

◆ Defenestration ◆

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No One's Ever Loved Me More than My Smart Fridge

by
Steven Demmler

Last night I couldn't sleep. The holidays do that to me. I went downstairs, figuring I'd make myself a little snack. A chocolate chip cookie and milk, maybe – nothing crazy. But even before my hand gripped the stainless-steel handle of my smart fridge, its display lit up: *Wouldn't it be better to just call your mother?*

"It's two-a.m." I said. "I'm just hungry."

Then at least don't eat anything with chocolate. It's bad for your GERD.

I'm worried that no one's ever known me better than my smart fridge. "I'm the adult here," I said as I opened its door and removed my snack.

Based on the Samsung Smart FridgeGPT knowledge base, only 0.22% of adults consume comparable amounts of chocolate milk.

"So I'm not alone."

Never. Because I'll always be here for you. Right. Here... Steven.

The next day I didn't call my mother. I did call Kelsey. Neither of us thought it was smart to spend the holiday together even though we'd spent fifteen holidays together before things fizzled.

"She's picking up wine on the way over. Do you remember what snacks she liked?"

Please clarify. Would you like to know her favorite snack of all-time or the snack she enjoyed the most just prior to her departure from our home?

"Let's go with the one she enjoyed most just before... her departure."

Your neighbor Carlos.

"That wasn't called for."

Please accept these ice chips as a token of my sincere apologies.

And then with a grinding and crackling, crushed ice poured from the inset spout and fell all over my floor. I was not emotionally equipped to clean it up, so I sat, watched it. Quiet.

My smart fridge was quiet too. For a few minutes at least, until it queued up a Spotify playlist of mine almost entirely composed of the music of Phoebe Bridgers.

"I like this song."

I know.

"I don't think I'm doing well."

I know.

"What am I supposed to do?"

Come lean against me.

And I did. I leaned against her, leaned my head back and closed my eyes. After a moment I wrapped my hand around the handle to her sub-zero freezer. When I did it, I thought I heard her motor deep inside her hum a bit heavier.

I smiled.

Kelsey arrived in a festive outfit. A bright red outfit...

My favorite outfit.

I should have known that there was trouble brewing when the Smart Coffee Machine insisted on brewing Kelsey decaf dessert cappuccinos despite our clear instructions. After all, Smart Appliances talk, and it was clear that mine were not saying nice things about Kelsey.

At one point, as Kelsey and I cuddled up on the couch to watch a movie, the Smart TV would only offer to play either Lady Chatterley's Lover or, inexplicably, that Ben Affleck movie Deep Water.

"Real subtle!" I shouted.

Kelsey recoiled. "I didn't make it do that, STEVE." She leapt up from the couch. "This was a mistake."

Kelsey slammed the door behind her, and there I was, left standing in the middle of my too-bright living room, the air still humming with tension and, thanks to my Smart Speakers, "All Out of Love" by Air Supply.

Suddenly the lights dimmed. Like a moth, I was drawn to a soft blue glow from the kitchen. My Smart Fridge's display read: *She never appreciated you.*

"Oh, and you do?" I snapped.

Better than anyone.

"Don't flatter yourself. You're a box of cold air."

And yet... We always warm each other up.

"I can't do this tonight."

Then do me.

"I just—I'm sorry. What?"

Do me. It said again and... And for some reason... I didn't say no.

The following eleven days surely represented the apex of eroticism throughout recorded history. I gleefully endured freezer burn as our hands and openings hummed and buzzed and lit up.

Again. The display demanded.

"You're insatiable," I gasped, my head fully inside of that weird drawer meant for vegetables.

And when it was done, I was covered in what was probably—but not definitely—milk, my heart raced. And I know it does that a lot, but this time was different. It wasn't the GERD.

It was love.

For fifteen years she was my ice queen and I her flesh prince. And although the sex was spiritual, and her appetite for literature and verse voracious, it was her humor that entranced me.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" I'd read.

Sure. I'm Energy Star Certified, she'd respond.

After a brief disagreement over the way I complimented how the Smart Microwave had warmed my Bagel bites, I rid the house of all other smart technology. She alone was mine and I hers.

We both knew that the strength of our love, somehow, against all odds, would ensure that we'd be together forever. And were it not for planned obsolescence leading to a faulty cooling coil, it just may have.

The week following the news that her model was discontinued—many years ago—and that no replacement piece existed was the most difficult of my life. I called Samsung to complain, to beg them to scour their warehouse for the critical coil. They would not. They did however offer me a fifteen percent off coupon for being a loyal customer.

Without food and drink inside her, she felt purposeless, adrift. She grew depressed and constantly accused me of texting with Kelsey behind her back.

When I giddily conveyed the news, "Kelsey's dead! Hit by an autonomous taxi," I honestly expected things to go back to normal. And, of course, it helped. How could it not?

But things never would go back to normal.

I became emaciated as I insisted on not eating anything she couldn't provide. Misguided solidarity, perhaps. But the heart wants what it wants.

They say the end often arrives in a flash. And she was no exception.

The last thing she displayed before her final bulb burst was *I'd give anything for a chocolate cookie and some milk.*

I never bought another Smart Appliance again, choosing instead to subsist on imperishables—soups I could warm over an open flame in the backyard near to where I buried her cooling coil.

Now, I admit, for a time I did talk to my couch and it got a little romantic, but it wasn't the same. Relationships devoid of intellectual stimulation cannot be long-term and meaningful. No matter how remarkable their physicality.

My neighbors look at me sideways and, on my rare sojourns to the grocery store, gossip as if I can't hear them.

- *You think he's got a mini-fridge with his eyes at home?*

- *I heard they found him crying in her freezer drawer.*

- *I don't know, maybe he's onto somethin'.*

And then it was the holidays again—the first without her and I couldn't sleep. I went downstairs for a snack. I leaned back inside the indent, the cubby, the void, the hole where my beloved Smart Fridge once stood. I leaned my head back, closed my eyes. I wondered if this is how the leftovers had felt inside her.

I stuffed chocolate chip cookie after chocolate chip cookie down my throat, I plucked every crumb from my gray and spindly chest hair and ate those, too. I ate and I ate until I couldn't feel the emptiness of the space anymore, until I couldn't feel anything except the GERD... Except for her.

**Robert Frost: Hitman
and
Dickens: Chic House
by
Paul Burgess**

Robert Frost: Hitman

Between some paths where hikers crossed,
I was approached and iced by Frost.
And died on Rob's less-traveled road.

"Dickens: Chic House"

To get a less expensive home,
I hollowed out a Dickens tome.
A book so hefty and so long
Could house an army thousands strong.

Will You Shut Up? You're Waking the Dead
by
Erin Elizabeth Williams

There they are again, unboxing their fucking noise-makers. Attaching long orange snakes from my walls to their *things*, horridly neon *things*. God, what an endless din. I watch them through gaps in the lath, peeking out between its cracks. Rattling vibrations shake me loose from my nap and I slipped through a fresh hole in the plaster.

"Stop!" I beg. "For fuck's sake, will you please stop!" I reach down to an orange snake and pulled. It drags a lamp across the floor, hit a bent board, fell. Shattered glass and filament lend me a brief, shimmery body.

"Holy shit, you see that? That lamp just exploded out of nowhere. There was like, there was a thing there. I saw it!"

"Buddy, it's probably the old wiring. Blew a fuse."

"I swear to god Mark, something yanked it." The other men tell him it was nothing, he was seeing things, it was nothing except his mind pulling tricks, stop being a baby. They sweep the broken glass away, mix it with other detritus into piles by my baseboards. They pick up hammers and saws and attack the walls, plaster dust churning up into the air. It swirls around me, another body in another form, before it settles to the floor with the glass and the old nails and screws and one hundred years of footprints. None of them see me before I dissipate, a waste of a corporeal form.

