

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XII, Issue III

December 2015

Table of Contents

Jon Hakes, "First World Simple Mistakes"	2
Sarah J. Campbell, Two Poems	8
Patrick McManus, "House of Logs"	10
Mark Kaufman, "Internship"	11
Sarah Frances Moran, "Calavera for Skeletor"	13
Christina Dalcher, "Mrs. Armstrong Counts her Chickens".	14
Nicholas L. Sweeney, "Contemporary Shepherd Seeking GF"	19
Fred Coppersmith, "We'll Always Have Robo-Paris"	20
Rose Biggin, "The Gunman Who Came In From The Door	24
A.J. Huffman, "Tragedy"	27
Ryan Shoemaker, "The Honest Adjunct"	28
Stacia Friedman, "Do Not Call"	30
Contributor Biographies	33

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First World Simple Mistakes
by
Jon Hakes

Dr. Horton entered the room and took a deep breath. "There's been a slight mix-up. We accidentally replaced some of your plasma with plasma."

Brownell frowned. "I'm not following."

Across the hall, nurses rushed into another room.

"You're familiar with the plasma in your blood?" Dr. Horton said.

"Not really. I know there is such a thing."

"Well, this plasma is different."

"Different like it's from a different person?"

"Different like it's a completely different substance with the same name."

The nurses across the hall were joined by a doctor, several doctors, a specialist.

"So what the hell did you put into my body?" Brownell said.

"Plasma."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"No. Sorry. It's the kind of plasma you find in the sun. Its temperature is about five million degrees."

"Is it dangerous?" Brownell said. She noted to herself that she felt relatively fine.

"Oh, extremely," Dr. Horton said. "Honestly, you should be dead."

The specialist stormed out of the room across the hall, arguing with one of the other doctors.

Brownell said, "Shouldn't I be feeling something?"

"Oh no, you'd probably just be vaporized."

A new nurse showed up in the hallway, pushing a cart. The cart was full of vials. The vials were full of liquids. The liquids were mysterious colors.

The cart disappeared into the room across the hall.

"So what happened?" Brownell said.

"Your system managed to quickly synthesize a completely innovative solution from its own research on the network," Dr. Horton said. "It encased the sun-plasma in a threaded magnetic seal."

"My system?"

"Your immune system."

"No it didn't."

"It certainly did. In fact, your immune system should be able to publish the results of its research."

"It's impossible. I have all automatic updates to my body turned off."

There were screams from across the hall, until someone thought to shut the door, at which point, there were muffled screams from across the hall.

"Come again?" Dr. Horton said.

"I have my body-updates turned off," Brownell said. "I don't believe in them."

"Interesting."

"That doesn't make me weird. A lot of people feel the same way."

"No, no. You're absolutely right."

"Somebody must have turned them on again after the operation."

"Let's not jump to conclusions."

"I don't feel like I'm jumping very far."

"Are you suggesting you'd rather your system had been offline?" Dr. Horton said. "You'd rather be dead?"

"I'm suggesting that your hospital is guilty of gross and subtle negligence," Brownell said, "and that it's time to involve lawyers."

Dr. Horton pressed an intercom button. "Patient has invoked legal option. Please proceed as per the usual thing."

The gaggle of doctors stood in the hall again. They whispered, shooting glances toward Brownell's room.

Twenty minutes later, Brownell's lawyer, Johnson, stood by the bed. The hospital lawyer stood next to Dr. Horton.

"My client wants to know who is responsible for this profound screw-up," Johnson said.

The hospital lawyer coughed. "We won't know that for months, pending a full review."

"Excuse me," one of the doctors from across the hall said, knocking on Brownell's door. "We have a situation in the room across the hall."

"We're in the middle of something," the hospital lawyer said.

"I understand that," the doctor from across the hall said. "I'm here on a related issue. It's pretty urgent."

"Tell me first," the hospital lawyer said.

The doctor from across the hall whispered to the hospital lawyer.

"I think you'd better explain it," the hospital lawyer said.

"We've had another incident," the doctor from across the hall said, "similar to yours."

"How similar?" Brownell said.

"I can't say too much due to privacy laws," the doctor from across the hall said. "Suffice to say, it's the exact same thing that happened to you, except the other patient's immune system was a little slow. It managed to contain the problem, but the other patient is in quite a bit of pain, if not in danger of immediate vaporization."

"Hell of a facility you're all running here," Johnson said.

"In any case," the doctor from across the hall said, "we'd like to try to duplicate your body's solution."

"I don't know," Brownell said. "They tell me my immune system can publish this. I don't want another immune system to steal it."

"We can make guarantees," the hospital lawyer said.

"I'm certain the other patient, who, as I mentioned, is in quite a bit of pain, will be willing to sign whatever you want," the doctor from across the hall said.

"And can we also get this stuff out of me?" Brownell said.

Dr. Horton said, "That's a separate issue. We'll need some time on that one."

Brownell shrugged. "Well, I don't want to prolong someone else's misery. I'll help."

"And," Johnson said, "let us be clear that this cooperation will have no bearing on any settlement between my client and the hospital."

"Understood," the hospital lawyer said.

Dr. Horton brought in a huge diagnostic machine and hooked it up to Brownell. Thirty minutes later, a super-clutch of doctors and nurses accompanied the machine across the hall.

The doctor from across the hall came back with Dr. Horton.

"Don't you need to tend to your patient?" Brownell said.

"He's not my patient," the doctor from across the hall said. "I've been assigned as your liaison with his doctors."

Brownell's phone rang. It was Collins.

"I need some privacy, please," Brownell said.

Dr. Horton took the two lawyers and the doctor from across the hall out into the hall.

"You were supposed to be home two hours ago," Collins said.

"I'm still at the hospital," Brownell said. "Something's come up."

There was a silence on the other end.

"It's not serious," Brownell said, "Well, it should be serious, but it isn't. Or something... I'm sorting things out."

"I want to come to the hospital," Collins said. "I want to be there for you."

