

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

down in the
pit

069

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Ugly I Bet

Randall Rogers

is it strength
or weakness
that makes
a person take
their own
life?

and what did my
face look like
before I was
born?

ugly,
I bet.

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Scars cover art of rolls of hay in
Pennsylvania.

The Ole Man Who Died Forever

Mel Waldman

Near the end of his life, the old man recited the poem “Old Man with a Cane” every night after midnight. And when he suffered from insomnia, he recited the poem until dawn. It was his eternal companion and friend, soothing and shielding him from the wall of loneliness surrounding him.

*Old man with a cane,
Nomad of the night,
A fading vestige of the past shall die.
Lost child of life,
Withered,
No love to feed,
Sad, piteous man,
Lonely heart must cry,
Never to waken, just a dormant seed.
Farewell sweet life,
Kind face he never saw,
For now old man is dead,
Heart beats no more.*

A few days before his death, the old man with a cane came to the fortune teller. The fortune teller read the Tarot Cards and searched the Crystal Ball. She revealed the old man's past to him. And perhaps, her revelations were more accurate than his broken memory.

“But tell me my future!”

“I can't.”

“Please...”

“I see things. Still...”

“I must know!”

Her dark potent eyes swept across his face and captured him.

“You must go to the Caves and discover your future!”

“Please, I am an old man.”

“Follow my directions!”

“Yes,” he said obediently.

For a moment, he wanted to lean over and kiss the dominant woman who possessed beauty and youth and infinite wisdom. But he was afraid. He waited for the fortune teller to give him instructions. Then he sauntered off.

Inside the Caves, he followed the infinite path that led to the Future Room. At the center of the room, was the Crystal Ball. He approached it and gazed into its circular universe. At the center of this universe, he saw the last three days of his life.

Now, his azure eyes leaped into the Crystal Ball and captured the faces of the

old man and the fortune teller. His desperate eyes followed them across the Eternal Now on the infinite path that led to the Future Room. There-he experienced the anguished moments of his last three days. He felt hopeless and craved instant death. He longed to commit suicide but he was not a courageous or impulsive man. Just once, he wanted to take charge of his life. Yet he couldn't. He was a little man, a frightened man, a lonely man, an old man with a cane, a man three days short of death, lost in life and unprepared for the end.

He lifted his unholy eyes from the Crystal Ball and drifted into a room adjacent to the Future Room. At the center of the room was the fortune teller who read the Tarot Cards and searched the Crystal Ball.

Inside the Caves, he followed the infinite path that led to the Future Room. But one eternal path is a million infinite paths. One old man-a million old men. One fortune teller-a million fortune tellers. Indeed, the Future Room is a circular mirror of infinite realities. The old man with a cane exists simultaneously in all futures. He exists and co-exists and is duplicated in all the mirrored realities. And he dies forever in all futures. Until...

A few days before the end of his life, the old man with a cane came to the fortune teller. The fortune teller read the Tarot Cards and searched the Crystal Ball. Her dark potent eyes swept across his face and captured him.

"You must go to the Caves and discover your future!"

"Yes," he said obediently.

But impulsively, he leaned over and kissed the dominant woman who possessed beauty and youth and infinite wisdom. She kissed him back. And the kiss was eternal, sprawled across the Eternal Now and more potent than all the simultaneous realities co-existing in duplicate universes, and the kiss contained the old man, his life and his death.

Now, he would no longer die forever but only once-properly, compassionately, passionately, peacefully, and blissfully in holy union with Death, a Fortune Teller who possessed beauty and youth, infinite wisdom, and a gentle kiss.

Existential Angst

(First Stanza)

Sophia Trozzo

Sometimes I think,
this is all make-believe.
I pray for death to release me
of my barren cage,
my cynic's heart,
my nihilist's soul.

Here and Nowhere

Domenica Martinello

The same song is playing on the radio
accompanying me from diner to gas station
from P.A system to cellphone ringtone
I sit at a table meant for two
but ideal for a woman with extra baggage
and if I turn my head towards the wilderness
my hair brushes the vines of a synthetic potted plant.

My scatterbrain throbs in rhythm with my wandering heart
and to the elderly couple eating pancakes
beating and chewing
breathing and ticking like a clock
straight ahead of me is a valley of concrete
with road sign flowers and broken body butterflies
the waitress offers me more coffee but I cannot sip anymore watered down tears.

I want to be here and nowhere
rooted to the ground and suspended in the air
but we all learn to settle for a passport and a lover in each city
a little change in our pockets and journals
overflowing with the demise of the "American Dream."

I wish I was a mermaid or a rich vacationer
so I could inhale the summery salt of ocean air
I want to bury myself in the sand, crawl with the crabs
but I've settled for an overpriced city apartment
where if you close your eyes long enough, traffic sounds like the tide
tires on pavement becomes sand beneath my toes
and sea gulls sound like bellowing car horns.

An hour and half and it's time to move on
leave my number on a napkin to a place where I never sleep
all that's left of me is lipstick war paint
we beat on like boats against stormy seas
and a thousand pots of coffee tears later...
the same song is still playing on the radio.

We Fix A You Golf Bag

Dave DeVal

Gaetano Moretti owned a shoe repair business in my hometown of Rye, N.Y. His tiny shop, The Shoe Guy, was wedged in between the Clinton Trust building and a beauty salon called To Hair Is Human. All three businesses were located on Purchase Street, the main thoroughfare in town. There was a Citibank across the street. City Hall and the public library were nearby.

I don't know when Mr. Moretti first opened his store. My guess would be that it was in the mid- to late-sixties. I cannot say for sure. Of one thing I am certain, his store had been open as far back as I could remember. I lived in Rye for the first 22 years of my life. I am 44 now, soon to be 45.

All too soon, actually.

I met Mr. Moretti in the fall of 1972. It was a few weeks after school had begun. I was 10-years-old. My friend Joey Rizzo and I were walking downtown one afternoon after school had let out. The two of us had been friends since kindergarten. Joey had a great sense of humor. Really, the guy was funny as hell. Everybody who knew him said that he was going to be a famous comedian one day. He was that funny. Maurice Stumper, the smartest kid in town, used to say that Joey was going to be another Curly Howard. This was no small praise.

Joey and I were pals for years. We saw our fair share of trouble together. Nothing serious, just harmless stuff. Like, ringing doorbells and running away. Making crank calls. Egging cars. That kind of thing. Good old Joey. We sure had a lot of fun together. I swear, it seemed as if a day didn't go by without somebody chasing after us. The grownups back then had no sense of humor. You would think that they had never been kids themselves. The cops were even worse. They were always so serious. We used to laugh at them while they tried to make like Clint Eastwood. The whole bunch of them were so inept. They couldn't even catch a cold.

The trouble began that afternoon when Joey and I walked by Mr. Moretti's store. We had never paid any attention to the place before that day. There was no reason for us to do otherwise. We were 10-year-olds. What did we care about a shoe store? The Smoke Shop, on the other hand, was another matter. That place was like a shrine to us. It was the only store in town that sold Playboy magazines. They used to keep them on a shelf behind the counter. My friends and I would always try and sneak a peek at the cover of the latest issue whenever we were in the store. Mr. Bubbico, the owner, was wise to us, though. He used to chase us out of there all the time. It didn't take much to set him off, either. The guy was tightly wound. Most of the time he would start making a ruckus as soon as we walked through the door.

"If youse ain't here to buy, youse up to no good," he'd yell. "Get the hell

outta here!”

He was a cheap old bastard.

Mr. Moretti, on the other hand, never gave us a second look. Nor did we pay him any mind. He would, on occasion, be sweeping the sidewalk in front of his store when we walked by, but he would no sooner greet us than we would acknowledge him. It was a convenient relationship for everyone.

That afternoon was different. Something in the window of Mr. Moretti’s store caught Joey’s eye. He stopped walking.

“Wait a minute,” he said. He peered intently at the store window.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Joey started laughing. He was really doubling up. He pointed at the window.

“Take a look at this,” he said. “It’s a riot.”

I looked in the window. A large piece of cardboard had been taped to the glass. It was a makeshift sign. The writing on the sign was crudely scrawled in black magic marker. The sign read: We Fix A You Golf Bag.

I read the sign and burst out laughing. Joey and I exchanged a high-five. We laughed our asses off.

After a few moments, Mr. Moretti came outside.

Mr. Moretti was a small man. No taller than a fire hydrant, really. He was slender and wore thick glasses. He had a full head of gray hair. His pants barely came to his ankles. He was wearing black shoes and white socks. His blue shirt had a penguin on it. My dad wore the same for years. After that, he shined his shoes with it.

There was a perplexed look on Mr. Moretti’s face when he first saw us. In short order, his puzzlement turned to rage.

“What the hell are you two wiseguys doin’?” he demanded. “Youse a lookin’ for trouble?”

“No, man, we’re just laughing at your sign,” Joey said. “It’s too funny.”

“You think that’s a funny? Well, youse a wait until I’m a through with a youse,” Mr. Moretti threatened. He raised his fist to us. “You ain’t a gonna be laughin’, believe you me! Now, youse two hoodlums get the hell outta here before I call a the cops.”

“We weren’t doin’ anything wrong,” I protested. “We were just laughing about your sign.”

“Yeah, ‘We fix a you golf bag.’ That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever seen,” Joey said.

Mr. Moretti failed to see the humor in the matter. Really, the guy was pissed.

“Hey, youse get the hell outta here right a now!” he thundered, shaking his fist for emphasis. “Pronto!”

Joey and I took off. We were still laughing.

“Hey! We fix a you golf bag!” we yelled as we ran away.

“I’ll a fix a you!” Mr. Moretti shouted. “You stay the hell away from a here if youse a know what’s a good for a you!”

We laughed all the way downtown.

The sign was still in the window the next day. This time, though, there were five of us.

“You guys gotta see this sign,” Joey had told three of our friends. “You’ll crack up, I swear.”

Our friends laughed like hell when they saw the sign. Then, on a signal from Joey, all five of us stuck our heads into Mr. Moretti’s store.

“Hey! We fix a you golf bag!” we roared.

Mr. Moretti was behind the counter examining the heel of a shoe. His face quickly became contorted with anger.

“Hey, youse hoods, get the hell outta here!” he yelled. He flung the shoe at the door, nearly hitting Bobby Grimaldi, who let out a yelp. Mr. Moretti grabbed a yardstick and came barreling around the counter after us. “I’m a gonna kick a youse ass!” he screamed. “Come a back here!”

We got out of there as fast as our legs would carry us. We did not look back.

After a few minutes of running, we stopped to catch our breath by the wall near Blind Brook Lodge. All of us were huffing and puffing like sprinters after a big race. Nicky Tomaselli said he was scared. Nicky was a tough kid. His dad was a truck driver. Mr. Tomaselli had forearms as thick as a redwood. His son was thick, too. Especially in the head.

“I ain’t goin’ near that store again,” Nicky said. “That old man’ll kill us.”

“You said it,” Bobby agreed. “That old bastard almost hit me with that shoe.”

“Like hell he did, Bob,” Joey said. “You were halfway home before the thing had even left his hand.”

“Yeah, and I’d a gotten home quicker if you hadn’t been runnin’ in front of me,” Bobby retorted.

Everyone laughed.

We went to Jerry’s and ordered sandwiches. They had the best sandwiches in town. There was a wall outside next to the store where people would sit and eat their sandwiches. It was part of the experience of eating at Jerry’s. All of our brothers and sisters had sat on that wall.

My friends and I sat on the wall and ate our sandwiches and laughed about Mr. Moretti. It was a good afternoon.

My father was waiting for me in the kitchen when I came home a couple of hours later.

“I want to talk to you,” he said to me when I came into the room. He pointed to one of the chairs that were around the kitchen table. “Sit down.”

My father was a big man. He never said much, but when he did speak I was careful to listen. He never hit me the whole time I was growing up. He didn’t have

to. His mere presence was enough to keep me in line. Most of the time, at least.