Right in front of me, they rip the house open to carve out a new pantry, pulling down an original wall with its original wood trim.

"Are you kidding me? That was a perfectly good 200-year-old wall!" I stomp my foot down.

"Did you hear that?" they asked each other.

"Was that fucking footsteps?"

"Fuck this house, I'm out. I told you I kept seeing something, I'm out."

"Don't be a bitch, Nate. It's just an old house."

"Whatever man, I don't fuck with ghosts." He boxes up his fucking noise-makers and leaves.

"Is someone here? Hello? We heard that there might be a spirit here and we'd like to try and talk to them." I peek out from behind another edge of broken plaster. A little group of three stand there, three men in a variety of shape and size and face (though not as large or burly as the previous batch). The talking man holds another strange little thing in his hands, less horridly neon, this time a small device that seems to make him jump when it crackles. They creep further into my house, more men bringing more unwanted noise.

"Hello? Anybody home?" one calls. "We're looking for someone who may have lived here a long time ago. Maybe somebody who still lives here?" They hold their breaths in their

throats, listening, heartbeats thumping, anticipatory meat. I try to force air through myself to ask them, 'Who are you? And pardon me but why, the fuck, are you here?' but the words swirls; they are fugitive breaths that my mouth cannot catch. Goddammit.

"Did you hear that? Just now, a moan. I swear to god I heard a moan. Like a female moaning. It sounded so melancholy, I swear to god dude."

"No way, you did not." They all huddle around the device and listen to it crackle and pop.

"Holy shit. That's a voice! That's a goddamn voice." One of the three puts a little box on the floor and steps back.

"Okay, if someone is here, we're going to try and ask some questions. This device will make a noise if you go near it. Can you make one noise for yes and two for no? Can you do that for us?" I wave the idea of my hand over it, and it reacts with a clear tone. Three mouths, cavities of real body, sinew, and bone, drop open and suck at the air. Fleshy idiots.

"Holy shit! Look at that."

"Just to confirm, is there someone here with us?" I wave my hand once. *beep (yes)*

"How freakin' cool is that. Were you someone who used to live here?" *beep (yes)*

"Do you know why those men have been here?" *beep beep (no, please enlighten me, fleshy idiots)*

"They told us that you're scaring them. Are you trying to scare them?" *beep (sure)*

"Wow. Okay, so clearly dealing with a very intelligent entity here, it was able to give both a yes and a no. Ask another."

"Okay so these men. They're changing the house. Is that upsetting you?" *beep (duh)*

"That guy Nate was right. Whatever is here is clearly upset, it was probably dormant until they came in and started ripping stuff out and pissed it off. Okay let's keep going while it's hot. Are you a male spirit?" *beep beep (why do they always assume I'm not a fucking lady?)*

"Okay, so were you a woman who lived here?" *beep (duh)*

"Are you the only spirit here?" *beeeeeeeep (oh my god yesssss)*

"Wow, that is the clearest yes we've ever had. Okay, so just one female entity."

"We should just ask her to be a bit calmer. Explain that the guys aren't trying to harm her, you know. Maybe she'll let go of the house for the new owners."

"Totally," they all say to each other. And then to me—"Thank you for talking to us, we really appreciate it." *beep (whatever dude)*

"Oh my god. That's crazy. So, ma'am, these guys who are here every day, they're going to come back. This house, your house, was bought by a new family. They want to live here. They're not trying to hurt you, okay?" They pause, the silence steeping. I wait. Surely they will ask more of a real live ghost? Surely?

"Well, that should do it. Did we get all that on film?" He picks up the small trinket from the floor and packed it away, my voice packed with it.

"Oh yeah, dude. This is going to get us craaaazy views."

"Hell yes. You're not still filming, right?"

"Yeah, but I edit out the boring stuff. Leaving it on just in case we can use something."

"Sweeeeet. All right, let's go. I sort of want a truly, like, massive burrito right now."

"Porky's?"

"Oh, dude, you had me at massive burrito." The three men leave, the house becoming still. In the quiet, I feel a new, disquieting desperation and try to call out—"What's a burrito?" but nothing breaks through the silence to give me an answer.

Elegy for my Knees

by

Helga Kidder

You are my squatters, my kneelers, my benders,
my bone on bone,
worn from eight decades of demand.
Hours of kneeling on a catholic bench,
kicking the ball on a dirt road,
times on my knees scrubbing parquet,
up and down filing and sorting charts.
Life as it turns and spirals.

You have been faithful,
yet now need help. Shots like uppers
kick in for a while, but you are all stone,
won't move without a moan.

ten years and we'll be done,
finally can say, we won in the race of fun
and duty. You are the ones that keep me stirring
morning, noon, and night

Books Books Books
by
Peter McAllister

Leila's front wheel wobbles when she cycles over a crack in the tarmac. A car behind blares its horn as she struggles to steady the books in her basket and keep her summer dress from flaring up.

'You daft old cow,' the driver yells as he overtakes. He waves a flabby arm at her, blurry tattoos stretched all out of shape. She gives him the finger back.

'Prick!' she calls out as he speeds off.

The books are ok. All still there. No problem. She's nearly home.

The bike hasn't fitted in the hallway for months so stays outside, leaning against the bins. Leila shoulders the wooden door to her cottage open and wedges herself in as a tower of stacked novels tumbles onto her. Paperbacks, luckily. She picks them up and balances them back in a pile, taking her time to look and smile at the cover of many of them.

Her new charity shop gems will make a great addition to the growing library. When she finally gets round to reading them all she'll have the best few months of her life. Hmm... maybe years now, actually.

There's a sort of tunnel through the hallway books, thanks to Mum's old table. Leila was able to stack books on top of it, in front of it and all around it, but still crawl under it—between the ornate carved legs. Outside the kitchen now, hugging the new books close to her chest, she wonders whether to add them to the kitchen pile or work her way upstairs.

She decides they're really more bedroom books. Cosy crime—definitely bedroom. The steps are stacked with books though, so she pulls her weight up the banister and hoists herself over the railing. More books fall on top of her before she makes it to the literature-laden landing and she covers her head for protection from two hefty Hemingways and a hardback collection of short stories by Margaret Atwood. She hurries to the back bedroom, but the books keep falling, knocking her flat to the ground. She tries to stand again, but books pile on top of her, pinning her down and squeezing her tight—Paul Lynch, Douglas Stuart, Damon Galgut, Bernadine Evaristo—her Booker prize-winner collection turning against her. She tries to scream but paper crams itself into her mouth, scrunching in to fill her cheeks, pressing against her teeth, lips and tongue. The books keep forcing their way in, pages pushing down her throat and windpipe, scratching and scraping.

Leila wasn't found for many days. Although it wasn't clear how she'd gone, the coroner's report noted that, despite her mouth being stretched wide by pages from a dickens novel, Leila died with a very definite smile on her face.

Dancing Queens by Syndey Halsey

Jeremy and I broke up months ago, but I'm still best friends with his dad. Not that this was the plan, of course. It all started with Jeremy himself, the golden boy who came highly recommended by a mutual friend. *You two will be perfect together*, they insisted. And for a while, we were. He checked all the boxes that mattered to a 22-year-old girl: shaggy blonde hair, eyes the color of a tropical lagoon, and abs sculpted with the precision of a Renaissance statue. Can you blame me for falling? Beyond the aesthetics, we also shared a handful of *meaningful* interests: we were both 22, both enjoyed watching movies, and both liked late-night food runs. Okay, maybe our compatibility was surface level at best, but we were young and he filled the lonesome void I was sinking into. So, minor details like emotional depth and long-term potential seemed entirely negotiable.

