feels the muscle tissue in his thigh part. He feels the pain as it flies free. A hand pressed to the thigh comes away red, wet, hot. This, of course, cannot be happening.

Somewhere in the distance he is caught up in a struggle for the knife. He shudders as he feels it slide so easily between the ribs of the smaller man.

He runs, drawing hot, wet, heavy breath after heavy, sodden breath. His lungs ache, throb. He runs until he can run no longer, collapsing—the door just beyond his reach.

The pain in his leg is severe as he fumbles with the lock. It is raining. The pain is forcing its way up into his chest. He goes back inside for the umbrella. The box is already under his arm. The—priest—is waiting, weak, bleeding propped up against Branch's Volvo. "Here, take your damn box."

"The key. Take the key. Open it—"

"Open it yourself. I'm through with this—"

"Open the box."

Charlie's leg is throbbing—the vise tightening around his chest. The pain is literally killing him. "Open the box, Charlie Fendick. Take the heart into your hands." But it is too late.

He is gone.

HE SITS DOWN HEAVILY AT HIS DESK AND RUBS HIS hands along the arms of his chair, his desk—the comforting coolness of the telephone receiver.

He dials June's number.

"Hi, June? This is Charlie. No, the leg's not feeling too bad. Yeah, I guess the ticker might even make it. Look, June, I know this is kind of short notice, but I'm sort of setting up an office here in my study. Yeah, screw the dean and the faculty senate too. Well, I might not be able to pay you much for a while, but I was wondering if you might—this afternoon would be great. You should see the stack of mail here."

G.L. EIKENBERRY

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Smile! You're in a hot air balloon somewhere over the South Atlantic!

THERE IS NO WAY HE CAN NOT DO THIS. HE TAKES UP the cane as the pain returns to the leg. He fumbles with the ridiculous old skeleton key in the lock. He makes a lunging grab for the umbrella as he leaves. He can't forget the umbrella. He makes his way down the lane-way, taking care not to rub against Branch's filthy old rust bucket. The paint almost sighs, resigned to neglect, dull and chalky. Little flowerettes of rust blossom through the grimy film….

"That's good, those hooks like that—they say they're supposed to mean good luck…"

"I'M SORRY, CHARLIE. REALLY, I'M SORRY—" THE tears were forming in her eyes, pooling at the lower lids, waiting to spill over and run down her cheeks. She gave his arm a compassionate squeeze.

"Everybody dies eventually…"

"I wish you hadn't."

"Hadn't what? Oh, the lamp. Shit, I forgot the lamp…"

"Charlie—I know—"

The pain forced its way into his chest. "What? What do you know?"

"I know about your job, about the doctor, about the man with the keys. I don't understand any of it, Charlie, but I know."

"It's not raining today."

"Charlie, don't change the subject."

"You don't understand. It won't work. There's no point in taking the umbrella. It wouldn't make sense."

"Where do you go? I know you don't go to the university. I know they eliminated your grant. And I know you don't go to Dr. Vernon's—so where?"

"I don't know." His head drops. He has to get into the study. It's not raining. He has to figure this out.

"The cancer? Is that a lie too? Why, Charlie?"

"It's not cancer. I never said it was cancer. But I am dying—June—try to understand—I have to go in—I—"

"I'm going to move back to my own place, Charlie. This just isn't working out. I know I'll feel guilty as hell about abandoning you if it turns out you really are dying, but it just isn't working—besides, I'm not doing you any good here even if you really are—"

"I don't think it's a good idea to change anything—I—I have to get into the study—I can't—"

"Damn you, Charlie Fendick!"

The pain is calling him. He has to go in. The week's mail, added to the mound, caused an avalanche, exposing the box. This is wrong—all wrong. He takes up the cane as the pain gathers force and moves down into his leg. It isn't raining….

"ONLY ONE HOOK TODAY. TURNED DOWN. THAT'S not good—turned down—all the luck runs out, Charlie Fendick—" "That's not the right key—that key won't fit—"

"You think I don't know my own keys? You take the key I give you and don't complain. You take that one. Now go."

THE GROWTH ALONG THE TRAIL IS CLOSING IN. IT'S too thick. He can hardly find the way. This is all wrong—the air is hot and dry. His lungs are sore from the effort—drawing breath after searing breath. The clearing is visible now—only a little farther. And in the clearing is the mound. And in the mound the door. And behind the door will be June and another door and, of course the box. But she isn't there. There isn't another door. Only a box. A rough but beautifully carved box.

"She was right. This isn't working out."

He looks at the key in his knotted palm. The box should be locked. The key should open it.

CHARLIE FENDICK ANSWERS THE DOOR. HE HALF expects it to be June. He's been planning to call her anyway—"You didn't come today. The pain must be getting pretty bad by now."

"No. I can stand—the pain—yes, the pain I can stand…. How did you get here without me?"

"I've got your key."

"No. No keys. I'm through. I don't understand what's happening here, but it has got to stop. I don't care anymore. I'd rather just get it over with and die. If I could just have a couple of days to straighten out a few things. Just two days. Hell, I'll settle for one—"

"Come now, Charlie Fendick, you have to go to the forest now. Not in two days, Charlie, now."

THE GROWTH ALONG THE TRAIL CLOSES IN—TOO thick—very nearly impassable. His lungs are constricted—burning from the effort of drawing breath after searing breath. The clearing is only a little farther. And in the clearing, the mound. Or—it's a pyramid. No box. At the top, not inside, is an ornately carved—altar.

"She was right. This isn't working out." He is stretched out on the altar, not bound, but held nonetheless. The man—priest?—short, dark, broad, chiseled face—uses the knife to open Charlie's shirt. He draws the blade lightly across Charlie's chest, seeking out his heart.

"This is not an easy thing, Charlie Fendick." He runs the index finger of his left hand over the first, glistening incision as he raises his right hand, the one with the beautifully gilded knife, high over his head.

As the blood seeps out, releasing the pain, Charlie rolls out of the knife's arc. In the same fluid motion, his fist is thrust, by a force he doesn't control, into the priest's solar plexus. He lurches down off the altar. He feels heat. He

Schrödinger's Keys

G.L. EIKENBERRY

A cane, an umbrella, a box, a key:
All unlock the secret of one man's life.

CHARLIE FENDICK ENTERS HIS STUDY. THE MOUND on the floor in the center of the room continues to grow, imparting an increasing sense of chaos to the room, to his life. Cards and letters from friends, former students and associates, or even mere acquaintances from all over the world feed the mound. He hasn't opened the more recent ones and has no plans to do so. It isn't necessary. Not one of his recent rash of correspondents has had the guts to come right out and say it: "Dear Charlie, heard you were dying and knew I'd feel guilty if I didn't make the cut-off, so I thought I'd write while there's still time," but they all hover around that theme.

The real chaos, the ornately carved box under the mound of paper, will also remain unopened.

