

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XVIII, Issue I

April 2021

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Q. Can I Hunt Underwater Zombies with Your New Chainsaw, And If Not, Does the Warranty Cover Water Damage?

**by
Myna Chang**

Jeremy chugged a can of Shake & Wake Soda. He'd been up for two days straight making a new video for his YouTube channel. A yawn morphed into a surprise belch that brought tears to his eyes. He shook his head and hit the upload button. This chainsaw stunt video was a masterpiece of editing, blending top-notch graphics with his favorite guitar riffs.

The style might not fit Grandma Sharon's taste, but he knew it would bring more upbeat customers into her quiet little hardware store. "Don't worry, Grandma, I got you covered," he said as he cross-posted the video to her Hometown Depot website.

He paused to admire how sick the video looked embedded in the sales copy. Pleased with his work, he decided to get some sleep before his shift stocking shelves at the store. His apartment was heaped with piles of camera equipment and chainsaw parts, so he stretched out on the floor under his desk and fell into a satisfied sleep-coma.

Sharon settled into her comfy office chair. Early morning was her favorite time in the hardware store, with dawn light streaming in the big front windows and the scent of pine mulch wafting from the garden aisle. She savored the quiet for a moment, then booted up her computer.

The day's first shoppers would arrive soon, but she had time to answer a few customer questions on the store's website. She zipped to the administrator Q&A portal and opened the first question:

Q. Can I hunt underwater zombies with your new chainsaw, and if not, does the warranty cover water damage?

Asked by: Nuke & Del

She wrinkled her forehead. The timestamp on the question was 3:07 a.m. "What the heck?" She pounded out a polite-yet-responsible reply and hit send. The phone rang before she could open the next question. So much for her peaceful morning. She forced a smile into her voice.

"Hometown Depot, how can I help?"

"Do you sell confetti dispensers to attach to my chainsaw?"

Sharon squinted at her phone. "Did everyone wake up crazy?"

Jeremy's phone alarm dinged, telling him it was time to go to work. Half asleep, he finger-combed his hair, grabbed his work apron and headed out. Chill morning air stung his face as he drove. He wished he could close his car window, but it'd been smashed by flying trampoline springs while filming his video. The cold drive was worth it though, because that

tramp scene was the highlight of his final action sequence. It looked *killer*. So who cared if his nostril hairs froze? It was a small price to pay for stunt-making glory.

The first thing on his to-do list at the store was to change the boring old labels on the chainsaw display. He couldn't understand how his grandmother had managed to make chainsaws dull. Good thing he was there to help. She expected him to spend the morning restocking the nails and bolts, but he figured that could wait. Bright new signage was more important. Maybe he could add some runway lights to amplify the route to the chainsaw aisle? Oh yeah, Jeremy was wide awake and ready to blast new life into the hardware business.

Sharon glared at the words on her screen. This was the fifth weird chainsaw question of the morning and she hadn't even finished her coffee yet.

Q. *I bent the chain guard cutting the roof off my car. Can I straighten the guard, or do I need a new one?*

Asked by: Wanna Be Florida Man

A. *This saw is rated only for cutting wood. Please don't...why would you even do that?*

Answered by: Sharon

A follow-up question immediately popped onto her screen:

Q. *I want a convertible. And you're seriously underestimating this saw, it took the top right off my Taurus, slick as snot. But what about the bent guard?*

A. *Don't do that again. You're lucky you didn't get hurt! And yes, you need a new guard. You can order one on the website.*

She shook her head and moved to the next question:

Q. *Can I cut thick tree limbs with the extension pole fully engaged?*

Asked by: Pearl S. Gleeson

"That's more like it," Sharon muttered. "A legitimate product question."

A. *Yes. The Safe-T-Cut Extendable Chainsaw can cut tree limbs up to 7.5 inches thick with the telescopic pole fully extended.*

Answered by: Sharon

Q. *How about a human bone?*

"Yikes." Sharon hit the 'block user' button and moved to the next question:

Q. *I was chasing a raccoon and it ran up a tree, so I tried to follow and fell over backwards, and the chainsaw flew out of my hands and wedged into the side of my house. Can I get a longer extension pole?*

Asked by: NOYB

A. *No. We don't have longer poles. Please use this product responsibly!*

Answered by: Sharon

AA. *And leave that raccoon alone!*

She massaged her temples, hoping to ward off the headache that was forming, then continued her work:

Q. *Is the Pole of Reaching effective against your basic water zombie?*
Asked by: Nuke & Del

A. *No! I already told you not to submerge the chainsaw in water! You're going to electrocute yourselves!*

Q. *That sucks. Can we get a non-electric chainsaw? Because that lake south of town is filled with undead.*

A. *What is wrong with you people?*

AA. *I guess you could try our gasoline powered model. It's on the website.*

Sharon frowned. The Pole of Reaching? That sounded like one of Jeremy's silly game things... *Jeremy.*

Her jaw clenched as she scrolled to the product description. Sure enough, all this nonsense was her grandson's fault. He'd been messing with the sales copy. Again. Instead of the "Safe-T-Cut Extendable Chainsaw," her website now offered the "Get Medieval Polearm Saw of Reckoning."

Beneath the ridiculous name, she saw the color options had been changed from the normal red, blue, or white to:

Options:

- Dragon Red - ***Only a few left in stock!***
- Extreme Blue
- Kick-Ass Pink
- Camo-Whamo - ***Temporarily Out of Stock***
- Beige - ***Special Gonzo Discount!***

Quantity - *Buy two and save a buttload of cash!*

"A buttload of cash," Sharon snorted. "That boy still doesn't understand basic arithmetic. No wonder he flunked out of college."

Still, discounts were a good idea for the slower-selling colors. She calculated the break-even ratio in her head, mentally bumped up the number to maintain a profit margin, then clicked into the pricing screen. She continued to grind her teeth while she edited out "Gonzo" and "buttload."

Jeremy saw that his grandma was still busy in her office, which gave him the perfect opportunity to unload the new shipment of Automatic WhackAxes. He feared she'd

disapprove of the new product, but he was sure she'd come around after all the lively new customers swarmed into the store. He unloaded the boxes, and whoa! The display looked pretty rad. He took a quick selfie and uploaded it to his stunt site, then checked the hourly traffic stats.

"Yes!" he yelled. He danced in a circle around the garden shovels, singing "oh yeah, highest traffic ever, oh yeah."

An older man in the paint aisle backed away from him, but Jeremy didn't notice. He was focused on the new comments that had already appeared on the chainsaw video. He skimmed them, then froze: a note from the Atomic Duck Tape Corporation? Fingers trembling, he expanded the message. Read it. Opened his mouth, fish-faced, and read it a second time.

"A sponsorship offer? From the most badass tape company in the world? You could stick a frickin' rocket together with that stuff!"

He danced around the shovels again, this time singing "oh yeah, unlimited super tape, oh yeah, atomic money."

The two customers who had been browsing socket wrenches hurried out of the store.

Sharon turned her attention to the chainsaw video. "How to use this bitchin' saw!" pulsed in neon yellow, and her headache immediately synced with the flashing graphics. She hesitated. Why couldn't he just stick to restocking the shelves like she'd asked?

She hit "play" and a blare of frenetic guitar music rattled her computer speakers. Then Jeremy wavered into focus, wielding a chainsaw. It was the Dragon Red model. He demonstrated how to attach the "Pole of Reaching," and explained how it allowed users to safely trim tree branches without the need of a wobbly ladder. Sharon smiled in relief. "Very responsible," she nodded.

Then someone off camera threw a watermelon and Jeremy swung the saw like a baseball bat, ripping the melon into a jagged wreck of rind and red haze. The guitar screech amped up to an image of Jeremy using the fully-extended pole to slice the net off a basketball hoop. The view changed to Jeremy gleefully sawing through the "Caution" traffic sign at the intersection of Lake Road and State Highway 6. The next shot showed him posing on a surfboard, using the chainsaw to fend off flying lakefish.

The montage slowed and a voiceover intoned: "Remember what Grandma says: Be responsible. Wear your safety goggles." Jeremy donned a ski mask and hacked an old trampoline to pieces.

Sharon gaped as trampoline springs bounced across the screen, while her grandson yelled "Banzai!"

Stunned, she squinched her eyes shut for a moment, then squared her shoulders and reached for the PA microphone. Her words boomed throughout the store: "Jeremy, come to my office. NOW."

Jeremy slid sideways through Sharon's door. "You wanted to see me, Grandma?"

She jabbed at her computer. "What is this Medieval Polearm stuff on my website?"

Jeremy grinned. "Pretty awesome, huh?"

"It's completely irresponsible," Sharon said. "You should see the questions that are coming in. You've set off an epidemic of stupidity!"

"Stupidity? That must be my fan base. I cross-posted from my YouTube channel."

"YouTube. Jeremy, Sweetheart, when are you going to stop playing with that nonsense? You have to take responsibility for your life."

"But Grandma, I make money off my stunt videos."

"People pay for that insanity?"

"Ha! No. But the advertising on my site pays, cash per click."

"They pay you for your viewers?"

"Yep. And I get a bonus when my fans come back to read the comments. It's called *viewer engagement*. I'm really good at it."

Sharon quirked an eyebrow, unconvinced.

"Let me show you." He scooted up a chair and clicked into her Q&A portal. One of the questions Sharon had answered earlier blinked at the top of the screen:

*Q. I'm going to a Dystopian Renaissance Faire this weekend. What types of armor can this chainsaw cut through when the pole is fully extended?
Asked by: Sir Worthington the Worthy*

*A. Son, you are too stupid to use a chainsaw. Return it to the store at once!
Answered by: Sharon*

"Grandma!" Jeremy said. "That's the opposite of positive viewer engagement. You'll tank your ratings."

"But that guy is going to kill someone," Sharon grumbled.

"Naw, he's just a role player. See his follow-up question?"

*Q. Ok, I've tested this. In handheld mode, I have greater cutting power—that flimsy LARP armor can't hold up. But, my reach is greatly reduced, putting me smack-dab inside the Shining Knight's cleaving radius (he uses the Automatic WhackAxe). Do you think the increased cutting power is worth the risk?
Asked by: Sir Worthington the Worthy*

Jeremy cracked his knuckles and began to type:

A. *Nope. That WhackAxe will fuck you up, bro. I say extend the pole out as far as it will go, and sneak up behind that cocky MF.*

PRO TIP: *If you enter the jousting competition, you might wanna reinforce the joints on the pole with some Atomic Duck Tape.*

Answered by: Jeremy Z Stunt King

"Jeremy Z Stunt King?" Sharon scoffed.

"That's my internet handle," Jeremy replied.

"Uh huh," she deadpanned. "And I suppose the Automatic WhackAxe is a real thing?"

"Yeah, we sell 'em. Aisle four."

Sharon sputtered, but Jeremy pretended he didn't notice and moved to the next question:

Q. *Is there a bulk purchase discount? I'd like to mount a saw on each wheel of my minivan.*

Asked by: Nancy

A. *That's the spirit, Nancy! Don't let those other moms crowd you out of the school drop-off line! You can see in the order box (above) a discount of 5% if you buy two. So I think that'll give you a total of 7% off, if you buy 4, but don't hold me to that cause I don't believe in math. How the hell are you gonna mount those saws to your van? You gotta come back & post some pix!*

"See Grandma? Customer engagement. People will come back to look at those photos and buy more stuff. You'll have tons of rockin' customers in your store."

"What? I don't want those lunatics here!"

"Really? I thought you hired me to bring some excitement into this dull place."

"It's not dull, it's peaceful, and I hired you because you flunked out of business school. I was afraid you'd starve."

"I didn't flunk out. I quit to focus on my YouTube channel. And I just got this great new sponsorship gig."

"Will it pay enough to cover your expenses, and give you some profit to save?"

"Yeah? Maybe? I already make enough to cover rent." He remembered his broken car window and sagged. "Maybe it's not really enough. I suck at math. But you're good with all this money crap, Grandma. Would you look at this contract for me?" He opened the Atomic Duck Tape message and handed over his phone.

Sharon sighed and started to read. Her breath caught. "Holy moly, Jeremy, this is more than I'll make all year."

"So it's a good deal?"

Sharon nodded. "But you might change this paragraph to state you're not liable for any injuries that result from your videos. In fact, you should probably warn all your fans. Your stunts are too dangerous for them to replicate."

"Wow, Grandma, you're good at legal crap, too. Wanna be my business manager? In exchange for my customer engagement expertise here at the hardware store? We can be partners!"

"Of course, I'll help you, but..." she stammered. The phone rang. Grateful for the distraction, she hit the speakerphone button.

"Hometown Depot."

"Hi, Sheriff Ortree here. Do you carry flamethrowers? There's a whole herd of zombies at the lake, and these chainsaws keep getting jammed up with bone fragments."

Jeremy leaned closer to the speaker. "I'd recommend the Flamethrower of Justice, Sheriff. We just got a whole crate of 'em, and we can give you a gonzo discount if you buy in bulk."

Sharon considered her grandson while he closed the sale. Were the lake zombies his fault? Possibly, but she had to admit, the store was more interesting with his brand of customer engagement.

He hung up the phone and she draped her arm around him. "You've got a deal, partner."

I Am Bryan From Work And This Is Just To Say
by
Sophie Panzer

I.

I have taken the credit
for the idea
you had
in the meeting

and which you
were probably
hoping
would get you promoted

Forgive me
for thinking imitation
the highest form
of flattery.

II.

I have also asked
you to get me
coffee
during your break

even though it is
our intern Brandon's
job to get me coffee
and not yours

Forgive Brandon
for being too busy
on his phone
playing Candy Crush.

III.

I have also decided
to ask you
out
again

although you have
rejected me
four times
and blocked my number

Forgive me
for knowing

women like
to be wooed.

IV.

I have talked
over you
again
in front of our boss

who you were probably
hoping to talk to
about our
diversity initiative

Forgive him
for not being supportive
of women
in the workplace.

