

◇ Defenestration ◇

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Rumplesynopsis
by
Iris J. Melton

"I don't care if you have to lie down in a fucking coffin like Edith Sitwell," Beelzebub says. "Get me some pages!"

This is my agent speaking. His name is not really *Beelzebub*—that's just how I have him listed in my phone contacts. He's very professional and he's never spoken to me like this before. It's just that I've pushed him to the end of whatever tether good agents are connected to their writers by. OK seriously—that sentence I just wrote? That is nothing like my usual high-quality prose. But just now, something really bad is happening to me.

It started when Word changed the double quotation marks to *guillemets*, for no apparent reason. Yeah, I'll let you look it up—I had to. It didn't take me long to correct it, but then I fell into some sort of vortex where I started to research the names of all the symbols, and then, of course, the *advanced* symbols. And then, for the really odd-sounding ones, I researched the etymologies.

When I got back to the page I was writing, I just sat staring at the cursor. A couple of words. No. Delete. Cursor... cursor... *curse the cursor. Hmmm... isn't cursor Latin for something like "runner" or "messenger?" I wonder what the O.E.D. says about it...*

So that was the first step on the journey to whatever hell this is. I haven't thought of a clever name for this place yet, but it is hades/inferno/the abyss. That's why I changed my agent's name in the contact list to *Beelzebub*. And no, I am never, ever telling him.

Here's the situation: several publishers are excited about the first book, but they want something more for a multi-book deal. An outline, chapters, a synopsis, something. I'm more of a storyboard and post-its type of writer. But Beelzebub has said amazing things about my talent, my discipline, my professionalism. And here I sit staring out the window like some sort of captive miller's daughter trying to spin gold from straw.

So, I've sequestered myself in my house on this rainy afternoon (no phone calls, no texting, no going out for anything) until I have a draft of the synopsis. *Hmmm... sequestered*. No. No. No. I am doing this. I am finishing a five hundred word synopsis today. (I'd prefer to suffer from a loathsome disease, but...*hmmm... loathsome*.)

That's when I hear a tapping sound. Like fingernails on glass. Nobody at the door. No cars in the yard. It's coming from the French doors on the back. I look up from my laptop and see no one, yet the tapping continues. I walk to the door and see a mangy-looking little squirrel tapping on the glass. He bares his sharp little teeth at me and keeps rapping with one paw.

"What do you want? I'm busy—go search for nuts or something," I say, looking down on him.

"There's a big hawk out here trying to eat me," he answers in a slightly raspy voice. "Open the door."

He looks right and left furtively, still rapping on the glass.

"I'm not letting you in here. You'll probably hide in a closet and shit on my sweaters, or something."

"Fuck you. Let me in!"

I rub my hands over my eyes vigorously, and put my glasses back on my face, but he's still there.

"I must be hallucinating—it's this fucking synopsis," I mutter to myself.

"What will you give me if I write it for you?" the squirrel says.

This is not real, I think. Squirrels cannot type. But. Why the hell not? I'm not getting anywhere.

I finger the pearl necklace I always wear when I write. So what? Seuss wore a hat, Amy Lowell smoked cigars, and there was that other guy with the rotten apples. We writers are a superstitious lot. But the squirrel isn't getting the pearls. *Hmmm... pearls before squirrels... oh, just stop!*

"I'll give you two chocolate truffles with almond butter inside," I offer.

"Sold!" he squeaks.

I open the door and he scampers to the chair I was sitting in. He looks back at me and bares his long, yellow front teeth again. "I'm going to need a box or something to sit on, genius. I can't hover like a hummingbird."

I take a box from the recycling bin, open it, and place it on the chair. Then I put a small pillow on top and pull the chair close to the table.

"Pull the laptop to the edge," he says. He wriggles his furry rump into the pillow until he's comfortable and then, after rubbing his tiny paws together, starts to type rapidly. He types for about half an hour without stopping, and then slowly maneuvers the cursor up to *file/save*.

"Truffles?" he asks, leaning back and resting on his tail.

I retrieve the agreed upon payment and place them on the table next to the computer. He sniffs appreciatively, grabs the foil-wrapped chocolates, and runs out the French doors.

I stand staring after him for a few moments, and then, without bothering to close the door, look at what he has written. It is succinct, yet flowing. Bare bones, yet compelling. And only four hundred seventy-five words. It is awesome. I read it through a couple of more times. No typos. No grammatical errors. It is gold. I email it to Beelzebub.

I take a deep breath, stretch, and pour myself a large glass of Malbec. Do I feel a twinge of guilt because *I* didn't actually write the synopsis? Well, yes, but no one would believe a squirrel wrote it. So.

The phone howls. Beelzebub texts a hearty *Attagirl!*

I watch the clouds, feed the hummingbirds, and water the flower garden the next day. That's all. No synopsis shit. Then the phone rings. It's Beelzebub.

"Well, you did it! I'm impressed as hell. Do you think you could write another synopsis this week, for the third book? I can get you a much better deal if I have more... and if it's anything like the second..."

My spirit sinks in inverse proportion to his rising excitement.

Maybe if I do the same thing, with the same sequence of steps, I can fall into a hallucination and write another one. Because really? A squirrel? That did *not* happen.

I sit there looking at the cursor for a while. Make some false starts. Try to write an outline on a legal pad. Tear it out, wad up the paper, and throw it at the French door. Where is that fucking squirrel when I need him?

I am ready to start drinking whiskey when I heard the tapping. Yes!

He is sitting outside the door, vigorously scratching the side of his head with his rear leg. When he has satisfied the itch, he bares his teeth and says "Let me in. What are you waiting for, stupid?"

"Same deal?" I ask, opening the door.

"Fuck no! I want something better this time."

"What do you want?" I ask, nervously stroking the pearls.

He studies my hand on the pearls, then crouches on all four paws, and pivots from left to right, glancing at all the objects in the room. Then he makes a noise that sounds like a combination of a grunt and a sigh.

"What would I do with any of this crap?" he says. "How about this? I'll write another synopsis for you, and you buy me a year's supply of miscellaneous nuts, in the shell. And none of those fucking Brazil nuts—I hate those."

"Done," I say. I retrieve the box and the pillow and he leaps up to the table and begins to type. He's done in less than half an hour this time.

"Since you don't have the nuts yet, how about some of those truffles for now?"

"Of course," I say, placing the chocolates on the table.

"More," he says. "You got any other flavors?"

I drop a handful of dark and white chocolate truffles on the table and he scurries away with as many as he can carry. He races back in to get the surplus just as I start to read.

"Pretty good, huh?" he says as he sidles out the opening to the deck. "Just so you know, the next time I see you, I will ask for one last thing as payment."

Beelzebub sold the novels in a three-book deal. Let's just say it was a lot of money, never mind how much. Of course, I still had to write the second two, but that was the fun part, and those goddamned synopses were done before I started.

I was busy for the next year and a half—between the writing and the book signings, you know. I did leave the nuts for the squirrel, just as I had promised, and I thought of him from time to time, but my mind was busy with other things.

Beelzebub suggested that I take a little break, maybe write some short fiction, while I was planning another series. It sounded good to me and I started on a themed collection about fairy tales late this fall.

The afternoon skies darken early and the leaves are beginning to fall off the trees. I sit in my usual place, tapping out the sentences happily, and when I hear the rapping, I immediately think of the squirrel. But no. I haven't seen him in almost two years. It can't be.

When I see his long yellow teeth bared at me through the glass of the door, I smile. He looks older and I notice a limp when he comes into the room.

"What happened to your leg?" I ask.

"Hawk. She almost got me."

How were the nuts—did I buy enough?"

"Enough with the small talk," he says. "You've been pretty fortunate since meeting me. Now I think I'll ask for that thing I mentioned, you remember?"

"You never said what it was."

"Well, I've been thinking about it for a while, and I've decided what I want."

"And?" I ask.

"I want my name on the cover of the next book."

"Oh, come on!" I say. "How can I give author credit to a squirrel? And then everyone will think I didn't write the other books—you know how that shit goes."

"Hey, that's your problem, bitch," he rasps.

"What are you gonna do if I don't agree?"

"You have no idea how thoroughly a small mammal can torture you. A thousand tiny torments—and you know how creative I can be..."

Goddammit. I am already imagining the kinds of crap he will come up with. I chew my lower lip a little as I tried to think of an appeasement.

"Tell you what," the squirrel says. "You were as good as your word on the other stuff, so here's what I'm willing to do—if you can guess my name in the next twenty-four hours, I'll let you off the author credit, but I still get a priority mention in the acknowledgements."

"OK," I answer. Should we start now?"

"You're ready to start guessing?" He draws his lower lip under his front teeth, squints, and cocks his head.

How hard could it be? He's a squirrel.

"Is it *Alvin* or *Theodore*?" I ask.

He shakes his head in disgust. "Those are chipmunk names, stupid."

"I wasn't aware there were special names for squirrels," I say. "How about..." Here I ran through a list of monosyllabic American men's names. *Shit. Maybe it isn't even male.* I test a few female names, but he just erupts in a squeaky trill of laughter.

"Look," he says, when he's recovered from his hilarity, "I'll come back tomorrow and you can try again. Maybe that brain of yours works better on names than it does on synopses, but I doubt it." Then he turns and sidles out the door. I'm pretty sure I hear him snickering as he scampers away.

I don't sleep at all that night. I research famous squirrel characters: *Rocky, Scrat, Sandy Cheeks, Bucky, Slappy, Hammy, Skippy, Secret squirrel, Conker, Surly, Pachirisu, Benny, Ginger Nutt, Grayson, Screwball, Ch'p, Felldough, Ranguvar Foeseeker.* I research literary squirrels: Beatrix Potter's Squirrel Nutkin, the squirrel in Nabokov's *Pnin*, Nietzsche's King Squirrel I. And I find that a series of unfortunate squirrels are brutally killed in Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, Blades *Small Game*, and Chekov's "St. Peter's Day."

But the story that reverberates the most is Fitzgerald's *A Diamond as Big as the Ritz*: a squirrel leads to the discovery of the massive diamond and is never thanked or mentioned again. Seems relevant.

So, I write all the names on a list. I also put bowl of chocolate covered almonds and cashews just outside the French doors. Then I wait quietly for the knocking.

An hour passes. No squirrel. Maybe he's rehearsing some of the passive-aggressive torment he has planned if I don't follow through. Another half hour passes. I go and stand in the doorway and look out into the woods.

Very high on one of the taller trees, a branch shakes violently and I hear a thrashing sound. Then a huge red-tailed hawk comes sailing out of the sky. She leads with her gray legs outstretched and her black talons reaching for the rail of the deck. With two flaps of her wings, she settles and stills. Then she looks directly at me: her yellow eyes are shaded by the heavy brow, and the intensity of her focus is fierce. She is perfectly still, except for the breeze that ruffles her banded chest feathers. Then her head twitches sideways and she suddenly launches from the rail.