He takes up the cane—once an affectation, but as the pain weakens the leg, more of a necessity. He'll need the umbrella against the rain. He fits the key into the door that leads directly to the lane-way. Clutching the umbrella in the same hand with the key and leaning on the cane with the other, he turns the key awkwardly.

As usual, Mr. Branch's old Volvo obstructs the lane-way. Branch never washes his car. Its paint is dull and chalky. Little flowerettes of rust blossom through its film. It could be a good car with a little proper care. It's a pity an old fart like him—

He snaps out of it and pulls back. His face has come within a mere breath of the fender. Lost. Falling into a deviously placed rust mandala.

Professor Charles A. Fendick has got to get a firm grip on himself. He has things to do today. The car will be there another time.

Back around at the street, Charlie pauses to take stock. In an effort to touch base with reality, he exhales forcefully through pursed lips. He steels himself and strides up the walk towards the bus stop. His heart stops.

The ornate box under the mound in the study stirs. The man approaching him is dark-skinned, short, broad, flat, chiseled face Charlie has come to think of as Mayan.

"One hook up, one hook down." The stranger traces a long, thin finger (surprisingly long for so short a man) along the hook of the cane and then down the shaft of the umbrella to the hook of its handle. "The old folks say hooks like that are supposed to make good luck. What do you think, Charlie Fendick?" The accent is not exactly Indian, not exactly Hispanic—not exactly anything. The hand attached to the tracing finger opens to reveal a key that is pressed into Charlie's hand, the one holding the umbrella.

Charlie already knows the key will fit the back door to his study; the one that leads directly into the lane-way where Old Man Branch parks his abused old Volvo; the door that hasn't been used for nearly two years—since he lost his key case on a trip. The room will contain the box. The box will contain…

"I'M BACK."

"How did it go?"

"Nothing new."

"Charlie, tell me how it went. What did he say?"

"June, it's not digitally timed. There is no countdown, dammit. What? Every time I see the doctor do you think he's going to say, 'Well, Charlie, you're down to two weeks, six hours and forty seven minutes—don't bother making an appointment for next month, you'll be dead'?"

"I'm sorry, Charlie. Really, I'm sorry—I'm so sorry—" The tears are gathering in her eyes again. She gives his arm a compassionate squeeze. She's been getting a lot of practice at compassionate squeezing. She's getting much too good at it.

"June, it's not digitally timed. Do you think he says, 'Charlie, you're down to two weeks, six hours and forty seven minutes—don't make an appointment for next month, you'll be dead'?"

"Hey, come on, look at it this way, everybody dies eventually, I just face less uncertainty about when it's going to happen than most people. I, uh, bought a new lamp for the upstairs hall."

"I wish you hadn't."

"Hadn't what?"

"Charlie—" She cuts herself short and then sighs and drops her head, shaking it slowly from side to side. "Are you going into that room again?" She forces the words around the lump in her throat.

"My study? Yes."

"What do you keep in there?"

"You'll find out when I'm dead."

"Dammit, Charlie!" She is beginning to cry in earnest—the angry tears, not the sorrowful ones, not the frustrated ones. The angry tears are smaller, their crying silent.

mean. They wheeled him out half an hour later. The woman, his dark companion, followed him out.

"HEY, JOE!" IT'S ME, CALLING OUT ACROSS THE WARD. It's midnight. Even Reg is asleep. The only sound, apart from me calling out, is coming from Len. He's in agony. Only instead of screaming as he ought to, he's moaning. It's a low moan; he's suppressing his agony. He's trying so hard to make this experiment succeed—too hard, if you ask me.

Joe agrees with me. We've got to do something about Len, or he'll be dead by morning. Slowly, painfully, I get out of bed. I hobble over to Len's bed. Christ, he's green! In the faint night light of the ward he's green. He's trembling all over. And moaning. A low moan that seems to come from somewhere deep inside him. But it's his face that's worst of all. That horrible green! He seems to see me. He's still semiconscious. His hand goes out, trembling wildly, reaching for his glass. He's still trying to keep up those half-hour drinks!

I take the glass and jug away. Then I set off to find a nurse. Before I reach the door, Len gives up. He can't suppress his agony any more. He lets it out. He screams. He screams and screams. I'll never forget it. I look back at his contorted green face, the mouth wide open, screaming. Shriek after shriek. A nurse rushes past me. She tries to pacify him but he won't be pacified. He can't be pacified. He screams and screams. The problem is, there's no doctor available until the morning to authorize stopping the experiment.

Until the morning? He'll be dead by then!

There's a little conference amongst the nurses, an urgent telephone call, while Len's screams pierce the air. Just hold up the receiver, let whomever's there listen to Len directly!

Finally they get their authorization. They draw the curtain round. We all wait, breathless, while the tube is inserted. The screaming stops. The moaning dies down. It's so quiet. Then we hear the urine trickling out into the pot. Ethereal music! We can breathe again. Len's going to be all right. I picture him slowly changing color as his pain subsides. Green first, then orange, yellow, white, and finally pink, his normal healthy pink. When they draw back the curtain there he is. Len! His normal healthy pink! He smiles. Yes! Straight-away a smile! It's incredible. He'll be all right now.

Only I'm afraid it's back to the drawing board for Len. Smile while you can, Len. Even now that plumber doctor of yours is dreaming up some new scheme to clear that blockage.

VERONICA'S COME TO VISIT ME. SHE'S WEARING A very short skirt, revealing her long bare legs. Right away I start to tell her how, lying here, I've realized how much I love her, how I've always loved her only I didn't realize it until now, how I'm going to stop being jealous—you know, my speech!

Veronica smiles. She drew her chair nearer while I was speaking. Then she leans close to me, across the bed. I think she's going to kiss me, you know, out of gratitude. But she whispers in my ear, "Oh, Chris, do shut up! If anyone overhears, they'll have you locked up. You're raving! You've been lying here too long, all on your own. I know what you need."

She stands up, draws the curtain round the bed, throws back the blankets, and lifts my chemise. From somewhere beyond the cotton wool and plasters my penis slowly rises. Veronica slips off her knickers and jumps onto me. It hurts. Christ it hurts! But I love it! When it's over, she tosses back her hair, smiling down at me, her eyes flashing. I draw her down and kiss her. Then we hear Joe calling out from beyond the curtain. "Hey Chris, what's going on?" Veronica starts to giggle.

Suddenly, I feel a pain somewhere down there. What's happening? Veronica gets off. There's blood everywhere! On her skirt. On me. All over me! The dressing's been torn off. The stitches have come undone. There's blood pouring from the open wound! Veronica snatches up her knickers and presses them firmly against the wound, squeezing the edges together to stop the bleeding. She's laughing so much, tears are streaming down her face. I'm laughing too, even though it hurts. My eyes are streaming too. Everything looks red through my tears. There's blood everywhere. It's no use. We can't stop it. We'll have to call for help.

"Nurse," we cry. "Nurse!"

