

◇ Defenestration ◇

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All Sales Are Final
by
Eric Lawson

On a typical sleepy Sunday morning in Glendale, California, Kyle and his wife, Noelle, were setting up lawn chairs for their garage sale. A small playing card table was situated between them with a pitcher of ice tea and two cups. A sign on a makeshift sandwich board read: GARAGE SALE. ALL SALES ARE FINAL. This was the second attempt as the previous day a steady drizzle had kept only but a handful of the bargain hunters away.

Noelle sat in her chair and took a sip of her iced tea. *Needs a bit more sugar*, she surmised. *I hope this doesn't take all day. I can't fathom another endless afternoon of playing Skip-Bo and running to the bathroom every forty-five minutes to pee out all the damn iced tea.* When Kyle finally looked up from his cell phone, she asked: "Did this really work for your uncle?"

Kyle shoved his phone back in his shorts pocket. "Oh, yeah. He made out like a bandit at his sale. But then again, all his suits are strait jackets now. He thinks he's a giant rutabaga these days. So there's that..." He trailed off, considering his own statement. Something caught his eye and he turned to Noelle and jutted a thumb down their driveway. "Don't look now, my dear, but I believe we've got a prospect on the line. Shall we reel her in?"

A pompous middle-aged woman wearing a bedazzled shirt which read 'Diamonds Are So Last Year' approached and looked at a coffee mug and a plastic sun visor. "How much for the mug and the hat?" she called up towards the garage.

Noelle made her way to where the woman was standing. "Hmm... For both of them together? Fifty bucks."

The woman set the sun visor back down onto the ping pong table and scoffed. "Fifty bucks? You're kidding. I can get ten of each of these for that price."

Kyle strode up to join the conversation. "How about we throw in these two gold wedding rings?"

The woman carefully picked up the two rings from the table and examined them. "Uh...wait. Are these real gold?"

"You betcha, sister," Noelle replied and smiled.

The woman's expression suddenly softened. "I think we can swing that. Let me ask my husband." She turned and called down the driveway: "Hank? Hank! Here! Now!"

A pompous middle aged man, wearing an epically disheveled Hawaiian shirt with buttons that weren't line up correctly, abruptly ended a phone call and walked up the driveway.

"What's up, honey?" he asked, mildly interested. "Any good deals?"

The woman held up the rings for him to see. "They were just offering me these gold wedding rings for fifty dollars?"

The man held up the rings to his face. "Well, they certainly look and feel like real gold."

Kyle was suddenly next to the man. "How's it going, friend? I'm Kyle." He offered the man his hand to shake.

The man shook his hand and said: "Hi, there. I'm Hank."

Kyle unspooled his pitch. "Hi, Hank. Nice to meet you. Now, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say that you're the kind of guy who's mildly obsessed with the occult, am I right?"

A goofy acknowledging grin spread across Hank's face. "Well, yeah, actually. Ever since we had our second little bundle of joy, my wife, Phoebe over there, just has no interest in, uh, making the beast with two backs, if you know what I mean. So I needed a new hobby. And one as far away from kid-friendly cartoon crap as possible."

Kyle couldn't help but smile. "Oh, I hear you, Hank. Loud and clear. That's how it starts, my friend. One minute you're in madly love, then the next minute you're bitter, desperate, and begging for hand jobs from the devil himself."

They both laughed knowingly.

Fifteen feet away, Noelle was working her own pitch on the woman. "Hi, I'm Noelle."

"Phoebe," the woman said as they shook each other's hands. "You and Kyle really seem to make a great team."

"Yeah, I guess," Noelle replied curtly. "When he's not begging for hand jobs at three a.m. like a man possessed."

They both laughed knowingly.

Minutes later, Kyle finished up telling his tale and held up a dog-eared leather book. "And then our names magically appeared in this creepy, ancient journal. Pretty cool, right?"

"That's awesome," Hank uttered, taking it all in. He walked over to the old grandfather clock near the garage. "So is this the clock that bleeds whenever Noelle starts her menstrual cycle?"

Almost there, Kyle's mind raced. *Just gotta get them into position*. He walked up next to Kyle at the grandfather clock. "The very same, Hank. Do me a favor and turn around for me."

Hank dutifully turned and faced the garage. A strong warm breeze ruffled his hair. "No way!" Hank gasped in awe. "The garage that eats small woodland creatures is still here? You didn't have it demolished?"

Kyle laughed nervously. "There you go assuming we have free will again, Hank."

Phoebe squealed with joy ten feet behind them. She quickly signed the deed for the house and did a little dance in the driveway. "Hank, honey! I just signed the deed for fifty bucks! The house is ours! We're finally homeowners, baby! Can you believe it?"

Hank was briefly mystified. "You did what now, babe?"

Kyle slapped Hank on the back. "Congratulations, Hank. My wife drives a hard bargain. Your wife must be a hell of a negotiator."

It was all happening too fast for Hank. "But we just put a deposit down on a condo in Marina del Rey last month. I don't understand what just happened."

"Fate just happened, sugar buns," Phoebe giggled and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. "Right place at the right time."

Noelle took out her cell phone and held it up. "Hey, let's get a picture of you two in front of the garage...of your new home."

"Yes, please," Phoebe offered, and squeezed Hank's arm.

Kyle used his remote to open the garage door. A foul breeze blew back his hair and he immediately walked backwards down the driveway.

Noelle also took several steps backwards and waved for Phoebe and Hank to move closer to the garage. "Back up, back up, back up... Perfect! Stop there. Now, say 'Feast of souls!'"

A befuddled Hank and an exuberant Phoebe both uttered: "Feast of souls!"

The ravenous darkness suddenly sucked them into the garage and the door slammed closed. The garage burped and then was silent.

Kyle raced over towards the ping pong table where Noelle was holding open the ancient journal. "Well? Are the names gone? Say something!"

A smile spread over Noelle's face. "Fading, fading... and...gone!" She sighed loudly and tossed the journal onto her lawn chair. "Finally..."

Kyle took a deep breath and looked around the driveway. "Huh. That's weird. I honestly don't really feel much better. Like, something's missing now."

Noelle took another drink of her iced tea. "I know. Now, that we've satisfied the demon and I'm not possessed anymore, I just feel...empty."

Kyle put his hands in his pockets and scanned the street again. "Yeah, me, too. And no offense, babe, but if we don't find another place with creepy dolls in the wine cellar, our sex life's never gonna recover."

An eager joy animated Noelle to stand up. She fished her car keys from her nearby purse. "I think the realtor's office is still open..."

"That's my girl." Kyle hugged his wife. "Race you to the car!"

Seconds later, the car peeled out down the street.

From inside the garage, Hank began pounding on the door. "Please let us out! It smells like dirty diapers, stale Indian food, and shame!"

Phoebe's voice was hoarse from screaming. But she could finally put her misery into words. "Help! This creepy doll is stabbing me with a plastic spork! This is gonna take forever to kill us... I can't believe I'm trapped inside a hellish garage," she cried. "In *Glendale*..."

According To Trader Joe's Grocery Bag
by
Monica Dobos

all you need in life is bread, grapes, wine, a wedge of Swiss cheese, a fork, a spoon, a man in high boots looking through a hand-held telescope, a man in a flying contraption who tries to steal the telescope. Both men wear a top hat—they don't share one, they each can afford a hat and how ridiculous would be for one hat to cover two heads, not to mention how unhygienic for the hat. Also pictured on the bag is one scary looking kid eating blob out of a plate, his brother/sister lost in thought, holding a spoon in one hand while the other rests on his bloated stomach—too much blob?—a few chicks in the grass nibble leaves of grass. On one side of the bag, a fork stabbing a peach, a butterfly (no flowers), a parsnip, three stalks of asparagus, grandma's mittens—no, wait, they're lobster hands and they're moving, inching towards the woman in a tall gown, who laughs high-pitched laughs, tilts back her red ringlets until the lobster tickles her neck and she shoots up, way up, bumps into the flying man who snatches the telescope from the telescope man, who, fist in the air, sprints after him so fast he loses his breeches and the bloated kid points his fat finger at him and laughs and runs after him and so does his brother/sister until all there's left on Trader Joe's grocery bag is crumbs of bread, stomped grapes, Swiss cheese holes, and a beautiful red-haired woman saved by her dress, who lands on my lap.

