

# B&P

BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE  
SEPTEMBER 2024

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TO READ**

**IN THIS ISSUE:**

**Henry Reichman**

**Katie Winkler**

**Gabriel Mambo**

**Marco Etheridge**

**Patricia Ann Bowen**

**Doug Hawley**

**Bill Tope**

**Michael Barrington**

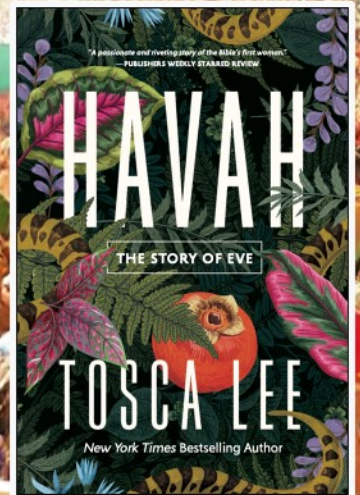
**Pawel Markiewicz**

**Peter Mladinic**

**Jill Hedgecock**

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**Stories | Book Reviews | Videos**  
**Poetry Artwork and more....**



**Featured:**

**Tosca Lee**

**Melody Horrill**

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## INKDROPS: September 2024

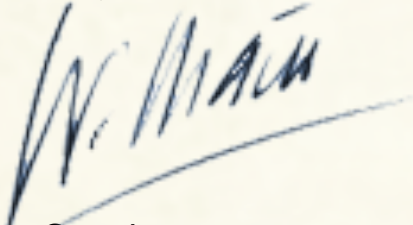
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# Facts

## BOANTHROPY

is a psychological disorder in which patients believe they are a cow.





# Trolley

A Short Story by Katie Winkler

“Yes! They’ve got Sammy Skunk!” Albert shouted to his wife Louise, who was folding the laundry and didn’t care. “I’m going over there right now and get it..”

Louise folded Albert’s boxers. “Now, don’t get yourself all worked up again.” They’re stuffed animals. Besides, collecting them’s just a little passé, wouldn’t you say.”

Usually, Albert would argue, but not today—Sammy was waiting. Albert huffed, sitting down to pull on his argyles and check for directions.

Albert thought as he drove his ‘92 Buick LeSabre into town how surprised he had been that The Old Tyme Toye Shoppe had a rare and precious commodity like Sammy Skunk. He stepped on the gas in hopes of beating his arch-nemesis, Mrs. Lavinia Brownsail, to the proverbial punch. She’d snatched away several prime specimens in the past, having better access to when and where collectors were cashing in on their beanie bag stashes. Maddening! Fortunately, Mrs.



Brownsail was known to stay away from public establishments like toy stores, having an aversion to other people's children and no great desire to be around her own for more than a week at a time.

The Brownsail woman preferred to deal with private collectors, with a cup of hot chamomile tea in hand and the Beanie Bags spread out before her on a glass-topped coffee table.

He had learned to avoid Lavinia, but his friends let him know of her movements. He suspected she hadn't been near the Olde Tyme Toy Shoppe, and he began to think he might just get that Sammy Skunk after all.

Main Street was crowded, but a parking spot seemed about to open up just as he rounded the corner. He pulled his Buick to the side and waited, tapping on the steering wheel as a family of five piled into their Ford. Albert snorted and shook his head. So many children. Albert laid on the horn. The father looked up, smiled, and waved before backing the station wagon slowly, so slowly, out onto the street.

Albert pulled the Buick into its slot, applied the parking brake, folded his computer printouts, turned the radio and car off, checked the lights, adjusted the mirror, and wiped a stray crumb off the red leather seats. He locked the car, took a few steps, furrowed his brow, and walked back to check, just to make sure. As he suspected, it was truly locked, but no harm in checking twice.



With one last look at his car, Albert entered the Olde Tyme Toy Shoppe. He glanced around the room, scanning for the presence of Beanie Bags. Seeing none, he frowned and took another step into the room. The floors creaked. Albert looked down to see old hardwood, faded and worn.

Albert was beginning to think that perhaps he was in the wrong place when he saw a large bin full of small, loosely stuffed animals in the back. Above the bin on a hand-painted sign, the words: Barrel of Beanies. Albert humphed in disgust. How was he supposed to find Sammy Skunk in there? In the old days, the different items were clearly marked and stacked according to color or release date. Special, rare Beanies should be behind glass cases. But here, the Beanies were in no order at all—green Timmy Turtles, gray Binky Bats, red Car-Car Cardinals. What a mess!

But Albert was not so easily deterred. He would find that skunk if it were anywhere to be found. He began to rummage through the bin, his eyes seeming to sink even deeper into their sockets as he wrinkled his brow in concentration. Albert blocked his mind to all colors other than black and white, tossing aside three Wistful Whales, five Perky Penguins, and one Zany Zebra.

He stopped. Something was odd about this Zebra. He had one at home as it was passibly rare, but this one... What was it? He fingered the bright yellow circle-shaped card that held all vital



information on Zany—its name and when it was produced. The Beanie had the essential tag; the thing would be worthless without it, but this Beanie was different—its tag was creased and worn, and on the inside, some child had written in a shaky hand—Agnes. Could it be that this was a used Beanie?

Albert raised himself to his full height of five-eight and three-quarters, sucking in his breath as he did. What kind of Beanie retailers were these people selling used Beanies along with new ones? Albert searched the room for a salesperson when behind him he heard a soft voice, “May I help you, sir?”

He whirled around. A small woman stood before him dressed in a gauzy purple dress that dropped to her ankles. Her delicate arms were clasped behind her. “You seem to like our Barrel of Beanies. Are you going to purchase that lovely Zebra?”

“Certainly not!”

Her laughter tinkled. “I hope there is nothing amiss.”

Albert thrust the zebra under her nose. “Did you realize that this...this Zany Zebra was in this bin with the new Beanies?”

She took the toy from him and gently opened the yellow card. “Oh, you’re right. This doesn’t belong here.”

Albert jutted out his chin. “I thought so.

“I’ll put it where it belongs.” She moved across the floor to a glass cabinet he hadn’t noticed before. Inside were all sorts of toys:



baseballs with yellowed, muddy covers, their red strings frayed; Tonka shovels, battered and dented; porcelain and plastic-faced dolls beside Barbies of all ethnic variations and styles of clothing, a veritable toy museum.

Out of her pocket, somewhere in the folds of her skirt, she took out a large silver ring with one key and opened the cabinet.

Albert watched as she gently placed the Zebra beside other Beanie Bags. “How come you locked up all of these toys?”

“Because they are my most valuable commodities.”

“But they’re....” He swallowed hard. “pre-owned.”

She smiled. “I’m not familiar with that term. How can something be owned before it is owned?”

“What?” Albert was shocked. “It means something’s, you know, used, old, worn out, depreciated.”

She laughed for some reason. “Oh, I see.”

He frowned at her. Obviously, she did not see, but he decided not to argue. He was on a mission. “Never mind. I hear you have a Sammy Skunk. I haven’t seen one yet.”

“Sammy Skunk?”

“Yes, my sources say you have one. Very rare, very valuable.”

The tinkling laugh again. “I don’t remember a skunk, but I have a lovely-.”

“No. Skunk or nothing.”

“Well, just let me check the back.” She locked the case and was gone.

Albert stood there for a moment, staring at the case. If this woman didn't turn up a Sammy Skunk, he would be one unhappy customer. He tapped his foot on the old wooden floor and glanced around the room. He half-heartedly rifled through the “Barrel of Beanies” again and sighed. Everything was so old here—dinted tin tops, old dolls with faded dresses. A display of model cars looked more interesting, not worth collecting, but he had always been charmed by them. He was holding a miniature Ford Thunderbird when he saw it. In a corner, on one of the tall shelves, a hint of gold trim glinted beneath the lights. He was drawn to it, replacing the model car and moving to get a closer look. There behind an old-fashioned H-gauge model locomotive was a trolley. A green trolley. It seemed so familiar. Where could he possibly have seen it before? Suddenly, he remembered.

Once, long ago, his parents had taken the family to San Francisco. Albert had loved it, the Golden Gate Bridge, the bay, the stomach-churning hills, and curved brick roads. But his favorite thing of all had been the trolleys, slowly spinning trolleys painted green with gold trim. They were nothing like he had ever seen, magical and wonderful.



The shopkeeper's voice brought him back to the present. “See something that interests you, sir?”

“Humph,” he scoffed but was unable to take his eyes off the trolley. “Just want to know about that Sammy Skunk.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have one.”

He whirled to face the woman, the trolley forgotten. “What! You mean I went to all this trouble for nothing?”

“I’m afraid your sources were incorrect. We have another Beanie Bag, a Slimy Skink, which is for sale. Skink, Skunk, I can see how they could have gotten those confused.”

“Slimy Skink!” Albert threw up his hands and turned his back on the woman, looking up to the top shelf again, to the gold trim again. “There must be thousands of Slimy Skinks. They’re no collectors’ items.”

“Those others are not like this one,” she said, taking out her key once again.

Albert turned to her, trying to be angry, knowing he should be. “Oh, no. I want something new, not one of those pre-owned things in there.” He waved a dismissive hand at the cabinet.

“But this little Beanie was loved...”

“You mean used,” he grumbled. He saw the trolley again out of the corner of his eye and turned to it again.

“This little toy was greatly loved by a boy who was extremely ill. He had to travel by plane to Maryland for treatments several times a year. He was frightened of planes, but this little skink would soothe him.”

Albert turned away from the gold and green trolley. He hadn't realized that he was staring at it again. He glared at the little woman. She must be insane. “So not only do you ignore production rates, you seem oblivious to the depreciation of a toy pre-owned by a sick child.”

“I'm sorry, sir, but you don't seem to understand. My most valuable toys are all pre-owned, as you call it. That's what gives them their value.”

Albert backed away from the woman. “You're a con artist. You lure people in here with promises, and then you talk them into spending outrageous prices for used toys.”

“Some people call my toys heirlooms.”

“I'm getting out of here. You won't con me.”

The little lady put the key back in her pocket. “Do as you wish. But I must tell you, no one has ever entered these doors to return a toy.” Albert continued staring at her as she stepped closer to him. “If you let me,” she said, “I bet I could help you find something...” she looked up at him, her violet eyes shimmering. “Something Wonderful.”



For some incomprehensible reason, Albert made no caustic reply. He simply turned and looked up. He could see the trolley and wanted to look at it closer to see if...

“No, nothing here I want,” he said. Nevertheless, he couldn’t take his eyes off the luminous green and gold. Just like all those years ago.

“I noticed you were looking at my trains.” The owner said. “Do you like trains?”

“Not especially, but I always have liked trolleys.”

“Oh, really? Me too. Don’t you have just a minute to see my marvelous trolley? I know you’ll love it as much as I do.”

“All right,” Albert found himself saying. “I’ll take a look at it. My wife won’t let me live it down if I come home empty-handed.”

She laughed.

He watched her as she moved a rolling ladder into position, as she climbed and stretched to reach the toy and bring it to him. “It’s a lovely toy, isn’t it? An exact replica of a San Francisco trolley. Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“Yes,” he breathed, remembering.

Quietly, she came down the ladder until she was even with him. She dropped soft fingers onto his shoulder. “Shall I wrap it up for you?”

He hadn't looked at it, hadn't examined it for signs of wear; he nodded, nevertheless.

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Later, after the toy keeper had carefully wrapped the trolley in its package after he had paid an unbelievably low price and even favored the toy store's owner with a smile and an "I suppose I'll have to come back," he went back to his car and sat there. He touched his package's brown paper and cotton string with his callused fingers and wondered.

The honk of a car horn startled him, and he looked behind him to see the harassed face of an old woman pressing the horn. He almost laughed out loud. It was Lavinia, Lavinia Brownsail, right on time. No doubt the little lady inside had some chamomile tea brewing in the back and something, something wonderful, besides.

Lavinia honked again.

Albert smiled, lowered the window, and waved.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katie Winkler's fiction has appeared in numerous print and online publications, including Saturday Evening Post, SciPhi, Fabula Argentea, and in the anthology *Unbroken Circle: Stories of Cultural Diversity in the South* by Bottom Dog Press. Also a playwright, she has had three full-length plays produced and is a member of the Dramatists Guild



of America and the North Carolina Writers Network. She lives happily with her husband John in the Blue Ridge Mountains south of Asheville, North Carolina where she edits the literary journal Teach. Write. ([teachwritejournal.com](http://teachwritejournal.com)) and blogs about higher education in the South at [www.heyMrsWinkler.com](http://www.heyMrsWinkler.com).

### Meditation for Writers (10 minutes)



<https://youtu.be/jQ8ojTTPEvG?si=GRnmtnSYaQc-a2KD>

# COUPLES

A short story by Gabriel Mambo

Charles and Nona didn't see it at first. After a long day of unpacking their belongings from cardboard moving boxes, the Penningtons guided their wicker couch into the shade of their porch. They slumped into the cushions. Nona rested her head on Charles. Charles thought about how every person who stopped at the sky-blue house stared at everything in its midst, only to move on without a word. The exceptions gave subtle nods or slight, hurried waves. Everyone was too busy. Or no one wanted to open their arms to strangers. Either one seemed true.

Hard, hollow knocks made the Penningtons look to their left towards an old picket fence with eroding white paint that drooped from the wood. Another couple stood on the other side of it. A husky man with shaggy blonde hair and facial scruff towered beside a slender, raven-haired woman draped in teal. The woman had skin like the lit moon, as if it came out ahead of schedule, and decided to roam the Earth until it got dark.

“Are you Charles?” the man asked.



Charles nodded, sitting up straight on the wicker couch. He kept his eyes on the husky man, who wrinkled his nose while scratching the right side of his face as if he realized the scruff irritated the skin.

“How’d you find out the name?” Charles asked. He hadn’t put either his or Nona’s names on their mailbox.

“We’re going to work together,” said the husky man. “I’m Paul Cavanaugh. I heard you and a couple of other men are starting at the Mill on Monday. Harlan told me about it.”

“That’s right.” Charles shrugged like the hire was common textbook knowledge. “You afraid I’m going to steal your job?”

Paul shook his head. “I’m just being friendly, is all. You don’t always live next door to someone you work with, you know?”

“I hear that.”

“You want to be real friendly to me, man?”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“Then please steal my job, I’m done with fucking Midtown Steel.”

Charles and Paul shared a laugh. Their howls carried into the air, slowly scaring the sky’s warm colors away. Violet night ribbons threaded through the blue. Nona noticed and compared the strands to the woman in teal. She smiled beside Paul. It was a thin expression, like an errant stitch standing out in a fabric sea.

When Charles stepped down from the porch, Nona followed. Both men tinkered with the picket fence, complaining about its dismal look. They resolved to work together to fix it. Nona learned the woman's name was Ana, short for Anastasia, inspired by her distant Russian heritage.

Every ounce of the life Charles and Nona brought with them from Chicago was out in the open by midnight. Paul and Charles reassembled a TV stand while the women asked their men to put the leather loveseat against the wall across from it. To add to the room's atmosphere, Ana showed Nona where to hang every brass framed photograph throughout the house. Everything was Nona's choice, Ana reassured her, but she had to give the feng shui a try.

Once Charles and Paul pushed both halves of a dining table together, an invitation to come next door was set. The Penningtons weren't allowed to refuse.

"Ana here—" Paul nodded toward his girlfriend. "—She's into pasta now. Like she's Italian. Uses sauce and everything. I'll get some beers for you and me, one or two of those baguettes or whatever, and you'll feel like you just went out to the harbor."

Charles grinned from ear to ear. The Penningtons thanked Paul and Ana for the help. Nona was caught by surprise when Ana reached out and hugged her. There was a yearning in the embrace, a



substance in the warm gesture. Nona returned the hug, and Charles mirrored her when his turn came.

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The problem still didn't show until later on.

Nona held fresh collard greens in her arms along with two "Thank You" cards. Charles held a chilled wine bottle. They bought everything at a nearby market named Marley's, which they thought was a good place to shop until they saw the price tags. The Penningtons matched outfits, dressing in red and black attire, far from formal but not quite casual enough to be too relaxing.

They waited at their neighbors' front door until Ana answered, wearing a frilly white dress with polka dots. She pressed both hands over her heart when she accepted the cards Charles handed to her; then she showed Nona to the kitchen so they could cook dinner together. Paul showed off his new Toshiba big screen to Charles in the living room. They had a common interest in football. They watched the Saturday Night Game of the Week while waiting for the meal.

Nona mentioned looking up Marley's Market in the phone book and noticing it was nearby. Ana clicked her tongue against the inner side of her teeth.

"You don't want Marley's," she said, scoffing. "Starling is much better. And cheaper. It's a hike, even with a car, but it's worth it."

“We don’t have a car,” Nona said, adding seasoning to the cooked greens. “Charles sold the Grand Am to a friend in Chicago who has a used auto lot. He was generous with how much money he gave to Charles in exchange for it. It helped us fill some gaps in the move.”

Ana repeated the info over platefuls of angel hair, Nona’s greens, and buttered baguette slices. Paul fumbled with the bottle opener when Ana mentioned driving Charles downtown. He nearly spilled the wine but caught it with one of his mitt-sized hands.

“Maybe that’s why he’s next door,” Ana said. “So you two could get to know each other on the way to work. It’s spiritual. Like God or whoever put us together, right?” Ana put a hand over her mouth as though she swore. “That—that’s not weird to say, is it? God putting us together? I mean, we’re already having dinner on day two.”

“I don’t think so,” Nona said, rolling her pasta around the prongs of her fork.

“I don’t like rushing other people,” said Paul as the wine glugged out into Charles’ glass. “I don’t know what they do in the morning.”

Charles lifted a glass as if he wanted to toast them right then and there. “I’m an adjustable man. But if it’s too much, I ain’t pushing.”

“You’re not.” Paul poured wine into Nona’s glass next. “I mean...I’m asking about you, so I might as well get you downtown. Until you can get your own car. It’s no big deal.”



Paul filled his own glass next. When the wine nearly overflowed, he set the bottle down on the cloth, which dampened from droplets that trickled down to its bottom. Ana blinked at the bottle. She glanced back and forth between it and her boyfriend, who continued eating until the thought sprung up. He snatched the bottle and poured wine into her glass.

“Why aren’t you telling me?” he muttered. “You want me to do it all for you. At least grab the bottle yourself, Ana.”

“I don’t see them asking,” Ana tipped her glass in Nona’s direction, though she clearly meant both of their guests. Red droplets dribbled onto the cloth.

Paul pointed at the spill. “Now you gotta put it through the wash. Good job. We spend a whole day trying to bring folks in, and we’re talking like this? In front of them?” He looked like he tasted something bad in the pasta or the greens. The wine washed down the bad feelings, consumed in one gulp as he tilted his head back and downed it all. Paul muttered, “Goddammit,” as if it were meant to be under his breath. Nona treated it as such and said nothing more.

Everyone looked down at their plates. They worked on emptying them and filling their own stomachs. The wine was gone and the men walked wordlessly into the living room to see the rest of the game. Paul seemed to make it a point to raise the volume so the

announcer and the huff of a thousand cheers drowned out the kitchen's humble commotion.

Ana pushed wayward chunks of uneaten dinner into the garbage. Nona insisted on helping her. She soaked a stack of plates in lemon-scented suds.

"It's like that," Ana said. "He just gets upset over small things, is all. It's no big deal. I do it, too."

Nona almost put a rinsed plate into the dish rack on the linoleum countertop beside the sink. She noticed a small bit of marinara sauce still stained the rim. "Between you and me? He should have poured you a glass. I'd give Charles hell if he forgot me. You were kind."

"I shouldn't have lost my temper." Ana handed her dirty dish to Nona.

"You didn't."

"I just cleaned the tablecloth."

Ana looked at Nona. "I'm sorry you saw that," she said. "I'll be more careful next time."

The exchange between Paul and Ana at dinner looked just like that—new neighbor jitters amplified by anxious emotions. Not a big deal at all. By early Monday morning, all was forgotten. Paul drove into town in his five-year-old Impala. Charles accompanied him, per



the proposed plan. Before their commute, the men met outside the house at the picket fence between the yards. Watching from the window, Nona recalled Ana's suggestion that God or whoever put them all together in the same place for a purpose, for a divine reason, for small moments such as this.

Ana worked as a full-time clerk at Starling Market. She passed by the Penningtons' place before her shifts to give Nona newspaper clippings with Help Wanted Ads. When Nona mentioned her education work back in Chicago, Ana's face brightened.

"Tons of teachers come in and out of the store," she said. "They complain about work all the damn time. They always need help. You can help them. You could probably save anyone you meet."

Langston Hughes Junior High School hired Nona as a fifth-grade teacher's assistant. After a full week's worth of classes, Nona told Ana about how uptight the middle-aged teacher was in the presence of her students. These same children crowded around 'Ms. N,' after Wednesday's schedule, begging her not to quit. Apparently, it was a habit for Hughes employees to violate their contracts by abandoning them altogether.

"I can see why," said Nona. "The children are rough. They swear, and I had to stop a few fights from happening. But the potential, Ana. All of them can be wonderful people if they just try, you know?"

The women sat out back on this particular Friday. Both of them relaxed in lawn chairs while the men watched another college game on Paul's Toshiba. Autumn slowly trickled into The Avenue, so the wind had a bite in it. Ana leaned forward to draw in Nona's recollection of the job. She treated each snippet like a fairy tale as if the talk brimmed with rich lessons to absorb. A lit cigarette rested between her fingers.

"They love you already," she observed. "I can tell. You make them feel great."

Paul and Ana made a promise at the first dinner. They vowed to help them get used to Middleton by showing them as much of it as possible. At first, the couples started small with their weekend tours. They walked in the grid system neighborhood that The Avenue itself was immersed in, passing by parks and small monuments scattered throughout the area. Once the north-central part of town was covered, more territories opened up.

Downtown was a combination of brick and metal towers overseeing chaotic roads. Still, the museums and artisanal restaurants proved themselves worthy of affection from visitors. Paul and Ana weren't made of money, they confessed, but they wanted to treat the Penningtons and save them a little grief from the craziness that was the city. The Avenue wasn't too friendly. What it didn't have in crime, it made up for in reclusive hostility. No



one really spoke to each other. Everyone was in and out. The Penningtons said they already believed the notion.

Nona learned the Neon District was off-limits at night, pretty as its illuminations may have looked in the dark. Ana lamented the fact because “so many good artists” opened their studios every first Friday of the month so the public could see their work. Ana wished she had a chance to do the same. She stored that part of her life away in the basement.

In her and Paul’s basement, Ana stored away many expressionist paintings. They hid in the shadowy corners of a square concrete space, surrounded by lonely cold air, cobwebs, and dust bunnies. Nona shooed the dust bunnies away from the portraits and picked up a particular picture. The mesmerizing combination of shapes and colors depicted Paul and Ana’s house in a dream-like state, as if the only reason this house stood was because Ana’s crafting of the portrait made it so.

“I wanted a studio over there.” Ana rearranged a set of clay jars sitting on a small coffee table that looked all but abandoned. “Paul said it wasn’t very practical. Artists don’t make money. They’re asking to be poor and we were hardly getting by when I thought a lot about it.” She cradled a jar with flowers carved into the surface as if it were an infant. Her thumb traced over the image in the clay. After that, she put the jar back.

“We’re still getting by now,” she said, looking at Nona with the saddest eyes. “Why try to do anything now?”

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The Middleton tours ended in November. Winter hadn’t arrived yet, but snow fell on the city regardless, crowning every rooftop. Paul and Charles still commuted to Midtown Steel together, but their talks were brief and more stilted. Sometimes, they had to make a beeline to the Impala and go.

Nona and Ana barely spoke themselves. Life nipped at everyone’s heels. It caught up to them, reminding all four of them that they were never in control, ever. Nona nurtured her students through all their tears, bringing relief to the teacher she worked with. Hughes’ principal praised Nona for making such an immediate impact in the classroom.

When she came home from Hughes, she found Ana seated on the wicker couch on her porch. Her eyes stared at the other houses across The Avenue. Bags billowed beneath both her eyes.

“I called in sick to work,” Ana said, bringing a cigarette to her lips.

“What’s going on?” Nona asked, taking a seat beside Ana.

Ana took a breath before sobbing out. Tears sputtered and leaked, running down her gaunt cheeks. Her skin harbored wrinkles Nona hadn’t noticed.



“The bills built up,” Ana said. “And while I was gone for a weekend shift, Paul...he just put the paintings in the car and drove them somewhere. Pawned them off to someone for extra money.” She buried her face in her hands while Nona held her, trying to soothe her. “It’s all empty, Nona. Everything. All of it. He just...he just fucking took it all!”

“I’m so sorry, Ana.”

“...Can I stay here?” Ana lifted her face from her palms. Nona wiped away at Ana’s face until it was dry.

“Of course, you can,” Nona said. “Why would I stop you from staying?”

When Charles arrived home, sulking and smelling like sulfur, he paused at the sight of Ana sleeping in their living room. Nona pulled him aside and mentioned the problem with the artwork sold to him. Charles blinked multiple times throughout the account with his mouth agape. He shook his head and wiped at his brow. Soot smeared across his brown skin.

“We’re inviting too much into our house,” he said. “I don’t like it. It’s no good.”

“You think helping Ana is no good?” Nona asked.

“I think they need to talk it out without us taking sides.”

“He had no right to take those paintings, Charles!”

“Maybe so, but they got to talk it out.”

“He wouldn’t even listen to her.”

“Then he’s going to have to start unless he wants to lose her.”

