

**COWBOY JAMBOREE MAGAZINE**  
Presents

Issue 8.1 Fall 2022

# THALIA ET ALIA

a Larry McMurtry incited issue



**Stories, essays, and verse inspired by Thalia,  
Texas and the like.**

**Suggested (But Not  
Necessary) Reading**  
Horseman, Pass By  
Leaving Cheyenne  
The Last Picture Show  
Moving On  
All My Friends Are  
Going To Be Strangers  
Duane's Depressed  
Lonesome Dove



**"The hardest thing on earth is  
choosing what matters."**

read on reader →

*“It's a fine world, though rich in hardships at times.”*  
*—Larry McMurtry*



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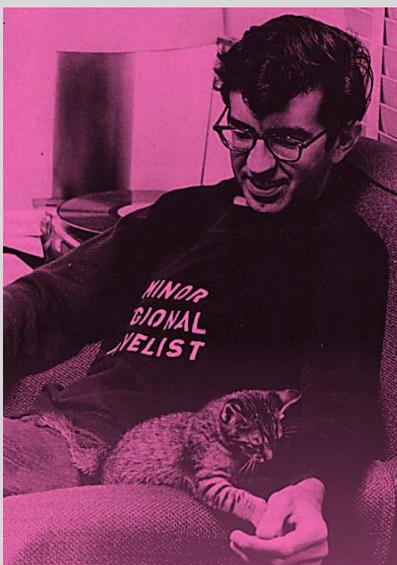
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## 5 New Hurley Shorts from Brian Beatty

### Jukeboxes

Used to be you could tell a lot about the class of a bar's clientele by what music you found on the jukebox there. That's why Hurley hated the new-fangled digital music machines in places now. They all had the same damn songs — reason enough for him to keep sober in public among strangers.

### Rumors

Riding that secondhand Schwinn into town after he finished topping off the air in its tires turned out to be a bad idea. Like that his neighbors all believed Hurley had lost his driver's license due to DUIs or something worse. Rumors got around faster than Hurley did on that bike, but he understood. He'd put on quite a ridiculous show for everybody: a gray, heavysset junk man wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt and bib overalls stomping those pedals until he hit a hill of any incline. Then he had to push the bike along until he'd caught his breath again.

### Weather, Man

The sky over the flea market grounds looked the sickening purple of a bruise all morning. When the clouds finally opened and the winds started howling, Hurley jumped inside his truck to watch the storm do its best to destroy every standing structure. His pop-up tent shuddered one direction then another as sheets of rain battered it. Dumbfounded customers stood wide-eyed in the downpour like thrift store mannequins suddenly sinking ankle-deep in mud. Silver flashes of lightning splintered the clouds all the way down to the far horizon. Hurley considered praying, but that thought passed even quicker than the weather.

### Paint by Numbers

Pastoral mountain landscapes. Naughty kittens tangled in yarn. Beloved dead presidents.

Hurley hauled the same stacks of paint-by-numbers pictures from sale to sale because he had convinced himself it was just a matter of time before some customer somewhere would appreciate their charms.

Some were in frames quickly spray-painted gold. Others were pasted on plywood boards. None of them ever sold, but they would someday. Just give them time.

Hurley's personal favorite was a poorly rendered bear standing in a river hunting salmon. Those giant fish were more blue-green than the water out of which they appeared to be flying.

### Gnaw Bone

Hard drugs — meth and opiates, mostly — had done a real number on the nearby town of Gnaw Bone. Folks said nobody lived there now except dopehead hoodlum thugs and terrified widow women.

Hurley only drove out that way with new hound Monroe because the hippie flea marketer had made a deal with the little town's last church to buy an antique stained-glass window the congregation was selling to help fund a new, modernized building.

Addicts had removed the window in the middle of the night a week earlier, but left it behind when scared off by sheriff sirens.

"They saw drug money in it," the minister told Hurley. "We see an answer to our prayers. Some financial prayers, anyway. *Amen.*"

Hurley didn't know if he was supposed to say "Amen," too, so he just nodded solemnly. Then he stared down at his own sandaled feet customers always claimed reminded them of Jesus.

Behind the minister's shoulder, where the more enterprising drug addicts of Gnaw Bone had extricated the stained-glass window Hurley hoped to resell for a profit

soon, the church janitor or somebody had taped a blue tarp to keep out certain elements. *Wasn't it a little late for that now?*

Hurley had carefully wrapped the window — an idyllic Garden of Eden scene, prior to the snake's arrival — in ragged bath towels and was securing it in the back of his truck when two lean teenage boys with bad attitudes materialized out of an alley.

"Strangers don't usually stick around here after dark," the first skinny boy snickered. Inside the truck Monroe started barking in a way Hurley had never witnessed before, with all his teeth flashing.

The second skeletal boy chuckled. "Your old dog thinks you're in trouble or something. Think he wants to protect you, buddy?"

Hurley had only seen dogs acting the way Monroe was acting in Stephen King movies, but he didn't say so.

He took a long, deep breath. "Honestly, I've only had him a few days." Which was true. "I really can't say what he wants, but there's one way to find out. I could just open that door. Pretty quick we'd see what kind of protection he makes."

Suddenly those boys had someplace better to be.

## Redfish

### Shome Dasgupta

He was known as Skittles and every evening and sometimes on Saturday mornings, he'd stand on the corner of South Meyers Street—just outside the Circle K on Kaliste Saloom, one of Lafayette's busiest streets—smoking a cigarette while leaning against the broken tire pressure machine.

Odilon didn't know why they called him Skittles for the longest time but whenever he'd pop into the store to get his daily cup of coffee and a mini-pack of Oreos, the cashier would look out the window and laugh, saying "There goes that Skittles—at it again every day" as he shook his head.

Sometimes Odilon would see people walk up to him, and he'd take something out of his pocket and there was an exchange of some sort, but it never looked like any money was being handed over—a quick handshake or a hug, and then he would see them putting something in their pockets.

It could be storming—it could be 100 degrees or a windy 30 degrees and no matter what, he'd be there, leaning on that tire pressure machine—Odilon was amazed at how he could light a cigarette and keep it going on those rainy, windy days.

Odilon knew that Skittles was a gambler. He played the slots, or poker, or the tracks—he put money on games, the fights mainly, and though he usually always came out on top, no one would know it. Clothed in a white shirt and khakis, always—no matter the weather, and a red Ragin Cajuns hat, he kept his life simple. He went all over Louisiana to get the edge—to squeeze out as much as he could out of the gambling game.

Odilon himself kept his life simple, too, after being in and out of jail for misdemeanors, he was able to settle down as a barista for one of the local coffee shops—The Cafe, off St. Mary's, just a block down from his apartment. The owner, Blue, knew all about Odilon's lifestyle because he lived it himself, once, and that was how Odilon was able to get another chance of some kind of job security. The coffee shop was also a bar so he worked double shifts as much as possible, especially Friday and Saturday nights. The more he worked, the less of a chance that he would fall back into his previous ways. That was all to his life now—working

and staying home, watching TV or drawing or listening to music and hanging out with Ma. He happily had no friends, having cut off anyone from those days he would find himself in constant trouble. It felt strange to him—not worrying about committing any crimes or wondering about food or clothes, a life that had consumed him since he left his house at the age of 18.

His parents? His parents were kind and caring—relentless with their love for their son. Odilon knew this, too—but he was too stubborn, becoming caught up in a lifestyle influenced by the group of friends he had surrounded himself with, friends who also wanted their own freedom and responsibility but not knowing how to live this way without getting themselves in trouble. They all fed off each other, being bad because they were trying to prove something when they had nothing to prove—getting caught up with the idea that they didn't need to live like the upper middle class families they grew up with—rebellious antics because they thought they knew it all.

The conversations on the phone with his Ma, when he called from time to time, was what got to him the most.

"Come home, Baby O," Ma said. "Come get a hot dinner and sleep in your bed. We miss you."

"I know, Ma."

"Your dad misses you. He hasn't been the same since you left and hearing how you've been living."

"I know, Ma."

"Call him. We love you and want you to be happy."

"I know, Ma."

"Do you still have a key?"

"Yeah, Ma."

"We'll be going out of town this weekend—why don't you just come here and stay a couple of days while we're out, just for a couple of days. There's some redfish your dad caught the other day. I'll cook it up and spice it up and keep it in the fridge for you."

"I got to go, Ma."

"It'll be just how you like it."

"I got to go, Ma."

"Okay, Baby O."

"I'll call again."

It pained Odilon—every time he hung up the phone with Ma, feeling guilty, knowing that she and his dad were the only two people in the world who truly loved him. Knowing that he didn't treat them the way he knew how they should be treated.

"I'm such a brat," he would say every time.

When they went out of town that weekend, Odilon went by the house. He ate the fish and washed the few clothes he had and took cash from Ma's secret little canister which she kept tucked away under her bed behind empty shoeboxes. He thought about all of the times she would take money from it and give it to him when he was young.

"This is my own personal savings," she would say. "I save it for you."

He cried when he left the house, full of anger—at himself for the way he had led his life and how he treated his parents. He knew, though, how happy they would be knowing that he dropped by and ate the redfish.

Not long after that last phone call, shortly after the weekend his parents returned from their trip, Odilon's dad had passed away. Memories swarmed Odilon's head as he hid in the back during the funeral—particularly, ones when he and his dad would be fishing at the river. His dad, showing him how to set the pole and the rhythm of the sway, letting the reel go and hearing it whirl.

"Now you got to listen, son," Pa said.

"Listen to what? Odilon replied.

"Now you got to listen to the muddy banks—they'll sing about the fish."

Odilon shifted his head to see through the crowd before him, his mother's face, who would turn her head back from time to time—he knew she was looking for him.

"Daddy, where do the fish swim to—where are they going?"

"They're going to the end of the world, son."

He remembered his soft voice—his gentle skin and how he always walked like he was never going anywhere, like he was surprised whenever he reached wherever he was going. It was the small delights in life his dad treasured that Odilon remembered the most—how he was always amazed to see the sun in the morning and the moon at night.

“Hi Ma,” he whispered to himself as the service had ended.

That night, he couldn’t stop thinking about Ma, living alone after being with his dad for 54 years.

“I was there, Ma,” Odilon said. “I’m sorry, Ma.”

“I know, Baby O,” Ma said. “I know you were there.”

“You saw me?”

“I saw you, Baby O.”

“Are you going to be okay, Ma?”

“Do you have food to eat tonight?” she asked.

Odilon twirled the cord—he was at Mel’s Diner, using their phone. The restaurant was becoming crowded—the bar crowd was just coming in after a night’s drinking until closing time.

“It’s getting loud here, Ma,” he said. “I’ll call soon.”

After hanging up the phone, he met his group of friends outside and they walked toward the pawn shop. This was Odilon’s last stint before he changed his life. It all took place after being arrested for breaking into the store.

It was during his first night in jail—he had to spend the weekend there, when he started to think about Ma and how she was all by herself and how scared and lonely she must have been. He realized, as he looked at his orange clothing and the scratch mark on his elbow he got while climbing over the railing of the bunk bed, not wanting to awaken the man who was sleeping below him, that he didn’t want this life anymore even though it meant leaving all that he knew for the past five years. He wanted to know his Ma again. He wanted clean clothes and a steady job and a warm place to stay. He wanted to be a part of the world he once knew years ago.

He called Ma from jail, telling her that he would be home soon.

“Okay Baby O,” she said. “Just let me know when, and I’ll have some pecan pie for you.”

“I’ll be home, Ma,” he said. “And we’ll be okay.”

He didn’t tell her that he was in jail, but he gathered that she knew just from having to accept the phone call from the correctional center automated system.

The weekend was long for Odilon, more so than his previous times, knowing that he was going to change his life for the better—knowing that he was going home. Finally the day arrived—he made bail with the help of a friend, one whom he had known since childhood. He hadn’t talked to him in years, since high school, but he never forgot his phone number, one that he had called a million times during their friendship.

He waited outside of the correctional center and saw that his friend was still driving the same car.

“I can’t believe you still drive this,” Odilon said as he opened the door.

“It’s been a while,” Cairo said.

“My fault. Thank you so much for this. You look good.”

“You, too.”

It didn’t take them long to get back on track with their friendship—like they had been talking to each other for the past five years, laughing and catching up on the past.

“You going to be okay?” Cairo asked as he pulled into Ma’s driveway.

“I might need your help, but yeah, we’re going to be okay.”

“Sorry again about your dad.”

They hugged and Odilon tapped on the trunk of the car before Cairo pulled out and drove off.

The transition from street-life back to home-life had little setbacks, mainly dealing with restlessness and missing the adrenaline rush of his previous day to day living but whenever he thought about those days, all he had to do

was look at Ma and talk to her for a bit as every time he did so, it reminded him of how much he loved her—how she was the only person in the world who loved him more than anyone else.

He had his withdrawals—drugs and alcohol, but he attended meetings, and sometimes Ma would go with him in support.

“Hi, my name is Odilon and I’m an addict.”

Ma’s voice was the one that was always the loudest—the one he heard above everyone else.

“Hi Baby O.”

One night at the house, as he and Ma were going through some of his dad’s belongings, Ma broke down.

“I’m so glad you’re home, Baby O,” she said, in tears.

“I know, Ma. I’m here now. We’re good, Ma.”

“I don’t think I would’ve been able to make it all by myself, dear.”

“I don’t think I could’ve either, Ma.”

They spent the rest of that night looking at old photos and boxing up his dad’s clothes to donate to the local shelter. After they had finished, they sat in the back patio—the Lafayette humidity had stretched out, sticking to their skin, and the condensation from the glasses of their lemonades formed tiny puddles on the table they shared. Odilon wiped it off with one hand while he had a cigarette in the other, making sure to puff away from Ma though the smoke didn’t drift too far as it seemed trapped in the thickness of the air.

“Those mosquitoes now, Baby O,” Ma said. “They’re getting bigger and bigger, just like the moon out there, plump and quiet.”

“I know, Ma. They’re biting tonight.”

“Where you going to go, Baby O?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Ma—I’m right here. I’m right here with you.”

“But where you going, Baby O?”

Odilon put out his cigarette and exhaled.

“You know I’m not going to be around much longer, Baby O,” Ma said.

“Don’t say that, Ma.”

“I say that because I want to make sure you’re going to be okay. That you’ll be able to live on your own and take care of yourself.”

“I won’t have it any other way—I’ll make it, Ma. I start my new job next week, too.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” she said with excitement.

“Remember The Cafe? Remember Blue? Remember how you didn’t like me going there when I should’ve been doing my homework and all during school?”

“I can’t believe, Baby O.”

“Strange how that works out—getting a second chance at The Cafe. Blue is a real good guy. He’s looking out for me.”

“That’s really good, Baby O.”

Ma rocked back in her chair, looking at the stars.

“What are you going to do after, Baby O? When I’m gone in the stars?”

“Oh Ma,” Odilon said. “Let’s not talk about that. Right now we have an infinity together just like that night sky.”

“We do, don’t we, Baby O.”

They sat on the back patio for another hour or so before turning in—they traded stories about Odilon’s dad, laughing and crying while the mosquitoes buzzed around, disguised in the twinkle of the stars.

Odilon had set himself a solid routine once he started his shifts at The Cafe. He mainly got the nights, especially on the weekends because most of the other employees wanted to enjoy their free time then. Blue had expanded The Cafe, which was just once a little coffee shop where teenagers hung out after school and smoked cigarettes and listened to the antique jukebox which could only play a few songs like Janis Joplin’s “Piece Of My Heart.” That was why Ma didn’t want Odilon to go there in his youth, thinking that he would just smoke his life away there and do nothing other than doing everything he wasn’t supposed to be doing. But the coffee shop wasn’t quite

working after a while—business-wise and Blue had to expand it into a bar as well and he also started to serve food, like the usual kind of bar food. The Cafe was divided into two—one side being a cafe and the other room was a bar with a pool table and one large TV mounted on the wall. Once that side of the business opened, Blue was doing well again with sales.

“I got to ask,” Blue said.

They were at The Cafe—Odilon was training before his first shift.

“Are you going to be alright with all of the booze?”

“It’s funny—on the cafe side, a lot of my friends from AA are there. I’m sure you know them by now—they’ve been coming for years. I should be okay—it’s time now.”

It didn’t take too long for Odilon to catch on—figuring out how to make espresso drinks while also mixing cocktails and preparing sandwiches and washing dishes. He loved it, and for the first time in his life, he was proud of himself. During breaks, he’d sit down with his AA friends, laughing, drinking coffee, and they would go outside to smoke their cigarettes, much like Odilon had done when he went to The Cafe at a younger age.

One night—after a good shift, Odilon was working the bar when Skittles sat down at the counter and ordered his drink.

