

◆ Defenestration ◆

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That Special Time of Year

by
Sean Cahill

The room was festooned with garlands and tinsel. Pinecones and sprigs of holly were taped to the walls, and a foamy blanket of fake snow covered the teacher's desk. On the chalkboard was a crude drawing of a late-model SUV, along with some dollar signs and percentages.

Scott took it all in as he followed his son's teacher, Mr. Thomas, into the fourth-grade classroom. With the fall semester winding down, it was time for a parent-teacher conference with the man his 9-year-old had described as "the best teacher EVER." Scott had been to several of these meetings in the past—they mostly concerned grades, behavior, and homework performance. But this time there was something else on his mind.

Mr. Thomas invited him to take a seat in front of his snowy desk, which Scott did with some difficulty, settling into a chair made for a child.

"Mr. Baldwin, I've been eager to speak with you about Cody's first semester of fourth grade," Mr. Thomas began. "You've got a really bright son."

"Thank you. We certainly think so."

"Yes, he's a curious little sprat if ever there was one. Eager to learn. Their minds are like sponges at this age."

Scott's eyes drifted to a miniature Christmas tree sitting on a nearby table. An ornament featuring Santa Claus driving a Japanese-style sports car hung on a sagging branch.

"Listen, Mr. Thomas," said Scott. "Cody's always been a good student. I'd be surprised to learn of a problem in that department. But I was hoping to talk to you about something that happened with him at home. Something I think you may be able to help me understand."

"Oh? I'll try my best."

Scott took off his baseball hat and ran a hand through his graying hair. "Well, he came home from school last week and asked my wife and I if we could drive down to Orange County over the weekend to visit a Honda dealership."

Mr. Thomas raised an eyebrow.

"He said he wanted to see the *Happy Honda-Days Year-End Sales Event*. As you can imagine, Mr. Thomas, we were mortified. My wife was so upset she went to the guest room and cried until the kids were asleep."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Mr. Thomas.

"And when I asked Cody why he was curious about this particular sales event, he said he learned about it from you—right here in this classroom. Which is a problem, Mr. Thomas, because in our family we proudly celebrate the *Toyotathon December to Remember Holiday Sales Event*."

Mr. Thomas removed his glasses, folded them, and tucked them into his shirt pocket with a heavy sigh. He understood now where this was all going.

"When I was a boy, Mr. Thomas, my father would pile us all in the '82 Previa and drive us to a dealership in San Bernardino to look at the low-low prices on Celicas and Corollas. Those are cherished holiday memories in my family. And this year we were going to honor that tradition by taking Cody to Farraday Toyota in Burbank to look at the all-new Crew Cab Tundra with heated seats and four-wheel drive. It's available for 0% down and 0% APR for 36 months for qualified buyers."

"Mr. Baldwin," the teacher cut in, "I think I understand your concern. You think that I've been teaching the children—evangelizing to them—about the *Happy Honda-Days Year-End Sales Event*. That I'm somehow abusing my position as an educator to lure students away from the beloved traditions of their families and homes. Is that the gist of it?"

Mr. Baldwin shifted in his minuscule seat. It creaked beneath his weight. "I... well, that's a blunt way to put it, but yes. Look, I understand not everyone celebrates the *Toyotathon December to Remember*, but it seems like school is hardly the place to be pushing alternative sales events on children."

"I agree completely."

"You do?"

"Yes," said Mr. Thomas. "Because that's not what I've been doing. All my students are welcome to celebrate this special time of year however they like. I encourage an open exchange of ideas in this classroom, Mr. Baldwin. Why, little Patricia Wang did a whole report on how her family celebrates *Seasons of Subaru at Mandalay Hyundai and Subaru of Thousand Oaks*. She read it for the whole class last week, and I have to say it was a hit."

Scott eyed the Santa-in-a-sports-car ornament hanging from the nearby Christmas tree. "But my son isn't interested in Subarus right now. Say, that ornament over there, that's Santa in a Honda S2000 coupe, isn't it?"

Mr. Thomas's eyes flicked to the tree.

"You gonna tell me little Patricia Wang brought that in here?"

"I... may have brought a few items from home to decorate the classroom, bu—"

"And that SUV on the chalkboard? That's a Honda CR-V, right?"

"Mr. Baldwin, really I—"

"What do you celebrate, Mr. Thomas? In your personal life? I have a right to know who's teaching my son."

The men exchanged a tense stare.

Finally, Mr. Thomas stood up, smoothed his tie hand-over-hand, and declared "if you must know, Mr. Baldwin, I celebrate the *Happy Honda-Days Year-End Sales Event*. Yes, it's true. And I am not ashamed. Every year since I was a boy, I've gone to see the deals on offer from America's fourth most reliable automaker. Why, just this year alone you can lease an

all-new 2026 Honda Civic for only \$299 a month, and that includes an eight-month trial of Sirius-XM satellite radio. And if you're in the market for used, qualified buyers can take advantage of Honda's Certified Pre-Owned program to get seasonal deals on low-mileage Accords, Odysseys, and Pilots."

"Listen, you son of a bitch," said Scott, shooting up from his seat and pointing a trembling finger at his son's teacher from across the desk. "I understand it's a free country and you can shop wherever you want. But you keep that Happy Honda horseshit away from my boy, do you hear me? Or it's going to be *you* who has a December to Remember this year."

Mr. Thomas sneered. "Is that a threat?"

"Just stop talking to my boy about Honda-Days. That's the last time I'm gonna say it."

Scott put his cap back on his head and turned to leave.

"He's a curious boy," said Mr. Thomas in a melodic tenor just as he reached the door. "Such an apt pupil. No doubt his curiosity will take him far come the spring semester."

Scott stopped, hand on doorknob, knuckles turning white. Then he thought better of it.

In the hall was a large man—clearly some other child's parent. He had a bushy beard and leathery, sun-damaged skin. He was chewing a wad of tobacco, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Scott noticed he was wearing a t-shirt with a "Chevrolet" logo on it.

Their eyes met, and after a moment, Scott spoke.

"Merry Christmas."

He turned and began the long walk back to his Tacoma.

What Ephesians Said by Kate Horsley

On the dating app called *Gotcha*, the tag line reads *connecting the unusual*, but the mechanics are the same as *Tinder* or *Raya* or *Grindr*. You swipe right for *yes*, left for *no*, send winks and pokes and pics. The app has a map thingy that helps you echolocate your date like a bat when you're matched. This is what Nate did the night he met Peta, following a green line along Des Moines Avenue, all the way to Charlie's Kitchen, where his destiny awaited.

In the section marked *Philosophy*, Peta's said *better the Devil you don't know*. In her bio, she wrote about how she loved *extreme cat vids*. *Quotes to live by* was from Ephesians 5:12 in The Bible, "It is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret." Nate worried that this meant she was religious, but his room-mate Vaughn reassured him it was a commonly understood reference to anal.

"If your date tanks, give her my number." Vaughn gazed down at Peta's profile pic. "She has a demonic glint."

"My date won't tank." Nate flung his messenger bag over his shoulder.

Vaughn's buddies cracked up laughing because Nate's dates always tanked. Then they went back to getting high and watching the game and eating cold pizza, a Sunday ritual Nate was never part of.

Charlie's Kitchen was a typical college bar—dark, dirty, a quick stumble of steps from a White Hen Pantry. Huddled over a pitcher of Sam Adams in a corner booth, Nate and Peta shot the shit about their majors. Four beers down, Nate slid his arm around Peta's shoulders. Rather than object, she put her face up to be kissed. They'd rounded second base and were tumbling towards third by the time the bar closed.

"Back to mine?" That glint of the eyes.

"Sure." Nate was questioning how easy this felt, but she was undeniably hot.

"One word of warning," she smiled over her shoulder. "If we run into my housemate, do not speak to him. Like, literally. Do not."

"Um... sure," said Nate. That wasn't sounding awesome. But, whatever, he didn't have to stay the night.

The house was a clapped-out colonial in Porter Square, haphazardly divvied into student apartments. Inside, the place was a little basic. They didn't spend too much time on the tour, though, because Peta yanked him into her room and shoved him down on the bed, where the warnings of Ephesians 5:12 became fleshly reality.

Nate woke with a jolt at 3:45, when it was both too late and too early to leave. Desperate for a piss and some water, he satisfied first one bodily function, then the other, chugging

from the faucet. Either he'd drunk way more than he thought, or those unnatural acts with Peta had dehydrated him.

A blue glow flickered from the den. He padded across the linoleum, bare feet velcroing the sticky floor. Some dude sprawled on the beat-up couch, bong in hand, glued to a college basketball game. Nate loitered in the background, remembering Peta's warning. But the game and the bong called to him, he who was never invited to bro down with Vaughn.

"I'm Nate." He perched on the empty side of the couch.

"Ur," the guy coughed through a mouthful of smoke. "That's my name. Ur. King of the Underworld. Want a hit?"

"Don't mind if I do," Nate laughed.

Nate became a fixture at the clapped-out colonial. He'd meet Peta for beer, then they'd head back to hers to ignore the warnings of Ephesians. In the small hours, when Peta was curled on her side, Nate would go in search of Ur.

If that even was his name. Nate didn't care. He'd never dreamt of befriending anyone as cool as Ur. This was a guy who only ate cold pizza and never wore more than boxers and a Nirvana shirt. He loved basketball, but he didn't get mad if Duke lost. He just chilled on the couch, passing his bong to Nate at generous intervals. Whatever stripe of hash was in that tube was dynamite. Every time a player sunk a solid hoop, Ur slapped the couch, or clapped Nate on the thigh, like guys do.

As for Peta, she was DTF every date and hated spooning. Plus, she went Dutch. Honestly, though, that was *all* they were doing. Beer. Food. Ephesians. Some nights another Old Testament heavy hitter. There just wasn't much *connection*. But with Ur... he didn't say much. He didn't have to. When Nate was sitting with him on the couch, smoking, laughing, he felt he'd come home.

Which is why what happened next hurt. One night—and Nate would always regret this—he told Peta he had a headache.

"Whatever," she grunted, rolling on her side.

But she must not have meant it, or maybe she never fell into that deep coma that overtook as soon as they'd boned. Later, Nate was in his usual spot on the couch, Ur cracking up at some Heisman moment of the game, when she padded into the den. Her hair stuck out every which way and she was wearing Nate's Adventure Time t-shirt. There was something so... sad... about the way she looked first at Nate, then at Ur.

Her voice shook. "Didn't I tell you?"

A wild thing happened. Her brown eyes, brim-full of tears, turned blinding white. Searchlights strafing the room, settling on Nate. Her lips shuddered out words Nate didn't understand. Ur's head turned slowly towards her, a stone lid moving from the top of a well. He answered her in ancient-sounding, guttural noises. His deep voice, that had always been easy, was harsh.

Ur's head swivelled back to Nate. "This demon claims you disobeyed her command," he shrugged, speaking in his normal dude-bro voice.

"I... I guess..."

"She says she must now burn you to an ash pile, as is her eternal right." Ur said this gently, like a doctor breaking bad news.

"But... you're my friend?" It was a Hail Mary, for sure. He could have gone with *she's my girlfriend*, and maybe everything would have ended differently.

Ur nodded sagely. "You speak truth. I, eternally lonely on this plane, have taken solace in your friendship. Yet Ereshkigal speaks truth, too. A law has been broken and amends must be made."

Nate's blood froze. He wanted to be tough, but he found himself squeezing his eyes tight shut and pissing himself a little. In the black space of his paralysing fear, he felt the tremor of an earthquake, heard a bang, like lightning striking a tree, smelled the stench of burned hair.

When he opened his eyes, Ur still sat beside him, as calm as ever. Nate's bare thighs still sprawled on the couch in front of him and his sweaty palms stuck to the fake leather like a couple of tongues. In the corner by the TV lay a smoking pile of ash.

"Fuck," Nate gasped. "Is that...?"

"Ereshkigal broke the laws of our realm and so she was punished." Ur flicked the wheel of his Bic lighter against the bong and breathed deep. Bubbles rumbled in the murky bong water and this time Nate could swear he heard the shrieking of a billion hell-trapped souls.

"As for you human, I have spared you. But you must depart to your own realm, never to return." Ur gave a baleful look, then snapped his fingers, neatly depositing Nate in his apartment.

Nate slept for about a week after that and was crazy thirsty. When he was on his own, he cried a lot. Some of it was for Peta, what happened to her because of him. Honestly, though, most of it was for Ur. He must have looked super bummed, because Vaughn started letting him in on pizza nights.

After a few weeks, he didn't cry, but he didn't show up for work or school either. He was too busy wandering around Porter Square, hunting for that clapped out colonial that had been so easy to find in the dark when Peta was pulling him along by the hand. When he wasn't wasting his time on that one, he was browsing on *Gotcha*, peering into the eyes of every halfway-hot woman on there. If one of them had a demonic look, then maybe he could find his way back somehow.

None ever did. So, he'd throw down his phone and bend the pillow round his head to muffle the sound of Vaughn and whatever girl he'd just matched with, and that girl's loud, fake screams. And he would stare at a hair-fine, jagged crack that ran along the ceiling up above him and wonder what had changed and why he felt so empty all the time now, even more than before. Had he learned something important? No, he hadn't. He definitely hadn't at all.

Sylvia Plath Goes to Whole Foods
by
Chris Turner

The kale bunches, thick-skulled and Germanic,
Green as envy. Eight dollars, ninety-nine
For what Aurelia pulled free
From Wellesley soil. I buy three bundles of virtue
That will blacken like the bell jar.
The Greek yogurt cultures multiply,
Multiply in plastic tombs, \$7.99 each,
Promising civilizations in my gut
I will never achieve.
I am thirty. My microbiome is dead, dead.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard,
Even your sauerkraut had more probiotics.
The cashier, blonde as butter,
Asks if I found everything okay.
Everything? EVERYTHING?
I found nothing but seventeen types
Of artisanal bread, each crust
More pretentious than my Ariel manuscript,
But I crave, I crave Wonder Bread
Like Otto's love.
At checkout: \$247.83 for enlightenment.
The receipt unfurls like my death certificate—
Three bundles of superfood kale
That will rot, rot
While I eat Pop-Tarts in my bathrobe.

Ben Dover Has Died From Dysentery
by
Christy Hartman

Ben Dover Has Died From Dysentery—

The words blinked across the bulky monitor, in neon-green pixelated 1983 technology.