"Can you just wait at home, please? I'll be fine. I'm dealing with the hospital lawyer. Take a nap or something. Save your strength."

Collins hung up without answering. Brownell cursed. She threw her plastic applesauce cup at the door to get the lawyers' attention.

When the doctors and lawyers were back in the room, Johnson said, "How exactly does a hospital accidentally inject part of the sun into a patient? Where did you even get the material?"

The hospital lawyer coughed. "The company that owns the hospital also has an astrophysical research division. Some boxes got mixed up. The tube containing the sun-plasma looked strangely like the tubes we use to store human-plasma."

"And the sun-plasma tube was somehow compatible with the medical equipment in this hospital?" Johnson said.

The hospital lawyer nodded. And coughed again.

"Seems like a wildly improbable sequence of events," Johnson said.

The hospital lawyer nodded. "A completely freakish occurrence, which, statistically, has no chance of being repeated, especially now that it has happened once."

"Twice," the doctor from across the hall said.

"Twice," the hospital lawyer said.

"Can you get this thing out of me, or not?" Brownell said.

"We're working on it," the hospital lawyer said. "We've moved 95% of the hospital's supercomputing capacity over to the project."

"We want that other five percent," Johnson said.

"We need a fraction of capacity for critical patients. I can get you maybe three percent more."

"Do it," Johnson said.

The hospital lawyer made a call.

"Rest assured," Dr. Horton said, "as soon as we can calculate a solution, we'll get that errant plasma out of you and back to the sun, where it belongs."

The hospital lawyer hung up the phone. "They say they're actually getting pretty close."

"I want the hospital," Brownell said. Johnson nodded.

"Excuse me?!" Dr. Horton said.

"It's a matter of scale," Johnson said. "We're talking about malpractice on an unprecedented level here. If we took you to court, we could easily be awarded more than the hospital's value."

"It's ridiculous!" Dr. Horton spluttered.

"Let me remind you," Johnson said, "that at this point, my client is still sitting in bed with a chunk of the sun circulating through her vascular system."

"I'm here to take that out," said a nurse in the doorway.

The procedure was painless.

"Excellent work," Brownell said.

"Thank you," the nurse said.

"Thank you," the two doctors said.

"You two can stuff it up your asses," Brownell said.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"We're waiting," Johnson said.

"I'm going to need to make some calls," the hospital lawyer said, heading for the door. "I'll be back."

When she got home, Brownell embraced Collins. They held each other for a while.

"Good news," Brownell said, "I'm fine, and I'm now the proud owner of a hospital."

"What?" Collins said.

Sunshine streamed in through the windows.

After some more hugging, Collins said. "Do they have cancer specialists there? Maybe I can finally start getting treatment..."

Brownell walked around, closing curtains. "I think I'd rather get you treated somewhere else, until I can make some changes."

Two Poems
by
Sarah J. Campbell

You used to believe in things

You used to believe in things:
Santa Claus,
the Tooth Fairy,
love,
life after love,
little people who lived in your TV and waited for you to turn it on so they could entertain you.
You believed that somehow you had been born without your parents having sex
(because who wants to think about that?).

You used to believe in yourself,
and, of course, the monster under your bed.

You grew up, and now
you believe in different things:
democracy,
that hard work reaps rewards,
that the Chicago Cubs will one day win the world series again,
that Melissa Layman is a cunt
(because why else would she have left you? And for your boss, of all people?).

You believe that it's your boss's life goal
to make you miserable.

Listen, your boss doesn't give a shit about you.

The monster under your bed, on the other hand,
cried at first,
your lack of belief voiding him of purpose.

But now he is laughing, realizing
he has the upper hand.

And his name is Reggie, goddammit,
which you would have known
if you'd ever had the decency to talk to him.

You look beautiful when you sleep

You look beautiful when you sleep,
like an angel—
a fallen angel, naturally,
but an angel nonetheless.

You look beautiful when you sleep,
your lips curved softly
in a shadow of a smile.
Delicate strands of hair
fall across your eyes
like the delicate strokes of an artist's brush.

You are art.

You look beautiful when you sleep,
and I watch you
from the foot of your bed,
where I am crouched in the sinister shadows
of the delicious darkness.

Shh, don't be afraid!

Please, don't be afraid;
you look ugly when you're afraid.

House of Logs
by
Patrick McManus

Brittney went upstairs to ask her husband a question. She found him sitting on their bed and watching a football game on television. "Honey, how would you like to go to a movie tonight?"

"You know I don't go to theaters!" Abraham Lincoln yelled.

"I know, I know. It's just that, Abe, sweetie, you know you that, besides your name, you have nothing in common with the 16th president. Right?"

"I'm not saying that I think someone will shoot me because my name is Abraham Lincoln. My point is, people are randomly shot and killed all the time in this nation, conceived and liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, and imagine what they'd say on the news if I happened to get shot in a theater. 'Abe Lincoln shot in a theater again, you'd think he would have learned his lesson.' I'm a real human with feelings and I refuse to let my death become nothing but a late-night joke."

Britney and Abraham Lincoln sat on the bed for a minute in silence. Britney, committed to doing something fun for once, pressed her attack. "It doesn't make sense to live your life in fear. Any of us might die at any time but we have to go on."

"I can see the house is divided on this issue. And I'll compromise to preserve our marital union. We can go out and do anything that hadn't been invented in 1865. It's not funny if Lincoln dies while playing mini-golf," Abe said.

Britney was thrilled and began getting ready to go out. Abe interrupted her, "There is one thing I feel I have to mention. I have one thing in common with the Great Emancipator in that I also cannot tell a lie."

"I thought Washington was the one that couldn't tell a lie," Britney responded.

"Oh, whatever, Lincoln was honest too. They called him Honest Abe."

"That sounds right."

"Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I had an affair with your sister Mary. And your cousin, Todd."

"You bastard!"

"I'm sorry, I hope you can forgive me."

"Sic semper tyrannis!"

And with that, another Lincoln was killed.

