

◇ Defenestration ◇

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The Doogie Howler
by
Alex Dermody

An excited Professor Maxwell watched from behind his podium as the last Chemistry 101 students trickled into the lecture hall. Professor Maxwell wasn't excited because today marked the start of another semester, or even because he loved teaching chemistry. Professor Maxwell was excited because he was an asshole. A fresh batch of doe-eyed pre-medical students meant another opportunity to give The Speech.

"Welcome to Chemistry 101," Professor Maxwell said. "Now, before discussing course specifics, I have a duty to do. I'm a betting man, and I would wager a night with my wife that everyone here wants to be a doctor. Mommy and Daddy got it in your heads that medical school is the obvious answer for their shining star. Well, I'm not Mommy or Daddy. I don't sugar-coat. Of the hundred students in this room, ten will go to medical school. And of those ten, only about seven will graduate." Professor Maxwell always paused here, letting the silence grip the room.

A girl in the back row raised her hand. "Hi!" she shouted. "My name is Sasha. Hi. I'm already a doctor."

"Excuse me?"

"You said everyone here *wants* to be a doctor. But I'm already a doctor, and I'm here."

After twenty-six years of teaching, Professor Maxwell thought he'd seen it all. "You finished medical school?"

"And surgical school. Both took a day."

The professor's anger spiked. This teenager, claiming to do something in a day that he failed at for years. "Why the hell are you in my classroom?"

"I'm here to advertise!" Sasha said. "The medical profession, it's about to change forever." She unzipped a duffle bag and out jumped a chrome mechanical monkey no bigger than a house cat. A few students let out involuntary *awwwwws*. "First, I created an AI software containing everything known about medicine. Diagnosis. Treatment. Theory. Then I crammed it all inside this robotic monkey, which I've affectionately named the Doogie Howler. My team thinks eventually we'll need to rebrand because, from a marketing perspective, *Doogie Howser, M.D.* is a pretty dated reference. But I'm on the fence. If you know the show was about a teen doctor it's like haha. The perfect pun *does* exist."

"Please get to your point," Professor Maxwell said.

"She's trying!" shouted a male student by the windows.

Sasha thanked her supporter. "I wanted to be a surgeon. So, after the invention of the Doogie Howler, it's pretty much a *Ratatouille* situation. Are you all familiar with the movie *Ratatouille*? A rat transforms a man into a fine French chef by operating his body like a puppet via his hair. Genius premise. It's no *Toy Story* or *Up*, but genius premise. And that's

exactly how I perform surgery, the Doogie Howler™ atop my head controlling my arms and hands like the rat in *Ratatouille*."

The students gasped. Professor Maxwell swelled with rage.

Sasha continued: "At first the Harvard doctors were skeptical about the Doogie Howler™. But all it took was one knee surgery for the truth to be revealed. With the assistance of this robotic monkey, a bus driver can perform a colonoscopy. A construction worker can make a melanoma diagnosis. Now, with help from a Doogie Howler™, anyone can practice medicine."

Sasha had the lecture hall eating from her palm. Because Professor Maxwell was right: everyone in attendance dreamt of being a doctor, and as the gravity of Sasha's story slowly pressed itself upon the room, everyone realized that making their dreams come true was now easier than ever. All they needed was a Doogie Howler™.

"How much do you want for one of those damn monkeys?" shouted a girl in the third row. Raucous agreement echoed throughout the hot August room.

Sasha settled the mob. "I'll start with the bad news. My team is still in the process of bringing the product to market. There are lots of ... *hoops* to jump through, especially at the federal level. However, we're now in a grey area. Across the street, there's a Quiznos sandwich shop. Outside the Quiznos is a line of people who all want or need a minor surgery. Appendectomies and vasectomies, mostly. To see if surgery is right for you, simply download our app, claim a ticket, and we'll call when it's your turn to cut someone open."

A student yelled, "What if I don't wanna be a surgeon? What if I wanna be a psychiatrist? Or a general practitioner?"

"Appointments for *soft*-medical jobs, as my team calls them, are tomorrow at the Jersey Mike's. Just download our app. The schedule spells everything out."

All at once the students pulled out their phones, the room now silent except for rapid tapping on screens. They gathered books and laptops and began to exit the lecture hall, some going for the Quiznos, some calling their parents with good news, everyone heading towards the rest of their happy, productive lives.

"Sit back down!" shouted Professor Maxwell. "If you leave this room, you fail this class!" But the professor's words were no use.

One by one, the students marched out.

Sasha waited until she was the last person in the cavernous lecture hall. She pressed a button on the Doogie Howler™ and, like a receipt, paper printed from its mouth. Sasha read: "Ever wonder why you're so angry? I think you feel unfulfilled. This isn't your beautiful career. This isn't the life you imagined. And the damage is buried so deep it's become your personality."

Professor Maxwell's mouth went dry. In that instant, he felt like a fly on an elephant's ass. He wanted to say terribly mean words to the teenager. Words she would never forget. Words like she just said to him. But the words weren't there. The doctor's diagnosis rang true.

Sasha ripped another receipt from the monkey's mouth. "You wanted to be a surgeon as a younger man, right? But you flunked out of medical school? Well, the dream isn't dead! Make a change at fifty-six. Come to the Quiznos. Perform surgery before your students. Show them starting over doesn't have to be hard."

Professor Maxwell's skin ran cold. His vision flashed white. The next thing he knew he was a young man again, his happy life shining ahead, calling out he wasn't too late. Actually, he might even be early.

The Doogie Howler™ strolled towards the exit, Sasha following closely behind. And before Professor Maxwell could think differently, he was following too. One foot after another. Finally leaving the classroom behind. Finally excited for the future.

Consequences of Poor Planning in Winter
by
Colette Parris

I have no truck
with planning ahead, and thus
from a frosted upstairs window
watch my forlorn Mini Cooper disappear
beneath a white shroud
(and who knows
what the kid next door will charge
to dig it out)

a larger concern is the wind-
well, not the wind
exactly, even though the whisper-
shrieks get old after the first fifteen minutes-
it's more the aftermath of wind
that's the issue, the downed lines
that leave me powerless
to entertain myself
somehow

no matter how many shrill alerts
I receive across all media
in the leading up days,
my phone invariably remains uncharged
at the time of predicted calamity
and my backyard still lacks
the generator on my "must buy" list
since Sandy

I therefore sit in nature-
enforced silence, and my underbelly
cogitations, often rude,
frequently desolate,
all replete with should haves and if onlys,
rush to fill the void

I want to cram them
in off-brand garbage bags, thrice-used
moving boxes, those styrofoam coolers
that multiply in the basement
with each frozen food delivery
and any other large containers at hand,
and drive them (plus match)
to a landfill; single trip

but this, of course, is
an impossibility
because as you have likely discerned already,
I have no truck.

The Lonely Princess by **Hana Carolina**

Once upon a time in a land far, far away there was a beautiful princess. Hated by her influential, evil younger sisters, and banished from her kingdom, she lived in constant terror. A target for ruthless assassins, surrounded by deadly traps and blood-thirsty monsters, she fought for her life. In desperation, she sought the help of a famous knight, Sir Gregor de Bute.

Sir Gregor cut down her pursuers with a few graceful swings of his sword. He swirled in the air, his fluid movements both elegant and deadly, blood spilling, screams ringing in her ears. Poisoned apples, arsenic in hot chocolate, arrows suddenly shooting from dark windows of abandoned houses, old ladies turning into gorgons, nothing seemed to faze him. Somehow, he single-handedly chased away the stormy clouds of her fears. With him protecting her, her paralyzing panic dissolved into a warm feeling of trust and safety.

Then, imperceptibly, her reliance on him turned into something more.

One day, as they were hiding in a little cottage at the edge of the forest, she looked at him sharpening his sword. His face appeared soft in the warm glow of the fireplace. She was just about to confess her feelings to him, when a loud knock on the door made her jump.

"Who is it?" Sir Gregor asked, his deep, low voice resonating in the silence of the cottage.

"You know bloody well who the fuck this is. Let me in," a sweet, musical voice announced from behind the door. It took him just a few seconds to lose his patience. "Greg?" He kicked the door with annoyance. "You can't be serious."