I sat down without a word. He took the chair opposite me. The room was still.

“What were you doing running away from Mr. Moretti this afternoon?” my father asked.

The theme from *Dragnet* popped into my mind. Not that I felt like smiling. Far from it.

My father continued, “I came home from work early today and saw you and some of your pals being chased out of Mr. Moretti’s store. What was that all about?”

He said all of this calmly. I almost pissed in my pants.

I swallowed hard. I knew better than to lie. That would only compound matters. I told him exactly what happened. I did not leave anything out.

When I was done, my father leaned back in the chair. He looked at me for a long time. I could feel the sweat running down my arms.

Then, something wonderful happened: he smiled.

“We fix a you golf bag?” he said. His eyes were twinkling. “The sign really said that?”

A surge of relief swept through me. I wasn’t out of the woods yet, though.

“That’s what it said,” I told him. “Honest.”

My father chuckled and shook his head. Then, he leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. The muscles in his upper arms were straining underneath his short sleeve shirt. There were tufts of gray hair coming out of the open collar. His eyes were fixed intently on my own.

“You and I are going to go see Mr. Moretti tomorrow,” he said, evenly. “First thing in the morning. When we get there, you are going to apologize to him. Understand?”

I nodded my head. “Understood.”

My father leaned back in the chair.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said.

He nodded to me.

“All right,” he said. “Your mother should be home from the market any minute.” He stood up and went out the kitchen door. A few seconds later, he was in the back yard positioning the lawn sprinkler. He turned the water on and watched the sprinkler for awhile. Our backyard was lush and green. The flower patches and rose bushes were interspersed with tomato and pepper plants. It was a beautiful and serene setting. My parents enjoyed tending to our backyard. Neither considered such activity to be work.

I laid in bed thinking for a long time that night. The moon was full and the stars were out in full force. A nice breeze filtered in through the open window. With each breath of the breeze, the promise of autumn flowed into my room.

After awhile, I fell asleep. In some respects, I have yet to awaken.

Next Time Won't You Sing With Me

Chad Newbill

Amsterdam ashes awaken the asphalt
AmBUSHed amputees accepted the artillery
Amish aggravated by aggressive atheists
Aristotle the alcoholic analyzes abstinence

Black British beer blackouts
Bar brawls between Bacardi and bourbon
Backseat bonds begets bastards and brides
Baptist bikers- bongos and bibles

Concrete campers collect coins in cups
Cactus corpse concealing my concepts
Criminally copulating Catholics with collars conduct catechism
Crayons consciencesly cursing in cursive

Drunken Diablo dimples distracts the disoriented drones
Daily drool from D.C.; the dawn of downfall
Down drinks to drown the detest of disappointment
Doctors or dope dealers?

Exasperating extraverts extracting my existence
Evangelist expecting everyone's eternity
Evil echoes evolving our environment

The Point

by Laine Hissett-Bonard

I heard Rob's fumbling, stumbling entrance into the house well before I saw him, and the sound filled me with weak dread. As it had every Friday night for the past several months, the sound of him dropping his keys, bumping into the bench in the hallway, and muttering to himself told me he had spent the better part of the evening downing beer after beer, which didn't bode well for how I would spend the small hours of the morning.

"Ow – shit." That bone-jarring, metallic clank-thud in the front hallway would be Rob knocking over the baby gate again, the one that had stood at the top of the stairs since the day we moved into the house over three years before. I cringed, gritting my teeth, and cast an eye toward the baby monitor standing atop the TV stand; luckily, the indicator light remained steady at one bar, which meant our daughter hadn't been awakened by Daddy Dearest's drunken entrance. I would be grateful for any small miracle I could get.

Gripping the remote control tightly in one hand, I continued staring at the movie playing on the television, although I could no longer seem to absorb the dialog. Hearing Rob enter the kitchen – the soft *flump* of his jacket hitting the floor, the twin thuds of his shoes being discarded somewhere near the door – I leaned my head back and closed my eyes in anticipation of his next stop in the living room, hoping with very little actual hope that if he thought I was sleeping, he would leave me alone.

Rob didn't make it as far as the living room, however; I heard the telltale thump-creak of him falling into the chair by the computer desk, which, due to our cramped living space, lived in the corner of the kitchen. I knew what would come next, of course, although that wasn't to say I welcomed it. "Lexi! Where the fuck are you?"

Here we go, I thought helplessly, pressing the pause button on the remote and reluctantly pushing my pregnant self up from the couch, draping my blanket across the nearby recliner and shuffling hesitantly toward the kitchen in my sock feet. "I'm here, babe," I called back softly, hoping my reserved tone of voice would prompt the same from him.

No such luck – as usual. "Whad'ja make for dinner?" Rob asked as I rounded the corner into the kitchen to find him slumped casually in the chair, his pants tossed haphazardly into the corner, his brilliant blue eyes bleary and laced with red threads. His face bore that vaguely slack look that meant he had passed just plain drunk hours ago and now tread somewhere in the territory between completely shellacked and falling-down inebriated.

"Um, nothing," I replied nervously, crossing my arms over my stomach and cupping my elbows. "Remember – you told me you and Jake were getting something to eat at Kelly's."

"Well, we didn't. Fucking kitchen was closed, so we just had some beers. So you

didn't cook anything?" His words were slurred to the point of ridiculousness, and I shivered a little inside, knowing I wasn't likely to sleep much that night, if at all.

"No, honey. I didn't cook anything. You told me you were getting something out."

"Fucking great," Rob said, popping the top on what was surely his twentieth beer of the evening, if not more. "So I got nothing to eat."

"I can heat something up for you," I said, avoiding his eyes by crossing the room to the fridge. "There's still shepherd's pie in there from last night—"

"I fucking hate shepherd's pie."

You ate two helpings last night, I thought, but didn't say it aloud. Instead, I simply continued, "Or I can make you a Hungry Man dinner, or a couple hot dogs—"

"Yuck."

"—or some fried eggs—"

"I don't want eggs; I want a fucking *meal*. Is it too much to ask to come home to a fucking meal?"

I took a deep breath and released it slowly, glancing at the clock. I couldn't imagine any other man in the world expecting his wife to cook him dinner at eleven-thirty at night. "Well, honey, you *did* tell me you were going to get something to eat. That's the only reason I didn't—"

"Did my mother make anything?"

Living in the upper portion of a two-family home with Rob's parents had its advantages – built in babysitters, among others – but being expected to raid his mother's fridge when Rob came home drunk was not one of them. "I don't think so. She told me she was making frozen pizzas for her and Pop."

"What'd you and Gina eat?"

"I had one of my frozen dinners, and I made Gina fish sticks and mac and cheese," I said, and then tacked on as an afterthought, "Oh, and she had carrots, too. And strawberry milk."

"Fucking great," Rob repeated, a hateful sneer crossing his face just long enough to register. "Fucking kid eats the same shit every fucking day."

"No, she doesn't, honey," I said slowly, mustering every ounce of self control I had to keep my temper under control. "She eats lots of different things – chicken nuggets, spaghetti, hot dogs, corn dogs, ravioli, grilled cheese – but you have to remember, she's three. Three-year-olds are always picky."

"You're gonna make her fat," he said, his eyes glinting in the way that only meant one thing: he was looking for an argument. On nights like that, he always was.

"Right," I snapped back, momentarily forgetting my resolve not to engage him. "It's *me* who's going to make her fat, not her daddy who gives her candy and doughnuts at six o'clock in the morning when he gets home from work. I feed her *very* well, all right? She always has all four food groups on her plate—"

"Yeah, all that fried shit."

"Nothing I give her is fried." I finally caught myself. "*Anyway*, back to what we were talking about before – what do you want to eat?"

“There’s nothing to eat,” he said petulantly. “As usual.”

“Robbie, I gave you a bunch of choices—”

“Make me spaghetti.”

“I’m not making you spaghetti.” I stared incredulously at him. “I need to get *some* sleep tonight. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m eight months pregnant and our three-year-old will probably be up by six a.m.”

“Make me spaghetti.”

“Rob!” I exclaimed, throwing up my hands. “I said I’m not making you spaghetti! I’m going to make you something else, and if you’re hungry, you’re just going to have to eat it.”

“Bitch.”

I opened the refrigerator, shaking with anger, and yanked out a carton of eggs and a loaf of bread.

“I ain’t eating eggs.”

You’ll eat what I cook and like it, I thought, but of course, I didn’t dare say it. “Then I’ll make them, and you don’t have to eat them,” I said instead.

“Fuck you. Fine, I’ll eat ‘em. I’m fucking starving.”

I turned to the stove, setting a griddle pan on the burner and cracking three eggs onto it, along with a chunk of butter. At over three hundred pounds, Rob certainly shouldn’t have been eating the way he did, but there wasn’t a soul on earth who could tell him that, and I wasn’t about to argue with him any more than I had to. Besides, a well-buried, very dark part of myself almost hoped his eating habits would ultimately cause him a massive, fatal heart attack. It would sure as hell make my life easier.

By the time I finished frying his eggs and buttering his toast, I could hear Rob snoring softly behind me. Praying he would stay asleep – or, more accurately, *passed out* – I quietly placed his plate on the desk in front of him, but just as I was about to tiptoe away, Rob’s eyes fluttered open and he looked groggily up at me. “I’m not hungry.”

“Then don’t fucking eat it!” I said, exasperated. “Let it sit there on the counter and get cold – I don’t care!”

Rob’s hand shot out and grasped my wrist with far more dexterity than I expected from someone as drunk as he was. “C’mere,” he said, yanking me toward him. “Kiss me.”

“Not right now,” I said, clutching at the first excuse that popped into my head, no matter how lame. “I want to brush my teeth first.”

“Just fucking kiss me,” he said, annoyed. “I don’t care if your breath smells like ass. I don’t care if you’re wearing your frog-eyes, either. Get over here.”

I knew I shouldn’t have changed into my glasses, I thought, clenching my teeth. *Just one more thing for him to pick me apart about.* “Just a minute, Robbie, okay?” I said, wrenching my arm out of his grip and stepping out of his reach. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t fucking bother,” he said loudly. “I don’t want to fuck you, anyway. You

haven't fucked me in three weeks; what's the difference?"

"Shh!" I hissed, pausing in the bathroom door. "*Please* don't wake Gina!"

Rob opened his mouth and let out a loud, wordless bellow, grinning when he saw my expression tighten. "Then get over here and kiss me."

Knowing I was merely bolstering him, I nonetheless returned to the kitchen in the hopes of allowing our daughter to remain asleep. "*Please*, Robbie – don't wake her. I need to get some sleep tonight. I'm exhausted—"

"Try working my hours," Rob said, picking up his plate and forking an entire fried egg into his mouth.

"Nobody's saying you don't work hard, hon," I said, struggling to keep the pleading note out of my voice. "All I'm saying is, I work full-time, I have Gina to take care of, *and* you, and the house, plus I'm eight months pregnant – with *your* son, by the way – and it's really important that I get my sleep, okay?"

"You don't even have to work tomorrow!" Rob mumbled around a mouthful of egg.

Sometimes, I wished wholeheartedly that spontaneous combustion was real and would occur immediately to the man I misguidedly married eight years before. "No, honey, I don't," I said carefully. "But like I said, Gina will be up around six—"

"So why do you stay up all night, watching your fucking gay Netflix?" Rob countered. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the glob of egg yolk at the corner of his mouth.

I let the obvious barb pass, focusing instead on the broader question. "I only have like ten minutes left, and I was hoping to finish this movie tonight so I can send it back tomorrow."

"Then it's your own fucking fault you don't get enough sleep."

"Babe, it's going to be your fault if you don't let me go to bed!"

"Who's fucking stopping you?" he asked loudly, and I cringed, glancing toward Gina's bedroom door and willing it to remain closed.

"Okay, then," I said finally, when I was reasonably sure Gina was still asleep. "I'm going to wash up and go to bed. I'll just finish my movie tomorrow; I don't care. Just *please*, babe – please keep it down, okay? Let her sleep."