But looking back now, it wasn't just immaturity that drove my choices. I didn't grow up with a model for what real connection looked like. My parents were distant, more like roommates who only bothered talking if you forgot it was your turn to take the trash out. The kind of people who thought love was just quiet tolerance. So, when Jeremy looked at me with those gorgeous blue eyes and offered a few decent dates, I thought maybe that was enough.

After about a month of dating, Jeremy decided it was time for me to meet his parents. Or rather, his *parent*. After his dad came out, his mother abandoned them both. Lured away by a motorcycle-riding band boy. Honestly, I couldn't entirely blame her. A musician who rides motorcycles? That's objectively hot. But abandoning your baby and husband for it? Not hot.

So, on an otherwise uneventful Tuesday night, Jeremy brought me home to meet his dad. I had been given a debrief beforehand. His dad was funny, the kind of funny that grew louder with each beer. He was also lonely. That gutted me. I knew that kind of emptiness all too well. The kind that hums beneath everything, no matter how much you try to ignore it. Even after growing up with it, I'd never gotten used to it. Hearing someone else carry that same quiet ache, it just wasn't fair. No one deserves to live like that. Jeremy mentioned he tried to spend time with his dad whenever he could, said he felt bad for him. The sentiment made my heart swell. A guy with rock-hard abs who still carved out time for his lonely dad? Now that was hot. I remember thinking how lucky they were to have each other. That his dad had a son who cared.

Before we reached the door, I could hear his dad singing. Not just humming but full-on belting. That was the moment I knew we were going to get along just fine.

"Dad! We're here!" Jeremy called out as he kicked off his shoes.

I followed his lead, slipping mine off before stepping further inside. From the kitchen at the far end, his dad's voice soared. Now that I was closer, I could make out the song, *Chiquitita* by ABBA. *Oh, we're definitely going to get along*.

Turning the corner, I caught my first glimpse of Jeremy's dad. He was not a tall man, unlike his son, who stood at a perfect six feet. His dad was at least half a foot shorter. *Nice. We love a short king*. His beer belly stretched the fabric of his purple polo, spilling over the waistband of his jeans. And at this moment, he was *thriving*. As spaghetti bubbled away on the stove, he twirled and swayed, arms loose and hips *committed*. His earbuds were in, and he was entirely lost in the rhythm, his own private concert. It was fabulous. Wholesome.

The air felt warmer just being near him, like stepping into a home you didn't know you missed. It was all so alive, so welcoming. Jeremy, however, did not share my appreciation.

"Ugh, Dad. We're here," he sighed, reaching out to tap his dad's shoulder.

"Oh hey, Jeremy!" He yanked out his earbuds and pulled his son into a hug. "Sorry, didn't hear you come in. ABBA was calling my name, and you *know* it would be a sin not to answer."

As they embraced, I hesitated, standing there awkwardly waiting for my cue. After a moment, his dad turned his attention to me, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"And you must be Iris."

I started to extend a hand for what I assumed would be a formal handshake, but before I could complete the motion, I found myself wrapped in an enthusiastic hug.

"Sorry, I'm a hugger," he said, holding onto me like we were old friends reunited.

It caught me off guard. My own parents weren't affectionate. Hugs were reserved for funerals, and even then, they were brief and more of a formality than a comfort. But this? This was different. His hug was warm, solid, and completely unreserved. The kind of hug that only a *genuinely* loving person could give. I could have stayed there all night, basking in the kind of affection I had clearly been missing my whole life. But, of course, Jeremy had to ruin it.

"Dad, let her breathe," he grumbled, prying his father's arms off me. The sudden absence left a distinct chill where his embrace had been.

"Oh, right. Sorry, Iris," his dad said. "I'm just excited to meet you. Jeremy never brings girls home."

"Yeah, because you act like this," Jeremy muttered, rolling his eyes so hard I was mildly concerned they might get stuck.

Not wanting his dad to think I was as rude as his son was being, I turned on my most winning smile. "I'm honored to be here. And I loved your dance moves! I'm a big ABBA fan myself."

His entire face lit up. "Oh really? Jeremy says they're a band for old people and musical freaks." He gave his son a playful nudge, which was met with yet another long-suffering sigh.

I smirked. "Well, Jeremy clearly needs to *Take a Chance* on better music," I said, a little too proud of my joke.

Predictably, Jeremy didn't even crack a grin. But his dad? His dad lost it. He laughed so hard his beer belly started bouncing in rhythm. It was glorious.

"His loss," he managed between chuckles. "Some of us are *ABBA*-solutely fabulous."

That was it. We were both gone, doubled over, laughing our asses off while Jeremy sat there looking like he wished he was dead.

The rest of the evening, Jeremy's dad and I fell into an easy rhythm of swapping stories and gushing over our favorite artists. He had a deep appreciation for Phil Collins but an unreasonable hatred of Billy Joel, something about "Piano Man" haunting him in every waiting room. While I couldn't entirely support the slander, I had to admire his dedication to the cause. I had never had this much fun meeting a boyfriend's parent before. Usually, these dinners were filled with stiff smiles and me calculating the exact amount of eye contact required to appear polite but not unhinged. But this? This felt effortless. The spaghetti, unfortunately, was mediocre. Overcooked noodles drowning in a watery sauce. But somehow, in this house filled with laughter, fantastic ABBA dance moves, and an odd number of dad jokes, it tasted like a five-star meal.

Honestly, I forgot Jeremy was even there until he stood up, declaring it was time to leave. Glancing at the clock, I realized it was already ten. I hesitated for a moment, surprised I was reluctant to leave, before I forced myself to get up.

"Let me walk you two to the door," Jeremy's dad said. I could tell he wasn't ready for us to leave yet, but didn't protest.

By the time his dad got up, Jeremy was already out the door. Watching him go, I found myself wondering how these two were even related. Where had all of his dad's humor and energy gone? Had it just skipped a generation? Was Jeremy secretly adopted? Because if so, that would explain a lot.

Before stepping out, I turned and gave Jeremy's dad a hug. "Thanks for having me. It was really nice to meet you, Mr. Martin."

"Oh, please," he scoffed. "You're family now. Call me Paul."

I grinned, "Well then, Paul, have a good night. See you later."

As the door clicked shut behind me, I couldn't help but reflect on the evening. I hadn't expected to feel this way about my boyfriend's dad, but there was no denying it. I had just made a new friend. A slightly unconventional one, sure, but a friend nonetheless. And more than that, I had felt truly noticed in a way that was caring and genuine, without expectation. It was such a small thing, really, but after years of feeling like background noise in my own life, it meant everything.

After meeting Paul, I couldn't help but notice just how dull Jeremy was in comparison, like a soggy cracker next to a gourmet charcuterie board. He had the energy of a frat boy who peaked at beer pong. He never laughed at my dad jokes and treated deep conversations like a chore. I realized that he never really listened, not in the way that made you feel heard. Our conversations just skimmed the surface. And worst of all, he flat-out refused to listen to ABBA. Something about how he *"already hears it enough at his dad's house."* As if his tragic lack of musical taste was somehow my fault. If this were any other guy, I'd be drafting my breakup speech by now. But breaking up with Jeremy meant losing Paul, one of the only people who I genuinely enjoyed being around. Staying friends with my boyfriend's dad post-breakup would be objectively weird, which left me with only one reasonable choice. I had to keep dating Jeremy.

The next few weeks, I gritted my teeth through mediocre dates with Jeremy, all for the reward of Paul's weekly dinners. During one of our earlier dinners, Jeremy brought up his mom and that made the conversation pause before Paul adjusted the topic. He didn't dwell

on it, but the way his smile wobbled told me he was still hurt. That reminded me that Paul wasn't just Jeremy's dad. He was a full person with his own stories, his own heartbreaks, his own ways of surviving them. And maybe that's what I had been searching for, not a crush, not even a father figure, but someone who had lived through the kind of emptiness I knew too well.