V.

I have also made
several comments
about how good your chest looks
in that sweater

did you know
your chest looks
good
in that sweater?

Forgive me
for complimenting you
about how good your chest looks
in that sweater.

Five Stars
by
Eric Kaplan

When I read *Talons of the Night* at first I thought I would like it because I am a fan of human/intelligent eagle erotic fan fiction and I thought this would be an example of that because of the title and because of the cover art which depicted a very curvaceous and lovely woman in a painting having an intimate encounter with a swan which although it is not an eagle which is what I find most exciting, is pretty close, much closer than for example anything on television where you have to imagine that the man with the woman is an eagle in a costume or changes into an eagle at some time of day which is the theme of the film *Lady Hawk* which I also like although the genders are wrong, at least for my own reading pleasure.

Imagine how disappointed I was to discover that it was not what I thought I would be but in fact different, and in fact, different along the dimension of making it worse rather than better.

Has the writer ever actually seen an eagle? If he had he would know they are not grey and white and full-chested—that is a description of a pigeon! The eagle body and coloration are entirely different! Has he ever actually had a sexual fantasy of being one and having an intimate encounter with a human woman, between five foot two and five foot eight with a slender waist and blondish or reddish blondish hair? If he had he would know that her naked bosoms are crushed against the bird's brawny chest and sternum, that the wings comfort her, and he would use the words "coo" and "squawk" and "nestle"!

Does he know anything about love?

The answer is unfortunately "no" or if it is yes his skills at using the English language to describe these experiences in such a way that it will be useful for a reader who is hoping to read a book in order to enjoy thinking about these things is nil defective and deficient, so much so that I will go back to my first answer—he has never had these experiences! I wonder if he has a heart!

And yet the picture of the young man borne up to heaven on the back of the immense VULTURE (not an eagle as I can tell you) for sodomistic love play with the King of Gods is not something that I can easily forget as I lie in bed trying to sleep.

I am eighty-seven.

You know nothing of love or sex or fantasy or eagles T. Wayne Roger Williams and you are a bad author and I give your book 1 star.

But I love you. I give you five stars. I know you don't know anything about love or eagles in fantasy and are an extremely poor writer. (Honestly did you know there is a part of speech called an "adverb"? You should google what they are and then use them TMRW!). But the fact that you are out there on the internet—I wonder in what country—it is clear English is not your native language? Perhaps the hot sands of Saudi Arabia or a bloc of flats in some former Soviet satellite—trying to put these fantasies into words and trying to say what love is, and failing, so desperately, so completely, so abjectly, makes me love you.

It took me two and a half hours of searching but I found your IP address in Moldavia. I am coming for you Mr. Mascalu.

I will rake your back with my nails and for our final consummation take you up up up above the clouds far far from where mortal men and birds do dwell.

Darwin's Prophet
by
James W. Reynolds

Is this a fist I see which approaches my face
with steroid-assisted velocity?
Or is this a fist of the mind, an immaculate conception,
gestating in a beer-soaked brain?

If real, that news report now rings true:
we are indeed evolving into crabs
because the fist is truly crustacean-like
huge as a Caribbean conch shell
with blue enameled calluses;
spikey ridges serving as knuckles.

Having now considered the fist close-up
perhaps it was wrong of me to so freely
and so loudly share my concerns about
your too obvious and too intimate
relations with your mother.
After all, you are simply ensuring
your odd traits will be inherited.

So, good for you, Darwin's Prophet!

Managing to crawl all by yourself
through the septic foam fringing the shoreline
and learning to adapt in a new environment.
Your flat head and crooked legs
proclaim that you are the pathfinder
in evolution's wilderness.

And well done, too, Darwin's Pharmacist!

Opting for an unnatural selection of supplements
to enhance bulk and brawn over brains.
Your scrunched brow crusted with barnacles
and those black pebbles passing as eyes
affirm that in the future only mutants
will be fit to survive.

Lola Gets Sober
by
Stephanie Gibbon

Lola Brandy Hicks made her wobbly way down the baking, summer sidewalk hell-bent on the bar she could see two copies of 100 feet ahead. People were staring but Lola told herself she didn't give a shit. She was used to this kind of attention and figured she knew what it was about. She was funny looking, as more than one slurring, anonymous suitor had pointed out. One of them, a pockmarked man with a cubic zirconia-encrusted eyepatch, had actually stopped mid-thrust to remark that her body looked like a potato with pipe cleaners for legs. Lola who at the time was flat her on back atop a vintage 60's chrome and Formica table in the middle of someone's wood-paneled rec room, stifled a sigh and decided to pretend she hadn't heard him. It was a plausible lie—the party was in full swing and somewhere nearby some guy was playing "Stardust" on an out-of-tune guitar.

It was harder to ignore it when the man took advantage of his grip on her thin calves to bend her legs at the knee several times and observe to a passing friend that this chick had legs like Kermit the frog.

Love is now the stardust of yesterday.

The music of years gone by...

Quite a romantic song, Lola remembered thinking.

She was now at an intersection, leaning against the pole and trying not to barf. A car honked as it whizzed by and Lola aimed a belated middle finger at the empty space left behind.

And then she did barf. As she critically examined the orange splatter of partially digested Zoodles and Reese peanut butter cups, she made a mental note that morning gin and two hits of Salvia extract did not combine at all well. A young mother pushing a stroller in Lola's direction did an abrupt about-face and aimed her chubby, Ralph Lauren-swaddled child back towards respectability.

The little walking man appeared and Lola staggered across the road. It took all the time that pedestrians were allotted and then some to cross this particular intersection because Lola travelled back and forth sideways just as much as she went forward. Matters were not helped by Lola's predilection for sparkling platform sandals, atop which she minced and tottered like a vertigo-struck Geisha girl even at the best of times. When she was at last on the opposite curb, she had to stop to catch her breath.

Then she did what Lola did: she barfed.

Hours later as the fat sun was setting Lola stumbled from the bar. That guy who'd been so generous with the tequila shots followed close behind, made it two steps, and collapsed. Lola tottered on through the parking lot and was suddenly very dizzy but fortunately there was a bit of lawn here separating the sidewalk from the plaza's parking lot. Seemed as good a place as any to fall facedown. She did not go down in one smooth motion though—rather, it was a sort dance involving two steps to the side, then one forward, then a pirouette of

sorts, and then finally a collapse earthward. Her noodly-thin arms reflexively stretched forward did little to break her fall but it was ok, she was beyond pain. As she lay there a moment or two, actually starting to feel better, she became dimly aware that her unexpectedly flat, little bottom was sticking up in the air. Her upper body was flush with the ground but only her shins were also pressed into the grass and so since she was nearly in the correct position, only tipped forward, Lola decided to pray.

"Just one little sign, God. So that I know that you're real. Just one little sign and I promise I'll change."

At that moment two teenaged boys were walking down the sidewalk. One boy looked to the other, smiled, and then stepped off the sidewalk and gave Lola's unexpectedly flat, little, spangled, Lycra-clad bottom a vigorous smack. The boys laughed loudly and went on their way into the failing light.

Lola's eyes flew open.

"Sweet Jesus," she said into the grass.

Jed, an alcoholic luthier with neck tattoos and a heart of gold, led the applause after Jackie, a leather- and stud-covered sober biker, gave her brusque, no-nonsense interpretation of the slogans. He resumed his position behind the podium and said, "Thank you, Jackie. And now we come to the highlight of this meeting. I always love hearing this woman speak. She's got one hell of—sorry, heck of—a message. She's someone I admire very much and have learnt so much from. Would you please help me welcome tonight's speaker, Bertha Q from this group!"

The applause was loud and genuinely heartfelt. Bertha stood and strode to the front of the room. She was a large woman nearly 25 years sober and currently in the employ of the men's treatment centre just outside of town. She was a crackerjack counsellor who chewed her tobacco and maintained order during group therapy sessions by challenging any misbehaving male to an arm wrestle, which she always won. It was she who had piloted the recommissioned school bus emblazoned somewhat less-than-discretely with the light-reflecting words "Serenity Glen Men's Rehab" here tonight. She was adored and feared in equal measure by her charges, who occupied two rows of seats near the back of the auditorium. There were one or two wolf-whistles from that part of the room as Brenda gripped the sides of the podium and launched into her spiel.

Before she had found recovery in AA, Bertha had lived a chaotic and friendless existence of odd jobs and dodging warrants. Her only enduring employment had been in a travelling freak show associated with a music festival in the 90s. She'd entertained otherwise disaffected Gen Xers by breaking bricks against her forehead and eating syringes. This brought a small measure of celebrity and an even larger measure of notoriety. But, in spite of the attention, it'd been very lonely being a freak. Hence the endless flood of alcohol until that glorious morning Bertha had awoken to Pedro the Ninja Midget gently draping a tarpaulin over her plump, booze-rouged, and naked bulk.

"Well Bertha," Pedro had said, "I reckon it's about time you got sober, huh?"

By this point in Bertha's narrative, there was hardly a dry eye in the house. Everyone present, even those who had been fairly sure that all this AA stuff was bullshit, sat listening

with rapt attention. There was something undeniably endearing about the honesty and earnestness of this remarkable woman. She spent about fifteen minutes of her talk speaking of the epic journey that began with her first meeting of AA. The result was a life that Brenda could have never imagined for herself. She dwelt especially on the importance of service. She waxed eloquent on the subject of the Responsibility Pledge which states that 'Whenever anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA to always be there. And for this, I am responsible.'

"I want us all to remember that," said Bertha. "How much more effective we will be in spreading recovery, if we remember that the next broken-down drunk who walks through that door was once us and that that person is completely deserving of the same chance to recover as we had."

Bertha punctuated this last sentence by indicating the door to the fire escape, which given the heat of this summer's night, was open to create a bit of a through breeze. And at the very moment Bertha's gesture caused the entire room to turn its head, Lola appeared. She was still completely inebriated and spent a long moment staring at the audience with her mouth agape and her body swaying.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU PEOPLE DOING IN MY BEDROOM?!" she bellowed at last.

Then she fell face forward over the threshold but never hit the ground.

A hand had caught her.

Where Sperm Come From
by
Barbara Daniels

They spurt right out of the brain. That's
why Athena leapt from her father's head,
clothed, armed. Somebody had to axe

Zeus's head open, but Athena was crouched
in there, ready. Greek men did their thinking
with their guts. Why not? Their brains

were busy making sperm. Place your hand
on your belly. Do you feel a quiver there?
Does it help you to apprehend mysterious

manliness—persistent whiskers, hands
catching baseballs, sperm snaking
suddenly out of the dark? Golden Athena

lives in London now. She shines above
a private club's portico, always outside,
never allowed in the picture room,

drawing room, morning room, and
certainly not permitted a sperm-rich
liaison in one of the sumptuous beds.

The Father, The Son, and The Hardware Store
by
Will Musgrove

God's broke. He's more than broke. He's bankrupt.

Six months ago, God met with his financial advisor, who chastised Him for all His poor investments throughout the millennia: plagues, mass floods, feeding people to lions, Enron. God asked if there was any maneuvering He could do to avoid filing for Chapter 11. His financial advisor pressed his hands together and replied: "pray."

The next day, repo men rang the doorbell at the pearly gates and hauled away everything holy. Angels now had to lounge on beanbag chairs instead of clouds. They had to play kazoos instead of harps. They had to fly coach instead of flapping their giant, bird-like wings. They traded in their golden halos for impure aluminum ones. And God's gem-encrusted throne was replaced with a La-Z-Boy.

Normal people's afterlives were also affected. A 19th-century woman who died in a train accident now woke up each morning to a car horn instead of a gentle breeze. A 9th-century man who perished in the First Crusade now felt guilty for all the people he'd killed while in uniform. And those are just two examples among trillions. Even famous people couldn't escape the downsizing. Isaac Newtown, Stephen Hawking, and Benjamin Franklin went from playing chess to checkers.

Unfortunately for God, during this time of monetary unrest, Earth, His beloved creation, was experiencing its own level of instability. Stock markets crashed. Resources were hoarded. Conflicts boiled. And more and more of His genuflectors inquired about miracles. God had to lay off Saint Peter, how could He afford a new Yamaha dirt bike for some punk teen in North Dakota?

God tried raising tithes from 10 to 20 percent, but His followers refused to pay, said God should quit all the pork spending and get back to the Old Testament. He explained to them the high cost of forgiveness, of mercy and kindness, but they just shrugged and said: "Sounds like a *You* problem." Then God decided to contact the pastors at the mega-churches to see if they'd float Him a loan. They all replied hell no. One pastor, after God told him what He wanted the money for, said: "Why don't You get a real job, You hippie? I don't know how You plan to stay in the green with a divine plan like that."

So, God went out of business. But His so-called disciples still wanted a piece of Him. They'd phone Him and send Him threatening emails claiming He'd promised them this or that form of salvation, that they knew where He lived, that they'd switched to another almighty being who, in their words, "could really smite." Thankfully, God was able to cut a deal with the federal government. He ratted on everyone from the private-jet-flying evangelists to the small-time pastors in the Midwest and brought down all of organized religion. Now, He and His son are in the witness-protection program and go by the names Joe and Fred, respectively.

Joe works at Fred's hardware store. Joe knows shit about paint, wood, and home repair. He swears He used to be in the customer service industry, but He keeps scolding people for cursing and telling dirty jokes. Despite His lack of knowledge and His holier-than-thou attitude, He's an all-right dude. So, the next time He's helping you and He mixes up dimensional lumber and underlayment plywood, forgive Him, He knows not what He does.

Camouflage
by
Lisa Fox

So, this is what it's like to breathe in hell.

The arid, gritty air grates my teeth, my tongue, my throat; it's sandpaper to my lungs as I suck in deep gulps, heaving one breath after another. My once-black MGM Grand T-shirt clings with desert sweat. Dusty hues of the Grand Canyon paint me with the guilt of my crime. I lean into the canyon wall, a salamander channeling its camouflage as angry searchers scan the vast expanse, hoping for the slightest glimpse of me under the hundred-and-four-degree spotlight that is the sun.