"Go away," he said, waving a hand curtly at me. "You're dismissed."

I wanted very badly to smash his plate of half-eaten eggs over his head, but instead, turned silently and closed myself in the bathroom, where I turned on the water in the sink, braced my hands on the counter, and sobbed quietly, staring at my pathetic, red-faced reflection and wondering when I became so goddamn *weak*.

After washing up, I spared Rob only a quick glance on my way into our bedroom, but he didn't appear to notice me. When I slipped under the covers and rolled onto my side, I had just barely gotten my pillows situated – one between my knees, one under my belly, another behind my back to prevent me from rolling over in my sleep; oh, the joys of late pregnancy – and closed my eyes when they sprang open again at the sudden blare of music coming from the kitchen. It was a Billy Joel song, generally inoffensive, except when played at top volume at nearly

midnight. To my great chagrin, when the piano man began singing, so did my inebriated husband – at the very top of his lungs.

As gracelessly as only a waddling pregnant woman could, I pushed myself out of bed and hurried out to the kitchen to find Rob watching a music video on the computer. “Robbie!” I cried, my voice lost beneath the roar of the music pouring from the computer speakers. I waved my hand in front of his face, and he glanced at me, his patented “who, me?” expression splashed across his face.

“What?” he mouthed, and I threw my hands in the air again, gesturing wildly at the computer.

“Turn it down!”

“What?”

I knew he was messing with me, but at that point, I was too tired and too furious to care about trying to best him in this bout of mental mind-fuckery. I turned the volume knob on the speaker to the “off” position and glared at him, sure there were actual sparks spitting from my eyes, but all I got in return was a semi-amused stare. “What’s the matter, Lexi?” Rob asked, as innocently as a drunken man could.

“You need to keep it—” My voice faltered at the sound of a door opening at the end of the hallway, and I fixed Rob with one more helpless glare before turning my gaze toward the sound. The door was cracked, and in the sliver of darkness that lay beyond, I could see one green eye – identical to my own – peering sleepily down the hallway at me.

“Hi, baby,” I said softly, forcing a smile onto my face and kneeling on the floor to open my arms. Pulling the door open, Gina padded out of her room, her pink pajamas rumpled, her blond hair in disarray, and her little feet bare, and burrowed into my embrace, burying her face in my neck. “What are you doing up?”

“Daddy woke me up,” Gina said frankly, her soft voice muffled against my neck.

“Daddy woke you up?” I repeated, narrowing my eyes in Rob’s direction.

“You told her to say that,” he retorted, and I rolled my eyes. Apparently, I had telepathic powers now that I didn’t even know about.

“Come on, sweetie,” I said, rising to my feet and taking Gina’s hand. “Let’s go lay on the couch. You can sleep with Mama.”

“Hey, baby!” Rob said cheerfully as we walked slowly past him. He reached for Gina, but she wrenched away from him.

“No, Daddy!” she said crossly.

“No, Daddy!” he said, mimicking her tiny voice. “Sure, Lexi – get my daughter to hate me, too, you fucking cunt.”

I stiffened, ushering Gina into the living room and closing the door behind us, only relaxing – slightly – when I had turned the lock on the doorknob. “That’s not a nice word,” Gina said, crawling up onto the couch.

“No, it’s not, baby,” I said, powering off the DVD player and changing the channel on the TV to PBS Kids. “You don’t say that word, right?”

“No.” Gina snuggled up to me when I curled up next to her. “Sometimes

Daddy's not very nice."

That broke my heart, but I chose not to reply, stroking her hair and kissing her on top of her head instead. "Go to sleep, baby. Mommy's here."

Through the living room door, I heard the music begin again, and turned up the volume on the television a little in a vain attempt to drown it out. "Too loud!" Gina complained.

"I know, baby," I said helplessly, tears forming in my eyes. "But don't worry; Daddy will go to sleep soon." *If there's a God in heaven*, I thought.

Nearly an hour and several songs later, a loud thump just outside the living room door roused me from an uneasy doze. Gina popped right up – once she was awake, it usually took several hours for her to wind down enough to fall asleep again – and beat me to the door, which she deftly unlocked and opened. When I caught up with her, she was standing next to her father, who had fallen out of his chair and lay sprawled on his stomach on the kitchen floor, moaning pathetically.

"Daddy's silly!" she cried, giggling, and, before I could stop her, leaped onto Rob's back. He let out a yelp of surprise and pain, and I hurriedly lifted Gina off of him.

"No, honey," I said gently. "Daddy's not feeling well. Why don't you go watch Elmo, and I'll help Daddy get into bed?" *As if I could lift his sorry drunk ass*, I thought, anger bubbling up inside me.

Complaining, Gina nonetheless returned to the living room, and I knelt next to Rob, shaking his shoulder. "Get up!" I hissed. "Your daughter does not need to see you like this!"

"I'm fine," Rob mumbled, his face pressed against the floor. "I'm just so tired..."

"You're not tired; you're drunk off your ass," I said exasperatedly. "What's it going to sound like if she goes to day care on Monday and says her daddy fell asleep on the kitchen floor?"

"I'll get up in a bit... just lemme lay here for a minute."

"Rob, get... *up!*" I exclaimed, grabbing his hand and ineffectually trying to yank him to his feet. I had a better chance of lifting the washing machine. Finally, I dropped his hand and stood glaring down at his prone form. "This is fucking pathetic," I muttered, pitching my voice low so Gina wouldn't hear me. "You know what you're doing? You're setting your daughter up to do the same thing you do. Do you think she should see her father passed out drunk on the floor? *Ever?* No, she shouldn't. Get your pathetic ass up off the floor and go to bed, Rob. You won't remember a thing about this tomorrow."

His only response was an incoherent, snoring mumble, so I returned to the living room, closing and locking the door behind me again. As I wrapped Gina in first my arms and then my blanket, something finally clicked inside my brain, something that took over eight years and hundreds of identical nights to hit home: I didn't have to live like this.

God help me, I had finally reached the point... and my only challenge now was refusing to back away from it in the morning.

Father O'Clanahan's curse

Benjamin Green

If the village even had a name, it had been lost in the mists of time. It was just another obscure Irish hamlet tucked into a valley, and anchored by a parish Catholic Church.

It was a hardscrabble place, where most of the residents lived by growing horse potatoes. The town was bordered on all sides by English manors, but none of them ever bothered to molest the village.

There were a number of suggestions for the why of this happy situation, the most popular being that the villagers had done some kindness to an English gentleman during the conquest of the Isle of Erin. However, the answer, if one even existed, had been lost in the mists of time, like the village's name.

This had given the village some relative and unprecedented prosperity, which caused an influx of tenant farmers from surrounding manors. That caused a certain amount of consternation amongst the villagers, who had a superstitious fear of breaking the peace with their English neighbors.

Of course, immigrants were the last thing on their mind at the moment. The entire town, and a large portion of the countryside were in an uproar over the fact that the parish priest had just died.

In the back of everyone's mind were the political machinations that would follow. The Catholic Church was inextricably bound up with the Irish sense of identity, which gave the Protestant English another reason to hate it.

A further layer of complication was that their church was an obscure backwater of the diocese, and there was a good chance that a priest sent there was being punished.

They had gotten lucky in that their former priest had been a local boy. Or at least, that was what they tried telling themselves.

Father Seamus O'Clanahan had been a terrifying figure, towering head and shoulders above the next tallest person in the village, and he was gaunt to the point of emaciation. The villagers had dubbed him "The Screaming Skull" behind his back.

He had a prominent widow's peak on his forehead, which had become even more so, as his hair receded. Nor had those who had ever seen him smile ever forget it.

He had been a stern, pious man, and his familiar expression was dour. The rare times he had tried putting on a jolly face, his smile looked like a rictus, as if the effort caused him physical pain.

Despite the holiness he wore around himself like a cloak, there was a sense of something dark and sinister lurking underneath. He bore little resemblance to any of his siblings, and a rumor began to spread that he was the seventh son of a seventh son.

When anyone had asked his mother, she always denied it. Of course, her eyes

were wide, her nostrils would flair, and her lips would go white, which would lead the questioner to doubt.

As the rumors began to swirl, he became more moody and indrawn. That set up a vicious cycle that fed on a closed-loop symbiosis, so that when the priest died, his parishioners felt a relief, and superstitious dread.

There had been some talk of putting garlic in his grave, and a stake through his heart, but the monsignor who would be officiating the funeral nixed that idea.

Tenant farmers attended the funeral from all the neighboring manors, packing the church to overflowing, with those who could not get in squatting outside.

The church put on its full pageantry for the funeral mass. Compared the pomp and majesty of Continental services, it was threadbare and poor.

However, the peasants were used to seeing their priest go by in a plain black cassock, with no processional. So they were dazzled by the pageantry they were treated to.

There was a collective sigh of relief at the end, as the tenant farmers began dispersing to their homes, after the graveside service concluded.

The English had never been very clear about whether they were giving permission for a mass migration of their tenant farmers to the church. About all the townspeople got was that the English were ready to tolerate it, the implication being there would be very negative consequences if they did not return.

Of course, while the tenant farmers all scattered to their homes, the funeral party of townfolk remained together, contemplating the coffin in its hole in the ground. Nobody said anything, or looked at anybody else. Everyone was meditating on their own private thoughts.

Obeying an unspoken order of groupthink, they marched back to the church, and trooped into the Fellowship Hall.

None of them could have offered a coherent explanation for this behavior, even if pressed. It was something fluttering amongst them on leathery wings.

Cold, chitinous fingers reached out for their vitals. Their hearts pounded, and sweat began to bead the brow of several of them.

However, none of them could seem to explain the cold terror that seemed to be hovering, leering above them. They just had a vague foreboding that something was about to happen, and they were not going to like it.

Time began to take on plasticity somewhat akin to taffy, sliding by with the deliberate pace of molasses. The charge built up and up, becoming angry, grumbling thunderheads, with the inevitable explosion being put off, and put off. It only notched the tension higher and higher.

Everyone became isolated, and inward-focused, since any human interaction risked a blowup from the other person. Each of them was a taut, humming piano wire, ready to snap.

The sense of foreboding that kept them together, waiting to see what would happen had not come any closer, but remained with tantalizing closeness while remaining just out of reach.

However, it came crashing down on them as the sun set, turning their tension

into stark, blinding terror. The fiery explosion of color caused by the sun setting seemed to be a positive portend of evil and terror.

Everyone began crowding around the windows. As they pushed, elbowed, and jockeyed for a spot, an ugly growl began going through the group.

For a moment, they trembled on a precipice of having an inner savagery released. They would have clawed and bit, attacking each other with ferocity that would have shocked a wild beast.

There was a last-moment outbreak of sanity, and they began to disperse, looking away from each other, their eyes rolling with fear as they eyed each other with suspicion. Then they heard an evil laugh that seemed to come from everywhere, and nowhere at once.

Cold shivers seemed to dance up and down their collective spines, because the voice sounded so familiar. They realized they were trapped in the grip of the diabolic, and many of them got down on their knees, praying to their chosen patron saint.

It was as if the vault of Heaven had been closed against them. As the sense began to dawn on them, it was accompanied by a choking black haze of despair, like a death shroud.

Their spirits began to rise as they looked toward the window. The deepening periwinkle of the fading sunset was giving way to the deeper purples and blues of night. Stars sparkled like spilled diamonds on the dark velvet of the sky.

How could something so normal be taken as betokening something evil? It was solid evidence that God was in charge of His creation, and what they had witnessed was an aberration.

Then, before their horrified eyes, the gibbous moon began to swell, as if pregnant. There were groans and cries from those present as the stars began to wink out, one by one.

Even the moon began to undergo a change. As it became full, its light became bright and cold, like that of a fluorescent bulb, though they wouldn't have known what one was. Even the word spotlight was alien to them, though the moon was providing a pretty fair approximation of the concept.

