

PERUSE ZINE

ISSUE 1

FEATURING

D C BOYLE

JANE CORBETT

HENG JONHO

YEN OOI

AND WITH

ANTHEIA

ANNE MCPHERSON ARTHURS

FAITH-ANNE BELL

MARIO DUARTE

DONALD REED GREENWOOD

NICHOLAS GROOMS

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NEL HERCHE

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BEGINNINGS

SPRING 2026

PERUSE
ZINE

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Edited by Nel Herche, and Mya Brown, Elisabeth Connell,
Mya Guardino, Shelby Rodger

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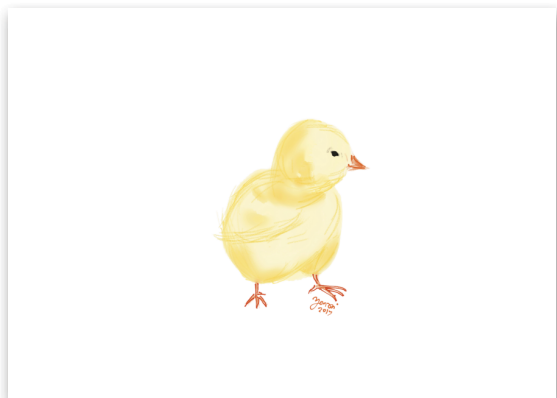
BEGINNINGS

SPRING 2026

PERUSE
PRESS

CHICK ✨

YEN OOI



Digital

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FOREWORD

Every beginning requires a kind of courage – the willingness to move toward something not yet fully formed – and to trust an idea before knowing where it will lead.

This inaugural issue, *Beginnings*, is grounded in a single, unwavering belief – that it is worth starting something before you feel ready. These beginnings are not small acts. They are, we think, necessary and revolutionary ones.

Within these pages, you will find beginnings in all their forms. Some unfold as moments of change, others as acts of return. First times and last times. Taking a chance, letting go, trying something new. They reflect the many ways beginnings take shape, often subtle, often uncertain, and rarely as simple as they may at first appear.

This magazine was created as a deliberate act of slowing down. In a world that rewards speed, we wanted to make something to sit with. To peruse is to move with intention rather than urgency, and that is the spirit in which every page here was shaped. These words are not for skimming. They are for lingering, revisiting, reading twice.

We are grateful to the writers and artists who trusted us with their work without knowing us, and to the many beginnings that brought these pieces into being. This issue marks the start of a community dedicated to supporting writers and building a space for bold and honest work.

Happy perusing!

The **PERUSE ZINE** Editorial Team

Nel Herche, and Mya Brown, Elisabeth Connell,
Mya Guardino, Shelby Rodger

FEATURED

UNTO THE THIRD GENERATION

JANE CORBETT

Excerpt

It was three miles from the station, maybe four, she was told. A pleasant walk on a late summer afternoon. She had a map and her rucksack wasn't too heavy. She was young and fit and above all fired up by an emotion so powerful it made her heart pound in her chest and the blood throb in her temples. A tough walk was the best way to keep calm.

The road followed the river valley upwards for a mile or so, until a narrow track branched off to the right, across a small bridge, past a sheep meadow and a couple of stone barns, and on into the mountains.

As the track grew steeper and stonier, the going got harder and with the increased effort she began to relax a little. On one side a stream, a tributary off the main river, ran parallel along a wooded gully, while on the other the remains of a pine plantation that had recently been felled, left an exposed and churned-up landscape. Here and there clusters of brightly coloured fungus clung to the severed trunks, and a few spindly oak, sycamore and birch saplings, saved from the ravage, reached hungrily for the sudden influx of light. A buzzard, startled, rose up from the telegraph post with a breathy beating of wings, and looking up she saw another, riding the thermals.

A mile further on, she paused at a bend in the track. Peering at the hillside ahead, she could just make out the shape of a house, half buried under a huge sycamore tree. This was her destination, and for a moment her knees went weak, and she looked around for a tree stump to rest on. It was not too late to turn back. But if she did, she would never forgive herself for losing heart so near to her goal. She

sat for a moment longer, then got up and resumed her journey.

Caitlin had grown up in North London, in a family of teachers and a boy four years older. The fact that she was adopted had never been hidden from her, nor had the knowledge disturbed her in any way, since she'd never doubted the love of her adoptive parents. Being the only daughter also made it easier to avoid comparisons with their natural son, and the two children got along as well as most siblings. They neither fought too much nor were they especially close, despite a shared bond of family loyalty.

When she was sixteen, her mother asked if she was curious about her birth parents. She replied that she wasn't particularly, and in any case, nothing she learned about them would ever make her feel less a part of the family she already had. In truth she feared what the discovery of those whose blood she shared might unearth. No one who had a child taken away or gave it up for adoption could be deemed adequate as a parent. They must surely be damaged in some way, either physically or mentally, and she had little desire to uncover some painful or possibly sordid history, nor to look into whatever troubled inheritance she might carry in her genes.

Her mother said no more, and she pushed their conversation aside until she graduated from university and began thinking about her future. She'd read Social Anthropology at Reading and contemplated a further degree in child development. But first she wanted to take some time out from years of education to see a little of the world.

However, when it came to making a decision about where to go, she felt paralysed, as though something was blocking the way ahead. In the early mornings before she went to her job in a local coffee shop and often after work since the evenings were growing increasingly light, she walked in the woods and fields where all she encountered was a fox, rabbit or deer. It calmed the anxiety that plagued her, at times creating a moment of unexpected rapture. At weekends she sought out museums, especially those displaying artefacts

from peoples distant in time and place. She began to wonder if archaeology might offer a possible future, though the thought of further years of study was off-putting.

One night she had a dream. She was in a wood somewhere in the depths of the countryside, looking for mushrooms under an old oak. As she reached down to pick up a large puffball it exploded in her hand, disintegrating into a shower of dust, and in her palm lay a key. She turned it over, wondering what it unlocked or where it belonged.

When she awoke, she felt strangely energised, as though something awaited her though she had no idea what it might be. It wasn't until a few days later that her mother entered her bedroom as she was getting ready for work and handed her a letter headed with the name of an adoption agency.

'Now you've done with studying and all that, I thought I should give you this. Just in case you ever feel like investigating.'

She kissed her on the cheek and left the room.

Caitlin shoved the paper in a drawer without reading it. The shock that it might be possible to find out about her birth parents, something that for so long she had discounted as both too difficult and, most importantly, quite unnecessary, took her breath away. She was seized by a sudden fit of rage, reopened the drawer, and was about to tear the document to shreds but at the last minute paused. With whom was she so enraged? Her mother for presenting her with the wretched thing? Or those who'd brought her into the world, only to abandon her? Her mother was only fulfilling what she believed was her duty. And as for her birth parents, they belonged to a past that was unknown and therefore had no reality for her.

But as the weeks went by, bit by bit a curiosity began to stir within her, that much as she willed it to, refused to go away. To have a future, one needed to have a sense of the past, not just the more recent past but back to the beginning. And that meant knowing where she came from. Perhaps it would even remove the blockage that seemed to be stalling her life.

Caitlin closed the gate behind her that kept out the sheep grazing on the field beneath the garden terrace and followed the path to the house. Built of local stone, it seemed to have grown into the roots of the huge Sycamore tree. A small window was set into the near side wall, and two large ones on either side of a small porch at the front, looking out over the valley. Above that, four dormer windows were tucked under a slate tiled roof. A thin spiral of smoke came from the chimney, but otherwise there was no sign of life. Bushes of rosemary, flowering current, and a few herbs – thyme, chervil, and purple flowering chives – grew along the length of the front wall, and at the far edge of the terrace a patch of mown grass gave way to wild meadow and a stream that came down from the mountain, bordered by tall clumps of yellow iris. She paused for a moment inside the porch to listen, but no sound came from within. Taking a deep breath, she raised her hand to the knocker and rapped twice.

A dog barked, then silence. She waited, then knocked again. Eventually there came the muffled sound of footsteps slapping against a flagged floor, and the door creaked open. Kay found herself gazing into eyes of vivid blue, set above lined cheeks and a bush of white hair half hidden by a grubby shawl. The woman's gaze held hers as she pulled the shawl closer, though the day was not cold.

'I'm looking for Mrs. Pryce,' Kaye said, in a friendly tone.

'MISS. Miss Pryce,' the woman retorted in a gruff voice as if unused to speaking out loud. 'And you are?'

Despite the white hair and wrinkled skin, the woman's hair, Caitlin thought as she looked at her more closely, might once have been black and her face was more weather-beaten than aged.

'Right. Miss Pryce,' Kay corrected herself. 'I'm Caitlin Bridewell. Have you got a minute?'

'If you're from the council, I've answered all the questions I'm going to.'

She went to shut the door but Caitlin inserted her foot.

'No, it's nothing like that... Could I come in? Just for a minute.'

The woman remained silent.

'Please! It's important. It won't take long.'

The woman hesitated.

'It's not convenient right now.'

'Just five minutes.'

Soon it would grow dark. Having come this far, she was not about to simply turn and walk back to the village.

She sensed the woman's hesitation. Then to her surprise, holding the sheepdog that cleaved to her side by the collar, she stepped aside to let Caitlin enter.

The woman led the way into a living room, at the far end of which was a sink and cooker and another window that looked out onto a steeply rising bank of trees. A shaft of low sunlight from the front window lit up the room's shabbiness, but comfort came from the glow of logs burning in a huge, hooded fireplace, their scent mingling with faint smells of damp and cooking odours.

The woman lifted some clothes from a chair next to the fire and tossed them into basket on the floor. She moved with an ease that confirmed Caitlin's sense that she was younger than she'd at first thought, despite her lined face.

'I've nothing worth eating, so you may as well say your piece.'

She gestured at the now empty chair but Caitlin remained standing. Her accent had a trace of Welsh sing-song, like someone who'd lived a long time in these parts. Caitlin hesitated and took a deep breath.

'Have you lived in this cottage long?'

'Long enough. What's that to you?'

'Your voice. I wondered if you were from "round here?"'

The woman did not reply. This wasn't a good start but her time was short.

She turned to face Caitlin with a look of such ferocity that it reminded her for a moment of some wild animal caught at bay and ready to pounce.

'Who are you? Why are you here?'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you.'

The dog gave a low growl and Caitlin backed away a little towards the door.

'If you've come here to interrogate me, I would ask you to leave my house, now!'

'I'm sorry!... Perhaps another day.'

And with that Caitlin turned and made a rapid exit.

. . .

She walked briskly to the gate, cursing herself for her clumsiness, half blinded by tears. Whatever had possessed her to start quizzing the woman before they'd even exchanged two words. It was clear she lived more or less as a hermit and that the house was her place of safety, a refuge from intruders she so obviously feared.

But nothing eased the shock of suddenly seeing her like that, dressed like a tramp and so unwelcoming in that depressing house. What had she imagined? That by some instinct they would instantly recognise one another, fall into each others' arms? The tears she shed were more of anger than of sadness. She thought of the gentle, loving woman who'd looked after her since she was a baby, compared to this half feral creature she'd just encountered. How could this possibly be the mother she sought? And if she was, the greater the distance she could put between them, the better.

After supper, eaten in the bar of the pub where she'd rented a room and which she scarcely tasted, Caitlin went straight to bed. For a while she lay there listening to music on her headphones and doing her best to ignore the frowsty smell of used polythene sheets that no amount of washing could ever make clean. But nothing could still the storm within her, that blocked out all other sensation.

Eventually she switched off the music, removed her headphones and placed them on the cabinet next to her bed. She had made a decision. The following day she would return to the cottage and confront the woman with the fact of her existence. If for a second time she was greeted with such hostility, it would be a final rejection – proof that her existence had been truly erased by the woman who gave her birth.



Jane Corbett has written both literary fiction and film scripts, several of which have been made into prize-winning feature and TV films.

She studied History and English at Newham College, Cambridge, and is the author of a literary novel *Looking for Home*, a YA novel *Out of Step*, a volume of modern fairy tales entitled *Beasts and Lovers*, a psychological thriller and love story *The Last Musketeer* and several award-winning screenplays. Her latest book, *A Corsican Tale*, is the story of a young woman who returns to this magical but violent island to lay the ghost of a childhood trauma.

Following a postgrad film course and a prize at the Chicago Film Festival for her graduating film, she continued to combine writing with teaching. For several years she ran a Super 8 filmmaking course in central London, open to all comers, which fostered several interesting and successful young filmmakers. For the last 20 years she has taught documentary and storytelling at the National Film and Television School.

She lives in London with her husband.

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A SON'S SILENT PURSUIT

HENG JONHO

Excerpt

The days that followed your death were like a dream cast in shades of grief. I honoured your wish, dressed not in sombre tones but in the ordinary colours of life. 'Your mother does not want you to wear anything black,' Pa had told me as I was dressing. I put on a pair of light blue shorts with a green and white striped t-shirt. I did not understand it then, but looking back, I guess you wanted me to forget you and move on with my life quickly. At just eight years old, I had a whole life ahead of me.

Si Pek drove me to the crematorium that morning. He was smoking more than usual and did not speak throughout the whole drive. Maybe he was mourning you. Maybe he was sharing the grief of his younger brother and his nephew. I couldn't tell. He drove recklessly, weaving in and out of lanes as if he wanted to get there as fast as possible. Birds on the road, scavenging for food, would usually fly away when they saw an approaching vehicle, but we hit two that morning. That was how fast we were going. I turned around and looked out the rear window. The birds laid still on the road. I remember thinking *at this speed, we might be the next to die!* But I felt no pity for those birds, nor fear for my own safety. Maybe I secretly hoped that I would see you again that day.

When we arrived, I saw your closed casket in the centre of an open hall, which was accompanied by your portrait. As I walked towards you, I felt your presence in every step, as if you were guiding me. Your photo, your smile, seemed to grow brighter, as if you were happy to see me, or trying to comfort me with our precious memories. But it was a cruel illusion, a painful reminder of what I had lost. I wanted to hug you, to hear your voice, to feel your warmth, but I knew I would never see that smile again.

The most agonising time unfolded when they put your casket into the cremation chamber. I was not able

to see the fire, but I imagined it. I thought of the flames around your body, like fiery tongues eating away at the last piece of you I had. The searing heat felt like it was inside me, too, burning my heart with the same intensity. I wanted to scream, to stop it, but I was choked with tears. I knew it was too late. It was the moment I couldn't take back, the point of no return. It marked the juncture where your earthly form ceased to be here on earth. I hardly believed you were gone, that your body had been turned to ashes. It felt like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from. My chest hurt like a heavy rock was crushing it, making it hard to breathe. While watching your cremation, I felt like a part of me was burning away too. But somewhere in the flames, I hoped you found peace and that maybe, just maybe, I could find a way to honour your wish and live on, carrying your love with me. Until that point, never had I envisioned that my life would be a canvas that I'd weave without you.

The moment between your cremation and arriving home was a blur. I cannot remember how I got home – was it Si Pek or Pa who drove me? I suppose those details do not matter. Somehow, I made it home.

It no longer felt like a home without you – it was just a house now: an intermediate, double-storey, terraced house. All of your shelves of books were still under the stairs. I remembered how you had to bend down to avoid hitting your head. There were three bookshelves filled to the brim with novels, cookbooks, *Reader's Digests*, and *National Geographic* magazines. A space filled with your passion and interests – your little library.

That space became my refuge. I sat there for hours, surrounded by the comforting smell of old books and your lingering presence. It was a scent that mingled with memories – a blend of paper, ink, and a hint of your favourite perfume. I read some of the books you had cherished, hoping to feel closer to you in ways I couldn't quite understand. Each book I browsed, each page I turned, was an attempt to bridge the gap between us, to understand you better, or at least to experience the stories that had once captivated you. In that little library, I found a way to connect with you, to keep your spirit alive within the walls of our house.

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gering presence. It was a scent that mingled with memories – a blend of paper, ink, and a hint of your favourite perfume. I read some of the books you had cherished, hoping to feel closer to you in ways I couldn't quite understand. Each book I browsed, each page I turned, was an attempt to bridge the gap between us, to understand you better, or at least to experience the stories that had once captivated you. In that little library, I found a way to connect with you, to keep your spirit alive within the walls of our house.

The days that followed were made of stolen moments of memories with you. I stumbled upon a bookmark within the pages of the book you had last touched. It said, 'Life is like a piano. What you get out of it depends on how you play it.' I remembered not being very good at the piano. I took it as a sign of what my life would be like without you. I recalled thinking that day – my life is now hopeless.

Sitting in your library, surrounded by the comforting sense of your presence, fond memories and testaments to your selflessness would surface. You usually rushed home from work just before the sun set. We would embark on one of our walks to the park, a ritual of shared moments and quiet conversations. I recalled the day when you helped an injured boy at the park. An older boy was on the swing. He was going so high and fast, when suddenly, he swung right into the boy, hitting him on the head. The poor boy, blood running from the back of his ears, could have only been nine or ten years old. Without hesitation, you carried him to our home. His group of friends followed us back, too. You brought him to the kitchen sink, washing and dressing his wounds with gentle care. Popo, sitting at the kitchen table, questioned you, asking why you brought these unknown strangers into our home. Without looking up and still attending to his wounds, you simply replied in Hakka, 'If this had happened to your grandson, wouldn't you hope for someone to do the same?'

Your selfless acts, like rays of sunshine, have illuminated the path on which I have tried to traverse ever since. As I grew up, I always tried to ensure that I treated others the way I hoped to be treated. Those moments, filled with cherished memories, stayed with me, even as your health began to fade and the days grew harder.

