InterText

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"Decisions"
by CRAIG BOYKO

ALSO INSIDE:

MARK STEVEN LONG • KYLE CASSIDY
GARY CADWALLADER • WENDY CHOLBI

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First Text

JASON SNELL

Old Fish, Teeming Pond

AFTER FIVE YEARS OF EDITING *InterText,* after having written twenty-seven of these FirstText columns, I'm constantly in danger of repeating myself when I welcome you to a new edition of this magazine.

It can get to be a little bit like listening to your doddering old Uncle Phil as you sit on the couch waiting for Christmas dinner. "Uh-huh, right, that's when the Zero came out of the sky and shot you down in the Pacific," you say, having heard this particular World War II story dozens of times while still doubting its authenticity. Every Christmas, Uncle Phil tells the same story, like it or not.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm becoming a bit like Uncle Phil. Not just because of my column topics—I mean, if I had expected to write twenty-seven of these columns, I would have never thought of writing a "from the editor" column to begin with!—but because of the length of time we've been doing *InterText.*

When we started publishing this magazine, there were probably two other online fiction magazines. ("Uh-huh, right, that's when *Athene* got shot out of the sky, and with only *Quanta* and *DargonZine* left standing, you and Geoff entered the fray.") Now I'd guess that there are at least 50 entities that call themselves online magazines and print fiction, either exclusively or as part of a package with poetry, journalism, or opinion writing. Some of them are nothing but glorified home pages on the World Wide Web, others are online arms of paper-based magazines, and still others fit the same format that *InterText* does—a traditional fiction magazine, *sans* paper.

What does *InterText* have on these other magazines? On one level, it's sheer age. We've been here seemingly forever, watching our small community of magazines turn into a flood of more than 700 electronic periodicals, according to John Labovitz's E-Zine List. We've stuck around. It's also quality—we seem to be pickier about what we accept and more careful with the text of our stories than some, though not all, other publications.

But these days, it's hard to get heard over the din of the World Wide Web. When there were only a couple magazines out there on the Net, it was easy to find *InterText*. But now it's pretty hard, and getting harder. How can we stand out from the crowd, and get interested readers to discover the brand of fiction that we provide every two months?

That's a tough one.

For one thing, I think there needs to be a central clearinghouse for online magazines like *InterText*—ones that publish fiction on a regular basis. Readers need a place to go to find detailed information about what kinds of stories different magazines publish, so they can match their tastes to the appropriate publication. Another need is for someone (or several someones) with time and guts to rate the quality of as many online magazines as possible, so busy Net users who don't have the time to separate magazines with good editorial filters from online vanity presses can find the best source for reading online.

Not quite the same solution, but one that's still pretty useful, is Jeff Carlson's *eScene,* the online fiction anthology, available on the Net at <http://www.etext.org/Zines/eScene/>. Carlson's goal is to make *eScene* the first stop for readers on the Net—a collection of the best stories printed online in a given year. Last year, *eScene* only received submissions from a handful of magazines (I'm proud to say that stories from *InterText* figured prominently in that collection), but this year's *eScene* has received nearly a hundred story submissions from many of the publications swimming in the Net. If *eScene* can gain cache from the Net literati, perhaps it can serve as a jumping-off point for readers.

But most importantly for magazines like *InterText,* a thriving future on the Net requires word of mouth from our readers. If you enjoy reading *InterText,* pass the magazine's URL on to your friends. Or e-mail them a copy. A virtual magazine with a budget approaching $0 and three people, all of whom have "day jobs," can't be a marketing juggernaut. We'd love to spend all our time promoting *InterText,* but we can't. That's where we have to depend on you.

Our next issue will mark our fifth anniversary on the Internet, and our thirtieth issue. Be sure to be here—and tell your friends. With your support, we hope to be here for at least thirty more.

At the Dead Mother's Bend

MARK STEVEN LONG

Some say certain moments define our lives…
and perhaps it's our lives which define the moments.

PEETO STARED AT THE LINE OF TWISTED STEEL bordering the outer edge of Ottawa River Road, which veered left without warning to avoid the gentle, treacherous river beyond. The more he looked at the hideous steel, the more he saw the river.

Only two weeks ago, a woman in her early twenties had driven the car into the guardrail and was killed instantly. Her little boy, safely strapped into his car seat, suffered only a bruise and instant orphanage. To spare the next of kin, it was decided the woman had lost control of her car trying to round the sharp curve in the road. By that time, the local kids were already calling it the Dead Mother's Bend.

The city repair crews went on strike the very next day, leaving the guardrail unrepaired. The next car to miss the curve would go through the rail and into the river. Peeto was certain of it, and he had to see it happen.

He rubbed his crotch and looked up the road, where it came away from a quiet intersection and skirted quickly past the school playground. From that direction, the road took its abrupt turn into a sudden glut of trees, ensuring no driver could see around the bend.

Peeto looked over to the playground and fixed on a sagging, rusted mass of pipes that were the monkey bars. They were the same bars he'd climbed and fallen off of when he was seven. He remembered leaning over to look at the ground, then losing his balance. It was his most vivid memory: that split second in the air when the trees whisked past and the sky fled as the ground charged at him. The impact broke his arm. He was always reliving it in his mind. To fly, to fall.

The years built up inside him as he leaped down stairways, rode his bicycle over the tops of earthen dikes, contemplated the high dive at the city swimming pool. Once, Brian and Jeeter Dowell had grabbed him after school and dangled him by his feet out of a second-floor classroom window. Peeto couldn't cry with fear like they'd wanted, even though he was afraid they would beat him up.

Sometimes, his upper arm still ached where it had been broken, even though he was now in his teens. He'd started spending nights sitting on the bed and hitting his arm to make it hurt. Closing his eyes, he would see the blurred trees, the uprising ground. Grabbing, hitting, twisting his arm could revive only the vaguest tinglings of crunched bone.

Peeto couldn't imagine wanting anything else from his life, though he knew he was supposed to. He wore long sleeves to hide the marks.

Tires squealed in the distance. He looked up the road, bouncing on the balls of his feet in anticipation. First he saw a blob of moving color that quickly refined itself into a battered blue Chevy Nova. The motor howled in a hideous bass voice. This was the one—he knew it was. It was going like a bat out of hell. Or a bat into hell. It was magnificent.

His upper arm still ached where it had been broken. He'd spend nights sitting on the bed, hitting his arm to make it hurt. Closing his eyes, he would see the blurred trees, the uprising ground.

The car raged past him. Peeto barely glimpsed the driver, who turned the wheel too late. The car smashed easily through the twisted and bent guardrail and hurtled over the edge of the earth and into space. Peeto felt his entire life within him in the few seconds the car hung in the air. The evening sun reflected off the driver's window, exalted the car's polished surface. The Nova spun slowly to one side before drifting downward, as if almost looking back, before it splashed into the river and sank.

Peeto fell to his knees and couldn't get up, he was quivering so much. The police would simply assume the boy was shaken by what he'd witnessed, and he would let them think it. Now he knew beyond all doubt that he would do this himself some day: he would fly, and fall, and die.

MARK STEVEN LONG

Is a writer and editor from New York City. He has been published in National Lampoon, Reed, Fiction Forum, *and elsewhere. His story "The Nutbob Stories" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1993. This is his first electronically published fiction.*

Decisions

CRAIG BOYKO

If we think of ourselves as moral persons, why do we always do the wrong things for the right reasons?

I NOTICED HER AS SOON AS I WAS THROUGH THE DOOR, as if she was emitting some sort of signal. Not to me—maybe not to anyone in particular. Something in the way she sat, the way she sipped from her glass, the way she watched the whole room in the mirror set behind the rows of glasses and bottles perched against the bar.

I stood there in the entryway, letting the rainwater drip from my coat, just watching her. Expecting her to turn around and smile at me.

Which was idiotic.

I sat about three stools away from her. I didn't want to frighten her, or even draw her attention. Gaining attention isn't necessarily a benefit.

I ordered a bourbon from the bartender, and he grunted. He finished wiping a glass, set it down next to the others, and walked down the length of the bar. I put a five on the bar and looked into the mirror.

The woman three seats down was leisurely oscillating a swizzle stick around the edge of her glass. Watching her fingers as they moved. Uninterested. Bored.

She was wearing a blue dress that showed a lot of back, leg, and cleavage. Her wavy blonde hair fell a few inches below her shoulders. Her skin was bluish-green in the bar light. Her expression made me think she was waiting for someone but had given up, knowing they wouldn't show.

Before I was conscious of moving, I found myself sitting down next to her. And immediately felt out of place and awkward; the stools were too close. My leg was almost brushing her thigh. And most of the bar was empty. No reason for my voluntary proximity.

Tactfully, she didn't look up—rule of the city, the bar—though I saw her shift in the mirror.

The bartender placed my glass in front of me. I thanked him, looked at the counter, then pointed to where I'd left my five. "That's, um, mine." He nodded, shrugged, and went to pick it up. Feeling stupid, I told him to keep the change. He nodded, like he knew I would say that. Like I should have, for making him walk to get the bill.

I looked at her in the mirror, and she was looking down at her fingers, lazily circling the glass, which was half-empty.

"Could I buy you a drink?" I said, hearing my voice as if it was coming from the other side of the bar, or maybe out on the street.

She looked up, first in the mirror, then at me. She looked amused, curious, nervous. Then smiled. White teeth, pink tongue.

"You could buy me a drink, yes."

I waved to the bartender. "Unless, of course," she said, "that binds some sort of agreement."

I looked at her. She tilted her head, her hand moving from the glass to the counter.

"Pardon?" I said.

"I said, unless that drink binds some sort of agreement. Socially. Or sexually."

I looked at her, feeling my cheeks get warm. Not understanding her, not liking the way she was gazing at me.

"No," I said eventually, looking at her, then her mirror image. Smiling past the rows of burgundy bottles. "I don't think so… I'm not sure what you mean…" Hating my voice, its high resonance inside my skull.

She shrugged, the whole dress shifting on her body like a second skin ready to be shed.

"No, I guess not," she said. "Sure, you can buy me a drink." And she turned back to her glass, and sipped from it. "But maybe I should finish this first," she added, clicking the glass on the bar.

"That was a line, right?" she asked, her voice as uninflected as if she was asking how far it was to the next subway station. "Asking to buy me a drink. It had to be."

The bartender stopped in front of me, waiting. "Sorry," I said, smiling. "A little later."

I looked at her in the mirror, and cradled my own glass, now empty, in my palms.

She sipped her drink. "That was a line, right?" she asked, her voice as uninflected as if she was asking how far it was to the next subway station. "Asking to buy me a drink. It had to be. Or just an… icebreaker?"

"Yeah. One of those."

She smiled and put down her glass. "Good."

She stood up, and I could only look at the blue fabric of the dress, speculate as to what lay beneath it. My cheeks burned and my throat was sore. I wondered dimly what the hell I was doing there. Avoiding the run, probably.

"I think I'll pass on that drink, though," I heard her say. I mumbled acceptance.

"Let's go somewhere," she said. "Maybe you can make it up later."

THE RAIN HAD STOPPED. THOUGH IT HAD BEEN RAINing before, she had no coat. Her hair wasn't wet like mine, which made me wonder how long she'd been in the Winder. Shit, I supposed, some people never left. She caught my sleeve with a manicured finger and turned down the street, not bothering to see if I was following. As she went, the street lights each provided her a private spotlight. It was hypnagogic.

Reminded me of Mae.

She led me around another corner and down a block, her heels clicking on the cracked sidewalk. I followed her mindlessly, like a confused stray dog. I thought then, fleetingly, about turning and leaving.

Then she turned into a dark niche, an unlit, unmarked opening. I stood behind her there, feeling the night air against my cheeks as it dried my hair. She tapped a keypad beside the door, and it lit up green. I followed her in, closing the door carefully behind me. She hadn't paid any attention to me since we'd left the Winder.

She walked down a hallway lit by dim incandescents, past unmarked doors with filthy glazed inset windows. Like a miniature version of a high school hallway.

My mind jumped up then, my vigilant guard dog, through the mist of bourbon. I wondered where she was taking me, why I was here, who she was, who I was… but only for a moment. These things didn't matter; nothing did. Not really.

Music became louder, and I became aware of it. A deep bass rhythm, a synthetic treble, digitally altered vocals. She turned around and smiled at me, reassuring yet disconcertingly vapid.

She led me through a door at the end of the hallway, and lights exploded. Rainbow psychedelics everywhere, in my eyes and gnawing away at my nerves. The music was huge, inexorable, and too loud, but at the level where my mind refused to register it.

It was a tiny room, a microcosmic bar. And there was a counter, a matte black ledge set against the far wall, dainty leather stools lined against it. There were four tables, each with four prosaic wood chairs, no more than ten people in the entire place.