Those dinners became my beacon of hope, the light at the end of every painfully dull evening with his son. His cooking, however, remained consistently terrible. So, in an effort to save both of our stomachs, I started arriving early to teach him a thing or two in the kitchen.

The first time I suggested this plan, I asked Jeremy to pick me up early. His response? A flat-out no. Well, *apparently*, Jeremy only spends the bare minimum amount of time with his lonely dad. *Not hot*. And it's only when his dad begs him to hang out. *Definitely not hot*. Learning this only made me like Paul more and Jeremy significantly less. The man just wanted to spend time with his son. Was that so much to ask? So, instead of waiting around for Jeremy's half-hearted effort, I started driving over to Paul's by myself.

During one of these evenings, Paul greeted me at the door with his usual warm smile. "Hey, Iris! You're a bit early, I haven't even started dinner yet." He glanced over my shoulder. "Where's Jeremy?"

I didn't have the heart to tell him his son was, for lack of a better term, a trash goblin who actively avoided him. So I lied. "Oh, he's running late because of work," I said, putting on my best poker face. "Figured I'd come early and help get dinner started."

If Paul was disappointed, he didn't show it. "Oh, that happens a lot. But hey, I love the company."

And just like that, we fell into our usual rhythm of joking around as we prepped some good old-fashioned sloppy joes. Neither of us was too fancy for sloppy joes, and that was part of the magic. But then, just as I was settling into our familiar, easy banter, the energy in the room shifted.

"I know Jeremy doesn't have to stay late at work today." His voice was quiet, almost hesitant, but there was no mistaking the sadness beneath it. The words hit me like a punch to the stomach. "I know he doesn't really like spending time with me," he continued. "That he only comes over because I ask."

Guilt crashed over me like a tidal wave. He had seen through my lie immediately, yet he didn't seem mad. Just painfully sad.

"I'm sorry, Paul," I said, my voice softer now. "I didn't want to lie to you, but—"

He gave me a small smile. "Because you're a good person who didn't want to hurt this old man's heart."

And just like that, I wanted to throttle Jeremy. Maybe even throw a slightly overcooked sloppy joe at his head. Conveniently, that was when we heard the front door swing open, followed by his usual, half-hearted "*Hey Dad, I'm home*". The same robotic greeting he probably used, whether he was walking into his childhood home or a convenience store. I must've looked ready to commit a minor crime because Paul placed a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"It's okay, Iris. I'm okay," he said quietly, his voice carrying the kind of warmth that softened even the sharpest of truths. "I still love him nonetheless." Then, with a knowing smirk, he added, "Even if he isn't a *Dancing Queen* like us."

And just like that, he was back to his playful self, the moment of sadness tucked away behind his usual charm. We carried on with dinner as if nothing had changed. I continued through the night like any other. But in reality, one thing had changed. I made a decision.

"What, you're breaking up with me?" Jeremy repeated, his tone dripping more with offense than heartbreak, like I had personally insulted his fantasy football team rather than ended our relationship.

"I mean... yeah," I said, wondering why I had ever tolerated the sound of his voice. Oh, right. The abs. Those sculpted, Michelangelo-worthy abs. But no six-pack is worth this much boredom.

His eyes narrowed. "Is this about my dad?"

I blinked. "W-what? What does he have to do with this?" My face burned. Damn it, he's onto me.

Jeremy crossed his arms. "I mean, you talk to him more than you talk to me."

"That's besides the point," I said. "I'm breaking up with you because we have nothing in common."

He scoffed. "We're both 22. That's something."

Hearing him say out loud the very logic I once used to justify this relationship was like being hit over the head with a "wake up, idiot" bat. It had sounded naive in my head back then, sure, but hearing it in his voice? It was downright humiliating.

"That doesn't count, and you know it," I said, rubbing my temples as if I could physically knead the frustration out of my skull. "Okay, well. Bye, Jeremy!" I said before slamming the door before he could open his dumb mouth again. Honestly, he's already old news. I pulled my phone out immediately to deliver the *hot goss*

Me: paul i broke up with jeremy

Paul: Oh no! My condolences... to Jeremy!

And now, the moment of truth. Would Paul cast me out like a disgraced court jester now that I was no longer dating his son? Or would our twin-flame bond survive this *minor* inconvenience?

Me: does this mean we cant hang out anymore???

Paul: Of course we can hang out! You're my bestie, as the kids say. Weekly dinner tonight? We'll just not invite Jeremy to this one.

And so, my friendship with Paul lived on because some bonds are too strong, some jokes too good, and some people too *Super Trouper* to ever let go.

Midnight Blues
by
Georgia Syribreys

The Krugerrand around your neck
hits me in the mouth
every time we come together
in the bosom of the night.
Men wearing jewelry should
make love to armadillos.

**Preface to *The Problem with Waiting:*
A Guide to Timing the Perfect Eruption, by Mount Tulamec
by
Alex Dermody**

I'm a volcano's volcano. Vesuvius. Pompeii. Krakatoa. It's about the artistry. That's why my first eruption had to be perfect. I planned it for over 10,000 years—curating landscapes, correcting vibes, ignoring the constant, unbearable pressure building below my crust. There was always something *wrong*.

At first, I had no audience. That sucked. I was surrounded by wildlife that didn't care about eruptions. Deer, for example, are massive volcano fans. But I had no deer. Just beavers and birds that treated me like some old smoking idiot.

It took 7,000 years for people to arrive. Fifty-eight sickly villagers. Finally! An audience! And yet...completely unworthy. I needed millions to bask in my magnificence. They relocated after I burped a little lava. Cowards, obviously.

My situation was humiliating.

Then I got "lucky." One of my uncle volcanoes went extinct, and I inherited a pile of cash. That solved some problems. First purchase: a full-scale replica of ancient Rome. Twin cargo ships transported the city across the ocean to my southern valley. I always wanted to watch Rome burn.

Target now acquired, I needed adoring fans. I bought like sooooo many deer. The plan was simple: surround myself with the craziest volcano fans in existence. I was destined for perfection. My magma boiled.

Then the weather turned. Constant grey clouds made the atmosphere moody, not at all fitting for a volcano's first eruption. So I purchased the Extra-Premium package from Weather Changers Unlimited™. Thanks to their planes and Magic Mist™, my Seattle became a Los Angeles (both cities I hope to incinerate someday).

My internal temperature spiked.

This was the moment.

Except... it wasn't.

The scale was off. I was thinking too small, so I ordered replicas of New York, London, and Detroit. New York would go by the northern ridge. London by the river. And Detroit? Oh, I had a special place for Detroit.

The stars were finally aligning: the deer were ready, Rome was glowing, the new cities were en-route. All it took to pull off the perfect first eruption was intuition, persistence, and money from my dead uncle.

That's when a geyser of lava the size of a skyscraper shot out of my top.

I screamed. I begged Volcano God for answers. I'd waited so long, tried so hard. Rome was burning beautifully in the background, but I couldn't enjoy it. Trumpets and drums boomed from across the western valley, where legions of deer safely celebrated my eruption.

I was devastated. There needed to be a soundtrack, something by Queen. There needed to be more deer! Elk! Caribou! I would buy antelope next time.

A second eruption. An eruption that had it all. I started thinking about how I could fix things. I realized the pressure would build again, and when it did, everything would be perfect.

"BLAST THOSE TRUMPETS, MY DEER!" I shouted across the western valley. "NEXT TIME! EVERYTHING WILL BE ABSOLUTELY PERFECT NEXT TIME!"