CHRIS VILLARS

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to that table. Unaided. It's part of the physiotherapy. No excuses allowed!

Our movements are excruciatingly slow, as if filmed in slow motion, with a sudden jerk every now and then—a lurch, a scream. We all try our best, but accidents can't be avoided. Your leg suddenly slips over the side of the bed, tearing at your wound. Trying to stand up, you lose control and topple over, clutching at the blankets to check your fall. Once you're down, there's no way you can get up. It's all fours from then on, doggie fashion! Thus did we all hobble and limp and crawl to our places at the table.

It takes a good fifteen minutes for us all to assemble. Len comes trailing his plastic tube, which in turn trails a thin trickle of urine, marking his meandering course. Usually a nurse brought over his pot, too, but sometimes she forgot. When this happened a pool of urine would slowly expand under his chair as we ate. Reg comes chattering incessantly. And Joe comes slowly, quietly, slowest of us all, always last to arrive. Then the meal can begin.

If there is soup, I keep my eye on Reg. I think he is allergic to soup. Watch him now: He's got a large spoonful. He's raising it carefully to his lips. Watch its slow ascent. It's just reached his lower lip. It's almost there. Suddenly he sneezes. Soup flies everywhere! This occurred, on average, one spoonful in three. You could get pretty messy some days when there was soup.

I've just realized that we're all sitting down at this table, all seven of us, including Joe. How does he do it with that wound of his? Then I notice that his elbows are propped up on the table each side of his plate. I take a peek under the table. He hasn't got a chair at all! He's just crouching there, resting on his elbows. Poor Joe. How he managed to keep that up through all those painfully slow meals I'll never know.

LEN HASN'T BEEN MAKING MUCH PROGRESS. THAT tube of his has been in and out a dozen times but still he's got his blockage. Now one of the doctors has had a bright idea. I overheard him giving Len instructions. On the cupboard by his bed is a jug of water and a glass. Every half hour, the doctor says, he's to drink half a glass of water. Until when? Until the blockage is cleared.

Of course! Why didn't somebody think of it before! I think that doctor must have been a plumber before. Your drain's blocked, what do you do? Turn on all your taps, build up a head of water, try to force it through. Sometimes it works—with drains. It looked to me like the same principles were being applied here. Len's tubes are blocked, build up the pressure, something must give. Something!

I was amazed at the trusting way Len accepted this regime. It sounded like kill or cure to me. A desperate remedy! The tube was removed. It was nine o'clock. He took his first drink. It's midday now. He's been religiously taking his half glass every half hour. He says he feels uncomfortable. That's all. He's confident this new idea of the doctor's will do the trick.

ABSENCE, THEY SAY, MAKES THE HEART GROW fonder. I always thought that was wrong. Absence, I thought, inclines you to forget. I see now there can be exceptions, special cases, where absence does intensify your feelings. Like with Veronica, for instance. It's been a week now since I walked out on her. I can't get her out of my mind. I'm thinking about her all the time. Why hasn't she come to see me? I know I told her not to, but if she loved me she'd come anyway! I've decided to tell

If there is soup, I keep my eye on Reg. I think he is allergic to soup. He raises it carefully, almost to his lips, then he sneezes. Soup flies everywhere!

her I love her; I don't think I ever told her before. I'll tell her I won't be jealous in the future. I'll tell her my love for her is not diminished if she has other friends, other lovers even. I'm getting ready to make up with her; I've got my speech prepared.

SIX O'CLOCK. TEA TIME. SIX OF US AT TABLE. LEN'S suffering. He can't make it to the table. I look back at him sitting in his bed. He's paler, much paler. The pain he must be suffering! I see him reach out for his six o'clock drink. It's heroic! Or stupid.

While I'm turned around looking back at Len a sudden urgent shout of "Nurse!" rings out from the other end of the ward, the old guy's bed. His companion has jumped to her feet. "Nurse! Nurse!" She's frantic. It seems there's something wrong with his drip. We all turn and look. Hey! She's right! That can't be right! Instead of the usual clear liquid in the bottle and tube, it's red, dark red, creeping up the tube into the bottom of the bottle. It must be his blood flowing back up the tube.

"Nurse! Nurse!" We all join in, make as much noise as we can. It can't be right, his blood flowing back up the tube like that. The nurse comes. The curtain is drawn round his bed. The doctor comes. Everyone falls silent, except Reg. He starts chattering away to himself, about that fire up on the roof, about how he'd told them, about how they wouldn't listen, about how he knew there'd be casualties, he'd warned them, now perhaps they'd take him seriously. All the rest of us were silent but we were thinking the same thing. That the old guy was dead, I

heard him telling the doctor all about it, how there was this fire up on the roof, flames lighting up all the sky. How did he know? the doctor wanted to know. He'd been up there, that's how. Last night. He'd seen it. The doctor said he must have been dreaming. But no, he was adamant. He'd been there. He'd seen it. The flames had scorched his pajamas.

"Look!" He showed some brown marks on his trousers and top. I know it seems incredible, but they certainly looked like scorch marks.

JOE. POOR JOE. IT'S THREE O'CLOCK, JOE. THE NURSE is coming for you.

Look at him over there, lying on his side, pretending to sleep.

Joe. It's three o'clock, Joe.

The nurse is here. She helps him off the bed. Slowly they make their way to the examination room. It takes several minutes, several slow minutes, their shuffling journey. Total silence descends on the ward. It's always the same at three o'clock, total silence as Joe is led away. Today I watch the sunlight streaking in through the windows, a million specks of dust drifting in each silent beam.

Then it comes. The scream. Joe's scream. It flies through the ward like a knife. They're changing the dressing of the wound on his bottom. For some reason it has to be left open, that wound. Each day at three they remove the light dressing to reveal the curious wound. Five cuts they made, a five-pointed star. For some reason they haven't sewn it up yet. It has to be left open, that horrid five-pointed star, its red edges flaring with pain. They put some ointment on it. They touch it. Joe screams, the scream flying through the ward like a knife, cutting us all as it passes. Poor Joe.

Here he, comes shuffling back again. The nurse lays him on his side. He's trembling all over. Poor Joe. You can rest now, Joe. The agony's over. Until tomorrow.

TOM CAME AGAIN LAST NIGHT. HE SAYS THERE'S nothing going on between Veronica and Peter. He says I've no reason to be jealous. Maybe he's right—but then why am I so jealous? I only have to see Veronica talking to someone else and straight away I get suspicious. Pretty soon I'm hopping mad. It happens every time. What's the matter with me?

AN OLD GUY'S JUST COME IN. THEY'VE PUT HIM IN THE bed on the far left opposite me. He's asleep propped up on his pillows. He's got a drip. Just back from an operation, I suppose. There's someone with him, a dark form huddled in the shadows by his bed. A woman I think, holding his hand on the bedspread.