She sat down on a leather stool; I sat beside her. The bartender, a tall blond kid probably just over half my age, came immediately, ignored me, bent over beside her.

"How's life?" he said, smiling perfect white teeth, and licking at a stray blond hair.

"Much the same, Dog."

"You seen Kleiv around lately?"

"No. Bill overdue?"

"Bet your ass."

"Get us a couple glasses from the special bottle, Dog."

The kid looked at me for the first time, a blank stare, then stood up and laughed. "You got it." He picked up a white towel and walked into a back room, behind a padded door.

"What is this place?" I asked her.

"A little elite club."

"What's it called?"

"Doesn't have a name. Doesn't have much, really. Just a place to go."

The blond kid put down two plastic cups in front of us. I didn't see an actual glass anywhere around us. I sniffed at the contents of the cup, and smelled oranges and alcohol. I looked at her, and she shrugged, then drank it all down. I did the same.

It tasted awful, and put a sting at the back of my throat like a lead stone. I coughed and wheezed, and she only laughed silently, along with the kid.

"What the hell was that?" I asked as I dropped the cup back onto the counter. The kid swept them both up and returned to the back room.

"Special potion. Part vodka, part orange extract. Part aphrodisiac, part truth serum."

I remember laughing at that and slapping my palms down on the counter, then looking up at her through dry eyes. "Why, are you going to ask me some questions?"

"Possibly."

"Who's the kid?" I asked, gesturing towards the dark room.

"Rude Dog. You know, a working kid." She looked at me then for a long frozen moment, her face a wooden block. "Do you want to go to bed?" she asked, without a smile or a single movement.

I looked at her face, her body, then her eyes. "Yes," I said, realizing that the drink might actually have included either or both of the last two ingredients.

She stood up, brushing the front of her blue dress as if from habit, then looked away. "Well, come on then."

I jumped up, too quickly. She didn't notice. She walked away, the same gait as before, back out to the hallway. I followed as she stopped at the fourth door, opened it, and went in.

There was an oval queen-sized bed covered in a green wrinkled sheet and a pillow. The tiny table beside the bed held a lamp without shade and a flickering 50-watt bulb. There were three chairs, none of which matched—kind of like the ones in Rude Dog's bar. A minuscule fridge, with a tarnished and scratched veneer, stood near the corner.

It reminded me, without warning, of a room Mae and I were in once, for about a month.

"Sit down," she said. "If you like."

I did, and she did. I looked at her as she smoothed her dress.

"So what are we here for?"

She crossed her legs, looked at the lamp. "That's up to you. Maybe to talk."

"Oh. So you're going ask me questions now?"

"Perhaps. What's your name?"

"Mute. Like silence."

"First or last?"

"Only, I guess." I waited then, for a few seconds, for her to volunteer her own name. "What's yours?"

"Whatever you want it to be."

I laughed then, but found no humor in my voice or the situation. "This is, isn't it? Like a business proposition going down?"

"No," she said, all seriousness. "I don't do that."

"So what's your name?"

"Giovanna."

"That's a nice name."

She shrugged, her dress moved. "I picked it out myself."

"So who the hell are you?" I asked, only vaguely feeling my lips make out the words.

"I came looking for you."

"No, you didn't. We ran into each other at the Winder." She smiled then, and it meant something. Betrayal. Upper hand.

"You go there a lot, don't you, Mute?"

I said nothing. Her voice was like a computer, an ATM, an airport loudspeaker. Professional and fluid.

"You weren't there last night, though. I had to wait until two. But tonight you walked right up to me. I couldn't have asked for better."

"What… you were stalking me or something?"

"Like that. In a sense. But not in a bad way. A big sister kind of way. I'm just checking up on you."

"Checking up on me. I don't even know who you are."

"But I know you. At least, the statistics. I read your bio. You're interesting, Mute."

My guard dog barked again, somewhere in my cerebrum, but it was drowned out by a porous sponge, a black fog just behind my eyes. *Drink she gave me was drugged,* I decided dully. As if in response to my bleak, perplexed look, she spoke gingerly. "I'm here for Mr. Krell."

My limbs petrified and my mind became sand. My eyes glossed over with oil, my pores contracted and fell asleep. I blacked out.

MAE WAS ASLEEP.

We were supposed to go out. I told her to go back to bed—it was too cold. The windows were rain-streaked and dirty, the floor was strewn with clothes and cleaning rags and small coins. The rain chattered against the corrugated roof. The electric heater clicked and surged, warming my legs and the bed sheets. Mae breathed. I smoked a cigarette, tracing the fissures in the ceiling plaster with my eyes. I watched Mae breathe. Her body was warm against my thigh. Her skin white and smooth, her hair dark against her cheek. She said something through sleep. "No," I said. It's too cold to go out. Sleep."

The metallic rain. The cigarette smoke, undulating lazily. Mae's rhythmic breathing, warm and sweet.

"Wake up," she said.

"No, too cold out—"

"OH, COME ON. WAKE UP."

Black well, spiraling somnolently.

"I didn't hit you with that hard a dose." Pin-prick light. Red hot pain flare. "Wake *up."*

Electric light, intense and immaculate. White tiles. Cool plastic or leather against my back. Throbbing pain against my cheek.

"Well, you opened your eyes. That's something."

"You hit me…" My voice, but it came from the bottom of the well, through a cotton muffler.

"I slapped you," said the voice, from beyond my vision. "To wake you up. Now you're up. Any questions?"

"You go there a lot, don't you, Mute? You weren't there last night. I had to wait until two. But tonight you walked right up to me. I couldn't have asked for better."

"Who are you?" My voice was like mud.

"You forget already? Giovanna. I picked you up at the bar. Come on, you've only been out a couple hours."

I struggled then, my guard dog at full wariness. But my head was a stone slab, my arms bound down by unseen straps, cool and padded.

And her face came into view. Smiling perfect white teeth and perfect pink tongue. Perfect pool eyes, deep blue, cold and serene. A wave of blond hair at the edge of her mouth.

"Right, Mute? We're old friends."

"No," I said. "I don't know you."

"Perhaps not," she said, and her face was gone. Click of heels on linoleum. "But you remember my employer."

I stared at the ceiling tiles.

"Sure you do, Mute. Mr. Krell."

I told the nauseous fear in my mind to shut up. Krell. The run. Skipping town. Leaving Mae. The run…

"He'll be here any minute. I'm sure you two will have lots to talk about." Her face was back, leering and satisfied. "Won't you?"

And then she moved, sharp and extreme, and the pain exploded in my head. The black returned.

SPOTS LIKE FIREWORKS, SOFT AND DIM. FROM A DULL pulse, hollow and warm, comes a room. In the room, seven, nine, thirteen men, dressed in bloody white lab coats. Scalpels in hand, gleaming virginal silver.

White, white, white everywhere. Chlorine bleach odor. Anesthetic tubes and rods, tools and drills, knives and forks.

Me on the white leather table, candles protruding from my chest and eyes. The candelabra. The meal. The lab coat men bend over, candle light flickering fluorescent. Sparkling knives, blood-red cheeks, insane grins.

Dig in.

Bloody ganglia. Wires spew forth from my skull and my rib cage, green and red and blue and yellow. LCD and LED, blinking sporadically. Tiny circuitry pops out of my eyes and my hands and my chest, and the bloody men tie knots in the wires, swing them around, cut and paste, solder and caulk.

They are fixing me, fixing my system, rewiring nerves. I scream, but the walls are soundproof.

WALLS CRUMBLE TO RUINS, AND THE BLOODY INCIsions disappear into rivers, tributaries, blue-gray macadam and cement. The night lights up neon, and the hum of business is a lover's song.

The run.

"Hey, Mr. Krell, how's things?"

Suited Mr. Krell, impeccable in his dark gray jacket. Mr. Krell, smoking his cigars and watching with icy eyes.

The run.

"Things are good. The operation was successful."

"Of course it was. I got a tough body."

"You do now."

The run. The job. Mr. Krell, smoking his cigars. Rewired. Faster and better. New system. Doped up. Ready to run.

The job. First mission.

Surprise. Disbelief.

"I own you, Mr. Mute."

Skipping town.

I CAME TO QUICKLY, CHEMICALLY. SOME STRONG smell out of my vision jump-starting my mind and consciousness. I was back again, under the harsh white fluorescents and the square tiles. Testing the arm straps, struggling futilely, I groaned.

"Welcome back to the world of the living, Mute." Woman's voice. "Giovanna?" I said.

"Indeed, Mute. You've got a visitor, dear."

Krell. "So good to see you again, Mr. Mute."

I said nothing, wishing it all away. My mind leaped and grasped for the tenuous strands of the memory of Mae, the dream.… I wanted it all back.

"You don't say hello to a former employer, Mr. Mute? And, I like to think, a former friend."

"We were never friends," I said, and hated myself for it. Because we had been, almost, if only a flash on carbon paper. And then his face was hovering over mine, the same as before. Close-cropped black hair, undoubtedly slicked back with his short red comb that he kept in the front pocket of his Armani jacket. Ice-blue eyes. Jutted nose, bony cheeks, faintest trace of day-old stubble. And his pout, infamous and capricious, always hiding his teeth, which were yellow and straight.

"I'm hurt you would say that, Mr. Mute," he said, his lips moving the minimum required to produce the words.

"Sure you're hurt," I said. "You must be real hurt. What exactly do you do with defectors, Krell?"

His face was gone again. "We try to get them back on the team, of course. Or, if that doesn't work, we do whatever the circumstances necessitate."

"You gonna kill me?"

"Oh, I doubt that. I've put too much money into that metabolic miracle that you call a body. See, I've made an investment in you, Mute." I cringed as he laughed. "And you turned tail and ran."

There was dense pause, with only the hum of the fluorescents revealing any passage of time.

"Yeah. I hauled ass. You didn't rewire my morals. I had no idea what you had in mind before."

The laugh again, much shorter, more sarcastic. "See, Mute, we had a deal. We've been in this business a long time, you've seen the way the game is played. What did you think? I'd put millions into that body of yours just so you could *steal* shit for me? You went into this with your eyes closed. Now you have to try conscious reentry."

"You want me to come back," I said languidly.

His face was back, hanging over me, but from the other side. "What the hell else would I want? You're mine, Mute. My machine. I made what you are."

"Bullshit."

His face was gone. I strained to lift my head, to look around the room, but my head was strapped firmly in place. All I could see was the juncture of the wall behind me and the ceiling tile.

"It isn't bullshit. Maybe someday, after you've repaid your debt to me, maybe then you could leave and pretend to live a normal life. But now you are in no position to negotiate."

"So it's a threat. Go on the juice, or I never leave this room."

Krell sighed, and that startled me; it was a sound I had never heard before. "I hate to threaten old friends, Mute. But yes. Neither of us has a choice."

"Right, Krell. Money's involved. So screw me and screw everybody, because you made an *investment."*

Long silence.

"Miss Giovanni? Please return Mr. Mute to his unconscious state. I'd like to give him a chance to think about this. I always prefer to sleep on any key decisions."

Crisp tapping of heels on linoleum. And then she was back, with her blue eyes and blond hair and pink tongue. She lifted her arm over my face, and in her hand was a small black box, like an electric razor. Two cylindrical chrome contacts at the top.

"All too enjoyable, Mr. Krell," she said, and the black box disappeared beneath my chin.

"Oh, and one thing," came Krell's voice. "Something to ruminate over. You'll be pleasantly surprised to know that your former companion, Miss Mae Cole, is under our care and supervision. Good night, Mute."

A fist of electric pain, followed by a pool of blackness.

NO DREAMS CAME. CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED EVENtually. Thoughts coalesced in my blood, stream of consciousness metastasized.

I didn't wake up. I thought.

I thought about the operation, about Krell and his run. I was a drug dealer. I had been before Krell, and I was doing it then, on the lam, for money to live. I guess you always go back to the basics.

Krell knew my supplier. Probably owned my supplier. Back then, in Nanking, business was a solid, esoteric plexus. It had rules, axioms, conduct and etiquette, unspoken protocol. An impenetrable clan, and like anything, you knew your clan members. The guys at the top watched the guys at the bottom. Krell happened to pick me out of the genus.

Being good at what I did got me into this shit. Of course, being inadequate might have gotten me a hollow-tip through the skull years ago. I remember his office, the place they made the offer. It's a funny thing, getting a compliment from a kingpin like Krell. You're scared for your life, just going up there, smoking his good cigars. And so relieved when you actually get to leave again that you remember next to nothing that was said.