“Say,” Odilon said, as he was mixing shots. “Aren’t you the one who hangs out down by the Circle K off Kaliste Saloom?”

Skittles shook his head and fixed his baseball cap.

“Sure is,” he said.

“I see you there every day.”

“That’s me.”

Skittles looked up at the TV screen—the Pelicans were playing the Bucks.

“I like to get my Oreos from there—I go there every morning, too.”

“They have some good Oreos there now,” Skittles said. “And that’s a good group of people who work there.”

“The best.”

“Oh yeah—Rousseau and them. That’s a good crew. They’re always looking out for me.”

Odilon put the drink down in front of him.

“They make me laugh—they’re always arguing about something.”

“Something and something,” Skittles said. “Always something.”

He laughed and took a sip.

“I was just wondering,” Odilon said. “What do you do out there, next to the tire pump and all?”

“Oh nothing,” Skittles said. “That’s all—just nothing.”

Odilon knew that meant that he didn’t want to talk about it so he nodded his head and smiled and watched the game. Not too much later, a man came and sat down next to Skittles, and Odilon could tell that they were good friends—talking about the game and joking around, pushing each other and cursing playfully.

“Well that’s my shift,” Odilon said. “I’ll see you.”

“You take good care now,” Skittles said. “Enjoy them Oreos.”

Odilon, though it was the first time he talked to Skittles, found himself looking up to him—admiring his demeanor and how it looked like he had life down just right.

“If I don’t see you at the K, come back here again, and the next drink is on me.”

“Deal,” Skittles said.

Odilon was smiling as he drove back home, looking forward to telling Ma about meeting Skittles—he had told her about him and how he was always standing outside Circle K. He was feeling happy, and it wasn’t like he wasn’t happy after he had changed his life, but it was like a different feeling, one that arose from being social and enjoying the company of someone else, especially Skittles—a man he was curious about since he had started his routine of going to the Circle K in the mornings.

“Ma,” he said, rushing into the door. “Guess what, Ma.”

“What’s going on, Baby O. Are you okay, Baby O?”

“I met the man outside of Circle K—the legend himself, I met him.”

He put his arms around Ma and hugged her—she hadn’t seen her son so excited in a long time, since he was just a child walking into the arcade at the Acadiana Mall.

Ma started to cry.

“Why the tears, Ma? What’s wrong, Ma?”

“I just haven’t seen you so happy like this in a long time. It brings back some good memories, Baby O.”

“I know, Ma.”

He led her to the living room and they sat down on the couch and Odilon told her all about his night and talking with Skittles at The Cafe. Ma was so happy for him, she barely understood what he was saying, but she would laugh and smile every time her son had done so.

But that was the last time Odilon saw Skittles at The Cafe. Last week, on a Saturday morning as Odilon pulled into the Circle K as usual—it was a sunny day, really pretty—Skittles was there as usual, and he was talking to a man in a red jacket. At first, Odilon was excited to see Skittles and he was wondering if he should go say hi to him after he finished talking to the man in the red jacket, but he soon realized, as he pulled into a parking spot, that the man held a knife and he was shouting at Skittles. Before Odilon could figure out what to do, the man stabbed Skittles and took something out of his pocket before taking off down the street.

The Circle K cashier ran out the store shouting Skittles’ name and Odilon joined him. There was blood on the air pressure machine and Skittles was breathing hard—he took Odilon’s hand and pulled him in, saying “Save them. You got to save them.” The cashier was on the phone calling for an ambulance and all Odilon could do was tell Skittles that everything was going to be okay.

“Do you remember me, Skittles? Do you remember me? We talked at The Cafe one night—the Pelicans were playing the Bucks. Do you remember that night, Skittles?”

Skittles was breathing hard—he managed a smile.

“I remember,” he said. “You are a nice young man.”

His hand was covering his stab wound, and Odilon pressed his hand on top of his, hoping to stop the bleeding or at least to slow it down.

“Everything is going to be okay, Skittles. In a good enough time, you’ll be right back out here and I’ll fix you a nice drink at The Cafe. It’ll be on me, Skittles—just hang on in there.”

“You got to save them,” Skittles said.

“Hang in there—everything is going to be okay.”

It wasn’t. He died. The puncture wound was too deep. Odilon watched the news during his shift at work that night. He had been trying his best to stay focused, but the morning had completely consumed him, and when he saw the report, he couldn’t hide his tears. He kept thinking about what Skittles had said and mouthed his words over and over again.

“You got to save them.”

The blood was still there on the tire pressure machine when Odilon was finally able to go back to the store—he got his cup of coffee and mini-pack of Oreos and there were three men at the register talking with the cashier, Rousseau, the one who would shake his head and say, “There goes that Skittles—at it again every day” and laugh.

One of the guys said, “Another bet gone bad.”

This made the cashier mad and he shook his head.

“Mind your own—you have no clue.”

“That was all it was—nothing else.”

“Mind your own.”

Odilon looked outside, and it was another pretty day, sunny—just like the day when Skittles died. The three guys left and Rousseau looked at him, shaking his head again.

“They don’t know. They just don’t know.”

“What was it about?”

Rousseau leaned down behind the counter and took out a handful of items such as Snickers, SweeTarts, Tylenol, Zapp's Potato Chips, and chocolate chip cookies.

"That's all it was," Rousseau said.

He laughed and scratched his chin.

"The goods—just to keep the people going. All he wanted to do was give a bit of light to these people and for the kids. It was just for them to get by, that's all."

"Skittles," Odilon said.

"Skittles"

"Did they ever figure out about the guy with the knife? Was it about gambling like those guys just said?"

He fiddled around with his pack of Oreos. Rousseau shook his head.

"Nothing like that," Rousseau said. "He's a betting man—that's right—but it wasn't anything like that. He gave all that gambling cash to the people."

"Skittles," Odilon said.

"The man—that man who stabbed and killed Skittles there—that man was no good. He'd come in here asking for money for this and that and free things and all. I'm sure he was asking Skittles the same, and he wouldn't give it to him. He wouldn't give it to him because he knew that wasn't his calling. His calling was to help the people—not to give in to their own self-harm."

Odilon thought about all the times he'd approach strangers and ask for money or cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs.

"See," Rousseau said. "Skittles was the priest of the streets. He was showing love to the people who needed love, even if it was a little bit."

He slammed the counter with the palm of his hand.

"And Skittles wanted to help that man—that man with the knife. He told him he'd help him, but that man didn't want any help. And that's all Skittles could do—staying true to his words. The priest of the streets."

Odilon pushed his Oreos and coffee toward Rousseau while he rang it up.

Rousseau continued to shake his head.

"Those people—they're going to miss him. I'm going to miss him. Always making us laugh. Always making us see the light, even if it was just for a little bit."

Odilon thought about his last words to him, about saving them—about how he had to save them, and he mouthed his words over and over again. He thought about Ma and his dad and all the people he had hurt. He thought about all of the second chances he was given in life.

"I'll see you next time," Odilon said.

"Alright—you keep doing your thing. Skittles asked about you from time to time, you know."

Odilon stopped walking and turned around.

"What do you mean?"

He switched his coffee from one hand to the other.

"He knew your story—he did. He knew everyone's story around here. That's why he visited you. He saw something in you."

Odilon looked down, trying to understand what Rousseau was saying.

How did he know me, he asked himself.

"He saw you on the street a few times back then," Rousseau said. "He was telling me how you asked him for money or something like that and how you looked real bad off."

"What did he do?" Odilon asked, trying to remember.

"He helped you out."

"Why? He knew I was up to no good, right?"

"He saw the light in your eyes—he did," Rousseau said. "He was so happy that he saw you coming here and getting your cookies and coffee. He was happy that he was right—that your light came through."

"Damn," Odilon said.

He realized that Skittles came to The Cafe just to check up on him.

“Skittles,” Rousseau said.

He laughed and shook his head.

“There goes that Skittles.”

Still stunned, Odilon managed a smile and said bye.

Odilon didn't get into his car though—he put his Oreos and coffee on top of the air pressure machine and lit a cigarette. I have some time, he thought and leaned against the machine. And he waited there—he waited to see if anyone would come, and if they did, he'd give them his Oreos. He waited, thinking about the redfish Ma had cooked for him, and so they arrived and they arrived with vague smiles on their faces.

## Plainsong

Carol Willis

This is how my last bender ended. I'd been staying at the Motel 6 with a boyfriend for three days. The guy was more of an acquaintance than boyfriend and I'd had only given him my first name before we hooked up, driving out to the motel with a grocery sack full of beer and cheap wine rattling in the bed of his truck. After we checked in, we had sex a couple of times, both of us pretending we enjoyed it more than we did. Mostly, we wound up laying around on the bed, alternating drinking, sleeping, and watching television. We must have ordered pizza judging by the oily empty box with pieces of leftover crust, but honestly, I was too blitzed to remember.

On the third day, I woke feeling like someone was taking a cattle prod to the inside of my head. I puked a couple of times and drank tap water from the bathroom sink like I was in the desert dying of thirst. By the time I emerged, the guy was gone. I peeked out the vomit-colored curtain, just in time to see him getting into his truck. I dressed in a hurry, braless under my hoodie, with the wind whipping through the holes in my jeans, and ran barefoot through the parking lot just as he pulled out onto the highway.

“Hey! Where's my money?” I yelled as I ran up alongside, but he gunned the engine, spraying gravel in my face. When I tried slapping the side of his truck, I whiffed and stumbled forward. I could see in the rearview mirror he was laughing his ass off. I flipped him the bird as he drove away. A couple with two young kids gave me a dirty look as they walked to their car.

The truck had already disappeared around a curve, so I turned around and went back to the motel room. Three days ago, I had two twenty-dollar bills folded up and stuffed in my back pocket but they weren't there now.

Hungover and stranded with no money, eight miles from town in a shitty little motel with no car and no one to call for a ride, I sat on the edge of the bed, cried my eyeballs out, and felt sorry for myself. I vowed to never have another drink.

I put my shoes on and hitchhiked my way to town, praying the whole time I hadn't been picked up by a serial killer. By the time I got back and walked to my apartment, I was already wanting a drink.

I never went on a bender like that again, but I didn't stop drinking until after I met Boyd.

It was Christmastime. Lonely and hard up like most everyone I knew at the time, I started off having a beer at the bar. I walked over to the jukebox next to Delores who was sitting at her usual table clinging to her Amoretto Sour as if it was going to get up and walk away. Just as I was rummaging my pockets for quarters, some guy bought me another longneck.

And that's how it always started. I'd go to the bar to relax and shed the stress of my day and some guy would always buy me a drink and then before I know it, it's three, four or more. I get drunk, get laid, wake up feeling like shit, arrive late to work, and vow to never have another drink. Put that song on repeat and you pretty much have my life up to that point.

But that night, after the first drink (second if you count the beer I bought for myself), and after I was getting that warm buzzy feeling I always get that makes me want to have another to keep it going, the guy I had gone to the Motel 6 with walked in with Lacey, a unit clerk over at the community hospital. Big tits. Blond hair and perfect teeth. A real hundred-dollar bill. Motel 6 looked in my direction but didn't recognize me. He looked right through me or past me like I was part of the furniture. And that's what did it. It flipped some switch inside my head. I snapped. I pushed off the jukebox, abandoning Johnny Cash and my quarters, and picked up an empty chair next to Delores and smashed it over Motel 6's head.

I must have hit him pretty good because he went down on one knee and put his arms over his head. Lacey's gold spangled earrings dangled from her ears like Christmas decorations, reflecting the green and red lights strung behind the bar. They swung back and forth as she put her hands over those perfect teeth and shook her shiny blond hair in mock outrage. Motel 6 guy looked up at me, his face full of indignation and confusion, "What the hell? Why—" He recognized me at that moment because he got a shit-eating grin on his face and started chuckling. "Oh. You still sore about the other weekend?"

I stepped in and started kicking him—I was still wearing my steel-toed shit-kickers from work—but the bartender and a man dressed like a lumberjack I'd seen hugging a pint earlier were already grabbing me under the arms.

They had to yank me off Motel 6 like a band-aid because I had gone in pretty committed. The next thing I know, I'm flying out the front door, landing on my ass. A few looky-loos hollered and clapped from inside the bar, but I couldn't tell if they were with me or against me.

I was still sitting on my boney backside, dazed and slightly buzzed, when it started snowing. Lights from a police cruiser lit up the parking lot, dazzling the new-fallen snow in reds and blues. At first, I thought Dirty Sally's had turned on their outside Christmas lights. They hauled me off to the Kimball County facility, the first and only time I ever went to jail. County jail was where I got a concussion for the first time. It's also where I met Boyd.

He and I were released from county with two others the next morning. My head was still swimming from being knocked out the night before when a big ugly girl named Wes shoved me into the wall of the holding cell. I don't remember for what reason, but I might have kicked her in the shins. Then again that might have been someone else. When I complained, the night staff laughed and said, "Looks like you got yourself the weekend special," and handed me an icepack, telling Meredith to go easy on me.

"It's Wes, you motherfuckers!" Big Ugly yelled.

That morning there were four of us sitting in the release tank—me, Big Ugly, Boyd, and some other little jittery dipshit that kept picking at his pimples. Dipshit cried and babbled. It had been his first night, too. Big Ugly told him to shut the fuck up. Boyd was older than the rest of us. Dressed in a pair of faded Levi's, a tan Carhart jacket with a torn sleeve, and cowboy boots, he looked like any other tired and windswept farmer from Western Nebraska, not someone hauled off to county for drunk and disorderly conduct like the rest of us.

I held the icepack to my head and kept my eyes down. I didn't want to give Wes any reason to go off and wallop me again. I think Boyd sensed something between me and Big Ugly because he told me to wait up if I was buzzed out before he was. Boyd ignored Dipshit entirely.

As it happened, they did let me out first but I had no clear idea how to get home. The wind whipped up snow and it was swirling about making my eyes sting. My head and whole body ached from the cold and from the hard edges of the cell. My winter jacket was still at Dirty Sally's. Between my hangover and head injury, my mind was a little fuzzy and I was uncertain about waiting for Boyd. He

seemed nice enough and Lord knew I could use some nice right about now. It was Sunday morning. I had no ride and no one to call.

Not long after, Boyd came out and asked if I needed a ride. An old friend had agreed to pick him up and he'd ask her to give me a ride, too. Dinah from the coffee shop pulled up right about then and rolled down the window. She and Boyd argued for a minute but she eventually agreed to drop me off at the community hospital. But that was as far as she would take me, saying she wasn't in the habit of picking up strays. Boyd and I didn't talk much on the drive back to town. Dinah didn't talk at all. She ignored me completely and didn't even look at me when she dropped me off at the emergency entrance.

The hospital said I had a concussion and kept me overnight for observation. I thought I'd seen the last of Boyd, but he showed up the next day with my jacket and said he'd give me a ride to pick up my truck. When he pulled into Dirty Sally's, I was already thinking how much I needed a drink. But it was Monday and the bar was closed. I was in no shape to go to work, so I thanked Boyd for the ride wondering what the heck I was going to do with the rest of my day. Boyd must have read my mind because he suggested we go for coffee, he was buying, no strings attached.

Boyd was kind and asked about my head injury. Other than that, neither one of us talked much; we mostly just sat and peered into our coffee cups. But he didn't seem to mind the silence and I was grateful for not getting the third degree. He invited me out for Christmas day dinner later that week. He said I wouldn't have to worry about any funny business, claiming I was too young, and he was way too old for that kind of thing, anyway. We ate store-bought meatloaf on paper plates and cookies out of the box. He didn't ask me any personal questions and I hadn't asked him any either.

Boyd told me he had a drinking problem but had been sober for going on ten years. He seemed to always know just what I was thinking—which was mostly about when and where I was going to get my next drink.

The last time I got drunk for good happened a few weeks later when I drove my truck into the bridge after another big night at Dirty Sally's. Ned, one of the officers that had driven me to the county jail just before Christmas, wrote me up. "You're going wind up in a body bag if you keep

at it," he said with disappointment in his eyes like I was his own personal failure.

Ned let me call Boyd who picked me up and drove me to the hospital. Boyd didn't lecture me but his eyes did.

The truth was I was already feeling the strain of my lifestyle. This last year had positively kicked my ass. I was twenty-eight years old and Ned and everyone else, except perhaps for Boyd, had started looking at me like I was some mangy dog.

I didn't get hauled off to jail, but I did lose my driver's license for a while. Boyd drove me back and forth to work at the feedlot out by the Interstate until I got a job in town stocking vegetables at the Co-op.

After that, I started going to coffee with Boyd instead of going to Dirty Sally's. He started showing up at the end of my shift asking if I was up for going to Dinah's for coffee and a grilled cheese. I knew it was his way of keeping me from going to the bar.

