

◇ Defenestration ◇

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Fangirls of the Ancient World

by
Kathleen Bryson

At the amphitheatre gates, three girls had been queuing since dawn with amphorae of watered wine, figs, wax tablets and absolutely no chill.

"OMG," said Livia, scratching HERCULES HAS RIZZ into the plaster with her hairpin. "I would let him clean my stables."

"You don't have stables," said Flavia.

"I would acquire stables."

This was not the demigod Hercules, obviously, but Hercules Maximus Felix, a Roman arena fighter from Capua who had chosen his stage name with subtlety.

Inside, the vendors sold little clay Hercules torsos, lion-skin bonnets. Livia purchased a full set of the commemorative apples of the Hesperides and also three suspicious vials labelled Actual Hydra Venom, Babe. Both the other temple priestesses rolled their eyes, but each still bought three as well.

When Hercules entered, the whole crowd screamed. Not war-scream or grief-scream, but the special high civic shriek of girls witnessing forearms. His thighs were democratic. His beard had policy implications. He waved just the once to stir up dust and thirty-seven respectable maidens fainted in the bleachers.

"He is such a baddie," whispered Claudia of Tibur, in Rome for the Games and already composing a scroll sponsored by ever-popular Horace New Consortium.

Behind her, an Apollo tribute act tuned his lyre. "Y'know, in my day, men had pulse without all this *branding*." O, he muttered, but few listened and no one cared. Things moved fast and crazes shift. Just last month, a Coriolanus-themed fighter had gone viral for sulking outside the city gates, but now this new gladiator Hercules Maximus Felix gave looksmaxxed facecard plus pure cross-market appeal: monsters, masculinity, redemption arc and oh, a damned excellent pelt.

Hercules disembowelled a chancer to his right, and raised his gruesome club in air.

"I can fix you," intoned a breathless widow, mouthing the words down to the arena.

Young Claudia held up her polished bronze mirror to catch his reflection. "Follow me for more demigod content," she whispered to no one and everyone. She side-glanced down below and afterwards would always swear he winked at her.

Then Hercules lifted his fake Nemean lion skull and smiled. The amphitheatre lost its mind. Laurels flew. Doves panicked. A senator's wife threw her girdle and blamed Venus.

Later, historians would call it hero cult. They would write of divine honour, ritual devotion, masculine excellence and perhaps the old Imperial ache for greatness, long-suppressed.

But on the wall by the vomitorium, under three hearts and a badly drawn thunderbolt,
someone had written the truer record in blocky Times New Roman: *HERCULES CAN GET IT.*

Henry VIII is Dancing
by
Robert Garnham

Henry VIII is dancing. There's a look of determination in his eyes as he shuffles sideways on the flagstone floor. His costume, his royal accoutrements, add to the solemnity. There is no music, just his dance. The music is coming from elsewhere, and only he can hear it. His gold chain glistens in the candlelight, his shadow mooches a few feet behind its master, elongated. Sidestep shuffle shuffle, sidestep shuffle. Henry VIII is dancing.

'He hardly raises a sweat', the Earl of Flinksborough said to me.

This was a lie, because His Highness was sweating profusely. Drops of moisture clung to his brow.

'Ah, 'tis a sight to behold', I replied.

The Earl of Flinksborough was not considered a part of His Highness' inner circle. The hall where the feast had been held had an earthy smell.

Henry VIII wore a doublet festooned with pearls and gold-stitch embroidery. Henry VIII wore a velvet jerkin. Henry VIII wore a flowing robe. Henry VIII was dancing.

'His trunk hose is exquisite', the Earl of Flinksborough opined. 'And as for his codpiece and his stockings . . '.

His stockings were made of silk.

'Yes?'

'They are magnificent and can only magnify his god-like serenity'.

His Highness had incorporated a shrug into his dance. Sidestep shuffle shuffle shrug shrug shuffle. The feathers in his bonnet quivered with his movements, each shrug sending their tendrils into waves as if the fronds of a willow tree in a midsummer storm. He didn't once smile.

'See how the feathers in his hat', the Earl of Flinksborough said, 'are without movement, such is the smoothness of His Highness' dance'.

'Motionless, eh?'

'Not the slightest movement'.

I wanted to get away from the Earl of Flinksborough, but we were seated behind the tables on which the feast had been recently consumed. The main course had been swan. We'd also had deer, hedgehog, wild boar and badger. The last three of the fifteen courses had been more of a chore, but His Highness had tucked in and was in remarkably high spirits. Outside, beyond the walls of the hall, wolves were howling in the woods, and bandits patrolled the highways. Sidestep shuffle shuffle shrug shrug shuffle.

'He really is quite amazing', the Earl of Flinksborough said. 'His stockings, his trunk hose, his velvet jerkin, his doublet, his bonnet, the feather in his bonnet, he's just . . . '.

There were soldiers in the gloom behind us with their backs pressed against the brick walls of the hall. I knew that they were within earshot and because of this, I was feeling increasingly nervous. I could sense them behind me, listening in on our conversation. They stood with tall staves, shoulders back, chest out. They were wearing armour on their upper bodies.

His Highness had incorporated a pelvic thrust into his dance. Still, there was no music, just his eyes staring straight ahead, and his mouth unsmiling. Sidestep shuffle shuffle shrug shrug thrust.

'His exquisite dance', the Earl of Flinksborough said. Sweat was now rolling down the Earl's forehead. 'His magnificent dance . . . His doublet festooned with pearls and embroidery . . . His dance is not ridiculous in the slightest, it remains . . . It demonstrates . . . It's not at all . . . Ridiculous . . . '.

Sidestep shuffle shuffle shrug shrug thrust.