Flying In Circles
by
Dave Lovell

Being the survivor of a happy union, 'til death do us part, would have been less painful than the daily combat of annulment crossfire. I flipped through my soon-to-be ex-husband's proposed divorce settlement with a feeling of loss, disappointed that decades of a life together would end in acrimony. Why should I be expected to settle for less than I deserved? The deadline to sign was approaching.

A producer at the other end of the video link called out, "on air in three, two, one..." I pushed the papers aside, looking up from the desk towards my laptop camera. My aging face appeared on a split screen in front of a large studio audience.

'MOSQUITOES WITH STINGERS DISCOVERED SWINGING IN POND' read the caption on Olen Live, the hit pop culture show.

"Welcome Professor Elaine Jones," Olen Luftkopf announced boisterously. "We are so happy that you are with us today. I've watched your nature show since I was a teenager and hoped that we would meet one day." Applause erupted in the studio audience. "Tell us about this naughty new mosquito variant that you found."

"Nice to be with you," I replied, taking my eighth interview of the day. "Your heading should read 'swimming in pond', not 'swinging in pond'."

A close-up picture of two male mosquitoes appeared on a screen in the studio. Stingers, like those of bees, protruded from the bottom of their abdomens.

"Professor, these two bad boys are up to some hanky panky. Tell us more about this stinger."

"The *Anopheles stingulus* variant evolved that organ so males could inject venom into other males. They're trying to sting each other in your photograph, not pass on their genes."

"Oh là là," Olen said, looking surprised. "That's horrible."

Gasps from the studio audience followed.

"Males use their stingers to fight other males to ward off competition for females. Their venom stops other males from releasing pheromones that attract potential mates. The victors get to procreate."

"Do these variants sting people?"

A side shot of a male and female *Anopheles stingulus* mosquito appeared on the screen.

"No. Each sex has a proboscis, that long thin tube below their head. You see that the males also have the stinger and the females don't. Male mosquitoes only feed on nectar. They never go near humans. Females risk their lives to feed on humans, but they can't sting because they don't have a stinger."

"I'm so relieved that they won't attack people," Olen gushed. "Professor, it's been a tremendous pleasure to have had you today. Perhaps we could do it in person next time."

"I would be delighted."

'FIVE-TIME RAZZIE WINNER TRYSTY DALLIANCE CAST AS IVANA IN A REMAKE OF THE SPY WHO SHAGGED ME,' read the new caption on the screen, as I faded to black.

There was a knock at my office door.

"It's open."

Sylvia joined me at the window overlooking the University's lush, spacious gardens. Fragrances from flowers sent by well-wishers filled the office air. "Finished speaking with the attention-deficit media?"

"Today, or permanently?" I asked.

"Let's start with today."

I turned to Sylvia, a younger, more ambitious professor than I was at that age. "What's their problem with science? *Anopheles stingulus* is a story about evolution not how a mosquito variant can harm people. Daytime news wonks stiff me every time."

"Every time? It's more like some of the time."

"Let's agree on much of the time."

"When it comes to you and science-challenged media personalities, remember who won the UNESCO science prize for biosphere management and the L'Oréal prize in science."

"I prefer visiting schools to talk about new discoveries. Something about young inquisitive minds refreshes me."

"Me too," Sylvia agreed. "Some tier one science journals have requested meetings with you. I'll set up proper interviews."

"Good idea."

"Maybe we brought this chaos on ourselves by replying to every media outlet that wanted to speak with you."

"Look on the bright side. People know more about mosquitoes today than they knew yesterday."

"More people saw your sophisticated manners and debonaire looks," Sylvia said.

"I suppose it's better that I look younger than my age, instead of the alternative."

Sylvia started fondling my half-marathon winner's trophy from a few weeks ago. "Don't be so gloomy. That last guy you spoke with was kinda flirty."

"Gorgeous too, but I'm probably not his type."

"Meow," Sylvia purred. "Want me to get his number?"

"Don't be silly."

"Counting down the days to being single again?"

"Not really." I picked up the latest edition of Prevention Magazine from my desk. "This is what replaces Cosmo when you get to my age."

Sylvia scrunched her nose.

"I just want the nonsense to end so that I can move on. Are we still doing dinner tonight?"

"Six o'clock, sharp. The whole team is going to be there to celebrate."

"Make sure that the restaurant we go to doesn't serve insects," I insisted. "Perhaps you can give me some tips about being single again."

"Let's bail now and start the evening early with some cocktails."

"I can't."

Sylvia stood by the window pouting.

"I have a few e-mails to catch up on. Funding requests. Donation pledges for our citizen science charity. Won't take long. Come get me in an hour."

Sylvia closed the door on her way out.

Awards and commendations on the walls of my office surrounded me, yet the comfort they once gave have been replaced by a nagging fear that being relevant had an expiry date. "Really?" I muttered upon seeing the latest addition to my inbox, braced for another impromptu e-mail duel with the soon-to-be ex.

Thursday; 4:05 PM

Elaine,

You were on all of the news channels I watched today. Compliments on your wonderful discovery. I closed the biggest deal of the year today, yet most of the correspondence I've received has been congratulations, Mr. Elaine Jones, what type of mosquito repellent should I use? Finding a new bug species isn't the most valuable contribution to science; it's not like you discovered a cure for cancer. Self-inflicted destruction of your reputation by reporting such a trivial matter takes courage. You have my full support. Perhaps a new social media thread to that effect is something I can help with.

Best, Randall.

PS. What's taking you so long to sign?

Thursday; 4:11 PM

Randall,

Your veiled threat couched in terms of endearment is sweet but unnecessary. It saddens me to think that you'll never be comfortable in your own skin. You don't need public recognition to validate your work. Neither do I, though it's a consequential benefit in my field. I've never meant for my public persona to make you feel that your work has lesser value. I differ from your position on scientific contribution. New scientific knowledge is always inspirational and must be shared regardless of whether laypeople judge it important or not. Jealousy of my professional success seems surpassed only by your disdain that our divorce settlement, as currently written, grants me full ownership of the summer house. I can do better than that!

E.

PS. I withdraw my request for the dogs. Keep them. I want the chalet, too.

Attachment - More Evidence.MPEG-4 (NSFW)

Thursday; 4:19 PM

Elaine,

You discovering a pest that has evolved a stinger seems appropriate under our circumstances. Why wasn't it named after you? Living in the spotlight of your success challenges me no end. Your notoriety as an award-winning scholar and past president of environmental protection groups rarely goes unnoticed by my clients. Today when I completed the acquisition of a clean energy producer by a leading oil company one of the CEOs asked, 'Does your wife approve?' I just made the guy a fortune and that was the first thing that came to his mind! As your security cam video inferred, Trysty Dalliance is a new neighbor at the chalet, which you won't get even if you make this video go viral! I'll deny everything.

Somewhat irritated Randall.

PS. Persistence is futile. Facts are flexible.

Thursday; 4:32 PM

Randy,

Anopheles stingulus males who use their stinger effectively are guaranteed to get it on. That may amuse you, as a fifty-something-year-old investment banker who's screwing a B-movie actress half his age. However; our discovery of a secondary variant is most interesting. Approximately eight percent of Anopheles stingulus males have only one wing, not two. All of the females have two wings. I reference this finding because there is a high

probability that you are outnumbered, at least two to one, by females you are currently aggravating.

E.

PS. Rethink the chalet. Facts aren't flexible, even under duress. #Galileo :)

Attachment - Housekeeper on top in guest room.JPG

Thursday; 4:44 PM

Elaine,

I refuse to cower just because you have 'evidence' supporting your claim that I've been intimate with other women. I have reasonable explanations for each encounter. Increasing your demands, at a time when I offer to settle, isn't a winning strategy.

Are you in the middle of a hot flash? Randall.

PS. You're just being greedy!

Thursday; 4:48 PM

Randall,

Pasante Unique has the only skin I know of that's thinner than yours. Call me greedy? I agreed to settle weeks ago, but you refused. How does changing your mind at the last minute, to hold out for my grandmother's collection of rare Baccarat paperweights, feel now? One more thing. Technically, mosquitoes with stingers are insects, not bugs.

Anopheles stingulus secondary variants vaguely remind me of how you've changed in the past few years. They are males that only have right wings. We are at a loss to explain why this provides evolutionary advantage, since they can only fly in circles.

