

down in the dirt

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

076

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Scars over art of a dead deer in Pennsylvania.

# Under the Blade

C. M. Humphries

Their silk shirts under expensive jackets, vests—their tacky and pricey dress shoes. They're the epitome of American success. In their American dream they've never been self-effacing, I guessed, yet as I pointed the barrel at all of them, I was as good as God. I knew their type: ruthless S.O.B.s who've backstabbed and cheated to the point that someone else cried in defeat. Look at them, humbled and kneeling, pleading for mercy underneath disgusting phlegm-filled sobs. Should I have pitied them? No. If not for them—if not for those greedy, undermining power gluttons—I would have never been in that forsaken bank. If not for them, I would be depositing funds rather than withdrawing with force.

"Sit down," I commanded the clients. They scurried around like moles above ground. I fell into recollection.

My day started like any other: boring, routine, and uninviting. Of course, if my day had remained mediocre, I would have nothing to say right now, nothing to do. There's a fair chance I would've contemplated suicide, but due to my daughter, I would have never tried. Nevertheless, my day twisted for the worst. Daylight became demonic.

Young, blonde, and beautiful, my daughter ambled into my room, tears in her eyes. Her grandmother, who had just brought her back from the doctor, slipped me a medical report. As I read the document, my daughter—her body soaked with nervous perspiration—rushed into my arms, embracing me. Conclusion: my daughter's kidneys were failing and they said it might've been my fault. \$54,875 could save her. I had a mere \$11,000 in my savings; next to nothing in my checking account. That day I met the ass-end of life, or as some say, someone took a dump on my life.

Black gloves, a black ski mask, and a pistol. Wal-Mart, Kohl's, Don's Guns. I kept my purchases separate to avoid suspicion. The sad part was that I had no idea how to fire a gun. It didn't matter. There was no other way to obtain almost \$55,000—to save my daughter's life. Her name was Emily and her life was my own. She was my soul. She was like the light at the end of the tunnel. Emily was like the blood that ran through my veins; without her, I would cease to exist.

Incognito, I stood in front of what I would have called yuppies had it been the 1980s. At the sight of my pistol, those rich bastards were like hamsters fighting to escape a closed cage. Some of them might have been overcharging surgeons and doctors. My blood ran hot at the notion.

If they tried to escape, I would catch them—perhaps kill them. I'd shoot the

doctors four or five times.

“How much do you want?” a teller asked, stealing my attention from the yuppies. “All of it?”

I watched as his shaky left hand snuck underneath the counter and felt for the panic button. “Press it and you’ll be responsible for two deaths,” I warned. The crowd behind me moaned, those self-centered pricks. “Shut up back there!”

The teller was shaking. I replied, “\$54,875.”

He looked at me like I was the insane one. *No*, all those medical people were the crazies. *Pricing life like they owned it*. God, I wanted to kill every last one of them, but if I did, I would’ve had the same problem, though without a solution. “That’s all I want,” I said. “Make it \$55,000 even. That’s easier. Don’t make me hurt anyone.”

Once the teller handed me a bag with all the cash, I fired a few rounds into the ceiling and departed.

Four months flew by, during which I paid off Emily’s life.

Now, a little girl sits with her grandmother, talking to me through a private phone on the other side of a bullet-proof pane. I want to hold her.

Tears streaming down her face, Emily says, “I love you.” She knows Daddy was bad, but can appreciate his motive.

“They can have the money back,” I whisper to her, assuming that she understands. The surgery had already been performed on the both of us.

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## Whispers in the Woods

John Ragusa

After spending most of his time at home, Irving Bengle decided to camp out in the woods.

His secretary Nan asked him what he planned to do there.

“It’s none of your business,” he said.

The girl was in tears. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bengle; I wasn’t prying.”

“Are you finished with those files?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you can get out. I’ll see you next week.”

Bengle had been cold and callous since his childhood. He had no regard for anyone. He was mean to other kids. He made fun of them a lot. His mother never corrected him. "He'll grow out of it," she'd always say.

Was it any wonder he came out the way he did?

Success only made him worse. If he didn't think he was superior before, he certainly did now.

He didn't have any friends, because people couldn't stand to be around him. They disliked his personality. He never had anything nice to say to anyone. He didn't care if he hurt someone's feelings, either.

Bengle thought that the world owed him something. He believed that other people existed only to serve him.

He was a very lonely man. He would have been happier if he could get along with others, but he just wasn't able to.

He intended to enjoy the solitude of his camping trip. He bought a tent for the outing. It would be quiet and peaceful, with nobody to bother him.

Bengle drove out to the woods. The weather was sunny and bright; there wasn't a cloud in the sky. He chose a clearing next to some trees. He parked his car, pitched his tent, and built a fire. He was all set.

After eating lunch, he loaded his rifle. He had plenty of ammunition. He was going to kill as many rabbits and ducks as he possibly could.

Armed with his rifle, Bengle went into the woods. Soon he spotted a rabbit hopping on the ground. He took careful aim and opened fire with unrestrained glee. His prey was killed instantly. He laughed; he was enjoying the trip already.

He heard footsteps behind him. Turning around, he saw another hunter.

"Hi there," the man said.

"Hello," Bengle said. "I didn't see you there."

"I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

"I thought I was alone."

"I've been here since this morning. Would you care for some coffee? I got a fresh pot on."

Bengle shrugged. "Let's go."

It wasn't a long walk to the man's tent. They sat down with their cups of coffee.

"How do you find the hunting here?" the man asked.

"It's pretty good," Bengle replied. "There's plenty of wildlife around."

"Do you camp out often?"

"This is my first time."

"I'm Don Jasse."

"And I'm Irving Bengle."

"It's nice to meet you, Irving."

Bengle nodded. "Sure."

"I saw you hunt down that rabbit. You shoot very well."

"I guess it's beginner's luck."

"Are rabbits all you go after?"

“No, I also hunt ducks. There’s a marsh behind the woods.”

“You got a pirogue?”

“I shoot from the shore.”

“It’s real cold today.”

“Yes, it’s been a harsh winter.”

“It’s good to have this campfire to warm us up.”

“It sure is.”

“I plan to do some fishing later on. I hope the big ones are biting.”

“I understand there’s many trout up here.”

“I’ll have a lot of good food to eat when I get back home. There’s so many animals to hunt in these woods.”

“I’ll cook up some rabbit stew tonight. That makes a great meal.”

“What do you do for a living, Irving?”

“That’s a nosy question,” Bengle said rudely.

“Never mind me. I’m always dipping into other people’s affairs.”

“It’s a bad thing to do.”

“So I’ve been told. Would you like more coffee?”

“No. What you gave me already was pretty weak.”

“I think that’s because you put too much cream in it.”

“That’s the trouble with men like you,” Bengle said. “You think too much.”

“You’re an ornery bastard, you know that?”

“This baby will give you what you deserve.” Bengle aimed his rifle at Jasse and pulled the trigger. It blew a hole in his face, killing him immediately.

It didn’t bother Bengle that he had murdered someone. He didn’t have a conscience.

After dumping Jasse’s body in the marsh, Bengle went back to his tent. By the time he reached it, night had arrived and he was tired. He got inside his tent, rolled out a blanket, and went to sleep.

He woke up a little while later and realized he was thirsty. He left the tent and fetched his canteen. As he drank, he heard Jasse’s voice whispering, “Bengle, you’re going to die.”

It was probably his imagination. Dead men can’t whisper.

Then he saw a stirring in some bushes. Cautiously, he picked up his rifle. “Who is it?”

There was no answer, just more stirring.

Bengle put his finger on the trigger.

A deer emerged from the bushes.

He let out a sigh. It was nothing to be afraid of, just a dumb old animal.

He walked back to his tent and lay down again. Then he heard a thumping noise and stuck his head out the tent. In horror, he saw a huge tree fall upon him.

Before he died, he could have sworn he also saw a man, armed with a hatchet, as he walked off into the woods.

He had a big, bloody hole in his face.

# House of the Living Dead

Mel Waldman

A year ago, I dreamed of a secret house below the earth where the Living Dead exist. I dreamed this dark dream every night for a month. Each time, I woke up sweating and trembling, and my head pounding incessantly. Then the dream stopped. Still, it seems as real and lethal as the first night it assaulted my psyche.

When I close my eyes, I leave Brooklyn and I'm in Grand Central Station at the information booth. "What train must I take to get to the House of the Living Dead?"

"Are you nuts, Jack?" the clerk says.

"I must get *there*. They're waiting for me."

"Like I said, we ain't got no train that goes *there*-wherever it is."

I saunter off. An old man taps me on my shoulder. "I know where you want to go. Follow me."

We descend the stairs and the old man, who carries a large flashlight, opens a few doors adorned with the sign: *DO NOT ENTER*.

We enter the *Labyrinth* and descend into the bowels of the earth. Seems we travel for hours, perhaps, days. But I'm not tired. This dark journey has invigorated me and I have boundless energy.

We arrive at the House of the Living Dead. Inside, we're greeted by a crowd of frenzied, frightened people.

"We'll have the Lottery now," the old man announces. "Our guest will choose 22 numbers at random. Those of you who *possess* these numbers will meet with our guest, one at a time, for 50 minutes in the Sanctum Sanctorum next door. After *seeing* all 22 winners, he will sleep for two hours. When he awakens, I will ask him if he chooses to *see* more of you or whether he wishes to return to Grand Central Station where the *others* live."

I *see* the 22 lottery winners and listen to their horrific stories. Each one has experienced multiple traumas and has been confronted with evil. Most claim they have seen the Devil. These men are the Living Dead-lost, hopeless, without faith, without G-d. Trapped within their past, they wait for me to free them from their psychic chains.

It's too much. I feel their anguish and slowly, my soul vanishes, drifting off into the darkness. I must go home. The stories are heartrending and unbearable. I search for the old man who sits in a corner away from the crowd.

"I want to leave now."

"You may go."

"Please take me back."

# Letter to Clemetson on Why Talk Is Cheap

Fredrick Zydek

Dear Nate: Words are like bells. They either become part of the music, announce something about to happen, or drown out polite conversation. Think about all the words that ask questions even though they sound like proclamations and great

truths. And what is the value of a term like *I Believe* if what is believed can not be proven or understood? What would happen if someone could draw out the anatomy of swearing? No gems of praise or building-up there, just terms that condemn,

dismiss or devalue - words from our lizard place. Look how often we are quick to say what we think when we know damn well we haven't taken any time to consider the subject or reflect upon certain of its valid alternatives. Note how eager we are to say things

are either this *or* that when experience has already taught us that most things are this *and* that - combinations, communities in which a vast array of options wait to be freed from first impressions and just what meets the eye. Try to remember that words are nothing more than noises

we make - verbal symbols, that try their best to explain what awareness is, what it means to come to terms with what and who we are in a monocular sense while looking at the differences between what appears to be sacred and what is clearly as scary as waking to the teeth of a tiger.

"I can't."  
"Why not?"  
"I am the guide to the underworld. But my trip is a one-way ticket."  
"How do I get home?"  
"Enter the *Labyrinth* and go north."

When you must choose between going left or right, follow the wisdom of the soul."

I wish to tell him I've lost my soul. But I remain silent.

When I open my eyes, I look for my familiar Brooklyn streets. But all I see is the mob of lottery players waiting to meet with me in the Sanctum Sanctorum.

Inside the House of the Living Dead, my eyes dart and flit back and forth searching for the old man. He is not here. But in the corner, I see the flashlight. I pick it up, leave the house, and head north.

G-d help me! Will I ever find my way home? Will I?



Bethany was leaning to her right to peek into room 303 again, to see if the man was finally awake, or in one of his dreams. She watched his body twitch, then jump, so she pulled back.