Charles reached out for his wife, holding her by the shoulders. The stringent scowl he wore fell off his face. He replaced it with a soft gaze, as gentle as the touch Nona trembled beneath.

“They have their own issues,” he said. “If we take on everyone’s burdens, Nona, we’re going to buckle and break.”

Nona shed tears of her own now, letting them dampen her face all the way down to the jaw. Charles wiped them away. “I’ll talk to him,” he said. “But after that, it’s hands-off for us both. Do you hear me?”

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Charles took a while next door. He walked Ana to the other side of the picket fence, which the men had barely finished fixing before winter. The conversation with Paul was practically muffled—muted, even. Nona couldn’t discern the words, though the content had to be to the point and from the heart. It just had to be, for Ana’s sake.

When Charles returned, he said nothing. He went straight upstairs, stripped off his work uniform, and took a long shower. When Charles emerged back downstairs in more comfortable clothing, he found Nona on the couch, frozen in the house’s silence. It took all of Nona’s decency to let him hold both her hands and look at him.

“Hands off for us,” he said. “You have to let them work.”



“What did he say?”

“He knows he has to change.”

~~~

The Avenue turned quiet again. Charles took the Metro in the morning, leaving an hour before he would have with Paul driving. Nona never looked out the window but recognized the rev of the Impala’s engine, its whir, causing her skin to crawl. Ana always left a little later in the morning, close to 9 a.m., so she could catch her own Metro to Starling. A week passed before the two spoke again. Ana’s tears returned at the same time.

“The shrink isn’t working,” she said. “It started to at first, but she’s just no good, dammit. And Paul...”

Paul always stared past the therapist. He and Ana always sat on a cream-colored loveseat in a loft office downtown. Minimalist art in square frames hung on the wall behind this white-haired woman with a clipboard in hand. Easy distractions for Paul to stare at. The therapist only scribbled what Ana said. Paul rarely spoke, even when offered the most comfortable questions.

“We can’t make anything work.” The two sat at a dining table a month after their last argument, at least the last one Nona had heard of. Ana was allowed to smoke her cigarettes indoors, though Nona had to turn on the fan and open the window despite the winter weather outside.

“Do you think you’re going to...?” Nona didn’t want to say the words “break up.” It pained her to entertain the thought. She scrubbed a dish from breakfast at the sink to forget it ever came up.

Ana knew anyway. She even scoffed, snorting smoke from her nostrils. “It’s getting there.”

“Did you ever consider getting married?”

“We don’t believe in that shit.”

“It could help.”

“How?” Ana almost tapped ashes from the cigarette’s lit end but stopped her finger mid-curl. She stood up, brisked through the kitchen, and lifted the screen to smother the cigarette and toss it out. “I need to head to work. I’ll see you later on?”

A thought suddenly crossed Nona’s mind.

“Not just me,” Nona said. “The both of us. It’s been a while since we’ve been out in the city. Maybe if we get together, we can smooth it all over.”

“Charles would never agree to it.”

“I’ll tell Charles everything’s better.”

Ana paused. “You’re...you’re going to lie to him?”

“No. No, it is. You’re taking couples therapy now with him. Maybe Paul will open up if we come back together. Add stability. You never know, honey. Just think about it.”



Ana said she would. She departed after hugging Nona, whispering that it had been a long time since the get-togethers. Nona talked Charles into the plan despite his reservations.

“I’ve heard nothing bad or good from them,” Charles pointed out. “I don’t feel too comfortable. Here’s to hoping they fixed their shit.”

Nona assured Charles this was the case. The women planned for the get-together to happen on Saturday. They’d go out on the town, revisiting their favorite outings while adding new ones to the mix, places Nona had only heard about but never set foot in. In the mornings leading up to the get-together, Paul started driving Charles to work again. They laughed and talked and updated each other on what their favorite teams were doing. Not much winning, the both of them joked, not a lot of victories to speak of lately. But that was fine.

Saturday arrived. Nona went next door when the evening arrived. She wore form-fitting bell bottoms with polished brown platform shoes. She swirled her braids into a hive and chose a sleeveless blouse with black, white, yellow, red, and green colors patterned into a tie-dye style. Ana said the blouse reminded her of a kaleidoscope.

“I swear to God, it’s trippy seeing you like this,” said Ana. “My head’s spinning.”

Ana did some work as well. She styled her hair into a simple braid. A matching dress went down to the top of her knees, canopied over delicate legs, and a pair of platform shoes. Nona looked into Ana's eyes and didn't see any signs of crying.

They sat in the living room waiting for the men to end their shifts at work. Ana brought out a tall bottle of wine and two glasses.

"I was saving this," Ana said. "I don't remember what for. But I wanted to share it with Paul."

Nona covered her mouth as Ana popped the cork off. "Is that wise?"

Ana sipped wine straight out of the bottle before filling the glasses. "He never knew it was here."

"Ana, maybe it was for an anniversary or something."

"It's not a big deal. Shit, I can buy another one. One better than what we're drinking."

"What's Paul going to think?"

"He wouldn't care."

Ana finished half her glass in the first gulp. She listed the different places the couples needed to revisit. The Neon District. Delgado Road. Bars by Harbor. If the men hurried up, Ana promised they'd make it to the places both couples had yet to visit.

"All the things you don't know yet," Ana said. "You need to see it all, I swear."



Nona's head spun after a while. The wine did too much to her blood and brain. She put down the glass and let herself rest on the living room couch.

"It's still early," Nona said. "One of us has to drive."

Ana sneered but instead put the bottle away. She gathered the glasses with it, putting everything on the kitchen countertop beside the sink.

"You remember me talking about King's Casino?" asked Ana as dishes clattered. "It's like you're in Vegas. People go there on nights like this, and it doesn't matter if you're rich or broke like we are. As long as you have some money, are old enough, and dress nicely enough." Ana put herself on display, like she epitomized the policy, an opinion Nona didn't refute. "They'll take you. They'll always take you..."

"I remember," said Nona. "It sounds like a dream, Ana. We'll go there. As soon as our men come."

They kept waiting, the women. Paul and Charles' commute was only forty-five minutes on Saturdays. Patience was required. To pass the time, the women listened to a record player hidden in a corner. Wonder, Joplin, and Hendrix didn't bring the men back to The Avenue.

Nine-thirty arrived. The women anticipated their husbands arriving at any moment. The men would have to shower quickly and get

changed, but that wasn't going to be a big deal ("The town doesn't come alive until about eleven anyway, Nona. Remember?"). Ten on the dot arrived, and the women fought to stay upright in their chairs. Nona toyed with her braids. Ana decided to apply makeup to her face after all.

At ten-thirty, Nona finished applying rouge to Ana's cheeks, along with violet eye shadow and matching lipstick. Paul couldn't resist you if he wanted to," Nona said, hoping that it was all alright. She wondered about Charles at the same time. Did he get hurt? Was there a crash they didn't think about? The news was a good source to use, a good way to find out what was happening in the city. One time Ana said the reports were getting grim with all the drug dealing, hookers, and murders that happened in some parts of town, especially in Midtown. Nona didn't like the idea of flashing lights.

Nona paced in the living room eventually, trying to stay awake and alert. Midnight arrived.

Ana stood up and went to the kitchen to find the phone. Her platform shoes clicked on the hardwood floors. The sound grated Nona's hearing, irritating her. Everything made her mad when things were happening. She sorted through scenarios, which made the knots in her body grow tighter until she couldn't really breathe anymore.

Bright golden lights illuminated one of the house's front windows. The glow seeped through the curtains, touching the walls. Tires screeched against gritty pavement. Two familiar voices spilled into the house as the front door swung open.

Charles cursed, and Nona thought he was mad. Then, he chuckled and seemed to slap on something hard—a back with a spine, a part of a good friend, probably on Paul's back. The house smelled like fresh booze.

“Ana!” Charles called out. “Paul got himself going early. I’m good. Paul needs some help, though.”

Charles brought Paul into the living room. He was upright and a little sweaty a little, still in his work uniform sans except for his white hard hat. Paul was a little worse off. He wrinkled his work suit and had messy hair. His burnt gold beard looked damp. He grinned at the women before prying himself away from Charles.

“I’m almost sober,” he said. “My brain’s clearing up, Charles.”

“Bullshit. You’re slipping from me every time I start to let go. I’m having you sit.” Charles completed his promise by sprawling Paul on the couch. He turned and folded his hands toward Nona like the beggar he didn’t want to become tonight. “Baby, I’m sorry. The boys at the Mill wanted to throw a couple back and Paul wanted to get some drinks in. We all lost track of time and damn...” He shook his head. “Look, we’ll make it up to you, alright? You look too good



to not go out. I hear there's a spot a few blocks away. We can go and Ana can come with us."

Ana's footsteps echoed all the way into the living room. Her glance cut past Charles and focused on the couch. She danced around Nona's husband and slapped Paul's chest, making a hollow sound. It was followed by Paul growling.

"Goddammit...!" He slumped off the couch and splayed himself across the living room floor. Paul coughed while clutching the smarting spot. "Ana, goddammit, you're a psychotic bitch!"

"Where were you?" Ana's mild voice was gone.

Paul tried to hold himself up by an elbow but thudded the back of his head against the wooden floor. "Didn't you hear Charles?"

"I didn't hear from him or you. Neither of us did. We thought you got in a wreck or something!"

"Well, we didn't."

"You just left us here waiting for you! This—this happens all the time; it's all about you, and it's always fucking bullshit."

Paul finally found his footing, pressing down on the couch cushions to support himself as he pulled up and stood to face Ana. He hunched while tapping his chest. He was like a gorilla, showing his feelings without a sense for words.

"I'm just having a life," Paul said, taking huffs between some of the words. "The boys, they're fun people. Charles's the best of them

—” He gestured to his best friend but looked at Nona. “Nona, you have a great partner. I see why you wanted to get stuck with him. I don’t want to get rid of the man; I’m jealous you got to him first.” He smiled and laughed. Nona’s stomach shriveled to the size of a pit.

“Don’t look at her—don’t talk to her!” Ana pulled on her hair and ran both hands down her face. “Fuck you. Fuck you, Paul.”

Ana slapped her boyfriend hard across the face, making him sit down. Maybe it was the force of the strike or Paul’s surprise that put him down on the cushions., but it was definitely a moment where Charles had to get between the two of them before anything got worse. Ana reached out at Paul, trying to claw at him. Charles pushed her toward Nona, gently lifting her from the ground to the point that it looked like she was floating.

In Nona’s arms, Ana’s thrashing halted. She slumped into the embrace, trembling and crying. Nona started shushing her and thought about what had to happen next, as well as when they could all try again.

The floor rattled. Paul cursed Ana in a loud voice and when Nona opened her eyes, he charged at them both. He pushed Ana in the back. Both women toppled on top of one another, crashing to the living room carpet below. Nona didn’t know the coffee table was behind her until her back bounced off it like a rubber mallet.

Charles was always mild-mannered and slow to anger. People knew him for his joy and smiles. His heart always softened to everyone, so long as they respected him and his. Once, Paul did the very least to avoid conflict with Charles; they got along and Paul didn't lay a hand on Ana, at least not one Charles knew of. Then, both women fell, and this changed.

Nona phased in and out of Charles, tackling Paul from behind. Her vision went black after that. She came to right afterwards and Charles buried a fist in Paul's face. Blood spurted from Paul's mouth. Charles cussed Paul out. Paul feebly apologized between blows.

"I...I got pissed," he said. "When I drink, I...I..."

Charles kept pummeling him. Paul didn't fight back. Nona crawled away from the foot of the coffee table. She didn't notice the broken glass until her palm got cut by a wayward shard. It dug into the center of the skin, making her bleed. The stain spread on the glass before more crimson trickled from the wound down to her wrist. Her braids felt wet as well.

"Charles..." Nona barely heard herself. Charles kept striking Paul's face with his fists. "Charles...stop...CHARLES."

Charles darted his head in Nona's direction. She saw his eyes widen. Nona must have looked worse than she thought. As soon as Charles stopped beating on Paul, Nona began blacking out.

"We...get you...Lake Valley."



Charles was like a radio. In and out in a static storm, never quite sounding clear. Physically close but also far away.

Nona reached up to Charles, knowing he'd pick her up. She didn't want to. She felt limp as Charles carried her to Paul's Impala. He took out the keys, which Paul must have handed over after he got drunk. After he put her in the car, went inside the vehicle himself and started the engine, Charles held Nona's hand. He felt so warm.

They must have been under the limit. No one stopped them. Every honk of a horn or skid of some tires whispered. Charles's voice became a little louder.

"Just stay awake," he said. "Stay awake for me, OK?"

Nona stared at the city's blurred lights. She kept grasping at Charles' hand, trying to keep her senses alert. As hard as she tried to make her grip, her husband's touch proved stronger. Nona didn't know who wanted to hold on more. She tried to speak, but Charles softly shushed her.

"Just...awake." The static storm returned. Charles looked worried and a little older. He fixed his sight on the road. "Awake...alive."

But you don't understand, Nona thought. I'm so sorry. You were right. They couldn't be fixed. What was I thinking, Charles? Why didn't we just walk...?

Nona fought to speak. When she did, her voice sounded muffled. Her hearing started to go as well. She tried to tell Charles she loved. The world went dark. Charles' touch intensified before she faded.

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The doctor diagnosed Nona with a mild concussion despite the gash in the back of her head. She was very lucky, given the circumstances. Falling backward in her own home, unprovoked by a mere rug, was rather unfortunate. It could have been worse. The doctor had seen much worse, he said. Nona didn't contradict the lie he came to believe.

In the hospital, Nona stared at the room's ceiling. She was dressed into a gown and had to let her dreadlocks down. They spread across the hospital mattress like a blanket of beads. Machines droned out their beeps, pulsating Nona's senses. Charles hunched over her bedside, leaning forward in a chair.

Nona pressed a hand on Charles' cheek. Her eyes were wet.

"Why did you lie for them?" Nona asked.

Charles talked about how Ana said Paul's name while he was carrying Nona out of the house. He glanced back, wanting to urge her away from Paul so she could be safe.

Before he could utter a word, Paul's head rested on Ana's lap. Ana bawled over Paul, who reached up and caressed Ana's right cheek. He thumbed away the tears. Charles heard him mumbling in

his drunken stupor, his voice as feeble as it had been when he tried to explain why he had to push his friend's wife along with her. Paul probably listed excuses, said bullshit like "I love you," and made up with her.

Charles said he'd seen that before. The bad cycle of love and hate, where one can't tear themselves away from the other, even if the union killed them. Charles never went through it in any way, least of all with Nona. However, he witnessed it. Charles' parents never beat him with a belt but trained him to be strong and learn certain hard truths through another's eyes. Better to be wise while learning than unwise while suffering.

It was best to leave Paul and Ana alone. Charles said. Nona silently turned away. She heard Charles ask her not to be like that, please. She needed to understand. What happened to her wasn't her fault, but what happened in that house wasn't right either. They did their best, and now they had to move forward.

Nona still struggled with her hearing. Her vision mildly recovered. The world was more discernible. She stared out the room's lone window, which had the cleanest panel of glass Nona had ever seen. The distant sights weren't warped like other windows. It was as if the window was filtered while in shards, only to be pieced back together to complete the puzzle of a city.



There were so many places she had yet to see. In the distance, there was a hill. That must have been the one she could find on the way to Harrison. Harrison was one of the suburbs she and Charles spoke of. It had a history of breaking color lines, of letting black couples like them live there. They always wanted to feel welcome, and Harrison would have been nice.

Maybe Ana would have taken her there. She seemed to know so much. Nona was looking forward to going into the casino on the hill first, though. She wanted to feel like royalty. She wanted to feel the velvet carpets beneath her feet and absorb the sounds. Her hands would have fit well into Ana's, as they always had in the past. They could have walked through the city for hours on end, finding new places together and understanding the thrill of what it meant to explore.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gabriel Mambo was born in Washington D.C., and grew up in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He earned his Bachelor of Arts at the University of South Dakota in 2013, as well as his MFA in Creative Writing, Fiction at Emerson College (Boston, MA) in 2021. He previously published work in Red Fez (where this piece was originally published), Unstamatic, and the Piker Press.

Gabriel currently resides in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife Shawday.

# Happenings

with New York Times Bestselling Author

## Tosca Lee





**Q. *Demon: A Memoir* just released in its fourth edition. What does this mean to you?**

**A:** I'm super excited for this book to be back out in the world in an all-new fourth edition—both it and my second novel, *Havah: The Story of Eve*, which is also re-releasing in a new fourth edition on August 13.

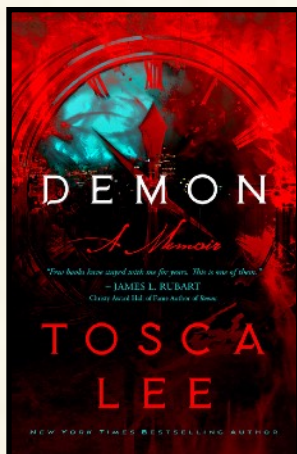


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For me personally, it's humbling and gratifying to see how many readers go back to re-read *Demon: A Memoir*, who write to tell me that they recommend it to their friends, and what the book has meant to them personally. I am very, very humbled by the letters I receive and personal stories readers share with me. To have a story be part of someone else's life is such an honor and frankly—given how many years it took (six) for *Demon* to get picked up by its first publisher in 2006—feels like a miracle. It's special to me because of that and because it's the book that started my career.

**Q: What's changed since the first edition?**

**A:** The story is the same with a few technology updates (when I initially wrote *Demon I*, like the main character Clay, in the story, owned a flip phone) and a



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few very minor tweaks. I can't help it—I've picked at one sentence or another every single time a new edition has come out. Something brand new for this edition is that that *Demon* (*Havah*, too) is available for the very first time in hardcover. These are the only two of my books that have not been out in hardcover and it's so nice to be able to offer longtime fans of these books that option. It only took 17 years but better late than never, right?

In addition to the hardcover, *Demon* and *Havah* both have



gorgeous new cover art, trivia about the story, discussion questions, and Havah has bonus chapters as well.

Q: You get asked regularly for a sequel to *Demon: A Memoir*. Will we see it become a series?

A: I do get asked this a lot. But I've always felt that the story ended as it should, so I don't have any plans to write a follow-up. But I never say "never."

Learn more about Tosca Lee on her website at <https://toscalee.com/>

Buy her books on Amazon at <https://amzn.to/4785DTX>

Peter James interviews Tosca Lee



<https://youtu.be/avpe7MaBoNw?si=gvQz4sfWgZkQg1Fq>.

# The dreameries with Egyptian cats

A Poem by

Paweł Markiewicz

*I looked at the window of my villa  
and it was midnight.*

*The brown cat meowed.*

*He is the guardian of many blissful melancholies.*

*He is the crimson memory of philosophers.*

*He is a signpost for golden-hearted poets.*

*I am tender ancient sage.*

*I am the poet of time.*

*I am a becharmed friend of the dawn.*

*I looked at the aperture of my home  
and it was meek morn.*

*The black cat purred.*

*He is the protector of the soft, eternal treasure.*

*He is silver recollection from dazzling nature.*

*He is a sign of an ancient charming culture.*

*I am a primeval charm.*

*I am a lyrist of spell.*

*I am a companion full of hearts.*

*I looked at the casement of my habitat.*

*It was time – Blue Hours.*

*The fawn cat drank milk.*

*He is the custodian of musing, Dionysian legends.*

*He is the golden remembrance of philosophers.*

*He is an indication of the Golden Fleece.*

*I am prehistoric thoughts.*

*I am a bard from wizards.*

*I am familiar of Plato-cave.*

*May three cats be shrouded forever! – thus*

*in the tenderness of the stardust,*

*fallen in love with amaranthine-celestial Gods,*

*in afterglow of amazingly tender druids.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Paweł Markiewicz was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is a poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems. Paweł has published his poetries in many magazines. He writes in English and German.



Daring to dream of a future yet lived. ~AI Generated

# In the Home Theater

A Short Story by Henry Reichman

She sat on the bleachers with crossed arms, a carefully constructed outfit, and a feeling of condescension. The fanfare at a high school graduation ceremony was far more extravagant than she had expected it to be. The excessive congratulations, the sappy songs of the twelfth-grade choir, and the roar of unfettered joy from the families of the students called across the stage were all things that seemed rather overindulgent for kids who were completing the bare minimum. The school board president getting up there and praising the graduating class for persevering through “such tough times” felt needy, and the speeches by the selected students hadn’t impressed her much either: they were unintellectual, a little sickly sweet in their victorious rhetoric, very generic. Another parent had told her that a few years ago, the valedictorian and salutatorian would give the addresses as customary, but this had all recently changed to make way for an egalitarian and anti-meritocratic vote among the students as to whom would talk, which to Celine, was exactly the kind of softening value system she had tried for eighteen years to protect her younger daughter from.



The daughter in focus sat somewhere in the ocean of chairs on the stadium floor, and while Celine couldn't quite spot her, she figured that the look on Eunice's face would also be that of her mother's: one of abject boredom. With the privilege of having an alphabetically early last name, Eunice had crossed the stage quite early in the evening, and they had had to stay put for hundreds of succeeding names, some of which Celine recognized from when her daughter was very little and the others fading in their irrelevancy. In her mother's opinion, Eunice had been a bit too attached to these friends and classmates in this senior year of high school. "But these are my favorite people in the world, and soon we'll all be at college," she would argue before a prospective party or get-together. "I have to make the most of this remaining time!"

Celine would stand in her kitchen and want to scream something like, "Your family are not your favorite people? We who clothe you, feed you, pay for your impending college education with unbelievable tolerance to major in film studies at NYU?!" but she got less effective at weathering this emotional reasoning as the time went on and started to believe that her resolute toughness was more of a facade than her kids thought it was.

Reservations aside about Eunice's choice of study - and there were many such reservations - Celine was authentically glad that both of her daughters had graduated high school happily, healthily,



academically successful, and without any major bumps in the road. Looking to her husband Charlie on her left - sitting and clapping robotically, checking his watch a beat too often - she had half a desire to high-five him, pull him in for a hug or some kind of public show of mutual elation, both whisper in his ear and yell to all the other parents in this god-forsaken arena, “Can you believe we did it? Can you believe that, in these times, we parented two generally stable girls off to good colleges? Two normal girls with intellectual interests, girls who could talk to adults politely, girls who had hobbies and were not disasters: girls who never needed intense therapy and never had unhealthy high-school romances, girls who we never caught smoking something in our basement, who were always home before midnight?” She wanted to lift Eunice and Audrey up and throw them, to kiss them on the scalp and reveal great pride behind that false layer of frigidity, to begrudgingly shake her head and smile because there was something worth celebrating tonight, just for a slightly different reason than everybody else. But more than anything right now, Celine wanted this to be over.

If what she wanted was what she got (two decades of parenting had taught her such a question would always be hypothetical) she would be free of the meaningless names receiving their diplomas ever so slowly and also liberated from the forced celebrations, instead back at their dining room table armed at either end by her

daughters and the extended family that had come upstate for Eunice's graduation. It was needed. Audrey never visited home at the frequency a junior in college should, Charlie had always seemed to be out working his multiple jobs in town government in this election year, and Eunice was constantly seeing friends these days, so Celine couldn't help but fantasize about perhaps some pricey takeout from a refined gourmet place, a glass of red wine in her hand, and finally, finally, all of the family in one place.

But her ambitions would be thwarted. Of course, they would be. They always were. Of course, Eunice was going to a party with her classmates tonight, of course, Celine didn't know anything about the house it was at, whether the parents of the hosts were classy, deferent, serious people or whether they were unrestrictive and absent, likely to let the kids drink, perhaps even gun owners: thoughts she shuddered at. Of course, she also knew that most of the attendees were going to uncompetitive state schools, happy to pour their futures into the Solo Cup every upcoming weekend night, and of course, she knew that her youngest daughter would do what she always did here: lower herself to these levels, engage in the gossip and the debauchery and the indignities of teenage life all because that was the usual custom, totally unaware of the fact that she could escape this degrading system if she just had the slightest dawn of independent thinking in her head, the tiniest cognizance

that she was better than this. These were good daughters - no, amazing daughters—in just a bad, bad system.

Last night, Celine had gotten a shred of the family time she wanted, but it turned into more material for concern when Eunice asked if they could watch the mother-daughter movie. The mother-daughter movie - it had some other silly kind of name that Celine always forgot, but it was all that Eunice talked about. Posters in her room, a Halloween costume one year, a quote in the yearbook from it—it being the apparent source of her sudden desire to make films as an adult. Celine had never gotten around to see it, and Eunice’s mission to change that had finally been successful, which soon became a depressing development.

“Do you relate to this movie?” Celine asked from the couch three-quarters of the way in, her feet up on the living-room coffee table and her head in a few different places at once.

“Of course. It’s my favorite of all time,” Eunice absentmindedly replied during what must’ve been the thirty-fifth scene of the sensitive yet strong-willed teenage protagonist complaining to more people about her mother. “It just tells such a real story I see myself in.”

“What part of this do you see yourself in?” Specifically, Celine was recalling with deep dread the moment ten minutes earlier when the girl asked her dad why her mom was “like that.”



“I don’t know. It’s just a very real family.”

“Well, I’m glad you think that,” Celine reproached, kicking down her feet on the rug and rising up. “I’m tired. I need to get rest before I take you and everybody else to your graduation tomorrow.” And then she climbed the stairs quickly, went to her room, and opened up her laptop - a device that never failed to block out her thoughts.