The soldiers conferred. I heard them behind me, whispering. They stepped forwards. My heart rate intensified. My heart was pounding in my chest. Sweat was rolling down my back.

His Highness stumbled, ever so briefly, hardly even noticeable at all. But I had noticed. And the Earl of Flinksborough had noticed.

'His Highness', the Earl of Flinksborough said, 'has not once . . . ' . He swallowed, because he was conscious that the soldiers were immediately behind us. 'He has not once put a foot wrong'.

They placed their hands on his shoulders. They gripped. They yanked him to his feet, he had to push his chair back. They dragged him away from the table. I didn't even look. I didn't even glance sideways. I just concentrated on His Highness as he danced. They dragged him away from the table and I could hear his heels scraping along the flagstone floor. Nobody else watched. Nobody else looked. We all pretended that he had not been there.

Henry VIII is dancing. No music, no expression. Nonchalant. The open sores on his legs were pungent. I had to catch my breath. Candles flickered because a door had been opened somewhere. Sidestep shuffle shuffle shrug shrug thrust, sidestep shuffle shuffle shrug shrug thrust. He likes to move it, move it. Outside the hall, the wolves were howling.

The Tallest, Drunkest Pope
by
Axe Cornwell

back when men were men
and Popes were Popes
and mystery was still sublime
when the Pope came out to
check his shadow each winter
and it was long, vast, and feared across America

they'd give Pope the ball
knowing he'd dunk it every time
because he never passed
and he refused to dribble
angel in the paint
demon on the pave

towering on the dance floor
in communion with the beat
Pope would get low
evoking reverence & awe
tears, penance, & jubilation
and there—in exaltation—
they would bring him his saxophone

beaming his smooth & brazen sound
to every radio across the empire
but now, it's just a thousand
little drunk popes
like pagan gods—
hard-luck, itinerant seraphims
ruling blackmarket theosophies
huddling over burnt offerings
for the smell and the warmth
of cooked meat—

you have to find your own pope
be a pope of one's own
drunk & alone with
the moon & your shadow
prodding the dead grass
in the godless night

Prophecy from a Wellspring of Anxiety, Recited by Coffee Mug

by
Janessa Mulepati

Adam's coffee mug talks with a Germanic accent. Why, he doesn't know. Words started escaping its coffee residue months ago, and when he holds the ceramic vessel to his ear, it's like talking on the phone. All in all, the mug isn't bad, but its claims are suspect. As if some thrift-store trinket invaded England with the Saxons in 449! All the more reason to ignore its prophecy late one Friday.

"Adam."

He glances at the empty mug and returns to work.

"Adam, son of Gregory."

Perhaps he's losing his mind. Auditory hallucinations might represent some bizarre, subconscious coping mechanism for stress, but hey, whatever works. He can't afford another breakdown or the bank might fire him.

"Adam, I bear dire news."

Mostly, Adam wonders why his subconscious is so annoying.

"Adam, pay heed! The coffee stains are clear. The ancients speak, just as they foretold the Saxon invasion of—"

"Stop. I still don't believe that Saxon nonsense."

"But you knew nothing about Saxons before I spoke."

"I must have read about them somewhere, but go on. What news, mug?"

The mug hums. It loves theatrics.

"The promotion," it announces. "Two weeks. Upper office."

"What?"

The mug blathers about high windows and drafts—and wouldn't Adam prefer a toasty hearth?—but Adam isn't listening. There's no way he'll get that promotion, even though he kills himself for this job. It's cruel, his subconscious torturing him like this, and his doctor's warning bears remembrance: *relax or you'll develop hypertension*.

"Fortuitous," the mug says, "but my tidings are bittersweet. Claim that office and Mada dies."

Who?

Mada is, of course, Adam spelled backwards. The realization means that the mug must be ignored—that Adam is dangerously close to another breakdown, and the added stress of this prophecy is simply egging him on. What he can't decide is whether Mada portends his own literal death or something more symbolic.

"I hate you," Adam tells the mug.

"The English spouted worse."

But the mug isn't real, which means the prophecy isn't real. Nothing will happen, so there's no reason to worry. Still, Adam is sweating so profusely that he packed two shirts today.

"No breakdown," he tells himself. "Get your shit together, Adam."

Karen, his manager, steps into his office.

"Adam? Could we meet now? My afternoon cleared, so we can do your performance review early."—A review he's been avoiding in fear of criticism or platitudes regarding his prior collapse.

"Now?" he asks.

"If you're available. I promise you won't be disappointed."

Her tone is light. Promising. Is he overthinking? Does she hear his damn mug striking up a battle hymn in some dead, Germanic language?

Adam follows Karen upstairs, where they pass someone unfamiliar—a woman in a sleek suit with bold, red heels. The color conjures a cacophony of memories: lipstick on grandmother's pinched expression, father's angry pen dissecting essays, and a ball snatched from Adam's hands with reprimands to go study.

"Oh," Karen says. "This is Mada."

"You," Adam hisses into his mug. "I've had three cups of coffee. You're saying the residue mean nothing?"

"The ancients are silent."

The sound that escapes Adam is something between a growl and sputter—a grutter.

"Mada must be symbolic," he says. "She represents success. Pressure. The perfect, high-achieving partner my parents expect. The one I'm supposed to break \$150K to attract, because the top ten percent love our city and make it unaffordable for everyone else, especially if you want kids. Never mind owning a house. Oh, screw that."

"Mada," the mug says, "appears to be a real person, not mere symbolism."

"Hush."

Arguing with his subconscious like this is crazy, except Mada is most definitely real.

Adam baits the mug: "Tell me something I couldn't know. Something Saxon."