It's usually an easy scam, only five steps to victory.

One: Dress like a tourist. Vegas T-shirt, Jansport backpack, New York Yankees cap, Nikes with worn soles, scratched wire-framed Ray-Bans.

Two: Wander into the crowd. Target the most enthusiastic site oglers—those who lack the proper degree of *situational awareness*.

Three: Lift their wares, swift as the wind.

Four: Disappear into the crowd, meandering from tour group to tour group until I've reached the parking lot.

Five: Escape. Comfortable in the driver's seat of... my black Ford Escape.

Fitting, isn't it?

I'm halfway back to Vegas before they know what's missing.

In six months' time, I've amassed thirty thousand dollars in cash, fifteen iPhones, two gold teeth, and a diamond engagement ring.

It's an easy living, but not today—thanks to the small, pale and exceptionally bored blond-haired boy playing *Pokémon Go* on a cell phone.

Who knew that was still a "thing"?

With the virtual *Pokémon* character taunting him through the tiny screen, the kid caught me in the ultimate photo bomb—just as I stashed a woman's small, red canvas duffle bag into my backpack.

"Mom. Mom!" The boy tugged at his mother's meaty arm. She swatted him back as she squinted through the binoculars glued to her eyeballs.

"MOM! She STOLE that lady's bag!"

I felt the whiplash of eighteen tourist heads snap in my direction, their quick, accusing eyes lancing into me. A middle-aged woman screamed with the realization that her satchel had vanished—poof!—like in a Copperfield show.

"Thief!"

I ran without thought, without direction—adrenaline overtaking my body and my brain. I dashed through the crowd, a clay dust cloud in my wake. I ran past the Desert View Watchtower of Grand Canyon National Park, past the native Hopis selling their weavings—their deep, knowing eyes following as I fled down the steep slope to a narrow ridge overlooking the canyon bed.

Angry voices echo as I quickly unzip the screaming-woman's bag. Sherrie Miller, 43, from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has furnished me with a stick of Cinnamon Red Cover Girl lipstick, a hair scrunchie decorated with miniature Elvises (or is it Elvis-ae?), a yellow Bic lighter, and half a pack of Marlboros. Digging deeper, I find a white handkerchief, one hundred and sixty-three dollars in cash, men's horn-rimmed eyeglasses, and a red T-shirt with 'Keep Calm and Play Slots' emblazoned on the front. Anchoring the bottom of the bag is a black Totes travel-sized umbrella.

Nothing in this sack warrants a mug shot.

The distance between me and my Ford is too vast for a ready getaway. By now, I'm certain security is swarming, guarding each exit, as the hapless victim files her report. My only options: amble down the steep decline and hide at the bed of the canyon, prey in wait; or turn back, ascend the dusty gradient and find a way out.

I peer over the precipice separating me from the canyon floor. Tumbleweed drifts over the jagged slope. Somewhere in the distance, the distinctive clatter of a rattlesnake melds with the heat in a veritable sizzle. To dive deep into the desert haze and wallow in the belly of hell, indefinitely, without water or shelter save for the shade of a Totes umbrella would precipitate certain suicide.

I decide to turn back.

But first, I peel away my sweat-soaked T-shirt. I toss my Yankees cap and Ray-Bans aside and use the victim's handkerchief to wipe the grime from my body. I turn the red "Keep Calm" T-shirt inside-out and pull it over my head, appreciating its clean coolness. I pull my long hair up in an Elvis-secured bun. I don the horn-rimmed glasses. They bear thin, slightly tinted lenses that thicken the canyon haze.

It will do.

I loop the umbrella cord around my wrist, pack the cash, Marlboros, and lighter in my back pocket, and carefully engage in my ascent.

I still hear the woman shrilling loudly in the distance and the murmurs of officers reassuring her that the *perpetrator* (me) will be found; and her *valuables* (questionable) retrieved.

I tread one foot at a time, ensuring my steps do not prompt a rockslide or worse—a fall into the Canyon.

I reach the top of the ridge, the Watchtower to my right. Groups of tourists mill about, crowding around an elderly craftsman as he weaves an intricate tapestry. Save for the woman's distant cacophony, it's quiet here. No one notices me materialize.

I open the umbrella, cloaking myself in its invisibility like some deranged Harry Potter.

Unsmiling officers block the path to the parking lot—tall and rigid. They're prickly as cactus. A pudgy, red-faced cop hovers over the blond-haired child as he shares the cell phone screen implicating me and the precious Pokémon.

Turning away, I crouch under the sanctuary of my umbrella.

A chopper whirs in the distance. I find my oasis on a splintered wooden sign, painted in crimson: **Helicopter Tours Over the Grand Canyon: One-Way to Las Vegas.**

I approach the ticket counter. The portly, disheveled agent extends a filthy hand to accept my stolen \$150 and absently slides me a crisp ticket. His eyes never leave his cell phone screen.

I release a Marlboro from its sheath, light it, and inhale.

So this is what it's like to breathe in hell. Sometimes, it's just too easy.

Two Poems
by
Maria Declare

The Instapoet

I am an Instagram
Bright, concise poet.
The one who said:

Caffeine is my life
And overlaid it with a crumpled coffee cup
(Because I am dead)

Once I loved a website browser

Once I loved a website browser,
but he has made me weep.
For I did the dual screen;
I pushed what should have stayed asleep.
In cyberspace, I danced to google green
and I grazed with the wireless mountain sheep.
I gathered my websites like wildflowers
and set my tabs to hexadecimal display.
I was in raptures on the web,
but when I tried to lead those lips across the second screen,
his soul got lost; my browser crashed and ran away.

Now alone, and it's all to zeros as I say:
Oh lonely pixels, where'd you go?
My liquid friend, oh why'd you go astray?

Gabe Chanterelle, Woke Detective!
by
Eugene Morgulis

I was diving into a jar of kombucha, when they came walking in. I noticed nothing about their physical appearance whatsoever.

"I need your help," they said. "Folks tell me you're the best."

"Sure, I've benefited from certain privileges on account of my race and gender," I replied. "What can I do for you?"

"It's my husband, Mort. He wants me dead. You've got to believe me, Mr. Chanterelle."

"I believe you, because I believe women, assuming that's how you identify."

"It is." She extended her hand, consensually. "Birgitta Domino."

We shook for an appropriate length of time.

"Alright then." I sipped my booch. "How do you know?"

"That I'm a woman? Or that my husband wants me dead?"

"The former is no one's business. The latter is mine."

"Mort's been looking around town for a hitman to kill me. He wants the life insurance so he can run away with his other woman."

I guessed this *other woman* wasn't exactly part of their consensually polyamorous throuple. I'd say it broke my heart, but that's one shelter dog no one's gonna rescue. "The other woman—you ever talked to her?"

"No. Does it matter?"

"Only if you want to pass the Bechdel Test."

I tracked Mort Domino to a charging station on the east side. "Can I sit here, friend?" I asked motioning to the empty chair.

"It's a free country," Mort grumbled. Apparently he hadn't heard about the new voter ID law.

The bartender floated into view and asked what I wanted.

"A \$15 dollar minimum wage," I replied. "But if you're all out of that, gimme a shot of booch. Extra fermented." He poured; I drained. "Another. And leave the mason jar."

"Man drinking like that's got one of two troubles," Mort said, taking the bait. "Money or female?"

"Money troubles," I told him. "Trying to get my kid into a Chinese language immersion preschool. And, buddy, they ain't come cheap." I introduced myself as my go-to alias, Alexander O'Connor Cortez, and laid out a sob story thicker than overnight oats. Before long, Mort was sympathizing, telling me how his wife had been threatening to ruin him. "Women," I told him, "they are all exactly the same."

It seemed Mort hadn't heard of intersectionality, because he cracked open like a cage-free egg. "Say, Alex, maybe we can help each other out."

Soon after, Mort led me outside to the trunk of his car, where he gave me the ol' NRA handshake: a gun and an envelope of cash. Once he drove off, I grabbed my bike and headed to present the proof to Birgitta like we'd planned.

Her house sat up in the hills, so my thighs were screaming by the time I pedaled into the driveway. I let myself in and called out "Mrs. Domino?" Crickets.

After a few more steps, I saw the dead body of female-presenting person. I didn't recognize her, but I sure recognized the police sirens. A set up neat as a cheese plate.

"Hands up, don't shoot," I called out as the buzzcuts swarmed me. The cold clink of the handcuffs took me back to my protesting days.

"So why'd ya do it, Chanterelle?" asked the bruiser in blue. "Was it the money?"

"You were schtupping her, weren't ya?" added his partner. "You and everybody else."

Amateur hour. "Cool it with the slut shaming, fellas," I told them. "Besides, with interrogations, like with in-group rap lyrics, I keep my mouth shut. Now where's my gavel jockey?"

"I'm not sure a lawyer's gonna help. Not when we got ya standing over Birgitta Domino's body with the gun and the cash."

My brain lit up like a wintertime holiday shrub. "*That* was Birgitta Domino!?"

"Don't play dumb, Chanterelle. We got a tip you was gonna plug her."

"Too bad we didn't get there sooner."

"Nah, you arrived just in time to be duped." I rolled my eyes. "You Chokehold Charlies know my gun wasn't fired. Can't you see I was framed worse than—"

"Enough references!" A meaty fist slammed the table. "Right now we got a sweet little open-and-shut case with you at the creamy center. But in light of your past work for the department, we'll give you 24 hours to find some new jelly for our maximum security donut upstate. Or we're taking you down."

The deal was as bad as the metaphor. Still I gave my consent, even if it was less than enthusiastic.

I needed to get back to my office fast. Too bad my bike was stuck in evidence lockup. Like Greta Thunberg at a Hummer festival, I had no choice but to walk.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the open door. But I noticed the gun and the hand holding it. If deceit had a glass ceiling, she just shattered it.

"Nice to see you again, *Mrs. Domino*."

"Oh, Mr. Chanterelle, we both know that's not my name."

"Judging by the invasion of privacy, Ms.... Zuckerberg, I presume?"

"The name's Debit. Lana Debit. I'm Mort Domino's mistress."

I didn't know what stung worse, being played for a sap or hearing a woman self-define as a man's object. Other times, I'd have reached for the kombucha jar. But with Lana's pea shooter trained on me, I had to make like a novice in lotus pose and sit tight.

"Here to write out a confession?" I asked her.

"More like the last chapter of your sad story. I call it: Gullible Dick Wanted for Murder Shoots Self in Pathetic Office."

"A classic," I said. "But that book's been pulled from the shelves. For outdated depictions of women."

"Like who?"

"Like you!"

"Please," Lana smirked. "I'm as modern as Lena Dunham."

"Sure about that? Check your Twitter account."

I could see her trying to resist, but once I put the thought in her head, social media addiction did the rest. Lana grabbed for the phone in her purse. Sure, I thought about going for her gun, but no way was I gonna risk nonconsensual contact. Luckily, I didn't have to. As soon as Lana started scrolling, her eyes grew wider than the wealth gap.

"So many negative comments!" she cried. "And more every second. What's happening?"

"You're getting dragged, that's what."

"Dragged? But why?"

"Like I said, you're outdated. The femme fatale trope is a representation of male writers' fear and distrust of strong women. You're toxic, Lana. Toxic as Flint's tap water. And just as criminal."

Lana dropped the gun. "Stop this, I'm begging you. I'll confess."

"The might've worked," I said, holding up my phone. "Before Chrissy Teigen subtweeted you."

The realization set in hard. "Please," she whispered. "I'll do anything. I'll... apologize on Ellen."

But it was too late. "Face it, Lana," I said. "You've been canceled."

And just like, Lana Debit was gone.

I'd have some explaining for the police, but for now, my office was a safe space again. The jar of kombucha had just two shots left. I drank the first for Birgitta. The second, for Lana. No shot remained for a world that didn't pit women against each other. Shame.

Forget it, Gabe. It's the patriarchy.

Preservation in Love
by
Jami Fairleigh

Mishaps with preserved brains are not uncommon. What most people probably don't know is how often pickled grey matter can interfere with romantic plans. My name is Willoby Walling and I am currently hiding in a steel cabinet. As I am wearing my second-best shoes, you can be assured that hiding in a cabinet, steel or otherwise, was not part of my plan when I awoke this morning.

My day started ordinarily enough, excepting for the flight of my alarm clock out my bedroom window. Disgruntled, I hastened through my morning toilet, confounded by what I should wear. As the Assistant Head Mortuary Assistant, my typical attire includes slacks, loafers, a clip-on tie, and a humorous t-shirt. I take pride in the curation of my shirt collection; the emblazoned phrases and puns must strike the right note between irony and a respectful observance of the brevity of human life. Since my white laboratory coat covers my torso entirely, no one has found occasion to challenge the whimsy and jocularly that I bring to my workplace. But I digress.

My agony this morning was in wanting to strike the right tone with Miss Mirabelle May, the woman I hope to engage in courtship. Two days ago, while waiting in line for my morning snow cone, Mirabelle May cut in front of me. I did not yet know Mirabelle, so, with a sigh, I tapped on her shoulder.

She turned with a half-smile and said, "Yes?"

"As I was formerly at the end of the line, and am now again at the end, at the least you could defend your case."

"My case? Is that all? I assumed you'd want my name and number."

"I wasn't planning to report you for cutting in line. A snow cone does not warrant that level of civil engagement."

"I suppose the question I should then ask is to what level of villainy must I arise for you to snitch?"

"Madam!" I protested. "Do I look like a scurrilous fellow who'd priggishly tattle?"

"Miss," she corrected. "Miss Maribelle May. Your shirt *does* suggest you like to announce facts."

I looked at my shirt which read, "#1 Cause of Death: Too Many Birthdays" and then back at Maribelle May. At that moment I fell a little in love.

"My name is Willowby Walling and I would like to buy you a snow cone."