But Eunice was a good daughter. Corruptible, yes, but sweet. Swayed in wrong directions yet intrinsically smarter than most of these classmates at this ceremony. Prone to introspective teenage obsessions and overthinking, yet still needing validation from her mother, like how she always called her whenever she got a good grade on a test. These were truths that Celine was sure of, repeated in her thoughts constantly after the nine combined times (Audrey 6, Eunice 3) over the years that her daughters had screamed “I hate you!” to her face: a tallied clock bomb of aggression she kept that would always be defused by the right sentiments. Sentiments that even wondered whether their degradations and animosities towards her were collateral damage, necessary pain to get where they needed to be. And now, in this arena, this minor-league basketball stadium rearranged for rituals of teenage transformation, only one girl in their cap and gown mattered; only one had withstood it all.

The rest could go to hell or to a bad college. Leering from the stands, Celine smiled and clapped when it was all done.

Leaving the scene, Celine and Charlie Bridgers bumped into former friends. Grace and Jon Bennet (the latter now Charlie's direct superior in town government from the position of mayor) were collecting their own son, Aidan, from the same ceremony. Their clothes and mannerisms wafted back the aesthetics of the dinner parties they used to share, expired Christmases spent together.

"Congrats to your daughter," Grace leaned in, maybe the third time they had spoken in the last five years. Celine wasn't sure whether Grace intended a handshake or a hug, and she suspected that Grace didn't know either. A mutual brushing of coats took place as a compromise.

"Yes, yes, we're both empty nesters now, aren't we," she replied as the men chatted it up. "I'll finally be able to breathe!"

"You weren't doing that all along?" Celine almost asked. Instead, she constructed a

laugh and walked out of the stadium, a thousand celebratory cameras clicking out an obnoxious beat.

"Before he became mayor of the town, your father used to take you two to the cemetery at night. Do you remember it? We worried it was sacrilegious. A couple of out-of-control eight-year-olds riding their bikes through the paths, playing games of tag and hide-and-

seek through all those tombstones, just, agh. It's not like— look at our church attendance record, and that'll tell you all you need to know about our casual piety—but I do remember thinking there was something wrong with it. Once, Aidan, you asked your dad to bring a soccer ball, and I stepped in - I was like, 'No, Jon. No. He's going to kick it against a grave. He's going to bounce it against a grave.'”

Aidan laughed. “That was probably in the plan.”

“Exactly. I could see it from a million miles out, and sure, I don't know much about religion, but I bet that's not in the Bible, and, well, anyways—I went one time with you guys. It was a really humid evening in May and the night before one of those patriotic holidays—the exact one slips my mind, but I remember that fact because it was the one time all of you were actually supposed to be in the cemetery. Jon wasn't mayor yet, but he still did a lot with the town government, and he was assigned the job of putting American flags on the graves of veterans. Keeping with his famous reluctance to indulge in any sort of physical labor, he thought about it for two seconds and decided, 'Hmm, I'll make Aidan and Eunice do it.' And then there you two were, these streaks of red, white, and blue dripping down your palms, a clipboard of names, and a flashlight given to each of you as you were sent on your way while we supervised. It lasted less than five minutes after Aidan couldn't find, like, the third grave on his sheet, and came back and complained



that there was no way it was in the cemetery, that there had to be some mistake. Of course, we found it immediately after. Eunice, you were a little better but not by much, and soon enough, my husband was facing two tired, whiny kids: maybe something he hated even more than on-your-feet work. He grabbed your stuff and said snarkily, 'Fine, I'll do it all like I always do,' which was two lies because he then gave one of the sheets to me, and suddenly I'm spending the evening on my knees in the dark trying to make out names on a tomb, my pant legs getting all dirty as you two started to run around, playing some game."

"Wow, Ms. Bennet. I was not a very thoughtful third-grader." Eunice leaned her chair back and ran her fingers through her long black hair. It was a movement performed in a mature, adult-woman way, foreign to Grace's experience of the girl.

"Oh no, both of you were fine kids. But kids who would get crazy and reckless and hard to manage in each other's presence. There's a - there's a provocative way that elementary school best friends act when they're around each other, feeding off each other," said Grace to the two now-eighteen-year-olds across from her at the kitchen table, a table which one of them ate at every day and the other one not having enjoyed a meal there since she was eleven.

"But fast-forward half an hour or so," she said towards Eunice, "and we're leaving, walking you home to that old house of yours

before you guys moved: the one only a couple of blocks away from us with the purple shutters, the patio out back we would all grill on, the street light near the driveway your mother was always terrified of backing her car into. Ha, I think Celine even called the town zoning department about it - that was something she would've done. Anyways, we're walking you back on the sidewalk, getting closer and closer and closer to that house, and my heart is just pounding like you wouldn't believe it. Almost as bad as my nerves taking the LSAT when I was twenty-one at Dartmouth, just awful."

"Why?" asked Eunice between sips of her tea.

"Well, this is your first crossroads today. Do you want me to smooth over details and speak kindly about people not in this room? People that might be important to you? Or do you want the full truth? Unfiltered and all."

"The second one, obviously. Why do you think I'm here?" she laughed.

"Okay, you've made your choice! I mean, this is going to come as no surprise to you but in my view, Celine was always—hmm—challenging. One of my best friends for many years of course, and I loved her very much, and she definitely had things I admired in her parenting of you and Audrey, the balance she found between high expectations and dispensing love, for example. But I mean, you probably don't disagree that she could be, and probably still is,

competitive and abrasive at times, never holding back her feelings. Condescending, you know. Passive-aggressive. And God, she was brilliant: the smartest person in any room that she would walk into, Charlie too. But she'd certainly let the whole room know right away that she was the smartest there," chuckled Grace sardonically.

"Honestly, these were qualities that maybe even drew me to her in the early years of our families' close relationship; Jon and I were both very struck by how soft and lackadaisical and just boring many of the parents were when we first moved here, and Celine, well, she was certainly none of those things."

Two sparrows feasted on the Bennets' bird feeder outside their kitchen window, nourishing themselves and indulging without guilt as Grace continued her story. "The reason I went with you two to the graveyard that night was because I needed to get away from Celine. Sorry, Eunice, that sounds blunt, but it's true. We had just had a bad, new kind of disagreement after dinner at your place that was really upsetting, so when Jon announced that he had a job for you guys, I took it as an escape route to come, but I left things behind really unresolved with her. Hence, my heart pounding with anxiety on delivering you back home for bed, Eunice.

"It would be a funny story if it wasn't the first nail in the coffin of a deep friendship. We're sitting around your living room, eating dessert and listening to a song play on the CD player: The Sound Of



Silence, a classic. I think Audrey was off doing something else - she must've been, like, fourteen, and I remember Celine's anxiety at having a teenager with a new social life, hanging out with friends alone. But you two were definitely there, and Aidan," she laughed, "you would always pretend to be sophisticated around adults you wanted to impress. I think you still do. So you take a subtle bite of ice cream, stroke your chin, and say, 'I love the way that Simon Garfunkel's voice sounds on this one,' and immediately Celine is like, 'You mean Simon and Garfunkel. Two people.' You look at her all confused and insist almost in an above-your-age patronizing way, 'No, Ms. Bridgers, I think I hear one person singing here: Simon Garfunkel. The best of all time.' And, of course, she goes, 'Are you crazy? It's Paul Simon. Art Garfunkel. I know these things; I saw them in Central Park in '82.' It went back and forth for a bit, and of course, all of us knew you were wrong, Aidan, but we were kind of enjoying this scene of her getting all flustered with a ten-year-old - at least I was - and suddenly you shout out like, 'I'll bet you five dollars it's one guy.' Celine gets all excited, says, 'Sure!' and walks over to you, literally shakes your hand, and then goes over to the desktop in the room and proves that you're wrong in two seconds. You were like, 'Ugh, I was confusing them with another guy.'

"But that wasn't the end of it. Celine walks over to you and goes, 'Great, glad that's settled. Now pay up; five dollars, remember?' We

thought she was joking and you definitely laughed before she asks again, and you go, 'I don't have cash on me, Ms. Bridgers.' And then she asks yet again and is like, 'Maybe you should think about that when you make bets you can't pay. Can you go get it?' which was ridiculous cause it was your house, Eunice, not ours. Where would he have any money? So you deferred again, Aidan and I really thought she'd give it up, but then Celine walks over and asks me for it. And not in a jokey manner. I'm like, 'Seriously? Five bucks?' but out of habit, or maybe just to shut her up, I pull out my wallet, which only had a twenty or something in there, and of course, I'm not giving her that, so I'm all forceful, no laughing, just 'Enough, Celine,' and I manage to change the topic.

"You two went upstairs to play after that, and when you were out of range, because I know that kids hearing adults fighting that they care about is really upsetting, I laid into her, like, 'What the hell, Celine? That's not how adults act! You take everything so seriously like you need to be superior here? And you know what she says? She goes, 'Sorry, Grace, I just think it's a shame that some parents need others to teach their children about accountability and trust.' God. The nerve of her! She could put you down so articulately, so passive-aggressively, it was unbearable. I huffed and walked away with you guys to the graveyard, and after that night, things just deteriorated, as you both know. Maybe that was the first time we

were able to be honest about our frustrations with each other, and I was obviously not a perfect mother or friend all of the time, but it was moments like that with Celine where, for the life of me, I could just not understand her. It was not a tenable family friendship. Maybe I'll see her at graduation next week and say hi, but man, it will have been a while.

“Anyways, I should stop talking like this about your mom. Eunice—are you regretting emailing me? Asking to revisit this house with all the memories before you go to college? Seeing you is bringing back memories for me, gosh.”

“No, no, it's great,” laughed Eunice a bit timidly. “Good to hear the other side of things.”

“I'm sure, I'm sure,” mused Grace. “I'm happy to indulge.”

To no great surprise, Eunice had mixed feelings about Grace's characterization of her mother. On one hand, these were true stories, justifiable critiques. Frustrations that Eunice knew too well because to some degree, in her shortly ending childhood, she had shared them. But on the other hand, there was this nagging, ineffable urge to dispute this woman in front of her at the table. “That's the person who raised me who you're talking about! I don't want your tea and your memories anymore!” In short, Eunice was torn on a lot of things.



In her world of teenagers trying to be intellectual, nothing was becoming more avant-garde and risqué than introspective criticisms levied against one's parents, and when this practice reared its spiky and enticing head in her friend group, there was nobody better prepared and more excited than the straight-faced and talkative Eunice Bridgers. On all areas of critique, she had a Story, and just as all episodes of the past bounce around and echo on the walls to nag and shape the present, she knew that an AP History essay on her eventful eighteen years would feature a contextualization section with such insane, nebulous maternal tales. When overbearing helicopter parents were brought up, Eunice would tell anybody who listened the story of her mother driving thirty minutes each way to the sixth-grade planetarium overnight, unfolding a sleeping bag that reportedly wouldn't come undone. When the topic at-hand was those kinds of high-pressure involved parents, Eunice shamefully would recount Celine emailing the freshman band teacher without daughterly permission, offering to pay for special private clarinet lessons after Eunice's home practice had apparently "regressed." And when other classmates complained about their moms or dads being emotionally volatile or snobby, the story of her mother's "your friends are bringing you down!" tirade was told. Lights, camera, action - the scene ahead from Eunice's future directorial hands: a mother picking her daughter up from an after-prom party, three

beer cans littered on the lawn that the mother almost definitely noticed out the window, a disoriented daughter who may have consumed a few drinks, who was dressed a little too revealingly, who was not - in that midnight moment of parental contact - an archetype of the excellent refined progeny that the mother had probably fantasized about prior to her birth, instead an archetype who had provoked this memorable road-rage speech. “These people are bringing you down!” she had screamed out of nowhere, turning a corner violently. “Do you think whoever was in there gives a shit about what college they’re going to? What their future holds outside of partying and getting drunk? You’re such a smart girl, Eunice, and I can’t hold my breath anymore watching these people - these people corrupting you.”

It was a story told selectively, often with great distortion, because many of Eunice’s people-analyzing, parent-criticizing friends were the unknowing targets of that rant.

But as she stood up from the Bennets’ kitchen table, taking in this small house that she used to spend almost every summer day at, that was much changed in her years of absence, yet not enough so to stop the most crippling attack of nostalgia Eunice had ever felt, she knew that Grace had it all wrong. Before she could pin down exactly why this was, before she could provide evidence to this thesis, Aidan was suddenly whisking her up to show her his room.

The bed looked a different size, all of the posters had changed and matured with age to reflect seemingly new fixations on rap albums and Democratic politics, and the toys they used to play with in the corners were replaced with SAT and applying-to-college study books, or in some cases, nothing at all.

“So. Are you getting déjà vu?” Aidan leaned against his bed and hedged his elbows on the mattress.

“No, yeah, this is crazy. It feels like I was here yesterday. Makes me glad I asked to swing by.” As their parents stopped being friends, so did they. A boy-girl platonic friendship facing up adolescence doesn’t have great odds anyway. “Are you excited about Georgetown?” she asked without great interest.

“For sure. It’ll be nice to live in a city,” he said. Eunice, disassociating, looked at his glasses, which he hadn’t worn back when they were best friends.

“Well, you too,” said Aidan after a pause. “NYU. That’s a city. For film school, right? You’ve seen more films than anyone I know.”

“Yeah, thanks. That’s the plan.” Outside his bedroom window, a police car went by, and a siren filled the oppressive silence. Eunice looked once more at the walls of the room, and Aidan did too, seeming to pretend to be taking them in for the first time. He hummed something vaguely familiar and strange. They avoided eye contact. A hush fell.



“You know, I always liked your mom and -”

Eunice’s right pocket sang three piano chords. “Ahh, my phone’s ringing; let me take this,” not realizing it was spam.

And, somewhere in that moment, she knew what Aidan’s mom had wrong about Celine. It had to do with hard truths, necessary hierarchies, the things she could think about but never say. How reacquainting oneself with old rooms, hidden corridors, forgotten places in familiar houses in aspirational attempts to feel something was all that some of her classmates really would do after college—returning to high school football games, wandering around the fast food chain parking lot where they had had their first kiss twenty years prior. Move over crack cocaine— it’s the twenty-first century, and a new drug is corrupting your innocent teens, ravaging the suburbs...nostalgia! Costs nothing but time, and your dealer doesn’t even have to be a person! No president has to plant it in the ghettos for it to spread. But it seemed as though there were better highs. The best part of Eunice’s future was her now-surefire abstention from it; she had had her fill, visited the Bennets, said very little and taken in a lot, and all she got in return was a bitter tangent against her mother.

And for what? Celine and her dad Charlie, too, had introduced her to movies, and where would she be without them? The Friday sun would set in the early 2010s - all of the other parents being at their

barbeque parties, drinking themselves into a false belief that it was finally the Knicks' year and that their kids were totally supervised in the backyard - while the Bridgers' home would morph into Cannes Film Festival. Obtaining a startlingly different education to her peers, Eunice was shown all of the classics one weekend at a time; her role models invaded by Kubrick, Scorsese, Anderson, and father and daughter Coppola. It didn't take long to imagine her own unique name (an Eunice in a sea of Ashleys and Hannahs, an old name, a family name) added to that list.

The things she learned in the darkness and glow in the home theater. 'What are those two characters doing?' 'Well, Eunice, ya ever wonder how babies are made?' 'CHARLIE!' Stuff about life too - like how the most real stories were the ones where you couldn't tell who the bad guys were, or how good people can make mistakes and still be good people. Many of her classmates still hadn't learned these things, and it showed. She didn't like when her mother put down her friends, but that didn't mean she had to always disagree with it. Interesting questions about other people sprouted up for her around a certain age, maybe sixteen. Like, did the dinner table discussions of her friends feature the same type of robust political conversation that her father always brought, or were they more focused on recapping school gossip and menial errands of the day? Did the bookshelves of these households really also have William Faulkner

and Marcel Proust on them? When they sat down for family movie night, was it Wes Anderson or was it Marvel superheroes? What did their kids want to be? These were Celine-esque questions, and Eunice felt queasy just thinking about them. But she did think about them.

The wrongheadedness, the taboo element of these questions, and these feelings toward her mom's influence on her life were addressed by one and one thing only: the mother-daughter movie. Packed into an AMC theater with two eleventh-grade friends on a cold December night, Eunice in ninety-four minutes, switched from a girl who really enjoyed movies to one who was monomaniacally obsessed with them, who had to understand and watch everyone, who needed to make them. She wasn't sure that her love for the film involved viewing the mother in it as Celine and the daughter as herself, nor was there much psychoanalysis that could have come from it, but similar threads kept creeping in upon every rewatch: the arguments the characters would have, the nonlinearity of teenage growth and setbacks, the kind of guarded optimism for college and the future ahead.

It was hers. There was some kind of ownership involved with the film like it was innately more Eunice's than it was a random person on the street. A year after watching it, it was brought up randomly and offhand in a class, and she kind of expected everyone in there



to turn around and look at her. “That’s Eunice’s movie, isn’t it?” It didn’t make much sense - she obviously did not work on the film and it was a classmate who could lay a better personal claim to it, having a mother who was apparently close college friends with the famous, stylish female director - yet she still expected association by way of obsession.

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Graduation eve rolled around to punctuate four hazy and inconsistent high school years, and Eunice sat in her room desiring yet another rewatch for symbolic closure. After all, films would hopefully be her life after this, and when it came to matters of her life in the meantime, what else could she do but aestheticize it? When her mother agreed to join her in this (there was something symbolic in this, too), Eunice wanted to kick the chair in front of her or pull her mom down the stairs when Celine left with thirty minutes to go. Whether it was offense or boredom or suspicion, the point was missed entirely and tragically, and it wouldn’t have been if she had just kept watching until the end. Things resolved in it; Eunice had resolved into wonderful matrilineal tastes, class, and pretensions. ‘Don’t you know I’m thanking you?’ She did end up kicking the chair.

From the top of the staircase, Aidan watched Eunice walk out of his family’s house at almost the exact same time that his father,

Jon, walked in. His suburban look of greased-back grey hair and wide spectacles changed into a bemused shock. “Eunie Bridgers! I was just with your dad at work. What are you doing here?”

Faced with that loaded question, it appeared as if Eunice abstained from saying something slyer, deciding to tell the truth. “I’m just revisiting some old places around town now that, you know, I’m technically done with my time here.”

“Wow, sounds very rich,” Jon said, crossing his arms. “You gonna make a movie about it? Charlie was telling me about your ambitions at Town Hall the other day. Don’t put me in it! The evil mayor character. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” They exchanged brief out-of-sync laughs and then Eunice closed the door behind her. Looking through the side window, Aidan saw her sit in the car for a few seconds before she left, just staring out the windshield.

“Didn’t expect to see Eunie here, God.” Jon chuckled.

“I think she goes by Eunice now,” Aidan said.

“That was crazy,” said Grace, walking into the living room and shaking her head.

“Emails me a couple days ago asking to see this house after, quote, so many years, and then sits down at the table and asks for me to tell her ‘where it went wrong between our families?’

It was a question Aidan had wondered too, although he never took the initiative that Eunice just had. And it helped anyway that

he knew the general gist of things from many years ago, even while forgetting the story of the Simon & Garfunkel song.

“Wow. A little gossipy if you ask me,” said Jon.

“A little?!” She went back to the kitchen, where she was making dinner. It was nearly 6 p.m., and Aidan had homework to do. Physics, a stray English assignment: loose ends to tie up before graduation. If Aidan had one wish, it was to skip past the last three months of these brainless transition tasks between high school and college, move to Georgetown, and call it a day with most of the people here. He’d rarely been there, but he would bet good money that the people who lived in DC were a lot smarter, funnier, hotter, and cooler than those from his suburb.

“What’s she like at eighteen now?” Jon shouted from across rooms, pulling black loafers off of his feet. “Anything like her mother?”

“Didn’t talk much, honestly.” Buttons to the oven were being pressed. “Just looked around; seemed like she was judging everything.”

“A female Bridgers family member judging things? Shocked, I tell you. Shocked.”

“The apple hasn’t even left the tree.”

Silent, Aidan walked over to the kitchen table, opened his laptop and resigned to take a look at his assignments. In recent years, he



had noticed his parents—one of them being mayor and knowing everything anyway—being far more willing to tell their only child more information about acquaintances in town. Nothing deeply inappropriate, but certain negative anecdotes about people that he would've never been made aware of back in, say, middle school.

“That’s got to be the first time Eunie was in here since what? 2012?” Jon joined them in the kitchen and hung up his coat.

“I don’t even remember the last time her or Celine was here,” said Grace. “Kind of a blur at the end. Can you believe we used to think they were different from all the other families?” “Well, they are different,” mused Jon. “Very different. But still toxic. Hey,” he pointed towards Aidan. “I know you want to go into politics too but be warned. You get in there and you realize how, how imbecilic everyone you serve is. There’s a reason we don’t host those holiday parties anymore.”

But contrary to his parents, Aidan did remember the last time that the Bridgers’ family closed the door - the old one they had before it was replaced - and left their house. He recalled it with vivid intensity, all the way down to the frigidness of the night outside to the contours of how his body lay slumped on his old bed when they were gone.

“What an asshole,” he had heard his mom shout minutes after they had departed. “What a fucking asshole.” This was the first time

Aidan had heard one of his parents use such language. Swear words were for inappropriate pop singers and the kids in his grade who didn't do so well academically - not his mother.

“Grace, calm down,” came his father’s voice. “Everyone makes comments that are - that are impulsive. I bet even Charlie thought that was too much. I could see his face, you know -”

“I don’t care what Charlie thinks! How could you just sit there and laugh and not say anything when she said that?” Aidan had no idea what they were talking about, and they certainly didn’t know that he was listening in.

“I just - stop!” yelled his dad. “You get so angry at these little things. You think every conversation is supposed to be perfect, and then the second that they aren’t, you lose your shit. You - you’re just as bad as Celine sometimes!”

“I’m just as bad as Celine! I’m just as bad as Celine! How dare you, how dare—” And at this moment, Aidan closed his door and put music on his earbuds, and the earbuds in his ears. The opening chords of Mrs. Robinson played melancholically. He stared really intently at the decaying wallpaper on the corner crevice near his bed. Never had it been more fascinating. A couple of weeks later, it was the twenty-first of December, and school was let out for a week. “Are we having Eunie and her family over for Christmas Eve

this year?” Aidan asked Grace in the kitchen, testing waters he knew to be contaminated.

“No, ah, I don’t think this year,” Grace said. “It’ll just be the three of us.”

“Is there anyone else we could invite?”

Grace laughed strangely. “Who else would we?” She left Aidan alone with his dinner.

The details often vary for Eunice, but the dream is always the same. It’s one of those dreams that’s so strong and so desired that it starts to become unbearable. When she thinks about it in bed, her blankets end up twisted. When she thinks about it in life, the people around her start to find her distant. It will hit especially strongly when she ventures into the graveyard one evening, trying to imagine herself being a lot shorter and a lot younger, and a lot less aspirational, running around with a kid she’d never talk to again. And suddenly, she will no longer be in this suburb that she is trying to take in before she leaves - she will be in New York City for school, but it’s more specific than that. She will be in some park there on a sunny April afternoon with some other faceless film students: actors, cameramen, set designers, and she will have a clipboard and a headset and a screenplay she wrote in hand, running the show.

“I need you two to be forceful with each other. But also soft and sympathetic.”



“Are you sure?” The girl dressed up to be older will say. “It’s a pretty rough script.” “Yes, I’m sure. It might not look like one,” she will say triumphantly with rehearsed

lines, “but this is a love story.” The younger-looking actress girl will nod and finally understand. Eunice will then sit behind a camera and signal for the mother and the daughter

characters to start speaking. As the tape starts to roll, she will teleport back out of New York City and return to that old house with the purple shutters and the frustratingly close streetlight. She will see people she knows very well talking in the windows, on camera, as all things in that house were. And the giant black camera she’s operating is definitely not in her amorphous city park anymore - it’s in the middle of the street that she grew up on. It’s the evening, and it’s definitively dusk; there are no cars to be seen and she is sitting on a stool across from her old house on the road all alone, pointing the camera towards the windows. Diverting her gaze for a second, she slides her face away from the eyehole and speaks with a slight smile to someone in front of that house who may or may not even be there.