"Do you know Mucking? That's where I was excavated."

He looks it up online and feels sick. Listed artifacts do resemble his mug, and he doesn't recall ever reading about Mucking, but then again, his subconscious might have stored anything he's seen over the years. And didn't his doctor say that his problems might stem from internalized criticism? Couldn't that tendency manifest as a prophecy meant to hamper promotion—to spoil promotion's validation with a downside? And say the promotion does validate him. Great. His family will ramp up questions about marriage and kids. More pressure. More stress. More expectations.

"Adam," the mug calls. "Gird your loins. Fate comes."

Karen is dangling a key and smiles.

"There's a new desk you might like."

Adam needs emotional support, so he carries his mug, much as he detests it.

"Here," Karen says, opening a door.

Adam sweats indecision. He can't turn down the promotion. He needs the money—retirement, a mortgage, graduate-school loans—and damn it, he wants to be good enough for this. He *is* good enough, but he can't stop seeing red pen across his essays and that toy ball disappearing into a closet, and he knows his family will demand a cut from this while yet belittling him. Oh, to have success untethered from anyone's judgment!

And then there's Mada, who might die. Double damn.

His feet stall shy of the office. One step will take him inside.

The mug speaks: "Be bold! Trample Mada. Trample her or return to your desk of shame."

But murder is an awful burden for starting a new position. Maybe he doesn't need the pressure of this promotion. Actually, for sure he doesn't, but whether he flees or stays, both decisions feel slicked by the self-doubt coating his palms and thoughts, and yes, the prophecy feels real, but it came from a mug or maybe his subconscious. Adam takes a neurotic eternity to shuffle all of his competing thoughts aside. What does *he* personally want?

He steps into the office and exhales.

"Where's Mada?" he asks.

"Who?"

"Mada. She's new?"

"Oh," Karen realizes. "Not Mada. Manna."

She congratulates him and leaves. The mug gripes: "So maybe no one was ever in danger. Like us, prophecy isn't perfect."

"Like us," Adam repeats.

"The Saxons—"

Adam spits into the mug, silencing it, and for a blessed moment that silence lingers. He cherishes the void of thought and chatter, uncertain how long it will last. Then, wondering whether the silence might be permanent, he vanquishes the mug to the trash bin.

Doorbell Blues
by
Andrew Urquhart

The bell rang and I leapt into action
with the preliminary grumble
of an aged Pavlovian hound.
I grasped both armrests
hissed a pneumatic gasp
and pushed
myself
up.

I shuffled to the door
imagining a visitor
or the letter I'd waited years for
from her.

But no—
I swung the door open in time to see
the backs of running kids,
giggling in full retreat.
One shouted "Gotcha!"
over his shoulder as they scattered
with big chicken steps
around the corner.
I played my part and bellowed:
"I know where you live, you little bastards!"
throwing in a cartoonish fist-shake.

I chuckled as I closed the door
but felt the sudden sting
of knowing I'd have given everything
to be running in their warm sunshine
with pockets empty of anything
to slow them down.

The Trench Coat

by
M.D. Rose

You learn quickly, working in court, that justice is blind but the courthouse is not.

The courthouse sees everything.

It sees who is late, who is lying, who is about to cry in the bathroom, and who still believes a color-coded binder can protect them from consequence. It sees who says "Your Honor" like a prayer and who says it like a threat.

It also sees wool.

I'm a court clerk. I don't decide guilt or innocence, but I do decide what gets filed, what gets stamped, what gets scheduled, and what gets quietly slid back across the counter because someone "forgot" to sign page six. I have watched grown adults crumble in the span of a single raised eyebrow.

If you want to survive in a courthouse, you learn the rules.

Not the posted rules. Everyone ignores those until the bailiff clears his throat like a warning shot.

I mean the real rules.

Rule #1: The printer can sense urgency. If you need something immediately, it will jam and then stare at you with its tiny blinking light like it's disappointed in your life choices.

Rule #2: Someone will always bring coffee into the courtroom, despite the sign. It is always the same kind of person, too—someone with a confident walk and a cup that says *World's Best Mom* like it's testimony.

Rule #3: The courtroom has its own weather system. It can be seventy-five degrees outside and somehow freezing at counsel table. People come prepared for litigation and leave with seasonal depression.

Rule #4: If a person says, "This will only take a second," it will take all day and possibly require a witness.

Rule #5: The judge hears everything, even when he looks like he's thinking about lunch.

And lately, we've developed a new rule.

Rule #6: If you want to be taken seriously in this building, wear the trench coat.

Nobody will call it a rule.

If you ask, they will laugh like you told a joke in church. They'll say it's just "professional." They'll say it's "court appropriate." They'll say, "Well, it gets drafty in here," as if the courthouse air-conditioning is targeting them personally.

But I notice patterns. That's my job. And the pattern is this: every lawyer comes in wrapped in the same shade of respectable beige like they've joined a tasteful cult.

Same cut. Same belt. Same quiet swish when they walk, like the fabric itself is whispering, *I object.*

You see enough of them, and you start to recognize individual attorneys by their trench coat the way you recognize birds by their call. The Corporate types have coats so crisp they could cut glass. The Public Defenders wear theirs like armor that's been through three wars and a custody battle. The ones with money have trench coats that make a soft sound when they move—like the air is paying them.

And then, every so often, someone tries to enter the courthouse without one.

You can spot them instantly. Not because they're sloppy. Most of them look fine. Blazer. Slacks. Decent shoes. A clean haircut and a hopeful face. That's the tell, honestly—the hope.

The courthouse doesn't like hope.