Until now, the bed on my right has been unoccupied, a pure white sacrificial slab waiting for a victim. That victim turned out to be Len. Len arrived with a real problem: He was having trouble pissing. Sometimes he could and sometimes he couldn't. When he couldn't, the pressure built up inside, causing much pain until (blessed relief!) he pissed again.

The trouble was, Len's problem was getting worse. The times when he could were getting shorter, and the times when he couldn't, longer. It was some kind of growth or blockage, interfering with his tubes.

Soon after his arrival, the crisis came: He stopped altogether. He suffered dreadfully that first time. We all felt for him. Though the doctors certainly had a point: A few more minutes, they said, and it might break through again. When, after many earnest conferences, even they were convinced this was not to be, they inserted a tube, a narrow polyethylene tube, up his penis. I don't know how far they had to push it before it broke through, but when it did Len's piss came trickling out into a pot at the side of his bed.

After that they were forever experimenting, carting him off for endless tests, trying one drug after another. I lost count of the number of times that tube was removed to see if he was cured, then reinserted when he could stand the agony no longer. They always let him have the tube at night so he could sleep peacefully. Many nights I lay awake listening, in the quiet periods when Reg wasn't raving, to the irregular drips and trickles that fell into the pot from Len's tube.

JUST SUPPOSE VERONICA DOES FANCY PETER. HOW does that affect her relationship with me? Does it mean she doesn't love me? Is that what I want, then? That above all, she should love me? It seems I need to believe in her love, yet the slightest thing makes me doubt it.

Tom says she does love me. He says it's *me* that's uncommitted and changeable. He says that if she loves me, it's not likely her feelings will change every time she meets another man. Perhaps I should put my trust in Tom's judgment and give up my own. He seems to understand these things much better than me.

IT'S MEAL TIME. THIS HAPPENS IN MORE OR LESS THE same way three times a day. We aren't allowed to eat in our beds. The nurses set up a long table in the middle of the ward. Everyone who's able — in other words, all of us except that old guy at the end—has to get to that table to eat.

Picture the scene: The table is set up. The food trolley has arrived. The exodus begins. The slow, painful exodus. In one place or another we all have our wounds. To one degree or another we're all in pain. We all have to get

S i c k

CHRIS VILLARS

A recent spate of TV shows and movies show how exciting hospitals can be. Sure… for the doctors.

WE WERE DRINKING IN THE STARS—THAT WAS our name for the place, on account of the tiny fairy lights strung across the ceiling. I was feeling pretty low. I'd split with Veronica a few days before. Naturally, I was feeling cut up about it. On the way home I began to feel ill—Tom had to hold me up. I must have been a dead weight. I just wanted to lie down right there in the street.

I had this pain, somewhere down below my stomach. Then it seemed like a great black curtain came down over me. I passed out. When I woke up, I was here. The doctors were conferring. They decided to operate.

Disposition of the ward, brief description: Eight beds, four along each side of a short rectangle; nurses' table at one end, my left, entrance doors behind; toilets and examination room at the other end, my right; single-storied building, flat roof, interior painted pale yellow.

Joe wants to know what I'm writing. "What's that you're writing?" he calls from his bed opposite. What shall I tell him? That I'm writing down the events in this hospital, setting it all down just as it happens? He's in here; I'll make him famous! On reflection I tell him I'm writing a letter to my girlfriend Veronica. After all, he may not like what I've written. He may not want his secrets disclosed.

They've given me a chemise to wear. It's much too short; it stops well above my knees. I'm sure I heard the others sniggering just now as I went to the loo. Suddenly a nurse arrives and draws the curtain around my bed. She's come to shave me. At first I misunderstand, then I realize—it's my penis she's come to shave! She lifts my chemise. There it is, sad little thing. Christ! Look at the size of those scissors! I hope she knows what she's doing.

Carefully she snips the hair away. Gently she lifts the testicles to get the hair underneath. She's very thorough. And very gentle. Too gentle! She's wearing plastic gloves, but still her touch feels gentle. It was okay until she started to use the shaver, that soft vibration. It started to grow. I just couldn't help it. When she saw what was happening she speeded up. She nicked me once or twice but got finished really quick. In the end it was fully erect. I don't know who was redder; she, me, or it! Surely you'd think they'd get a male nurse to do these things.

I WAS CONSCIOUS DURING THE OPERATION. Honestly. Of course, they put me out in the usual way. I was asleep before I could count to—well, I can't even remember what number. But somehow I was conscious of the operation itself. I could see the surgeon. The whole time, he was explaining what he was doing to someone I couldn't see. It wasn't an out-of-body experience—I was right in here the whole time, where I usually am. I could just make out the surgeon working away down there and not much else.

Suddenly a nurse arrives and draws the curtain around my bed. She's come to shave me. At first I misunderstand, then I realize—it's my penis she's come to shave!

I could feel the cuts. They weren't painful. It was like I'd had some local anesthetic. The knife would cut, blood would run out; then another cut, and another, but no pain. At one point the surgeon held up something he'd cut away, an ugly little mass, dripping blood. I saw it again later. Pickled, in a little glass jar! The doctor showed it to me. They'd preserved it! Apparently it was a perfect specimen.

TOM BROUGHT ME A NOTE FROM VERONICA. SHE SAYS she's sorry to hear what's happened. She wants to know if she can visit me. I told him to tell her no. I couldn't face her. This enforced separation should do us good, give us time to make up our minds whether we want to go on or not. Just what is going on between her and Peter anyway? Why does he keep cropping up if it's me she wants? That night I found them together in our flat was more than a little suspicious.

Okay, I admit it, I'm jealous. But I seem to have reason to be.

REG IS IN THE BED ON MY LEFT. I NEVER FOUND OUT what he was in for. One thing I did find out—he talks to himself. It's a bit disconcerting until you get used to it, him suddenly starting up out of nowhere, top of his voice, any old subject. It's worst at night.

Take last night for example. I was asleep. Suddenly: "Fire! Fire!" It was Reg shouting at the top of his voice. "Everybody out! Everybody out! Fire!" I vaguely remember him trying to get up out of bed, to lead us all to safety, I suppose. A nurse was struggling to restrain him. Then I must have fallen asleep again. In the morning I

WHILE CURTIS AND DIANA TRACE CORONARY arteries and explore the atriums and ventricles, Victoria shifts up, next to the table. Ungloved, her fingers momentarily reach out, then pull back to grip the edge of her jumper. Odd thoughts tumble in her mind.

We are this woman's future, and she has seen it. She's immortal through us. Her flesh will become our knowledge.

Victoria lays her naked hand on the arm of the cadaver. She feels her body heat soaking down into the skin.

The whole is greater than…

She lifts her hand, then replaces it, giving the waxy surface a small pat.

Diana glimpses her movement and turns. "Vicky! Put on some gloves first!"

"Well, Vick," says Curtis. "If you can do that with the bloody thing, get around here now and muck in with the rest of us."