Sir Gregor rolled his eyes and looked at the princess, apologetically. "That's just my... troubadour. This will only take a moment," he said, voice hushed so the person behind the door wouldn't hear.

"Oh, just your troubadour, you bastard?" the voice snapped back. "Better be warned, I'll make motherfucking sure to take all the time I need, just wait and see." He let out an exasperated sigh. "What possessed me to make your pointless escapades the subject of my best work, I'll never know. You sure made me regret every stellar turn of phrase I used to describe that ugly mug of yours."

Sir Gregor blinked a few times and opened the door.

The princess saw a youngish-looking overdressed man, with messy blonde hair, hands on his hips, and pure outrage written all over his face. He looked at Sir Gregor, eyes narrowing, and then looked down, both hands pointing at his destroyed trousers. His knees were covered in dry mud, fabric torn in multiple places. "Did you not see me running behind your noble steed this morning?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, I ran. And I slipped. It was quite impressive."

Sir Gregor seemed skeptical. "You expect me to believe you didn't change right away?"

The man flinched. "I didn't... for the sake of a dramatic entrance," he admitted.

"Ah. No, that makes sense."

"Didn't you see me wave when you were passing through the town?"

"I did."

"And it didn't occur to you to stop?"

"I'm working."

"Sure. You're always working these days, as long as that work takes you far, far away from me."

"Fidel, this is not the time."

"Of course it's not, it never fucking is. It's been *weeks*."

"Fidel—"

"I can see what you're doing, you know? It's the oldest trick in the book. I won't be dismissed like this. I know how this goes. It finally happens... and then the man magically disappears. Poof! I wake up to a fucking cloud of smoke."

"Don't—"

Fidel was fuming. "You fucking coward," he seethed.

Sir Gregor stepped back, calm but the first cracks in his composure were beginning to show. "Could you just—"

"No, Greg. I can't *just*, that's the point." He licked his lips, and took a deep breath, attempting to calm down. "If I was a fucking stranger, it would be understandable, to an extent. But oh..." He laughed sadly at the thought. "I'm so far from a stranger, Greg. So fucking far."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other with a quiet huff.

"If you had a grain of respect," he continued, "any inkling of what it feels like to be abandoned so you can go be some macho, monster-killing protector of fair maidens." He stared at Sir Gregor with suspicion. "Are you compensating for something?"

The princess walked up to the door, a bit shaken by the situation. Sir Gregor's eyes passively followed her before he turned back to Fidel. "I need you to leave," he said.

Fidel seemed hurt, eyes a bit glassy. He inhaled sharply, ready to retort but then stopped himself. "You know what?" he said, finally, voice controlled. "I don't care. Stay with fucking—"

"—Flora," she added in hesitant tones.

"Flora, thank you." He looked towards her for a moment and bowed his head a bit before turning back to Sir Gregor. "So proper, pretty and nice. She's—"

"—a princess," she said with some pride, and Fidel nodded in acknowledgment.

"Impressive, Greg, well done. I wish you both all the best. I'm sure Greg will look extremely attractive with a crown on his head. I can already picture it—the prestige, the class, the elegance." Suddenly a thought hit him, and he blinked a few times. "Wait... *the* princess Flora?"

"Yes."

"Your story is all the rage amongst the royals. So much compassion for your banishment."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Prince Phillip is desperate to find you. He commissioned multiple ballads about your golden hair and charming smile, so sentimental. My greatest rival, Carlo Garvaldi, wrote some truly abysmal stanzas about your teeth. What kind of a deranged man expects the public to want teeth?" Fidel rolled his eyes.

"Fucking teeth," Sir Gregor muttered under his breath.

"Right?" Fidel turned to Sir Gregor, and both nodded in agreement for a moment. Then he turned back to her. "There's no reason for you to keep running. You're completely fine."

"Oh."

"What was I saying?" Fidel was distracted again. "Ah, I found this at the threshold." He held out a neatly packaged present with a fancy, silk bow. He was surprised when both Flora and Sir Gregor moved away. "It's just a present, nothing scary. I know some of us have issues accepting nice things, but let's be reasonable about this."

"Fidel, put that down," Sir Gregor growled, instantly turning from frustrated to protective. "Throw it the fuck away."

"Now you care, don't you?"

"Put. It. Down."

Fidel shook his head, eyes set on Sir Gregor. "So *invested* all of a sudden. Who would have imagined?" He pulled on the bow, enjoying Sir Gregor's nervousness.

"Don't be a fucking idiot." Sir Gregor launched forwards, and grabbed the box.

Fidel pulled back. It split. Something tiny and swift slipped out of the tear and ran up his arm. Before either of them managed to respond, the creature bit Fidel and disappeared.

"Fuck, Greg," Fidel squealed, not a trace of previous annoyance in his voice. He stared down in disbelief. "My feet! I can't feel them! Or move them! I'm... turning into stone?" he whined, half scared, half offended by the ridiculousness of the predicament.

"Shit," Sir Gregor hissed, frantically looking through the box. He found a letter and read it hastily. "Fuck," he summarised.

"What?"

"It's one of these curses that needs true love's kiss to be lifted."

"I thought these were just legends," he whispered.

"That's what it says."

"Well, fine." Fidel was in no place to argue. He could already feel his knees turning numb. "Just do it."

"What? Me? Are you joking?"

"Well, who do you think? I'm sure this will work, relax." He gave it a second thought, and panicked a bit. "Does it say if my love needs to be reciprocated?"

"The letter doesn't go into *that* much detail."

"Then just do it. I'm not asking for much, am I? I mean—if it's going to save my life?"

Sir Gregor reluctantly came closer. "Just don't be disappointed if it does nothing," he growled, some actual concern in his voice.

"Yes, sure. Just make it good. You know, in case you never do it again."

Sir Gregor didn't give it a second thought. He grabbed Fidel and pulled him close as if he weighed nothing, tossing him around like a rag doll. Fidel held on to him, barely managing to keep his balance, fingers pulling on his partner's linen shirt. His eyes grew wide as he felt Sir Gregor wrapping his hand around his waist, another supporting his spine and tipping him backwards. Suspended above the ground, he clawed at the knight's straining muscles, both uncomfortable and mildly impressed.

Finally, Sir Gregor leaned towards Fidel and went for it. Sadly, the result was no more than a lingering peck, completely impersonal.

Fidel whacked Greg's muscular shoulder a few times, frustrated.

Sir Gregor smiled snidely in response, still not breaking away, but keeping his lips pressed together, and the kiss shallow. The moment Fidel accepted his fate, Sir Gregor deepened it, perhaps too much, surprising him.

Fidel grunted with disapproval but then, as the kiss turned from playful to passionate, he instantly eased into it, melting into Sir Gregor's arms, his displeased moans transforming into a satisfied rumble at the back of his throat.

This somehow encouraged Sir Gregor who became surprisingly involved, and then pulled away, shocked by things turning so genuine.

Fidel was having none of that. He pulled Sir Gregor back and returned the kiss in earnest, clinging on to him with iron determination.

Flora kept staring, startled, somehow more petrified than Fidel. She cleared her throat to attract their attention but they ignored her. They were approaching the task with full dedication which had little to do with any princesses or even curses. After a while, they slowed down, both panting, fingers tangled in each other's hair, faces flushed, hearts racing.

Sir Gregor looked at Fidel. The image turned borderline hazy and he was surprised by a sudden influx of strong emotions, which he was afraid to give a name to. The most ridiculous, sentimental thoughts passed through his head, and he flinched. "Fuck." *Not again.* He blinked a few times but the feeling was not going away.

Then he stared down at Fidel's feet.

When he looked back up, Sir Gregor appeared as if he fell head first into a dark void. Even his hair was messy as if shaken the moment he hit the rock bottom. "Fidel, fucking shit. Oh, gods."

Fidel froze, terrified. Although his legs felt normal now, it could have been an illusion. He spent a few seconds imagining his own slow and painful demise. "What?" he asked, finally, afraid to look down. "Did it fail? Am I getting worse?"