The moon was a glowing cat's-eye in the sky, glowering out into the darkening sky, while the man in the moon laughed, gibbered, and made faces.

He was making mock of the pitiful humans that were getting ready to witness the feast of the Devil's Sabbat. What made him most merry was knowing whom the guest of honor was, and knowing how much they would tremble at it.

That made them want to close their eyes, turn away, and not find out who it was. However, the die had been cast, and some force beyond their control held them transfixed, unable to look away. They quaked in terrible foreboding of who it might be.

As if on cue, a pipe organ began thundering out its discordant bass note. It was something far above the asthmatic organ with the pump bellows in the choir loft. They had a sick certainty what they were hearing was something beyond the most cunning arts of human hands.

The mystery organ continued to boom and roar, pouring out the sounds of a funeral mass, but in such a minor key that it was rendered a diabolical dirge.

The first members of the procession began to march into the moonbeam spotlight. The altar boys marched in front, the light gleaming on their upside-down crucifixes on poles, and white albs.

They looked like angelic little cherubs, until they turned to face them. Then they revealed their eyes glowing with a terrible glowing reddish-orange fire, horns beginning to grow out of the sides of their heads. Then they smiled, revealing snaggle-teeth fangs.

Behind them came a tall figure in a cape and cowl, who looked like a monk. His cowl hid his face, and the dark material blended into the background. His most notable feature was his hands. They were fishbelly white, with long tapering fingers that ended in claws.

He held a censer in one hand, and was swinging it back and forth. However, it was not incense he was burning. They grimaced and shouted with disgust, as they smelled the brimstone.

Then the figure also turned, and looked at them, causing the blood in their veins to turn to ice. His eyes also glowed with the unholy light of the *deadlights*.

Then came the dreaded guest of honor. Father O'Clanahan had been tall in life, but he seemed even taller in death. He wore the black cassock and pectoral cross he had been buried with, holding a large black book under his right arm.

His face glowed with an unholy light, and all pretenses had been dropped. His mouth was curved in a sneer, and his eyes glowed with hate and contempt for all of them.

His black obsidian eyes searched them out, looking for one in particular. They held their collective breath, a cold shiver passing over them, praying it wasn't them he was looking for.

He seemed to have found the one, because he stopped, and pointed a bony finger. A woman screamed, then fainted.

In the pandemonium that followed, it wasn't readily apparent that it was his aged mother he had pointed to. Nor in an age where contagium was believed to come from poisonous ground mists would they understand the idea of Patient Zero. However, she had been stricken with the Bubonic plague, and when revived, sneezed several times.

Demonic imps leaped and gamboled in his wake. The procession seemed to last forever, but at long last, it came to an end.

The moon shrank back to its normal size, and the stars reappeared in the heavens. However, those who had witnessed those events knew that things would never, could never be the same.

The next day, the first black spots that signaled the beginning of the Irish Potato Blight appeared on the crops. Less than a week later, the mother was dead of the plague, and the disease was spreading like wildfire.

They found themselves trapped in their valley, hemmed in by manors all

around, with all doors shut against them. In the church, the monsignor continued saying masses, even though the candle in the red vessel, symbolizing God's presence, had gone out, and refused to be relit.

Toward the second month, the church collapsed, killing all the surviving congregants, with only the monsignor surviving to tell the tale.

He was the last to go. He was dragged before an ecclesiastical court to face charges of simony and heresy, but died of the plague before he could defend himself.

The valley became uninhabited, and so feared that even Englishmen wouldn't go near it. For all I know, it's still true today.

Outside the Box

Jon Brunette

Looking over the fence, King Williams eyeballed two boxes that stood about four feet in height. Chirpy noises had alerted him to the field beyond the backyard. Slowly, the boxes lifted, and below, four untied shoes poked. The kids lowered the boxes, playfully, over their small bodies, and stood motionlessly. They hid completely by the cardboard.

King walked to the front of the house. Standing atop the balcony, beside the frontal windows, two people who had purchased the Victorian failed to see the black pedestrian in the baseball hat. Frowning her brow, the woman in the wool turtleneck bowed her head. Looking overprotective, her husband held her tightly by her narrow shoulders, with his thick arm. His opposite hand held the telephone.

Behind a baseball hat, Williams watched the balcony, but alerted nobody. If asked, he might tell about the kids, but nobody asked yet. Probably, the family had allowed the toddlers to play in the boxes. King never liked to interfere in peoples' business, like he enjoyed nobody in his business. Throughout his life, he had

learned that trouble always arose for people who interfered in business that didn't concern them. It had happened to him routinely, before he had learned to look, not touch, and never open his mouth. And King wanted no part of jail anymore. He would just walk back home.

Quickly, the police squad blared the sirens, flashed the lamps brightly, and squealed into the path that began at the front and circled backward. It took just moments for the burly policeman to hustle from his cruiser and flash his light around the vast backyard. No movement happened until a squirrel darted into a tree. That alerted the officer, who beamed his flashlight into the branches. He brushed the bushes below the tree. The owners joined him, and slumped, with no humans visible below the tree.

Other officers arrived, and King walked toward his house, about six miles southbound. Surprised, King felt one policeman holding him by the bicep. That officer said, "Now I found the sex criminal." With a headshake, he said, "King Williams—I remember you fondly. You spent time in jail for sexual abuse. Obviously, you escaped—no jail would release you voluntarily. You shouldn't hide behind that baseball hat."

Pulling Williams to the Victorian house, the officer said, "You took kids from that house, touched them inappropriately, killed them, like you did to the kids that landed you in jail initially." Williams zipped his lips, like always, around policemen. The officer shook King forcefully. "Did you hide their bodies, molest them, like you did before? Did you rape them while they still breathed? Did you wait until you killed them before you touched them inappropriately?" The officer pulled on King's bicep and squeezed tightly. Williams felt his arm become numb. The black male tried but couldn't pull away. "Without answers, I will arrest you. Hell—I will arrest you anyhow. Inmates will treat you wonderfully, you child molester, like they did before." He laughed, sardonically, not humorously. "Now, you will leave jail only in a wood box." Other officers nodded, like justice had been found finally. Celebrations of joy left Williams, but uniformed officers polished their badges, pumped their fists, and looked to celebrate joyously at the jailhouse, with the molester behind bars eternally.

Only King had knowledge about the toddlers in the cardboard, behind the backyard, inside the field, but arrested before, for molestation, he held his arms for the metal handcuffs. He said, "With my background, I will ride silently to jail, and sit silently in jail, like my Constitutional Rights allow." Unlike any time before, King will land in jail without powdery-sweaty smells of toddlers on his hands and body. No ideas of illicit sexual behavior with kids surfaced in him anymore. Finally, he believed urges to fondle aggressively had vanished completely. Until now, he had never lived as happily.

Rhyme, Reason, and the Meaning of Life

Joel Frohlich

Right now, as I write this altruistic epistle, I am on drugs. I'll remain on drugs until my hair falls out like dandelion seeds and pallor mortis licks my skin like a chalky tongue. The drug I'm on isn't any drug you're familiar with. The drugs you're familiar with are designed to make crazy people even crazier.

My name is Samuel S. Nicholson, and I want to help you. I want to help you become nothing more than an appendage of the Universe with no self-interest.

If you've already heard of me, 97% of what you've heard about me—that I was offered a Nobel Prize in physics but declined, that I taught chemistry at a school called Princeton for fifteen years, that my Intelligence Quotient is one point lower than Steven Hawking's Intelligence Quotient—is irrelevant.

Here are some other things about me that are also irrelevant: my middle name, Stephen, means "crown" in Greek, I'm descended from Andrew Johnson, the seventeenth president of the United States of America, and I have a third nipple.

Now for some information about me that *is* relevant.

The drug I'm on is called Sanity Syrup. I invented Sanity Syrup nine years ago, while I was still teaching at Princeton. Up until that day, I had been a lunatic my entire life.

You are still a lunatic.

Sanity Syrup is a drug which, when injected into the bloodstream with a hypodermic needle, numbs those glands of the brain, such as the amygdala, which are responsible for emotion.

Emotion is a mental illness that affects every human being on planet Earth. It causes such diseases as love, hate, anger, depression, greed, selfishness, shame, and lust.

Emotion was originally an evolutionary adaptation for our animal ancestors, who, unlike human beings, cannot reason. Because animals cannot reason for themselves, they need emotions to guide their actions for them.

A mother ape, for instance, cannot think, "If I do not care for my offspring, my offspring will die. If my offspring die, the ape race will die. The ape race must live on. Therefore, I must care for my offspring."

No. An ape is capable of no such thoughts. The mother ape cares for her offspring for one reason and one reason only: because she loves them.

We are human beings. We *are* capable of such thoughts. We know that if we don't care for our children, the human race will die out. We know that if we don't eat, we will starve. We know that if we jump off a very high ledge, we will die.

Etcetera.

We are like adults still dressed in swaddling clothes. As we grow up, our swaddling clothes constrict us like a python.

The same is true of the primordial emotions that enslave us. If we have reason, what need have we for love and hate? For fear and anger?

None whatsoever.

#

Incidentally, there are a few human beings on planet Earth who are no longer lunatics. They're my patients. They came to me and allowed me to heal them with Sanity Syrup because they knew they were sick.

Let me tell you a story about one of my patients: a young man named Sylvester Starbuck, who once was, like you, a lunatic.

Sylvester Starbuck, like many other human beings, had a question: he wanted to discover the meaning of life. No matter how many books he read spewing useless philosophy like a professor ranting in Pig Latin, or how many erudite people he consulted so full of themselves their ego bled out every pore, he could not find the meaning of life.

As a matter of fact, Sylvester had another question. He wondered whether or not human beings had free will.

Sylvester first began pondering this question after he became a journalist. His first employer after he graduated from the Missouri Journalism School at the University of Missouri was the *Washington Post*, one of the most reputable newspapers in the country. Sylvester's first story assignment for the *Washington Post* was to write an article about the mayor of Washington, D.C., Wilbert Mustaine, and the audacious new bowtie Mayor Mustaine had begun wearing since February.

Mayor Mustaine's new bowtie was hot pink with little white flamingos embroidered on it. It was a present from his mistress, Martha Dick, who had purchased the bowtie for 500 dollars at the Nordstrom in Tysons Corner Center Mall in Mclean, Virginia. Mustaine had worn it like a Jew wears a yarmulke ever since.

Martha bought the bowtie for the mayor while fondly remembering her father, who always looked snazzy in any shade of pink. Martha did not realize that her father had, in fact, been an effeminate homosexual.

The hot pink bowtie led to immutable criticisms that Mayor Mustaine's taste in fashion was overly feminine, causing enough controversy to deserve a proper article written in one of the most reputable papers in the country, the *Washington Post*.

It was Sylvester's life-or-death assignment to get an interview with the mayor about the bowtie. Sylvester, in fact, ran across Mayor Mustaine eight times in one day trying to work up the backbone to ask him for an interview. The problem was this: while Sylvester was as loose as a floorboard in a creaky old shack around people he already knew, he became as stiff and unsocial as a mummy around people he didn't know.

When Mayor Mustaine crossed paths with Sylvester an eighth time that day inside a Seattle's Best Coffee shop, he mistook Sylvester for Martha's son, Joshua

Dick.

“Joshua!” the mayor said directly to Sylvester.

“Y-Yes?” Sylvester replied.

“Would you ask your mother to give me her macaroni and cheese recipe?”

“Um.”

“Let me tell you something Joshua: no one can make macaroni and cheese like your mother.”

Sylvester was so confused that, for a moment, he really thought his name *was* Joshua.

After failing to ask for an interview with the mayor, Sylvester was disgracefully fired from his first job. A rival newspaper, the *Washington Times*, subsequently hired him and asked him to write a column for their sports section. Sylvester knew as much about sports as he did about Vietnamese brands of toilet paper, but agreed to take the job out of desperation.