ALTHOUGH ROB, GILBERT AND MANDY SIT THEMselves next to Victoria in the lecture theater, she is invisible to them.

"…stuffed up. I fuckin' cut the four, uh… arteries—"

"The pulmonary veins," Mandy corrects him wearily.

"Yeah. I cut 'em so close to the… um—"

"Pericardial sac."

"Yeah. So close I wrecked the ventricle—"

"Atrium. Well, Gil, maybe you're just not going to be a surgeon."

"Maybe I'm not going to be a doctor," he sulked. "What about your table?" Hoping for some evidence of an equivalent bungle.

"Fine," says Diana. "Very smooth. Very interesting, especially the—"

Gilbert immediately loses interest. "Footy tomorrow, Robbo?"

Rob stops exploring his nostril. "Wha…?" He farts.

THE GLOVES ARE THE COLOR THAT SHE IMAGINES dead flesh would be like. They simultaneously numb her hands and heighten the sensitive tingling of her nerve endings inside the latex.

She wears a smear of Vicks Vaporub on her top lip. In future years she will never be able to bring herself to wipe it on her children's chests.

The trunk before her is mostly a damp cave; its major contents are now stored elsewhere. Her protected hand, still spread, enters the cavity.

"You got a shitload of catching up to do, Vick. But, y'know, welcome to tactile city."

"You could spend some extra time and study her other parts out of the fridge-boxes," says Diana.

"Yeah—you heard how tough the prof was on getting the right bits back together for when they're buried."

Curtis and Diana have become a slick dissecting team. Indeed, they have become lovers.

"The sex isn't the main thing," Diana had said yesterday in the cafeteria, laughing. "But maybe I'll feel like it more after we get through this part of Anatomy."

VICTORIA GENTLY TRACES THE TWIN PATHS OF THE woman's ridged trachea, through which a billion breaths once passed to the now-absent lungs. She seeks and studies the lymph nodes and tracheal rings. Then she incises the bronchus and finds the carina.

…Greater than the sum of the parts.

THE ARMS ARE STILL HER MOTHER'S. THEY WILL always be.

She is glad of it now: they have protected her and kept her human. Many of her fellows would have to struggle for years to regain that. Some would not succeed. (It is Rob who is reprimanded for putting his bare finger up his cadaver's aortic arch and making choking sounds, to amuse his mates. But it is Gilbert who eventually quits the course.)

Victoria's experience of dissection becomes an act of transformation and reverence, not one of disjunction and dehumanization. She thinks she might manage to become a good doctor. The woman's arms gesture in welcome.

SHOPPING, VICTORIA TRIES ON A DARK KNEE-LENGTH winter coat, which suits her. She buys it.

Her mother praises her choice, and they continue down the street arm-in-arm. The sun is shining, but there is a chill breeze that brings with it a rich, fecal flavor, a garbage smell that has swept out of an alley. Victoria pauses to inhale and take the human odor into herself.

Her mother pats her understandingly. But, of course, she does not understand at all.

STEPHEN LAWRENCE

Teaches English and writing in Australia, and writes a column for the Adelaide Review. *His collection of poems is* Her Mother's Arms *(Wakefield Press, 1997).*

"No. No point. It's not that we're close or anything. I don't even like her very much." Victoria begins to cry.

CURTIS APPLIES THE HANDSAW WITH VIGOR AND precision, cutting through ribs two through six on either side of the sternum, as required. He removes the chest wall. They all examine the thoracic cavity and the strange lobes filling it.

"Amazing texture." After the removal procedure Curtis, with dangerous pressure, squeezes one of the dark gray spongy masses.

"Look at the color. A smoker," says Diana.

"Or just fallout from city living," adds Curtis competitively. He now dominates the process and controls the instruments. Diana holds the anatomy book. Victoria is in charge of written observations.

THE PROFESSOR ARRIVES AND LEANS ON ONE OF THE blocks at the edge of the stainless steel table. He queries the absence of disposable gloves on Victoria, then addresses her, gentle and admonishing:

"…first time, but… best practical analysis… hands-on study… critical to… overcomes this reluctance… more familiar with the body… touch it, palpate… professional versus a lay… be ready to make the move into the ward later on… so…"

THEY ARE AN ELITE. IN WHITE COATS, THEY SWEEP through the main library when in need of non-technical volumes. They cross open spaces between buildings, wide flaps opening in the breeze, feeling like angels or superheroes or camp commandants. At times they deign to lunch in the general refectory, some affecting soulfulness and abstraction, some the rushed-and-harassed aura of a surgeon in an emergency; strange stains mark their white garb. They act out—often in parody—their future profession and fit themselves into it.

They have seen and touched and explored things others have not. The places they have visited, the objects they have laid bare, set them apart; they cannot be the same people they were. They are not the same as others.

For some this is a horrible revelation.

Victoria sees the changes occurring around her. It is like an epidemic whose early symptoms are x-ray vision and prurient arrogance. She knows she also has the virus but is kept aloof from the experience. If she succumbs, if she touches the dead woman too soon, she will be giving away something of herself. Her mother's human arms flank the corpse, shielding her, urging: "Wait. Wait for the right time."

VICTORIA DISCREETLY CONFINES HERSELF TO THE medical-center cafeteria for her meals. She eats a salad sandwich, taking sips from a carton of unsweetened lemon juice. Diana has cheese and savory biscuits.

"Do you want to talk about this problem with your mother yet?"

"It's not a problem with my mother. It's not a problem. I'm not the only one just observing."

"Er… you nearly are." Diana puts a hand on her shoulder in a gesture of concern. She has never touched Victoria before.

Victoria decides to treat it with humor, pointedly sniffing Diana's hand as she lifts it off and drops it away from her.

Diana lets her arm flop to the tabletop. "All right, all right," she laughs. "Ya can't get the smell off, can you? I wash them six times a day."

A group of fellow students approach the table.

"Oh no—Rob and Gil are with Mandy. I used to think Gil was all right, but he's a perv," says Diana, grinning. "At least I don't think he looks at my breasts anymore if I'm wearing something low-cut."

The threesome arrive noisily. Gil mock-throttles Robert, then picks at something on his forehead. "What's this? Basal cell carcinoma, I reckon. Lemme pull it off for you before it kills ya."

"You're fucked. I'm livin' forever, man."

"Sure—just like the stiffs, right?"

"Sorry," says Mandy to the two women. "They just followed me."

"You gonna give your body to medical science, Di?" bullies Gilbert, quickly reaching over and tousling her hair.

"Not to be fondled by someone like you."

"Hey—they *want* to be touched. That's why they do it. Gives 'em a thrill in the afterlife."

"Does it give you a thrill?"

Gil blinks, not expecting such a jibe from a woman. The surprise draws something unexpected from him. He says in a slightly lower voice: "Nah—still scares the shit out of me."