"No. Fuck, no. It worked like a dream."

"Oh." Fidel lit up, feeling relieved and finally breathing easy, but then processed Sir Gregor's response. "Oh."

"This can't be true," Sir Gregor growled with disbelief.

Fidel was insulted, but also a bit compassionate. Confronting his feelings was such a struggle for Greg every single time. "Facts are facts," he shrugged, trying to remain casual, but his smugness was undeniable. "Things could have been much worse, though, right?"

"Could they?" Sir Gregor didn't seem convinced.

"I'm going to go on a limb here and assume you didn't really want me to turn into a statue. Am I right, Greg? You don't want your best friend in the whole wide world to die, correct?"

Sir Gregor just grunted in response, but remained unsure. Fidel tossed back his hair, some repressed anger in the movement. "It was a bit much, let's admit, such an all or nothing situation, but—" he was failing to hide his excitement. "I mean—well. At least this brings us *some* clarity, some much needed clarity, considering—"

"Shut up, Fidel. Just—"

"There's no shame in experiencing some strong feelings, especially positive ones." Fidel smiled encouragingly but his expression faded as he met Sir Gregor's vacant eyes.

Sir Gregor massaged his temples with a groan. "Maybe this doesn't really mean anything?"

"Eeeeh..." Fidel was not quite sure how to respond, and let out an uncomfortable laugh instead. When he stopped, the silence was deafening.

"We could—" Fidel started but was unable to continue because this beginning alone made Sir Gregor appear *scared* for a lack of a better word. "No, I don't mean, ehm." He hesitated. "I just mean we could ignore the curse and trust our guts. You know... Was that good for you by any chance? Not to be presumptuous but I had a strong feeling—"

Sir Gregor's eyes somehow managed to become even more distant.

Fidel swallowed, loudly.

"This was not what it seemed," Sir Gregor announced with suppressed anger.

"Right, yes, fine, of course. No, sure, I understand. That's clear too, see?" Fidel blabbered on, sweating slightly. "We're doing so well. Clarity all round. So much... clarity." His eyes grew wider and he sighed. "I might, just... I don't know. Kill myself now, maybe?"

"That would defeat the purpose."

"Well, yes, it would, wouldn't it?" Fidel nodded eagerly. "In that case I can't, surely. Who would want that kind of sacrifice to go to waste? I have to live so bloody long now, just to compensate... No death for me." He shook his head. "Killing monsters and protecting fair maidens is one thing but this, I mean, oh boy. Maybe I should—" he chuckled, unable to stop himself "—pay you."

Sir Gregor laughed despite himself and some of the tension dissolved into the air.

"Great," Fidel sighed, relieved. "We have an answer now. We're s—so great." His awkwardness turned into intense sadness all of a sudden, eyes watering.

"Fidel?"

"What?"

"Don't start this again. We're upsetting her."

Fidel stared at Flora for a second as if he was surprised by her very existence. "How the fuck is she more important than me? She's a bloody stranger." He turned to her, apologetic. "With all due respect, but it is what it is."

She opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but he already turned away from her, upset and focused on Sir Gregor.

"Could you please acknowledge that something actually happened here? Can you? Can we finally move past this repressive nonsense of yours, and stop tiptoeing around the issue?"

They both turned towards the door for a second, hearing it close behind Flora.

Sir Gregor shook his head and turned back to Fidel. His eyes softened a bit, and he groaned, annoyed with himself. "You will never give up on this, right?"

"Right," Fidel proclaimed with pride, his chest puffed slightly.

"*Fine*," he said with a sigh.

Fidel stared at him in total disbelief. "Really?" he asked, his voice overflowing with anticipation and hope.

Sir Gregor just grunted in agreement, and shrugged his shoulders.

And they lived happily ever after.

Two Poems
by
Oak Morse

Crazy-as-hell-ville

Villagers swarm the police station
there's a marijuana issue across town,
a marijuana issue!
Folks are unlawfully getting stoned!
Chief soars out smelling like the finest indo
don't worry people; we will solve it, carry on!
Please carry on!
Chief runs to commissioner's office down in the trap,
villagers say there's a marijuana issue across town,
a marijuana issue!
Commissioner with blood shot eyes:
don't worry, I will fix it, carry on!
Please carry on!
Later, on the local news commissioner:
Villagers, do not worry about the marijuana issue
we are solving it as I speak;
it's been sent to a joint committee!

Headliner

Drunk man crashes into woman's car.
Woman's head strikes steering wheel.
Condoms fly from back seat.
Woman gets out, sees bashed bumper,
crumbled plate, throws slurs.
Drunk man spits and flicks off woman.
Woman flings black dildo.
Drunk man records woman until cops arrive,
then winks goodbye.
Next week headline news, her picture,
Porn star sues: rear ended.

We Are On Spin
by
Richard Foreman

We are on Spin. It's got the latest, before it's too late. Cash is so, like, last century and plastic is a slow draw. Spin's now. See it. Yours today. Now. Wear it, hold it, eat it, drink it, watch it, sit on it. Now. We love Spin, plugs every gap in our deep need profiles. See it, grab it, let the device track the debts – not a worry, they're just feeding the economy. Flash spin and the wheels keep turning. Yeah. New wheels, we could use some of those. Check the screen. There they are. Soon get a bleep from DeliverE. Window in a couple of hours.

Just time for a BoxFlix binge, then. 'Celebrity Massacres' is good. Latest one's a shock nail-biter. Agnes in over her neck. Has to mow down Kim, Angelina and naughty Natalie if she wants to stay a contender. One chore: microwave a SnakPak each and then we're into the show. Dead witty script. Jump cuts and dazzle. Suck from the Pak. Lemon and coriander flavour. Yum. Got nutrients too. What's yours, Brad? Ciliegia and basil. Wow. Got to be a next-time-must have. Oh look. There goes Kim, pushed out through a window twenty floors up. No wonder she's shrieking.

Ping. Front door. Can't be DeliverE yet surely. Not even the Polish drivers get here that fast. Better see who it is. Out of the sofa. Just a mo to set footsteps – might as well clock it up – and I'm in the hall. Another ping. Can't some people wait? I open up. Person stands there. Man with grey hair and some kind of period costume get up. Like in a Flick. Raincoat, black trousers, brogue shoes. Smiles but in a sort of embarrassed way. "Hello, sorry to bother you, but I need a bit of help."

"Cando maybe. What is?"

Blank look from him. Quick frown then tries to hold the smile. "I'm sorry. Er... What did you just say?"

"Said candomaybe. Justmo... Brad! Pauseit. Could be a while this!"

"Goodsdone babe! Prob?"

"Dunno," I say, turning back to the bloke. "Whasprob?"

He nods, "Ah, prob... yes, problem, yes... My wife and I, we've just moved into number 37 up the road. We can't seem to work out how to get the... what do they call it nowadays? The house-system. We can't seem to get the house system up and running. It's all supposed to be some sort of smart network thing and frankly it's got the pair of us baffled. No instructions. No manual. Well, I'm assuming you have the same sort of... But if you could just give us a pointer or two, I'm sure we could get it going and get some heating on at least..."

"OnSpin?"

"Er, I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

I slow it right down for him. "Are... you... on... Spin?"

He shakes his head, slowly. "No. No idea what you're talking about, I'm afraid. Is that the name of something? A service or something?"

"Spinsinstant. Get on Spin. Sorted." The device is in my hand, of course. Show him the Startscreen.

He looks at it. Frowns. "So sorry, I don't have the right glasses on. This is, er... one of those 'applications'. Am I right?"

"Appyes. Gotcredit? Noproob."

"No, I'm just wondering if there's some way we can just deal with this ourselves. Manually or whatever."

Not sure what he's at. Clock despair in his eyes. Bit sorry for him, slow it right down. "Spin... The... Only... Way... Is... Spin... Understand?"

His head sinks. "I see. Um, perhaps I'll try next door. I'm sure there must be more than one way to... Anyway, sorry to have disturbed you. Thanks for... er, trying..."

He turns away. Fat chance, I think. Close the door and back to the living room. Nat's paused onscreen, loading her weapon. Brad looks up from his device. "Who wassit?"