"Dude, dysentery is a bitch!" Matt Cooper squinted at the rudimentary picture of an ox and wagon, and then shifted his hazy gaze to his friend Snake, laying on the floor.

"What's that?" Snake asked, pointing up with one hand while reaching blindly for the paper plate of gooey brownies behind his head with the other.

"It means I shit myself to death." Matt replied before dissolving into laughter.

Snake erupted along with his friend. "I meant where'd you get that?" he wheezed, pointing at the Tandy 1000 perched on the oak desk in the Cooper's basement.

"Probably from a dirty ox." Matt answered, howling at his joke while he popped another brownie into his mouth.

"The computer dumb ass! It wasn't there yesterday." Snake sat up, peering at the screen through red-rimmed eyes. "And, who's Ben?"

"A surprise from Dad yesterday. This Oregon Trail game's awesome!" Matt opened the list of top scores. Lou Stool, Rusty Pecker and Ben Dover were in the first three spots.

Matt, overcome with his own hilarity, guffawed himself right out of the chair, and onto Snake, the shag carpet, and the plate of brownies.

Snake emitted a guttural *Ooooh-Yeah*, threw his arm across Matt and with the speed of a scared slug, wrestled him into a headlock. "Feel the wrath of Hulkamania!"

Matt bucked his legs to free himself from Snake's grip. In the process, he knocked the oatmeal-coloured monitor off the desk. The heavy screen bounced off Matt before smacking Snake on his carrot-haired noggin. The teens roiled on the carpet alternating between groans of pain and laughter. Matt attempted to focus on the cartoon stars flying around as the room began to spin. Faster and faster.

"Axle...?"

The spinning stopped and the stars disappeared.

"Huh?" Matt lifted his head from the rough wooden boards and squinted up at the man staring at him like a zoo exhibit, with the bushiest gray beard and eyebrows Matt had ever seen.

"Son, this ain't no place to take a nap. You got an axle or not." The man impatiently tapped his index finger on a glass cabinet.

Matt gaped, open-mouthed. The man shuffled backward until he was out of view. Moments later the tinkle of a bell and soft thud of a door shutting snapped Matt out of his trance.

"Dude, how many brownies did we eat?" Snake's languid voice drawled from behind him. Matt pulled himself to his feet and took in the surroundings. He was behind the long glass counter filled with knives, axes, and other metal objects he couldn't identify. The small room was stuffed with wooden barrels, burlap sacks, rudimentary hand tools and bolts of cloth.

"You look so dumb." Snake snorted. Matt looked down and saw his Levis and Led Zeppelin shirt had been replaced by itchy wool pants, a tea-coloured linen shirt and suspenders.

"I wouldn't talk. You look like Pa from *Little House on The Prairie*," Matt replied.

"Oh no, Blind Mary is trapped in the old barn. I need to save her," Snake said in a sing-song voice, skipping around the room, a black felt hat perched on top of his head.

Matt grabbed Snake by the shoulder and pointed at *Matt's General Store* painted in green above the wooden door. "Homie, look! It's like from the game—gnarly!"

Snake's eyes widened as he looked from the sign to Matt before clapping his friend on the back enthusiastically. "Congrats man! I didn't know you bought a store."

The boys hooted with laughter until they were interrupted by the jingle of the bell over the door. A buxom woman in a long dusty dress and straw hat sashayed towards the counter.

"Good day ma'am welcome to Matt's Marvellous Mercantile." Matt bowed deeply.

"Dude! Did you just make that up?" Snake stared at him, slack jawed. "You're like a poet and didn't know it."

"It just sort of popped into my brain. I think I might be a genius here." Matt closed his eyes, concentrating. "Roses are red, violets are blue. We sell shovels and pickaxes too!"

Snake put up his palm for a high five. "You need to write that down! Awesome!"

The woman stared, wide-eyed, from one teen to the other, taking in the exchange. She blinked slowly several times before speaking. "I'm Mrs. Stitts. I'm in need of one full sack of grain."

"Mrs. Stitts, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Matt." He held out his hand.

The woman softened slightly and lightly pressed her fingers to his. "You can call me Norma."

"Norma Stitts needs her sack filled!" Matt called to Snake in the back room.

Snake exploded with a room-shaking hee-haw. "My pleasure ma'am," he replied. He resumed scooping grain, mumbling "Norma Stitts" every few seconds, followed by fits of giggles.

A disheveled man stepped up to the counter, shoulders drooping. "Solomon Tobias Bauls, here to pick up my new wagon wheels," he said somberly.

"Why so glum, chum?" Matt said, smiling brightly.

"My Mavis died from dysentery yesterday." The big man sniffed.

"Disen-tery? Serves her right!" Called Snake from the back where he was still filling Norma's sack. "What'd Terry ever do to her?"

In a surprising burst of speed, the man pushed past Matt, grabbed Snake by the collar and backed him into a wall of wagon wheels. "What'd you say about Mavis?"

"Ok Sol, calm down." Matt wedged himself between the two men. "Snake, our friend here said Dys-en-ter-y! No one was dissin' Terry!"

The purple-faced man lowered Snake to the floor. "Just get me my wheels so I can get outta here."

Matt looked through the large ledger book on the counter, scanning the names. "Ah, here we go. Four wheels for Sol T. Bauls."

Snake's whoop of laughter echoed through the little store and Mavis' poor widower could do nothing but watch as both teens doubled over with laughter.

"What's your name, young man?" He asked angrily. The boys struggled to catch their breath. Matt managed to squeak out "He's Ssssssnake."

"Snake! Where?" Solomon jumped around the room, grabbed a rake and scrambled onto the counter. "Is it a copperhead?"

"My mom says my hair's auburn." Snake stopped laughing and looked at the man indignantly. "And she says it's beautiful, like a sunset!"

"He's talking about the snake, Snake." Matt brushed spilled grain from his wool pants.

"You're both loons! I'll get my wheels somewhere else." Mr. Bauls slid off the counter and huffed out.

"Here you go, Mrs. Stitts." Matt handed her the full bag. "Happy trails!"

Norma departed with her grain.

"What now?" Snake propped himself up on a barrel, surveying the shop.

"Do you have any more brownies?" Matt slumped to the floor, the weed and adrenaline of the last hour abandoned his body at the same time.

"They're in your basement," Snake replied. "How do we get back there?"

"I don't even know how we got here," Matt said. "The game ends when the player either makes it to the Willamette Valley or dies."

"I'm too young to die!" Snake cried out. "I've never kissed a girl and I'm supposed to see *Return of the Jedi* in the theatre next week!"

"I guess we need to hitch a ride," Matt said with a sigh. The two stood up and shuffled out the front door to the bustling street. Settlers loaded wagons with months' worth of supplies, tended to livestock that looked skinny and hungry already, and gossiped in small groups about everything from runaway wives to illegitimate babies.

A frazzled man limped towards them and implored in a thick French accent. "I hope you are not closing for zee day. I need to buy a cane. I fell off zee wagon."

"A cane's not going to help you with that Buddy! Just need some good old-fashioned willpower!" Snake said under his breath.

Matt shot a threatening look at Snake and continued. "Sorry friend, we don't have any canes, but I have an even better idea." Matt pointed at the wagon. "We'll help with your wagon in exchange for a ride."

The man held out his hand. "I'm Monsieur Strappe, but call me Jacques." Matt helped him into the wagon seat.

Snake climbed into the seat beside him and whispered. "Don't feel bad, my Granny's fallen off the wagon dozens of times and she's still alive. But she's a lot less fun when she's on the wagon."

"Let's roll!" Matt called from the back of the wagon before Jacque had a chance to respond. The wagon set off, creaking and bouncing along the trail to Oregon.

The next four months were filled with struggles as the travelers faced perils flying at them with rapid speed. First Jacques' injured leg developed gangrene and the Frenchman was dead within a week.

Jacques Strappe Died From Gangrene

Despite being alone on the trail, they managed to stay alive and avoid trouble until they came across Norma walking along the trail, drenched from the rain, tears streaming down her mud-streaked face.

"Bandits tossed me out of my wagon and took off with all my belongings." Norma wept as the boys helped her into the back of the wagon, piling wool blankets onto her shivering body. When they stopped again that evening Norma was burning hot to the touch. The fever killed her the next day.

Norma Stitts Died From Fever

Their oxen dropped dead two weeks later - seemingly out of the blue. With nothing to pull their wagon, Matt and Snake begged for mercy from Solomon Bauls. He agreed to let the boys ride in his wagon in exchange for the rest of their supplies.

Sol hadn't returned to Matt's General Store for his new wheels, a decision he deeply regretted as they began to cross the Willamette River. Two wheels got stuck in the mucky river bottom and that was all it took for the trip to turn disastrous.

"Dear Jesus, I'm sorry I stole that Playboy from 7-11 and hid it in the woods. I'm sorry I didn't pay for my Columbia House subscription. I'm sorry I..."

"Snake! Snap out of it!" Matt shouted at his friend over the roar of the river. Water was pouring in on all sides as the wagon floated along.

"Jump fellas!" Solomon called from the front of the wagon. "1... 2... 3..." Splash! Matt pulled the canvas flap open in time to see him jump into the water, surfacing briefly only to be dragged back under by the current.

Sol T. Bauls Died From Drowning

"It's now or never. Swim as hard as you can." Matt held out his hand to Snake and the two plunged into the frigid river just as the wagon broke apart. When they resurfaced the canvas was barely visible, bobbing through the frothy water.

They swam and drifted for several hundred yards before the current dragged them close to shore. Matt and Snake pulled themselves onto the rocks, panting with exhaustion.

"Look!" Snake pointed at a neon green orb floating in mid-air fifty feet from shore.

"That must be the end of the game. Let's go!" Matt and Snake clambered to their soaking-wet feet and sloshed their way towards the light. The world began to spin as they drew close and Matt felt himself being dragged forward.

"Delicious..."

"Huh?" Matt raised his head from the plush carpet, shaking out the fuzzy feeling. His father and mother stared down at him. Chewing slowly.

"Did your mom make these Snake?" Mrs. Cooper popped the last brownie into her mouth. "I need the recipe."

"We thought we'd see if this computer stuff is fun for us oldies too." Mr. Cooper reached for the keyboard.

"No!" Matt and Snake shouted in unison. Matt rolled across the floor and pulled the plug from the outlet. "How about we play scrabble?"

My Hot Broker
by
K. G. Kirkland

I arrived at the apartment 10 minutes early. I had an appointment with the guy with a big smile on the real estate website. I tapped my phone and pinched at his face to make it bigger. He wasn't completely bad looking, either.

I'd been feeling lonely ever since my long-term boyfriend passed away in our local Vietnam War re-enactment. It was something we did for fun in my hometown of Mendota Heights, Minnesota. He died a heroic death: he got his leg blasted off by a grenade that everyone thought had been a costume prop, but they really do sell functional hand grenades on *functionalhandgrenades.com*. Geoffrey had started to bleed out of his stump, perhaps fatally. So I asked the doctor if he was going to make and she said, "yeah, almost definitely." But then I remembered that Geoffrey always told me—"if there's a day in this life that I'm hooked up to some machine, take me out back and shoot me in the back of the head." So that's what I did. And it was really hard, because he had definitely put on a few pounds during the winter.

Anyway, you might say that my move to New York City was to forget Geoffrey and our life together, our duplex, our board game nights. I craved the city. Night after night, the suburbs felt like death to me, or being taken out the back of Regions Hospital in an Ikea duffel bag and shot in the back of the head.

As a young and beautiful woman, I was hopeful for a new beginning.

"Hi, you're Liz, right?" a voice said behind me.

He was also early. I wasn't expecting him to be so handsome. Over six feet and flecks of silver in his hair. He had to be my real estate broker—my gateway to my New York City apartment.

I tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. "Yeah."

"Am I pronouncing that right? Liz?"

I blushed. Was he flirting with me? "Yes." I remembered my manners. "Sir."

"Okay, just checking because you appear to be a melanated POC."

He took the stairs three at a time, showing off his impressive gait. I followed close behind, looking at his buttocks firmly grab his standard real estate khakis.

"Nice," I said about his ass.

He opened the door to the apartment, revealing a beautiful three bedroom with an in-unit dishwashing machine.

"Nice," I said about the apartment.

He leaned back, propping up his body with his foot against the wall like a Hollister model. "You're here alone, without your roommates?"

"Yeah, it's just me." I looked up at the lofted ceilings, the sconced lighting. "Just me."

"Yeah, it's nice, right? Me and my wife used to dream about a spot like this."

"Used to?" I noticed the past tense as I toggled with the gas stove and rapped my fist against the drywall to test for sound insulation.

"Yeah, she died during a revolutionary war reenactment at Fort Greene." A single tear fell down his cheek.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I crossed the 1100 square foot apartment with south facing windows to put my arm around him, breathing in his woody musk. I wiped the tear off his face, which sparkled on my thumb.

"Thank you—I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm responding this way. I just—I have a way of opening up to you."

I rubbed his back. "My boyfriend died in a Vietnam War re-enactment."

"That's really weird. Who would have a Vietnam War re-enactment?"

"A bright and vibrant suburb in Minnesota," I retorted.

"You're Minnesotan?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Canadian!"

"Oh my god, you've got to be kidding me."

"Do you—do you love ice hockey?"

"Yeah, I miss it all the time."

He laughed and I felt like I'd known him a million years. I leaned in close and his fingers brushed across my face, electricity pulsating through my velvet underground.

"Do you want to show me the biggest bedroom?" I asked, with sultry inflection.

He smiled. Not with his eyes, but with his face. "If you're interested in the apartment, there's a \$750 in good faith deposit—and maybe we should get drinks around the corner first?"

"What?!" I exclaimed. I slapped him.

"Ouch, what? I'm trying to get to know you first?"

I slapped him again.

"No! I'm upset about this bogus good faith deposit thing!"

"Ow!"

Then I slapped him a third time, which might've been unnecessary.

"You stupid Canadian." Tears of betrayal ran down my face. "Don't you know that under the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act passed in 2019, New York City law prevents brokers from collecting anything higher than a \$20 application fee for background and credit checks?"

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS, NEW YORK TRANSPLANTS.

Two Poems **by** **Jeff Cove**

Horse Thoughts

If I was a horse,
I'd be, like... into horse stuff.
Running, probably.
Or standing still in a field,
which seems like a big part of it.
Eating grass?
Yeah, definitely eating grass.