“Kill the lights.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Henry Reichman is a 19-year-old undergraduate student studying English and Political Science at Boston College, having grown up in Albany, New York. He has been writing stories and novels since he was very little and hopes to make a career out of it. An avid reader, he is influenced by writers like Virginia Woolf, Zadie Smith, and Joan Didion, and while not reading or writing, he loves to play the piano and talk with his friends. *The Home Theater* is not directly the story of his childhood, but very much an encapsulation of the suburban upbringing he had - an upbringing that covered up uncomfortable tensions and truths that this story brings out.



Signing. *AI generated image*



# Drinking with Strangers

A LONG Short Story by Marco Etheridge

**A**scending through darkness brought suffering enough to cause Ripley Walker to beg for everything just to stop, please, but his painful return to consciousness was a powerful current. Another heartbeat. Light pierced his eyeballs and seared his brain. Ragged coughs pushed past his swollen tongue. The coughing turned to gagging. Shards of electric pain split his skull. This was easily the worst hangover in human history.

The room spun forward and back. Bile pushed into Ripley's throat. He clamped, sweating palms to his skull, not sure his aching melon would stay attached if he let go. Then, his eyes began to focus. Ripley did not like what he saw. He lay sprawled on a lumpy sofa in a room he did not recognize. Ripley blinked. This did not help.

C'mon, brain, a little help. Damage report: this is not your apartment. Right. Where am I? Shit.



Ripley peeled back a none-too-clean Avengers blanket, very relieved to find himself fully clothed. Bonus points: no one else on the sofa. No need to guess a naked stranger's name while enduring a monster hangover.

He was alone, apparently unmolested, but where the fuck was he? He blinked again, trying to believe his bleary eyes. The room appeared to be a low-rent office.

Weak daylight leaked through a single window. A cubby-hole kitchen made up the left third of the room. A crippled desk guarded a steel door. A pair of mangy easy chairs facing the sofa. Another steel door in the wall behind the sofa. An open hallway crooked off into shadows. Ripley hoped like hell that it led to a toilet.

He closed his aching eyes, offered a silent prayer, and then squinted into the light. If anything, the room looked worse. Everything looks filthy, old, or broken. The place reminded Ripley of an abandoned biker clubhouse. Not far wrong, as he would later learn.

An ice pick stabbed Ripley's brain. A tiny woodpecker had built a nest in his skull, and now it wanted to batter its way out.

Ripley moaned. This wasn't fair. He was a distiller by trade, the only skill he possessed. Distillers aren't laid low by the grog they brew. Yeah, whatever. Boutique distiller, meet hungover bum on a

strange couch. Then, a pulsing urge in his bladder put an end to inner dialogues.

He pushed himself upright, wavered, and almost fell. The stench assaulted him like a blow to the head. Ripley possessed a distiller's fine-tuned sense of smell. This stinking shithole bludgeoned his nose into submission.

Gritting his teeth against the stench, he forced himself to take a step. The impending flood of piss propelled him down the short hall and into a cramped, filthy bathroom. Luckily, there was a toilet. He yanked open his fly before the flood commenced, but only just. He peed like a man who had not passed water in years.

Pecker in hand, Ripley Walker glanced into a cracked mirror. What he saw caused him to pee on the floor. The face in the mirror wore a thick beard. Not the stubble of a three-day-bender. No, this was a mountain man beard, whiskers to be proud of. His stared. Those were his eyes and nose, but someone else's huge beard. He screamed and ran.

Water, he needed water. He staggered into the kitchen, turned on the tap, let the water run, and grabbed a stray glass. Rinsed the glass halfway clean, filled it, sniffed it, then bolted it down. The water hit bottom and threatened to return the way it came. Ripley braced himself against the counter. He looked down and saw his pecker hanging out.

Ripley groaned. No one deserved this. He tucked himself back into his pants, zipped up, and refilled the crusty glass. His hands shook. Water ran down his chin into a forest of facial hair. He slammed the glass to the counter and smacked himself in the forehead.

Ow! Shit. Think, goddamn it. What the hell happened to you? You left the apartment yesterday evening to go... somewhere. Money in your pocket, showered and shaved. And then?

His mind went blank. Then he heard a muffled noise through the back wall. Without thinking, Ripley bolted to the steel door, yanked, fumbled with the lock, then yanked again.

The door flew open. In the second it took to scream, Ripley very much wished the door had stayed shut.

He stared into a darkened room hung with weird shadows. One of those shadows blocked the doorway, waving an evil-looking club. The shadow screeched at him.

“Who do you think you are, fuck-face? Get the fuck out of my room, or I’ll smash your skull! I will beat your ass ragged, you filthy rapist bastard...”

Ripley slammed the door and twisted the lock. Heavy blows rained down on the locked door. He retreated to the far side of the room, his heart pounding.

Fuck this place, and fuck the neighbors. Whatever happened, it’s time to move.



He found his jacket draped over a chair. Keys? Check. Wallet? Check. Phone? Nope, no cell. He pawed between the couch cushions and almost heaved. Nope, no way, we can buy a new phone. Then the pounding started up again, accompanied by more curses.

Fuck this, we are outta here.

Passing the desk, Ripley spotted a bottle-opener keyring and a single key. He snatched it up and slid the key into the bolt on the exterior door. Perfect fit. He stepped outside, pulled the door closed, and locked it.

Ripley blinked at an overcast sky. Where the hell was he? An empty parking lot except for two hulks perched on cinder blocks and stripped clean. Grass and weeds grew through cracks in the asphalt. Tall grass.

His eyes searched the unfamiliar surroundings. A shitty industrial strip mall, where cheap offices fronted chop-shops, fly-by-night windshield repair, or cut-rate gutter services. The place looked like it had died years ago. Same for the neighborhood. Not a car on the street. He wracked his aching brain. What day was it? Sunday morning?

Ripley walked to the curb. Nothing in either direction. Then, his eyes caught a glimpse of something red and blue. It seemed to rotate. A barbershop. And some guy out front wearing a smock.

Okay, barbershop open. Can't be Sunday or Monday. Whatever, go with Tuesday as a guess.

The barber was sweeping the sidewalk as Ripley drew near. A tall Black man, maybe sixty, grey-white at the temples. The barber turned to eyeball Ripley, then leaned on his broom.

"Morning, Sir. This your place?"

The older man gave Ripley a once-up-and-down before answering.

"That's right. Wilkes' Barbering. I'm Wilkes. Don't believe I seen you before."

"You'd be right. I don't remember seeing your shop before today."

Boston Wilkes nodded and spun his broom.

"Thought not. But I know a man needs a trim when I see one, and I'm looking at that fella right now."

Ripley pushed his fingers through the strange beard.

"Bit more than a trim. Is that coffee I smell?"

"Yessir, just put on the first pot. What you say your name was?"

"Walker, Ripley Walker."

"Well, step inside Ripley Walker, 'fore the morning crowd shows up."

Wilkes held open the door. Ripley crossed the threshold. The place was a two-chair time capsule. A collage of sports memorabilia

covered everything except the mirrors. The barber stepped to a burbling coffeemaker.

“I hope you like it black ‘cause that’s all we got.”

“Suits me, Mister Wilkes.”

“Call me Boston. You got money? Coffee’s free, but not the barbering. I hate to ask, but times are hard.”

Ripley fished out his wallet, peeked inside, and smiled. Two twenties, a ten, and a few singles. Whatever else happened last night, he still had cash.

“How much for a haircut and taming this beard?”

Boston Wilkes scowled at the proffered wallet.

“Nothing those antique greenbacks can buy. The haircut is four units, and the beard is two. I’ll go five even, but only cause you’re my first customer. That’s five monetary units. In advance.”

“Okay, I got fifty-three units here, so we’re good.”

“Son, you missed the deadline for turning in those greenbacks by ten years. Twelve, now that I’m remembering. Nossir, you got nothing but worthless paper. Alright, I understand. You my charity case for the day. Get your ass in the chair, ‘fore I change my mind. But not a word to anyone, you hear me? I don’t want to be up to my ass in freeloaders.”

“But Mister Wilkes...”

“Call me Boston or get out.”



“But Boston, I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand what? Pretty simple, son. Get in the chair or get out the door. Choose.”

Ripley slipped into the barber chair, carefully not to spill the precious coffee. Boston swirled a chair cloth through the air with the practiced motion of a matador. The cloth settled over Ripley’s lap and shoulders.

“You gonna have to keep some of that beard. I ain’t got time to shave you ‘fore the boys show up.”

“You’re the boss.”

“First thing you right about so far. Lean forward.”

The clippers buzzed. Hair fell in clumps. After the initial shearing, Boston paused to change clipper heads.

“You go on and drink your coffee now.”

Ripley pulled the mug from beneath the lapcloth. The caffeine woke his brain, and his brain had questions.

“Boston, mind if I ask you something?”

The man harrumphed. He swung around, clippers held at the ready.

“Best cover your mug. One question, no more.”

“What’s a monetary unit?”

“Mmmh, you do push your luck. I’ll humor you this one time just to see what you do.”

The clippers buzzed as Boston pushed Ripley's head forward.

"Units are the government money, as every child knows. New Monetary Units, legal tender, like your antique greenbacks used to be, 'cept units are electronic money. It's dole money is what it is. Good for the crap at the government store and not much else. Most folks use barter amongst themselves."

Ripley's mind reeled. Boston switched to scissors, but Ripley barely noticed. Something was very, very wrong.

What the fuck happened to me, and where in hell am I?

The scissors stopped.

"Ripley, imma ask you a question without permission, this being my shop."

Ripley gulped a breath and tried not to scream.

"Fair enough."

"What is wrong with you? You don't strike me as the average crazy person I get now and then. I help them fellas out when I can. Clean 'em up and whatnot. But you don't seem crazy. More like confused or lost."

Ripley looked in the mirror and saw Boston standing behind him, holding sharp scissors.

"I don't know. Confused, man, that's an understatement. I woke up this morning in a strange room just up the road. No one else there, no idea how I got there, no clue what happened last night.

Well, drinking for sure because I've got a pitbull hangover. Strange shit is happening to me, and now you're telling me my money's no good. I just want to go home and sleep this off. And I know you don't believe me, but I'll try to find some way to pay you back."

"Alright, take it easy. Let me even up this beard a bit and you be done."

Boston leaned in with a small trimmer.

"Close your eyes now."

The whisk danced over Ripley's face and flicked across the nape of his neck. He felt the neckband loosen. Then, the lapcloth swept aside. Loose hair cascaded to the floor. He pushed himself from the chair.

"There you go, Ripley Walker. I hope your day gets better; maybe you get some answers. Don't know what else I can do to help you."

"You've done plenty, Boston. I owe you."

"Yeah, but not a word to anyone, hear? You got a way home?"

"I'm hoofing it. Can't be too far."

"Where you stay at?"

"Over on Alton."

The older man's expression sharpened.

"Alton and what?"

"The Beauregard, Alton and Fifth."

Wilkes stepped back and shook his head.



“Now why you want to do that? You come in my place, all down on your luck. Do I disrespect you? No, I don’t. I give you coffee, cut your hair, treat you decent. Then you lie to my face.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the Beauregard Apartments. The cops burnt it to the ground during the Urban Wars, along with that whole neighborhood. Killed many folks. Said they was terrorists. That was fourteen, fifteen years ago. Don’t nobody live there now ‘cept rats and pigeons.”

Ripley felt the floor shifting under his feet. He fell into one of the empty chairs that lined the wall.

“No, you don’t. You get out of here, or I’ll run this broom across your shoes. Serve you right, you liar.”

A bony hand snaked under Ripley’s armpit and yanked him to his feet. Another hand snatched away the coffee mug. The world spun and before Ripley had time to think, he found himself on the empty sidewalk. A bell jangled as the door slammed shut behind him.

Not knowing what to do or where to go, Ripley retraced his steps. He hated the idea of returning to the derelict office, but something told him it was better than searching out his old apartment.

Ripley recrossed the cracked asphalt. He hesitated, then slipped the key into the lock. The door opened a crack. He peeked inside.

Everything seemed the same. He stepped inside and closed the door. Before he could lock it, a banging filled the room.

“Hello in there.”

A woman’s voice. The voice that wielded an evil club.

Ripley froze, not knowing whether to run or hide.

“Look, I saw you come in.”

“Wait, how could you see me?”

The words jumped out of Ripley’s mouth before he could bite them off.

“Duh, scope on the roof. Look, I’m your neighbor, right?”

“Yeah, the spooky neighbor with the club.”

There was a snort from beyond the door.

“Right, that’s me. Very spooky. Four years I’ve been living here thinking that room’s abandoned. Suddenly, some hairy guy busts into my space. By the way, Boston did a nice job. That caveman look didn’t work for you.”

“Wait a minute, okay? I don’t understand any of this, not a single thing.”

“How about you start by unlocking the door? My name’s Jasmine if that helps. Jasmine James.”

Ripley slumped onto the sofa and stared at his shoes.

“Hello?”

Fuck it. Getting hit with a club might help.

He pushed himself up and unlocked the inner door. Then he flopped back onto the sofa. A few seconds passed, then the door eased open. A head of wild hair appeared around the jamb.

“Hey. Wow, you look like your dog got run over by a train.”

Ripley nodded.

“Yeah. You might as well come in.”

The rest of Jasmine James slid into the room, closed the door, and leaned against it. She was tall and thin, maybe twenty-five, her skin the bronze of faraway islands. Ms. James wore welder chic. Faded overalls, a denim shirt, and heavy boots. Her hair gathered into a scrunchie atop her head and exploded upwards from there.

“So, umm, hi neighbor I didn’t know I had.”

“Hi.”

Jasmine folded her arms across the top of her overalls.

“And you are...?”

“Right, sorry. I’m Ripley, Ripley Walker.”

“Okay, Ripley. You can call me Jazz. I’m guessing you already met Boston, so now you know half the folks in the neighborhood. You wanna tell me what you’re doing here?”

Ripley shook his head and stared at his shoes.

“I wish I could, but I have no idea. None.”

Jazz circled the sofa and perched in the nearest armchair.



She lowered her head and tried to look into Ripley's eyes. He gave up and raised his head. Jazz gave him an assessing look and frowned. Whatever she saw did not meet with her approval.

"When was the last time you ate anything? You're looking pretty peaked."

"Don't know. I had a cuppa coffee at the barbershop."

"I thought so. You better come next door. I'll cook you breakfast, make amends for scaring you. It's just dole food, but I trick it out special. You get some food in you; then you tell me what's eating you, cause something is damn sure chewing on your ass. What do you think, new neighbor Ripley?"

"I think it's the best idea I've heard in a long time."

Jazz's laughter filled the nasty office. Ripley liked the sound of it, even though it hurt his head.

"Well, the day's young. C'mon, let's get you fed. Then you can tell me your tale of woe."

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Over the next half hour, Jasmine employed spicing tricks and subterfuge to render dole food edible. Ripley took a stab at sorting out his jumbled memories. Both failed, although Jasmine had better luck with the government-issue protein patties.

While Jazz cooked, Ripley surveyed the warehouse. Looms filled one wall. Fabric, yarns, and all manner of textiles spilled from

shelves. The weird shadows that had spooked him turned out to be woven garments hanging from overhead rafters.

Jazz served the food, and they dug in. Ripley contemplated the food dangling from his fork.

“What exactly is this stuff?”

Jazz chewed and swallowed before answering.

“Best not to know. It won’t kill you, at least in the short run, but it will keep you thin. Shit’s too nasty to get fat on.”

“And everyone eats it?”

“Mostly. Can’t hardly touch meat anymore. I’ve forgotten what fish tastes like. We barter for eggs in summer, chicken too, but winter is hard. Rabbit and deer show up now and then, but hunters pop them right quick.”

Ripley forked more mystery patty into his mouth. Jasmine’s spice helped, but it was like chewing spicy styrofoam. While he ate, Jazz asked questions.

“Let me get this straight. All you remember is walking down the street, some guys hanging out front, and they invite you for a quick drink. That’s it?”

“Yeah, but bits are coming back to me. They all looked alike. Maybe brothers or something.”

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. You said four of them, right? Four brothers?”

“Maybe it was five. And not brothers, but family or something. I remember they all had beards.”

“Maybe that’s why they offered you a drink. Saw your beard and figured you for a long-lost cousin.”

“Except I didn’t have a beard last night. I already told you that.”

Jazz gave him a raised eyebrow.

“This is some crazy shit you’re telling me. You know that, right?”

“I know.”

“Okay then.”

“It’s weird, but I can see it more than remember it, if that makes any sense. Five of them, short guys with beards and dark hair. They were hanging out on the sidewalk.”

“And they offer you a drink. What were they drinking?”

“It was beer, or ale, something dark. I think they poured it out of a growler, like home-brew. Oh shit!”

“What is it?”

“I remember something else. Later, after a few brews, one of the little dudes asked me if I wanted to try something special. I said, sure, why not? I remember he asked twice, or maybe three times.”

“Then what?”

“He broke out some grappa, homemade firewater. Dude had some nice shot glasses. I remember that. Too fancy for a sidewalk drink.



Anyway, I guess we did some shots. And that's the last thing I remember."

Ripley chewed his last reluctant bite, laid down his fork, and looked across the makeshift table. Jasmine stared into his face.

"Ripley, I'm gonna ask you a question. I probably don't want to know the answer, but you got to tell me the truth, okay?"

"Sure, I promise."

"What year is it, for you, I mean?"

"Jazz, you're freaking me out a little."

"Year? Please?"

Ripley felt the shadow of doubt even as he opened his mouth.

"Twenty-twenty-three."

Jasmine James reached across the table and laid her bronze hand over his arm.

"Ripley, I got some bad news for you. You're two decades off. It's twenty-forty-three."

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Ripley tossed and turned on the too-short couch. He had come close to a complete freakout in front of his new neighbor. Very close to the edge, indeed.

Jazz talked him back from the abyss, but only just. After Ripley calmed enough to maybe avoid a heart attack, Jazz gave him a mug of foul herbal tea that she claimed would help him sleep. When he

finally choked down the nasty brew, Jazz led him back to the office, tucked him in, and promised to look in on him later.

Thrashing around on the sofa, Ripley wished Jazz would poke her pretty head through the door. Better yet, she might invite him to share her bed, where he could freak out naked and in good company. Before he could take that dream any further, a fresh mob of worries scrabbled into his brain. Any further thoughts of Jasmine were blotted out.

Twenty years gone—Poof! How was a guy supposed to reconcile that? Besides the enormous questions of how and why, there were so many other weird things.

Ripley couldn't make sense of this crazy shit. Take the simple fact of his age. Twenty-eight or forty-eight? When he'd asked Jazz, she tried to make a joke of it. She said it meant she might be dating a younger and older man at the same time. Ripley failed to see the humor and the hopeful hint went right past him.

Then there was the state of the world. Society had gone to shit during his two-decade nap. Anarchy, civil war, the cops burning down his apartment building. He might have died along with all those other poor bastards.

Thoughts bombarded his addled brain, getting more and more jumbled. His head was going fuzzy, maybe from the tea, maybe from

shock and a huge hangover. Despite the clamor of worry, darkness slipped over him. Ripley welcomed it.

Deep in the night, when all should have been dark, the room flickered. Images shifted like a badly spliced film. Ghostly images appeared. The briefest flash of a person sitting at the desk, then someone walking out the door, muffled snippets of conversation, daylight, darkness, and all of it moving too fast to see or hear.

Ripley swam out of the nightmare. He tried to move, but his body felt frozen. Was he still dreaming? Fear stabbed an icy finger through his guts. This was no dream, and he was not alone. He prayed it was Jasmine come to nurse him, and in the same moment, he knew it wasn't.

Without opening his eyes, Ripley knew someone else was in the room with him, a mere arm's reach from where he pretended to sleep. And somehow, the intruder's presence felt familiar. It was a horrible way to wake up, and it only got worse.

"I see yer eyelids moving, ya daft human. Yer foolin' no one."

Ripley yanked the Avengers blanket over his head, forgetting how bad it smelled. He pulled it back down and saw someone grinning at him. It was not a nice smile.

The figure was bearded, muscular, and hard-looking. A short man dressed as a miner. Or maybe a blacksmith. A very small blacksmith. Even with his heavy boots, the grinning apparition wasn't four feet



head to toe. But hovering over the sofa, the little bastard looked twelve feet tall.

Ripley was already at the end of his tether, and now the tether broke.

“Who are you, and what the fuck do you want with me?”

The wee miner pulled a face of mock hurt.

“Oh, so that’s how it is, aye? Quick, you are to forget a friend, Ripley Walker. Bah, humans! All alike, ya louts. Ya weren’t so standoffish last night, that’s sure.”

“Last night. Wait, you were here? What happened? What did you do to me?”

“That’s a laugh. I, do something to you? That’s rich, that is. We invited you to share a drink with us. All too willing you were. Then we broke out the good stuff and warned ya off, but ya wanted a nip, ya greedy sod. Speaking of which, did youse check yer pockets this morning?”

“My pockets?”

“Aye, the sacks in yer britches where ya keeps yer whatnot, ya daft bugger.”

Ripley tangled himself trying to reach into the pockets of his jeans. When he untangled himself and opened his hand, five golden heads of grain cradled on his palm. It looked like rye or barley, but it was too dark to tell.

“Tis midnight on the last day of May, and here you be, sleeping through it. Tsk-tsk, lad.”

In a twinkling, the little man skipped to the window, yanked up the blinds, and was perched on the edge of the easy chair before Ripley could scream.

Beyond the window, the dark of midnight lay over the world, yet the room glowed. The eerie light did nothing to improve the situation nor the countenance of the wicked stranger. Ripley recognized wicked when he saw it.

“No, lad, I’m not wicked. No more than you are. We struck a bargain, plain and simple.”

Ripley sat up and swept off the blanket. It smelled awful, he hated having the little fucker staring down at him, and worse, the midget could read his thoughts.

“I see ya kept a bit of the beard. Suits ya, I must say.”

Ripley waved a finger.

“Who are you, and what did you do to me?”

The short man sat back, hands twined over his waistcoat, and twiddled his thumbs.

“Right, so that’s how ya wants it, straight and to the point. Very well. Stupid fucking humans, dense as logs. It’s a wonder how you lot managed to take over the entire world, but there it is. My name

is Robert. I'll not be telling ya my full name; goes without saying. I'm a kobold."

Robert the kobold gave Ripley the human a wink. The human opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water and failed to notice.

"Sheesh, idiot humans. As I was saying, I'm a kobold, or puck if you prefer. Pixie, knocker, you big folk have plenty of names for us, all of them wrong. We used to live cheek-by-jowl, yer kind and mine, but then youse took to wheels and gears and machines. Next thing ya know—Presto!—the whole planet is fer humans and humans only. All the other creatures, furred, finned, or faeried, we're left to hide where we can, in the deepest, darkest shadows."

Ripley found his tongue, despite the insane shit the little man spouted.

"Okay, whatever you say. But what does that have to do with me?"

The kobold laughed, not a happy storybook laugh, but a creepy, sinister cackle.

"Bad luck, Ripley Walker. You were handy, that's all. Now that you big folks are busy destroying yer own kind, there's a chance fer the rest of us. But it's a tickly business, very tricky to navigate. My kind needs to bounce safe through your last dying years. Probably take



you humans half a century to finish the job. After that, it's clear sailing for the Little Folk."

"Bounce, like, jump through time?"

"Look at ya, now, awake and smelling the midnight air! That's exactly right. But the bouncing requires the drink, and the drink is tricky. Needs constant calibrating. So, we test it on humans, find a safe spot, then make another jump. Think of it as stations on an underground railway if that helps."

"But what about me?"

Robert the kobold snorted.

"What about you, human? We struck a deal. Yer holding the payment in yer hand. Grain for the bargain, and our drink the privilege. Asked you three times, as required, and three times ya answered aye. Done is done."

"Then I'm stuck here? Twenty years gone, just like that?"

"Twenty years and two days, to be exact. As I was saying, the drink needs constant tending. And them years ain't gone. The clock is just reset, is all. Lucky you. You'd be dead otherwise."

"But my life is ruined, you little bastard. You took everything from me. Give it back!"

The kobold waved his hand through the air. The anger Ripley clutched so tightly flew away from him like a sail cut loose in a raging tempest. He sagged onto the sofa.

“A civil tongue in yer head, if you please, Mister Walker. Now then, yer life wasn’t much. Be honest with yourself. No gal, hardly any mates, lonely most of the time. Add on the likelihood that the human police would have killed ya with them other poor sods. Not a terrorist amongst them, by the way. All of it just a sad circus. To my way of thinking, we did youse a favor.”

“And there’s no way to send me back?”

“None whatsoever. We can jump back and forth, but not you lot.”

“And it won’t matter, because all the humans are going to die, right?”

“I said no such thing, Ripley Walker. Humans are unpredictable ‘ceptin when it comes to making things worse. Some of yer kind might survive. Not many, but some.”

Anger swelled through Ripley and gave him strength. He lunged from the sofa, intent on strangling the smirking kobold. Before he was halfway to the creature’s throat, Robert the kobold flicked his hand and vanished. The last thing Ripley saw was a malicious grin. Then he crashed into an empty easy chair and the room went black.

The chair flipped backward, and Ripley went along for the ride. He landed flat on his back under an upside-down easy chair. Old pennies and mouse shit rained down from the loose cushions. Then a pool of light settled over the wreckage.

Jasmine James’ voice followed the sweep of the flashlight.

“You wanna tell me what the fuck you’re doing? Middle of the goddamn night and you’re wrestling with furniture.”

Ripley yelled a muffled reply and got a mouthful of dust for his trouble.

“What?”

He flailed at the cushions, then squinted into the beam of the flashlight.

“I said, the goblins came back. One anyway. He sat right here in this chair.”

“A goblin, huh?”

Ripley scuttled out from under the chair until his back slammed into the wall. His legs splayed out across the floor.

Jasmine squatted beside him.

“So you attacked the chair?”

Ripley waved a weak hand.

“Give me a second, okay?”

“Sure, take your time. It’ll give me a chance to sort this shit out. Let’s see. A new neighbor appears out of nowhere. Says he’s from the past, but more likely he’s just some crazy homeless person.”

“I am homeless! The cops burned down my apartment building.”

“Right. So, back to my version of this weird story. I take pity on the guy because he’s kinda cute. Another bad move in my ongoing



series of bad decisions about men. Now my neighbor is wrestling armchairs at midnight and telling me they're demons."

Ripley rubbed a hand across his forehead, then shook a finger at nothing.

"Wait. He told me his name. Robert. And he's not a demon. He said he was a kobold, whatever that is."

"Big difference between a goblin and a kobold."

"Yeah? And how do you know that?"

Jasmine snorted.

"Kids books, that's how. Your parents never read you fairytales?"

Ripley's sagged forward and gripped his head. A few seconds passed in silence. Then he felt Jasmine's hand on his shoulder.

"Okay, tough night. I get that. Look, I gotta leave early in the morning. There's a barter fair outside the city. But I doubt either of us are getting back to sleep anytime soon. Why don't I make some tea and you can tell me all about your pal the kobold."

Her hand slid under his armpit and urged him up. Ripley gave in, pushed himself to his feet, and followed the beam of her flashlight.