The venom delivered by Anopheles stingulus is non-toxic. Rather than killing their victims, the males inject neurotransmitters that disrupt cognition, which alters how their victims' brains process stimuli. In layperson terms, the venom suppresses sex drive, and makes victims wonder if facts are true.

Since right-wing mosquitoes can't fly away quickly from predators their longevity is doubtful. Potentially applicable to you, given the size and competence of my lawyer's firm.

E.

PS. Please put the insect nets back up at the chalet.

Thursday; 4:51 PM

Elaine,

I never fully accepted being Mr. Elaine Jones but have managed to tolerate it for sometime. I have felt smothered these past few years. Sign the agreement. Let's move on. I fail to see how a bug variant reminds you of me and do not wish to be enlightened.

F'kin hell. Randall

PS. Still not budging on the chalet.

Thursday; 4:59 PM

Randall,

I grow tired of your stubbornness, and must leave for an appointment. We expect that therapeutics to reverse the confusing effects of 'alternative facts' will benefit society. Clinical trials of an antidote to the venom are underway. We also discovered that all Anopheles stingulus variants detect cancer in humans. So much for your dig about my discovery being trivial.

E.

PS. Forgot to forward this when it arrived at the house last week.

Attachment - Randall Bigwanker - Tax Avoidance.pdf

Sylvia poked her head into my office. "Time to go."

"Already?"

She handed me a piece of paper with Olen's phone number. "In case you change your mind."

"Meow." I glanced at a text that just arrived. *What's next? Take the chalet and the paperweights. Revised agreement is on its way. SIGN! R*

"Do you need to respond?"

"Would I look out of place driving a cherry red convertible? It would be electric."

Sylvia cocked her head, raised one eyebrow and lowered her bottom lip.

"Never mind. Forget that I brought it up."

"Are you going to reply?" Sylvia asked more firmly.

"I'll wait 'til later. Let's paint the town."

The Bog King
by
M. Benjamin Thorne

When it showers the frog shall deign
to regale the world about his reign,
his justice and wisdom without equal—
and once he's croaked, without sequel.

After "The End"
by
Carrie R. Hinton

Charlie Buyers

Life has been a little weird since that portal opened up. At first everyone was all "Oh my God! Hell Beasts are flooding the earth, seas, and skies! We're going to die!" and the government was telling us to arm ourselves to the teeth. I'd never bought a gun in my life, but it seemed like the thing to do at the time.

Then it became "You can't kill them, they're too strong! Stay inside! We're gonna die!" So, we did. I stayed inside for *three whole days* before I thought I was going to lose my mind. After that, I just couldn't take it anymore. I took a walk on the end of that third day (with the gun of course).

A lot of people were being eaten, but the monsters were way too focused on their current meals to eat me. That was about when I started to have my doubts about things. I went walking every night after that and was totally fine. My eyes didn't even get sucked out by one of the smaller eye sucking monsters.

After that it was decided even staying inside wasn't working, and we were all doing it wrong anyway. I called bullshit. How could anyone expect us to stay in all the time anyway? Everyone needed to work so they could buy groceries and ammunition. Congress wasn't going to pay our damn rent, that's for sure. The blame game that came after was pretty rich too. Like, yeah, of course some of us are going to benefit from the monsters. Moving up in the office because your boss was vaporized by a mysterious rolling fog isn't some kind of unforgivable sin. It's just business. Just because his soul ended up damned to roam in that same fog for all eternity doesn't make it *your* problem. He couldn't even answer phones anymore, anyway.

They even came after people like me who were simply enjoying our evening gun walks. Why should I risk my life—or my evening!—to try and save one of the people getting eaten? They were going to die anyway; they just weren't built to escape the monsters like I am. Plus, if someone *did* try to play hero, they would become a target for the Hell Beasts too. Rushing into danger wasn't going to help anyone.

After a few weeks, the government started suggesting end of life alternatives for the people who didn't want to die violently. One of my neighbors took themselves and the whole family out, even the dog, after a live news broadcast of someone having the skin licked clean off of them by a half-dog-half-cow flesh-creature. I mean, the lengths some of these channels will go to for a story is disgusting. You could clearly see the guy's skull was CGI, and skin ripping doesn't sound that wet in real life. It's a real shame the panic got to my neighbor, because he still owed me gas for borrowing my lawn mower.

Then after only a few more weeks, they changed their minds again! The government was telling us "We've made contact with the aliens, there may be a chance for negotiations." And everyone was all "Aliens? I thought you said Hell Beasts? Are they from space or from Hell?" Those jerks on Channel 6 couldn't even keep their story straight.

To be fair, things did slow down a bit after that. I mean, they were still eating people, but they didn't seem to be having as much fun with it anymore. The eating was a lot faster from

what I could see, which is great for the victims, I guess, but really made my evening walks tough. It took the sport out of the shooting.

Now, here we are. *Apparently*, the Hell Beasts have agreed to stop eating humans in exchange for assistance in reopening the portal. Great. So now we're helping to reopen their stupid portal. What good is that going to do? How are you sure they even want to get home and aren't just looking to let more of their tentacled friends through? Are we even sure they're actually Hell Beasts? Space Aliens? For all I know they could be messengers of the Old Testament God.

These things have us by the balls. What's next? We supposed to live with these fucking monsters? Invite them to the neighborhood barbeques? Turn our old folks' homes and hospice centers into their restaurants?

Come to think of it, that last thing might be a good idea. I've got to get on that before some other bozo does—I wonder if my uncle would spot me for another startup?

Colleen Grove

Not this asshole again.

This guy comes in here every. Single. Day. He just stares at me from the ceiling for hours, doesn't even blink. I don't even know if he has eyelids. So maybe he can't blink? It's creepy either way.

I don't know what his problem is, like, is he going to eat me or something? I wish he would just do it already. I hate it when guys stare—and I'm pretty sure he's staring at me. He has way too many eyes for me to tell exactly where he's looking, but my gut says it's definitely me.

Usually, he just hangs up there in the corner of the building, leaking clear goop all over the floor. My manager says they can't remove him for it, because it would be a violation of the Corporeal Forms Equal Access amendment.

"We just have to respect his differences and clean up once he leaves," she said. He always buys a ton of things before he goes too, so she won't even take him out for loitering. As if it takes *eight hours* to pick shitty gas station snacks?

I even asked if the goop might be some weird reproductive thing, maybe we could ban him for sexual harassment of an employee. She didn't want to take me up on that either.

"Too much risk for the company, we're in a gray area with all these new kinds of people," she told me.

So, I said, "They aren't people, Brenda. They're monsters. Portal dwelling, Hell Beast, Space Alien monsters. They were just eating everyone, like, three years ago, remember?"

She threatened to write me up for that one. Fucking Brenda.

I asked around and my other coworkers said he comes in on their shifts too, but not for as long. Jenna said she thinks he's looking for me specifically, and that that's why he stays for my whole shift and no one else's. Gave me the heebie-freaking-jeebies. She might be right, but she didn't have to say it—I'm stressed out enough about it as it is.

I've managed to get away with skipping the night shift since it started, but two different people called out this week and now I'm screwed. Not a whole lot of people stop for gas or cigarettes this late at night, and mine is the only car in the parking lot. It's just me and this gray, gooey, Gumby looking bitch.

I can't wait anymore. He'll eat me, he'll eat me not... he'll eat me, he'll eat me not...

The whole thing is exhausting. I sit back in the rolling chair I stole from Brenda's office and kick my heels up onto the counter. I might as well read a trashy magazine before I die.

I'm just about to find out if celebrity actor number one is having an affair with the mother of celebrity actor number two when the bell above the door rings. The customer is a short, skinny white man with greasy hair. He could be seventeen, he could be twenty-eight, just one of those faces.

I give him a quick nod, but don't put my magazine down. He doesn't seem to notice me much anyways, as he makes a beeline straight for the coolers in the back.

Almost immediately he screams, "Shit!" His voice is deeper than I thought it would be.

Looks like someone finally slipped on the goo pile, I think, and I'm right. The man has fallen square on his rear, feet over tits.

I try not to glance at my friend on the ceiling, but I can't help it. He's sitting there, as gray and squishy as ever. I bet he's feeling pretty proud of himself right about now, I can just imagine a smug-ass grin on his face.

Okay, maybe the dude falling *was* kind of funny. But I don't like that *he* gets to enjoy it too.