"Thanks, no." smiled Mirabelle. "I don't consume ground foods."

"Then why are you in line?"

"I like to queue," she said, fluttering her lashes.

Emboldened, I said, "Join me for lunch on Thursday at the hospital. The cafeteria boasts famously long lines."

"Will unground food be available?"

Having no idea what the cafeteria offered, I nodded with enough vigor that she acquiesced, and we agreed on a time. With an airy flip of her hand, she left before I realized I had failed to obtain her number.

I floated to work whence I found that a busload of elderly cutlery enthusiasts riding a casino shuttle had accidentally backed off a twenty-story parking structure. Even we in the morgue found the level of dismemberment of the recently-deceased astonishing. The Medical Examiner unequivocally cancelled our lunch breaks, personal appointments, and planned holidays until the backlog cleared. Furthermore, laboratory assistants from the State were to be brought in to help. Tasked with the cataloging of organs and limbs in an overcrowded morgue, my impending assignation with Maribelle slipped from mind and the happy day arrived with no way to postpone our scheduled rendezvous.

Thus, today I was faced with the perplexing task of how to dress for a romantic appointment that I would attend to cancel. With a harried grunt, I grabbed a navy shirt that proclaimed, "Future Corpse" and left the house. Skirting an astonishing amount of alarm clock debris, I proceeded to work without stopping for my customary breakfast snow cone.

I knew something was wrong upon arrival at my workplace. A single goggled and masked laboratory assistant, vaguely familiar, sat at a desk on the far side of the room. On the counter nearest stood glass jars numbered one through eighty. Each was half-filled with formaldehyde and approximately twenty were already occupied with human brains. The air hung strangely dead in the room. I donned my goggles and mask and went to check my assignment from the list. The clipboard was not hanging where it ought to be, and I stood awkwardly, hesitant to bother the lone worker with my question.

Without looking up, she called, "You, whoever you are, will assist me today with the weighing and preserving of brains."

Respectfully I nodded and opened my organ catalog.

"Millicent Aaronson."

I searched for Millicent's drawer number and removed the brain. Calling out the weight in grams, I carried Millicent down the line of jars and found the empty jar labeled *M. Aaronson*. Carefully, I lowered the wrinkled tissue into the liquid.

We worked in concert for over an hour and I was carrying Amos Vyland toward his jar when she called, "Willowby Walling" which to me sounded like "Willow-bye Walling".

"Willow-bee Walling," I corrected automatically.

"Yes."

Did she mean to call my name? I certainly was not diseased and had no plans to relinquish my life *or brain* today, regardless of what my t-shirt said.

I peered at the woman and alarm bells rang in my head as I gazed into Mirabelle's myopic safety goggles. We were separated by the merest wisp of a counter. I believe I fell mostly out of love right then because, without hesitation, I dropped poor Amos with an undignified plop and ran.

Concealed in a cabinet, I am flooded with ambivalence as I wait for my death. While I'm delighted to have set my eyes upon Miss Mirabelle May again, I am wholly unprepared to become a specimen floating in a glass jar. I regret not reading the labels on the first twenty-jars; I would have had a longer head start had I realized the brains had been donated by my former coworkers.

Polite knocking on the cabinet door signals that I have been found. I sigh and wait to be dragged into the light. I hope my brain will look dignified as it floats in its jar.

"Willowby, I'm afraid that I'm going to postpone our luncheon," says Mirabelle, her voice muffled by the cabinet.

Postpone? My heart gladdens. Perhaps she's not planning to remove and preserve my cerebrum today while I'm still using it.

"Oh?" I asked, trying for a nonchalant tone.

"As I parked my car this morning an alarm clock struck and cracked my windshield. My car is my darling and must be repaired tout de suite! I would have telephoned but I didn't have your number. Are you free for lunch tomorrow?"

**Best Look
by
Chris Bullard**

Thanks for the makeup
and for burying me in
this really neat suit.
I look so good I might run
for President of Hades.

Rusty
by
Arthur Davis

The name of my horse was Rusty. At least that what he said it was when we first met, so I went along with it. I knew little of his early days as a colt, but the years we spent together were some of the best of my life and, I have to believe, his.

But Rusty got old all too quickly and had lots of medical problems, and in the months before he passed, he had to use a walker to get around, which was humiliating for him.

Days after the service I called my sister, who cried with me at our loss.

"He was so amazing. A friend and a confidant," she said, "I loved him too, you know."

"How could you not, or any of the kids that I let ride him when I was out at the farm?"

"In all these years, it was like all I had to do was think where I wanted him to go and he just responded. Like he could read my mind."

"I don't get it," I said through the gaging tears. "What do I do now?"

"Well, I think I know, Rusty would want you to go on bravely and honor the memories you two friends had together. Maybe do something great. Something that would be so un-you."

"Well, whatever it is you're getting at, it sounds expensive."

"You have the nest egg you've been saving, and there's always the insurance."

"Right, I forgot about the insurance."

"I remember when Rusty told you he had taken out a \$150,000,000 term policy and named you as the sole beneficiary."

"He showed me the documents. I was so moved and upset at the same time."

"So do something big to honor the big horse's legacy."

I squeezed my brain, but nothing came to mind, until only one thing made sense. "How about I run for president?"

"Ok, then. There you go."

"But I don't know a thing about politics and how to run a campaign."

"I'll help. We'll make it happen together."

"What about the corruption, the backstabbing, the influence-peddling lobbyists who will hound me night and day and offer me cash and women and more? The double dealing and the kickbacks, and being forced to nominate corrupt judges, and making promises to the public that I have no chance of keeping? And, worst of all, getting in bed, if you will, with some of the scum of the earth?" Then there was the hand shaking and baby kissing. Gross.

"First things first."

"Yes. Sorry. Of course. Sometimes I get ahead of myself."

"How about I reach out on the internet, you know, like to Facebook, LinkedIn, IdiotsDelight, TrashTalk, Fuck-The-Truth, Lies & Deceit Magazine, Influence Peddlers Anonymous, and ask everybody with your name to start a committee and organize fundraisers to elect you? Hold on."

"What are you doing?"

"Sorry. I just checked. There are 86,217 registered voters in the United States, including 274 in prison, with the name Delmar Graves."

"But that's not my name."

"I know. You're going to have to change it. I like Delmar Graves better. I'll set up a GoFundMe campaign today and start getting backing for you."

"What about my platform? What I believe in? What I hope to accomplish as the leader of the greatest country in the world?"

"Really? That nonsense concerns you?"

"Right."

"So, let's move on."

"You know you're the super-best sister any horrible younger brother could possibly ever have."

"See, you're already beginning to sound like a smarmy bureaucratic microbe."

How quickly I had changed. I was glad Rusty wasn't around to hear what I had turned into.
"Sorry."

"So, with Rusty's policy to start, you're well on your way to becoming the leader of the free world."

The check from the insurance company arrived at the end of the month. The insurance broker's sister was a thirty-two-year-old named Laura Graves, who tragically suffered from infantotalonis assimilaritis and has been living in a nursing home on life support since birth. He was excited by the idea and pledged to contact everyone in the industry to turn out the vote for me. Of course I had to thank him.

I worked very hard this past summer and eventually was nominated by a third party that was created for me and, to no one's surprise, as the other two candidates were campaigning from their prison cells, I won.

The day after the election I was contacted by the CEOs of most every Fortune 1000 company. They offered their generous support and were eager to suggest how we could

improve the environment. I never gave the environment much thought. I mean, I knew it was somewhere out there. I was touched by their concern for the health of our planet.

And it felt good, strangely gratifying, to have everyone taking notice of me. It rarely if ever happened on my day job.

Countless hundreds of thousands frantically waving handmade posters and banners cheered for me at my lavish inauguration. I was overwhelmed with emotions at the outpouring of support from every age, race, religion, ethnicity, and region of this great country.

"I want to thank all of America for placing their trust in my vision for the future of our great nation and for our overwhelming, sweeping, and unprecedented victory, and as such I take and accept this oath on this sacred day," I began that clear, frosty January, "and pledge to do what I can and nothing more when I have the time after work sorting mail at the Post Office. And I want to thank my dear departed friend Rusty for his companionship, encouragement, insight, and advice, and a special thanks to my brave sister who will stand at my side as Vice President in charge of whatever she wants. You have my word on it, so help me God. And, oh yeah, God bless America too."

Bad Excuse Josh

by
Ginny Hogan

Once upon a time, there was a young gentleman named Josh. And Josh, I'm sorry to say, was a man who would never find love. He never had, and he likely never would. Because Josh was cursed.

Poor Josh wanted nothing more than a partner. This was unusual for a man his age (32), as society had taught him he was still two decades away from needing to sacrifice his two fundamental freedoms—the freedoms to ignore texts and not change his boxers—to be in a relationship. But Josh did not want to ignore texts. He did not want dirty briefs. Josh wanted a relationship.

Josh's singledom remained a mystery to those around him. He was a nice guy. A *good* guy. He was a teacher—Good. And a registered Democrat—definitely Good. He never got laid—perhaps the most obvious indicator that he was Good. In fact, Josh respected women so much he let his mom support him financially. Josh never wanted to upset a woman, and yet, all he did was bring pain upon himself and others. He could not shed the Curse. Simply put, Josh had Bad Luck.

It started with Sarah. Sarah worked in social media, and she spent the day on Twitter. This would be fine—Twitter has never been known to cause problems for anyone—except for one glaring issue.

Sarah is what we call a "millennial," which means, by definition, she sent Josh texts all day at work. And Josh found himself unable to respond to her texts immediately because he sometimes had to engage with the young minds he was molding. Occasionally. And this upset Sarah. Sarah believed she deserved a faster response. And maybe she did, because she was a Witch. And Witches typically get what they want, by Hex or by Vex.

The next time Josh took more than 15 minutes to respond to a video of a dog who could turn on a lamp (how?), Sarah lost it. She dumped him, but even worse, she placed a spell on him. For the indefinite future, Josh would be followed by a cloud of bad weather, for him and him alone. It was Bad Luck.

Several weeks later, Josh spent a charming afternoon at a coffee shop with Felicity, a lady from an app (like a real woman, but from the internet instead). She was cute and easy to talk to and interested in him. Josh would have settled for one of none of those three, but he got them all.

The next weekend, she suggested they ride in a paddleboat. Josh didn't even make fun of this suggestion—that's how badly he wanted a relationship. But on Saturday morning, he saw nothing but rain. Because you see, Josh hadn't yet realized the rain followed him and only him.

"Felicity?" He said into the phone. "Should we go to a museum instead? It's raining."

Felicity looked out her window. There was no rain. Josh was full of shit, she thought. He simply wanted an out. So he suggested the most boring date of all time. No one has ever enjoyed a museum—they are simply storage units for old, expensive things. Josh only suggested the museum in the hope that she would cancel—a coward. A typical man.

"It's obviously not raining," Felicity said. "That's a Bad Excuse, Josh. A terrible excuse. Why can't you just admit you hate me?" She hung up the phone.

Josh was perplexed. Unfortunately, when Josh checked the weather report near Felicity's house, he saw that it was sunny. Ok—the weather was different for women. Maybe it was a menstrual thing. Or just another way in which they were pushed to the margins of society. He'd have to keep this in mind. Undeterred, he carried on.

A month later, Josh met Teagan. Their first date was lovely and even ended in a kiss! Well, not for Josh—Teagan got too drunk at a bar and made out with a stranger, but he didn't hold that against her. He liked observing that she was fun, even if he wasn't the current beneficiary.

Teagan agreed to go to dinner with Josh that Thursday—it seemed like his luck had turned. Unfortunately, although the rain in Josh's yard had stopped, there was now a permanent river. And Josh, unused to the river and therefore not careful enough with his technology, dropped his phone into it.

He found Teagan's email and sent her a quick message explaining what had happened. He acknowledged that it was a typical "guy" thing to have your own weather, unrelenting rain that causes a river randomly spring up in his backyard and destroy his phone, but he wasn't like other guys—he was Good. He then suggested a time and location for dinner, in case he couldn't get a new phone by then. He wasn't worried.

You expect me to believe that Bad Excuse? Teagan wrote back. *You have your own river in your own lawn because it rained just for you and not me for a month? What are you going to tell me next, your name isn't really Josh? I'm sure you're planning to stand me up. The lying—it starts so early. I've had it with men.* Teagan wasn't born yesterday. She was born 4/21/1996—it said so on her TikTok. And she was right—Josh was his middle name.

Josh was sad about Teagan—he had Bad Luck. How could he get women to believe him? They seemed to think he was just pulling excuses out of his hat like a magician, but Josh had never lied, and he didn't wear hats. He was saving them until he started balding. He wanted to be completely honest, and yet, it backfired.

A week later, Josh shot his shot with Doreen, his hot neighbor. Doreen understood that Josh's life was different—he had suffered constant rain when others hadn't, he now had a river he didn't want, he just had bad luck. So Doreen couldn't accuse him of making Bad Excuses—she would believe him.

He'd invited her to a drive-in movie theater. Unfortunately, as he pulled his car out of the driveway, he realized one of his tires was flat.

Josh got out of the car. On the back tire, there was a note.

If you didn't want to go out, you should have manned up and told me. Sure, I saw the river, but you clearly threw your phone into it because you hate me. Enjoy these flat tires, you flat liar! - Teagan.

Josh was floored. Even when she'd come by his house to confirm the truth, she didn't believe him. Could it be true that women were Crazy? No, that's misogynistic and wrong, Josh thought to himself. Because Josh was a Feminist. He was Good. Although, from his perspective, it *was* starting to seem like women *might* be a bit crazy. It was okay, though - he'd moved on to Doreen.

He figured he'd simply change the tire, because he'd had enough of trying to convince women that his excuses were real. Unfortunately, at the exact second he removed the tire, his pregnant dog gave birth, and one of the puppies scampered out (human babies are so useless—other species' infants move around immediately) and hid in the wheel hub of the car. The others followed suit. Josh was unable to attach a new one. He asked Doreen if she could drive them instead.