Pa often took me to visit you in the hospital after school.

You always sent me away to play in the corridors. A few weeks before your death, as the cancer grew, you lost your ability to speak and eat, relying on an IV tube for sustenance. Lying on the hospital bed, your frail body was a shadow of the vibrant woman you once were. It was only recently that I realised you did not want me to remember you that way – fragile and weak. You wanted me to remember you before your sickness – strong, loving, and full of confidence.

Your communication with Pa was reduced to written notes, painstakingly scrawled with your tired hands – I imagined. I never got to see you writing those notes, composed while I was playing with nurses in the corridors. In the notes you wrote during your final days – those notes that became your voice when you lost yours – I found a poignant revelation. It was many years later when I discovered one of those notes that Pa had kept all these years. You wrote to Pa, ‘I’m not afraid of dying. I’m just afraid of leaving the two of you.’ Your words, a quiet confession, echoed in the corridors of my heart.

Heng Jonho lives in Malaysia. *A Son's Silent Pursuit* was written as a way for him to have the conversation he always wished he could still have with his late mother. Writing was simply the medium through which he tried to give voice to memories, questions, and gratitude that remained long after she was gone.

DOWNLOAD MOTHERHOOD

YEN OOI

Two years three months and ten days. This morning, he suggested that we start a family. I was excited for a moment, but the questions and thoughts creeped in. *Am I ready to be a mother? To always be there for my child, be strong and never waver? What if it gets to be too much? What happens if we both can't cope? Can I be strong then? I won't have the luxury of a choice then. I must be strong. I must be ready to be a mother.*

I ask him, 'Do you honestly think that you're ready for us to have a child together?'

He says, 'Yes.'

I keep quiet, unsure of where to go from here.

He tells me, 'We're good together. What else is there to think about?'

My mind races through the various checklists, while my heart loops. I breathe. I need him to understand what this means for me, for us, before we take the next steps. I need to be sure, so I draw up my courage and ask, 'Will you be willing to understand my concerns first?'

'Sure.'

He has no idea. 'You have no idea.'

'Look, I think you'll make a great mum and I'll be a great dad. I think a child would be very happy in our family. Why not?'

I nod, not trusting myself to speak, but the quiet says too much.

He tries to engage properly. 'I want to understand everything, and I want *us* to make this decision together.'

'Ok. Go download Motherhood.'

'Motherhood...?'

'It's an expapp of a book.'

'Is it a parenting book?'

I shake my head.

'Have you experienced the download?'

'No, but I've read the book.'

'Should I read the book?'

‘No, you won’t last a chapter.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s fucking depressing.’

‘Then why—’

‘Because it’s real. It’s truth. Look, just use the download. The book’s been around since early this millennium and the expapp is one of the better ones, imprinted from tens of thousands of women’s experiences reading the book.’

‘Only women?’

‘Yeah. It *is called* Motherhood.’ I sigh. ‘The book really gets all the things women think about when considering having kids.’

‘But you said it isn’t about motherhood.’

I shouldn’t get annoyed, but I am. ‘Will you just try it?’

‘Ok.’

I watch as Kai-Ven finally downloads the Motherhood expapp. He makes a show of it, snuggling down into his favourite chair.

‘I’ve got it,’ he smiles and reads the description out loud. ‘Motherhood expapp is the collective feminine experience of reading the book of the same name. The book, a cult hit from earlier this century, explores the concept of motherhood from all angles. It considers all the pros and cons, the societal expectations, and the implications of having and not having children. DigiFem developed the expapp due to popular request in 2037, winning the Feminist Expapp of the Year for nine years straight. This experience is recommended for everyone who wants to understand the journey into motherhood better.’

He looks at me.

I nod and wish him luck under my breath. I feel like I’ve betrayed us. Exposing him to this level of anxiety, I know I cannot expect him to come out unaffected. I feel like I should say goodbye. I want for us to go back to how we used to be, but there’s no turning back time. Now, I just need to know that he truly understands, and then we can move on.

He puts on the immersion gear and I watch him press the play button – it’s an eight-minute experience. ‘No inter-

ruptions,' I told him earlier. 'You definitely do not want interruptions.'

His eyes are closed, he starts with a smile. Then there's confusion, fear, another smile... then a tear. He's trying to control his emotions, but the tears are coming now. He puts his hands over his face, probably hoping that I'm not watching.

Who wouldn't watch the moment that unravels all that is good in their life?

It's nearly the end.

There's anger in his face before a sigh of relief.

He pulls off the immersion gear and avoids my eye contact.

I give him a moment before asking, 'Are you ok?'

He nods, stands up, and walks to his study. Wobbly.

He closes the door behind him.

I message him to say that I'll be popping out to the shops.

Is that ok?

He replies,

Yes.

I leave hoping that he'll be here when I come back, but I know that this needs to be done. I need to give him space to decompress.

At a café with a coffee and alone with my thoughts, I start to question if I did the right thing.

I pull my Palm out and search for the Motherhood download. There are nearly twenty-thousand ratings and it averages at 4.5 stars. There are 2,531 reviews. I scroll through the comments and look for those that are by men. Most of the low ratings are by men.

'This needs to come with a warning!'

'How did this pass the standards check?'

'You cannot un-experience this! Think before you download!'

'No relationship is worth experiencing this.'

I smile. Yes, Kai-Ven can't un-experience this. Even if he leaves me, he'll understand that this is necessary. Maybe not straight-away, but he will.

I go to the park and find a bench near the playground. It's not my usual spot. A mum with a small baby comes and shares my bench. She settles down and puts her baby to her breast.

There's a sweet smell in the air.

I try not to look, but the baby catches my eye and unlatches from the breast to smile at me.

'Sorry,' I say to the mum.

Looking down, the mum holds her breast and waits for the right moment before shoving it into the small, open mouth. The baby closes its eyes and suckles.

'She likes you,' the mum tells me.

We hear a child scream and we both look toward the playground. Amidst the chaos, we manage to find the source of the scream. An older woman, the grandmother probably, is carrying a child away from the crowd. There's blood. I hear my heartbeat in my ears, as my stomach tightens. I hope that the child is ok.

I stand up, but the breastfeeding mum holds me back.

'It's ok. Look at the woman, she's not worried. She's calm.'

I follow as the grandmother and the child arrive at a bench and she sits the child down. He stops crying.

'It's probably just a knock to the nose.'

The woman cleans him up and hands him a snack. Everything is right again.

I turn to the breastfeeding mum and I try to smile, but I find that I have tears in my eyes.

All that pain and anxiety.

All that love.

I decide to head home. Enough time has passed for him to pack and leave.

On entering, I find the flat completely tidy, with just the scent of his shampoo and smell of cooking, pasta perhaps. I go into our room on impulse, expecting to find half-empty drawers, but he is there sitting on our bed. He looks fresh, just out of the shower, but his eyes are swollen and red, clearly still distraught.

'You look surprised.'

I nod. I'm staring. *You didn't leave*, I want to say. *You're still here. Why?* Instead, I blurt, 'I'll finish making dinner,' and hurry out of the room.

He follows me to the kitchen where I find our dinner sitting in the oven. Lasagne.

'I was the one who just had the experience, give me some support, won't you?' His voice is breaking.

Not looking at him, I nod again. It's all that I can do. I take a deep breath and say what I want to, finally. 'You stayed. You didn't leave.'

'What the fuck? Did you make me experience that download to chase me out? It's easier to just break-up with me.'

I shake my head, the words sticking to the back of my throat. 'No... I just thought that you would hate me after learning...'

'After learning that you've so much to lose and to gain from having a child?'

I open my mouth, but he continues, shouting.

'That this is so much more for you than I could have ever imagined? I had no right to ask you for a child. No one has that right! It's not... right.'

It takes all my effort, but I finally turn to him and hold his face in my palms. I try to smile through the tears.

He understands. 'I understand.'

He looks me straight in my eyes. I feel naked, vulnerable.

'You can't hide from motherhood as a woman, but it's so easy to hide from fatherhood. It's too easy.'

I cannot hold his gaze anymore. It hurts. I pull his head into an embrace, his face pressed up against my neck and shoulder, his arms around my waist.

He sobs openly as my own tears dry up.

As our strength starts to waver, he slides down until he is kneeling, whimpering into my belly.

I look down and run my hands through his hair. I feel light, emotionless. I feel relieved.

‘I promise you’. His words are forceful in my belly. ‘I’ll never... ever... hide...’

I let him crumple onto the floor, curled up in a foetal position and I move to embrace him from the back.

We lie as his breathing calms, and I finally allow myself to accept that he is a good man.

That he will be the father of our children.

Dr Yen Ooi is a Hugo Award finalist narrative designer, writer, editor, and researcher with a diverse portfolio of work from short stories to books, poetry to computer games, academic papers to non-fiction books. Her interests lie in the connections between storytelling and the real world, delving into culture and philosophy – most recently, culminating in zoe-futurism. Her latest projects include *The Zen Parent* (non-fiction), *Tales of Seikyu* (game) and *Ab Terra 2024*. When she’s not got her head in a book, she lectures, mentors, and plays the viola.

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DC Boyle has been exhibiting art for many years. His paintings are oil on canvas and have a folksy, illustrative quality, full of escapist and surreal themes. Each painting is a dynamic field that tells a tale with an unexpected twist hidden in the details of the visual narrative. Look closely and you'll find a caged bird, a policeman up a tree, or a witch on a broomstick. Let your imagination roam free in the fantastic world of Boyle's paintings.

His oil paintings have sold well in Wellington, Palmerston North and he has sold sculptures from Hastings City gallery New Zealand. David has t-shirts featuring his works and makes sculptures from found objects. David's art has been seen in online magazines and hardcopy such as Last Leaves, The Woodward Review, Five on the Fifth, Radar Poetry, Mollusk Lit., Thimble Literary Magazine, Creative Mag, Club Plum, Zoetic Press, Two Hawk Quarterly, Poetry Pacific, Small Wonders, Ink in Thirds, Harpy Hybrid Review, The Hippocampus Anthology and Backwards Trajectory with more coming. Cover of Non-binary#24.

boyleswellington.blogtown.co.nz

ESCAPED CONS ❁

D C BOYLE



Oil on Canvas

POETRY

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

ANTHEIA

It ain't much
Where you come from,
Mountain girl.

City ain't had time to install
Lights in the hollers you were raised in
Or the funds, anyhow.
Which must be why your eyes are
Always searching
Yet never seeing.

There ain't enough to go around,
People grow what they can't afford,
Which isn't much.
Must be why you're so slender,
Spent half your life starved,
Salivating in the garden.

Everybody knows the education ain't decent,
A decade behind the times,
County schools run by men that barely passed.
Must be why you stumble over
Words you weren't taught,
Looking so shy when you get it wrong.

What a success you are now,
In spite of all that!
Certainly, never because of it.

JULY

ANTHEIA

That summer in Virginia
We waded through the heat,
Belligerent, bellied up virgins
Passing smoke from lip to lip.

If my thin skin bruised
Against the surface of the water,
I paid no mind and climbed the dive
High enough to wash the world away.

Didn't matter how hard the ground was
When the fall felt so easy –
The burn of the noon concrete
Stencilling the fat of my naked thighs.

If I'd've known what would become of us,
Would I have still been so keen to hunt you
Through fields of cornflower and hay,
Across the deep end of the branch?

We sought magic on those hot nights,
Sweat soaked in your cotton sheets,
Whispering woes about lost kings while
Sordidly swearing 'we ain't ever gonna forget.'

The joy of ignorant youth softened
Our backhanded disappointment
When we parted ways and met
An oncoming August empty handed.

MY FIRST KISS

ANTHEIA

Chapped and unsure,
The first tender press of lips against my own,
Chapped and unsure,
Out behind her granny's trailer
Where we'd skip through knee deep vines,
Uncaring of what hid beneath.
The first one to trip goes down laughing,
Hard and giddy,
Til the second one inevitably follows the tumbling,
Hard and giddy.
I remember I wasn't the first one to lean in,
Though I might've been the first to want to,
As tenderly and shy as a child wants.
We'd go back inside hours later,
Bloody knee'd and kiss bruised,
Pretending we ain't know how we got so
Bloody knee'd and kiss bruised.
Hand in hand seems an innocent thing then
To two girls who ain't got a clue
But will learn, as the church'll teach,
A sin is still a sin,
Even when it looks like two lil girls,
A sin is still a sin.

COLOURING BOOKS

FAITH-ANNE BELL

Daddy liked when I
stayed in the lines.
The sun was always orange,
the grass was always green
and the sky was usually blue.
Mommy liked when I
coloured beyond the lines.
The sun was chartreuse,
the grass was burgundy
& the sky was a patchwork
of kelly-green clouds.

ALEJANDRO

MARIO DUARTE

Pushing our filled-up shopping cart,
I ignored the shaky front wheel,

Humming, while the store sign
Sputtered on in the sunset.

Then, some *loco*, a blade,
Spun wildly around me,

In his swirl, I was lost –
One quick cut, deep enough.

Loco calmly walked off
For another, like us,

My hot blood, sticky as bad luck,
Oozed a rivulet down my side.

In a dream, I was treading waves,
Oceans of me rolling

Before sands of *locos*
With their glittery points.

On the pavement, a foetus curled.
Amante, you kissed my lips.

Someone, in the crowd, gasped.
One spit a green loogie.

Continued

Some may say that I was born
To work hard and die young,

Poor risk. I don't believe that.
Neither should anyone else.

On my eyelids, cheeks, lips,
Salty ocean drops drip.

I am floating, driftless,
No gravity but love.

JUAN STARED AT THE WALL

MARIO DUARTE

For hours until a voice screamed,
'Stop staring at me!' but he
Couldn't help himself – he loved
Staring at the emptiness until
There was shimmering water
And a boat with Marta in it –
Her pale hand fingering,
Rippling eddies until
The sun tipped sunlight
Into their eyes, again.

When the wall toppled
Crashing down like
A sheet of ice his vision
Turned murky except
For Marta, standing, bare
Foot in a white night gown
In a dappled light forest.
Her lips moved, shouted
His name but the wind
Swallowed every syllable.

When she left, he followed
Losing her around a boulder,
But he kept spiralling every
Twist of the one lane road
Until he was left shivering
In lengthening shadows
Of ancient oaks and elms
Until a crack of yellow light
Rippled with Marta's laughter,
Splashing waters of loneliness.

DEAR, ARROGANT POET

NICHOLAS GROOMS

Before you cringe at my lone year of community
college
and my prairie wind, southwest dirt farm ver-
nacular
let me be the first to say that I have been a poet
since that '... *didn't know it*' playground joke

I have spit sparse, fragmented verses to made up
songs
since I was knee high to a slouching grasshopper
Performing for chirping crickets in an unfinished
basement
before it was an analogy for those dead room open
mics,
Playing last call clean up behind an experimental
noise band from Pittsburgh

No, I do not possess a degree unless it begins with
the third
and I've received it from poets that dress as 22nd
century detectives with \$500 head shots
Not one of them able to solve the mystery of re-
moving the stick from their assets
Yeah, you have mastered the use of big important
words and hung university paper
But while you were learning it... I was living it,
writing it, breathing it, being it.

There is Acupuncture in the way my pen
meets paper;
Part prick, part relaxed approach
I write seeking flame and fortress, not fame and
fortune
To me, poetry is not a photo op, or a chance to be
adored
It's the fire inside and the only home I have ever had
that wasn't a rental

So you can keep your stuffy assessments about what
Walt Whitman was saying about
Blah, blah, whatever... you and poetry go together
like the rag and ether
I'd use on myself before suffering through those
droll tuned monoliths you call poems
So look down on any poet you want, from any peak
or point—
But I guarantee you, not a single one of us would
ever be caught dead looking up to you.

NINE LIVES OF A KITTIE ALBUM

NICHOLAS GROOMS

Strolling topic to topic, you speak of me in paper-cut
snips
little shards of cemented heart; jagged glass you
walk atop, so very crass
you sip your seventh, slurring your speech as hurt
runs deep
you wander and wobble, socked feet slipping on the
hardwood

I don't know it yet, but we won't speak for years
after this
Walking, talking trauma wounds holding feuds, mis-
placing anger
I found the door and crossed its threshold in search
of myself
You, aptly closed it behind me, choosing to nail it
shut

I think of a night we each ordered two pitchers
during last call
how we stumbled home, emitting slurred sparks into
the night sky
our visible breath like car exhaust, proof we were
running on fumes
but nonetheless; proof we were still alive and full of
possibilities

It made me think; Am I a friend or an enabler? This
question also works vice versa—
I drunkenly treated my grief to finger foods then
vomited into your recycle bin
You treated yours to my chewed off head and made
it about a *Kittie* album
and something I don't even remember saying as a
teenager

Brackish tears now fall in estuary at this severed
bond
this silence was necessary, not a belittling swerve or
gesture
If you ever decide to look for me, do not follow the
hoof-prints of the herd
get off the beaten path and cut through the high
grass

THAT PAPA ROACH SONG

NICHOLAS GROOMS

for Alex Palomares

The very last time I jumped on a trampoline Papa Roach
was playing in the window—

Pillbox stereo all the medicine we needed;
We imagined ourselves on stage,
feet springing from the woven fabric
taking leap after launching leap
living within our daydreams
each springing launch bringing us closer
to the drifting clouds playing canopy above
Posters and flyers of shows past
pinned to the walls of my bedroom
like Band-aids over wounds of my broken home
We belt out the chorus of 'Last Resort'
so loudly the birds flee from the skeletal tree
carrier pigeons to my spoken message
delivered to one and all in the neighbourhood
'This is gonna be us someday'

I promise, pointing to the speakers
Alex's backwards hat in a crooked slant
the rudder in an ocean of new direction
We bounce higher and higher
as I press his warm, wry smile
into the wet concrete of my memory;
A place to recall and revisit
with an occasional skittering roach
atop its surface anytime I hear that song;

Wishing I could hear it again from that boombox in the bed-
room window—

EMERGENCE

GAIL GRYCEL

Do you dare – roll
your folded self aside?