I go back to my magazine only to find myself disappointed. The author waited until the very end of the article to explain that the rumors were unverified and likely untrue. What's the point of the article then? 'Yeah, but wouldn't it be weird if it *did* happen'? Bummer.

Before I can flip to the next page, skinny dude clears his throat. I guess he's ready to check out.

He's fidgety, but not like crackhead fidgety. More like unattended-friend-at-a-party fidgety. The whole transaction he keeps looking around at the ground, at the door, at the soda, but never at me. Not even when I hand him his change. He just holds his hands out like a cup, refusing to take the damned cash from me. I drop it into his hands, careful not to touch him. I've had weirder customers, and at least this one paid for his shit.

I'm settling back into my chair as he walks out the door. Just as the bell rings, he stops and turns on his heel. Now, he looks directly at me. There is something I don't recognize in his eyes, close to anger but less focused. We stare at one another for what feels like ages, and I find myself unable to break away.

The thing in the corner clicks softly and the sound must pull the skinny man out of his trance. He turns away and crosses the parking lot with a fast, determined stride.

I glance up at my gooey friend, unsure if I should thank him or not. Instead, I choose to pick up my magazine and go back to reading about this year's hair faux pas.

My replacement, Michael, still isn't here, but my shift has been over for nearly an hour. I'm not sticking around any longer, Brenda can suck my clit and cry about it.

"You better get out or you'll be locked in here. I'm leaving," I tell the slimy patron. I'm not sure if he understands English, but I want to give him a chance. Last thing I need is for Michael to come into work and find an angry trapped animal ransacking the place.

He cocks his head at me, but eventually comes down the wall and onto the floor. When he stands on his back two legs he can nearly hit the ceiling with the eyes on top of his head. He starts to fill his four arms with snacks and drinks, but I stop him.

"Oh, no you don't. I'm clocked out dude, you'll have to come back and buy those when Michael gets here. You had *all* night to do this."

He swivels back towards me slowly, and I feel my mouth go dry. *Shit, did I piss him off?*

The monster gives me a slow nod, and puts the drinks and candies back on their respective shelves.

I sigh, a bit out of relief that he didn't put up a fight and a bit out of frustration that all of the things he touched are now coated in clear slime. Brenda's definitely going to make me take care of that tomorrow.

I shake my head and gesture towards the door. "Come on, Goopy, let's go."

The monster leaves as soon as he is out the door, bounding on all six of his limbs with a frightening speed. I lock the door behind me and start to mentally prepare for the ass reaming I'm going to get from Brenda's tomorrow. Michael is late, but I'm the one leaving the store unmanned, and we can't miss those twenty dollars from the late night weirdos. The store's entire budget is hanging by those pocket pennies, you know.

Fucking Brenda.

I'm almost to my car when a hand clamps over my mouth. It smells like gasoline. I try to bite down onto it, but the assailant doesn't let go. I taste blood and dirt and something bitter. Spitting doesn't help either.

I'm struggling against the arms that have snaked around my waist. He is pulling me backwards. I thrash my head into his chin— the impact's not enough to slow him down.

My hands are prying at his, trying to free my mouth to scream or bite or spit. He laughs at me—laughs at me. Fucking *laughs* at me.

My fear and shock quickly morphs into hot anger. I fight harder, my feet lifting clean into the air, contracting and stretching my legs to try and throw off his balance.

And it works. We're falling. He lets go of me to catch himself and I waste no time crawling to my feet. My car is so close. I only need to find the keys.

A hand grabs my hair and yanks me back. Splitting pain shoots through my neck, and I worry that he has broken it. But my limbs keep moving, turning me around to fight against him. I can see his face now: Skinny guy. *Asshole fucking tweaker.*

"Screw you!" I'm all fury. I swing my leg up to kick him in his stupid balls, but I miss. Hot tears are clouding my vision, and I feel so incredibly stupid. Stupid and angry and scared.

But then he's gone.

I feel his hand release its grip and slump to the ground. Just his hand.

My heart is pounding in my chest. I stare at the hand on the ground, at the ripped and jagged stretches of skin that hang off of it. I feel something warm on my face, and I don't know if it is blood or sweat or tears.

The slimy, goopy, gray monster has come back. A mouth I didn't know was there licks its teeth.

I want to run, but my legs won't listen. *Oh god, did I piss myself? I think I pissed myself. Why am I even worried about pissing myself right now?*

The beast crawls over to me and extends his hand, as if he is offering something to me. I open my hand and his slender fingers drag against my skin as they open to reveal... a candy bar?

A second of his arms holds out a pinched five-dollar bill.

"You came back... to pay for your candy bar? You pinched a candy bar?"

The beast cocks his head at me, his many eyes still unblinking. I grab his hand with mine, gentle and shaking, and I place the candy and the money into his palms. Then I carefully close his hands with mine. I try to rub my now-slime-coated hands off on my jeans, but it doesn't help much.

"This one's on the house, dude. Keep it."

The beast looks at me in that way it does, 3 dozen eyes at a time, before opening its large mouth. "Thanks," he says. Then he runs off into the night.

Zingar and Ollie

I've just moved in with my boyfriend, Zingar, and life couldn't be any better. Ever since we met in the park six weeks ago, I've just known we were meant to be together.

Zin was there, walking his eye sucker. I was playing fetch with my dog. It was just like an honest to God fairytale, the way his eye sucker and my dog started chasing each other, playing like old pals. They led us right to each other, actually. I felt like the costars of one of those old movies: the two owners tangled up in the dog's leashes, bound together by fate and puppy love.

You know, those two pups have been inseparable ever since, and not just because his eye sucker latched onto my poodle. They're *always* purring and cuddling. My dog's tail hasn't stopped wagging once since they became attached!

Obviously, we had to exchange information since our two pets were now one living body. After the second custody swap, when Zingar asked me out, I was *SO* nervous. I had never been with a hulking mass of shifting shapes, somewhere in between the states of fluid and solid, before meeting him. But I've always told myself that love is a process, and that sexuality is a spectrum, and I wasn't about to put myself in a box.

Our date was so romantic. We went to that Brazilian place, the one that serves meat off of medieval swords and encourages you to shoot cheese bread cannons at the staff. Absolutely *to die for*. I thoroughly recommend it for any cross-dimensional first date.

I stuffed myself silly on meats and cheese and Zingar was over the moon with his dish. He chose to eat the chef's hair color and to absorb the genetic memory of the lady sitting at the next table over. I got to drink this lovely, dry red- really full bodied. It paired with the red meat perfectly. Zingar chose something a little more refined, and each sip from his cup stole an early memory from one of the staff member's future children.

That's all to say that the date was heavenly. I've never laughed so much in my life. Zin is amazing at impressions of deceased celebrities! We even got a little rowdy and played a game of charades. He won every round, and I didn't mind one bit. I loved that he respected me enough to put real effort into the game, he didn't make himself smaller just to make me feel better.

Well, some of the items he turned into were on the smaller size, but you know what I mean.

Unfortunately, we got kicked out after Zin morphed into a haunting outline of the waiter's dead mother. I don't think it would have been too much of a problem, it was actually a pretty funny joke. But a certain someone had to take it a little too far and Zingar just *had* to start reciting the waiter's sins in the dead mother's voice. He goes a little too far with the jokes sometimes, but hey, no one's perfect.

The restaurant was kind enough not to charge us for our meals though, which I think speaks to their professionalism. We are going back again in a few weeks. I doubt they'll even remember us, since they get so many hundreds of customers every day.

I remember being so sad that our first date was over, but Zingar morphed a small section of his body into an arm and held my hand. We walked all night long!

We even went down to this little pond behind my house. Zin turned into a rowboat and ferried me back and forth for nearly an hour under the full moon. The world stood still. Even the crickets stopped chirping while we were out there. I think that counts as our first time, right? I *was* technically inside of him. I'm not normally a sex on the first date kind of guy, but Zingar felt special.

Things fit together seamlessly after that night. After our third date, Zin stopped going home except for the essentials. It was easier on the pets that way too, since they didn't have to switch houses constantly. Actually, I officially asked Zin to move in permanently last week, and he accepted! I mean, he didn't *say* 'yes', he doesn't really speak unless he is acting as a conduit for the voices of the damned. But the old condemned building he had been staying in burnt down that same night, and I just knew it was his way of showing his total commitment to me.