We were an odd couple, me and Boyd. He was older by a long ways and treated me like his daughter. Eventually, Boyd helped me get off the sauce for good and I got my driver's license back. He'd always let me call him anytime, day or night when I was feeling shaky, no questions asked. He'd let me talk and ramble on, but said very little about himself. I never did learn how he wound up in county before Christmas.

Boyd hadn't picked me up for coffee for a few days and he'd stopped answering his phone. No one down at Dinah's had seen him recently, either. So, I went out to his farmhouse to check on him. The place stood all by itself outside of town along the Old Highway about a mile past the Jesus billboard. If I ran into someone, I'd tell them I came out to get the extra propane tanks from the backyard. Encountering anyone way out here is unlikely, but I like to have an excuse ready. Old habits die hard.

Bandit, Boyd's one-eyed dog, greeted me as soon as I drove up into the front lawn if you can call it that. A patch of weeds and prairie grass. The dog was chewing on a stick. Boyd's truck was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, Bandit. How ya' doing, buddy?"

The dog dropped the stick at my feet and wagged his tail, looking up at me with his one blue eye. I picked it up and threw it in the side yard past my truck. Bandit loped off after it. A little half-heartedly, as if the dog was only trying to keep up appearances.

I didn't wait for the dog to retrieve the stick before I went to the front door, knocked once, and started working the handle. It was locked. I could have busted the door lock in about two seconds, but out of respect for Boyd, I didn't.

I went around to the back patio to check the screen door. It was slightly ajar, so I thought Boyd might be home and went inside. The room just through the door was dim and smelled like dog and dirty diapers. I was startled to see a woman standing opposite me in the kitchen. She was holding a baby like she didn't know what to do with it, eyeing me as I came in. Another woman, around the same age but with sunburned skin and narrow eyes, was leaning against the low kitchen counter smoking a cigarette and picking at scabs on her bare arms.

When they saw I didn't mean them any harm, the woman holding the baby walked over and plopped down on the couch with an oomph. She wasn't being too careful with the baby, and its head bounced against her shoulder when she leaned back against the cushion.

"Thought you was the police," she said. The baby stared wide-eyed and didn't cry out or make a peep.

The woman smoking the cigarette hadn't moved from the kitchen counter like it would topple over if she walked away. Smoke curled up over her head toward the ceiling. Boyd never smoked and had never have let anyone smoke in his house as I was aware of. He never mentioned a daughter, cousins, or any family for that matter. "Burned too many bridges," he told me once. I was running over in my mind who these women might be. I hadn't seen a car when I drove up.

"So, who are you? You related to Boyd or something?" I asked, which I figured I knew the answer but I was trying to buy some time.

The woman holding the baby spoke softly and didn't look at me. "We're just visiting."

The woman from the kitchen reached into the small Frigidaire grabbed a longneck and thrust it in my direction. "Here, want one?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks." It was ten o'clock in the morning and I was wondering what I had walked into. "So, you here to visit Boyd?" I ask just to clarify, trying to wrap my head around this odd little scene of domesticity. Boyd is a recovering alcoholic, just like me. It's not like him to have beer in the fridge.

"Who? The old man? Yeah, we're here visiting Boyd," the woman from the kitchen said, then forced a laugh like it's some big joke. She flicked the top of the beer off with her thumb, letting the metal cap fall to the floor. It skipped over the linoleum and landed next to the baseboard. She took a swig, never taking her eyes from mine.

I nodded. "Okay," I said slowly because I didn't know what else to say. That's when I glanced out the side window. Boyd's truck, I could see, which is a beat-up old blue and white Ford, had sideswiped the shed. "1990 F-150," Boyd had told me once as if that would have meant something to me. The shed's tarpaper roof had caved in on one side crushed the windshield and dented the hood.

"What happened there?" I asked pointing to the Ford and looking from one woman to the other. "How'd Boyd's truck wind up smashing into the shed?"

The woman from the kitchen shook her head. "Couldn't really say. Can you Belinda?" She looked over at the young woman holding the baby who now had its eyes closed.

Belinda shook her head once and gave a small shrug so as not to wake the baby. "No, can't say I know either, Tanya." Belinda is looking straight at the other woman when she says this, drawing the name out, emphasizing the last syllable. I get the feeling Belinda is mad at Tanya for revealing her name or perhaps for some other matter.

Tanya lights up another cigarette, having stubbed out the other one in the sink.

"Where's Boyd?" I ask, just see what they'll say. Things are getting out of hand and I'm pretty sure they don't know Boyd and never did.

"He's not here," Tanya says. I get the impression she is the ringleader between the two. Or maybe she's just taking the lead because Belinda is holding the baby.

"He's coming back, though. Real soon, I think," Belinda says looking at Tanya.

Something's up between those two. They're probably responsible for Boyd's wrecked truck. What I can't figure out is where Boyd is or why they're here. It's not like Boyd to have people staying at his house.

We're all quiet for a moment before it suddenly dawns on me that they're waiting on someone else to show up. Probably the baby-daddy. That's why there wasn't a car out front when I pulled up. For the second time, I have the notion that I've likely walked in on something. I have a bad feeling and want to leave.

"Well, I'm just here to pick up the propane tanks. I'll be on my way then," I say and start to back out of the screen door. I run into Bandit who comes in at that same instant. I stumble over the dog and wind up stepping on his front paw. He yelps and limps away from me and cowers under the small dining table.

The baby woke up then and started crying. Belinda said, "Shit." She got up stomped down the hallway and disappeared into the spare bedroom. I could hear the baby wailing from behind the closed door.

"You woke the baby," Tanya tuts and blows a ring of smoke in my direction. "Anyway," Tanya continues, watching to see what the dog will do, "propane is all used up."

I lose my patience with her and find myself angry. "Fine, I'll just leave then. But you shouldn't have used it all up before...before Boyd gets back," I fumble with the line because I somehow know Boyd's not coming back. But I am happy about the chance to get out of there. I just want to leave and drive away. I need to get back to town and talk to Dinah. None of this was adding up.

"By the way, who are you?" Tanya asks. "We've introduced ourselves, but you've never said who you were," she says evenly, eyeing me up and down like she's sizing me up. Tanya is younger than I am but her eyes tell a different story. She's not a big woman but she's got heft to her like someone used to a lot of manual labor. I've been in my fair share of scrapes—back in the days when I was drinking—but I don't stand a chance against her.

Tanya's been working the longneck pretty good and the bottle is almost empty. I can't tell if she is drunk but I don't like her tone. I turn around and exit out the back, closing the screen door softly behind me, and start walking away.

Except for the smashed-up shed and truck, there's nothing for a long way across the open prairie as far as one can see. The sky is a light powdery blue, the fields look like they're made of flaxen yarn. Nothing moves except for a bunch of crows circling above their own shadows, and beneath them, Boyd's old mule stands with his eyes closed.

The screen door creaked open and I hear the soft steps of Tanya's shoes on the patio behind me. That's when I start running but trip over the handle of a push broom. I wobble trying to regain my balance. There is a quick scuffling behind me and I get a sinking feeling, knowing I've blown my chance at a getaway. Something heavy cracks the back of my head and glass shatters as it rains down around me.

Everything happened so fast but in slow motion at the same time. The blue sky flew away from me and the gray concrete patio came up and hit me in the face. The last thing I remember thinking is, "I need to tell Boyd about this."

I don't know how long I was knocked out. When I woke, I was sick and dizzy, trying to remember where I was. The ground was hard beneath me and something sticky dripped in my ear. I'd only felt like that once before when Big Ugly slammed me up against the wall down at county.

"What did you go and do this time?" Belinda was talking to Tanya, whispering from behind the screen door.

"Shhh!" Tanya said.

"I don't think she hears you," Belinda said. "Is Jackson back yet?"

"No. But when he gets back, just tell him it was an accident, okay?" Tanya said. "Just like the old man."

They don't know that I've regained consciousness and I keep my eyes closed. Belinda said nothing for a long moment. Finally, she said, "Okay."

"You got to promise," Tanya said. "Don't go and get all maudlin like you did last time."

"Jesus, Tanya. Why didn't you just let her drive away? What are we going to do with her?"

Tanya's reply comes from further back inside the house and I don't hear what she says. I want to get up but I don't know if I can stand. I'm afraid they'd run after me before I had a chance to make it to my truck. I wonder if Tanya is

talking about Boyd. I don't think of him as an old man, but consider that most people might.

"She's dead." Tanya's voice swims up to me from a long way off.

Belinda started crying. "Are you sure? How can you tell? What are we going to do?"

"Throw her out in the field next to the old man."

"I'm not taking her anywhere," Belinda said, sniffing.

For a moment, I fall asleep or drift out of consciousness again. I have a dream in which I am trying to ride Boyd's mule but I can't get him to go anywhere. The fields keep expanding around me and the crows are circling overhead in endless loops.

"I'm glad she's dead," Tanya said. "She would have gone back into town and started telling everybody about us before Jackson got back. The police would come sniffing around for sure and we'd be stuck up shit creek without a paddle."

The screen door screeched open and I heard footsteps approach but was powerless to get up. The world wobbled and spun around worse than any hangover. My head throbbed and I felt like I was going to vomit. Tanya grabbed me under the arms and started to drag me off the patio toward the fields like she was taking out the trash. "You know, I wouldn't mind working as a hitman," Tanya said. Her head was directly over mine and breathing hard from the effort. I smelled the beer and cigarettes on her breath.

The ice age carved a path in this region several hundred thousand years ago. There have been alternating floods and droughts and scourges of locusts. Deaths and dramas played out over these plains for thousands of years. Boyd's wheat crop is dead again, and the failed cornstalks are laid out on the ground like fallen soldiers. Most of the farmers around here don't even plant anymore. Most of the planting is left to the big operations with more money than God.

Boyd died out here, abandoned and alone, like his dreams. I feel something now, a deep-down feeling, something other than my legs bouncing along the uneven ground and Tanya's hands digging into my armpits. The clouds scatter

overhead like broken promises and I think about Jesus. Is that what he felt like being dragged to his death? Arms flung out to the side, betrayed and discarded?

Tanya and Jackson, Belinda's baby-daddy, tortured Boyd before they threw his body out in the field. The crows likely had seen, swirling above in the empty blue sky. Tanya told me all about it, turned her mouth on like a radio. Guilt does that to a person. She and her boyfriend beat a man almost to death with a crowbar right on the street in Tucson, Arizona. Her boyfriend is in the state prison in New Mexico but convicted of something else entirely. Someday, I think she'll have to answer for all of this, but in the meantime, she seems intent on piling up the bodies.

They found me in the field, certain I was about to die, about fifty feet from the propane tanks after someone spotted my truck when they came looking for Boyd. Boyd's body was further away in the cornfield. The mule standing not far off, crows circling and squawking overhead. Vultures had already pecked his eyes out.

The police questioned me pretty good about Boyd's death. There was no sign of two women or a baby or a man named Jackson but they found fragments of the broken beer bottle on the patio, a dirty diaper under the bed in the spare room, and even a bottle cap in the kitchen next to the baseboard, just like I said. In the end, because I had been hit on the back of the head, they let me go.

A few weeks later, I stopped in at Dinah's to get a coffee-to-go when I overheard Verna Dyer at the counter tell a friend, "I always knew that old drunk would wind up dead someday." Her voice was low and gravelly like it was scraping the bottom of a barrel and her face was worn and cracked like that of any good farmer's wife. Her friend snorted and they both cackled softly, shaking their heads. I figured Verna and her friend must have been a couple of those bridges Boyd had burned a long time ago. He had been sober going on ten years when he died, but I know the deal. Once a drunk, always a drunk. It follows you around like a bad smell. I didn't wait for my coffee but turned around and walked out and just kept on walking.

It is hard to believe how the world can continue as if nothing has happened. At the Co-op, everyone congregates in the employee lounge and huddles around the coffee pot because that's where the time clock is. I stay away; I don't want to mingle with the other employees. I'm still learning to live sober and stay out of trouble. Everybody thinks I got my head injury in some drunken brawl. I am still suffering from imbalance and confusion. Sometimes I hear Tanya's voice muttering in my head; the world around me is frayed at the edges and sometimes I have to stop and hold on to one of the bins in the produce aisle.

I've been back to the farmhouse only once since that day. I found Bandit wandering around the back forty. He was hungry and dehydrated, but not too much worse for the wear. He lives with me now. The dog helps lift my spirits, even if this is an unhappy time for me. I find myself waking up in the middle of the night reaching for the phone to call and tell Boyd what happened. Ned told me a Colorado police officer spotted a man driving a beater truck with two women and a baby at a gas station in Fort Morgan. I think Boyd would be relieved to know I'm taking care of Bandit.

The prairie. Western Nebraska is just miles and miles of empty fields with nothing but scrub oak. When the wind blows, the golden waves of grass ripple and splash just like the ocean. I sit in the cab of my truck for a while and feel the wind buffet all around. The horizon vanishes into an endless blue and white sky and I can't tear my gaze away. Blue and white of Bandit's one eye and Boyd's Ford truck.

Sometimes, just for a second, I get that deep-down feeling again that sends a shudder right through me. Sometimes the feeling makes me want to go on living, sometimes it just makes me want to crash my truck into the bridge again.

## in the A.M.

### Allison Barnett

I was driving from Aberdeen all the way to Red Banks, one middle of nowhere to the next. My boyfriend said it made no sense that we both lived in such similar towns and yet couldn't live together; one of us should move to the other, it would basically be the same town anyways. But I didn't want to give up my home as I knew it, nor did he. So we made the drives, me more often than him, until we could find a town in the middle of nowhere that meant nothing to both of us.

I always went late at night, much to everyone I know's chagrin. I was told to stop, because I guess they all feared I'd wind up on the news—crash, kidnapping, strange paranormal activities. But I liked it enough, much as you can like a drive that looks the same for a hundred miles. One hundred and four tonight, as I had to take a construction detour this time. Still, it was quick and quiet, me alone with my thoughts speeding through the countryside. And if I couldn't stand my thoughts, I turned to the radio.

Dwight Yoakam crooned at me softly as I pressed the AM button. The old country was fine in the daytime but I loved to peruse the independent radio stations. Seemed all the people too shy to come out in the day had their spotlight. Even the bozo on the bus can have a very interesting look on life when given a mic and is able to project for an audience unseen.

For some reason though, tonight I couldn't tune in. That's the thing, most of the jockeys owe no one anything so they don't have to have a show. Some are actual shows, syndicated or whatnot, and those are pretty reliable. But I guess I couldn't find them. I was especially anxious now, as this detour seemed much longer than it said it was. That was always the one downside; it is much easier to do construction in the middle of the night on a highway. I trusted the men in the orange vests but my phone didn't and kept trying to reroute me. Until of course I lost service, and I began to panic just a bit. The trees were all the same, towering and dark, feeling more and more like walls enclosing me and the road. The one that was beginning to look more and more like it was the road less traveled, with its chipping road paint and host of potholes.

That is until I saw a billboard tucked into a small clearing, illuminated by a single flickering light, bold black letters

fading onto wood painted white, all of it beginning to peel off:

## YOUR TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

AM 1620

And what did I have to lose? I needed to calm down anyways. I turned the dial to hear static, then it slipped into the audio. A crackle came over as the disembodied voice boomed at me and said "Good evening folks. Suppose good morning, as it's just now midnight. It seems you've tuned in, whether on purpose or not. We're here to speak on the truth, the light. Perhaps you're seeking salvation. Perhaps this is your divine intervention. Like when Jesus appeared to Saul and Saul became Paul. Became a new man."

Ah, great. A preacher. Sure encountered enough of those in my time hunting the radio. Sometimes they have an inspirational message, sometimes something that seems...spiteful.

"Well folks, our subject matter today is love. We all love love huh? Love to *be* loved eh? But sometimes we don't *love* loving one another do we? That's the problem today, everyone wants to be loved without having to love."

Sure, but I wouldn't be making the drive if I didn't love my boyfriend, right?

"We do find ourselves to love many things though. We love our new clothes and our neighbor's new house. We love drinking on the weekend and complaining on the weekday. We love the things that we shouldn't. Things that are ephemeral in the worst ways. Adrenaline rushes that never really satisfy us. All the hedonists and the hippies, huh?"

Hedonists and hippies. Sure. Jesus was probably the biggest hippie anyways. I reached for the dial, sick of whatever this could be.

"Just like that little boyfriend of yours, huh?"

I perked up, my hand hovering over the dial until I slowly eased it back to the steering wheel. The one I was gripping a little harder now. As I continued on the road, a billboard popped up again, the same style as the former. Chipped and weathered lettering barely lit up.

## YOUR LIES WILL CONSUME YOU

AM 1620

"Yes, yessuh, we love ourselves some bad things that mean good times. Looking over at that glimmering wedding band, saying it doesn't mean anything anyways. Your spouse isn't your best friend anymore, and you got a lot of new best friends to make."