The security guard pauses half a second longer than normal. Not enough to stop them. Just enough to wonder if they're supposed to be here.

Other attorneys glance up, then glance away, like they've watched someone bring store-brand chips to a cookout.

The bailiff's eyes do that thing—soft, sympathetic, already preparing a mental "bless your heart."

And me?

I watch.

Because I want to see the moment it hits them.

It always hits them in the hallway, right outside Courtroom Two, where the acoustics are unforgiving and the beige wolves like to gather. They walk in, coatless, and realize they are the only bare-shouldered mammal in a herd of wool.

Their eyes flick down the line of attorneys: trench coat, trench coat, trench coat.

Their eyes flick down at themselves: blazer.

Their face tightens.

They start doing internal math the way only a person with student debt can.

Is this a courthouse thing? Did I miss an email? Am I...

Am I casual?

It's tragic, honestly. Like watching a baby deer step onto ice.

This particular morning, the undercoated attorney was young. Not young-young—old enough to have passed the bar, which means old enough to have cried at least once in a library—but new to the building. He clutched a briefcase like it was a shield.

He walked up to the counter and slid his filing toward me with both hands, careful, respectful. Like he thought the paperwork might bite.

"Good morning," he said. His voice did that bright, professional thing. The tone of someone who still believes words can fix situations.

I looked down at his forms. I looked at his signature. I looked at the blank where he'd forgotten to initial, because they all forget that part.

Then I looked up at him.

No trench coat.

I didn't say anything at first. Clerks are trained, emotionally, the way zookeepers are trained. You don't startle the animals.

Behind him, the hallway shifted. A group of attorneys in matching coats drifted closer, smelling blood in the water. One of them—an older man with a trench coat that had seen the inside of every courtroom in the county—tilted his head at the young attorney like he'd found a stray cat.

The young attorney cleared his throat. "Is... is there a problem?"

I tapped the page where he'd missed his initials.

"This part," I said.

"Oh." Relief flashed across his face so fast it was almost funny. "Right. Sorry." He initialed, quick and shaky. He slid the folder back.

"Anything else?"

I could have lied. I could have told him no. Let him walk into Courtroom Two in his blazer and learn the trench coat rule the way everyone learns it: publicly, painfully, and with a witness present.

But there are some things you do for the sake of community.

So I leaned forward slightly, lowered my voice, and said, "Do you have... the coat?"

His eyebrows pinched. "The coat?"

I didn't clarify. You don't explain sacred phrases. You simply repeat them.

"The trench coat," I said.

His face did exactly what it always does. Confusion, then suspicion, then the horrible realization that the adults around him are being deadly serious about something stupid.

"I didn't know I needed one," he said.

"You don't," I said, because that's the truth. "Not officially."

He swallowed. "But..."

I nodded, once, like we were sharing a legal strategy. "But."

Behind him, one of the beige wolves—an attorney with a dramatic collar and the kind of confidence that comes from never having consequences—sighed loudly, as if the young attorney was wasting everyone's time by existing incorrectly.

The young attorney leaned closer, whispering now. "Where do I—?"

I slid a business card across the counter. Plain white. Crisp black text. No logo. No joy.

**H. BRAMWELL, TAILOR
TRENCH COATS / SUITS / ALTERATIONS**

On the back, in smaller print, like a disclaimer:

DISCOUNT FOR LAWYERS.

He stared at it like I'd handed him a map to buried treasure.

"How much is the discount?" he whispered.

"Four percent," I said.

His face flickered.

"Four," he repeated, like I'd told him a sacred number.

I held my expression steady. I've seen people react to four percent like it's life-changing. The human brain does strange things when you attach meaning to cloth.

He nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Same tailor," someone muttered behind him, reverent.

The young attorney turned like he'd been struck. "Same tailor?"

Three lawyers in trench coats nodded at him in unison.

Like church.

He pocketed the card, stood straighter, and walked away with the doomed determination of someone about to spend money they don't have.

I stamped his filing and moved on with my day.

Two hours later, he came back.

He didn't just have a trench coat—he had *the* trench coat. Beige. Belt tied with casual authority. Collar sitting just right. The fabric swished when he moved, not because it needed to, but because it wanted to be heard.

He approached the counter again, this time with a different energy. Not confidence, exactly—more like... protection. Like he'd been vaccinated.

"Hi," he said. Same voice, but steadier.

I looked up, took him in, and felt the courthouse itself shift around him.

The security guard glanced over and nodded.

One of the beige wolves stepped aside to let him pass.

Even the air-conditioning seemed to respect him more.

He set a second filing down, and for the first time that day, I saw an attorney look like he belonged here.

From Courtroom Two, the judge's voice carried into the hallway—dry, impatient.

"Counsel," the judge called, "are you ready?"

The young attorney's eyes widened. He hadn't even been here five minutes.

Then he straightened his shoulders, the trench coat settling around him like an oath, and he said, quietly but clearly, "Yes, Your Honor."

And I'll be damned if the judge didn't pause half a second longer than usual before answering.

"Good," the judge said.

The young attorney walked toward the courtroom, trench coat swishing like precedent. I watched him go, then turned back to my stamp, because the docket doesn't care about superstition. The docket cares about deadlines.

Still, I couldn't help it.

I murmured, mostly to myself, "Court appropriate."

Then I stamped the next form and added a new rule to my list.

Rule #7: It was never about warmth.

It was about being believed.

Pizza delivery
by
Mark Day

I disdain your pizza order.
These are ignorant toppings.
Once I commanded ravens
to deliver fresh bread
to Elijah in the wilderness.
Now I deliver pizza.

Flat tablets of cardboard stacked
on a moped's rack:
these are my commandments,
written in pepperoni and artichoke.

