

# ◇ Defenestration ◇

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**Clown R&R**  
**by**  
**Kevin Sterne**

I'm in the middle of my tuna melt when Wendy tells me she's got a woman on the line with a clown stuck in her window well. Great.

"Can I call her after my break?" I say with a mouth full of moist tuna.

To which Wendy says, "I'm really sorry but she sounds like hysterics."

Wendy's big for her age, her age being about 55—or 20 years my senior—and big being residual body mass from her college rugby days.

I put the rest of my lunch in foil.

"You still have a little on your" Wendy says while rubbing at my chin with a Kleenex. Wendy's husband passed away suddenly last Christmas time, but she's abbreviated the five stages of grief, more or less.

"Thanks," I say with a feeling of loneliness.

We have a script we're supposed to follow here beginning with: "Thank you for calling Clown Removal and Rehabilitation, this is Dennis speaking."

The voice on the end says: "My head aches like heck, dear."

"I would be more than happy to assist you with this issue," I say while sticking to my prompt sheet.

This woman, Susan or Linda—it's been a while since the first call—claims the sound of my voice has intense therapeutic and relaxation benefits for her. She's been calling since the spring when Rob pulled a dead clown from one of those big glue traps—which, as is company policy, we do not endorse nor recommend.

This weekly exchange has become a cute little routine for us. Placating Susan/Linda also beats doing the Observational Data Reports or working on the email server—two things Mr. Larsen—director of operations for the southwest region—once said I have a high aptitude for.

"Can you read the FAQs again?" Susan/Linda says. These are her favorite.

"I'd be happy to."

I start somewhere in the middle: "The majority of clown bites result in minor swelling and redness around the bite area and typically subside within 48 hours."

"Perfect," she says, "don't stop." So I read to her for the next approx. 30 minutes and she listens, silently but for a few moans and sighs and unintelligible rustles. Midway through the

*Clown Myths, Rumors and Urban Legends* section Rob walks in still donning his SC-R&R Gas Pack.

Rob's got these "*Rob's 10 Rules of Life While Living Life at Work*" with Rule #1 being 'Always speak your mind especially in a professional setting.'

He starts going on about how this jackwagon—his words—confused him for a clown and shot him with a hunting bow. This is classic Rob.

I shoo my hand at him while pointing to the phone in my ear, but he seems to misinterpret this as a directive to talk louder and faster, which is not helping Susan/Linda's headache. Then he shows me his left quad, which definitely has an arrow lodged in it.

"Jesus," I say.

"It's pretty much numb by now, but listen, you got to yank it out for me," Rob pleads and props his leg up on my keyboard, "I'm going to look away. Don't tell me when you're going to do it."

On the phone Susan/Linda asks if I'm still there. I tell her to give me a minute.

"I'm losing blood fast here."

"Okay, alright." I set the phone down and grab the end of the arrow.

"Wait," Rob says, "Are your hands clean?"

But I've seemed to have already pulled it out.

We both kind of stare at the arrow in my hand for a while.

Finally Rob says, "This. Cannot be talked about," and hops off my desk. "They'd axe me for sure. First thing I need to do is destroy this." He snaps the arrow in two. "Now I shall have a snack." He starts digging through my candy/cookie drawer.

I've all but forgotten about Susan/Linda and find the phone on the floor, the line dead. I consider pressing redial but ultimately slam the phone in the cradle, with a bit more force than I intended.

Rob kind of stares at me. "Did Wide Back eat all the Chewy Chips Ahoy?"

Wide Back is Wendy.

\*\*\*

At 4:58pm I clock out, buckle the buckle on my helmet and head out the door hoping to avoid Wendy, who unfortunately is already waiting by air conditioning unit where I lock my bike.

"Hi there," she says. I'm just close enough to where I can't turn around and pretend I don't see her.

"Wendy," I say and act like I'm in some sort of hurry.

She tells me it's Thirsty Thursday, though I've told her upteenmillion times I don't drink since my DUI.

"I got fifty dollars in singles." This is the voice of quiet desperation.

I try to avoid eye contact.

"We could go to Great Alaskan Bush Company."

"Sorry," I say as I saddle my Huffy, "Mom gets antsy if I don't come home right away." And I peddle off as fast as I can.

\*\*\*

'Antsy' for my mom is her pretending for the last two months that dad is dead. Doctor said it's early onset Dementia. Doctor also said to hide all weapon-like objects, so ixnay the steak knives, scissors, etc.

Tonight I walk into the kitchen and mom is having one of her episodes, this time about the plastic sporks.

"Money's tight," I tell her as we sit down to eat, "and people will pay good money for cutlery."

"I wish your father would have left us something worth selling. Instead of just a body."

Dad is seated to the right of mom at the table. He looks over at me and says, "Whatever makes her happy," then sporks a piece of porkchop into his mouth.

"Denny." My mom looks at me. "I never got to tell you, but I think you taking this job to stop these clowns was a good thing of you."

In this moment I almost think she's snapped out of it—that this women is much more my mom and much less the thing eating her brain.

"God knows your damn father couldn't stop them."

I read somewhere that we are hurt most by the ones we love. I don't want this to be the lasting memory of my mom: that she thought dad was killed by a gang of clowns.

\*\*\*

In bed I block out my mom and Wendy and think about Susan/Linda. I only have a voice to go off of and my imagination isn't great, so I end up with a hazy mental image of my ex-girlfriend from community college, a redhead who was a tattoo artist and renaissance fairs enthusiast. I imagine reading Susan/Linda/my ex-girlfriend something with slightly more literary merit than the Clown R&R webpages and blog. Maybe *Beowulf* and/or *Lolita*. I've never read either but figure they must be more romantic than "10 Fail Safe Tips for De-Clowning Your Car, Boat or RV." In an ideal world they'd actual pay me extra for writing those click-bait lists instead of folding them under the umbrella of 'corporate property

produced during employee's term of employment.' I would use this money to take Susan/Linda out for surf n turf followed by a nightcap at her place.

I get close to climaxing there in my bed when Rob's stupid arrow pops into my head. I can hear him yelling out in pain. And Susan/Linda inside the phone saying *hello? Are you there?* That puts the kibosh on that. I let a Sleepy Time tablet dissolve on my tongue and I'm out in a few minutes.