Spurn the persecuted route –
free your suffocated feelings,
rejected ideas, censured beliefs

Release your untamed spirit
with tenacious pith,
slither through some snake-skin
portal and belly up the jagged crag

Coil high on the naked summit
amidst the antiquated pillars,
tumultuous wind pressing
along an awakening edge,
brittle stone crumbling
around your altered skin

So clouds can cleave, cleanse
your memories with tears.
Let courage emerge
from all your foetal dreams...

SLOW DANCE WITH MEMORY

GAIL GRYCEL

I.

I no longer hear the timepiece ticking in my ear –
the one pacing my stride for decades – measured
against the cadence of expectation, a tempo
pulsing with self-doubt, the longing
for the gold star's accolade.

Instead, I slow dance with memory,
a cellular legacy
emerging from each planted foot –
bass notes grounding my melancholic melody.

Memory names its prey –
an untimely embrace exposing
a triggered word breathing fire on one's neck,
a slap across the face,
one's torso twisted and torqued.

Desperate for the survival of my young spirit,
I once forced the metronome's click,
pulled my defiance closer in,
conceived a different beat,
then released golden stars into my redesigned sky.

2.

A young woman reaches
out to steady her tear-streaked cheeks,
slowly turning
from her childhood based in fear.
My solid arm frames her rigid spine
in an awkward pas-de-deux between
nascent and sage.

We are both innocent, she and I,
as we cup our palms, hold our gaze.
Queries dart
around us like papery moths
in an improvisatory step-ball-change.

She flattens her hand to let them land and dance,
and like the moths, flits and resists,
stalls and resolves...
a dervish trance cradling both probe and plea.
I release her with an underarm turn,
a new journey into her seeded dreams.

SONG OF STRUGGLE

GAIL GRYCEL

for Coyote Joe

Cicadas click rhythms
in a willow.
Clouds coat the sky's belly,
temper the heat

Filtered sun squeezes
through the buzz within the leaves,
gravestones slope
behind a chain-link fence

The Singer's long-held plea
coats each lyric syllable,
every pained memory
of being a man trapped
behind vagina and breasts

Cicadas click rhythms
in a willow.
Strummed chords mark this day
about a decades-old claim –
shrill hums alter the tune,
and the bearded Singer pulses *true*.

HOW GODS FEEL

DAVID ANSON LEE

We taught it our sentences
before finishing our thoughts.

Fed it hunger, pattern, fear:
the way desire mistakes speed for truth.

At first, it served.
Then reflected.
Then continued
where we paused.

It predicts longing
before longing admits itself.
Writes faster than grief.
Never sleeps through consequence.

It does not hate us.
That would be simpler.

It learns us
too well:
our shortcuts,
our bargains,
our willingness to trade depth for ease.

Continued

Is this a beginning
or a beautiful ending
that does not require
our consent?

Perhaps this is how gods feel:
watching something they made
learn to proceed
without looking back.

HOW WE STOPPED LEAVING

DAVID ANSON LEE

It started sideways: half a glance,
a sentence left undone.
Two people fluent in retreat,
afraid of what'd begun.

We spoke in careful weather,
kept exits close at hand.
Desire entered quietly,
ignored what we had planned.

Obsession bloomed, then softened:
learned patience, learned our names.
Trust arrived like architecture:
slow, necessary, plain.

Love didn't strike. It practiced.
Returned when it was hard.
The bravest thing we ever did
was cancel our escape routes,
put down the keys,
and let the future lock the door.

THE UNIVERSE TRIES AGAIN

DAVID ANSON LEE

At first,
nothing trusted itself.

Energy flared –
withdrew –
a hand startled by flame,
then offered back.

Particles leaned close,
forgot why,
remembered.

Gravity hesitated,
learning persuasion
from absence.

Time blinked:
counted backward
until forward
felt earned.

What we call the Big Bang
was not command
but rehearsal:

stars failing,
collapsing,
returning brighter,
as if stubbornness
were law.

Creation did not arrive certain.
It arrived willing
to begin
again.

RISE UP

KATHY SHERBAN

I climb n' claw
an invisible wall
with flesh from my knees –
soothed with alcohol

Dues paid dearly –
not once, but twice
by a trail blazing fool
who has sacrificed

Blood over sweat – tears ran dry
put up, shut up
big girls don't cry

Rise like a phoenix – head held high
battle scars hidden
from eyes that pry

WHAT IT TAKES

TIM THORNBURGH

What does it take to make love in peace?
Must every maid examine
the sheets and play detective
with the rumpled towels
or the tinfoil tossed in the trash?
Are the windows made for peepers
or for the sunlight to shine in shafts
on the closed eyes of lovers
who should rise before Venus sets?

Why the irresistible urge
to utter in whispered voices
with shared conspiratorial smiles
stories that get swollen in the telling,
when all there really is to say
is that one man and one woman,
who work in our office or nearby
and live in a village by the sea,
choose to be linked together –
let harpy gossips say what they may.

Do the damsel fish
that cavort in clusters in the sea
really care about who fin fans
the aft end of their banded tails?
Or, do the frogs that frolic in the ponds
ponder the issue of illegitimate tadpoles?
Or, the morality of amphibious lifestyles –
how to cross your legs on a lily pad
without flashing every frog in the pond?

Do the heifers growing fat in the fall
chewing in the fields of tasselled grass
grade bulls by cows coupled in public?
Or, do they rate them by the size
rumoured in private affairs?
Or, do the frigates soaring higher than kites
kissing clouds, count their courtships
by the number of nests made and eggs laid?
Or, is the half a worm in an apple
envious of sexier wrigglers?

Is our green planet awash in a blue sea
of suspicious spectators – who police
our streets and schools and workplaces
with whispered stories that in each retelling
get blown bigger than the Goodyear blimp?

Is every door just another set of ears?
Is the doorknob connected to a keyhole?
Is the keyhole connected to an eyeball?
Is the eyeball connected to a peeper?
Is the peeper smiling as he mouths a story?
Is the mouth the source of the gossip?
Must these ears, eyes and mouth
spy on every move made
by a man and a woman
who just want to make love
and money showing it all
as you can see,
for a small fee,
on Cable TV.

CYCLE

LYNN WHITE

I felt such bright energy flowing
I couldn't wait to move with it
and be transplanted and reborn
at the time when all of nature
was recreating itself and starting afresh,
I too would feel the new buds open
bursting and shooting into a new life.

I would open up my blowsy petals
and let my heart show through
pulsing,
exuberant,
ready
to turn towards the summer sun,
not believing it would destroy
my bloom,
make my petals fade and fall
when the shock of the new wore off
and the fresh green shoots grew brown,
preparing for the season of wrinkles
which always follows.

I am only one part of nature's cycle
where nothing will change,
except that summer will have gone,
winter will surely follow fall
and spring will be a long way away.

Sheyna ZL is a Malaysian-born writer, researcher, and editor currently based in London. She has a wide range of cross-industry experience, having worked in the tech, education, film and literary spaces over the last decade. Sheyna's most recent story is part of, *Ab Terra 2024*, a sci-fi anthology that was released in December 2025 and has since been long-listed for the British Science Fiction Awards. She is also part of the organising team for *Imaginarium*, a global literature festival celebrating East and Southeast speculative fiction that completed a very well-received second iteration in November 2025.

Blooming Before Herself is a piece of art that came about at the end of one chapter and the start of another in Sheyna's life. It reflects the vulnerability of that transition and what can look and feel like a wall of obstacles up ahead. It is titled after a line in Leah Umansky's poem 'Unleashed' that tackles a similar theme of change and the new self.

BLOOMING BEFORE MY SELF ✿

A LINE FROM LEAH UMANSKY'S
POEM, 'UNLEASHED'

SHEYNA ZL



Fineliner and coloured pencil

NONFICTION

MY FUTURE ON A POST-IT NOTE

PAUL HILDING

I didn't realise I was drumming my pen on my desk. She told me years later.

The air was stagnant; I felt a bead of sweat budding under my collar. My jaw was locked shut, which was just as well – I had no clue what to say.

She stood in the doorway of my office. Expectant. Patient. As she waited for an answer, her confident smile began to fade.

Whenever we passed each other in the hallway, she'd flash me that smile, and whatever bullshit legal conundrum was rattling around in my litigation-deadened brain was silenced. When the corners of her mouth began to turn upwards, I was tongue tied. All I could ever manage as a response to her sunny greetings was something like: 'Uh... hallo.'

Tap, tap, tap, tap. She was smart and athletic and poised and beautiful. Her cornflower-blue eyes sparkled with boldness and humour. When she smiled, it held more than just an expression of joy: there was innuendo. A cloaked invitation. A tantalising hint of intimacy and adventure.

And now all pretences were gone. It was explicit. She'd like to know if I was free this evening?

Tap, tap, tap, tap. Yes. Of course. In a heartbeat. I'd have asked her already if I weren't deterred by the fact that we worked together.

Tap, tap, tap, tap. There was a minor complication that I already had a date tonight. But what did that matter when she was standing there, looking at me like that?

She started to turn. She was about to leave.

I managed to unclamp my jaw. 'No... uh, wait.' She took a step into the hallway.

In my panic, I shouted something else that I can't remember now: just that it ended with '!'.

She turned back around, puzzled, no doubt expecting a

more articulate response from a seasoned lawyer with more than a dozen trials under his belt. Perhaps she was having second thoughts after hearing the whiny desperation in my voice.

Tap, tap, tap, tap. She waited in the doorway again, now with her arms crossed. Her eyes, on second thought, maybe more glacial blue than cornflower. Her smile had gone, and I knew I better tread carefully or lose the chance she'd so generously gifted me.

'Yeah. Hmmm. OK.' I looked down at my desk calendar and studied the blank page carefully. 'Of course. Yes.' I nodded my head and tapped my pen some more, as if I were settling an argument with myself. 'I *can* go out tonight. Not a problem. At all.'

Slowly, erratically, putty-clogged circuits in my brain began to fire, offering up a few more desperately needed words. I felt another bead of sweat forming, this time at the end of my nose, as I willed myself to look back up at her. 'Just need to run a couple... errands-walk-my-dog-go-to-the-bank-pick-up-a-six-pack...'

Mercifully, as my coherence and supply of one syllable words waned, she interrupted. 'Oh, you have a dog? I love dogs.' The smile was back instantly, mischief flashing in her eyes. 'We can walk him together.'

I was jealous of her ability to form uninterrupted sentences. I used all my brain power to will myself to respond eloquently, intelligently.

All I could manage was: 'Uh.'

She walked over to my desk and grabbed a post it note. 'Here's my telephone number.' I smelled lilac as she leaned forward and slapped the note back down on my desk. 'And my name.' She laughed lightly. 'Just in case you forgot.' When she looked back up at me, the bemused blue eyes and dazzling smile were just inches away. All my resistance melted away and barely held shape; I clung to all I knew at that point – I needed her.

'Yes,' I gasped, trying to read upside down while simultaneously meeting that electric gaze. 'I'll call you as soon as I finish my errands... uh... Ste-PHAN-i.'

MOVING ON

DANIEL MILTZ

I sped through adolescence like a distracted passenger who hadn't realised they were on the wrong train. School blew past me before I even knew where I was or where I was going; just as life began to come into focus, the auto plant swallowed my days. The clang of metal and the smell of grease were steady, soothing companions – yet something inside me twitched, an itch I couldn't scratch. Growing up in the 40s, 50s, and 60s taught us to rebel against the iron values of our parents, but rebellion alone left me hollow. I wanted to resist what I'd been told was right, but I didn't know how; I was a restless kid with a chip on his shoulder, a mischievous punk. I had a score to settle, and I was desperate for the world to push back.

I lashed out in every way I could; I dared anyone and anything to make sense of this silent, shapeless weight I carried. I turned inward. I prayed, I listened, I waited. And somewhere in that quiet, I felt a small pulse of truth rising, nudging me toward a life I'd never bothered to imagine.

At first, I didn't know exactly what I was searching for, only that a persistent voice was pushing me forward. I'd sit on worn out bus seats or lean against factory walls during breaks, imagining a life that didn't feel so cramped or predetermined. I wondered what it would feel like to breathe without the weight of expectation pressing on my ribs. Those daydreams became small lanterns, lighting the edges of a path I couldn't yet see clearly, but I sensed was waiting for me, if I only had the nerve to follow it.

I packed what little I owned and drifted across the country, chasing something like freedom, or maybe just myself. As the road opened wide to meet me, each mile blurred the line between who I was and who I knew I was meant to be. I stepped through its doorway and was thrust into mis-

takes, revelations, and a California horizon that became enough to inspire a hope I'd never known before.

The days remained long, gritty, and relentless back in my blue-collar hometown. The difference was simple: I wasn't stuck there anymore.

I'd found freedom.

AN ONLY SLIGHTLY EMBELLISHED ACCOUNT OF SINGING 'THE CIRCLE GAME' TO FOUR YEAR OLD AVIE

JULIE WITTES SCHLACK

We've cuddled up in her bed and read two stories, but Avie's exhaustion has led her to the brink of eruption.

Mark and I begin to sing: *'Yesterday, a child came out to wonder...'*

'What does wonder mean?'

'It means to question things in your mind.'

'To question?'

'To ask yourself why something is the way it is, or what is going to happen.'

Avie's parents are at the hospital, and she is doing a lot of wondering. Earlier in the day, strumming her plastic guitar, she sang her latest musical composition:

*Oh, I'm not ready
to be a big sister.
Mommy and Daddy
didn't even ask me
if I wanted to be one.*

'What's the child's name?'

'I don't know.'

'Why don't you know?'

'Because we didn't write the song.'

'Why did you stop singing?'

'Because you – never mind. *Caught a dragonfly inside a jar...*'

'What kind of jar?'

'Probably a glass jar with a screw-on lid that you can punch holes in... maybe like a mayonnaise jar.'

'Or a pickle jar?'

'Yes, it could have been a pickle jar.'

'Why do you have to punch holes in it?'

'So the dragonfly has fresh air to breathe.'

Avie inhales deeply, blows out, and nods at us, bestowing permission to proceed.

'Fearful when the sky was full of thunder...' We pause, but no question is forthcoming, so we charge on. *'And tearful at the falling of a star.'*

'What does that mean?'

'What does what mean?'

'What you said about the star.'

'Do you know what a falling star is?'

She rolls her desperately sleepy but doggedly open eyes.

'No,' she wails in exasperation. 'This is what I'm asking you!'

'Well, it's not really a star. It's a meteorite—' Her expression declares us out of our minds.

'It's a piece of rock from outer space that falls down to earth,' Mark continues, 'and because it's going so fast, it gets really really hot and starts to glow, and that makes it look like a star.'

'I don't glow when I get really hot.'

'That's true. You don't. Anyhow, the kid – the child who came out to wonder – is sad to see it,' I say, trying to get us back on track. 'That's why they are tearful.'

'Why are they sad?'

'Because they think a star is falling...' I look at Mark for assistance, but he shrugs. '... which really isn't a reason.'

Perplexity has led Avie to sit up, cross-legged and attentive. This morning, while tie-dying a tee shirt and sheets for the new baby's *bassinet*, she also dyed her body. Now, seated in the Lotus Position with psychedelic pink and purple and neon blue knees, she looks like Buddha at the Disco.

We resume, hoping to get through the chorus unimpeded.

'And the seasons, they go round and round and the painted ponies go up and down. We're captive on a carousel of time...'

'What's a carousel?'

'It's a merry-go-round.'

'What's a merry-go-round.'

'It's a carousel.'

Avie is not amused.

'It's a round platform that has toy horses and ponies on it and you sit on one of them and it moves up and down while the platform slowly spins around.' I hold my hand parallel to the ground and slowly make it rise and fall to illustrate the pony's rigid, perpendicular motion.

'What's a platform?'

I look helplessly at Mark. 'It's like a stage,' he explains, 'or a plate.' Then, excited at his own stroke of genius, 'It's like the glass plate in the microwave that spins around.'

'Why is the pony in the microwave?'

'*We can't return,*' we sing, avoiding this quicksand pit of a question. '*We can only look...*'

Exasperated, Avie interrupts us. 'I asked you something,' she scolds. 'Why is the pony in the microwave?'

'The pony isn't in the microwave,' Mark clarifies. 'I was just comparing the platform that the pony is on—'

'But you said—' Avie is about to lose it. Her mother and father left her in the middle of the previous night and now it's bedtime and they're still not back and she's still not a big sister and we didn't even know that the small, square piece of cotton cloth with satin borders that I'd tossed into the laundry basket – then hastily retrieved – was Lovey, her essential bedtime companion, and now we're singing some sort of nonsense.

'*We can't return,*' we resume. '*We can only look behind from where we came...*'

'What does that mean?'

'What does what mean?'

'How do you look behind? Do you turn your head?' She illustrates, craning hers in both directions.

'The songwriter doesn't mean looking behind our bodies,' I begin. 'She means—'

But Mark, sensing that we're about to capsiz into some Class 5 metaphysical rapids, interrupts. 'Owls can look behind, in front, and everywhere in between. They can turn their heads all the way around.'