I'm going to ask him to marry me soon. I know what you're thinking, 'Ollie, it's only been six weeks! How can you be sure?' And to that I say, when you know, you know.

Literally everything about him feels like it was made for me. His sense of humor, the way his body literally— and I do mean literally— morphs to better suit mine when we cuddle, how effortless living together is... Plus, he is such a clean roommate! He even goes as far as to absorb the dead skin cells in the air as he oscillates between the state of being and not-being, pulling from the matter surrounding him to create a new form each time he reforms and reshapes himself. Which means no dusting for me!

The sex is great too. I hope you don't mind my saying so. Zingar can be anything at all, and he always tries to surprise me with the body of old movie stars or ancient kings. I think I've finally gotten him to understand that, while those can be fun, what I really want is *him*.

Figuring out how to actually *have* sex in his purest form was a tough one, but my god was it worthwhile. We're even experimenting with having him straddle the line between dimensions during the act. If you can ever get to try that, I highly suggest it. At first it felt so perverse, like an affront to God and the very nature of existence, but I think that was just the Catholic school guilt talking. Zin is really helping me to become more comfortable with pushing my boundaries.

I can sense him pooling under the front door and across the threshold right now. God, we are *so* connected. The hairs on my arms stand straight up when he gets near, and every cell in my body is screaming "Run!"

Yes, run! Run to him, embrace him, love him. When he leaves it's like this immense weight lifts from over the entire house. Like a beloved weighted blanket being ripped away.

I get so anxious when he's gone.

Anyway, that's all to say that I'm going to introduce him to my parents tomorrow. My mom is going to cry so hard. She never thought I would find the one. After my last three boyfriends kept going missing under mysterious circumstances, even dad told me I should take a break from the dating pool for the safety of the general public. They are going to adore him—especially his Doris Day impressions.

**"Overheard Aboard the Zeppelin *Hindenburg*,
May 6, 1937, 7:24 PM"
by
Kelly Scott Franklin**

"The future lies in hydrogen, you see:
the age of airships! Science! Industry!
I've even heard they're trying to devise
some way its particles could weaponize—
ah Fräulein, yes, I'll have a cigarette—
Herr Doctor Braun says these will kill me yet;
a learned man, but I don't think he's right."
[Pats both his pockets] "Do you have a light?"

Untrampled by Horses by **Olga Zilberbourg**

In June of his hundred-fifty-something-th year, when the pages of his native Russian novel started to feel positively toxic, Innokentii dusted off the folds of his jacket, picked up his hat and a walking stick and stepped out into the world.

Thrust into being by the imagination of an author, whose own name nobody cared to remember anymore, Innokentii felt more powerful and free than that man had ever been. He was created to walk in step with the times, and he would carry on his mission with pride no matter what the times were. The important things about people never changed, wasn't that the Russian author's insight?

After a cursory tour of the world's capitals, Innokentii settled in Vienna. He liked the slightly offbeat, cozy and still recognizably European feel of this capital. There were ample pedestrian areas here to get away from the noisy horseless carriages. Partly of German descent, he understood the Viennese dialect, and the cuisine agreed with him.

He tasted a Sacher torte and an Apfel strudel for breakfast, then walked the streets some more, and in the afternoon finally scoped out the perfect café. He made his selection and landed on a bar stool with an ube mochi muffin and a pour-over.

The café, set decidedly against the Viennoiserie, was popular with the international students, employees of the Museum Quarter, dancers, filmmakers. As ancient as he was, Innokentii felt right at home with those aching to create a better world. He struck up a conversation with one budding director.

"There were simply too many characters in the pages of my novel," Innokentii explained his origin story. "The Count and the murderer, the brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, third cousins removed and fourth cousins remarried, servants, maids, cooks, laundrywomen, generals and the army, and the tsar himself all kept fighting with one another. No reader could ever remember my name."

"How do you pronounce your name?" asked the director, sliding his fingers across a glowing keyboard as though playing a game.

"Call me Kesha, for short."

"Ke\$ha, like the singer?"

"If you insist on Innokentii, think of 'innocence.' I'm not to be confused with Ippolit, the one trampled by horses, from page 135. Ippolit is an entirely different character, though it is not impossible that the author himself got confused and meant for me to be him—or for him to be me."

"Wait, who are you?"

"A character. A figment of my author's imagination. For over a century, scholars have been arguing whether my actions were dictated by passion or cold calculus. In truth, it was always a sense of having been born different."

"I admire your honesty, Kesha. Why Vienna?"

"My most considerate reader, Dr. Freud, was of these parts."

"Sigmund Freud? He died in London."

"Oh, believe me, I know. We, people of letters, have ears, too. Unlike most readers who focus on the Count and the murder, the brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, and the tsar himself, Dr. Freud noticed me. He saw the individual in me, he saw the uncertainty of my very name as a manifestation of my unconscious conflicts. I came here to commune with his spirit."

"Indeed?"

"That, and the cuisine. I enjoy formal structures suffused with contemporary influences."

"Do you plan to stay? What will you do here?"

"I was just starting to hope to make a new life for myself with your help, young man. Won't you make a movie about my traumatic past and glorious triumph over the circumstances of my creation?"

"I'm afraid nobody's interested in Russian novels at the moment."

"That I understand perfectly. I am horrified to see what Russia has become. Indeed, I myself cannot forgive my author for his flirtation with imperial ambitions. I consider myself his first victim. This is exactly why I want you to help me: let's do our part in bringing him down. Make a movie about me!"

"Nobody will watch it. Nobody even remembers his name."

"I wish I could argue with that." Innokentii finished the last of his coffee, thinking. "In that case, I'll train as a pastry chef. This does not mean that I let go of my ambitions for change. Forget that most overhyped Sacher torte! I've brought with me some magic dust to thrill my customers."

"It isn't opium?"

"Opium! You confuse me with the British. My sprinkles are pure, innocent, bookish. The only high they will give you is the belief that your own self is worthy of notice. You will wish for space, the unbridled steppes where your own story might roam free, unmolested by wolves, untrampled by horses."

"That sounds unhinged," said the young director, backing out of the conversation.

Innokentii lifted his hat in a gesture of goodbye. The look of confusion in the director's eyes only kindled his enthusiasm for this chapter of his life.

He was just getting started. First off, he was going to stage a grand celebration for his former copagitants, the Count and the murderer, his nieces and nephews, and so on, including the tsar himself. His departure had created a fatal gap in the novel of his birth. It went up in smoke and left behind a hefty residue. Before even realizing the fantastic

properties of his former home's remains, Innokentii collected them into a handy flour canister and packed it into his luggage.

Now he would mourn the novel's former glory and bake a cake, airy and light, with just the right amount of birch syrup and pine nuts for flavoring. As a final touch, he would sprinkle it with the magic dust to enchant a new generation of fellow innocents.

**Outlaw Diary
(abridged)
by
Theric Jepson**

Billy Joe Shaver shot me twice.

Johnny Cash shot me once, but I'm pretty sure it was an accident.

Kris Kristofferson shot me but it was an arrow so it doesn't really count.

Merle Haggard never shot me, but he did stab me a couple times, once after a show in Bakersfield and once at my third wedding after he caught me canoodling with his wife.

I's also once shot by Prince but that was my gun just handed over with safety off, I take the blame, may his God rest his soul.

Hell of a guitar player, Prince.
Introduced me to Better Midler at the AMAs.

That woman will blow your mind.

A Narcissist Walks Into a Bar, Because Two Is One Too Many by **George Beckerman**

Marc and Daphne have agreed to go on a blind date. But it may never come about because in the restaurant's parking lot, both wait in their respective cars, not wanting to make it seem that they arrived first. Why is this, you may ask? Because Marc and Daphne are narcissists. Once they notice each other waiting, they have no choice but to exit their cars, approach and pretend that what happened did not.

Inside, Marc and Daphne simultaneously notice a mirror. There is subtle positional jostling, as each tries to take command of the reflector. With two vanity-driven wills of iron going head-to-head, let's also call this round a draw.