"…CUT ACROSS THE ASCENDING AORTA… transect… lift it by its apex… remove… use blunt forceps for the vessels… inspect the isolated heart…"

HER MOTHER AVOIDS KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT Victoria does during the day. It is enough to be able to say to her own friends and relatives that "Victoria is doing Medicine."

In gratitude for the status it affords her (and in compensation for her discretional ignorance), she gives her daughter a car and a clothes account.

Victoria understands her mother's limitations, and forgives her.

Her Mother's Arms

STEPHEN LAWRENCE

"It familiarizes the heart to a kind of necessary inhumanity."
—William Hunter

IT'S LIGHT: WHITE AND BLUE. ROLLS… IT ROLLS UP, and eye-ache fades. I sigh amid deep, muffled brown. Arm-cradle tastes pink and creamy.

Smells, tastes of me.

Is me.

Me.

"NO, VICTORIA!"

The handprint on the side of her thigh remains there all her life. It is impressed on her mind like blown paint on a cave wall.

SHE SQUASHES HERSELF BACK AGAINST A WALL OF body warmth. The arms come down over her, join in a V at her tummy. Victoria holds them like seat-belt straps. She pokes out her tongue at the girl that has bullied her.

"HEY—YOU'RE INVADING MY PERSONAL SPACE, Diana," says Mandy, in the biology lab. She whips a thin cord of intestine at her friend, out of the freshly dissected rat splayed and pinned between them. At the next table, it catches Victoria on the cheek. Squeals of laughter.

WHEN SHE IS ACCEPTED INTO MEDICINE, HER MOTHER gives her a rare hug. The maroon coat tickles Victoria's cheek.

"Oh, Vicky!" Over her shoulders go her forearms, and they each give two thrilled pats in the midpoint of her dorsal region.

"…CORE OF THE STUDY OF ANATOMY; THERE IS NO substitute… you should be relaxed, but this is a scientific investigation… respect and dignity. No improper… several weeks' focus is the trunk: thorax, abdomen… lucky enough to have only three per cadaver… start, isolate… identify with special attention to… stab incisions, then… separate… pull away along… feel…"

CURTIS WEARS A CREAMY MUSTACHE.

"Vicks, ladies?"

Diana waves away the squat jar.

"Maybe soon," says Victoria, flexing her gloved hand, feeling prepared but still unable to fit her new role snugly around herself.

Curtis pulls down the sheet with a flourish that he immediately regrets.

A gray, bald woman lies there, waiting like a pharaoh for her remains to be transmuted into knowledge.

"Her…her skin! It's like…waxy…y'know, sheep brains… Like… Uh… If, if I, um," he babbles. "I do the sawing thing, later on—y'know, the cutting through ribs, manubrium, xiphisternal joint, and that. The hard stuff. And you—" he reaches shakily for a scalpel and hands it to Diana "—you do the opening body cavity thing. Right? That'd be fair. Right?"

Disgusted, Diana lowers the blade towards the crumpled surface of the corpse. She slows approaching the skin of the chest, pressing through a force-field like a cushion of air blowing from all the pores.

She unzips the flesh's coat. Diana has cut too deep, through the superficial fascia, and brown muscular tissue becomes visible where the subcutaneous fat is thinnest. The smell is sweet—like cinnamon and fresh farts.

Victoria follows its route with her eyes and then sees the arms. She looks and looks. It's her mother there.

As she progresses, being more careful to apply traction, a trickle of formalin creeps around the flattened outcrop of breast and down the dead woman's side. Victoria follows its route with her eyes and then sees the arms. She looks and looks. It's her mother there.

"Cut further past the acromion this time."

"No, there's enough to fold—unless *you* want to do it."

"Uh, what about Vick? Paying attention there?"

"We've got enough skin off this side now, I think. Vicky?"

The corn color of the fine down on the forearm, the arrangement of each mole, the prominent wrist bones, slightly swollen first finger-joints, two little creases above her rough elbows. "It's, uh… It's, uh…" Victoria keeps staring. She is not ignoring her fellow students' queries. Indeed, she tries to answer them. She searches for a path around her impossible conclusion, looking for more information, a detail that would deny the evidence of her eyes. There is nothing. The arms belong to her mother.

Victoria takes a step back as if gently shoved, and begins to pull off her gloves. "I'll watch for now." Her peers give her 'I understand' messages, then return to their task.

SHE CONFIDES IN DIANA.

"But your mum's alive. You still *live* with her. Like, she's in really good health. Have you told her?"

Everybody moved outside into the sunshine—except for Spung, who tapped Spackles on the shoulder and kept him from lifting his Winchester.

"All right," Spung growled. "It's time I got paid. When do I get muh money?"

"You'll know when the time's right," Spackles replied. "Follow me."

He stalked through the house and out the front door, and Spung followed. The entire town seemed to have assembled before Trent House. To one side, Trent's daughter was showing her card-shuffling tricks to a group of awestruck cowpokes. Directly in front of Spung, Rhododendron the Happy Horse was jumping up and down on a mangled scarecrow (borrowed from a nearby farm) as the crowd clapped and laughed its approval. Spung's jaw dropped when the mare looked to Clem for applause. It dropped even further when Clem blew her a kiss and she neighed ecstatically.

"Rhododendron! Sit!" Spung yelled. The horse abruptly fell back on her rump, her forelegs propped up in front of her and her hind legs skewed at impossible angles.

Spung stuck a piece of tin in his mouth and began grinding away at it. "Whut the hell are you doin' with muh horse?" he demanded.

The muscular transvestite rubbed his chin. "Just doin' her old circus act," he said. "Y'see, there was this routine where a villain would threaten a fair damsel in distress. But before he could visit his evil designs upon her maidenly flesh, Rhododendron would come to the rescue an' stomp that evildoer into the ground. It was always a real crowd-pleaser."

Spung spat the chewed-up ball of tin into a nearby picnic basket. "And how d'you know so damn much about all thet?" he said.

"Simple." Clem looked at him. "I was the Bearded Lady."

"Holdit!" Spung sputtered. "You was in thet pony show with—"

"That's right!" Clem said. "Freckles the Clown was my brother! *I* hired you to kill Trent—and then get my revenge!"

Before Spung could react, Clem pointed at him and yelled, "Stomp that villain!" to the horse. Within a cat's heartbeat, the animal was upon Spung, pounding him mercilessly with her front hooves, and she didn't stop until his pulped flesh was thoroughly mixed into the dust and dirt.

The crowd gasped. "Say, that was pretty nifty," said one voice.

"Do that again!" said another.

"That man's rights have been violated!" cried a third.

Trent's daughter ran up and embraced Rhododendron. "Oh, what a nice horsie!" she cooed. "I love you, horsie!" The mare cocked her head and looked upon Miss Trent with all the horse love she could muster.

Clem planted a kiss on the horse's nose. "C'mon, darlin'," he said. "Let's show them how you dance the mambo."