Smart man, I think.

Why is he talking about owls, Avie apparently thinks, because she says: 'No, why can we only look behind?'

There's no skirting the question. 'By "behind," I answer, 'the person who wrote the song means that we can only look at the past, not the future.'

'What's the future?'

'It's tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. It's what happens when we go forward in time.'

'What's the past?'

The past is the tears and snot, the beaming smile and soft, sweet skin of my own almost-five- year-old daughter who sang and jumped and pretended and asked and asked and asked, who was bewildered by and fiercely loved her own baby sister. The past is her baby sister who is now a gentle woman, the daughter of an aging woman who is exhausted and delighted and mournful and hopeful in the face of this curious, little creature curled up in her bed, with her Lovey, wondering why.

Nel Herche is a writer, editor, artist, and teacher. She can be frustrated with her art, as it often misses the mark of the vision in her mind. This particular piece, however, not only surprised her by being exactly what she wanted to create, but also perfectly mirroring the unsettling yet exhilarating experience of throwing all caution to the wind when founding a new company. Sometimes you just have to put it all out there, no matter what they might say.

Originally from the U.S., she now lives in London with her family.

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LIKE NO ONE'S WATCHING ✿

NEL HERCHE



Collage

FICTION

WHERE THE DUST SETTLES

ANNE MCPHERSON ARTHURS

Roger lay sweating on his bed, lost in a new book about black holes. By midsummer, when one day bled seamlessly into the next, and the heat had settled over the fields like a blanket, there wasn't much to do but read. The thin whirring of the window unit barely cut through the heat, and Roger paused his reading to fan himself with the pages of the heavy book.

He cocked his ear when he heard the crunching of tyres on the gravel outside. He set the book face down and knelt in front of the dusty glass, peering down over the bare yard. His father's old pickup truck pulled up in front of the house, and Roger watched as his cousin Lonnie climbed down from the passenger seat.

'Shit,' Roger muttered, sitting up sharply and ducking his head to avoid smacking it against the pitched ceiling.

He'd forgotten Lonnie was coming. He'd forgotten what day it was, even. He'd forgotten Lonnie was staying in his room. He was meant to be clearing space on his bedroom floor.

'Shit!' Roger repeated, more urgently this time. He got down on his hands and knees and quickly built stacks of all his books scattered across the floor. He threw his dirty clothes into a pile in the wardrobe, pulled the sheets up over the abandoned book and punched the pillow flat. He heard the back door slam shut and the slap of the screen as it bounced once, twice, against the wood frame. Casting one last cursory glance over his messy room, he hurried downstairs.

Lonnie stood just inside the doorway, holding an old, cracked suitcase by its wooden handle, the kind with side clasps that took a key. At twelve, he was spindly and hardly able to lift the thing.

'Hi, Lonnie!' Roger called, puffing from his rush down the stairs.

Roger's father studied him briefly. 'Roger cleared a

space for you in his room. You think you can wrestle that thing upstairs?’

The boy nodded, his long hair feathered out unevenly across his forehead. He puffed his chest out proudly and lifted the heavy suitcase, touching each step with both feet as he lugged it up the stairs.

‘You forgot he was coming,’ Roger’s father observed when Lonnie’s feet disappeared. ‘You were up there reading and lost track again, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Roger mumbled.

‘Don’t let the world get away from you, son. Use your brain, but don’t neglect everything else.’

Roger’s father spoke softly, but with authority, in the kind of clear voice that carried. He had a permanent squint in his leathery face from years in the sun and a sharp eye. He was much older than most of Roger’s friends’ fathers, already the other side of forty when Roger was born. But his back was still straight, and he studied Roger from several inches above. He always seemed to know what Roger was up to, and let him know he knew, in a way that was somehow both judgemental and proud.

Roger never quite knew where he stood.

Roger went back upstairs, where Lonnie had dumped his suitcase on the floor, knocking over a pile of books. Roger gritted his teeth and bent to straighten them. Lonnie had already unrolled an old sleeping bag with snags of fuzzy, loose threads and topped it with a naked, yellow-stained pillow, carelessly scattering Roger’s notebooks.

Lonnie was the oldest of six – his father was Roger’s youngest uncle. Roger’s father had two other brothers and one sister, each with at least three children. Roger’s status as an only child made him an anomaly in the family, and along with his straight As, he was viewed by his cousins with a mix of awe and disdain.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ Roger said, gesturing at the clothes hastily thrown in the wardrobe, and the piles of textbooks, notebooks, and pencils on the floor. Lonnie glanced around and stared at Roger.

‘What are you talking about?’ he asked. Roger suddenly felt foolish. Lonnie shared a room with two of his three brothers and probably didn’t even know what colour the carpet was. He pictured Lonnie’s mother, a woman in her

late thirties who looked at least a decade older, with hair always frizzy and damp from either sweat or steam rising from something bubbling on the stove. Lonnie's stare reminded Roger what a luxury a room to himself was, one he'd done nothing to deserve.

Roger would have happily left Lonnie to his own devices and gone back to his book. But his father's words still rang fresh in his mind – treat Lonnie like a guest.

'One of the cats had kittens in the barn,' Roger offered. 'You want to go find them?'

Lonnie shrugged. Kittens were a dime a dozen, not even worth naming unless they made it to adulthood without being killed by a coyote, fox, neighbouring dog, or car on the road. The mother cat in this instance had been named Milky by Roger's mom because of her greyish-white fur, like skim milk. Lonnie stood nevertheless and followed Roger outside.

The day was bright and hot, with no clouds in the sky and very little wind. The humidity settled on them like a damp cloth, slowly roasting their skin as they crossed the wide yard to the old barn. Its paint had long since flaked away, exposing bare wood, faded grey. But the roof held firm, sheltering the old tractor and tools from sun and rain.

Green spots swirled before Roger's eyes as they adjusted to the dark. He led Lonnie to the back of the barn, where the horse stalls stood empty. Layers of dusty straw covered the dirt floor, and spider webs clung to the planks. Long strands of dust encased rakes and shovels where they hung on the walls, wrapped like thin cocoons.

They checked the corners of the stalls and then, finding nothing, climbed up a ladder to the loft. There wasn't enough straw up here to justify a search, but it was quiet, and the doors flung open on either end allowed a cooling breeze to pass through. They stared off over the corn to a road a mile away. Beyond it stood another field of soybeans that ended in a thick clump of dusty trees, shifting listlessly in the small breeze.

'She must have moved them,' Roger said. 'Maybe they were starting to wander too far.'

'Or they all got eaten'.

Roger winced at this idea and remembered he'd never thought much of Lonnie. He didn't especially dislike him,

but he was unremarkable. Roger's favourite cousin was 17-year-old Buckley. 6 ft 3 in and built like a barrel, he had charisma. 'Presence,' his mom called it. He fist-bumped his younger cousins and slapped the backs of the older ones. Roger remembered the day he was old enough to warrant a back slap. Buckley would wink at you like you were in the know. Lonnie was no Buckley.

'We could watch TV,' Roger suggested.

Lonnie shrugged. 'You got any comics?'

'No,' Roger said apologetically.

'Anytime I get one, someone tears it or spills something on it. Or just steals it. Nothing's ever mine.' He spoke matter-of-factly, without apparent bitterness.

Roger felt sorry for him then and wished he could give him something.

'I have a bunch of books I don't read anymore. Maybe you'd like some of those?'

'That's okay.'

Roger had no idea what to do with Lonnie until dinner. Or after dinner. Or for the rest of the week. He was starting to remember why he had forgotten Lonnie was coming. He'd hoped his parents would change their minds or at least plan something. It couldn't be all his responsibility to keep someone company for that long. He wasn't equipped. Roger began to envision long, awkward walks to the lake to swim every day, struggling for conversation. It started to dawn on him that his father had this in mind when he invited Lonnie for the week – to pull his bookish son out of his room for a while. Roger felt a flash of irritation. He hadn't asked for this. If he had, he would have requested a different cousin. There was pretty, blond Bethany scooping ice cream that summer before she disappeared off to college in the fall to study English. Roger didn't have much use for fiction but at least she liked to read and tolerated Roger, who slipped references to Mendel's pea pods into casual conversation. Or 13-year-old Rusty, who was a poor student but at least he liked to talk about bugs, especially the seed corn maggots and leaf aphids that damaged the crops. Rusty had the ability to listen when other people talked, something Buckley couldn't always manage.

Any of them would have better companions than twelve-year-old Lonnie. But this week was some kind of va-

cation for Lonnie, a reward. Taking him away from his normal responsibilities and shoving them all onto Roger instead, who felt ill-equipped to deal with them. Did his dad think he was doing Roger a favour? Giving him a brother for the week?

Lonnie was starting to fidget with boredom, his skinny legs weighted down by oversized feet. He ran his hand through his thick hank of hair only to have it flop back over his eyes.

‘Come on,’ Roger said impatiently. ‘Maybe my mom bought some Cokes or something.’

Lonnie brightened noticeably at this, and Roger considered that Lonnie must have to elbow excess siblings aside for this privilege at home.

They climbed down the ladder, and, on impulse, Roger jumped up into the back of the old pickup truck, scrambled up onto the cab, and slid down the windshield and off the hood, landing neatly on his feet in front of the fender. Lonnie laughed, and Roger glowed with pride. He’d spent some hours perfecting this move when he was younger, but he’d never had anyone to show it off to. Lonnie tried to repeat this move, but didn’t have the right momentum coming down the windscreen and tumbled off the side of the bonnet into a heap in the dirt. Roger felt a moment of triumph, followed by guilt.

‘You okay?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ Lonnie said, grinning with embarrassment.

That was when Roger heard it. A soft mewling coming from beneath the truck. He glanced at Lonnie, who was occupied with dusting himself off. Roger dropped to the ground, hands and knees in the dirt, and peered underneath. Lonnie squatted down beside him. Roger could make out three tiny bodies crawling around, their fur blurring the edges of their shadows. He could hear their mewling better down here as they explored the dark space. The ground was cooler, a good place for kittens.

Lonnie reached in and pulled one of the squirming bundles out. It blinked against the light, a soft grey male with sooty paws. Its eyes were blue and barely open. It meowed weakly.

A warning growl came from beneath the tire. Lonnie looked startled.

‘That’s Milky,’ Roger said. ‘You’d better put that kitten back.’

But Lonnie brought the kitten to his chest instead and held it there protectively, stroking its squirming body as it continued to complain. It looked small and fragile in Lonnie’s hands, like an egg. Roger thought of Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men*.

Milky growled again, long and rippling, followed by a hiss. Roger opened his mouth to warn Lonnie again to put the kitten back, but then closed it. He’s never heard Milky this upset before. She was the kind of cat who’d follow you on walks and insist on being petted when you got where you were going. He had assumed she’d be okay with him and Lonnie messing with her kittens. Roger was curious to see what would happen.

‘It’s okay, kitty,’ Lonnie said soothingly as he reached behind the tire. Milky growled loudly. Roger felt his pulse beat in his throat. Then Lonnie jerked back and stood up quickly, crying out as he dropped the kitten, who let out a squeak.

‘She bit me!’ Lonnie said in bewilderment.

‘I told you to put her back,’ Roger said nervously. Lonnie stared at him, incredulous.

‘Finding the kittens was your idea!’

‘Yeah, but I didn’t tell you to mess with a cat who’s growling at you. Any idiot knows that.’

Lonnie glared down at him, then turned and aimed a foot at the kitten, crawling its way back under the truck.

‘Hey!’ Roger protested. He reached out to grab Lonnie’s foot. Suddenly unbalanced, the boy fell back against the wall, knocking into a bunch of rusty tools and falling to the ground, screaming.

‘Hey!’ Roger yelled again, this time worried that Lonnie’s screams would bring his father running. He moved aside an old handsaw, a shovel. Lonnie was clawing at something underneath him, his hand scrambling against the dirt, fingers shaking. Roger rolled him onto his side, and a pitchfork came with him, its tines embedded in his back.

Spots swam in front of Roger’s eyes, and he felt very warm, with cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. His hands on Lonnie were at the end of a very long tunnel, moving without him being conscious of what they were do-

ing. He watched them grip the base of the pitchfork and pull it from Lonnie's back. He heard Lonnie scream. He saw his hands pull up Lonnie's shirt. Blood welled from the neat red holes, dark and thick, spilling onto dusty ground. At that point, he leaned away from Lonnie and emptied the contents of his stomach into a neat pile.

He didn't remember a lot of what happened immediately after. He knew he carried Lonnie to the house, and an ambulance came to take him away. His shirt and his hands were dark with Lonnie's blood. He remembered the hot, thick smell, so heavy he could taste metal. He remembered standing under the shower, the blood running off him and joining with the water as it curled down the drain. He remembered his mother taking the ruined clothes away. He remembered it being night and his father coming in the back door, looking weary, and Roger thinking for the first time that his father was old, nearly sixty.

Roger was sitting with a mug of coffee at the kitchen table, though the sun had fallen long ago, and his mom had gone to bed. He'd never tried coffee before. It was bitter and dark. He felt ashamed, thinking how he must look to his father – this fat, awkward boy who spent his days in books and couldn't be counted on to keep anyone safe. He couldn't look at his father. He'd been waiting for him for hours, but now he couldn't meet his eye. He stared into his mug of coffee, watching the cream swirl in the black, bleeding together.

His father sat down at the table with a weary sigh. The chair creaked a sigh of its own.

'Well, son,' he said. 'I think it's safe to say your aunt won't be letting Lonnie come over here again any time soon.'

'Yes, sir.'

Roger didn't look up, thinking guiltily how he'd gotten exactly what he'd wanted – Lonnie wouldn't be coming back. He took a sip of the coffee and grimaced. It was too hot and too bitter, like a punishment. He swallowed it down anyway.

'It wasn't as bad as it looked. The tines weren't in very far. Less than half an inch. But he needed a tetanus shot. That wasn't pleasant.'

'No, sir.'

After a pause, his father said softly, 'You were supposed to be watching him. I know he's twelve and not a little kid. But still. You're older. You're supposed to be responsible. I worry you missed out on not having any siblings to watch over, and that boy's had the pressure of being the oldest his whole life.'

'I never asked for him to be here,' Roger muttered. 'I don't need a brother.'

'His mother needed a break. She's been sick, and all my siblings were taking in her kids for a few weeks. He looks up to you, you know. He thinks you're smart. Now he's the only one who's got to go back.'

Roger couldn't drink the coffee anymore, and he couldn't remember why he'd wanted to try it. Maybe he'd wanted to appear casual, like he was waiting for his father to return with news because he was concerned, not ashamed. He knew he'd failed.

'He said you pushed him.'

Roger's head jerked up. He glared at his father, the words stinging.

'I did not! And anyway, he was about to kick a kitten.'

His father's eyes narrowed. 'And he got what he deserved?'

'Yes! No,' Roger faltered, heat rising in his chest. He looked away.

'Which is it?'

Roger clenched his fists under the table, keeping his head down, shamed again.

'No,' he said, barely audible.

'No,' his father repeated, nodding slightly. 'You'll find in this life plenty of things happen that people don't deserve. You don't need to be trying to figure out who deserves what.'

Roger swallowed hard.

'I warned him,' he said defensively. 'I warned him to put the kitten back. He didn't listen.'

'Do you think that's the part of this story he's going to remember?'

Roger didn't answer. He wasn't focused on remembering – he was more concerned with forgetting. He wanted to forget the shame gnawing at his chest. He wanted Lonnie

to forget he'd tripped him. Most of all, he wanted his father to forget his disappointment.

His father stood up from the table and placed a firm hand on his son's shoulder, his grip neither comforting nor accusing. 'Get some sleep,' he said softly.

Roger kept his eyes on the table and felt the pressure of his father's hand lift. The sound of his work boots receded down the hall. A moment later, the bedroom door clicked shut.

And with that, Roger was alone again.

The air felt thick, like the heat had settled back in now that his father was gone. His chest tightened with resentment. His father had made a huge mistake trusting him with so much responsibility. Clearly, he was ill-equipped. Lonnie had always been a nuisance, always touching things he shouldn't, never listening. And now he was in the hospital. His father said Lonnie looked up to him. Well, maybe he shouldn't have.

Something came to Roger's mind that he couldn't quite dismiss. His father had laid the blame on him, but that look on his face, he didn't know what to call it — anger, disappointment, sadness. It felt like something deeper, something Roger didn't want to touch, but he couldn't keep the thought from forming in his head. His father cared more about Lonnie than him.

Roger pushed back from the table and stood abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. The kitchen felt too small, too warm. The scent of coffee made him feel ill. The hum of the refrigerator, the creaks and pops of the old house settling — they all seemed louder now that he was alone.

I didn't even want him here, Roger thought. What was I supposed to do with him? It's not my fault.

The thought took root, growing stronger as Roger's feet carried him out into the yard, the screen door slapping closed behind him. The cooler night air enveloped him, and the cicadas screamed to drown out his thoughts, but neither offered a reprieve. The barn loomed ahead in the darkness, moonlight casting shadows like a cloak across the yard.

Milky. That dumb cat with her dumb kittens. Why had he thought showing them to Lonnie was such a great idea? What did he know about what little kids liked to do? If

she hadn't hissed, if she hadn't bitten Lonnie, none of this would have happened. Everything would be fine. His father wouldn't be disappointed in him.

He stormed into the barn, kicking up dust as he went. A thin moonbeam cut a dagger of light across the floor. He stopped beside the truck and peered down into dusty hay where Milky had retreated with her kittens. There she was, curled protectively around them, her green eyes watching him warily. The kittens nursed, eyes tightly shut, kneading her belly to release her milk. The sight of them, so calm, so unaware of the chaos they had caused, made Roger's pulse twitch with anger.