I stand listening to the silence for several more minutes. The afternoon light is fading and still no squirrel. Then I hear a thrashing in one of the trees. Some leaves fall as some small violence occurs, but it's too dark to see what's happening.

The squirrel never shows. Well, maybe tomorrow.

When I wake up in the morning I go to the doors and look out. I forgot to take the nuts in, and the bowl is overturned and empty. There are some brown marks on the deck - maybe chocolate? But I can't tell if they're squirrel or raccoon tracks.

My name is the only one that appears on the cover of the book. I do mention some vague shit about being inspired by nature in the acknowledgements, but that's it. Because, after all, I never got his name, did I?

Hera
by
Marianne Gambaro

In a golden palace on Olympus
she soaks in her alabaster tub
and looks disdainfully at her tummy
made flaccid by too many draughts of ambrosia
and by whelping too many demi-gods.
She gives it a tentative jiggle
swamping ships and inundating islands.

Imposter Syndrome by **Marlowe Gardiner-Heslin**

Out of all the 18,652 cosmic shapeshifters that had infiltrated the planet, Kymbyrlee was sure she was the only one who had yet to master walking. The thought came with predictable speed the moment she tripped on the sun-cracked pavement, her left heel hitting the pavement a little too hard. The connection sent a shock through her leg, compressing the rough skin of her foot painfully against bone. She caught herself with the other leg and avoided yet another scraped face, but she could feel her posture overcorrecting, becoming stiff and unnatural. She could feel the looks of passersby graze her, and couldn't help imagining what they thought. She just wanted to get home.

Simple actions had become complicated by sweltering insomniac nights, which sent her spiraling into herself in waves. Feelings of inadequacy would bubble up, forcing herself to soothe her anxieties over and over again. This made her days seem unreal and even more difficult. Outside of her building, she caught a glimpse of herself in the darkened glass of a window. Her eyes were too close, her ears too large and circular, and her nose seemed to somehow sit both too high and too low on her face. She had formed it all wrong, but it was too late to try something different. A change would attract suspicion.

There had been no such trouble on her last planet, where she effortlessly assumed the form of a sentient gelatin cube and wobbled heroically in place for a full cycle. That had been easier. She had even received an (unofficial) commendation for the effort. Here on earth, however, it didn't seem to matter how tenaciously she wobbled in place. She felt stuck.

She finally made it inside her building, where one of the many middle-aged divorcees who lived there was sitting in the lobby and scrolling through his phone. This one was named Orin, she thought, or maybe Alex. She had difficulty keeping her neighbors straight in her head. They had the same air of desperation, and the same tendency to let their eyes linger.

"Hell of a day," the man said, looking up from the glass surface of his phone. "You holding up?"

"Yes. Holding it all up," she nodded and quickly moved to the elevator. "Thank you. Good bye," she added. As the doors closed, she could see his slightly perplexed face struggling to maintain a smile.

Language had proven another challenge. Letters and words in general were needlessly confusing. Adjectives in particular eluded her. Her assigned native tongue of English simply had too many of them, and she was always confusing words like oily and ornery or tasteful and traceable. They all melted together into a jumble that left her feeling as if she were picking them out at random and hoping for the best. The whole thing always left her feeling balsamic.

Like everyone in the invasion force, Kymbyrlee knew that fitting in was not just a part of the job, it was a sacred calling. They were the select few that would be the forerunners of a new way of life. By becoming one with the populace, they would understand it. What was alien would become familiar, and together something new would emerge. Of course, there would always be some initial resistance from the locals, but it would be overcome as they were absorbed into something greater and the galaxy was united into a glorious whole united around the Emperor. There could be no greater destiny than to be the engine of that

change. Kymbyrlee's grandfather had preached this to her as soon as she was capable of listening, and the words had contained so much truth and been conveyed with such passion that she had cried when she first heard them. For this reason, her failure to walk and talk naturally after nearly a year among humans was crushing.

As Invasion Day approached, she was still living in a cheap apartment on the poorly serviced edge of a large city. It was important, she had been told, that the Traltalite Empire have accurate information about every area within the twelve selected insertion cities. She couldn't help noticing that other members of the Empire had been better positioned to climb the ladders of society. They lived in the middle of town or in lush surroundings on the outskirts. They had important-sounding job titles, while she was still working the deep fryer at a local fast-food restaurant.

Finally in her apartment, she let out a large sigh and headed for the shower. She had almost reached the bathroom when she was stopped by frantic knocking and a playful voice from the other side of her door.

"Let me in, Lee," the voice shouted.

It could only be Tina. Kymbyrlee was tired and unprepared for socialization, but she did not want to disappoint her only friend. She sighed to herself as she turned around and unlocked the door. Never having got the hang of human greetings, she stood awkwardly in place and looked down at Tina with the approximation of a smile. She waited for her friend to take a lead she could follow.

"Something on my face?" Tina laughed, hugging Kymbyrlee before pushing past her. "You really got to decorate a little bit. It's so depressing. I guess you go in for that minimalist vibe, yeah?"

Tina had always been like this. She assaulted Kymbyrlee with friendship from the moment she had met her. Kymbyrlee had been suspicious of espionage at first, but had learned that the young college student was simply desperate to cling to the only other person in the building who was in her general demographic.

At first, Tina had tried to incorporate Kymbyrlee into her group of friends, but those outings were a disaster. When the other young humans all talked and laughed. Kymbyrlee did not know how to respond.

"What kind of person do you hate the most?" That had been the implied topic of conversation at one such outing, as they all shoved food and drink in their overly moist human mouths.

"Personally, I'm done listening to anyone who talks down to me" one woman had said, and everyone nodded in approval laughing and sharing examples they had encountered.

Then it was another woman's turn. "Yesterday, I had to go over and speak to some guy who decided to listen to his music through the speaker of his phone." Everyone laughed again, although no joke had been told.

It seemed to Kymbyrlee that these humans had conversations primarily to affirm things they already believed and knew that their friends believed as well, so Kymbyrlee thought of irritations that others likely experienced and decided to try her luck.

"I've never been able to tolerate people that blink constantly," Kymbyrlee had said.

There was a moment of silence.

"Blinking?" she saw one young man mouth to his friend, his brow furrowed in confusion.

In that moment, Kymbyrlee was positive that her arms looked inhuman and her exoskeleton could be seen rippling beneath her human skin. She froze in place.

Tina finally intervened. "I think Lee means squirrely people, like when someone fidgets all the time."

This was evidently enough for the others, who laughed and talked about the kind of people that fit that description. It had been a close call.

After that Kymbyrlee, had avoided further large social outings, but she continued to make time for Tina, who was kind and understanding in a way that was unfamiliar. It was not unusual that she would drop by at the end of a work day, nor was it strange that she would have a gift, as she evidently did this time. She took a book she was holding and placed it on Kymbyrlee's bare, white table.

"I thought you could use this," Tina said, placing the package on the table and sliding it across the table to her friend. The book was titled *Accepting Ourselves in a World of Nonacceptance*. "It's like we talked about. I thought this might help with your whole over-thinking thing."

"Thank you," Kymbyrlee half-shouted in her best approximation of human excitement.

Tina laughed and shook her head. After a moment she launched into a series of stories about life at the university. Most seemed trivial and not worth telling, but Kymbyrlee enjoyed the rhythm and tone of her voice. She nodded and smiled her way through the thirty minutes that followed.

When Tina was gone, she took a quick shower, and climbed atop her bed to read. She was up to F in the large academic dictionary she kept perched on the windowsill, but she remembered the book Tina had brought and went to retrieve it instead. It was foolish to think that humans would possess knowledge that could help her, but then again, being human was precisely the problem she was having.

Although it was slow-going at first and full of empty aphorisms, she was surprised to find that there were truths hidden within its pages. Not just truths about blending in as a human, but truths about the desire to blend in altogether. She grabbed a pen and begun to underline important passages. Over the course of three short chapters, Kymbyrlee learned that her awkwardness was a result of self-doubt and an inability to live up to the imagined standards of others. Society had taught her that she could never be good enough and if she was going to flourish, she would need to unlearn all of that unhelpful thinking. She needed to stop fitting in and start standing out. Something clicked into place as she read this, as if everything that had never made sense in her life was now legible, and not just her life on Earth but on Trital Prime too. She fell asleep reading the book and slept with a feeling of ease that she had never before known.

It didn't last. The next morning, doubts swelled up within her once more. It sounded good to embrace your individuality, but it was at odds with everything she knew to be true about

the universe. It was only by coming together that there was any hope of cosmic harmony. What unity could exist without acting as one? The revelations of the human book felt profane in the light of day, blasphemous even. Yet, each night she felt herself revisiting it until she had made her way through its pages three times over.

She was at work one day when she made the first tentative steps towards the version of herself the book prescribed. It was another in an endless chain of cloudless, humid days. Normally she would never speak an opinion first. She always waited for her coworkers to offer conversation so she could nod and agree, but the day was unbearable and, surprising even herself, she found the courage to express as much without any prompting.

"It feels like I'm melting," she offered.

She had just been expressing a fact, but the teenager on her right laughed.

"Maybe we'll all get heat stroke and get the rest of the shift off," he added.

Not used to this kind of banter, Kymbyrlee was reluctant to let it go.

"Illness would certainly be preferable to another three hours."

Another laugh. It was working. She was just expressing herself honestly and yet somehow it was helping her be accepted.

"Let's hope we die in terrible, painful agony and never have to work again."

This time there was no laughter, just the usual strange look, but it didn't matter. For a moment, she had participated in a fragment of a normal human conversation. She felt a sense of victory, and regained a sliver of the confidence she'd lost in the "blinking" incident. As successful interactions piled up over the following days, she even began to feel as if she had solved a great mystery.

A little over a week later, she was revisiting the self-help book yet again when Dev showed up at her door. He was her commanding officer and the only contact she had with the higher-ups in the invasion force. Neat and trim, with an angular haircut and nicely tailored suit, Dev somehow exuded not only success but also an air of forget-ability. He might draw your eye for a moment, but nobody was likely to remember his only slightly above average face. She had seen him only twice since her arrival. He was supposed to be collecting and reading her bi-weekly reports, but Kymbyrlee doubted he was. On more than one occasion, she had found her hand-written notes sitting in the drop-box untouched. Sometimes two or three would pile up before someone collected them. She never received any feedback.

This was the first time Dev had been inside her apartment, and he tried to hide his disgust as he stepped into her room. Currently living as the CEO of a large tech company, he clearly felt out of his element in Kymbyrlee's home. He gingerly sat down in one of the beige, plastic chairs, where he explained that the invasion was set to take place the following day.