MARK STEVEN LONG

Is a writer and editor from New York City. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1993 for his short story "The Nutbob Stories." His work has appeared in National Lampoon, Reed, Paragraph, Wax, Fiction Forum, *and the online zine* THOTH. *This is his second appearance in* InterText. *The first chapter from his novel-in-progress, "Punchy Fights For His Country," can be found on the PureFiction web site at <http://www.purefiction.com/>.*

Without taking his eyes off Spung, he cocked his head toward a large door behind him. "Morgo!" he called out. "Step out here, please."

The large door opened with a sickening creak. Into the room stepped the biggest man Spung had ever seen, bigger even than Wallem Ford, the epileptic logger of the Oregon wilds. He had to double over and turn sideways to get through the door Spung had thought was so large. When he straightened up, it was as if a smoldering volcano had suddenly centered itself in the room.

"Albert Spung," chortled Trent, "allow me to introduce Harold Morgo—my champion!"

Spung stared up at a cement block of a face topped by stubbled hair and supported by a thick, bullish neck. Eyes of steel-bolt blue bore into Spung, looked him up and down as if their owner were sizing a hunk of fresh meat. His torso served as solid wrapping for a continent of massed, muscled flesh. Mighty-thewed arms hovered precariously at his sides; legs of untold power stood astride the earth, balancing it and holding it in its orbit.

The man-mountain drew a deep, terrifying breath and expelled it in Spung's direction. The blast threatened to rip Spung's hair from his head. He tensed and waited for the hulking brute's inevitable threats.

"Mr. Spung?" the brute said in a surprisingly cultured tone.

Spung arched an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"I must say, sir, that this is a genuine pleasure." Morgo held out a large, meaty hand, which Spung carefully shook. "I have always wanted to meet a gunfighter of your stature—and if I may say so, Mr. Spung, you occupy the highest echelon of those artists who practice this noble craft."

"Whut?" said Spung, confused.

"Excuse me," Trent said from behind his desk, "but you two should be trying to kill each other."

"With all due respect, Mr. Trent," Morgo said, bowing to the Old Man, "it is a rare occasion indeed when I am able to 'talk shop,' so to speak, with a colleague—especially one of worthy note such as Mr. Spung." He patted Spung respectfully on the shoulder, and Spung could hear his collarbone creak under the strain.

"In fact," Morgo continued, "Horace Smeld of the *New York Tribune* once called Mr. Spung's draw, quote, 'A frontier ballet which melds flesh and instinct in one brief, unforgettable dissiliency of steel and fire.' He was writing, of course, of Mr. Spung's now-legendary circus showdown—"

Spung suddenly whipped the Colt from behind his back and shot Morgo in the left eye. The giant's head jerked back, then forward. His good eye fixed itself on Spung.

"Astonishing," he croaked, then toppled. But he could not fall to the floor because of his massive size. His head struck the rear wall and his neck bent inward, lodging it in place; his feet dug into the now-splintered floor. Spung snickered as he looked at the corpse, now jammed tightly between wall and floor.

Trent slowly stood, a broad smile pasted on his face. "That wasn't exactly according to Hoyle, was it?" he said in a high-pitched voice. "I was expecting more of a… gunfight. A proper showdown."

"Horace Smeld of the *New York Tribune* once called Mr. Spung's draw, quote, 'A frontier ballet which melds flesh and instinct in one brief, unforgettable dissiliency of steel and fire.' "

Spung holstered his Colt and casually drew one of his six-shooters. "'Tweren't no gunfight," he said. "Just part o' muh job." He indicated Morgo's cigar-store-Indian-like cadaver. "Usedta be part o' *his* job. Showdown's got nuthin' t'do with it."

"Well," said Trent, "so much for your 'frontier ballet.' *A-henh.*"

"Yup," said Spung, displaying his teeth in a final, terrible smile. "So much." With that, he emptied his iron into Trent. As he detested slow motion, it was over in an instant. He kicked the scrawny body to make sure all the life had been taken out of it.

"Daddy? I heard a noise and—oh!"

Spung turned and saw a golden-haired woman, smartly dressed in a cowhide vest, workshirt, and faded dungarees. Her light blue eyes danced from Spung over to Morgo, then to what she could see of the Old Man behind the desk. "You've killed Daddy!" she squealed.

A commotion sounded outside the door. It flew open and a crowd of townsfolk spilled into the room, led by Spackles and Clem, who was now carelessly attired in a housecoat and jodhpurs. "'We were at the saloon in town,'" Spung carefully recited to Trent's daughter, "and we heard a noise.'" He threw a wink in Spung's direction.

"This man shot my father," Trent's daughter said, pointing at Spung.

"Oh, Dearie Mae," Spackles went on. "That is truly awful. Does this mean you'll sell us our homes?"

The woman shrugged. "Okay," she said. "It was Daddy who wanted to own everything. I just wanted to move to Reno and deal blackjack. Now I can!" she added, brightening.

The gunfighter grinned, for this was the kind of frontier logic that appealed to him. "I like yore style, kid," he said. "Whut kin I do fer ya?"

"I'm Spackles Genofsky," said the lean man, "and this here is Clem Velasquez." He indicated his partner.

"Charmed," Clem rumbled, his dress rustling.

"We was sent to fetch you by the gent what hired you," Spackles said. "He told me to mention the twenty sheep with warts."

At the word "twenty," they began hearing a steady *clop clop clop* from outside. Rhododendron the Happy Horse, following her circus training, was counting to twenty by pawing the ground with her front hoof.

Spung rubbed his chin as he ruminated. "Twenty sheep with warts" referred to an incident known only to him and the man who hired him. Spung had never met the man; a go-between had arranged everything in advance. "Let's go outside," he said. "I wanna shut thet horse up."

He followed Spackles and Clem out into the street. Rhododendron had worked herself loose from the hitching post and was just finishing her count as a small, appreciative audience boisterously counted along. As they applauded, she leaped up on her hind legs, shaking her head and grinning all the while.

"Rhododendron!" Spung called out. "Play dead!"

The mare instantly flopped over on her side in the filthy street, coating several bystanders with dirt. "She'll stay thet way 'til I say other," Spung told Spackles and Clem. "Now, when do I meet 'im?"

"You don't," Spackles replied. "Word's already spreadin' about you bein' in town."

"He's right," Clem said as he picked a burr from his dress. "Those two—" he nodded toward two cowboys hurriedly riding out of town, "—work for the Old Man."

"The Old Man," Spung repeated.

"Your victim!" Clem laughed.

"So now the Old Man'll know you're comin,' " Spackles said. "All the more reason to move now."

"I don't like this!" Spung thundered. "Things're movin' too fast!" Rhododendron snorted and wiggled an ear but didn't get up.

"You already got paid half," Spackles countered. "After you plug the Old Man, you get the rest. Simple as that. We got the money ready to give you. Take it or leave it."

Spung wordlessly checked his six-shooters, the Derringer in his sleeve, the Colt in the small of his back, and a .25 that he'd put down the front of his pants. "Let's go, then," he said. "Up, horse!"