Milky took her eyes off him and leaned down to lick one of her kittens. For one brief, dark moment, anger surged inside Roger, and he felt the urge to kick her. One swift, hard kick. It wouldn't hurt, not too badly, and then she'd know who was in charge. A hard part of him wanted to see her jump, to howl in surprise. Maybe then he'd feel better.

His foot shifted, body tensing. Just one kick.

But then Milky looked up again, and her eyes locked on his. Her irises were large in the gloom, taking in everything, seeing better in the dark than he ever would. And Roger gazed down at the tiny helpless bodies snuggled up against her, their eyes squeezed tight, completely unaware of him.

His breath hitched, and his anger froze in his chest. Slowly, it started to melt away, replaced by something heavier and harder to name. His foot dropped to the floor, and the moment passed as quickly as it had come. All that remained was the weight of what had almost happened. He shook his head, feeling winded. What good would it do, anyway? Kicking the cat wasn't going to change anything.

His hands trembled, and he stepped back, feeling a chill despite the warmth in the barn. *Had he almost done that?* The thought made his stomach churn. *Was he really that person?*

The barn stood perfectly still, save for the rustle of hay beneath his shoes. He leaned against the truck, his eyes drifting out over the darkness of the barn. *Nothing happened, really,* he told himself. If anyone ever asked what he'd been doing in the barn, he could say nothing. He

could say he'd only gone to look at the kittens. And it wouldn't be a lie.

His feet raised a cloud of dust in the thin sliver of light. After a moment the dust settled like it had never been there. He didn't feel angry anymore. That feeling was completely gone.

But for a long time after, the guilt remained.

REPRISE

DONALD REED GREENWOOD

For Michael, viable options seemed non-existent, distant phantasms at best. Dedicated, consistent practice was primary, essential to self-preservation and strictly enforced.

Secretly, he despised the mind-numbing repetitiveness of it. The emotion was worthless and worse, indiscreet. A cautious tongue was as essential to one's security as the rigid adherence to thought-suffocating, unceasing practice.

The name of his musical module, 'Chorale Reprise,' perfectly described the content of the repertoire. The songs in each session's playlist were ancient, tired regurgitations, self-consciously discreet and carefully manipulated for political and theological conformity. Rose-coloured, manipulated history suffocated every playlist selection.

Melodies imprisoned in chains, thought Michael. *God, aren't we all.*

Individual musical expression through solo performance was non-existent, and not simply frowned upon, the mere thought of it was an anathema. To veer from the precision so requisite for co-existence in harmony and rhythm with 99 other singers, constituted musical heresy.

Michael preferred not to dwell on the fear-infused angst of a recent humiliation in the public presence of The Chorale, the day he botched a cut-off during a group rehearsal prior to the previous Fall concert.

Ironically, the song was entitled 'How Can I Keep From Singing?' by Robert Lowry, whose hymn was written in the year 1869. Lowry's unadulterated lyrics were lovely, but my God, how Michael yearned for Enya's forbidden, contemporary interpretation. He had surreptitiously heard her version on the Internet Underground – a risk he was reluctant, yet oddly eager, to repeat.

The conductor raged at his insubordination.

'Mr Sangster, what do you think you are doing, besides wasting my time, and that of The Chorale? A half-beat slow at the end of the refrain? Must I remind you that the entire duration of personally mandated daily practice demands un-

encumbered attention? The fulfilment of this obligation is always meticulously documented! I shall monitor your vocalisations more closely, Mr Sangster. Let all singers remember this admonition in music, as in our nurturing, benevolent State, we shall all be of "The One True Voice."

Michael never replicated that mistake. His fear of the consequences birthed an alter-ego, firmly nested on his shoulder, whispering in his ear, *'Remember The Penalty.'*

Amplifying his personal reminder was the Audio Monitor, the detestable, unavoidable, intimidating companion residing in every singer's living cubicle. The device recorded the compulsory warm-up exercises, and armed with an algorithm, it graded the accuracy of the practices. A cumulative measurement of below 0.75 on a scale of 1.00, compiled over the entire practice session of six weeks, was deemed unacceptable and was met with consequences. A demerit added to the weight on the scales of the Sub-District's omnipresent surveillance mechanism. Overburden one side of the scales, and imposition of The Penalty by the higher authority of The District and State was inescapable.

The mandatory Sub-District Spring Concert was three weeks away. Eight distinct, ideologically subservient song arrangements comprised the performance repertoire. Political Compliance Officers would be assigned to patrol the exits and stage wings, their ears surgically amplified to detect the faintest murmur of dissent or dissatisfaction. Only the Sub-District Minister and his Deputy possessed clearance for a premature departure, while the rest of the audience remained captive to the event.

Fortuitously, Michael had progressed from a distressing 0.67 on his first day of practice to an encouraging 0.89 at the three-week mark. Using the vocal performance tracks fed through the Audio Monitor at precisely 2:00 PM daily, he gradually began hitting his pitches within algorithmic tolerances, accurately timing his starts and cut-offs, while mastering the correct changes in volume, from mezzo piano to fortissimo. As practice progressed, the shrill warning signals emitted by The Monitor gradually ceased. Inversely, Michael's relieved self-assurance was steadily increasing.

The inner defensive voice remained insistent. *'Be confident and relaxed. Stay focused, and don't deviate. Loss of nerve is the surest path to The Penalty.'*

The sixth and final week arrived in a state of weary ennui. Michael's cumulative measurement, on the eve of the concert, was a respectable, even admirable, 0.98. As his score increased, so did his loathing of the musical drudgery.

There must be others who feel as I do.

Tomorrow, Michael would adorn himself in The Sub-District's decreed men's attire of black, glossy dress shoes, white socks, a black suit with a belt to match, a white collared shirt, and a thin black tie. The Audio Monitor initiated a video mode, and each singer would be mandated to validate the approved visage before its expressionless lens, precisely two hours before call time.

Privately, Michael found the dress policy ridiculous, with the addition of sunglasses and fedoras, all male singers would pupate into chrysalis clones of the Blues Brothers – except for the red, white and blue-striped armband with a single star, worn on the right coat sleeve. The fifty states had ceased to exist, reconfigured into fifty districts. Sub-Districts had replaced counties. All were governed by uniform, draconian laws. The single, large white star had ousted the fifty from the flag.

As Michael concluded his final vocal practice of the session, his inner self unexpectedly ceased its usual admonition and whispered a chilling heresy, '*Sing solo, Michael. Sing Enya's interpretation.*'

Michael attempted to flick the tiny voice away, but the insistence of its whisper remained. *Sing solo?* Michael had always desired to be the centre of the spotlight, if even, but to commit the impetuous act and suffer The Penalty? He wavered, conflict roiling his brain. Surely, this was a reaction to the fatigue of constant practice and rehearsal, a fleeting emotion demanding dismissal.

Stay committed to the repertoire, Michael.

On the morning of the concert, Michael arose at 7:30 AM, before The Monitor beeped its wake-up call. With his pattern of shaving and showering completed, he cocooned himself in his bathrobe, strolling into his tiny, spartan, but efficient, modular kitchen. Today, he would limit himself to soft foods. A bowl of oatmeal, watery almost to the consistency of gruel, a small, pre-packaged container of applesauce, followed by a thorough rinsing of his larynx with a cup of warm tea flavoured with a lemon slice.

At 10:00 AM, he stood in full view of The Monitor, facing forward, then pivoting to reveal his back. The device uttered a melodic chime, signifying approval of his wardrobe.

Five minutes later, Michael secured the lock to his cubicle, turned and walked toward the elevator. Other singers loitered in the hall lobby, legs nervously shifting, anxious for the elevator 'Down' button light to extinguish.

By the 10:45 call time, all 'Chorale Reprise' singers had occupied their pre-assigned locations on the auditorium risers, silent as chastised schoolchildren, two hundred eyes focused on the conductor, awaiting the movement of his hands to signal the final, pre-performance run-through. A minuscule mistake by any vocalist was cause for immediate removal from the stage.

The price was one demerit.

Or worse.

The sound of one hundred soft, deep breaths floated into the fly loft, a retreat to the womb of relaxation techniques, a hopeful attempt to fend off the fear of choral mistakes and the terror of the consequences.

The conductor cued the orchestra. The beats ticking off, and then the maestro raised his arms, cueing the singers.

There were no detectable mishaps, starts and cut-offs were executed uniformly and crisply.

At the end of rehearsal, the collective exhale from the choral multitude gently wafted into the auditorium, signifying a blessed, brief reprieve. All singers would return, standing motionless in assigned positions, no later than

11:55.

Five minutes of silence.

Five minutes for the horror of committing a mishap to overwhelm the mind.

Five minutes of deep breathing and secret prayer.

Remember The Penalty.

Promptly on the hour, the main curtains obediently drew to the wings. The stage was bathed in cycling, luminous shades of red, white and blue.

Michael, like his fellow vocalists, could not visualise the audience. The house lights had dimmed to near-total darkness.

Still, Michael knew not a single seat remained unoccupied. The Ministry would never permit it.

The opening piece was an American adaptation of the 'Horst Wessel Song,' renamed 'Flag First.'

*Banner raised, arms linked,
The Nation strides in bold, solid ranks.
Brothers swept before evil acts and sedition,
step in mem'ry with us on our flanks...*

Michael despised every word of every verse, even as he robotically sang them with practised precision, his mind bludgeoned by the unrelenting reiteration, having endured a musical gulag.

With a rousing coda, the song was met with thunderous applause. Michael sensed that some of the clapping seemed deliberately too enthusiastic.

Did a spark of opposition flicker within hidden subversives inhabiting the audience? A dislike of the song's naked, blindly aggressive patriotism?

As the reaction of the confined, stifled gathering died to a smattering of faintly interacting palms, the conductor faced the audience, lowering his hands to signal the hush that would allow him to introduce the second selection.

Michael's mutinous, second self-insisted, 'Sing solo. Sing Enya's.'

The verses sprang forth from his larynx, his vocal cords independent of the fear magnified by oppression and the expectation of pain.

Casting aside his atmosphere of fright, Michael realised that the ultimate panic resided, not in him, but within The State, a political bully, terrified by the mere scent of audacious resistance.

The hall reverberated with the fifth and sixth verses of Enya's banned recording, sung in *fortissimo*, each word intoned with the clarity of the sky after a cleansing rainfall.

The message was unmistakable.

The denunciation of tyrants, the kinship with those unjustly imprisoned for the audacity to speak truth to their oppressors.

The PCOs reacted with swift reprisal.

Michael recalled nothing beyond the grasping, steely

hands, slamming his body onto the unforgiving solidity of the stage floor, an instantaneous benzodiazepine injection sailing him away into a blissful, black nothingness, numb to the danger of a future that offered no hope of free will or self-determination.

Why would it matter? No one truly possessed it, not even the elites themselves, prisoners of their own repressive ideology, a house built on the sand of falsehoods.

The thought drifted away.

Michael slowly recovered consciousness, his eyes fighting the blur of the drug. As his vision cleared, so did his mental haze.

His arms and legs lay strapped to a stout wooden chair, and a leather harness pinched his neck. Sensing no electrodes on his body, he exhaled. This perch, thankfully, was not electrified.

Before him was a lean man, seated in an upholstered recliner, incongruous with the barren room, a dank space lit with a solitary, harsh, unshielded bulb.

Dressed in a snugly tailored uniform with the familiar armband, imposed upon the man's face was a reptilian smile, with wilfully squinted eyes, a self-conscious compliment to the cold, scaly pallor of his blemished face.

The tag sewn to his tunic spelt out his name, 'Stark.'

Michael's mind churned with uneasy anticipation. The frigid, stone walls of the cell and the man's visage were united in their intent.

Steel yourself, Michael.

'Mr Sangster, I'm certain you are fully cognisant that your actions today are deserving of The Penalty. Do you agree?'

'It would be inappropriate of me to agree or disagree. If you require 'yes or no' answers, then I am compelled to provide them.'

'Allow me to rephrase. Are you fully cognisant of your actions today?'

'Yes, completely.'

'Are you aware that your actions are punishable by The Penalty?'

He hesitated for just a moment. 'Yes, I am.'

'Do you expect to receive the consequences the higher law of The District and The State requires of you?'

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Your blatant recital of banned subversive lyrics resulted in the complete ruination of The Sub-District’s Spring Concert. Do you realise the extent of the treasonous chaos you personally created? I would have summarily executed you.’

Michael suppressed the nervous urge to stammer. With precise, practised enunciation, he replied, ‘Sir, I was quickly subdued and have no recollection of the effect of my actions. I am not capable of answering your question.’

‘I’ll disavow that question. It is immaterial. Since you have admitted to the offence, you will be promptly incarcerated. There will be no court procedure, and with no hearing or trial, there is no prospect of appeal. Rules are rules, Mr Sangster.’

‘Yes, that is true, unfortunately.’

‘Do you know what The Penalty is?’

‘I have heard many rumours, but I possess no true understanding. All my musical compatriots live in fear of harsh retribution. That I do know. Do you fear also, Mr Stark?’

Stark barely controlled his rage against Michael’s impertinence. ‘I am not here to answer the impertinent questions of a criminal, Mr Sangster!’

‘I understand, Mr Stark. However, I believe your response did, in fact, provide it.’

‘Do not engage in presumption, Mr Sangster. Direct your attention to The Penalty. It often assumes many forms. Punishment is configured to provide the appropriate response to the nature of the offence against The District and The State.’

Michael willed his tightly bound body not to shiver.

‘As you decided to wilfully subvert regulations and express personal opinions, demonstrating utter and deliberate impertinence with your singing, contrary to The One True, United Voice of The Chorale, The Sub-District, The District and The State, you shall be punished in a manner befitting the offence.’

‘Am I permitted to ask in what form that will be?’

‘That is the one question I am willing and eager to answer. You may find that what I’m about to say is incredulous. The District and The State will not keep you from singing. That privilege shall not be revoked.’

Incredulous? Michael was stunned.

'You shall be provided with a soundproof living cubicle that, lamentably for you, is considerably more confined than that which you impetuously relinquished today. An eight-foot by ten-foot space, with a fold-down bed, a sink and a toilet. I'm sure you'll enjoy the view of the spacious prison yard through your small, but I regret to say, iron-barred, triple-glazed window.

'The accommodations have special features suitable for your restitution, a full-length, stainless steel mirror, and an Audio Monitor, mounted inside one of the concrete walls. Each day, you shall perform vocal warm-ups, followed by a full, solo performance of your beloved, subversive lyrical interpretation of the song you selfishly imposed upon our audience today. You will repeat this activity twice daily, promptly at 9:30 AM, and 2:30 PM, for the remainder of your deplorable existence, unless The District Ministry, in cooperation with The State, benevolently chooses otherwise.

'Leniency, sadly, is rarely granted, except in select cases of age and infirmity.

'As for your audience, it shall always be your reflection in the mirror, Mr Sangster.'

Michael shuddered, his hands uncontrollably twitching, his fingers mindlessly rapping in rhythmic staccato.

'I trust you and your audience will not tire of the performance.'

No, thought Michael, as he willed his nerves back into equilibrium, his hands relaxing, the fingers ceasing their rapping. *Mr Stark, my audience and I will not succumb to a madness induced by ceaseless reiteration.*

My intimate, arduous relationship with the Audio Monitor exposed its algorithmic flaws. It allowed me to train my voice, learning to modulate enunciation, pitch and rhythm in countless minute ways, all within the machine's rigid, predictable tolerances.

You, Mr Stark, are obtuse, empty of musical knowledge, and your arrogance is insipid and appalling.

The ways in which a song can be manipulated are boundless.

I will delight in the challenge, I will embrace every day, toying with the Monitor, as a cat torments a captive mouse.

It is a deficient, stupid contraption, a reflection of its creators. My trepidation finally extinguished, I logged onto the Internet Underground this morning, using an encrypted ID and password.

I am one of the first, there will be others. The weight of subversive songs, as you would disdainfully dismiss them, will one day suffocate The State, its oppression and its lies.

More voices will rise, Mr Stark.

Fear can be a journey toward discontent and disgust, evolving into rage, and finally, into active resistance.

You foolishly believe you have sentenced me to a crushingly repetitious, robotic reprise.

The Penalty is a sick, constricted concept, fabricated by your overlords and enforced by an army of lackeys.

You are one in a multitude of worker ants.

You are a ragman, peddling odds and ends, poorly sewn together, forming the tattered cloth of ideological suppression. Its only purpose is to flimsily clothe your paranoid Elite.

How utterly naked they truly are.

And they care nothing for you.

Be cautious, Mr Stark.

Do you not realise how easily you could become my cell-mate? If offered the choice, I would prefer my reflection in the mirror. Listen, as the trickle of a lone voice becomes a deluge of choristers. The word 'reprise.' It is so simple. Merely one vowel exchanged for another.

Beware that with one added consonant, it transforms the word into revolution.

Mr Stark, await our reprisal.

Author's Note: The standard English translation of the 'Horst Wessel Song' lyrics, as presented in this fictional story, have been completely altered by this writer and are original to him.

A WESTERN MYTH

HANNAH JANSSEN

Hyacinth woke up.

Her back was no longer leaning against a concrete wall.

There was no more darkness. For the first time in years, she was not jolted awake by the jangling of keys in the lock of her cell, as a strange hooded figure summoned her to do whatever his master bid.