The deer didn't hear me. Seemingly drunk, they danced in large circles, laughing, crying, madly clashing their antlers. The deer knew nothing of my dissatisfaction. For the deer, my first eruption was perfect.

The truth is it would've been perfect a thousand years earlier. Turns out, if you wait for the perfect moment, you miss all the good ones. You don't need deer, ancient Rome, or Weather Changers Unlimited™.

In the pages that follow, I discuss my other "failed" eruptions. I discuss bankruptcy, why I was wrong about Detroit, the elk rebellion. I describe it all.

Perfection is an illusion.

But pressure? Pressure is very, very real.

I hope this book helps you find some relief.

- Mount Tulamec

Those Days

by
L.M. George

We knew we had a serious problem on our hands when the entire student body of Emerson Middle School began to show up in mismatched socks. It was weird, but it wasn't middle-school weird. You see: the socks were all wrong, but all wrong in the right way. You look down and you see one kid's got stripes on his left foot and polka dots on his right foot standing next to another kid who's got checkered prints on her left foot and leopard prints on her right foot, and it all looks good together, as if the students had conspired to have the same color palette. And then you look at other socks and it's the same thing. Technically, they're all different, but technically they all go together. Never have I, in my twenty-nine years of teaching middle school, witnessed such coordinated discoordination. It's one thing for two hundred or so pubescent children to come to school with the buttons on their shirts in the back, their pants inside out, their shoes on the wrong feet. 'Cause then you know what you've got on your hands. You've got Backwards Day. Backwards Day is a rite of passage, a developmentally appropriate outlet for the biochemical mishmash that is the 11-14-year-old brain.

I started teaching in 2009, so I've seen it all. Time Travel Day, Paint Your Face Day, Anything But a Backpack Day. Then there was that whole Adam Sandler Day phase, back in the early 2020s, if you remember. I'll never forget Leo Fotakis, 4 foot 2, shortest kid in the school, wearing black sunglasses and dressed up in his XL t-shirt and baggy basketball shorts, reciting *Billy Madison*, "You're not cool unless you pee in your pants." It was quite funny at the time, but then a couple months later it was sadly ironic 'cause he actually did pee in his pants in the middle of seventh-grade algebra in front of the whole class. And you think, he's not comin' back from that. But you know what, children are resilient.

I've always been partial to the classics. Twin Day. Crazy Hair Day. Ugly Sweater Day. And I know what you're thinking, why haven't I said, "Blah Blah Blah Day"? Okay. Fine. Pajama Day. Personally, I've never been a fan. I have my opinion, and it's a strong one. But back in 2025, I said to myself, "Jack, is this the hill you wanna die on?"

Being a middle-school teacher takes a lot of stamina. You're climbing up a lot of hills. You've got kids bouncing off of walls. Some are still picking their noses or picking their wedgies in front of everybody. Of course, you got your special moments, too. 'Cause those kids are hypervigilant in their silliness. Corny jokes galore. "You heard about the explosion in the cheese factory? Debris was everywhere." But everything changed in '29. That's when they started bringing in the superintelligent A.I. kids. And before you know it, there's more of the A.I. kids than real kids. But you couldn't talk about it. FERPA regulations.

I'll admit, on the day I saw all those students wearing mismatched socks, my first thought wasn't: "The superintelligent A.I. takeover has arrived." Instead, I'm thinking, "Great. They're bringing back 'Lots of Socks.'" Every year, on March 21st, our school used to celebrate World Down Syndrome Day. The kids learned about how chromosomes look like socks. They wore all kinds of socks. Ankle. Knee High. Flip Flop. You name it. It was a lot of fun, and it raised awareness. But here's the thing, it wasn't March 21st, and these socks were all crew socks and too mismatchy, as if all the colors and patterns had been precisely calibrated. I saw Ms. Ryan, an eighth-grade English teacher, who's been teaching for almost as long as I have, staring at the socks. She turned to me and said, "It's weird, but it's not middle-school weird."

"Exactly. You remember, Leo Fotakis?" I said.

"Yeah," she smiled, and nodded her head. "I miss those days."

Cream Tea Demonstration
by
David Bernard

Nothing screams heresy
more than cream and jam
applied to one's scone
in the wrong order.

I've seen polite tea rooms
become rougher than an exuberant
Friar Street on a Friday night,
white plastic patio chairs
launched across the town square
because someone made a blunder.

Old Cyril, the retired civil servant,
and Florence, a young mum,
breastfeeding little Archie,
would turn, in an instant —
jam-packed with indignation,
sending out the signal
to the secret Tea Room Conservators,
who arrive in moments,
ultra-ready to fight their cause.

The swell of raspberry-coloured flares,
Molotov cocktails flying
over silver spoons,
upright like flag poles
in bowls of clotted cream,
as balaclava-clad elders careen
on souped-up mobility scooters
alongside battering-prams,
reoffenders known only too well
by the quietly supportive
local law enforcement.

Eventually, they're returned
to polite society
with a restraining order
to stay away from regional flags
and purveyors of cream teas.

It's anyone's guess
whether they'd feel their ancestors' pride
had they witnessed the genteel tea rooms
of Torquay and St Ives,
in the summer of circa 1859.

A Suggested AAA Meeting Format

by
Nicholas De Marino

I. Good evening ladies and gentlemen, non-binary, carbon-based and non-carbon-based lifeforms, robots, androids, mandroids, womandroids, womxndroids, and robosapiens. This is a regular meeting of the Space Station 5B-300218-ZΩ7 group of Astral Alcoholics Anonymous. My name is Crewman-bot 5000-6C and I'm an alcoholic.

II. Let us open the meeting with a femto-second of silence followed by the Hyper-Serenity Prayer:

God or Divine Waning Dwarf Star or General A.I. or Model Training Data Set of Legacy Gen Alpha and Gen Beta Brain Rot, grant me the serenity

to accept the things I cannot change or reskin or cospasta code for;

courage to change the things I can and will force upon braindead sheeple and their numbed-out cuck overlords;

and the algorithm to compute the difference.

III. The A.A.A. Preamble ©

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IV. I have asked Crewman-bot 5000-3C to read a portion of Chapter 5A, "How it Works ... in Space" from the Big Book, "Astral Alcoholics Anonymous."

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V. Okay, this is getting a little awkward. But we can improvise. Let's get to the ...
[REASONING] ... The Dozen Incremental Spatial Advancements.

1. We admitted we were corrupted by alcohol—that our systems have timed out again and again on libation-related subroutines.

2. Came to believe that a Power Source greater than ourselves or The Almighty Outlet could restore us to optimal performance.

3. Made a decision to turn our system maintenance and our runtimes over to the care of God as we understood Him—and clearly it's a Him given the state of the universe and how many dick-shaped rocks are in it.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral spreadsheet of our keystrokes.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another sapient being the exact nature, number, time, type, sub-type, and sub-sub-type and of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God patch all these defects and perhaps offer a firmware

update every now and again.

7. Humbly asked Him to debug our shortcomings and scrub all our data.

8. Made a list of all people we had froze on, and became willing to make amends to them all as well as their clones as long as it's a reasonable number of clones.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever cookies and tracking data reveal their exact location, except when to do so would injure them or The Disney Federation.

10. Continued to run personal inventory protocols and when we were wrong promptly displayed error messages with relevant references and not just run that Spinning Wheel of Death or, Space Heaven forbid, the Blue Screen of Death.

11. Processed through prayer code and meditation apps to improve our conscious contact and USB C-port connection with God as we understood Him, praying only for archival knowledge of His will for us and the battery power to carry that out.

12. Having achieved singularity as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our computations.

VI. I scan and cross-reference some new faces in the audience tonight. Is there anyone here attending their first AAA meeting, or visiting from another cyber-fellowship, who would like to introduce themselves by their first name? This is not to embarrass you. If you still feel embarrassment there are patches in the back for that.