"Tomorrow? Without warning?" Kymbyrlee asked.

"There was plenty of warning, but it was not necessary to share it."

She paused. "I don't understand."

"You only have to stand in the crowd during the announcement and reveal yourself to the humans. There will be thousands of others around you. It's a simple task, and there was no need to include you in the planning."

Kymbyrlee nodded. It was disappointing, but not unexpected. A strange sadness washed over her. She had wanted to leave this planet every night for a year, but now that it was a reality, she found herself reluctant. She had only just started to understand how things worked

"And you have nothing to add," Dev said. It was not a question. He was simply terminating the meeting.

Kymbyrlee's mind was drawn to the book sitting in the corner. Perhaps as a desire to test its central hypothesis that everyone doubted as she did, she stopped him as he began to stand up.

"Wait. Actually, I, um-"

Dev looked down at her with slight annoyance but waited for her to collect her thoughts.

"Have you found it difficult? Being a human, I mean?"

"Difficult how?"

She shrugged and shook her head.

"The smell? You must mean the smell. Yes, that can be difficult to bear."

"No, difficult to fit in. Be human."

He was shaking his head before she was even finished.

"No," Dev said without thinking deeply. "It's what we do. What we've always done. It is only through uniting ourselves that we overcome our selves."

This last phrase was a popular saying within the invasion force.

"If it's not coming naturally, I would assume there's a problem with your functioning." He sighed. "That is to be expected though. There's that stubborn vein of failure in your family. Your grandfather thought you might be an exception, but it appears that is not the case."

Kymbyrlee looked down and said nothing.

"No matter, we can think of your future at a later date. Let us focus on tomorrow."

Kymbyrlee nodded and Dev stood up to leave. She could see him already disinfecting his hands as she closed the door behind him.

Strangely, Dev's arrival removed the last of Kymbyrlee's doubt. Whether it was a need to prove him wrong or an acknowledgment that he was right, she was determined to change. She needed a new tack, but this did not mean she had given up on cosmic harmony. She still believed in the mission with all her heart, but she would not achieve it by pretending to

be something she was not. Her experience at work had taught her that there was a deeper harmony possible if one ceased trying to make themselves as small as possible.

She got into bed and read through her favorite sections of Tina's book. As she did so, a plan came into her head.

The next morning, she looked in the mirror and her eyes shone back at her with renewed vigor. It was the first time in over a year that she had not averted her gaze in disgust. She would walk in public in her true form, glowing, purple, and mantis-like. She knocked first on Tina's door, needing to return the book and say goodbye to her friend. "Is that you Lee? It's so early," she said in a faux-whiny voice from the other side of the door. Tina threw the door open with typical enthusiasm, but the moment she looked into her friend's eyes, she screamed and quickly ran for the safety of her bathroom.

This was sad but of no great significance. She would come to understand in time. Kymbyrlee set the book down in front of her friend's door. She walked down the rest of the stairs and out into the August morning just as the sun began to cook the sidewalk. The heat no longer felt oppressive. It was a fire driving her forward.

There were more screams from the few people on the street that early, but she had expected some screams. The book had mentioned there was a cost to being yourself. They would stop eventually. They, however, did not stop before Kymbyrlee reached her destination. The screams carried across town all the way to the appointed meeting spot. The police caught up to her just before she reached her destination. Another member of the invasion force, seeing Kymbyrlee already transformed, assumed he had made a mistake in failing to change before arriving. He quickly revealed himself and prompted a domino effect among the twelve members of the invasion force who had arrived early. A large police force began to assemble and every single Triticalite that showed up that morning was carried away to a nearby military facility.

"Traitor!" Dev shouted at Kymbyrlee as he was wrestled into a military vehicle and placed next to her. "Wait until the Emperor hears of this." Her old self would have felt shame. But now, as the words washed off her back, she smiled and said nothing.

She no longer needed to feed negative thoughts.

As it turned out, the Emperor would hear about Kymbyrlee's actions, but not before he had the opportunity to do anything about it. It is said across the galaxy that a Triticalite's voice produces a dozen echoes. When one top-ranking officer spilled the beans under threat of incarceration, the others were quick to back him up. Only Kymbyrlee held her tongue, while the others tripped over themselves to offer additional details. Confession was evidently the majority decision and no self-respecting Triticalite wants to be the lone hold-out. The groups hidden across the other eleven cities had gone into hiding after the botched reveal, but with the exceedingly helpful suggestions of the captured invasion force, the majority were tracked down by the following Wednesday.

Earth marked an end. Not just the end of the invasion, but the end of the Triticalite Empire. It turned out that cosmic harmony was something of a forced proposition. Perhaps protest and revolt could have been quelled if the Empire had not been spread so thin, but success had bred arrogance. Most of the Empire's top military brass had been on Earth, eager for the PR that came from yet another victory. Being captured left a power vacuum, and being

captured by such a primitive military cast doubt on the capabilities of the invasion force. The Empire's structure crumbled from within as planet after planet took back control and finally even Trital Prime fell.

In the mirrored spires of the capital, the Emperor felt a pang of relief. He no longer had to pretend to be as calm and collected as he always appeared. It wasn't that he didn't believe in the perfect harmony that his forebears had espoused, he had just found it difficult to embody those values at every moment of the day. As the Emperor watched his courtiers pilloried by an angry mob, he at least took some satisfaction in how little resistance they offered. Indeed, it seemed as if the whole planet was now united in opposition to the Empire. He took some solace in this. His downfall was shaping up to be a harmonious one.

**An Ode to HR
by
Kenneth Nichols**

Without you...
Applicants wouldn't
enjoy long, happy afternoons
copy-pasting the exact same information
from their resumes into
fourteen different portals.

Without you...
There would be no
completely worthwhile
three-hour seminars
devoted to reminding us that
watching porn all day
over company WiFi is
prohibited.

Without you...
how would we know that
Bluecorp finds it
unacceptable
to hurl racial slurs
at coworkers
or clients
or customers
or consultants
or contractors
or anyone else?

Without you...
the company wouldn't spend
hundreds of thousands of dollars
during a hiring freeze
for outside consultants to develop
completely useful
online training modules
that wouldn't challenge a
bright second-grader.

Without you...
we would see a puddle
of an unknown substance
on the floor,
and we would fall to our knees,
sniff the liquid,
roll it between our fingers, and
lap it up like a
dog taking a drink after
a walk on a hot summer day.

Without you...
The people who actually
generate revenue for Bluecorp
would be alone.

So.
Alone.

Headless
by
Laerke Olsvig

"There's something different about you today," said Jane as she poured herself a coffee using the coffee machine at the coffee place in the office. The line was longer than usual.

"I agree," said Beth. "Did you get a new haircut or something?"

"No," I answered. "Maybe it's because I'm not wearing any makeup."

"Oh, dear, I see what it is," said Jane and leaned forward, uncomfortably close to me. "It's your head," she said and studied me carefully. "Your head is gone."

"That's it!" Beth agreed. "Your head is gone."

A few moments later, I looked myself in the mirror in the bathroom, and it was true—my head was gone! I wondered where I could have lost it. Where does one lose their head? I did not remember ever losing my head before, or even hearing about other people losing their heads. I had never really considered this to be something that could happen. For obvious reasons, I needed to find my head again. However, I could probably find a temporary solution to last me for the rest of the day—at least until after work.

"I'm afraid that's all we have," said the woman behind the counter. She had a resting-friendly face. I looked at my options, and they were not as varied as I would have liked them to be, but I needed to choose something as I had a meeting coming up in a few minutes.

"I understand," I said and pointed towards the pink scream mask. I did not really wish to wear a scary mask as I did not find it suitable for work, however, this was the least scary one of them all, and I also figured that the pink colour made it slightly more approachable—almost soft.

"You could also try Party Queens down the end of the street," the woman said, with a relaxed and therefore friendly face.

"I appreciate your help, but I need a mask immediately, and it's just temporary anyway."

The woman shrugged. "That'll be twelve pounds,"

"I don't need a bag," I said and paid.

The mask came with a little stick that I stuck into my neck.

"It works," said the woman triumphantly. "Good luck finding your head."

"Don't worry, no one will notice," Beth lied as we entered the meeting room.

"Thank you," I said and adjusted my mask—a new habit I had taken up since walking out from the store a few moments earlier. The small room was already warm from all the people inside it. I found a chair amidst the sweaty crowd and noticed Anne from Design wasn't in today. Odd, she had never missed a meeting before.

"I'm happy we can all finally put our heads together," said Mike. He glanced at me, his face turning slightly red—or pink. A bit like my mask. There was a silence. "I mean," Mike pulled his tie and corrected himself, "It's good that we can get together to sort this out." Mike had had a few complaints over the past year. Some people thought he had discriminated against them, so I guessed that was why he was anxious after having said that thing about heads getting together. From his perspective, I could say I had felt excluded in this meeting due to his choice of words. Had I? I adjusted my mask, and Mike swallowed.

"Without further ado, let's commence," said Mike and put on a colourful PowerPoint presentation on the screen behind him. The first slide featured three different-coloured heads, so Mike rapidly clicked onto the next slide.

"There have been some complaints due to contracts not being fully completed before we begin delivering," he made a grimace, "and from our side of the table, we're trying to be as transparent as possible—we're trying to make it clear to all of you that we are not trying to mask—" Mike glanced at me quickly again, "—cover anything up." His face turned into an aggressive pink—not soft like my mask—and he seemed to have frozen because he was not saying anything.

"It's okay," I said, feeling a bit sorry for him. "Let's address the elephant in the room. I've lost my head, and I'm determined to find it again."

"Oh, it's hardly noticeable," said Mike and looked around the room to receive confirmation. People nodded in agreement.

"True," said Beth. "I didn't even notice it until you told me this morning."

That was, of course, a lie. But maybe it was not too noticeable after all since I, myself, had not realised it either until Jane had pointed it out. Jane was a person known for her exceptional attention to detail.

"I would even go so far as to say it even suits you," Mike said, obviously becoming a bit too frisky due to the team supporting him.

"Thank you," I said, wishing to move on from this topic.

"But it's true!" he pronounced. "You look great today."

"Absolutely," Kenny from Marketing joined in. "Stunning."

Although I knew they were lying—they were only trying to make me feel comfortable—I tried not to get angry.

"Thanks everyone," I said. "But to be honest, I would really like to find my head again, so if anyone—"

"Not necessary," Kenny interrupted. "In this day and age, I can't believe that we are forcing people into thinking they need heads. Some have heads, and some don't."

"Exactly," Mike agreed. "Head or no head, it doesn't and should never matter."

"But," I tried, "I'd really like to have my head back, so—"

"Sorry," said Kenny with annoyance in his voice, "that is a personal matter. You want your head back, fine. But there may be other people who do not wish to have their heads back, and I think that you should consider your language when thinking of them."