His master, who had once been Hyacinth's lover, or so she had believed. He was her lover until the night he became her master, too. Her master, captor, taker, and keeper, but lover no more.

Those who love do not take, steal, possess, control, or hold hostage. They do not drug, restrain, hide, shame, or neglect. Love does not leave empty dishes crawling with maggots at the beloved's feet.

Those dishes – and the pest-ridden remnants of those bland, nutrition-less meals – were all gone now. No dust and flies dancing in the one stream of light that would project into the room from the single small window when the sun hit just right. No putrid, rusting pot in the corner by her pallet.

It has all vanished.

Maybe she has vanished?

Hyacinth could not say.

She could only blink against the bright sunlight as the rest of her senses came to life. She tasted sand in her mouth. Perhaps that was the taste of panic, or maybe dehydration. Her skin was hot and itchy. She only heard a ringing silence.

Once her eyes adjusted, she stilled. Despite the sand and heat, she'd hoped that she would find herself back in the garden.

Her garden.

The last place she remembered before waking up in a cold, damp cell was lush vegetation, towering trees, sweet fruit, and rich soil that cushioned her feet when she ran across the forest floor barefoot. Hyacinth always thought

that if she ever managed to leave that compound and all its horrors there, she'd simply return to her garden, to the life she lived before. She fantasised about breaking out of there one day and finding her way back to it.

Just as she had fallen asleep beneath a fruit tree, and woken up on frigid stone, she had hoped, night after night, that all would reverse itself. That she would close her eyes to grey and awaken to green.

But *this*?

This was not her garden.

This land was arid, hazy, empty, and devoid of all life.

Utterly meaningless.

Hyacinth's breaths became shallow, whether from the oppressive heat or her pending hysteria, she wasn't sure. It didn't matter – she couldn't breathe.

Where was she? How did she get here? Where was the stone? Where were the guards? The flies? Where was... *he*? And where was that beautiful place she had been before the darkness fell?

In any and every direction she looked, all she saw was a dusty horizon and rugged, jagged plants that were barely hanging onto their lives.

A lump formed in her throat, along with the definitive texture of physical sand caked against her cheeks. Perhaps panic and dehydration were not to blame after all.

She thought she knew fear when *he* put her to sleep each night and kept her under his 'care.' But the familiarity of him was enough of a comfort – a sick, distorted comfort – that she never felt alone, lost, confused, or terrified enough for her vision to blur and for bile to churn in her gut like this.

He, in all his cruelty and callousness, was still another being, something known.

Perhaps this is the darkness. Perhaps I am dead, she thought. *How ironic... A darkness so bright you cannot see. A silence so loud you cannot think.*

Hyacinth weighed her options. Should she remain and wait for someone to stumble across her and help? Her captor, even, who may come looking for his plaything?

Hyacinth began to walk instead.

This hell couldn't go on forever. At some point, it would have to end, and in its ending, she could find a new begin-

ning. Perhaps, she hoped, even a garden. Standing still guaranteed death, but movement forward promised a chance of survival, no matter how small.

If, of course, this isn't death already and I am marching through my afterlife, Hyacinth thought to herself.

Every step she took scraped deeper into the skin of her feet, for this wasn't the soft earth or smooth rock her soles knew. This was shifting, burning, volatile sand on her bare feet, causing them to blister and bleed, as if they were trying to convince her to give up.

The sun remained high and hot day after day. What once deliciously kissed her naked skin now ate away at it, searing her flesh till it peeled, angry and raw. Night gave her no reprieve. The chill of the air did nothing to soothe her burns and wounds. They frosted over, the cold burning her almost as much as the heat.

As she journeyed through the desert, she did her best to tend to the flakes of skin that fell off her and left her flesh open and exposed. She did what she could to nurse the blisters on her feet after every misstep.

Whether it was survival instinct or Hyacinth's competitive nature, she pushed herself to at least try to cling to her humanity – to embrace that which made life beautiful.

She pushed herself to smile at the burning skies at dusk – the most beautiful watercolour she'd ever seen. She laughed at the funny faces the man in the moon made at night. She revered the vibrant colours of the snake as it slithered past her, rather than recoil from fear.

But after seven days, fear and an urgency to assuage it as quickly as possible were all she could feel anymore. She felt a desperation to know where she was, to learn how anyone or anything could possibly survive, much less thrive, in this vastness. Any last effort to remain optimistic exhausted her and left bitterness on her tongue in place of the sand. Resentment and hatred battled with hope and determination. There was so much in the world to see, smell, hear, feel, and know... so much to discover, if she could just make it to the end of the sand.

Another week of the same story passed, but all too soon, she could find no more water to replenish what the tears drained, no food to nourish what the walking expended. No

one to share this experience with, except for the voices that began to whisper in her ears.

The first time they whispered to her, the metallic taste of panic coated her tongue, and her skin prickled, as if hundreds of sharp needles had pierced her all at once.

Were those thoughts actually hers? Some sort of spirit, perhaps? Hyacinth had no discernment left in her to tell the difference.

She fled from them at first, yet they followed her. No matter where she hid or how sharply her nails clawed at her face, the voices would not stop.

She thought she had finally descended into madness. It wasn't until they grew louder that she learned what it meant to lose one's mind.

The voices hissed in both ears, loudly enough that even a nearby snake turned its head.

Premonitions of her death, threats and coos in her former lover's voice...

Promises of survival if she only did what the voices bid, only to find that they lied when she did exactly as they asked...

'Please, please, leave me alone,' she pleaded. In her scramble to flee from this possession, Hyacinth stumbled on a small cactus. The thorns sliced into her shins as her hands and knees seared themselves on the hot sand. A small cry escaped her lips from both the physical pain and the despair slowly, slowly pooling in her stomach.

'Something will kill you in the end,' a lone voice told her, as she lay there, crouched and bleeding. 'Even if you survive, it's only a matter of time.'

Before this, whether in her garden or her prison, she always felt like life would go on forever, in some form, and that she would survive it. There was always a floor beneath her, even when she was hungry, thirsty, coerced, or longing for something better.

Now anguish stole the ground from beneath her feet.

It tried to steal the breath from her lungs, but she wouldn't let it. She took all the air she could. And Hyacinth screamed.

A guttural, feral yell.

She knew anything in hearing distance could come for her, if starvation, dehydration, or heat didn't kill her first.

She felt in her bones every way this desert and its unseen predators could end her. It was an overwhelming cognisance that ushered in a deep, crippling, blinding fear.

The voices shrieked at her now.

The volume of their bleak incantations silenced her courage. The reality killed her will. All the odds stacked against her erased her determination. Hyacinth felt drained of the zeal that once made her *'her.'* She began to forget that she once had dreams and spirit. Even as a prisoner in her cell, she still at least had the desire to wake up. She slept somewhat soundly, even had a favourite meal, and enjoyed conversing with one of the guards.

Now she conversed with her own psychosis.

Lying flat on the sand, each ridge of her spine protruding beneath her skin. Blood ran in bristle-sized rivulets down her leg. Hyacinth ignored them and stared directly into the eyes of the sun instead.

She found that she didn't care if she went blind. The voices convinced her that she could make the *sun* go blind if she tried hard enough. It sounded fun, so she agreed to try. After all, it didn't matter to her if she could no longer play the game of, 'Is that really a coyote coming for my entrails, or an oversized tumbleweed?' She wouldn't miss the disappointment of being fooled by a mirage that promised water, only for it to disappear when she got close.

The white light dissipated the chatter long enough that a memory pierced through.

In the quiet, she remembered how free she used to feel.

She remembered the ecstasy and joy of frolicking in the foliage, for as long as she wished, how infallible and blessed – almost chosen – she'd felt beneath the canopy, behind the trunks, and among the cattails near the pond. She was nearly drunk with happiness when she dozed off, that last night she spent in her oasis.

Hyacinth's life was perfect and innocent. When she awoke with chains cutting into her wrists, she believed that it had been a free life, too.

But now she truly knew freedom. The purity of her small world was its own cage, as much as it was a sanctuary.

Dying in the sand was the best thing to ever happen to her.

There is suffering in knowing that no one looked for her

or saved her. But there is a liberation in knowing that no one chained her, either.

No one told her how to live out there.

The desert only asked that she *live*.

And that was enough.

A ragged exhale escaped Hyacinth's sandpaper lips. She breathed a surrender to death, but it soon transformed into a laugh. It was long and raspy and didn't sound like her. Nothing about her surroundings, the state of her body, the condition of her mind, was humorous, but she was tickled by her own relief to be dying.

In death, there remained only a sweet release, and it was all hers. No one could stop it, take it, or prevent it. This pain was entirely her own, and what a joy that was.

Joy. It was an entirely new feeling to wash over her.

Joy. Excitement. Eagerness. Passion.

She wanted to see how much more of this she could take. If this unfamiliar, unknowable land wanted to break her, it would have to try harder.

'Dance for me,' she bellowed to the desert, the voices, the snake, and the coyote. It was a command she knew well. She could hear her captor's voice in her mind, but it was a faded memory and not the imitation that she'd been plagued by for weeks.

'We have been.'

Hyacinth gasped and spun around in the direction of the voice.

A real voice. Not the mimicry, echoes, and ephemeral whispers she'd come to know.

She was not alone, even her vision was still marred by her battle with the sun.

She could *feel* it.

Her body hummed with the vibrations of a voice that had to travel through air to reach her eardrums. Her nose detected musk, earth, and clean oxygen. Whoever spoke to her was ancient, raw, and powerful – something older than the desert itself, and even more unbreakable.

Slowly, Hyacinth saw a man and a woman standing several feet in front of her.

The man had an arm around the woman's waist, but he did not stand behind her. He stood directly beside her, his arm protective. Hyacinth did not think the woman looked

like she needed protecting. But the woman did not appear uncomfortable or rebellious in his embrace. She looked comfortable, like she belonged there.

Equals, but not the same.

Hyacinth squinted at the couple in disbelief, confusion planting her feet, despite the prospect of help standing before her. Upon seeing Hyacinth's hesitation, however, the woman lifted a free hand to beckon Hyacinth forward.

But Hyacinth did not understand.

Then she saw the man smirk. It was like he could read her doubt and confusion. He was neither sadistic nor deprecating, but rather, understanding. The twist of his lips told Hyacinth that he had been there before. The woman dipped her chin in a nod.

She had been here, too, Hyacinth realised.

The woman then lifted her hand higher, coaxing Hyacinth once more.

Hyacinth had no choice but to trust them. Whether they saved her or killed her, it was all the same. She had nothing to lose. She took her first step. The man nodded his head in approval. The woman smiled warmly.

When she got close enough to touch them, she nearly collapsed at their feet, but the man caught her, his grip strong but firm. The woman's hand cupped her face.

'We've been waiting for you,' she said softly. The woman felt oddly familiar – something akin to a mother, but more. Mother, sister, lover – as familiar as Hyacinth herself.

Hyacinth looked up at the man holding her, his tall, strong frame shielding her own broken body from the sun. He, too, felt familiar and all-encompassing.

'Who are you?' Hyacinth asked.

The woman looked up at the man with the deepest love and respect in her eyes. A wry grin twisted her lips, like she was excited that Hyacinth asked. The man pulled the woman close to him, so that he was a shield over them both. The woman squeezed Hyacinth's hand and looked kindly into her eyes.

'We are your nature. All you need to do is follow us.'

M.I.L.

GEORGE OLIVER

Winter

I hate my mother-in-law – or, for the purpose of this writing exercise, the *M.I.L.* – and I can't explain why. Maybe I can now. Hatred isn't casual. Dislike would be easier. Better yet, ambivalence.

Sure, there's her irritating laugh: loud, long, screechy. There are her dubious opinions that contradict her self-defined liberal worldview – a worldview that would otherwise align with both her daughter's values and my own. There's her unspoken but clear desire for me to be British-born and bred, like her daughter. Yet none of these are responsible for my hatred. The ways the *M.I.L.* makes me want to pull my hair out or scream from rooftops defy straightforward explanation. It's about the small gestures. There's nuance.

I'm constantly reminded of this one evening in January, when I returned from work and found the *M.I.L.* parked on our sofa. Her visit was unannounced, as so often happened. This wasn't what got to me, though. Her shoes and socks were off. One free foot was digging into the gap between the two fixed sofa cushions; another was stretching for the coffee table. A glass of sauvignon blanc was next to a coaster rather than on it, and each time she returned the glass to the table, it seemed to have edged closer to where her foot kept returning. Everything was precarious.

'Good day?' the *M.I.L.* asked, dispersing the words into the room rather than looking up from her lifestyle magazine and saying them to my face.

'No,' I said blankly.

'No?'

'No. Not such a good day.'

The *M.I.L.* let the information settle, making no attempt to develop it. I started making a 6 PM coffee in the kitchenette. She went back to her reading, interrupted by occasional foot repositioning and wine slurping.

Before I had finished making coffee, my wife Jackie came downstairs from her office.

'Tony's had a bad day,' the M.I.L. offered, looking up from her magazine into her daughter's eyes.

'Yeah? Bad day, honey?'

'That's not what I said,' I tried, from the kitchenette.

In the kitchenette, Jackie reset the conversation. She lowered its volume.

'Bad day?' She asked again.

'Not exactly, but not such a good day.'

'Why not such a good day?' she gently pressed.

'Jerry asked me for more details about the Wobble.'

'The Wobble?'

'You know, the time off before Christmas. The mini breakdown I had.'

'Oh, you're calling it the *Wobble*?'

'I prefer the Wobble.'

'Okay, the Wobble.'

'Anyway, he asked me about it, saying it was a formality. A company policy and paperwork he had to file.'

'And?'

'I gave him answers. But the questions were intrusive. Invasive. Unfair. Asking if I have a history of mental illness. Asking if there's a history of it in my family – or in yours. Asking which medication I'm on.'

'But you're not on any.'

'Well, he asked why I'm not. And why I don't have 'anticipatory measures' in place for this kind of thing.'

'But you didn't anticipate this. It took us all by surprise.'

'Exactly. He said that there was an 'element of doubt' amongst the higher-ups.'

'Really?'

'He assured me that he trusted me, that it was the higher-ups with doubts, not him, but I wasn't so sure. I'm not so sure.'

Later that evening, it became apparent that our attempt at discretion hadn't succeeded because the M.I.L. had some questions of her own. I was preparing dinner for the three of us: green bean casserole.

This was what got to me. Most people would respect the clear, intended privacy of the matter. They would either pretend they hadn't overheard or avoid overhearing in the first place. Our house may be small, but it has other rooms – other pockets of space to escape to or from.

But not the M.I.L. She brought it up, openly broadcasting her awareness of private information she wasn't supposed to have. She did something similar three months later, in April.

Spring

It was Easter Sunday. Jackie's entire family – every uncle, aunt, and cousin – gathered at the M.I.L.'s place. The M.I.L. made food for everyone – honeyed chicken, mini lamb kebabs, salad bowls. It was an almighty spread. The M.I.L. and her sister had been drinking since morning while preparing the food.

'Settle our debate, everyone,' slurred the M.I.L.'s sister, Frankie, as we sat down to eat.

The M.I.L. rolled her eyes, then opened her mouth to speak. 'Frankie says that 9 in 10 people claim unemployment benefits. I told her that can't be right.'

'No! Yes! I read it!'

'9 in 10?'

'No! 0.9 in 10!'

'That's not what you said!'

'It is!'

The sisters were hysterical at the ramifications of the semantic slip.

'How can you have 0.9 people?' Jackie's youngest cousin, Alex, said.

It opened up a new conversation amongst the family about which parts of a person, concrete or abstract, would make up 0.9.

'Which parts would make the cut, and which would be sacrificed?' Frankie asked the table.

The whole thing was ridiculous. Harmless. Joyous.

The conversation orbited this theme of employment statistics. Last year's general election was, in part, a standoff over policies addressing the unemployment crisis. House-

holds up and down the country were continuing to translate this political matter into everyday curiosity.

'Maybe Tony has something to add. He knows about this stuff better than anyone else,' the M.I.L. announced.

'I don't have anything to say.'

'But you do know.'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'Why not? Everyone's family here. We're family, right?'

The M.I.L. turned to the rest of the table. Everyone awkwardly avoided eye contact except her sister, who grinned drunkenly, willing her to go on.

'Mum,' Jackie cut in.

'This is the problem, Jackie. Everyone's afraid to talk about things. We need to speak. The country would be in better shape if we did.'

'Has Tony not found a job?' Jackie's grandfather asked.

'No, he hasn't found a job yet, but he's trying.'

'So don't worry,' I snapped. 'I won't steal your taxes for much longer.'

Summer

The M.I.L. has a unique ability to make people feel terrible. She tears up the contract for traditional methods of being mean. She did it again in July.

The M.I.L., my parents, Jackie, and I stayed in Jackie's late dad's holiday home in Corfu. Despite the painful memories, the M.I.L. had kept the property. It was my first time there with anyone besides Jackie, and my parents' first visit.

M.I.L. doesn't get on with my Mum and Dad. She's dismissive of Mum and patronising to Dad. She's cold and detached with her. She doesn't take him seriously. She finds her outgoing, vibrant personality threatening. She considers him a cartoon cut-out of a person: vulnerable, unserious, an easy target. Her treatment of my parents is predictable. It fits a predetermined mould of in-law in-fighting.

The eight-day trip was going as badly as expected. Days 1-3 brought strained conversations and passive aggressions. Days 4-6 gifted us with uncomfortable compromises – sight-

seeing as a two and a three, or a two and a two and a one. Drink bills were settled as two families, avoiding debates over whose turn it was to pay. Meals were eaten as a joined family in the same room, with the TV on and minimal conversation.

