was possibly some remnant of nostalgia that had been drown accidentally in the sea of his thoughts, only to wash ashore and be mistaken for the mythological creature known to him as Hope. Perhaps it was planted into his cloudy mind by some god, he thought. Maybe gods do watch and know us, and in turn they whisper little clues to us while we sleep. Any stupid possibility would do, he thought, that is, except the possibility that he just wasn't happy and he was doing something about it. This was heresy due to the fact that it would pre-suppose the existence within him of initiative; a drive. The possibility that some piece of him had survived the years of dismissive poisoning, only to be heard crying out for more and better, made him shudder. While he was previously successful in the act of hiding from his most feared opponent, Potential, he began to fear the futility of the act. He suddenly knew, while he was washing his hair, that he was going to spend the rest of his life chasing a dream of himself he had once had as a child, at the manipulatively implanted suggestion of his mom. The fact that he was resigned to chase a ghost was fine, he thought, as long as it was his ghost, not the ghost born of desire in his mother's heart, deviously snuck into his mind, and hidden as one of his own thoughts. While the years ahead led him to a close relationship with her, that shuddering disoriented young man (who was trying hard to live a life in a glorious haze) who stood in the shower at that very moment would always hate her.

As he sat in his truck, which was parked haphazardly in the carport, miraculous due to the fact that he parked it there over a week ago amidst the deepest drunk that he had experienced up until that point in his life, he watched the



needle of the fuel gauge hover above the E. He felt safe. While he had no idea where he was going to go, nor did he know where he would find the experience he needed to solidify his resolve (the water to his concrete), he had survived the house. He noticed the saplings growing in the gutter of the roof. He noticed the undiscovered shed in the backyard in which he never so much as looked into, fearing the sight of such yard implements that would stir within him the thought of actually taking responsibility for something, the way that such yard implements do. He noticed the older model non-descript vehicles parked in front of the house, the kind you see parked in the management-mandated farthest reaches of a fast-food joint. Then he noticed something even more sinister: a for-sale sign slumping in the yard. He felt no pity for himself as he had survived the house, today. He felt pity for those still in the house. Years later he would remember that sign, he knew. He knew that even though that house would eventually be lost to his friends who slept off the previous night inside, the haze that it created within their minds would propagate other such houses. As though the seed of that house was spreading itself through those who slept, only to give rise to other such houses, in a biologically reproductive way.

As he steered his truck across town, he saw the town for the first time. He wasn't going somewhere in town, watching only for those visible clues he used to inform his hands to turn the wheel; he actually saw the town. He had always thought of Brighton as some kind of mushroom, sprouting from the fields, feeding on the decay of some poor bastard's dreams. He never tried to find out who the poor bastard was, he just assumed he existed. The thought that Brighton was intentional, disturbed him slightly, in the same way that sour candy did. Who would make sweet candy sour, after all? And more mysterious still, how did they know others would actually buy it? All the same, here Brighton stood. The bars and the churches were running neck and neck, numerically speaking. The schools were exactly where he had left them. The restaurant on the highway had flipped names again, in the same way people went to war in 1984, for the mere sake of giving people something to think. As he pulled into PDQ to remedy the gas gauge's needle-position, he had an odd realization. As he opened the door to stand, he looked across the street to see his brother, bending over an open car hood, working diligently. Why, he thought, did he purchase gas at a gas station across the street from the gas station his brother owned? And worse yet, did his brother wonder the same thing?

Bolstered by his remembering that he was intentionally avoiding conversation, thus excusing any rudeness inferred by his choice of gas station (at least, for this occasion), he pumped ten dollars worth and cautiously crossed the parking lot, careful not to make eye contact with anyone present, as chances were he knew them all. As he fidgeted for the money to pay, he noticed a sign on the door by consequence of avoiding eye contact with the clerk (who in all reality was always a girl who had graduated eight years prior to him, as was always the case, no matter which individual girl it was). While the sign was turned outward, its translucency allowed for it to be noticed from either side of the door. And while its familiar colors made it

unnecessary to actually read, he took note of the date posted there in, to cross reference to the date on the stack of newspapers that always rested disheveled by the door. The dates matched. The carnival was in town.

As he crossed the parking lot again, he slyly looked towards the aging gas station across the street, to be sure that his brother hadn't looked up from his work long enough to notice him. Feeling confident that he was going to escape unnoticed, miraculous in itself due to the size of Brighton, he confidently sauntered to his truck. As he started the engine, a car pulled into the stall next to the one in which he was leaving. He left the parking lot faster than he would usually have, having noted that the car, a black Pontiac, being the only such one in town, belonged to a girl he once dated (or at least a girl he shared affection with briefly over a summer, never having gone on a single date). As he rounded the corner that contained his brother's gas station, he thought about how strange it was that all of his relationships seemed to go that way; dating without dates. Also, he thought how strange it was that, without actually seeing the girl in her black Pontiac, he knew what she was wearing, up to and including the engagement ring on her delicate finger. Living in Brighton gifted you with such skill: knowing details without the burden of experiencing them.