Internship
by
Mark Kaufman

Blurch the Earthworm spat out a mouthful of putrid soil. Although he badly wanted to scowl, he lacked the musculoskeletal qualities to do so.

Ostensibly, Blurch resided in an annelid utopia: Coastal Northern California, where the misty land was drenched in water and the verdant environment left an abundance of floral decay upon the forest floor, waiting to be churned inside an earthworm's gizzard.

Unfortunately for Blurch, a portable toilet had been placed atop the soil that he had spent his life burrowing through—a place he called home. Confronted with a ceiling that now leached a noxious blue acid, Blurch promptly sought alternative means of shelter.

He left the only home he had ever known, inching with optimism towards a new life. Not ten yards to the north stood one of the tallest corporations on the planet, a redwood tree. Beneath its shady embrace life flourished; the soil was rich in rotting fungi and moss.

Upon arriving at the redwood, Blurch was directed to the Division of Decay Processing where he met its under-secretary of Employment Vacancies, Mr. Drinch. Like Blurch, Mr. Drinch did not have a face, but if he did, it would have held a stern, unemphatic stare. Mr. Drinch opened his mouth to speak, but coughed up a bit of spongy mold matter. Instinctively, Blurch sucked it up.

"Blurch," Mr. Drinch began, "We appreciate your interest in an entry level position as a Rot Consumption Specialist. However, we are not accepting applications at this time."

Blurch struggled to grimace.

"However," Mr. Drinch continued, "We are accepting applications for some internship experiences."

Blurch's setae (bristles used for locomotion) straitened. "I'm interested."

Mr. Drinch shifted positions to release pressure on his clitellum. "But before I delve into the expectations of the position, I need to ensure that you meet our minimum qualifications."

Blurch nodded his faceless head.

"Have you any experience processing *Polypodium scolieri*?"

Blurch was dumbfounded, but his lack of face saved him from detection. "Of course."

Mr. Drinch leaned forward. "Oh really? Where?"

Blurch straightened his body and responded confidently. "Just ten yards south of here. Why, I have been consuming it my entire life."

Mr. Drinch sagged his head, as if to sigh. "Blurch, there is no *Polypodium scolieri* ten yards

south of here. Based upon the fact that you are alive, I suspect that you've been processing an adequate amount of rotting flora. However, I regret to inform you that we're looking for candidates that have had extensive experience processing this particular type of fern that grows exclusively in this corporations' canopy—it rarely falls ten yards south of here."

"But it's an internship!" blurted Blurch "Isn't that the point? To gain experience at a novel task in a professional environment!?"

Mr. Drinch was unmoved. "I really wish to avoid belaboring this. I do recommend that you watch for other potential internship opportunities with us, as they arise from time to time. Although you have an impressive skill-set, there are other candidates who have more competitive resumes."

As Blurch turned to leave, Mr. Drinch observed the pleasant manner in which Blurch wiggled, and slithered quickly after him. He whispered through the thin membrane above Blurch's cerebral ganglia. "There are, however, exceptions that can be made—qualification limitations that I can be persuaded to ignore."

Blurch knew what this meant, but because offensive acids were leaching into his former home, he had little choice but to consent to sex with Mr. Drinch. Like all earthworms, both Blurch and Mr. Drinch were hermaphrodites, so mating was of little difficulty.

Blurch's greatest grief, however, was not the outrageous harassment experience. Rather, Blurch wondered if he might outlive the mandatory one year internship commitment, which he did not.

Calavera for Skeletor
by
Sarah Frances Moran

That motherfucker He-man finally got to him.
Broke his spirit.
Spoke up and told him he was no Calaca. No Grim Reaper.
A skeleton of a skeleton. Destroyed his guard and splintered him.

His bones lie here. Inside the soil of Eternia.
Weeping and whispering,
I just wanted to be fabulous.

Mrs. Armstrong Counts her Chickens
by
Christina Dalcher

"Congratulations, Mrs. Armstrong, you're having twins."

"Twins?"

"That's right. Now if I could see you in about ten weeks?"

"What do you mean 'twins'?"

"I mean two babies. We don't know whether they're fraternal or identical yet, but..."

"That's wonderful, Margie!"

"Be quiet, Harold. I don't see what's so wonderful about twins. You see, Dr. Myers, I wanted multiples."

"Mrs. Armstrong, twins are multiples."

"No, I mean I wanted more than two. Like triplets. Or fourplets, even."

"We call those quadruplets."

"I don't care what they're called. The pamphlet said there was a high probability—a high probability, mind you—that I would have multiples. Two isn't a multiple."

"Yes it is."

"Margie, honey, isn't two enough?"

"Harold, I'm trying to get this whole baby thing over and done with in a single pregnancy."

"Mrs. Armstrong, I assure you in thirty weeks you'll be the proud mother of two healthy babies."

"I don't want two healthy babies. I want multiples."

"Well, Mrs. Armstrong, we can't control the outcome. Some in vitro patients never get pregnant at all. Some have only one baby."

"And some have more. It says so right here: 'With in vitro fertilization, many women will conceive multiples.' That's what I want. Multiples."

"Honey, stop badgering the doctor."

"Shut up, Harold. If he's a real doctor, he can fix things. Isn't that right, Dr. Myers?"

"Fix things?"

"That's right. Fix the problem. Just put another one in there."

"Mrs. Armstrong, let me explain. We've gone through three rounds so far. We didn't get results the first couple of times. But, as they say, third time's a charm."

"What charm?"

"It's a saying, Mrs. Armstrong. Now, how is October the second for you?"

"Again with these small numbers. Can't you make it the third? Or the fourth?"

"Margie, it doesn't matter what date the appointment is."

"Harold, I wish you would stop interrupting. The doctor and I are trying to solve the problem."

"What problem, Mrs. Armstrong?"

"The problem of how to get another one in there. How long will that take?"

"I'm afraid we can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You see, Mrs. Armstrong, we've fertilized all your viable eggs. There aren't any more to insert."