I wait to pick up another
unholy order.

There was no tip.

One day, you will face
my judgement, as did
the Israelites who spat out
my manna, demanding quail.

I shall smite you with a plague,
a stuffed crust stuck
in your gaping maw.

Your driver has arrived.

The Greatest Narcissist Who Ever Was

by
Neil Weiner

Alex arrived thirty minutes early so he could choose the largest chair in the room. All the chairs looked nearly identical, but his was slightly larger. He arranged the others in a circle around it and nudged his own chair six inches forward. On a nearby table he displayed three framed certificates. One proclaimed him Founder and Visionary of the First Narcissist Club and had been presented to Alex by Alex. Another named him Member of the Month. The third awarded him a Lifetime Achievement Award.

When the other members arrived, several paused to examine the display. "Nice awards," Bradley said.

"Of course," Alex replied.

"Who gave them to you?"

Alex shrugged. "Someone who recognized greatness."

Once everyone was seated, Alex cleared his throat. "Welcome. My name is Alex. I've convened this inaugural gathering for individuals unfairly labeled narcissists by spouses, family members, coworkers, and other jealous observers. We already have forty prospective members waiting to join."

"You didn't start it alone," Roberta said.

"Actually, I did."

"And?"

"And I started it best."

Before anyone could respond, all six members began talking. Alex raised both hands. "Please. One at a time. We are all equals here. Except for me, since I'm the founder."

The room immediately erupted.

"Who elected you?" Bradley asked.

"I assumed I was in charge," Linda said.

Gary laughed. "Neither of you has the charisma."

Raj sighed dramatically. "Leadership emerges naturally around enlightened souls."

Alex pounded a small gavel. "Introductions. Roberta?"

Roberta tossed her hair. "My boyfriend tricked me into couples counseling. One session later I had a diagnosis. Ridiculous. I'm an influencer."

"How many followers?" Gary asked.

"Twelve. They're highly engaged followers."

Bradley smirked. "I manage three thousand employees."

"Employees aren't followers."

"They're better."

"Only because they get paid."

Alex pounded the gavel again. "Bradley?"

Bradley adjusted his expensive tie. "My family staged an intervention because they're intimidated by excellence. During therapy I told my sister, 'If I wanted your opinion, I'd give it to you.'"

Several members nodded.

"Then I reminded them humility is one of my finest qualities."

The nodding stopped.

Linda adjusted her glasses. "That's not humility."

Bradley sighed heavily. "Thank you for demonstrating the persecution I endure daily."

When Linda's turn arrived, she smiled proudly. "My therapist described my grandiosity as among the most impressive she'd encountered in twenty years."

"Really?" Roberta asked.

Linda beamed. "I consider it a professional endorsement."

Gary stood. "Three ex-wives independently described me as larger than life."

"So?" Linda asked.

"When multiple sources validate my self-assessment, that's called evidence."

Raj smiled serenely. "You remain trapped in ego. I transcended mine years ago."

"Then why are you here?" Roberta asked.

"To teach."

For a brief moment the room fell silent. Then everyone began talking.

Determined to restore order, Alex distributed membership packets. The cover page read: *The First Narcissist Club: A Movement Larger Than Any One Person*. Written by Alex. Foreword by Alex. Introduction by Alex. The acknowledgments thanked Alex for his courage, vision, leadership, perseverance, resilience, and exceptional hair.

Inside was a section titled *Common Symptoms of Being Surrounded by Inferior People*. The list included frequent frustration, chronic underappreciation, being right too often, others failing to recognize your genius, and repeated exposure to idiots. Several members nodded before realizing they were agreeing with Alex. They immediately stopped.

Another section listed famous people allegedly accused of narcissism: Donald Trump, Napoleon, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, and Madonna.

Bradley frowned. "Why isn't my name on this list?"

The others instantly began searching for theirs.

Alex pointed triumphantly at the page. "Notice the pattern? Greatness is often mistaken for narcissism."

"Madonna shouldn't be above me alphabetically," Roberta muttered.

The next page listed offensive stereotypes: control freak, showboat, user, spotlight addict, egomaniac, emotional vampire.

"The prejudice is disgusting," Roberta said.

Bradley pointed at the word *egomaniac*. "I prefer premium self-esteem."

Alex turned the page. "Worse are the jokes."

The examples included: *Let's talk about something that interests both of us: me. Everyone is entitled to my opinion. Enough about me. What do you think about me?*

Several members underlined their favorites.

Alex ignored them. "Our mission is to educate the public and demand the respect we deserve."

Bradley raised his hand. "As future president and CEO, I support this mission."

"Future what?" Alex asked.

Roberta stood. "I nominate myself for Supreme Influencer."

Gary rose. "I'd like a lifetime appointment."

"Leadership should be determined by intellectual superiority," Linda declared.

Raj smiled. "Enlightened beings don't need elections."

Alex raised both hands. "We'll settle this democratically. All in favor of yourself becoming president?"

Six hands shot into the air. The meeting immediately descended into a competition over who suffered from the most impressive diagnosis.

"My diagnosis was severe," Gary said.

"Mine was extreme," Bradley countered.

Linda scoffed. "My therapist called mine extraordinary."

Raj smiled beatifically. "Mine was spiritually unique."

Alex stood. "Clearly Alex suffers more from misunderstanding than any person in modern history."

Before anyone could challenge him, Roberta suggested a group photograph. Ten minutes later they were still arguing over who should stand in the center. The meeting ended without a picture. Later that evening, six selfies appeared online. Every image had been cropped to exclude everyone else.