~~~

In the days that followed, Ripley Walker slipped from despair into depression. The first week of June brought sunshine and warmth, but he ignored both and locked himself inside. The walls closed in, and the musty office became a prison cell.

Jasmine had disappeared to her mysterious barter fair. She'd said it might last four or five days. Midnights came and went with no sign of the horrible Robert. Ripley became a castaway stripped of everything, including his past.

Four mornings without caffeine drove Ripley to the edge of madness and forced him out the door. Once outside, guilt kept him moving. Dawn edged the eastern sky, but the sun had yet to show itself. He crossed the parking lot and headed up the sidewalk.

As he neared the barbershop, Ripley saw no sign of Boston Wilkes. He looked to the dawn light. Too early, even for barbers. But not too early for him to start paying off his debt.

Ripley wandered around back and found a battered trash can. Then he set himself to work. Starting with the gutter out front, he picked up every bit of litter he could find, right down to the cigarette butts. Then he policed the sidewalk. He worked around the building until the trash can stood half full. Then he heard a voice behind him.

“Might be misremembering, but I thought I done thrown you out.”

“G'morning, Mister Wilkes.”

“Don't you be morning me. And it's Boston. What're you doing?”

Ripley straightened up and faced the barber.

“Paying off my debt.”

He held up the trash can as evidence. Boston harrumphed and shook his head.

“If you give me a broom, I’ll sweep the sidewalk. Hell, I’ll sweep the whole street for one cup of coffee. Wash the windows, run errands, anything you want.”

Boston scratched his chin and eyeballed the young man.

“Needing a cuppa coffee, I spose that’s understandable. But you stay out of my way, hear? I don’t need no bother, and this ain’t no homeless shelter.”

Ripley swept the sidewalk like it had never been swept before. He swept the gutter. He would have kept sweeping, but Boston stuck his head out the door.

“Coffee’s ready.”

~~~

The morning sun warmed the bench in front of the barbershop. Ripley cradled the coffee mug close to his chin. He took small sips, savoring each one. A few of the regulars arrived. They greeted Ripley with an air of caution, the way one might speak to a dangerous child.

When he stepped inside, the room fell silent. He sidled over to the coffee station and stowed the dirty mug. Boston already had a regular in the chair. Two others sat along the wall. Every eye stared at him.



“You need anything else, Mister Wilkes?”

“Nope, that’ll do.”

“Right. I’ll be going. Thank you.”

Ripley got gone.

The sun warmed the street. No way he could face that shithole squat, not today. Ripley set out walking. The street seemed to be a border of a sort. A neighborhood of brick walkups and vacant lots rose on his left. Vague recollections tickled his brain. This had been a poor section of town back in what he now thought of as his own time. The passing of two decades had not been kind. It looked a lot poorer now.

South of the street, a crumbling industrial wasteland stretched to the horizon. Nature seemed intent on reclaiming the ruined warehouses and gravel lots. Saplings reached for the sky, the beginnings of a new forest. Weeds and brambles conquered the open spaces and climbed over tumbled-down fences.

Ripley crossed the street and found a faint path that led into the tangle. He hadn’t gone a hundred yards before he felt he’d entered another world. The signs were everywhere. Rabbit runs pierced the brambles. A pheasant shot into the sunlight.

He thought of his grandpa. Ripley was a city boy raised by parents who were unhappy with themselves and their son. Every summer, his

parents shipped him upstate to live with his grandparents. His fondest memories were of long days with his grandpa.

Grandpa Walker rarely said two words, but he understood the world of critters, as he called them. Young Ripley learned to hunt, fish, and sometimes see the world through his grandpa's eyes. Those skills had lain dormant from lack of need. Ripley needed them now.

A quarter mile on, the game trail ended at a canal. Cattails lined the banks. Clear water flowed past in no hurry to get anywhere. Ripley stood on the bank, alone with his thoughts. He watched, listened, and waited. Then he turned and hurried back the way he'd come.

He strode along, rolling ideas through his head. He needed tools. The only way to get them was to scavenge. Fortunately, there were piles of junk everywhere. Most had been picked over, but he had lots of time. The thought caused him to laugh out loud.

The first vacant lot yielded a stout rake handle minus the rake. After searching several other middens, he uncovered the head of a garden fork. In another, he found half a machinist's file. Bits of wire proved easier. Not a scrap of copper, but plenty of old steel wire. He soon gathered a collection of tangled lengths in different gauges.

Clutching his treasures, Ripley headed back to the squat. He opened the door and window to air the fetid office. The broken desk became a worktable.

First, he filed the tines of the garden fork to dagger points. The file rasped his fingers raw, but he kept at it. Using the edge of the file, he cut grooves in the tines and fashioned crude barbs.

Next came the handle. Using the lightest wire, he wrapped the handle six inches from the end, coiling it tight until he'd created a steel band two inches wide.

He found an old knife blade in the makeshift kitchen. After sawing a groove in the end of the handle, he fitted the knife blade to the groove, braced the handle against the floor, and banged the blade with a piece of brick. A few blows split the handle to the band of wire. He used the edge of the desk to knock the blade free of the wood, then wiggled the sharpened garden fork into the split and forced it home. More wire wrapping bound the split end closed.

He hefted the final product and jabbed the air. A crude weapon, but it might work.

Ripley wanted to run back to the canal, but that would be pointless. He stepped outside. The sun rode high in the sky. Hours yet until nightfall. And what about the moon? Last he remembered, the moon waxed gibbous, heading to full. He had no flashlight, so the moon would have to do whatever phase it was in.



Time to do something about the stinking squat. He searched cupboards and dusty bins. A narrow door off the kitchen opened into a tiny utility closet. He found a bucket, the remains of a mop, and a box of solidified soap powder. He chipped away enough soap to pour into the bucket and set to work.

After two hours of scrubbing, the place was still a hovel but less nasty than it had been. While the sofa cushions aired in the sunshine, Ripley fried up two of the protein patties Jazz had left him. He took his dinner al fresco, sitting on the outside walk with his back against a wall. He choked down the patties and watched the sun slide into the west.

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Boston Wilkes arrived at his barbershop to find Ripley waiting on the bench out front. A burlap bag rested on the sidewalk at his feet.

“Hmph. Morning, Ripley.”

“Good morning, Boston.”

The barber rattled his keys and unlocked the door.

“I spose you looking to cadge another coffee?”

“No sir. I’m looking to barter for a cup.”

“That right? What you got in that sack?”

Ripley grinned at him.

Fortune took a small turn for the better. Boston Wilkes happened to have a strong affinity for frog legs. The two men struck a quick

deal that left Ripley with coffee credit, an upcoming haircut, and a dozen frog legs still in the bank.

When the first of the regulars showed up, another round of barter commenced. Ripley came out of the bargain with an empty sack and the promise of used but serviceable sheets, a pillow, and, best of all, an army blanket that did not stink to high heaven.

He left the barbershop dead tired but with his head held high. It had been a long night. He needed to rest up for the next one. Yesterday, he'd been a bum exiled from his own time. Tonight, he had frogs to gig and promises to keep.

That night, Ripley worked another section of the canal. The bullfrogs were in full voice. By midnight, the burlap bag bulged with dead frogs. Ripley washed the mud out of his pants as best he could. With only one set of clothes to his name, the problem of laundry reared its ugly head. But now he had goods to trade. With the wet pants and a sack of frogs slung over his shoulder, Ripley walked home in his underwear.

~~~

Clean bedding wrapped Ripley as he slept like the dead. The sun stood past noon and still he snored. He might have kept right on if not for the knocking. The persistent sound penetrated his dreamless sleep, deeper and deeper until his brain responded. His eyes blinked

open. The knocking came from behind the back door. Jasmine was back!

He leaped from the sofa wearing only his skivvies. Pants, he needed pants. Except all his clothes were outside, drying in the sun. He snatched the lovely new army blanket from the bed, wrapped it around himself, and dashed to the door. The lock stuck. He cursed, yanked, and the door flew open.

“Hi. You’re back.”

“And you’re still here. Nice outfit.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m working nights. My clothes are wet.”

Jasmine leaned on the doorjamb and grinned.

“I see we’ve got stuff to talk about. Lucky for you, I scored at the barter fair. Here, I hope they fit.”

Jazz held out a small bundle. Ripley performed some sleight of hand to accept her gift without losing his blanket.

“Why don’t you get dressed while I rustle up some lunch.”

“Wait. How do you feel about frog legs?”

“Seriously? I could murder a mess of frog legs.”

“Give me two minutes.”

“You’re an odd man, Ripley. I’ll just go find the cornmeal.”

~~~

Ripley sat in Jasmine’s kitchen wearing clean canvas work pants and a denim shirt. Jazz fried up the frog legs while Ripley filled her in



on his adventures. They tore into the fresh meat and chewed the bones clean. Jazz talked about the barter fair. She'd left with bundles of woven cloth and returned bearing hard goods. Ripley bragged a bit about the new hunting knife and headlamp he'd bartered for.

He hung around her place until late afternoon. Jazz gave Ripley a tour of her looms. She showed him samples of yarns and the finished products. They talked about barter, how to survive, where to get the fairest deals, and what tomorrow might bring. As if by mutual agreement, they avoided mentioning the past.

Jasmine begged off an invitation to go hunting with him. Stabbing amphibians wasn't her thing, but she wished him luck.

That night, clouds obscured the moon. Ripley followed the beam of his new headlamp, confident that tonight would be a good hunt. He reached the canal and began working a new section, conscious of the need to preserve his stock of frogs.

An hour later, he saw a light bobbing in the darkness. Then he saw another, further down the canal. Word spreads quickly in a hungry community. He had competition.

~~~

Ripley lay on the sofa. His body felt dog-tired, but thoughts raced through his brain. He thought about bartering for material to build snares. Rabbit and pheasant would be valuable trading commodities.

But if he could snare them, so could others, just like the frogs. It wouldn't take long before the whole area was hunted out.

His thoughts turned to the creepy kobold and the strange things he'd said. Something about how humans were unpredictable except when it came to making things worse. The kobold was not far wrong there.

Ripley needed something that no one else had, a skill not easily duplicated. The germ of an idea began to form in his brain. The more he thought, the more he knew it could work. Unfortunately, bringing the plan to fruition involved the kobold.

The idea crystallized, details becoming sharper as he rolled each question around in his noggin. Humans needed solace. They needed barter. They needed booze. And that foul bastard Robert needed something as well. The time had come to strike a deal.

But how to summon a kobold? Ripley wracked his brain to recall every word the creature had said. Then it came to him as if the kobold had reappeared.

"T'is midnight on the last day of May, and here you be, sleeping through it."