“What’s wrong shu’ga?” asked a voice from behind her ear. It was Angela, Bethany’s rotund supervisor, speaking in a tone of managerial confidence. She had not jumped, or turned, to face her boss for she did not fear that she was in any trouble; however, she did lower her head in shame because she knew she had to come up with an answer, and this being the umpteenth time she had been caught peering into 303, it was about time to tell her boss the truth.

She lifted her head, turned on her heels with grace and said, “I think he’s going to wake up soon.” As she took in some breath for a more detailed explanation she moved a curl of blond hair from her brow and tucked it behind her ear. She locked eyes with Angela, and continued. “He’s been moving a lot in his sleep for the past week or so and I think it means he’s dreaming,” she had to speak fast, knowing her boss wanted was waiting to interrupt. “If he is dreaming than he’ll probably wake up soon because comatose people don’t dream..... do they?”

Angela finally saw her opportunity to speak to old bubble-head Bethany and set her on the strait and narrow, “Honey,” She said, “that half a man in that room been sleeping for a decade or more. He aint gonna wake up tonight, and probably not tomorrow, and even if he do, he aint leaving that bed, so calm yourself and stick to your side of the floor.”

She had emphasized the word “your” and gave her the stern, over the eye glasses look that every RN in the building knew meant business, so Bethany turned, and stalked away without giving the man in 303 another glance.

She sat back down behind her computer, sipped from her now cold cup of tea, and thought about what Andrew could possibly be dreaming of.

Could it be his childhood? His first bike, or his first time at the movies? Was he in a dim, and comfortable place with his first lover, or any other memory of the good times he had before he came here? Was it possible that the half of a man lying on that bed in 303 still held memories?

One thing was definite, he was in a dream when she saw him shake and twitch, and soon he would be awake. Angela might not believe her, but some things do not require the faith of others.

#

Andrew had been dreaming, and not of times of love, or of childhood toys. Unfortunate for him he could not escape the dream of the day he lost himself.

His last morning on the base had been short, but nice. The guys had gotten together and bought him a cake, some drinks, and a farewell banner. Diana, his girlfriend, had come to pick him up. She had brought with her the car he had been pining for since he left. He had fixed up that 5.0, together with his father, and painted

it blood red one summer long ago, with his kid brother watching from the garage window, and now it was back. The car he never thought he would drive again.

She pulled the Mustang in front of him, then in her excitement, forgot to take it out of gear before leaping out to wrap her arms around her man. The car bucked, then stalled, making Andrew cringe and drop his bags, but before he could cry out in disgust she was on top of him, smothering him in kisses.

His arms were up, and his hands were atop his head. The look of shock he wore was for more than the cry of pain omitted from his beloved Mustang, but also because he could not understand Diana's actions. He had after all been home for more than two months and only living on the base until his papers went through. Why on earth she had relapsed into the girl she was his first day back he could not explain, and now his car had unjustifiably suffered for it.

He shook it off, then kissed the wild woman clinging to him. She squealed then jumped up wrapping all her limbs tightly to her man. She dropped down after having her fill and ran to the other side of the red muscle car, opened her door, and waited. Andrew opened his door, and the two of them pulled the top up with big smiles. He threw his duffel bag into the back seat, and then both of them took off.

Twenty minutes later, she would bring up the scar on his face and the argument would ensue. She would scream and yell, call him a cheat, and try to smack him causing the mustang to lose its grip on the road and turn onto its top.

He would wake up an unknown amount of time later, stoned from the Demerol, and in a hospital bed with his mother hovering over him in tears, his father nodding and frowning as he listen to a doctor explain that the reattachment of his sons left arm was successful, but his other arm, and legs, were a lost cause, the spinal damage was so extreme that he would never move on his own again, and the best thing to do for him right now, was to sign a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate), and hope they can keep him from falling into a coma.

After this, there was darkness. Falling. A never ending hole of pain and screams that came from within, and never seemed to cease. He could see his limbs falling, but he could not reach out to them. His left arm was limp. The more he tried, the more it hurt, and the more it hurt, the more he tried.

The site of his falling limbs faded, and the screams in his head slipped away. He tried to scream but nothing came out.

Andrew was awake.

#

Angela's shift was nearly finished when she saw the pastor enter room 303. Pastor Mario would always visit Andrew in the mornings to give him a prayer before going down to the chapel to counsel those in need, but Angela was surprised to see him here before the five o'clock hour. His early arrival gave her a bad feeling deep in her bones. Something big was going to happen today, and she could only hope it would go down after the end of her shift.

She watched as Pastor Mario entered the room carrying his coat over his left arm, wiping at his brow with his left, and her feeling of abnormality grew. Hot or

cold he always wrapped his right hand in a white hanker chief to wipe his mouth, or brow. The man was never seen without one. It was warm outside and he had no need for an over coat, not with the three piece blue suit he was wearing (and did wear every other day), but Angela supposed his vanity called for such things under all conditions. There were no other explanations for his extra clothing that she could come up with, so that was the one she stuck with. Her father would always say, "The first thought is usually the best," and from experience she found him to be right.

Pastor Mario was out of sight and she knew where he was. Right now he was laying his coat over the chair in the corner of 303, and going into the bathroom to pray.

She hated the sound of his prayer. He never prayed for Andrew out in the open, only in the restroom. The sounds that came from inside were strange. He would not deny it when asked, but only say, "The words of a man are heard best by the Lord when he prays in private," but Angela knew there was someone, or something, in there with him during his visits. She may not be able to decipher what was being said, but she knew damn well there were two separate voices in there once he closed the door.

She shivered, and then rubbed at her bare arms to warm herself. The thought of the pastors prayer had gotten to her. First dippy the blond notices the poor man in mid dream, and the impossible way he twitches, now the early arrival of the hospitals only religious member. Soon people would notice the other strange happenings in room 303.

Angela had been caring for the man in that room every night for his entire stay. First he was a one armed, no legged, vegetable with so much swelling in his brain that if he ever did reawaken, he would be useless to this world. Then she watched, day after day, and year after year, as the man slowly began to re-grow his body piece by piece. The accident had left him only two fingers on his remaining hand, a thumb and index, but soon she saw a nub growing, then a knuckle, and soon the man had re-grown a new pinky with no nail at it's tip. His legs had gone from stout little stumps that ended at mid thigh, to two half legs with knee caps and all. All of the doctors had said his spine had been virtually shattered, he would never again move on his own, but now, he would twist and move in his bed. There are many miracles on this earth, and one of them was in room 303.

Doctors simply adore patients like Andrew. They could poke him and prod him, search him and study him, always looking for the miracle he held, and that is why she remained silent.

In Angela's belief structure, one left God to his work in peace and undisturbed. What she did not know was that she was not the only one aware of the miracle inside of the broken soldier of room 303.

#

Pastor Mario exited the bathroom with a new sweat dripping from his brow as he re-wrapped his hanker-chief around his hand. He used the yellowing cloth to dry himself, then scratched it at the top were a scar the size of a quarter burned and bothered.

He went to the chair in the corner with his over coat draped over the back but did not take his coat and leave; instead, he picked up the chair and set it beside

Andrew's bed for he had, on good authority, known that this was the day the man would awaken.

He set the chair on the right side of Andrew's bed and sat down, with the rooms picture window at his back, and it's door in front of him, he had better access to the soldiers remaining limb. He sat, laid both hands flat on the bed, then leaned in and whispered, "Andrew? Son are you awake?" but received no response.

The pastor leaned back in the chair, looked up to the ceiling, and took in a deep breath then let it out slowly. His hands still on Andrew's bed side he watched the mans chest, rise, and fall.

His mother had requested that his face be covered as much as possible so no man, or woman, would have to see the disfigured mess that was once her handsome boy. The doctors and nurses all agreed that the request was fine, for the man did not have a hole from a tracheotomy to worry about, because, after a few months they were able to remove the tube from his throat, allowing him breath on his own. The mask, made by his mother's friend, fit him like a fencers mask. It was not made of mesh like a fencers would be, but rather a solid white cotton cloth, that was suspended by two thin crossed wires and hovered in a dome fashion atop an oval frame that rested around Andrew's face.

At the request of the nurse's, Andrew's IV had been relocated from his hand to his left shoulder, making it easier to bathe and change him without tangles. Aside from that, the only other wires he had were for monitoring his breathing, hart rate, and blood pressure, with one final tube to feed him, and all together, they were only five, most of which attached to the top of his only arm. To pastor Mario, despite his condition, the man in the bed looked quite comfortable, and peaceful.

The pastor slid his naked hand along the over starched hospital spread, turned it over, and grasped Andrew's, and to his surprise, the man jumped.

The hart monitor, which had been running silently, was now sounding it's alarm. The display on the machine read Andrew's hart rate as 102 bpm and rising. Pastor Mario sat upright and placed his other hand over Andrew's, then spoke calming words with no effect. Andrew's hart rate hit 118 as nurse Angela arrived, waddling through the door at what must have been her top speed.

"What in Sam Hill is go'en on in h....." Angela was cut off when she witnessed the man in the bed twisting slightly and squeezing the pastors hand with his remaining fingers. "May God be merciful, the man has woken up," She had pronounced God, as Gawd, as her words came out in a frightened wisp. She ran to the back of Andrew's bed and pressed the call button, "Beth, I need you to get the doctor on duty to room 303 right away, and tell him to bring some sleeping potion wit'em."

#

Andrew knew he was awake but had been wishing to the God's that this was just some kind of nightmare. He could see nothing and hear even less, but the taste and smells in the air told him he was in a hospital, probably lying on his back. He tried to speak, to call out to someone, but he could not tell if it worked. He could feel his breath moving, his mouth shaping each word, but could not hear them leave his body.

Without warning, he felt a hand in his and it startled him. Moving was difficult, but still he tried to pull away just as a second hand closed over. He began to panic. He tried to scream for the person that was near him to release his hand but heard no sound. Next, he tried as hard as he could to open his eyes, wanting to look at this person holding his hand. That's when he realized, his eyes were already open.

*"Oh my God, I'm deaf dumb and blind,"* He thought. *"I can't feel my trigger arm. I can't feel my legs. I've become burden incarnate."*

He squeezed the hand in his palm and felt the one atop his own squeeze back, then something large and heavy bumped the side of his bed, shifting him a few inches to the side.

With so many questions coming at him from the inside he had to slow down his mind and think hard for the best plan of action. When it came to him just seconds later, he inhaled deeply and held.

Morse code.

He gathered his concentration and tapped his thumb softly, *\*\*\* - - - \*\*\**. He repeated the pattern twice more and waited two seconds in-between for a response. When the hands around his finally did, he let go of his breath.

#

The pastor had not used Morse code since his days as a weekend warrior and was shocked to see he still knew it. He quickly taped his finger tips on Andrew's wrist.

*"Andrew. You must calm yourself. You are in good hands, and help is on the way."*

Andrew responded, *"How do you know me?"*

*"I'm the man that sold you the fastest mustang ever built,"* Pastor Mario tapped.

*"Pastor?"* Tapped Andrew.

*"Yes son, It's me,"* Tapped the pastor, *"I've been offering Gods services here at the hospital since the day after your accident. Do you remember that day Andrew?"*

*"Yes sir. I remember it all. We were making the big turn just past the farm. Diana and I were arguing about were I got my scar, then before we knew it we were on the side of the road, upside-down. I could see her face and....."* Andrew became agitated and quickened his taps. *"Please pastor Mario, ask the Lord to forgive me for the burden I have become. Ask him to forgive me for betraying my love, and allowing that other woman to scar me. Tell him for me because I know he will no longer listen. Tell him for me would you? Tell him I only wanted....."* He trailed off and his heart rate went up another few numbers.

*"I can do that for you son, and later, you can do that for yourself, but first you must calm yourself. Your mother and the doctors are on their way"* Pastor Mario was preparing to tell the man more, when he suddenly broke out into another barrage of messages.

*"Please don't let my mother see me like this. Don't let those doctors put me back to sleep and allow me to be a further burden. Please pastor? Hold them back. Don't let them keep me here. Tell my mother how much I love her."* Andrew stopped tapping his thumb and his breathing calmed.