“Our senior sports columnist just died of food poisoning after eating sushi sold at an Aerosmith concert,” Sylvester’s interview explained. Sylvester couldn’t have remember his interviewer’s name if you had put a ten-gauge double barrel shotgun to his temple.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Are you up to writing a sports column for us?”

“Unquestionably,” Sylvester said.

As part of this column, Sylvester would have to interview Michael Shortshack, a professional basketball player for the Washington Wizards. After receiving clearance to enter the Wizard’s locker room, Sylvester realized he didn’t know what Michael Shortshack looked like. Michael Shortshack might be black, white, tangerine, or terra cotta. He might be a baby, or he might be Moses. He might be a munchkin, or he might be the Statue of Liberty.

Not only did Sylvester have no idea what Michael Shortshack looked like, but Sylvester didn’t know what position Michael Shortshack played for the Washington Wizards.

Sylvester didn’t even know what the positions on a basketball team were.

So, rather than asking for the interview, Sylvester ran out of the locker room sniffing like a pig dying of asthma. As he left the Verizon Center where the Wizards played, thousands of Wizards fans also leaving the Verizon Center saw Sylvester sniffing like a dying pig. One of them, Wilbert Mustaine, still thought Sylvester was his mistress’s son.

“Joshua!” called Mayor Mustaine. “Get that recipe from your mother, will you?”

It was following this incident that Sylvester began to doubt that he possessed so much as a metaphysical molecule of free will.

Sylvester’s great-great-great grandfather, Richard Starbuck, had felt the same way a century and a half earlier during the Civil War, just before being hanged for desertion by the Union army. Richard had been spooked by a shrill rebel yell

he heard just before the First Battle of Manassas.

The rebel yell sounded like this: “Wa-woo-woohoo, wa-woo-woohoo!”

When Richard heard the rebel yell, he imagined that all the demons of hell were waiting for him on the other side of the battlefield with a boiling cauldron of demonic water to cook him in if he were captured. The demons were so excited about the prospect of boiling Richard alive they were yelling “Wa-woo-woohoo, wa-woo-woohoo!”

After Richard imagined this, he took off in the other direction like a jackrabbit being chased by the boogiemer.

Richard’s last words before being hanged were, “I didn’t want to run. My legs made me.”

#

After being shamefully fired by the *Washington Times*, Sylvester went regularly to see a psychologist named Amy Oshkosh, who happened to be a very sweet lady.

A psychologist is someone who crazy people go to see after they finally figure out they’re crazy. What the crazy person doesn’t know is that the psychologist is also crazy.

This is why Dr. Oshkosh couldn’t help Sylvester: she was a lunatic, just like you, and just like Sylvester.

When he visited Dr. Oshkosh, Sylvester would sit on a long, cozy chaise that faced away from Dr. Oshkosh, ergo avoiding eye contact and allowing Sylvester to overcome his social phobia of speaking with people he had never met before.

Dr. Oshkosh would tenderly beat Sylvester over the head with an onslaught of questions about his life: questions about his phobias, about his childhood, and about his mother. After Dr. Oshkosh finished tenderly beating Sylvester over the head with questions, Sylvester would ask his own questions.

“Dr. Oshkosh? Do you believe in free will?”

“Absolutely,” replied Dr. Oshkosh. “I believe that every human being is responsible for his or her own actions.”

As a matter of fact, Dr. Oshkosh had written her thesis at Boston University on the impossibility of free will.

“Free will,” Dr. Oshkosh had concluded in her thesis paper, “is like darkness. We see it everywhere, but it does not, scientifically speaking, exist.”

Though Dr. Oshkosh withheld this truth from Sylvester, her reply still didn’t give him much confidence. The question of free will made Sylvester so anxious that one night, while he was driving home from a job interview in Baltimore, Maryland, Sylvester decided to test his free will by attempting to swerve his Buick Lesabre into an oak tree on the side of the road at 65 miles per hour.

Sylvester couldn’t do it. No matter how much he wanted to send a signal from his brain to his hands via the spidery motor nerves in his arms, he didn’t possess the free will to fling his Buick into the oak tree.

This made Sylvester furious. It made him so furious that he stopped his car

on the side of the road, walked back to the exact oak tree he had wanted to slam his Buck into, and began wailing at the tree like a barbarian preparing for disembowelment.

“You’re one damn lucky tree!” Sylvester screamed at the silent trunk. “You don’t worry about free will, do you? That’s because you’re a stupid old tree! You can’t move ‘cause you’re rooted to the damn ground! Well, guess what? I can move and you can’t!”

Sylvester stuck his tongue out at the oak tree and began skipping around it in circles, like a demented hyena dancing around a carcass.

“I can move and you can’t! I can move and you can’t! Nanny-nanny-boo-boo!”

Although taunting the tree made Sylvester feel a bit better, he was still incurably envious of the tree’s ignorance. He wished he, too, were a tree, so he could be ignorantly blissful. Being human wasn’t worth having legs and mobility.

“Maybe in another life I’ll be a tree,” Sylvester sighed to himself.

#

The next time Sylvester went to see Dr. Oshkosh, he tried her with his most sacred question.

“Dr. Oshkosh? What is the meaning of life?”

“I wish I could answer that question, Sylvester, but I’m a psychologist, not a philosopher.”

“I think we should all be philosophers,” Sylvester said.

Sylvester was particularly melancholy on this visit to Dr. Oshkosh’s office, because he had recently grown so fond of a young woman named Melanie Ostrich that every time he thought of her, his brain would release astounding amounts of testosterone, dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin into his blood stream. These chemicals caused him to feel either ridiculously giddy or ridiculously miserable, depending on whether or not he thought Melanie’s brain also released dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin, and estrogen every time she thought of him.

Incidentally, Melanie’s brain released no such chemicals when she thought of Sylvester.

Melanie Ostrich had been one of Sylvester’s classmates at the Missouri School of Journalism. Like Sylvester, she had moved to the D.C. Metropolitan Area to capture one of the countless journalistic jobs available in and around the nation’s capital.

Melanie Ostrich is also a descendent of Andrew Johnson, the seventeenth president of the United States. That makes her my fourth cousin, twice removed.

#

When Sylvester drove to Baltimore to interview for the *Baltimore Monitor*, he quite literally ran into Melanie in the paper’s lobby. Because Sylvester was being stressed like a rubber band in the hands of a third grader by the importance of the interview, he had momentarily forgotten where he was. When he saw

Melanie, he thought he was in a museum of memories. The memories were not real, but they appeared real because Sylvester was under so much stress he could no longer distinguish reality from imagination.

This part of the museum was clearly an exhibit on the four years of Sylvester's life spent at the University of Missouri. The young people in the lobby, Sylvester thought, were students, and the old people were professors.

There were a lot of professors in the lobby. So many that some of the old men, Sylvester quickly realized, couldn't be professors, but rather manifestations of Sylvester himself, later in life. Sylvester had—or rather, Sylvester *would*—return to the museum of memories again, at age 60, age 70, and age 150.

The 150-year-old manifestation of Sylvester was so old that nothing remained to hide his soul. He was a decrepit old scarecrow. His eyes showed nothing but misery. His lips showed nothing but fear.

"My God," Sylvester said. "That's me."

Realizing that his youth was as ephemeral as a firefly on a late July evening, Sylvester turned to the memory of Melanie and walked right up to her, as if she were his animate statue. The animate statue of Melanie was facing the opposite direction. Sylvester studied her long legs, then her plump buttocks, then her smooth drape of auburn hair, flowing down the back of her head and shoulders.

The statue of Melanie began to walk away. Sylvester ran after the memory, running into the animate statue and accidentally knocking her over like a daffodil bent over by the wind.

"Sylvester?" squeaked Melanie after lifting herself up and childishly turning around. Her eyes were like pools of French chocolate.

It was at this moment that Sylvester realized Melanie was real. He also realized that the old men in the lobby were not manifestations of him later in life, but old men employed by the *Baltimore Monitor*.

"I'm so sorry—" Sylvester apologized.

"Oh my God!" Melanie laughed. "What are you doing here?"

"Nothing important—are you alright?"

"Are you interviewing for a job?"

"No—I mean, yes, I am."

"Oh, good luck! I'm doing the same thing! Isn't this cool? We're both doing the *same thing*."

#

Melanie saw Sylvester again that day, as she was driving home to her Alexandria apartment from Baltimore. She noticed Sylvester alongside the road screaming at an oak tree like a savage having his hair pulled out, his Buick pulled over on the shoulder as cars often are when they breakdown.

"Are you okay?" Melanie asked after pulling over her car and rolling down the window. Her car was an enormous lime green Hummer H2, given to her by her uncle, Billy Ostrich, who is also descended from Andrew Johnson and there-

fore my fourth cousin once removed.

Vice president Dick Cheney and senator Barack Obama are actually eighth cousins. President George W. Bush and senator John Kerry are ninth cousins, twice removed. In case you were wondering, I have the incredible relationship of being your eight hundredth cousin, eleven times removed.

Billy had given her niece the enormous lime green Hummer H2 last Christmas because it was a very safe vehicle to drive. The Ostrich family was quite concerned about safety. George Atzerodt, a conspirator with John Wilkes Booth, had almost assassinated their ancestor, Andrew Johnson, nearly one hundred and fifty years ago at Kirkwood House in Washington, D.C.

Two years after receiving the Hummer, Melanie and her future husband would be unable to pay rent and therefore rendered homeless due to the cost of filling the Hummer up with gasoline. By then, no one would be left on planet Earth who wanted to buy a gas-sucking machine such as a Hummer. Melanie's Hummer H2 got seven miles to the gallon, whereas the average vehicle got 27 miles to the gallon.

The last Hummer General Motors will ever manufacturer will be called the Hummer H ∞ . It will get $-\infty$ miles to the gallon, thus traveling along an axis of negative space-time into the fifth dimension, where no one ever pays for gas.

#

From the side of the road, Sylvester called out to Melanie, "I'm fine!"

"Having car trouble?" Melanie asked.

"I broke down!" Sylvester replied. He wasn't referring to his car, but Melanie misconstrued "I" to be a metonym for his car.

"Need a ride?" Melanie asked.

"I'd love one," Sylvester replied. He then left the oak tree and his Buick, with the engine running on the side of the road, and climbed inside Melanie's enormous lime green gas-sucker.

Sylvester's Buick Lesabre is still there, on the side of the Baltimore Washington Parkway. The engine is still running. No one has touched it.

#

After Melanie took Sylvester home, Sylvester's brain began generating insidious chemicals with as much power to get him high and subsequently make him miserable as cocaine or heroine.

This phenomenon happens to many, if not all, human beings. There's no evolutionary explanation for this phenomenon. It's more than is necessary for the propagation of the species; it's overkill on the same magnitude that hunting a duck with nuclear bombs is overkill.

This illness is so strong that sometimes, human beings who didn't previously realize they were lunatics realize they're lunatics.

Because there's no evolutionary explanation for this phenomenon, it must be magic. I therefore call it *chemical magic*.

After Melanie drove Sylvester home, *chemical magic* turned Sylvester's brain into a mushy playhouse of Care Bears, rainbows, and unicorns. It didn't bother him in the least that his Buick Lesabre was still sitting with its engine running on the side of the Washington Baltimore Parkway. Instead, Sylvester felt so giddy that he decided to call Melanie, who had left him with her home phone number.

A smooth, manly voice slick as motor oil answered after two rings.

"Hi, is Melanie there?" Sylvester asked the smooth, manly voice.

"Sorry," the smooth, manly voice said, "she's out right now."

"Ah. And who am I speaking with?" asked Sylvester.

"This is Melanie's fiancée."

Sylvester dropped the phone. He then picked it back up and hurled it into the wall at 38 miles per hour. It shattered to pieces like a Lego toy.

His brain was no longer a mushy playhouse of Care Bears, rainbows, and unicorns. It was now a murderous madhouse of Nazis, napalm, and nothingness.