And with meetings like that, you don't say no. The operation came and went in a week. Heightened senses, accentuated responses, intensified reflexes. A fine-tuned biological machine. On the outside, nothing out of the ordinary, except for the pink ribbons on my chest, concealed easily enough.

And my new system had to be turned on. My switch is betaphenacaine, which I keep in durable hypodermic needles, capped and cased.

And then the run. Krell sat me down in his office, and I was more confident, so sure of myself, knowing that I was one of his official hired men now, no reason to fear the results of unemployment.…

I felt a dull aching hate, lying there on the table, strapped down, pretending to be asleep. Because he didn't even bother to desensitize me, start me out with two-bit runs. He was too cocky for that, so positive that I was his faithful possession.

In retrospect, maybe I should have gone along with it all, played the run, killed that guy, one of Krell's business competitors. But it would have changed me absolutely, sent me into an implacable spiral. Killing wasn't something I was ready to cope with, even if I did it every week with the drugs I sold.

Krell knew my supplier. Probably owned my supplier. The guys at the top watched the guys at the bottom. Krell happened to pick me out of the genus.

Hardest decision I ever made, ever will. Mae.

I knew then what I know now, what they were capable of. And I took my chances, leaving Mae, hoping they would never find her or trace her to me. They did. I endangered her.

I'm an asshole.

UNEXPECTED METALLIC COLD, THEN PIERCING ELECtric pain. I opened my eyes to Giovanna.

"Good morning, Mute. Have a nice sleep?" I only stared. Then she moved, and instinctively, I moved my head with her. It wasn't strapped down, and I jumped, expecting my arms to be free as well. No such luck.

I looked around. Plain white room, like a hospital. Giovanna was in black jeans and a white t-shirt now. She sat down on one of two black leather chairs, set in opposite corners along the far wall. In between them, a gray door that looked plastic; probably reinforced and bulletproof.

"You've been out two hours. Probably closer to five altogether. Plenty of time to get your bearings. So now you're supposed to give me an answer, and there's only one that I'm supposed to accept."

The tendons in my neck tightened and ached; I let my head fall back to the padded table. I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the silence in the room.

"Come on, Mute. See, if you don't accept Mr. Krell's offer, I'm supposed to let you ponder it a little more. Unconsciously. And getting there, that's the fun part. I've got all kinds of fun toys. Fun for me, anyway."

I opened my eyes, and rubbed my teeth together, feeling the lingering pain beneath my jaw.

"What about you, Giovanna?" I asked.

"What about me?"

"Why are you here? You aren't the traditional muscle Krell employs. Don't you think you're better than this?"

"Traditional? Like you? A wirehead?" She chuckled. "I'm here because it's my profession. I'm just a working girl, Mute—but let's talk about you. I can let you off the table right now, if you'd like. Even give you a plug of your drug, if you'd like. All you got to do is agree to come back home with Mr. Krell. Doesn't that sound comfy-cozy?"

"You can't," I said. "You give me the juice, and I'm all over your ass. Doesn't matter how many guns you got, I can be out of here with your head in a box."

"Not quite. You're forgetting an item Mr. Krell has in his possession. Miss Cole."

"Jesus. So it's blackmail, then."

"Pleasant business you're in, Mute. Me, I just get to pick up cute guys at bars, then have my way with them while they're tied to operating tables."

I didn't want to think of Mae, then. Even if I left, killing Mae wouldn't help them get me. For all I knew, they didn't even have her. Probably just using her name as collateral.

"Shit," I said, my voice strained and tired. "Okay."

Giovanna was over me again, without warning. Apparently lost the heels with the change of wardrobe. "Okay, as in okay-we-have-a-deal?"

"Okay."

SHE GAVE ME NEW CLOTHES, BLACK JEANS AND T-shirt, which were both too big. I swore silently, longing for my own clothes: I had a couple of hypos in the jacket pocket. Then I remembered she'd offered me a plug, because of Mae, and what they knew she meant to me.

"So where's my juice?" I asked.

"Oh, funny thing, that. Technically, it's not your juice. An upper, a lot the same, but it won't make you metaphysical. More addictive, nicer effect. No comedown, either."

I stared at her, trying to discern her expression. "Fuck it."

She looked amused, and for the first time I noticed the small gun in her right hand. "I read your bio, Mute. You only swear when you're *really* pissed."

"Fuck *you."*

"Not a good idea to antagonize the girl with the gun, Mute."

KRELL WAS WAITING IN A SUITE ON THE TWENTIETH floor of a grandiose downtown hotel, complete with inch-thick carpeting and a uniformed elevator operator.

Giovanna motioned me down the hall to his room with the gun, hidden beneath a leather jacket draped over her arm. She knocked twice, eyes on me. Krell opened it himself. Cocky son of a bitch.

I sat down in a chair, looked around the room without moving my head. It was a wide expanse of green linoleum that ended in an elevated area, where I saw a king-size bed, a complete entertainment system, and a mini bar. A complete kitchen was to my right, and a bathroom to the left. The ceiling was probably 20 feet up; I figured the place took up a quarter of the entire floor.

Krell picked up a half-full glass from the counter in the kitchen area and walked back to me. "Cherry whiskey," he said, sipping from the snifter. I ignored him, and stared out through the purple-tinted windows, wondering vaguely why anyone would want to look down on a purple city. "Want some?" he asked.

"No thanks."

"Well, then, down to business." He walked back to the countertop and picked up a pair of silver tongs. "Miss Giovanna declares you are going to be cooperative. I assume that's correct, or you wouldn't be here."

"I am. But not the way you do business. No blackmail."

He plucked an ice cube from a silver bucket and dropped it into his glass. He turned to me and smiled; he'd gotten a new gold-plated tooth put in since I last saw him.

"I assume you're referring to Miss Cole." I stared out at the Shanghai cityscape and said nothing. "You have to understand my position," Krell continued. "I couldn't have you running around loose, not until I'd gotten my money's worth. That may sound materialistic and shallow, but…. Look, I could give you a speech on what it took to get where I am, but I don't think that's what you're after. Don't worry, Mute. Miss Cole is safe."

"Where is she?"

"We're looking after her back in Nanking."

"How do I know you have her? How do I know that she's still alive?"

Krell scratched his stomach through the terry cloth and sipped his cherry whiskey. "My word, Mute. After all, what good is she to me, or anyone, dead? I wouldn't do that to an old comrade, especially one that I hope will become a valuable new comrade."

"Put me on a plane. I see Mae, or screw everything."

"Already set. You leave in an hour."

I WAS EXPECTING A TENEMENT, A SQUALID WAREhouse of rotting lumber and broken windows, sitting close to the harbor and reeking of dead fish and discarded canned foods. Instead, I stood in front of a condominium, surely not older than my shoes. It was twenty stories tall, had symmetrical windows and terraces, and a sleek black pebbled siding. It looked exactly like the kind of place Krell would live in, or possibly own.

"Lives quite the life, huh Mute?"

I looked at Giovanna, and watched her eyes glimmer as she stared past me at the building.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Mr. Krell's humble abode."

"What are we here for?"

"Waiting. He's coming in on his private jet in a little while. We're to wait here until then."

"Where's Mae?"

"We wait for Mr. Krell, Mute."

I frowned at her as our eyes met. Her eyes changed, from some sort of rapt disbelief, to a weary amusement. "I don't make the rules," she said.

I shook my head and began to walk towards the front of the building. "I don't understand you."

"Me? There's little to understand. At least, for you."

"I mean, you're the bait, the lure, and the hired thug all in one. Is Krell hard up these days?"

"I'm good at what I do. Mr. Krell pays for my expertise. Now shut up, Mute."

We walked up the concrete steps to the double doors at the front. Giovanna held the gun loosely in my direction as she punched in a rapid succession of numbers on a small digital lock. A hypersonic beep, and then the lock clicked. She waved me inside.

WE WAITED AN HOUR. KRELL'S HOME WAS JUST A miniature version of the hotel suite in Shanghai, a miniature version of every place I ever imagined rich people would live in. Phony and metallic and cold.

The black jeans were too big, and the shirt made my neck itch. I picked at it. "Where are my clothes?" I asked Giovanna, who sat on the other side of the room in an identical chair, and stared at me listlessly, the gun resting in her perfect denim lap.

"Burned 'em."

"Well, these are really bugging the hell out of me. Am I going to get to go shopping?"

She moved the gun to the other hand and hesitated. "Your old clothes are out in the limo, in the trunk."

"Thought you said you burned them."

"Lied," she said, with an evanescent smile. She pulled a palm-sized cellular phone from her suede jacket, and popped it open. "I'll get Pedro to bring them up for you."

SHE MADE ME CHANGE IN FRONT OF HER.

"What, you afraid I'll attack you with one of Krell's toothbrushes?"

"I play safe. Rules of the game."

"Some game," I said, but obeyed. I changed into my old clothes, comfortable, cold, and slightly damp from being outdoors. I did so with as little emotion as possible, avoiding Giovanna's gaze, uneasy about what expression would be on that scalpel-perfect face.

I sat down and left the rain jacket folded over the arm of the chair. I wanted to check it for the hypodermics, but such a move at that point would have given me away. Better to take it easy.

I looked up at Giovanna finally, and she was smiling faintly. "All done?" she asked.

I said nothing for a moment, only watched her. "You have a comment?"

She laughed softly, and her smile faded into a bored pout. "You think you deserve one?"

"Never mind."

"It was a nice exchange of clothing you performed," she said, her face a mix of apathy and seriousness.

"Thanks." I lifted my left arm in the habitual motion of checking my watch, which was no longer there. I sighed, and let my hand drop to the rain coat on the chair's arm. "When the hell is Krell getting here?" I asked.

I felt the two small cylindrical needles through the fabric of the coat, safe in the secret pouch I had sewn in months ago. I smiled, then sighed again.

"Whenever the hell Krell wants to." I felt the two small cylindrical needles through the fabric of the coat, safe in the secret pouch I had sewn in months ago. I smiled, then sighed again.

"Oh," I said.

I HAD SLIPPED MY HAND INTO THE SECRET POCKET, withdrawn one of the needles and transferred it to my front jeans pocket when Krell came in. I put both hands into my pockets and attempted a look of disgusted indifference as he entered and closed the door behind him.

"Good afternoon, Mute."

"Yeah."

"Cheer up, Mute," Giovanna said. "You and Mr. Krell are friends, remember?"

"Bullshit," I said.

Krell gave me a benevolent look of disappointment. "But Mute, I thought we'd put aside our grievances."

"Yeah, my ass. Look, I'll do your runs, however many you think I owe you. Whatever. But the only reason I'm here is 'cause you're threatening me with Mae. So let me see her now, make sure she's okay. Then business."

"Of course, Mute. We needn't be animals." And at that moment, I felt it, raw and intense, like a poisonous lump in my stomach, a rancid dart snaking through me until I could almost bite down on it. The hatred I felt for him, with his smug narcissism and self-complacency. The way he looked down at everyone like he could shape their lives to his satisfaction with his omnipotent hands.

I watched, detached, as Giovanna handed him her phone, and he dialed.

"I thought I was going to see her," I said, struggling to keep my voice uninflected.

Krell only smiled in my general direction, and turned his back.

I waited, and he spoke a few soft words into the phone. Giovanna looked out the window and ran her thumb across her fingernails. I heard Krell say "Put her on," and then he turned around to me, smiled again, and handed me the phone. I took it, my arm strained and full of the poisonous hatred. I smiled dully back at him, and it felt like fire.

"Mae?" I said into the small black receiver. There was silence for an eternal moment, a void of electric blackness from the phone… and then I heard her, soft and timid.

"Mute? Is that you?"

I had difficulty finding my voice, insignificant and sore at the back of my throat. "Yes. God, are you okay? What are—"

And then she was crying. A surreal static weeping, muffled and painful.

"Mae, are you okay? What's the matter? What are they doing—"

Then the phone was gone, somewhere in Giovanna's hand, and she was walking back to her chair, one furtive eye still on me. And there was Krell, smiling down.

And Mae was gone.

"What the fuck are you doing to her?" I heard my voice, but it wasn't mine. I could hear my thoughts coming from my mouth, but I made no conscious decision to speak aloud.

"We're doing nothing to her," Krell said without looking at me. His tone hadn't changed the slightest. "She is perfectly safe and perfectly well."

"How do I know that? You're going to let me see her right now."

Krell looked at me. "No, I'm sorry, Mute. We've got a deal. No premature benefits."

I stared at him through burning eyes. "Bullshit! You let me see her, or we don't have a deal."

"No." Krell's ice-blue eyes were now directly on me, his face was stone, and his voice matched his eyes. "Miss Cole is our property until you perform your responsibilities to me, which is precedent, and…"

I didn't hear him. My ears had gelled over, my hatred thick and putrid in my veins. I did not notice that my hands were in my pockets, clenched in trembling fists, my left hand crushing the hypodermics.