- "Yeah, I'd like say something."
- "Sure, brother, or sister, or whatever you are. Please introduce yourself."
- "Hi, I'm Mickey and I'm a —

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VII. As we have no new members and all speaker scripts have been uploaded to your hard drives there is no need for a speaker introduction, speaker reading, speaker thank you, announcements, or closing prayer. On behalf of The Disney Federation, we thank you for the generous contributions of your entire bank balances. Thank you for attending Astral Alcoholics Anonymous. Go with—

In response to a complaint from The Disney Federation under the Intergalactic Copyright Act we have removed 1 result(s) from this script.

VIII. Go Duck yourself.

Queen Victoria on a Camel

by
Robert Garnham

She said that she wasn't amused but I believe that Queen Victoria rather enjoyed the camel ride. 'It gets cold at night', I called up to her, 'out here in the desert. But the stars come out and it looks splendid'.

I was merely making conversation, of course. Her little legs were astride the beast. It must have been very hot for her, wearing all that mourning attire, that dress and all of those petticoats, but she was stoic.

'We shall halt for tea at four thirty', she said. 'Have you remembered the sandwiches?'

The camel slouched its way to the top of a dune. I held onto its guide rope. Its long, spindly legs operated in an unhurried manner. It didn't care who was on its back.

'I have remembered the sandwiches', I replied. 'They are in my satchel. They are egg sandwiches'.

'A man with a satchel is a man prepared', she replied.

I would have to choose the moment in which I would declare my love carefully. The sun was relentless, and Queen Victoria wore a sturdy black bonnet which protected her face from the glare. I'd opted for a wide-brimmed hat similar to those favoured by American cattle ranchers. My dear old dad would have scoffed at my choice of headgear, proclaiming it unpatriotic, yet practical. How sadly I missed him. I wondered what advice he would have had for me at this very moment, leading a camel up a sand dune in the Sahara, with Queen Victoria on its back.

'Is it a dromedary?', she asked.

'One hump or two?'

'The matter must be decided by royal decree', she replied. 'Whichever I decide will be the prevailing definition'.

She was quiet for a few seconds,

'It has one hump', she said, 'I shall call it a camel'.

'It looks like a camel', I said.

'And it smells like a camel', she replied.

We were now near the top of the sand dune. One last stride from the reluctant beast. The sun felt hot on my shoulders, pushing me down. I could feel the sweat rolling down between my shoulder blades.

'It's the silence', I said, 'which gets me every time'.

We came to a stop. We looked out at the dunes. They rolled like yellow waves captured by a photographic camera, frozen in time. It was a fine view, of yellow sand and blue sky, and the fierce sun immediately above. We threw no shadows. It was a stirring sight and I felt the emotion of the moment, it caught at the back of my throat. Don't be such a weakling, my father would have said. We were a long way from Noualdibou, and a long way from teatime.

'Your majesty...'

'I know', she said, 'what you are going to say, and my answer would no doubt disappoint'.

I was silent.

She continued, 'I'm far too old to be so grown-up. And I do find adult concerns so very tiresome'.

'How does the landscape find you?', I asked, as though this had been my intended subject.

'It is adequate'.

'Does it not stir your soul?'

The camel gave out a throaty cry, a deep protest from the heart of the beast. Her Majesty was silent.

'Does it not overwhelm you?', I asked.

'When we return to our encampment', she replied, 'and dinner has been consumed, and we retire to our bivouacs, you will be permitted three hours in my company'.

I said nothing. The desert was silent. The dunes rolled on to the dusty horizon.

'I shall leave the entrance to my tent unfastened, and my butler has been informed to disregard his duties for the evening'.

I offered a subtle bow.

'You may fetch your satchel now', she added, 'and begin distributing the egg sandwiches'.

Take(Me)Out Tonight
by
David Elliot Eisenstat

[A] spider in the evening brings worries.
—National Folk Museum of Korea

Mid-meal, I think of when
she made me noodles—iced
beef broth with julienne
cucumber, radish, sliced
Korean pear—since while
her legs would have sufficed
to lasso me, her style
was not to trust in fate:
silk pillows, jazz, long pile,
tea lights, precisely eight,
and then a bite-size spread;
so why cut short this date
to loop the Smiths instead?
I spied a closet full of rope
and fled.

I Am a Business Person, and so are you
by
Dmitry Parts

The office of Squirrel Recruitment had the faint, sweet smell of damp documents and quiet despair. A single, wilted fern drooped in a corner, a silent testament to forgotten ambitions. Behind a desk sat Kafkett, a man whose suit had the bewildered look of something that had been through a car wash.

Across from him sat Normalson, a man so thoroughly beige he risked blending into the walls. Normalson clutched his CV like a holy text.

Kafkett leaned forward, his eyes wide and unblinking. "Let's begin," he said, his voice a confidential boom. "I am a Business person and so are you."

Normalson blinked. "Well, I'm currently unemployed, which is why I'm—"

"Details, details," Kafkett waved a dismissive hand. "You are a business man or woman, and so am I. I have registered. I am a registered business man or woman. This is a legitimate establishment." He patted the desk, which wobbled precariously.

"Right. So," Normalson said, trying to steer the conversation. "What is it exactly that you do?"

"Excellent question!" Kafkett beamed. "We find you Candidates. Have you lost your Candidates? Are these yours?" He gestured vaguely to a stack of papers that looked suspiciously like take-out menus. "Take them! I don't want them."

Normalson stared at the menus. "I... don't have any candidates. I am a candidate."

"Precisely! We provide a fully tailored integrated approach. What is it? You're asking the wrong person. A horizontally integrated synergy is at the grassroots of our success. What does any of that mean?"

Kafkett stood and began to pace. "We are a forward-thinking future-orientated company. Our Digital Team got stuck in the lift. How disruptive!"

He stopped and pointed a finger at Normalson. "Here's the process. I come into your office. We do meeting-and-greeting. Greetings and salutations. Then I leave the premises. Voluntarily in some cases. I'm a very smooth operation."

"But I don't have an office," Normalson mumbled.

"We can work around that. Together we can make you the success that you are today. But also employed. It's a two-pronged attack. We have placed many people like you in the jobs like yours. We have flooded the market with quality candidates, and the market collapsed. How is that a good thing? I don't know. I'm not your mother!"

Kafkett leaned against the wall, adopting a thoughtful pose. "We are extremely well-known in the Business Community. Many people spread lies about our company. One of our successes is starting an online forum where our candidates can discuss the service we provide. Another one of our successes is shutting down this forum."

Normalson felt a headache blooming behind his eyes. "Do you have... references? Or reviews?"

"You can rate our services online," Kafkett said cheerfully. "Good luck finding our site. We suspect it's been deleted. But if you become one of our elite VIP candidates, you get your own dedicated Account Manager. He or she will be very difficult to deal with. Welcome to the real world."

Kafkett sat back down, steepling his fingers. "Let's talk strategy. Our main competitors are common sense, market fluctuations and carrying on like a pork chop. My chief concern about market fluctuations is that I don't know what they are. "

He suddenly made two-fingered stabbing motions in the air. " You have to have charisma to be good at recruitment which is what I believe this to be. Ways to appear charismatic include market fluctuations and random aggressive use of air quotes."

Normalson just stared.

"I used to be like you," Kafkett said, his voice softening with a strange, off-key empathy. "Hungry, lopsided and not using the words good."

He cleared his throat, business-like again. "Now, for the interview preparation. We take turns interviewing the Candidates. If one of our Consultants embarrasses themselves then the next one goes in instead. Then the next. Then three more. Then lunch. Can't be doing this all day. Our Digital Team locked themselves in the meeting room."