Maybe someone would brush my mane.
Maybe I'd kick a fence post once in a while,
just to remind the world I had power.
But mostly I think I'd just stand there,
ears twitching,
pretending I understood the wind.

I didn't really think this through.
I wanted a metaphor,
something about freedom,
or strength,
or the unbroken line of wildness
from prairie to horizon.

Instead, all I have is grass in my mouth,
flies in my eyes,
and the uneasy sense
that even as a horse,
I'd still be looking around
for someone else to tell me
what I'm supposed to mean.

At the Eldritch Horror Zoo

They told us to stay with the group,
to keep our hands behind the rope.
But when the guide lifted the latch,
everyone leaned forward,
phones out,
ready for the spectacle.

And there it was—
the shoggoth,
its surface folding and re-folding,
eyes appearing and closing again,
a body that never decided
what shape to keep.

Someone said it was safe.
Someone said it liked attention.
So we pet it with care,
palms brushing its slick surface,
like stroking warm glass
that rippled when it breathed.

For a moment, it purred.
Or maybe that was the sound
of stars rearranging themselves.
Then the glyphs appeared—
on our wrists,
our cheeks,
our tongues—
burning faintly,
like ink scrawled by a hand
we could not see.

The guide cleared his throat.
"These marks are temporary," he said.
"They fade after a few weeks.
Most of them."
And then he smiled,
handing out pamphlets
with emergency numbers
in case the dreams
grew too loud.

The Coiled Snake

by
Remington Bishop Lamons

Mark's entrails screamed. He hobbled into the doctor's office, took the clipboard and gingerly sat. Nerves mixed with pain as he determined what to write. Mark rehearsed (in his mind, of course) his word choice and hand motions. He hoped his concerns were unwarranted. He'd likely be assigned to a room that hadn't been retrofitted yet. He drove past three other hospitals to get to County General, one of the last still under renovation.

Mark barely registered the female voice from the telescreen: "Healthcare has never been so accessible, for all subjects of the Beloved. We'll keep an eye on things to make sure nothing goes wrong. Hail to the Emperor!" A prerecorded "All hail his name" played. A few people in the waiting room joined in, nervously or mindlessly.

"Mark Guzman? Dr. Zelner will see you in room one."

Mark followed the assistant to the back. His heart dropped into his distended stomach. The large numeral "1" cut in half as the new carbon fiber doors retracted into the wall. Mark entered, avoiding looking at the Cilia Macula. The Cilia's single, dark red eye did not move, but Mark knew it was never off. He thought about leaving, but that would look suspicious. Anyway, he doubted whether he'd be able to walk out of the room without collapsing from the pain.

Dr. Zelner walked in with the ease of someone too busy to mind government monitoring. It appeared he was already used to the new camera in his workplace. "What can I do for you today, Mr. Guzman? Your chart here says 'general upper body discomfort.' You work a desk job, I see. That lifestyle can be killer on the neck and shoulders."

Mark was glad he hedged on the form. The fool! Why would he read it out loud? The next few lines would be crucial. "Oh sure well, yes I'd say it's more... thoracic in origin."

"In the lungs? Like trouble breathing? Or more in the chest?"

"No, more of a lower thoracic, I'd say." Mark stared at Dr. Guzman who was looking down at Mark's paperwork.

"Lower thoracic. Can you be more specific? Point to where it hurts." He looked up.

The dark grey glass eye in the wall remained inert, and watchful.

Now that he had the doctor's gaze, he had a chance. With practiced precision, Mark grabbed his bottom rib, but let his pointer finger drag, ever so slightly. The effect, he hoped, was one that looked to the AI as "lower thorax," but to a human as "my intestines feel like they're going to explode."

Mark's face looked calm. He tried to make it a communicative, frantic calm. He stared daggers into Dr. Zelner, whose back was to the eye.

Clarity rose over Dr. Zelner's face. "Trauma to the lower ribs. How long has it been since the last time you... didn't have rib pain?"

"Almost ten days."

"Ten days! What are you eating, son? We need to clear you out... the pain, I mean. Clear out the pain." He hastily added: "I ask about diet because it can have an effect on rib cartilage strength."

It was a crucial misstep. The mediocre recovery was insufficient. The red iris of the Cilia lit up. It said nothing.

Two men and a computer sat still for a long moment.

Likely the Cilia's AI had flagged for an operator, even as it continued to record. Everyone knew the AI wasn't very good, but it was calibrated to be hypersensitive to potential Law Three violations. And since the edict abolishing doctor-patient confidentiality, conversations in hospitals had a low threshold for operator intervention. A human would not be so easily fooled.

The pain chipped away at Mark's forbearance. If he could just explain before the operator came, he'd could leave without getting into it. It was a foolish thought. A quarter of the town was already at Central, working as operators or support. One would join them soon. But Mark was desperate.

"Please, doc. Can't you just get me some fiber pills or something? Anything. I'm just so constip—"

"Identify." Human but cold. Not a question.

Mark stood too fast. A lightning bolt of pain shot through him. Dr. Zelner turned to face the Cilia.

"Dr. Robert Zelner, colon, Baltimore, colon, 385237."

"Mark Guzman, colon, Rockville, colon, 225398."

The bodiless voice ran the IDs. "Hail to the emperor."

"All hail his name," the two chorused.

"What seems to be the problem today, Mr. Guzman?"

"Nothing too bad sir." Mark tasted bile. "Just injured my rib here."

"I see. Well AI flagged you boys as being at risk of violating Law Three. We're not talking about something we shouldn't, are we?"

"No sir." Dr. Zelner took the lead naturally. Hopefully he could carry both of them through this. Mark's stomach was all knives and fists.

He channeled his pain into hatred of that voice. He could picture its owner, crew cut hair, seated in his cubicle at Central. He would be wearing the empire's colors: chocolate brown uniform with the yellow seal emblazoned on his left arm. The seal Mark saw countless times per day. The seal he pledged to in his recorded home.

The eastern brown snake, coiled and resting on a bed of solid white dandelion.

The snake that conquered the world, with its cocktail of poisons.

"Do you know the Three Laws?"

"Of course, sir. We all know the Three Laws of His Awesomeness." Zelner again.

"Recite."

"We cannot recite them without violating law three, Sir."

"Good. Very good." A pause, likely for the operator to take notes, or consult a script or superior. The camera was, of course, one way. "You are both regular?"

Straightening his back to address the operator was agony. Sweat was starting to form on his upper lip. The room sloshed around Mark like soup. "Yes. I, I recite the pledge each morning."

Zelner responded. "Twice daily for me, Sir. Always pledge after my morning coffee, and again most afternoons."

Another pause as the operator pulled recent footage confirming their claims.

"Sing the anthem."

Without questioning, the two grown men began to sing. Dr. Zelner sang with gusto. Mark sang like a man who had a bullet in his gut.

*From Germany to the USA,
His name we will proudly bellow,
His snake flies forever, and all will bow,
Before the great brown and yellow.*

*Never again will we question his right,
His valor, his worth, his rule.
I dare not joke, He is highest in might,
And the world is his footstool.*

Mark steeled himself for the big finale. His voice was barely audible.

*For my Beloved I bow, I stoop,
For my Beloved Emperor Peup.*

Mark vomited on the ground. It was suctioned down through micro-vents, and a fresh sanitizer washed away the residue. A citrus smell filled the air. He actually felt a little better.

The red eye of the Cilia remained lit. Dr. Zelner remained at attention. Mark was doubled over, but still on his feet.

"As you were." The light dimmed to AI mode, quietly monitoring.

Mark collapsed back onto the patient table. Dr. Zelner rummaged around multiple drawers for a while, his back to the camera. He came up with a tongue depressor. "Sometimes rib pain can cause vomiting. Let me look at your throat."

Dr. Zelner pivoted so his body was close to Mark's, his back still to the camera. He barely touched his tongue with the wood, but squeezed his hand tightly. Mark felt a smooth object pass between them.

"I'd say you have a dislocated rib. Take some over the counter pain medicine and rest, it should relocate itself. Have a good day." Dr. Zelner quickly left the room.

Mark palmed the hard item as he hobbled to his feet. It felt like a rifle bullet. But there would be no need to hide that from the camera. No, Mark knew he was holding contraband. He didn't glance down. He casually put his hands in his jacket pockets, then pulled them out a moment later empty.

There was construction in the hall. New cameras were being installed, but the workers were out to lunch. Just below an uninstalled Cilia, Mark snuck a quick glance at what he, and the good doctor, risked so much for:

Amalax Rectal Suppository.

Mark sat doubled over in the driverless taxi, willing it to go faster. He did not raise his head toward The Effigy. He saw it daily, and didn't feel in the mood to say a pledge to the statue, despite the car-Cilia recording him.

The 13-year-old Emperor towered over the city, 169 feet tall, per his exact specifications.

Between the despot's seated knees, graven in the marble, granite, and limestone, were the three laws of Emperor Fahrt Peup:

1. Obey the Emperor.
2. No poop jokes. Punishable by death.
3. You know what? Nobody even talk about poop at all. Ever.

Build-a-Grudge
by
Joy Kennedy-O'Neill

Mari lugs two heavy suitcases into the office and heaves them into the corner. "Where's yours?" she asks me.

I point to a half-filled garbage bag.

"That's all you got?"

"I've never done this before."

She tsks at my inexperience. "You've got to fill it up!" She takes her cubicle's photos and cuts out her husband with scissors as sharp as her curses last week, when she found his secret texts. She dumps the massacred pictures into one of her suitcases, along with a snow globe from their Saint Croix vacation. Finally, she tosses in an empty vase for good measure.

"Clean sweep," she says dramatically. She eyes my garbage bag. "Seriously, you couldn't find more stuff?"

I scrunch down in my chair. "It felt sort of... wrong."

I'd searched my apartment this morning for regrets. The advertisements for the Build-a-Grudge store say preparing to visit one is just like a good house cleaning, but that's not exactly true. More like cleaning cobwebs with your bare finger. Unsettling.

"Why does it feel wrong?" Mari asks me. "What's Gabe done for you lately anyway?"

"He's a good guy."

Mari snorts. She's never even met him. She's only heard me say, "I'd wish he'd—" too many times.

At lunch we go to the mall, to the Build-a-Grudge store. She makes a big show of her suitcases, huffing and angling up her elbows. A woman by the pretzel shop gives her a thumbs-up and shouts, "You go, girl!"

The pretzels smell great, but Mari warns me off. "Don't eat. You want to be hangry when you do this."

Inside the store, she upends her suitcases' contents into a vat churning with agitation. Her shredded pictures, snow globe, and vase fall in first. Then clothes, books, old concert tickets, and dark clouds. It spins with lightning crackles, with the fury of a woman scorned.

Next to this vat, golden tokens spill out of a dispenser. It's like a slot machine's cacophony of jackpots and false promises.

"Woo-hoo! Your turn."

I throw in three of Gabe's shirts, the coffee maker he swore he'd fix last year, and a handful of foggy misgivings. They slither out in gray wisps, more like sighs than anger. When I dump the rest of the bag in, the vat coughs politely and gives me two tokens, as if embarrassed on my behalf.

Mari moves over to a glass fronted machine. She inserts her tokens and works a foot pedal. Fluff rains down in the windowed box. It reminds me of the dust-bunnies under the bed that Gabe promised he'd vacuum but never did.

She then moves to a skin-machine and grips a brass wheel like she's steering a listing ship. Her grudge's stuffing gets covered with green, warty fabric. Like bubbling bile.

"Excellent!" she grins.

My stuffing gets wrapped in terrycloth, all cocoa-colored and soft. The color of Gabe's hair. It's actually kind of cute.

"You've got to *concentrate*," she says. "You're not making a teddy bear. This is *serious*."

"I'm trying!"

She moves to the eyeball station. Her grudge gets mean, jealous eyes. Mine are googly.

We hold our noses by the scent machine. Hers gets smells of cheap perfume, nasty sheets, and sweat. Mine's like a mildewing shower. I had wanted more help around the apartment when I started night classes.

We step around a gaggle of little kids at a machine, hard at work building a grudge that looks like a hydra-headed mean mom.

Mari shakes her head. "Just wait until you have kids. No one holds a grudge like an eight-year-old. Oh, except *them*. Teenagers are the worst."

She points outside to where young girls drift by Hot Topic. They watch us with narrowed eyes, covered in body glitter and applying lip gloss. Way too cool for this store.

I try to stay angry at Gabe, but I keep coming up with things I've done wrong too. When his father died last year, did I do enough? What if he's been depressed?

The sound machine gives Mari's grudge squelches and wet slaps. Mine barks.

"We were going to get a dog," I explain sheepishly.

When we're done, her grudge looks like a fat gremlin with tentacles. Mine's like a drunk monkey. Both of ours have Velcro straps so we can hoist them on our backs. When Mari walks, her grudge makes meaty thwacks like two people humping.

She places it on a weight machine by the exit. "Fifteen pounds!" she says proudly. "Spite weighs a lot."

Mine barely registers.

"Seriously?" she asks. "What about all your talk about Gabe not listening? Not paying attention to you?"

"I know, right?" I try to work up my anger. My grudge's head tilts on its floppy neck, like it's listening. "But maybe if we had just talked more—"

"Oh please. Men don't talk." Mari points to the store next door. It's a new franchise of Eat Your Feelings. Full buffet, all you can eat, open 24-7, and sure enough, there are *a lot* of men in there. Maybe their wives are in the Served Cold revenge store next to Sears, but those windows are too frosty for me to see through.

"Come on. We're done here." Mari tosses all her empty luggage cases into a bin labeled "Old Baggage." Then we walk out past the dating store, where people wear hearts on their sleeves. Past the Chips-Ahoy, where folks come out strutting like admirals with chips the size of epaulets on their shoulders.

We walk past the Bone to Pick kiosk. The 20/20 Hindsight optical store. The row of discount lawyers' offices. I really want to stop at the Tough Cookies store and get one of their giant chocolate chips, but Mari's grudge is squelching, moaning, and smacking so much that two moms cover their kids' ears.

Back at work, Mari sets her grudge down with an exaggerated "omph."

"Wow," says someone from Accounting. "That's... impressive."

Sympathetic tongue-clicks follow, the workplace equivalent of applause. Someone even brings her a coffee. Now everybody knows that Mari can carry a *serious* grudge. Nobody is cutting in front of *her* in the copy queue.