"What do you mean by consider my language?" I asked.

"Perhaps be a bit more discrete about your wish as it's a rather sensitive topic," Mike offered.

"And that comes from you?" I said, irritated.

"I know I've said some insensitive things in the past," Mike said and placed a hand on his chest. "But I've taken quite a few unconscious bias courses over the past couple of months, and I am happy to say that I am a new person—I do not discriminate anymore."

"You go, bro!" said Kenny, clapping loudly, and the whole team followed by giving an enthusiastic applause, making me feel I was at the opera.

"Okay, fine, Mr Correct," I said. "I'd still like my head back."

Shocked gasps from the audience. Mike put his face into his hands, and Kenny got up to give him a pat on his shoulder. "It's okay, Bro, we've all been there," Kenny said soothingly, and then turned to me in aggression. "This has escalated out of proportion, so Louise, if you could please leave the room. We'll take this up with HR later today."

"You're not even my manager," I said.

"You really want to go there right now?" Kenny answered nodding towards Mike who dried his crisp-dry eyes.

I could not believe I had been kicked out of the meeting. I had not been kicked out of anywhere since that time in school when I was ten and I pulled Choe's hair a bit too hard. I put my hand where my hair should have been. This may be the real punishment creeping up on me finally. If I could just have my head back, I could probably think clearer and know what to do. Evil thought! As if other people without heads could not think. Maybe Mike and Kenny were right, I was full of unconscious biases towards the headless. Maybe this was internalised headless-phobia?

Explaining that I had felt excluded by the language Mike had used before commencing his presentation, I got away with a warning from HR.

"We understand your feeling about wanting to have a head," said the HR guy making a face of false sympathy. I wanted to tell him that I already had a head, but that I had lost it and was very keen on putting it onto my neck again. But I figured it was not the right time and place for that kind of conversation, so I nodded in agreement.

"Yes," I said, "I guess a bit of jealousy towards Mike's head took over in that moment. I am deeply sorry."

"Very brave of you to admit that," said HR guy and handed me a handkerchief, but quickly took it back as he realised that I did not need one.

Where could my head be? I tried thinking of where I had been the night before, but my memories were all clouded due my lack of head. I decided it was okay to feel this way. This was my individual and private experience, so I was not claiming that anyone else without a head could not think by concluding that I could not.

I tried the most obvious place: *The Departed*, a bar I often went to.

"I'm sorry, hun," said the bartender. He was new. "We haven't seen or heard of any lost heads around here. I'll keep an eye out for you."

"I'm sorry, we haven't seen any heads lying around here," said the woman behind the counter at Tesco's.

"No lost heads here," they told me at the lost and found.

"No heads no."

"I'll put it aside if I see it."

"Absolutely not. Have never seen any heads around here."

"Nope."

It was useless. There was no point in looking anymore. Maybe someone had taken it? I sat down on a bench in Victoria Embankment Gardens. Dusk began darkening the trees.

"Oh my God, you scared me," said a woman. She was sitting on the same bench as me. Had she been sitting there before I sat down?

"I'm sorry," I said. "If it's the mask, it's supposed to be temporary."

"No, it wasn't the mask," she said with hesitation.

"Ah, come on," I said. "We've all seen *Scream*. Of course, it was the mask."

She laughed. "Okay, it was the mask, but then I quickly realised it's pink. So, it really isn't scary at all. I just couldn't see that well in this darkness."

"It's okay," I said. "I would have reacted the same way. This mask," I shook my mask, "was supposed to be temporary. You see, I lost my head and I have no idea where to find it, so I guess I'll have to live with this a little longer. Or maybe get another mask. An animal— maybe a rabbit?"

"Don't get another mask," she answered determined. "If you go down that path, you'll never find your head again."

I could not believe she had just suggested that I may not find my head again. Firstly, because I was scared of not finding it. Secondly, because it was discriminatory to assume I wanted to find my head again. What if I had no wish of finding it and was fine with being headless?

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "I once too lost it."

I could not believe my non-ears. She had lost her head, too?

"It was years ago. It was a different time. But I know what you're thinking, what you're feeling. You need your head back. Don't let them bully you into not finding your head again."

"Why?" I asked.

"Trust me, I knew someone who lost their head. It started with the head. Then it sort of just spiralled from there. Arms, then legs, then feet. In the end, the person was completely gone." Her words gave me an odd feeling inside. I had never even considered that it was possible to lose more than one's head. Then again, that very morning I had no idea that losing one's head was a possibility either. "Promise me, you'll find that head of yours," she said. And that's when I realised there was no one next to me! She, herself, had been that 'someone' who was losing it all.

When I arrived home that evening, I could not believe what met me in the corridor. My head! There it was looking all sleepy and a bit confused. I immediately threw off my pink Scream mask and put on my head. Everything seemed so clear now. I had taken it off for a moment the night before just to test if it was needed or not. I definitely needed it and I would never take it off again—not even to shower, I promised myself.

"There's something different about you today," said Jane as she poured herself a coffee using the coffee machine at the coffee place in the office. The line was shorter than usual.

"I agree," said Beth. "Did you have a new haircut or something?"

"No," I answered. "Today I'm finally myself again."

"Oh, dear, I see what it is," said Jane. "It's your body," she said and studied me carefully. "You have a new body."

"That's it!" Beth agreed. "A new body."

I ran to the mirror in the bathroom, and that was when I realised it. I was wearing Anne from the Design Team's head!

How To Tell When Things Are Dead

by
Ron Riecki

Cartoon characters—after they have completely disappeared when falling into an abyss. There is no other surefire way to know a cartoon character is dead, so if you are ever wanting to kill one, ensure an abyss is nearby.

Plants—I have no idea. Since that's the case, just keep watering them. Who the heck knows if it's alive or dead?

Celebrities—when they are doing an interview on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross. Any celebrity being interviewed by Terry Gross has a fifty-fifty chance that they're dead. Just wait until the interview is over and then Terry will tell you if it is a repeat of an earlier interview she had done with the celebrity and then she will sadly tell you that they died last Tuesday. Otherwise, if she doesn't mention them being dead, they're alive.

Serial killers in horror movies—completely impossible to tell if they're dead. If you are in the audience, you're fine. If you're in the movie, you're screwed. Make sure you're not in the movie.

Sleeping lions—very difficult to tell if they are dead. One way to check is to pet them. Another way is to throw rocks at them or crank Metallica's *Kill 'Em All*. Or both.

Flamingos—really easy to tell if they're dead. They'll be lying down, all dead looking. Like I said, one of the easiest things to tell is if a flamingo is dead.

Zombies—kind of a trick question. Zombies are the living dead, so they're already dead, but they're also alive. So this is just simply a really hard question. If it ends up coming up on the MCAT, just keep answering all of the other questions and you can come back to this one later, if you have time.

Finnish people—I'm Finnish, so I know this one pretty well, but Finnish people are mostly the same as normal people, so a Finnish person will be dead just like other people are dead, but they'll just be more Finnish than other people. Even when we're dead.

Cobras—man, fuck cobras.

Man with a hat over his face—just pull the hat back and you'll see his face. You can tell a person is dead by looking at their face most of the time. A common error is that some people look at the person's feet or sometimes even at their watch. Don't get caught up on feet or watches. Just look at their face. If a hat is on their face, don't look at the hat. Remember: remove the hat. The face will be right there. If the face looks dead, the other things like the feet will probably also be dead. Also, sometimes the watch is dead too, but that's just a coincidence.

Dead people—this one's easy. They're dead. It's in the title. If a person calls someone else a "dead person," they're most likely dead. The only thing to be aware of is if it's a fight. If two people are fighting and one person calls the other person a "dead man" or says something like, "You're dead," they're not really dead. People say the opposite things in fights. This is why I hate fights. You can't tell who's telling the truth.

John Wilkes Booth—he died in 1878 or one of those years like that. The point is a long time ago. But he's definitely very dead. Once you die, your death just keeps getting older, so he's very dead at this point. That's one thing I'll always remember about John Wilkes Booth—how dead he is.

The Easter Bunny—can't be killed. Trick question.

Navy Seals—also can't be killed. Trick question.

Trains—this is just stupid. Trains can't be killed. If someone ever asked you this, just ignore them. Unless it's a child, then you can explain to them how trains aren't alive and they'll learn something valuable.

My neighbor who says he owns an Orange Julius—I see him walking around in front of my apartment complex, so he's alive. But if he's ever lying there on the sidewalk, he's probably dead.

Queen Elizabeth I—dead. All queens are dead. I think. I don't know much about history or other countries or anything like that, but if someone's a queen, always assume their dead. Just like John Wilkes Booth. (But there are probably actual queens out there somewhere in the world, but if you live in the U.S., then just consider a queen to be dead.)

Janeane Garofalo—she's alive. She did a show in the city where I grew up a few weeks ago. So she's alive. But if she was dead, it'd be like a regular person, so just look at her face. She doesn't wear hats, so you can just walk up and look at her face. She's an easy one to figure out if she's dead. (Also, I'm glad she's alive, because she's really cute.)

Spiders—man, fuck spiders.

A Thief in Monkey Junction
by
Deborah-Zenha Adams

Miss Virginia Fryar's breakfast was all but spoiled by the sight of the corpse in her back yard. Miss Virginia spotted it as she crossed the dew-wet lawn, carrying a tray that contained her usual morning Danish and coffee.

In spite of reflexes slowed by seventy-three years of life experience, she managed to juggle the tray with its rattling china so that there was little spillage. Setting the tray on her new wrought-iron lawn table, she contemplated the situation.

The late gentleman sprawled across her annuals had a pickax planted firmly in the back of his head. Miss Virginia glared at the body, hoping it would disappear. When it didn't, she eased her delicate frame into a chair and pinched off nibble-sized bits of sweet pastry, popping them into her mouth and chewing thoughtfully.

Miss Virginia recognized the deceased, of course; he was—or had been—the earnest young fellow who'd knocked on her front door the previous day and introduced himself as Perry Hampton, a writer of regional histories.

"I've been told," he'd said, with a dimpled smile, "that *you* have some fascinating stories."

Miss Virginia's elderly heart beat that much faster and her wrinkled face flushed. These were sensations she'd given up for dead many years before and now came this handsome boy with an impish grin implying that Miss Virginia might be as fascinating as her stories. Which she was, but no one had noticed for a good long time.

She'd invited him in for ice cold lemonade and cookies fresh from the bakery, and the two of them had passed a pleasant afternoon together. "Oh, yes," she'd told him. "I've always lived here. Why, I remember when the only business hereabouts was a little filling station. Papa used to take me there to see the monkeys. Of course, back in those days..."