Within a week, each member launched a competing organization. Alex founded the **Original First Narcissist Club**. Bradley launched **Narcissists for Executive Excellence**. Roberta unveiled **Influencers Against Misunderstanding**. Gary created the **Larger-Than-Life Foundation**. Linda established the **Institute for Advanced Grandiosity Studies**. Raj announced the **Society of Spiritually Superior Individuals**. Each publicly denounced the other five groups.

Six months later all six organizations collapsed. Not because of financial problems. Not because of infighting. Not because of public ridicule. Each founder had been expelled by the membership for excessive narcissism.

One year later the former members reunited for the First Annual Narcissist of the Year Awards. Six trophies were presented. Every member received one. Every member filed an appeal. Each insisted the others had received trophies that were slightly larger.

Alex alone appeared content.

His trophy was.

Wisdom courtesy of our mother
by
K.R. Rose

As the green grass always says,
the secret to a long life is
whatever the fuck
reticulated pythons
are doing in Indonesia.

You Went to Canada for Garth

by
J. Scott Boyd

You went to Canada for Garth. Your digital courtship brief, but consuming. After hours of searching underground blogs for the perfect venue for your first in-person meet, you found, and now sit in, the hippest bar in all of Canada, while pretending it's the Ace Hotel. You're on a love seat in an empty corner, enjoying your trademark root beer float. Just the thought of Garth sets the butterflies in your stomach aflutter. As you sip your delicious frozen subtly you wonder what will happen when he does walk through that door, where will you go, what will you end up doing? That's when you see the man enter the room. And from a distance, he seems about the right height and about the right build to be Garth. As he makes his way through the crowd of pure hipness you can now tell that he has what, if he were a woman, would be called a bob haircut (do they call them bob's in Canada?). He's probably early 30s, but has a 7th grade heavy-metal-kid mustache. He's wearing a gigantic LA Kings jersey, below-the-knee cut off jean shorts (complete with Goody comb planted in back pocket) and blindingly white hi tops, Ponys you think.

Thankfully as he moves into the light you can confirm that he does not match the mall-quality photos you have seen of Garth. But it does put a fright in you. Like what if Garth isn't who you think he is? What if he's just a guy who found pictures online of the hottest guy he could. He searched for hours and days, and by far the hottest photos of the hottest guy, on the entire internet, from .com to .edu, even on the heavily censored Chinese version of the internet, were the ones he sent you. So what if fake Garth hides behind the thick walls of fake internet photos until the day you finally meet in-person and then he looks nothing like his photos. What if Garth is not hot? The opposite of hot? It's just too painful to think about, so you scan the crowd to find not Garth again and you do, and he seems as if he is lost and out of place, as if he shouldn't be here, but should in fact be at the Canadian version of Buffalo Wild Wings (which might be an actual Buffalo Wild Wings because their wings are so tasty it would make sense for them to be an international brand). And this Canadian version of Buffalo Wild Wings would of course be located in the Canadian version of West Covina.

But clearly he is not, he is here in this Canadian version of the Ace Hotel, and it seems as if he is searching for someone, someone in particular. And he looks in your direction and your heart stops. And you are like, *No way. No fucking way, please God do not be imposter Garth*, but your respiration returns to normal as his gaze glimpses, grazes and goes on without recognition. Don't get yourself wrong, you are sure he is a very nice person and it might be quite enjoyable to share a frozen treat with him, but he is not the type of guy you want to think about getting naked with. Not the type of guy you'd like to imagine touching in the places he might want you to touch him, those places that are currently, and thankfully, well covered by jean shorts. Not the type of person you'd consider doing sex with.

You notice some of the hipster patrons stare at him as well. They lean close in to their friends to talk shit. Like, *what's up with Papa Roach over there*. But before they can even make the Pa sound of Papa Roach, they stop. At first you wonder why, but then you can almost see the thoughts birthing in their little hipster heads. They're wondering, "is it possible that his style might actually be based in irony, seeped in it, drenched in it, saturated in it in fact?" They're wondering if maybe LA Kings jersey guy's execution of white trash style is so replete with irony, sated with it if you will, that it has raised the bar and is putting everyone else's weak attempts to shame? Is he not to be mocked, but to be

emulated? And what if he is not only, not an actually white trash Canadian version of an inland empire native, nor just a super hip guy taking it to a new level, but what if, in reality he is Banksy? What then? Well, then of course his attire would not be lame, it would be awesome. Maybe these Canadian versions of Ace Hotel hipsters had not gone far enough, had stopped well shy of the ironic limit in fact. Damn it they think, why were we so unimaginative? It's insanity, cause now it seems there are no rules. Hipster minds are being blown and nothing makes sense. This carefully constructed, exclusive and well-defined hipster universe is crumbling down around them and on top of them with the force and urgency of a Shinedown guitar solo. *Who are we really?* they wonder.

So the hipsters look around attempting to see themselves through the eyes of the possibly coolest-person-ever. They check out their own clothes and hair, their tight jeans, their scarves. They're like "holy shit it's hot in here, and I have on a scarf and a beanie and a sweater and a scarf and a jacket and a third scarf? That Kings jersey with all those little holes in the fabric, might allow for a nice breeze to reach my skin. I bet it's silky smooth too, unlike the wool from this vintage cardigan on the other hand, which is not. It's neither cashmere nor merino, and it's a bit itchy. In fact, it's super fucking uncomfortable. Why would I have not worn a shirt under this?"

You see one gentleman with a handlebar mustache sitting atop a unicycle, step down, lean the unicycle against a table and slowly walk away, as if it was not his unicycle, as if in fact he didn't even know how to ride a unicycle. You see a woman slowly remove a corn cob pipe from her mouth and hide it in her purse, the purse that happens to be made out of an authentic southwestern Native American horse blanket, and looking at it she realizes that it may be as equally unacceptable as her pipe, so she proceeds to push it under her chair.