Even our boss compliments her. And she's been super nice since one of the temps built a grudge that looks just like her and demands overtime.

So I suppose grudges are good things?

But my grudge's head flops. Its googly eyes stare straight through me. I hide it in a drawer where it barks once, then starts to disintegrate.

Later, I go to the Build-a-Grudge store to try again. This time, I think of things I did wrong with Gabe.

The machine whirs. I get so many tokens that they spill through my fingers. I crawl around the floor in supplication, picking them up.

This time, the machine makes lots of stuffing. Self-accusing button eyes. Guilt. Reproach. The bitter-sweet whiff of missed opportunities.

When it's finished, it looks a lot like me. I hoist it on my back, and it's so weighty, I nearly fall over. With each painful step, I know exactly what I'd do differently.

I take it to the office, and Mari shakes her head in disbelief. "That's not how it works," she says. "You don't do *you*."

I shrug. "My first one sort of disappeared."

She arches an eyebrow.

"I like this one better. It's mine. It's *me*, not Gabe."

"Are you serious? You're literally saying, 'It's not you, it's me' with this thing."

"But what if it was me?"

"Whatever." She carries her grudge to the copy room. It squelches and makes its slappy sounds along the way, moaning like R-rated betrayal. People practically fall out of their cubicles to look.

After work, I hoist my grudge on my shoulders. I walk down the street, past the library, and through the park, where Gabe and I first met. Finally, I totter into our neighborhood grocery store. My shoulders ache and my back screams, but I don't care. When I shuffle to the produce aisle, bam!

There he is.

His cart has soup for one and Tums. He looks terrible. He's hunched over, wearing a build-a-grudge too. And—surprise—it looks exactly like him, right down to the slouch. It smells like stale coffee and regret.

He sees me.

"Hey," he nods.

"Hey."

My grudge chooses this moment to unravel. A button-eye plinks off and rolls under the cabbages, where it stares up at us in wonder. Under the fluorescent lights, Gabe and I both look older than we should, bent under the weight of all the things we should've said sooner.

But then the vegetables' misting system turns on with a green-song smell of fresh spring rain. It smells like cucumbers and second chances.

"I'm sorry," we blurt out at the same time.

We step forward to hug. To embrace. To feel each other's heartbeats against our own once again.

But first, we lay our burdens down.

A Conversation With My Bath Bucket
by
Marvin Garbeh Davis, Sr.

(In our home they say: "You can't hide your nakedness from the bath bucket.")

My bath bucket knows too much.
It has witnessed every version of me—
the young body, the unsure body,
the body that believed in future,
and the one renegotiating its terms.
When I complain,
the bucket laughs in plastic:
Oh, now you care about dignity?
After all the years you stood before me
like a half-finished warning sign?
It reminds me that water reveals the truth—
the sagging, the scars,
the courage it takes to wash ourselves
even when the body feels borrowed.
I tell the bucket not everything
needs commentary.
It tells me:
My friend, you can hide from the world,
but not from the one you bathe with.

I Am Your Puppetmaster, Now I'm Going To Critique Your Crudités Selection

**by
Olly Blackburn**

Pass the grissini and listen carefully...

Right now I'm the only person who matters in your world, understand?

Not your wife, Meredith. Not your son, Dylan. Not your part-time server, Anushka, who you found on Nextdoor and pay five bucks an hour plus tips—nice touch, transferring the cost to your guests in a passive aggressive masquerading as a virtue kinda way. Cute. Super-millennial. Where was I..? Oh yes! Not weird uncle Fred with the Pokémon phone case. Not the karaoke guy. ME. I am your world. Your Alpha. Your Omega. Your beginning, your end—Is that fresh-cut ginger in the spritzer...? Pomelo, too? It's rather good. Did you consider putting an aromatic in there?

Yep. Cardamom would be nice.

Now we're gonna play a little game you and me... First, pass the cheese boat.

There's two types of people in this world, Kemosabe: The kind who tell people to put the Dr Karg's pumpkin seed crackers on their plate and those who actually put the crackers onto the plate.

Yes, I'm asking you to put those crackers on my plate.

Tongs! Use tongs, dammit! I don't care if they're on the charcuterie board! Pick those bad boys up, take a breath, aim, squeeze slow... Good, see what you can do when you focus on my commands...? Ease up buddy, you're gonna break the crust.

Now tell me about the dip: is the spinach organic?

Do NOT play for time! Did I ask about the Himalayan salt or the cold-pressed olive oil? I asked about one thing: spinach. Dioecious plant; family *Chenopodiaceae*. Iron-rich. Eaten raw, steamed, sometimes fried in butter. Oil too, if you really want to mix it up try some yuzu...

So let's up the ante on our little game, shall we? A new trick I came up with, just for you... Called 'dip the toasted focaccia in the balsamic infusion'. Pour that bad boy in the ramekin, stir well. A bit more. Go ahead. Break the oil.

Now I'll tell you a story... The Scorpion and the Frog. What? You heard it before? In 'The Crying Game'? Yeah—I know the twist! Okay... Let me tell you how I got my scars... Wassat? 'The Dark Knight'? ALRIGHT... I bet you don't know the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled... Uh-huh. He made us all believe he doesn't exist. That's right.

Listen, no one likes a smart ass.

Now let's try the guac, shall we?

Did you know that if you decode the first 15 chapters of the Book of Revelation, taking the second syllable from every third line of the prime numbered verses and cross-check them with the horizontal zero points of the foreshortened features in each of the twelve characters of Leonardo's Last Supper... You will discover a terrific guacamole recipe.

Why are you looking around? Who do you think's going to help you now, Captain America? Your son Dylan, cute little Dylan... Busy with his Lego set. A 2000 piece construction kit of Hogwarts. Yep, I walked in on him, looking for the powder room. Helped him finish up the Quiddich ring. There's still two more towers and a dragon to go on that bad boy, so you won't be seeing Dylan for a while.

Do NOT attempt to leave my presence! I haven't told you what I want from you yet. What do I want from you? This is...

Is that a fondue bowl? Mmm. Tastes like... Emmenthal, Gruyere? Maybe a dash of aged cheddar? Jesus, that goes great with the ancient grain sourdough.

Okay. So, this is what I want... Listen carefully or you will enter a world of pain the Lord on high, Jesus Christ and the host of heaven in their fullest glory could not save you from. By the way, you got crumbs on your lip.

Tonight, you will go to work just like any other day. You will park in Lot D, section 32 like always. You will ask Wayne behind the desk how his kids are and talk about the Mets season. You will proceed to your office but tonight... You'll keep walking. All the way to the mainframe control center where you will proceed to deactivate all 15 magnetic sensors in the plutonium enrichment chamber—

What?

You don't work at the White Peaks nuclear research laboratory..?

Best Buy?

Regional sales manag—

Do NOT play games with me! Earl Mason Jones of 2343 Westlake Drive—

Westlake Avenue? Not Drive? I thought it was Drive.

Mm-hm.

Yep. That's what I told the Uber driver.

Uh-huh. I see that now.

Hey... How about a refill. Another glass of the Chardonnay? If you got it.

Godammit godammit godammit! Jurgen pinned the wrong address again...! Where's the stupid wifi here?

Let's see... What's behind this door?

Aaaaaaaah.

Little Dylan with your Lego set... Hello again,
Now it's showtime.

Do Not Resuscitate
by
Michael Fowler

The old man leapt up from his desk and confronted me. "You weren't trying to resuscitate me, were you?" He demanded. "Everyone's trying to resuscitate me," he went on, shouting and drawing attention to himself. Eyes turned to me since I was the one getting reamed out. "Can't a man keel over at his desk and fall lifeless to the floor without a bunch of damn do-gooders and screwball Samaritans bothering him?" He got right up in my face and continued screaming, "Go back to your work, whoever you are, and let me pass on in peace! Interfere with my death once more and I'll have the law on you!"

As calmly as I could, I protested that I didn't realize he was trying to die. I had just moved in at the desk beside his, and was only trying to warn him that the boss was making rounds while he was clearly sound asleep. I thought he would want to know that if he valued his job.

"Oh, who gives a crumb about that little pustule? He's the one who dialed 911 when I died last week, and we all know how that worked out," he said, growing ever more incensed.

I sheepishly took my seat beside him while he continued to glower at me. "Sorry," I muttered, and shyly introduced myself as his new coworker. I didn't add that next time he lost consciousness in my presence, he could consider himself interred.

Later, after he had calmed down and fallen asleep once more, evidently his function here, Marge, the young lady on the other side of me, told me that he had been sorely disappointed by his first death, and more and more was acting out his frustration with it. Whenever anyone spoke to him, or called his name, or handed him a memo, or asked him what his lunch plans were, or inquired as to when he might retire, or made any sound or sudden movement whatsoever, he immediately leaped to the conclusion that he was at death's door and the troublesome party was pulling him back from his richly deserved demise. It was after he was hauled away on a stretcher the first time that he began to show up in the office not only with his nose out of joint by a mile, but wearing a silver Do Not Resuscitate necklace and a gold Do Not Resuscitate breastpin, neither one sufficient alone. He also placed a wooden placard on his desk, on top of a copy of his living will, that in all capitals shouted DNR.

"Was being revived the first time so excruciating that he can't bear the thought of going through it again?" I asked Marge.

"Yes," she replied. "It would seem so."

I avoided contact with him as much as possible, a difficult task since he began most mornings by fixing me with a baleful look and saying with heavy sarcasm, "Not calling any first responders today, now are we? I don't have to watch the elevator for men with oxygen tanks and defibrillators, now do I? You do agree that a speedy death is every citizen's right, now don't you?" I usually bowed my head in silence and got to work. In fairness to him he directed those questions not only to me, but looked around as he spoke to include all those around us who might be listening in. Some of these, I noticed from the corner of my eye, shot him dead with a pretend handgun or moved an imaginary knife across his throat. If anyone looked at me, to see how I, as closest to him, was bearing up, I sometimes mowed him down with a fictive assault rifle.

Our boss would mention him at the meetings he failed to attend, and explain that he, the boss, was doing all he could to encourage retirement, but couldn't force the issue due to the man's seniority and uncanny ability to do useful work while either at death's door or sound sleep. But he did mention that he felt we were legally in the clear if we let him expire the next time he collapsed, and expressed sincere regret that he had been the one to call the life squad the first time. Marge said she thought of buying him a ticket to one of those European suicide spas where they gently assist you to stop your heartbeat, in case he would agree to that, but she had checked and the price was prohibitive. She told us the price, and it was.

After I'd been there three weeks, he had what appeared to be another life-threatening incident in the file room. Marge, who was not just young but attractive, witnessed it, and said he keeled over right after asking her to accompany him to the Bahamas for his annual weeklong vacation. "Looks like you might have to cancel those plans," I ribbed her, but she ignored this. Now he lay on the floor, slowly looking around and muttering, "Nothing to see here, move on, continue as you were, notify no one." Soon twenty or thirty people were staring at him as he lay motionless in a corner, several spilled files open on him. Everyone was afraid to move, even to breathe, lest any commotion somehow revive him. Finally the boss, after standing there shaking his head for ten minutes, said, "I'm sorry, folks, but I can't just let him die. I'm going to dial 911." At that the dying man, who had closed his eyes, opened them wide and screamed, "Not again, you're not!" He jumped five feet in the air and landed squarely on the boss's shoulders. After riding him like a bull for a minute, the oldster fell on his neck, dying instantly.

His funeral drew an amazing crowd of celebrants, of whom I was one of the gladdest.

my cat is possessed by a demon
by
Susan Page Deutsch

or perhaps a very small and angry god
with an affinity for socks and unprovoked violence.

my cat is a microcosm of the Universe, or God, or Nature; she, too, abhors a vacuum
and is well-versed in string theory

and when her pupils dilate to the size of black holes, I know she is seeing
the eventual heat death of the universe
or, at least, the laser pointer with its feeble button batteries.

apparently, nobody ever told my cat not to bite the hand that feeds her
(or perhaps she simply did not need to be told that wild things love in blood)

but really it was my fault for moving too quickly,
or too slowly, or for some other reason unknowable to us mere mortals,
and how dare I try to clip God's nails.

my cat then presents me with her asshole as a metaphor
for the divine, or mortal folly, or accepting the shitty
parts of life. she knocks glasses of water off the counter

to symbolize the gravity of all things, and tries to eat plastic bags
as a reminder to never let my guard down, or perhaps
to seek out more eco-friendly alternatives at the grocery store.

and speaking of the grocery store, the bottom of my cat's food bowl is visible
and, just like a small and angry god, she wakes me up at 3AM,
yelling,
to impart this divine portent of catastrophe.

Court Night
by
James Rumpel

Ricardo stared at Lavanda as she struggled to place the cap on his Styrofoam cup. He marveled at her beauty. Her eyes captivated him the most. Behind her unnaturally long eyelashes were dark blue irises that gave off vibes of equal parts wonder, confusion, and naivety with a pinch of mischief. At times, Lavanda reminded Ricardo of a lost puppy, a very attractive lost puppy.

"Here's your triple latte, Ricky," announced Lavanda as she handed him the cup, the lid slightly askew.

"Thanks, Lavanda," replied Ricardo. He placed his phone against the reader and entered the desired amount for the tip. He took a very deep breath before speaking again. "You know, we keep talking about doing something together sometime. Why don't we make plans to go out or something?"

"That would be great," said Lavanda. "As a matter of fact, I'm having a little get-together at my place tonight. It's Court Night, you know."

"I usually go to the gym and lift on Wednesdays," explained Ricardo. He nonchalantly pulled up the sleeves on his tight-fitting t-shirt and subtly flexed his biceps.

"That's too bad. It would be a lot of fun."

Ricardo considered his options. It would be nice to have a chance to charm Lavanda. While he would have preferred to have a little one-on-one time with her, a small gathering wouldn't be the worst thing. Plus, it would mean that he wouldn't have to worry about footing the bill for a date. Even with his recent promotion at the data input center and its accompanying pay raise, he was still finding it difficult to keep his bank balance in the positive from one payday to the next.

"Okay," he finally announced, "you've got a deal. I'll see you tonight."

"Great," smiled Lavanda. "I've got your number from the last time you asked me out. I'll text you my address."

"Hey, quit gabbing and get me my coffee," called an older man, who was at least thirty, from the ever-growing line of untended customers.

"I'd better get back to work," said Lavanda with a slight giggle.