Pastor Mario tapped again, *"I will son. I'll tell her for you now, and then you can tell her. I promise you that you're going to be OK. Stay calm and I'll go and tell the doctor. Be still."* And with that, the pastor stood up, tapped the man's chest in a sooth-

ing manor, and left his side.

Outside, pastor Mario was speaking to Bethany and giving her Andrew's message. Andrew could not hear what was going on but knew he had to work quick. He concentrated hard, figured out which wire was which, and what tube was which, then set to work on ending his life.

He used his arm as best he could and felt his face. He did not remove the mask completely, but lifted it high enough to reveal his mouth. He then reached up behind his head, and pulled to help him crane his neck toward his shoulder, then he bit into his IV tube and began to blow.

The expanding pain in his arm moved quickly and reached his chest. He knew the task was complete, and even though his heart felt as if it was near exploding, he smiled. He felt the hands of others roaming over him in a panic, probably trying to stop the unstoppable. Trying helplessly to stop the air bubble that he set in motion to end the embarrassing hindrance he had become.

Just before he left the world, Andrew saw a bright white cloth, and heard the clouded and dulled sound of a woman screaming for a doctor.

#

Dr. Mathew had went from walk to run at the sound of the nurses call and nearly stabbed himself with the covered syringe of what the nurse had referred to as, "sleeping potion." He reached the room and saw the two nurses, one a skinny blond, the other an overweight older woman, and what he recognized as the hospitals Pastor hovering over the man of 303 in a panic as the man appeared to have a tube in his mouth.

Once Dr. Mathew realized the tube was from the mans IV, he recognized what had just happened, he pushed his way through the people, uncovered the syringe that nearly stabbed him, inserted it into the dying mans half a leg and pushed the plunger. The sedative he brought with him was mild, but effective, and he saw the mans chest rise once..... twice..... no more.

"Contact the morgue and tell them the time of death was 5:22 am. " The doctor said to Angela, then turned to Bethany and said, "Call the next of kin and inform them of their loss." Both nurses set forward with their given tasks and Dr. Mathew turned to face the pastor and spoke one last time before turning off the machines, covering the body, and leaving the room. "I've said it once, and I'll say as many times as I can. That God of yours, has one fucked up sense of humor."

#

The pastor went into the bathroom after the doctor left and locked it. He removed the hanker-chief from his hand, exposing the bright white scar, and set the cloth on the side of the sink. From within his shirt he removed a chain that held a silver coin with three X's on its face, then held it up face high so that the coin and his face were reflected in the mirror.

The coin moved back and forth from his left hand as is suspended from its chain like a pendulum, then turned a bright red. The pastor lifted his scared hand and lowered the silver coin directly over the old wound. He made no sound as the red hot piece of silver burned itself into his skin, nor did he utter a breath as it cooled

and was covered entirely with his searing flesh.

He released the chain, let it dangle, then he placed both hands, palm flat fingers strait, at chest height and looked into the mirror. He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and the image in the mirror changed.

The pastor of the mirror let his hands fall to his sides and raised his head. As his eyes opened they were the burned the color of the hot silver. It watched closely as the pastor in the bathroom spoke.

“The deed is done,” He said with his head still bowed, “The soldier you sent me to procure has betrayed his God, and taken his own life just as you said. His soul now belongs to you.”

“He has been received,” The mirror pastor said, “He will be trained and become a useful tool against the God that created him. Your job is now finished, you may keep your thirty pieces.”

The pastor of the mirror bowed his head, closed his eyes, and placed his hands back together, then disappeared into the image of the pastor in the bathroom.

Pastor Mario held up his hand with his 30 piece of silver inside and rubbed at it with his free thumb. His skin bubbled, then changed to the color of burnt ash as the silver coin slipped out from beneath the skin, and dropped to the floor between his feet.

He looked at his hand, watched as the wound closed up and returned to its normal white scared appearance, then bent down to pick up his prize believing that one day he would have enough to buy his way back into the heart of the Lord.

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## Taxi Driver

Doug Downie

The Home sat on a hill above the little town of Youngville. The vets festered in there, like untreated wounds. They were victims of the wars, which we all were, of course, but they were so much more so. It didn't even matter if they had been shell shocked or had cowered on the beaches on the front lines of the assault or crouched in the jungles waiting for a sniper's shot to slam into their heads or hearts. They were victimized and raped by their very training, sucked dry by the corporals then sergeants then lieutenants then majors and all the way on up to the biggest bastards of them all. But the guys at the Home were not guys who had gone very far up that ladder. They'd mostly been privates and such and had done their stint, and maybe even reenlisted, because there were no jobs for them, and now finally the government was taking care of them as their use to society reached its lowest ebb.

In a world of stunning beauty it is horrible what people have to do to survive.

I was one of the town taxi drivers. I loved to drive, to feel the breeze slapping my cheeks and see the hills pass by, take the turns like a luge rider, or hang on along the long straightaways, feeling the earth pass beneath my feet, covering ground. I felt

like I was seeing the world when I was driving. So I thought it might not be such a bad job, and I took it, quaking inside, as always, at the folly I was forced to commit.

Ralph, the owner of Town Taxi, was fat and was usually glued to a swivel chair behind a chipped and mostly barren desk. He smoked a cigar and he looked like Jackie Gleason.

“Look kid, you work for me I don’t want to hear about no drinking or doping on the job. You can’t make any money by hanging out under a tree reading the newspaper. You make your rounds, anybody wants to come down to town from the Home, Town Taxi will be there to bring ‘em on down. Got it?”

“Got it Ralph.”

“Alright, get out of here.”

Youngville was a little town, not much more than a village, though the entrepreneurs were beginning to notice it, and the tourists were beginning to be lured by their enticements. But in those days most people in Youngville had no need for taxi cabs. They had money and expensive cars and could trot down to the quick store or go pick up some salmon and asparagus down in Napa without so much as a thought. Ralph had built his business on the vets up at the Home. And there were only two places the vets ever wanted to go to - these were the quick store to pick up some meagre supplies, like candy bars and potato chips and porn mags; and the bars, especially around Happy Hour, when the drink prices were knocked down, two for one. We’d cruise the Home like vultures as the time for Happy Hour approached and haul them on down, five at a time, drop them off at The Whistle Stop, or The Grapevine, or The River Inn, then turn around and go pick up another load. When Happy Hour was over we’d carry them all on home, much livelier than when we’d carried them on down.

“The system never dies.” Charles said one evening on the ride back to the Home. “People die. Plants die. Animals die. Mountains erode and disappear. Planets die.”

Charles was dressed in a snappy brown three piece suit. He clutched a portfolio close to his side, filled with the art that would never see the light of day. I’d seen his sketches, and they were good. But there was no one to market Charles, and maybe there was no market for Charles, like so many others out there.

That’s the way it is: the entrepreneurs create the markets, and the people follow along.

“What the fuck is he talking about now?” Romeo shouted. “Does he always have to start with this shit?”

“Stars die. Solar systems die.”

“Leave him alone Romeo. You could learn something from Charles.” responded Henry, the only Hispanic in a Home that sat in a valley that ate Hispanics like oer’dourves.

“He just gets to me sometimes. You know what he did the other day? He sketched a picture of me that made me look like a baboon!”

I looked in my mirror and I could see that Charles smiled, just a bit.

“Atoms die. Solar systems die. But the universe never dies. There is no beginning and there is no end.”



“Hey Charles!” shouted Eddie, an ex-plumber from Pittsburg, who spent a year in Korea, mostly manning the watch along the DMZ and the bars of Seoul, never even hearing a shot. “I’m a Catholic! What the fuck you mean? We’re goin’ to heaven, man!”

“All the components die, but the system never dies.”

“What system Charles, what system?” said Frank. He was a veteran of the second world war, like Charles, and had completely white hair and a full white beard. This was the first time I had heard him speak. He’d taken advantage of one of those tiny moments of silence, when everyone sulked and sucked into themselves.

“The universe.” Charles answered. “All the religions want you to believe that there is an End. But there is no end. The system never dies.”

“Oh shit! I can’t stand this!” Eddie curled into his corner seat with his right arm pulling his head down to his shoulder.

“Science wants you to believe that there was a Beginning. But there is no beginning. No beginning, and no end.”

By the time we pulled around the long loop that led to the main entrance of the Home everyone was shouting at someone or mumbling to themselves and as I piled them out of the cab it felt like I’d just gotten rid of a bunch of farts. It was good to be relieved of the pressure. But there were more on the way, waiting on their stools, swirling the last of their drinks, and I’d be listening to them on the ride back up. I watched Charles as he tapped his wobbly cane up the slate steps. There was no way I could ever know what he’d seen in his life.

Every so often we got called on to travel further afield, usually just down to Napa, not ten miles down the road. On rare occasions we got a fare that needed to get down to the airport, south of San Francisco. The vets hardly ever tipped and we always hoped for a bonanza on one of these trips. The bonanza might be money, or it might be a situation: an unforeseen situation, usually involving a beautiful woman. Taxi drivers are no exception to the rule of men who dream of impossible outcomes from improbable beginnings. Our adolescent dreams chase us down the alleys of adulthood like shadows.

I was hailed by a couple one afternoon, not long before Happy Hour, who needed to get to the airport.

“Climb on in.” I told them.

“Take us to the airport?” said the guy, tall and muscular and vaguely Latino looking. His confidence shouted to silence all opposition. “How much?”

“Forty bucks.”

He pulled out his wallet and handed me two twenties. “Let’s go. We have to make a stop on the way.”

“It’ll only be extra if it’s out of our way.”

“It’s on our way.”

Then I was forgotten, like the morning mist. He turned toward the woman and the outside world was lost. He worked her as if she was clay. She was lovely, dark of hair and dark of spirit, and she smouldered under his kneading, knowing that it was

she who was really in control.

After a while, about when we'd gotten down to the Carquinez Straits, he pulled out a bomber of a joint and waved it around, asking; "Do you mind?"

"Naw, but I can't. I'm driving."

"What's the matter, you think you can't handle it?"

"Well, I'm not sure exactly. I don't drive this route much."

"Are you afraid of what might happen as you get out along the edge? Afraid to take chances?" He leaned forward from the back seat and blew Acapulco Gold into my ear.

"Alright, give me a hit."

Not four exits after we'd crossed the Bay Bridge he told me to get off, head down Market Street and up O'Farrell. We pulled up in front of a dingy townhouse and they got out.

"C'mon, man! C'mon up? We'll only be a little while."

"Yeah, c'mon man." she said, her eyes pools of promise.

I figured it was better than waiting in the cab.

We climbed a flight of stairs and fell into a room filled with smoke and bottles and turned out shirt tails.

"Hey! Enrico my man!"

My man hugged him and in general the greetings were robust.

There were seven people in the room, mostly men. It was clear that both the women were Enrico's. It wasn't clear what it was about Enrico that held these people in his palm. He sat down comfortably in an arm chair that seemed as though reserved for him.

"There's a demonstration against this shit the city council is trying to do this Friday. Who's in?"

Everyone except me lifted their arms, fists clenched.

"We have to show these capitalist pigs that we mean business! We will not let them run over the people!"

Enrico looked at me and said, "I don't see your arm, amigo. I don't see you. Where do you stand?"

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"I'm talking about your future, man! I'm talking about the freedom of the working man! Isn't that you? Aren't you a working man?"

"Yeah, but not the same way you're thinking." He had absolutely no idea of my story.

"What way?" He held his arms outstretched in disbelief, casting his burning eyes across the crowd of ten.

"Are you talking about violent revolution?"

"Ah! Violence! Violence is beautiful my man."

"I don't think so."

In a move that would have done a movie star proud he reached behind him and pulled out a pistol and squared off and pointed it at my head. He came closer and I could feel the cold sting of the steel against my forehead. He loomed over me like

destiny, his finger on the trigger.