I glanced over to the cupholder, a gold band and a diamond ring bouncing gently with the dips in the road. Another billboard came into view, the same peeling paint.

## THEY ALL KNOW THE TRUTH

AM 1620

"How sad that you don't love him anymore. Tragic, even. But does that give you the right to sneak off, right under his nose? And I'll tell you what, I think he knows his suspicions are right. You think he isn't nervously twiddling that ring around his finger, telling himself not to reach for the phone? Oh you can say you're driving to clear your mind. Get that creative spark for work. But an odometer don't lie, nor does needing gas every couple days. You can go late when you think blinds are closed, but nobody ever shuts them completely in a small town.

"You see, everyone does bad things. But some of us make quiet theater about our bad things. Loud tiptoeing and unhushed whispers, yessuh. Like bragging about how many secrets you can keep, it just contradicts the whole point. The ruse is done and the jig is up or all those other sayings, and it's time to just wear your scarlet letter around town. What do you think, Lily?"

I gasped. The voice began to cut out as static replaced his rapidly crackling voice, tears welling in my eyes and my throat felt like it was closing from the shock. I rolled down my windows, gasping for air.

"Who are you? How do you know me?" I shouted into the dark abyss of the backwoods. The static faded out as his voice came through again.

"Oh Lily. You don't love that little boyfriend of yours. You just love that someone actually maybe loves you. If you could call it that. And you'll tire of him soon enough too. Yes, yes, I know it's hard. Playing two characters at once. By day, sweet hometown wife to some boring man you don't remember loving. He may not be good for you,

but you aren't good for him either. And every couple of nights getting to be Cinderella, where you dress up and pretend you're some prince's princess. But only for the night. That isn't love, you know that. This routine of yours is getting old to everyone, especially your husband. You'll never be free will you?"

He paused. I realized I had been holding my breath, and as I forced myself to let it out, it came out as a whimper.

"But you could be. Couldn't you?" He said, a gentleness now present in his tone.

His voice morphed into static once again, a low screeching echoing through the car.

I looked up at an approaching billboard, the single light a little brighter than that which illuminated the three previous ones. There was a faded young blonde woman on it holding a notepad and a company logo next to it, her smile and hair almost the same color due to weathering.

IT'S TRUE! STARTING HOURLY RATES

ARE \$16-20

Huh. I looked down at the clock. 11:59PM. *Huh.*

Sighing, maybe from exhaustion, that post-adrenaline numbness, I kept driving down the road, my eyes settling into a distant stare. Not looking at the road or the trees or anything I should be keeping my eye on, but just...just to calm down. I loosened my grip on the wheel and unclenched my jaw.

I noticed though that the road slowly began to look fresher, with brighter white paint and visibly newer asphalt. It curved around until I came to a stop sign that put me back on the highway.

Right for Red Banks, left for Aberdeen.

## Angel

### Travis Grant

I still hadn't worked out how to tell Angel we weren't gonna see each other anymore. She was only fifteen, so I was taking her to an old drive-in burger joint that's been around since before I was a kid. She was sitting across from me in my pick-up, looking out over the river valley, as we headed into town. I cracked my window and lit a cigarette. Angel watched me drag on it, and the smell of burning tobacco filled the cab.

"Can I have one of those?" she asked.

"You're smoking now?"

Angel shrugged her shoulders. I grabbed the pack of Player's Navy Cut from the dash and tossed it on the bench seat between us. She cracked her window and lit one, inhaling the smoke like she'd been doing it for years.

Angel is my daughter in every way except one. Her mom, Jolene, was eighteen when she got pregnant. The guy who did it wouldn't take responsibility for shit, so Jolene was on her own. I met her a few years later, in Athabasca, when Angel was three. Truth is, I'm the only father Angel's ever known. I offered to adopt her, make it official, but Jolene wouldn't do it. She'd seen enough of men trapping women, and she didn't want that for her and Angel. Picking up and leaving was easier without getting a court involved.

Seagulls were picking at a greasy bag when we pulled into the parking lot. The cashier took our order and hollered at the fry cook, who was sweating over the grill. The place smelled like day-old onion rings. Angel and I got our food and sat at a picnic table outside. She was quiet, looking down at her fries. Kids aren't stupid.

"How are things going at home?" I asked.

"Fine," Angel said.

"When did you start smoking, anyway?"

"Where've you been?"

I sighed and put down my burger. She was looking right at me, sipping her shake.

"I'm sorry I haven't talked to you about what's been going on."

"Well?" Angel said. "I haven't seen you in over a week, and mom's out every night."

"Your mom's out every night?"

"Pretty much."

"Who's she with?"

Angel shrugged, "I don't know. She doesn't tell me."

"Who's looking after you?"

"I'm old enough to look after myself," Angel said. "You never answered my question."

I was anxious about telling her, but I decided thinking about it was worse than doing it, so I just blurted it out:

"Angel, your mom and I, we're not gonna be together anymore, alright?" I watched each little movement in her face as she received it.

"Is that what you want?" she asked.

"It's not what I want."

"Is it your fault?"

"Yes."

"Can't you fix it?"

"I don't think I can, not this time."

Me and Jolene hadn't done it in well over a year. I don't know what came first: me not making an effort or her losing interest completely. Whatever the case, Jolene started hanging out with people I didn't know and she was out a lot. I was working long days at the United Farmers Association, operating equipment in the yard. Sometimes when I couldn't stop thinking about how bad things were between me and Jolene, I knocked off early and hit Trapper's until last call.

One night I was down there, a couple pitchers deep, and I convinced myself Jolene was cheating on me. I knew the waitress, Tammy MacLean, and she looked hot enough, with her curves and fake eyelashes, so I said fuck it. After last call, I drove her to the edge of town and we banged it

out in the back of my pick-up. I regretted it almost immediately and told Tammy to keep it quiet, but her mouth is fatter than her ass, so word got around pretty quick.

I was drunk when Jolene confronted me about it. She came in hot, and I got mad and smashed a bottle against the kitchen wall. I told her she was a fucking bitch and a shitty mother. She met me head on and told me to get out, that she didn't want me around her and Angel anymore. She said she'd get a restraining order if she had to.

"So you're not even gonna try?" Angel asked.

"It's past trying," I said. Angel scoffed and pointed her nose at the cigarettes in my shirt pocket.

"Can I have another one of those?" she asked. I tossed her the pack.

"Keep em, I got more in the truck."

Angel swiped the pack from the table and lit one.

"You got a phone number written down here you know." She held up the inside fold of the pack for me to see. I'd written it down after I got the phone hooked up in my new place, so I'd remember it.

"That's my new number. Keep it, I'm good now."

"You're already moved out?"

"I'm in the trailer park, up by the Petro Canada there. At least for now."

"Are we still gonna go to Edmonton?"

I promised Angel I'd take her shopping in the city before school started back up. It was more about us hanging out than anything else. We planned to eat in restaurants, go to a movie theater, stay in a hotel, the whole package. That was before Jolene said she wanted me out of their lives completely. Not even phone calls. Jolene considered it a one-off kindness, letting me break the news to Angel.

"I don't think it's maybe the best time," I said.

"You don't think August is the best time to go back-to-school shopping?" Angel said.

"You know what I mean."

"No I don't."

"I mean while your mom and I figure out what comes next, it's best if I'm not around."

"Are you saying we can't see each other?" She saw it on my face, that was exactly what I meant. "So what," she asked, "no more dad, you're just Sydney now?"

"I'll always be your dad."

Angel raised her voice, "Then how come we're not going to Edmonton like you promised?"

It took everything she had not to cry, and she didn't. I hung my head, feeling shame instead of just regret. I wished I could tell her it was all her mom's doing, that if it were up to me, we'd still be going.

"Fine, maybe I'll go to Edmonton by myself," she said.

"Now how do you suppose you're gonna do that, huh?"

"I'll hitchhike."

"The hell you will!"

Angel stood up from the table and I stood with her.

"If you're not gonna be around anymore, you don't get a say." She turned her back on me and ran through town, toward the river.

I shouted at her, "Angel, get back here, we're not done talking," but she didn't look back.

For the whole next week, all I could think about was Angel and Jolene. I wondered where they were, what they were doing, who they were with. I was making myself sick, analyzing all the ways they were probably moving on without me. I wished I could go back and unfuck everything.

The guys down at the UFA could tell I was a million miles away, and they asked me what was going on. I lied and told them I was worn out from chasing tail now that I was back on the market. They wanted all the dirty details, so I made up a bunch of bullshit to get them off my back. After work, I'd pull out of the yard and turn right instead of my usual left. The closer I got to my new place, the lonelier I

felt. By the time I got home, I was feeling so blue, I couldn't even get supper down, just beer, and I was drinking a lot of it. I'd get half cut and pick up the phone, pressing all the numbers except the last one, trying to build up the courage to call Jolene, see if maybe I could still take Angel to Edmonton. But I didn't want to hear "no" so I always hung up.

Friday after work, I was most of the way through a case of beer when I finally got the courage to call her. Jolene answered and I said, "Hold on, don't hang up on me, I just wanna talk." It was dead air, which was better than a dial tone.

"What do you want, Syd?"

"Angel was pretty upset about not going to Edmonton. I was wondering if maybe I could still take her?"

"The answer's no."

"Jolene..."

"I said no, Syd. Work your shit out and move on."

"Come on, Jolene..."

"You know she came home the other day smelling like an ashtray? I found your brand in her pocket. Know anything about that?"

"She started smoking behind both our backs."

"What are you gonna do if she asks you to give her beer, huh? You gonna do it because she's tried it before? You're the adult for Christ's sake. You're not taking her to Edmonton, Syd. Goodbye."

She hung up on me and I threw the receiver at the wall so hard, it broke through the wood paneling and stuck there. The cord had just enough tension to pull the rest of the phone off the table, and the ringer chimed when it hit the floor. I left it like that until it started beeping off the hook, which pissed me off, so I picked it all up and slammed it back down on the table.

Saturday, I didn't get out of bed. It wasn't even the hangover, I just didn't have the will for it. I couldn't control what was coming into my head. Sometimes it was Jolene with other guys, and it filled me with pain and loss. I'd fixate on trying to remember the exact moment things went wrong between us, and I'd think of all the ways I

could have done it better. There were moments when I wondered if Jolene just used me to raise Angel. I started seething, swearing she was the vilest, vilest bitch on Earth. Then I'd feel guilty for having thought it.

When my head got a little clearer, I thought about Angel, when she was a little girl. She went through this shy phase and didn't like talking, so we worked out a system. She'd blink once for yes, twice for no. That's when we really started getting along. One night, when she was brushing her teeth, I told her I loved her, and she kept looking at me, like she wanted me to ask her. So I did, I said, "Do you love me, too?" and she blinked once. I kept clinging to that memory, trying to squeeze every bit of happiness out of it until I fell asleep. I slept most of Sunday, too.

Monday morning, I finally got out of bed but only to call in sick. According to the microwave, I drank my first beer at 10:37 am. I had five down before lunch and figured the day was shot so I tied one on. By suppertime, I was loaded and contemplating single life. I started imagining banging Tammy again, so I swerved my pick-up down to Trapper's to see if she was working. I sat in my usual spot at the bar and ordered a jug of beer. That song "Nightlife" by Ray Price was playing on the jukebox. There's something about hearing sad songs when you're feeling blue, like you can imagine they're about you, when no one else gives a shit. I fed the jukebox some quarters and picked a few more, so I could wallow in them. Tammy was busy serving drinks and I watched her, thinking of all the ways I was gonna give it to her. She saw me and shot me a coy little smile. I hadn't talked to her since she blew up my life, and I knew I should probably still be mad at her for that. But here's the thing about your life coming unglued: it makes you do crazy shit, just to stop feeling. And in my particular experience, it was shaping up to be a bottomless pit of booze and hopefully women—anything to fill the hole growing inside me.

I was halfway through my jug when Jolene and some guy I'd never seen before walked in. "Fuck that," I said. Jolene hadn't been to Trapper's once in all the years I'd known her, and now she was gonna hang out in my bar with her new boyfriend? I had to put a stop to it. I guzzled my pint and walked over to their table. Jolene saw me coming, and she touched her boyfriend's arm, whispering in his ear. He saw me coming and braced for it.

I demanded to know, "What the fuck are you doing in my bar?"

"Actually, we're just leaving," Jolene said. She looked at her boyfriend and nodded at the door. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"That's right, both of you get the fuck outta here."

Jolene said, "You're wasted, Syd. You should go home."

"You're judging me, Jolene? I ain't got no obligations. I hear you're out every night, though. Some mother you are."

Jolene's boyfriend put his arm around her and ushered her to the door. It wasn't even the booze or the heartache, there was something about the guy that I didn't like. I got real close and started talking shit in his ear.

"That's right, you homewrecking piece of shit, get the fuck outta here." He didn't say shit to me, he just kept walking. I followed them outside and it was spitting rain. Jolene lost it on me.

"Syd, stop it! Just fucking stop it." She was crying, but not in a sad way. It was tired and desperate.

"It ain't fair," I said. "You two coming here, rubbing this shit in my face. This is where I hang out. You want me to stay away from you? Well then you stay the fuck away from me."

A cop on his rounds pulled up in front of the bar and saw things getting heated. He asked Jolene if she was OK.

"I'm fine," Jolene said.

"Me too," I said, just to have the last word and show her she couldn't hurt me. But what I really wanted was for her to see the sadness in me, even though I was making that impossible. The cop eyed me up like he knew I was a piece of shit, then he told us to have a good night and drove off.

Jolene said, "I feel sorry for you, Sydney." Get in line, I thought. The rain picked up and traffic sloshed past us. Jolene and her date walked to his car, and he helped her in like a real fucking gentleman. I went back inside to whisper some dirty shit in Tammy's ear and give her my new number. I didn't want to risk an impaired charge with that cop driving around, so I walked home alone in the pouring rain and thought about throwing myself in front of a semi truck.

Tammy came over after closing and I bent her over my kitchen table, but right in the middle of doing it, she said it was weird, me having a picture of "Jolene's kid" on the fridge, so we moved to the bedroom. The digital clock on my night table read 4:13 am. Tuesday was going to be a write off, too.

That was pretty much my new routine: getting drunk, missing shifts, being miserable trying to feel happy banging Tammy. Sometimes I'd see Angel and Jolene at the post office or the grocery store or wherever. I kept my distance, to avoid Jolene's wrath. But when me and Angel got the chance, we'd smile at each other, miming little jokes without Jolene noticing. It'd fill me up in the moment, but when I thought about it afterwards, it just amplified the loss.

Angel phoned me a couple times. It was good to hear her voice and have an actual conversation, but I worried Jolene would see calls to my number when she got the phone bill at the end of the month. One time Angel even showed up at my place after school. She just wanted to hang out, watch some TV, listen to records. But I told her we couldn't be going around behind her mom's back. It crushed her, hearing that. Hell, it crushed me. Doing the right thing ain't easy when you know it's the wrong thing.

August rolled around, and I still had time booked off to go to Edmonton, but since that wasn't happening, I spent it drinking and smoking weed, instead. I was on my way out to Colinton to buy a couple ounces from a guy, and just as I was leaving town, there was Angel with her backpack on, thumb out on the side of the highway.

I pulled up beside her and asked, "Where you headed?"

"I'll wait for the next one," she said.

"Get in the goddamned truck, Angel."

The door creaked on its hinges and she slammed it behind her. I whipped a u-turn on the highway and drove back into town.

"I'm guessing you were on your way to Edmonton, is that right?"

"I was thinking about it," Angel said.

"Thinking about it, were ya?"

She was sheepish, so I knew I didn't have to be too much of a hard-ass on her.

"Look, I know you want to go and you're mad we can't, but hitchhiking into the city, it's dangerous, you understand me?"

"I just want outta here."

"You're fifteen years old," I said.

"Can I have a cigarette?" she asked. I thought about what Jolene said, about me being the adult.

"You're not old enough to be smoking," I said. Angel didn't fight me on it. She leaned on her door and rested her forehead on the window. "I'm gonna take you home." She ignored me, so I knew she was mad about it. "Hey, I'm not the bad guy here. I'm just looking out for you, alright?"

Angel looked right at me, her voice wavering as she said, "Then how come nobody asked me what I want, huh? You're gone, mom's gone most of the time with her creep boyfriend..."

"Creep boyfriend? What's he done?"

"Nothing. I just don't like him. He looks at me weird sometimes, like he wants something, but he never asks."

"Well stay away from him as best you can," I said. "You still got my number?" Angel nodded. "You call me if he tries to pull any shit. I'll bury that son of a bitch in the deepest darkest hole."

Angel smirked, knowing I was partially joking but mostly serious.