Ricardo stepped aside and began sipping his drink, which was most definitely not the triple latte he had ordered but some sort of pumpkin-spice flavored concoction.

"I have a black coffee for a Guy with Big Lips," shouted Lavanda.

The elderly gentleman who had shouted earlier stepped forward. "I ordered a coffee, but my name's Roger."

"Oh, right," said Lavanda. "I had forgotten your name, so I just wrote 'Guy with Big Lips' on the cup." She extended a cup with a crooked lid. "You are definitely the guy with big lips," she added.

"Give me that," snarled the old man. He held his phone over the pay station."

"Don't forget to tip," said Lavanda with a smile.

From his vantage point off to the side, Ricardo found himself grinning also.

"Come on in," said Lavanda, batting her eyelashes. "I'm so glad you made it."

Ricardo stepped into Lavanda's small apartment. The place was packed. There had to be at least a dozen young adults, all males, scattered about the two rooms. Every guest there was completely focused on their phone.

"So," continued Lavanda, "help yourself to a drink." She pointed to a small table that held a stack of Styrofoam cups and two small urns. "I got lucky today. We had almost a whole container of pumpkin spice latte and about half a jug of dark roast left over." Grabbing a cup from the stack, she handed it to Ricardo.

"Uhh, I'm okay," said Ricardo, noticing that the words 'Guy with Big Lips' were written on the cup.

"Oh, don't worry," laughed Lavanda, "I had Maliki rinse them all out when he got here. He always gets here early. I'm sure they're clean enough." She directed Ricardo's gaze toward a nerdy-looking guy sitting on the couch, who wiggled his hand as if to say, "Maybe."

Ricardo recognized Maliki. They had crossed paths once or twice before. He didn't really like Maliki, mostly because Maliki really liked Lavanda.

"What kind of party is this?" asked Ricardo. "Where's the music? Everyone's just looking at their phones."

"Of course, silly," answered Lavanda. "I told you that tonight was Court Night."

"What?"

"Don't tell me you don't have Courtbook."

"Oh, you mean the app. I downloaded it when it first came out, but I've never looked at it." He pulled out his phone and started swiping side to side. "I don't see it right now."

"It's probably in your idle app folder," interrupted Maliki. The little nerd grabbed the phone out of Ricardo's hand.

Ricardo marveled at how such a tiny twerp could make him feel so small. Instinctively, he straightened to his full height and puffed up his bulging muscles.

"Here it is," announced Maliki, handing the phone back to Ricardo. "I found it." There was an obvious smugness to Maliki's tone.

"Great," said Lavanda. She snatched the phone and opened the app. Wrapping her hand around Ricardo's arm, she pulled him close and explained. "You see, there are three sections to Courtbook. The first is for civil suits." She pointed to the screen. "See, I have seventy-six cases this week, mostly just suing for larger tips. The cases are all closed at ten o'clock, so on Wednesdays I get a bunch of friends together and we all vote for me."

"What happens if you win a case?" asked Ricardo.

"I get the money, of course, silly. The funds are automatically shifted from the account of the person I sued to me." She returned the phone. "All you need to do is go to each of my suits and vote for me. I've already opened it to the page with all my cases on it."

Ricardo examined the screen. Each of Lavanda's cases was displayed with a short paragraph describing the lawsuit. Beneath that was a section where Lavanda presented her case with a short video and a second section where the person being sued was given the opportunity to respond; most of the second sections were blank. Finally, each case had two buttons featuring the names of the litigants.

"So, this is all legally binding?" asked Ricardo.

"Of course," answered Maliki, who for some reason was still hovering around Lavanda. "Courtbook has made lawsuits way easier and less of a hassle."

"Wait a second," said Ricardo. He turned to Lavanda. "Four of these suits are against me. I'm a good tipper."

Lavanda shrugged. "Nothing personal. I mean, you've never posted a defense, so I figured you were just being nice to me." She batted her eyelashes.

"I didn't even know you were suing me."

"I bet all your notifications are going into your spam folder," suggested Maliki. "You should really pay better attention."

"You're telling me that I've been being sued by God knows how many people for the last six months and I never had a chance to defend myself."

"Well, technically, you have had the opportunity, you just weren't aware of it." Maliki grabbed the phone again. After a few seconds, he announced, "Looks like you were sued twenty-one times this week."

"Hey, guys," interrupted Lavanda, "It's getting late. Ricardo has a lot more voting to do for me. After you finish with the civil suits, you can go to the next part of Courtbook. It's the AITA section."

"The what?"

"The Am I the..."

"I know what it stands for. What is it?"

"Oh, it's the part of Courtbook that deals with social arguments." Continuing the game of hot potato with Ricardo's phone, she took it from Maliki and opened a new section of the app. "If you are having a disagreement with someone, you can state your side of the story. See, here's a section where I defend myself for unfriending Mari because she bought a dress just like the one I had just gotten. Well, it wasn't exactly like mine, I mean, the skirt was a bit longer and the top had sleeves. But other than the color it was definitely the same basic design as mine."

Ricardo shook his head. "Why even bother with suing over that?"

"It's not really a lawsuit," interjected Maliki.

"Yeah, it's just a chance to prove that I was right," said Lavanda. "Plus, every time you win an AITA case, you get five dollars."

Ricardo took back his phone. "Still doesn't seem worth it to me."

"It's not about the money," explained Lavanda. "It's about pride. Last week I made \$60 in AITA cases."

"\$5 doesn't seem like much. Is it really worth losing a friend?"

"Oh, she lost me as a friend the minute she ordered that dress."

"It's ten minutes to ten," announced Maliki loud enough for the entire room to hear. "Better get in all your last-minute votes."

"Wait a second," said Ricardo. "Didn't you say there were three parts to Courtbook?"

"Yeah, but the last one doesn't have anything to do with me," replied Lavanda. "It's for actual criminal cases."

"You mean they use the app for criminal trials?"

"Sure," said Maliki, "it saves a lot of time and money." He seized Ricardo's phone and quickly brought up the criminal trial page. "Hey, wait a second. You're on here, Ricardo."

"What?"

"Yeah, you're being charged with assault. It looks like you're facing a penalty of 90 days in jail."

Ricardo ripped his phone from Maliki's grasp. "What are you talking about?"

Sure enough, at the top of the page was a statement of the charges. Below it was a video statement from a man accusing Ricardo of knocking him to the ground at the gym last Wednesday night.

"I didn't assault him," said Ricardo, defensively. "I needed to get one more rep in on the free weights, and I saw this really old dude trying to get ahead of me. He must have been at least thirty-five. I was just rushing to the weight station and I accidentally bumped into him. He tripped over a barbell and fell down. It was pretty funny."

"You should have posted a defense video," said Lavanda. "You don't have a chance of winning the vote if you don't speak up for yourself."

"I didn't even know I was being charged."

Maliki stole the phone and examined the screen. "Hey, you still have a little hope. I'm reading the comments. It appears that the person accusing you does this all of the time. He makes all sorts of accusations, and a bunch of the regulars on Courtbook don't like him, so they voted against him. You're only eleven votes behind."

"Great," shouted Ricardo. "Hey, everybody, go to the criminal charges page of the app and vote for me in my criminal case."

The other men in the apartment all began scrolling on their phones.

"If Maliki and I vote for you," interjected Lavanda, "that should be enough for you to win. Unless the other guy gets another vote."

"Give me my phone. I'll vote for myself."

Maliki passed the phone back to Ricardo. "You can't vote for yourself. That would be making a mockery of the judicial system."

Suddenly, all the phones in the room chimed. The variety of ringtones, bells, and soundbites created an odd cacophony.

Ricardo glared at his phone. "Well, did I win?"

"We won't know for another half hour," said Lavanda. "First, we have to wait for all the advertisements to run. Have some pumpkin spice latte and relax."

Twenty-nine minutes later, there was a knock on Lavanda's door. She opened it to find two uniformed police officers.

"We are here to take Ricardo Anderson into custody," one of them announced. "His phone GPS says he is here."

"Yup," said Maliki, "he's right over there." The five-foot nothing nerd pointed at Ricardo.

"But that can't be," whined Ricardo. "I had enough votes to win."

Once again, everyone's phone beeped, indicating that the results were now available. As one of the officers grabbed Ricardo by the arm, Ricardo looked at the polling results. "I lost by one measly vote. The other guy didn't get any new votes. That means someone here didn't vote for me."

The screen on Ricardo's phone suddenly blinked red, and the Courtbook app page was replaced with black and white text spelling out Ricardo's Miranda Rights.

"Just click the 'I accept' button," instructed the officer who was slowly pulling Ricardo towards the door.

"But... but... I didn't..."

Lavanda, Maliki, and the rest of the young men in the apartment never heard the end of Ricardo's sentence. The officers rushed Ricardo into the hall and closed the door.

"Well, he's not going to be around for ninety days," said Maliki, a smug grin set on his face.

"I know. I'm going to miss the extra tip income," said Lavanda. "I do feel pretty bad for him, though. He's a nice guy. It's too bad somebody here didn't vote for him."

Maliki nodded slowly. "I guess." After a moment, he added. "You know what might make you feel better? Why don't you and I go out tomorrow night? There's a hot new group playing at the club across from the coffee shop."

**An Audience at the Cumberlisheen Regional Historical Society,
19th August 2018, 4:12pm**

**by
Gregory Jones**

I ruled as far as the eye could see, providing you didn't stand on any hills. From my people's ringfort above the confluence of waters, I succored my beloved subjects and scourged my—

"Oh mom, look at this! Gross!"

Listen here, kid. Like you'll look any better after two millennia, presuming you survive that long. I'm one of the lucky ones, you know. Actually, I prefer to think of myself as divinely chosen, spared from shifting tectonic plates and oxygen-rich environments to serve greater purposes. In some respects, I'm more powerful than your superheroes, even if my muscle tissue has atrophied and I'm trapped under glass, displayed with iron tools I never even saw whilst I lived. You're referring to me, aren't you? I can't exactly turn my head here.

"Is that a real person?"

Yes, reading is a stretch for you people. The plaque on my display case defines me as "Linfield Man – Bog Body, c. 2nd century BCE," but I'm so much more than mere labels. For one, cast your eye on my full, lustrous hair. Two thousand years buried in rotting sphagnum moss turned it crimson; I'd say it's one of the few upgrades to my condition. Moreover, I was a king, and you can't take that sort of thing away. A "minor" king according to this august institution, but how would they know? You think my people interred me with all of my hammered gold bracelets as the gods demanded, or pocketed some for themselves? Devoutly worshipping Dagda, my leathery a—

"But why did they kill him?"

You children don't appreciate the philosophical advances of my descendants. You think I wouldn't have scribbled down a law or two if I'd a written language? Something like "thou shalt not snuff the king if the barley doesn't come in" would've been lovely. A sacrifice to the water gods, I've got the defensive wounds to prove it, and I still have the stakes used to pin me to the bottom of the bog keeping me company in here. But those treasonous bastards got theirs—they forgot that sacrificing your king to the spirits turns him into a spirit, and I turned off the rain for years. Years! At least a year. Or I think I did; I practically radiated hate from the bottom of that bog.

"But why would they hurt their friend?"

Ha! Friend. Pray to your gods that your friends never strip you naked and drag a dull blade across your neck. That they never follow a supercilious priest who diligently served your regal father through lean years but jumped at the first chance to scapegoat you, and that your faithful subjects never get it into their skulls that they'd prefer to keep the tribute you demanded from their barren fields. It's then that your royal furs are torn from your inviolable carcass, all your bits exposed as you bleed out at the edge of a bog, your dear friends' eyes finally seeing your too-mortal body as they approach for the finishing blow.

"So he's not as old as the deer?"

No, I'm not as old as the Dagda-damned elk. Had you listened to your mother earlier, you'd know that big idiot was found underneath me. A purely ancillary discovery! I was in the bog because my people deliberately placed me there; that hoofed ignoramus sank into the pre-bog mud five thousand years earlier looking for a drink. And now everyone wants to see a brainless animal instead of an honest-to-goodness king.

"Can we see the deer again?"

The Irish elk is also known as *Megaloceros giganteus*, according to the staff who know at least two more languages than you or me, and to whose idle chat I owe all of my knowledge about the current nation that arose around my bog. And the Irish elk drives me as insane as one can be in a glass-and-polished-wood, climate-controlled case. He's all browned bones and antlers on a pedestal at the entrance, whilst I crumble back here with my golden skin and one open eye that you could see if you weren't asking your mother asinine questions. Look at my unpilfered bracelets, at least, if you won't take a straight-on look at one of your betters.

"Well, can we go to the gift shop?"

Bored, eh? Your mother looks like one of my new kingdom's guests who read every word of every sign. What, she takes pictures of them, too? Sure, I almost pity you, walking around and gawking at me and breathing. I bet you'll never raid villages at sword-point or receive tributes of oats from the grumbling unanointed.

"I have to pee."

Wait! Not yet! Maybe I can give you a wink with my good eye. I've spent 57 years back above ground failing to get a response from these withered extremities, but lately, if I concentrate, I can almost feel—

"Mom! Mom! His eye fell off! It's right there!"

It's come to this, then. Ah, to be one of my treacherous farming clan, gone gracefully into the afterlife without a trace. Yes, yes, go with your mother and inform a docent; maybe they'll wedge it back into the socket, or perhaps it'll get its own display case. At best, I'll get a new layer of dust on the one pane of my little world that I can see through. Or could; that eyeball is iris-down.

When I'm alone here, it's almost like I'm back in the bog. The loneliness of the first few centuries would've killed me if I weren't already dead. You feel what little warmth trickles through the surface as each planting season returns. Eventually you feel the tremors of your progeny's machinery as they invent it and destroy it and rebuild it. But in this other loneliness, where you're exposed to the hoi polloi, you start to forgive those who were delighted to shut your mouth and keep the meager fruit of their fields, and you begin to value the brief attention of a common—

"Whoa, come look at this guy's dick!"

Oh, fuck off.

Hurry Up and Wait

by
Brandon Yu

"Space we can recover. Time, never."

–Napoleon Bonaparte

Vast, incomprehensible, and depressing, the Hurry Up and Wait is the perfect way to kill time on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Untime your blues, shave seconds off your five o' clock shadow, or haggle a kiss away and trade it for an hour on a hot stove: This classic cocktail has it all.