"A woman slashed your tires because you emailed, not called, her because you'd dropped your phone in the river in your backyard that you have because you alone experienced a month of solid rain?" Doreen said. "And then your pregnant dog's new infants rooted themselves in the wheel hub when you tried to remove the tires? Do you even know how many guys have lied to me about animal families living in the wheel hubs of their cars? And yet, you expect me to believe that? I'm not an idiot."

"I have Bad Luck—you saw the river. And you saw the rain! Can't you just drive? It's not too far away. Or I can drive your car. Or we can get a ZipCar, or even take the bus. Or we can go somewhere nearby and walk. I really want to go out with you—I'm willing to consider many different alternatives. I was so looking forward to this."

"No," said Doreen. "No I can't just *drive*. You asked me out, and now you have some Bad Excuse for why we need to change our plans. You're clearly not interested. I wasn't born yesterday—my name is Doreen. I was born in 1975 at the earliest. You have no idea how often women have to deal with this—the lying. About their heights, their intentions, even their names - he expected me to believe he was in the Witness Protection Program just because his brother got murdered? I can't handle the Bad Excuses. I don't want you as a neighbor. I'm going to have to insist that you move."

At this point, Josh had begun to lose it. His guilt had induced a permanent state of panic. He hadn't meant to upset all those women. He understood where they were coming from—a lifetime of being belittled by men had left them untrusting, and he got it. But if even one had been willing to give him a chance. To believe him, when he was telling the truth, even if it sounded far-fetched. *Even one.*

His stomach was in constant pain from the anxiety and dread. Horrible pain. Debilitating pain. He could barely take care of himself, much less his six new dogs. He called his doctor.

"You need a colonoscopy," his doctor said.

"How do you know?"

"I don't, that's just the procedure I like to schedule. It has to do with butts. Come in Friday."

Josh understood where his doctor was coming from—he liked butts, too. Speaking of butts, he checked Hinge, just to distract himself from his impending procedure. He immediately matched with a pretty woman named Jen.

"Want to get dinner Thursday?" Jen asked. Maybe Josh's luck was about to change! Maybe he'd hit rock bottom and was now climbing his way up.

"Yes!" Josh replied. He regretted the exclamation mark instantly, though. Then again, "Yes." would have been sociopathic. Punctuation—a never-ending challenge.

Thursday afternoon, a nurse from the hospital called. "Make sure not to eat or drink water tonight," she said. "It will interfere with the colonoscopy."

Josh groaned. He texted Jen to ask if they could go on a walk instead because he couldn't eat dinner because of the colonoscopy. Of course.

"I know you're just trying to sleep with me without spending any money," Jen said. "I'm not an idiot. Do you know how many men have used the *"I have a colonoscopy in the morning, which I need because my stomach's in constant pain from the anxiety of having a woman mad at me for not being able to drive because my tires had been slashed by another woman who I also couldn't go out with because my phone had fallen in a river in my backyard that I got because a woman cursed me with constant rain because I didn't respond to her texts fast enough"* excuse just to get out of paying? I would have split the bill 60/40 with you - 40 from me, obviously. Or we could have split 50/50 and you pay the tip - something like that. What a Bad Excuse. I will destroy you."

Josh's stomach dropped—the Curse did nothing for his already over-active bowels. Maybe he should quit dating forever. But no—Josh wasn't a quitter. At least, he didn't think he was. He had to prove it to Jen, and to all of them—he was a Good Guy. A guy who didn't lie to women, didn't make excuses. A guy who didn't deserve to be alone. He wanted to shake off The Curse. He must double-down on dating.

From there, things spiraled out of control. He made plans with Loretta—a woman he'd met once at Yoga—but couldn't leave his house because Jen was standing outside, menacingly holding a leashed Llama. Josh didn't *think* Llamas were dangerous, but he didn't want to find out.

He asked out Tricia, but he had to bail because his bank account was frozen, because it turned out that Loretta had emailed Bank of America to accuse him of embezzling funds. She'd successfully forged all necessary documentation—just imagine how good she would have been at filing his taxes, if things had worked out—and BOA believed her.

Next, he cancelled on Jeanette, although that's just because he wasn't interested.

"Why don't you just admit you're not interested?" Jeanette said. "I'm sick of all these Bad Excuses."

"I said I wasn't interested," said Josh. "I said those exact words."

"You're an asshole, Josh."

His Bad Luck continued to rage. Tricia stole his identity. To protect himself, he had to deactivate all social accounts, including his Bumble, where he'd already agreed to go out with Nadia.

Can you text me instead? I'm about to deactivate Bumble, he wrote to her.

Why? She asked. *I don't like this behavior. It seems like you hate me.*

He tried to explain, but she wasn't hearing it.

Who'd even want your identity? She wrote. *Yet another lying good-for-nothing man trying to convince me a woman stole your identity because she's mad that you had to bail on a date because your bank account was frozen, because another woman hacked into your bank account because she's mad that you said you were being stalked by a woman and her menacing llama, because you wanted to go on a walk instead of getting dinner, because you couldn't eat or drink because you were getting a colonoscopy the next morning that you needed because you suffered from gastrointestinal distress because of the anxiety of another woman accusing you of lying when a herd of small puppies moved into the wheel hub of your car, which they did when you removed your tires that had been slashed by a woman who didn't believe you had to email not text because you'd dropped your phone in a river that exists only in your backyard because you have your own weather? I've heard it a million times. You're nothing but a Bad Excuse loser.*

Josh had had it. None of these women believed him. None ever would, it seemed. Not having slept in days, he started skipping work. Before long, he was called into the Principal's office.

"You suffer from Chronic Insomnia due to the stress of too many women accusing you of making Bad Excuses for bailing on your dates, starting with a month of you experiencing your own weather?" The Principal had asked him.

"I know it sounds like a lie, but wait—"

"I believe that, I really do," she said. "It's a perfectly reasonable thing to happen, I see it all the time. Nonetheless, we're going to have to let you go."

Josh moved in with his mother. He thought he was safe at last—would a woman even want him now? But alas.

Can I come over? Carla texted. They'd never met, but he'd given her his number off Tinder months ago.

I live with my mom now, he responded. *If you're okay with that, then sure.* He'd learned enough to know not to tell her the whole story—he was beginning to believe why it seemed unlikely. But tons of adults lived with their parents!

You're an asshole. What a lame excuse. Go to hell. I'm reporting you to the authorities. Carla replied.

He deactivated all dating accounts. He was done, forever. He spent his days curled in the fetal position watching *The Great British Bakeoff*. His mother tried to comfort him, tempting him with treats he'd loved as a child.

"I stopped eating cookies because of a wheat allergy," he responded.

"That sounds like an Excuse," said his mother.

Josh, frustrated by yet another accusation of lying, ate the entire tray and broke out into hives. He went upstairs for an ice pack. And as he opened the freezer, he saw her. Watering a hydrangea in his mother's backyard.

She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She had warm eyes, which meant she was a Good Person—everyone knew that. And she Smiled at him, which meant she saw his Soul. She was The One. Alice, the Gardener.

It was all meant to be. It was not for nothing. It had all built to this. Sarah had cursed him so the rain would come so Felicity would dump him so Teagan would slash his tires so his stomach would ache so Doreen would stamp on his heart so Jen would stalk him so Tricia would break into his bank account so Loretta would steal his identity so he'd have a full-blown nervous breakdown so he'd get fired so he'd move back in with his mother. If none of that had ever happened, he never would have come into contact with Alice. He didn't have Bad Luck, after all. He was Blessed.

"Hey, would you like to get a drink this weekend?" he asked her.

"No, thanks," she said. "I'm not interested."

this poem contains 69 Ws
by
Emma McNamara

i hate the letter *W* because it's the only letter
in the english language With more than one syllable
(3, in fact—hoW pretentious!)

i have a draWer stuffed With *Ws*
(my first roW, second doWn draWer is broken)

i Want *Ws* in my choWder
(i don't like choWder)

i hope my Wife shares my aversion to *Ws*
(i don't have a Wife)

i don't Want *Ws* in my Waffles
(i do like Waffles)

i spy Wild *Ws* out my WindoW
(i do have a WindoW)

i don't Want *Ws* at my Wedding
(i Want a Wife)

i Wonder if *Ws* have a croWn
(i don't have a croWn)

i find *Ws* quite aWkWard
(i am aWkWard)

i Wish *Ws* Would leave me alone
(i Wish i had a Wife)

i Will not accept floWers from *Ws*
(my favorite floWer is the blue iris)

i Wonder if *Ws* are in love With other letters
(i Wonder if i'll ever have a Wife)

i can't let *Ws* Win
(i'll Win at life if i have a Wife)

i Will not Wait for *Ws*
(i Will Wait tWelve business days for a Wife)

i hate the letter *W* because it's the only letter
in the english language Who loves me
(*W* is not Wifey material)

Fresh Paint
by
Floriana Gennari

Couple number nine. Vivian smiled at them as they walked up the cobbled path. They looked young enough, late twenties, early thirties perhaps. Something and Something Jackson. Mr Jackson pointed at the magnolia which took up most of the front yard. It was majestic, leafless branches weighed down with fat pink blossoms. A fairytale tree, someone had said. Couple number six, Vivian thought. The house behind the tree was no less imposing: three floors, including a semi-basement. Eleven rooms, rooftop terrace. Vivian made sure, once she had introduced herself, to tell the Jacksons this as she unlocked the front door. She pushed a half-empty paint bucket to the side to allow the couple to enter after her and led them straight through to the spacious living/dining room area, where she opened the curtains to let the sunlight in.

The magnolia blossoms sparkled with dew in the scattered morning sunlight, but Vivian didn't have time to appreciate it. She started her tour, taking the Jacksons from the living area to the kitchen, with its view of the garden (apple tree, swing set, grass just tall enough to spark the urge to trim it).

It all went very well for ten minutes.

"It smells like fresh paint," Mrs Jackson commented, her nose wrinkling.

"Was it painted recently?"

"Oh, two days ago or so," Vivian said.

"How come?"

The lies had become routine, but they still sounded feeble.

"Oh, the last family to visit the house had a toddler, it was a bit of a mess. All cleaned up now, of course."

Vivian led the couple around the kitchen to the hallway, the downstairs bathroom, then back into the living room, where she pulled open the curtains to illuminate the natural hardwood floors and the intricate vine leaf stucco peppered with fat cherubs, who looked down stony-faced at their domain.

"All original work," she told the Jacksons, "restored five years ago."

The Jacksons were delighted with it all. They tried to cover their enthusiasm at first, but quickly gave up to erase the house's antique elegance. Up the creaky stairs with the curving banister. ("The old owners liked to polish it with coconut oil, you can still smell it in the wood.") Vivian made sure to stand between them and the bathroom mirror as they took a look at the upstairs bathroom, but they were too busy enjoying the colourful bathroom tiles to notice.

"Hand-painted and imported from Portugal," Vivian recited. "They clean like a charm."

The door to the master bedroom was ajar again, so Vivian decided to detour first by the rooftop terrace. Mrs Jackson took a deep breath.

"That's some fumes from the paint," he said. "You should maybe open up the windows."

"I'll make sure to air it out properly," Vivian said. She had absolutely no intention of leaving the double-panelled glass windows vulnerable to being slammed shut, but the couple seemed pleased.

Mrs Jackson did nothing to hide her delight for the wall-length built-in closet in the master bedroom. Vivian opened it for her, making sure to look inside before allowing the couple to test the sliding doors. The brightly-lit second bedroom with windows overlooking the magnolia were a winner, too; the mid-morning sun gave the polished floors a deep, reddish tinge.

"What kind of wood is this?"

"Cherry."

The fumes soon had Mrs Jackson light-headed again, so they went for a walk in the garden before entering the basement through the garden door. Vivian no longer recoiled at the spiders which scuttled underfoot. She did her best to step on them before the Jacksons noticed, and hurried the couple back upstairs after the briefest of peeks in the basement rooms.

"The boiler," she said, when Mrs Jackson enquired about the strange sounds coming from one of the rooms.

By the time they had made it back upstairs, Mrs Jackson said she needed a rest, and sat down on the dusty sofa in the living room with the nonchalance of someone in their own home. Vivian pulled the curtains open, and unlatched the veranda door to clear the smell of paint.

She was feeling nearly optimistic—this was the farthest she had ever come with any potential buyers and the Jacksons looked very much at home, chatting excitedly about how to furnish one of the upstairs bedrooms for when the baby arrived.

That was when the doors slammed shut. The Jacksons jumped. Vivian groaned. She managed to reach the veranda door and stop it with her foot (she had long since learnt to wear her stronger boots to viewings); the other doors in the house rattled in their frames.

She had come so close, what was it this time?

She could pass it off as a draft, or perhaps...

"What is that? I don't remember that being there."

Mr Jackson follow his wife's finger to the stucco. One of the cherubs looked decidedly less angelic than it had earlier. The arrow-tipped tail was a new addition, but the horns and snarl were old news.

"Did you hear that?" Mr Jackson looked around him.

Vivian was barely listening, but Mrs Jackson perked up as her husband asked them all to quieten down.

The scratching started on the other side of the dining room door, the one that led to the hallway. It crept across the wall and to the door that connected the living room to the entrance, then painstakingly slowly made its way back. Vivian was bored by the third round, though she had to admit, adding extra claws on every turn was a nice touch.

"Is it an animal? I think it can smell us."

"Not to worry," Vivian said lightly, "probably just the neighbour's cat. I must have left the main door open."

"That would explain the draft."

"That *would* explain the draft," Vivian agreed. She'd have to use that on the next couple.

She was about to say some more soothing words, or meaningless platitude, to fill the silence, but just then, the writing started to appear.

Mr Jackson shouted and pointed; Mrs Jackson looked paralysed.

It started in the middle of the wall, at hip height, red and dripping and shaky. Then it expanded at random, popping up on the walls, the doors, the window, until the whole room was waist-deep in the bloody script.