Rhododendron leapt into the air, whinnying with the joy of life and unbridled love for her master. She danced a tiny jig before Spung managed to mount her. After a warning glare from him cut Clem's laugh off at the knees, they were on their way.

J. FORMALDEHYDE TRENT—THE "OLD MAN"—owned every piece of real estate in town. He wouldn't sell any of it to anyone for any amount of money, although he'd had plenty of offers. Instead, he rented out the land and the houses and the office buildings and the stables to the townsfolk. Everyone owed him rent on the first of the month, no exceptions. The Old Man never thought twice about evicting people who missed payment.

There wasn't a family or business that didn't have to move at least once every other year or so. The Old Man would raise the rent too high. Or he wanted to tear it down and put up a newer, bigger building in its place. There wasn't a day when someone in Temporary Town wasn't in the process of moving somewhere else.

Spackles related all this to Spung as they rode out to the Trent homestead. Spung was to kill Trent so all the Old Man's holdings would pass to his weak-willed daughter, who could be persuaded to sell them off to the townsfolk.

"We just want a permanent place to live," Spackles said. "What the hell's a man, after all, if he ain't got land to call his own?"

"A tenant," Spung growled. Rhododendron happily nickered for emphasis and executed a brief foxtrot.

After a few miles they stopped at the edge of a vast ranch. Verdant green pastures stretched to the horizon like a lazy tomcat whose grassy fur bristled in the breeze. A giant house slept peacefully in the distance beside a shaded tree.

"This's his spread," Spackles said. "You'll have to go up there alone—I can't be seen with you. If his daughter tumbles to me, that's it."

"You should be so lucky," Clem said haughtily.

"Whutever yew say," Spung said to Spackles. "Yore payin'."

He checked his six-shooters again, then prodded Rhododendron, who neighed a brief aria, and proceeded up the road to Trent House.

When they reached the small path leading to the house, Spung dismounted and sauntered up the path and through the front door. He strode through the great hall, his spurs ringing on the polished wooden floors.

Choosing a room at random, he stalked in and found an elderly man seated behind a large desk. The man wore a shabby three-piece gray suit with as much dignity as he could muster, even though his body had obviously shrunk over the years and was becoming lost inside it. The man looked up and said, "You must be Albert Spung."

"You must be the Old Man," Spung growled.

"I have the good fortune to be J. Formaldehyde Trent, if that's what you mean. Don't!—" the Old Man held up a hand as Spung reached for his irons, "—don't draw your weapons, Mr. Spung. If you make a further move in that direction, you will die where you stand."

Temporary Town

MARK STEVEN LONG

In which we learn the history of the West comprises swindlin', cussin', spittin', drawin' iron… and highly trained circus animals.

THERE WASN'T A MEANER GUNFIGHTER IN THE West than Albert Spung. His eyes were slits that opened onto hell; when he looked at you, you could swear Satan himself was about to possess your soul. His trigger fingers were callused serpents that sparked death whenever they coiled. Even his piss smelled strong—that's the kind of man he was.

The sun was beating down on him like a good woman with sense when he rode into Temporary Town. Nothing stirred. Even the tumbleweeds were flat, collapsed by the heat. The only thing moving was Spung's horse, a smoky brown mare. She danced through the dust like there was no heat at all, chittering away like a bird. Her name was Rhododendron the Happy Horse. She had once been a star attraction in a circus, until the owner gave her to Spung as payment for killing a clown.

Spung rode down the main street, looking for a place where he could wash the trail grit out of his mouth. He saw a sign that said DUSTY BOB'S SALOON—UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT, then stopped and hitched Rhododendron to the post in front of the place. The mare nuzzled him. "Git outta muh face, horse," he growled. Rhododendron shook her massive head, nickered happily, and smiled at him with horse love.

Spung went inside and approached the bar. "Whut'll you have, mister?" asked the bartender as he rubbed at a glass with a rusty cloth.

"Gimme a Gag Reflex," Spung muttered. As the barkeep went to work, Spung turned and surveyed the room.

A player piano, its insides obviously rearranged during a brawl, sputtered the same broken tune. Five trail-fresh cowboys sat around a large table in the center of the room playing cards.

"You got a three?" said one, a giant beefy mass of hair.

"Go fish!" shrilled the skinny cowpoke sitting across from him.

"Yew lyin' sack of shit!" snarled the first cowboy as he stood up and drew his gun.

The skinny cowboy went for his six-shooters, but he wasn't fast enough. The beefy man's hog-legs spit steel death, and the card cheat was thrown back into the wall by the force of his killer's brutal bullets. The giant then picked up the dead man's card hand and studied it. "Goddammit, I knowed he had a three."

He looked up and saw Spung. His leathery face slowly responded to the effects of recognition. "Hey, yore Albert Spung, the gunfighter!" he exclaimed. Turning to the others, he said, "Now boys, you are lookin' at the surliest gunfighter in the whole damn West. Why, I seen him gun down Freckles the Clown in cold blood!"

"Albert Spung?" The barkeep had finally returned with his drink. "The man with the strongest-smellin' piss in the Panhandle? Our outhouse is closed to *you,* mister."

The gunfighter whirled around and—faster than the flies could blink—fired three slugs into the barkeep's gut. The bartender dropped like a sack of old potatoes.

"Practicin' for the job, Mister Spung?"

Spung looked up and saw two men standing between the saloon's double doors. One was gaunt and sallow, and he struggled to hold his Winchester aloft. His partner was as solid as a granite wall, with the face of a petrified rock and limbs of John Henry steel. His bulging muscles strained the fabric of his pink taffeta dress.

"Albert Spung?" The barkeep had returned with his drink. "The man with the strongest-smellin' piss in the Panhandle? Our outhouse is closed to *you,* mister."

Spung spit into his Gag Reflex and quickly guzzled it down. Keeping his eyes on the two men, he banged his glass on the bartop and barked, "Refill." Since the bartender was still dead, one of the cowboys still living jumped up and scuttled behind the bar.

"So," he said to the two men, "if yore lookin' to get hitched, the preacher ain't here right now." He guffawed at his own joke.

"Yes I am," said a tiny voice from the other end of the room. Without looking, Spung casually grabbed a glass and threw it in the voice's direction. There was a crash and a gurgled moan.

"Watch yer mouth, Spung," the spare-looking rifleman said, "or I'll kick your ass and I'll kick it clean. Not on the left cheek or the right'un, either. Straight up the middle is where I'll aim."

"And then I'll pump buckshot into every God-damn hole in yore body," Spung said.

The scrawny man hugged his rifle and shifted from one foot to the other. "That ain't the point," he said. "I'm not talkin' about that at all. All I'm sayin' is, I'm fixin' to plant my foot up your pipe. I'm just gonna do it, an' it'll be done. Don't matter what happens after."

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"Temporary Town"
by MARK STEVEN LONG

NEW STORIES BY

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