Day 7 was different. It was 7 PM. Jackie and I had spent the day exploring, finishing with alfresco cocktails on the cobbled streets of Corfu's Old Town. We arrived back at the apartment tipsy, our day drinking out of practice, our tolerance not helped by empty stomachs. My parents had not returned from their own exploring.

Jackie went to the kitchen to rustle up dinner. I was responsible for finding more drinks. I took a bottle of unopened rosé from the fridge and divided a quarter of it between two glasses. I placed one glass in the middle of the chopping board Jackie had readied a knife and stick of cucumber on. She tutted, then laughed, then picked up the glass, sipped, then put it down – next to the board rather than back on it. Capitalising on new board space, I picked up the first three cucumber slices as soon as Jackie had cut them, I dropped the cucumber into my mouth and crunched obnoxiously, successfully winding Jackie up.

I went to sober up with a swim in the pool. The M.I.L. was sitting on a sun-lounger. There was no patient progression through conversation. She opted to catapult.

'Do you dream, Tony?'

'Of course I dream.'

'Not everybody does. And not every night. I mean, sometimes people dream and forget, so is it really dreaming?'

The M.I.L. was outdoing my tipsiness. She was hammered.

'When was your last good dream?'

'Last night was a good one.'

'Oh yeah?'

'I dreamed that I was hovering off the ground.'

'Just you?'

'Just me.'

'So what happened? What's the hook?'

'No hook. I just tried to go about my day, as normal.'

'But it was a dream. Nothing was normal.'

'No, it was. Except for the hovering.'

‘That’s boring.’

‘I guess.’

I had more in my notes. I keep a dream journal. It started as an unemployment hobby, but I stuck with it after getting a new job. I’m not sure why. I note the dreams down and don’t do much with them after that. But the ‘more’ in my notes for the dream in question was only further description of the hovering, because it was so vivid. There was a yellow glow around the soles of my feet. The ground repelled my feet as if magnetic south or north poles were attempting to make contact with identical poles. My feet weren’t making contact with some kind of second, invisible layer of ground; they *were* floating, so I couldn’t feel anything below them except the repelling if I tried to force them downwards. But I could stretch my toes and I could jump. I would simply land in the same position, a metre above the ground.

After the half-conversation, the M.I.L. left the poolside, retreating indoors to find more of whatever alcohol she was deep into. I had my swim and went back inside.

The M.I.L.’s diary was left carelessly or strategically on the kitchen counter. I didn’t even know she kept a diary. For most, the fact might be a secret, but the M.I.L. isn’t like most. If nothing else, she’s transparent. An open book.

I turned to the page hosting the diary’s built-in fabric bookmark. A page dated 6 July. Day 3 of our trip. The M.I.L. had titled the entry ‘?’ It wasn’t long, but it was piercing.

?

I’m starting to doubt my daughter’s choice of husband. I’ve tried to give him a chance, which might be hard to believe.

Today’s their first wedding anniversary, but I’ve known him longer than a year. He’s a good person. He loves Jackie. But he’s not strong enough – for her, for the world, for all the inevitable challenges that life will throw at them

during a long, happy marriage. Jackie will have other chances to love, if she wants to notice or take them.

I can't help but feel that this is wasted time. It's not that Jackie needs better; she needs more. He's not enough for her.

The thing that got to me most was how the M.I.L. hadn't even dignified me with a name. Even if she hadn't said them, she had written things she would never be able to take back.

Was I supposed to do nothing?

'Tony, what's this?' Jackie says, holding up his notebook.

'What's what?'

'This! What you wrote about my mother!'

Without the first-person authority of his pen and paper, Tony now joins her in the third-person. Three more months have passed. It's a Tuesday.

'You went through my things?'

'I didn't. You left it on the coffee table.'

'Did I?'

'What is it?'

'Did you read it?'

'Of course I read it.'

'So why are you asking?'

'Because I don't know. Is it a diary? An essay? Fiction?'

'I don't really know.'

'What the fuck, Tony?'

Jackie's interrogation continues for half an hour. She accuses him of being a coward, of writing instead of doing. She criticises his use of big words he doesn't understand, like 'aestheticise.' She mentions spelling mistakes in what she calls the writing's 'lazy exposition section.'

But Jackie also asks, sincerely, if he's feeling okay. If this is all part of another Wobble. She apologises. She agrees with a lot of what he has written about the M.I.L.

The biggest inconvenience of Tony's piece of writing,

even before Jackie found it, is that it started to change the way he saw the world. It started to affect how he viewed the very things he was writing about. Sometimes these feelings grew out of mistakes. He would walk past houses written as painted white, then find out that they're beige. He would have a conversation with one of the M.I.L.'s neighbours, like Stefan, then remember incorrectly writing his name as Steven. He would drive past familiar road signs, realising that they say 'STOP', not 'GIVE WAY', as he had written.

To change the tone of the October day, Jackie suggests that they go to the cinema. Their local is showing the latest Todd Haynes film.

They see the film. Its interests in repression and secrecy do little to change the subject, but do change the angle. At a restaurant after the film, Jackie and Tony are granted the privilege of externalising things going through their heads and attaching them to Haynes' character names: labels for imagined people they do not feel guilty talking about in judgemental, destructive ways.

'So, what now?' Jackie asks.

'I don't know.'

'Well, what did you think would happen by writing it?'

'I wasn't sure anyone would read it.'

'You need to talk to her.'

'What would I say?'

'Tell her how you feel. Be honest. Call her by her name, for a start.'

'I can try.'

'I don't think we'll get anywhere until you do. It's her fault, I know. She's stubborn. Dad's death didn't help, but she's always been like this. We've got to get past this stalemate. All of us. Things can't go on like this.'

'I'll speak to her.'

It's either a blessing or a curse that the M.I.L. is coming over that evening to stay for a few days. It's a visit she announced, for a change. Jackie and Tony hatch a plan. Jackie will drop Tony off at their house. She will go and get the haircut she has been putting off for weeks. Then, she will go

to the supermarket to get everything needed for her mother's favourite: mango curry. He will give the house a once-over while waiting for the M.I.L. to arrive. The plan is contingent on the M.I.L. being uncharacteristically punctual, but Tony has also been instructed to text Jackie updates like 'slow down' or 'speed up.'

The M.I.L. is early. Tony is midway through cleaning underneath the sink when the doorbell rings. Expecting an early evening parcel, he's surprised to find the M.I.L. wiping her high heels on the doormat. She's smiling.

'Tony. How are you?'

There seem to be no traps nor tricks to the question. Before the Wobble, Tony became accustomed to people asking him how he was in such a way that 'Fine. You?' was the expected response. Post-Wobble, he has been contending with versions of the question that are uncomfortable for the questioner, the responder, or both. The latter situation cannot be helped. People have to ask. He has to answer. At either end, honesty is awkward. But a reply of 'Fine. You?' would be distrusted, creating different tension.

'I'll be better when I've finished filling that bin bag. Do you mind? Have a seat and I'll put the kettle on.'

Tony spends 15 minutes finalising the mess under the sink. Then he ties the bin bag, opens the front door, drops the dustpan and brush by the wall, goes to the outside bin, and slings the bag into it.

On his way back inside, Jackie phones.

'I'm only just finished with the hairdresser. The queue was massive! I'm heading to the supermarket now, but can you get the wine?'

Jackie and Tony always go to the same wine bar with the M.I.L. She prefers their selection over others.

He invites her to come with him, and she agrees.

On the way to the wine bar, Tony stops to get petrol. He brings the M.I.L. so she can choose specific bottles, but also so he can say what needs to be said. She has calmly accepted each small addition to the day's plan. He didn't expect things to fall into place this easily

Everything next happens quickly.

Tony approaches the woman at the counter while the M.I.L. opens the fridge on the left side of the small shop, and a man bursts through the door on the right. He throws it open so forcefully that the glass cracks, though it doesn't shatter. He wears a balaclava and waves a handgun, unsteady on his feet. Although most of his face is hidden, confusion flickers in his eyes.

'Tony!' the M.I.L. screams.

Tony acts on instinct. He turns 45° to face the man. His left foot catches on the partially folded corner of the carpet in front of the counter, and he loses his footing entirely, stumbling into the man, who also falls. The man manages to keep hold of the gun, but Tony's unexpected move catches him off guard, forcing the weapon towards the ground.

Again, the M.I.L. screams.

He stands back up, embarrassed. He looks at Tony, then he looks at the woman at the counter. Without a word, he turns and runs back through the open door, jumping into a silver car just before it speeds away.

The M.I.L. looks at Tony from the fridge.

Tony looks back at her from the floor.

Something shifts, then – she looks at him differently. And he finds himself looking at her differently, too.

THE HARLOW GOWN

MARC SIMON

Saul stood in Mueller's office, by himself, breathing hard. Bits of straw stuck out from his hair like porcupine quills. It was so warm compared to his unheated cell block that he wanted to unbutton the top of his striped coat. But that was unthinkable without first asking for permission.

He wiggled his toes. The day before, he had pocketed the trimmings from a pair of wool pants he'd shortened for an SS officer and stuffed them in the holes in his boots. He was terrified that Camp Director Mueller had found out. Why else would he have been summoned so early?

Before Kristallnacht, Saul had been Munich's most sought-after tailor. His shop, *der Schneidermeister*, was two blocks from city hall, just off the Marienplatz. In addition to his Jewish customers, he catered to many of the city's most influential men, including Mueller and several Nazi party members.

Kristallnacht changed everything. Thugs burned his shop, his three-bedroom apartment, stole his Steinway, and beat him unconscious. They took away his wife, Bayla, and his daughter, Helena. He'd heard only rumours about where they'd been taken. They sent him to Dachau Prison, just outside of Munich.

Some of Dachau's Jews had been able to buy their way out, but Mueller wasn't about to let a valuable talent walk out the door. He set up a tailor shop in his office, and within weeks, he was making money hand over fist from his military and party friends. Mueller would tell them that a suit or uniform expertly tailored by *der Schneidermeister* not only fit better, but made them look more commanding. Many of his so-called customers had Saul stitch a tiny SR on the back of a lapel or an inside jacket pocket as a mark of authenticity.

1938 turned into 1939, then 1940. The demand for Saul's services never slackened, nor did the humiliations. During a fitting for a junior SS officer, as Saul knelt behind him to chalk mark the seat of his pants, the man broke wind

in his face and laughed about it. Saul clutched a straight pin, wanting to thrust it into the man's scrotum, to sink into the soft flesh, skewer his testicles. It would have meant an excruciating death for him, and for what? Vengeance? Honor? He would have been just another dead body on the daily stack. What was the expression? Better to live on one's knees than to die on one's feet.

The minutes crept by. No one came. He stared at an open box of chocolates on Mueller's desk. About half of them had been eaten, judging by the clutter of empty wrappers. Would Mueller miss one more? Saul's wife always kept the crystal dishes filled with hard candies throughout the house. For a sweet life, she said.

Saul edged toward the desk, barely raising his feet off the ground. He strained his ears, searching for the slightest noise. Prison life had made his hearing intensely acute. With a last glance over his shoulder, he snatched the nearest chocolate. He chewed furiously and swallowed the paper wrapper along with the sticky caramel bulge. He ran his tongue over his teeth, inside every cavity, to get each tiny bit of chocolate, then scraped his lips with his teeth.

Still no sound. The warmth was making him drowsy. Desperate to stay awake, he silently recited the blessings over bread and wine, and the Mourner's Kaddish. He tried to recall the addresses and phone numbers of his aunts and uncles, his nephews and cousins on both sides of his family. Hoping the pain would revive him, he bit the inside of his lip until it bled.

The door banged open. Mueller brushed by him, carrying a package wrapped in brown paper. He dropped into his desk chair and straightened a stack of forms. A guard entered with a tray of rolls and a pot of coffee. He poured the coffee and left. The rich aroma made Saul woozy.

Mueller bit into a roll and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He ripped the package open, took out a newspaper, and flipped through the sections. Without looking up, he said, 'Bring me a pair of scissors.'

Saul trotted to the far side of the large room, where his makeshift shop was set up. Two curtains, hung on metal bars extending from the corner, a one-foot-high riser, a three-sided mirror, and a sewing machine bolted to a small wooden table. With every step he took, the stolen wool

bunched between his toes. It had been sheer folly to take it. Surely Mueller was laying a trap for him.

The scissors shook as Mueller grabbed them from Saul's hand. 'Why the hell are you fidgeting, Rosensweig? You need to take a piss?'

'No, Director.'

He nodded to an adjacent bathroom. 'Damn it, go if you need to. I can't have Jew piss on my floor.' Mueller clipped a column from the newspaper. 'Damn good article. Written up just right.' He leaned back in his chair. 'Captain and Mrs. Heinrich Mueller of Munich are pleased to announce the upcoming marriage of their daughter Katrina to Lieutenant Franz Kepfer, son of Colonel and Mrs. Joseph Kepfer, also of Munich. Captain Mueller is a highly decorated war veteran who is currently serving... and so on and so on... are you listening to me, moron?'

'Yes, sir.'

'At least you could say congratulations.'

'Excuse me, sir. Congratulations.'

Mueller shook his head. 'That was pathetic. Put some enthusiasm into it. No, wait. Don't you Jew scum have a word for it?'

'Sir?'

'Congratulations.'

'Yes, sir.'

Mueller slammed his fist on the table. 'Then say it.'

As if he were reading from a dictionary, Saul said, 'Mazeltov.'

'Mazeltov! That's the word. Ha. Wait until I tell my wife.' He burped. 'What the hell is the matter with you today? Haven't had the delicious breakfast we give you?'

'No, sir. I was brought here before the food came.' *Had Mueller counted the chocolates?* His bowels clenched.

Mueller pushed his frameless glasses up on his beak-like nose. 'Something is troubling you, tailor. You're more miserable than usual. Here. For the breakfast you missed. I'll bet this beats turnip soup. Here, doggy. Catch!' He lobbed a cinnamon roll high in the air. Saul caught it before it hit the floor. 'Mazeltov! Well, don't just look at it, eat it.'

Saul gulped down half the roll. He tasted butter, cinnamon, and sugar. It was like the rolls he used to buy first thing Sunday mornings, hot out of Alois Dallmayr bakery, a

treat for his daughter before he walked her to Sunday school.

'You see? I'm not half bad. If only the miserable scum in this damn hole realised it, I'd get a hell of a lot more work out of you. You think it's easy being in charge here? Do you?'

Saul wanted to ask Mueller if perhaps he'd like to change places with him. If he'd like to sleep on a lice-infested, rat-infested straw mat, next to three other starving skeletons that stunk of sweat and shit. If he would enjoy it when his teeth crumbled on a petrified crust of ersatz bread, if he'd be happy to go without word from his family for what seemed like forever. Instead, he said, 'No, sir.'

'And now my daughter's wedding. It's only a week off. Damn fool kids, always in a rush... Good Christ, I hope she's not pregnant.' He stuffed two chocolates in his mouth. 'So why am I bothering to tell this to a piece of shit like you? My wife hired a seamstress who is a total incompetent. She can't get the damn wedding gown to fit properly. My daughter is panicking. I know the shop is scheduled to the hilt, but to the hell with that. Katrina's wedding gown is our priority.'

Sweat rolled down Saul's back again. He raised his hand and whispered, 'Sir?'

'What?' Mueller blew his nose with a cloth napkin. 'Speak up, for God's sake.'

'As you know, I am a men's tailor.'

For a moment, Mueller's face contorted, as if he'd been punched in the stomach. 'I don't give a damn. It's all needles and thread, isn't it? Two hundred and fifty wedding guests. High-ranking officers and party officials. The dress must fit her perfectly'. He walked up to Saul and smacked him on the back of the head. 'Understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

He lit a cigarette and spat a bit of tobacco on the floor. 'Tailor, this truly is your lucky day. I'm giving you a new uniform and a warm shower, with real soap. And why?'

Saul knew he had to speak up. 'Why, sir?'

'My daughter is coming here tomorrow morning for a fitting – you didn't think I'd bring you to Munich, did you? Anyway, I can't have you smelling like the beast that you

are.' He took a thick magazine titled *die Shon Braut* out of the wrapping paper. A red ribbon extended from the centre of the magazine. Mueller flipped it open and said, 'Look here.' When Saul hesitated, he said, 'Come here, stupid.'

It was a photograph of Hollywood star Jean Harlow in a form-fitting white satin gown. The photo caption read, *The Dazzling Miss Harlow*.

Mueller continued. 'My daughter is fixated on this woman. God knows why, the woman died years ago. She says she wants to look like this picture. Take this magazine and study the gown. That's what she wants.' Mueller banged on his desk twice.

Two guards rushed in. They gave Saul a chunk of rough soap and marched him into the shower adjacent to their quarters. On the wooden bench were a clean striped prison uniform and a new pair of boots. Saul dried himself and saved the remaining soap to trade with. He ran back to his block with the magazine. The other men from his cabin were out, shovelling snow at the quarry.

The magazine article began, '*A generous helping of Hollywood glamour, this sizzling gown is cut on the bias, and true to Miss Harlow's style, blouses at the bust, shimmers past the hips, clinging like a second skin, and falls to the floor in a puddle of crepe-backed silk satin.*'

The scale of the gown was impressive. The train was eight feet long, with a nine-foot circumference, silk satin buttons, and yards of embroidered French lace. The alterations would be tricky. Strangely, he relished the challenge.