His eyes were stern and paternal and smouldered like hot embers in a cold night. It looked like I wasn't going to get a tip from this fare either.

That's what life was like. A long string of fares who don't tip.

After about thirty seconds he relaxed and said, "I'm just kidding man."

Everyone laughed and a huge sigh seemed to exhale from the room.

Enrico grabbed the hand of my tantalizing taxi woman and drew her to the bedroom adjacent to the room we all shared, closing the door gently behind him. She cast me a coy flicker as the door closed in front of her. We listened to those two in the room of eight, and seemed to find no passion that could match that of that asshole. We were all doomed and we knew it, he only had more fun on the way down.

The drive to the airport was filled with silence, like a woman is filled with child. I got back to Youngville about half past five in the morning. I'd made fifty bucks that day - eat, put some clothes on your back and a roof over your head, maybe spare a few moments for a little bit of wonder. The light was just creeping over the hills toward Pope Valley. I knew Ralph would want to know where I'd been. Knowing that he made his living preying on a bunch of lonely and disabled men who'd done nothing but been fools for their country, I didn't really give a shit.

I was missing Charles and the old boys though, and hoped they'd all gotten back to the Home after Happy Hour, all in good shape. They were the old boys of Youngville.

I was also hoping that Janie wouldn't be too pissed off at me. We'd had enough of that lately, and this was not a night for that sort of crap.

I headed home, hoping the ride would last forever.

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## From Where I'm Sitting

Christopher Lawless

Jesus lived across the street  
in the body of a disabled boy  
but age wise a man  
who never pronounced our last name correctly  
"Yo Wallace! Wallace!"

He wore wings under his tee-shirts  
had a laugh that set the house on fire.  
He would yell to the boys driving fast cars passed him.

The kind he saw in black and white  
sitting on his green bench,  
Auto swap sheets in his hands  
and the doctors told him he wouldn't live passed eight,  
twelve, or twenty.

He would look through our kitchen screen window  
as we ate dinner  
my mother screaming at his face  
separated by the tiny holes between them,  
later laughing as he ran through the front door

finishing dinner with us  
describing a 76 Firebird, blue as the ocean  
with a V8, only 3200 dollars  
and he'd reach for the salad barehanded.

“God Damnit, Brian!  
Tore us all apart  
a third son in a household with already two  
pulling things we could never get away with  
as sons or neighbors.

Rolling tires from hills  
urine in the lemonade  
knocking on a neighbor's door as he beat his wife  
“Hey neighbor, I'm Brian,”  
running after midnight  
through the backyards of surrounding streets  
the man chasing us with gun,

Brian never catching his breath  
until we made it home  
shut off the lights and each took a knife for protection.  
The one night he stayed out too late,  
scared his mother to death.

The next morning he discovered blackberries,  
“Shit, shit, Wallace! Holy shit, shit, Wallace!”  
Pushed purple into his lips and mouth  
ran threw the tiny thorns, praising the Lord  
leaving his own flesh and blood in the bushes

leaving us with nothing, to put into baskets  
but the few we found before him  
the few that fell in front of his feet  
and the few that the birds took.

The kingdom of Blackberry  
had found their Prince of Peace  
but he would never return to claim what was now his.

Brian passed a few weeks later,  
twenty eight years old  
with a body as strong as a bison's  
but a heart that just couldn't pull it.

I hadn't been to church in many years.  
People lined the aisles and filled the pews.  
We weren't the only family Brian had changed.

Barb Cowie spoke about the time he jumped his bike  
"Whooooooooo"  
off our homemade ramp  
and crashed into her son holding the video camera.

Sarah Worthington told of when he wouldn't leave their house  
"Get out, Get out! This isn't your house, I live here."  
I remembered that day, then dropped my head into hymns  
listened to my father cry for the first time

The hymns turned into advertisements  
showing pictures of cars for sale:  
A new Blue Taurus, four door,  
a 92' Jeep Cherokee, rusty, but willing take best offer.

I started to hear the Gospel of Brian  
through the idling of a 57 Chevy,  
sequenced turquoise, designed for racing shows  
drag strips and trashy, fast women.

I heard the choir sing,  
"Yo, Wallace!" eighteen voices carried  
"Wallace! Chris Wallace!, through the church, down the streets, passed the lake,  
into the woods, and across the town,  
"Wallace!, Chris Wallace! There's even faster cars up here, and I can even see your  
house from where I'm sitting."

# SHAPES :

## A Retelling of "Tam Lin"

*Elizabeth Avery*

The complex is beautiful. It's one of the largest in downtown Portsmouth, and if you ask most people, it's one of the finest, too. The shrubs out front are neatly trimmed, if a bit squat. The ramp is neatly swept, silvery concrete. A wooden swing hangs from the willow that leans against the East window. The bricks on the first level are so clean, they shine.

There is someone outside the door—a tall young man, clean-pressed, a bowler hat shading his face. In his three-piece suit he comes from another time. He doesn't fit in with the modern Portsmouth morning, the joggers sliding past him in their neon poly blends.

One woman—not a jogger to judge by the chain-smoke cloud that follows her—breaks from the pedestrian flow. She sidles up to him, already sure what he wants.

"Randall Carter keeps a wonderful complex," she says, by way of introduction. "It's such a shame, really." The young man looks like he's about to ask a question. When the woman continues, however, he turns toward her, readjusting his well-pressed shoulders.

"The complex can hold more than half a dozen families, all comfortable and well. The economy being what it is, though—we don't say 'recession' around here" (she smiles at him, conspiring) "there are only two families living there. Three, you know, if you count the MacPhaes, but who can tell if they're ever coming back... And then there's Randall himself, and his little daughter. Janet—not so little now, really. Star of the basketball team, you know, or she will be once that Parry girl graduates." The woman wrinkles her nose, pulls a crinkled packet from her coat pocket. She draws out a limp cigarette, like a snail pulled from its shell. She takes a drag. When she exhales, she blows her smoke at an angle. "Janet's a good egg, if a bit flighty. And with her father in such a condition, who can blame her, you know?" She peers at the young man as if he does.

The woman makes a clucking sound, a concerned matriarch in a daytime soap. "Whether you count two or three families in the Carter complex, it's a lot of work to keep it. And Randall can only do so much in his wheelchair, of course." The woman gives the young man a knowing look, the look two people with working legs sometimes give each other when they're in a mood for pity.

She stares up. The young man follows her gaze. He absorbs the gradation of filth, from the scrubbed-earth red of the lowest bricks, to the dinge on the third floor windows, up and up to the top. Seven floors. The top is nearly black, and it blends into the sky. The roof bends in the wind, or seems to. There is a spindly outline in a window, like some dying, exotic plant. Things move, and do not move.

The young man says he's not looking for an apartment.

The woman nods. "What are you looking for?" she asks. The young man is silent.

The woman huffs, and resumes her stroll down the morning street. As she waggles around the corner, the young man isn't watching her. He stares up at the roof, trying to discern an edge. He stares for some long moments. Then he turns away, his shoulders square with a decision made.

He begins to whistle, an ice-cream truck tune, a too-happy tune, and he, too, makes his way down the street.

...

Janet watched them from inside. She had her legs tucked against her, and she leaned against the third-story window. The window-seat cushion was too thin.

She shifted, let her feet rest on the floor. But she could feel her belly too much, then. She quickly pulled her legs back up. There was life inside her, but she didn't have to face it yet.

If Tam were here, things would get better. Janet thunked the crown of her head against the wall.

"Ow," she said. She scuffed her hands through her yellow hair. She stared out at the street again. The man in the hat, and the old woman, were gone.

Of course they were. More likely the port would dry up than they'd get a new tenant anytime soon. No one came to Carter Complex any more.

Janet wished they still called it Carter Hall. Her dad thought that Complex sounded more modern, and maybe it would attract tenants. It had been Carter Hall until Janet's mother died. She rubbed a spot of dust from the window. Carter Hall sounded like a palace. Carter Complex just sounded like apartments.

She sighed. She stood up. Just because she'd been up sick since four o'clock didn't give her a reason to neglect her work.

She climbed up to the top floor first. The stairs were clean, at least.

Janet didn't know why she bothered to keep them so; she was the only one walking them. There was a motorized lift between the first and second floors, but they couldn't afford any more than that. Besides, Dad said the lifts were ugly. They made people uncomfortable. People don't want reminders of things like that when they're coming home at the end of the day.

Still, there was one who used to walk them...Janet shook her head. There was no one left but her.

Janet took a deep breath before opening the door at the top of the stairs. There used to be a sign on the door that read "Penthouse," but now there was only the number 7 in dirty brass. She used to avoid the penthouse because it hurt too much, but lately she'd just been avoiding the filth—so she told herself. It got dirty faster than the other floors, or so it seemed. The dust was not a presence here, but the articulation of an absence, a lack.

Janet recalled the way Tam's mother filled any room she entered, infusing it with a heady smell of peat and incense. The woman absorbed light, and reflected it back at will. She was tall and regal, always dressed in velvet. And Tam, beside her as if

leashed. Tall and quiet, his face neutral. Until Janet pulled out a smile.

No. No thinking of him now. Janet had let the filth encroach too long.

She brandished her duster. The feathers glowed neon green in the early morning half-light that barely filtered through the windows' grime. The dust sparkled when she dislodged it, before fading into shadows.

Janet took a deep breath. She pressed a hand to her stomach's curve. There wasn't much give.

She could feel bile coming up, radiating in her throat. She checked the rotten-looking grandfather clock—a quarter to seven behind the cobwebs. The sun was coming in stronger now. Right on time.

Janet dashed into the greenish bathroom, throwing her duster behind her.

A cloud of dry filth spattered in the air. She made it just in time, crouched fetal over the toilet. She coughed and choked with sick. Her throat and nose burned. She knew the baby couldn't kick yet, but there was plenty of violence inside her all the same.

When there was nothing left, she could breathe again. Janet unrolled some stale tissue and wiped her nose, rinsed her mouth with a palmful of tap water. She sat on the floor and stared up at the ornate porcelain sink, the claw-foot bathtub and mildewed shower curtain. The mirror was brassy and speckled. Is it really only two months since they left? She wondered. But she knew it was.

Janet felt tears coming in, but she shook them away. I can deal with this. Right now her father would be waking up, would be needing her. None of this was his fault. She didn't want him worrying. She stood up, wiped the sweat from her face. She braided her hair up tight and neat. She nodded at her reflection, and the wan girl in the mirror nodded back.

She left the duster where she'd dropped it. She would clean after school. Janet ran down the stairs, successive doors banging shut behind her.

...

The young man comes around the block again. His suit is still smart and clean, no smudges on his shoes. He stops at the corner, staring at the Carter building again.

The young man is beautiful in a sweet way, a way that most young men these days try to avoid. There is a natural flush to his cheek, and color to his lips. His bowler hat casts shadows over his dark, gleaming, thick-lashed eyes.

If anyone were watching now, she would see him pull at his jacket, adjust his hat. She would see those full lips whisper something, but she would not be able to discern his words. His beauty would distract her, and no one would blame her for that.

She would be overcome by the desire to give him something. Perhaps she would tug at the ring on her finger. Perhaps she would purse her lips.

But no one watches at this moment. The young man has made sure, with several slow paces around the block, that no one is near.

He whispers something else, then, and the watcher would now grow bored. A pretty young man, certainly, but nothing to distract her from the morning's business. She would turn away, thinking of things to be done.



And if she turns back, for one last glimpse of the beautiful youth? He is gone now. She would see nothing.

...

“Let’s hustle, Carter!” The coach’s cries swung at Janet over the basketball court. The October air chilled her lungs and made her cough.

Her legs burned. Her belly ached and boiled. Janet wheezed, desperate to keep up. Only a week ago—two weeks? Barely three... she led the pack at every practice, breaking ahead of even the seniors, her long legs rotating smoothly underneath her. But her body didn’t listen to her now.