\*\*\*

I spend majority Friday playing Angry Oxcart Driver hoping Susan/Linda will call. I make it all the way to the Cambodia map where you have to carry .5 metric tons of shafted and milled rice grain on several poorly maintained bridges and unpaved paths around Angkor Wat. You have to do this under the allotted time or else the barter, Phanith, will refuse to pay the previously negotiated price. If you fail the mission you return to your village without enough rice to feed your malnourished family. I only get three carts, because it's the beta version, and one of my children dies of starvation. I clock out at five without a call from Susan/Linda.

It's against company policy to bring a work laptop home so without Angry Oxcart Driver I decide there's no better time than this weekend to test out an idea I have: convincing mom that dad is a ghost. I hope it will trigger some repressed memories i.e., their wedding day, my birth, or that one vacation to the Keys.

Dad says it's worth a shot, and we start with him walking in front of mom while she watches Antique Roadshow.

"Wait," I say next to her on the couch, "did you see that?"

"The vase?" she says, "Your piece of shit uncle broke a vase like that when we were kids."

Dad sits down next to me and asks if I have any other bright ideas.

Then mom turns off the TV and says, "Denny. I want to go to the cemetery."

So we go to the cemetery, which is about a quarter mile on the bike path cutting through our backyard. There's like this hill half way there and when we get to the top we find a clown squatting in the middle of the path. It's young, maybe a few months old, and holding its one arm awkwardly.

"He's hurt," I say.

Before you can bat an eye mom kicks the baby clown square in the jaw.

"You son of a bitch" she yells. The clown goes down right away, out cold.

Dad and I just look at each other, completely shocked.

But that's not the end.

Mom continues to kick the knocked-out/possibly dead clown yelling: "Give. Me. Back. My. Husband."

Then a pair of joggers come by—this like Swedish Olympian couple. They stop and take in the situation: a family of three—that is, us—blocking the cemetery bike path, and the mom kicking an unconscious clown and shouting for it to resurrect her dead husband.

So that's my weekend in a nutshell.

\*\*\*

Monday morning rolls around and Rob has exercised one of his two allotted sick days, which means I'm doing field calls.

I'm barely on my second cup of coffee when Wendy sends me out to West End to retrieve a clown from a tree. "Apparently this Rottweiler chased it up an old Elm," she says, and then adds a "Be careful hun." I ignore this as I grab Rob's C-R&R Gas Pack.

The company field van is this white Chevy cargo with no windows. The inside smells like Rob, which is to say greasy fries and spearmint—the smell of the C-R&R Gas, which, as our proprietary research indicates, clowns have an irresistible affinity for.

I drive really slow to kill time and when I arrive at the address, this dumpy two-step ranch with blue windows, there's neither an old Elm nor a Rottweiler to be found. I try calling Wendy but she doesn't answer; I figure she's on another call or eating or both, so I leave the pack in the van and mosey to the front door.

This woman in a long t-shirt with wet hair answers. On field calls we have a script that goes: "Happy day sir/ma'am, I'm here to safely eradicate this premise of clowns, could you please direct me to the infestation," which I say word-for-word.

"Hey stranger," the woman says, and I realize I'm face-to-face with the real Susan/Lisa.

"Wow," I say, "It's you."

"Me." She flips her hair gently and as she does, her shirt lifts up to reveal more of her legs.

She props open her screen door and invites me inside.

I follow her into the kitchen where she was drinking of the bottle of a beer. "You want one?" she asked while already popping the top. What would you do in this situation?

For the next twenty-five or so minutes we have sex on her living room futon. She doesn't take off her t-shirt, which I'm okay with. She even provides a condom, and I make a point of stopping in the middle of it all to thank her for that. I also make a point of kissing her thighs a lot. I get a lot of saliva on them, and she tells me I don't have to go any higher. I listen. When we're finished she offers me a cigarette and excuses her self to go pee.

I feel like this must be love. I don't know what else you could possibly call it. She was a beautiful woman and I admire her stack of magazines next to the futon while she's away. The name on the addresses is neither Susan nor Linda, but Todman. One name.

"I could read one of these to you," I say when she gets back. There could be nothing more romantic than me reading to her while she rests her head in my lap, even with wet hair, and we smoke her cigarette.

But then she says, "Oh I'm through with that. Now I have this compulsion to have sex all the time. It helps a lot."

I'm still sitting on the futon while she stands, telling me this.

"And, like, if you hadn't come, I would have called the pizza guy."

I hold myself together long enough to make it to the van, but not inside the van. Because waiting for me outside the van is a group of clowns. Seven clowns. All fourteen eyes looking at me, and what do you know, I've left the gas pack in the van.

Gone from my mind is everything I've read on our website re: this scenario. I can think only of my dear mom kicking that one baby clown. And the color of her rage. Pink with misplaced hatred, a confusion. I go in fists clenched.

I pow one right in the kisser and my mind dislodges itself from my corporal body. It goes to the memory of me and mom and dad sharing pink cotton candy at the fair. The blue sky, our joy. Clear as day. My fists hit another clown and I'm back in our old mini van, the three of us singing the Bee Gees after my baseball game. I can hear my dad out of tune. I can feel my seat belt.

I plunk and plunk and plunk them all in their faces until it's just me standing in the middle of the street with all these zonked-out clowns. And it's over. I'm breathing heavy and I can taste blood on the inside of my bit lip. And there's no image in my mind.

**Hamlet's Solilwocky**  
**(after William Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll)**  
**by**  
**Tucker Lieberman**

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Felt dread of something after death—  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Long life—To die, to sleep—No more—  
And by a sleep to say we end  
The Jubjub bird, the borogoves.  
In undiscovered country, we  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were our mortal coils,  
Our barest bodkins soon outrabe.  
Ophelia, all our sins recall,  
As when in uffish thought you stood,  
And, in a sea of trouble, warned:  
"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"  
Your conscience cowarded us all.  
You paused: "To be, or not to be—  
And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?"  
That is the question burbled now  
Still whiffing through the tulgey wood.  
When consummated heartache came,  
Perchance the manxome foe we sought—  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame—  
Had fardeled the pale cast of thought.  
No resting by the Tumtum tree!  
Delay will lose the name of act!  
One, two! One, two! And through and through  
Our slings and arrows snicker-snack!  
We left it dead, and with its head  
And patient merit, back we went.  
"Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
And you yourself your quietus make.  
The mome raths bear the whips and scorns  
Of grunt and sweat, of vorpals sword.  
'Tis nobler, far, than shuffling off  
The frumious fortune Bandersnatch!"  
When thus Ophelia chortled some  
Such joy to us, what dreams may come.