INGREDIENTS:

1 part Existential Crisis [™]

727,609 part Missed Chances

5 part Obvious Hints from girls you didn't realize were flirting with you at the time

½ part Nostalgia Syrup

2 dashes Agonizing Bitters

Garnish: Lemon wedge & Toothpick umbrella

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Mix ingredients in a cocktail shaker. Blend until smooth.

2. Strain into an open-topped hourglass over fresh ice.

3. Garnish with a lemon wedge on the rim.

4. Serve and endure!

Leon and the Zubman

by
Rick Jones

It was nine in the morning, and Leon was well into the story mode of the latest Call of Duty. He had beaten all the Call of Dutys, or Calls of Duty, depending how you approached the pluralization. He didn't know what this one was fully called—Call of Duty 19: Carnage of Vengeance or whatever. They were all pretty good. Leon was high, anyway.

"Leon."

Leon had his headset on, so assumed another player was calling him out. It took him a few moments to remember that he was playing the single player version. It didn't also occur to him that even if he had been online, his username was TorMans69, not Leon.

"Leon! Over here, young man!"

Leon finally put down the controller and headset and looked at his phone, but no call was active. Huh. How strong was this weed, anyway? He'd tried a new strain from...

"LEON! OVER HERE! AT ONCE!"

This time the voice was so loud, so clearly real, that Leon bolted directly off the couch into a standing position. It had come from towards the kitchen.

"Come on, Leon." Almost paternal. "Leon, here. We must talk, my son."

It was the guinea pig. The guinea pig's name was Andre, for what reason Leon did not know. It had been a hand me down from his friend Carl, who'd asked Leon to take care of Andre for a week, and then skipped town. The cage sat atop milk crates in the living room. That had been a year ago. Leon didn't really mind. He was a chill little dude. Granted, he'd never spoken before.

"Holy shit," said Leon.

"Yes, I know, you must find this a bit disconcerting. Would you do me a favor before we begin?"

Leon was quite sure this was a dream, but it was better than the one where he hadn't been going to school all semester and his Dad was going to find out. "Begin what?"

"We need to talk, but first, your pizza smells delicious. You neglected to feed me today, so might you provide me with a morsel of your pizza?"

In the kitchen, a stack of pizza boxes threatened to topple off the stovetop. The top one, from that evening, still had half a pie from Pizza Pizza, the chain so downscale that it didn't have a real name, it just repeated the name of the product. Leon ducked in and tore off the end of one slice. He carefully placed the pizza into the cage. The rodent happily began nibbling on it.

"So, uh... what do you wanna talk to me about, little dude?"

"Pull up a chair, son, and you might want to get your own slice. Oh, I see you already have. Very well, let me tell you a tale." Leon sat down. Maybe it was the weed, but the little dude seemed friendly enough.

"I, Leon, am a djinn. Do you know what that is?"

"Like the booze?"

"No, not gin. Djinn. You would know us as genies, though..."

"WHOA!" Leon said in delight. He began singing "Friend Like Me."

"LEON stop! Not like that. My name is Zubayr al-Mukhif ibn al-Ifrit, The Illustrious, The All-Powerful, The Incandescent, Born of Cold Fire, Master of The Deserts of the East Beyond the Mountains... Leon? Leon, wake up."

Leon shook himself awake.

The guinea pig continued, "I have existed for time immemorial, given form and name in the good time of the Creator, and my travels have been limitless. I have seen the mountains rise from the earth and be torn down by the wind, seen man arise, empires come and go. But all this time, Leon, I have been but a servant of others. For once, Leon, I was incorporeal, but in the day of the Ubaid, the priest Ur-Turuk summoned me and imprisoned me in a vase. Since then, I have from time to time moved from one vessel to another at the permission of a mortal. But I cannot return to the liminal realm of my kind between man and angel. For that, Leon, I need a man. A special man. A man unique among men. I believe it is you."

"Okay man but I gotta be outta here by ten 'cause I gotta lunch shift at Wendy's and my boss has been on my ass for being late." Leon didn't like working there, but one of the line cooks was his best supply of MDMA.

"Very well. Leon, I am trapped in this vessel, as I have been trapped in hundreds before. But were I to have the body of a man, YOUR BODY, I could perform the ancient incantations that would transfer me to the realm of beyond-touching. However, Leon, I cannot take human form without one willing to switch with me. And that means you, my son."

"Whoa," said Leon. "Why mine?"

"It is as the ancient texts of Uffah al-Zarr foretold; that such a power existed in a man whose hair was tangled like the branches of an olive tree!"

"You mean my dreads?" Leon thought for a moment. He wasn't great at that. "Whoa."

"Yes, I realize it is difficult to imagine..."

"No, man, I mean whoa, I just realized I didn't pay my cell phone bill and I got no money until Thursday. Hey man, what's your name again?"

The guinea pig put a little guinea pig hand over its face. "Zubayr al-Mukhif ibn al-Ifrit. Leon, focus. I need you to agree to exchange bodies with me. It will be a temporary state. Once my incantation is done and I return to the Land Between Two Veils, you'll return to your body."

Leon was a little less high than he was before, and this alarmed him. "I dunno Zubs, I like being me. Also how would I fit in there? You're really small."

"My name is not Zubs. It's... look, Leon, I am a genie. I shall grant you a wish."

Leon pondered this. "I dunno man. This is a lot to ask."

"Ask away, Leon, for the boundaries of time and space, the rules of energy and matter, these limit me not."

"Okay, man, look, this is big, but... can you cover my shift at Wendy's?"

The guinea pig/genie appeared stunned. "Uh... yes. You don't want... I guess I can do that. All right, Leon, I must cast the spell."

The guinea pig stood on its hind legs and began to wave its arms. Its little face actually looked pretty serious.

"Bi-ithn al-Muḥayya al-Awwal, wa ḥaqq al-arwaḥ al-raqidah taḥta ḥikmat al-Jabal, uqsimu bi-asmai al-kamila, anah Zubayr al-Mukhif ibn al-Ifrit, Nūr al-Khaṭwah, Sayyid al-Zawayah al-Nasiyah anih aṣṭafaytu hadha al-insan Leon ibn Fresno, Qaṭin al-Arikah, Sharib al-Ashab, Werit al-Jundub al-Fari! Li-yaḥmila ruhi fi jasadih, wa aḥmila ruḥahu fih ṣurati l-far Wendy's!" Nothing happened. "Leon, you have to repeat that now."

"Oh no way man, sorry, I didn't catch all of that."

"I, ahh. Fine. Just say a-meen."

Leon did, and the world whirled around him. The lights became impossibly bright, his senses heightened. There was a rising noise, louder and louder, like a million angels singing, or it might just have been "See You Again" by Tyler the Creator. And then he was a guinea pig.

Leon looked around his cage. He tried to look at himself, but realized his head wasn't very flexible. He could see whiskers in his field of vision. His front feet were very amusing. He looked up and saw his Leon body standing there, looking down at him.

"Whoa, I'm HUGE!"

"Indeed, from that vantage point it must seem that way," said the Leon-genie. "Now, I must go find the materials I need for the incantation!"

"Okay dude, but first ya gotta cover that shift at Wendy's, man. If you're not there at ten, Carl gets all pissy. He's my manager. Your manager. He sucks ass, man."

"Yes, yes, Leon. I am obliged by the laws of heaven to do this, for it was a wish promised. I will retrieve my materials afterwards!" He charged out the door without even getting the uniform on.

Leon, meanwhile, just chilled out. He ate some more leftover pizza, drank water out of the water dispenser, had a good lick of salt, and then went to sleep.

Zubzilla should have been back around five, but by ten he still wasn't back. Leon was just beginning to think the Zubber wasn't a genie after all but just an asshole. But then Zubayr came crashing in the door, carrying several shopping bags.

"Leon! I have covered your shift! Also I have retrieved some but not all of the materials I need. Do you know where I might find frankincense and the shadow of a lie told to a snake?"

"Dollar Value's not bad, Zubbo."

"That is not my name, but... very well! I will go there tomorrow. I have had a busy day and now I shall sleep!"

"Hey man, don't go spending all my money, I don't even have enough for..."

"Worry not, Leon! I was so industrious at your job with Wendy that you were promoted!" And with that, Zubayr, in Leon's body, was off to bed.

"Whoa," said Leon, and then he ate more and went to sleep.

The next day Leon was awoken in his cage by the sound of someone playing acoustic guitar. It was him, or more precisely, Andre. Zubostomy? No, Leon was the guinea pig. Zubayr was in the human body. That was it. Crazy.

"Yo, Zubborino, man, can you toss some food in here?"

Zubayr smiled. "That is not my name, I am Zubayr, but I already have, my friend. While you were sleeping, which you seem to do more than I did in that form, I sallied forth and retrieved the finest rodent food. It is in your bowl. Feast!"

Leon tried it. He'd normally just thrown whatever at Andre. "Thanks man, this is good. Hey, uh, I didn't know you could play guitar."

"I am learning. It is much like the instruments played in centuries past. Ah, once I was beholden in servitude to the Al-Muallim Safwan. His *oud* was strung with sinews of gold, its body of pure onyx. When he played, the stars would stop in the heavens and the creatures of land and sky would pause to listen."

"I knew a guy who was a roadie for Weezer."

"I am enjoying this instrument, but, Leon, I will now go out and find the things I need to free myself from this mortal realm. Take heart!"

"Hey man, can you turn on Netflix? It'll just play stuff nonstop."

Zubayr al-Mukhif ibn al-Ifrit put on Netflix and left.

Once again, he was gone a long time. Leon was briefly a bit worried, but Netflix started playing Naked Gun movies, so he was having a good time until he fell asleep.

The next day, Zubayr admitted that he still hadn't found a critical part needed for the spell, "a grain of sand from the desert that once knew it was an ocean." He was somewhat apologetic.

"That's all right," Leon said. "As long as you keep covering me at Wendy's, we're okay."

"Yes, I will do this. Your master, Carl ibn Jerry, has given me the job of handling drive-through duties during the dinner hour. This is a position of trust and power."

"Whoa, okay, man, that's a tough gig," Leon counseled. "Ya gotta watch Julie, she'll totally hand you the wrong drinks."

Zubayr replied "Ah yes, but she is a lady of seraphic countenance."

"Huh?"

Zubayr said, patiently, "Her visage is of the greatest pulchritude."

"I don't get it," Leon said.

Zubayr thought of how to get the message across, and settled on "She's hot."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess, man, but she's stuck up."

"This surprises me," said Zubayr, "for she seemed quite pleasant to me when I invited her to spend time with me enjoying the banks of the San Joaquin. Indeed, I must do this immediately following my, or your, shift at Wendy's. Do you have sufficient lettuce?"

"I guess man."

"Farewell!" and Zubayr, in Leon's body, swept out the door.

Leon looked around the apartment. The Zub-A-Dub was keeping it awfully clean. Smelled like, clean stuff, or something. Earlier in the day he'd wanted to ask the Zubstep to blow some weed smoke into the cage, but he'd forgotten. He didn't really care all that much.

Zubayr still couldn't find everything he needed; he told Leon he couldn't find the ashes of `a note that bore a broken promise,' and apologized for the continued delays.

"Man, that sucks. You should try Thrifty Pete's."

"Perhaps I will," Zubayr said. "I must inform you that I have invited Julie to spend time here watching your Netflix, and she also wishes to chill. Truly, hers is the beauty of pearls struck at midnight by a summer moon. Though she hands me Diet Cokes, my thirst to hear her silken voice cannot be quenched."

"Bro," Leon said, "that's awesome, you're gonna score!"

Just as he said that, the living room was filled with the blackest smoke, which receded as fast as it had materialized towards a huge figure standing in the doorway. A man had appeared, so tall he barely cleared the ceiling, his skin made of black rock polished to mirrors. He wore armor made of chains. Fire surrounded him, danced across him, and yet burned nothing.

"Humqa!" it roared, but Leon mostly felt the roar inside him. "Especially you, Zubayr al-Mukhif! This Tahwir al-dat violates the laws of our universe!"

"Aw man, we're busted," Leon said. Zubayr stared at the floor.

The enormous figure boomed, "This is no mere bust! I am Malik, Sentry of the Sevenfold Depths, Jailer of the Unrepentant, The Wielder of Unburning Flames, Lord of the Nineteen Hosts of the Infernal Guard, and Bearer of the Chain of Justice! You, Leon, test the patience of the angels of the Lord!"

"Man, I'm just eatin' lettuce here."

Zubayr said, "Lord, I have cast the incantation as was done in the days before memory. As you can see..."

"FOOL!" Malik roared. "You have been in this body for almost five days! That is the time allotted, as was written in the Blinded Yellow Codex of the Vanishing Bones! Zubayr, if you do not resolve this situation, by midnight tonight, the both of you shall be cast into the blazing flame!"

Malik vanished as fast as he had appeared.

"Dude that sounds like it would suck," Leon said.

"It would... suck," Zubayr said, rubbing his chin. Leon noticed Zubayr had actually been shaving. His hair looked neat. "I will cancel my chilling with Julie and redouble my efforts to find the necessary ingredients to send myself to the Veiled Realm. Then you may reinhabit your body." Zubayr sat on the arm of the couch with a sigh. "Since before the Pyramids rose, I have sought to return to the Land of the Unseen. It is where I belong."

Leon said, "Can you play guitar there? You're gettin' pretty good man, you were sizzling when you did Metallica. You can take mine, I don't use it."

"Alas, Leon, material things are not of concern in the Place of Shadows. There the djinn exist in a matter incorporeal, beyond the conception of your kind. It is my place, my plane of existence. And I must apologize and thank you for your infinite patience. You have been trapped in the body of this cavy for longer than either of us anticipated, and you deserve to resume your life in your normal form. I have risked your very soul for my own purpose."

The two were quiet for a moment. Then Leon said, "Hey, Zubbarino, like, how many magic spells do you know?"

"I know incantations, conjurations, and thaumaturgies of every description."

"Well, Zubboleon," said Leon, "I gotta tell ya, man, I kind of like it here. This cage is, like, mega chill. I used to smoke so much chronic, but I don't even miss it now. Being a guinea pig is like being high—I get to sleep all day, I always feel kinda fuzzy, and I don't have pants

on. I got my Netflix over there, I really love lettuce now, it's warm in the cage. This is a sweet gig. And, man, you're killin' it at Wendy's, you're shredding on guitar, and Julie likes you."