"I hate everyone!" Sylvester roared. A web of scarlet veins ran across his eyes, tears dripping from them like condensation dripping from a hot glass. "I hate life!"

Sylvester had no more freedom than a pack mule. Emotion was smiting him with thunderbolts of insanity.

#

Sylvester left Dr. Oshkosh's office very disappointed the day she revealed she was not a philosopher. He knew he didn't have a flea's hair of free will, but he still didn't know the meaning of life.

I was the one who would teach Sylvester the meaning of life.

After Sylvester left Dr. Oshkosh's office and began to walk home, he passed me on the street outside Dr. Oshkosh's office, handing out flyers for Sanity Syrup. I was competing for patients with another man standing not twenty feet away, Larry Fudge, a brain surgeon who performed lobotomies. He, too, was passing out flyers.

The best place to find lunatics who actually know they're lunatics is outside a psychologist's office. Larry and I both know this. Statistically, seven out of eight people choose Larry's lobotomies over my Sanity Syrup. For some reason, they think Sanity Syrup is heroine.

They're lunatics. I forgive them.

When I noticed Sylvester leaving Dr. Oshkosh's office, I licked my finger and pulled a periwinkle blue flyer out of the stack.

"Here comes another one, Larry," I said.

The difference between Larry and me is that Larry is still a lunatic and I'm not. I'm still trying to interest him in some Sanity Syrup. He's still trying to interest me in a lobotomy, which is foolish, because I've already been cured and even if I hadn't been, lobotomies have a pitifully low success rate of 1 in 300,000.

When I handed Sylvester a flyer, he took it, glanced at it briefly, and then asked me a question.

"Do you know the meaning of life?"

“The meaning of life,” I told Sylvester, “is to become nothing more than an appendage of the Universe with no self-interest.”

“Is that what this is about?” Sylvester asked, nodding towards the flyer I’d just given him.

“Yes,” I said.

“I can’t become an appendage of the Universe with no self-interest,” Sylvester said. “I don’t even have free will.”

“It’s true,” I said, “that you have no free will. But you *can*, with my help, become an appendage of the Universe with no self-interest.”

“How?”

“A long time ago, a man named Plato divided the human soul into three parts: Eros and Thumos—desire—and Logos, or reason.

“As long as Eros and Thumos have control over you, you’ll never become an appendage of the Universe with no self-interest. But if Logos is your only master, then you’ll be one with the rational Universe around you.”

I then drew a plastic bottle of Sanity Syrup from my pocket and showed it to Sylvester.

“This will free you of Eros and Thumos,” I said.

#

I have good news: Sylvester Starbuck is now a cured man.

After taking him to my office just a few blocks away and before injecting him with Sanity Syrup, I gave Sylvester a pair of Bose headphones and played a song for him. It is a something I do for every patient, so I can make sure the patient is cured after the injection.

The song I played for Sylvester was the fourth movement of Gustav Holst’s orchestral suite *The Planets*. The movement is named after Jupiter, the bringer of jollity.

After the song was finished, I asked Sylvester to describe to me what he’d heard.

“It was euphony bleeding out of violins,” Sylvester said. “It was as unbearably rich as the whole spectrum of life. It was the voice of God.”

After an injection of 15 milliliters of Sanity Syrup into Sylvester Starbuck’s bloodstream, Sylvester fell unconscious for three hours. When he awoke, I gave him the Bose headphones one more time and asked him to listen to the song and describe it to me again.

“I heard a large instrumental ensemble of string, brass, and woodwind instruments playing a song that began in the key of C major,” Sylvester said. “The key then progressed to D major, then dominant G.”

Sylvester Starbuck was finally an appendage of the Universe with no self-interest.

To misquote the words of the old Negro spiritual once correctly quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr., “Free at last! Free at last! Thank the rational Universe, we are free at last!”

The Importance of Food Safety

Devin Reany

“...one of the most well known food-borne illnesses is salmonellosis, more commonly referred to as salmonella, which can be transferred not only through raw poultry but also beef, eggs and unwashed fruit.”

“Salmonella?” the portly redhead at the front of the table chimed in. “Sounds like a character on the Sopranos HA HA HA HA HA!”

The instructor and everyone seated at the conference table joined in her laughter as I rested my head on my palm, closed my eyes and fantasized that I had tire iron in my hands and a license to do whatever I wanted with it. I had just crept up on the aspiring comedienne when a voice piped up from the front of the room to drag me back to reality.

“Stay awake back there, Mark!” the instructor requested. “We’ve got a full day of this to get through and we can’t have you sleeping in the first thirty minutes!”

“Maybe he’s got shigellosis! Exhaustion is one of the symptoms!” the obnoxious woman helpfully added as she shot a toothy grin in my direction. “Don’t touch me Mark HA HA HA HA!”

Another round of chuckling ensued. I managed a tight-lipped smile and sat up in my chair, making a mental note not to do anything else to attract attention to myself. Once the instructor had regained his composure he resumed his lesson, going over each and every kind of horrible disease one can obtain from eating improperly handled food. His words ran together into indistinguishable droning as I scanned the room, hoping that I could find somebody else at the table experiencing the same kind of crushing boredom I was. No such luck. All I saw were a dozen beaming faces in business casual, inexplicably delighted to spend their Saturday learning about how tainted food would undoubtedly kill them.

Like the idiots we’re serving know the difference. A smirk crept across my face as I remembered how just last night some miserable prick kept sending his steak back for being too well cooked. *All he seemed to care about is that the last one he got was practically mooing. Didn’t seem to notice that it had somehow managed to hit the floor and be stepped on a couple times before reaching the plate.*

The instructor moved on to the mortal dangers of raw shellfish as I glanced at the ancient analog clock on the wall, having to squint to see past its round frame of thick scratched glass. 8:28. I hadn’t even been there half an hour and I already felt like slamming my forehead into the cheap pine table. *To think I was happy about this food safety class getting me away from the restaurant for a day. This is torture. I don’t even care anymore that I’m getting paid for this. I’d be willing to slip the instructor fifty bucks if it meant I could get the hell out of here.*

The barely audible click of the second hand grew louder as I focused in on it, willing the slim plastic appendage to speed up and shorten my time spent in this pale

fluorescent hellhole. It kept on its excruciating pace despite my best efforts, actually seeming to slow down the more willpower I put into it. My gaze drifted to the open window where the scene of a magnificent spring day played out before me, torturing me with its simple perfection. A gentle wind fluttered through the newly formed leaves of a stately oak as golden sunlight illuminated the expanse of grass and wildflowers that lay before it, populated by a pair of squirrels that frolicked happily within its blooming beauty.

Oh, c'mon, that's just rubbing it in. I grumbled at nature's shameless attempt to aggravate me as I glanced again at the clock. 8:28. My body crumpled into the chair and I cast my eyes skyward, overcome with despair at the prospect of spending another eight and a half hours trapped in this room. *Maybe if I jam a pen into my neck they'll forget all about the class by the time I get out of the hospital.* I had started to idly stroke the ballpoint in my pocket when the instructor broke the monotony of his lecture by slapping his hands together and excitedly addressing the class.

"Okay, now we're going to watch a video," he announced. "It'll cover the basics of hand washing, glove usage and personal hygiene."

"Thank God." I grumbled under my breath. The video was sure to be agonizing at worst and an insult to my intelligence at best, but at least it would make the time go faster. My classmates murmured excitedly while the instructor dimmed the lights and fiddled with the projector until it whirred to life. A cheerful little tune filled the room as the title sequence appeared on the pull-down screen, informing us that the following was legal property of ServSmart and to not be redistributed under penalty of law.

I looked on in half-lidded boredom as a community theater actor unconvincingly portraying a health inspector made a trip to a local eatery and reminded the brain dead employees that, no, handling food with bare unwashed hands after using the bathroom is *not* okay. After being told for the third time the proper way to put on a latex glove I zoned out and turned my attention to two uneven divots in the center of the table, bouncing a tiny imaginary sphere between them in an endless non-competitive game of Pong.

The monumental struggle between the seams of raw wood was nearing its climax when the instructor flicked the lights on, the harsh artificial illumination burning away the game ball while my pupils suddenly and painfully dilated. I cringed and looked up in annoyance as everyone at the table burst into conversation, sharing their favorite parts of the video with inexplicable glee.

"Wow, that was so good!" The voice of the increasingly unpleasant woman rose above the rest. "They must have gotten Steven Spielberg to shoot it HA HA HA HA!"

I rolled my eyes so hard I thought they would pop out of my skull. With a sigh, I glanced at the clock, hoping that the film had killed at least five minutes.

8:28.

My body tensed as I rose in the chair. *That can't be right. Wasn't that the time when the video started?* I rubbed my eyes and mumbled a brief prayer that the clock

would say something different the next time I looked up.

8:28.

I raised my eyebrows. *Okay, so the clock's broken. Not a big deal.* Careful to not be seen doing so, I fished my cell phone out of my pocket and flipped it open under the table.

8:28.

A growing knot of tension developed in my gut, as though my stomach were collapsing in on itself. *This has to be some kind of a joke,* I reassured myself as my eyes darted around the room. The lecture was continuing as though everything were normal, a dozen smiling faces listening intently as the instructor reviewed everything that had been covered on the video in agonizing detail.

I swallowed hard and took one last look at the clock to make sure I hadn't been seeing things. But before I could confirm the time I noticed a tiny spot of dark red developing in the center, growing with each passing second. After a moment it began to creep down the minute hand, the liquid curling around the black plastic before trickling off and collecting in the bottom of the clock. Before my eyes, the flow grew faster and faster until it was practically gushing, the viscous substance quickly filling the frame.

"Christ!" I shouted as I jumped to my feet and knocked my chair over. I stumbled backwards and pressed my back against a wall. "What the hell is that?!"

"Now Mark, I'm going to have to ask you to take your seat," the instructor asked as though I had simply stood up and stretched.

"Yeah, Mark," the woman up front added. "If you're a bad boy we might make you wear the dunce cap HA HA HA HA HA!"

"What is *wrong* with you people?!" I shouted over the laughter, my hand shaking in the clock's direction. "Don't any of you see this?"

"Okay, so, who can tell me the five things every hand washing station needs?" the instructor asked.

The class listed the items in unison, ignoring my panicked inquiry. I stared at them in disbelief for a second and was close to screaming to gain their attention when I saw that the clock had been completely filled with the liquid. Tiny cracks began to develop in the frame, allowing beads of crimson to seep through and drip to the floor. I looked on in horror as the pressure became too much for the glass, the face shattering and showering those nearby with a spray of tiny shining shards. The liquid splashed heavily onto the carpeting, splattering onto the same people who had their hair and skin embedded with glass just a moment ago. Despite this, the smiles never ceased, their crimson-speckled teeth kept proudly on display.

I clamped a hand over my mouth and gagged as the heavy smell of copper filled the air. The gushing continued stronger than ever, its splashes continually painting my classmates as they went about their lesson unaffected.

"This is insane," I cried out as I pressed deeper into the wall and clawed my fingers against the rough stucco. "You people are fucking crazy!"

No response. I cursed again before pushing myself off of the wall and mak-

ing a beeline for the door, striding unnoticed past the entire table and the instructor. I gripped the knob but found that no amount of strength would allow me to twist it even the smallest amount. My panic began to develop into full-blown terror as I pounded at the door with my fists, desperate to get the attention of anyone that might be on the other side.

“God damn it!” I shouted as I stomped my sole into the cheap wooden rectangle. “Let me out of here!”

The wood gave slightly under the force of the kick, spurring me to drive my foot into it again and again as though my life depended on me escaping the room. I heard the sound of splintering and gave the door a mighty final blow, at last knocking it off of its hinges and back onto its face. The relief I felt at gaining my freedom was dashed when what lay beyond the door came clear to me, a vision that overloaded my senses and drained my spirit.