She couldn’t manage. She jogged to the bench and collapsed on it, scuffing her knees on the peeling red paint.

“Five minutes, Coach,” she mumbled, embarrassed. “I’m feeling sick. Please.” The coach harrumphed. “You’ve been sick this past week at least,” he growled, crossing his meaty arms. “If you were any other girl...” he squinted at her. “You come see me after practice if you wanna talk, Carter.” His glasses reflected sun and sky.

“Thanks,” Janet said. “I’ve just been working too hard lately. It’s my own fault.” He looked doubtful. “Seriously, Coach. I’m okay.” She smiled as wide as she could manage, feeling a painted grimace spread across her face.

The coach sighed. “You take care of yourself, Carter,” he said. He faced the team; the girls slogged by him on their fifth lap. “Parry! Hustle!” he yelled at the girl in front.

Janet still gasped for air. She hated this. She put her head between her knees and listened to the buzz of blood rushing to her head.

After a few moments she felt a tap on her shoulder. Five minutes already? She pulled her head up. Her braids lashed her back when she flopped them over her shoulder.

She had to squint through the bright sunlight to see who it was. The school nurse squinted back at her, her apple cheeks pulled into a simpering smile.

“Why don’t you come inside, dear?” she said. “This nippy weather won’t do you any good.” Janet swung a look at her coach, who tossed his cell phone from hand to hand. She rolled her eyes. She’d told him she was fine.

“Sure, Nurse Court,” she said.

She followed the nurse through the school’s beige halls. Nurse Court was so short that Janet could see clear over her, though the nurse plodded only a few steps in front.

The health office sat at the end of the third hallway. The door was low, and the room smelled like bandages and stale cotton. Janet ignored her turning stomach and eyed the window blinds warily. If Nurse Court had her figured, she didn’t want anyone to see her cry.

The nurse sat down at her plywood desk and gestured for Janet to sit in the yellowing chair opposite. Janet sat as delicately as she could.

“I’m not one to judge, Janet, dear,” said the nurse. From the softness in her eyes, Janet could almost believe her. “I know how hard this must be for you.” Nurse

Court's words sounded scripted. Janet imagined she must have said them many times over the years.

"I've seen this enough times to know. You're pregnant, aren't you?" The nurse offered a box of tissues, but Janet would not, would not cry. Some of the windows were open.

The nurse continued, Janet's face apparently having given her away. "Now don't worry, dear. Girls today have options." She slowly slid open a plywood drawer. There was a rustling of paper.

The nurse withdrew a glossy pamphlet. It was tan, plain. No feminine pinks to remind you of baby clothes. Portsmouth Women's Clinic, it said. Janet stared at it. She straightened her shoulders. She could feel the joints in her back again.

She looked up at the older woman sitting across from her, and startled at the genuine fear in her eyes. "I'm just trying to look out for you, Janet, honey," said the nurse. "I'm sure you can understand the...position this puts me in. Your decision is your own, but..." the nurse's chin wobbled, her lip trembled. "I hope you understand." Janet did understand. She thought of the Sisters in their black habits, judgment dangling from their rosaries. She knew the pamphlet on the desk could get Nurse Court fired, or worse.

Her voice came out flat when she spoke, but she managed to keep it from breaking.

"Thank you."

...

There is a woman. She paces the steps, the curb. The wind cascades around her, billowing her skirts like sails. Her green eyes glitter, jewels or scales.

She, too, surveys the complex.

Her teeth snap in her smile.

...

Janet unhooked her bicycle from among the vast row by the school's entrance. The other girls were in leggings for the ride home, but not she. She tucked her skirt up into her belt on each side. The heavy wool plaid and numerous pleats were more than enough to keep her decent, and she liked to see the nuns' faces as she cycled past with her knees bare.

Bicycling was still comfortable, for which she was thankful. Janet rode out of the parking lot as fast as she could. Her visit with Nurse Court had kept her late, and she didn't want her father to worry.

...

After dinner Janet climbed the steps. Her father was fed, clean, and helped into his brown chenille armchair with his Newsweek in hand. He wouldn't want to stir for at least two hours.

Janet tried thinking in her room at first, but the pink and yellow paint she'd picked out when she was five made her feel like all her younger selves were watching. So she went from room to room, sitting briefly and starting up again. There was nowhere good to think, nowhere to make a decision. She needed to decide.

So she ran to the top floor like she used to, ignoring the cramps that popped up with her first steps. The door creaked when she opened it, moaned shut behind her. There was a clicking sound. A moment's echo.

The dust had settled back as if she'd never been there. The afternoon sunlight dripped into the room, too thick, congealing in the windows. The glass bent and flowed, and the light buckled in the panes. The peeling paint on the walls took on an encroaching green, the color of copper rust.

Janet sat down on a brocade loveseat, settled back. The wooden armrest felt solid, smooth under the dust.

She let out a harsh breath, more air than she thought her lungs could contain. She unzipped the overfilled book bag she'd dumped on the floor. Binders, notepaper, study guides expanded inside. Janet dug through them all. There it was.

Her planner had crumpled the pamphlet under its weight, torn off a corner. Janet smoothed the paper down as best she could. She unfolded it on her lap, stared a moment without seeing.

Then she began to read. The words got past her eyes easier than she thought they would. She was not afraid.

Janet realized that she'd already made this decision. She took air in, now, even more than she'd let out before. She held it inside, let her head buzz with oxygen. She exhaled. There was a number on the back of the pamphlet, and an address.

She dug through her book bag again and found her phone. It was nearly out of power, but still held more than enough to make this call. Janet lifted her head.

And there he was. In the shadow, in the dark at the corner of the room, his arms crossed over his chest. The brim of his hat kept the light from his face.

Still, she could hear his smile when he said her name. She leapt from the couch and rushed to him, crushing him into the wall with the force of her embrace. The warmth from his body spread into hers, beating her blood and coloring her skin.

Tam pulled her back, just enough to see her face.

"What's happened?" he asked. Janet saw a sheen of water on his cheek, a patch of wet on his suit shoulder. She touched her own face, and realized she was crying. Never in front of her father, not with Nurse Court. But here, on the seventh floor, Janet could cry.

Tam broke away a little more, keeping one arm secure around her. He looked around the room. His eyes darkened.

"How long have I been gone?" he asked. Janet swallowed. Her tears dried as quickly as they'd come. Now her eyes flashed too.

"Two months," she said. "More than that, now. And—" she searched for the right words.

"I know," he said. He placed a hand over her abdomen. She wanted to hand him some of this burden, but she didn't know how.

Janet closed her eyes. She breathed in his scent of amber, wood, rivers.

It rushed her back to the last time she'd seen him. In this very room, under cover of night. His mother, her father, both sound asleep in another world. His skin pale as

hers in the trickling moonlight. Even then, he seemed to flicker away from her.

And in the morning, he was gone. His mother too, and all their things. The dust thick on the place, and the windows stained and dark. Janet had gathered her clothes off the floor, confused, betrayed. A double rose lay on the spot where Tam and she had lain before. She gathered it up, too, and ran from the room as if chased.

A day had passed, two. Three. Janet couldn't understand why they'd left, at first. And she couldn't understand how. But she began to.

She remembered waking that morning when her head hit the floor, knocking her into consciousness. Small red marks clustered on her forearm, as if someone with a stubbled cheek had just rested there. He couldn't have been gone long—and Janet began to imagine, as the silent days stretched into weeks, that she had woken on the exact moment of his departure. Dreams echoed in her mind; a bright and angry queen—a spiraling darkness, a forest filled with roses. Tam—calling to her—nowhere to be seen.

And now he was here. She kissed him. She let herself revel in his presence. For a moment.

“Tam.” She focused her gaze on his, thankful for their equal height. She drew power into her voice. “You have to tell me what happened. What’s happening.” Something inside her jerked. She could be so far along already.

Tam’s face stayed open, his eyes connected to hers. “I’ve tried to come back,” he said. “I’ve tried. This is the first time I could get away.” He slid his hands through her hair, untangling her braids in eddies and swirls. “I didn’t know how long I’d been gone. I’m so sorry, Janet.” Janet pushed him away. His hand flickered out to her cheek.

“Excuse me?” she stared him down. He flinched, but didn’t look away. “Two months is two months anywhere, Tam. Not that I even know where you went.” She scowled. He whispered something, something sweet and inaudible and delicious...no. Janet would not let him draw her back in.

“What’s that?” she demanded. Tam hung his head. His fingers trembled over his neck, buttoning and unbuttoning his collar. His nails throbbled red with bitten edges.

Janet was tired. Living alone with her father, with a secret she couldn’t tell but everyone could figure; it hurt. It hurt knowing Tam left her to bear this burden, bear this child, alone. And now she worried for him, instead of blaming him.

She let out a frustrated cry and put her arms around him again. She could hear what he was whispering now.

“She stole—I tried—she took me away—I’m so sorry—” his breath passed in quick, hot rasps over her cheek. Janet whispered back to him, cooling nonsense sounds. She led him to the loveseat’s deep green brocade, and they sat down together. He couldn’t stay still. Janet moved her hands back and forth over Tam’s shoulders as he fought to find the right words.

Finally he cleared his throat. “I don’t want to scare you,” he said—though that only made it worse, really. “I lived in Portsmouth first, you know. The place I’ve been—it’s hard to come back from. It’s been seven years since...” he trailed off again.

Janet began to lose her patience.

“Tell me,” she said, gently as she could.

He nodded, resolution sifting over him, making him sit up straight. “My...mother. So long ago, she took me away.” Janet nodded. She’d heard little snatches of this before: a lonely childhood in the shadow of ever-present Mrs. MacPhae, a woman with apron strings of steel, to say the least. The two of them moving from place to place, never staying anywhere long...Janet reprimanded herself for not understanding before. Of course he was always going to leave. Or rather, Mrs. MacPhae would leave, and take Tam with her.

“Does she know you’re here?” asked Janet. Tam groaned.

“I’m certain she does,” he said. “Janet, you believe me, don’t you?” Janet didn’t know quite what it was he needed her to believe. Still, of what he’d said, she was pretty sure she believed it all. “She’s going to take me away,” said Tam. “You have to help me.” Something sparked over Janet’s shoulders like the touch of a blade. She felt taller, wider, stronger. Yes.

“Tell me what to do.”

“When she comes for me,” he said, “you can save me then.” He looked down at his raw, bitten hands. “She’ll change me. She’ll make you think I want to hurt you.”

Janet had to laugh at that for a moment—but stopped. Hadn’t he hurt her already?

“Janet.” She looked up at him again. “Just hold on to me, don’t be afraid. Don’t let me go.” He took her hands in his again. “I am your child’s father.”

Janet glanced at the pamphlet on the floor between them. It fluttered in a breeze neither of them could feel. Her hold on Tam tightened.

...

A scream of wind, a rush of enclosing darkness. The top was off the complex, and Janet could see the sky. Somewhere, it was Halloween.

There was a woman. She stood over Tam and countless others. Her presence filled the air with the thick sweetness of opium smoke.

Janet tried to remember what she needed to do. Where was Tam? She had seen him, just a moment ago, in the crowd that stood before that gaping, howling void. They were all singing—praying—maybe crying.

She plunged in, hollering his name. She heard Tam call hers back. It didn’t take long to reach him—she only followed the sound, and the coal heat emanating from that central void.

But when her hands clapped over his arms, when she pulled him in—ah! A rending of light split the air, and smoke tore into Janet’s lungs. She wheezed, sick again. Her eyes watered and burned. When she blinked them clear, she couldn’t see Tam. She held something, but it wasn’t him.

The new thing in her arms writhed, hissed, boiled. Its face contorted into a wrinkled sneer, then a mask of pain. Janet heard a woman laughing.

Fur sprouted from its throat, its hands, everywhere. Ebony claws dug through her school uniform. Janet winced in expectation of pain—but she remembered Tam’s words. Don’t be afraid. She gripped the beast tight. She stared into its face, its eyes,

hoping for some acknowledgment, some promise. She saw nothing.