Daphne is clearly annoyed that a pretty young woman at the next table listening to a waiter's specials spiel has usurped attention she thinks always belongs to her. Daphne "oops" drops a fork, diverting the waiter. When he bends to retrieve it, she throws him a flirty smile and even flirtier "Thank you", then glances childishly at the pretty young woman who is deep in conversation and couldn't care less. Feeling disrespected, Marc bounces back by complimenting the sommelier on her "illuminating hazel eyes" and orders a bottle of pricey Pinot Noir. Daphne interjects that she was disappointed by that very wine brought by a guest at a dinner party at a house she rents in Easthampton (lying). Marc miniaturizes Daphne's Hamptons-drop by declaring that he just sold his house out there just last month (lying), complaining that the area has gotten riff-raffy. He prefers Water Mill. Advantage Marc.

While Daphne is in the powder room, the sommelier brings a bottle of Cabernet. Marc is annoyed. He ordered the Pinot. She mentions that his date changed the wine order on her way to the ladies room. Marc instructs the sommelier to take it back and bring the Pinot. When Daphne returns, Marc pushes the conversation toward his new Rolex. Daphne jolts him by pointing out that his watch is a fake. It doesn't have the laser-etched crown at six o'clock. Marc is humiliated. The sommelier comes back with the bottle of Cabernet again. Marc is livid. The sommelier tells him that Daphne changed it again on her way back from the ladies room. Touchdown Daphne.

The evening, heading south, takes an unexpected turn when a somewhat homely-looking couple is seated adjacently by the maitre d. Marc and Daphne make coinciding derogatory asides about the couple. Their eyes meet and smiles glow in pleasant surprise. For the first time both consider that a relationship could be very possible.

When the waiter brings Marc's sixteen ounce steak, he examines it, then sends it back. Not well-done enough. His power play gets a nod of approval from Daphne. When her twelve-ouncer arrives, she rejects it before the waiter can even place it in front of her. Not rare-enough. As the server scurries away, our couple exchange looks of "Well-played". The relationship possibility quotient is on the rise.

But what seals the deal is when a busboy trips and falls, sending dishes flying. While everyone else in the place is sympathetic to the poor guy, and help him up. Our two beauties cannot contain their laughter. And when they're stared at from all angles, they just shrug and reach their hands to each other across the table.

The check comes, but we won't even get into who reaches for it first, if anyone. Stunning is their perverse pleasure in demanding the amount be reduced because of unhappiness over the wine and the steak or the chocolate Grand Marnier soufflé dessert, which by the way was on the house because of the complaining about the wine and the steak. And as you can imagine, narcissists are not great tippers. The wait staff can be heard cursing under their collective breath as the two leave the establishment.

Marc and Daphne stand in the parking lot, each waiting for the other to make the kiss move because neither's pride, thirst for control or just plain insecurity will allow them to initiate. As the Legends in Their Own Minds standoff continues, the parking lot empties of diners, then eventually employees and finally parking lot attendants, leaving our subjects alone and stalemated outside the darkened venue even as the sun begins to rise.

The Traveler
by
Ethan Kwak

two roads diverged
yet both lead
to the future
I sat between the two
among piles
of yellow leaves
and waited for
the city to infiltrate
the country
centuries later
I got up and walked
to the nearest
fast-food diner
where the redwoods
once stood
on the way
I spotted the windy
less-worn path
remembering legends
of grandiose adventures
of heroic warriors
of quests of glory
I walked past
and ordered a
cheeseburger

Don't try to remove the device because the electronic lock can only be opened by a company representative
by
Scott Erickson

We're just about done here, then on to HR for your employee identification card. I just need to finish securing the device to your wrist. Please don't attempt to remove it. The electronic lock can only be opened by a company representative upon termination.

No, not termination in the sense of dying. In the sense of termination of employment. Although it could be said, from the company's perspective, that once you're terminated you're "dead" to us.

Yes, that was a joke.

The purpose of the device? You may recall, among the many onboarding documents you signed, one that granted permission for the application of electrical shocks. How's the strap feel? Not too tight?

Good.

The purpose of the shocks? I'm sure you recall our conversations about our productivity requirements, which are quite stringent. And since productivity is vitally important, so is the device. Not only for the company, but for your satisfaction as an employee. Obviously the concerns of the company come first. But we like to think that the concerns of our employees come in at a close second. And the device is one way that we express this concern. It's our policy to give employees the maximum amount of freedom to do their jobs as they see fit. We have no wish to micro-manage our employees. You don't even need to come to the office. You can work from Tierra del Fuego, assuming that Tierra del Fuego has 5G internet access.

Yes, you're right. That *is* very generous of us. Yet with freedom comes responsibility. As productivity requirements must be taken seriously, so must failure to meet those requirements. I want to stress that our company has a strict policy against torture.

No, we don't consider the electrical shocks to be a form of torture. We prefer to think of them as forms of constructive feedback. It's important to keep in mind that there's no objective criteria of what constitutes torture. For some people, drinking a sub-standard latte is a form of torture, while other people can have their arm chewed off by a bear and report only mild discomfort.

No, I've never had my arm chewed off by a bear.

There's no need for you to be concerned. According to our records, you're in excellent health, which means you should have a high tolerance for even the more extreme levels of constructive feedback. Not that I expect they would be necessary in your case.

Well, consider that constructive feedback has been a requirement of employment since humanity climbed out of the mud to form the first corporation. What we're doing is continuing this in a modern way that's compatible with our digital age. Also, consider the

insights of Buddhism, which clearly demonstrate that torture is self-inflicted—whether by guilt, by inappropriate thoughts, or by excessively high standards for espresso drinks.

Yes, you're right. This wouldn't apply to devices specifically designed to inflict torture, such as "the rack" from medieval times. But can you really compare a primitive machine constructed of wood and rope to a highly advanced digital device enclosed in a sleek case of impact-resistance plastic?

Sure, I can explain how it works. It's electronically linked to your productivity as recorded in our company database. If your goals are met, no feedback is required. However, over time we assume that, once you become familiar with your responsibilities, you will discover ways to increase efficiencies. Which is why the device—which is nearly foolproof—is programmed for goals that increase over time, controlled by algorithms designed to seek an optimal ratio of productivity versus what we like to call "resistance to further feedback."

That's right, I said *nearly* foolproof. To claim that any technology is perfect is to apply a standard that's unrealistic. We assume that our employees have the intelligence to reject a standard that would cost more than we're willing to spend.

There's no need for concern, because the document you signed absolves the company of any liability. The greater concern, which should be yours just as much as it is ours, is the need for increased productivity. Because as I'm sure you'll agree, it's what allowed humanity to crawl out of the mud and create an economic system that has given us the means to purchase lattes and subscriptions to premium streaming services. And if this means the creation of a global economic system that puts every person on earth in a competitive race to the bottom, that's what's required for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I'm glad that you understand. Unfortunately, some people have trouble accepting reality. They don't understand that if you refuse to wear the device provided by our company, you will wear the device provided by another company. Now, as for your identification card...

Me In That Pink Chiffon Dress, 1964
by
Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

shirred at the chest, sequined at the bodice,
for once not minding this dress was worn by my oldest
sister, nor that I sported my mother's plastic sandals
with the see-through high heels
that looked like Cinderella slippers.

I was the Cinderella of the house,
the third girl of a family
who only plugged for a son,
the one who stood on a telephone book
to iron the family clothes
because I didn't know how to adjust
the spring doohickey
beneath the ironing board.

I was Queen of TV dinners
that I ate on a TV tray
while watching Lassie
on our black and white Zenith
with the rabbit ears antenna
that I jiggled to stop static.

But I was not sorry for myself.
I knew my prince would come
and it was you, my husband,
who took me to the prom
in my sister's pink chiffon,
your hand on my sequined bodice
as we fox-trotted, your size thirteen shoes
stepping on my toes that stuck out
from my mother's plastic sandals.

Total Donation
by
Alex McNall

It was four in the morning and Douglas was sweating, the harsh Alaska sunlight blasting through the window of his efficiency cube.

"Hell!" Douglas said, the worst word he could say without risking a fine.

He sat up and fumbled for the air conditioner. His cube was such that he could reach almost everything, from door knob to toilet handle, while sitting in bed. Douglas turned all the dials on the AC unit and checked the plug seven times. He was about to kick it again when he saw that his alarm clock was blank.

"The power is out?" Douglas asked aloud. "Then why do I smell squid-waffles, huh?"

He didn't really expect his squid-loving landlord, Gregor, to answer him. Nobody in the building had spoken to him in months. They'd accused him of stealing ice from the community freezer, which he was guilty of, but didn't have any proof so shame on them for jumping to conclusions.