Violent technicolor streaks stained the sky above, the insane hues pulsing like the beating of a dying heart. The ground before me was nothing more than a harsh charcoal wasteland that extended beyond what my eyes could see, littered with outcroppings of impossibly sharp rock. Bodies lay naked on the points, writhing and crying to one another. In the foreground a river of black ice snaked languidly through the nightmare landscape, frostbitten arms flailing above the surface as those trapped between the banks clawed at each other to keep their heads above water.

I staggered backwards, fell, and scuttled away from the door on my hands, my eyes wide and my breaths coming in rapid, shallow gulps. As I struggled to comprehend what I was seeing, flashes of memory forced their way into my thoughts. Scattered images came together as my panicked brain scrambled to make sense of them. I saw a flash of silver as the chef tripped. Experienced the chilling sensation as it slipped effortlessly into my gut. Felt my hands grow slick and warm as I pressed them against my stomach. Heard the cries and shouts of the staff as everything went black.

I rolled onto my hands and knees and vomited, my body shuddering violently as pathetic moans forced their way past my lips.

“Now, let’s review the food borne illnesses we’ve learned about so far.”

Through tear-blurred eyes I looked up to see the class continuing as normal.

“Who can tell me a symptom of Anisakis?”

“I know!” the woman up front joyfully cried out. “Those who come across Anisakis are forever plagued with the mummy’s curse ooooOOOoooo HA HA HA HA HA!”

Everyone in the room craned their necks back and cackled like madmen. The sound of bones cracking reverberated between my ears as jaws dislodged all around the room, mouths gaping like those of hungry snakes as laughs poured endlessly from them. The cries grew shrill and horrible and it wasn’t long until I could no longer hear the sound of my own screams.

An Unfinished Trip

Nicholas Manjerovic

He plopped down and opened his book. Another tough day at the office, that internet doesn't read itself. He pulled his sunglasses up, dropped his head, and began to read.

"Doors Closing," the automated voice announced.

"Did you hear they're startin' that thing at the stad'm again," a young black kid with awful teeth, about 19, asked another across the aisle.

"Nah, whatchu mean," the other kid responded dressed in a getup that popped with color.

"That job thing, you know, like last summ'r, for the Indians," the first one prodded.

"Oh yeah, we should do that." And that was all they said. But their presence remained noticeable throughout the trip because they smelled. There isn't really a name for what they smelled like, but it broke the peace.

Just as the door closed, a young black girl snuck through sideways. He picked up his eyes from his book just a bit as not to be noticed, but he was too late to check her out. He only saw two young calves that shined in beige sandals that held large beige silk flowers, and returned to his book.

"A quick swim and then home by six," he thought "plenty of time to write something before Kate gets home."

The first stop came. A white woman stepped onto the train with a small Asian boy clutched to her chest. This was common; he had seen her most days on his way home. Today, however, he noticed a large tattoo that seemed to stretch across her entire back.

"That's new," he thought before returning to his book.

The ride unfolded like usual. Other than him and the lady, there were no other white people aboard. He thought this odd, everyday. He never had a problem with another rider and no one ever approached him in any sort of negative way, but still, he found it odd.

In his life outside the train, he would tell people about how he was the only white guy on the whole train. He thought it was an interesting observation point that might be met with simple "how bout thats" or "oh that's neats." Just something to talk about. Most, however, would nod their heads as if this odd feeling was some sort of normal thing that all white people felt. Some would shift their eyes and look at him crookedly; he decided these were the types that thought any mention of race by a nonminority that wasn't actively condemning racism, was racist. Neither of these reactions were what he expected or wanted so he stopped mentioning this.

Before his stop, a sharp stomach pain hit his gut. He rearranged himself in the seat, hoping it was some sort of cramp. To no avail, however, his discomfort only grew. A decision was needed fast, either he exited at this stop and went to the gym, or he continued to the next and went home.

“I only worked out one day this week, and Friday’s a holiday, so that’s out. I really don’t wanna go to the gym, but that’s no excuse, I’m here, I got my stuff, there’s no reason not to. Does this hurt for real or am I thinking it hurts so I don’t have to go?”

He tried again to get comfortable, nothing worked. He turned back to his book and continued on.

“She told me I was crazy” a voice perked up behind him. “Yeah, the bitch said I was crazy.” He turned over his left shoulder and saw that it was the black girl with the shiny legs. She was about 16, pretty, and on her cell phone.

“So we went and saws the social worker, so my moms can get us back. And my dad and sister and mom and the social worker were there. She said she would like to get me a psychiatrist.” There was a break, but it was short, whoever was on the other end of the line had few words to say, probably the equivalent of a nod.

“Yea, she said that I have some issues that I needed to work through ...what... yeah, all white like that...some issues I need to work through,” she continued.

Meanwhile, his stop was coming up. “A quick walk home, doesn’t look like rain, and then I can sit down and get this story out before I forget it,” he thought. “What, what is she saying,” his train of thought broken, “She aint crazy. Aint crazy? Well, this something I gotta hear.”

“Yeah, yeah I told her that I wasn’t crazy and didn’t need no psychiatrist, I aint got no felonies, I aint got no babies, there aint nothin’ wrong wit me. I don’t need no therapy.” Her speech had been rehearsed; she had said these things before.

“Social worker? Moms lost custody? God knows what else. If anybody needs therapy, it’s this girl. How can anyone today still think that only crazy people go to therapy? Someone should explain that to her. Maybe it’s me. Maybe I’m supposed to say something. Maybe I should say I go to therapy. Yeah, yeah it could be something simple like, ‘Goin to therapy doesn’t mean your crazy, I go.’ Yeah, maybe I’m supposed do that, I mean, I was planning on the gym all day until like right now. This is just too perfect,” he thought.

He stood up. He slung his bag onto his shoulder. He gripped the overhead bar, and then regripped it. “Ok, Im gonna say something. And if she don’t like it, then what did I lose?”

His stop had arrived. He turned to the exit near her, and got her attention with his eyes. He took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and only a sigh left it. He dropped his sunglasses over his eyes and walked on by.

He stepped off the train and went home.

Kerosene

Adrian Ludens

The autumn cloud cover hung in the sky like a dirty sheet nailed tautly between the neighbor's roof and her own. The identical houses squatted side by side, windows like lidless eyes staring accusingly across the street at each other.

Abby gazed up at the sky a moment longer, then turned her eyes back to the street. Richard would be arriving home soon. Then the curtain would be raised and she would show Richard how serious things really were. She would shine the spotlight on herself for once, and show how badly she hurt.

Abby padded back down the hallway to the bathroom. She knelt beside the kerosene heater she had taken out of the garage this morning. Looking in through the protective grill, she turned the wick adjuster knob until the wick reached an appropriate level. Then she sat back, staring at it solemnly.

She would have to watch the clock carefully. When the time was right, she would turn the heater on. Then she would curl up in the bathtub. With the window tightly closed, the carbon monoxide would build up to lethal levels. Richard would come home, and seeing that she was not at the door to greet him with her customary cup of coffee and kiss hello, would immediately seek her out. She closed her eyes and imagined him striding down the hallway, bursting in through the bathroom door to chastise her for something that she had done wrong. The lunch dishes were stacked in the rack in a way that he didn't like, perhaps. Or maybe the flower beds beside the house needed weeding. His complaint, whether real or invented on the spot just so that he had something to use against her, would vanish from his mind when he saw the situation.

Richard may be an overbearing lout, but he was no fool. He would add up the situation and certainly not like the sum. No, he would not like it at all. The severity of the situation could no longer be denied. Richard would have to change how he treated her. No husband stands by after his wife attempts suicide and doesn't make some significant changes for the better.

Of course, it would all be for show. She'd only turn the kerosene heater on when she knew he would be home soon. Just enough to fill the tiny room with warmth and odor. Just enough to get the message across; sell the scene.

But was it a desperate cry for help or calculated emotional blackmail? Abby was a practical woman. She had done enough soul searching to know that this was a little of both. Call it six of one and a half dozen of the other. But in the end, her life would change for the better and wasn't that all she was asking for?

Once she had harbored a dream of going to school to pursue a career in interior design. Richard scowled whenever she brought the subject up. Money wasn't the issue; he made a comfortable living, and there were grants she could apply for. The issue, as Richard so succinctly put it, was: "Who's going to keep this place in order?"

If you go running off all day, this house will become a disaster.”

The last time she brought up going to school, Richard slapped her across the mouth while she was still talking. Eyes burning with tears, lips numb and teeth aching, Abby silently buried her dream.

Her family and closest friends were no help. She had tried talking to so many of them, needing a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on, but they invariably sided with Richard.

“He’s a good provider,” her father said.

“Richard’s just a little old fashioned,” her mother explained.

“I’d be happy to have a man taking care of me every day,” sighed her friend Roxy.

“Honey, you’re being oversensitive,” opined her neighbor Carla.

Abby rose to her feet and glanced critically at the woman in the mirror. Her button nose, perfect teeth and womanly lips that always seemed just on the verge of pouting should have been enough to make any man admit she was beautiful. But dark circles had made a permanent home under blue eyes that no longer sparkled, and her kewpie-doll cheeks had diminished to pale skin stretched over her cheekbones. The harried housewife was steadily gaining ground on the precocious teenager. Six of one and a half dozen of the other all over again.

Abby returned to the kitchen. It was almost time. The cloud cover had broken, and a single sunbeam struggled in through the window and fell lifeless on the linoleum. Abby paced nervously. What if he stopped for a beer on his way home? What if he had a flat tire? She would simply wait until the last possible moment to turn on the space heater. Abby had no actual desire to end her life. She only wanted Richard to change. That was all she needed.

Abby wanted to be loved and cherished. Richard treated her like a possession, not a partner. Even while they were dating, she felt like a trophy that Richard took along to show off wherever he went. Be quiet, look beautiful. Those were Abby’s duties as Richard’s girlfriend.

Then came the early morning nausea and Abby knew she was pregnant.

“So when do you want to get married?” Richard had asked her when she told him the news. Abby thought things would improve when they married. They would be partners then; there would be so much more depth to their relationship. But Richard had other expectations from their union. Richard liked his steak cooked medium rare, never medium well. Richard liked his socks folded in two, never rolled. Richard liked his lemonade with two ice cubes, not three. Richard liked things his way, and he disliked any changes or interruptions to his routine. Abby felt less like a wife and more like a maid who worked twenty-four seven for her room and board.

The first six months they had lived in his apartment. Then he had bought the house. “In the heart of suburbia, where the suburbs meet utopia,” Richard loved to joke. How everyone had oohed and aahed over the house. Abby, excited at first, soon learned that all it meant to her was more housework. More rooms to be kept clean and well organized.

Then, on an otherwise unremarkable Tuesday, Abby’s heart broke. After she had

finished mopping the kitchen, she decided to get started on the laundry. Halfway down the stairs piercing pain shot through her abdomen and she dropped the basket. Dirty clothes tumbled down the stairs. Blood slicked down Abby's thighs as she stumbled to the downstairs bathroom.

When it was all done, Abby was struck by the sight of the dirty shirts and dresses draped over the steps like prostrate grieving women. She joined them.

She had composed herself enough to take a scalding hot shower and to brew Richard's customary pot of coffee. She met him at the door and fell into his arms weeping. Richard held her for exactly five minutes. Then he had said,

"You'll feel better after dinner."

He had told her to stop grieving and start cooking. Richard also said something about the laundry still laying on the stairs, but the blood in Abby's head hummed so loud she couldn't quite make out what was said. She knew he would not want to repeat himself, so with water boiling on the stove, Abby went to gather up the clothes.

And so the days had gone. Weeks became months. Months piled up and gave way to a year, then two. Abby felt numb inside; slowly dying. She had to show Richard where she was headed under his constant and heavy demands. Today was the first day of the rest of her life. The phrase was an old one, but apt. Today Richard would see what he had driven her to do and would make amends. Perhaps he would even-

His pickup! She heard him turn the corner into the cul-de-sac and in her excitement, she momentarily forgot to breathe.

The rumble the engine grew louder, shaking her from her momentary indecision, and she fled toward the bathroom.