LEAVE, it said, hundreds of times over.

LEAVE

LEAVE

LEAVE

The Jacksons didn't need any further instructions. Afraid they may try and kick the door down, Vivian ripped open the curtains, which had shut again not long after the doors, and swung the veranda door open. In her haste to let the Jacksons out, she forgot to cover her ears for the piercing screech that shot through the house and followed the couple down the paved path and all the way to their car.

She didn't try to stop them. Once the Jacksons had closed the car door, the screeching stopped. Vivian opened the doors to the hall and the dining room again and inspected them for damage. The scratches were bad, but she'd seen worse. She could probably afford to sand the doors down one last time. The upstairs bathtub was filled with blood again. Vivian pulled on the latex gloves she kept in the bathroom cabinet before unplugging the bathtub drain. She made sure to avoid the mirror when she left, but caught a glimpse of wide eyes and too many teeth on her way out.

She squashed a few spiders on her way to the basement.

"Do not," she warned, holding up a finger to nothing in particular. "Do not with the fucking spiders, I'm serious."

The dark shadow of oversized legs and beady eyes receded back into the darkness, but it took her a good twenty minutes to free the boiler room from webs.

"Honestly," she muttered on her way upstairs, "the blood, fine, but the spiders creep me out."

The living room door rattled half-heartedly, but Vivian rolled her eyes and it died down. She collapsed on the sofa and crossed her arms, dreading another phone call from the agency.

The sofa cushion next to her compressed as though through some invisible weight. Vivian turned to look at the wall above her.

The new words appeared just to the left of her head.

NO BABYS.

"So *that's* what it was."

NO BABYS.

"It's spelled with 'E-I'."

NO BEIBYS.

"Very funny."

NO BABIES.

"I don't get to decide that."

NO BABIES.

And then, smaller,

PLEASE.

Vivian sighed.

"You're going to be the death of me, you know."

HA HA.

"I'm serious. I get paid on commission, what do you think this is doing for my bank account?"

Silence.

Vivian picked up her bag.

"See you next time. Don't scare the painters, I keep on having to find new ones." She rubbed her temples. "I'm going to sell this place sooner or later, I'm not giving up. Stubborn as a mule, my mother used to call me."

ME: 9

VIV: 0

"We'll see about that. I only need *one* win." She pushed down the handle to the front door. "You know," she mused, "perhaps I'll sell to some ghostbuster family. With eight kids."

The glass on the front door fogged up.

FUCK YOU.

Vivian rubbed it out.

"Watch your language. Honestly."

A flurry of magnolia blossoms swept past her on a breeze as she made her way to the front gate. She sat down to her car, phone to her ear, and when she looked back to reverse out of the parking spot, she saw the living room curtains open, just a peek wide, just enough to show a wide, victorious grin.

Couple number ten.

Ode to Retirement
by
Annette Sisson

And I shall let my hair go gray. Not
that it's white like the shiny pearl of baby teeth,

nor gleaming like the stainless appliances I polish
in the kitchen. I shall let my hair go gray—

silver-white, the fading threads weaving
into the dark brown mass, and I shall call

this mongrel color of mine *aging gracefully*.
And I shall save thousands of dollars with this new

no-particular color. For retirement. Naturally.
But you and I cannot agree what's

best, what retirement should look like,
its preferred location, and when we do it's not

what's affordable—not even with my cost-saving
not-exactly-gray head of hair.

A place not too far from the city,
with a workshop, a place with mature trees—please,

no hackberries—and with sunny garden spots
for flowers and vegetables and natives, and ideally a creek.

With fish. A place where we can build
the perfect house with two offices and a music

room and a place for every book, and screened-in
porches and fireplaces. It must be the right

size, and not deplete our retirement savings.
A place our not-yet grandchildren would find

entertaining, even on gray days, when their moods
are cloudy and overcast, like ours as we contemplate

retirement. And I, regarding myself in the mirror, cannot
decide what color my motley hair is

any more than the two of us can settle
the right place to grow old among trees

and water and books, with sun for our gray-brown
days, and our mostly white teeth still

set in the garden spot of our mouths, and me
wondering if it's too late to go in for highlights.

Chip Rickwilder's Flawless Entrance to Professional Cage Fighting by Alex Dermody

This is it you son of a bitch, your first walk to the ring as a professional cage fighter. I bet Gretchen's chin is on the floor right now. When my walkout song starts playing, I might pull my hair out. This is why you trained for twenty years. Kids in school thought you were a loser for doing Jiu Jitsu instead of playing football. Yeah, well how does my Louis Vuitton cape look in HD? Listen to that rowdy packed house. They're not ready for my song. It's too perfect. My brother Sebastian and my trainer Zeke McNaughty are next to me in the tunnel, looking buff and tough, just like I imagined. Where the *hell* is my song? I can't wait to be on the jumbotron. Yesterday no one knew your name, but tomorrow—

YES. Here we go! I knew this was the perfect walkout song. Sebastian said "Nookie" by Limp Bizkit was a bad choice, but he looks like an ass right now. Slap hands with fans as you pass them. The acoustics in this arena are stupendous. Concert quality speakers make *such* a difference. That guitar sounds so sinister it makes me wanna run into traffic. The crowd is looking at one another and they're all like, no way. Are you joking? Did Chip Rickwilder pick the perfect walkout song? They probably think I'm the coolest man on the planet, which I'm not, but I understand why they would think that.

I'm on the jumbotron. Chip Rickwilder, a man who worked at Dick's Sporting Goods only a few months ago, he's on the jumbotron. Why does my face look puffy? I would've moisturized this morning if I knew the cameras would be zoomed in so close. It makes me happy to know I'm walking to the octagon and Chaz Maxwell, the now out of shape gym teacher who teased me in seventh grade, is sitting on a sofa with his pig of a wife watching this. Drink it in, Tabitha, a cashier at the smoothie shop next to my gym who turned me down for a date. I can't wait to watch my entrance online later. I can't wait to read the comments. "Has there ever been a better walk to the ring? Asking for a friend!" one will say. "Did anyone else notice Chip rocking the Louis V cape? SO dope." another will say.

And now, the moment everyone's been waiting for—the chorus. The drums in this song are malicious, villainous, perfect, just like my entrance. What even is a Limp Bizkit? I should reach out to Fred Durst after this to see if he wants to hangout. Pound your chest like an angry gorilla. That's it. Now toss your bandana to the cute chick in the front row. Niiice. She's lucky it's sweaty. I feel like a hired hitman. No. I'm a classically trained ninja. No. I'm the Pope on his balcony looking out at all his followers. Pop off the hood of your cape. Shake your curly hair for the cameras. Yes, you nailed that. Point at a random section in the arena and wink. Fantastic.

The end of the road is dead ahead. The cage is calling out, "Chip! Chip! Enter with flair!" This is the cork popping off the champagne bottle. This is the fireworks at the end of Independence Day. Look up at the rafters and howl like a man raised by wolves. Rip off your cape, throw it into the crowd. Sprint to the mesh fence and vault yourself into the spotlight. Yes, up and over. Land on the balls of your feet. Throw a few jabs. Throw an uppercut. Throw a few sidekicks. Raise your arms above your head, Mr. Balboa. You deserve the glory.

You did it, you crazy son of a bitch, I mean you really did it. The perfect ring walk. These people paid good money and you delivered an unforgettable performance. Take a bow. No, take *two* bows. If this was a Broadway play, you'd be knee deep in roses. Zeke's calling me

over to my corner. Blow a kiss to the cameras before you swagger over to your team. Stick out your tongue. Make a pillow with your hands and pretend to take a nap.

"Stop showboating and lemme talk to you," Zeke shouts over the crowd.

"What the hell?" I say. "They cut my song off with over a minute left."

Mouth hanging slightly open, Zeke slaps me hard across the cheek. "We need to fight our fight," Zeke shouts. "Remember what we practiced in camp. Work his legs. Get him tired. Take this fight deep, and we can win this thing."

"His feet, work his feet," I say. "Remember to practice."

Zeke looks at me as if I'm speaking Mandarin.

Across the ring sitting on a stool of his own is my opponent, Tony "Bone Saw" Malone. He's built like a rhinoceros. Bulging shoulders. Boulders for biceps. Tree trunk legs. He's looking at me with dead eyes, and his teeth are gnashed into an ugly snarl.

I bet Bone Saw is scared shitless after watching the show I just put on.

Losing Grip
by
Rebecca Fletcher

John woke up with a grenade in his hand.

That wasn't the worst of it. His alarm said he was also late for work.

"Shit shit shit." Bleary-eyed, he moved his (non-grenade) thumb vaguely across the phone's screen to shut it up.

Not yet knowing the full gravity of the situation, but suspecting it was going to be significant, he allowed himself a single, full-armed stretch before letting one eye peek at the non-phone hand.

Still a grenade.

He stared at it for a moment, waiting for it to explain itself. It had failed to do so before the alarm sounded again, reminding him that he was, in fact, still going to be late for work.

He looked at the phone.

8:31am

While it would be incorrect to suggest that John was okay with the current state of affairs, he was intimately familiar with what was going to happen if he was late for work again.

He was going to have his arse handed to him, and he much preferred his arse stay where it was.

John's apartment looked like a seventeen-year-old's bedroom. It should therefore come as no surprise that he had a roll of electrical tape on his bedside table. It was nothing nefarious; he was just the kind of person more likely to tape than band-aid his toenails after blithely hacking away at ingrowns.

He wrapped the tape around his grenade hand, making sure he couldn't move his fingers. Hand firmly taped up and he feeling confident he wasn't going to accidentally blow himself up, John was able to focus on the more important things—like finding shoes he didn't have to lace.

Five minutes later he was out the door, satchel over his shoulder, dashing for the bus stop just up the road. He reached it, panting, and joined the queue. As he wrestled his card out of his wallet with one hand, the bus driver stared at him. Or rather, at his hand.

"What's that, then?"

"What's what?"

"What do you mean 'what's what'? That—the thing on your hand."

"Hrm? Oh, I just didn't want to forget something, so I taped it to my hand."

The driver blinked at him, then leaned on the wheel towards him. "What is it?"

"Look, I'm going to be late."

"Is that a grenade?"

John decided to test his skills of persuasion.

"No?"

The driver heard the question mark.

"Mate you can't bring that on here."

John goggled at the bus driver, card poised over the reader.

"I don't see a sign," he ventured, trying not to make eye contact.

"You don't need a sign, it's a bloody grenade."

John felt too harassed to make an argument about the relative merits of proper signage.

"Well I don't think that's very fair. I need to get to work."

"No one's getting anywhere if that thing goes off. Are you stupid?"

John considered a counterargument but wasn't entirely sure where to start. After a few moments of silence, he realised he was making the bus driver's point for him. John turned around and stepped off the bus, self-righteous in his belief that the driver was being incredibly unreasonable, but well aware that the next bus would be along in five minutes.

Looking around, he slowly pulled his hoodie out of his satchel and draped it over his hand, hiding the grenade. When the next bus came, he had the good sense to slide into the middle of the queue and avoid notice. Finding an inconspicuous seat up the back, he looked at his phone. So long as the bus didn't get caught in traffic, he'd get there on time. He let out a huge sigh of relief—maybe today wouldn't be so bad after all.

With a bit more swagger than he usually employed, John walked into the office two minutes early. He flumped down noisily in his chair, hoping to look confident to anyone watching him (no one was), and dropped his things on the floor.

After ten interaction-free minutes of trying to type in his password—complicated somewhat by having only one free hand—Karen, the receptionist-cum-dictator, walked up to his desk.

"Hi John," she chirped at him, the smile never reaching her eyes.

"Hello Karen."

"How's it all going this morning?"

"I have to be honest... absolutely spiffy, couldn't be better." John had little tolerance for Karen at the best of times, and this was far from that.

There was longer-than-polite pause.

"Well, I couldn't help but notice that you seem to have something on your hand there," she said, her tone not dipping.

John looked at it as if seeing it for the first time.

"Yes," he said, "it's a hand grenade."

Another pause.

John thought about assuring her that if he was going to blow the place up, he would have done it about a week after starting the job. Instead, he had the good sense to say, "It's for a bet."

"And by it..."

"Yes Karen, the grenade." He was audacious enough to sound terse.

"A bet," came the flat echo, her expression not changing.

"Yes, a bet, with my brother."

He could almost hear the wheels turning in her head.

"What do you get?"

"What?"

"What do you get if you win?"

John hadn't anticipated the grenade needing a backstory. "He has to carry it around for twice as long."

"Well that doesn't seem worth it."

"You've never met my brother."

Her attempt to stare John down failing, Karen straightened her collar instead.

"Might be best to keep it at home tomorrow, alright?"

"Of course, Karen, anything for you."

Karen gone, John got to work. The only thing John liked about his job was how little he had to think about it. Unfortunately, it was not designed for someone with a bulky object in one hand. It's difficult enough just typing with only one hand, never mind holding something to staple. It took until morning tea for John to convince himself that his situation wasn't going to work. Surely leaving early wasn't the same as turning up late? He decided to try his luck.

Walking past Karen, he made a movement towards the door with his head.

"Not feeling great today, think anyone would mind if I ducked out early?"

Her eyes flicked to his hand—yes that one—and back to his face. With a forced smile and tight tone, she told him that she was sure it would be fine, and to make sure he left all that at home tomorrow, okay?

On the way home, John wondered if there was some way he could exploit this situation to get out of work again in the future. He was still wrestling with scenarios (maybe the neighbour wants you to babysit their bomb?) when a familiar voice called out.

"What are you hiding?"

It was Samantha, John's smoking buddy. She was out in her front yard, watering the flowers with a hose.

"What?" John said.

"In your hand, you're hiding something."

"What on earth would make you think that?"

"Well if you weren't, you would have just shown me by now." She didn't break eye contact.

"Any chance of a do-over?"

"Is that a grenade?"