Douglas heard reggae coming from upstairs, and a cheese printer churning out slices in the cube next door. Everyone had power but him.

He carefully cursed for five hours, then reluctantly put on pants to walk to the Central Power Inc. offices because he didn't have money for the bus and he refused to ride a bike for fear of spontaneous combustion.

It was only four blocks, but Douglas made eleven stops along the way, all for AC. He was a known freezer-freak, a person who loiters in air-conditioned stores and molests the frozen foods, but never purchases anything.

"Ya gonna buy those peas, or ain't ya?" Mr. Stevenson asked from behind the counter of his convenience store.

"Uh..." Douglas removed the bag from his pants and looked at the nutrition facts. "Just checking the ingredients."

"The ingredients is peas!" Mr. Stevenson shouted, slapping the counter. "Buy something or I'm callin' the army."

"All right, all right," Douglas said, tossing the peas to the old man.

Reaching the power company ten minutes later, he paused to check his reflection in the mirrored door, arranging thinning hair into an attractive bird's nest and forcing a smile.

The door slid open and Douglas waited for the sweet blast of chemically cooled atmosphere to caress his face. Instead there was a sucker punch of hot, stale air. Douglas entered the lobby, his smile now a snarl. A big black eye stared at him from a brick wall.

"I'm Douglas Beachum," he said. "I want to know why my power was shut off. Is there someone I can talk to?"

"I would be happy to assist you," the eye said. "According to my records, Duh-glass Beachum, you owe five dollars and thirty-seven cents on your power bill. Would you like to make a payment?"

"Five bucks! That's twice what my bill was last month. I want to talk to a real person, please."

"All humans are busy," the eye said. "Would you like to make a payment?"

"Yes, obviously I would *like* to, but I don't have any money."

"You chose yes. Five dollars and thirty-seven cents will be automatically withdrawn from your bank account."

"Nice try, cyclops, but it's empty," Douglas said with a smug grin. "And I only have three dollars available on my credit card."

"You chose to pay by credit card. Goodbye."

Douglas punched the eye, rubbed his fist, and continued down the street. He had a couple hours before the credit card company would issue an overage fee and charge him money for not having money. He'd been out of work for half a year, surviving by selling blood, plasma, and other bodily fluids to science (unfortunately, they did not want his plentiful sweat).

Last time he went into the lab to donate he was told he'd reached the six-month limit. They said he may be eligible for other types of donation, but Douglas was reluctant. Still, he entered the Body Harvest building for the twenty-fifth time that year.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Beachum." A receptionist named Denise sat behind the desk with a smile on her face and a pen in her hand. "I take it you have reconsidered our offer."

"What was it again?"

"How jazzed are you about donating bone marrow?" Denise's eyebrows waggled with encouragement.

"What does that entail?" Douglas asked.

"Well..." Denise took a deep breath and spoke in a burst. "Basically, a large needle will penetrate your pelvic bone and suck out the precious goo inside."

"Hmm," Douglas considered. "Does it hurt?"

"We can almost certainly numb the top layer of your skin."

"I see." Douglas pictured a huge steel needle drilling into his spine, and his testicles, which were trying to stay as far away from his overheated body as possible, retreated half an inch. "I don't know..."

"You get forty smackers for the whole shebang," Denise shot back.

It would be enough smackers to cover the credit bill and keep him in cannoli for a couple weeks.

"All right, I'll make an appointment," Douglas said, figuring he could always weasel out on extraction day if his lottery number came up in the meantime.

"Great!" Denise said. "How does thirty seconds from now work for you?"

"Now? I guess that's okay."

"Perfect, here's your complimentary leather strap." She handed him a thick strip of moose hide pocked with teeth marks.

Douglas was about to complain about his secondhand strap when two orderlies ushered him into an operating room.

"Face down on the table, please," one said.

Douglas removed his shirt and crawled onto the table. He didn't know if he was supposed to take his pants off, so he hedged his bets and pulled them halfway down. A second later the doctor came in, a shockingly tall man with curly white hair.

"Thank you for presenting the ilium." The doctor said, staring at Douglas' exposed buttocks. "I hate pulling patients' pants down. It's degrading for everybody. I guess you've done this before."

"Not really, no," Douglas said.

"You're going to feel pressure, then a pop-crunch as the needle punctures your bone, Doug. Do you mind if I call you by a shortened version of your first name? Research suggests that it creates a trust-bond between practitioner and meat bank. Try not to scream, Doug. It upsets the waiting donors."

Did he say *meat bank*? Douglas bit down on his strap and barely convulsed as the needle grinded against his pelvis.

"You're a bit older, so your bone has hardened." The doctor got on his tiptoes and pounded the syringe like a jackhammer.

Douglas' crusty old bone finally gave way and the mining began.

"You're going to feel negative pressure in your abdomen," the doctor said, pulling back the plunger on the syringe. "Women say the feeling is something akin to menstrual cramps, but for us guys that's purely academic, eh Doug?"

"I guess," Douglas said, dizzy with pain. "Ow! Is it almost over?"

"Yep, all done," the doctor replied.

"Thank God..."

"Now for the other side."

Douglas curled up in bed, sucking on a frozen cannoli. He felt violated, but at least the credit bill was paid and the power was back on. He aimed the AC unit at his face, turned it on full blast, and was asleep in seconds. Seconds after that, the AC unit sputtered and died.

"Double Hell!" Douglas said.

It was now nearly ten in the morning and the sun was nearing its zenith. Douglas called The Cooling Company and they said a replacement unit would cost fifty dollars, plus tax, plus shipping, plus installment, plus several other kinds of tax. When Douglas protested about the cost, they informed him that the other option would be for him to come pick up the 300 pound machine and try to wire and weld the unit into the exterior wall himself. Douglas went ahead and ordered the Deluxe Chap-Master III with all the trimmings.

To kill time before it arrived, he went back to Body Harvest. It was the only way he could afford the unit, plus their waiting room was cold. Denise greeted him while Douglas peeled his shirt away from his back, surprised to find that it wasn't chemically bonded.

"Help yourself to some complimentary oxygen," Denise said, gesturing to a chair with a gas tank next to it.

"So what else can I donate?" Douglas sat down and happily jammed the tube up his nose. "I imagine I've just about run the gamut."

"We're running a special on kidneys," Denise said. "One for twenty-five bucks."

"That would give me a down payment on my new AC unit," Douglas mused. "Is that tall doctor with the curly hair going to do the procedure?"

"Who?" Denise scrunched her aquiline nose.

"You know, the guy who sucked out my bone marrow."

"Oh, he's no longer with us," she said. "Rest assured we will now be doing full background checks and psychiatric evaluations of our surgeons before they are allowed to operate."

"Well that's reassuring," Douglas said. "How long is the recovery for the kidney thing?"

"How long do you want it to be?" Denise asked.

"As short as possible, I should think."

"Great, then you can leave as soon as you wake up."

"So there's general anesthesia for this one?" Douglas said, but he didn't actually say it at all. He just mumbled the words as his eyes closed and his lungs filled with knockout gas.

He hadn't even noticed when they made the switch.

Forty-five minutes later, Douglas awoke in the waiting room chair, right where he had passed out.

"All done, Mr. Beachum," Denise said. "You did great."

"I did." He shook his head to clear the cobwebs. "You already took my kidney?"

"Yes, they are out and you're all sewed up!"

"They? You took both?"

"Only temporarily," Denise said. "Did you read the contract? Your kidneys will undergo a barrage of tests and the one with the best function will be transplanted into the baboon, while the other one will be returned to you in a timely manner."

"Wait, my kidney is going to a baboon?"

"Wow." Denise made a disapproving face and wrote something on his chart. "I didn't realize you were a specist, Mr. Beachum."

"No, no I'm not," Douglas said, lifting up his shirt to look for scars. "I was just curious."

"The kidneys are located closer to your back," Denise said.

"I know," Douglas said. "So why is there an oozing wound below my stomach?"

"Well." Denise put on her most agreeable grin. "The surgeon noticed your appendix was slightly misshapen, so she removed it free of charge."

"Are you serious?" Douglas jumped to his feet and clutched his aching abdomen. "How am I going to live without my appendix?"

"Take four of these every hour on the hour, double doses at noon and midnight." Denise leaned across the counter and dumped a giant bottle of pills in his trembling hands.

"Is that really going to compensate?" Douglas said. "Isn't it the most important organ in the human body?"