Still. She knew Tam was hidden somewhere in this creature, powerless perhaps, but there. She clung to the golden fur, taking comfort from its shimmering heat even as the beast clawed after her skin. And it vanished. Janet panicked, remembering her promise to hold on—then felt a slither in her hands. A crackling hiss, and she looked down to a snake clasped on her breast. It gaped its growing jaws, venom dripping in liquid splinters off its long, silver teeth. Its girth changed in her hands, from a small quick thing larger and larger, heavier, until it threatened to crush her under its muscled weight. Janet wrapped both arms around it, fighting to keep a hold on its slick, hard scales.

The woman bent over Janet, and the snake, too, disappeared. Janet felt warm human skin against hers, and choked with surprise at finding Tam again, naked in her grasp.

He tore away from her and cowered in the dark. She saw no charm in him then, no sweet beauty. Only a trembling dark-haired boy, lean and pale and plain, huddled inside his own limbs. There was no spell over his body, as there had been—she knew now—when they'd met. He opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. His eyes were dull, his lips cracked and white. His breath came in gurgling shudders.

Janet ran to him, covered him with her hands, her hair. She yanked off her sweater and wrapped it over him. She rubbed at the shivering bumps that covered his skin, knowing nothing but to hold him close and keep him warm.

Another scream poured through the sky, driven by voice or by wind. The woman appeared before them, elemental rivers hissing around her—fire, water, air. The earth she stood on rose to her calling, buckled beneath her.

Her gaze pressed down with physical weight, so that Janet's shoulders slumped and the joints cracked in her spine. Janet stood, slowly, painfully, bringing her lover up with her. In an echo of her movements, Tam straightened, too. His voice returned enough for him to laugh.

The woman drew closer, wind seething around her. Lightning crackled from her fingers, the tips of her hair, her navel. She stepped forward and plunged a hand into Tam's chest.

Janet cried out, but before she could stop anything the woman retracted, drawing with her something gory, brown, gleaming. A heart—a shell. Janet looked closer, not knowing what she hoped for. The woman wiped away a nascent slime, and Janet saw what it was—an anatomical wooden heart, or the shell of one, hollow inside. A crack ran a jagged circle through it, a splintered rift engendered at a near-invisible join. Tam clutched at the hole closing on his chest, probed and tested the blossoming pink scar tissue.

The woman pressed the wooden shell to her chest. She stared for a moment at the couple before her.

“An ill death may she die!” The woman's voice charged and magnetized the air with all the power of an ancient god.

Her gaze shifted from Janet to Tam. Lines shimmered over her face.

“Oh,” she said, and in her tones Janet heard the rustle of innumerable fallen leaves. “Tam, I would have given you a true wooden heart, if I could. I should have known that you would break this shell.” The lightning faded from her touch. The heart, now clean and smooth, vanished.

In a river of smoke, the woman was gone.

...

They leave the clinic together, each leaning on the other. Breezes whistle around them. He strokes a hand over her flat belly. She rests a tired head on his shoulder.

Winter has come, and the first snow blankets Portsmouth. The widows' walks are brimming with it, rendered useless, at least until spring. Cold, soft white subdues the edges on the horizon.

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## Heidelberg Home

*Andrew H. Oerke*

Sometimes I go to places where I am happier thinking about them than I was back then, so real happiness is on Memory Lane. Things happen too fast for us to enjoy them.

There was the Schloss, the Altebrücke, the Altstadt, the university and the Philosophen Weg and its Kleistgrab. Here was a city that lived in the shadow of the past. But the sun of Now was bright on castle walls and garden paths. Shadows stalked us in the streets at night and we couldn't tell them apart from the dark.

Frequently I go back there in my mind. We read Sartre, Heidegger, and Brecht like a double play team that never missed for they passed out startling new insights like tickets to the secret society. The racket of the streetcars rattled us to Kaesekuchen n Kafe, Wuerstchen n Bier. We strolled through our thoughts as if we were detectives with a full deck of clues, and it made life come alive and be significant; and every phrase we begged from the sage and bountiful air was what it could be if style were king. Your cigarette dangled Bogart-like from your smart smirk. The city loved us and we loved it back. Back then it was our mind-home but not as real as it is now in retrospect in whose framework I am a detective melting into his long-lost clues.

# Initiation

Benjamin Green

As I sit down to pen these words, I can hear the storm outside raging. It's like the night Pledge Peterson disappeared, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I know the end is near. The Grim Reaper is leering over my shoulder, and I want to unburden myself before he comes for it. The others are gone, and I am the last keeper of our black little secret. I should have carried it to my grave, but on a night like this, the burden is too great.

It all began in October of 1954. I was a senior at Cromwell Academy, a second-tier Ivy League school with pretensions. I was also a frat brother at Chi-Alpha-Omega. That was *the* fraternity to belong to. We saw ourselves as being the equals of Yale's Skull and Bones.

It's easy to laugh at us now. A bunch of bourgeois boys acting like cultural snobs. What you children of the Sixties don't realize is what a schizophrenic time it was. The Fifties was pregnant with the radical egalitarianism of the Sixties, but the old class colors still flew with pride.

All of us were WASPs that came from upper-middle class New England families. Most of us had gotten too many gentlemen's C's to get into Harvard. So places like Cromwell Academy welcomed us with open arms. But I'm starting to digress.

We the brothers of Chi-Alpha-Omega saw ourselves as the New England blue-bloods, even if our family money was less than a generation old. Our fraternity was meant to keep the riff-raff out.

Cromwell Academy might accept the *hoi polloi* in the name of academic excellence, but the fraternity was about keeping the class distinctions alive.

By 1954, a new wind was blowing across the land. The Supreme Court had handed down its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. While it was Kansas, a chill wind blew over us. We spent months after that arguing what we were going to do about that.

Everyone lived in mortal fear that a Negro would apply to our fraternity. There were a few tokens on the campus, to show how open-minded we were. Nobody doubted for a second the Burger court would overturn our free association rights in the name of making a political statement.

After much debate, we decided to let Anthony Peterson pledge. Though his family had renounced Judaism three or four generations ago, he might as well have had KOSHER tattooed on his forehead. As we used to say, Not out kind, dear.

As distasteful as the idea was, we saw it as better than having to accept a Negro. Plus, there was no promise he would make it through the initiation. That was the genesis of an idea that would haunt us for the rest of our lives.

There was a street in that college town called Gaylord. Today, I suppose it would be called a slum. Then, we said the neighborhood was down at the heels.

Anyway, Gaylord turns into a dirt track up to a rambling Victorian mansion gen-



erations of undergraduates have dubbed Haunted Hill. The house was razed in the early Seventies as an eyesore, but all plans to build something on the land have fallen through.

The man who built it was a reputed robber baron, and a notorious recluse. He created the college just before the turn of the century, with one caveat: it was not to bear his name.

When he died in the teens, the Gilded Age was still alive, but on life support. After the Great War, the climate became forbidding to such palaces to vanity. The mansion stayed unoccupied, and a legend began growing up around it that it was haunted.

With this in mind, we decided that in the spirit of the season, Pledge Peterson would have to spend the night in the old mansion. And because we didn't believe in ghosts, frat brothers Hyde and Pratt would do the honors.

After all, we didn't believe, but that wasn't going to stop us from exploiting the legend. If we were going to have to break bread with a Jew, he was going to have to *earn* the right.

Are you shocked by this, dear reader? This was how we thought back then. We were looking forward to watching him run screaming out the front door.

The evening's festivities began with a Judas meal. Pledge Peterson was told about what he must do for his initiation. Then we started telling him stories about the haunted mansion. Since most of it was vague on details, we embellished it to suit our purposes without shame.

Frank Hyde and Jeremy Pratt left, claiming disgust that we would fill the kid's head with nonsense. All of us at the table had trouble maintaining straight faces while we were doing this.

Anthony soaked all of this up like a sponge. His eyes got wider and wider behind his horn-rimmed frames. I kept hoping he would back out, but only because I didn't want to go out on a wild night like that one. Pledge Peterson wouldn't though, so we all loaded into my 1936 Plymouth.

As the cliché goes, it was a dark and stormy night. The wind howled and shrieked through the skeletal trees, and the lightning opened the heavens with a strobing effect. Rain poured out of the sky, so the windshield wipers didn't have a chance of keeping up.

I had to keep the speed down, to avoid driving off the road. The drive out there was a nerve-racking experience. Part of it was an extended period of repressing laughter.

Once we left Gaylord proper, there was the threat of mud. By all rights, that track should have become a quagmire, stopping us before we did what we did. Somehow though, whoever was watching over us saw that we got through.

I don't think it was God. Any divine being that would allow us to continue on would be a cruel, capricious monster.

Mind you, it wasn't easy. There were several kidney-jolting potholes, and heart-in-the-throat moments where the back wheels spun. Somehow, the old Plymouth managed to claw its way to the top of the hill. Once it reached the gates, it spluttered, and died.

I looked at Pledge Peterson, and said, “There is no way off this hill tonight, unless you want to brave the elements. Your other option is to brave the haunted mansion.”

Anthony was white as a sheet, and trembling. It was clear that was the last thing he wanted. He had no choice at this point, though. I had bullied my car up here, and now I was feeling mean. If he backed out on us now, he would be hounded off the campus. It was as simple as that.

Everyone piled out of the car. The wind resisted our attempts to open the doors, and the rain slashed at us like liquid knives. We should have recognized them as the omens they were. However, in the arrogance of youth, we figured it would add credence to our haunted house tale.

We followed him part way up to the porch, and called out to him that we would be waiting outside for him. Then Percy Wainright said, “Don’t be more than an hour, or two! We might get bored otherwise!” There was no repressing our mirth.

Then we beat a hasty retreat. By the time we climbed back inside my car, all of us were soaked to the bone. Percy opened the glove box, and peeled off the cellophane wrapper of a pack of Lucky Strikes. He produced a book of matches, and we all lit up.

“Do you think this old heap will ever run again,” somebody asked.

“Of course it will. The old girl will still be running when you are all dead and gone.” Little did I realize how prophetic those words would be.

As we continued smoking and waiting, the talk turned to how long it would take Hyde and Pratt to scare the socks off Pledge Peterson. A betting pool was established as to how long he would hold out. Because we were poor college students, it did not rise above the level of penny-ante.

As our cigarettes began burning down, and most of us lost our bets, the first doubts began setting in. We had a second round of cigarettes, then a third.

Somewhere along the way, the windows were cracked, to keep the air breathable. By the time we’d smoked our Luckies as far as we could, we began getting concerned.

Not so much for Peterson as Hyde and Pratt. Neither of them appeared, to boast of their exploits. We might have felt different if we’d heard that Pledge Peterson had a heart attack. After all, the aim was to scare him, not *kill* him.

A check of my watch showed that it was almost two o’clock. If they hadn’t succeeded in chasing away that little Jew-boy by now, we’d be stuck with him.

The question now became, what happened to Hyde and Pratt? They should have given up long ago, but given a status report on how they had done.

Percy volunteered to hunt everyone down, and put an end to all this foolishness. The rest of us tried passing the time with conversation, but by now, we were all aware that something was seriously wrong. None of us had any clue how wrong, though.

After half an hour, Percy also failed to return. I was nervous, and out of sorts, so I said I would go next. After scrounging up a flashlight, I set off.

The storm had abated to a steady rainfall, but the air was charged with electricity, as if the storm was set to resume at its full fury at a moment’s notice.

The house could be best described as Medieval Ugly meets Victorian Decadence. Plus, it was painted in dark shades of gray and blue, which further added

to its forbidding exterior.

This may sound strange to you, dear reader, but the house seemed to radiate an aura of menace beyond that. It was almost as if it was laughing at me, challenging me to unwrap the enigma of what it had done.