He counted off the days in his head and smiled. Come the last day of June, he'd be ready. In the meantime, he had work to do.

~~~

The last night of June found Ripley alone in the squat. The moon had waned to a sliver. A wooden crate sat on the floor between the sofa and an empty, easy chair. Atop the crate, a single candle illuminated the squat. Beside the candle stood two shot glasses and a bottle.

Midnight crept closer. Sleep tugged at his eyelids. His chin sagged to his chest. The room flickered. Images shifted and spun away. Ghosts appeared and vanished. Daylight flashed through the squat, then darkness, again and again.

Ripley's eyes snapped open. Robert the kobold grinned at him from the easy chair. The kobold's grin wasn't as nasty as he'd remembered. Ripley blew out a long breath and shook his head to clear away the shock.

"Hello, Robert."

"Hello yourself, Ripley Walker. This was well figured, lad. You've learned a bit."

Ripley gathered his scattered thoughts.

"I wanted to apologize about the last time. Make amends to you."

"Think nothing of it. Ya couldn't have harmed me. It's not in yer power to do so. But what's this I see? A bit of the hospitality?"

"Only a bit. It's poor whiskey, to be honest."

"Ah, but what did the wise man say? Any port in a storm, and better bad whiskey than none."



Ripley reached for the bottle, cracked the screw cap, and poured the shot glasses full. Human and kobold each lifted a dram.

“To what shall we drink, human?”

“To bargains.”

“Oh, aye? Tis a good toast. To bargains, then.”

Both whiskies disappeared in one go.

“Buggers. Yer not lying, Ripley Walker. That’s a foul spirit, no offense meant.”

“None taken. Another?”

“I wouldn’t say no.”

The glasses were refilled, and the shots downed.

“Now then, what’s on yer mind? I can sense you’ve been cogitating.”

“You’re right. I’ve been thinking about something you said the first time. You called this place a station house, so I figured I’d be seeing you again. Now that you’re here, I want to ask you a question.”

Robert the kobold leaned forward, his eyes keen.

“You’ve captured my attention, lad. Ask away.”

Ripley marshaled his thoughts and pushed on.

“Can kobolds carry stuff when they slip back and forth? Baggage or gear, anything like that?”

“Aye, that we can. How do ya think we supply the next station? But there’s limits. We found that out the hard way, centuries ago. If a fella can hold it in his arms or strap it to his back, the gear jumps with the fella. But if the cargo is electronic, forget it. Phones, computers, that sort of garbage, it vanishes if youse try. Don’t know why, but that’s the way of it.”

That was the answer Ripley needed to hear. It could work. If he distilled booze in his old life, then why not here in the future? All he had to do was make it worth the kobold’s time.

“What would you say to a deal, Robert? An arrangement that would benefit both of us.”

“Benefit, now that’s a word of power. Does that mean no harm to either party, then?”

“None. My word of honor.”

The kobold leaned even closer. Ripley tried not to cringe away from the fierce glow in the creature’s eyes.

“Ah, now, Ripley Walker, you’re speaking my language. We love a good bargain, that’s sure. Tell me what you have in mind, and we’ll thrash it out.”

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“It’s a good thing you don’t look as batshit as you sound.”

Jasmine set a mug of tea in front of Ripley, then slipped around the table and slid into a chair facing him.

“Jazz, is this the sleepy tea? Because I already slept away most of the day.”

“Naw, that’s feel-good tea. You’ll like it. But quit stalling. Tell me the rest of the story. What was your deal? Did little Robert go for it?”

The rest sounded unbelievable, but so far, Jazz had dealt with strange far better than Ripley. Across the table, Jazz was bouncing up and down like a twelve-year-old, and the ball of hair atop her head bounced as well.

“Okay, I’ll tell you. Stop bouncing. You’re going to hurt yourself.” Jazz stuck out her tongue and made fisheyes.

“Jeez. Okay, the first time Robert appeared, he made it clear I was never going back to my own time. Like, the deal is done.”

“How did he say it? Was he mean about it? Like, fuck you, you’re stuck here?”

“No, he just said it straight out. I asked him if there was any way to send me back. He said, ‘None whatsoever. We can jump back and forth, but not you lot.’ In a way, it was like getting a death sentence.”

“Does he have a gravelly voice like that, or is that just your bad impression?”



“No, that’s exactly how he sounds. It’s creepy and kind of cool at the same time. It’s like the voice of a giant stuck in a little body. You’ll hear it yourself when you meet him.”

Ripley looked across the table and saw Jazz smiling like a sunrise. He had just offered her the possibility of meeting an ancient being, and she was grinning like a kid at Christmas. He saw no trace of fear on her face. One, two heartbeats, and Ripley knew he was a goner for her.

Then he told her how he and Robert had worked out a deal. The kobolds would transport Ripley’s gear from his old shop. The little bastards would make a few trips between past and now, toting Ripley’s pot still and his column still. They’d fetch the condenser coils and carboys, the bags of grain and malt. Whatever they couldn’t transport, he could build or barter for. And he would have powerful trading goods. Whiskey futures would command attention.

Setting up a new distillery was only part of the deal. While Ripley’s mash bubbled away in the carboys, he’d get busy creating something special, a spirit no human distiller had ever crafted. He had in mind a special still, a miniature built of copper and distiller’s magic, a device to give the kobolds the one thing they truly desired.

That was the idea that had crystalized in Ripley’s brain. The kobold’s potion was tricky, needing constant calibration. Who better to deal with a tricky spirit than a man who distilled spirits? Robert

agreed to show him the basic recipe, and Ripley promised to do everything in his power to improve and stabilize the potion.

The deal was struck. Ripley would help fine-tune their potion and act as a stationmaster on the underground railway of time. The kobolds would come and go as needed.

He told Jazz how wee Robert had spit on his palm and held it out.

“Ewww. Did you hesitate?”

Ripley laughed at the memory of the calloused hand cradling a pool of spittle.

“Nope. I hocked a loogie, gobbed it onto my palm, and grabbed the little bastard’s hand.”

“Jeez, men are so gross. So, what happens now?”

“Yeah, about that. I need space to set up the distillery.”

Jazz waved her mug of feel-good tea.

“Plenty of space around here. That’s one thing we got lots of. The warehouse next door is empty.”

Ripley swallowed the lump in his throat and went for broke.

“And I’m going to need a partner.”

Jazz set her mug on the table, leaned back, and folded her arms across her overalls.

“What sort of partner are we talking about, Mister Walker? Do you mean two people working together, bartering their respective goods, and sharing the profits?”

Ripley was at a loss for words. Jazz noted his silence and smiled.

“Oh, I see. I think you mean two people who do all the above while sharing a bed. And sharing all the joy and misery being a couple brings with it. Am I close?”

This time, Ripley found his words.

“You’re spot on with the second one, the bed, joy, and misery.”

Jazz cocked her head and gave him a long look. Then she smiled.

“I’ll tell you what, Ripley Walker. If you can make a deal with a supernatural munchkin who spits in his hand, you can damn sure make a deal with me. How long before your first batch of booze is ready?”

“Well, to get everything set up and then distill something drinkable, I’m guessing six months.”

“Mm-hmm, I think that might work. Okay, we work together for six months. I help you with the distillery; you help me with the weaving and whatnot. We pool our resources. Meanwhile, I make you up a pallet over there in the corner. Robert and his mates can have the front office.”

“So, I’m moving in with you.”

Jasmine’s eyebrows flashed and Ripley thought maybe he better change his tone.



“Roommates, you and me. Your pallet is way over there, and my bedroom is way over here. If we survive six months without killing each other, then we can discuss the next step. Deal?”

“Do we have to spit in our hands?”

Jazz laughed and Ripley knew he would always love that sound.

“Not necessary. When do I get to meet Robert and the boys?”

“He said he’d be back tomorrow with the first load. You better watch that little bastard; he’s a charmer.”

“Look at you, jealous already. I sorta like that, Ripley. Shows you care. But don’t let it run away with you. Now, why don’t you tell me all about the good old days before you started drinking with strangers.”

“Sure, but you need to school me up on this brave new world I’ve fallen into.”

“You first.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marco Etheridge is a writer of prose, an occasional playwright, and a part-time poet. He lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His work has been featured in over one hundred reviews and journals across Canada, Australia, the UK, and the USA. His story “Power Tools” has been nominated for Best of the Web for 2023. “Power Tools” is Marco’s latest collection of short fiction.

When he isn't crafting stories, Marco is a contributing editor for a new 'Zine called Hotch Potch. In his other life, Marco travels the world with his lovely wife Sabine.

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# Nigerian Writers: A Treasury Of Riches.

An Article by Michael Barrington

While teaching in Nigeria many years ago, I discovered the African Writer Series novels published by Heineman and was immediately captivated. They opened up a whole new world of literature to me. After Chinu Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' followed by 'No Longer at Ease,' I wanted more; I needed to be educated about this amazing country. Achebe often called the 'Father of Nigerian Literature,' frequently weaves oral tradition with Ibo folk tales and the individual's struggle to find a place in this 'new world.' Since I was born and educated in the UK, his anti-colonial sentiments showed me how naive my attitudes were and how simplistic my understanding of Nigerian history. I needed to read more. That had its own challenges since I was working in a remote part of the country where there were few amenities and the nearest bookstore was over two hundred miles away. But I was hooked!

Achebe's works directed me to another Ibo writer, Cyprien Ekwensi. His 'People of the City' was the first major novel to be



published by a Nigerian. His most widely read work, 'Jagua Nana,' returned to the same setting of 'People of the City,' the capital Lagos, but boasted a much more cohesive plot. It focuses on the contradictions within the life of an aging sex worker. Almost better known for his short stories, 'Burning Grass,' a collection of vignettes about a nomadic Fulani family, really captivated me.

T.M Aluko, a Yoruba writer, uses similar themes in his novel 'One Man One Matchet,' reflecting the growing sentiment of the anticolonialism of the 1950s.

Wole Soyinka, novelist and playwright, also from the Yoruba tribe, in 'The Interpreters,' focuses on the oppression of the poor and abuse of the weak by the strong. He spares nobody, neither the white speculator nor the black exploiter. During my ten years in Nigeria, he, of all the writers, made me question what I was really doing there.

I discovered several female writers, which shouldn't have surprised me but did. At the time, there were few females in academia generating creative thought and expression. Flora Nwapa is considered to be the 'Mother of Modern African Literature' starting with her novel 'Efuru.' Balaraba Ramat Yakubu writes love stories and popular fiction, in Hausa, the first African language I learned.

While earlier writers used themes of culture and tradition, the more contemporary Nigerian literature has expanded impressively and now draws from the realities of the country's social processes, from women's rights and feminism to post-war and post-colonial identity. Racism, class, abuse, and violence, as well as patriotism, beauty, and love, are all explored.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels have garnered universal acclaim; 'Purple Hibiscus' (2003) and 'Half of a Yellow Sun' (2006). Her novel 'Americanah' (2013) is a book every person concerned with racism, immigration and globalization should read. Essentially a love story, it traces the lives of Ifemelu and her childhood sweetheart, Obinze. They are separated when she goes to study in America and stays with Aunt Uju, who is never short of advice on how to acculturate; "The problem is that there are many qualified people who are not what they are supposed to be because they won't lick ass, or they don't know which ass to lick, or they don't even know how to lick ass." It's about love, loneliness, and race. But it's also a poignant, funny, scathing look at the reality of being a new immigrant in the USA...from an African perspective.

Oyindamole Affinnih gave up her career as a lawyer to write two intriguing novels about personal relationships, 'A Tailor-made Romance' (2015) and 'Two Gone...Still Counting,' (2014). Chibundu

Onuzo's first book, 'The Spider King's Daughter' (2012), portrays life in modern-day Lagos with its informal economy and class divide centered around a compelling love story. Chigozie Obioma is sometimes referred to as "the heir to Chinua Achebe." His novel 'The Fishermen' (2015), is a powerful tale of grief, healing, and sibling loyalty, and was a finalist for the 2015 Man Booker Prize. His works have been translated into more than 25 languages. Ijeoma Umebinyuo, named one of Sub-Saharan Africa's greatest contemporary poets in 'Questions for Ada' (2016), embodies the pain, passion, and the power of love. Lesley Nneka Arimah, the author of 'What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky' (2017), offers a fascinating collection of stories demonstrating rich imagination and love of language and people. Ayobami Adebayo, in 'Stay with Me' (2017), explores feminism and relationships. "She writes not just with extraordinary grace but with genuine wisdom about love and loss and the possibility of redemption. She has written a powerfully magnetic and heartbreaking book." (New York Times).

As more young Nigerian debut authors rise to global prominence, the diversity and range of the country's fiction is on full display. Elnathan John's debut novel 'Born on a Tuesday,' which tackles the rise of Islamic extremism through the eyes of a homeless teenager



who gets swept up in political violence, was heralded as “a stunning, important coming-of-age story” by a critic in Publishers Weekly. The treasure trove of Nigerian writers is deep, varied, and fascinating.

Among other notable writers are Helen Oyeyemi, Tejo Cole, Sarah Ladipo and Oyinkan Braithwaite, each one with their distinct voices, sharing with us insights on their cultures and a world seen and experienced through Nigerian eyes.

The country’s flourishing literary scene is giving rise to some of the most groundbreaking and boundary-pushing fiction on the continent. In the past, successful African writers often first gained renown abroad yet weren’t widely read in their homelands. But now, many of Nigeria’s promising young authors are increasingly building an audience at home, where there is a growing appetite for fiction that addresses contemporary issues.

A new wave of thematically and stylistically diverse fiction is emerging from the country, as writers there experiment with different genres and explore controversial subjects like violence against women, polygamy, and the rise of the Islamist militant group Boko Haram.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Barrington writes mainly historical novels: *Let the Peacock Sing*, *The Ethiopian Affair*, *Becoming Anya*, *The Baron of Bengal Street*, *No*

Room for Heroes. Passage to Murder is a thriller set in San Francisco. Magic at Stonehenge is a short story collection. Take a Priest Like You is a memoir. He has published more than 60 short stories and also blogs on his website: [www.mbwriter.net](http://www.mbwriter.net).

Michael Barrington presentng at the Walnut Creek, CA library



<https://youtu.be/a6hz0s5gHdc?si=Ma3iUixvX7Oo8CEF>

# A Sudden Reduction of Innocence

A Short Story by Patricia Ann Bowen

**A**nna and her half-brother Rudy watched as their neighbor Paulie lifted Shadow's stiff body and laid it in the deep-sided garden cart. Paulie was big for his age, stronger than both of them put together, so he offered to do the heavy lifting while his two friends mourned their pet.

"Let's bury him down by the creek," Anna said. "Shadow always liked to splash around there and bring back the sticks we'd throw 'im."

"Nah, it's too muddy. My dad'll tan me if I track in any more dirt." Paulie's father was an Iraq vet who suffered from PTSD, and you never knew when he'd change from nice dad to mad dad. "Let's dig his grave up here on the hill. It's close enough, and dry. You can still hear the creek and feel the cool air comin' up from the water."

"Yeah, and we won't have to carry him so far. This puppy musta weighed a hunnert pounds on an empty stomach." Rudy always looked for the easy way out. He just turned thirteen, a year older than his half-sister, but leaned toward the slow side.



“That don’t matter,” she said. “Just roll him onto this sheet and wrap him up good and tight. We can wheel him over to where we’re gonna dig the hole. Let’s all grab a shovel and get to work.”

They all had homework to do, so they didn’t have a lot of time to argue about finding the perfect gravesite if they were to get home before dark. They quickly agreed on a fine spot, around ten yards from the creek with a nice view. Paulie marked off a large triangle with shovel cuts in the dirt, and they all started digging. Each took a corner and worked toward the middle. The dirt was loose and loamy, easy to dig, except they kept hitting lots of rounded sandstone rocks. They set a few stones aside to mark Shadow’s grave after they got him in the ground.

“How deep should we go down?” Rudy asked.

“Deep enough so no critter can smell ‘im and dig ‘im up,” Paulie said. He was twelve, too, almost thirteen, and knew a lot about animals and nature. “I reckon halfway up your shovel’s handle. What do you think, Anna?”

“Yeah, you’re right. A human grave is s’posed to be six feet deep, so around three should be fine for a dog.”

They’d dug as deep down as they wanted to when Paulie lifted what appeared to be a piece of greyish bone. “Well, I’ll be. Looks like this ain’t the first dog buried in this spot.” He gently lowered his shovel beneath the bone and lifted again. The spade held the rest of

a small human skull with the piece missing that he'd just pulled out. Paulie dropped his shovel and jumped back so fast he landed on his rump behind the hole.

“Holy sweet Jesus,” Rudy said. “It’s a kid’s head. Or what’s left of it. What are we s’posed to do now?”

“Just calm down,” Anna said. “So, there’s already a grave here. Let’s don’t mess up the rest of the bones. We can make the hole a little wider, enough to fit Shadow without layin’ him on top of what’s already down there.”

Paulie recovered and stood up. “Are you kidding? We’ve gotta call the cops and report a body, or what’s left of one.”

“Yeah,” Anna said. “But first, let’s see if it’s a whole set of bones or if somebody chopped up whoever this was. Then we can bury Shadow in the hole, put the bones in the cart, and take ‘em to the police station. Maybe they’ll give us a reward for findin’ ‘em.”

“I don’t think so. I like my plan better,” Paulie said. “Besides, we have to get Shadow buried. He’s already gettin’ stinky, and he’s only gonna get worse. I don’t feel like diggin’ much more, either. Let’s just make the hole a little wider, lay him in it, and cover it up. Then you can tell Daddy Jack what we found when he gets home tonight. He’ll know what to do.”

Rudy stood and watched as Anna's stepfather cut her tale short, right after she said, "I was down by the creek with Paulie and..."

"How many times do I have to tell you, stop hanging around with those boys? You can be one of their gang for only so long, Anna. They're getting to the age where they have just one thing on their minds, and there you are, short shorts, pretty face, and tits ready to sprout, putting temptation right in their reach."

"We was just buryin' Shadow down by the creek, and we found somethin'." She lowered her head. "I don't even know how to tempt anybody, Daddy Jack."

"I don't care what you were just doing. Go to your room until your mom gets home from work. And if I catch you again doing something we told you not to do, you'll be one sorry young lady. Give me your phone, too. No crying to your friends about your mean stepfather."

Anna yanked her iPhone from her pocket, handed it to him, and slunk off to her room. Rudy started to say something to her, but changed his mind and just stood there with his mouth open.

"What're you looking at, dumbass?" Daddy Jack shouted to him as he stomped out the door and sat on the steps, fuming.

Paulie's father, named Finley, but everyone called him Finn, had stared at the children from his kitchen window as they dug a hole and buried Anna's mutt. They looked a little confused, starting,



stopping, seeming to argue and, finally, they finished and climbed back up the hill, pulling the empty cart.

Finn worried about Paulie a lot. His wife, Paulie's mom, deserted him and their son two years ago and took their three-year-old daughter with her. She'd had it up to here with Finn's mood swings and his nightmares. He'd go back to therapy every time she threatened to leave, then slack off when times got better. But she never helped make his problems any easier to deal with. And now Finn had to raise up a boy into a man, and doing it alone scared the crap out of him. But—big but—the lone responsibility also kept him on track most of the time, having to deal with Paulie's needs more than thinking about his own dark thoughts and feelings. He slipped back into his fears and anger only once in a long while now, and when that happened, Paulie went off and kept to himself until Finn calmed down.

The next day, Friday, Anna, Rudy, and Paulie met in the cafeteria at school, in a far corner, where they could talk privately over lunch. Anna told Paulie that her stepfather wasn't interested in what she had to say about the bones, but she didn't tell him why.

"I thought about it a lot last night," Anna said, "and I decided we should go see Reverend Banks, tell him what we found, and ask him what to do. We don't know if a crime was committed, and if we go

to the sheriff, he might get mad at us for wasting his time. But if the reverend goes to see him, that's another thing."

"You always want to be the boss of us, Anna," Rudy said. "Who died and put you in charge?"

"Chill, Rudy," Paulie said. "You got any better ideas? Besides, she's right. Banks coaches our church's basketball team and we practice tomorrow morning. I'll ask him can he meet us afterwards, and y'all show up around 11. Good to go?" He slapped his right hand on the table, palm down. Rudy frowned and put his hand over Paulie's, and Anna, all smiles, laid hers on top of the pile.

"You tell it, Anna," Paulie said as the three kids sat in Reverend Banks' office after the practice session.

She related the story of what they'd found while burying Shadow. Banks asked a lot of questions about what they did afterward and who they'd told.

"We didn't tell nobody because we were afraid to get in trouble," Paulie said. "That's why we came to you. We knew you'd know what to do and not blame us."

"It's a sad story, unfortunately, one I can relate to. I lost a child myself to illness a few years back. And you three found the remains of someone else's child, whose parents surely grieved like I did for mine. Well, if we find foul play, and we don't know that we will, the good Lord will punish whoever needs it. It's not my place to pass

judgment. I'm glad you told me. Let me decide when I should call the sheriff and what I'll say to him."

"See, I told you," Anna said. "The reverend knows what to do. So, let's let him take care of it. Will you please tell us what happens with the sheriff, sir?"

"Why thank you, Anna, I will. Please stay behind for just a minute. I have one more thing to ask you. Boys, you can go now, and don't say a word about this to anyone until I tell you to, okay? We'll see you in church tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Paulie said, and Rudy waved to the man on their way out.

"Anna, you're not making any of this up, are you?"

"Of course not. No sir. Why would I?"

The reverend stood up, went behind Anna's chair, and spoke into her ear. "Oh, sometimes young girls want some attention, and they do or say things to meet with me. Are you trying to get my attention, dear?"

She scrunched down into the armchair to make herself smaller and said, "No sir, I'm not."

He laid his finger on her shoulder and stroked the strap of the training bra beneath her thin polo shirt. She felt the heat coming from his hand and tried to stand up, but he held her down with both hands on her shoulders.



“I have to go now, sir,” she whispered.

The reverend bent down and kissed the side of her neck, then released her. “All right, Anna. You’re a very nice young lady, a very pretty one. Thank you for coming by to see me. My door is always open if you need some help.”

Anna walked out of the building as fast as her legs could carry her and caught up with Rudy and Paulie waiting for her outside.

“Your face looks splotchy,” Rudy said. “Did he hit you or something?”

“Or something is right. That creepy preacher slobbered a kiss on my neck. We need to tell somebody else about those bones because that perv can’t be trusted.”

“Should we go to the cops ourselves, like I said yesterday?” Paulie asked.

“I still don’t think that’s a good idea.” Anna paused to calm down and give the matter some more thought. After a couple of deep breaths she went on. “I tried to tell Daddy Jack about the bones last night and he got mad at me for hanging out with you guys. How about we go to your dad, Paulie? He won’t take it out on us, will he?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes he gets madder than you’d ever believe over almost nothing. Worse than your stepfather.”

“Well, this isn’t almost nothing. It’s a big deal. And it can’t wait. I don’t trust the reverend anymore, and I don’t know where we could go next. Please, can we?”

Finn brought four cans of Dr. Pepper out to the porch and handed one to each of the kids who sat waiting for him. He popped the top on his own, drew a sip, and asked in a serious voice, “So who called this meeting, and what can I do for y’all?”

This time Paulie took the lead and related the story of the burial and the bones.

“I happened to look out the kitchen window and saw you burying Anna’s pet,” Finn said. “I’m sorry, Anna. And you too, Rudy. Shadow was a fine dog. But tell me more about the bones.”

“We just saw the head, the skull, and we knew it was from a little kid,” Rudy said.

“So, I decided we ought to go tell Reverend Banks and see if he could help us, tell us what we should do,” Anna said. “And that was a big mistake.”

“Why?” Finn asked.

“Because first he said it was God’s job to take care of it, and then he kissed me.”

“He what?” Finn stood up and gripped his own arms. He forced himself to recall his therapist’s advice, to focus on doing good for

others and forget himself in this moment. “He kissed you! What did you boys do?”

“The reverend shooed them out before he did it so he could get me alone,” Anna said.

“Did he do anything else? Touch you anywhere?”

“No, well, yes. He rubbed my bra strap, then he held my shoulders down while he kissed me on my neck, right here.”

“Anything else?”

“No, sir.”

“Okay. Okay. Here’s what we’re going to do. First, I’m going to call the sheriff and ask him to stop by. Then, Anna, I’m going to ask your mother and Jack to join us. That way you all can tell your own sides of the story one more time, about the bones you found and about what the reverend did.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” Paulie said.

“Thank you, Mister Miller,” the other two echoed in unison.

A policeman wearing gloves and a face mask excavated the bones and placed them in a metal box. Then he dug a second hole and carefully reburied Shadow in it. A police lady who was with him boxed up lots of dirt from the first hole to examine for any clues that might have been left behind.



The remains of the small child were taken for DNA testing, and she turned out to be Finn's daughter, Michaela Miller, age three at the time of her death. The police chief called Finn in for questioning and released him on his own recognizance, pending further possible action.

Reverend Banks denied making advances toward Anna, but when she confronted him directly, in front of her stepfather and the sheriff, he broke down crying and saying how lonely he was and what a tempting young girl Trisha was.

Daddy Jack shook his head and laughed angrily, barely restraining himself from attacking the man. "Can't even get the names straight, can you, you perv? Trisha was Finn Miller's wife. Is that who you thought of when you forced your filthy mouth on my little girl's neck?"

Banks turned white. He felt all eyes watching him. Including God's. "All right. I'll admit it. I'm in enough trouble. But first, get everybody else out of here and I'll tell you my side of the story."

Daddy Jack and Anna stepped out to an adjoining room where her mother sat waiting for her on a long padded bench. She'd rushed to the station from her double shift at the veterans' hospital as soon as Jack called her. Anna sat down and her mom wrapped an arm around her and Anna sank into her cuddle. Then, in the other room, the reverend proceeded to confess.

“I’ll let Finn off the hook here. I had an affair with Miller’s wife a couple years back. She told me she’d had enough of his moods, promised again and again to leave him. She finally did, and carried one of their kids away with her, the girl. I didn’t know where they went off to. Then a month or so later, she called me and told me Finn took Paulie to the beach or someplace for a few days. I met her and she said she still loved me, pulled out a key to her house and wanted to go in and retrieve some pictures of her son that Finn wouldn’t let her have, and asked me would I come with her. So I did.

“We wound up rolling around in her old bed, and in the heat of the moment, we forgot about Michaela. She’d wandered out of the house and down to the creek, and a while later we found her floating there, bruised and drowned. Trisha went almost crazy. I dug a grave and buried the girl. I never dreamed anyone might find her body down there in such an out-of-the-way place.

“Anyway, I often counsel people going through hard times, people who are real upset, so I carry some mild tranquilizers on me all the time. I gave a few of them to Trisha and she calmed down, not much, but some, and then she took off. I never saw her again.

“Oh, and yeah, I kissed Anna. I didn’t mean her no harm. I imagined what she’d be like when she grew up, and I wanted to let her know I cared about her, that’s all.”

The sheriff told Finn about the reverend's confession, and that, of course, exonerated him as a suspect. And that the department was trying hard to find Mrs. Miller, but so far no luck. The sheriff researched many charges he could recommend against the reverend, and he had to determine which would wield the most impact without putting any of the children through the wringer. So far, he'd come up with child endangerment, concealment of a crime, desecration of a body, drug possession, sexual assault, and more. In the end, it would be the prosecutor's job to decide, but he'd be sure to include all the input he'd gathered into his report.

Finn organized a belated funeral for Michaela, presided over by the youth minister now that Reverend Banks was out on bail and keeping a low profile, and attended by Paulie, Anna and Rudy, their parents, and some friends. It was a somber affair, but less so after all this time as Finn's wound had healed into a tender scar. He'd given up hope a long time ago of ever seeing his wife and daughter again, and he was staying in therapy, taking his meds, making peace with what happened, for his own sake and his son's.

When the service ended, they all went back to the Miller home where the church women laid out a generous spread. Finn excused himself and went to the garage for a moment. He returned with a



brown lab puppy in his arms, and he winked at Daddy Jack as he handed the squirmy dog to Anna.

“I know you’ll never forget Shadow, and I won’t either. If not for him, I’d never know what happened to my daughter. But this here pup needs a good home, and I thought maybe you might want to give her one. Whatta you say, Anna?”

“Can I have her, Daddy Jack? Please? She’s such a honey. I’m even going to call her that.”

“Sure, sweetheart. You can keep your Honey. I’m sure you and Rudy will take good care of her.”

Daddy Jack pulled Finn aside while the kids gathered around the dog. “Thanks for stepping in, Finn. I guess I could use some parenting lessons. How did you get them to open up to you about what they’d found?”

“I just listened, Jack. Just listened.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Patricia Ann Bowen is the author of a medical time travel trilogy, a short story collection about people in challenging circumstances, and a serialized beach read. Her short stories have appeared in several anthologies and, most recently, in *Mystery Tribune*, *Chamber Magazine*, *Idle Ink*, *Unlikely Stories*, and *Commuterlit.com*. She has taught short story writing, and she leads

a critique group of short story writers for the Atlanta Writer's Club.  
You can connect with her at [www.patriciabowen.com](http://www.patriciabowen.com).



Chocolate Ink. *Image generated by AI*

# House

A Short Story by Doug Hawley

Sergeant Sam York got the tip by phone in the morning. “You know the rash of disappearances that have happened lately? I think that I know the house where they are kept. Strange noises have been coming from 5280 Simpson for a couple of months. Not only that, but vans show up late at night behind the house where they can’t be seen. When you pay the reward, remember who called - Homer Bartholomew.”