"Yes, it's a grenade."

"How'd you get that then?" She sounded like she wanted one.

"I woke up this morning and it was just there."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Why didn't you just tape the spoon down?"

"What spoon?" John wondered if he was going mad.

"The lever, on the grenade. That's what it's called. Why didn't you tape that down instead of taping it to your hand?"

"I was late for work."

"Oh." She moved the hose to another pot.

"Do you think that'll work?"

"Being late for work?"

"No, taping the lever down?"

"Yeah of course. Best thing for it really."

"Right. Well, thank you"

"No worries mate. Let us know how it goes." She looked away.

John continued the two-minute walk down the block, into his building and up the stairs.

Dumping his satchel on the living room floor, John sat down by his coffee table and got to work snipping into the hastily-wrapped layers of tape. Apparently, the looming threat of imminent disintegration was sweaty work, and the glue was already gummy from its few hours of keeping body and soul together. Cutting around the bottom first, he taped the skinny end of the lever to the body of the grenade, gradually layering tape around the handle and the grenade as he cut his hand free, the monotony of swapping scissors for tape almost relaxing.

He leaned forward and looked at his work—a grenade, gift-wrapped for absolutely no one. He placed it on his coffee table and slowly opened and closed his hand, which was still sticky from the tape residue.

He picked his bag up and swung it onto his shoulder, not seeing it tip the grenade as he walked out the door. One less problem and the rest of the day off left John with only one question:

Was it too early for a pint?

The Overcoat
by
Shai Afsai

I once accompanied a woman
I loved and lived with
to her college sorority reunion.
It was a cold evening.
I wore my favorite coat
to the event
and hung it on the coat rack.

We were among the last to leave
the social hall that night
and when we finally made our way outside
I discovered my coat was gone.
One of the other men taken there
by his girlfriend or fiancé or wife,
and perhaps lacking the foresight
to bring along a coat of his own,
had simply stolen mine.

Since then
whenever I read Gogol's *The Overcoat*
I'm reminded that—
nineteenth-century St. Petersburg
or twenty-first-century New England—
people are shit.

A Green Thumb on the Scales of Justice

by
David Marie-Garland

This is how I remember the fateful concatenation of events which led to my present state.

I'd gone to the flower shop to buy some flowers for my mother for her birthday, her birthday having been the day before. And even though her birthday was the day before, I thought she would still enjoy the flowers, anyway.

The clerk behind the counter was attractive, in a cute sort of way, so I decided to ask her a few questions about flowers, like what are they and does she fancy them as much as I do.

I then asked her what type of flower I should buy my mother. She recommended roses, which I thought was kind of obvious, but I went along with her recommendation, anyway, because she was that cute, in an attractive sort of way.

The roses, however, were quite expensive, and I could not afford all that she recommended; but we met a quarter of the way, and I bought my mother three roses. They were the best of the dozen, which I knew personally, since I had gone through the whole dozen individually and picked out the best three. The clerk acted like she didn't mind, which was a good thing, as I really hate when people get bothered by the things I do.

After paying for the roses and thinking that was the end of my relationship with the salesclerk, I noticed a flower which sat all by itself on a small table. In front of the plant was a sign that read, "From The Jungles of South America."

When I was a kid I'd heard stories about the jungles of South America. These stories always fascinated me, as kids are easily fascinated, but as an adult, seeing those words again, I was transported to my past, a simpler time, a time of delight and wonder. So I walked over to the table to inspect the plant further.

"Go ahead and smell it," said the cute and attractive salesclerk.

I looked at her puzzled, then back at the flower and lowered my head to give it a sniff. It was sweet, like honey and fresh air, but also made my head a little dizzy. Then everything went white.

I became disoriented and started thrashing about, knocking over plants and lawn ornaments. I was causing real destruction to the little flower shop but could not stop myself. Vision returned to me, but it was not my vision. Now everything looked green, and yellow, and purple. My hands began to melt and my feet were stuck to the floor, which was good, as I was feeling so unmoored and needed to be anchored.

There was a tapping on my shoulder, and so I turned around and saw two of Satan's henchmen. They began asking me questions, wanting to know if I had insurance and who my emergency contact was.

I told them I did not know the answers to their diabolical questions, and how dare they ask such satanic questions to me, a follower of Jesus Christ.

I felt a prick in my arm, probably from one of the pitchforks they were holding; then I fell

asleep, just like in a fairy tale.

I awoke later in a hospital bed, strapped down, and my own vision having returned. Next to my bed was the cute-but-also-attractive salesclerk from the flower shop, and in her lap a small potted plant, which I hoped was a gift for me.

"Are you feeling better?" said the salesclerk.

"Yes, I feel much better," said I. "I'm not sure what came over me. I've never had a fit like that before."

"I hope it wasn't the plant."

"The plant?"

"Yes, right before you had your fit you smelled the plant—the one from the jungles of South America."

"No, it couldn't've been the plant. I have no known allergies, especially toward plants."

"That's good to hear," she said, then lifted the plant, which to that point had been sitting on her lap.

"It's for you."

"Thank you. It looks beautiful."

"My name is Carol, by the way."

"Hello. I'm Carlo. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"We've already met, at the flower shop. Don't you remember?"

"I meant formally. Sorry, I'm not quite myself yet."

"Oh, I understand."

"Thank you for understanding."

There was a brief pause in our conversation as we took our time processing the preceding exchange. Then, Carol shifted in her chair.

"It's funny, our names are so similar."

"Yes, they do seem so."

"By the way, would you like to have dinner with me sometime? Once you are out of the hospital, of course."

"I would very much like that, dinner being a favorite meal of mine."

We went to a restaurant, not a fancy one, but a nice one, where the waiters wore white button-down shirts and black pants and the menus were printed on paper, not laminated.

At one point, the mayor came in and sat at his usual booth. Both Carol and I took notice of the mayor. He was resplendent in all his glory. And seated across from the mayor was a beautiful lady, a once former beauty queen, who was not his wife. The mayor was doing business with her—she owned a car dealership and the mayor wanted to buy a car from her. Why did he need to go out to dinner to buy a car? It was a difficult question to answer, but, needless to say, the reason made sense. There was nothing untoward about it.

While at the restaurant we ordered some food to eat. But we not only ate; we also talked. And you might say that we were the topic of our conversation, and not because of arrogance, but because of formality. We were getting to know each other.

"I work in a flower shop."

"Yes, that is where I met you. I was in the hospital recently."

"Yes, I came and visited you. I brought you a plant from the flower shop, where I work."

"Yes, I remember that."

We were having a nice conversation and really getting to know each other. She was pleasant to be around, and did not talk too much, nor too little. And she had excellent taste in food, for the meal she chose from the menu was a superb choice. My meal, on the other hand, was quite horrible. Although I finished it, it was only to prove to her that I could.

She was an excellent dinner companion. But I was curious if she would also be a good companion to accompany me to a movie or the museum. I asked Carol if she would be interested in accompanying me to either of those places, and she said that she would. To both, in fact. The look on my face told her I was excited by her answer; and so we made plans to see each other again.

That night I went home and wrote in my diary about what had just happened, how wonderful the dining experience had been, how great Carol was as a dinner companion.

I further confided to my diary that I had not been on many dates prior to the one with Carol and was, therefore, nervous about what we would do if our first date went well. I'd heard about others asking women to movies and museums, and thought I could try something similar to that, if not that exactly. I knew it would not be easy to ask her about a future outing, that it would be fraught with grave danger. But since the two of us got along so well, I was able to do it with the confidence of a man who had read many magazines.

I told my diary that Carol had indeed accepted my offer to a movie and a museum, then I thanked it for its time and said goodnight, turning over in my bed and shutting off the light.

For our second date Carol picked me up in her car, a late model sedan, which she had purchased from her landlord, who was also her mother. The car ran nicely. And I was glad when Carol had offered to drive, since I was still feeling unwell from my hospital stay.

She was a good driver, able to signal well, and could change lanes with relative ease, all

areas where I have great difficulty. I was also impressed with her parallel parking skills, as this is a skill that does not come easily to most. Many a car has been damaged due to neglect in parallel parking.

Our first destination for the evening was the movie theater. We had decided on a movie earlier that day, by phone, and so when we arrived at the theater, we knew which movie we were going to see and at what time it was playing.

(The movie was excellent and provided many laughs.)

After the movie ended we headed for the museum. The museum itself was having a retrospective of the photographs of Helmut Newton, an artist whom both Carol and I respect. While there we enjoyed ourselves, looking at the many photographs, and made plans to return another day.

For our third date I had a novel recommendation, something I thought the two of us would thoroughly enjoy. And the idea itself was quite a romantic one.

"Carol, I have a romantic idea for our next date."

"Yes, Carlo, what is it?"

"A bank robbery."

"A bank robbery? Carlo, that is romantic! Have you ever done anything like that before?"

"No, never. That's what makes it extra special."

"Oh, I'm so excited. I just know it will be so special. And romantic. When shall we do it?"

"Well, the thing with banks is they're only open during the day. So it will have to be a daytime date. And no weekends. When do you have your next day off?"

"Thursday."

"This Thursday?"

"Yes."

"Okay, that works for me, too. So you want to do it this Thursday, then?"

"I really do, Carlo. I really do."

"Then it's a date. This Thursday we will rob a bank. I'll come up with a plan tonight and ask my friend Tony if I can borrow his gun, he's got plenty, then I think we'll be ready to commit our first robbery on Thursday. Don't worry about anything, I'll handle all the details. I want you to really be able to enjoy this."

"I can't believe it. I'm buzzing I'm so excited."

"Me, too. It's going to be great."

Afterwards, when I asked my friend Tony if I could borrow his gun, he said no, he didn't want any of his guns used in the commission of a crime, that he could be held responsible if we were captured with his gun. I told him I understood, and so he recommended a friend of his who sells black market guns. These are guns with their serial numbers rubbed off, therefore untraceable. Tony's always been a good friend.

As for the planning of the robbery? The task was not difficult. All I had to do was decide which bank we should rob. That was it. It only took about fifteen minutes to do, and just as I was finishing the planning, Tony's friend with the gun came over. We chatted for a few minutes then he left, and I was now the proud owner of an untraceable gun. Fate is a funny thing sometimes. I never thought that when I went to buy flowers for my mother for her birthday, I would also find someone whom I would care so deeply about.

Thursday.

We arrived at the bank around lunchtime, the inside crowded with people on their lunch breaks. I was glad to see so many people inside, for there cannot be a performance without an audience, and a bank robbery is certainly a performance of a kind.

Before entering the bank, we paused, breathing in the air of the moment; then Carol and I walked through the bank's doors, ready to commit our first robbery.

Once inside I pulled the gun from my front pants' pocket and pointed it in the air. It was now time to yell the famous line.

"Everybody put your hands up, for this is a robbery!"

I noticed people were doing what I asked of them, which gave me a feeling of great confidence, and I was able to proceed much more comfortably than when I'd first entered the bank.

The tellers were handing money to Carol as I waved my gun around the bank, pointing it at various customers and bank employees. While I was performing this activity, I noticed out of the corner of my eye one of the bank's employees bending over, as if she were pressing a button under the counter. I knew this meant she was probably tripping the silent alarm, so I shot her.

The shooting of the bank employee prompted the security guard—an elderly gentleman, who had worked at the bank for quite some time—to action. He reached for his gun, which he did with great difficulty, fumbling with it, then holding it with both hands, in an unsteady manner. I had to wait for him to finish with all this, being that I did not know what his intentions were. Did he plan to engage in fire with me? Because I was more than willing, as my confidence had been steadily increasing since I'd entered the bank.

It turned out he did want to have a gunfight. With unsteady hands, he pointed his gun at me and took one shot, luckily missing me by a mile. But he did shoot one of the customers, which was probably bad news for his position as security officer at that bank.

Now that I knew what his intentions were, I aimed my gun at his head and pulled the trigger. I was not sad by the results. The bullet struck its target and inflicted mortal injury.

In response to this, one of the bank tellers yelled out, "You killed Bob." And I say, I did not know his name then, but now I will never forget it.

By this time the police had arrived. We did not take the time to exchange pleasantries, but instead exchanged crossfire. The shooting caused a mess, covering the floor in blood as the customers kept getting in the way of the bullets. The police kept yelling to the customers, "Get down, let us do our job," but little good that did. They really did seem to have no control over the situation at all.

After about twenty minutes of this shooting business, the chief came in and said it was time to cut out the nonsense. He asked me what my demands were, and I told him—I would like to leave the bank with my money, as I intended to do when I first entered.

It would've been nice if he let me do as I wanted, but he had another idea. He wanted me to lay down my gun, put my hands up, and walk outside to his squad car. "No dice," I said.

"I'm taking a hostage."

"Now, can't we talk about this for a minute?"

"You've had your chance for talk, and it's over. I'm taking a hostage, and then I'm leaving, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"I can ask you to think this over, you have so much to live for."

"Darn right I do. I have me a woman, who I love, and we're both leaving here, and we're taking this hostage with us."

I took the hand of the person closest to me, who happened to be a small boy, that couldn't've been more than three or four. This caused the child's mother to go into hysterics. I told her to calm down, I was not going to hurt her child, but if her child did get hurt, the police were probably to blame.

And so we walked out of the bank, the three of us, with me exiting first, holding the small child's hand, my gun to its head, and Carol behind me, holding the bag of money that was our score from the robbery.

Once safely in our car, Carol seated in the front seat and I in the back with the child, still with my gun to its head, we drove away, not really knowing where we were headed. However, we needed to make a decision, sooner rather than later, knowing that the police would not leave us alone.

When we got far enough away and saw that the police had kept their word and did not follow us, we let the child go, dropping him off at a gas station and giving him a few dollars to buy a treat while he waited for his mother to come collect him. He waved goodbye to us as we drove off, and we gave a little honk of the horn to let him know it's been fun.

And off we went, to the great unknown, except we knew now where we were going, for we had seen a sign on the side of the road which advertised lodgings in a secluded location for a reasonable price. Exactly our qualifications.