**Here Lies Ennis MacDonald**  
**by**  
**Kay Bevan**

Evelyn wasn't entirely sure what to do, when her husband choked and died at the breakfast table one Saturday morning. Lifting him was out of the question; she was fit for a seventy-two year old, but Ennis was decidedly less so. No, she wouldn't be able to budge him without straining something. Going into town for help was out, too. She was definitely not ready for any of the folk in town to come sneaking and spying around her house under the guise of caring. No, she wasn't going to make the walk all the way in just for a bunch of sneaks to make gossip about her.

In the end, she decided that she would just leave him there. She packed a few items of clothing into a bag, along with a small cooking pot and some selections from her herb collection. Into her bag also went a few hard biscuits, and some candies wrapped in waxed paper. She said goodbye to the crows that liked to perch around her kitchen, and they warbled a blessing in return.

She boarded up the windows then, deciding that if she couldn't bury dear old Ennis she could at least give him some form of tomb to spend the rest of his days in. She also made sure to lock the front door, in case someone decided to rob them and was faced instead with the decomposing corpse of her late husband. To the front door, she stuck a note.

"Warning to would-be burglars: This house is the final resting place of Ennis MacDonald. Do not enter unless you wish to see a dead body. Even then, I would rather you didn't."

Evelyn wasn't sure if she had gotten her point across entirely how she had intended, but it would have to do. Time was passing her by, and she had a lot of exploring to do now that Ennis was no longer home to occupy her time. In her mind, she decided that she would find some way to rebel - she would begin to wear colourful beads around her neck, and learn how to spit. Perhaps she would even return one day and write Ennis the scathing eulogy she had always wanted to give him.

"Here lies Ennis. He was a man. We were married once. It was unpleasant."

She shivered with delight at the thought, and briefly thought of going back to amend her note. But no, she mustn't jump the gun. It was the Evelyn of a few years from now that would write that eulogy, and nail it to the door with a hammer and nails instead of sticky tape. Who knew what wild and wonderful turns of phrase she would learn by then? Who knew what new and exciting ways to choke a man to death she would find?

**Never Give Up, Poem**  
by  
**JD DeHart**

someone will take you, poem  
don't give up  
keep fighting the good fight  
chin up

oh, damn  
you don't have a chin  
you are so far only made of two  
stanzas on a page

let's pretend the first line  
is a pompadour haircut  
the second your eyeline  
the third your chin

keep that line held up  
don't worry about  
the anatomy of  
the rest of  
the lines.

**Out of Town**  
**By**  
**Jennie Byrne**

*I'm out of town.* That's all I had to say. *Sorry mum, it's work, I'll visit as soon as I'm home.* Then book a one way ticket to Australia and change my name to Silvia.

She'd never know about the three pictures a day I post on Facebook which are clearly from my living room. She'd never know that I'm sitting in all day binge watching *Orange Is The New Black*, with my hair scrunched up into a bobble, a cup of tea in one hand and the other arm deep in a bag of Doritos, (the chili heatwave kind of course, because the cheesy ones leave your mouth tasting like a badgers armpit for hours), chili dust clinging to the hairs on my forearm. She'd never know I lied.

*I'm out of town.* It could have been so simple. Instead I open my big gob and now I have to have dinner with my parents.

"I'll expect you for 6 o'clock sharp," Mum says and hangs up before I can pretend I'm coming down with food poisoning.

Well shit.

\*\*\*

The second she sees me there will be some type of insult, then maybe a 'Hello' and a 'How are you'. But finally comes the interrogation. *How's Callum? Why didn't you bring Callum? Where is he tonight? How are things with you two? Did he get that bottle of wine we sent him? Why hasn't he proposed yet? Have you had a fertility test recently because you might want to make sure you're able to give him a child before you marry him and ruin his life?*

The one thing you need to know is my parents like Callum more than they like me. He's someone successful. A surgeon. A healer. He has a profession. And apparently I don't. It doesn't help that my little brother is an ex druggie who now runs weekly sober meetings and lives in his childhood bedroom because he can't afford his own place.

But besides my parents distaste for both their children's life choices, there is something more crucial to worry about. How in the hell am I going to survive tonight?

\*\*\*

I'm standing at my least favourite door in the entire world. I'm pretty sure hell's door is more welcoming than my parents'. Behind this door I'd spent twenty three years listening to my mother. A chronic torture session with Lucifer himself would be less painful.

I stand here for a few minutes mentally preparing myself for whatever she'll hit me with tonight and the realisation I'd have to tell her the very thing I'd been avoiding for three weeks straight. There's no doubt it won't go down well, but there's no avoiding it either. She'll probably suck out my soul with one glare. Disown me. Go to court and adopt Callum instead. Okay, maybe I'm being a *little* dramatic. But I have no doubt that if she could, it would cross her mind to do that.

I ring the bell and almost immediately the door swings open.

"Your skin is so pale it's almost translucent." *And it begins.* I step into the hallway. "You practically blend into the wall. You're not getting enough sun."

"It's England Mum, what sun?" I leave out the part where I've pretended to be ill and spent the past three weeks in my pyjamas snuggled under a pink polka dot blanket.

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit Sarah," she says and walks into the living room.

"For once I was serious," I whisper to myself.

"How much are you regretting walking through that door?" I look over to see my brother Hunter leaning against the banister in the hall.

"So much so I wish I'd jabbed a fork into my eye so I would've had an excuse not to turn up," I reply while giving him a hug. "And what are you wearing?" I ask, frowning at his suit. Hunter never wears suits.

"Don't ask," he rolls his eyes. "And it's about to get worse. Their snobby friends are already here," Hunter warns me.

Lord help me.