"I feel like no one cares what I do," she said.

"If that were true, I would have driven right past you."

"Yeah, but you're not around. It's like you died or something. I don't understand why we can't see each other."

I shifted in my seat and cleared my throat, but I didn't know what to say to her. Framing it in a way that made her choose sides was only gonna make it worse. And I was too proud to tell what I'd done.

"So you're not gonna tell me?"

"Angel, it doesn't matter. Your mom's just making decisions she's entitled to. I gotta respect that, and you gotta listen to her, you understand?"

"Why should I? All she cares about is herself."

"She loves you, and she's still your mom, just like I'm still your dad, no matter what happens, alright? You gotta do what she says. If not for her, then for me."

Angel looked at me with all the love and sadness and confusion in her heart, and I knew she was hurting bad, poor kid.

It felt wrong, driving into my old neighbourhood with Angel. Jolene was walking out to her car when we pulled up to the house.

As I was rolling down my window, I said, "Oh boy, here we go."

Jolene was furious.

"Syd, what in the actual fuck? Angel, get out of the truck and get inside."

Jolene's creep boyfriend came out onto the front step to see what was going on. He tried to put his arm around Angel as she was going by, but she wriggled away from him.

"Have you been drinking?" Jolene asked.

"What? I'm fine."

"I can smell it on you." She leaned into the cab, sniffing the stale air. "You're loaded." Jolene shouted at her boyfriend, "Call the cops, tell them to get here fast."

"Jolene, what are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm making sure you stay away from us."

"Jolene..."

"Driving around drunk with my teenage daughter in the passenger seat? You just crossed every line imaginable!"

"She was out hitchhiking on the side of the goddamn highway, in case you were wondering. What do you want me to do, leave her there for some psychopath?"

"I want you to not drive my daughter around drunk. I want you out of our lives. That's what I want. You're gonna learn that, one way or another, Syd."

"You know she doesn't think much of that boyfriend you're keeping. You might wanna ask her about it."

"Mind your own shit, Syd. Who I'm with is none of your fucking business."

I heard the cops coming and it started to sink in how truly fucked I was. I didn't bother running, I just shut off the engine and waited. I failed the breathalyzer and the Mounties bent me over the hood, cuffed me. Jolene and her boyfriend watched from the sidewalk as they took me away. Angel watched through the living room window.

The way it got written up in the local paper made me sound like some sort of freak, cruising around drunk with an underage girl, no mention of me raising Angel, no nuance. That was too much for Tammy. I tried to explain it to her, tell her how it was, but she didn't wanna know. No one does. So it's just me now. Been that way for over a year.

A few months back, I heard Jolene and that boyfriend of hers moved to Edmonton with Angel. I get angry thinking about it, but I know that won't fix anything, so I grit my teeth and wait for it to pass. I still got the same number in case Angel calls, but so far nothing.

The other day at work, one of the guys was talking about when we used to drink beer in my garage, back when I was still living with Angel and Jolene. He asked if I'd been up there lately, to see the old house. He told me someone bought it and tore it down, started over. I almost didn't believe him, so I drove up there to see for myself and sure enough it was gone. Just a dirt hole where the basement used to be. The rest of it had been hauled off to a landfill, like it never happened. Gone in a blink. I lit a cigarette and tossed the pack on the empty side of the bench seat, thinking about the hole inside of me. An end is just a beginning, or so I've been told. But lately, I have my doubts.

## The Flag

Francois Bereaud

I must have driven by a dozen times before I noticed it and, even then, I denied what I saw plainly. The house looked like all the others in the neighborhood. Suburban beige paint job on stucco, brown shutters, a driveway in front with a mid-sized white SUV and a grey sedan.

The house sat on a corner lot and the extra frontage held a detached garage which was unusual for the area. An oversized charcoal Chevy truck was parked parallel to the garage door, implying, in my mind, a space filled with things. I would come to imagine ATVs, old camping gear, a freezer or two, the head of a hooped animal mounted on the wall, guns. Stereotypes fueled by anxiety and anger.

The flagpole fronted the house around the corner from the garage and, on a windy July day, I first spotted the three symbols, fully unfurled, screaming perpendicular to the house. The American flag took its place at the top, followed by the black and white MIA piece of cloth. It was the third one I refused to see. I thought Union Jack. Or maybe a football team. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers came to mind as unlikely as that might be in Southern California. Five minutes later I was at the rink, pulling on my hockey socks amid the light banter and funky smells of the locker room. I couldn't have seen what I saw and pushed it from my mind.

Playing hockey for the first time in years seemed a means to mitigate the anxiety that had permeated our lives for the last eighteen months. Every POTUS tweet, every grainy picture of a smog-filled Chinese city, every homeless person lugging an impossibly full bag of cans through our hipster neighborhood, every lonely and emaciated polar bear stranded on an ice floe, and every morning exchange, which I would translate into dismal subtext, was a catalyst for a downward spiral. I'd ask a question, work satchel in hand as she towed off from the shower.

"Working late today?"

[Fucking one of your coworkers?]

"Not sure. Let's do our own thing for dinner. You could pick up Thai for yourself."

[If I am fucking my coworker, it's only payback.]

"Let's check in later, in case things change."

[You used to always text me in the middle of the day. Now never.]

"Sure."

[No chance.]

On a late Friday morning, I cut out of work and head to the rink for the 12:30 pickup game. I take my shortcut through the residential neighborhood knowing I have to look. A light breeze distends the flags, however limply. I pull over and use Google to confirm. Red background cut symmetrically by a blue X with white stars. The Confederate flag. In San Diego. In July 2018. The Chevy blocks the garage. I bite my lip and slowly pull away from the curb.

Almost a year before, Jen and I had sat motionless in front of the computer monitor as images streamed in from Charlottesville. "Jews will not replace us. Jews will not replace us." Swastikas. Then news of a murder. I reached to X out of the site, but Jen caught my arm.

"We have to bear witness."

"It's time."

"I can't. Next month."

I didn't push it. I wasn't sure I could either.

It had been time to have sex. Jen's uterine temperature reading told us that early afternoon on that day was the optimum for the month. We were trying to follow our latest fertility plan to the letter. I had ejaculated forty-eight hours earlier in order to optimize the sperm to semen ratio. It was time. Instead, we sat frozen, staring at the horrors on the screen, the memory of Jen's touch lingering on my arm.

Only later, did I see that moment as more than a missed opportunity. The carnage robbed us of more than a meeting of an egg and some sperm. It took our words. Our conversations became shorter, as if each word were an expenditure beyond our means, a cost to be borne. We followed that fertility plan for the rest of the year. Jen

measured temperatures, sperm counts, days and hours. I measured words and sentences. Her numbers did not bear fruit, mine simply diminished.

“Damn, how’d you miss that one?” I feel Creamer’s elbow dig into my ribs and know without turning my head that he’s smiling. He’d fed me a perfect pass on a two on one and I’d missed an open net.

“Mind is somewhere else I guess.”

“Fucking get with it. I need every assist I can get.”

“It’s Friday pick up you big dummy.” I elbow him back.

“Whatever. First beer is on you and you miss another one like that and you’re buying a round for the bar.”

Creamer isn’t exactly a friend, I don’t even know his first name, but we occasionally grab a beer after hockey. He’s a big guy, easily six foot three, with broad shoulders, a bit of a belly, and a hockey player’s gait. He, like me, is one of the stronger players in the group. I wonder how he’d take the flag.

On the long weekend of Martin Luther King Day last January, Jen had traveled to San Francisco to catch up with an old college roommate and attend the Women’s March. Other than a Friday night hockey game, I had nothing planned and it felt good to be alone in the house. The resounding quiet was honest; without Jen, the ghosts of missing conversations subsided for a few days. I slept a lot, ate my meals at the taco shop, and worked halfheartedly on a small landscaping project in the yard. On the Sunday evening before Jen was to come home, I got a text from a co-worker, Martha, letting me know that one of her kids had a dental appointment on Tuesday morning and asking me if I could set up the conference room for her as she’d be rushing in for a client meeting.

I liked Martha well enough, but a few years back she’d invited us to her house for dinner and it hadn’t gone well. Jen found her husband, Marvin, an artist who had several large tile installations in the city, pretentious, and their three children cloying. She was irritated that I had shared a joint with them after dinner and let me know on the way home.

“I can’t believe you got stoned with them.” Her eyes briefly left the road to shoot me a look. “He got even more annoying when he was high. And isn’t she still breastfeeding the little one? Or are her boobs always that full? Don’t answer that.”

We never reciprocated the invitation.

Still, Martha and I maintained a decent work friendship, grabbing lunch maybe once a quarter and occasionally sharing an illicit cigarette across the street from the office. We both identified as former smokers but only she kept a pack in her desk,

In retrospect, I must have been lonely that Sunday evening. Other than ordering at the taco shop, I hadn’t spoken to anyone since hockey two nights before. After telling Martha Tuesday morning was not a problem, I’d extended the chat by asking her how her weekend was going. It turned out she’d also had the house to herself; her husband and kids away. Unlike me, she’d been busy, having painted two bedrooms. I opened a bottle of wine and toasted her industriousness. Our text exchange was light until, two glasses in, she told me that I’d seemed withdrawn lately. By the third glass, fertility woes had been shared.

I’ve thought a lot about the probabilities of the events of that Sunday afternoon and evening and still can’t wrap my mind around the unlikeliness of the sequence. Jen receives a text that afternoon from Southwest Airlines telling her that her Monday flight for the next day is cancelled. She calls the airline and they offer her a seat Sunday evening. She decides to take it and surprise me. I get a text from my fertile colleague who also happens to be home alone. After four glasses of wine, I fall asleep, phone on my chest. Jen finds me in that position on the couch at the very instant another sympathetic text from Martha drops in. I wake up a few hours later to find two more messages on my screen and Jen lying rigidly in our bed. Nothing is discussed, but, three days later, Jen tells me she needs a break from the stress of baby making. We’ll try again in a year. The ghosts rage.

After hockey, I have a few beers at a nearby dive bar with Creamer and a couple of other guys. I’m close to ordering a third but think better of it. I’m close to telling them about the flag. I can’t guess the politics of a bunch of white hockey players but I hope for sympathetic views. I

imagine all of us arriving at the house, sticks drawn as weapons.

Driving home, I think about the graffiti in the bar urinal. "Maria is a fag" makes little sense but "Look down, there's not much there" strikes a painful chord. I think about my parents, that deep loss never far from the surface. I imagine the ghosts of dead Confederate soldiers smiling, as they drift across the desert, pleased to see their legacy celebrated so far from their blood-soaked homeland.

My parents always said the biggest fight of their marriage was over what to name me. My father was fixated on James, after Jimmy Carter whom he revered. "The only president never to fire a shot," he would proclaim to my friends and I as we polished off slice after slice of sausage pizza post-hockey game. My mother, who conceded that Carter was fine man, couldn't see naming any son of theirs after a southern white man, and a politician to boot.

My parents were a couple whose racial identities were often swapped. As a dark-skinned first-generation Portuguese immigrant, my mother was often identified as black, a confusion she felt no need to dispel. My father, who called himself "high yeller", his family lineage containing both owned and owners, was generally perceived as white. They told me later that this naming fight went on daily for months. My father's case was boosted by the fact that I was conceived in Atlanta where my mother was finishing her master's degree on a full scholarship from Emory University. My mother didn't buy it.

It was in the Emory library, her belly full to the point of bursting, that my mother hit on the solution that should have been obvious to her months before. Carter. As in Carter G. Woodson, a prominent intellectual and the second black man to earn a PhD from Harvard. And, if my father thought of Carter as coming from somewhere else, so be it.

I was born with my mother's dark hair and a skin tone closer to my father's. Before my first birthday, we'd moved to Wisconsin, my mother having landed her dream job as a college librarian and my father, who'd never lived north of the Mason-Dixon line, happy to learn how to drive a city snow plow and be a hockey dad.

I grew up a racially mixed kid in a white Midwestern town where my aptitude at sports drove my social relations and friendships. At the University of Michigan, sports

continued as I played club hockey, but I also developed more of my mother's political sense, joining several activist groups and hanging out in the black student union. When Obama was elected in the fall of my junior year, I wept openly and stayed up all night, hugging anyone within reach.

After I married Jen, whose skin tone wasn't far from mine, though her roots were on the other side of the globe in Malaysia, my father proclaimed, "Can't wait to see how them babies come out." My mother punched him in the shoulder but we all laughed.

At the moment we were boarding our plane back from our Hawaiian honeymoon, my parents were hit and killed by a semi that lost control and spun across two highway lanes in a late spring Midwestern snow storm. I've been afraid to ask her, but I'd guess the ghosts of my father's words haunt Jen as well.

On Friday evening, I drive back to the rink for my regular league game. Although it's dark, I consider a short diversion to avoid the house. Changing my behavior makes me angry so I don't. There is no breeze and the flagpole stands rigidly in the dark with no sign of what it holds. At the stop sign, I'm struck by the bright fluorescent light coming from the garage. I make the turn very slowly, staring unabashedly. Nothing unusual. A fridge in the back, a leaf blower, a tool cabinet, a few folding chairs, and the other detritus one might expect in a suburban garage. Then I see a man walking up the sidewalk toward the open garage. Is he the owner? Medium sized, girthy, a baseball hat over longish hair. Redneck, I think, though I'm aware that profile fits half of the guys I'm about to call teammates. In the rear-view mirror, I see him go into the garage. My jaw tightens and I drive on.

Driving home, the garage door is closed and the house dark. I'm angry because I've played poorly or maybe I'm angry because some guy has a Confederate flag outside his house or maybe I'm angry because we have a white supremacist in the White House or maybe I'm angry because I'm not man enough to make a baby with my wife. As I make the left turn away from the house, I think about rocks. Baseball sized rocks. The canyon down the street from our house is full of them. I can feel the heft of a rock in my palm. I see myself simultaneously in the past and

the future. According to physics, there is no present so this trick shouldn't be hard. In the past, I'm a high school sophomore baseball pitcher, bearing down, each pitch just nicking a corner of the plate before it cracks the catcher's glove with a satisfying smack. In the future, I'm dressed ironically in a black robe and black hood. Unlike my past high school self, I'll have only one pitch in this game. I feel nerves wondering about my arm, untested for more than a dozen years, and anticipating the screaming cacophony to come. I let the rock fly and the years evaporate. A perfect strike and the upstairs window shatters. Before I flee, I listen for a cry, hoping I've unleashed some terror, some small redemption, generations overdue.

I pull into my driveway unsure why I shouldn't find and hurl that rock, knowing also how crazy I must be to even entertain that thought. I haven't told Jen about the flag. I should. But I know I won't. The words aren't there.

On Saturday, Jen and I have dinner with friends. It's miserable. I get lost in thought thinking about the phrase "the South will rise again", have trouble following the conversation, and Jen kicks me repeatedly under the table. We drive off with no mention of the next get together. We are no longer a fun couple to be with.

Jen starts, "Well, that sucked."

"Sorry."

"*Sorry?* That's the best you got? Where were you?"

"I don't know. It was a mistake to go out with them. We're not a bunch of laughs right now."

"That's for sure. But you could at least have tried. And something has been eating at you these last few days." Jen's voice softens a bit. "I know we're not good right now, but there's something else."

I'm surprised and shamed. I can't remember the last thing I noticed about Jen other than that she no longer has any interest in sleeping with me. I should tell her about the flag. I don't.

Sunday morning just after light has broken, I ask Jen if she wants to hike Cowles Mountain, a popular three-mile round trip hike to the highest point in San Diego.

"I thought you hated that hike. You've always said it like the freeway of hiking with a bunch of entitled college students in pastel spandex outfits. And don't you think it will be super-hot?"

Our bedroom is already uncomfortably warm. I feel clammy as I pull on a t-shirt and look for my running shorts to swap with my boxer shorts. "State isn't in session yet and maybe the heat will keep others away. I just need to sweat."

"Go ahead. I'll be lazy here. Can you put some coffee up? I'll drink it iced later."

"Sure." Shorts on, I make a move to the bathroom.

"Carter?"

"Yeah?"

"It seemed like you were going to tell me something in the car last night. But then you stopped talking."

"Sorry about the dinner."

"You said that already."

Jen pushes the sheet aside and I'm struck by the beauty of the dark mole on her caramel skin just above her right clavicle. I consider confessing my obsession as a means to reconciliation, but I can't. She looks at me too long then reaches for the book on her bed stand.

Driving to the hike, I realize I've forgotten water and also to start the coffee. I consider turning around or pulling over to text an apology. I do neither.