"New guy, just moved in at 37."

"Whassee like?"

"Dead meat."

The Pirate Life for Me
by
Lauren Piskothy

The year be 2007, and me mateys and I just docked on the shore of new land, a place where all the scoundrels of the world be roaming free with little to no consequences, the drunkest, meanest, stinkiest, tannest lads and lassies ye will ever meet—Daytona Beach, Florida.

Daytona be a lawless land. So it be the perfect place for me scallywags to swindle our way to a treasure greater than any riches in the world—The Blu-Ray DVD of *Reservoir Dogs*. It be the only one of its kind and therefore, it be worth a fortune. And once me mateys and I find this booty, we'll make hundreds of thousands of copies to sell to the masses for an extortionate price!

ARGH!! That be right, I be a pirate who pirates DVDs! Yer probably thinking... *He be a pirate, but not the kind I thought*. Alas! I come from a long ancestry of pirates, and this just be how we evolved, but don't question it too much.... ARRRGGGHH!!

Me name be Stony O'Malley, me old man gave me that name as a little lad, because I never smiled, not a once. That was until I was thirty one years old, when me daughter Gracie was born; we be thick as thieves when she was a little lass. (And I would know how thick the thieves be, I've met many, they be not the sharpest knives in the mast). But little Gracie be not so little anymore, aye, she be saying things like, "Yer not the boss of me, I be me own person" and "Get out me room Dad, I be watching *Gossip Girl!*" I just don't understand her anymore. Me old man and I bonded over our piratey missions, so maybe little Gracie and I can bond over our quest for the digital versatile disc of *Reservoir Dogs*! Alas, I be going on a tangent, but it be hard being a single dad in this day and age. But Gracie will be me number one fan again, just like when she was a wee lil lass. When we go on our quest and brave the dangers that lurk at the Blockbuster on Orchard Lane. *Shiver me timbers*. Just the thought of the pimply employees asking me what type of movie I be looking for sends a chill up me spine! Aye, I've seen ships sunk and lads walk the plank, but small talk with a movie loving teen making minimum wage be the scariest thing I ever encountered.

I knock three times on Gracie's door, she be not hearing me over the theme song to *Gossip Girl*... so I knock harder, and she swings the door open.

"What now, Stony?" She sat down on her bed, her poster of a handsome lad by the name of Chace Crawford, looking me dead in the eyes, like he be reading my mind and knowing all me secrets. Ooh... the shiver is back.

She be calling me by my first name lately. It be... not my favorite thing, but she'll grow out of it. At least that's what I've read.

"I need to show you the treasure map for our next quest!"

"Ugh... Dad... what did I tell you, I'm not a pirate. It goes against everything I believe in!"

Ya see, Gracie be on about becoming a filmmaker these days. Like her mom.... Her mom who left us to make it big in the worst place on earth, that's right... I be talking about

Hollywood, California. I be trying to talk sense into her lately, but she be a stubborn lass, just like her mom. I'd be lying if I said this be not triggering to me... So, I decided the only way to get her to help me on my quest was to use her love of films to me own advantage and tell a wee white lie. Argh! Do not be judging me, parents do it all the time, ye probably thought Santy Clause was real for yer whole life and yer not getting angry with yer folks now are ye? Santy Clause... imagine that. I know she'll have fun once she's there looting with me!

"ARGH! I remember now... sorry me memory is spotty lately, what if we go rent a movie? It be my treat!?"

Gracie turned to me as if she'd seen a ghost! And I should know, I seen lots of ghosts in me days of raiding abandoned ships with me old man.

"Are you being for real!?" Gracie was excited, like when she thought Santy Clause had brought her presents. Kids be so gullible believing in fictional characters!

"Yes I be for real!"

"You mean rent as in pay, not steal a physical copy of a movie?"

"AYE!"

Gracie came up and hugged me so tightly me head barely popped off me shoulders. She skipped straight out the door and waited for me to follow her along, like when she would show me her favorite toy as a little lass. Me felt a little guilty about lying, but hey-ho, it be for her own good!

There she be. The blue and golden chunky letters Gracie be so fond of. She tells me this is the place where she fell in love with cinema—Blockbuster. I be seeing what me piratey heart desires through the window: there it be, on aisle three: *Reservoir Dogs* on Blu-Ray, what a glorious treasure, better than any gold I've seen. The only one of its kind. She be a beaute. Gracie has a glimmer in her eyes when she looks into the video store, and something tells me she's not thinking about piracy. I pull out me treasure map: a blueprint of this Blockbuster so we can steal the booty without walking the plank—or as regular lads call it "being escorted out by the local authorities." That be super embarrassing.

"Gracie! Come look at me map!"

But she be gone. Already inside the shop. She just walked right in. I never would've thought to do that! That lassie be a genius! I walk right in. She be talking to the scrawny lad at the front of the shop. ARGH! A distraction! Good thinking. She be a natural pirate and not even know it! The ghostly looking lad at the front be not even paying any attention to me. He didn't even ask me what movie I be searching for! *Praise be to Blackbeard!* So, I walk right over and slip the DVD right into me puffy shirt. It be very puffy and good for theft and storing stuff. Ye would not believe all me snacks I kept in there when Gracie was a baby.

"Gracie!" I whispered.

But she be not hearing me, so I whisper louder.

"Psst! Gracie!"

Gracie still not be hearing me. She really be committing to this distraction. And then I be hearing a sound I only hear when she be watching interviews with Chad Micheal Murray on the YouTube... *a giggle*. She be twirling her hair like she does when she watches those pretty Gossip Boys too.

"Argh... Gracie...?"

She giggles some more at that whisper of a lad.

"Gracie! I be having a heart attack and I also be on fire!"

Not even a glance.

I do the only thing I be knowing how to do. Scare the living daylight out of this son of a biscuit eater! I limp with me peg leg and give him the dirtiest look me can muster.

He stares at me, with bloodshot eyes, not a thing behind them. I never seen nothing like it.

"Oh! Dad, this is Kevin. He's a cinephile like me!"

Kevin looks at me with a wee nod of the head. "Sup?"

"We were just talking about maybe grabbing a pizza?" She be batting her eyes at him the whole time she talks.

Now me blood be boiling. This be me father daughter bonding mission and she be leaving me for this smoky smelling lad! I'd sooner walk the plank than leave her with this... Kevin!

"ARGH! This be not happening!"

"But it is Dad."

"Blimey! No way!"

"I'm eighteen, Dad! I'm a legal adult! I can make my own choices and just because you don't agree with them doesn't mean you get to boss me around! C'mon Kevin!"

Gracie storms out with Kevin. She be leaving me all alone in the Blockbuster, I be having dreams like this all the time. Just me and a ton of booty... aye, I mean treasure, get yer mind out the gutter... but I be sadder than a marooned scallywag swabbing the poopdeck in the middle of a snowstorm. So I take all the DVDs me puffy shirt can fit and go back to the ship to drink and commiserate with me mateys... but they all be bachelors with no kids, so it's hard to relate.

Gracie and Kevin be a couple now... and all I can do is pour meself into me work. Sure, I be raking in the big bucks with me thousands of hundreds of dollars from the pirated copies of *Reservoir Dogs* I've been selling, but it not be feeling as good as me thought. There be a Gracie size whole inside me heart. She never be home anymore, and she never calls. I get so sad sometimes I sit in me quarters and watch *Gossip Girl* alone, Gracie was right, this show be addicting. I even browse all her non-pirated DVDs... I would be lying to meself if I said me didn't watch one or two or maybe five of them. I would never tell me mateys this, but I even saw a movie in the... cinema. ARGH! I know this be hypocritical of me.

Twas not my plan to sneak into the cinema, it just happened. This also be what Gracie's mom said when she be sleeping with an indie director... so I know how it be sounding. But it just happened to be on me walk back to the ship. Okay? ARGH I don't need yer judgment.