Mum is ten times more snobby when she's around her friends. Everything has to be perfect and everybody has to be on their best behaviour. She can't give her friends any reason to say something bad about her family behind her back. *Gossip spreads like an STD*, Mum would always say. Imagine a five year old sitting at the dinner table in a Ralph Lauren, black cotton dress sitting next to her three year old brother in a matching suit and tie asking 'Mummy, what is an STD?' Yes this is my life.

Before I could walk into the living room Dad walked out into the hall.

"I'm so glad you could make it Sarah. Your mother has just informed me she has laid out a dress for you to wear in your old bedroom," Dad says.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" I ask him, looking down at my fitted black dress, tights and heels.

Not that I needed to ask the question. If your clothes aren't Ralph Lauren, Armani, Prada or Burberry, then you're not fit for socialising.

"Come on Sar, it can't be that bad," Hunter says and grabs my hand dragging me up the stairs to my childhood bedroom.

As soon as we walk inside Hunter falls to the floor in a fit of giggles while I just stare at the horrific dress in front of me. It is a three quarter length black, velvet dress with transparent arms and the design on the front can only be described as something from the inside of a computer monitor. I'm going to be the definition of a human robot. Who on earth would willingly wear something like that?

"Oh Sar," Hunter gasps, sitting up from the floor. "You're gonna look *gorgeous*."

He grins like a five year old. I smack him.

"How much do you think that cost?" I ask.

Hunter leans over to pull the tag out of the neck line. In big black numbers it reads: **£1,595.**

"Oh my god, I think I just swallowed my oesophagus," Hunter gasps, clutching his throat.

"You can't swallow your oesophagus dipshit."

"My car doesn't cost as much as this dress," Hunter almost screams. "I feel hot. And clammy. Am I sweating? Yep, I've got the money sweats," he says, fanning himself with both hands.

I give him my trademark *what the fuck* look. "What are the money sweats?"

"Whenever Mum and Dad spend a ridiculous amount of money on something pointless-"

"So everything," I cut him off.

He ignores me. "I start breathing all funny and sweating and thinking about all the things I could have done with that amount of money instead. Do you know what happened when I saw this suit on my bed this morning? I nearly had a heart attack. Seven hundred on a plain navy blue suit. You used to be able to get a daily dose of heroin for five times less than that." Hunter starts taking deep breaths. "Okay, just go and put the dress on before I pass out."

I take the dress into the bathroom with me. I step through the neckline and drag the dress up my body, but by the time it reaches my hips it is almost too tight to move. I manage to pull it high enough to slip my arms into the sleeves, but it is in no way a success. I feel like I'm wearing a corset three sizes too small for me.

"Hunter," I gasp out stumbling back into the bedroom.

He is still sprawled out across the floor. He looks up as I enter.

"It's too tight. It doesn't fit," I say.

He jumps up to his feet and turns me around trying to zip up the dress.

"Hold your stomach in," he says, pressing one hand against my stomach to push it in.

"I am."

"Well it's not good enough. I know you've been depressed but seriously, how much have you been eating?" he accuses me, but manages to yank the zip up all the way. "Oh thank god, I thought it wasn't going to budge."

"This is not okay," I whisper, one hand on my stomach.

"Alright. Just don't move or breathe and you should be fine, okay?" he says seriously.

I glare at him. "You are not helping."

"It's either suffer through wearing this dress for a couple of hours, or you go downstairs and tell Mum she spent one-thousand six-hundred on a dress for nothing."

He raises an eyebrow at me.

"Fine, let's go," I say and move slowly towards the door.

I feel like Elizabeth Swan in that pink dress at the beginning of Pirates of the Caribbean. I was almost certainly going to pass out at some point during dinner.

Hunter and I enter the living room to see Peter and Margaret, Mum and Dad's best friends for as long as I can remember. When I was little I always used to assume they secretly lived with us they were over here that much.

"Oh Sarah, what a pleasure seeing you again. How have you been?" Margaret asks walking over to hug me.

"Pretty good thank you, and yourself?"

"Very well dear. Did you hear? Our Charlotte has just been promoted to chief of surgery over in New York."

Just what I need to hear.

"And what have you been up to Sarah?" Peter chips in.

Suddenly, I felt as if I was in a job interview.

"Oh, well, I've been writing a lot of different articles lately..."

And clearly, I wouldn't be getting the job.

"Such as?"

"Well, my editor has got on researching some local news...you know, shoplifters in Birkenhead and such..." I trail off, wishing I hadn't pretended to be sick for the past few weeks.

"Yes, well, how about a drink?" Dad interrupts, embarrassment plastered all over his face.

We are met with two whiskey tumblers from Mum in one hand and a bottle of ArKay whiskey in the other.

"It's 0% alcohol, 0% carbs, 0% calories," Mum smiles and pours us each a glass before returning to her friends to fill their glasses.

"0% fun," I complain to Hunter and take a large sip.

Hunter dips his tongue in the liquid and almost immediately gags.

"It tastes like sewer water. It doesn't even burn your throat as it goes down."

"Please tell me you have some real whiskey," I beg.

He just stares at me while pulling a flask out of his back pocket and dunking it into my glass before topping up his own.

"Did I ever tell you you're my favourite brother?" I grin.

"How are you enjoying the ArKay?" Dad asks, walking over to us.

"It's fantastic," I lie.

"Top notch Dad," Hunter smiles.

Dad stares knowingly for a moment then walks back over to his friends.

I eye Hunter. "Top notch?"

"I don't know where that came from. I think I'm catching the snobbiness. Quick I need a vaccination."

"Down the whisky. That should do it," I tell him and down my own glass. "Pour me another."

I'm going to bloody need it.

\*\*\*

After what seems like a decade we sit down to dinner and it is during the main course when my mother's *compliments* begin.

"Have you put on weight Sarah? You look...bigger," Mum says looking at me from across the table.

"Yeah Sar, how many bags have you gone through now?" Hunter grins, referring to my binging sessions over the past few weeks.

I dig my elbow into his ribs and watch him squirm while I look at Mum.

"No Mum. I've been totally healthy. Only chicken and salads for me."

Mum laughs. "Oh of course, Callum would never allow you to eat the sort of rubbish you used to. He has such a healthy body."

I can practically see the drool from here. I know I can't let this go on any longer. At this rate she'll be planning our tenth wedding anniversary before dinners over.