I begin the hike at a run. There are few people out, the heat is oppressive. I run until my throat and legs burn and I can't run any more. I'm desperately thirsty and unsure why I'm punishing myself. Looking southwest from the peak, downtown and the ocean shimmer like a mirage on the horizon. I'm alone here and I imagine myself an explorer ascendant of this peak for the first time. What flag I would plant? Not the stars and stripes, not now, maybe not ever. Though it's on far too many trendy shirts, I like the California Republic Flag, the now long-gone grizzly bear plodding forward beneath a single star. But that doesn't feel right. I don't know many other flags, and weigh the Olympic rings, but I hit on the Portuguese Flag, vibrant

bands of red and green with a fancy coat of arms in the middle. I have yet to visit Portugal, but my mom had an elderly aunt there with whom she corresponded and I remember being excited every time a thin blue airmail envelope would arrive in the mail, always adorned with two stamps of the colorful flag. The Portuguese brought the invasive eucalyptus trees to San Diego, which, pretty as they may be, act as match sticks during a fire. Regardless, I'm Vasco de Gama, and I imagine this view from his perspective until the sounds of hip hop bring me back to the moment. A scrawny white guy, his phone affixed to his upper arm, has broken my spell. I consider punching him in the face. Or at least telling him to get some fucking earbuds. But I know this anger is displaced or misplaced or both and I head back down the trail, the Portuguese flag limp in the hot, breezeless air, and my throat dry as hell.

The water fountain provides relief and I cruise surface streets in a neighborhood I don't know well. I'm looking for I don't know what, something to atone for my poor behavior. I pass a flower shop and a Starbucks, both much too trite. Then I spot Lucky Star donuts. Perfect. Our neighborhood has two hipster donut shops which charge \$4.50 for a maple-bacon or lemon-tarragon varietal. Jen finds those pretentious but loves a good old school glazed or jelly donut. The proprietress, a smiling elderly Vietnamese woman and fingernails polished a pale pink, tries to sell me a dozen, but I leave the shop with only two.

The road alternates between small strips malls and condo complexes and I follow it over the freeway in the direction of San Diego State. As I pass the university and crest a hill, I realize where I am. The hockey rink is minutes away and so is the house. The flag. Is this what I was doing all along? I wonder if there is a baseball rolling around in the back of my car which is ridiculous since I haven't played since high school. It wouldn't be hard to find a rock.

I approach the house from a side I hadn't before and am shocked at what I see. Solar panels on the east facing roof. Fucking solar panels. Both of our immediate neighbors have gotten solar in the last six months and we've felt shamed at not following suit.

"With the size of your house," -900 square feet- "you could probably get away with just six," my neighbor Alex has told me more than once.

The three flags hang limply. Fucking confederate flag and fucking solar panels is all I can think. My car is inching,

but it's still early, so probably no one is around to witness my stalking behavior.

I turn left as if to go to hockey instead of home. The garage door is open. A guy stands toward the front with his profile to me, coffee cup in hand. From the shape of his body, I'm sure it's the guy I saw the other night. He's looking toward the back corner of the garage, at what I can't tell. I slip my automatic car in neutral and roll down the small incline. Again, the contents of the garage look unremarkable. Tools, boxes, junk. Past the garage is a wooden fence which extends the property even further. The graying wood calls for a paint job. I'm sweating through the A/C. In the middle of the fence, there is a piece of white paper with the words written in large block letters with black marker.

**Free**

**Cactus cuttings**

**Bring your own gloves**

I glide past the fence to the intersection, stop, put the car in drive, turn left, and pull over. Sweat pools on my lower back and my breathing comes quick, I'm almost panting. Fucking solar panels. Fucking cactus cuttings. Fucking gloves. Then a thought. My hockey bag lives in my trunk. After I dry my stuff out on our small deck, I pack it up and throw it back in the car. Jen insists that our place is too small for the ever-present funk of hockey gear. Hockey gloves would work. Jen loves cacti. Several cuttings might finish the small area in the back that I've been lagging on for six months now. She's a big proponent of the exchange and give-away economy promoted by sites like Next Door and Buy Nothing and would love that I didn't buy them. But getting them from a racist?

I lower the windows and shut off the engine. Hot, humid air fills the car. I should go home and forget about cacti, solar panels, and flags. But I can't. I'd as soon forget that my parents are gone, or that I can't get my wife pregnant, or that our country is being run by a racist. My palms itch. I'm in almost as good shape as I was in college. As a hockey player, fighting wasn't my niche, but I'm sure I could take that guy. I'm thinking about assaulting a man in his home. My stomach growls. One punch to the jaw and he'd go down. Followed by a few kicks to the midsection. Then I'd leave. Like that, maybe even with cactus cuttings.

I'm hungry and I have to pee. A bead of sweat slides into my left eye. It stings. I pull the trunk lever and open my door. The car dings. The keys are in the ignition. I leave them there. I rifle through my bag and find my gloves. I shut the trunk, and walk slowly up the street. A short half block away, I can see that the garage door is still open. Approaching, I can't see the man from my angle which means he's moved from his previous spot. I clear the garage's corner and look in. It's dim and I think he's left. Then, a fluorescent light. He's opened the refrigerator in the back of the garage.

"Good morning," I say too loudly.

He turns, clearly startled, "Hey." I imagine he can't see me too well as I'm backlit. I try to decide if I detect any trace of an accent in his one-word response. The fridge closes and he moves towards me. "You lookin' for something?" Southern but not deep. North Carolina?

"I know it's kind of early, but I saw your sign for cactus clippings," I hold up my hockey gloves as the man approaches.

"Sure. Wait, are those hockey gloves?"

"I play over there at the rink. Driving home I saw your sign. My wife loves cacti and we got a little spot out in our backyard." The man is about six feet from me now. Brown hair drops from under his cap and covers half his ears. A light beard covers his jaw line and his eyes look small for his wide face. I'd peg his age around thirty-five.

"Follow me. There's a door out the back of the garage. I got some pruners out there. Funny, my wife put that sign up yesterday. I told her no one's gonna stop. And here you are bright and early. The wife's always right, huh?" he chuckles and I follow him through the garage, ignoring his comment.

The backyard is long and narrow. We step into a rectangular lawn, immaculately cut, with a stone path as its perimeter. He turns right, in the direction of my car, and at the end of the yard, I see a sandy embankment with succulents. As I follow him, I size up his body. He's squat, maybe an ex high school wrestler, with his weight concentrated in the thighs and midsection. His upper arms are big though I doubt he works out. I didn't see the bench press I expected to find in the garage. I have several inches on him. We get to the end of the lawn and he half turns to look back at me while pointing forward.

"My wife loves to re-landscape so we took two cactuses out. If you cut off a piece you can stick it right in the ground and it'll grow. You can also trim some of those," here he points to a grouping of cacti still standing. "Same deal, just stick what you get in the ground." He hands me the pruners. "Have at it. I've got a burlap bag in the garage."

I don't know anything about cacti but I know Jen will love these. Growing up in the Midwest, I thought all cacti were saguaros. The plants in front of me vary from round to spindly and deep green to purple. I put on my hockey gloves and hack away, not caring if I take too much. When he comes back, I have eight clippings laid out in front of me.

"You work fast." he tosses the burlap bag in front of my haul.

I put the clippings in his bag and stand up. We stand face to face and he looks at me, surely waiting for a thank you and then for me to leave. My legs feel unsteady.

"What about the flag?"

"What?" He's genuinely confused.

"Your flag out front."

"I got three flags out front." His jaw tightens.

"You know which one I'm talking about."

"You come into my property and I'm nice enough to give you plants. You need to leave." His voice struggles to control the obvious anger.

"Why do you have it there? It's a symbol of hate," my legs have steadied, neither of us have moved.

"That's bullshit. It's southern pride, not that you would know anything about that."

"I got roots in the South. That flag is about hate." Sweat beads into my eye, I resist the need to wipe it.

His face reddens, "Look snowflake, we're not gonna argue about this, now get the fuck out."

"Why not argue? Because you can't win? Next you're going to tell me the Civil War wasn't about slavery?"

His open hand strikes me fast and, as it hits my face, I consider that he may have been a boxer rather a wrestler. I reflexively step back, feeling the fire in my cheek. He takes a step back also. I look away. I've been slapped. Not punched, slapped. Slapped as a parent might hit a child or a master might hit a slave. Ghosts swirl. I look up. He looks smug and I know he's misjudged me. Scrawny strong is how Jen describes me. I know that right here in his backyard, I could pound this cactus-giving, solar panel-owning, Confederate flag-waving white man. I could leave him bloody on his pristine lawn. I know this with certainty just as I know Jimmy Carter never fired a shot and that Carter G. Woodson wrote "The Mis-Education of the Negro." I am neither a strict pacifist nor mis-educated, but I step around the man, cactus clippings in hand. I don't look at him but I know he's watching me as I pass. I stop at the garage door.

"Educate yourself. You're spewing hate out here." He doesn't respond and I walk through the garage and to my car. I glance in the rear-view mirror before pulling out. He's not there. My cheek is red and starting to swell.

The front door of our small house without solar panels is open. I know that means the back door is also open, our strategy for air conditioning. Though it's not long past eight, the heat of the day is such that it's time to close all the doors and windows to preserve whatever cool the cross breeze has gained us. We've had fights about this. My legs are heavy as I walk to the front door. I leave my shoes and socks on the stoop and enter quietly. Jen is on the couch, legs extended, looking lovely in a yellow tank top and her navy-blue shorts with white striping on the sides. I like to tease her that they come from an 80s movie. She's engrossed in her book and doesn't hear me. I avoid the creaky floorboard and almost get to her before she hears, or maybe smells, me. Before she can look up, I place both bags on the floor in front of her. She looks in the donut bag first.

"Old school, my favorite."

As she turns to the other bag, I see the wrinkle in the corner of her eye which I know means a smile. I lower myself to the floor and sit with my back against the couch. If I lean back my hair will touch her bare leg.

"These are amazing, where did you – Jesus, Carter, your, face, what happened?"

As our eyes meet, I lower my face. Tears come. I feel her hand on my shoulder and then my face. "Hey." She strokes my face.

I can't stop. Tears pour out. I look up but can't see her. Tears flood and it feels good.

I wonder how you kill ghosts.

## Can't Put It to Words

Alfred Stifsim

I sat there on the front steps with him, the summer heat still imposing its will on the night air. There were no tears in his eyes, but I could hear it in his voice. What is it about old men and sadness? I guess sometimes they can't help but let the harder things in life crush them. No matter how tough they try to be the years just pile on.

I was walking home when I saw him there on the porch, lonely with a bottle. He saw me too and called out, "Hey kid, you want a drink?"

I'm not yet old enough to get into a bar, so I jumped at the chance. He never told me his name was Dale, the embroidery on his work shirt did. The red wine stains and sweat-darkened pits told me he had been on these steps for a while too.

"You come from the big game?" he asked as I sat down and handed me the bottle.

I nodded and took it from him. June bugs flew all around as they orbited the dull yellow porch light above us. Bringing the bottle to my mouth I took a sip.

"Have as much as you want," he said with a tiredness in his voice.

I smiled, then took a long swig. The only other time I'd had wine was at church, but there it was bitter like cough medicine. This wine was sweet, fruity.

Dale looked out down the row of old houses that lined the street. "So, coming from the big game, huh," turning to me he reached out his hand signaling for a drink. "Did we win?"

"Yep, twenty-four to twenty-one." I handed the bottle back to him with a toothy grin. My head started to warm from the wine. "Everyone in town was there."

"Everyone but me," he said then took a long pull.

I cocked my head, "Don't you like football?"

He did his shoulders to show his indifference. "You know, I think I've seen you 'round before haven't I?"

"Maybe, I only live a few blocks over." I was eyeing his grip on the bottle. I wanted more but didn't want to seem too eager.

Dale noticed, took another swig and surrendered it over to me. "Don't you have any pals to be hanging out with on a night like this?"

"Sure," I said. "They all went to get shakes at the diner."

He raised an eyebrow. "What about you? You didn't want to be with 'em?"

I looked down at the ground. One of the June bugs was lying on its back, its legs moving like it couldn't get up. I flipped it over and as soon as I did it flew away. "I just wanted to go home."

Dale leaned back and pulled a comb from his pocket that was missing some teeth. He drew it over what few thin hairs he had left, then let out a slow breath and stared out past the street, past the houses like they weren't even there.

"When I was young I had a group of friends. We did everything together. Went to all the games, chased all the girls, got into fights." He drew his finger back and forth through the air. "We ran up and down these roads like they were ours. All I ever wanted was to hang out with those guys forever, but as we got older, one by one they slowly started moving away. I kept telling myself, 'Dale you should go too, you should go too, or you'll end up left behind.' But I never did. Then one day they were all gone, and I was left behind."

"What did they move for?" I asked.

He shrugged. "This town wasn't enough excitement for 'em anymore, so they found excitement elsewhere in the world. Big cities, bright lights. Guess this place never really was anything special."

"Why didn't you leave too once they were all gone?"

"By then I had a wife and a kid. Real responsibility that tied me to this place. But that didn't last very long anyway." He sighed. "We were never truly happy, fought all the time. She said that I was too stuck in the past to care about our family."

"Sorry," I murmured.

"Ah don't be, it's been years since she left me," he said waving his hand like he was swatting away the truth of the memory.

But I could tell that truth haunted him, that he was getting sadder with each word, and I didn't know how to feel for him except sorry, and I didn't know what else to say. Instead, I let the sound of the insects fill the space as they fought over the porch light.

Dale cleared his throat and spit. "I used to hold it against 'em you know. Almost hated them for it."

"Your family?"

"No, my buddies. I'd cared so much about them that I stayed around when I could've gone. I kept asking myself, 'Why didn't they feel the same way about me?' I mean, maybe if they'd stayed I could've been more present as a husband and made things work with my wife." He stared down and slowly shook his head. "Of course, I later realized my buddies were just doing what was best for them. Can't blame 'em for it. It's selfishness for me to want 'em to stay when it wasn't what they needed. But me not being what they needed, every time I think about it, it's like a—a—" he trailed off still staring out into whatever memory had opened in front of him.

"It's like a what?" I asked.

"Shit, I don't know. You just can't put it to words I guess." He grabbed the bottle and took a drink. "Maybe when you're older you'll understand."

We both sat quietly for a while. A truck washed us in light as it came up the street, then it turned the corner and drove off.

"If you live long enough life gets boring, kid," he said.

I gave him a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"All I do is come home from work and sit here watching people go by. The other day a semi-truck couldn't make that turn in front of my house there." He pointed out to where the truck had turned. "The driver had to back up. The semi took up the whole damn street. Cars kept coming and stopping and I just watched them get stuck and frustrated. It was the most interesting thing I think I'd seen in years. That little bit of chaos was enough for me to forget about my life for a moment."

That sure did sound boring to me, but that was his own fault, wasn't it? If a man sits around all the time why wouldn't he get bored? "Why not try something less boring? You can still leave here for somewhere else if you wanted. Like your friends did."

Dale shook his head and let out a laugh that turned into a groan. "It's easier for me to live here and reminisce about the good times than up and leave for something new. At least here I've got my memories to keep me company. Hell, out there all that's waiting for me is more disappointment."

The bottle was empty now, so were any of the words I might've said to try and cheer him up. I had a good buzz going, and I didn't want to ruin it listening to an old man get sadder. Sadness can be just as contagious as the flu sometimes. "I'd like to stay longer but my parents will want me home," I said standing.

Dale leaned back. "You don't have to bullshit me. I know you don't really care about what I'm saying."

"It's not that I—"

He held up his hands to cut me off. "You come on back anytime. I'm always out here sitting. If you can put up with my rambling I'll share my wine with you again. How about that?"

I thought for a moment then nodded. "Alright, I'll come back." I stepped closer to the road and gave him a slight wave. "Thanks."

He nodded.

I turned and walked away.

It was three weeks before I walked by Dale's house again, but the porch was empty. No lights were on, inside or out. The place looked like a ghost.

## Never Better

### Sheldon Birnie

The lounge was dead when he walked in. Some albino kid was slouched against the counter, watching the clock tick. Chappy ordered a rye and soda. The kid fetched it with a gigantic sigh so full of disdain Chappy could taste it. When it arrived, Chappy nursed it. Back in the room, Chappy knew Ray would be sawing logs to wake the dead. He wasn't willing to deal with that just yet. When he waved the boy over for a refill, the kid looked fit to puke. As he lurched off to fetch the drink, Chappy heard the bells above the door jingle behind him.

"If it isn't Michael Chappy Chapman," a drunk woman's voice announced itself from the back of the bar. "Ol' lady killer himself."

Chappy spun around on his stool. There she was, crossing the floor in the same leather jacket and high-waisted jeans she'd had on earlier, not so sure of her footing.