As the truck idled, waiting for the train to pass, his thoughts returned to his old enemy, Potential; the enemy he recognized in his disjointed thoughts earlier while in the shower. The first time he could remember Potential was in the comment area of his third grade report card. Mrs. Burk had given him all A's, of course, that is, except in handwriting (for which he had received a neatly written C). Along with his glowing good grades, the written comment read about how, despite the satisfactory performance of all third grade academic duties, he lacked the application of his Potential. The word carried a weight unfamiliar to him as it left his mom's lips as she read it aloud to him before signing the card. Potential, he was instructed by his mom, was what set him apart from all of the rest of Brighton. Potential was what he would use to achieve the life she knew he was capable of, she reported. And, as most things he assumed, Potential became distorted by his then childish mind. In a mind such as he had, objects would become distorted through their having been discovered by him in near proximity in time along with other discoveries. (Which, in the case of Potential, became a grotesque alter-ego, having been distorted by his discovery that Batman was Bruce Wayne's answer to the trauma he experienced in his life.) Even though he was aware of this arbitrary distortion, he thought he could do nothing to disentangle Potential from this view. As the crossing gates lifted and the station wagon in front of him sputtered to a crawl, he accepted that Potential was his doppelganger. Potential was what he would hide in futile efforts, only to accept as his downfall at a later date.

The makeshift parking lot that was the grass field of the park was filling with cars. Children left behind their parents in effort to reach the ride-ticket booth before their cohorts. Parents walked along the same paths that they used to rush along as children, pretending not to notice the irony. A token police

officer, wearing an absurd orange traffic control vest (novel in its being worn in a town with 2,300 people), pointed the way for his truck to follow; finding its place amongst the others on the grassy hillside. The tall grass was wet, alluding to the rain that had fallen the day prior. While the rain forced the carnival to cancel the evening before, souring children's and parents' moods alike, the closure made for a more pleasant experience that night, as the picnickers felt as though they were being allowed something.

As a child, the first order of business would have been to distance himself as much as was possible from the adults, who congregated at the bandstand and the arcane wooden pavilion. However, tonight, looking for that catalytic experience, he walked straight into the pavilion. He had decided it was time to take his right of passage. All tribes have one; that gateway to adulthood, the thing that children mock until they finally accept it. New Guineans have tattoos. Canadians have hockey. Brightonians have Burgoo.

As the son of the Boy Scout Troop leader, he had the mixed blessing of helping make the fabled concoction one summer of his childhood. Mystery surrounded the soup. Even its name was a source of mystery. No one knew where it was given rise to, nor did they know of what words were used to construct the morpheme that is Burgoo. Children told tales of its ingredients, substituting any vile ingredient they wished each telling of the story, ranging from road kill to boogers, rotten meat to tragically misplaced body parts. So as he watched the adults read the recipe (hand-written by no one knows who and presumably the very same piece of paper that had been consulted for countless summers prior), he dreamt of all of the disgusting and vile things he was about to witness. But, to his relief (and disappointment), the ingredients put in were only the most obvious: beef, beans, vegetables, spices, etc. In fact, the only aspect of Burgoo's inception that would cause one to raise an eyebrow was the stupendous quantity that was made each and every year, so much so as to warrant it being stirred with Tommy Northcutt's canoe paddle. And while he remembered the stories of Burgoo's un-palatibility, he now knew of its benign nature. Even armed with this knowledge, he had somehow avoided so much as tasting the elixir. But that was something he was going to correct that very evening.

As he stood in line, he saw everyone he remembered as a child pass by the pavilion. He saw grade school teachers. He saw the town pharmacist that used to give him suckers. He saw the owner of the local food store sucking down lemonade from the Booster Club's stand. He saw a distant relative, the brother of an uncle by marriage, eating a funnel cake. He began to realize that no one stood in this line because they really wanted Burgoo; they stood in line because everyone they had ever known had also stood in that line. As his turn approached, he ordered a bowl and some tea, and found his seat amongst the adults of the town. As he sat staring at the brown viscous stew, with words like Potential, Hope, and 'adult' mixing in his head, he scooped up a bite and he imagined the water mixing with the concrete...

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Down in the Dirt  
Alexandria Rand, editor  
[AlexRand@scars.tv](mailto:AlexRand@scars.tv)  
<http://scars.tv>

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