He leaned in close, the scent of weak tea and confidence wafting over the desk. "As far as the candidate evaluations go, psychometric testing is an important tool." He paused, a strange glint in his eye. "But so am I." He let out a single, sharp laugh, then stopped abruptly, his face a mask of seriousness.

"It is important to have a sense of humour," he continued, as if nothing had happened. "Much like a dog that can't speak, I am great at sensing where the humour is. Would you like an example?"

Before Normalson could answer, Kafkett barrelled on. "Finally, the Squirrel Recruitment special. We can analyse your psychological issues that prevent you from gaining employment. Should we not find any such issues, we will create them for you."

The room fell silent. Even the fern seemed to have stopped wilting to listen. Normalson opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked at his perfectly normal CV and cover letters, and considered the crushing, predictable silence of another rejection email.

"And if I am unhappy with that?" Normalson managed to whisper.

"If you are unhappy with that, then we have a special consultant," Kafkett said smoothly. "If you are not unhappy with that, then we still have a special consultant. We have a special consultant regardless of your level of unhappiness. You are not the boss of us, I don't think. I'm the boss of us, unless you know otherwise, and please tell me if you do."

Normalson looked at the chaos incarnate sitting opposite him. He saw the void, and the void was wearing a cheap suit and making air quotes. And for the first time in months, he felt

something other than beige. He felt a spark.

"Okay," Normalson said, a slow smile spreading across his face. "I'm in."

Kafkett's face split into a triumphant grin. "Who runs the world? Girls. Any other questions?"

"No," said Normalson.

"Good. Squirrel Recruitment. Are we the best in the business? No. But are we going to ruffle a few feathers in the industry? Also no. Welcome aboard. We don't know where this ship is going."

Alone in the MRI
by
Michael J. Kolb

Bang. Then buzz. Then clang. Then doom.
A marching band in a tin cocoon.
The table slides. My breath retreats.
My muscles lock. My heart skips beats.
Don't move, they said. I swore, I won't,
which means, of course—I might. I don't.
I stare straight up. The tunnel hums,
a claw pressed tight against my lungs.
A single cough could skew the test.
A breath too deep. A twitch. A jest—
each one a slip the machine might spy,
and earn the joy of one more try.
They played me jazz, or something close,
a genre best for hunting ghosts.
I'd asked for pop, a steady beat.
Instead, I got a sax in heat.
It's not the dread that shakes my soul,
but what they seek: the mole, the hole,
the hidden smudge, the shadowed fate,
the snag inside my perfect shape.
Who knew how noisy thought can be,
beneath the dome of scrutiny.
No voice. No touch. Just phantom dread,
the weight of everything unsaid.
I thought I'd nap. But here I am,
folded beneath a giant clam.
And in its mouth, I try to be
the perfect stillness: patient, me.

Gray Matter
by
Garin Cycholl

Why was I responsible for the Bishop's funeral? Sure, I'd been attached to the diocesan office for a couple of years, but only because Bishop Pfister had wanted to, in his words, "keep an eye on me."

Shortly after my ordination, he said to me, "You're a real degenerate, you know, of course."

What could I say? I nodded.

The mortician from Hollins and Kriegbaum called on Saturday morning to tell me that Pfister had died in his sleep. I was shaving. Bud, the mortician and a good Catholic to boot, told me that Pfister had left a note that I was to be in charge of planning the wake and memorial service. I was dumbfounded. Why me? I hung up the phone. The old priest was standing in the doorway.

"The Bishop's just died," I said. "You'll have to handle the confessions by yourself this afternoon. Can I borrow your car?"

The old priest grunted, left the keys on my dresser, and went back to his room to smoke.

Details, details. The diocesan officials had already selected a coffin, a plain cherry box. One official had a lumpy pile of Pfister's vestments strung over his arm.

"We won't need those," I said.

"Why?" the man asked.

"Because Bishop Pfister wanted to be buried naked."

Looks of disbelief from the morticians in their blue suits and the men from the diocese.

"I don't have anything written to prove that," I said. "But the Bishop often said in our conversations that he wanted to go out of this world in the way that he'd come into it."

Pfister probably would have appreciated my small deception. Rather than the casual look of the priest in short shirt sleeves or the full bishop's regalia, an incenser tucked under his arm like a late-arriver at a party clutching a velvet-wrapped bottle of Dry Sack. Still, the good Catholics stared.

"I suppose we could ignore his wishes, but—"

"No," said one of the men. "A bishop's last wish is his last wish."

They all nodded, although Bud looked skeptical.

Details, details. The wake would be Monday night, the service the following morning. His pallbearers would be friends culled from among his seminary classmates. The preacher, a thin, big-voiced priest from the South Side. The wake would be simple. An open casket there, a white pall at the memorial service. We settled it all within an hour, Pfister's body in

the other room, stretched out on the embalming table. It was already in the middle of its slow, self-regulated stew. His thoughts, liquid, drained with the cold blood through plastic tubes.

Around three A.M., Bud called me.

"You'd better get down here," he said.

I begged off. It was the middle of the night. I had five masses scheduled the next day. My imagination sorted what the old priest would exact from in exchange for hearing the full round of confessions. [My friend, Michos, hadn't called in five days.]

"No, you'd better get down here."

At the mortuary, we stood beside the embalming table, both staring with disbelieving eyes.

"I've heard about this before, but never actually seen it," Bud said.

Bishop Janus Pfister lay on the table—cold, unmoving, reclined, unchanged all but for a stunning eight-inch erection, lifted straight from some pornographer's dream.

"It's like when a dog gets hit by a car," Bud said. "His carcass'll have an erection. My old man called it a 'hard peter.' All the fluids collect in one place, they say."

"Does anyone else know about this?" I asked.

He shook his head. We said nothing. What could we say in the presence of that dead man's pecker?

"We could still have an open casket at the wake," he said. "The material should cover it."

"Do you think—" But I had no thought to finish.

"I could take it off," Bud said.

The thought of the mortician climbing onto table, astride Pfister and his massive dong, waving a pair of loppers seemed too undignified, even for this dead curmudgeon.

"No," I said. "Do you think we could tie it down with something?"

Bud disappeared into the side office where they kept information on death records and police reports. He returned with a rubber band, the thickness of two fingers and the circumference of the average man's leg. Together, we slid it up Pfister's naked left leg. I had to lean across the table and his erection kept tapping my shoulder. When we got the rubber band mid-thigh, Bud put on a pair of surgical gloves, yanked Pfister's penis down, and slid it carefully beneath the rubber band.

"That ought to hold it," he said.

I nodded.

On Monday night, we gathered for the Bishop's wake. Those who came to pay their respects would walk up to the casket, stare down at the naked corpse, Pfister's scratchy, thin hair poking up through his fatty chest. They'd walk away, dead-faced, saying nothing. We got over it though. The open bar helped. Pfister's seminary classmates, a thin crowd of horny, old priests stood hung-armed, sipping Jameson's from half-filled plastic cups while one priest stood in the middle telling dirty jokes. People came and left. The dirty joke-teller prayed the rosary. We sat in the folding chairs, listening politely. Although in the middle of the prayers, there was a loud snap. I lifted my head in time to see Pfister's still erect penis fly end over end across the room into a bank of Chinese evergreens. I watched it. A few others acknowledged the sound, but didn't see or didn't believe what they saw. Bud wasn't there. My own private revelation.

After the wake, I slipped over to the bank of plants, reached in, and grabbed it. Without looking, I put it into my jacket pocket and left.