"Can't you get some?"

"That would be difficult, given your present condition."

"Some doctor you are."

"Margie, dear, you're being obstinate."

"When I want your opinion, Harold, I'll ask for it. Besides, what do men know about female issues? Dr. Myers is about to explain how the procedure will work."

"The procedure, Mrs. Armstrong?"

"Exactly. The procedure."

"Which procedure?"

"The one to get more eggs. Now, let me check... I have this Tuesday free. No, wait, that's my bridge club day. Wednesday is booked solid. Tennis, lunch, tea. Thursday I'm at the spa for six hours, so that won't do. How about Friday morning? I can squeeze you in at ten o'clock."

"Mrs. Armstrong, I'm not exactly sure what you want me to do."

"Get more eggs."

"Get more eggs?"

"That's right."

"I can't do that."

"Why the hell not? Don't I have more eggs? You told me I was still producing them."

"Yes, I did, Mrs. Armstrong. But you're not producing them while you're pregnant."

"So we'll use donor eggs."

"Margie, honestly, don't you want your own?"

"Shut it, Harold."

"Mrs. Armstrong, we've already made the transfer. Transfers, actually."

"Well, if that's the only issue, the solution is simple."

"Simple?"

"Yes, simple. Take out the eggs."

"Embryos, Mrs. Armstrong. They're not eggs anymore."

"Eggs, embryos, what's the difference?"

"Quite a lot."

"I don't see how it makes a difference at all."

"Mrs. Armstrong, if I understand you correctly, you want an abortion. Is that right?"

"An abortion? Of course not. I simply want you to remove the bad eggs and put some good ones in."

"Embryos, Margie."

"Harold, don't talk about things you don't understand. You sound like a fool."

"He's right, Mrs. Armstrong."

"About what?"

"About the embryos."

"I've just realized. Friday isn't good either. How about Monday? But only if we can do it before eleven."

"Do what?"

"Take out the bad eggs."

"But there's nothing wrong with them."

"Yes there is. You just told me there are only two in there."

"Mrs. Armstrong, are you positive you want to do this? I can't promise another success."

"You call this success? Twins?"

"Well, yes, I'd call it a success."

"Margie, honey, at fifty years old, I'd call it a goddamned miracle."

"No one asked you, Harold. And watch your language. Can we do Monday at eight? That way I can get to my Rotary Club meeting on time."

"Monday at eight. It will have to be a medical abortion. We only do surgery on Tuesdays."

"Removal. I'm not having an abortion."

"Of course, Mrs. Armstrong. I meant medical removal."

"Excellent. Now, as far as the next transfer goes, how soon can we start?"

"The next transfer?"

"Yes. The next transfer. The one with the multiples. You are paying attention, aren't you, Doctor?"

"Um, yes. We should wait at least two months."

"Two months?"

"It would increase your chances."

"By how much?"

"I honestly don't know."

"You don't know? Did you go to one of those foreign medical schools?"

"I went to Harvard."

"Harvard? Well, they didn't do a very good job."

"Harvard's a good school, Margie."

"How would you know, Harold? Now, Doctor, I'm pencilling you in for Monday at eight."

"Mrs. Armstrong, I really must advise you—"

"Oh my goodness! Look at the time, Harold. If we're going to make it to the baby store by ten, we need to go."

"Mrs. Armstrong, I'm confused. You're going to the baby store? So you're not coming on Monday?"

"Of course I'm coming on Monday. Harold, where did you put that circular? They've got a sale on triplet strollers. And we'll need to stop by the Mercedes lot and trade in the sedan for something larger."

Contemporary Shepherd Seeking GF
by
Nicholas L. Sweeney

Come message me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
Of hash and tag and smiley face,
The punctuation masquerade.

The cushions on our satin chairs
Will hug our cheeks for all the years.
With greasy face and sweaty palms
I'll tap a beat on keys of bronze.

And I will send thee texts so long,
For pages stretching on and on.
I'll send you shots of "down below"
For you to look at on your phone.

I'll send out tweets so sweet and bright,
For you to read and softly sigh.
If these delights thy mind may move,
Come message me and be my love.

We'll Always Have Robo-Paris
By
Fred Coppersmith

They shot the Messenger, Tabitha said, and he wasn't expected to survive.

"What was he even doing there?" Brad asked. "Breaking up a robbery, a drug deal? That doesn't sound like him. Last I heard, he was stranded at the Cosmic Gates, lost in the Mists of Time, thinking deep thoughts about truth and justice or something like that."

"Turns out he was in Poughkeepsie."

It turned out, much to the shock of the gathered League, that the Messenger had been a fraud.

Brad remembered fighting at the man's side when the robot armies from the dark beyond had invaded New York, when the deal that Dr. Highbrow had tried to broker with the alien machines fell through and their mechanized armada had crashed into Central Park.

That had been a lie? Those memories were false?

Apparently so, if what Tabitha told him now was true.

"Looks like he wasn't some celestial being from the distant future," she said, "just a plumber from upstate who stumbled into some future tech."

Chief among that technology had been the memory destabilizer. Dr. Highbrow had retrieved the weapon from the Messenger's hideout—more Motel 6 than fortress of solitude—and she and the Screaming Shadow had spent the better part of the afternoon trying to figure out how the strange apparatus had worked.

It was fifty-first-century technology, that much at least was obvious, and as best they could tell the Messenger had used it to create false memories of himself in all of their minds. Memories of battles that had never happened, intergalactic wars that had never been fought.

Even Prince Nocturne, who biologically speaking didn't *have* a mind, hadn't been immune.

"I guess he finally decided to try and be a real hero," Tabitha said. "And it went badly for him."

Here in the confines of the League's orbital station, she had swapped the mask and costume for jeans and a T-shirt, and Brad still wasn't used it, casual workplace or not. He knew her better as the *Betweenner*—powers maybe more impressive than the name—and without the bolts of golden lightning streaking from her eyes, he sometimes had to remind himself who he was listening to.