"That's why we pay top dollar," Denise said. "Can you believe people used to think the appendix was worthless?"

"What a bunch of morons," Douglas said with a chuckle, relaxing considerably when he heard *top dollar*.

Denise handed him the first one hundred dollar bill he'd ever seen, enough to cover the unit and fees outright. Douglas left the office feeling like a king—money in his pocket and a slew of powerful narcotics in his veins. He saw The Cooling Company van outside his building and skipped up the steps, eager to enter his frosty new cube. He bumped into a delivery guy coming out the door.

"You Douglas Beachum?" the guy asked. "Sign here."

Douglas quickly signed, then forked over his hundred dollars. He got some change, but left the delivery guy with a generous tip. He even flipped a quarter to a kid sitting on the stoop of his building.

"Whoa, thanks mister!" the kid said, running off to buy a new gun.

Douglas saw his whole world turning around. His cube would be the coldest in the building, making him an instant celebrity. He put a hand on his doorknob and savored the cold metal against his skin. It didn't open. He wiped his hands on his pants and gripped it harder, thinking his sweaty palms were throwing off the fingerprint recognition.

Douglas shouldered the door with a grunt, then looked up and saw an eviction notice dangling from the threshold. Apparently he hadn't paid rent in three months.

"Triple Hell!" Douglas banged on the door until he became exhausted and slid to the floor.

He could hear the gentle hum of the Chap-Master III, which could not be returned or resold. Douglas jammed his lips under the door and tried to suck up the cold air.

Gregor, and three burly teens from upstairs, arrived and physically removed him.

"That's my cold!" Douglas cried. "I paid for it!"

They hauled him outside and threw him into the street. Douglas laid in the gutter crying and perspiring until he couldn't tell the difference between his tears and his sweat. He was also in severe agony since the painkillers had worn off and he didn't have water to swallow his fistful of appendix replacement pills.

Douglas Beachum had no friends to turn to, no family to help him. He'd moved to Alaska from Florida to escape the heat. It was advertised as the "coldest spot in the U.S." and Douglas had bought it.

He staggered down the street, terribly dehydrated and becoming delirious. Shop owners lasered their doors when they smelled him coming. Soon he found himself back at Body Harvest, nowhere else to go.

"Hello again, Mr. Beachum," Denise said. "How are we feeling?"

"We are very, very, very hot," Douglas mumbled.

"Well, I might have just the thing for you. How long have you been dreaming about our total donation program?"

"Never heard of it."

"It's not exactly legal just yet," Denise said, "but basically we put you on ice and extract organs as the needs arise. You will remain in this frozen state until—"

"Frozen?"

"Yes, you'll be kept at a brisk zero degrees in one of our premier corpse coolers, but there are no guarantees about—"

"I'll do it," Douglas said. "I'll do it right now."

"Verbal consent achieved," Denise announced. "Sleep well, Mr. Beachum."

Two orderlies appeared and wheeled Douglas out on a gurney. Denise waved to him and he happily waved back, all of his problems finally solved.

A minute later, the men slid him into his personal cooler. They checked his vital signs and asked if he needed to go to the bathroom. He said no, even though he did. Douglas figured that would be their problem.

"Okay Mr. Beachum," an orderly said before sealing him in. "Any last words?"

"Please close the door," Douglas said with a smile. "You're letting in the heat."

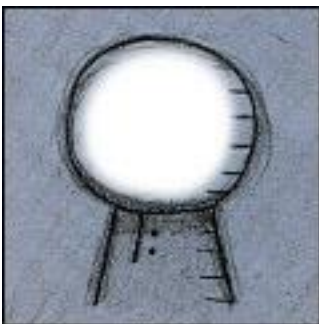
Contributor Biographies



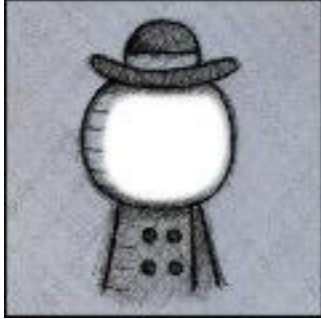
Eric Lawson is the author of the forthcoming short story collection *Circus Head* (Sybaritic Press) as well as the forthcoming poetry collection *Backseat Emperor* (2nd Avenue Press). He wrote the "Holly Hatchet" segment of the *Body Count* horror anthology film. Now in its fourth season, he hosts the *Make Your Own Fun* podcast on YouTube.



Monica Dobos was born in Romania and now lives in California with her husband, son, and two parakeets, Raamu and Krishna. She has a deep interest in Buddhism, spirituality, etymology, and funny words. She teaches meditation and English online. She loves drum circles, hiking, and pickleball. Her work has appeared in *Duo Anthology* by Linen Press and is forthcoming on *Mars* with Bugaboo Hot Press.



Dave Lovell writes speculative fiction and local history. Some of his sci-fi short stories have appeared in *One-Shot* anthologies produced by the Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Group. Regarding tales of local interest, he recently co-authored "Perseverance and Glory - The History of the Argonaut Rowing Club." Once upon a time, Dave worked in research centres and commercial laboratories in North America and Asia where he authored scientific journal papers and patents.



M. Benjamin Thorne is an Associate Professor of Modern European History at Wingate University. Possessed of a lifelong love of history and poetry, he is interested in exploring the synergy between the two. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Sky Island Journal*, *Cathexis Northwest*, *Griffel*, *The Westchester Review*, *Witcraft*, *Feral*, and *Gyroscope Review*. He lives and sometimes sleeps in Charlotte, North Carolina.



Carrie R. Hinton is a Maryland based writer with an unfortunate penchant for decrepit sailboats. Her work has previously appeared in *Dread Stone Press* and *Sand Hills Literary Magazine*.



Kelly Scott Franklin's students appreciate his humor because they are a captive audience and want to get good grades. His essays, poems, translations, and reviews have appeared in *Able Muse*, *Literary Matters*, *Driftwood Press Literary Magazine*, *Light Poetry Magazine*, *Commonweal Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and elsewhere. He teaches what one of his children refers to as "Boring Grownup Books" at Hillsdale College. He also plays the ukulele.



Olga Zilberbourg is a San Francisco-based writer and the author of *Like Water and Other Stories* (WTAW Press) that explores "bicultural identity hilariously, poignantly," according to the Moscow Times. Her fiction and essays have appeared in *Electric Literature*, *Lit Hub*, *World Literature Today*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Bare Life Review*, and elsewhere. She serves as a co-moderator of the San Francisco Writers Workshop and co-edits *Punctured Lines*, a blog on the literatures of the former USSR and diaspora.

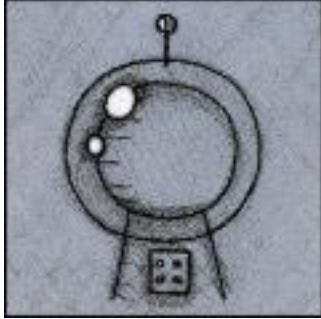


Theric Jepson has written a couple novels, both of which are funnier than whatever this is. He lives in California and will probably die there someday as well. In lieu of flowers, buy one of those novels.



George Beckerman is a veteran TV and film writer who is currently serving a five-year prison term for plagiarism. He is very excited about his upcoming cell block production of *My Fair Lady*.

"A Narcissist Walks Into a Bar, Because Two Is One Too Many" was first published by *Little Old Lady Comedy* in September 2022.



Ethan Kwak is a Korean-American writer who mainly writes of the surreal and autobiographical.



Scott Erickson is an award-winning writer of humor and satire. He has published several novels, and his writing has appeared in newspapers, magazines, and humor compilations. His website is www.scott-erickson-writer.com



At 77 (soon to be 78) **Rochelle Jewel Shapiro**'s major goals are to be well-published (she already is) and to die laughing. (This can wait.) Her poems, stories, and essays have been published in *The MacGuffin*, *Euphony*, *NYT (Lives)*, *Empty Mirror*, and more. She currently teaches writing at UCLA Extension. <https://rochellejshapiro.com/> @rjshapiro



Alex McNall grew up adventuring in the woods of the Pacific Northwest, relying on his imagination to keep himself entertained. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his lovely partner and motley pack of three rescue terrier mixes (they'd have more if only the city would allow it). He's recently met a life goal of befriending his backyard squirrels and delights endlessly in feeding them.