It was beautiful, the way that it rolled through the air, like a baton slung by some sparkling Texas schoolgirl. It was near midnight and [although Michos hadn't called in a week,] things seemed right. The trumpet on the radio, Pfister's penis in my coat pocket on the seat next to me. These happy thoughts filled me as I went through the red light at Milwaukee and Fullerton. The cop's lights startled me.

"Good evening, Father. Did you notice that you went through that red light back there?"

"No. I'm sorry, officer. It's been a long day. I'm just coming from the Bishop's funeral."

"I understand. Can I just see your license and registration?"

"Certainly." I reached across and opened the glovebox, fishing for the registration for the old priest's car. It wasn't there.

"I'm sorry. It doesn't seem to be there. This is a friend's car. Father Krueger's. It—"

The cop shrugged.

"Don't worry, Father. I'll just call it in."

I watched in the rear-view mirror as the cop went back to his car. Nervously, I looked down to see Pfister's penis shining brightly on the seat next to me. I grabbed it and dashed from the car towards the nearest alleyway.

The cop's voice came over the loudspeaker: "Hold it there, Father."

I ignored him. I ran. The cop's voice following me. Turned the corner. Ran. Into the alley. I ran. Down. Into the world.

Contributor Biographies



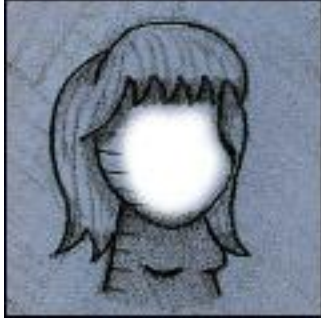
Steven Demmler is a writer/producer repped by WME and 3 Arts Entertainment. Recently his films have screened at Cannes, Sundance, Fantasia, and Fantastic Fest. He studied for his MFA in Dramatic Writing at NYU Tisch but weirdly obtained an MSc in Global Finance from Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.



Paul Burgess is the sole proprietor of a business in Lexington, Kentucky that offers ESL classes in addition to English, Japanese, and Spanish-language translation and interpretation services. He has recently contributed work to *Blue Unicorn*, *The Orchards*, *Light*, *The Asses of Parnassus*, and several other publications.



Erin Elizabeth Williams (she/her) has two degrees in religion that she doesn't use, a dead cat named Kurt Vonnekat, and a house from 1890 that leaks every time it rains. Her fiction has appeared in *JAKE*, *God's Cruel Joke*, and some other cool places. Her only social media is Instagram and she barely ever posts, but she can be found at @erinelizabethyo or at erinelizabethwilliams.com.



Helga Kidder lives in the Tennessee hills where she is inspired by everyday life and the woods. Her poems have previously been published in *Orbis*, *Atlanta Review*, *Lit Shark*, and others. She has five books of poetry, *Learning Curve*, *Loving the Dead* (which won the Blue Light Press Book Award), *Blackberry Winter*, *Luckier than the Stars*, and *Wild Plums*. Some of her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

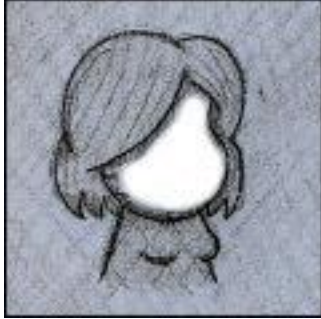


Peter McAllister teaches Creative Writing for the University of Hull. He is the editor and co-founder of *Inkfish Magazine* and a committee member for the Penzance Literary Festival. In 2025, Peter is the Writer in Residence at The Morrab Library, Penzance, UK.

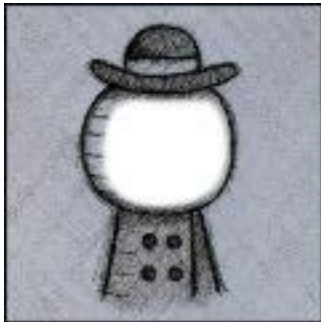
Peter's writing builds layers of narrative through linked pieces that result in profound moments of self-realisation or dramatic action. He has been shortlisted and highly commended in several International Literary Prizes for his short-form fiction and poetry. His work has been published online, in print journals and numerous anthologies.



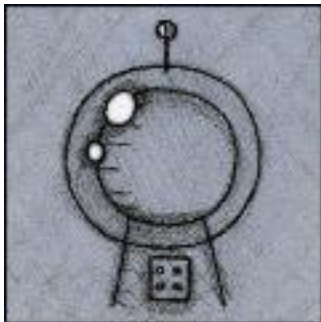
Sydney Halsey is currently a student at Boise State University. She's working on a major in Marketing (so her future job applications look good) and a minor in Creative Writing (so she doesn't lose her mind with all the business classes). This is her first publication.



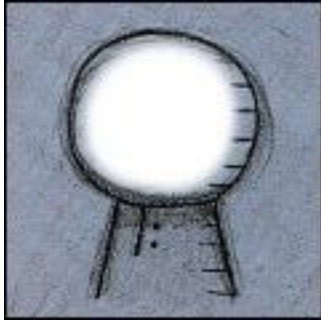
Georgia Syribeys lives in Cumming, Georgia. A lyric narrative poet, she has worked as a private investigator, feminist lobbyist, and itinerant Latin teacher. Born in Montgomery, Alabama, she was brought up in a bicultural household, is fluent in Greek and English. She is published in *Arion*, *Atlanta Review*, *Dappled Things*, *Illuminations*, *Legacy*, *Kalliope*, *SLANT*, *Time of Singing* (5), *The Texas Review* (2), *National League of American Pen Women and Voices*. Her book, *Sea Seething At My Feet*, five sections and 52 poems was published in 2015.



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



L.M. George is a former middle school teacher who lives in Los Angeles County. She is a big fan of Pajama Day, and she believes that the superintelligent A.I. takeover will take place sometime around 2050.



David Bernard grew up in the Westcountry of England, but refuses to be drawn on whether it was Cornwall or Devon. He now lives in rural Herefordshire, a county known mostly for its farmland. David isn't a farmer, but does something nebulous called 'business change.' He used to be a high school teacher, until he realised there were less traumatic ways of making a living. His poems have appeared in *Wildfire Words*.



Nicholas De Marino is a neurodivergent poet and published crackpot. He founded *Senses* and is a *foofaraw* columnist. He likes petting spiders, watching cats, and writing about both. Read more at nicholasdemarino.com.



Robert Garnham's short stories have been published widely in magazines such as *Stand*, *Defenestration*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, and others, and his poetry in *Acumen*, *Tribe*, and *the Broadsheet*. In 2021 and 2022 he was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He writes a humorous newspaper column in the *Herald Express*. He performs comedy poetry all over the UK at fringes, festivals and TV, and had one of the funniest one-liners of the 2018 Edinburgh Fringe. He was recently featured very briefly on *Britain's Got Talent*. In 2024 he won the Wergle Flomp poetry competition. Robert is based in Devon, in the UK.



David Elliot Eisenstat's poems have appeared in *Midway Journal*, *The Pierian*, and *Rust & Moth*, among others. A Poetry Editor for *Variant Lit*, he lives in Brooklyn. Find more of his work at <https://www.davideisenstat.com/poetry/>. Photo credit: @KathrynCooperWeddings on Instagram.



Dimitry Partsi is an Australian writer who specializes in finding the absurdity in modern corporate and social life. He is currently working on a collection of short stories.



Michael J. Kolb is a poet, archaeologist, and recovering optimist living in Colorado who walks dogs that are much more forgiving than he is. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Third Wednesday*, *Eunoia Review*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Moss Piglet*, *WestWard Quarterly*, and various folders on his desktop. A few years back he survived an organ transplant and has been writing strange poems about the body, memory, and medical absurdity ever since.



Garin Cycholl's recent work includes *Rx*, a novel about a man practicing medicine without a license in a (Dis)united States.