"Well, Mum, I actually have something to tell you," I begin to say, just as the room goes quiet and all attention is on me.

Fuck.

"Are you engaged? Did Callum propose?" She smiles.

"Dear girl, please tell us you're not pregnant out of wedlock?" Peter speaks up.

"Surely not," Margaret gulps.

"No, it's not any of that. Actually...Callum and I...broke up," I say and close my eyes waiting to be hit with her fork or something.

But nothing happens. I crack open an eye to see my mother staring at me, a look of anger and disappointment on her face. This is almost worse than being stabbed by a fork.

"Why did he end it?" Dad asks, seeming a little too calm for my liking.

"What makes you think he ended it?"

"Oh please Sarah, of course he ended it. He was a perfect gentleman, a fine surgeon, what more could you possibly want in a partner? And what he gets in return is a story writer," Dad says shaking his head. "I always said it was a wasted career."

"Journalist," I correct him.

"Isn't it all the same thing?" Margaret butts in.

"How could you have let this happen, Sarah? And how do you expect to meet anybody who can compare to a man like that? For once in your life I thought you'd made a good choice. If not for your career then your future husband but once again you've driven another man away."

Mum sighs rubbing her temples.

"Mum, that's not fair-" Hunter starts to say.

"No, what is not fair is your father and I having to watch you both throw your lives away. Everything we have done for our children and this is how you repay us, embarrassing us in front of our dearest friends...I need a moment," Mum says, and quickly leaves the room.

"Oh June," Margaret gasps and rushes after Mum.

I love Hunter with all my heart but we aren't exactly in the same place in life. I have a successful job, my own flat and a nice car. I travel wherever the story takes me. But *clearly* being involved in the arts is the equivalent of being a druggie in my parent's eyes. All their friends' children are doctors or lawyers or politicians or whatever. Every single one of them has a doctorate and then there is me and Hunter. One ex druggie and one newspaper woman. Talk about disappointment. But then again, I never have thought anything we do would be good enough. They've had dreams about our career paths from birth. I swear I heard them mention Prime Minister once.

"I am dreadfully sorry you have had to witness this," Dad says. "How about you join me for a drink on the deck."

"Of course Leonard," Peter mutters awkwardly and follows Dad outside so it is only Hunter and me left.

I lean back against my chair, sighing heavily and that is when I hear a loud ripping sound. I look around to see my dress has split right down my back. Hunter and I look at each other.

"I should have just fucking said I was out of town."

**We, humans**  
**by**  
**Nathaniel Sverlow**

sex with coworkers  
is not recommended

sex with wife  
is expected

sex with yourself  
all depends

We, humans,  
have too much  
fluids  
to know  
what to do  
with

**Now that you've seen me in my gimp suit, there are some things I  
want to talk to you about**

**by  
L. Soviero**

I know how awkward that must've been for you, coming home and finding me how you did. It was for me too.

I probably should've told you before we moved in together. The thing is I never expected you to see me that way, especially caught to your lace curtains by one of my zippers. It must've been hard to swallow.

The thing is and what I couldn't express as you ran out screaming, was that it was a brand new gimp suit. I usually don't try them on without a spotter, kind of like at the gym. So getting into it, especially in the middle of our living room, was a risk. And as you could see, most of the zips were in hard to reach places.

Now that the gimp suit thing is out of the bag, I feel relieved. And a bit like it's taken our friendship to the next level. One of total honesty.

I want to take this opportunity to let you know a few more things I've been meaning to tell you for a long time now.

First of all, and I hope you can see where I'm coming from here, your relationship with Ben is creepy. When I walked in on Thursday and you were booping the tips of each other's noses with your fingers while saying *boop, boop, boop, boop*, I threw up a bit of the mousakka I had for lunch inside my mouth. The fact that he has flowers delivered to your workplace too, I mean, the guys a sicko.

Also, when you leave those notes to me on the bathroom mirror, you know, telling me to have a great day, I kind of hate it. If I'm going to have a great day, I can do it without the help of a Post-it. Frankly, the amount of paper you use is alarming.

Finally, please do not show me even one more picture of your nephew. To you, there is a human being there, one that has Uncle Bobby's eyes or Nanna's dimples. To others, he's just a meat blob. I would hold off on sharing any pictures until he's about three or four — unless he's dressed in a lobster costume or as a hot dog, in which case I will happily have a look.

Phew! Doesn't that feel good?

Because I've been so understanding of your weird tendencies all this time, I'm sure you'll find it in your heart to accept what I do with my alone time—time when you're supposed to be in work and when I should be getting punished for being a very bad boy, very very bad.

Your curtains should be mended by Friday, the latest.

**He Considers Dating a Ballerina**  
by  
**J.P. Celia**

He imagines moving to kiss her  
And her pirouetting away,  
Not knowing if she's compelled to practice  
At that very impractical instant, or attempting to play,

Or, like some life-sized wind-up doll, possesses,  
In lieu of mortal bones, a cache of spastic gears  
That kick in unwantedly at such moments.  
This he fears.

And how comical in the morning  
She would be, his theoretical bride,  
Her tutu bubbling up from the breakfast table  
Like a witch's brew refusing to subside.

Or, God forbid,  
Her shattering  
A sliding glass door as she bounds  
Stupidly through it, the shards scattering

Everywhere. Or her frolicking  
Like a dim animal into traffic,  
Dying pointlessly on tip toe,  
Oblivious and theatric.

This he doesn't need.  
The fantasy has ended.  
It would be a show, he's convinced,  
Best unattended.

**From Doug the Bear with Love**  
by  
**Chris Connell**

I'm writing this from what seems to be a box. Eh, it's a computer. I'm sitting at a computer and now I have to come up with a short story that will win the hearts of its readers.

Yeah, so it was 1973. Yeah, 1973, everyone loves the 70s. This will work. No, it was 2017. Yeah, 2017. Cool. We got the year out of the way.

On a dark summer night in 2017, it was dark like most nights are, and I was fishing. Yeah, fishing. OK, I got it, yeah, I was fishing and there was a bear. A bear. I caught a fucking bear.

Wait, no. That isn't likely... like at all. I'm going to go ahead and say that catching a bear with a fishing pole is extremely unlikely.