My heart quailed before it. Then I thought of Frank, Jeremy, and Percy, and I forced myself into action.

I almost turned back as my flashlight fell on the bronze gargoyles. They leered at me with evil intent. Then the door swung open. Knowing I had no choice, I went in. The doors slammed shut behind me.

I half-expected to be greeted by a zombie English butler in the lobby. If the house had one, it chose not to put him on display. I began tearing throughout the house, calling out for my friends.

In some of the rooms, I found dirty red velvet rugs, and furniture covered with white sheets. Dust and cobwebs were everywhere. Pictures of stern men in costumes that were at least a hundred years out of date stared down at me with cold, fishy eyes. I also had the sense of a dark malicious creature hiding in the shadows, enjoying my torment.

I called out for my friends. Nobody returned my hailing. I heard inaudible whispers, and a few times there was a dirty chuckle. However, there were no signs of anybody. On the second floor were bedrooms, and the third floor was dedicated to storage, but there were no signs of anyone human being up there for decades.

I was just about to give up, when I heard a pounding sound in the attic. Aware that the house could be setting me up for one of its tricks, I went up into the attic.

There was nobody there either, but there was a doorway to the roof. I found Percy sitting on the point of the roof. His hair had gone snow white, and he was giggling, and pounding the roof with a hammer.

The next couple of days were a blur. There was a minor sensation in town. Because we all hung together, and kept our mouths closed, the investigation ground to a halt for lack of evidence.

The entire affair ended as a tempest in a teapot, but it spelled the end of Chi-Alpha-Omega. After we swore a blood oath never to reveal what we knew, the integrity of our fraternity was compromised.

There were a couple attempts to revive it, but the Sixties killed it, and Cromwell Academy. It closed in the Seventies, and is now a private school. Percy died in an insane asylum three years later, never uttering another coherent word.

The first chance I got, I tried getting rid of that 1936 Plymouth. Despite my best efforts, it keeps coming back, like that proverbial bad penny.

Now my grandson owns it, and is turning it into a hot rod. Every time I see the damned thing, it brings back a flood of bad memories. So do thunderstorms. Whenever the weather is like this, I think of Anthony, Frank, and Jeremy.

They vanished off the face of the earth, and they are waiting for me on the other side. And they are *very* angry.

After Bruce drank his beer, he ordered vodka and orange juice, like he had everyday for three years. He had yet to fall into a rut, though, like many of his life-long friends. They appeared headed for divorce or depression. Actually, the best days of his life had just arrived. The liquor stood on his tabletop in just seconds. Nobody sat inside the tavern but he and the lovely waitress. Obviously, the world had other things to do. Bruce and Melody liked it that way; it allowed them to behave playfully, like the friends they had become. The happy waitress brushed her blonde hair-do back, turned and pouted when he told her to work with haste. He had to drink quickly, with a baby on the way.

Melody shook sexily, mixing the next screwdriver. She looked at him while she mixed the liquor, and flipped her ponytail with a hint of awkwardness. Attraction to him showed in her blush and nervous gestures. It began when he first walked through the door. She found that Bruce didn't smoke, throw bottles, or pinch her, which she likely wouldn't mind with him. Maybe she wouldn't mind it with anyone, but Bruce didn't dwell on it. It would put her in a light about which he preferred not to think. And he enjoyed his friendship. He reveled in her playfulness when he walked through the front door and sat at a table where she would see him immediately. Without notice, she would look at him quickly, and blush innocently, with lust in her blurry eyes, like schoolchildren with puppy love.

Naturally, he told Melody how he met his wife. Also, he announced that he just drank to relax before he looked his bride in the eyes and told her about his lowly paychecks. One complaint lingered about Linda, who had married Bruce: her pushy quality. She wanted him to ask forcefully for a raise, but he would walk into the unemployment line if he did. She didn't understand. Melody liked Bruce anyway. She loved to sit by him and watch him drink like his wife didn't. He visited Melody frequently, joyfully yet not romantically. He had become her favorite customer; she had told him many times.

Minutes later, she set the tumbler on the tabletop. The surface showed thick marks, black liquid stains, and jagged indentions, imprinted by rowdy clients. Melody smiled and sat by Bruce like she would in quiet times. The small phone in his pocket bleated. He fumbled with it, but answered it on the third bleat. She bowed her head and didn't listen. She offered respect to his life beyond her place of employment. People in her position learn quickly to become invisible, like butlers and housekeepers.

He spoke enthusiastically and told Melody what just happened. "My wife will have her baby, really, in just hours, by that medical person who just spoke to me." His voice trailed with liquor in him. Awkwardly, he stood, tripped slightly, and jangled his keys before the lovely waitress. She smiled when he walked into the lot, shyly yet without playfulness, not happily at all. He didn't know if she looked lowly because he had married and would have a baby or whatever other reason may exist. With women, it always looked mysterious why they hang their heads. Or look happy, for that matter.

Climbing into his Ford, he turned the key and heard music playing loudly, incoherently. Very few musicians play melodically anymore. Almost no traffic drove by the road that led to Highway 10, which led to the hospital. It would take just minutes to reach the highway, if he didn't miss the light. Still, he had hours and would need time to allow his body to sober properly. Swerving the Ford, he floated over the yellow line, but barely. After all, he drove drunk frequently and would never stop fully. He bragged at his inability to attract police, with liquor in him or not. Nobody had arrested him before; likely, nobody would. Cops just didn't look at him. Maybe he knew how to avoid them like few could. Assuming he went as planned, he should be able to hold his bride while she pushed the baby from her body. With a sly smile that he could accomplish anything, like bring a child into the world through a beautiful woman and finish three beers and a tumbler of vodka and orange juice beforehand, he pushed his foot into the accelerator and spun loudly in the brilliant dusk.

*Shortly after he left the light, he turned onto the highway. Briefly, it appeared that time like the bumpy road would slip by him. The highway would narrow into two lanes before he would reach the hospital, instead of three lanes with thick shoulders. Like a hungry vulture over his shoulder, he could feel that his life would end before he walked into the hospital. After all, he barely felt his head; it swam lightly, sleepily, and his vision blurred. His foot wouldn't always react while he drove, and yet he had just begun. Thinking about his baby, it should improve before he approached his destination. When he swung off the spiral, zigzagging off the lumpy curb yet pulling back, he floored the accelerator into traffic. Cars and trucks filled lanes, but plenty of room allowed for Bruce to drift. One truck honked, but didn't follow. It appeared that truck couldn't approach the lofty speeds that Bruce found in his rusty Ford. It took a youthful man with energy to impregnate a woman like his bride, drink liquor, and still arrive safely at the hospital before the baby popped from her belly.*

*On the highway, Bruce pushed the pedal downward, with lights behind him and bleats of sound. They annoyed him greatly. Does anybody enjoy the blare of sirens? Nobody likes the look of legal cherries. With money in the bank, if not in his jacket, he could pull to the side. He should allow the officer to arrest him. If he did, though, he would miss the birth of his baby. With little choice, he put the Ford into another gear. It threw gravel behind him, hiding the squad temporarily. When he arrived at the hospital, he would explain. With a wife in the maternity ward, the officer shouldn't arrest Bruce. Nearly everyone suffers with this problem eventually, with a baby on the way and a jittery husband plowing frantically through traffic.*

*With police tightly behind him, he looked into dusk as the yellow ball in the sky lowered. Over the hospital, it loomed blurrily, with hazy clouds before it, yet it still stood majestically, like his black-haired bride looked, impregnated or not. And it blurred occasionally into pinkness, like the skin of his beautiful wife.*

*With Linda on his mind, Bruce pictured his wife yelling aggressively for the baby to emerge. With her behind it, the baby stood little chance. Bruce had joined with a wildcat; he had just never appreciated it before. Momentarily, he left the road mentally and physically, and failed to hear the horn bellow loudly, just miles from the hospital. Unlike the blare of the siren behind him, the throaty horn didn't blend into the chilly twilight.*

*It echoed thunderously, like foghorns in a bay, and it brought Bruce back to reality quickly. Bruce opened his eyes and looked into three lights aglow before the train, plowing down the tracks like a bullet from a rifle. At the nearby intersection, the lengthy wooden arm didn't fall nor did flashers blink rhythmically. With the Amtrak about to hit him, he froze with the inability to react properly. Painfully, a brick broke his skull, or it seemed, and he didn't attempt to pray. God wouldn't help anymore.*

*Bruce didn't bow but prepared himself to approach God without regrets. Always, he had approached life similarly. Although he had plenty of failures upon which to dwell, namely that he would never look at the black eyes of his baby, he never looked upon memories as hindrances and experiences as lessons. After all, people who lived like he shouldn't atone before God. He had pleaded with people to help end his life somehow, with liquor or fisticuffs, like brutal animals that bare their teeth with little provocation. He brought his demise with little remorse.*

*The train traveled quickly, into a blur, especially as it approached, and hit the rusty Ford. Sparked by gasoline, flames burst from the Ford, keeping Bruce pinned to the leather, and fiery balls of smoke broke apart with flimsy metal. Sheets of automobile flew wildly around the train. Looking at his reflection with finality, the body named Bruce melted with a bloody explosion, mixed with plastic and leather. Most of the sedan shredded completely, like the beefy body, pulled for miles. Finally, the train slowed, loudly, metal-on-metal, but it wouldn't save Bruce anymore.*

The waitress wiped the table that had kept the vodka and orange juice like the beers before. She had already put the tumbler back on the lengthy bar. With a pause for the man who had sat there and would no more, she failed to watch the body walk into the tavern. She paid little attention, with her mind on someone else. Only his shadow presented itself initially, like Death on a chilly night to people with tumors in their brains. When the front door opened, she said, "We close in thirty minutes. Nobody has walked in here for hours, but maybe one"—she shrugged—"and he left. Probably, he won't come back, not tonight, maybe never." To herself, she said, "Maybe I shouldn't either." She said to the shadow, "We shut the doors without customers, regardless of hour."

He replied that he had come to the tavern today and had sat on the stool she had just lifted onto a table. She shook her head. "I didn't see you, but I don't look at people anymore." Finally, she looked at the bulk in the doorframe. Wide-eyed, she said, "You did sit here today!" She kept joy from her voice, but barely. "Why didn't you leave for the hospital?"

He shrugged and said, "My car stalled about one block from here. It always does when I need it—especially when I need it." Perhaps she knew the truth, but didn't show it, and didn't question him. And yet, a smile told him that she knew about his lie and didn't mind. "Maybe I should take a taxi to the hospital. My head feels like a bobble doll." He held his head for effect, and got the response he wished for.

She walked to him, shook his body, and said, "I will pay for that taxi—happily!" Tears welled in her eyes, yet she didn't blink. One lonely teardrop fell onto her cheek, slowly, but she didn't wipe it off, like it had fallen accidentally. "I have twenty dollars that I need to spend. It just sits in my purse"—she shrugged playfully—"and it will sit

in my handbag until I find a purpose for it. Now, I can spend it productively.”

He told her that he would take her money. He had very little money in his pocket, and wished for Melody to know that friendship didn't come cheap. Besides, he would annoy Melody if he rejected money offered. She shook his body tightly, with tears visible in her eyes, looking like she hadn't spoken to him or anyone in years. “Certainly, I will pay for your taxi.” Like Melody understood what Bruce had envisioned, she said, “Truthfully, I have never spent money as prudently before.”

She touched the telephone and smiled. As a bartender, she had memorized taxi-cab numbers. Any would suffice. As joyful as she appeared, she offered a small snifle that she attempted to hide. When she repeated, “I have never spent money as prudently,” she spoke to herself as to him. Then the Dispatcher answered and she listened to Bruce no more until she finished.