Although the level of tragedy from the loss of hipster identity here is just north of a school shooting, it's possible there is a bit of post-traumatic growth to be had. A bit of a silver lining if you may. Agreed of course that it's scary, there is no minimizing that, it's terrifying to be riding this fixie bike sans hipster-rules-training-wheels, but might there not be a glimpse of freedom beyond this wreckage? Of opportunity? Yes I think there is. And this tiny glimpsable seed we have just agreed upon, starts to grow, and it grows and grows until it is a sapling of liberty and then it grows some more, and now it's a big ass freedom tree, in full red, white and blue bloom. And of course we should be free, this is America after all, I mean Canada (they aren't a dictatorship up there, or under some kind of sharia law are they?), and we invented freedom. With the hipster handbrake off, the things that were previously off limits that are now on the table...well it's just mind-boggling...and the hipsters think, does this mean I don't have to wear suspenders anymore? That I don't have to be vegan. I can eat KFC? I don't have to listen to every single Ezra Klein Show episode nor read all those novel length Atlantic articles (cause there's like a million of those)? I can like Emily in Paris? I don't have to let Pitchfork reviews, penned with the infinite wisdom that only a 22-year-old kid who was bullied all through adolescence can pen, decide my musical preference? I can drive a Cyber Truck? Well maybe that's going too far, but a Kia Soul? I can stop carrying around this fucking cosmetic cane?

And now, as if the perceived scorn of the hipster kid's pitifully-lacking-in-irony-ironic-attire was not bad enough, it seems like he is not feeling the soundtrack either because as the new !!! song comes on, his head tilts just slightly. And everyone just knows he is like, "are you kidding me with this? Where are the guitars?" And then a guy in short-shorts, knee-high tube socks and a too small tank top heads over to the DJ booth. Maybe he's feeling more confident because his hipster look is not all that terribly different from Kings jersey guy's what was not, just moments ago, a hipster look, but that actually might now, be the hippest look. He asks the DJ loud enough for Kings jersey to hear "got any Daughtry?" the

trans DJ shakes their head, they do though give tank top an it's-cool-nod and the indie-tronica fades out and Staind fades in, and up, up, up the volume goes. And with *It's Been Awhile* blaring, the crowd starts getting into it. They're like, *wow, being allowed to like Staind feels fucking awesome* and they're hoping the DJ has the entire *Breaking the Cycle* album, and some Nickelback or Trapt as well. Kings jersey is clearly feeling it. And the too tight tank top guy is like *look at me, hey, over here, i'm the one who got Staind put on*.

And then you see Kings jersey pull a phone out of his jeans shorts and it happens to be a flip phone. And at first everyone is like *fuck, our phones too?* But of course they slowly slip the iPhones they were using to look up Three Doors Down reunion tour dates back in their pockets and now they remember how awesome flip phones really are. And then they start to pray, and although they pray individually, they hope the culmination of all the simultaneous individual prayers might have some kind of emergent property effect in which the total of the sum of the prayers is greater than the parts because they pray that in that one drawer in their bureau, the one with all the random stuff, the one with forty-seven different micro usb power cords, they pray when they get home it still houses one of their old Nokia Razrs. They're like, *how could I have totally forgot how fucking cool Razr phones are? With T9 text input and that slick anodized aluminum shell. Unforgivable*.

And then the Kings jersey turns, and with an entire bar full of people he could lay his eyes on, he looks straight at you, with what you swear is recognition. And he walks your way. And your stomach explodes, as if your butterflies just shot an eight-ball of coke and washed it down with sherm (but not in the good way). And you are again saying *No way. No fucking way. Is this an ersatz Garth after all? Please Lord no*. And you knew that meeting him for the first time would be exciting, but not this kind of exciting. As he comes over he gives a hesitant wave and you urinate yourself a bit. And although it doesn't absorb all of it, you are glad that today is one of the rare days you decided to wear underwear. And now you are looking around for cameras to see if you are on the Canadian version of Punk'd (they have MTV in Canada?), but you see none. And Kings jersey looks at you and you know he is going to introduce himself. You just know he is going to say *hey, it's Garth*. And then he is going to say, *yeah, I know, I get that look a lot, but those pictures are kind of old (and not even me) but I don't have a camera on my phone, so...* But, instead he says, "excuse me, do you happen to know where the Canadian version of West Covina is?" And hearing that you cum. Just a little, but you think it's possible you have never felt more relieved in your entire life. Never more alive. You're even enjoying the little bit of pee that has yet to dry between your legs. You might even be into water sports now. In fact, this feeling you have (not the pee feeling, we're past that, leave it), it might be the best feeling you have ever had. And you're like *this is the feeling of happiness I dreamed of when meeting Garth for the first time, the real Garth*. And Kings jersey continues — "and not just the Canadian version of West Covina, but specifically the Canadian version of Buffalo Wild Wings located in a strip mall in the Canadian version of West Covina?" And you are so happy you pull out your non-flip phone and thank God you never deleted that Mapquest app that came bundled with your old hotmail address so many years prior, and you give him turn-by-turn driving directions. You also give him your number in case he gets lost (the getting lost part is probable due to Mapquest's directions being almost universally wrong because there are tons of new roads (possibly new cities) since the app was last updated).