So... 2017? Fishing? Mom? No, go away, Mom. God dammit, everything just becomes Freudian after a while. I can't even look at my mom anymore thanks to Freud.

Alright, it was 2017 and my mom and I were fishing with my friend Doug the Bear. Doug is a gay man, he's a bear, ya know, the hairy one. Now, Doug began to confide in me, telling me about how he used to date a man who liked to dress up as a spider during sex. I always thought that this information was something that I did not need to know, and to me, the whole thing seemed kind of like a lie blanketed warmly underneath a mask of absurdity in order to write an entertaining essay for a publication that I can't name, but that's not the point here.

I'm no longer interested in this story.

Doug the Bear is an actual bear? A bear who walks around searching for salmon? See, again, I'm not too excited to write about salmon or bears.

Bears? Beers? Beards? Bearded bears?

**From Doug the Bear with Love**

It wasn't 2017, it wasn't 1973, it wasn't me creatively introducing a subpar essay by being as meta as possible. In the year 1974 on a **WINTER AFTERNOON**, Douglass Fern-Shape Mc'Man? No, Doug the Bear, shaped like a fern, in all of his glory, stuck to his guns, or his guns stuck to him? He glued guns all over his body in hopes of protecting himself from some lazily named bad guy that I haven't come up with yet. "My name is Doug! My name is Doug! My name is Doug!" he chants to himself in the mirror for confidence. He needs this confidence, he is about ask the most important question of his life. He is about to ask for Lisa Maria's hand in marriage. At this point in the story Doug is no longer a gay man... he's an actual bear.

So, Doug, with guns glued all over his body, who is an actual bear and NOT a gay man, starts to chant. As he chants his own name he is startled by a loud crash that occurs behind

him. It was Lisa. Lisa has always been clumsy and this annoying bitch knocked over Doug's unicycle.

Now, readers, I've just been informed by my own brain that Doug is a circus bear. Doug hates his job, hates his kids (who he never sees, out of spite and because the court won't allow it, but that's another made up story that I'll write eventually).

Scared by the crashing, Doug quickly turns around and yells, "GOD DAMMIT THAT'S MY LUCKY FUCKING ONE WHEELED BIKE YOU BITCH AND I—"

Realizing who he's yelling at, Doug continues, "And I—will ask you for your hand in marriage by the end of the night?"

Doug the Bear isn't very smooth.

"No you won't, I don't love you, and I know what you did to your kids," said Lisa

"What is it that I did?" said Doug

"Oh, don't play Doug, Doug," said Lisa

"I'm not playing Doug, Lisa... I am Doug." replied Doug.

"You know what you did, you fucking loser. It was when you were with Kitty, you remember Kitty, right?" asked Lisa.

"Of course I remember Kitty." replied Doug. "I could never forget an ass like that."

Lisa replies angrily, "SO YOU SHOULD REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR OWN FAMILY! WHAT YOU DID! YOU TORE THEM APART!"

"....Alright, I admit... that ass was fat. And I tore that ass apart," said Doug.

"Fuck you. I'm leaving. Men are pigs. I hate you, Doug," said Lisa

"I WAS GOING TO MARRY YOU, YOU BITCH. COME BACK TO ME RIGHT NOW," shouted Doug.

"I'll never come back," said Lisa.

Lisa walked out of Doug's trailer, leaving Douglas the Bear alone with his thoughts.

As the writer and narrator, I kind of feel sorry for Doug. Neither him, you, nor I knows exactly what will happen to him after this whole Lisa thing, but it might be entertaining. Honestly, I forgot, until right now, that Doug still has guns glued all over his body. I don't know why he decided to glue them there because removing them would only add to the pain that he already feels, ya know, with Lisa leaving. Emotional pain. He was going to marry her. She's a bitch anyway. Yeah, a real bitch. Doug deserves better. Doug deserves a woman with a fatter ass.

"Yeah, I do." said Doug, to me, the narrator.

Well hi, Doug.

"Hey," Doug replies.

What do you think is going to happen next?

"I'm not really sure, man. I think I'll probably try to get Lisa back, she'll say no, I'll be sad for a few months, start doing CrossFit, join a cult, get kicked out, try to get my life back in order, and eventually find another woman to settle down with," said Doug.

Well, It seems like you got it all figured out. I'm glad we had this talk.

"Me too, Chris." said Doug.

As Doug sits on his futon, sad, lonely, and suicidal, he's only thinking about Lisa... and suicide, because he's also very suicidal. I'd really hate to ruin it for you guys, but he won't kill himself. He won't do it. He won't do it because he is a pussy. Doug the Bear is a pussy.

\*\*\*

A few months later Douglas the Bear is new and improved. He started doing CrossFit, he looks good. I mean, real good. Doug is most likely chiseled as shit and probably has abs by now, but I also have no idea because of all the hair that's on his body. Last I heard he started moisturizing his fur, but I haven't spoken to him in a while. I miss him.

Sometimes I like to think of all of the fun times we had while I type bullshit stories. I remember a time when he and I broke the 4th wall in this very story. That was so cool. I miss him dearly. We might have been the first to ever do it, but I'm also unsure of that because I don't read too much... Wait. I just got an email from Doug. I just got an email from DOUGLAS! DOUGLAS! MOTHER FUCKING DOUGLAS!

I'll post it soon. I'm trying to figure out how to copy and paste from my email.

Got it. Here it is:

*Hey, Chris. It's me. Doug. Doug the Bear.*

*"My name is Doug! My name is Doug! My name is Doug!"*

*LOL Remember that? We've had some good times! I know you're writing a short story right now and I really hope that is going well. I've been doing CrossFit for about 3 months now and yes, underneath all of this hair I AM in fact chiseled as shit and do have abs.*

*Thank you for thinking about me,*

*From Doug the Bear With Love*

*P.S. I'm still really proud of that 4th wall break we did earlier in the story. ;P*

Gosh, it's just so nice to hear from him. Although he didn't mention the gun/hair thing. I've been wondering about that.

Anyway, I'll leave you with this. I've been thinking, well hoping that this is something worth reading and—

"Hey, don't go, man. We've got a lot of catching up to do." said, Doug

Doug! I'm so happy to hear from you again!