Abby's hand shook as she pushed the ignition button. Seeing that the wick was lit, she released the button. The burn chamber lowered back over the wick.

Abby stood quickly, cast a panicked glance at the mirror and the woman who was counting on her. She lifted one leg into the bathtub, then the other. Abby slid down into the interior of the bath, closing her eyes.

She heard the keys jingle briefly, then the front door opened and closed. Abby concentrated on lying still and tried to regulate her breathing.

"Abigail!" Richard called from the kitchen. "Where's my coffee?"

His footfalls echoed on the hardwood floor of the living room.

"Where is that woman?" Abby heard him mutter as he strode down the hallway. She could hear agitation mounting in his tone. Richard paused and Abby imagined him looking in on their empty bedroom. Then she heard the knob twisting on the bathroom door and held perfectly still. The door swung open.

"Abi-" Richard began then stopped short. The rest of his wife's name sank back in his throat. There was silence.

Abby became painfully aware of her breathing. Her sprint through the hall had caused her shortness of breath but with any luck, Richard would mistake her fast shallow breathing as the last vestiges of her life slipping away.

Sell the scene, Abby told herself.

Richard still made no sound. Once she thought he exhaled air sharply and their was a rustle of fabric. Otherwise all was silent, save for her ragged breathing and the slight hum of the heater.

The door closed. At first Abby didn't know that was what she had heard, but when she heard Richard walking hurriedly across the linoleum in the kitchen, she realized she was alone. The front door opened and closed again for the second time in less than a minute. Richard's pickup engine roared to life. Abby waited, eyes closed and body still, as the rumble of the truck faded away into the dusk.

"He left," Abby realized, stunned. She shifted in the tub and opened her eyes. Abby looked at the kerosene heater. Through the protective grill, she could see the flame licking hungrily at the newly exposed breadth of wick. He had paused to turn the heater up.

Her vision blurred as bitter tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her pale cheeks. There would be no changes for the better. Her husband was prepared to let her die. It seemed that he actually wanted her death. But did she?

Sobs racked her body. Abby felt utterly hopeless. If she got up, extinguished the heater and made coffee for Richard's eventual return, he would be prepared to pretend the incident had never happened. It would have been a disruption of his daily routine, after all.

Get up or lie still? Continue life dead inside or end the suffering now? They both amounted to the same. Call it six of one and a half dozen of the other.

Abby decided.

Clock

John Grey

This I know from reading,
in a pendulum clock,
an escape wheel rotates
through the pitch
of one tooth for each
swing of the pendulum
and transmits an impulse
to the pendulum to keep it swinging.

This I know from observation:
five o'clock can't get here fast enough.

The Dog Bowl

Lauren Wescott Dobay

He only walked his dog at midnight,
he only thought things in the dark.
A cigarette fingered loosely,
hands half dead on the leash,
the streets like honey, sucking at his feet.
He only walked his dog at midnight,
looked down on her and thought,
she shouldn't have to drink water
out of a bowl with flies in it.

He only walked his dog at midnight.
He only thought things in the dark.

A Poor Suffragette

K (Franceè Bouvenir) McSpadden

On the day I was born, I could imagine that the doctors told my mother: “Congratulations it’s a girl!” and that was the day that my choices of etiquette began; the color pink identified that I’m a female even though it isn’t my favorable color. Dresses were chosen more than pants which I now favor and I was told to cross my legs when sitting- not anymore, I sometimes cross my foot on top of my knee. I only cross my legs to prevent some sick, fresh pervert to what they may encounter within experience the pleasure when daydreaming. Thank goodness for those women’s rebelliousness, it was the result for the ratification that granted them the right to vote, the demand of respect instead of being treated like sex objects and limited to perform domestic servants’ duties. I was an aggressive girl who fought boys, got bruises and got hit with thrown objects, but I retaliated by kicking them in their private area, tripped them, and punched their face. Also, I fought fearlessly in a domestic violent relationship- I twisted my so-called, want-to-be controlling, children father’s arm, including the knuckles of his hands, and called the police to have him arrested; His lost. Still I could imagine what’s going on through the male shove less mind about working women and why they’re not at home serving their men either in the kitchen or in the bedroom. A woman chooses to work wherever she pleases, but not enough women are speaking out about their rights, while others rather continue to live in the meaningless limitations of inferiority.

But if I was born with a dangler between my legs: *I will have a job instead of collecting unemployment and supplement my income with food stamps, owned a home instead of rented an apartment, owned a car instead of riding on public transportation and my children have enough money save up when going to college instead of have to apply for government grants.*

If I was married without a doubt, I would be a trophy wife whose husband would probably have a mistress while he had a thrill of clandestine with laughter behind closed doors. OOPS!!! No need to go to counseling and restore that train wreck of a marriage, take him to the divorce court and pray there’s a woman judge and let that fool know there’s no coming back because no more love lives here. Why should a woman be with a man who doesn’t honor her choices? Personally she’s better off alone and happy.

My Daddy
Says Jesus
Was A
Carpenter

Justin Blackburn

I came to the Ku Klux Klan rally
Dressed as an apricot
Trying to find you

I was horny
And wanting to stand out

And there you were
In the middle of the field
Burning

My favorite cross
In my entire collection

Bastard

Mika Nadolsky

Macomb Spires believed there was life in just about everything. Every two liter bottle of diet soda, every peanut in the red metal can, every strip of glazed floss that he would save in the small drawer under the sink until the whole spool was empty.

Saffron Spires tolerated her husband's peculiarities. She handed over her cigarette butts so he could save them in the ashtray until the entire pack was gone. She held onto used napkins and paper towels, she kept the little silver air vacuumed tops from her cans of Pringels and made sure to put it all in the spots where he liked them. In the beginning she thought it was cute, something kind of innocent. It made her tear up a little to see him collect the little dried bits of cheese off the floor after they had tacos. Saffron used to watch him in those first few months of marriage and put a painted nail to the corner of her eye attempting to staunch the black mascara run she could feel coming.

For a time after her marriage Saffron still had her looks even though she was five years older than her husband. Her hair had refrained from going stoically white; she had yet to see the damage done to the veins in her right calf from a recent blood clot, so skirts were still an option. She had yet to receive the silver scar on her shoulder where Dr. Caspone would rip out a mole he assumed was cancerous even though the test results came back negative.

All the boys at the office still looked at Saffron they seemed excited just to stand next to her in the elevator. Mr. Renton still came over after lunch every day and perched on the edge of her desk to chit-chat, especially when she was wearing her loose black blouse that she knew even God himself attempted to peak down every now and then.

That time went quickly for Saffron.

A day after their second anniversary and Saffron's forty-third birthday they didn't hold the elevator for her. She took the stairs and felt the cellulite on her legs shift in the opposite direction of her trembling muscles. She sweat so profusely going up the three flights that her hair no longer obeyed her and sat atop her head like a two year olds crayon scribbles. Saffron had come home that day thankful that Macomb would be there, that he didn't judge her or refuse her no matter what kind of consoling she needed or wanted. It was that night in the middle of their coitus that she noticed Macomb staring worriedly at the discarded green sleeve from a stick of gum on the dresser. That was more than Saffron decided she could stand.

Saffron didn't come home the next evening. For almost three years she had come home promptly at five and Macomb had her dinner ready. It was quarter after when Macomb reluctantly pulled the phone off the receiver and punched in her office number. He got her machine. He looked at the clock. He asked it if it was the right time. He got no answer. He knew she should have been home.

Macomb went into the living room and turned on the television. He kept it on

low because she hated the noise of the television especially when she first got home from work. Macomb had just stopped watching television all together but now he wondered if there might have been an accident so he chanced turning it on. None of the sparkling commentators behind their expansive desks had much to say about anything other than the weather. She should have been home.

At quarter to six Macomb drained the rice and poured the over cooked granules back into the orange box before setting it gently into the trash.

Saffron went to her sisters. She didn't answer any questions. She took her supper in the boys game room in the basement. She cried over her cheeseburger macaroni.

Saffron made a fool of herself in the afternoon meeting that day. She laughed a bit to long at one of Mr. Renton's jokes. Then she put her hand on his arm with her head full up of thoughts of a different life. The life she thought of was one where strange eyes did nothing for her, and worry didn't press down on her like the humidity, where she didn't feel like scratching the skin right off her bones every time she let a word slip from between her lips. They were all looking at her in the little meeting room. Mr. Renton removed her hand.

Leanne Ray came downstairs after she put the kids down. She was four years older than Saffron but looked ten years younger. Saffron watched her sister scoop up video game cartridges and DVD cases wondering if it was all them cigarettes that caused her to get old so quick, but then she noticed the lit one in her sisters hand.

"You gonna call Macomb?"

"Hell with that loony."

Macomb set out with no idea where Saffron might be but some kind of understated knowledge that it was a husband's duty to go looking for his missing wife. He drove slowly with his brights on and the radio coming in low. He decided to try the beer joint up the hill. He imagined maybe someone at the office had been promoted or was leaving and they were celebrating and she had just forgotten to call. Maybe, he thought, even though it had never happened before.

The place up the hill was famous, or rather infamous for getting people drunk then putting them behind the wheel of their vehicles and sending them down the hill in neutral. It was something like a right of passage. You turn twenty-one you go up the hill drink until you pass out and wake up in the cow pasture strapped behind the wheel of your car. Eve ryone knew you didn't head up the hill after a certain hour. Everyone knew to take the back road behind the mill.

Marty Mcurmtry had been drinking since one that afternoon, since receiving his walking papers from the disposal company upon them getting word of his third D.U.I. Marty had just been propped up behind the wheel of his twice repossessed red Mustang and sent down the hill when Macomb turned up it. Marty ended up in the passenger seat of Macomb's sputtering Honda upside down pinned there by a section of the windshield.

Macomb ended up in the gravel almost ten yards away from both vehicles. His left

leg was still in his car. They finally found him way back in the bushes, long after he had bled out. He crawled that far apparently trying to capture the clear plastic knob one held on to in order to roll down the car window. The little sucker had popped off on impact and easily picked its way through the gravel.

Saffron didn't feel a thing. She stayed with her sister for a month turning away all

Old Timer's

Chris Butler

I hope I die before I get old
Double-helix spiraling downward
These are the genes I wear
Since they are my only pair.

Double-helix spiraling downward
Covered in defective chromosomes
But they are my only pair,
Like decaying leaves on the family tree,

I'm covered in defective chromosomes
Smothering my precious brain cells,
Like decaying leaves on the family tree.
I sit in my rocking chair awaiting my fate.

Smothering my precious brain cells
As I sink, drowning in dementia
I sit in my rocking chair awaiting my fate,
Stalling regularly to recall.

As I sink, drowning in dementia
Naively believing that life is fair,
I stall regularly to recall
All the tales I've been told.

I still naively believe that life is fair,
But these are the genes I wear,
And from all the tales I've been told
I hope I die before I get old.

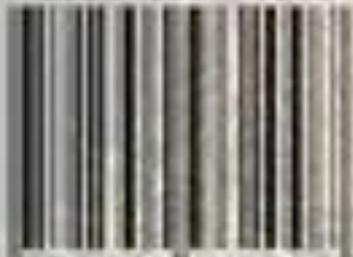
consolations. When she left for San Antonio she found she had not been thinking much about Macomb at all but her Daddy instead. He'd been gone for over fifteen years; he was a miner and caught the black lung. He came home at night dark as an African. He would get something to eat then go out drinking. He'd come back with blood on him, sometimes his own sometimes not. He liked to sit by Saffron's bed late at night and fondle her little pre-pubescent breasts. He liked to kiss and lick her earlobes.

Saffron smoked as she drove with the windows down. When she finished she almost saved the butt, almost crushed the cherry and set it in the ashtray like she used to do waiting until the whole pack was used and Macomb could assemble it like some crazy puzzle. She caught herself and flicked it out the window. Her daddy was a bastard she thought, but at least he was a real man.

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