York picked up his partner Jean Jersey at her desk and filled her in. On the way to their car, they couldn’t help but notice that they attracted whispers and chuckles. Jean said, “They’re talking about us. What do you suppose they know and what do you suppose they imagine?” Sam just shook his head.

It took half an hour to get to the house in their cruiser. Before they got to the door, they could hear a quiet cacophony of sounds. Unnerved, they both got their guns handy. After they knocked, an average-looking forty-something male in bloody overalls answered the door. “Hi guys, what’s up?”



Sam and Jean looked at each other, clearly thinking that this didn't sound like a mass kidnapper. "Well, sir, strange sounds coming from your house has been reported."

"Oh, I'm very sorry about that. I've tried to quiet the inmates and my place is really well insulated. I'll show you. But I'm so sorry about forgetting my manners. I'm Jason Atkins, but call me Jace."

After introducing themselves, Jean asked, "Maybe you could also explain your bloody clothes too."

"Sure, sometimes the inmates injure themselves. Also, I have to butcher a lot of bloody meat. I should really be more careful, but sometimes I can't help getting blood on my clothes. Ready to see them?"

Both Sam and Jean were both confused and wary, but Sam said "Lead the way." Underneath Sam's calm exterior, he was deeply disturbed and began to sweat. He began to knead the butte of his gun.

On the way through the house, Jean looked into a room and spied a voluptuous naked woman tied to a chair. She had a ball gag and various things attached to her that Jean didn't understand. Startled and aroused, Jean's breath became shallow and rapid. Despite that scene, Jean decided it was best to see to the "inmates" first.

As they got close to the staircase, the cacophony increased. What seemed like laughter and screams emanated from the cellar. As they descended the staircase, their trepidation increased until their first view of an inmate came into view. It appeared to be an anteater. When they were able to take in the view, they observed a veritable zoo of animals of various kinds: monkeys, hyenas, pigs, parrots, and different kinds of cats in cages.

Jean blinked and said, “Huh?” while Sam’s mouth just dropped open.

“As I said, I do my best not to disturb my neighbors, but what can you do with howler monkeys? You are probably wondering what I’m doing with this menagerie. I contract with the zoo for special projects—some veterinary work, isolating animals if necessary, and keeping some of these guys while transport is arranged back and forth to other zoos.”

Sam said “We are so sorry to have bothered you. You may have heard of several missing persons cases in the last month. Somebody suggested that you might have been keeping them based on the sounds coming from your house and the late-night deliveries.”

“No problem. I don’t pay much attention to the news. Tell me about the missing people.”

“As I said they were missed over just a few days. Jerry Stock, Sally Hendrix, Jo Hemple, George Simpkins are a few of the people that I can remember.”

Jace cackled “You came to the right place. I just solved your case. I know those people. They snuck off to the PST swinger’s convention, and they will go home soon with some sort of innocent cover story. PST stands for Portland Swinger Time. We use the abbreviation around the uninitiated. Judy and I couldn’t make it this time. Oh crap, I forgot all about Judy.”

Jace ran upstairs followed by Sam and Jean. He went into the room with the woman Jean had seen earlier. He got her loose from her shackles and introduced everyone around. Judy seemed mildly peeved about being forgotten and not the least bit embarrassed, but Jean was unnerved by Judy’s rapt attention, switching back and forth from her to Sam.

Jace and Judy looked at each other, and then Judy looked at Jean and said, “Maybe you two would like to join our kinky group?”

Jean said, “We’ll have to think about it.”

On the way out Sam whispered to Jean, “That clears up everything but one. How much do you think PDT charges members, and is it a one-time charge, annual or both?”

*This story was first published in Scarlet Leaf, Down In The Dirt, and Haven.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR




The author is a former actuary who lives with his editor in Oregon. He has published in all of the usual genres in four continents.

<https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantword/hello>

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# Why My Protagonists Have Paws, Claws, Fins, Feathers, And Flukes

*An Article by Melody Horrill*

It was winter in Melbourne, and the anti-cyclonic weather system that brought day after day of dullness and drizzle showed no signs of dissipating. The city seemed to have sunk into a murky malaise. I looked out the window of my spare bedroom, which also doubled as my writing room, and scanned the empty street below. No one was out. It was after 6 p.m., and COVID-19 lockdown restrictions meant that we were not allowed to leave our homes.

Fighting off a creeping melancholy, I returned to my desk and stared at the flickering black line on the laptop screen. It was rare for me to write in the evening; I was usually more motivated in the mornings. But during lockdown, the structure of my days had become as hazy as Melbourne's mid-winter skyline. As I settled, I



heard the faint tinkling of a bell. My rescue cat, Q, sauntered into the room and deposited himself at my feet. He was my regular writing companion and usually napped for hours on the shag rug beneath the desk as I tapped away. I smiled to myself. His timing was always impeccable; he seemed to know the exact point at which I returned to my manuscript. For countless months, he'd been the solitary, nonjudgmental witness to my bouts of frustration and elation as I tackled the task of writing my memoir. And he stayed by my side as I began my second book – a young adult fiction novel titled 'A Cat Called Q and the Magic Globe.' Such was my love for him that he inspired me to include a feline hero in the novel based on his delightful idiosyncrasies.

A deep, low purr erupted from Q's throat as he curled into a ball and dozed. I re-entered the fantastical world of Opimae – a land I had created for the book. The greyness of my lockdown reality dissipated as I concentrated on concocting the furred, flippered, and feathered friends helping my heroine, Sheri, save Opimae from a vain, avocado-obsessed overlord. Opimae was a place I could explore without restrictions, where I could conjure enchanted landscapes and create quirky characters that would ultimately prove to Sheri that there was magic around her and within her. Opimae was a place where saving creatures also meant saving their environment and



where Sheri could uncover her inner strength and help others find theirs. I introduced Q as a bossy, magical, mischievous, sandwich-loving cat. Bringing him to life within the pages was such fun! I hoped he would resonate with young readers, who may even be swayed to adopt their own black rescue kitty.

Although 'A Cat Called Q and the Magic Globe,' was my first work of fiction and included creatures inspired by both my imagination and the real world, most of my life had largely revolved around telling stories about animals and nature. Throughout my career as a broadcast journalist, I was passionate about covering issues related to the environment and the species that depended on it. I'd also written and produced numerous documentaries, most of which focused on these themes.

My memoir and first book, 'A Dolphin Called Jock,' tells the deeply personal story of the bond I formed with an injured wild dolphin named Jock. This book explores how Jock helped me heal from the scars of my traumatic childhood. I finally wrote my memoir after learning about dolphins dying in the river where Jock had once lived. I knew I had to share my remarkable, sometimes traumatic experiences to help other people appreciate the incredible intelligence and complexity of dolphins. I hoped it would lead to a greater awareness of the need to protect them and their ocean home. I also felt that exposing my own brutal truth might, in some

way, help others heal. I was thrilled when my memoir was eventually accepted by a Canadian publisher and released internationally under its new title - 'The Dolphin Who Saved Me.'

Several months later, I completed the children's fantasy that was so close to my heart - 'A Cat Called Q and the Magic Globe.' While I was reviewing the manuscript, I began writing my third book, another non-fiction. Again, it focused on animals and the importance of connection. I was prompted to write the book after learning about the distressing trend of adopted animals being abandoned and surrendered as people returned to their 'normal' lives post-lockdown. Shelters were overwhelmed by the demand and the cost of living crisis has only added to that. Having adopted companions from shelters myself, I felt compelled to help. The book, titled 'Sheltered' delves into the themes of deep bonds, love, and devotion between rescue animals and the people who save them through real-life stories. 'Sheltered' will be published in September. I hope that it will inspire others to consider adopting a rescue animal and raise awareness about the crucial work of welfare organizations.

As I now reflect on all three books, I am proud that I have consistently used my voice to advocate for our animal friends. I strongly believe that we are all interconnected within the remarkable matrix of life on this planet and that we rely on each other for

survival. Animals help us reestablish our bond with nature, through caring for individuals of a species other than our own. Reconnecting with the natural world can ignite our passion to protect it which, in turn, also helps other living beings. Whether it's the creatures of the oceans or those on land, I hope that my writing endeavors contribute to fostering a deeper appreciation and respect for animals and the environment more broadly. Animals may not be able to tell their own stories, but it is up to us to share theirs, whether in a fictional or real-world setting. People write books for various reasons, but it is my clawed, pawed, finned, feathered, and fluked friends who truly inspire and motivate me and will continue to do so.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

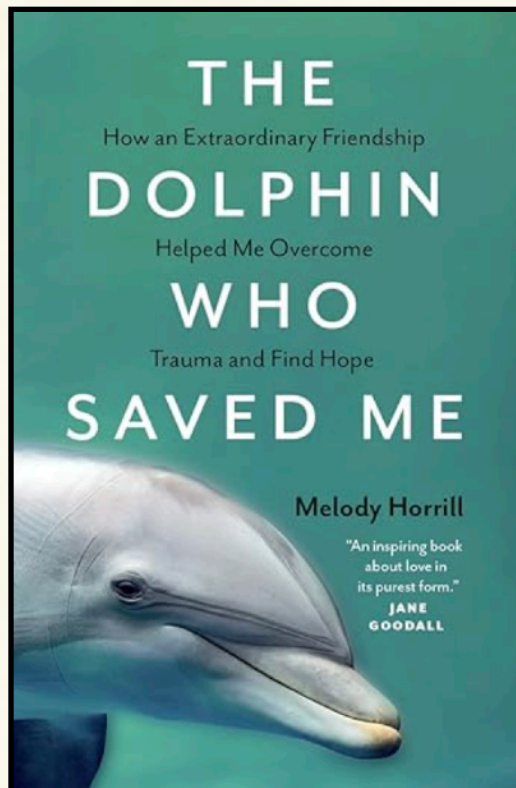


Melody Horrill is an award-winning Australian environmental journalist, freelance media manager, speaker, and author of three books. She is well known in South Australia for raising awareness about dolphins and marine conservation. She is co-chair of the Jane Goodall Institute's Cetacean Committee and Ambassador for Kangaroo Island Dolphin Watch. She lives in Melbourne with her fourteen-year-old rescue cat, Q, and partner Grant. She is a passionate animal and nature lover and likes nothing more than spending time beside or in the sea.

Although Melody spent many years writing for broadcast media, her memoir 'A Dolphin Called Jock,' was her first book. It was



published across Australia and New Zealand then internationally under a new title - 'The Dolphin Who Saved Me.' The book focuses on connecting with nature and her extraordinary friendship with a wild, injured dolphin which helped her heal from a childhood deeply impacted by domestic violence. Dr Jane Goodall endorsed Melody's memoir book - which led to her involvement with the Jane Goodall Institute's Cetacean Committee.



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Her debut young adult fantasy 'A Cat Called Q and the Magic Globe' also focuses on the theme of connecting with the natural world. It also explores the power of discovering and believing in your magic, even during challenging times. The feline hero of the novel is based on Melody's thirteen-year-old rescue cat, Q who is also her constant writing companion. As a young girl, Melody loved reading fantasy and escaping into worlds such as Narnia in C.S Lewis's The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. She dreamt up the 'Globe' story as a child and is thrilled that, many years later, it has come to life. Melody is passionate about animals and protecting the natural world and loves nothing more than

spending time on and in the water and hanging out with her favorite feline friend! Her third book, a non-fiction titled 'Sheltered' will be published in September 2024.

To find out more please visit Melody's website: [Home - Melody Horrill](#)

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Melody Horrill, Author of 'The Dolphin that Saved Me'



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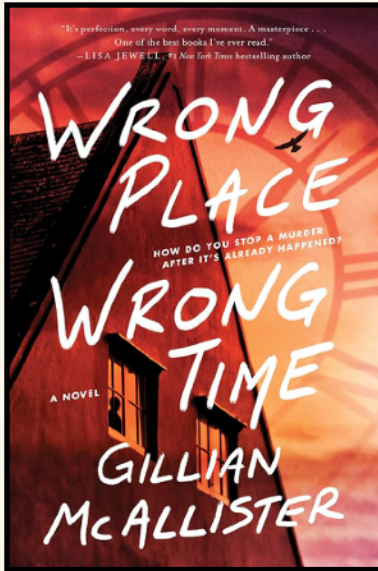
# Wrong Place, Wrong Time, by Gillian McAllister

## Book Review by JillHedgecock

“Wrong Place, Wrong Time” (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2023 reprint, paperback, 416 pages, \$10.99) by Gillian McAllister is a twisty suspense thriller full of tense moments and intriguing mysteries. Jen, a devoted mother, and happily married wife, witnesses her son, Todd, do the unthinkable. In the wee hours of Halloween, eighteen-year-old Todd murders a man and is caught by the police while Jen watches in horror.

Just like in the movie, “Groundhog Day,” the next morning, Jen wakes up on the day that her son will commit murder. However, unlike the famous movie, Jen continues to move backward in time each morning. With each revisit of the past, Jen finds clues she failed to recognize as signs that something was amiss. As Jen relives her life, regrets surface as she realizes she has been too caught up in her job and has neglected her son.





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She begins to change certain things as she relives the past, hoping to alter her son's behavior. With each step back in time, Jen wonders if her meddling will be enough to stop her son from ruining his life, as she worries that she might make things worse.

In one prior day, Jen removes the murder weapon, a knife, from her son's backpack. Even so, she keeps regressing in time. One of Jen's greatest regrets was not being there for her father when he passed away. When she wakes on the day of her dad's passing, she tempts fate by going to her father's house and changing the past. But even correcting her worst regret is not enough to prevent her freefall as years gone by resurface as her new 'now.' What is she missing? There are definitely twists and turns that McAllister throws at the reader without compromising the fundamental heart of this family drama.

"Wrong Place Wrong Time" has been sold in 31 foreign territories and became an instant global bestseller. It was selected for the Radio 2 book club and was the Reese's Book Club August 2022 pick. It debuted as Number Two on the New York Times Bestseller List. Fans of Matt Haig's "The Midnight Library" and Audrey Niffenegger's "The Time Traveler's Wife" will enjoy this book. Part mystery, part

time travel, and one hundred percent heart, this book kept me turning the pages.

Gillian McAllister was born in Sutton Coldfield and raised in Tamworth, England. She worked as a solicitor in two Birmingham-based legal practices before focusing on her writing. She is a British Sunday Times and New York Times bestselling author. Her seven novels include “Everything But The Truth,” “The Evidence Against You,” and “Just Another Missing Person” which became an instant international bestseller, hitting the Sunday Times and Canadian Bestsellers list. Her work has been published in 37 languages. You can find her on X and Instagram at @gillianmauthor and at [www.gillianmcallister.com](http://www.gillianmcallister.com).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

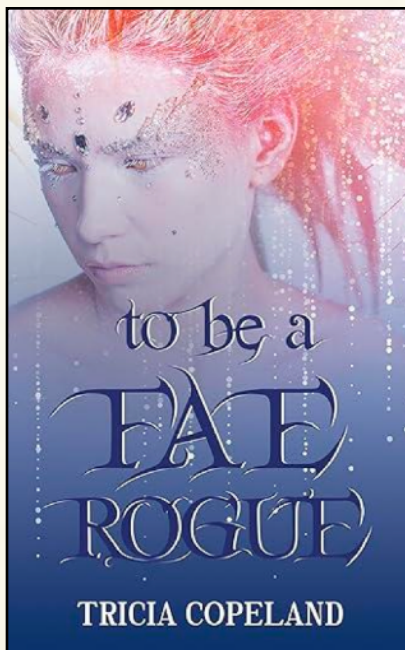


Jill Hedgecock is the author of several novels featuring animals. Her new release “In Shadow’s Reflection” is the third novel in her young adult Doberman series. This novel, along with “Between Shadow’s Eyes” (Book 1) and “From Shadow’s Perspective (Book 2), is available on amazon.com.

## Book Suggestion

# To Be a Fae Rogue Realm Chronicles Book 4

by Tricia Copeland



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Unknown to most fae, their biggest threat lies beneath them, watching, waiting perhaps, but for what? Or whom?

Queen Titania gave up everything, her kingdom, her family, her friends, and her home, to end Sonia. Alas, Sonia's soul lives and grows more powerful, threatening annihilation of the human realm.

Titania's supposed death may be the only thing deterring Sonia from unleashing her wrath on the Fae Realm as well, but Titania

has a sworn duty to protect the humans. Does she dare to risk



detection by aiding the witches in stopping Sonia from unleashing Hell on Earth?



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Tricia Copeland believes in finding magic. She thinks magic



infuses every aspect of our lives, whether it is the magic of falling in love, discovering a new passion, a beautiful sunset, or a book that transports us to another world. An avid runner and Georgia native, Tricia now lives with her family and four-legged friends in Colorado. Find all her titles from

contemporary romance, fantasy, to dystopian fiction at [www.triciacopeland.com](http://www.triciacopeland.com) or HERE on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).





# Visual Music, a review of Lyrical Years, by Gary Grossman

## A Review by Peter Mladinic

The world is more connected than it seems—Gary Grossman

‘Lyrical Years’ is a collection of poems in which the extraordinary lies beneath the ordinary. In its concerns for family and the natural world it is reminiscent of the poems of Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry. Like those poets who made their mark in the second half of the twentieth century, Gary Grossman has lived in Snyder’s California and lives in Berry’s southern region of the United States. Gary Grossman’s voice, authoritative and distinct, reflects his vast knowledge of nature: birds, insects, animals, reptiles, plants, trees and fish, without overthinking. In Lyrical Years, his first book, he brings human dignity to things airborne, to things close to land and water, and to things close to home.

Gary Grossman’s knowledge of birds and other winged creatures manifests itself in wonder. In showing their relation to



other entities of nature and to humankind, he celebrates life. The visual music in “Chimney Swifts in Athens, Georgia,” is one extended image. As the “sleek chimney swifts/ side home” the poem’s free verse form, and content vividly depict their flight. “Gusts of/ black confetti/ they flutter/ falling. The swifts’ horizontal flight pivots into a vertical fall “into the/ sleeping/ stacks/ of the red/ brick mill,/ that fed/ our town.” Grossman’s poems include hawks, cardinals, buzzards, and hummingbirds. It’s very clear he knows more than he shows and tells. Cicadas are more heard than seen, mostly from trees. “Cicadas, Brood X” depicts their beauty, close up. “I was sitting on a poplar branch...when you landed.” “Eyes glowing like/ rubies from Ceylon” and “Golden-veined wings like/ a Tiffany window/ from January 1908.” The poem concludes, “And your wings/ clicked “yes, to say/ yes...” as we coupled/ to make Brood XI.”

Grossman writes with a tender authenticity of trees, flowers, plants, fish, and creatures from the sea. “Figs July 26, 2021” evokes the sensuality of this “purple-dressed fruit.” By contrast, kudzu is described as “A get out of my/ way or I’ll bury/ you, plant.” His poems about avocados, redbud trees, beach trees, rhododendrons, and rainbow trout reveal the link between humans and nature. “Budbreak” gives an account of a boy’s death, followed by a memorial; and a depiction of resilience. “But the buds will/

break again next year,/ and the next, woods/ bursting green.” A professor emeritus, Grossman spent much of his life in the classroom. “Snake Handlers” is set among students, learning by doing.

Not mere touches, but minutes  
of close contact. Learning  
to support their slithering frames.

“Don’t grab, just let them flow”  
across forearms and biceps, over  
open hands and flushed warm skin.

Home, for this poet, is family, his wife and two (now grown) daughters. Some poems are memories of a young, just married couple, of painting (at his spouse’s urging) their kitchen yellow, of painting the outside of their house during the Covid pandemic, of going out, for the first time, to a movie, during the pandemic, and in “American Sycamore” of husband and wife walking a trail in “the Georgia woods in January.” “Thanksgiving Recipe Poem 2021” is a holiday memory that includes extended family and gives credence to the adage: expect the unexpected. One detail showing the poet’s

bond with this immediate family appears in the first of two tattoo poems. “On Getting a Tattoo” ends with

Cobalt fading to pearl,  
ringed by Barbara, Rachel,  
and Anna.

A permanent reminder—life  
flings us to and fro. But strong  
arms are there to catch us.

One of the most emotive and affectionate, i.e., loving poems in the collection is “These Are My Gifts,” with its dedication: For the wedding of Rachel and Nauroze. “My gifts to you are freedom/ tolerance, and an open heart.”

Heart is what abides in these poems. Whether about jogging, or cleaning out an office at a university in preparation for retirement, or fishing, or loaning a young woman a campground’s thirty dollars fee, or, to his family’s delight and dismay, rearranging dishes in the dishwasher, the commodity of these poems is heart. It would be accurate to call Gary Grossman a nature poet, but it would be limiting. He is that, and more. What readers take away



from 'Lyrical Years' is a love of life, a life fraught with pain as well as joy. They are poems of an individual with strong ties to family, humankind, and nature. Gary Grossman is saying things only he can say and saying them well.

Visual Music, a review of *Lyrical Years*, by Gary Grossman. Kelsay Books. American Fork, Utah. 2023. \$23.00 paper

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter Mladinic's most recent book of poems, *House Sitting*, is available from the Anxiety Press.

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# Fire on a Distant Mountain

A Short Story by William Gensburger

**J**ust one more. The sky leaked, pale red pastels blending with orange hues as the sun fell behind the New Mexico hills behind them.

They sat outside at Rusty T's Saloon, the Plaza Hotel in the square, Las Vegas, New Mexico's quaint throwback to the old west. They'd been there for hours, the tall young man and his girlfriend; he was drinking heavily although he wasn't drunk, tequila shots with a Corona chaser, but she was sipping an iced tea, her belly large and round, her hands resting across it.

For a time, they sat in silence. They were waiting the day out until the appointed time at 6 pm when they could leave, and the girl was already distressed and uncomfortable. Her hair was tied back loosely, no makeup, eyes reddened by tears; she fidgeted, often running her hand across her belly reassuringly.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked her, sipping at his beer.

"It's not like I have a choice." She wiped a loose strand of hair back. "You."

“I guess. I wish it had been different.”

“Do you?”

“Of course I do. We used to be happy.”

“Happy! I’ve forgotten what that’s like.” She reached for her tea.

“Will you be happy afterward?”

“For you. I want you to be able to move past this; have a life where you can be happy again.”

She looked away at a line of smoke rising from the distance. The mountains seemed far away, unlike the Sangre de Cristo chain behind the hotel. Her parents had moved up there, to El Porvenir, past the El Rito Cabins, along the windy trail of the river amongst the pines and oak trees that littered the landscape, with the old Indian profile of Hermit Peak so prominent above. She loved it up there, and always enjoyed their visits, although recently those visits had stopped; it was all she could do to get out of bed each day.

“I packed your bags before I came,” she told him. “They’re by the door.”

“Why?”

“After today, you have no reason to stay. There’s nothing holding you back, and you know you want to be free of all this.”

“I’ve stuck around this whole time. You’re not being fair.”

“You used to look at me. Your eyes were different then. You don’t see me anymore.”



“Lots of things were different then.”

“Why couldn’t they just take us this morning like they said? Why did they make this more painful?”

“They had a lot of babies today, the nurse said. It’s not her fault.”

“Save the defective mother to the end.”

“Stop! You’re not . . . .”

“You wanted a boy, didn’t you?”

“I just . . . .”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He took a swig of the beer, almost draining the bottle. “We should do something for it, don’t you think?”

“It . . . yes. I want to hold it.” She leaned closer to him, her eyes brimming again. “I want it to know how much I loved it even though I couldn’t make it live.” She leaned back again and wiped her eyes. “I am defective.”

“It’s not your fault, Joy. They said it happens. It happens.”

“But I had to carry it all the way. I wish I didn’t have to.”

“I know. It wasn’t fair.”

Next to them, a couple with a dog finished up and left. They watched the dog, a retriever, as they crossed the plaza square.

“Remember our high school prom? You looked so beautiful in your pink gown.”

“Peach.”

“Peach. Do you remember what we promised each other?”

She looked at the ground and nodded.

“We still can.”

“Can we? How do we do that?”

“I don’t know, Joy. Your dad told me we shouldn’t pretend about this. We should face it.”

“My mom thinks we should move on, try again, even though they didn’t want this for us. I don’t think I could do this again, David.”

He was about to reach for her hand when the waitress came out, a different one than the one who seated them.

“Hi guys. Michelle’s shift is over, so I’m taking over. My name is Candy. Can I get you another round?”

“Double shot, house tequila, and a Corona,” he told her.

“Ice tea, please.”

Candy nodded, smiled as she noted Joy’s belly and clapped her hands. “When are you due?”

Joy stared at her, her face void of any expression. “Today,” she replied. “It’s dead.”

Candy clasped her hands over her face in shock. “Ohmygod,” she blurted out. “I am so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” he told her.

“I feel terrible. Please forgive me.”

“Candy,” Joy said. “It’s fine. Honest mistake.” But her eyes were sending the silly girl off to get the drinks and leave them alone.

“Another hour,” David said, trying to break the mood. “What will you do tomorrow?” He knew it was a stupid question, but he didn’t know what else to say.

“I want to change everything,” she said. “I don’t like the house. I want the nursery gone. Furniture. Everything.”

He let her rant. “Of course, I’ll move after you’re gone. Stupid for me to stay there . . . .”

“Stop saying that.”

“It’s true.”

“You don’t know that. You just keep saying it. Maybe you want me gone?”

“You don’t know what I want. Just drink your booze.” And it was true; he didn’t know what she wanted.

Candy returned and quickly placed their drinks down, avoiding all eye contact and leaving quickly.

He downed his shot, then grabbed the beer and took a swig.

“Do you still love me?”

“What?”

“You blame me for how things turned out.”

“That’s not true. It’s just been difficult.”



“It’s been difficult for me too. Ever since you found out you’ve pushed me away, avoided me. I can’t even touch you.”

“I see the look in your eyes.”

“What look?”

She sipped her tea. “We should go. It’s almost time.”

“It’s early. The hospital’s only five minutes away.”

“I don’t want to wait anymore.” She banged the glass onto the table and covered her face. “It’s been so fucking hard waiting. Do you know I’ve been praying for a sign. Every day since we found out, I pray for a sign, just anything that it’s still there.”

“I didn’t know you prayed.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know. You’d be asleep, and I’d go to the nursery, sit in the rocker, and just pray and cry. But there were no signs. No kicks. No shivers.” She wiped a tear from her face. “None of those things people with babies always say happens.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I wish I’d known. There’s no reason you had to be up by yourself. I’d have stayed with you.”

“There’s nothing you could do.”

“That’s not the point.”

He took another sip of the beer, felt its cold travel down his throat.

“The nursery was cute, wasn’t it? The baby would’ve loved it.”

“Yeah. I remember how excited you were.”

“I was.” He was smiling. “It’s funny. I didn’t want to be a parent, you know? I wasn’t ready. Until you got pregnant, and it all changed.”

“Do you think you’d have been a good dad?”

“I think so. Do you?”

“I think so. I guess we’ll never know now.” She clasped her hands together, raising them to her lips. “I’m scared,” she told him.

“What about?”

“I’m scared when they take the baby, I’ll die. I feel like I’ve died already. I’m scared when they show it to me because I’ll know it’s not alive.” Tears were now freely flowing. She wiped at them and he got up to hold her, leaning over so he could get closer.

“I’ll be there. We’ll deal with it together.” He reached for his beer, downing the rest. He pulled a wad of cash from his pocket and counted it out, leaving it pinned under the salt shaker for the server. “C’mon. Let’s do this,” he told her, extending his hand for her to take.

“David, I just want you to know that I don’t blame you. And I’ll miss you. Us. But I don’t blame you for that either.” She looked at his face, searching for something she didn’t know. Then together, they walked to the car.

At the hospital, she was ushered into a birthing room and hooked up to an I.V. dispensing Pitocin to induce contractions and childbirth. The contractions came rapidly, and quickly, the nursing staff prepped her for delivery. There was no doctor present. None was needed unless there was an emergency, in which case the doctor on-call would attend.

Legs up and spread apart, feet in stirrups, Joy was covered by a thin blue paper gown. With each contraction, she began to groan and then cry. One of the nurses wiped her forehead and gave her some ice chips to suck on.

David waited until one contraction had passed, then moved so he was in front of her face.

“I want you to know something. I love you. I love you, and I don’t want this to end here. I want us to figure it out together. I want us to try.”

Joy reached for his hand and gripped it, starting to nod as another wave of pain overtook her.

“Bear down,” the nurse said. “Push. The head is crowning. It’s coming.”

With another huge groan, Joy screamed out as she pushed hard. The baby came out, and into the towel the nurse was holding. Joy was crying now. The nurse wiped the face of the baby, checking its



genitals for a quick second before wrapping it up completely except for the face.

“Would you like to hold your son?” she asked Joy, who nodded.

“Son,” David said.

The nurse placed the baby on Joy’s chest, waiting until she had a firm grasp on the baby before pulling away, allowing them their time. Joy stared at the little face, ran her finger across the nose and lips. But there was no movement, no breaths, no cries. She looked up at David and smiled. “I love you,” she said. And to the baby, she said it as well. “He’s so beautiful, David. He’s so beautiful. I couldn’t love anyone or anything more.” The wetness of her tears was now across the baby’s face, and she lightly kissed him on the forehead.

It was only when the baby opened his eyes and started to cry, his eyes fixed upon her face, that she knew everything would be fine after all.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Gensburger is the author of the award-winning novel ‘Texas Dead,’ and its sequels, ‘Angle of Death,’ and “American Dead.” This story appeared in his anthology ‘Distant Rumors: 10 Short Stories.’ You can buy it at <https://amzn.to/4elsqyf> and learn more on his website at [www.MisterWriter.com](http://www.MisterWriter.com)

# Flamer

## A Short Story by Bill Tope

"I met a chick today," I said with a grin, walking across the living room and into the kitchen of the Big Yellow House. There, I found my friend, housemate, and unofficial house manager, John, making a huge pot of hamburger casserole.

John looked up and cocked his long, penciled brow. "Was she pecking the ground with her beak and saying 'cheep, cheep, cheep?'" he asked sardonically.

I smirked. "No," I said, "but I'll have her cheeping tonight. I've got a date." John scowled and shook his head but said nothing.

Tom, another housemate, tromped into the room. He was swilling an ever-present bottle of beer.

"Hey, food!" he said with interest. "When do we eat?"

John cocked his brow again. "I don't know about you, but I'll have my dinner in about five minutes."

"Is there enough for me?" inquired Tom inelegantly, licking his thick red lips in anticipation.

"I work," explained John didactically, "to earn money and to buy food, which I prepare in order to sustain myself. You want to eat,

get a job!" He stared down his long, narrow nose at the other man, who, at six feet two, was yet seven inches shorter than John.

"Well, screw it," scoffed Tom, walking to the cupboard. "I'll just make some eggs."

"You do that," said John. But when Tom extracted a cast-iron skillet from the cupboard, John objected again. "Don't use that pan, please," he said in a cautionary voice, rushing forward and taking it from his housemate.

"Why not?" spluttered Tom, taken aback.

"Because," said John. "This pan's finish has been cured by years of careful use to the point where I barely need any butter to fry my eggs." Tom stared at him. "You'd only scratch it up," he said in conclusion.

Tom scowled, took out the only other clean pan available, which was a sixteen-inch pizza pan, and plopped it onto the metal burner over high heat. John blew out a breath, receded, and put the coveted pan back into the cupboard.

"What are you doing tonight, John?" I asked as I opened a can of tomato soup and dumped it into a small saucepan.

"I have to work the door at Stagger tonight," replied John.

"Oh yeah, it's Friday; I forgot." I knew that John checked IDs and collected the cover charge at The Stagger Inn tavern on weekends, when they had live bands, in order to make extra money. I also knew