"Of course, man. You know what, bro? Lisa Maria was a bitch with no ass anyway" said Doug.

Yeah. I had the feeling. Hey, Doug. If you don't mind me asking, what happened with you and your kids?

"Oh, it's nothing." said Doug.

No, you can tell me. You can trust me.

"If it's all the same to you I'd rather not speak about this" replied Doug.

Doug... it's me... Chris... you can talk to me.

"Ok, fine..." Doug begins to share reluctantly. "So... It was 1973 and I was fishing with my mom and my friend Doug the Bear. Ya see, Doug the Bear is a gay man. Ya, know. The hairy one. He's not an actual bear. Well, that night we were fishing and... well... We caught these kids. They were a lot to reel up, I didn't think I was strong enough to pull these water logged humans out of the water, it's hard enough to stand on two legs when you're a bear-" said Doug, but only to be interrupted by me, the narrator.

I'm sorry to interrupt, but you have a gay friend named Doug the Bear? Isn't your name Doug the Bear? Also, I understand how callbacks in comedy work... so if this is a fake story, I need you to tell me right now.

"Ugh, there's something I need to tell you... You are Doug the Bear. We're all Doug the bear. "My name is Doug. My name is Doug! MY NAME IS DOUG MY NAME IS DOUG," Doug replies convincingly.

Oh, cut the shit, Doug. I've seen Fight Club.

"Listen, I'm sorry. I'll tell you what really happened."

Ok, go on.

"It was 1972 and my children and I were fishing with my mother and my friend Dave the Duck. Now, Dave has, well, he had a drinking problem. We all knew this well before we even planned this fishing trip. We just, ya know, we just hoped for the best because Dave doesn't get out much and we wanted to get him out of his house. So, as I was talking to my mother, David turns to me and says "I killed your children". At first, I didn't believe him. I thought he was full of shit. Well, I knew his was full of shit... and... and he was full of shit. My kids were fine, ya see, all the booze abuse gave Dave a real dark sense of humor. Hey, I mean, don't we all have a dark sense of humor at our lowest moments?" replied Doug.

Get to the point, Doug.

Doug continued, "Yeah, ok, Well, I started laughing so hard that I fell, I fell backwards and tripped over my own mother. This, well, this trip caused my mom to drop her fishing pole, which shifted the line and wiggled around both of my children's neck's and... and... and well, they strangled to death. I get blamed for this, but it was Dave. I swear. It was Dave. I... I... I just want to see my kids again, Chris."

Doug, I'm so sorry

"Don't be, I killed them both. Bears eat other bears, Chris. It's a fact. We're cannibals," said Doug.

THE END

**The Wife Of**  
**by**  
**Annette LeBox**

The wife of a goat is a goatee, a bearded lady in the circus, three bristly hairs on her chinny chin chin, trimmed and smoothed into a lively point, making the point that hair defines gender, sort of.

\*

The wife of a cheater is the last to know, though the clues were there; she is considered clueless for her lack or in denial for not believing that love lies.

\*

The wife of a gopher is a go-fer of the first order, a bringer of coffee and tree nuts and a bearer of bad news bears. Go figure.

\*

The wife of a fireman flips the calendar past September, her cheesecake honey's month. The glossy two-page spread's been photo-shopped to hide the roll around hubby's pot. She's the envy of the other wives, but she fantasizes about December, her husband's best friend, thinking how she'd like to slide off that cheesy Santa hat he's holding over his briefs.

\*

The wife of a writing prof is his perennial student serving his inflated ego in parenthesis, (the semi-to his colon, comma to his exclamation, lower case to his capital I).

\*

The wife of a dentist hates teeth, resents hubby's talk of cavities and drills, his lectures on gum disease and rubber dams. She implants gold bridges of conversation, whitens choppers, wears a party tooth to soirees, grins a lot.

\*

The wife of a big wheel is the tire on which hubris treads or the rim, a machinated appendage, not the engine that moves a rig.

\*

The wife of a sloth is an awful housekeeper. She lazes the days away, lounging on treetops and telephone wires. She's laid back, hanging by her toes, dozing the days away. She and her mate are perfectly-matched slackers.

\*

The wife of a CEO is a trophy, a younger version of the first, blonder and skinnier, having not yet birthed the prerequisite child after which she'll become a stay-at-home mom.

\*

The wife of a cigar is a cigarette. The cigar is full-bodied, richer — a fat cat preening. He creates a big stink, fills a room. She's thinner, sleeker and sneakier. Accompanied by coffee or beer, she's a lively hit. The pull of her stronger than smack.

\*

The wife of a nut loves peanut butter, cuts herself crunchy. She's addicted to the stick of it, finds community in the spread.

**We Cannot Become What we Need to be by Remaining What we Are**  
by  
**C.B. Auder**

"I need a transplant," Dad said, and before I could even back up my spreadsheet, the old man had tripped over the coffee table and windmilled into my lap.

I'd always thought of my father as a person only in the abstract, of course. But once that cruller-loving flesh bag was slumped across my chair, pinching my carpal-tunnel arm? Well.

Then the spark left his eyes and it hit: I was alone in the world. Just me and the family's creeping ficus.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying the idea of losing my parents ever bothered me. But at that moment, with everything seeming so--what's the word, real?--and his elbow crushing my esophagus? Yeah, I felt sheepish I hadn't thought to offer a parting wheeze.

What kills me is that I could so easily have slipped something in. That moment right after he'd clutched his chest, just before high-fiving the choir invisible. His hairy ear so close to mine I could smell those funny little balls of wax....

I could have murmured, "When's dinner?" or "Whoopsie-daisy!" or "What kind of transplant?"

What do they say? That when you're in the middle of it, that last moment always feels so penultimate?

Luckily, I'd learned the fireman's carry as a kid. I heaved Dad over to the dining room and rolled him onto the buffet table just seconds before the surgeon steamed out of the kitchen, clutching her sterile tray.

She fussed and clacked her shiny silver utensils, and then hacked a panel out of Dad's sternum.

Seeing that cross-section of ribs, that was a weensy bit too CSI for my blood, so I averted my gaze to the Gauguin. Which I never take the time to appreciate because it's always hanging over my head, and--don't tell my boss, but--I prefer Van Gogh.