"Sarah Michelle Masterson," Chappy smiled, forgetting about everything—the albino behind the bar, his drink, the bantam hockey tournament, the team he was coaching—as a window of opportunity, a faint glimmer of hope, presented itself. "Out past curfew?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Sarah laughed, sitting next to Chappy with the confidence of a cougar on the prowl. Straight away, she pulled out a cigarette, stuck it between her red lips. "I need a drink. And a goddamn light."

"Barkeep," Chappy called, snapping his fingers. "Pour one here for the young lady, would ya?"

"Such a gentleman," Sarah smirked around her cigarette as Chappy flicked his Bic, lighting her up. "Shouldn't you be resting up for your big game tomorrow?"

"Hard to sleep from excitement. Figured a nightcap or two might help."

The barkeep delivered the drinks, making a show of looking up at the clock. Ignoring the boy, Chappy and Sarah clinked their glasses together in cheers, locking eyes. The sound echoed through the otherwise empty lounge. Chappy cleared his throat, considered their options. With the tourney going full bore, there wasn't a room available in the whole damn town. Both he and Sarah's rooms were otherwise occupied. Would either of the lounge's

restrooms be anywhere near clean enough to get nasty in? If the men's room was any indication, not a fucking chance.

"The last thing I needed this weekend was to see another goddamn hockey game," Sarah lamented, swirling her drink, tapping her right foot in the air. "I've seen enough shitty hockey games to last me a lifetime."

"You and me both, baby."

Sarah pulled another cigarette from the pack in front of her on the bar. Chappy pulled one from his pocket before lighting them both. They each pulled hard, drawing the sweet smoke down deep and holding it in for a long, silent moment.

"You ever think you'd end up doing this?"

"Coaching a bantam hockey team in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere? Been a dream of mine for years."

"You know what I mean. Come on now."

"I never knew what the hell was in store for me, I guess. Didn't care. Not really. So long as I was playing hockey and having a good time."

"Sounds familiar. What's it with you boys and this stupid game, anyways?"

"Dunno." Chappy shrugged and took a long drink, smoke forgotten between his fingers. "Didn't really wanna coach these little fuckers, but I owed Bill Price a favour. Ain't as bad as I figured."

"Really?"

"Could be worse," Chappy signaled for another round. "Lately, though, I been wonderin.. Job's OK, sure. Working my way up, there. I got my girl. Alexia. Best thing I got going for me and it ain't even close. Every second weekend, anyways."

"That's sweet."

Chappy shrugged. The drinks arrived. Sarah crushed out her smoke.

"Jesus, I can't believe I came up here. Not that I had much fucking choice."

"You always got a choice," Chappy said, looking her up and down on the barstool. There was a little more there than when they were teenagers, a couple extra pounds in all the right places, the hint of wrinkles and bags around the eyes. Half a lifetime has a way of doing that. But she still looked dynamite to Chappy. Time had been kinder to her than him. "You're a grown ass woman, ain't ya?"

"That," Sarah sighed, "appears to be the problem right there. Ted fuckin said I'd been 'putting it out there too much' lately. You believe that shit? Fucker said he didn't 'trust' me on my own at home for the weekend. Cocksucker."

"No shit."

"No shit. Told him to stick that Easton aluminum up his ass. Anyways, this is the last time I put my own shit on hold for a goddamn hockey tournament. I'm such an idiot."

"Hey now. Don't talk like that. Shit, Sarah. I think we both know who the idiot is here. It ain't you, that's for sure."

"Thanks, Mike," Sarah said, so soft and low Chappy could hardly hear her. "You're sweet. Always were. Mostly."

For a long moment, neither said a thing. Then Chappy smiled, sat up a little straighter in his stool and took a long drag on his cigarette. He leaned in.

"You remember that Parisienne I used to drive?" He got her laughing, peppering her with hot and heavy memories, got that mischievous smirk spreading across her red lips. After they'd finished their round, Sarah ran a hand up the inside of Chappy's thigh, dry fingers rough against his Levi's. When she'd reached the fork in his crotch, she stood, giving the warm bulge an insistent squeeze.

"Gonna hit the pisser," she said, running her fingers up his side and over his shoulder before leaning over to whisper hot boozy breath into his ear. "Don't go nowhere."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Not five minutes later, Chappy met Sarah by the front door. She sized him up with a sufficiently lusty smirk.

"You ready, Killer?"

"Goddamn right I am," he replied, as they walked out into the cold together. "Let's go."

"Keep your voice down," Sarah told him, taking his hand and leading him across the dark parking lot to the Mastersons' Ford Aerostar, which was parked in the shadows of the Borealis Motel. She'd fumbled with the keys at first, then slipped as she pulled the side door open. Chappy grabbed her around the waist, saving her from falling. That got them both laughing as they hustled into the back of the van, trying in vain to keep quiet. When they were in, Sarah slid the door closed, then lay back and slid out of her jeans.

She wasn't wearing panties.

"Damn things get in the way," she said, grabbing at Chappy's belt as he fumbled with the buckle Chappy gaped. "And turn up at the worst times."

Pants loosened, Chappy pulled Sarah's blouse open beneath her coat. Chappy laid feverish kisses across her chest, her scarred belly and her thighs before devoting his attention to her slippery lower lips as he kicked his own jeans off.

"Hurry up and stick it in," Sarah demanded. "I haven't been fucked right in years."

"Got a rubber?" Chappy grunted, wiping his wet mustache with the back of his hand.

"Just fucking do it already," Sarah commanded, gripping Chappy's hairy ass with her long, dry fingers. "Goddamn."

So they had. Quickly, the Aerostar was rocking in the moonlight as they grunted, groaned, panted and moaned together in much the same way they had in the back of Chappy's 1972 Parisienne half a life earlier. With the added years experience and the alcohol in their bloodstreams, the act no doubt lasted longer than the bulk of their youthful couplings combined. As Chappy felt himself about to blow and he made to pull out, Sarah bored down.

"Don't you dare stop now," she insisted, teeth clenched. She pulled him closer, deeper, bucking ever harder beneath him, panting for breath. "Don't. You. Fucking. Dare."

He did his damndest to hold on until Sarah was going so wild he figured she had to be coming or was about to. By then, he couldn't help it anyways. He felt himself go with a grunting spasm, then another and another before he was spent and gasping next to Sarah for air in the tight, tangy confines of the Aerostar's back end. Sarah reached back, arching her breasts up, and cracked a window, letting the cold night in.

"I need a smoke," she said, nipples hard, sweat cooling across her pale skin. She reached into the front for her jeans, pulled out a pack of smokes and lit one up. Chappy hiked up his drawers and shimmied back down into his Levi's. It took him a moment to find his shirt, scrunched up and jammed into a corner.

"Bum a drag?"

Sarah took a deep one before passing the smoke his way. He sucked it back, savoring the burn. He passed the cigarette back, taking a long last look at Sarah, lying there tits up and smirking.

"That was fun," he said, pulling his shirt on. He was under no illusions that what they'd done was anything more than a spitefuck, and he was fine with that. He'd do it again at the drop of a dime, though. Fuckin rights.

"It was OK," Sarah said, fixing Chappy with a look that meant business. "But I won't hear a goddamn word about it, from you or anyone else, ever again. Not once. Not ever. We clear?"

"Loud and clear, sugar."

"Good." Sarah leaned back onto her shoulders, pulling her ass back into her jeans. Then she reached over to open the sliding door. When the little yellow bulb lit up the interior of the van, what had gone down came into brief, ugly focus among the sweat stained upholstery, crushed candy bar wrappers and highway dirt. Chappy stepped out over Sarah's legs into the dark parking lot. "Sweet dreams, big boy."

## Barnburner

### Burke De Boer

"If I'd known it were an Aggie wedding, I never would of allowed it," Grandpa admonished.

He glared in the direction of the partial barn collapse. In its direction - not at it. He glared past it, over it, into the rimrock horizon, as if the expanse of reality were an easier sight to take in. He drank his coffee. Black. Folger's. Bought in bulk, brewed through a too-old Hamilton Beach, poured out of a carafe with its lid duct-taped to the glass to keep it from leaking. He drank it like this every morning.

Cynthia lingered on the porch beside him. She hadn't had a drink of coffee ever since she got to the ranch. In fact she hadn't had any since she read an article about caffeine tolerance and the psychoactive properties that you can unlock if you go cold turkey for a while. That was when she was still in Dallas, five months back.

They walked out to the barn.

The sunrise spilled its oil paint colors over the landscape. Being on the family land really made Cynthia feel like she was in a painting. Far away from civilization, plunged into splendor. She tried to hyperfocus on the colors of dawn, because the closer they got to the barn the more she felt like Fredo Corleone walking to the boat.

All this had been her idea after all. Turning the family ranch, the Rancho Real, into a wedding venue. *Where Love is Real*.

Grandpa was not a man who embraced change. From the decade of stains on the coffee pot (*WalMart's in Fort Stockton, that's just a long, L-O-N-G long drive*) to the decades plural of inbreeding cattle (*Not a whole lot can handle this heat out here. You got to trust the bloodline*), change was not his strong suit.

Neither was praise. When Cynthia lined the driveway with picturesque plants - agave bordering the dirt road, an overstory of sabal palm behind it - she had to find her own satisfaction. "Real" means royal in Spanish, so the Rancho Real as a wedding venue needed a grand entrance. She loaded the plants herself, hauled herself, strung a line to keep all of it straight and dug the prickly plants into the unforgiving ground herself. All the way she accepted the cuts and gashes.

The old man only grumbled. "You're really doin' it."

"Yeah - we are."

He grumbled again.

She painted the sun-bleached walls of the barn. The new color was black with white trim. This gave it a classy touch. She cleared out the inside, cluttered with years of junk. She replaced broken boards and sanded rough ends smooth. Dusted, washed, stained.

The barn had stood since the family first came to this no-water backwater of Texas. For over one hundred years it stood.

The first wedding passed without incident. As did the second. The checks were good. Grandpa wouldn't admit it with words, but he did raise his eyebrows. Cynthia had learned to find satisfaction in that as well.

It was a self-deprecating joke to be a single woman running a wedding venue. Especially out here in the wilderness of the Rio Grande's Big Bend. Her only daily company was this grumpy old codger stuck in his John Wayne ways. Sometimes she desperately missed her people in Dallas and wondered what the hell she was doing out here. Dad and all his siblings had left the Rancho Real for their own reasons, and they had many. But when the stars shined at night, she couldn't imagine what those reasons would be. She could envision a future out here. She just had to get it off the ground.

She pulled shattered timber out from the mess that was dashed across the rocky sand.

"Careful," Grandpa grumbled. "Don't want the rest of it to come down."

"Maybe that'd be cheaper - demo, build a new one."

"Watch your mouth. This barn is history."

"You said it."

She started a pile, and mentally called it a burn pile. She had learned from the old man not to say everything she intended and kept the designation to herself. He wasn't a man who lost his cool, even in the high noon heat, and when he grumbled "Ya don't got to voice every intention or opinion" it had been enough of a hint. She started another pile for the wood that seemed salvageable.

Grandpa skulked back to the house.

Maybe he was right that they shouldn't have hosted an Aggie wedding. She knew a wedding wasn't complete without the War Hymn. Bound in one another's arms, the Fightin' Texas Aggies would rock back and forth and sing about sawing varsity's horns off. It made the upper deck at Kyle Field sway. She should have known some hundred-year-old barn that had weathered dust storms and gully washers would be no match.

Insurance appraisers were going to come do what they do best: appraise. Whatever they found, she doubted the insured value of the barn as-is (or as-was) would cover the cost of building a new one. She was trapped in terrifying limbo between the prospect of paying for negligence, only getting a paltry sum of insurance, or maybe, somehow, everything working out.

That last one was a long shot.

She toiled with calloused hands over the splintered timber as the sun climbed. The heat raged upon her.

The inbred longhorns, mouths full of needles from the cactus they ate for water on the range, came in to watch. She scowled. Maybe the old man was right about them, too. Maybe they were the only ones who could handle it out here.

She surrendered to the heat and with her hands full of slivers went inside to brew coffee.

"It's easier if you wear gloves," Grandpa said.

"Be easier with help, too."

"This is your big deal, girlie, I ain't helpin' with jack."

She watched the coffee sputter into the duct-taped carafe.

"Been tryin' to tell you, cattle worked for a hundred years. Your grandma tried merino wool, we tried bighorn huntin' leases. Fads come and go, but long as people eat t-bones, cattle work."

"So what works better exactly," she asked, "Cattle or social security checks?" He lived month to month off the government cheddar and had sold the Real's last horses and the stock trailer too within the last few years.

“Dang it, it’s my land! If I wanted to sell any of my cows I would. I’m doin’ fine out here!”

“Yeah, on a fixed income. I want to keep this land in the family, if you don’t mind.”

“Why? The hell why! If you don’t wanna keep it the way it’s always been, what’s the damn point! Look what tryin’ to change got ya: you tore down the damn barn!”

He never swore in front of women, until he did.

She scooped ice out of the freezer into a big thermos and poured the coffee over it. The ice melted quickly, the whole cloud of its steam rising in her face. She dumped in a bunch more ice and screwed on the lid and left.

“Cynthia,” Grandpa said after her. He spoke with the tone of calling but not the volume. The screen door clattered into its wooden frame and her boots clapped down the porch steps without stopping.

He was partly jealous of her audacity. Maybe the difference was because she was a proper heir to the Rancho Real, while he had married into it. (He sometimes remembered that he was actually from Ohio and felt profound shame; it was for that reason he never allowed a radio to play “Pancho and Lefty” to completion in his presence.) But even then, she grew up in Dallas. A ten hour drive, assuming you don’t stop to stretch your legs but twice. And still, only her third time ever coming down in her life, she’d come to change everything. Without even *knowing*.

When Cynthia had rolled in behind the wheel of her Challenger, it was clear she intended to make good on all the hot air she’d blown about wedding venues over the phone.

It reminded him of when his mother-in-law died.

Rachael’s brother Dave had a hot-shit job as a yarder engineer those days, logging the piney woods in East Texas and West Louisiana. He’d missed the funeral. A week later, he came all that way with a flatbed trailer, and without a word to anybody started loading up the gun cabinet and the roll-top desk and anything else he could fit and ratchet down.

He got caught in the act when they came down from working the herd in the north pasture. It was springtime. Weaning season.

“Our fuckin’ folks never gave us shit when they were alive, I’m gonna take what’s owed now they’re fuckin’ dead,” Dave seethed. Cajun country had given him a colorful vocabulary. “Fuckin’ idiots didn’t leave no will so it’s up to us to figure it out, like always. And don’t you fuckin’ try to stop me, Pretty Boy.”

Despite Rachael’s pleas, the Ohio Pretty Boy did try to stop him. They kicked up dust in the driveway, the cloud growing as they beat each other, until the fighters were fully engulfed. Rachael yelled, the dogs barked, and the yearlings bawled.

When the kids got old enough to go off, he’d always assumed they’d be more Rachael than Dave. He’d always thought they’d be home shortly, spouses in tow, and they’d run a branding camp, wean yearlings, and haul them to sale in the fall. And yes, in some instances, saw the horns off. Just like they had every year, and would every year to come.

Until they didn’t.

Rachael told him they couldn’t expect anything, that everyone has a right to go their own way. And then she passed too.

Cynthia crawled between the agave and felt somehow comforted by their familiar serrated stabs. Her t-shirt was soaked in sweat. A spiked tip cut through the clinging sleeve fabric and sliced the skin to which it clung. Blood beaded out, dark against the bright Mavericks blue.

She sat beneath the cool shroud of the overstory, the agave serving as a prickle-barbed womb. She drank down the iced coffee in ravenous gulps.

A Mexican grackle with its great, showboating tail landed in the dusty driveway. Its bright yellow eyes beamed out in full stupidity from the oil slick colors of its plumage. To cool itself down the bird puffed up and opened its beak, making itself look like it was gobsmailed into stunned silence.

The caffeine gave Cynthia angelic jitters and spun a web of solutions inside her mind. She felt the assured confidence of inevitability. It came in waves. Her focus shifted between plans for the new barn, plans for the insurance, and just taking in the sight of this wacky grackle.

She looked at the grackle. The grackle looked back, beak still agape. "I'm right there with ya," she said.

Across the way, Grandpa wrenched a clean timber out of the burn pile and dragged it to the salvage.

## **Buster's Bored**

**John Weagly**

"Would you please be quiet?" I said.

"Fuck off! Who made you the king of the movie theater?"

I was supposed to be wrestling at the Foard County Fair. Instead, I was about to come to blows with some Texan who couldn't keep his mouth shut.

I settled into my seat, trying to convince myself that violence wasn't the answer, even though I thought people that talked during movies should have their lips sewn shut and their heads dipped in lemon juice.