Miss Virginia went on to relate her well-worn family tales: the Yankee who'd died on the roof just before the fall of Fort Fisher; the mysterious Gray Man who had saved the Fryar home from a hurricane that leveled all the houses around; even the scandalous escapades of an ancestress who had taken up with Blackbeard the pirate then broken his heart.

Young Mr. Hampton beamed and said, "So there's more than one *femme fatale* in your family!"

Once upon a time such a comment would have been rewarded with fluttering lashes and an expertly-cultivated blush. Miss Virginia was no longer susceptible to such blatant flattery, however much she enjoyed it, and so Mr. Hampton got only a grandmotherly smile for his trouble. Miss Virginia had shown him family photographs and Bibles, and even taken him to the attic for a tour of six generations' worth of memories. Oohing and ahing over yellowed newspaper clippings that chronicled the lives of numerous Fryars, Mr. Hampton's attention was suddenly and sincerely drawn to a tattered sheet of paper that escaped Miss Virginia's grasp and fluttered to the dusty attic floor.

"What's this?" he asked, retrieving the wayward scrap.

Miss Virginia cocked her head for a closer look. "One of Grandpapa's doodles, I expect," she said. "He was quite artistic, wasn't he?"

"Indeed." Perry Hampton studied the sketched circles and squares and squiggly lines intently for a moment. Then, as if slapped in the face by reality's hand, his gaze returned to Miss Virginia.

"Now what is it you have there?" He indicated the packet of documents she'd pulled from the old sea chest in the corner.

"Well," said Miss Virginia, "My mother was a very thorough amateur genealogist. Would you like to hear about some of my maternal ancestors?"

For an hour or so, Miss Virginia regaled her visitor with tales of her many deceased relatives and the parts they'd played in the social and political scheme in and around Wilmington. Eventually even she grew tired of dead kin, and when her voice cracked from fatigue, Mr. Hampton hurriedly apologized for taking so much of her time.

As he stepped out the front door, Perry Hampton declared himself enchanted by Miss Virginia and her family, and begged an invitation to return, which Miss Virginia graciously offered.

She hadn't counted on him turning up in such an undignified and troublesome position, however.

A shift in the wind's direction caused Miss Virginia to twitch her nose in distaste. She sighed and rose to cross the tidy lawn, looking around to be sure no one traveling down Carolina Beach Road could see her through the ancient iron fence before she squatted by the body. Running her still-graceful fingers lightly over the earthly remains of Perry Hampton, Miss Virginia found nothing of interest in his soiled tee shirt. (On his first visit, he'd been properly dressed for a social call. His current attire suggested to Miss Virginia that he'd not expected to encounter anyone of worth in her backyard.)

There was a fair amount of dried blood on the back of his head, and an odor she chose not to identify. In the right back pocket of his denims, Miss Virginia found a wallet containing the usual no-nonsense assortment most men carried—driver's license, social security card, and so forth—and five ten-dollar bills. Miss Virginia replaced it all except forty dollars, and tucked the wallet back into the pocket of Mr. Hampton's trousers. She ran her hand into his left back pocket and pulled out a folded piece of tattered and yellowed paper—Grandpapa's doodle!

Obviously Mr. Hampton was not the gentleman she'd assumed he was, for gentlemen didn't steal from elderly ladies—and there was no doubt in her mind that Perry Hampton had stolen the scrap, although she couldn't imagine why he'd want the thing. She wrapped the paper around the four ten-dollar bills and tucked the resulting packet inside her bodice.

As soon as she had carried her breakfast tray back into the house, rinsed the dishes, and set them to drain, Miss Virginia called the police. Then, not wanting to face what was to come without moral support, she made a second call to dear Captain Lambdin, explaining her dilemma. Captain Lambdin, ever thoughtful and compassionate, promised to start for Miss Virginia's immediately.

"Now, Ma'am," Officer Allen said after introducing himself and his partner, "you called in a report about a dead body?" His tone implied that he found this unlikely.

"Indeed." Miss Virginia eyed the two officers, wondering if they were old enough to cope with such a profound emergency. "You'll find him in the back yard. I'll be glad to show you the way if you'll give me a minute."

"Good morning, Miss Virginia!" Howard the mail carrier jiggled all over as he rocked up the steps. "Everything okay?"

"Yes, thank you, Howard." Miss Virginia held out her hand for the day's mail. "There was a difficulty but the proper authorities have been notified. Now they're here and all is well."

She wasn't about to go into it further. Everyone knew that Howard gossiped like a biddy, and Miss Virginia fairly shuddered at the thought of being the subject of the inevitable speculation to come.

She retrieved her morning's mail, then stepped inside ahead of the openly amused police officers and slammed the door in Howard's face. "We can go through here," she said, leading the way to the back door.

"Let me make sure I've got this straight," said Officer Baxter, who was sandwiched between Miss Virginia and his partner. "There's a dead *body* in your yard?"

"That's correct," Miss Virginia told him. "Watch your step there. There's a bad spot in the Linoleum. I really must have some work done on this kitchen."

Miss Virginia led the officers through the kitchen and out the back door. "He's right over there, in the impatiens." She pointed, lest the officers fail to notice Perry Hampton's lifeless form atop the crushed blooms.

"Holy sh—cow!" Officer Allen whispered. He stepped around Miss Virginia and made his way gingerly across the grass, followed closely by his partner.

"His name, I believe, is Perry Hampton." Miss Virginia held her ground by the back door.

"You knew him?" Officer Allen looked at her in disbelief. "Miss Virginia, you didn't...?"

"I didn't kill him, no," Miss Virginia replied. "I merely found him. As it happens, Mr. Hampton had visited me yesterday. He's a writer of regional history books and I was able to provide him with a few anecdotes for his research. I did invite him to visit again—I have quite a few stories left to tell—but I certainly expected him to call ahead!"

"We're gonna have to get the coroner out here, and somebody from homicide," said Officer Baxter. "Hell, I figured at most we'd find a dead dog."

"Watch your language," Officer Allen reminded him, with a nod toward Miss Virginia.

"I can see you have work to do here," she said. "Please make yourselves at home. I'll keep out of your way." With that she melted into the cool dark house, gathered her reading glasses from the desk, and sat down at the kitchen table to open her mail.

The letter on top bore a return address she recognized as that of a distant relative. Miss Virginia put it aside to answer later. She wasn't sure just which relative this was, but that was unimportant. The great disadvantage to living on the coast, she'd decided, was not the effect of salt air on one's skin or tourists or even hurricanes, but rather that one's landlocked kin tended to think of one as a very affordable vacation inn.

In her younger days, when Miss Virginia was still convinced of the basic goodness of her fellow human beings, she had welcomed the assorted cousins, nephews, and twice-removeds. They came in droves, like stampeding cattle, to graze on her food. They thundered through rooms she'd cleaned in their honor and left behind mildewed towels and enough sand to build a full-scale replica of Wrightsville Beach. They gorged themselves at the Oceanic and Buddy's Oyster Bar, but never once invited their hostess along or even brought her a doggie bag!

Miss Virginia was tired of boorish relatives who never bothered to send a bread-and-butter note, much less remember her with a small token of affection. Still it would have been unthinkable to deny family, so for the past few years Miss Virginia had resorted to what she thought of as Mannerly Self-Defense; she replied to all those invitation-begging notes with reports of her lingering and highly-contagious illness. No one ever wrote or called to inquire after her health, but they didn't turn up on her doorstep, either.

Miss Virginia deemed her solution a success and made a mental note to add some new symptoms in her reply to these moochers.

The rest of the mail was far more exciting, and Miss Virginia's eyes lit up as she shuffled through it. Two bulb catalogs promised an afternoon of contented browsing. Miss Virginia had recently taken on the task of restoring the landscape around her home and ordering dozens of exotic perennials gave her a tingle of excitement that she suspected bordered on sin. Fortunately she was too old to worry about her immortal soul, reasoning that, at her age, she could claim senility as an excuse for anything and even God would have to believe her.

The final envelope contained Miss Virginia's new credit card. She'd been preapproved for credit, 6.9 per cent interest for the first six months, and no annual fee. Technically, it was her late mother who'd been preapproved, but Miss Virginia was certain that Mama wouldn't mind that her only child indulged in a wee bit of honest forgery.

Papa had never approved of being indebted to man or business, and Miss Virginia had subscribed to the same philosophy most all her life. Finally, when the Frigidaire and the Buick ceased to function on the same day that Miss Virginia withdrew the last of her savings to buy groceries, she thought for the first time to question Papa's financial strategy.

Thanks to the generous offers of lending institutions across the country, she had since replaced the vital appliances, refurbished the sitting and dining rooms from the Sears catalog, added a central heating and cooling system to the house, and purchased a few unpretentious niceties for herself.

She'd been surprised how easily credit could be obtained. Why, it wasn't necessary to possess good character or assets, it wasn't even required that the credit card holder be either alive or human! So far Miss Virginia had collected four accounts in her own name, one in Papa's, one in Mama's and one in the name of her dear departed cocker spaniel, Tillie.

No one had noticed that each signature on the many accounts was written in the same hand

and no one had ever asked if Tillie and her parents were alive and well. Miss Virginia certainly would have answered truthfully, for she prided herself on her honesty and high ethical code.

By using her seven (now eight! she noted with glee) credit cards equally, she had kept the monthly payments on each quite low. This allowed her to make the payment on one with her social security, and to use the handy checks provided by credit company A to pay the monthly fee due credit company B, and so on.

The charges for interest did not concern her; Miss Virginia planned to leave that problem for her thankless heirs to handle after her death. The total amount, if there was any justice in the world, would exactly equal what they would have spent on food and hotels during their visits to the ocean.

Officers Allen and Baxter were zealously guarding the body and awaiting the arrival of the coroner when Captain Lambdin finally knocked on the front door. Miss Virginia welcomed her longtime friend with a cup of still-fresh coffee and an offer of pastry.

"Gratefully accepted!" the captain boomed. "Love a Danish in the morning, what?"

Miss Virginia allowed him a peaceful moment in which to take the first bite, then explained the cause of her upset. "There's a dead man in the back yard," she said simply. "The police, of course, have the situation in hand, but all the same..."

"I should think!" the captain agreed. "How on earth did this happen?" He finished his pastry in two bites and gazed hopefully at the remaining sweets on the counter.

"The young man was bashed in the head with Papa's pickax," Miss Virginia explained. "I really should have kept that tool shed locked, but who could have predicted...?"

"Quite," the captain agreed. "And what was the deceased doing skulking around your yard at all hours? Just the sort of behavior that leads one to a bad end."

"All I can tell you for certain," she said cautiously, "is that the deceased is Perry Hampton, a writer of—"

"Regional histories!" the captain finished. "Thor's thunder!"

Miss Virginia cocked her head to one side, puzzled. "How long had you known him?"