And then I did notice, and thoughtless conviction washed over me as my thumb popped the cap off one needle and my hand grasped it. Without hesitation or regard, I plunged the needle into my thigh and emptied it.

The juice burned with equal passion, and it melded slowly with my blood and anger.

Krell talked, calmly and coldly.

Memories of Mae, her frightened voice, her soft skin, her warmth, her soft electric crying… they all reached me at once, as if a side-effect of the drug that now coursed through my blood stream.

Five seconds passed.

HAVING THE JUICE RUNNING THROUGH ME IS, PUT simply, a weird experience.

It's a common street drug, but a controlled one, so you don't have to worry about purity. They call it bloom sometimes, or rapture, or just junk. It's an opiate, your regular domestic upper. Makes the kids fast, reckless, excited. For me it's different, because of the operation.

Like splicing a nerve. Like crossing the wire. The juice heightens my senses. My nerves burn, my eyes crackle, and I can feel every hair on my body. Then a brief pathos settles over me in an icy spinal wave, and I'm in the domain. I don't usually call it the domain, but I don't know what the hell you *would* call it.

I feel things I'm not supposed to, like the way my eyelids brush the fluid from my eyes when I blink, the brush of taste buds against the roof of my mouth, and the blood rushing through my veins, and my sweat glands expanding and contracting.

Everything slows down. Technically, of course, I'm speeding up. I'm twice as fast, my reflexes kick in three times sooner. But to me, all of that is bullshit, 'cause the world, it just slows down.

That day, in Krell's posh, frigid apartment, the anger left me. It mutated and mixed with the juice, I guess, but it just stopped mattering. And so did Mae, and so did Krell, and so did everything around me. It was like a switch; once that derm emptied into my thigh, I was on cruise-control.

I know I jumped up and grabbed Krell around the neck before his expression could even change, though I don't remember actually making the effort. I watched vapidly as my hands closed and my fingers clamped down on his perfect Bermuda-tanned skin. My thumbs dug into his esophagus and crushed his trachea after what seemed like eternity. Blood welled over my fingers, and I didn't bother to look into his dead icescape eyes before letting him drop to the floor.

I turned and felt the air circulating through the room, cool and sterilized as it caressed my skin and the hair at the back of my neck. Giovanna was just getting up, an incredulous yet coyly professional grimace crawling across her lips.

Before she had moved another inch, I had her pinned on the floor, her sleek black revolver chill against my

palm, the hammer cocked, and the barrel lightly placed against her perfect pale forehead.

"Where is Mae?" I heard the words with my ears, but I also felt my lips form them and the air pass from my lungs into my mouth and out into the open where it mingled with Giovanna's heavy breath and the apartment's neutral undulating current.

Her lips began to move, but it was too slow for me. "I don't want to hurt you, you're kind of cute. Tell me where she is now!"

"The phone, my front pocket, has a last-call function and a display. I don't know where she is." Her lips trembled only slightly, and her eyes remained dry, her face stolid. Pro.

And then the phone was in my left hand, and I was hovering two feet over her, the gun pointed at her neck. She never even shivered.

I tapped the green button on the pad that read LAST, and the small green display lit up with seven numbers, followed by CALL and a question mark.

I didn't dial it, didn't bother phoning the operator or information. I knew the number. It was mine.

I WAS IN FRONT OF MY OLD BUILDING BEFORE I KNEW how I had gotten there. I looked behind me and saw the limo I had arrived in, and I knew if I were to open its door I would see the driver's blood on the seat, but I didn't remember it. I shouldn't get lapses like that when I'm on the juice.

I turned back to the building and that feeling, stinging and cellular went through me and through the drug, right to where it hurt. I'd been here eight years of my life and it doesn't go away, the gestalt of emotions and memories tying my life wholly to this spot. Nothing more than a ten-story tenement with tiny rooms for rent, crawling with bugs and peeling plaster.

And then it happened again. I was in front of the door to my old apartment, staring dully at the gilt-crusted 303, not recalling how I came to be there. Lapse.

And then again, but much shorter. The door was collapsed inside the room and I was walking in. And for an ephemeral moment I didn't know or care why I was there. Nothing mattered.

I was back home.

THERE WERE TWO OF THEM WITH MAE. I DIDN'T LOOK at their faces as they turned around slowly, so slowly. I just waited for the juice to take control of the situation.

A thought occurred to me as I watched them leap to their feet, so slow they seemed to defy gravity: I should have taken another hit, just for good measure. And I should have, because one already had a gun in his hand and the other was reaching.

I went for the quick one, and I had little trouble shoving his gun into his face. I don't like to kill but the juice told me to get a move on because Thing 2 behind me would be a pretty good shot at two feet.

I was and turning around just as the gun in my hand erupted and the body beneath me shuddered violently, once. And what felt like minutes later the second gun was fired. I thought for a moment there was a lapse, since I couldn't remember pulling the trigger, but then I felt the bullet rip through my left shoulder.

The drug made every nerve sear, and I could feel every shattered cell in the bone. I screamed, pure reflex. But so was jumping to my feet and breaking my attacker's neck with my right hand. He fell, and it seemed that the apartment had never been so quiet. The juice stopped dead, and all adrenaline drained away into an amorphous vacuum in my stomach, surrounded by a raw nausea.

I looked at Mae. Her face was cool and dry, with only the finest trace of shock. A single black strand of hair touched her pale cheek.

What felt like minutes later the second gun was fired. I couldn't remember pulling the trigger, but then I felt the bullet rip through my left shoulder.

I looked down and watched as blood from my shoulder dripped down to the filthy floor where it mingled with dust and the other men's blood.

I coughed once, looked at Mae.

"Mute," she said, her voice slow and smooth. Then the pain in my shoulder receded and the world turned black.

ELECTRIC LIGHT, INTENSE AND IMMACULATE. WHITE tiles. I was sure for a moment that it was all a dream, a sick unconscious joke. I was back in the white cubicle, Giovanna just out of sight, filing her nails or polishing her gun. Krell was on his way, landing in his gray-carpeted luxury jet, coming to talk to me about the run.

But he was not.

Mae bent over me, her face blank for a long moment. She smiled sadly, and one perfect tear slid down each pale cheek.

"Mute, you're okay," she whispered, not a question.

"My arm…"

"In a cast. We're at Royal Mercy. The doctors said you'll be fine… I hardly even saw you come in," she said, and then her bottom lip quivered.

"You're okay? They… didn't hurt you?"

"No, dammit." She stood up, walked out of my field of view. I struggled, pushing with my good arm and trying

to keep my balance, trying to sit up. When I did, my back crashed against the headboard. No strength left in me.

Mae was looking out the window.

I waited. Minutes, hours.

She looked at me. More tears, new ones probably, glistening against her cheeks. "You don't understand, do you? You can't just keep doing this to me…"

I wanted to ask what I was doing, but maybe I knew. "What's the matter?" I asked, finally.

"You don't get it. Nothing ever works…" And I just stared at her, wanting things to be all right. "There's somebody else," she said.

"I know," I said. But I don't think I did.

I LIKE THE RAIN. IT'S STRANGE, BUT I FIND SOME SORT of comfort in it. I'm getting wet, but I don't much care. Above me to the left, the rain is hitting a blue neon sign. Making it crackle and hiss. And that too, for no reason, is comforting.

I walk. The street is crowded, the sun below the gray buildings. The night life is starting to kick in, people coming out to play in their bars, clubs, joints. Business crowd. I wonder about work. About runs. About getting some money, maybe a warm bed to sleep in.

Across the street, darting into a doorway, I spot Giovanna. Not in her high-gloss costume. One of the crowd. I almost wave, but she's gone. Or maybe she was just the rain. Wet hair is hanging in my eyes.

I need a haircut, or maybe a hat.

Decisions.

CRAIG BOYKO

Lives in Canada, and spends most of his time in his room, which is very dark and doesn't smell at all. Besides being a necessary biological function, sleeping is his hobby. He is a senior in high school, and dreams of someone who will fill the myriad of vacancies that make up his life. That, and fudge.

This Is the Optative of *Unfulfillable Wish*

KYLE CASSIDY

"In present and past unreal conditions the prostasis implies that the supposition cannot or could not be realized because contrary to a known fact." — Smythe's Greek Grammar 2303

AFTER GRADUATION I LEFT MY APARTMENT AND moved across the river into a house. It is a big, fat house on the hard edge of the city—edge enough that the houses here have backyards and hard enough that they're surrounded by razor wire.

"Welcome to the 'hood," my new landlord had said, the ink not even dry on the lease. I found him looking at me, grinning with the disquieting implication that he knew more than he was letting on. The move itself was five leisurely trips in a borrowed green pickup truck whose tired radio dribbled country-and-western music from one melancholy speaker and whose fan buzzed ceaselessly like a steel bee in a trash can. I had, at the time, possessed reservations about moving to the city, but I signed the lease with reckless glee and the witless assumption that Dr. Pangloss was right and everything was for the best.

HERE EVERYTHING SEEMS VAGUE, LIKE A PICTURE IN a museum you looked at with no particular interest before finding out that the artist shot himself in the eye with a ten-gauge shotgun because he was jilted by the queen of Turkmenistan, and now that you're interested, you can recall only general shapes. The faces come and go. This house is a port town, inhabited by nomads who have other destinations in mind. We are mobbed by transient sailors who leave Chinese food in the fridge and then depart for exotic and faraway lands, leaving others as Keepers of the Slime Molds.

Not all of the faces here are so ethereal—some have remained constant. It is, as often as not, friends and relations who traipse through the house like hobos. None have remained so stolid as Sir Fickwickwood, the affectionate gray tabby of unsubstantiated ownership who last night amazed us all by surviving a three-story fall into the backyard after making a heroic leap from a nearby rooftop into the window of David-the-Archeologist—thwarted by a pane of glass.

Aside from David-the-Archeologist, there is David-Who-Works-For-the-Discovery-Channel, where he produces educational films about insects. His room on the third floor is stuffed with raw videotape footage, most of

it silent and much of it dull, which he watches endlessly: scribbling down counter numbers and sending out for rough cuts, slowly distilling hundreds of hours of film, thousands of hours of lives, into 30 minutes that will keep a fourth grader interested. He, like Gregor Samsa, is slowly turning into a bug.

There is also Marty-the-Other-Archeologist (most places can barely afford one archeologist; it is a flagrant and vulgar display of wealth for us to support two): Martine, who was born in France to wealthy parents and came here to study dilettantism where it is best practiced. At dinner he informs us that ancient Greeks measured dry goods and food "by the assload." We think this is perilously funny and can't stop snickering all evening.

Marty works for a company that produces a popular series of books instructing readers on how to lie convincingly about their occupations, ostensibly for the purpose of picking up women. The volume he is currently writing teaches the layman how to carry on a conversation as though he were a foreign consul. The guide gives lists of answers to questions frequently posed to diplomats by attractive young coeds at parties, names of exotic countries that one may claim to have been stationed in, the proper attire, a list of buzzwords that no one understands, and a smattering of phrases in ludicrous languages. I ask him if he wants to write books for the rest of his life. He tells me an idea for an archeology book. It would claim that the Pharaohs were from outer space; that the Greeks had conquered time and death, invented the toaster, and discovered electricity; that crop circles were telegraphs to God fashioned by superintelligent boll weevils left here as the overlords of humanity; and a thousand other wild things. "I would be hated by my colleagues," he says, apparently in a trance, "but my book would sell millions." And in the end, what is so wrong about misleading a few million rubes? I realize that he has thought long and hard about this.

EVERY AFTERNOON AFTER WAKING, I MAKE THE ADventuresome trek into the backyard, where I sit beneath the rosebush and trudge through *Moby Dick*. I plow like a bullock toting its load, I plod from line to line, furrow to furrow, digging channels in my mind and filling them with Transcendentalist droppings. This is perhaps the twentieth time I have attempted to read *Moby Dick,* and I am sworn to finish it this time. I have vowed to see Ahab's beckoning arm as the white whale sounds for the last time, the *Pequod* sinking from sight and Ishmael bobbing along like Job's last servant, clinging to Queequeg's coffin. And what after this? Perhaps a week of science fiction novels to clear my brain.

Today the neighborhood children are out back, jumping over a jagged razor-wire fence into the sanctity of an old woman's garden, quarantined from all but the youngest and most bored by these gleaming, lacerating steel ribbons. I divide my time evenly between the thickness of whale blubber and looking up at a long string of kids who are laughing and leaping over the blades as though they are playing on a water slide. A ball lands in my yard. Gleeful at the opportunity for legitimized fence scaling, the neighborhood queues up. "Wait," I say, lifting the ball, "I'll throw it back." Long faces—no opportunity to test young limbs against metal and thorns. This urban army-in-training might defeat the wire, but the rosebush would claim victims.