Hadn't the two of them *met* in New York? Wasn't that when Brad had first become a provisional member of the League? If that strange, star-spanning adventure had never actually happened...what had?

Brad knew there had always been a contingent among the League who eyed their alliance with him warily. Once a supervillain, always a supervillain, he sometimes heard them whisper—and that wasn't just the Whispery Five, or that weird Martian dialect they sometimes spoke amongst themselves.

The League might use this new development as an excuse to drum him out. If they had proof now that he hadn't truly earned their trust. If half the battles where he had joined forces with them were nothing more than shared delusion. If their camaraderie was just the byproduct of the Messenger's stolen bag of tricks.

How long, he wondered, before it was *goodbye, Bradley Milton, the newly minted Mr. Exceptional*, and *hello again, old foe, the dastardly Professor Nefarious?*

Brad didn't want to go back to that old life, that old secret identity. He was tired of skulking around in sewers, stockpiling uranium beneath active volcanoes, recombining dinosaur DNA in a lonely laboratory late into the night. And for what? Bank heists and holding the city ransom could buy a lot of things, but not one of them was friendship.

"I think it's Taco Tuesday in the cafeteria," said Tabitha. "Wanna come with?"

The mess hall was already crowded, remarkably so, considering that it wasn't even yet noon. Of course, that was noon *station time*, Brad reminded himself. How many heroes had flown or teleported in from the planet down below?

Johnny Velocity had gotten there ahead of them, not surprisingly, but so had a string of other regular team members. There was Wally, the Impeccable Man, spooning salsa onto his plate, and right beside him Captain Computo, who Brad hadn't seen since the android had been swallowed by the time vortex, two, or maybe three weeks earlier. Lady Hera's Ghost hovered quietly over one of the tables, as did her occasional sidekick the Phantom Boy, and Brad spied several more costumed do-gooders either chatting in line or nibbling on warm tortillas.

Not for the first time, he marveled at the sheer size of the League—was that all *twelve* Champions of Infinity, huddled in the corner around the soft-serve ice cream machine?—and he worried again that they didn't really need him as a member at all.

"C'mon, there's a seat over there," Tabitha said.

At the end of the otherwise empty table sat Dr. Highbrow. She looked tired and frazzled, more so than Brad had ever seen the scientist look before. A plate of refried beans in front of her sat untouched, while pages of penciled schematics were strewn all about. If he'd had to guess, Brad would have said that she was already at her wit's end. The patented Thinking Cap she was wearing still had several higher settings than that, but Brad wondered at whatever problem she was chewing on if it was serious enough to merit the unreliable contraption atop her head.

His own knowledge of science was not insubstantial, but it was more of the *mad* variety, and he recognized only a few of the quantum equations that the woman had hastily scribbled down.

"What's the damage, doc?" Tabitha asked as the two of them sat.

"Hmm?" said Highbrow, looking up. "Oh, hello, my dear. Just reviewing some of our findings from the Messenger's device, that's all. It's..." She sighed, shaking her weighted head. "I daresay it's rather more complicated than we initially wagered."

"Really made a hash of things, did he?" Tabitha said, reaching for the beans.

"Yes, quite," said Highbrow. She handed Tabitha her napkin and fork. "Muddied reality something awful, it would appear. Even the unflappable Screaming Shadow was taken aback. It's only—"

"Only what, doc?" Tabitha asked around a mouthful of refried beans.

"It's only I'm not convinced we should blame the Messenger, not entirely."

She pointed at the schematics, which Brad still couldn't quite puzzle out. He'd built a giant robot once, back in his misspent youth, that had rampaged through Paris, and before that he'd studied centuries of arcane symbols and glyphs in a failed attempt to raise an army of the dead. But he didn't think this was equivalent to either of those two ill-considered pursuits. The mathematics that was spread out across the cafeteria table looked like it was well above his own pay grade.

"The man obviously made extensive use of the memory destabilizer," said Highbrow. She smiled, not unkindly, at Brad. "With intriguing results. Yet, if our calculations prove correct, it's altogether possible the device was operational for *considerably* longer."

"What does 'considerably' mean?" Brad asked.

"Well, it's rather difficult to say, actually," said Highbrow. (Brad remembered no such hesitancy in the woman when she and the League had *destroyed* that giant robot.) "The device creates false memories quite indistinguishable from reality. It therefore makes suspect everything we presume to know. The Shadow and I have a few working theories about how many centuries ago it was first activated, but—"

"Wait a minute," said Brad. "*Centuries*?!" He looked around the cafeteria, at the costumed crimefighters zipping from one table to the next, and at the bright expanse of stars outside the space station's windows. "What are you saying? That *none* of this is real?"

"Yeah, doc," said Tabitha. "Are you saying it might not even *be* Taco Tuesday?"

Highbrow shrugged. "Honestly?" she said. "There might not even be any such thing *as* tacos, *or* Tuesdays. We don't know just how deep the false memories run."

"Oh," said Tabitha, the beans for the moment forgotten. "Well that's unexpected."

It also changed everything, Brad suddenly thought. Because if *everything* was up for grabs, if all of their shared history as friend and foe could be rewritten, then the Messenger had delivered a surprisingly wonderful gift.

Brad didn't have to go back to being a supervillain if he had never actually been one in the first place.

He allowed himself a little smile. Taco Tuesday or not, it was turning out to be a pretty good day.

The Gunman Who Came In From The Door
by
Rose Biggin

The demand was for constant action; if you stopped to think you were lost. When in doubt, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand. – Raymond Chandler

It was a dull day, I wasn't doing very much. In theory I was working from home, but that theory wasn't working and neither was I. I tried looking out of the window but the sky was a smudged grey, like yesterday's make-up, and it didn't compel me out of doors or into better thoughts. I looked again at my work, but it could all wait a few more minutes. I didn't know what to write. I was waiting for inspiration, and starting to feel stood up. The phone was silent. The clock ticked. A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

I stood immediately, with my hands up. I hate guns. I wanted to say *who are you?, why are you here?, what are you doing with that gun?*, or something stronger, but I found I couldn't speak. Anyway, it was his turn to say something. He had the gun.