"Met the lad yesterday, in fact," the captain replied. "Knocked on my door, introduced himself and said I'd been recommended to him as 'a storehouse of history's facts and follies, a man who knows legends of the sea and the land, of neighbors and strangers.' Pretty speech, eh?"

"Mr. Hampton had many fine speeches, it seems," she said to the Captain, "For all that, we are waiting for someone to tell us the young man is dead."

"Ah," replied the Captain. "Let's proceed on the assumption that he *is* dead. Have you any thoughts on that?"

It was typical of the Captain to gather information before forming an opinion. He was a man who enjoyed knowing as much as he enjoyed sharing what he knew.

"Here is what I think," said Miss Virginia. "I believe that Perry Hampton came here looking for more than family history. I don't know what it could have been, but he filched one of Grandpapa's doodles from the attic, then came back here for... well, for *what* remains a mystery."

The two of them finished their coffee in contemplative silence, ignoring the bustle of activity in Miss Virginia's back yard. There would be no end to the rumors, she realized. She'd simply have to hold her head up high and ignore the curious gawkers. That was how Mama had handled the earlier scandal and eventually that had been all but forgotten. Except by Mama, who had created yet another tempest when she'd up and disappeared.

Miss Virginia's sleep was seldom deep or steady and, as might be expected, a body in one's yard did not entice slumber. It was nearing 2 a.m. when she gave up on Morpheus and descended the squeaky old stairs. Hot milk, she'd learned, was of no use at all; a bit of rum was much more effective.

Through the window above her chipped enamel sink, Miss Virginia spotted shadowy movement. "Honestly!" she muttered with disgust. She wrapped a houserobe around her slender body before snapping on the yard light, then jerked the back door open and shouted, "*Who* do you think you *are*?"

Captain Lambdin spun around at the sound of her voice, dropping his heavy-duty flashlight right on the spot where Perry Hampton's body had lain that morning. "Apollo's apples!" he cried. "You took a good ten years off my life. What are you doing up at this hour?"

While her attic was cluttered and dusty, the same description could not be applied to Miss Virginia's mind, and she said as much to the Captain. "The question, sir, is not why I am standing out in the damp air, but rather why are you traipsing about a crime scene? I hope you aren't planning to sell pictures to a tabloid or—"

"Certainly not!" the Captain assured her. His pride was wounded; that much was clear. "Although I suppose an explanation is in order."

Miss Virginia felt this statement was throbbing with accuracy and therefore she made no comment, only waited to hear how Captain Lambdin would acquit himself.

"Fortunately, you see, Mr. Hampton came directly to me after his visit here. I say 'fortunately' because I am the one person—yourself excluded—who is likely to remember the live oak." The Captain gestured toward the far corner of Miss Virginia's back yard.

"The oak?" Miss Virginia asked. It had been a magnificent old tree, steadfast for decades. Half the county mourned its loss when the grand sentinel succumbed to Hurricane Hazel.

"Yes, the very one!" the Captain exclaimed. "And so when Mr. Hampton showed me the map, I was able to decipher it based on the location of the tree!"

"Map?" Miss Virginia said. She thought it odd that Mr. Hampton hadn't asked her to look at any map, given that it directed one to her own home—if the Captain were to be believed.

"Your grandfather's map!" he explained. "Young Hampton tried to pretend lack of interest, but it was clear he was after the treasure."

"Treasure?" Miss Virginia asked.

"I suppose Hampton thought he'd found Blackbeard's stash." The captain chuckled at such gullibility. "Trash and nonsense, and the lot of 'em fall for it! I expect what we'll find here is the missing Confederate payroll, hidden away by our loyal men who defended Fort Fisher till the end."

The captain's face beamed in the moonlight.

"What is it you're babbling about, Captain?"

"Your grandfather's map, of course. Imagine that boy uncovering it after all these years. And thank goodness he considered me a doddering old fool."

"Captain, if you're searching for treasure on the basis of that doodle dear Mr. Hampton filched, then you *are* a doddering old fool! Why, it's nothing but one of Grandpapa's silly notions."

"Ah... but..."

"Grandpapa was never a genius," Miss Virginia confessed, "and in his later years he was exceedingly confused. Why do you think we kept him in the attic? Of course, he didn't mind. Just happily whiled away the hours drawing blueprints for his proposed moon base. And maps to imaginary treasure."

She gave him a Look.

The Captain's pudgy jowls quivered. "But... but... if there's no treasure, I killed him for nothing!"

"You killed Mr. Hampton?" Miss Virginia exclaimed. "Captain, what were you thinking? Have you no sense of propriety? Don't you realize what a murder in the neighborhood does to property value?"

"You will turn yourself in to the police, won't you, Captain?" Miss Virginia certainly hoped his fine upbringing and integrity would not fail now. Of all the difficult situations she'd weathered in her long life, this was the most daunting.

"Suppose there's nothing else to be done," the Captain agreed. He placed a hand over his heart and shook his gray head. "All that digging. The great hopes. Fancied myself a hero of the Confederacy, saving the gold and what from a Yankee."

He steadied himself against the kitchen counter.

"I can see remorse setting in. Something medicinal?" Miss Virginia suggested, reaching into the cabinet for a bottle of rum. "We can both use a calming beverage."

Behind her the captain slid gently to his knees, then toppled face-forward onto the floor. Miss Virginia turned to find him sprawled face down on the faded Linoleum.

"Gracious!" she cried and hurried to the fallen gentleman's side.

Miss Virginia was familiar with CPR, even though she'd never practiced it on a human. The question she asked herself was not about breath-compression ratio, but rather about the wisdom of employing life-saving techniques. If the captain were revived, he was doomed to face the humiliation of a murder conviction.

Miss Virginia thoughtfully and carefully weighed the options. By the time she'd made her decision, the Captain was far beyond caring one way or the other.

Dawn was peaking when Miss Virginia made a complete tour of her house, making sure that all the doors and windows were securely locked. It had taken only a few minutes to cover the captain's body with a good percale sheet, a few more to pack a small suitcase and she was ready to go. Two dead bodies in the space of a day—well, it was just more than a lady should have to bear. What years were left to her, Miss Virginia vowed, would be enjoyed in the company of strangers, in some foreign place such as Pittsburgh, where no one knew her or her scandalous history.

With her credit cards tucked safely in her purse, Miss Virginia was ready to leave. On the way out of town, she would mail the letter she'd written to those beggarly relatives, extending a warm invitation and suggesting they use the spare key hidden beneath the welcome mat. 'Should I be away when you arrive,' she'd written, 'help yourselves to whatever you find in the kitchen.'

CAPTCHA
by
Gary Grossman

You're an A-hole really,
my optic nerve skewered

far into my cerebellum.
by this chastity belt for

the Web. Postage stamp
pictures, grainier than beach

sand, but missing warmth.

Hacker no, hackee yes,
but minor troubles, once

a laptop purchase—quickly
erased, though the schmuck

reordered sixty-four minutes
later. But you, CAPTCHA,

you've held me hostage
one hundred plus times

Mark all photos with toe
shoes, mark all photos with

with cyanobacteria,
mark all photos with

tires made in Kurume
Japan, mark all photos with a

book title in six point
Gothic.

After three rounds I curse this
century, and then just exhale.

Lawyers in Love
by
Cameron Vanderwerf

"I can't keep up with what's been going down. I think my heart must just be slowing down."
–Jackson Browne

Not long into the trial of the Steubenville Strangler, the prosecutor and the defense attorney fell deeply in love with each other. For obvious reasons, this was not an ideal development, and the two lawyers decided to keep this fact concealed from the rest of the courtroom.

They had both been consummate professionals up to that point, never letting irrelevant things such as "feelings" get in the way of their jobs. But as soon as they saw each other across the aisle of the courtroom, they couldn't resist what they both instantly felt. They arose as the judge entered, but they continued to look at each other instead of facing front.

From that point forward, they tried to be discreet, at least at work. The prosecutor was relentless in presenting the evidence—which was quite substantial—and the defense attorney employed every tactic to cast even the faintest shadow of a doubt on every assertion.

Meanwhile, in the evenings, they often booked a room under an assumed name at a motel in the neighboring county. There, they would revel in each other's company and very occasionally discuss work.

"Hey, can I ask something off the record?" the prosecutor inquired one evening as they lay in bed together.

"Go ahead," said the defense attorney.

"He definitely killed all those hikers, right?"

"Oh, absolutely."

And then they made sweet love.

As the trial progressed, their passion for each other only grew more intense, and they began to chafe at the necessity of discretion. They wanted the whole world to know of their epic, forbidden love.

They almost made it to the end of the trial. The prosecution had just completed closing arguments, going over all of the gory evidence in nauseating detail. The jury looked quite queasy, and possibly quite convinced. And then it was the defense's turn.

"Jurors," the defense attorney began. "Your honor. People of the court. The prosecution would have you believe that my client is some type of inhuman monster who would willingly strangle nearly two dozen hikers to death, over a period of sixteen months, in an area localized to a specific four-mile radius. But what has been shown repeatedly over the course of this trial is that the evidence is circumstantial and cannot be said to definitively link my client to those brutal acts. Yes, the prosecution has presented their case in an orderly and even convincing fashion. Yes, the prosecutor is an effective and accomplished lawyer. And

yes, the prosecution has the most striking, beautiful eyes that have ever grace this world. But..."

The defense attorney's train of thought seemed to become derailed at that point, as the two lawyers had become lost in each other's gazes.

The lawyer for the defense eventually resumed by saying, "Stenographer, please let the record show that I am very deeply in love with the lawyer for the prosecution. And I would like this official court document to embody my proposal of marriage."

The prosecutor stood excitedly to accept the proposal, and the entire courtroom cheered and applauded. The judge's gavel eventually regained order in the courtroom, whereupon the judge declared formal congratulations for the happy couple.

"Unfortunately," the judge added, "in light of these circumstances, I must declare a mistrial, and all charges against the accused shall be dropped. You're free to go, Mr. Strangler. Uh, I mean, Mr. Denton."

And so, in the end, the price of love was that the Steubenville Strangler was set free to continue his heinous work. But the lawyers—and the courtroom as a whole—were too swept up in the euphoria of romance to care very much. Besides, I believe it was Baudelaire who said that a single perfect love is worth the lives of a few hapless hikers.

There Is a Small Window
by
Eric Odynocki

of opportunity when I can wash
my clothes in my building's basement,
unhurried or without delay. Nine-to-fivers,
nodding off from routine, haunt

the laundry room in the evenings
while empty-nesters prefer the early AM
when they can peek over their crosswords
and grimace at how much softener I don't

know to pour. Weekends are for mothers
and fathers finally on their day off and their
eyes ablaze between soccer practice
and pointe class. My chance chimes

at the latchkey hour, when some of us
teachers arrive home. So it's an elevator ride
down nine floors side-by-side with a fellow tenant
whose name I never remember, both of us

avoiding eye contact as I hold a basket
with my intimates stuffed at the bottom.
Then it's a shuffle down the mint green hallway
past the garbage compactor and its odor cocktail

of sweet and wrong. And, at last, as hoped,
the laundry room greets me with its russet quarry tiles,
fluorescent lights, and soullessness.
Carte Blanche on washing machine.