David's room is stuffed with raw videotape footage, which he watches endlessly, scribbling down counter numbers. He, like Gregor Samsa, is slowly turning into a bug.

Inside, my abstract housemates are engaged in a long variety of Sysiphian tasks: doing laundry, guarding the television (which must be kept on the Discovery Channel at all costs), cooking packages of frozen food, typing… one is learning Chinese, another laboring over Sanskrit… these are all very dedicated if ambiguous people, toiling over self-imposed afflictions of arduous endeavor with no tangible reward. The archeologists sgrpeak ancient Greek to one another over dinner—a more amazing feat than one would imagine, as ancient Greek is apparently not a language that lends itself to conversation: the grammar is so astoundingly complex that it takes a full five minutes of brain-bursting concentration to properly conjugate "Please pass the butter." After seven or eight sentences punctuated by long silent minutes of sweating frustration and hair pulling, the archeologists crawl away from the table like whipped dogs and into the relative safety of the living room, where a new episode of *Beavis and Butt-head* is on television.

We are all graduated, degreed in something equivocal and useless and pursuing loftier goals for lack of anything better to do. We are comfortable in academia and we also realize that once we leave this succoring bosom, we are largely qualified to perform no task for which money can be gotten. For this reason, our diplomas ceremoniously line the bathroom wall. Marty's B.A. from Rice University is conspicuous for the glob of pizza grease smack in the middle, which I dropped on it one drunken evening.

There is no idealism here in our house of learned fools—no lofty politics guide our conversations, which are just as empty, though more extravagant, as those we enjoyed when we were undergraduates.

CLAUDIA WALKS THROUGH THE HOUSE, TRYING ON A shapeless black beret in a number of arrangements that make her look, in turn, like: a New York debutante; Lorenzo de' Medici; an acorn. None of these please her. The original goal, I am now told, was to appear "French." Claudia and I have become abstractly involved and spend much of our time milling about in thrift stores and trying on one another's clothes. Sometimes Claudia says that I seem distant, but it is only because I am thinking. I have told her that. Claudia herself spends much of the day dancing in rings to music that only she can hear.

I HAVE DEVISED ELABORATE METHODS OF KEEPING my food hidden from transient tenants, all of whom are voracious eaters and prodigious book-borrowers. Over the past months a veritable hoard of houseguests has been steadily picking at my stores of rice and beans and has left me with only skeletal remains of a once-noble collection of the works of Mark Twain, complete in 31 volumes. They are all looking for something, moving like turtles with all their worldly possessions upon their backs but lacking that animal's grace and packing sensibility. They bring with them the most amazing assortment of broken and useless devices: telephones that do not dial, umbrellas made of wire and rags, televisions whose pictures continually jerk to the right in a sort of drunken vision—but above all, dishes. Our kitchen resembles the crockery department at Woolworth's after a minor earthquake. We possess place settings enough to invite the whole of Congress to lunch. Perhaps four of these plates match one another. Most of them spend their time lying in the sink, coated with hardened spaghetti sauce and miscellaneous bits of crusted things. Teapots are best filled in the bathtub, where the spigot, though white with dried soap, is largely unencumbered. We also have silverware in great abundance. If smelted down, all these utensils would provide ample raw material to fashion a cannon and enough ammunition to sink a sizeble navy.

THERE IS SOMEONE LIVING IN THE BASEMENT. I'VE seen him only once. In the kitchen he scurried past me and down the stairs, muttering, " 'scuse me." I can't even see people anymore; they have evaporated from my head. But this one I can hear playing video games with the rapt attention of a Buddhist monk. Zaps and bangs and squeals can be heard through the floorboards for twelve or sixteen hours a day. One afternoon I hear him leave, and I sneak into his room, feeling the constricted glee of one committing a crime. It is like looking through a dead person's belongings. Nameless people in creased photographs lying under old newspapers and cigarette butts. A mammoth television with a Sega Genesis plugged into it. A bleeding beanbag chair, a dirty mattress, and a broken copy of *Atlas Shrugged*. Indecipherable albums by disco musicians. I back away in revulsion.

There are sirens all day long here. It is as though the city is burning down forever, one house at a time. The homeless people are not affected by the fires—the whole city could burn to ashes and they wouldn't lose a thing. If tomorrow Philadelphia were expunged like another Gomorrah they would be the luckiest people alive. Amidst the wailing and gnashing of teeth over the loss of fortunes and houses hard won, the vagabond would suffer only his daily dose of melancholy. A reprieve from the gods—when you've nothing to lose, you've nothing to lose. Rain bothers only those who live above the water.

CLAUDIA: BAITING SIR FICKWICKWOOD WITH THE anchovial remnant of a pizza. The cat is not interested and remains perched on a wall, awaiting the Second Coming. "We're adults," she says. "We can let the cat climb up on the table, and we can let him eat off of our plates."

"Our whole generation has been brainwashed by MTV!" I shout up the stairs after Marty. "That's not true!" he calls back, "heh-heh heh heh heh."

"I never felt like an adult," I tell her, "until I bought my first bar of soap. In the Acme, after I had first moved out, when I realized that I didn't have to get Dove anymore because *I* was paying for it. It was going to be my bar of soap, and I could get any bar of soap that I wanted. I could get Lava, or Irish Spring, I could get Ivory because it floated in the tub. I'd always wanted a bar of Ivory soap because it floated in the tub. It seems so practical."

IN THIS POCKET WORLD THAT EXISTS WITHIN THE razor wire we have a collective definition of reality: house rules—codes of conduct upheld and violated by all alike. Whose turn is it to buy detergent? Who takes out the garbage? Don't leave the front door unlocked. Don't park in front of the garage….

All in all, we are good people—in that belief I am secure. We are well intentioned, motivated and aimless. We have picked directions and blindly pursued them because we cannot see further than what's on TV this afternoon. "Our whole generation has been brainwashed by MTV!" I shout up the stairs after Marty. "That's not true!" he calls back, "heh-heh heh heh heh." We are all cyberpunks, digirati. We are capable of carrying on meaningless conversations at the speed of light and we can't go an hour without reading our e-mail.

CLAUDIA HANDS ME A LIME FREEZE FROSTY. THE green ones are the best and we both know this.

We are sitting in the backyard. As I tilt my head back and pull on the plastic, a child's balloon hurtles by overhead, far above the razor wire, a spaceship of sadness and desolation. "Look," I say to Claudia, pointing, "aliens."

"I can hear a kid crying," she says.

I CALL CONSTANCE, WHO LIVES THREE BLOCKS AWAY. "Come on over," she says, and I do. At one time Constance was my best friend, my confidante, my accomplice. It's been a long time since that hazy and distantly remembered summer when we spent almost every day together, mostly eating and planning with sumptuous complexity the location, consistency, and duration of our next meal. Seven dodecahedrons and one lone cube of hot summer days rolled over us, banging their hard and lumpy sides down into our world, *clump, clump, clump.* In pieces they were completed, their facets not too terribly distinct from each another—yet together they formed a perfect shape.

There were dots of adventure, such as the August when I cut her lawn for the first time. It had grown to a height of perhaps four feet, tough and sinewy weeds that the lawn mower would not even begin to consider devouring. So, dressed in blue denim cutoff shorts that I still own, carrying a scythe we found in the shed, I spent five absorbed hours playing either Willa Cather or Death, garnering a set of monumental blisters, hewing down cities of straw. Dynasties of entomology crashing before me, I the tyrant, I the destroyer: Your worlds are dust. Where was David-Who-Works-For-the-Discovery-Channel that day when I made homeless a thousand crickets and their myriad children?

Constance is somehow better than when I last saw her. Her hair has acquired some definition if not purpose. Her clothes have achieved a mature sense of style. She is sitting on her porch playing guitar, waiting. I have never been to this house of hers before, and it is late at night.

"Guess what," she says when I climb the porch stairs. She smiles and I say the first thing that anybody thinks when an old friend says "guess what" to you like that.

"You're pregnant."

"I'm pregnant," she says, giggling.

"Is this a Good Thing?"

"This is a Good Thing."

"What are you going to do?"

"The Get-Married, Buy-a-House Thing. The Whole Thing."

"Big wedding and lace?"

"The whole thing. The big thing, and I want you to be there. I want you to take pictures at my wedding."

"Congratulations." I hug her and it is good to see her again, but still there is something missing. We are no longer the crazy kids we once were, though as we go inside I am gratified to see that she still has the lamp that I made for her out a dressmakers' dummy. It is wearing a new shade, green and sloping with tassels hanging from clamshell fluting, and a denim jacket. Thankfully this is touting a collection of buttons printed with left-wing slogans. I am glad to see everything that remains.

Constance makes popcorn. We eat it and wipe our fingers on cloth napkins. I tell her about Claudia.

"Did I meet her?"

"Yes, I think so, maybe that time—but we weren't, she and I, not then…"

"Yes, maybe."

THERE IS SOMETHING WE HAD BEFORE THAT WE NO longer possess. Perhaps it is passion, perhaps it is recklessness, or perhaps it is that now we are aware of our boredom. In 21 years, Constance's child will lie in the grass with a great friend and mull over what can be the most important thing in the world only when you are still 20 years old: What shall we do tomorrow? And the next day, and the next? And the next 20 years? But today, Constance and I sit at her dining-room table and we talk about the things of no importance that are now our lives and although we talk and smile, we are both only half there, the other half is buried away in some lost summer. And in the backs of our heads, a dull, relentless, quiet voice asks us: What is it all for? We talk and we grasp for the things that are left in the dark hole that was once our youth. We try to remember what it was like, and pretend that this is better.

And in the end, some second of our life will be our last. And in that span of time, the stoic face of Death will look down at us and ask: What have you done?

KYLE CASSIDY

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The Greatest Vampire

GARY CADWALLADER

Submitted for your approval: a tale of one relationship dying while several others, bonded in blood, are being born.

"GREAT VAMPIRES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WOMEN," my wife said. She nudged me in the darkness of the auditorium as Luchesa, Queen of Witches, Greatest of Vampires strode toward the lectern.

"What about Dracula?"

"The real Dracula was mortal," Carla whispered. "But look at her!" Carla's breath was hot in my ear. "She's magnificent."

And so she was, this Luchesa, who walked like a man but whose pale body made me ache. She stood tall and was sensuously thin, white as an albino. She captured her audience with quick movements and sparkling eyes. Her presence was ethereal.

Her clothes were businesslike. A gray felt suit and peach blouse. Small gray pumps emphasized shapely legs. Perhaps we were to imagine her working in a law firm downtown, but I kept sensing the clothes were a mask.

"Great women have always been vampires," I whispered to Carla, in a poor attempt at humor.

Carla dug her nails into my palm and looked at me sideways. She wanted to chew me out, but Luchesa saved me by starting her presentation.

Luchesa's eyes swept the crowd and locked too long with my own. I looked away dizzily and saw blood welling up from the floor. It splashed across my shoes and sopped into my socks. It was warm against my ankles.

A hallucination! I shook my head. Luchesa still looked at me. The air was heavy with steam and the smell of human entrails.

"That's a horrible thing to say!" Carla whispered.

"What?" Less than a second had passed and Carla had just answered me. Luchesa's eyes moved on. I mumbled an apology and sank into the chair. Was I in the presence of the real thing? I'd taken it for granted Luchesa was a fake… who wouldn't, besides Carla?

But my head hurt. Single words from Luchesa's speech came to me as images in a fog. Freedom: a wolf lunging through the gray woods, tracks like flower petals in the snow. Ritual: a den of serpents tangling in sexual frenzy. Blood: a vision of a Vietnamese child stepping on a popper. A small leg shoots up in the air, turning end over end and spattering me with a fine red mist, throwing blood across my lips and face.

I looked at Carla. Tiny droplets of blood, like beads of sweat, were in her hair. I reeled in the chair, which seemed miles wide. I bounced off the back and was propelled to the floor.

I'd never been a believer. Not like Carla. I could deny this a thousand ways. I got food poisoning at Don Choo-Choo's. Some bad acid from 1973 was coming back to haunt me. I was having a stroke.

But all excuses fled when I looked at Luchesa. If she wasn't a full-fledged witch—or vampire—then my brother Billy didn't burn up in a Huey helicopter and I didn't work as a computer programmer. Nothing was real. My mother was Einstein and nobody's old man ever drank too much. This woman was bad news.

Carla looked enraptured. She couldn't have missed the fact that I was hunkered on the floor, but she was hanging on Luchesa's every word, while a pounding headache kept me from calling out to her.