As he thanks you and starts to leave, the crowd begins to realize Kings jersey is not in fact super hip, he is not Banksy, he is just your run-of-the-mill white trash dude headed to the Canadian version of Buffalo Wild Wings in a strip mall in the Canadian version of West Covina. The Staind song quickly fades out and the !!! song fades back in. And it's the !!! song that was remixed by oOoOO and remastered by alvvays, the CSS cover that Brendan Yates guests on. And now everyone knows where they stand again. And friends look over at

friends and say "phfhfhfhfhf, Canadian version of West Covina. So lame. Fucking Staind, stupid." And the iPhones get unpocketed, the unicycles get remounted, the corncob pipes get pulled out of the Native American blanket purses and reinserted into mouths and the canes get taken back up. All thoughts of their next drink being a Zima or a shot of Jäger fade as they head back to the bar and put in their orders for the cocktail of the day, the one named after the B-side from the first Joy Division single. The cocktail is made with locally sourced organic tequila produced in oak barrels of limited quantity by a throuple out of Ottawa. It takes about 75 minutes for the mixologist to prepare this cold-pressed blood orange, chia seed milk, hand pulled tamarind and kale muddled piece of perfection, but it's worth it. It's so worth it. And the rules are back, and there is not a single question in their minds, this drink is hip as fuck, and so are we.

You order another root beer float from the soda jerk and bask in your relief and pray that when you really meet Garth, it can feel like this. And you really hope so, because now that you've had this feeling, you so want this feeling, you need this feeling, and you can't fight this more-than-a-feeling feeling anymore, and in fact you forgot what you started fighting for and you're thinking maybe it's time to bring this ship to shore and throw away the oars. Forever.

Contributor Biographies



Kathleen Bryson is from Alaska and lives in North London. She is the author of 3 evolutionary non-fiction books and 4 novels; the writer-director of 5 underground feature films and an artist with 10 solo art exhibitions. Her first full-length poetry book, *Luciferin*, will be published imminently by erbacce-press. Her work moves between fiction, evolutionary science, poetry, underground cinema, paintings, myth, animality, sexuality and deep time. She holds a doctorate in evolutionary anthropology from UCL and is currently an EU Postdoctoral Fellow investigating virtual reality. Her website is www.kathleenbryson.com.



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



Axe Cornwell is a technocrat at heart. He lives in the woods in Quebec learning no French at all. You can find him on Instagram ([@axe.cornwell](https://www.instagram.com/axe.cornwell)) or Substack ([@axecornwell](https://www.substack.com/@axecornwell)).



Janessa Mulepati is more successful at fainting than writing, but alas, here we are. You can find her work in *Pif Magazine*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Ramblings are available at <https://substack.com/@jlmulepati>.



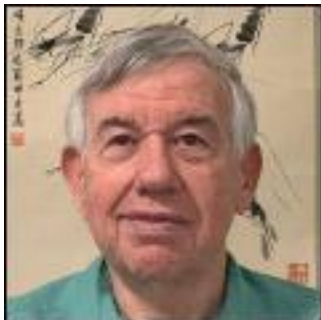
Andrew Urquhart is originally from Glasgow but has lived in the Scottish Highlands for most of his life now. He has taught English and Scottish literature for many years. He writes poems and stories in both English and Scots and has most recently had work published, in the award nominated pamphlet, "Mair Northern Nummers," and in magazines such as *Lallans*, *Eemis Stane*, *Allegro*, *Dreich*, and *Clarion*.



M.D. Rose is an English major at the University of Cincinnati, an honors student, mother of four, and writer who went back to college later in life after putting family first for many years. Although she has been writing for as long as she can remember, returning to school finally gave her the courage to start sharing that work with the world. "The Trench Coat" marks her third publication—and her first outside of her college literary community. When she isn't writing, studying, parenting, or wearing approximately fifteen other hats, she is probably finding stories in places she absolutely did not expect to find them.



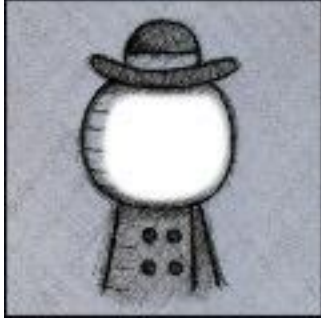
Mark Day works in the charity sector and lives in London, UK. He has a serious job, so relaxes by writing poetry and trying to get it published. He rarely sleeps.



Dr. Neil Weiner has over 40 years' experience as a clinical psychologist who specializes in trauma recovery and anxiety disorders. He enjoys using stories to help readers harness their resilience to aid them on their healing journey. He has been published in a variety of professional journals and literary fiction in over fifty magazines. His psychology books include *Shattered Innocence* and *The Curio Shop*. Non-psychology publications are *Across the Borderline* and *The Art of Fine Whining*. He has a monthly advice column in a Portland Newspaper, "Ask Dr. Neil." nweiner@usa.net



K.R. Rose is a blind poet and storyteller living in Boston, Massachusetts. Eyewitnesses claim she is actually a goose in disguise, and is most likely plotting to take over the world with her fellow waterfowl. More of her writing has appeared in *Wordgathering*, *Muleskinner Journal*, *Scavengers Literary Magazine*, and others. When she's not writing, Rose may be collecting rocks from streams across New England. Connect with Rose and join her gaggle at <https://krrosewrites.com>.



J. Scott Boyd spent fifteen years in the music industry, working with artists including No Doubt, Social Distortion, and Chris Cornell before becoming a licensed psychotherapist. He has worked in the Boulder County Jail, the Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Center, and the Exodus Psychiatric Facility. He has a private practice in Boulder, Colorado, where he focuses on addiction and trauma. His short fiction is forthcoming in *J Journal*. He is the author of the novels *Black Forest* and *Bad Cop, Worse Cop*.