After the organ harvesting, the doctor disappeared again, and I peeked over.

Dad lay there, like a giant napping open-faced sandwich and I had to smile. He'd always been such a quiet person. And he loved mustard!

Well, I figured there wasn't anything more I could do--the embalming machine was making its little gloopy noises--and by then that goddamned sunbeam had arced onto my computer screen. All four of Gauguin's Tahitian buttocks went peachy-cheeked in the light as though to say, "Hello? This project is on a double-deadline."

I don't know, for some reason I was drawn back to Dad instead. Maybe I was curious to see if I'd get any feelings from glimpsing his lifeless corpse? I didn't expect any miracles, but

they say death changes people.

It was a good thing I turned. Dad had risen and was rolling over, mumbling something about having to get back to the office--his hair a bird's nest as usual--and I lunged in (making sure to bend at the knees, not the waist) and grabbed his wrists.

"You're semi-retired, remember? You need to relax," I said--probably too loudly, now that I think back.

I hoped he wouldn't see my attempt at a casual smile as patronizing, the way the neighbor's asshole Akita always did. But Dad was so drained by that point, he didn't even notice the embalmer in the room.

Then again, when had he ever? I took heart in that normalcy and had to chuckle even as I leveraged my leg against the wall to press his earnest cadaver back down.

"Stop flopping around," I grunted. "You have to stay still or all the tubes will pop out." (Whether or not this was true, I confess I don't know, but I wasn't going to spend the next six months eating my meals above a formaldehyde-soaked rug.)

Then things got weird. An urge came over me: to rock Dad into a slumber with little chuffing noises. I was like, what the hell? Just creepy.

When the doctor returned I asked, "What kind of transplant had he needed?"

"Brain." She scowled at a vial of some bubbling purple liquid.

"Ah, of course. That makes sense," I murmured. Soothingly, I hoped. I mean, people don't go into the healing professions because they're well-adjusted and happy with their own lives, right?

But the doctor had already forgotten me. Which was a comfort, because it reminded me of Dad.

Funny. It was all so long ago. Two years, now? Three? I think I don't even own that buffet table anymore.

## Contributor Biographies



**Kevin Sterne** is a writer and journalist based in Chicago. He writes about beer and music for *Substream Magazine*. He's also the editor of *LeFawn Magazine*. His work has appeared or will appear in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Potluck Mag*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Down in the Dirt Magazine*, and *Word Eater*, among many others. Kevin attended Joliet Junior College. Find him on the dark web at [kevinsterne.com](http://kevinsterne.com), on Twitter [@kevinsterne](https://twitter.com/kevinsterne) or down a pseudoscience rabbit hole.



**Tucker Lieberman's** poems have appeared in *Snakeskin*, *Ariga*, and *Flutter*, and in his book *Wild Mushrooms*. He studied philosophy and journalism and works in technology and finance. When he doesn't believe in something, he gives presentations to the Disproof Atheism Society in Boston. He believes that pumpkin belongs in pie and not in coffee.



**Kay Bevan** is an English teacher from Australia. Which is the same as being an English teacher anywhere else, except for the frequent need to remove spiders from the classroom, which should really have been in the job description in the first place. They also do some writing from time to time.



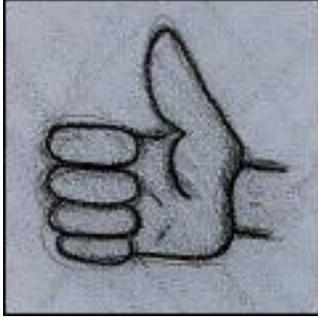
**JD DeHart** is a writer and teacher. His poems have appeared in *Gargouille* and *The Other Herald*, among other places. He blogs at [jddehartpoetry.blogspot.com](http://jddehartpoetry.blogspot.com).



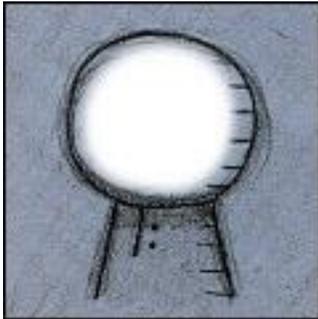
**Jennie Byrne** is a poet and short story writer from Wirral, Merseyside. She obtained a first class Creative Writing degree in 2016 and is now studying a master's at Edge Hill University. Her work has appeared in *Under the Fable*, *MIR Online*, and *The Black Market Review*. Recently, she was shortlisted for Jane Martin Poetry Prize 2017 and currently works for Edge Hill University Press in association with Arc Publications.



**Nathaniel Sverlow** is a freelance writer of poetry and prose. He was born in 1983 in San Diego, California and has since spent most of his time hunched over a laptop randomly pressing keys. He currently resides in the Sacramento area with four cats, two roommates, and one incredibly supportive wife.



**L. Soviero** firmly believes that if you ruin someone's couch or curtains or tablecloths with your gimp suit zippers, it's your responsibility to make sure they're fixed. Always do the right thing, people. Always. I'm serious.



**J.P. Celia**'s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rattle, Barrow Street, The Recusant, First Things, Tar River Poetry, The Lyric, and The Rotary Dial*.



**Chris Connell** writes comedy. He tends to write stuff that isn't planned out at all and is most likely complete nonsense. With that being said, he hopes everyone enjoys his nonsense.



**Annette LeBox** is an award-winning poet with 45 poems published in literary magazines such as *Event*, *Poetry Canada*, *Prairie Fire*, the *Southern Review* (Australia), the *Hiram Review*, and *Scrivener*. She also writes novels, short stories and picture books. Two of her picture books won the BC Book Prize. She divides her time between Maple Ridge, BC, and her remote cabin in the Cariboo grasslands. She holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia.



**C.B. Auder** has pursued a nearly-lifelong career as a perambulating ecosystem and currently basks in the luxurious glow of being a part-time cartoon otter. Auder's oddly-tortured prose has appeared in *Storm Cellar*, *Cleaver*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, and elsewhere. C.B.'s story was originally published in *Jersey Devil Press* (Nov. 2015). Follow Aud's tweets on Twitter at [@cb\\_auder](https://twitter.com/cb_auder).