Carla had always been a believer. She still thought the Beatles were getting back together. I tried to tell her one of them was dead, but that didn't matter. "It won't be on this plane," she said. We were the couple about whom people said "opposites attract." People had been saying that for twenty years and it was still true today. All I wanted was another twenty years with my crazy wife.

If she wasn't a full-fledged vampire, then my brother Billy didn't burn up in a Huey helicopter, my mother was Einstein and nobody's old man ever drank too much.

Without Carla, I'm a shark. No feelings, no motivations beyond the primal, nothing. I need her spiritualism and astrology. I need her delving into the unknown to fill the emptiness in my soul. I'm not stupid, I know what people say: "Roger's all control, and Carla's—Carla's a flake." We were the perfect yin and yang of couples. What one lacked, the other had in abundance. Carla gave me control. Without her I was the vampire.

So there was something familiar in Luchesa, something warlike in her thin body. She looked like starving children I'd seen in Vietnam, like fresh corpses beside the road. She had my attention like nothing had since a cobra had crawled across my chest while I lay half asleep in the jungle.

I knew her hallucinations, too. In college, the days were long and drugs were easy to find. After that was the war, and don't think we didn't try to fill our emptiness with whatever we could find.

Was Luchesa making some promise of eternal youth? That would tempt my Carla. Her disappointment with her own body usually came as a put-down of mine. I took it quietly; I had a paunch but didn't mind aging. Carla not only hated it—she feared it.

"I'm sick," I mumbled and crawled to the aisle across the unmoving feet of strangers. Carla didn't notice. I saw rows and rows of glassy, unblinking eyes staring at Luchesa. No one watched me as I hurried to the door, not daring to look back.

The lights and fresh air of the lobby gave me the strength to make it to the toilet. I threw up. The white bowl was cool against my hands. The tiled floor sparkled with the extraordinary vision given to those with fever. My retching slowed, then stopped, and my eyesight returned to normal. I slicked the sweat from my forehead and rose with increasing strength. That had been a tough attack of… of what?

In the hard fluorescent glare of the men's room, my vampire theory didn't hold up. Just nonsense. I must have been out of my mind.

"You okay, buddy?" A hand touched my shoulder. A well-fed, bearded man with a nose like a red cauliflower was looking at me. "Your wife sent me in to get you. You okay?"

"Yeah, sure." I patted his sleeve and walked to the door. I felt his jaundiced eyes following me. "Really," I said. "Just something I ate."

He grunted. That was something he could understand. His hand found its way to his ample belly and stroked it absently.

I walked out into a darkened lobby that smelled of cigarette smoke and orange soda. That didn't seem right at all. I saw the glow of Carla's white dress among the shadows before I saw her face.

"Where the hell you been?" she started in on me. "The lecture's been over for forty-five minutes, and I wanted to go talk with Luchesa. You've ruined—"

"Wait—what do you mean the lecture's over? She just started five minutes ago."

"You're nuts. Did you fall asleep in there? I swear, if you've been drinking…"

"No, of course not. I haven't had *time* to get a drink!"

"You've had almost four hours. Don't play stupid! Luchesa talked for three hours with a break in the middle. And I been waiting out here for God knows how long! I finally sent the manager in to check and out you come like nothing happened? Well, listen mister, I'm pissed!"

"Baby, I was sick." Could I have fallen asleep?

Carla looked skeptical. "You're never sick."

"I know. And I'm freaked out, okay? I don't know what's happening, but I blacked out or something."

She put her arm around me. "Did you fall down?"

"No. Are you sure it's been that long? I know, of course you are, sorry— I did throw up."

"Maybe you passed out."

"No, I'm sure. I threw up, then I came right out. I just lost four hours somewhere."

"That's crazy."

Carla, the ditz, was calling me crazy. "Is this some kind of role reversal?" I asked.

She laughed. "Let's get home to bed. I'll drive."

That night we had the greatest sex of our twenty years together… and then I saw Luchesa outside our second-story window.

She floated as in a dream and my vision was blurred. It could have been a dream. Except for the sound. I don't hear sounds in my dreams.

Luchesa was beside Carla and they were caressing. Luchesa stared at me with amber, metallic eyes. She bared her fangs and sank them into Carla's soft neck. I tried to scream a warning but found myself floundering under waves of shock. Luchesa was overloading my nervous system with swells of sensation.

Sound and feeling and imbalance struck me, forcing me out of the bed and onto my knees. I struggled to raise my head and it was like putting my face into a campfire. The heat seemed to peel my skin away. And the smell brought a picture to my mind. It was a picture of small fingers, chopped and placed neatly in a bowl of vinegar, their bloody nails all pointing at me accusingly.

I looked at Carla and she was sinking into herself. The life was draining out of her. Her beautiful skin, which had been so hot and soft moments ago, looked like dried tapioca on concrete.

And Luchesa threw back her head and roared. She was a lion and I was less worthy than carrion. She slit her own throat with a sharp thumbnail and pressed Carla's lips to it. And Carla began to suck.

That sound petrified me. That sucking. That awful adult suckling that only the terribly hungry can make. And I wet myself with tears and urine, and I trembled with fever until, mercifully, Luchesa let me pass from her hypnotism into unconsciousness.

"DARLING," MY CARLA SAID, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING on the floor?"

I unwound like an ancient cat, sore and stretching. My head was bruised, my neck was stiff. I looked at her with bleary vision. "What happened?"

"You were on the floor."

"No, I mean last night. What happened last night?"

"I slept like a log."

I stood up and nearly fell across the bed. "I had the strangest dream… about Luchesa." I pulled Carla's robe away from her neck. No marks.

"Roger, what are you doing, silly?"

"Never mind," I said. "It was just a dream… I guess. But it was so real."

"And that's how you ended up on the floor?"

"Forget it. Let's get some breakfast."

On weekends, we did a few chores around the house and then went to a movie. But Carla suggested we drive to St. Louis, maybe take in the zoo, go to a riverboat. It sounded good to me and I wanted to get out of the house.

So we drove for five hours and had lunch along the way. It was a nice, calm trip. I enjoyed the scenery, the river, everything. That is, until we got there and Carla asked me to buy a newspaper.

Somehow, she knew exactly what page to turn to. She found the ad for "Luchesa, Queen of Witches, Greatest of Vampires" on page twenty-four.

"This is where I want to go," she said.

There was a subtlety about her voice that I found odd. I looked at her and knew why we'd come to St. Louis. It was the next stop on the vampire train.

"We can't," I began. "It's impossible," I stammered.

I sputtered like a dying '73 Bel Air. I searched for reasons we couldn't go. There had to be one that didn't involve the very things I didn't want to talk about, the supernatural events in our bedroom. Finally, I just yelled. "I won't have it!"

She looked at me like I was a dog. She challenged me with her eyes to give her the real reason. But she stayed absolutely silent and left the next move to me.

"And that's that!"

She slapped me hard across the face. My teeth felt like they would fall out. And I bit my lip.

"What the hell you do that for?"

She hit me again.

I doubled up my fist and she looked me straight in the eye. I'd never hit her in twenty years. I wanted to then, but I didn't. I feared that once I started.… No, no, I couldn't hit her.

"You're so full of shit you squeak," I said, and turned away.

We didn't talk much that afternoon. We found a motel room. We ate dinner. I watched the clock, waiting for eight, when the show would start. What was it going to be like this time?

I never found out. Carla sneaked out while I was in the bathroom. I heard the car starting and knew she'd left me to wait in the motel.

I spent the next several hours in a state of agitated denial. *Nothing's wrong*, I thought, pacing the floor. *It didn't really happen. I passed out, then I had a bad dream. That's all. Carla's only into this vampire business because she's nuts.* Crazy Carla, the ditz. She even called herself that.

But as the hour grew later, I worked up to full panic. *She's leaving me.* With that thought I saw a truth more frightening than the supernatural. *I'm not worried that she's in danger, or even in love… I'm worried because I don't want to be alone.*

I had to do something. I called for a rental car and headed for the theater.

I don't know what I expected to find on that deserted street. All the people had gone home, the show was over. Hot wind blew off the river. The theater was locked up and I was out of places to look. I began cruising, like a mother looking for her lost kid. Driving up and down without hope of seeing a sign. But you have to keep moving because you're so worried.

And I found a restaurant that looked right. Not for Carla maybe, but it had Luchesa written all over it. A classy place, darkened and smelling of red wine and redder meat.

They were there.

I think they wanted me to find them. They were in a booth close to the front. I could see them from the window. I got out of the car and pressed my face to the glass. None of the diners paid any attention to me.

Luchesa smiled, her teeth razor sharp. She found Carla's hand and bit a huge, ragged hole in it. Luchesa looked up, lips and teeth bloody, then held Carla's hand over her wine glass and slowly filled it with blood.

Only Luchesa saw me. She smiled. Her canine teeth were razor sharp. She found Carla's hand and bit a huge, ragged hole in it between the thumb and first finger. Blood ran down Carla's arm. Luchesa looked up, lips and teeth bloody, then held Carla's hand over her wine glass and slowly filled it with blood. I screamed. I hammered on the glass. No one even looked up.

I scrambled for the door and lost sight of them for a moment. I rushed in past a maître d' who grabbed at my shirt. A table spilled over. People began to scream.

A man cursed me and his wife laughed. I found the booth, but it was empty. The glass of blood was gone. There were no blood stains on the tablecloth. It was as if I had dreamed it all.

They threw me out into the street and I fell to my hands and knees in the gutter. The concrete tore my pants. A rat ran across my hand. I could smell the river sweating in the distance. I saw a bum urinating against a trash bin. The wind screamed in my ear, *"She's gone."*

I picked myself and limped to the car. Back at the motel, the few things Carla had brought were gone. She'd left a note: "Don't try to find me, Roger. I don't love you anymore." It was on amber motel stationary with a picture of the St. Louis Arch.

I sat on the bed and stared into space for two hours.

Finally, I decided to go after her. I didn't care if she loved me, that wasn't the point. What I cared about was whether she was alive or not. Was she some kind of walking dead now?

I went back to the theater and broke in through a side door. I turned furniture over and tore up the lobby until I found what I wanted, a pamphlet showing Luchesa's next stop. Indianapolis. She was headed straight east on I-70. I was going to catch her.

IT WAS PAST TWO IN THE MORNING BY THE TIME I crossed into Indiana, and I was wondering some pretty strange stuff. Like, was it legal to kill a vampire? Did they have rights under the Constitution? Should I even go after Carla? Maybe being a vampire was her choice and I shouldn't interfere.

I was all mixed up, but I kept driving. One thing was clear to me: I didn't need a wooden stake to kill Luchesa. She wouldn't have bothered with all those hypnotic fireworks unless she was afraid of me. No, a gun would do, or a heavy pipe… maybe I could even strangle her, as long as I didn't let her get to my mind.

The stars were painfully bright, and I was alone on the road. A farmer's light shone off to the left a mile or so ahead. My headlights outlined corn growing right up to the shoulder. I saw more stars than I'd seen in years. Under other circumstances, it would have been a wonderful night.

I rounded a corner at eighty and saw Carla standing in the road. She had on a white full-length nightgown and her skin was yellow in my lights.

I pulled the car hard to the left and jammed on the brakes. The car jumped into the air and flipped over. The car turned over once—twice—and landed upright, facing backwards in the median.

Carla was gone.

The car wouldn't start and I had a headache that wouldn't quit, but I seemed unhurt. The doors were jammed shut, but I pulled myself out through the window even with the broken glass everywhere.

"There was no reason for that!" I yelled. Damn women had ruined a perfectly good car. "I'll wring your chicken necks!" And I waved a fist at the sky.

I thought I heard giggling in the cornfield. It scared the hell out of me. *Ain't going in there*, I thought. *I'll walk until I come to a house. Let 'em fight on my terms.* And I set off for the lights I'd seen just down the road.

I CAME DOWN THE FARMHOUSE ROAD INTO THE circle of light and saw a man on the porch with a shotgun. He was about fifty and balding. White hair rimmed the sides of his head. He had on red plastic glasses, an orange checkered bathrobe, and those brown slippers men used to wear in the fifties. Skinny white ankles showed under his pink pajamas.

"That your car back a ways," he said. It wasn't a question. "Those vampires do it?"

I stopped. The shotgun—a Mossberg, Marine issue—was pointed at my chest. This old boy had been in a war, too. One of his legs was plastic and metal; the foot inside the slipper was flesh-colored, but smooth as glass.

"They took my wife," I said.

He grunted and hobbled down from the porch. "She's gone, mister. Come with me." He walked away from the house expecting me to follow.