Alas, it was out of me hands, all the sudden I be sitting in the dark theater, with a big thing of popcorn and a mountain of Coca-Cola. Me mateys woulda had a good laugh, but I thought, *what the heck, might as well lean into it*. All the sudden the image appears on the screen, crystal clear, sparkling almost, like the open waters me ship sails across. I couldn't believe me eyes, there be no quality like this on me pirated DVDs!

Even the trailers be looking real enticing, and trailers are the worst, they be giving the whole movie away for free! But then the movie started, the title appeared on the screen, sharp as the hook me matey Billy has for a hand! The movie be called *Enchanted*. It told the tale of a young lass from a cartoon world, set to become a princess, who gets trapped in our world and falls in love with a young lad who divorces people for a living. But it be their differences that make them such a good match. There also be a father and daughter who be the best of friends. I be halfway through the movie, and there be definitely no salty water coming out me eyes. That's for sure. I thought to meself, *Gracie be right, there be something different and magical about watching a story unfold on the big screen*. The long list of names of people who be working on the film came onto the screen. Something came over me, and I wanted to see every last buccaneer that worked on this masterpiece. Then the lights came up in the theater and I felt a tap on me shoulder.

"Dad?"

I turned around to see me Gracie with her... Kevin.

"Gracie!"

Kevin nodded, "Sup?"

This scallywag be making weird sounds and actin like they be words. Arghh...

"What are you doing here? You said you wouldn't be caught dead in a cinema! Were you... crying?" Gracie sounded impressed.

I quickly patted me face dry with me puffy sleeve.

"What ye be talking about? This be condensation from me Coke cup that just so happened to get on me face... somehow!"

"You were crying! At the movie!?"

"Yer seeing things lassie!"

"Okay, you know what Dad, I think we're going to go. C'mon Kevin."

Kevin and me Gracie were just about ready to leave that theater, but just then I felt a knot in me chest, that if I didn't tell me daughter what I was feeling, I might lose her forever.

"Don't go! Yer right lassie, I was crying..."

Gracie stopped in her tracks and looked me in me glassy eyes.

"Ye see, sitting in this theater, watching that divorce lawyer with his little lassie, I started thinking about how close we used to be when you were just a little lassie and how you be spending most of yer time with Kevin now... this movie be moving me to tears without me realizing it."

"Wow Dad... that's big of you to say."

"Wait, I'm not done yet, Gracie, if ye want to stop pirating movies with me, I won't be making you walk the plank. If yer dream is to make movies, I want to be supportive. I think... I think I be understanding the magic of cinema now..."

Before she could say anything, Gracie came over wrapped her arms around me, giving me the biggest hug. Shiver me timbers! She squeezed me tightly.

"Thanks Dad..."

I guess me quest for treasure did bring me and Gracie closer afterall...

The year be 2035 and after years of attending PA meetings (Pirating Anonymous) I earned me twenty eight year chip! However, it turns out that piracy be not a victimless crime, so me PA group members got slapped with a big fine and threatened with up to five years in the brig. Luckily me Gracie is now a big time movie director and can afford a good lawyer. She be directing her fourth movie and I be the proudest I've ever been! When Disney learned about her pirate heritage, they be knocking down her door to direct the next six *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies. Gracie starts directing the tenth *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie this summer and guess who be playing Pirate #4...

All Together, Now
by
Mary Cresswell

Let us now praise famous men:
Praise is wholesome, by and large—
you know they need it now and then
because they're famous, because they're men.

Minister, god or demiurge,
a bloke needs sweetness now and then,
so lead him to the biscuit tin.
Let us praise our famous men.

Up and out the egos surge
mightier far than sword or pen.
Keep them sweet, those famous men.
(That's what I meant by 'biscuit tin'.)

From *Hallelujah!* to *Amen!*
let our rapturous hymns converge:
Because we're praising famous men,
because they need it now and then.

First Time
by
Analise Chambers

The boy tugged playfully at the girl's plaid pleated skirt as they were making out. A TV show of some sort was playing in the background, but neither person paid it much mind, or any at all, really. They were both engrossed in the taste of each other's tongues.

The girl pulled at the navy wool sweater covering the boy's shirt. He slipped it off, then continued kissing her, moving his lips away from hers and down her neck. A small moan escaped from her, so he kissed deeper. He pulled her shirt off; she unbuttoned his. He unzipped her skirt and slid it off. She unzipped his pants and pulled them down. All that was left between them were two thin layers of cotton underwear.

Through his panting, he asked, "Should I go grab the condom?"

She nodded quietly, unable to suppress the grin on her face. He snuck out of the room. Her parents wouldn't be home for a few more hours, but the secretive air to his movements was all the more exciting. She smoothed out the pink blanket that covered her bed and pushed some pillows around. The lavender velvet pillow to her right, and the fluffy white pillow to her left. She chose the silk cheetah print to prop herself up on, since it was inarguably the most alluring.

She looked over and saw the ragged stuffed bunny that she had loved since her first birthday. By this point, it was torn and missing an eye, and there might have been some dried food stuck to its arm. Alarmed by how childish her prized possession now seemed from her recently matured point of view, she hastily grabbed it and threw it off the bed.

With a quiet thump, the bunny hit the K-Pop poster hanging on the wall. There was a dark ring around the lead singer's mouth—a result of the countless times the girl had used the likeness to practice kissing. The repudiated rabbit, in one final bid for attention, knocked over the girl's trophy for second place in the middle school science fair. That was the first time the award had been moved since she had received it four years prior.

The girl lurched to restore her possessions to their rightful order, but she paused when she heard the boy's footsteps coming up the stairs. She hastily arranged her hair in the sexiest way she could, fanned out over the silken print of her pillow. She wasn't sure about which pose she should make because she had never gone this far with a boy before, but she didn't mind not knowing. She was going to have fun.

The footsteps continued round the corner and stopped in front of her door. She could see the shadow of his feet behind the door. Through the small crack, she watched him shift from one foot to the other. She giggled to herself. Images of what poses he might be striking came to her mind. She was just about to call his name when she heard a peculiar sound: another set of footsteps echoing up the stairwell as someone else ascended to the landing.

The girl's stomach dropped. Fear gripped at her heart. Her body froze.

Her parents must be home early.

The steps slowly approached the door. It was all over. She would instantly be sent to the all-girl's school by her aunt's house in Kumamoto Prefecture. No doubt they had already found her near-naked boyfriend fishing around in his backpack for the condom. The shame was mortifying.

As the door creaked open, she quickly remembered to rip the blanket out from under her and cover herself as best she could. She was still working out how to cover her bare shoulders when she saw her boyfriend hop over the threshold.

"Ooh," he purred, "do you want me to unwrap you like a sexy little present?"

The girl chuckled halfheartedly. "Did you just get to the door?"

The boy scratched his head in embarrassment. "Oh, yeah, it took me a while to remember which pocket I had the condom in. Sorry for making you wait, but," he lowered his voice, "I thought the suspense might turn you on."

"Yeah, yeah, it did." She said this in an effort to convince not just him but also herself.

"So... where were we?" He climbed onto her bed and pulled the blanket off of her. Her mind quickly returned to the matter at hand, and she found the butterflies returning to her stomach as they began kissing again.

Her eyelids fluttered open for a moment. They closed, then shot back open. There was nothing out of the ordinary past her boyfriend's head, but the girl could have sworn she saw a shadow being cast against her wall, as if someone was in the room watching them. She broke the kiss, and the boy took this as a green light to press on.

Before the girl's concerns could be voiced, the boy expertly slid the last bit of clothing off her body. His boxers followed suit. He put on the condom and straddled the girl. He leaned close and asked, "Are you ready?"

Nervousness and excitement rushed to her brain. She looked deep into his eyes. "Yeah," she whispered.

She inhaled sharply as he entered her. It felt good. Just good. Maybe a little painful, but tolerable. She tried not to get hung up on her mild disappointment and willed herself to kiss him deeper. He kissed her back, and soon she started to enjoy the rhythm of their bodies. His hands ran up and down her thighs. Fingers ran through her long black hair. She paused, though not sure why, when again she felt the boy squeeze both her legs, while a hand simultaneously brushed her head. She jerked up, slamming her chin into his forehead.

"Ow," the boy whined as he nursed his head. "What was that for?"