"Yes, yes she does," said Zubayr. "I admit, Leon, that my time here has been perhaps the most congenial I have spent since inhabiting the mortal coil. I enjoy playing your lyre, and watching the programs about this heroic Picard, and... and my sweet Julie, my golden desert moon. Our souls intertwined when we went bowling."

Leon said "So, like, this is a pretty sweet deal. You're better at being me than me. I never used to smell like soap. And I like being this. So, do you have some crazy magic that could keep us this way and that asshole with all the fire and whatnot can't do whatever he was gonna do?"

"The Invocation of Frozen Souls would do this," Zubayr said, "but while I have many of the materials needed, to find the last necessary reagent in this place, this Fresno, before the Shadow Hour, would surely be impossible. We would need... the memory of a false covenant, lined in salt."

"Dude," said Leon, "I totally know where to find that."

Zubayr and Leon, peeking from Leon's old backpack, got to Wendy's at a quarter to midnight. It was closed but what Leon was looking for was out back, and that's where they went.

"There are so many salty false covenants in the dumpster." Leon explained. "Just you wait."

Zubayr approached the dumpster and went to open it. It was chained shut. "Leon, this container of refuse is chained, and I do not have the keys."

"What? Dude! You said you were assistant manager now!"

"No," Zubayr said, now panicking, "I said *I soon would be*, for Carl ibn Jerry promised me the job once Jerome went back to Stanford in September!"

"Just reach in as far as you can and grab old food bags!"

"I cannot reach! Woe are we both!"

With a sudden burst of smoke, flames, and the screams of the damned, a familiar figure, taller even than before, his skin of pure obsidian, materialized in the alleyway. Zubayr held his hands up and screamed in terror.

"Ahl ah-Jahim!" Malik roared, as loud as a volcano. "I am Malik, Angel of the Most High, Keymaster of the Nether, Excruciator of the Unrighteous, The Unsmiling One! I am here to see to it your punishment is meted! Abandon hope!"

"We still have seven minutes!" Zubayr cried out, checking Leon's Mickey Mouse watch.

"I enjoy watching your despair! I had nothing else to do!"

Leon climbed out of the backpack onto his, or Zubayr's, shoulder. "Dude, I got this. Get the other stuff out and mix it up or whatever!" He scampered down off Zubayr's quaking borrowed form and skittered beneath the dumpster.

"Ha!" shouted Malik. "Ignorant, idle reprobate! Do you think a mere dumpster can hide you from the wrath of the Almighty?"

Leon ignored the shrieking in his guinea pig head and found the drain holes in the dumpster. Climbing up, he found himself in a heap of vile fast food trash. Discarded wrappers, soda cups and filthy used napkins attracted flies. He needed one thing, though. Only one would do. He rooted around.

"Five minutes and you burn!" roared Malik, while Zubayr desperately mixed oils, wolfsbane, and verdigris in a silk pouch.

Leon's nose worked a lot better than his old one, and he could smell what he needed. The paper food bag was just the thing. He began pulling it towards the drain hole.

"Four minutes! The end of your bodies is nigh but your souls face eternity burning in the Saqar!"

Just as Leon was about to get the paper bag out, it stopped moving and began tugging the other way. Confused, Leon peeked around it. It was being pulled back by a huge rat. The rat was twice Leon's size, at least. He tried his best, but the rat was dragging the bag, and him, back into the dumpster. He pulled and pulled but had nowhere near the strength.

"Three minutes until you feel the ceaseless flames!"

"LEON!" cried out Zubayr. "The mixture is ready but for one thing!"

Leon was losing his fight with the rat. He had to do something, and his mind cleared, and thought logically, unfiltered by narcotics. He knew what to do. He let go of the bag with his teeth, crawled around it to the rat, and yelled "Dude, that's my bag!"

The rat, having never heard a fellow rodent shout with the voice of a human being, let go and fled in terror.

Leon grabbed the bag, pulled it out of the dumpster, and scampered to Zubayr.

"What is this?" Zubayr asked "A medium takeout bag? This helps me not!"

"Two minutes!" Malik shouted, his chiseled face impassive. He began to unwind mighty chains from his arms.

"Dude, this is what you need," Leon explained. "What was it again?"

"The memory of a false covenant lined in salt!"

"Yeah! That's it! Well, exactly, man! EVERY bag that had fries in it is a memory of a false covenant lined in salt! They all have salt, man, everything here is salty. And you just know someone promised to share their fries and didn't!"

Zubayr stared at the guinea pig. "Leon," he said, "you have rescued us from damnation."

"No worries, Zubosity."

"That's not my name," Zubayr said.

"ONE MINUTE!" Malik crowed, his voice betraying joy. The flames that surrounded him grew, bursting outwards in a mighty conflagration without heat, their cold light blinding.

Zubayr crumpled up the bag, stuck it in the silk pouch, and circled his hand over it, and spoke, quietly, an incantation being of ancient Egyptian, Akkadian, and tongues from before history and memory. The pouch burst into flames and vanished without ash or smoke.

"NO!" cried Malik. "YOU HAVE RUINED MY DAY!" He vanished.

Zubayr placed Leon carefully in the backpack, and they longboarded home.

"I shall have Julie over tomorrow," Zubayr said as they coasted along. "She wishes to try taquitos."

"That's wicked, Zubman," Leon said. "Can you pick me up some more kale?"

Beef Curtains
by
Susannah Shepherd

Grant's tire crushed a hypodermic needle as his BMW rolled to a stop at a red light. He was explaining wireless internet to Taylor, the woman riding shotgun (*a 7.5*, he will later rate her to his buddies). Grant observed his pre-gentrified surroundings with an arrogant ease that relied entirely on being inside of an automobile. They were headed to a pop-up concept in an abandoned warehouse in Denver Arts District that was doing a \$250/head tasting menu.

Wireless Fidelity... Radio waves... Would you roll your window up?... Fiber Optics... Because the AC is on... Antennas... Taylor was checking her reflection in the side mirror to ensure her mascara had imprinted onto her eyelids, making her look like a drunk aunt. Scrunching her nose, she gave herself a hyperbolic preview of how she was going to look once the Botox left her system. Taylor was sorry she'd asked how internet works, until she realized that she hadn't.

Fifteen minutes into their first date, both of them thought it was going well. Grant believed this because it was his understanding that every woman on the planet would commit murder one to be wined and dined by an objectively handsome (if not for a yarmulke-shaped bald spot) gentleman, and taken for a spin in a luxury vehicle with an unimaginative vanity plate: BMRLVR (*the utter low-hangingness!* Taylor and a woman named Rea will agree, cackling over a shared cigarette several hours later, Rea's red lipstick like fire on the filter). Grant was certain that Taylor, well-fed and buzzed from French wine she wasn't educated enough to pronounce, would be riding him with enthusiasm in no time at all.

Taylor's metric for how the date was going was based solely on the fact that she was detoxing from male attention. Similar to exposure therapy, Taylor had spent all her free time during the last month going out with any man she believed would bring her closer to the edge of the cliff. She was confident in the method's effectiveness after having used it several years ago to quit drinking alcohol. Fifteen blue raspberry-flavored wine coolers and one stomach pumping later, Taylor had achieved cold turkey sobriety.

In a few short weeks, Taylor, thirty-two, will free fall and be reborn. She'll commit suicide, so to speak— shave her head, cut off her eyelashes (*we get the rest of it, but why did you do that?* her otherwise supportive friends will ask), stop waxing her upper lip, quit barre classes or sucking in her stomach, and act in ways that society deems generally feral. In a few short weeks, Taylor will be the happiest she's ever been in her entire life.

Grant was thirty-eight years old and split his time between New York and Denver (*the best of both worlds*, he'd say often. And, *why not?*). He clocked-in an average of nine hours each week for a financial firm owned by his father and started by his grandfather's father. When Grant wasn't skiing in Hokkaido or sailing around Martha's Vineyard, he trolled dating apps, cocktail lounges, and the international aisle at the grocery store in search of grateful women to sleep with. The latter was where he found Taylor, comparing prices on different brands of wasabi paste. (*You look like someone who knows how not to burn rice*, he'd said, in reference, she guessed, to the fact that her mother is Vietnamese. *Would you like my number?* Taylor had responded in what Grant felt was record speed.)

Unlike his Ivy League brethren who were engaged to Mary Catherine's and welcoming their second child into seersucker bassinets with Sayre's, Grant self-identified as alternative. This

belief in his own complexity seeped into all corners of his life. His residences were more Yayoi Kusama than Monet, his shirts more vintage Joy Division than Brooks Brothers. In the romantic sphere, he was invested in the humanitarian act of finding someone to temporarily rescue from the horrors of financial inferiority (someone with student loans and credit card debt who regularly shoved crinkled one-dollar bills into self-checkout machines after ringing organic produce in as regular). He took considerable pleasure bringing insecure blondes with too much eyeliner, nipples shining through their sheer, Rent-the-Runway gowns as his plus-one to high society events. Half-Golden Retriever, half-emotional terrorist, there wasn't much Grant could do to lose favor in the eyes of his people. To operate with such confidence—the kind informed by unconditional acceptance in the upper echelon—is bound to wreak havoc on anyone's personality.

Much like Make-A-Wish for relatively healthy and able-bodied women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five (no exceptions here), Grant delighted in watching his dates absorb the exclusive surroundings he may otherwise take for granted. (*You're absolutely correct to note that, Gillian! It is cool that the waiter comes around and washes our hands with a warm towel in between courses,* he recently validated an eager Spirit Airlines flight attendant at his favorite foie gras joint in Midtown.)

But like any non-profit, this wasn't some kind of handout. After much data collection, it was Grant's understanding that this type of woman was more attentive to his needs (i.e. gave more/better head than rich girls), and was less likely to give him a hard time for ghosting. Furthermore, she wouldn't deign to throw a 9-pound bronze paper weight at his temple if they were to discover he'd been stepping out, protected by their wealthy father's attorney. (Like a tennis ball, Grant's short-lived go at monogamy had been derailed when he got distracted by an attractive mother-of-four, the night shift clerk at his local bodega in Chelsea.) And even if these women did push back on his lack of follow through or diminished post-coital interest, who cared? That's what doormen and the block function on iPhones were created for.

As far as Grant was concerned, "she" could be any one, so long as she was struggling financially, met his age and hotness criteria, and didn't have vocal fry. (*It's triggering, reminds me of my dad's third wife—nagging lady, terrible cook,* he'll later unearth during a productive EMDR session.) "If you have, Really-Good-Nurse vibes, it's a maaaaajor plus," read the seeking: section on Grant's Bumble profile just beneath a photograph of him lending a hand in the somber disposal of a beached whale.

"Sometimes I wonder," Grant released a barely audible nose-laugh that was intended to make Taylor believe at once in both his profundity and humility, "I mean, this is *crazy*, but—I think, that person could be *God*."

A bad actor watching the rain, decided Taylor, her date looking just beyond his window with performative compassion that made the bile in her stomach churn.

Grant was referring to a man in the midst of a psychotic meltdown at the intersection who was violently waving around the remnants of a shattered High Life forty and hissing obscenities at passing bicyclists. A cardboard sign that read: BEEF CURTAINS rested amongst his scattered belongings—a water damaged copy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, *Herland* (most of the pages torn out), a broken-in-half Blu-ray of *Ex Machina*, a pair of dull shears he'd used to give himself blunt bangs of the deranged variety minutes earlier.

Grant lurched forward only to brake again at the very next red light. Taylor glanced up briefly before taking out her cracked iPhone to study the pop-up menu. *A bone-in grilled sea*

bass atop a bed of micro greens doused in a creamy eggplant sauce. Beef tongue and liver pate on freshly baked bread. Wires crossing or synapses firing, she smiled to herself at the idea of *beef curtains* existing on a menu somewhere—a chef pushing the envelope to compete with those places where you can pay thousands of dollars to eat an endangered ortolan, your face hidden beneath a napkin to shield the decadent act from God. (Decidedly a bad look to chow down on a \$1,000 bird while famine strikes on a global level, but such judgments weren't stopping people like Grant from indulging.)

"*What if God was one of us...*" Grant's singing voice was nasally; *more assault than serenade*, thought Taylor. And, perhaps operating with base level self-awareness, Grant was picking up on Taylor's standoffishness. Grant, for a brief time, was determined to remedy this perceived glitch in Taylor's lack of affection. *Pay attention to me*, two layers beneath his consciousness was sputtering, *find me out of your league and irresistible. Want what I have*, demanded his programming.

"Can I smoke in here?" Taylor asked without looking up from her phone. In response, Grant would've had you thinking she'd asked if she could fuck his dad.

As a defense mechanism, Taylor, impervious to his charm, registered to Grant as a broken toy. *Work, thing*, he thought, *why aren't you working?* And finally, eventually: *broken*, Grant will declare, easing the sting of this unexpected rejection.

For Taylor, stomaching Grant was important. This was all part of the plan. And while it was difficult in the same way climbing a 14er without water, sunscreen, or shoes whilst suffering a traumatic brain injury might be, she knew the view from the top would be worth it. In the meantime, *brined beef tongue on homemade sourdough*. Exhausting work. Undeniable perks with brief shelf-lives. (Sound familiar?)

Taylor realized she'd been biting her tongue so hard, tiny pinpricks of blood had formed in an imperfect, semicircle formation. She swallowed, returning to studying the menu and fantasizing about oversized labias.

"Another part of me thinks they should just be rounded up and taken out to pasture," Grant said, testing the waters. Perhaps this was the way to Taylor's black heart. But alas, she found this more deplorable than the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* shit that succeeded it.

Grant's arm was now situated behind her head rest in an act of unearned familiarity.

These were the longest red lights in the history of red—

"Just a slob like one of us..."

Every second with this guy sucked more than the one before it. He was *perfect*. Not dangerous, just terrible. A heavily concentrated dose of ick. And this was saying something because before this, Taylor'd been having coffee with a guy named Drew, a mechanic who chewed his ice, spoke mostly of feline aids, and shushed her mid-sentence so he could pick up a non-emergency FaceTime call from his mother in the middle of their date.

Taylor was far more bothered by these men than she ever could be by the folks who collected an eclectic assortment of trash in stolen shopping carts, lived in tents, and lit trashcans on fire in the downtown area. Mostly, they were harmless, kept to themselves. Plus, she figured she was about one missed paycheck away from joining them, and thus wasn't about to cast judgment on those who may soon be her neighbors. All this said, she

did not believe that the woman who broke into her apartment building to take a dump in the only functioning community washing machine last Tuesday was God disguised in a method-out skin suit. And besides, Taylor was a practicing atheist.