I thought he was going to kill me. I thought I didn't care. *It might be a good thing.*

He led me to a foul-smelling barn and slid back a heavy door. The door was big enough to drive a tractor through and I heard animal noises inside. He flipped a switch and blazing light blinded me for a moment. *This is it*, I thought.

"They done this," he said. "There was two. Reckon your wife was one." He pointed into a horse stall, expecting me to turn my back on him and have a look.

My heart thumped as I looked inside.

"Jesus!" I screamed, and began to throw up.

WE WERE HAVING COFFEE IN HIS KITCHEN WHEN HE asked me to do it. I didn't want to, but it seemed like I owed him. My wife was part of this, after all.

"Take the gun," he said. "Make it quick if you can."

So I went into that barn that smelled like cats had been using it for an outhouse, turned out the light, and waited for my night vision to return. And I stalked his poor nine-year-old granddaughter like some gook in the bush. Only she couldn't go anywhere, because he had her chained in the horse stall.

She was still making that awful sound, the same sound I'd heard the night Luchesa had visited our bedroom. And the last of three white lambs was dying in her arms as she tore at its neck and spilled the blood down her throat. The other two mutilated corpses lay at her bare feet. The chain, bloodied and strained to its limit, was around her left foot. She had on white cotton panties and a sleeveless t-shirt, stained red with lamb's blood.

And I murdered that poor little girl. I shot her through the neck, blast after blast, until what was left of her head came off. It looked like a slaughterhouse in there.

And I buried the body away from the head, like the old man told me to, with the body behind the barn and the

head across the highway. I prayed over both mounds. I prayed God would forgive me for killing a child. I prayed God would forgive Carla for making the child into a vampire. And I prayed I'd find Luchesa and kill her, because I knew she'd hurt the child just to slow me down.

I went back to the old man's house. There was a note in the kitchen along with a K-bar fighting knife and a greasy blue Colt .45 automatic. There were three thousand dollars wrapped up in the note.

Roger,

You did the right thing. You may not believe it in the morning, but it was right. Do me one more favor… I can't face my son and tell him how his daughter died, and it seems I can't do this myself. The police will be after you when they find the bodies and your car, so take the shotgun, the money and the rest and kill those blood-suckers for me. Please. One Marine for another.

Semper Fi.

I THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT HE WROTE FOR A LONG TIME. And then I silently went upstairs and found him asleep. I slit his throat with the K-bar— it seemed like a good way to die. By then it was dawn and I took his truck and headed for Indianapolis.

I'm gonna find Carla, if the cops don't find me first. And I'll kill her. Luchesa too. Then I'll do myself. I suppose they'll say another vet went nuts.

Maybe I am. I killed a nine-year-old girl and an old man I didn't even know. Now I'm after my wife. If that ain't nuts, I don't know what is.

GARY CADWALLADER

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Twenty-One

WENDY J. CHOLBI

Most people play solitaire with cards.
For others, it's not just a game—it's a state of mind.

IT IS MY TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY. IT'S ALSO A Friday night. I can do whatever the hell I want. Everything except paint.

Is there such a thing as artist's block? Writers get blocked, and they're artists, sort of. Or is there some other reason the paper stays blank, all the brushes in their holders, tubes of paint unopened?

I have my back turned to my work table as I deal cards onto the floor. I made that table myself, particle board on cinder blocks, and it's just the right height for me to sit at and paint. It's even and solid and square. I spent a long time moving the cinder blocks under the wood to balance it and compensate for the warping of the floorboards.

It's the right height to sit at and play solitaire, too, but even though it's empty, I am playing on the floor. I feel too guilty for not painting. The emptiness of the table would accuse me.

I feel hungry. As I finish the game that I'm losing, I promise myself that as soon as I win once, I'll eat. I deal myself another game. Looks bad. No aces in sight and I can only do one move at first, put the seven of clubs on the eight of diamonds. I start to flip my way through the deck.

I am a master of solitaire. It is a constant in my life. I use it to dull my mind when I'm upset, to while away the time when I can't sleep, to smooth the flow of my subconscious when I'm frustrated with working on a painting. I also use it to bribe myself—I promise myself an uninterrupted round as soon as I finish a painting. Or after I call my mother. Or I use it to delay the inevitable, as I am doing now. As soon as I win, I will look up from the worn cards, survey my shelves, try to find something edible.

The games are also keeping me from panicking over the naked sheets of thick paper, thirsty to soak up water and color. I haven't set brush to paper in two weeks. The last thing I painted that I was really happy with was about three weeks ago. It was a crow sitting on a streetlight. I was pleased with the way I managed to catch the high-

lights of his feathers, with that kind of dusty shine crows have. And his one yellow eye, his head cocked. Last week I turned that painting to face the wall, because it had begun to seem like he was staring at me accusingly.

I'm worried that my brain will dry up with my paint, if it hasn't already.

It's also been two weeks since I've been to the grocery store. The last two nights I have ordered out—pizza last night, Chinese before that. I went to the liquor store today, though. On my way home from work I stopped and bought a bottle of scotch with the last of my petty cash to celebrate today. Tony at the liquor store knows me. I've been buying stuff there since I was seventeen.

Two aces show up in a row: hearts and spades. Hearts in spades. I should have spades and spades of hearts. I don't want to think about that now.

The year I moved out I was seventeen. My parents split up when I was fourteen, and the day the divorce papers were signed I resolved to get out as soon as I could. It was the usual arrangement: I lived with my mom, spent weekends once in a while at my dad's place. Nobody asked me who I'd rather live with.

They're OK, my parents—they didn't beat me or anything. My dad even came to see the student art show my sophomore year. It's just that the divorce was very messy and anyone could see that they had more important things to deal with than me. I checked out my options.

I was working one night a week stocking at a local comic book store, and they needed part-time work at the main warehouse. So I worked there after school most of my junior year. They hired me full-time as soon as I got out for summer, and I never went back to school. After a month I was making twice minimum wage, taking orders over the phone. I rented an apartment on the south side of City Park, a small place, just to get out. After my first six-month lease was up, I found this place. It's much better than the last one, on the north side, closer to work, with lots of windows. I could say to my friends that I had light to work with now. I told my mom I was barely making the rent payments, and with the two hundred dollars she gave me I bought a brown-and-red Ford Fiesta.

The first time I made love with Jason was in the back of that car. But I'm not thinking about that now, as I lay the four and the five and the six of hearts on top of the pile. I sold it for parts three months ago and bought a Chevy Citation with an oil leak. I repaired the leak myself with duct tape.

Besides, it wasn't making love. It couldn't have been.

The sun is setting. I can tell because the light is getting red. I can't see the sun when it sets—the buildings of downtown Denver are in the way—but I don't mind. Afternoon light is best to paint by, and the afternoons will be longer soon, when daylight savings time starts.

My dad's place, where I used to spend weekends, had great light. It's in the mountains, and it's very quiet and all that. I used to wish that they would let me live with him instead of my mom, but there would have been no way for me to get to school. So I had to spend weeks at my mom's place, with her and Dave. Dave always tried to be nice to me, but his idea of being nice was offering me a beer. I hate beer, and they drink too much. Besides, I didn't care if he was nice to me. I just wanted him to leave me alone, so I could play solitaire and think about what I would paint the next weekend at my dad's. I had a deck of cards with cats on the backs that I used until I lost the jack of diamonds. These days, cards take a couple of months to wear out between my fingers, but I keep a spare deck around just in case.

When I started drinking, I drank vodka, just like every high school student. It's cheap. But the first time I went into Tony's liquor store, I knew if I tried to buy vodka, especially dressed the way I usually was, in jeans and tennis shoes, he'd know I was underage. So I put on a pair of costume glasses and styled my hair in a French twist. My hair was long then.

Two aces show up in a row: hearts and spades. Hearts in spades. I should have spades and spades of hearts. I don't want to think about that now.

After Jason left for college I cut my hair. I read somewhere that a lot of women cut their hair after ending relationships, but I didn't end it. He did. I cropped it short, not more than an inch long. I did it myself, standing in front of the bathroom mirror. I did a pretty good job of it, too, and I've gotten better, since I have to trim it every month or so.

I wore heels to the liquor store, and a skirt and blouse. I asked the man, who turned out to be Tony, for his recommendations on what wine to drink with grilled fish and rice. He asked me what kind of fish, and I said halibut because I knew it was a fancy type of fish. He recommended a French dry white wine from Meursault-Blagny, whatever that means. I only remember it because I saved the bottle. I put flowers in it once in a while.

I thanked him, and bought it, and he didn't card me, so the fifteen dollars I spent on the wine was worth it. The next time I went into the store, I wore a short skirt and a blouse with three buttons open and bought some Grand Marnier. After that I knew I was safe. He's never carded me, even when I've bought vodka.

When the jack and queen of spades show up in the right order, I know I've won the game. But I play to the end as

I always do, and then slide the cards together into a pile. I've played so much solitaire, it's become another art to me. I know a lot of different games, from clock solitaire to forty thieves, which is a two-deck version, to portable solitaire that you can play in one hand. The person who taught me portable solitaire said it was great for airplanes. I've never been on an airplane.

I still have staples left. Rice, flour, spices, that kind of thing. Some cans of tomato paste. I put a pan of water on to boil and measure out rice. I don't sit down to play again because I know that if I do I will let the water boil down to nothing rather than interrupt my game. I glance at my painting corner as I salt the water.

I really should paint something, but I've been telling myself that for days. My half-finished efforts, except for one, are stacked behind the table. I hate most of them. I tried painting my hand holding a deck of cards, I tried painting a group of people playing poker, and finally I just tried to paint a big king of spades. When I noticed that it had Jason's nose, I tore it up.

I wander into my bedroom and throw a couple of dirty shirts into the clothes basket. I'm normally very neat, it's only during this dry spell—that's what I'll call it, it has a nice ring—that I've thrown my dirty clothes into the corner instead of in the basket.

When I was finally ready to show Jason my place, my apartment that was a studio even though it wasn't a studio apartment, I thought maybe I should throw some things on the floor. It's usually very clean, and I didn't want him to think I had cleaned up for him. We made love—no, we had sex on my bed, which is really a mattress on the floor. He didn't stay the night, because his mother didn't know where he was. He was eight months younger than me. I had forgotten that people my age still lived with their parents, still listened to their mothers, still called if they were going to be out late. So he left me with kisses, saying he wished he could stay. At three in the morning I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep, because I could smell him in the sheets. It bothered me. I felt fiercely territorial about my place. So I got up and took a long shower and changed the sheets on the bed. I put the dirty ones in a pillowcase to separate them from the other untainted laundry. Then I felt better, and I went back to sleep.

The water is boiling, and I dump in the rice. I make a deal with myself that I can play solitaire, but I will interrupt my game to get the rice. In payment for this, I am allowed to cheat. I have devised several ways of doing this. There are rules even for cheating. Sometimes I give myself permission to go through the deck more than the specified number of times. Sometimes I can switch the positions of certain cards. Sometimes I let one card be wild. Tonight I play that black can go on black and red can go on red, but only if they're opposite suits.

JASON HAD THIS DECK OF CARDS THAT HE HAD DRILLED a hole through. That was the first thing that I noticed when I met him. He had a job at the same warehouse I did, but in a different department. It was my second summer there, and his first. He was going to work full time for a year, to earn money before he went to college.

I came down to the break room for a Coke and he was playing solitaire on the lunch table. I noticed that he didn't play very well, and that there was a hole in every single card. The holes weren't in the middle—they were a little off center, toward the top left corner. We were the only two people in the room. I knew better than to suggest moves to him. I also knew that everyone probably asked him about the holes in his cards, so I didn't. I just sat down across from him and drank my Coke.

He was kind of cute, I'll admit that. He wore glasses and had curly brownish-blond hair. His fingernails looked like they hadn't been cut in weeks. He didn't look up, even though I knew that he knew I was there. I knew that the holes in his cards were a conversation piece with him when he picked up the jack of diamonds from his pile, and, before playing it, held it up at arm's length so the light shone through it.

"Don't you ever cut your nails?" I asked him.

He opened his mouth, then shut it and looked at me funny. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'Don't you ever cut your nails?' They're pretty long, for a guy." I raised one eyebrow.

"Yeah, so?"

"So, nothing. I was just curious." I tossed my hair back and drained my Coke. "I gotta get back upstairs. Where do you work, anyway?"

"The subscription club. It's hectic today, and I just had to take a break." He spread his hands over his cards and smiled. He had a nice smile.

"Listen." I lowered my voice. "You must be new around here, because you don't know how bad it would be if they caught you in here playing."

"What can they do?" He smirked.

"Fire you."

"No they can't."