We didn't speak for a few moments, just stared at each other. He had a hat as well as a gun. I had neither.

"I'm here about the case," he said.

"What case?" I said.

"You know what case," he said, and seemed content to leave it at that. I wasn't.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. "I'm not a detective. I'm an actor."

He raised an eyebrow. "An actor?"

He sounded unconvinced and I didn't like that. As if he thought actors didn't exist outside the theatre—like a school kid can't believe his teachers sometimes go to shops or restaurants? It wasn't my fault I was at home today. Let him walk into the theatre with a gun while I'm working, he wouldn't raise an eyebrow at me like that.

But he had a gun, so I kept it short. "Yes," I said. "I'm a writer and an actor."

"You in a play right now?" he said.

"I've just finished one," I said.

"Get good reviews?" he said.

"I never read those things," I said. "Mostly they were bad."

"Quit stalling," he said—hypocritically, I thought. "I'm here about the case."

"I'm telling you," I said (because I was), "I don't know what you're talking about." You hear stories about confused fans, practical jokes, that sort of thing – but I've never played a detective in anything, so this wasn't one of those stories. I didn't know what he wanted. "Unless you mean, I don't know, do you mean an actual case? Have you lost a suitcase? Because apart from that I don't know what—"

He started to say, "You know full well what I'm talking—" but he was interrupted.

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

"Oh, god," I said, and stepped away until I reached the far wall. I thought this must be back-up, but the first man looked as surprised as I was.

The two men arranged themselves so they were evenly spaced. They pointed their guns at each other, which was a relief for me.

"Do you two know each other?" I said. They both shook their heads. "Are you here about the case too?" I said to the new man.

"Aha! So you do know about it!" said the first man, pointing the gun at me. The second man kept pointing his gun at the first man.

"I don't know this man," said the second man, "But it sounds like you're the person I'm looking for."

"Now look," I said, "I was just telling your colleague here: I know nothing about this."

"She *was* saying that," said the first man. "But I think she's lying."

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

"Is this where I can get some info on the Siddons Case?" he said.

The three men pointed their guns at each other.

"The Siddons Case?" said one of them. "I'm here about the Terry Affair."

"Look," I said. I'd had enough of this. I went for a guaranteed tension-breaker: drinks. "Anyone want a cup of tea?" (I had a feeling I should offer scotch or whisky, but I didn't have any. And I didn't want anyone to get drunk.)

The men nodded. The second man said, "Ooh, lovely."

I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

As I returned, a man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

Without saying a word, I went back into the kitchen and put out another mug.

When I returned again, all four men were asking each other what they knew, and nobody was admitting to knowing anything. I watched for a while. After a few minutes, I started to suspect they'd forgotten about me. A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

A couple of men sat on the sofa. One pulled up the footrest and sat on that.

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand.

I proposed a gun amnesty. Some of the men were reluctant at first, but eventually, they all agreed to put their guns in a pile in the corner. I don't know if there were any more guns hiding in socks or waistbands. I didn't want to check, I didn't look.

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand. He was immediately told about the amnesty by the other men, and complied with no trouble. The pile of guns grew by one gun.

I never made the tea. I didn't want to offer again, and anyway I didn't have enough mugs. By now it was standing-room only.

A man came through the door with a gun in his hand. He added his gun to the pile of guns and looked around, was welcomed by the nearest group of men, and squeezed in. Multiple conversations were happening by now, and some of them sounded friendly. I saw handshakes, and some of the men were doing impressions of the other men. I thought about putting on some music. Then one man asked me where the bathroom was. That was it.

"All right," I said. "Everybody out."

It took a while to get the men to go; eventually I had to move one of them off the sofa and stand on it to get their attention.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I waved my arms until they were quiet. "May I have your attention please?"

"I think there has been a misunderstanding. I can't help any of you with any cases or mysteries you may have come here to investigate. I was sitting at my desk and I'd like to get back to it. I have a lot of work to do. Thank you."

They took their guns with them as they went. I don't know where they are now.

Last night I dreamt that a gun came through the door with a hand in his man.

Tragedy
by
A.J. Huffman

Vexing fact of reality, fateless truth:
flea markets do not sell fleas.

The label evokes strange images of miniature
carnival barkers in top hats and elaborate costumes
presiding over an auction-like scenario. A line
of festering mites paraded about in rags and shackles,
responding to crack of tamer's whip. One by one,
brought forth before arena full of cats, dogs,
domesticated creatures of all kinds who should have known
better, but bid on these back-biters in spite. Eagerly
trading valuable toys and collars for savage
motes, bringing them back to their owners. Retribution
for some human oversight.

Instead of this encompassing fantastical sideshow,
we find unclothed tables erupting with trinkets, baubles
in various stages of decay, disarray. Books
with missing pages, torn covers, match wits with antique
stemware, glasses laced with germs of myriad mouths.
Fueled by the driving belief that somewhere amidst the rubble,
the mess, lies treasure, buried, forgotten, we proceed
to forage, ferreting with ever-lessening hope of finding
or being found.

The Honest Adjunct
by
Ryan Shoemaker

Come on in. Ashley, isn't it? No? Emily? Alexis? All you sorority girls look the same. I think you're in one of my Tuesday classes. Hannah? That's right. You usually sit in the back of the classroom, left side, and last week I distinctly remember seeing you order a striped bikini from Forever 21 during my lecture on affirmative action. Such forethought—and it's only November.

Have a seat, Hannah. And no need to apologize for being late. Really, I expected it. I mean, you've really had a tough semester. All those stolen bikes, the glitchy computer, that needy boyfriend, and the debilitating skin rash you contracted in your sorority hot tub. It's just so unfortunate how tragedy always strikes whenever a paper is due. And I thought I had all the bad luck.