The girl ran her hands through her hair again and again. She looked behind her. There was nothing of note among the colorful pillows and the white, wrought iron headboard. The boy took the girl's chin and turned her face towards his. He kissed her gently and asked, "Babe, what's wrong? Is this too much for you? Am I too-" his eyes glanced down to his penis, "Am I too big for you?"

"No, no," the girl answered. A look of disappointment flashed across the boy's face. "I don't know, I think I felt something in my hair." The girl gripped the boy's wrist tight with two clammy hands. "Do you think there's someone in my room?"

The boy laughed and tried to calm her down. He assured her they were alone, but she insisted that he check around the bed.

"Nothing under here," he called out from under her bed.

"Look in my closet," she pleaded.

He looked at her and considered if all this effort was worth it, but then he glanced at her breasts and decided he would play along a little longer. He walked over to her closet and turned back to the bed to watch her as he turned the closet doorknob. The slatted door creaked open to reveal...

"Nothing." The girl let out a sigh, followed by a quiet laugh. "Sorry, you must think I'm crazy."

"Yeah," he replied as he walked back to the bed, "but crazy girls are hot." He climbed onto the bed, grabbed the girl by her small waist, and flipped her over. She leaned forward and kissed him lightly with her legs straddling him. He grabbed the back of her head and sent his tongue deeper into her mouth. The boy reentered the girl and slowly guided her body down. She began to gyrate her hips uneasily, but her eyes still darted around the room.

The boy lifted his hand to the girl's chin and directed her attention back to him. "Let me see those tits," he growled.

The girl smiled and arched her back as she continued to ride him. The bed squeaked with her movements. She actually began to enjoy herself and she brushed the sweaty locks of black hair out of her face with a feigned nonchalance. She rolled her head to the side when a loud gasp forced its way out of her lungs.

There in the corner stood a tall, thin woman in a long, white kimono. She faced the wall, and the long gray tresses of her thinning hair crept down her back and hung motionless by her knees. There was an unnerving stillness to the woman, as though her presence caused the rest of the already static room to freeze over. The girl's eyes remained transfixed on this apparition in the corner, and she sat motionless on top of the boy.

"You finished already, huh?" He sighed as though this was a common inconvenience for him.

"Do you see that?" the girl whispered.

"See what?" the boy asked dismissively. His air of incredulity crumbled when he followed the girl's gaze and saw the tall, pale woman in the corner. He threw the girl off him and, as she tumbled to the floor, he cried out, "What the FUCK?"

The girl stood up and, though the ghost faced the wall, she awkwardly tried to shield her nipples. The boy jumped off the bed to join the girl. They both backed up slowly until the

girl felt her back press against the wall. The boy maneuvered her to stand in front of him so that now she felt the cold sweat of his body press against her back.

The ghost in the corner jerked her thin, bony fingers in unnaturally quick movements. Her overgrown nails scratched the paint off the walls. The stringy grey hair swayed against the soiled silk of the woman's kimono as her head began to turn. With her body fixed in its position, her neck cracked loudly as it continued turning until the ragged locks of grey were replaced by a pale, sunken face. The flesh of her neck was twisted grotesquely as the spirit gazed directly at the nude couple.

"*Obaa-san?*" the girl asked.

"What?" demanded the boy.

"That's, um," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "that's my grandmother." She reached down to grab the stuffed rabbit slouching against the wall and shoved it backwards into the boy's hand. "Cover yourself," she ordered over her shoulder. All reason left the boy's mind. He nodded blankly and did as she said.

The woman's feet pointed towards the corner of the room. She lifted her foot, her heel forward facing the boy and girl. She moved her foot back and took a lurching step towards the bed. With a thud, her other foot hit the ground as she took another strained step. Her head lulled from side to side with each advancement. A long, straight lock of grey hair fell in front of the dark shadow her browbone cast over her sunken eyes. As she approached, the boy could make out only the shine of her pupils sitting deep within her hollowed eye sockets.

The girl scrambled to grab the boy's clothes and she tossed them in his general direction. She hastily pulled on her skirt. He tensed up, afraid to take his eyes off the ghost. His gaze darted to the pile of clothes, then back to the woman. She took another step towards him. He waited for her to get stuck on the bed, but her leg glided right through the mattress as though it were made of air. He whimpered and put on his clothes, turning back every few moments to make sure the woman was still coming. She was.

The girl grabbed the boy's hand and hurried him out of the room, down the stairs, and to the front door.

"Sorry," she said breathlessly.

"Wha—" the boy said. His eyes looked glazed over.

The two could hear the pounding of bare feet as the ghost staggered down the stairs.

"My grandmother—she died two years ago. At her deathbed, when I was saying my last goodbye, she was adamant that I promise to stay a virgin until I'm married. It was weird, but she seemed pretty serious, so I promised. I didn't think she was *this* serious."

The boy let out a whine when he saw the ghost approaching from behind the girl.

"I think you probably better go home," the girl said, "but, hey, I'll see you at school tomorrow, yeah?"

The boy nodded quietly. His face was vacant of any particular expression. He turned to go home but stopped. He turned back to the girl and the ghost. He gave a brief bow to the spirit and quickly muttered, "*Owabi moushi agemasu*. I am so sorry," then hurried out the door. He went home, masturbated, and fell asleep. He did not go to school the next day.

Soft Taco Party Pak
by
Robert Beveridge

I guess there wasn't a way
this wouldn't have happened

when I show up late
to a party where everyone
has done shots since midafternoon

with three soft taco party paks
thirty-four little packages
of squishy deliciousness

someone will always, every
single time, get the idea
to get out the sports equipment

but this time it's not baseball
Jack Weisinger from two blocks
over rummages through
the host's closet and brings out
two lacrosse sticks

and before long the kitchen,
the family room, and the patio
are all covered in sour cream-
smearred beef, tomato, and lettuce

and I slip out before anyone
notices I'm gone and eat the other
two on my way home,
a smile on my face

Cultivation of Culturedness

by
David Hutto

I'm sure you're the kind of person who likes culture. Maybe you own shirts with buttons. I don't know. Maybe you've read a book without pictures for some reason. Maybe you use a napkin when you eat. I'll tell you openly and honestly, because I'm that kind of person, that I was a little bit behind in the culture department. It's not that I don't admire culture. I've learned to recognize it whenever it comes on TV, except sometimes I change the channel by accident. So I admire culture, as I said, and one day I sat on the couch and thought about what it would be like to be cultured myself. I started to imagine myself as somebody who might use a napkin, but I fell asleep and spilled my potato chips.

So I admired the idea of being cultured, which I already mentioned, because I noticed cultured people get shorter jail sentences, they own toothbrushes, and they don't have potato chips mashed into their couches. Since I wanted the quickest way to become cultured, I decided to go to a poetry reading. In my town there are people who write poetry. Some of them are poets who stroll through the floral bowers of linguistic cultivation, noting the nuances of the human condition, and some of them are teenagers who write about how everything sucks. Another thing we have in my town, besides poets, is a coffee house called Dog of Woe. Once a month the poets go there and read each other their poems. So I admired culture, as I already told you, and I decided to go to a poetry reading.

Now that I had committed myself to culture, I thought about what to wear in my new life of refinement and good taste. Behind the TV I found my "Ram it with the Sex Pistols" T-shirt. This was a famous musical group, and music is cultural, so I decided to wear that T-shirt, as it would show people my level of culture. I wondered about wearing a hat, and I tried to remember what cultured people on TV wear. The only hat I owned was a Pittsburgh Steelers baseball cap, but I had dropped it in the bathtub when I was washing my dog, and it never seemed as good after that. I decided not to wear the hat. I don't think cultured people smell like dogs.

At the coffee house people were drinking coffee and eating cookies. I like coffee, I thought, I'm glad, I thought, I can still drink coffee as a cultured person. I went to order a cup. "I'll have a medium coffee," I said to the kid behind the counter. "A metrovilla?" the kid asked me. "No," I said, "a medium coffee." "That's a metrovilla," he said. "What's a metrovilla?" I asked. "I just want coffee." "I mean the size," he said. "I told you that," I replied. "A medium. And I'll have a granola earth cookie." He turns around and yells to somebody "one metrovilla!"