We would stay there awhile, count our money, see what the police had planned, and then make our next move.

That night we went to bed.

The following day I awoke with my fingers sticking together. I could not pull them apart, though I did not try too hard for fear of causing great injury to my hands. My feet as well had undergone a change. They were now a lot more veiny than before. This was all very odd to me. Just what could be going on here with my body? I wondered aloud to myself, but also to Carol.

"Let me see your hands."

I showed Carol my hands, and she inspected them as a mother looking at a child's hands making sure it had washed them properly.

"Yes, they do look different. They appear to be changing color, too. They look greener than normal."

It is true my hands have always had a sort of greenish tint to them, but she was right, my hands were becoming greener. I thought it might be from the stress of the situation.

"I think it might be from the stress of the situation," I said.

"Yes, perhaps. But I couldn't help notice that your feet look different as well."

She had noticed my feet! I guess it was to be expected since they no longer really looked like feet anymore. Yes, my feet had more veins than before, but it was more than that. It was like the muscles and bones and toes of my feet had become—not veins, no—had become, well, roots. My "feet" looked as if they needed to be planted in a pot of soil. There was no longer any mass to them. Our situation was greatly changing.

Hours passed by as we waited in the motel. We didn't do much, as there wasn't much to do. And even the great time killer coitus was out of the question, since my legs had begun to fuse together and I'd lost my member completely, which was all very unfortunate, as I have heard on-the-lam sex is quite good.

By evening it had become obvious what was happening. I was transforming into a flower, specifically, a chrysanthemum. My feet had become roots, my legs and torso were the stem, and my head the petals. I spoke to Carol with what I knew were going to be my last words.

"Please, you need to plant me in a pot of soil. My roots need to be in soil."

Carol drove the few miles to town where they had a general store. At the store she asked one of the employees if they had any flowerpots or soil for sale, which, luckily, they did.

As Carol moved down one of the aisles in the general store looking for the soil, another customer approached her. The other customer was a curious lady, who wore a pink sweater with a poodle on it.

"You look familiar. Are you famous or something?" asked the other customer.

Thinking quickly, Carol replied, "No, I'm just in town on vacation, visiting some relatives."

"Well, which is it, vacation or visiting relatives?"

"Both, I guess."

"You guess?"

"It's both. I had to use my vacation days from work to come and visit my grandmother."

"Why are you visiting your grandmother?"

"She recently married, and I wasn't able to attend the wedding, so I wanted to come and bring her the wedding gift I had bought for her. I didn't want to send it by mail, since it is very fragile. It's a serving plate with a picture of her and her new husband on it."

"But where did you get this plate from? I have a wedding I was invited to coming up and that sounds like a great gift."

"I bought it from a kiosk at a local market in the town where I'm from. Unfortunately, the kiosk went out of business, as the owner of the kiosk didn't have the proper licenses."

"Oh, don't get me started on the government. Well, it's been nice chatting with you, but I must get on. Take care, and I hope you enjoy your visit with your grandmother."

"Thank you. And take care."

After her conversation with the curious customer, Carol went to the front counter and paid for the pot and soil. As she was walking out of the general store, she noticed a post office next door with a flyer posted on its window. The flyer caught her attention due to its subject matter. It was a picture of Carol and me with the words "Wanted" written above our heads.

She rushed back to the motel room and helped me into the pot. She was out of breath the whole time, which was very concerning, to be honest.

I asked her why she was so out of breath, and she explained to me what had happened. I told her the flyer was worrisome, but she shouldn't concern herself about the lady at the store. She probably did think she recognized her, as Carol does bear a striking similarity to the famous actress ****.

My comments were very helpful to Carol and she calmed down considerably.

Once things had settled down a bit, I asked Carol if she could water me. My voice had a dry sound to it, which is why I thought earlier I was losing my ability to speak, but I was still able to communicate, though I no longer had a mouth. However, this ability would not last—by midnight I would lose complete use of this function.

That night the police finally did show up. They broke down our door and entered our motel room with their guns drawn. There must have been over a hundred of them, and you could tell they came to play, wanting to use their guns and send us to the morgue.

What they found instead was Carol, sitting on the edge of the bed, a cup of water in her hand and at her feet, a flower in a terra-cotta pot.

"Where is he?"

Carol did not speak or move.

"Look, you two are in a lot of trouble, but we really just want your boyfriend. So give him to us, and we'll let you go. Okay?"

She looked down at her feet, then back up to the police officer who had spoken to her.

"This is my boyfriend. He's a plant. He wasn't always a plant, but he is one now. I must take care of him. I know how to do this, because I work in a flower shop."

Salem's Sid and Nancy
by
Nancy Byrne Iannucci

-For Giles and Martha Corey, Salem 1692

Tis smotherin' under these stones
but me conscience suffocates me worse.

Travelin' nights with the weight still on me chest.
I should have kept me mouth shut, Martha,

callin' thee a witch, me own wife.
what's worse, I signed thee off to the gallows

led by those damned Girls,
especially that Ann Putnam.

Oh, how they howled like banshees when
the court stripped thee down to thy shift,

sifting for the mark, the Devil's mark.
Hathorne heeded their cries like the Lord's counsel.

I'm a damned fool! No one is innocent!
The slanderers, the lot of us, like that Mercy Lewis.

she said I was "a dreadful wizard."
for that I stood before the court, mute.

Many think me now a brave man
for I'd rather be put to the peine forte et dure

than confess to their lyin' talk of witchcraft.
Brave! Brave, me arse!

Me tongue still hangs out me mouth
from the weight of these stones.

Can thee forgive me, Martha?
Can thee help me breathe again?

Aye? Speak up, Martha.
I can hardly hear thee.

Fuck thee, Giles Corey!

Contributor Biographies



Myna Chang writes flash and short stories. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Best Small Fictions*, *Fractured Lit*, *X-R-A-Y Lit Mag*, and *Bending Genres*. She has been nominated for *Best Microfiction*, and she is the winner of the 2020 Lascaux Prize in Creative Nonfiction. Read more at MynaChang.com or @MynaChang.



Sophie Panzer lives in Philadelphia and enjoys performing stand-up comedy when it does not result in the death of innocent people. Her humor writing has appeared in LOL Comedy and the Philadelphia Satirer, and her serious writing has appeared in HOOT Review, The Hellebore, Coffin Bell Journal, and elsewhere.



Eric Kaplan is an Emmy award winning television writer and philosopher. His work has appeared on *The Big Bang Theory*, *Futurama*, *Flight of the Conchords*, and *Young Sheldon*. He is the author of "Does Santa Exist: A Philosophical Investigation" which examines logic, mysticism, and comedy as three approaches to contradiction. Born in Brooklyn New York, he now resides in Los Angeles. He can be found online on twitter at @ericlinuskaplan and at ericlinuskaplan.wordpress.com



James W. Reynolds lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. His work has previously been published in *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Defenestration*, *Ariel Chart*, *Lighten Up Online*, *Parody*, *The Broadkill Review*, *The Loch Raven Review*, and *Scarlet Leaf Review*.



Stephanie Gibbon will NOT share her recipe for overnight oats under any circumstances.



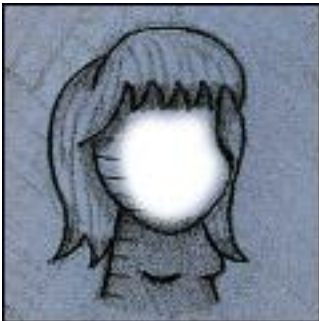
Barbara Daniels's *Talk to the Lioness* was published by Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press in 2020. Her poetry has appeared in *Cleaver*, *Faultline*, *Small Orange*, *Meridian*, and elsewhere. Barbara Daniels received a 2020 fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.



Will Musgrove is a writer and journalist from Northwest Iowa. He received an MFA from Minnesota State University, Mankato. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ghost Parachute*, *Inklette*, *Serotonin*, *Rabid Oak*, *Tuna Fish Journal*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Barstow & Grand*, *Flash Frontier*, and elsewhere. Follow him on Twitter at @Will_Musgrove.



Lisa Fox is a pharmaceutical market researcher by day and fiction writer by night. She thrives in the chaos of everyday suburban life, residing in New Jersey (USA) with her husband, two sons, and their couch-dwelling golden retriever. Lisa has been previously published in *Defenestration*, and her work has been featured in various other publications, including *Metaphorosis*, *New Myths*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *The Satirist*, among others. You can find her online at lisafoxiswriting.com, on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/lisafoxiswriting>, and on twitter @iamlisafox10800.



Maria Declare is an engineer from Canada. She likes to write poetry when the math problems get too confusing. She lives in Toronto, Ontario with her mom and Doug the dog.



Eugene Morgulis is a lawyer and writer quarantining in Los Angeles. His other short fiction has been published by *McSweeney's*, *Ad Astra*, *Deep Magic*, and others. You can read more of his work at eugenemorgulis.com/writing.



Jami Fairleigh is a writer, urban planner, and hobby collector from Washington. She is currently working on her first novel and shares her life with a husband, a trio of well-mannered horses, a pair of dubiously behaved parrots, and one neurotic dog. Her writing has been published by *Terror House Magazine*, *Horror Tree*, and *Amsterdam Quarterly*. You can find and follow her at <https://jamifairleigh.com/> or <https://twitter.com/jamifairleigh>.



Chris Bullard lives in Philadelphia. He received his B.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from Wilkes University. Kattywampus Press published *High Pulp*, a collection of his flash fiction, in 2017, and Grey Book Press published *Continued*, a poetry chapbook, this year. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Nimrod*, *Muse/A Journal*, *The Woven Tale*, *Red Coyote*, *Cutthroat* and *The Offbeat*.



Arthur Davis is a management consultant who has been quoted in *The New York Times* and in *Crain's New York Business*, taught at The New School, and interviewed on New York TV News Channel 1. He has advised The New York City Taxi & Limousine Commission, the Department of Homeland Security, Senator John McCain's investigating committee on boxing reform, and testified as an expert witness before the New York State Commission on Corruption in Boxing. He has been published in over eighty journals, a single author anthology, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, received the 2018 Write Well Award for excellence in short fiction and, twice nominated, received Honorable Mention in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2017*.



Ginny Hogan is an LA-based writer and comedian. She's the author of "Toxic Femininity in the Workplace."



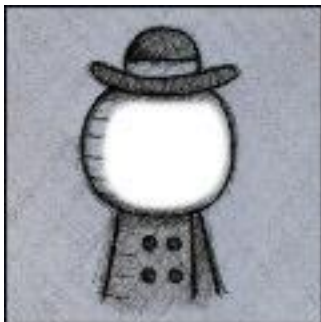
Emma McNamara is a 19-year-old national award-winning writer from Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Scholastic Art and Writing*, *Beyond Words*, *Storm of Blue*, *Tech Directions*, *Ember*, *Eunoia Review*, and elsewhere. Emma's passions include mental health awareness, disability advocacy, and LGBTQ+ issues. Follow her on Instagram at @author_emma.



Floriana Gennari is an emerging writer from Italy, currently working (more or less) in Spain, who enjoys spending her free time outdoors, indoors, and occasionally just hanging out under door frames. She's previously been published in *Literally Stories*, and used to both write and perform for Hong Kong's Liar's League. Floriana writes fiction, mostly sci-fi and fantasy, because non-fiction already exists in the indoor/outdoor world.



Annette Sisson has published poems in *Nashville Review*, *Typishly*, *One*, *HeartWood Literary Magazine*, *Cordella*, *Kosmos Quarterly*, *Psaltery & Lyre*, *The West Review*, and many others. She published a chapbook, *A Casting Off*, in May 2019 (Finishing Line) and was named a 2020 BOAAT Writing Fellow, received honorable mention in *Passager's* 2019 poetry contest, and won The Porch Writers' Collective's 2019 poetry prize. Her recent book-length poetry manuscript, *Small Fish in High Branches*, was a finalist with Glass Lyre Press and a semifinalist in the Brittingham & Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry (U of Wisconsin Press). Visit her website: <http://annettesisson.com>



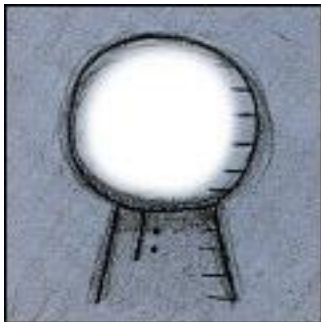
Alex Dermody has the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance for fighting cavities, gingivitis, plaque, and bad breath. Alex is dentist recommended, laboratory tested, and is made from all-natural ingredients. He comes in several flavors including spearmint, cinnamon, and (for the upscale nutjobs out there) zesty Italian lemon. Alex works especially well for people with sensitive teeth, and for people looking to whiten their smile. He can be purchased online for the very reasonable price of \$5.99, and can be contacted at alexdermody15@gmail.com.



Rebecca Fletcher is a Ballarat-based writer who has recently completed a master's in creative writing and is trying to justify why. A mother of three working in digital content management, she has heard about relaxing, but she hasn't even laxed yet and looks forward to the opportunity. She's making life easy for historians by documenting her work at saltyturnip.com.



Shai Afsai lives in Providence, Rhode Island. Enough said. More information, if inexplicably sought, may be found at shaiafsai.com .



David Marie-Garland is the author of two short story collections: *Stories From Hell* and *The Wisdom Of Wisdom Man*. He lives alone in the American Southeast.



Nancy Byrne Iannucci is the author of *Temptation of Wood* (Nixes Mate Review 2018). Her poems have appeared in several publications, some include *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *The Mantle*, *Gargoyle*, *Clementine Unbound*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *8 Poems*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry (Poets Resist)*, *Red Eft Review* and *Typehouse Literary Magazine*. Nancy is a Long Island, New York, native who now resides in Troy, New York, where she teaches history at the Emma Willard School. (<https://www.instagram.com/nancybyrneiannucci/>)