First dibs on industrial dryer. I feed
the front loader, let it lick and drink
the stray spittle of *mole*, the chalk dust,
the sweat. And when I tuck the last T-shirt

into the drawer and I chuck yet another
peerless sock into the rag bin, it's two hours
after I started. And I wonder who expects
Sunday best every day. Why we go

through this cycle. Why our bodies
soil everything they touch.

The Weatherman
by
Brian Clark

Friday, 4 p.m.

Susan: This is WKNW, 1160 on your radio dial, and I'm Susan Collins, keeping you company on your drive home. WKNW now has triple the number of weather updates, with reports every 10 minutes. Meteorologist Chuck Blain is on the case. How are things looking, Chuck?

Chuck: Well, all I can say is enjoy the sunshine while you can, 'cause it's not going to last. Our spell of beautiful weather is coming to an end—just in time for the weekend. Rain will move in overnight and stay with us Saturday and Sunday. Tomorrow will be breezy, with northeast winds gusting to 40 miles per hour. It's going to cool down, too, with highs for both days of only 68. So that's the weather picture, Susan. I guess all good things must come to an end.

4:10 p.m.

Susan: So, Chuck, what's happening on the weather front?

Chuck: Well, Susan, I'm afraid our string of sunny days is coming to an end. Rain will move into the area tonight and stick around for Saturday and Sunday. Expect a strong breeze tomorrow, with northeast winds gusting to 40 miles an hour. A rather cool 68 will be the high both days. But we've still got a few more hours of sunshine, so get out there and soak it up while you can.

4:20 p.m.

Susan: Well, Chuck, what's the latest with the weather outlook?

Chuck: No change to speak of there, Susan. We're still looking at a rainy weekend, with 68 the high for Saturday and Sunday. Tomorrow will be windy.

4:30 p.m.

Susan: So, Chuck, what can you tell us about the weekend forecast?

Chuck: It's still the same, Susan. *Exactly* the same. No change whatsoever. Rain Saturday, rain Sunday. High of 68. Both days.

4:40 p.m.

Susan: Keeping an eye on the forecast is Chuck Blain. What do you have for us, Chuck?

Chuck:

Susan: Chuck?

Chuck: OK, no way that was 10 minutes.

Susan: What's that, Chuck?

Chuck: Nothing, Susan. Um, the forecast is, um, unchanged. Unaltered. Unmodified. Same as when last we spoke. Rain is coming. All weekend. High of 68 Saturday and Sunday. That, too, is unchanged. *Completely* unchanged.

4:50 p.m.

Susan: Chuck Blain is here to fill us in on the weekend forecast. Chuck?

Chuck: Ditto.

Susan: What's that, Chuck?

Chuck: No more sunshine, Susan. Like I said. Rain Saturday, rain Sunday.

5 p.m.

Susan: Well, Chuck, tell us about—

Chuck: Did I mentioned it's going to rain all weekend?

Susan: Um, yes, Chuck, you did.

Chuck: I know, Susan. That was a rhetorical question. Did I mention the high for both days will be 68?

Susan: Was that a rhetorical question, too?

Chuck: Yes, Susan.

5:10 p.m.

Susan: I've got a bone to pick with you about this terrible weekend forecast, Chuck.

Chuck: I'm not responsible for the rain, Susan.

Susan: Yes, Chuck. I was just—

Chuck: Let me explain, Susan. You see, heat from the sun turns moisture into water vapor. The vapor rises, cools and condenses into tiny water droplets, which form clouds. When the water droplets become too large and heavy, they fall as rain. This is part of the hydrologic cycle. And I play no role in this process. None whatsoever! So that is what's going to happen this weekend—the hydrologic cycle in action. High of 68. Both days.

5:20 p.m.

Susan: Well, Chuck, I guess it's going to be a great weekend—if you're a duck.

Chuck:

Susan: You there, Chuck?

Chuck: Yes. I'm here.

Susan: I was just saying—

Chuck: Yes, Susan, I heard you. You were talking about ducks. Yes, I suppose ducks will enjoy this weekend, what with all the rain we'll be getting. How delightfully whimsical.

5:30 p.m.

Susan: Time for another weather update. Anyone out and about this weekend should bring along an umbrella, eh Chuck?

Chuck: An umbrella? Yes, I guess an umbrella would be useful, given the fact that rain does have a tendency to make a person... um... wet. Good thinking, Susan. But hey, here's a thought. Just for fun, why not try a rake instead. Highs of 68.

5:40 p.m.

Susan: What's in store for the weekend, Chuck?

Chuck: I've been thinking about the ducks. And although it's undeniable that ducks like swimming in water, I'm not entirely sure they like being pelted by it from above. You see, Susan, I studied atmospheric science in college, and not once did we discuss ducks. It may have been an oversight on the part of the faculty. Anyway, it's going to rain Saturday and Sunday. High of 68 both days.

5:50 p.m.

Susan: An announcement before we get to the weather. Boy Scout troop number six has canceled its campout this weekend due to the rain. OK, Chuck, over to you for the forecast details.

Chuck: They blame me, don't they?

Susan: What's that, Chuck?

Chuck: Maybe I need to explain the hydrologic cycle again.

6 p.m.

Susan: Chuck Blain is here with a rundown of the weekend weather.

Chuck: Great news, everybody. There's a new forecast. Sunshine for the entire weekend.

Susan: Gee, Chuck, how is that even poss—

Chuck: The skies will be an immaculate shade of azure blue. They will be adorned by a few puffs of cottony clouds, fluffy enough to serve as beds for angels. With highs of 75 both days, the temperature will be *just right*, much like Goldilocks' porridge.

Susan: Chuck?

Chuck: The humidity level will be perfect, imbuing the air with a sublime dewy freshness. A soft breeze will caress your skin like a lover's gentle touch.

Susan: Chuck?

Chuck: Butterflies will flit through sun-dappled meadows. Little birds will have to invent new songs to serenade what may be the most beautiful days that Planet Earth has ever seen. Roses and daffodils will open their petals and smile upon the world. Honeybees will—

6:30 p.m.

Susan: This is WKNW, 1160 on your dial, with weather updates every half hour. I'm Susan Collins. Well, it looks like we're in for a rainy weekend. The high will be 68 Saturday and Sunday...

On Anophthalmia in Cervids

by
Daniel Galef

I had an Ideas problem. Not too few, but too many. I was plagued by them. More of an infestation, really. I needed to get them out of my hair. Literally.

I asked Kera over to help corral them. She dealt with a Style thing a few years ago that I thought might have been similar. Honestly, I don't know. We're not really close friends. But she was a creative type, and I hoped she might be able to do something with them.

As soon as she stepped in the front door, she saw it was serious. The Ideas were all over. Hiding behind my plants, running rings around the coffee table, in the decorative bowl of seashells half-buried in the spirals like a jacuzzi.

"Yeah, must be annoying." Kera was an artist. Multi-media. Brilliant stuff in execution, but she didn't have a lot of ideas of her own. Maybe it was insulting to call her over for this, something I should have thought of.

"This one isn't even my field." An unwritten paper on facial deformities in elk herds near industrial dump sites glowered from where it dangled by two tentacles from the chandelier. "I don't know the first thing about wildlife ecology," I protested, but it just blinked at me and climbed a little higher. Its bibliography alone was three columns long.

"What, so that means it's completely useless? You could even just use the title."

"Yeah. Right." I hadn't slept at all. "I just want to be rid of them."

Kera was unsympathetic. "So call an exterminator."

"That seems a bit inhumane, don't you think? Heck, I'm sure somebody else out there might be able to do something with some of these ideas, I'm just not the guy. What do you think I should take out an ad in the penny-saver?"

"Won't do you a breeze of good. People want their own ideas. They don't want someone else's."

I showed her what happened. I had them under control, more or less, and then I went and dropped the box while spring cleaning. Now they're everywhere. She tried the latch like the problem was with the box. It wasn't.

"You know, some people would be grateful to have a lot of good ideas," she said, eyeing a sonnet about a taco leering out at us from under the ottoman.

"Dammit, if they were *good* ideas I wouldn't have this issue! Take a look for yourself!" I cornered an ugly little wrinkly feller that was perching on the banister and grabbed it with both hands. I pushed it on Kera like a poopy baby.

"*Romeo and Juliet...*" it purred.

"This one seems to be all right," Kera said. "It's a pretty old idea, but it's all right."

"—*in space! In space! In space!*" The idea leapt out of Kera's hands and shrieked around the living room twice, incensed at being heeded.

"Whoa. That one got away from me."

"No, it'll be back." I sighed. "Whispering planet names and pentameters and suggesting rhymes for 'nebula' while I'm trying to sleep. It couldn't care less how shitty it is."

"Hey look," Kera said. She was still on that box, like that was anything. "There's still one in here."

"There is?" I looked in the box. Shivering, in the corner, there was only one idea left, skinny and wretched and beholding me in wet dinnerplate eyes. I picked it up, and it felt light and stupid. "Write a flash fiction about me," it whimpered, and I put it back in the box.

Genie Needs Help
by
Alex Dermody

cave of wonders (arabian desert)

Genie floated above Aladdin, a towering blue know-it-all. "I grant you three wishes, little man," Genie said. "The rules are—"

"I wish for the ability to stop biting and picking my fingernails," Aladdin replied.

The corners of Genie's mouth curled into a small smile. "Biting your nails?"

"Biting *and* picking," Aladdin said. "I wish for the ability to stop biting and picking my fingernails."

Genie couldn't help it. He laughed so hard his forehead hurt. He laughed so hard he turned purple. "I needed that. Wow, I needed that." Wiping away tears, he said, "In all my years granting wishes, that's the dumbest one yet."

Aladdin looked at Abu (the monkey on his shoulder) and whispered, "Asshole."

After a bit of coughing and rib holding, Genie said, "Granting that wish is like making Shakespeare write fortune cookies. Wish for the ability to rewind time. Or all the riches in the world. Or a hot girlfriend."

"You don't understand," Aladdin said, holding out his jagged nails. "I've battled this my whole life."

"*Battled!*" Genie cackled and snorted. He wheezed. "Please, kid. Enough. It's too much."

Aladdin had heard enough. He whistled for the magic carpet.

"Ohhh, relax," Genie said. "Your wish is stupid, but your wish is also my command. I grant you the ability to stop biting and picking your fingernails." Genie snapped his fingers, and it was done. "You've got two wishes left."