I took my medium metrovilla and granola earth cookie and found a seat where most of the tables were between me and the microphone. I know by now you're already thinking I seemed pretty cultured just for being there, and thank you for your supportive attitude, but I wanted to observe. I was there as a student of refinement, of classiness, of savoir faire. I looked at the next table and saw a girl with pink hair. Say, I thought to myself, say, what's that about? I wasn't sure I wanted to dye my hair pink. You're probably thinking the same thing. But maybe you're not that cultured. I don't know. Anyway, pink isn't really my color. I'm more of a mauve guy. At a table near the pink-haired girl was an elderly man wearing a hat and holding a pipe between his teeth. Damn it, I thought, I knew I should have worn a hat. I wondered if I should buy a pipe. In a few minutes, other people bought coffee and

granola earth cookies and sat down. It was a very cultured crowd. Almost everyone had a napkin.

I was ready for the poetry. That was why I came, as I told you, to expand my world by strolling through the gardens of verbiage and verbalness. Finally a skinny young man got up and went to the microphone. "Welcome to the poetry coffee house," he said. "As most of you know, we do this as an open mike, so whoever has something to read can come up here and share. I know some people are ready to go, so I'm going to sit down and let them come on up."

Another young man went to the mike. He looked at the floor and never looked up. "Rain in the Dark" he said. I think. I think he said "Rain in the Dark". He said it quickly and not very loud. He read the poem fast, too, and didn't speak up, and kind of mumbled, and didn't really stand near the microphone. I had no idea what he was saying. It sounded like he kept repeating "leave my heart for dead". When he finished reading, he scowled at us. I wondered what we had done. Maybe we were supposed to apologize, but I didn't want to go first.

After the angry poet, a middle-aged woman went to the microphone. "This is a poem about my sister as a little girl," she said. She got serious to read.

You knew the way
To play all day
You were the one
Who loved the sun
In childhood bliss
With summer's kiss
You loved to sing
And dance in rings

While she was reading I looked around the room and I noticed a woman in a really tight sweater, which made me spill my coffee. Since I had to get up and get napkins to clean it up I missed part of the poem. I must have missed the good part.

Another woman got up to read. "My current series of poems grows out of the soil of central Pennsylvania," she said. Oh, good, I thought, poems about gardening. She started reading:

As I drive past Amish fields
I sense the secular seeds,
Of austere paternal religion
Planted in columbine soil,
Nourished on the breast of Gaya,
The all-mother to all of us.
Verdant points on promising fields
Match points of light
In the stellar mirror...

Whoa, I thought, we're all here for poetry. If she doesn't cut that out people are going to start leaving. She kept reading, but nobody left. I looked around. Was the tall man putting on his coat? No, he was looking for a pen. Was the red-haired woman picking up her purse? No, she was looking for a tissue to dry her eyes. I felt like crying myself. Maybe this is cultured, I thought. I wasn't happy about it.

Fifteen poets read their poems that evening. I think it was fifteen. When it goes over ten I get kind of lost, but you probably do too, so you'll understand. Every poem I heard I felt more and more like crying. I couldn't understand anything. I thought I'd never be cultured.

Then the last man got up. He was wearing a Sex Pistols T shirt. Say, I thought, say, I like this guy. "My poem," he said, "is called I Love Beer." I yelled out "hey! hey!" People turned to look at me, so I knew they liked beer, too.

The guy in the cultured T shirt read:

When my girlfriend won't shut up

When my boss acts like a dick
There's nothing like a beer.
When it's hot outside
When it's cold outside
There's nothing like a beer.

He kept reading. It was a good poem. I could see everybody else thought that, too. People were shaking their heads, wondering why did we have to wait until the very end for the good one. Seemed like everybody was wondering that. I left the poetry reading feeling good to know that my level of culture was increasing. I thought I should celebrate, so I went home and drank five beers. With corn chips, because potato chips are so...you know.

You From the Future
by
Anna Koltes

"Whatever you do, don't fall in love with Jason."

You gape at the twin of yourself who purposely rode into you with her electric Divvy bike. Except it's not a twin at all. You don't even have a twin, not that you know of. This not-twin who looks exactly like you is wearing your ripped jeans, your yellow sweater with the broken zipper, and your scruffy checkered Vans you bought back when you thought you were a skater.

But it isn't even the clothes that's disturbing. It's the face, the red hair, the posture...the you-ness of it all, but this You is speaking to you like someone having a normal conversation with another somebody.

You glance up and down North Clark street. A girl swipes nonchalantly through her phone from inside her idling car. A guy in noise-canceling headphones picks up his dog's shit. No one is paying any attention either of Yous. No one even gets it.

"Hello, did you hear me? Can you pay attention for once?" the second-you says. Is this how you sound in real life, pushy and not that nice?

Maybe this second-you is just a bitch.

You're probably hallucinating. Yes, that must be it. You ingested one too many gummies last night at Sherry and Elvis' because they're pushers. You pull out your phone to take a photo of You. If this isn't real, the camera will definitely back you up. But then you think about all the ghost stories you've ever heard of and sometimes the ghosts do appear on camera, and film, too.

Now you don't know what to think. You're more confused than ever and you blame the cocktails, too. Sherry was blending a lot of veg and fruit stuff with spiked kombucha and making you drink it.

The mean version of You slaps the phone out of your hand. It clatters across the sidewalk with an elaborate chorus of cracks.

"What the hell?" you crouch down to retrieve the phone and see that the screen is indeed cracked beyond all recognition. You didn't buy a screen protector because you never have your shit together.

"It's just a phone," the mean-you snaps. "Trust me, a phone is the least of your worries if you end up with Jason."

"I don't even know a Jason," you counter.

"You will," the phone-destroying-mean-you says brusquely. "And you'll thank me later. Or you won't. I'm not even sure you'll ever see me again. But yeah, your life won't fall apart in total burning ruins if you steer clear from Jason."

"Are you going to get me a new phone?" you demand.

The second-you rolls her eyes and speeds off on her Divvy. "Why am I such an idiot?"

You'd chase her down if you weren't so hungover.

"This is awkward, but your rent is three days late," your roommate Madison says as you tear into cheap Chinese takeout. Seeing Yourself in the flesh has made you ravenously hungry for junk food.

You pick up your splintered chopsticks. "Madison, what would you do if another You showed up to warn you about your future?"

Madison chews insipidly. "What are you talking about?"

"Maybe it's future You, or alternate reality You, or another version of You, or I don't know...a vision of You..."

Madison snorts into her egg rolls. You try not to be offended, but she's already shaking her head. "This reminds me of the time you found that disgusting stray cat and were convinced it was your grandfather reincarnated."

"What if it was?"

Madison starts cleaning up before you've even had a chance to finish your lo mein.

"You need to lay off the weed gummies. And you also owe me fifteen bucks for dinner."

"Madison, this is mega," you plead with her. You're not even sure why you need her validation. "What would you even tell your current You if you could tell them anything? What would you tell me?" you press.

Madison marches off into the kitchen. "I would tell you to pay your fucking rent."

You go out with a guy to a dive bar with sticky tables, but his name isn't Jason like your couple friend Sherry and Elvis who set you up led you to believe. It's Oliver.

"Are you sure?" you ask. You're disappointed. He's kind of cute, in a preppy way.

You tell him about meeting Yourself on the street. You don't know why, maybe you just want confirmation you're not insane. But Not-Jason-Oliver looks at you like you're high or drunk or on a list of meds with names no one can pronounce.

Apparently Sherry didn't warn him about you.

He shakes his head in disbelief. "Why would you even want to meet this Jason? Sounds like you should steer clear of the guy."

He doesn't get it.

"Yeah, but now I want to find him more than anything, just to find out what kind of person can do that to you," you insist. "It's gotta be good enough for your Future Self to track you down through the maze of time and warn you, right? I want to know what it's like to be that into someone. I want to feel something intense, something undeniable. I want to be sleepless over someone. I want to cry over them until my face hurts. I want to feel love so strongly I throw up. I want to know what it's like to feel earth-crumbling, building-collapsing, star-exploding love. I want to be ruined."