Here, let me turn on this lava lamp so we can see better. Do you like my office décor, the lava lamp and the Monet prints? And all those postcards on the wall are the exotic places my meager salary will never allow me to visit. And how about this potted bamboo I picked up at a garage sale? I've just always felt that an office should be a home away from home, which is good because this office is my home. Really. Last year I lost my apartment when the university slashed adjunct salaries to fund the campus aquatic center's wave pool and that new alumni fountain. You know the fountain I'm talking about? The one that's shaped like a giant finger. Yes, I just sleep right here on an inflatable air mattress and pray the cleaning woman doesn't walk in. Which reminds me: I need to get to the laundry mat tonight. My desk drawers are practically overflowing with dirty underwear.

So, how's life? All well? Since I have no time or money for socializing, I tend to live through my students. Like how's everyone in your sorority? And those sorority outfits are so cute! Do the Ugg boots, frayed skinny jeans, and low-cut T-shirts come with your Alpha Chi Omega membership? And what's up with Taylor Swift? Do you think she looks like a giraffe? I kind of think she does. But a really beautiful giraffe. Hey, you mentioned last week that your dad owns a half dozen Allstate Insurance franchises in Scottsdale. That's so cool. Do you know if he's hiring?

Okay, now let's spend a few minutes discussing your last paper on immigration reform. If you remember, I gave some suggestions in our previous conference, but it seems you completely ignored them and instead advocated for starting a nonprofit to provide undocumented workers with a free fashion consultation to help them integrate into American society. You argued passionately that no one wants to hire a cleaning lady who wears Baby Phat short shorts and an oversize Dodger's jersey. My overworked colleagues and I just laughed and laughed about that. Well, I'm glad that paper's behind you. I guess the bright side is that you were really thinking outside the box.

Now to your next paper on socioeconomic disparities in the United States. Why don't you read the paper out loud? I love hearing the conviction in my students' voices. Plus, I haven't looked at a single draft you've emailed me. Let's be honest, with 150 students, who has time?

Just a little louder, please, and less gum smacking.

Very good. Thanks for reading that. What an interesting perspective! It sounds like having a best friend with a Peruvian nanny and a Mexican gardener really connected you with the socioeconomic struggles of minority communities. Maybe I can add some personal perspective from someone who's homeless and teaches five sections of freshman composition at a large state university. Like how on weekday nights I disguise myself in an Arab headdress and deliver pizzas to student housing. And look at my belt. It's a bungee cord I found in a Wal-Mart parking lot. And here's a pithy quote for your paper: Yo soy muy tired, muy hungry, and muy broke!

Well, I hope those sad insights help as you finish your paper. I really feel... Sorry, my stomach won't stop growling. I guess it's about dinnertime, isn't it? Hey, I hear your sorority has its own private chef. All organic and free-range food, right? No GMOs. Actually, I've spent some time scavenging in your sorority dumpster. Amazing food. The butternut squash risotto and Portobello mushroom tostadas are fabulous. Tonight, though, I'm splurging on a microwavable chimichanga. And I can't forget my vitamin C tablet. Doctor Chen at the Mission of Mercy Free Clinic prescribed a vitamin supplement when he diagnosed me with scurvy, the first case he's seen in ten years of practicing medicine in the U.S.

Looks like we're almost out of time. Any questions? No? Good. Because my sciatica's screaming and I'm dizzy from hunger.

Hannah, I want you to know that I'm here for you. But let's be realistic: with 150 students and course prep and grading and a job weekend nights hosing out dog kennels at the humane society to pay my car insurance, I'm here for you between 2:00 AM and 2:05 AM on Mondays if you need to email me.

Good. I think this conference was helpful. I'll look forward to seeing a complete draft of your paper after Thanksgiving. Okay?

So you're going home for Thanksgiving? That sounds nice. Since Facility Management Services is fumigating my office for vermin over the break, I'll spend Thanksgiving in my car at a rest stop off the I-10. But I'm really looking forward to Thanksgiving dinner at the Phoenix Rescue Mission. Word on the street is they're not stingy with the stuffing.

Okay, Hannah, see you after Thanksgiving. Well, maybe I'll see you after Thanksgiving, unless the Arizona Fertility Clinic finally greenlights my sperm donor application or Universal Pictures buys my zombie screenplay.

Do Not Call
by
Stacia Friedman

"Hello? Hello?"

(pause)

"Hi. This is Suzy."

"Um, yes?"

"You're receiving this call because you've been recommended by a friend who hates your guts!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"According to our records, you suffer from multiple personality disorder and qualify to participate in a free 7-day, 6-night clinical trial at the luxurious Poco Loco Resort in sunny Guadalajara."

"I don't have multiple personality disorder."

"Is this Sheila Gomberg of 625 Fulton Drive?"

"No. This is Jane McQuire."

"Excuse me, ma'am. But how would you know that if you have multiple personalities? Why don't I hold while you put Sheila on the phone?"

"I told you, there's no Sheila here."

"Not now. But, be reasonable, Jane. This fabulous, limited time offer will fill very fast. If you enroll right now, I can get you an ocean view room for just \$160 per day."

"I thought you said this was a *free* clinical trial."

"It is. All psychiatric services and medications will be provided without charge. Your only expenses will be for your airfare, room, meals, tips and an optional serenade by strolling mariachis. I'll hold while you get your credit card..."

"Wait a sec. Guadalajara isn't on the coast. How can there be an ocean view?"

"Good point, Jane. One of your personalities knows her geography! How about instead of an ocean view, I give you complimentary electroshock therapy upon arrival?"

"Who the hell is this? How did you get my number? I'm on the Do Not Call Registry!"

"No need to shout, Jane. As I explained, you are receiving this call because you were either referred by a friend, requested information online or clicked onto a Facebook video of frolicking kittens."

"I don't understand. What do kittens have to do with psychiatric disorders?"

"I'm not a medical professional, Jane, so I can't answer that. But if you take advantage of this fabulous offer, I'm sure our team of certified mental health experts will be happy to answer your questions during Happy Hour by the pool."