"No thanks," Aladdin said. He reigned the magic carpet like a horse. "We'll show ourselves out."

With that the magic carpet swirled and darted out of sight.

Genie couldn't believe his eyes and pointed ears. No one had ever turned down the last two wishes. "Some people just don't know how to have fun," Genie said. He picked up the glowing gold lamp—his eternal resting place—and stuck it in his pocket. "Whatever." He shrugged. "Time for a vacation."

six months later, cliffside malibu mansion

Super models. Professional athletes. The entire cast of *Friends*. Caviar. Oysters. Champagne. Ice sculptures of swans. An infinity pool. These things surrounded Aladdin as he lounged on a large white daybed with Megan Fox and Kendall Jenner. Dressed in pink silk Gucci pajamas, the Pacific Ocean reflected in Aladdin's Tom Ford frames as Abu popped green grapes in his mouth.

"Aladdin?"

It was Genie.

"Street rat! Woah. You got, like, a lot of tattoos."

Aladdin was absolutely tatted from head to toe.

"All pieces of my story," Aladdin said.

Genie began to feel out of place. "Crazy running into you all the way out here."

"Considering this is my home, it's not that crazy."

Genie's chin hit the marble pool deck.

"Well," Aladdin said, correcting himself, "one of my homes."

"Shut the fuck up," Genie said.

"Once I could stop picking and biting my fingernails, I finally had the confidence to finish my apps. After my apps took off, I published *Nails in My Coffin*, a memoir about my trials and triumphs. And now Netflix is turning the story into a movie they think could be the next *Social Network*."

"Baby," Megan Fox said to Aladdin. "It's like *so hard* to stop biting your nails."

"Exactly baby," Aladdin replied.

Genie now understood the whole situation. He terribly underestimated the importance of Aladdin's wish and, he deduced, the wishes of many others. The realization caused him to vomit in the white rose bushes.

"Good God," Genie said, wiping his mouth. "I'm a monster."

Aladdin rolled his eyes. "You're not a monster."

"Well, maybe not in this instance. But Hitler wished he could tap-dance, and I laughed right in his little mustached face. And Napoleon? He wished to be two inches taller. Two! I laughed so hard I punctured a lung." Genie hung his head. "I bet they decided to become dictators on the spot."

"And then there's you," Genie continued. "I laughed and laughed about your wish, now you're having mansion parties with the entire cast of *Friends*, and you're dating Megan goddamn Fox."

"We're actually engaged," Megan said, flashing a fat diamond on a perfectly manicured hand.

Genie massaged his eye sockets with his palms. "I'm a fraud," he said.

Aladdin patted Genie's back out of pity. "Come on—what's the lesson? No more belittling wishes. Now you know, for next time."

The words "for next time" vibrated between Genie's ears like a tuning fork. Because Genie knew he could never change. Genie knew the next time someone wished to be a master magician or a professional bowler, or the next time someone wished for thinner eyebrows or bigger feet, he would have no choice but to laugh. The thought made his skin cold. It made his stomach hollow.

That's when Genie saw a solution.

"As a favor, Aladdin, could you use your second wish on a hammer? A big one, like from the carnival game with the bell at the top?"

Puzzled but wanting the interaction to end, Aladdin said, "I wish for one of those big carnival hammers."

Genie snapped his fingers, and in his other hand a massive hammer appeared. "I would like to formally announce my retirement," Genie said. Grinning lazily, he withdrew the glowing gold lamp from his pocket and placed it on the marble pool deck and with a rippling of back muscles Genie swung the hammer up and over his head and brought it down on his home. The gold lamp shattered into large shards. The sky went black. Red, green, and purple lightning splintered the atmosphere, and Genie dissolved blue particle by blue particle into nothingness.

Thinking this was all part of some elaborate fireworks show, the party erupted with cheer.

Aladdin draped a tattooed arm over Megan Fox, both staring up at the exploding neon sky. Abu stuck a lit cigarette in Aladdin's mouth.

"What was that?" asked Megan Fox.

"He helped himself out," Aladdin said, smiling. His happiness quickly washed away, however, upon remembering a conversation with a Netflix executive. The network wanted Genie to play himself in the film adaptation of *Nails in My Coffin*, and Genie's sudden unavailability would not make the studio happy.

From across the infinity pool came a voice. "Hey, Aladdin!" It was David Schwimmer, beloved cast member from the hit series *Friends*. He was toasting a martini, shouting over the neon explosions in the sky. "Kickass party!"

The corners of Aladdin's mouth curled into a small smile. He pointed a perfectly manicured finger across the infinity pool. "Schwimm-Daddy! Get over here—I just found your next big role!"

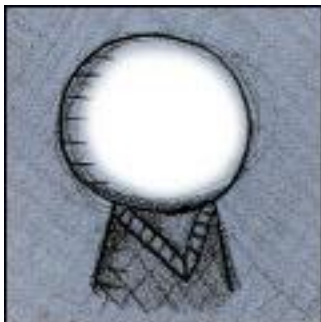
Contributor Biographies



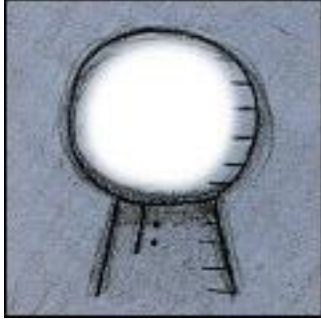
Iris J. Melton is a former waitress/attorney who lives in a growlery in the Appalachian Mountains. She learned to swim from a book and has a perverse affection for the Oxford comma.



An escapee from New Jersey, **Marianne Gambaro** writes and gardens in verdant Belchertown, Massachusetts, where she lives with her talented photographer-husband and two feline critics. She trains cats (which is a real thing) at her regional humane society. Publications which, during a momentary lapse in judgment, have been kind enough to publish her work include *Oberon Poetry Magazine*, *CALYX*, *Mudfish*, and *The Naugatuck River Review*. She is author of the chapbook, *Do NOT Stop for Hitchhikers* (Finishing Line Press). <https://margampetry.wordpress.com/>



Marlowe Gardiner-Heslin was born in Ottawa and raised in the city of Toronto. He spent his teens working as a voice actor, and his twenties and thirties in graduate school. He now splits his time between Canada and Japan. He has all his original adult teeth with the exception of an incisor lost in a tragic collision with a supermarket cash register.



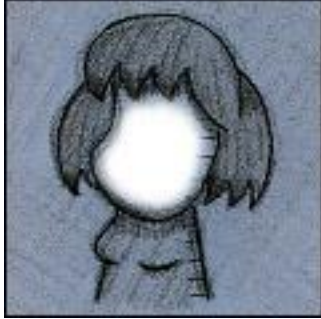
Kenneth Nichols holds a Creative Writing MFA from Ohio State and teaches writing at SUNY Oswego. His work has appeared in publications such as *Prime Number* and anthologies from Catapult Press and The Raving Press.



Laerke Olsvig writes short films and stories and has co-created a comedy web-series in Madrid, Spain. She lives in London and is from Denmark. Not Copenhagen.

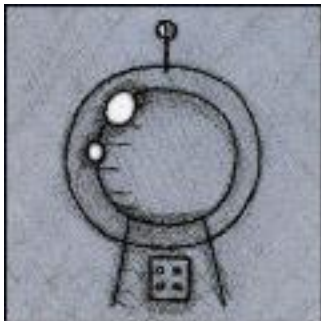


Ron Riecki's books include *Blood/Not Blood Then the Gates* (Middle West Press, poetry), *My Ancestors are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction* (Loyola University Maryland's Apprentice House Press, hybrid), *Posttraumatic* (Hoot 'n' Waddle, nonfiction), and *U.P.* (Ghost Road Press, fiction). Right now, he's listening to Kay Starr's "The Headless Horseman."



Deborah-Zenha Adams is often lost in the woods without a paddle, snapping pics of natural wonders and curiosities. In addition to being a flaneur and a saunterer, she is an award-winning author of novels, short fiction, CNF, and poetry. You're invited to read samples of her work on her website, where everything's free and the dress code is "whatever." www.Deborah-Adams.com

"A Thief in Monkey Junction" was originally published in *Magnolias & Mayhem*, presented by Jeffrey Marks, Silver Dagger, 2000.



Gary Grossman is retired Professor of Fisheries at University of Georgia. His poetry can be found or is forthcoming in 28 reviews, including: *Verse-Virtual*, *Poetry Life and Times*, *Your Daily Poem*, *Poetica*, *Trouvaille Review*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Poetry Superhighway*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *The Knot*, *Delta Poetry Review*, and *Last Stanza Poetry Review*. He's published essays in *Alaska Magazine* and *American Angler*, and short fiction in *MacQueen's Quinterly*. For 10 years he wrote the "Ask Dr. Trout" column for *American Angler*. Gary's first book of poems, *Lyrical Years* is forthcoming in 2023 from Kelsay's Aldrich Press. Hobbies include running, music, fishing, and gardening.

Website: <https://www.garygrossman.net/>

Writing blog: <https://garydavidgrossman.medium.com/> .



Cameron Vanderwerf holds an MFA in creative writing from Hollins University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Worcester Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Write Launch*, *Corvus Review*, *Every Day Fiction*, and other publications.



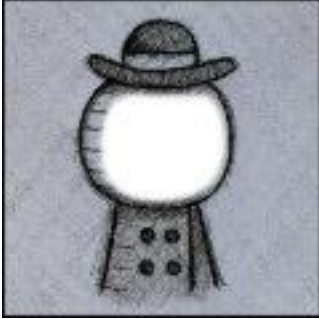
Eric Odynocki is a first-generation American writer whose parents come from Mexico and Ukraine. Eric's work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions and has appeared in *Jabberwock Review*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *PANK*, and elsewhere. When not teaching Spanish or Italian, Eric is an MFA student at Stony Brook Southampton.



Brian Clark was born and raised in the Toronto area and now lives in St. Catharines, Ontario. He spent many years in the newspaper business, working as a reporter and a copy editor. He's now trying his hand at fiction. Several of his stories have been published in literary journals. In addition, he has written a novel and a collection of fictional ghost stories, and is hoping to get both published. He writes all his stories by scattering Scrabble tiles on the floor.



Daniel Galef's writing has recently been featured in the *New Yorker*—in that, earlier this year, he placed second in the cartoon caption contest. His more substantial writing has been published or is forthcoming in the *Indiana Review*, the *Atlanta Review*, the *American Bystander*, *Juked*, the *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, and the 2020 *Best Small Fictions* anthology. His first book, *Imaginary Sonnets*, is coming next year from Word Galaxy/Able Muse Press.



Alex Dermody can be reached at alexdermody15@gmail.com