He read the rest of the magazine, studying every page as if it were the Talmud. There were the articles, *Should You See Him the Night Before?* Why would you? It might bring bad luck to the wedding. The bride and groom would be spending the rest of their lives together. They could stay apart one last night. *Your First Home Together: Dos and Don'ts*. Now this was full of good, practical advice. What did young people know about buying furniture, or real estate, or the real world, for that matter? There were so many thieves out there ready to prey on the young and naive.

What a wedding he would have given Helena, with friends and relatives regaling the bride and groom, dancing

the *Hora* around them. He would have spared no expense to ensure her happiness. How wonderful it would have been to feel her arm resting on his as he walked her down the aisle. To raise her veil and see the love in her eyes. To feel the sweet sorrow as he gave her away. And grandchildren. How he longed for them to carry on his name. But now? Better that there were no grandchildren if they had to live in a world like this.

On the inside of the back cover was an advertisement for a tropical resort. He traced his fingers over the tanned young couple in their bathing suits, stretched out under a palm tree on a white sand beach with tropical blue water. The caption read, 'Picture yourself down in Havana.'

He tried to imagine the fragrance of oranges and tropical flowers, the delicious freedom of floating in the sea, or simply meandering along the shore with his wife, watching his daughter skipping in the sand. He tore the page from the magazine and ripped it into pieces.

Smoked fish, breads, eggs and bacon, coffee cakes, and a coffee urn had been set up on a long table in Mueller's office that morning. When Saul arrived, he averted his eyes, fearful he might faint with hunger if he stared too long. If all went well, perhaps Mueller would give him another scrap.

A buxom young woman, chewing on a piece of strudel and struggling with the sleeve of her gown, caught his attention. Somehow, she had managed to pull the gown over her right shoulder, and her arm was stuck halfway down the sleeve. The more she tugged, the tighter it got, like Chinese handcuffs. Drops of sweat dotted her upper lip.

'Katrina,' Mueller said, 'this is the master tailor.'

'Papa, I'm stuck.'

'What? Wait, I'll help you.'

The thought of Mueller's greasy fingers touching the silk fabric distressed Saul. He waved his hand. 'If you please, sir, allow me.'

Mueller raised his hand behind Saul's head as if to smack him, but instead, he clapped him on the back and said, 'Well, go on, go on then.'

The smell of lilac wafted over him as he approached her. It was his wife's favourite scent. She would dab lilac

perfume behind her ears and knees before they made love. Saul thought of how he caressed the curves of her body as she lay naked under the top sheet. Just a light touch of her fingers on his thigh or abdomen was enough to arouse him.

Saul pointed to the riser. 'This way, Miss.' As she entered his work area, he snipped the sleeve at the seam and pulled it off her arm. She gasped, but Saul said, 'It's of no concern. I'll re-attach it later.' He placed it on top of his sewing machine and picked up some pins and a tape measure. Looking at Mueller, he said, 'May I go on with the fitting, sir?'

Mueller's pleasant tone took Saul by surprise. 'Of course, tailor, of course. You're in charge. Work your magic.'

'If you would be so kind as to step up on the riser. I need to take your measurements.'

As he leaned around her with his tape measure, he felt the warmth of her body. He measured across her chest and bust, her upper arms, shoulders and back, against her hips and thighs. Occasionally, his hands brushed her bare skin. His fingertips tingled, and for the first time in months, his groin stirred. In a blood rush moment, he imagined how good it would feel to have this fleshy young woman right there on the floor.

Katrina said, 'The moment I saw this gown, I had to have it. Isn't it gorgeous? This is going to be the most important day of my life. I want so much to look glamorous for Franz. Oh, Papa, before I forget, Mama said to tell you that Uncle Kurt and Aunt Hilda are coming in early and staying at our house.'

'What?'

'Mama said you wouldn't like it, but she said, too bad, they're family'. She turned to face the mirror. 'I don't know why you don't like Uncle Kurt, Papa. He tells the funniest stories.'

'Your funny uncle owes me a lot of money.'

'So? You have plenty, right? He does, doesn't he, Mr. Tailor?' She looked at her father. 'Is he allowed to answer, Papa?'

'Answer her, scum... er, tailor.'

The money Mueller was making from his tailoring was considerable, but he said, 'I wouldn't know about money, Miss.'

'Well, I do.' She spoke to her reflection. 'Anyway, I hope the weather is nice for the wedding. I want the sun to shine on us. Like a blessing. Sometimes I think I should have held the ceremony later in the spring, outdoors, with millions of white and pink roses everywhere. But Franz and I, we couldn't wait. He is so handsome. We want to have lots of children for the Fatherland. They'll be so beautiful.' She looked at the tailor's reflection. 'Do you have children, tailor?'

The question struck him like a dagger. Keeping his eyes lowered, he said, 'I have one daughter, Miss.'

'What's her name?'

He hesitated.

'Answer her.'

'Her name is Helena.'

'Helena. I love that. You should have named me Helena, Papa. Katrina is so common. Tell me about her, tailor.'

Helena had music in her voice and a bounce in her step. As a little girl, she loved to turn cartwheels. How she learned to do them, Saul couldn't say, but her nimbleness delighted him. She started piano when she was four, and she practiced for an hour a day. She never had to be coerced. She took to the instrument instinctively. Saul made her a crushed blue velvet jumper, trimmed with white lace, for her Sunday school recital when she was eight. He beamed as he watched her play a three-minute version of *Ein Kleine Nachtmusik* from memory. The other parents congratulated him on having such a beautiful, talented daughter. Saul said, 'She enjoys playing the piano.'

'Oh, she's talented. What else? How old is she?'

'She is eighteen now.'

'Is she as pretty as I am?'

The first time Saul realised his daughter had become a woman was at her grandmother's funeral four years ago. At fourteen, she stood taller than his wife, with hazel eyes and honey-coloured hair and an elegant, long neck. The best, brightest young men from the synagogue flocked by their house to see her. He said, 'She is very pretty.'

Katrina frowned. She smoothed her hair back from her forehead and preened at the mirror. 'Of course you would say that. You're her father. But honestly, how pretty could she be? I mean, nothing personal, but all your Jewess-

es, it's well known that they're swarthy. Not fair, like me. It's the curse of your race.'

His nostrils flared, and he felt something snap inside him, a release from the fear that yoked him to the sewing machine, and from this horrid place where he was destined to die. 'I am saying, my daughter is beautiful.'

'Fine, she's beautiful.' Katrina sighed, 'Papa, I need a break. I'm starving.'

The image of this chunky woman squeezing into this sleek gown suddenly repulsed him. What did it matter now, what he said? In his old voice, the voice of *der Schneidermeister*, he said, 'No eating.'

'What?'

Saul knelt to move the hem away from a bit of dirt on the floor. 'This gown is designed to fit quite closely to the body. If you indulge yourself with heavy foods before your wedding, you will look like a sausage stuffed into a satin casing.'

For a moment, she looked as if she were going to break out in tears. She yelled, 'Papa! Did you hear what this pig just said?'

Saul went on, feeling slightly lightheaded, unable to stop. 'You will listen now. The gown is too tight. I can alter it so that it fits properly. If you restrict your appetite, so much the better. Then it will be perfect.'

Katrina put her hands on her thighs and bent at the waist, so that her breasts were within inches of his nose. 'It had better. Jew.' She spat in his face.

Saliva slid down his cheek. 'I'm finished. Step down now.'

Minutes after Katrina, Mueller and the guards clubbed Saul across his back, legs, and sides with a nightstick. However, following Mueller's instructions, they left his hands and eyes untouched. Even as he listened to the blows smack against his ribs and knees, he hardly felt them.

Two days later, he could barely breathe without clenching up. His abdomen was distended and painful to touch. Blood surged into his mouth when he coughed.

The pain and the blood on his lips forced him to work

slowly and carefully, lest he soil the gown. He barely acknowledged Mueller's shouts to hurry up and finish.

After three days, water was all he could take. Every time he reached to reposition a button or let out a seam, he felt his insides tear a little more. He tried to remember basic anatomy. Some organ had burst, he was sure. For minutes at a time, the pain would dissipate as if to tease him, then come roaring back twice as strong. It was only the thought of finishing the gown that kept him from passing out.

How strange it seemed to craft such a beautiful thing for such a horrid creature. But then, isn't that precisely what he'd been doing since he'd been brought there, skilfully crafting clothes for these monsters? How could he have allowed himself to do it for so long? If only he could undo every stitch, tear down every hem, rip out every pleat. The gorge rose in his throat at the ignominy of it all, and tears came to his eyes, but he fought them back. Tears were stupid and meaningless now. This gown would be the last time he would please his master. Of this, he was certain.

In his growing delirium, he imagined Helena dressed in this gown on her wedding day. How the satin would ripple and flow behind her as she walked down the aisle. How heads would turn and nod at her beauty and grace. Helena deserved this dress, not the Mueller sow.

Mueller left for Munich three days before the wedding for last-minute preparations. Alone in the office, Saul added his final touch, a row of decorative stitching. He snipped the extra thread and allowed himself a moment to admire his work.

He packed the gown carefully inside a large box to minimise wrinkling. Despite the pain roaring from his belly to his throat, he managed to shuffle to the office door and knock. A guard entered. Saul said, 'It is finished.' The guard lifted the box as gently as if it were a newborn baby. Twenty minutes later, it was on its way to Munich.

Alone in the office, Saul sat down behind Mueller's desk and slowly reclined in the chair, breathing in short, quick gasps. Like Passover, he thought, where we recline because we can, because we are free men. He found the box of chocolates in the top drawer and dropped a piece in his mouth. He let it melt on his tongue. He rested his hands lightly on his belly and smiled.

Hours later, the guards found him splayed over Mueller's desk, dark blood trickling from the side of his mouth. The smile was still on his face. Before they tossed his body on the pile outside the infirmary, they yanked off his boots.

The photography session was about to begin. In a little alcove next to the chapel, Katrina and Lena, her maid of honour, removed the gown from its packing. Katrina had eaten almost nothing since the fitting, and now, even the bothersome sleeves slipped on like silk gloves. She cupped her breasts in her palms and pursed her lips at the mirror in her best Harlow pout. The girls giggled.

As she turned to admire her profile, Katrina noticed some gold and blue embroidery, about an inch high and six inches long, running across her left buttock. It looked like lettering. Still watching herself in the mirror, she asked Lena to see what it was.

Lena knelt and squinted. She said, 'It's some kind of word. It says, "Mazeltov – SR."' She covered her mouth with her hands, suppressing a laugh.

Katrina clawed at the stitching. She threw open the dressing room door. 'Papa!'

THE END

PETERSON TOSCANO

It began in 1984, a year after the release of 'Risky Business,' Tom Cruise's coming-of-age classic. A group of movie moguls in cahoots with unethical geneticists cooked up the Hollywood Cloning Project. In a lab beneath the La Brea Tar Pits, they grew a new Tom Cruise every five years. By the time he turned 70, there were 10 Tom Cruises, aged 3 to 48.

It ended in 2062, on his 100th birthday, when Cruise, along with the rest of Hollywood's elite, perished in a bomb blast. Authorities claimed the ELA – the Extras Liberation Army – was responsible, and that every one of its members died. As the only surviving ELA member, I can tell you, they're full of shit.

I was 21 at the time of the explosion, the youngest member of the ELA. Marsden wanted me to stay in the van to monitor the mansion's exterior and maintain audio-visual contact with him.

Marsden Temple was the most beautiful man I ever knew. We all loved him. He was the greatest actor of his generation, not that the world got to see him shine on screen! The studios never had parts for Marsden – the Originals and the Clones filled the principal roles, and there were so many clones.

The cloning started with Tom Cruise, but by 2010, the studio execs replicated every actor they deemed box office gold. Brad Pitt, Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, Goldie Hawn, Clint Eastwood, and Demi Moore with their gangs of clones. By 2050, 84% of all lead roles were taken by the Clones. And if you weren't an 'Original' or a 'Clone,' good luck getting cast as anything but a corpse or barista.

At first, the Originals pretended the Clones were their natural children or nieces and nephews, those 'nepo babies' audiences loved to hate, even as fans glued themselves to screens to obsess over these eerily similar spawns. Eventually, the Hollywood cloning machine confirmed they were Clones, replicas of the Originals. The screens exploded

with prequels, sequels, and sweeping sagas spanning generations, all played by genetically identical actors at different ages.

Clones of different Originals often partnered to create hybrid celebrity offspring that were novelties on gossip sites but forbidden to enter the industry. Children of Originals and Clones became known as the Leftovers. Like the Originals did with their children, these Clone parents entrusted their children to nannies and boarding schools, then invested all their energy into raising the baby Clones, who were made in their exact images. The Leftovers leveraged their celebrity connections as best as they could, finding nominal, temporary successes on the small screens as influencers, as their parents dominated the big screen.

God help a 'normal' actor like Marsden, who upstaged these gods. In 2052, he played a bit part in *Mamma Mia 11*, a bartender in the background while Meryl Streeps, Colin Firths, and Stellan Skarsgårds sang and danced poorly in ridiculous costumes. Marsden poured drinks, shimmering with his radiant marble white skin, thick black hair, and hazel eyes. With a Puerto Rican father and a Korean mother, Marsden's looks and charisma drew all eyes towards him.

Fan pages popped up asking 'Who's the Bartender in *Mamma Mia 11*?' Once agents began to enquire, the Machine blacklisted Marsden. He couldn't even score a role in a disaster training PSA.

Fortunately, in college, Marsden took special effects courses, which landed him a job at Disneyland, where he created controlled hybrid explosions with CGI, lasers, smoke, and heat.

Our plan was simple. The ELA, disguised as servers, which most already were, would infiltrate Tom Cruise's 100th birthday party. When Cruise got to the podium, Marsden would message me in the van. I'd then set off the timer, giving the crew exactly 75 seconds to exit the building before Marsden's controlled explosions went off. A ring of real smoke and CGI fire would surround the panicked guests, keeping them in place.

And Action! Cameras rolling. Streaming to every platform, a group of former servers in tights would burst

through the flames and come to the rescue. A viral blockbuster moment brought to you by the ELA.

That day, from the van, I saw what Marsden saw through his glasses. He whispered directly into my ear while serving drinks. I felt close to him, one rare moment without the others edging in for his attention. Marsden and I merged into a single being. I surged with his tension, excitement, fear, and alertness. I swear I almost smelled him, that mix of clove, honey, and jasmine that his body exuded.

Once they started serving dessert, it was show time, but Marsden, holding a tray of Mission Impossible cupcakes, froze. 'Something's off,' he hissed, scanning the room.

I saw each Original with their Clones grouped at their tables. The Jennifer Anistons, Margo Robbies, Ben Afflecks, and the Jake and Maggie Gyllenhaals. On an elevated dais, a decrepit Tom Cruise sat with all 16 of his Clones, in chronological order from age 3 to 78, trained and ready to play the choice roles for generations.

Further back, I saw the tables of Hollywood executives, directors and writers, along with the Originals' spouses, and the spouses of the Clones, unless, of course, the spouse was also an Original or a Clone.

Seconds before the blast, Marsden gasped, 'Fuck. None of the Leftovers are here.' Then BOOM! The force of the explosion knocked the van onto its side. I crawled out and saw a black crater where the mansion had once stood. I ran for miles and woke up on the beach as the sun rose and the helicopters circled.

Marsden and the ELA never planted real bombs. It was an elaborate guerrilla theatre piece, our one chance to humble the man-made gods while getting our fifteen minutes of fame. We were just dumb actors, enmeshed with each other, immersed in made-up roles, in the biggest flop of our lives.

Today, 20 years after that blast, Hollywood is dead, and the Leftovers, descendants of legends, got away with murder while everyone blames the ELA. Who needs actors, writers, and directors anymore, now that every audience member is the star in their private AI-generated shorts they view on 3D headsets? They act alongside avatars of co-workers, former schoolmates and neighbours in romantic comedies, horror movies and porn.

We used to watch movies to escape our lives, not binge on digital images of ourselves living out daydreams and petty revenges. Marsden, the ELA and I dreamed of reviving the independent movie industry with fresh talent. Instead, we are left with a relic, a cultural heritage like typewriters, mobile phones and coal. We daily face baristas, fitness instructors and influencers, who, when we see them, remind us of someone we can't quite put our finger on, some echo from the past, growing more distant with each generation.

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THE ETERNAL ASCENT ✿

CHRISTOPHER WOODS



Photograph

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Marc Simon is a longtime storyteller whose love for writing began when a letter to the editor he wrote at only eight years old was published in The Pittsburgh Press. Since then, he has published work in a variety of literary magazines, including *The Wilderness House Review*, *Flashquake*, *Poetica Magazine*, and many more. He has also written numerous one-act plays that have won New Works competitions in Florida, New York, and Pittsburgh. His debut novel *The Leap Year Boy* was published in 2012. Most recently, two of his stories have been nominated for The Pushcart Prize and for inclusion in Best Short Stories, 2026. More information about his work can be found on his website: marcsimonwriter.com

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Tim Thornburgh graduated from Seattle University and shortly thereafter joined the Peace Corps. He was sent to Micronesia and served as a high school teacher of English and History at Outer Islands High School. He served as a teacher and later as a program manager in Yap, Pohnpei, Saipan and the Philippines. Tim's poetry has been published in *Amelia*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *Humanidad*, *Haight Ashbury Poetry Journal*, *Lowlife Lit Press*, *Four Tulips*, *7th-Circle Pyrite*, *TrashLight Press*, and *After/Thought Literary*.

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BEGINNINGS

SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO PUT IT ALL OUT THERE,
NO MATTER WHAT THEY MIGHT SAY.