"I do have vacation time coming, but I don't know. With the airfare and all it would be over \$1,500."

"Tell you what, Jane. You sound like someone who could really use a week in Paradise. I could give you a 30% discount if you reserve your room right now and give me the names and phone numbers of ten friends suffering from multiple personality disorder, migraines, urinary incontinence, acid reflux or insomnia."

"What did you say the name of this company is?"

"Oh, we're not a company per se, Jane. We're a multi-national consortium of marketing organizations based in Kuala Lumpur that have hacked their way into the private cell phones of millions of Americans in order to better serve them with outstanding offers during their dinner hour."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Not in this hemisphere... Now about that 30% discount, I'm only authorized to make that offer until midnight and it's 11:59pm here, so what's it going to be, Jane? A week in Paradise, sipping frozen strawberry margaritas, or another week of living hell with your demanding boss, over-bearing husband and impossible kids?"

"How do you know about my personal life?"

"I don't. I'm just reading from a *script*. But if I hit a nerve, all the more reason to throw a swimsuit into a bag and spend a week in Mexico. The clock is ticking, Jane. Do you want the discount or not?"

"I'm thinking. I'm thinking. Isn't Mexico dangerous now?"

"You tell me, Jane. What's more dangerous? Another week of pointless meetings, slamming doors and screaming teenagers or getting an oil massage on your own private terrace overlooking the pool?"

"Okay, but what if I get down there and they find out I'm just an ordinary middle-aged woman with two kids who works at an insurance company who doesn't have multiple personality disorder?"

"No problem, Jane. If you don't want the complimentary Thorazine or group scream, there's yoga, aerobics and a tour of the fortified villa of the local drug lord Juan Carlos. But first, I need those names and numbers..."

"Hold on, hon. I'll get my address book!"

Contributor Biographies



Jon Hakes has been writing fiction and other things since before he was potty-trained. His short stories have appeared in *Brain Harvest* and *Analog Science Fiction & Fact*. You can visit him at www.jonhakes.com, www.facebook.com/JonHakesTheWriter, www.patreon.com/JonHakes, and/or twitter.com/HakesJon, if you don't have anything better to do online.



Sarah J. Campbell is a Houston-based writer with a degree in Creative Writing from the University of Houston. She grew up in Tanzania (yes, she rode an elephant to school, had a pet lion, and knows that one person you know in Zimbabwe) before moving to Germany, where she completed high school. She has lived in Houston for 6 years now and is sick of the mosquitoes and the lack of fall, but the city has grown on her and she can't seem to escape. You can follow her on Twitter @mzungu_mfupi. She's funny sometimes maybe.



Patrick McManus is a writer and comedian living in Chicago. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame and has read widely in Arthurian myth.



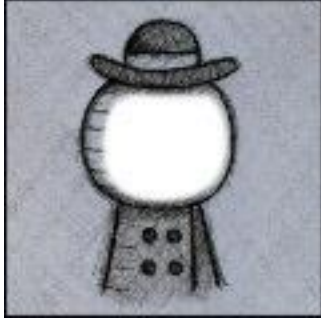
Mark Kaufman enjoys reading short story fiction as much as he enjoys writing it. He is poor at discriminating, and will delve into dirty realism, speculative fiction, and the absurd. He hails from the once quaint pueblo community of Los Angeles, but his work at national parks leads him most everywhere. His last stop was in Alaska's Katmai, where bears outnumber people, but typically don't eat them. Read more of Mark's work at Peculiartales.us.



Sarah Frances Moran is a writer, editor, animal lover, videogamer, queer Latina. She thinks Chihuahuas should rule the world and prefers their company to people 90% of the time. Her work has most recently been published or is upcoming in *The No Se Habla Espanol Anthology*, *Elephant Journal*, *Dirty Chai*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Rust+Moth*, *Maudlin House*, *Blackheart Magazine*, *Red Fez*, and *The Bitchin' Kitsch*. She is Editor/Founder of *Yellow Chair Review*. These days you can find her kayaking the Brazos in Waco, Texas with her partner. You may reach her at www.sarahfrancesmoran.com



Christina Dalcher is a linguist, novelist, and flash fiction addict from Somewhere in the American South whose work appears in *Zetetic*, *Maudlin House*, and *After the Pause*. She prefers to count her chickens after they hatch. Find her at <https://christinadalcher.wordpress.com>



Nicholas L. Sweeney is a student at Western Washington University, where he will graduate, much quicker than he meant to, with a major in creative writing. His short stories have been published both online and in print. When not frantically applying for graduate schools, he busies himself with stories, literature, and carrot cake.



Fred Coppersmith is a writer and editor from the mean suburban streets of New York. His fiction has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceway's Inflight Magazine*, *Mythic Delirium*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, among others. He publishes the quarterly zine *Kaleidotrope* and can usually be found nattering about something or other on Twitter @unrealfred.



Rose Biggin is a writer of stories and plays. Her published fiction includes "A Game Proposition" in *Irregularity* (four sex workers in 17th-century Jamaica play dice against the explorer William Dampier) and "The Modjeska Waltz" in *The Adventures of Moriarty* (a thrilling diamond heist and feminist ballroom dancing). She has a PhD in immersive theatre and digs film noir, old maps and peacocks. She's @rosebiggin on Twitter.



A.J. Huffman has published eleven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her new poetry collections, *Another Blood Jet* (Eldritch Press) and *A Few Bullets Short of Home* (mgv2>publishing) are now available from their respective publishers. She has two additional poetry collections forthcoming: *Degeneration* from Pink Girl Ink, and *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* from Transcendent Zero Press. She is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, and has published over 2,200 poems in various national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press (www.kindofahurricanepress.com).



Ryan Shoemaker's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Booth*, *Word Riot*, *Gulf Stream*, and *Juked*, among others. He lives and writes in Burbank, California. Find him at RyanShoemaker.net.



Stacia Friedman is the founding editor of DailyLobotomy.com.