that John would let me in for free, a favor he also paid to any good-looking, hot men who tickled John's fancy. John was one of only a handful of openly gay men in the small town of Edwardsville on this date, November 1, 1977. John's largesse, however, did not extend to Tom, a newcomer to the Big Yellow House, so named for the awful mustard-yellow paint job on the building's exterior.

"Why can't I get in free?" Tom bawled dourly.

"Because you get money from your parents, and they give you enough to buy twenty beers a night, so you can just pay your way in," answered John with a touch of reproof.

"It ain't fair," protested Tom in a high-pitched squeal. "Sturges gets in free."

"Sturges is only working fifteen hours per week," John pointed out, "and he gets no help from his parents. He can't afford rent, groceries, plus the tavern. But," he added pointedly, "he is working!"

"Ain't fair," muttered Tom again, dropping eggs onto the heated pizza pan. The eggs sizzled and sputtered angrily. "Damn it!" growled Tom. "I forgot to add any butter." John shook his head and assumed a seat at the kitchen table, where Sturges was spooning up tomato soup.

"And don't forget to do your dishes, Tom," scolded John, indicating with a wave of his hand the tremendous pile of dirty plates, cups, saucers, and pans stacked in the sink. John took up his

pan of hamburger casserole and spooned a generous portion onto his plate.

"You're having casserole again," observed Sturges, slurping his soup.

"It's all I can afford," lamented John, forking up the familiar concoction. "I'm so big that it takes a lot of calories to fill me." John always consumed a lot of food, though Sturges knew that John weighed no more than 170 pounds, soaking wet.

Tom, meanwhile, was viciously scraping the burned eggs from the pizza pan with a metal spatula, growing angrier and more frustrated by the second. Tiny bits of egg plummeted to the floor. The other men stared at him for a second, then returned to their meals.

"Are you working all night?" asked Sturges.

"Just till one," replied John. "Vern," referencing the bar owner, "lets everyone else in at no charge after then. I start at seven and work till one."

"I have to work tonight myself," said Sturges. "Eight to twelve at Wagner," referencing the old array of small factory buildings in town, reclaimed by the university and where the art department was housed.

"I don't see how you can take your clothes off in front of everyone," said Tom with a snicker. Sturges worked as a nude model for the art classes.

"Nothing to it," said Sturges blithely.

"I'd be afraid I'd get a hard-on," squawked the other man indelicately.

"For you, it would only be a little problem," John pointed out.

Tom's face darkened. "Why'd you say that?" he demanded.

"Girls talk to me," revealed John with a little smile. Everyone knew this to be true. John, for some reason, by virtue of his being gay, or perhaps in spite of it, inspired the confidence of most women. Tom's mean little eyes squinted, and he hurriedly quit the kitchen, leaving his mess, as usual, behind him.

"You don't want to get him too wound up," warned Sturges, staring at the receding back of the other man. "When he gets loaded...."

"He's always loaded," remarked John. eating more casserole. "Principally with shit," he added.

"He outweighs you by eighty pounds," Sturges pointed out. "What would you do if he took a swing at you?"

"I'd tell everybody that he sucked me off," replied John dismissively. Sturges laughed out loud.

At the door of Stagger Inn, John sat on a bar stool and met guests as they filed through the portal. He collected the \$2 cover charge and checked IDs for anyone of questionable age. Elaine, a



full-figured woman dressed all in white, paused and handed him a five-dollar bill. Rapidly making changes, John told Elaine, "You look lovely tonight."

"Ooh," tittered Elaine, instantly flattered. Though he was gay, John was still tall, dark, and handsome and capable of outrageous blandishments. And Elaine was the type of woman who gravitated towards gay friends in lieu of lovers, much to her ultimate dismay.

"Have you seen Dennis tonight?" inquired John with a hopeful smile. Dennis was an object of John's lustful fantasies and another supposedly gay friend of Elaine's.

"I talked to him on the phone," revealed Elaine. "He said he might be popping in."

In a low, hot voice, John said, "I'd like to pop into him." Elaine tittered delightedly again and proceeded into the tavern.

Next through the door was Betsy, a tiny, dark-haired lesbian who was also a friend and housemate of John. Though she was just nineteen, she was granted admission by virtue of her sexual identity, her status as an art student at the university (the Stagger Inn was known infamously around town as a gay, art student bar), and her acquaintance with John and Vern, the tavern owner.

"Hey, buster," said Betsy, kissing John on the lips.

"Hey, sweet stuff," John greeted her in turn.

At that moment, Vern walked up to the door and told John, "Let that new blonde girl, Melody, in here tonight, John. She's just nineteen, but..."

"Girl?" repeated John. "Did you mean young woman?" He stared blankly at Vern, who snorted. The tavern was but a dodge; Vern made most of his money selling nose candy.

"Whatever you say, John," he said, drifting back into the growing crowd.

The night proceeded apace until just before midnight, when Sturges showed up and John allowed him inside. "Buy you a beer, John?" asked Sturges.

"No, I get free beer; it's one of the perks of the job," replied the tall man, lifting a glass from the bar and taking a sip. "How did it go tonight at the studio?" he asked. "Any hot men there?" He grinned.

"Your friend Dennis was there," replied Sturges, unzipping his coat and tossing it behind the bar. "He was asking about you."

This garnered John's immediate attention. "What did he say?" he asked, his expression eager. "What did you say? Tell me everything," he demanded.

Sturges chuckled. "He said he'd be by later," he said. "He wanted to know if you'd be here."

"Of course, I'm here; did you tell him so?" Sturges laughed again.

"Yeah, but he might have been just screwing with you. He knows you're in love with him."

"In lust," John corrected automatically. "I don't want to marry the man; just do him," and he smiled a little.

"I don't know if he's even gay, John," said Sturges; "the women are all over him."

"That man is too damn good-looking to be straight," declared John positively. "Everyone," said John, "is capable of bisexuality."

"Wishful thinking," said Sturges.

John scowled. "You just go ahead and harvest your little 'chicks' and do your straight thing. How boring," he said dismissively.

Suddenly, a loud voice boomed out of the crowded bar. "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," declared Stan, a homeless Black man known for his homophobia.

"Oh, God," mourned John, shaking his head. "He's back."

"Stan's alright," said Sturges, grinning. "He's just...."

"Yes, he is," agreed John. "I hope you won't be bringing him home again tonight." Stan stayed at a different friend's house every night; it was, Stan thought, part of his charm.

"Stan's got a girlfriend now," said Sturges, sipping his beer. "He'll be crashing at her pad for the foreseeable future."

"Woman friend," John corrected automatically. "Huh," he muttered. "Even the homeless have lovers."



The tavern, which closed at 3 a.m., was in wild disorder by two o'clock. The band was doing their last encore, a rich rendition of Jackie Wilson's 'Higher and Higher,' and everyone who hadn't found a companion for the night was on the dance floor, pursuing that end.

Almost everyone was high and/or intoxicated, and no one wanted to go home alone on a Friday night. Tom was there, and he had already consumed his quota of twenty beers. A woman he'd disdained at the beginning of the night had assumed the character of a love goddess in his beer-addled mind. Tom was dancing close with Rose, the single mother of a little girl who lived two houses down from Big Yellow. A decade older than Tom's 25 years, she clung desperately to him, deathly afraid to be alone or unloved. Tom often attached himself to broken, misused, and fragile women.

John, now free of his responsibilities, sat at a table, sipping a beer and observing the throng of partygoers. He sighed heavily. Dennis had not shown up, and Edwardsville tonight was itself as barren of gay lovers as a small town in the U.S.A. could be. Though there were homosexual and lesbian men and women in the community, most were circumspect about their sexual identities. John knew who they were, but most were entrenched in old, established relationships they'd had for years or were unwilling to reveal their true selves. It was not unheard of for an employee to be discharged on suspicion of being gay or lesbian. Unlike John, they were still closeted. At that

moment, Sturges, with his new girlfriend on his arm, passed John on the way to the door, and he stopped for a moment at John's table.

"No luck?"

John knew what he meant. He shook his head disconsolately.

"He's probably off with some skanky female," he said unhappily.

"Want to walk home with us?" asked Sturges.

John shook his head. "No, you children go on. Don't worry about me," he said melodramatically. He drained his glass." Sturges clapped him on the shoulder, and the two young people disappeared through the door and into the autumn night.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across the table. John looked up to find a tall, thin, blonde-haired woman in a halter top and shorts—in November, he marveled—standing over him. The two's eyes searched one another for a moment before John climbed to his feet, grabbed his jacket, and together they swept out into the night.

Sturges was at the kitchen table, drinking a glass of milk and eating toast with peanut butter and jelly, when John trooped through the kitchen to his bedroom, which was just off the kitchen on the first floor. He cracked the bedroom door, and the tall, good-looking girl slipped through. John glanced back at Sturges and grinned wildly, then followed her inside. Sturges shrugged. After ten minutes, the girl reappeared, fully clad again, and she left without a

word. Five minutes after that, John poked his head out of the door, grinned stupidly again, then sauntered into the kitchen.

John was drunk, thought Sturges. "What was that all about?" he asked.

John laughed aloud, then shook his head in wonder. "I don't know," he said slowly.

"Who was that?" asked Sturges.

John shrugged. "Deborah....something."

"What did you do?" Sturges asked with morbid curiosity. This was the first girl that he had ever seen enter the sanctum sanctorum.

"We fucked," he said shortly. "She's been hitting on me for weeks."

"But..."

"I know." John nodded. "But it was either that or Rosie Palm," he held out his hand, "and her five daughters."

"You mean," said Sturges, "that it meant no more to you than masturbating?" He was rather horrified. John shrugged again, opened the fridge door, took out a carton of orange juice, and poured a glass. He took a seat across from his housemate.

"Like John Lennon said, 'we're all doin' what we can.' " He looked up. "Where's your new woman friend?"

"She had to go home," replied Sturges. "She has a class on Saturday."



"So you didn't get off?" inquired John bluntly. "What's the point of having a lover if you don't do it every chance you get?" he asked incredulously.

"There's more to a relationship than just sex," said Sturges. "I want this to work. You can't be using one another, you know?"

John shook his head. Clearly, this was beyond his comprehension. "I prefer the Bath Houses," he said, referencing the notorious sexual emporia in nearby St. Louis, which catered to gay men. "No strings," he explained.

"I like strings," Sturges pointed out. "I mean, otherwise, what's even the point of being with someone?"

John swallowed the juice and then replied in one word:

"Conquest," he said tersely.

The Baths were shadowy and dimly lit, with different colored lights in the different rooms, of which there was at least a score. There were no definitive rules of conduct other than no violence, no hard drugs, no overt prostitution, and no non-consensual relations. Most of the men were good with that. There were beds in some rooms, plain mattresses in others, and just carpet in a few rough zones. John, having paid his five dollars and disrobed and stored his things in a locker, donned a terrycloth towel and found himself in a darkened hallway, illuminated by only a large exit sign suspended

from the ceiling. Up ahead, in the shadows, he discerned an indistinct form, crouching upon the floor on all fours. Boldly approaching, John stopped before the gauzy form. A hand reached up and, pushing the towel aside, grasped John's manhood. John inhaled sharply. Spreading the towel wide, the figure fixed his lips around the other man's penis and began engaging in fellatio. John's breathing increased. Ten minutes later, John exited the hallway, having never seen his partner's face and having not exchanged so much as a word.

"Hi, John, do you want my rent now?" asked Beth, the fifth and final member of the household.

John looked up with interest. "Thank you, Bethal Ann McClanahan," he said in a sing-song voice.

She stood there uncertainly for a moment. "Are you going to the party over at the Corner Tavern tonight?" she asked.

"I suppose so," he said glumly. "There's nothing else to do."

"You're not working the door tonight?"

John shook his head. "No. Vern canceled the band he had; they're just going to use the jukebox tonight." He sighed. "I need the bread," he went on.

"You want to go to the party with me?" Beth asked. He looked at her. It was well known that Beth was in love with John's tall, dark,

and handsome form, despite his sexual peccadillos, and she was always waiting in the wings, as were many similarly hopeful women.

"Sure," he replied slowly. "About ten o'clock?" he suggested.

"I'll be ready," she chirped.

Beth, scurrying off now to shower and dress, was the most recent arrival in Big Yellow, having been there just a month or so. Tom, scoping out any and all available women, had loudly announced to Sturges and John that "I'll fuck her in a week." John, of course, repeated this boast to the plump Beth, who, though she might have been amenable to such a development once, now disdained Tom as "ungentlemanly." Besides, everyone had a measure of pride.

At the party, held at Corner Tavern, the uproar was manifest. By eleven p.m., virtually everyone was drunk, high, or otherwise strung out. It was nickel beer night. Sturges edged up to John and Beth, standing at the bar, and said, "Hey, you guys want to do some crystal?"

Beth's face lit up with a smile, but John shook his head no. "My sinuses are bad enough from all that pot without snorting up lines of Drano," he said. Beth chuckled.

"Man," Sturges told him, "it'll keep you up all night—if you know what I mean."

"I'm up all night anyway," murmured John, sipping his beer.



"Ooh, John," teased Beth, "ain't you the one?" He grinned and had the grace to blush.

"Is your woman here tonight?" asked John archly.

"My ex-woman, you mean?" said Sturges dourly. "She's got a new man in her life," he told them.

"Oh, Sturges," said Beth, grabbing his arm. "Poor baby."

"You see now why I don't form so-called exclusive relationships," remarked John.

"Well, this should interest you," said Sturges. "Her new love interest is none other than your good buddy Dennis!"

"What!" squawked John, taken aback. "That boy is gay," he insisted, only half in jest. What's he doing with a mere woman? He could have me," he argued.

"Some men like mere women, John," said Beth.

"Maybe he wanted to wake up in the morning with his lover still in bed with him," suggested Sturges.

"A person's breath smells bad in the morning, all that cigarette smoke and pot and stale beer."

"It smells whether or not you're alone, though, John," Beth pointed out, placing a gentle hand on John's forearm.

Sturges occupied his regular spot at the huge maple kitchen table one night when John returned home from the tavern with a

handsome, bearded man in tow. As he opened the door to his bedroom, John paused in transit and introduced Sturges to the man. "Sturges," he said with no little pride, "this is Franklin, my man friend from St. Louis." Sturges glanced up and smiled in greeting.

"Hi, Franklin," he said.

"Hello, Sturges," replied Franklin. Sturges thought that the other man was unusually handsome and slender, like a soccer player. "We just got in from the Tivoli," Franklin said, referencing an avant-garde theater in the city.

"What was playing?" asked Sturges, curious.

"Rocky Horror Picture Show," Franklin answered.

"Is that still on?"

"I've been playing for 52 consecutive weeks," revealed Franklin.

"A toast!" he chirped, quoting the movie, and pulling a piece of toasted bread from his jacket, he tossed it in Sturges's direction. "Sturges caught it and laughed.

"Yeah, I've seen Rocky Horror a couple of times."

John held open the door to his bedroom. "Franklin," he invited, and the two men retired.

The next morning, Sturges was fixing breakfast at that same kitchen table when Franklin emerged from John's room, fully dressed; John was clad in a bathrobe. A third man walked in through the open front door and greeted the two.

"Ready to go back to the Lou, Franklin?" asked the newcomer, who, like Franklin, was strikingly handsome.

"Be right with you, Ellis," replied Franklin. Turning back to John, he leaned in for a goodbye kiss. The men embraced momentarily, then bid each other adieu, and Franklin and Ellis exited Big Yellow.

When they had departed, Sturges asked, "Who was that man?"

"That's Franklin's husband," answered John with a warm little smile.

"Not the jealous type, huh?" said Sturges.

John batted the question away. "He's got no reason to be. Franklin's committed to him." Sturges stared back at him. "Well," observed John, "he married him, didn't he?"

"I thought the Supreme Court ruled against same-sex marriage," said Sturges.

"Not exactly. In Baker vs. Nelson, in Minnesota; the Court refused to hear it. It's still on appeal." Sturges nodded.

"You know, John," said Sturges, "I never know who's going to walk out of your bedroom." John grinned broadly. "John," added Sturges. John looked up. "Don't you ever get a little lonely, you know, with one-night stands all the time?" The other man pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment, shrugged, and replied, "No," rather unconvincingly, thought Sturges.

. . .



"We're having a guest over Christmas," John informed the others one week before the holidays. "Stephanie will be staying with us till after New Year's."

"Boston, Stephanie?" chirped Betsy, fitting slices of bread into the toaster. "I like her! She was here last year."

"Boston Stephanie?" repeated Tom, again cooking eggs on a pizza pan. His dishes remained unwashed. "Who's that?" he asked.

"An old friend of mine from when I studied for the ministry for one year in the Northeast"

Tom unleashed a loud, ugly cackle. "Ministry? You're kidding!"

John shook his head. "I was a confused youth," he revealed, "back when I was eighteen. I was at a Lutheran College for the longest eleven months of my life. Stephanie was a novitiate at a nearby convent."

Tom continued to laugh unpleasantly. "What happened?" he asked.

"We fell from grace," replied John cryptically.

"What's she like?" asked Tom, getting right to the point. "Is she good-looking?"

"When has that ever been a prerequisite for you?" asked John archly.

"Where's she going to sleep?" Tom inquired further.

"In your bed, of course," replied John.

Tom's eyes bugged out like hardboiled eggs, and he said, "Sounds good to me. I'm always looking for a good piece of tail."

When Stephanie arrived several days later, the household gathered around to welcome her. She was of medium height, dark-haired, slightly round, and dressed in a Red Sox jersey. Stephanie greeted John with a kiss, Betsy with a hug, and the others with a friendly wave. Beth and Sturges took to her immediately. Tom wasn't so sure, however. He was mentally fitting her into his queen-sized bed. Having already consumed a dozen of his 20 daily beers, Tom asked stupidly, "Are you a virgin?" She blinked in surprise.

"Honey," she said, wrapping an arm around Tom's thick neck, I've been with 212 men, four women, two goats, and a Bedouin camel driver."

"Yikes!" exclaimed Tom excitedly.

For the next two weeks, Stephanie slept not in Tom's bed, but in John's, a "friend, with benefits" type arrangement, John told Sturgis.

Two weeks after New Year's Day, Bethel moved out, only to be replaced by Theresa—Te—a philosophy student at the university. She was diminutive and striking, like a porcelain miniature, and rivaled John with her libidinous promiscuity. In no time, she was sleeping with Sturges in his third-floor atelier and doing lines of blow in every room of the house. Nobody thought much about Te and

Sturges canoodling, though it did not sit well with Tom, who, like he said, was always on the hunt for a new piece of tail.

One night Tom sought to replicate his romantic feats with the much scorned Rose, whom he regularly abandoned at the tavern in favor of prettier, younger women. Returning from the bar at midnight, he approached Rose's screen door and hammered with his fist upon the portal.

"What do you want, Tom?" she asked, shielding four-year-old Katie behind her hip. They had been roused from sleep. "I've got my daughter tonight," she pointed out. "Come back tomorrow. Katie will be with her father then."

"I want to fuck you now, tonight!" he bellowed, smacking the door again with his fist.

"Please," she implored, "go away."

"At least stick your head out the door and gimme a blow job," he insisted, edging closer to the door.

"Go away!" Across the neighborhood, lights began blinking on in the windows of other residences. Suddenly, a police car came screaming down the street, its blue and red lights flashing crazily.

"You bitch!" Tom spat. "You called the damned cops!" and he took off, lumbering the two hundred feet from Rose's home back to Big Yellow. The cruiser, meanwhile, proceeded down the street, giving not a thought to obtruding on a mere sexual harassment



case. Wiping beads of perspiration from his bare chest, Tom clomped up the stairs to his second-floor bedroom. As he cracked the door to his room, he discerned whispering coming from the third floor—Sturges's room. He stopped and listened. It was Sturges and Te.

"Pillow talk," murmured Tom. Still very drunk, he took a swig of beer and tiptoed halfway up the carpeted stairs and stopped again to listen. It was Te alone, and she was on the telephone. Tom recalled that Sturges was posing for a drawing class tonight. Tom proceeded up the stairs. Finally arriving at the top, he peered around a structural pillar and saw her: all four feet eight inches and ninety pounds of her, naked as a jaybird and lying atop a body pillow, with her delightful derriere accommodately angled his way. He felt himself growing hard. Walking forward as if in a dream, he unbuckled his trousers and finally stood over and just behind her prone figure. Lowering himself, he grabbed her shoulders and lunged forward.

John was taking a bath in the second-floor bathroom when he heard the scream. It was a woman's voice—Te! Jumping from the tub, he ran for the door, wrapping his terrycloth robe around his shoulders. With no further ado, he raced up the stairs to Sturges's attic apartment and found Te, squirming helplessly beneath Tom's huge, flabby body. Without a second thought, John grabbed Tom's half-filled beer bottle and brought it down smartly on the other

man's thick skull. With a sickening "Thook!" the bottle reverberated off his cranium. John struck again. The bottle shattered into an amber cloud of glass shards. With a little squeak, Tom fell unconscious off of Te's backside.

Uttering an anguished cry, Te took up a letter-opener and plunged it violently into Tom's crotch. Blood spurted everywhere.

"Are you alright, Te?" asked John in a concerned voice.

"Motherfucker came before he could get into me," she said with a sneer. There were tears in her eyes.

Though initially inclined to seek retribution for Tom's foiled assault, Te at length decided not to press charges. One reason was that she had succeeded in severing one of Tom's testicles, and might have faced countercharges had she proceeded; the other reason was that there were so many illegal drugs and paraphernalia in Big Yellow that it was deemed imprudent to invite an active police investigation of the premises. Tom, of course, moved out a day later and spent much of the next week recuperating in the hospital.

John emerged from his bedroom into the kitchen, clutching a threadbare corduroy coat around his large body. "I hate this old coat," he grumbled unhappily. Betsy looked up from breakfast.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"When I go to St. Louis with all of rich UMSL students, they all have expensive, warm coats. I want one." Betsy nodded sympathetically. "Why can't one of my rich relatives die and leave me money so I can buy a new coat?" he wondered aloud.

"John," said Betsy, "you don't mean that!"

"Who says I don't?" he asked. "They've got thousands of dollars in their bank accounts, and I have like twenty dollars." He plunged his hands into his pockets. "I just need one of them to die," he explained. "I need new shoes, too," he added thoughtfully. "Maybe a meteorite could take out a whole household, and then I could afford a new car." His face shone with avarice. "I'm a student," he went on, "and I'm trying to make a better life for myself; they're... old!" he said disdainfully.

In May, just weeks before completing his junior year, John became more circumspect. Always rather flamboyant, he spoke little of his personal life and stopped hitting on random men. He also discontinued his forays to the Baths. Sturges noticed his friend's change in behavior and became a little concerned. One day, unable to hold his tongue any longer, Sturges asked John, "What's going on with you?"

John ceased washing dishes, looked over his shoulder, and said, innocently, "What do you mean?" Sturges scowled.



"I mean," he said, "are you eating salt peter, taking quaaludes, doing smack? You've changed, man!"

John grew pensive and decided to come clean: "I've found a new...man friend," he revealed. He giggled like a little girl.

"Who is it?" asked Sturges.

"You remember that man I was with at the bar last weekend, when I was working?" Sturges nodded. He remembered a short, unprepossessing figure in what appeared to be a Brooks Brothers suit standing with John at the door of the tavern.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"That's Eliot," said John. "Eliot Denholm; he's from Scotland. He works for Lloyd's of London, believe it or not. He's an executive or something, very high up in the company."

"What's he doing here?" Sturges wanted to know.

"I asked him that," said John. "And he said if he told me, he'd have to kill me." And he exploded with nervous laughter, clapping his hands together.

"How long's he here for?"

John shook his head. "Not long. He's got to go back to bloody old Londontown," he said, using a poor British accent. "Goddamn limey," he said half-jokingly. The two men were silent for a moment, and then John said quietly, "Eliot wants to take me back with him to

Europe. He's moving back to Scotland and wants me to live with him," he disclosed.

"What about school?" asked Sturges.

"Oh hell, I can go to school anytime. I could even attend college in Europe. Eliot said he'd pay my way." But John's face, Sturges decided, was troubled. The whites of his eyes seemed to glow like the sun.

"So what's the downside?"

"There is none," replied John

"Is he...?" began Sturges.

John nodded. "Yes. He's rich."

A Month Later, a bon voyage party was to be held. John would be joining Eliot in Glasgow the following week. Looking around his bedroom, John found that he had little to pack. "There's nothing I want to take," he said to Sturges and Betsy, who were helping him prepare for departure.

"Are you ready for a big change, man?" asked Sturges. John nodded.

"Eliot said he'd put some real estate and stocks in my name," remarked John. "That way, I won't be dependent on him, and I won't stay with him just because he supports me."

"That's very cool, John," said Betsy, folding one of John's shirts and dropping it into the open suitcase. "Eliot seems like the real deal, you know what I mean?"

"He wants us to be monogamous," said John suddenly. The three friends stared at each other. "I've never been monogamous before. I'm not sure I know how to do it," he admitted.

"How old is Eliot?" asked Betsy.

"Fifty."

"Are you afraid he won't be able to...?" she asked.

"No, no, no," he interrupted her. "He has a strong sex drive; it's just that I've never been with one person—one man—in a committed relationship before." Sturges thought John looked torn.

"What are you really afraid of?" asked Sturges.

"I'm not sure if I really love him. If I can love anyone, it all used to be so simple," he remembered. Going to the Baths, and before that, when I was in high school, hanging out in Forest Park in St. Louis. Like I said, there were no strings." He looked up at Sturges. "I know, you like strings. You told me that before."

Betsy, who was in the third year of a committed relationship to a woman in her own young life, told him, "If you commit, then you risk getting hurt. The worst thing in the universe is rejection, honey. I've gotten to know him over the past few weeks, and I think that Eliot loves you. I really do." John said nothing.



"Eliot seems like a good man," offered Sturges.

"I think you feel the way you do about love," said Betsy, "because of your father."

At Sturges's questioning look, John explained. "My dad is a Lutheran minister," he said. "He disowned me when I came out when I was nineteen." Sturges hadn't known this. "He hasn't spoken to me since," he added. "My sisters and my mom still talk to me, but he won't, and I can't go home." Sturges had never seen his friend so affected. The whites of John's eyes glistened with moisture.

The going-away party was a wild one. More than a hundred people swarmed through the many rooms of Big Yellow and spilled out into the yard, where lawn chairs and picnic tables had been set up to accommodate the many partygoers. An enormous amount of beer was drunk, and inordinate quantities of marijuana were incinerated. Though police cruisers drifted past the front of the house, no stops were made; good conduct was observed.

"When are you leaving, John?" asked the mysterious Dennis, showing up at last and running a finger under his eye and preening as though for a camera.

"Two days," replied John, leaning against a wall, looking at the other man, and wondering what he could have found so fascinating

about him. Dennis was drunk on his ass. It was not a pretty sight, thought John. He shook his head at the one who got away.

By three a.m., the crowds had disappeared, and the housemates busied themselves tidying up the premises. Hundreds of beer bottles were scooped into trash cans, and half-eaten plates of food were plunked into bags. Sturges had never before seen so many filled ashtrays. Not bothering to snap on the light, he sneaked into John's bedroom, emptied an ashtray into a large coffee can, and came upon a small mirror lying upon John's bed, with two thick lines of coke arrayed upon it. Te, by his side, took up a dollar bill and rolled it into a tight cylinder, and each snorted up a line. All of a sudden, Te was in his arms, and they were kissing. She plunged her hand down the front of his jeans, and he pulled her shirt up over her head. In seconds, they were prone upon the bed, Te astride him, making frenzied love.

It wasn't until later that they realized they weren't alone. Beside them on the bed was John, performing fellatio on another man. John and Eliot, thought Sturges with a smile, too high to be embarrassed, until he looked closer and saw that it was not John and Eliot but rather John and Dennis. All sound and movement ceased. No one said a word.

On Monday morning, before the Yellow Cab arrived at Big Yellow to take John to Lambert International Airport, John and his two fastest friends, Sturges and Betsy, waited pensively. As the minutes ticked down, they found they had little to say but were each wrapped in their own thoughts. Suddenly, John spoke.

"Don't forget to collect the rent at the first of the month," he told Sturges with a wistful little smile.

"Got it," replied Sturges.

"And don't forget the furnace filter, once a month," he continued.

"I've got it, John," Sturges assured him calmly. John nodded.

"When are you coming back?" asked Betsy all at once.

Eliot returns to the States two or three times a year," replied John. "One time to New York City, one time to Los Angeles, and once to Chicago."

"Sturges and I can come up to Chicago when you get there," she said.

"Sure, Eliot will put you up at the Hilton," said John with a smile.

"I'd expect nothing less," said Sturges with a grin. Then, "Do you still have misgivings, John?" John shook his head and said nothing. Suddenly, they heard the scunch of gravel, and Betsy peered out the window.

"Taxi's here, John."



John climbed to his feet, tugged his light jacket around himself, and turned to his friends. After a second, he grabbed Betsy in a crushing embrace then released her. He held his hand out to Sturges, and when Sturges reached for it, John took him up in a savage hug, too. Both men giggled happily. "You kids write, you hear?" he said in a strangled voice, and in a second, he was out the door, suitcase in hand. They heard the car door open and then slam shut. The taxi backed out of the driveway and sped rapidly up the street.

"I hope it all works out for John. He deserves it," said Sturges.

"Yes, he does," agreed Betsy.

"But," said Sturges, "what if Eliot finds out?"

"He knows," said Betsy with certitude.

"He does?" exclaimed Sturges. "Did Dennis tell him?"

"No," replied Betsy. "John did."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Tope lives in the American Midwest with his mean little cat Baby.

# Finis

That's the end of this giant issue, dear readers. As you can see, we offer a wide range of materials, from tame and cute to somewhat sordid. Each author has a different style, and each story has a different objective. Sometimes, you just have to bear with us to find a story you love. Until next month....



*Sometimes you just have to bear with us to find a story you love. Photo by William Gensburger*





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