"You seemed way less shy when I met you," Grant said, with a hint of irritation at having to do the conversational heavy-lifting.

A month ago, Taylor may have apologized, tailored a response that would alleviate his discomfort. If she liked the guy, she might've whispered an erotic defense: *I'm just thinking about all the things I'm going to do to you after dinner*. But those days were behind her. Taylor was done explaining herself. She was done bending over backwards to please and she was done catastrophizing over signs of her aging and pretending she enjoyed getting choked out in the middle of sex. Taylor was even done with having fantastic eyelashes because of their ability to distract from the truth that her eyes told.

"It's green," said Taylor flatly.

Grant was unimpressed by Taylor's knee-jerk reaction to the High Life bottle making violent contact with his rear windshield.

"What the *fuck* is funny? What is funny about *any* of this?"

It was in this instant that her initial attractiveness rating of 9 plummeted to a 7.5. It was at this very moment that he classified her as: an ungrateful woman, a total bitch.

Taylor thought it excellent how Grant, like a power-tripping father, threatened to cancel their dinner reservation (the awkward first date equivalent of: *I will pull this goddamn car over*). This would have been more than fine with Taylor. She'd gotten what she needed from Grant and then some. The assault on his prized vehicle was on par with any joy she'd have received from feasting on egregiously-priced culinary goodness.

But the reservations were non-refundable. Taylor had always found this curious— rich people's unwillingness to cut their financial losses. Grant spent the remaining twelve minutes of the drive over to the restaurant on speaker phone screaming at a customer service representative after being placed on a brief hold. There was something so pedestrian about it—Grant's aversion to his own inescapable humanity. Taylor marveled at this; how Grant, too, had to get emissions tests and deal with his balding hair and wrinkling skin, vomiting nonstop if he were to ingest *Listeria* (which he would in approximately thirty minutes, along with the other guests at the pop-up who ordered the beef tongue). It was Grant's aggressive pushback on the fact that he shouldn't *have* to—that he was somehow above waiting in lines or having his head stuck in a toilet—that made the whole thing such a delight to witness.

"Sir, I understand you're upset. Did you happen to get the ID of the person who threw the bottle at your car?"

"No, Meredith, was it?"

"Meagan," Taylor corrected.

"Meagan," the woman on the other line confirmed.

"I didn't catch the name of THE CRACK HEAD WHO WAS TRYING TO TAKE MY LIFE."

It was in this same way Grant had shifted his view on "God" that Taylor's understanding of the patriarchy had shifted. A wake-up call, subtle as a jackhammer. A light switched on to illuminate the grotesque creature that she'd spent her entire life accommodating. Taylor had simply snapped out of it as though hit over the head by a glass bottle. She had spent the majority of her days blinded by this idea that romance was the anecdote to her profound loneliness. How could she not? It was sold to her in just about every ad and Blockbuster hit, by every single love-drugged couple she encountered on the streets. This was suddenly comical to her. To answer Grant's question, *everything* about it was funny. *Everything*.

Grant's evisceration of the customer service rep faded into the background as Taylor got lost in thought. The way her labia minora hung beyond-the-lips in an objectively dumb manner reminded her of a dog panting. This was an observation that supplied her with endless pangs of amusement ever since she first named it. Taylor was just about always horny, something she'd read in a Christian Nationalist magazine from the 90s that her mother religiously subscribed to meant that your brain was made of, "rotten porridge". Taylor thought that if there were any truth to this, she must be quite stupid since thoughts of getting laid had infiltrated her head near constantly since she was a teenager. How could she possibly make sense of it all? Her heteronormativity, sex drive, and hatred for men who showed any sign of not-*getting-it*?

Her attention shifted to memories of an ex, Paxton, who she'd once told the panting-dog-thing to while he was going down on her after they'd already broken up. (Twice.) He'd resurfaced from beneath the sheets briefly, wiping sweat from his forehead and her from his red beard with the back of his hand, to confirm that her genitals did indeed give panting dog vibes, said he, *wouldn't be able to unsee it now*. When he'd returned to work, Taylor, grinning sideways said, *hey, you're not supposed to agree with me*, squeezing his head with her thighs a little to indicate her wish for him to come back to eye level. She wasn't actually bothered (oppositely, she was happy for this intimate confirmation), but Pax wasn't doing it right and she felt the need to redirect without offending. This was how it so often went. Eating pussy is an art form. Some were master painters. Others competent in the world of stocks and bonds or international policy. Pax was super handy—not a duct-tape fixer like his predecessor who couldn't so much as change a lightbulb or remove a leaking trash bag from the receptacle without groaning, though incidentally gave great head. (*What on earth then, Taylor demanded, is the point of us living together?*)

Taylor hadn't wanted to train anyone. She just wanted to make the dog happy and have broken things fixed. She craved reciprocity, someone delightful to share the rising cost of groceries and responsibility of disposing of the garbage. Taylor (finally) realized that the most efficient route to this was: Task Rabbit, a roommate, and solo play.

"Let's start over, shall we?" Grant asked as he expertly parallel-parked his damaged vehicle. His smile revealed a jarringly straight set of printer-paper white teeth, an observation Taylor regarded with mild disgust.

"Do you still wear a retainer?"

He did, he sure did. Consistently wearing a retainer in your late 30s felt, at best, pure vanity, at worst, sociopathic behavior (thought the woman with endearingly crooked teeth who lost her own retainer two days after it was made). Taylor got a front row seat to Grant's dark side that he was now trying to cover up with the behavioral equivalent of a Nixon mask. This to say, his attempted pivot back to "charming" was unsettling.

Once inside the derelict brick building, a hostess who looked like Sydney Sweeney sister led Grant and Taylor to a folding card table disguised by a starchy cloth. Taylor noticed Grant drooling over what Grant's mother would refer to as, "the help," and felt briefly aroused in an unfeminist, early-2000s-Porn-Hub kind of way. What could she say? The programming ran deep.

The dining room that once functioned as a ballpoint pen manufacturing factory (before China won) was lit by a sea of glittering tea candles. The darkness almost succeeded in shielding the naked eye from the fact that the building was on the brink of collapse, the whole place brimming with safety code violations. Taylor tripped on a rogue extension cord, and while it was too dark to make out her facial expression, she sensed the freshly objectified hostess was less than thrilled to be used by her as a human crutch.

Several moments later, their server came over to greet them, likely finding her way to the table by Grant's abnormally bright teeth that shone like a Lighthouse from a horror movie. In obligatory fashion, she introduced herself, Rea, asked about dietary restrictions, and would they like to get started with the wine pairing for an additional \$400 each?

"Absolutely," Taylor said. No longer a drinker but many years a server, she planned to leave the wine glasses untouched as a bonus tip for their waitress.

"You too?" Rea asked in the direction of Grant who seemed to be hiding his face—yes, who was definitely hiding his face. From Taylor? From *God*?

If Grant were unhappy with Taylor's reaction to the High Life bottle, he was even less so with her response to Rea returning to the table to pour a full bottle of Chateau Haut-Riot over his bald spot. Her manager's hands were tied, Rea had to go. But not before she announced to the entire dining room that half the menu was bought directly from Costco's prepared food section.

Taylor, mesmerized by Rea, followed her outside and all the way to her shitty Prius parked three blocks away. A bumper sticker that promised in all caps: IF YOU HONK AT ME, I WILL KILL MYSELF was peeling off the hatchback. Taylor had exited the pop-up just as the hostess had rushed over to Grant with a linen, damp with soda water, to apply directly to his soiled groin.

"*Shit*," Rea said. She had bills piling up, hadn't thought this through. She had only seen red as she recalled how the jackass at table 7 had knocked her up three months earlier. When she'd told Grant about their mutually unwanted child (then the size of a green pea), Grant had blocked her, but not before he'd called her a liar in response to her \$150 Venmo request that would cover less than half the abortion fees.

"Hey, Rea? Can I come with you?" Taylor asked while Rea paced the street, kicking a rock that ricocheted in the air and landed with great force on the ancient Prius' windshield.

"*FUCK*."

"That was incredible, what you did back there."

"Your boyfriend's a psychopath," Rea said, procuring a pack of American Spirits from her canvas bag.

"He's not my boyfriend."

Rea looked at Taylor unconvinced, fishing around for a lighter. Taylor produced one, daring to come closer with a flame.

"I was going to kill him tonight," Taylor said, unsmiling.

Rea accepted the fire with a nod, and speaking through grit teeth asked, "Are you a crazy person? I have enough problems right now."

Taylor said there was a massive chance she was crazy, though probably not in a harmful way.

Rea unlocked her car, pleased by this honesty.

"Me too. Get in," she said.

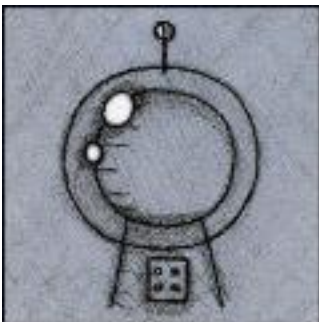
Contributor Biographies



Sean Cahill is based in Los Angeles and writes literary and speculative fiction. His recent work can be found in *Unlikely Stories*, *The Morgue*, and *Belladonna's Garden*, and is forthcoming in the 2026 anthology *I Haven't Made It Home Yet* from PWU Press. You can find him on Instagram @SeanyCWrites.



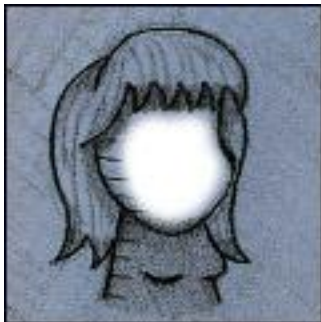
Kate Horsley's first novel was shortlisted for the Saltire Award. Her second was published by William Morrow. Both have been optioned for film. Her short fiction has appeared in magazines like *The Cincinnati Review*; *The Citron Review*; *Fictive Dream*; *BULL*; *Paragraph Planet*; *Blood+Honey*; *Tiny Molecules*; *Flash Fiction Online*; *SEXTET*; *Ink, Sweat, & Tears*; *Fish Barrel Review*; *Cake*; and *Strix*, and placed in competitions including Bath, Bournemouth, Bridport, Oxford, and Smokelong. She's a creative writing lecturer.



Chris Turner is an award-winning writer of humor, horror and comic books. Upright Citizens Brigade trained in improv/sketch/stand up. Contributor to *Points in Case*, *Slackjaw*, *Frazzled*, and more. @christurneronline



Christy Hartman pens short fiction from her home between the ocean and mountains of Vancouver Island, Canada. She writes about the chasm between love and loss and picking out the morsels of magic in life's quiet moments. Christy has been shortlisted for Bath and Bridport Flash Fiction prizes and is a two-time New York City Midnight winner. She has been published by *Sky Island Journal*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Sunlight Press*, and others. www.christyhartmanwriter.com



K. G. Kirkland is a writer based in Queens. She writes about urban mythologies, Catholic guilt, and the bureaucratic surreal. She is hard at work on her debut novel. You can keep up with her life as it's currently happening (the asinine and delightful) on her substack, YoungDumbAndKierkegaardian.Substack.com.



Jeff Cove lives in the internet. He has published some things. His website is <https://jeffcove.com/>



Remington Bishop Lamons cannot grow a mustache. That's what the haters said. Well, what do you think of THIS!? No, this. Right here, below my nose. Well, come closer then. Hold on, let's just go into a room with better lighting.

Since unveiling his lip sweater, Remington was published in *BRUISER* and made a small nest in a branch of the internet. Come say hello: RemingtonLamons.com.



Joy Kennedy-O'Neill teaches English at a small college on the Texas Gulf Coast. Her fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Galaxy's Edge*, the *Lascaux Prize Anthology*, the *Cimarron Review*, and elsewhere. More of her work can be found at JoyKennedyOneill.com. "Build-a-Grudge" was first published in *Daily Science Fiction*.



Marvin Garbeh Davis, Sr., is a Liberian writer whose work explores memory, endurance, faith, and the quiet dignity of ordinary lives. His fiction and poetry draw deeply from Liberia's river towns, rubber plantations, and the landscapes of post-war resilience. His works seek to preserve overlooked histories and illuminate the essence of the human spirit in the face of hardship. He lives with his wife, Angea, in Monrovia, where he writes to honor the stories that shaped him and the ones still unfolding around him.



Olly Blackburn is the filmmaker behind cult movies *Donkey Punch*, *Kristy*, and that commercial with babies pooping in slow motion to the 2001 song. He's been a journalist, a copywriter, and a sprinkler factory assembly worker, and he's not bad at cooking potatoes. His writing has previously appeared in *Points in Case*, *The Haven*, and *The Washington Boast*.



Michael Fowler writes humor and horror in Ohio.



Susan Page Deutsch (she/they) is a part-time poet and full-time silly goose. She lives in Wales with her cat, Noni, who is unemployed and regularly turns to a life of crime. Previous work can be found in *Fatal Flaw*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Tangled Locks Journal*, *Thread*, and elsewhere. You can find her (and Noni) on Instagram: @suzewritesstuff



James Rumpel is a retired high school math teacher who enjoys spending some of his free time trying to turn the odd ideas circling his brain into actual stories. He lives in Wisconsin with his wonderful wife, Mary, though it should be noted that if her name was Wanda the alliteration would be most impressive.



Gregory Jones studied literature and history while growing up in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. He lives in Albuquerque by way of Philadelphia and Baltimore. His work has appeared in *The Fiddlehead*, *Ligeia*, *Blood Tree Literature*, and *The South Shore Review*, and was longlisted for *Southeast Review's* World's Best Short-Short Story Contest. "An Audience..." was originally published in the Spring 2020 issue of *Ligeia*.



Brandon Yu is a writer and poet from South Florida with a passion for storytelling. His work has been published in *Fabula Argentea*, *Oyster River Pages*, *The Washington Square Review LCC*, *The Gordon Square Review*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, and elsewhere.



Rick Jones is an author of short fiction across all genres, and his debut novel, *Phoenix*, will be out in 2026. He lives in Burlington, Ontario, with his kid and a really demanding cat.



Susannah Shepherd is a writer of feminist smut. She currently resides in Denver. Contact: susannahkshepherd@gmail.com