Not-Jason-Oliver's stares at you. Then he chugs the last of his beer. "Yeah, whatever. Are we going to hook up or not?"

You watch him traipse out of the bar alone. He leaves a 10% tip.

What a dick.

You are forced to take extreme measures.

You swipe right on all the guys named Jason on a dating app you vowed to never sign up for. You're feeling pretty psyched with this strategy, even if just to piss off Future/Alternate Mean You.

But the only Jason who agrees to go out with you is twice your age, balding, and worst of all, an accountant. As you drift off into your pasta pomodoro he lists theories about why he's so proficient at his job, punctuating every sentence with "Isn't that wild?"

You wish it was.

You realize fast this can't be Jason-the-life-ruiner-Jason. You're not in any danger of falling in love with this Jason and why didn't you think to ask Your Future Self for a surname?

Because you were hungover, that's why.

You figure you need to start thinking outside the box.

You stalk guys at the library, the gym, at your local supermarket like a crazy person, accosting them in the baked goods aisle as they shield themselves with baguettes.

"Are you Jason?"

No one ever is, and if they were, they wouldn't tell you.

The manager is onto you. "You can't keep coming in here and harassing customers, lady."

You have no choice but to expand your horizons, repeating these failsafe tactics in public places where you're less likely to be subject to close scrutiny or get arrested. Lincoln Park, the Lakefront trail, Daley Plaza. Even the line of tourists just trying to get into Willis Tower.

"I'm Jason," a man yells while you wait dejectedly in a coffee shop for your name to be called.

You watch with bated breath as coffee-shop-leather-jacket-Jason strides to the counter to pick up his latte. Could this really be Jason/the-Life-Ruiner? You've never been into tattoos but you could be open to trying new things.

"Want some, babe?" coffee-shop Jason says as he offers his boyfriend a sip.

You realize this has all been a huge waste of time.

Also side note, you have a job and you're running out of sick days.

You go to Sherry and Elvis' wedding at the Adler Planetarium.

You stare at the sailboats floating cheerfully on the lake as the band plays and people do the chicken dance. You don't feel like dancing, like you don't feel like doing a lot of things these days. You've given up the hunt for Jason after your friends did an intervention for you.

"It's time to give up on Jason," they said.

It feels like a breakup, like loss, even though you never even met Jason. Maybe Future You got it all wrong, or maybe You got the wrong you. Maybe you met Jason in another version or in a bunch of other versions but this is the version where you didn't.

Or maybe you just missed him because you weren't paying enough attention, because you were too high at a festival or too wasted at a bar or too engrossed watching reels on your phone to look up and see him right there, standing in front of you. You only had one task.

Who knew it was so hard to ruin your own life?

"Having fun?" Elvis beams at you. You don't exactly approve of Sherry marrying Elvis, but he's a decent guy even if he used to be Sherry's weed dealer.

"Yeah, sure, congratulations," you say.

"You've said that to me five times already," Elvis or Sherry shakes his head. "I have someone I want you to meet."

You try to tell him you've already met all the people, the eligible bachelors and the frat guys and the gropey uncles, but Elvis is already waving the someone over.

The lights dim. Thunder crashes in the sky. The floor quakes. Your heart stops because you know this is it. This is probably the end of the world.

He walks toward you. Eyes the color of steel knives and nightmares. A devastating smile that slices open your veins. A voice that dunks you in acid rain.

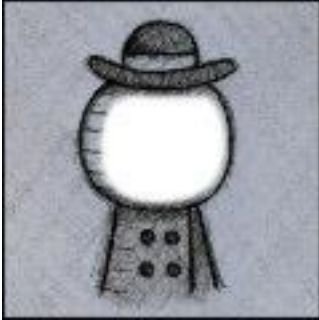
It's already happening and you haven't even introduced yourself.

You can almost hear Future You screaming from behind the wall of time. If only you cared.

He tells you what you already know, what you've been waiting a lifetime to hear.

"Hey, I'm Jason."

Contributor Biographies



Alex Dermody's fiction has been most recently featured in *The Seattle Star* and *Robot Butt*. His published work can be found on Instagram @alexdermodywrites.



Colette Parris is a Caribbean-American attorney who returned to her literary roots during the pandemic. Her poetry and prose can be found in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Offing*, *Scoundrel Time*, *Cleaver*, *Unbroken*, *Vestal Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in New York. Read more at coletteparris.com.



Hana Carolina is a pseudonym of an Edinburgh-based creative and academic writer. Born in Poland, she moved to Scotland and studied literature, film and television for many years. Since then, she has been working as a tutor, interpreter, and researcher, and publishing academically while writing (mostly) dark stories about horrible people. Her work has been published in *Every Day Fiction*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Five on the Fifth*, *the Chamber Magazine*, *BRUISER*, *The Horror Tree*, *Black Sheep Magazine*, and others. You can find her on X/Twitter @HanaCarolinaSCO, and BlueSky @hanacarolina.bsky.social.



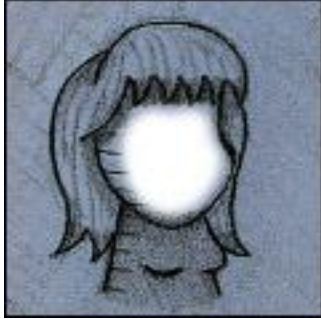
Oak Morse lives in Houston, Texas, where he teaches creative writing and theater and leads a youth poetry troop, the Phoenix Fire-Spitters. He was the winner of the 2017 Magpie Award for Poetry in Pulp Literature, a finalist for the 2023 Honeybee Poetry Award, and a semi-finalist for the 2020 Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry. A Warren Wilson MFA graduate, Oak has received Pushcart Prize nominations, fellowships from Brooklyn Poets, Twelve Literary Arts, Cave Canem's Starshine and Clay, as well as a Stars in the Classroom honor from the Houston Texans. His work appears in *Black Warrior Review*, *Obsidian*, *Tupelo*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Tinderbox*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Terrain.org*, *Hampton-Sydney Review*, and *Hobart*, among others.



A former comic strip scripter, community arts worker and performer, **Richard Foreman** writes poems and stories. He scripted *Black Orchid* on a monthly basis for DC Comics in the 1990s, and photo-stories/comic strips for *Who Cares* (a UK national magazine for young people in care) for 20 years. Recent work has appeared in *Confluence*, *Spank the Carp*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Tigershark*, *Albedo 1*, and on websites *Molly Bloom*, *Fortnightly Review* & *International Times*. His short story collection, *Wilful Misunderstandings*, was published by Lepus Books in April 2016. He is an associate editor of *Tears in the Fence* magazine.



Lauren Piskothy is an American comedy writer, living in Scotland where she spends her free time pretending to be the main character in a Nancy Meyers movie. You can find more of her writing on *Points in Case* and *The Belladonna Comedy*.



Mary Cresswell is from Los Angeles and has lived for many many years on New Zealand's Kapiti coast. As a child, they fed her Edgar Allen Poe, Ogden Nash, and Cole Porter, hence her lingering passion for light verse. Go figure.



Annalise Chambers recently graduated from the University of Alabama, where she studied Spanish and Computational Linguistics and minored in Creative Writing on accident.



Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). Recent/upcoming appearances in *Sideways*, *The Green Silk Journal*, and *The Serulian*, among others.



David Hutto grew up on a farm in Georgia where he learned that animal noises are generally better when performed by the animals themselves. In his career as a writer, he has devoted himself to eventually using the entire alphabet, including letters that don't seem to have that much function, really, like Q and Z. He has also been quizzically investigating the humor potential in weather diversity, so far with only shady results. Website: www.davidhutto.com



Anna Koltes' stories have been shortlisted in the Reedsy Prompt Contest and published in magazines like *Dark Onus*, *The Caterpillar*, *The Colored Lens*, *Wyldblood Press*, *Arena Fantasy*, and *Daikaijuzine*. She is based in Chicago where she talks about writing with her writing group and sometimes gets some writing done.