"Sure they can. Darth Vader up there," I pointed at the ceiling, toward the office of William Kozanski, the president, "owns this company. He can fire anyone he wants to. And he's not very nice to anyone who plays cards on company time." I was going to catch it if I was away from my desk much longer.

"Well, I may be new here, but there are two things I know that you don't. The first thing is that I punched out before I started this, so I'm playing on my own time. The second thing is that this is my lucky deck." He tapped a card with his fingernail.

I rolled my eyes and said, "OK, I give up. Why did you punch a hole in every card in your deck?"

"It's a bullet hole." He said it very calmly, but he had the same extra tone in his voice that my dad does when he's playing a trick on someone. I knew he was making it up.

I raised the other eyebrow and gave him a half smile. "Look, I really have to get upstairs. I'm going to be in trouble if I don't. What's your name?"

He looked disappointed. "Jason. What's yours?"

"Miranda."

THREE GAMES OF SOLITAIRE LATER, TWO OF WHICH I win thanks to my extra rule, my rice is ready. I like butter on my rice, but all I have left is margarine. I make a face at the fridge and dump the rice, butterless, onto a plate to cool. Then I pour myself a shot of scotch. It smells less like rubbing alcohol than vodka does, but I pour myself the last of my grape juice for a chaser anyway. I drink another shot and deal myself a game.

"BUT AREN'T YOU GOING TO COLLEGE?" HE WAS walking around the warehouse with me on our morning break. It had taken him about a week for him to digest the fact that I was nineteen, I lived by myself, I was a high school dropout, and I was perfectly happy.

"College? What would I want to go to college for? I'm an artist." I laughed.

"Do you really think you'll be able to make a living doing that? I mean, what if you end up working here for the rest of your life?" He didn't need to point at the warehouse. It dominated us.

"Jason, it doesn't matter if I work here for the rest of my life. I don't need to make a living from my paintings. All I need is to be able to do them. I work here so I can pay the rent, and then I go home and paint. It's simple."

"But how can you stand to know that you'll be working here? I know I'll only be working here for a year, and most of the time I still hate this place. I mean," he stopped and faced me, "until I started talking to you, I ate lunch with my lucky deck."

I shrugged and smiled at him, and that was when he kissed me.

I tell myself that I wasn't surprised, that I had noticed how he touched my hand every so often when we talked, that I had seen him looking at me. I tell myself that I knew all along that he was interested in me.

But I was surprised. I was surprised and delighted and I felt warm inside even though he was a lousy kisser and I had to wipe my chin afterward.

I WIN ONE MORE GAME OF SOLITAIRE, USING A DIFFERent rule this time (all face cards can be put in an empty space, not just kings), drink another shot of scotch, and finish my grape juice. The rice is now cool enough to eat, and even without butter it tastes like the best rice in the world.

I hope I'll be able to sleep now. I don't want to think anymore, don't want to worry about not being able to paint anymore. Don't want to remember anymore. It's seven o'clock. I curl up in my blanket without bothering to take my shorts and t-shirt off and doze. I do not dream.

When I wake up the clock says it's only two hours later. I feel defeated. Nothing is right. I can't even sleep through the night. This is crazy. I'm too hot from being twisted in my blanket and there's a sour taste in my mouth from the scotch. I'm hungry again. I feel like I want to cry but I don't.

"It doesn't matter if I work here for the rest of my life. I don't need to make a living from my paintings. All I need is to be able to do them. It's simple."

"You stupid fuck, stupid fuck, stupid fuck." I can't tell if I'm talking to myself or Jason as I trudge into the kitchen. I have to get out of here. I know that I probably shouldn't drive, but I put on my shoes anyway and have one more shot, no chaser, because I don't care.

HE SHOULDN'T HAVE PROMISED ME IT WOULD WORK. And I shouldn't have believed him. He was going to Colorado Springs. Only fifty miles, but it might as well have been a thousand. We both had cars but he was usually too busy to come up to Denver for the weekend. "College isn't like high school," he told me. "Things don't just stop on Friday after classes." So I drove down to visit him a few times on weekends. His roommate was really freaked out about me staying in their room the first time. He was a little nicer about it later, but he was creepy in general. And I started noticing that Jason had all these friends, friends who were going to have careers, friends who were in the same clubs, friends that had more in common with him than happening to work in the same warehouse all year with no one else to talk to. I couldn't talk about the same things as they did. I could only tell him I had finished a new painting, when I actually had. It was hard for me to work for awhile after he left, and I mostly did boring park landscapes. Or I could tell him about things that were happening at my job, which he didn't care about. My last resort was to take my clothes off. Then we wouldn't need to talk at all. But even that didn't work for very long.

The last time I visited him was in November, for his birthday. He was twenty. His college friends threw him a party and brought a keg and they all got drunk. I didn't. I left after he disappeared with a girl from his drama class. It was a long drive.

IT'S A CLEAR NIGHT. THERE SEEM TO BE VERY FEW cars out tonight. I check the clock in my car to be sure I read the time right, and I did. I drive towards Bill's house. Bill manages one of the branch stores, and there are usually people hanging out at his house on weekends. Sure enough, there's something going on. It looks like a party, in fact, even though no one knows it's my birthday.

The door is wide open with music and people floating in and out. As I walk into the hallway a man appears from another door in the hall and points at me, saying, "You, you, I haven't kissed you yet." He grabs me and kisses me and I let him because I can't think of a reason not to. Then he walks out onto the front porch and I hear him saying the same thing to someone else. I continue into the house, looking for someone I know. There are people dancing in the living room, mostly high school kids in leather jackets, and two girls playing with a cat in the bedroom.

I find Bill pouring drinks in the kitchen. He hands me a glass with about an inch of brown liquid in the bottom and introduces me to Eric, Sebastian, Angie, and Willow. Friends of his.

"What's this?" I hold up the glass.

Bill shrugs. "Someone brought it. It's some fruit thing, I think." It smells like whiskey. I chug it and make a face. One of the guys claps. The other three continue their conversation with Bill. They're discussing levels and spells. It blows my mind that Bill must be thirty and still hangs around with high school kids and plays Dungeons and Dragons.

"Are you Eric or Sebastian?" I smile at the one who clapped, who's staring at me appreciatively. He's got round black sunglasses perched on his head and I can tell his black hair is a dye job because lighter hair is showing at the roots.

"Sebastian Wolf at your service." He bows deeply and I snatch the sunglasses.

"Thanks." I put them on and strike a pose to make him laugh. Sebastian Wolf, yeah right. No one is named Sebastian Wolf. If I hadn't already been introduced as Miranda I would have said my name was Moonlight or something.

"I'm going to dance. Coming?" He follows me and we dance in the living room to loud music with lots of synthesizers and drums. I lose myself for a while in the movement of my body and the rhythm shocking up through my feet and legs to the rest of me and the faint smell of alcohol being sweated out of people. I do not think about Jason and his college friends. I do not think about Jason having sex with his college girlfriend and calling it making love. Someone changes the music to a ballad, still with synthesizers and drums. I walk to the porch and 'Sebastian' follows me. There are three or four people standing outside, smoking or making out. I've only been leaning against the railing for a few minutes before Bill comes outside trailing high school kids. "We're going for cigarettes. Want to come?" I shake my head and wave at them. They pull the other people on the porch with them.

'Sebastian' edges closer to me and I don't move. I think, I know what he is going to do and I don't care. I'm mostly right, except he's not pushy. He puts his arm around me and in a minute he's kissing me, and in another minute he has me pressed against the railing while he kisses my neck and tries to slide his hand underneath my shirt. I hear the noise of the people coming back from buying cigarettes and I push him away and say, "Do you need a ride home or something?" I jingle my car keys.

I get into my Chevy and drive three blocks, so he'll know that I am gone, before I stop. I let the engine idle as I lean my forehead against the steering wheel and cry quietly.

At his place, his roommate is asleep and we watch *Star Trek.* When he starts kissing me again, I let him push me back on the couch and after a while he stands up and takes my hand. I let him lead me back to his room. He does me the favor of turning out the lights before we undress.

In the dark I close my eyes and let him fuck me. It is easier than I thought it would be. I let part of my mind float away and imagine I am watching myself from the corner of the ceiling. I want to laugh but I change it into an appropriate noise. I feel nothing.

When he is finished, he lies on me for a minute and then rolls off to the side. I am wide awake and looking at the ceiling. My eyes have become used to the tiny amount of light that seeps in from below the thick curtains from the street light outside. I'm cold and I pull the blanket up over me. He helps me and I'm surprised because I thought he was asleep. He puts his arm over me and pulls me a little closer. It is a small act, probably meaningless because he doesn't know me at all, he doesn't even know my last name, and he certainly doesn't know that I'm a painter or that it's my birthday or that I never do this kind of thing but I'm so lonely tonight that I was willing to do anything to feel close to someone.

And of course it didn't work. I tried to convince myself that I maybe felt a little bit close to him, and maybe for just a few seconds while we were physically close I almost believed it, but then it was over and I realized that all I felt was empty, empty and hollow and worse than I did before. And him putting his arm around me has just enough tenderness in it to make me realize all of this. I will never make love with anyone. I did that and then it turned out not to be lovemaking at all. It was just sex and that's what this is now. Foolishly, I start to cry. I am very quiet but he is right next to me and he must feel me shaking.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong? Are you OK?" He touches my face and then pulls the sheet up to dry my cheeks.

"I'm—I'm OK." I struggle to control my voice. I refuse to hold on to him and press my face into the hollow of his neck and say something ridiculous like 'hold me.' I take deep breaths and finally I'm able to laugh just slightly and say, "I'm just pretty tired, I guess. I'm sorry."

He doesn't say 'everything's going to be all right.' He doesn't say 'tell me what's bothering you.' He strokes my hair once or twice. I am grateful.

His clock says it is 12:03. Goodbye, birthday. I am still trembling inside even though I know I won't fall apart again in front of him. I close my eyes because it's true that I am tired. But I realize that I can't face waking up here, with this person who calls himself Sebastian Wolf. I know he won't hurt me and he's nice enough in his way, but I need to be in a place where I know where the light comes from and the sheets smell familiar. "Sebastian." I kiss him on the forehead. "I need to go home." I get up and find some of my clothes.

"Are you sure?" He props himself on one elbow, a dim outline.

"Yeah." I do not lie and say there are things I need to do in the morning or that my parents are waiting for me.

"I'll let you out." He starts to rummage for his own clothes. He sees me to the door. That's nice of him, I guess. We don't hug or kiss or anything. I have the brief thought of shaking his hand and almost laugh. I say goodbye and turn to walk to my car. He calls after me softly, "See you around." I don't say anything.

I get into my Chevy and drive three blocks, so he'll know that I am gone, before I stop. I let the engine idle as I lean my forehead against the steering wheel and cry quietly. I cry until I'm finished, and when I am breathing normally again I shift into Drive and go home.

I turn on every light in my apartment and take off my clothes and put them in a pillowcase. Then I take my deck of cards and rip each one exactly in half. It doesn't matter because I have a spare deck. I'm just sick of the old one, that's all. Then I'm on my way to take a shower, but before I get to the bathroom I see myself walk past the full length mirror in my bedroom. I watch myself and I do not look at my face. Without thinking about it I walk to the mirror and turn my back on it. I stand with my feet a yard apart and bend from the waist until I am facing the mirror again, one good hard look and then I stand up straight. I close my eyes and see the negative image of the tangle of hair between my legs and fix it there.

I kneel deliberately at my painting table, close my eyes once before I rub my brush in the paint. It comes very easily, surprising me with the long strokes that flow from my hand. It is quickly and deeply done. When I am finished, my knees are numb and there are goosebumps on every inch of my bare skin but I ignore the cold. I am breathing normally and I look at what I have painted, and it would probably scare a lot of people. It is simply painted with broad strokes of red and black and pink and peach. It looks like Georgia O'Keefe has taken some bad acid.

I get up to clean my brush and my knees explode into feeling. I decide to take a shower before I paint any more.

When I am warm and clean and dry I put the first painting on the floor and start another one. This one is mostly peach, and gray and black. I blend the colors more carefully this time. I work on the edges. Things have to have edges, but they can't look like edges. I keep my mind fuzzy and I am pleased when I am nearly done. It looks very much like a desert landscape, I even make the background a wash of the palest shade of blue. But a few more minutes of working with a black and gray spot and I can tell that it's a navel. I make sure that the rise behind the woman's body is a slightly darker shade so I can tell it's a man next to her. I am pleased enough with this one that I sign it with my tiny curling M in the corner and the date. The stars are beginning to fade as I turn out all the lights.

It is Saturday morning and I am twenty-one and I sleep naked in sheets that smell like me.

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Hey, where I come from only farm animals have nose rings.