Moments later, her customer spoke; she lowered the telephone to hear him. With a wink registered by Melody on the telephone, he said, “I wonder if you ever will.” Finally, she replaced the mouthpiece and they both smiled. When he returned after the birth, he would pay her back, happily. She would accept happily. Married or not, he had found a partner in his waitress, in friendship if not romance. One problem existed with Melody; her lively friendship required him to kill his body. With alcohol, he had justification to visit her. With his wife and baby back at home, how could he visit another woman playfully, without justification? They would misunderstand completely.

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from the book **“Tales of Madnes,”** by **Tom Ball**  
a series of short short stories

## On Fermenting Human Milk Etc. Tom Ball

X was a certain Belgian monk who was in charge of one of the breweries there, brewing very strong beers in the Belgian tradition.

He was totally drunk most of the time, killing what little sex drive he had.

One day he had an inspiration. He would take wet nurses' milk and ferment it. Of course the resultant beverage would be expensive and hence a luxury item, but it would be a special and nutritious luxury item. And he would need tens of thousands of wet nurses who he would have to pay handsomely.

Now of course human milk had never before been fermented as far as anyone knew. And to ensure quality X would personally “milk” each girl. As he did so he found that he had a sex drive after all and so he left the monastery and set up his own business.

The new drink was a hit among the elite, some of whom demanded more exquisite beverages.

So then X had another inspiration. He would ferment men's come, to make what might be the most exclusive of all beverages. Of course each drink would require several hundreds of men to produce, but there were plenty of people who said they were willing to pay. Some of these people were women, others were gay men. In fact the gays started referring to it as "gay champagne" even before it was produced.

It was another hit, and everyone was asking him what next. Some said he should ferment urine or shit (you could drink fermented shit for your sins, some monks said). However X wanted to concentrate on his existing businesses.

Some pundits remarked that he was changing society getting so many women to give milk. Some of the women's husbands reported drinking a little while making love and such. So finally X started marketing unfermented women's milk as well with various flavorings such as strawberry or chocolate.

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## A Glacial Refugium

Tom Ball

It might have been 40 000 B.C. Surrounded by ice on either side of the huge valley for years now the tribe had lost all contact with the outside.

There were memories of a better time when the climate was warmer, and the tribe happier and more numerous than the present 19. Stories abounded; though they were becoming more and more distant from what they all knew to be the truth....

The shaman was believed to be dying, and today he'd called for an assembly outside his hut. It was bitterly cold, yet the shaman had commanded them to build a great blaze. The shaman spoke "Madness parallels the real, it is as raw potential untamed like a wild fire. The only consolation we have is what ought to have been... and with that the ailing shaman hurled himself into the flames, and died in contortions, stunning the onlookers.

This time the madness was infectious and several men grabbed burning logs and ran about. Then one of them began to set fire to the huts. People started screaming, some men moved to stop him from burning the huts. Then another hurled himself into the fire.

In the end the tribe dispersed into several groups which fled the madness in different directions, but the storm was fierce, and a few days later the tribe was no more.

Strange, but true the whole thing took place in 2100 A.D; they were a group of extreme traditionalists, in the manner of Rousseau, who had decided to get back to nature. This arctic tribe lasted exactly 50 years; by the time they went extinct none



of the original settlers were with them; the youth of the tribe hadn't even been told of the "outside world". So they didn't even know enough to call for help.

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## Transforming Venus

Tom Ball

Experiments on Mars and elsewhere had paid off, and now it had been decided that the atmosphere of Venus would be redesigned. Completely. The planets internal heat would drive the massive chemical factories, which created chain reactions causing solids to fall from the clouds, progressively lightening the heavy atmosphere, and then to provide steamy, but earth-like ground temperatures. It was a piece of cake really, and they were nearing completion.

And the project had attracted a number of romantic idealists too, if only because the planet was named Venus. These romantics had agreed that the ideal romance should only last 4 hours. That is, spend 3 hours getting the best stories out of someone and finding out who they truly are and then 1 hour making love.

As it turned out many people back on earth thought the Venusian love affair was quite good and it caught on. Many people would wear a V on their shirt indicating that they were Venusians. If two people who were V's met one would simply ask if the other wanted to do a V. Or if you did not have a V on your shirt you could still ask a V or ask anyone for a V.

The Venusian organization would accept stories of V encounters and if they were a prize-winning story, the couple in question would get a free passage to Venus. Many people wanted to get to Venus to meet these outstanding lovers. Venus was truly the most romantic place in the solar system.

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## Disaster on Europa

Tom Ball

Well it was difficult to monitor the doing of the scientists at the base on Jupiter's moon Europa. Their mission had been to bring in simple earth sea creatures and biota and start them going in Europa's vast sea which existed under the frozen surface of ice.

The scientists there were all first class, each a virtual polymath, but now they had a problem. Genetic engineering was now a very advanced science, and one of the European scientists, had created new sea creatures of super-human intelligence. According to UN law, altering intelligence of any creatures including humans was forbidden. However the creatures were now rapidly increasing their numbers, there were thousands of them. They had begun building structures on the seabed and appeared to be able to communicate in an advanced way with each other.

Back on Earth there was a sort of panic, the U.N. was paralyzed for how could they justify allowing such intelligent life to coexist with humans. Observer teams were sent only to find that the new creatures possessed telepathy. And the scientists were forced to conclude that these creatures were more intelligent than any humans who had ever lived.

So it was decided to send thousands of earth's best scientists to study the phenomenon. Meanwhile the scientist that had created them disappeared and everyone said the UN intelligence organization had taken him away to work on secret programs to make more intelligent life.

As the scientists studied the new creatures, the creatures told them what they thought of humans. They said humans were illogical, selfish and living lives of illusion, among other things. They proved how they were more intelligent and demanded that they at least be put in charge of the government of Europa. So finally the scientists abandoned this moon and left the new creatures alone.

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# First Man On Mercury

Tom Ball

Despite the U.N. cover-up, it eventually became evident that events contrary to protocol and decency had taken place during the first landing on Mercury. It seemed that one "Colonel A." had stepped out on to Mercury and simply continued running until he died from exhaustion.

Strangely this bizarre episode was to have dire consequences for human settlement on the planet. Just as red Mars had attracted aggressive types, and Venus the romantics, Mercury came to attract the mad and unstable. It was one weird episode after another, a kind of snowball effect until finally the whole planet was abandoned to the lunatic fringe of earth.

For example all the buildings of Mercury were discordant and asymmetrical. And they all took drugs, which made them crazy and sick (just the opposite of what they took on earth). Acting sane was punished by instant deportation according to the mad judges' rulings.

To be a judge you had to be in the top 2% of madness. Everyone on the planet was ranked according to how mad they were. Simple acts of madness like speeding too fast in your Mars car were considered low level, whereas plans to drive everyone on the planet crazy were considered advanced. People would be judged once a year on their degree of madness.

The judges also served as the rulers of the planet and would only issue visas to newcomers who proved they at least had mad potential.

And Colonel A. was worshipped by an annual mad run. Every newcomer to the planet (i.e. those having lived there less than one year) had to go in it, and they had to run in a mad way that was original and stimulating. Props were allowed. The top 50% stayed on Mercury. The others were deported.

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# Conversations with the Everything/Nothing Man

Tom Ball

Here is a madman who says he is the “Everything/Nothing Man”.

Q: Is it true then that you really are everything/nothing?

EM: Yes.

Q: Well does that mean you are God?

EM: Of course. Humanity is on the verge of becoming god-like. We will soon be able to create super beings who will be as Gods.

Q: Yes, and do you say that you are mad?

EM: Madness means losing your reason and in this world it is obvious that nothing makes any sense, despite what the scientists say. Since reason is an illusion we are all therefore mad.

Q: But aren't you a man with human desires and instincts?

EM: I'm too old and wise to be controlled by selfish desires. But my instinct is to fight against this world of illusion.

And let me tell you that the essence of all science, which is about to deliver us from our boring civilization, is madness. All great discoveries require unorthodox, weird, crazy thoughts. And what about art? Are artists sane? Of course not. And if you look at history nearly all the leaders were mad kings. And I could go on and on.

Socrates claimed he was the wisest man in Greece because he admitted he knew nothing. Similarly the person who admits he/she is mad is the maddest and a whole new world opens up to him/her. Such a person is free to do anything. Such a person is the person of the future.

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# Mad Andriod Fable #4

Tom Ball

Well the vessel had gone to the far reaches of the universe, like so many others, android controlled...

But this one didn't go according to plan. As the ship landed it became obvious that someone had played a joke. The civilization that had been planned, the sperm and egg banks and such had been perverted to strange purpose. As the youth came to life, nourished by the androids, all were trained to be Shakespearean actors in the differing plays. It was a society of tragedy and comedy. And they all had to act it out. After all said the great androids "Is not Shakespeare the greatest literary genius?"

The androids had been told that an ideal society had to be based on Shakespeare. And the plays were real. Deaths were real, for example. If you died in the play that was it, you were dead. Since the androids had billions of eggs and sperm in their banks, it was no big deal to have some die.

Typically these humans were born fully-grown with memories mainly of the Shakespearean plays and little else. When not in the play, the actors and actresses had to act "Shakespearean", and they would be judged by the androids. If they lived well, they would be given a good role. Those actors who had starred in one or more of the plays had the highest status and were virtually worshipped by the others.

This "civilization" lasted for thousands of years. The people did no work and lived comfortably from the bounty of the many androids that were created by the original ship. Few people questioned their roles and the androids were seen to be Gods who knew what was best for people.

Of course the Shakespearean plays are very violent and would have seemed stupid to most of the people who dwelt on other planets, with most of the plots based on things like jealousy, rage, revenge and such. Most people on other planets had pretty much moved beyond that sort of thing. Still some fools liked Shakespeare.

The moral of the story is that everything can be perverted, even an entire civilization.

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## Seeds

Tom Ball

At about age 7, X was taking a bath. Whilst bathing he happened to put his finger in his belly button. He pulled out two specks of dirt, but in his innocence he thought them to be two seeds. After all he reasoned women are pregnant in the stomach, so a man would give his seeds to a woman and she would have the babies.

So X carefully put his seeds on the sink. And he proceeded to splash around. But upon finishing his invigorating bath, he discovered that he had washed his seeds away.

Tearfully he explained to his mother that he had lost his seeds, much to his mother's amusement. However his mother didn't explain the truth to him, just laughed.

Now let me ask you, why is sex an issue which causes so much embarrassment for parents? Don't most people enjoy sex?

And why are children always treated like morons? You say that children are foolish and unwise because people look back on their childhood and feel it was foolish, but isn't our adulthood foolish also?

And of course adults (along with Hollywood) are often discoursing to teens about the importance of romantic love... They try to make sex into such a special thing... And now so many people around the world claim to be searching for a "soul mate"; this soul mate more often than not is someone who has never existed... In other words their standards are too high...

In my view people need to get back to basics, and treat sex as a thing which is necessary to have almost everyday, like food or water. Just look at most animals; they don't make a big deal out of it, but rather just do it.

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## World Sex Records

Tom Ball

X wanted to get in the world record books. So his first step was to have sex with every conceivable creature in any way possible. However the keepers of the world records told him his deeds merited psychological help rather than world records.

However he was not put off and proceeded to make love to every conceivable object. He made love to desks, mountains, art works and anything else he could think of. And it was all recorded on tape so that the keepers of the records could see for themselves what a daring open-minded man he was. He claimed to truly love all things and said that everyone should be like him.

But again the keepers of the records snubbed him saying that he was degrading the very idea of world records with his madness.

But this made him extremely upset and so he decided to take revenge on the record keepers. He proceeded to blow up their museums and presses, which printed their books. Also many new record attempts by others were sabotaged in various ways.

The keepers of the records had him arrested, but the attacks continued. It became apparent that he had a loyal following, who wanted to carry out his work.

The terrorism was so virile that finally the keepers of the records had to close down their business. Henceforth there would be no more world records.

The moral of the story? If you don't include radicals in your world plans bad things will happen.

Down in the Dirt  
Alexandria Rand, editor  
AlexRand@scars.tv  
<http://scars.tv>

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

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