It was late-July. I was in a small, bleak Texas town made of dust, dirt and hardscrabble cement. It was hot – one-hundred-and-two degrees with a heat index of over a-hundred-and-ten. I was supposed to be doing a show for Cowtown Championship Wrestling, but our outdoor performance was cancelled over concern for the high temperatures. I still had another match at the Fair the next day, meaning I couldn't leave, so I decided to see if there was anything to do in this whistle-stop. My two options were a pool hall or The Royal Movie Theatre. I wasn't very good at pool, so I decided on the Royal. The theater was having a retrospective of some kind and the picture showing was *Falling From Grace*, a 1992 movie that I'd never heard of directed by and starring John Mellencamp.

My cinema adversary had started right after the opening credits. Pointing out to his buddy stuff like, "That's Johnny Cougar's former guitar player Larry Crane vaccinatin' those chickens" and "Oh, cool, Sheriff Lobo" and "Ha! 'Some whore from Bedford.' Bedford's a town in Indiana." I'd started out with a couple of dirty looks and moved up to "Shhhh!" When those approaches didn't have any effect, I turned around and made my polite request.

My appeal had the opposite effect of what I'd intended.

"That's the singer John Prine, did you know that your majesty?" Now the yahoo was making comments directly to me. "Look at that cage. You ever been put in a cage, you gorilla?"

The springs in my seat were digging into hind end and I could smell the mildew in the fabric that barely covered them. I wasn't enjoying the movie, mainly because I

wasn't enjoying the company. I got up and walked up the aisle to the exit, purposefully ignoring the loudmouth. "Bye-bye Princess Snowflake," he called after me as I left the theater.

Not knowing what else to do, and feeling tedium trying to envelope the day, I gave the pool hall a try. It was a small place, only four pool tables and an area in the front with a concession counter and a couple of bar tables, pale green walls with paint doing its best not to chip off and not succeeding. I went in and found out the man behind the concession stand was a fan of independent wrestling. He gave me a Diet Coke on the house, after he established that I was the one and only Buster Bash. Johnny Cash's "Sunday Morning Coming Down" was playing on a CD player on top of the refrigerator. I thanked him and found a table.

It was hot and sticky inside, a small air conditioner making a lot of noise but not doing much else. I played around on the felt for an hour, the sound of clacking balls and the establishment's baked-in stink of cigar smoke and chalk distracting me from my apathy. I had an okay time, but it reminded me I wasn't anywhere close to being a shark.

I had three balls left on my fourth game when my movie rival came strutting in. He joked for a minute with the guy behind the counter, then surveyed the room. His eyes locked on me, and he smiled.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Movie!"

I ignored him and tried to knock the two ball into the side pocket, failing miserably.

"You got a problem with me?"

I banked the seven ball into a corner pocket, making it almost look like I knew what I was doing. The heat and closeness of the room made sweat trickle down my sides.

"Hey! I'm talking to you, boy!"

I'm a big guy, seven-feet tall and three-hundred pounds, one of the many reasons I chose a career as a professional wrestler. Sometimes people see a specimen like me as an opportunity to prove their toughness. This was one of those times.

I put my pool cue back on the wall and walked toward the door. The Johnny Cash CD had progressed to "Big River." Just before I reached him, Mr. Talky-Talk stepped in front

of me. Still not saying anything, I tried to go around him, but he moved to block me everywhere I went.

"Namby-pamby coward," he said.

I don't have an ego, I'm not going to get into it with someone just because they call me a name. But namby-pamby? Who says that? This moron was getting on my last nerve.

I looked him square in the eyes and smiled. He smiled back. I brought my knee up quickly and, with my height, caught him in the stomach. As he exhaled in pain, I wrapped my hands around his head and threw him out of the way, enjoying the feeling of dominance. He landed on the floor on his side, clutching his gut.

I walked over to him and, as calmly as possible, said, "You shouldn't talk during movies. It bothers people." Then I walked out into the hot street and headed toward my hotel, giving up on any kind of pleasant distraction.

## Subsidence

Tom Funk

“Just even it up on the sides and block it in the back, Lacey,” I told the petite, stiletto wearin’ woman cuttin’ my hair. Lacey was so short she couldn’t stretch across my chest to get to the opposite side of my head without leaning fully into me, which I didn’t mind, best sex I’d had since Melinda left me.

And she might have been short in stature but she sure wasn’t short on words. If it wasn’t for the fact that I don’t like spending time searching for barbers, I might be looking for somebody who knew how to just shut up and cut hair. But Lacey’s pretty good at what she does, other than the motor-mouth. Today she was in rare form.

“I don’t wanta open up an old wound,” she started, “but I heard Billy’s insurance company had some investigator dude snoopin’ ‘round, asking questions about the old mine again. Ain’t they paid off on that yet? Seems like by now they woulda settled up, what’s it been 3 years now?”

My first thought was if you don’t wanta open an old wound, then don’t. But I guess I’m tolerant enough to just take that kinda crap, cause that’s what I did. “It’ll be three years this December,” I finally mumbled.

“I don’t understand why they take so long, they gotta know it just makes the pain linger,” Lacey offered.

Truth was she was pretty much right on target. It had been a long time since my ex-wife died falling into the gaping hole that opened under the construction trailer she and her boyfriend visited every Tuesday night out in the country by Salt Creek. It sat atop the old coal mine. I mostly dealt with it by not dealing with it, but folks like Lacey were not gonna let me just move along.

And now I guess the Bona Fide Fire and Casualty Company wasn’t gonna let me do that either. I’d talked to Harry Franks, their investigator, til I politely asked him to leave a year and a half ago. When he stopped asking questions about Melinda and her weekly nighttime adventures and started asking me what I was doin’ about it, I didn’t like the insinuation and told him he could find his own way out.

Truth is I did spend a lot of time runnin’ with Bo Embry and his messed-up brother Red down in the old mine when I was a kid. That was before the state ordered them

to seal up the entrance and posted all those No Trespassing signs. But that’s about the last time I’d been anywhere near Billy Downs’ trailer.

To me, seemed pretty clear if you insure somebody for mine subsidence, and mine subsidence kills your girlfriend and puts you in the hospital with a fractured spine and in a neck brace for a year then they ought to pay your bills. But Bona Fide had different ideas. They went lookin’ for somebody else to blame, which I guess is what insurance companies do.

“You’re gettin’ a little thin up here on top, I can sell ya some of this volumizer shampoo, my Henry really likes it?” Lacey chirped.

I didn’t hear a word of that, I was lost in what Bona Fide was doing snoopin’ around again. Damn investigators can’t leave people be. Lacey kept yammerin’ on, said something about how I probably oughta go talk to somebody about all this.

“After my friend Cheryl woke up to her dead husband not movin’ she couldn’t go back into that bedroom for months ‘til she went to see a counselor,” Lacey said. “Y’all needta realize there’s stuff below the surface of us that sometimes we don’t even realize is there that’s messin’ us up. That’s why we got counselors, some of them good at what they do! All I know is it saved Cheryl a buncha money on motel bills, she was tired of livin’ outta that room when her house was sittin’ there empty, but she just couldn’t go back without help!”

I guess my poker face wasn’t as straight as I thought it was. Lacey could tell the whole thing was bothering me. She moved on to other topics, but I was stuck on what that investigator was up to. About the time I was getting my wallet out to pay, my phone started vibrating. Pulling it out of my back pocket, I saw I had a text from Red Embry. Great, I thought, what the hell does he want?

Red was my best friend Bo’s little brother. Bo and I had been like two brothers from different mothers growin’ up. We lived two blocks apart and he spent as much time inside my folk’s house as he did his own. Red was two years younger and, like I said, messed up in a big way. He was skinny as a rail and had a lot of freckles and a stock of red curly hair that was the source of his nickname. Even as ten-year-olds we knew there was something not right about him. One day at the mall I was tagging along with Bo and the rest of the Embrys. It was the Saturday before

Easter, and the Easter bunny was there handing out chocolate eggs. Red took one look at him and bolted in the opposite direction. Old man Embry just rolled his eyes and started walking in the direction he ran off to. We didn't see either of them for the rest of the day. Bo told me later they found him in the bathroom of the Wendy's down the street and it took both Mr. and Mrs. Embry and the store manager to pull him off the john and get him home. I guess they call it "OCD." He gets stuck on something and can't let it go. People in animal costumes were real and freaked him out. You could tell him anything and he'd believe it.

In high school we told him you could get high from snorting C&H Sugar cause it was laced with cocaine and heroin. Next thing we knew he was in his mom's kitchen cabinet, getting the sugar bowl out and making lines on the kitchen table!

The tale he got stuck on the longest was when Bo told em there was gold buried in the old coal mine. I was in on it too. He liked to tag along with us when we went out cruisin' El Dorado, the main drag downtown. It just ain't cool to have your little brother in the back seat when you're trying to impress the chicks. So Bo took this old 'treasure map' he had from a birthday party that was yellowed and looked like it was it was a couple hundred years old. We told Red we'd found it down there at the mine and that the mine was originally a gold mine before they found coal in it. There was still some gold left nobody knew about other than the pirates that left it there. Bo drew some lines on the back that sorta followed the path of the mine as we remembered it. He marked a spot with a big red "X" where the gold was and gave it to Red. His eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. He was off to the mine and we got to cruise uninterrupted. Except it didn't stop for Red that day. He didn't find any gold, but he was right back the next day looking again.

Red was stuck. Like I said, once he put his mind to somethin' he couldn't get it off. He came up missin' so much that his mom demanded to know where he was going every day after school. After a week or so, his story that he was at his buddy P.J.s wasn't matchin' up with all the coal dust on his clothes. He showed his mom the map and told the truth. All of us was grounded for a long time.

I took a long sigh and hit the green phone icon on my screen. "Hee--yellow," I drawled, repeatin' the signature greeting I had used with the Embrys for nearly 30 years.

"Bosco," Red replied using the nickname his brother had given me in the 5th grade. "Some cop wants to talk to me about Billy and Melinda gettin' killed when they fell down that hole.... what should I do?"

"You sure it's a cop?" I asked.

"Well, he said he's an investigator, ain't that a cop?"

"Could be, but I heard Billy's insurance company sent somebody out to investigate his claim, I'm thinkin' that's who called you. And don't forget Billy's still alive, 'member?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," Red admitted. A long pause followed. "What should I do?" he repeated.

"I dunno, Red, not sure what they're up to after all this time. What'd Bo say?"

"He said I should talk to you, you know more about it than he does."

Great, I thought, thanks a lot, Bo. I didn't see why Bona Fide would want to talk to Red about anything. He rarely had any contact with Melinda, she couldn't stand him. I didn't see him that much anymore since Bo had moved away. He still lived in town, worked as a roofer or farm hand or whatever let him pick up a few bucks, but our paths really hadn't crossed since Bo left town 6-7 years ago.

"I suppose you should talk to 'em,'" I offered. "Not sure what they're gonna want from ya, but I suspect it's about the old mine."

"I can't tell 'em much," Red stated, "all I know is Melinda shouldn't been out there with Billy, Bosco, she just got what was comin' to her, God don't put up with cheaters like that."

"Now, Red, don't be so hard on her, I've told ya she had a lot goin' on, it ain't up ta you'ta judge. I got nothin' to hide, so you kin tell that guy whatever he needs to know, and I doubt you're gonna answer a whole lot for him.

Red dropped his voice low and whispered, "You don't think they caught wind that they's gold down there do ya?"

"Hell, no," I gruffed, "how many times I gotta tell ya there ain't no gold down there Red? Bo and I made that up, 'member?"

Red sighed real loud. "Yeah, that's what you said." There was a pause. "Yeah," he continued, "never did find nothin' down there. But that map wasn't drawn real good, and they's little nooks and crannies down there the map didn't show."

I shook my head, "Red...there ain't nothin' down there!"

"You said that," he fired back. Then he got real quiet, like he was holding back and wasn't sure whether he wanted to say somethin'. "Bosco, I got somethin' I need ta tell ya, but not on the phone..."

"Ok...", I blurted, not really knowin' what else to say.

"Kin you meet up with me down at Shirley's Tap, ... I wanna tell ya today, if you got the time."

"Sure," I said, "I don't gotta be at work til four, how 'bout 2 this afternoon."

"Well, kin we do it now? I got stuff I gotta do this afternoon."

What you need to know about Red is that he ain't never in a hurry, if his boss tells him to be somewhere at 2, he'll wander in 'bout 20 after and think he's early, so I knew he was nervous. Truth was, he was makin' me kinda nervous.

"Alright, Red, I'll see ya there," I finished. I clicked off the phone and noticed Lacy was waiting to tell me something.

"Here's your 'pointment card," Lacey said, offering the cardboard to me. "Don't forget to call that counselor, Freddy, it's gonna save ya a lotta grief."

I took the card, grunted "ok," and headed out the door wondering what Red had on his mind.

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Shirley's Tap was a redneck biker joint out on Route 29. Normally I avoided it and I couldn't imagine Red bein' a regular in there, but when I had opened the front door and recovered from the blast of Metallica that polluted my eardrums, I seen him sittin' by himself at a booth near the john.

Soon as I sat down he apologized for the location. "I figured weren't nobody else gonna hear what we was sayin' in here", he explained.

I nodded, and waited for him to speak, hoping it was gonna be short and we could get outta Shirley's before I went deaf or got beat up.

Red was fidgetin' around and not lookin' straight at me. "I been gettin' some weird phone calls," he started. "The phone says "unknown caller" and this dude comes on talkin like a pirate ... ya know.. calls me "Matey" and does a lot a "arrgh.. and shiver me timbers"and that kinda crap. Then he starts talkin' bout the gold he left buried down in the old mine.."

I rolled my eyes big 'n cut 'em off; "Red, you makin' this up?, I told ya 'til I'm sick of it , they ain't no gold in that mine!"

"Damn , Bosco I'm tellin" the truth!"

"Whatever..," was all I could think to say.

He glared back at me, shakin' his head like he found it hard to think I would take his pirate talk any less than serious. "So this dude tells me I ain't lookin' in the right place down there. I ain't gonna find the gold 'til I push the walls back, cause its nowhere you can see with a flashlight. Says, it in the old north shaft, which I know'd they closed off after that ceilin' collapsed on them two miners back in '75. I thought the dude was pullin' my leg, 'til he said that. Ain't too many folks knows about that less'n theys from around here, ya know what I mean?"

I just buried my head in my hands. It was twenty years on since Bo give him that map and he was still stuck on it.

I finally pulled my head up and looked Red in the eye. 'Red, you gotta get over this, now yer hearin' pirates talk to you about gold that don't exist, you need to get some help before you do somethin' stupid."

"Bosco, that voice was real, just as real as what I'm hearin' you say right now! And it's too late to keep from doin' somethin' stupid," he whispered, leanin' into the middle of the table."

I leaned in too, "Red!" I replied, trying not to shout, "what the hell you talkin' 'bout,... what'd you do?"

Red sighed deeply and looked down at the floor, "That pirate dude said I was gonna need some help getting through the wall, next mornin' when I woke up, they was five sticks of dynamite sittin' on my back porch, with a note sayin' "Drill a hole in the brick, and place it well, light thee the fuse and run like hell! Good luck me hardy!"

I could feel my jaw droppin', goin' to the worst possible take on what Red was sayin.'

"Red, tell me you didn't do what I think you're tryin' to tell me you done?"

"Wish, I could, but I just keep thinkin' 'bout all the gold behind that wall, and I just got greedy I guess. What I ain't said yet was that was three years ago. I started gettin' these calls three years ago and that dynamite showed up three years ago....see Bosco, I blew that wall the night that hole opened up and took Billy and Melinda down it.... I been livin' with that ever since, but now it seems like I ain't gonna be able to keep it in n'more, I'm 'fraid that insurance fella knows 'bout it. "I'm sorry Bosco", he continued shaking, "didn't mean to kill nobody, but I gotta think that hole opened up 'cause of me."

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Not sure why, but my first thought after Red dropped that bomb was he needed to talk to a lawyer before he said anything to the insurance snoop. I guess I shoulda been all riled up about him lightin' up explosives in the mineshaft, but I was thinkin' more 'bout what the effect of that was on him and maybe me than I was on the chance it mighta been him that sent my Melinda to her early grave. And I knew that Billy Downs wasn't the type that would just let bygones be bygones if he heard anything about Red's adventures in dynamite. Billy was left pretty gimpy by that fall, but I knew he still owned a collection of deer rifles and was a pretty fair shot. Red needed some counseling of a legal nature before he opened up to anybody about dynamite.

Red said he had a cousin that worked in a lawyer's office the next county over from us. I told him he better give his cousin a call. He nodded and excused himself, said he was gonna go call her. As he pulled himself outta that booth he paused and grabbed me by the top of the shoulder.

"You gonna be o.k., Bosco? He asked, staring into my eyes gape mouthed.

I crinkled a grin at him and slid my butt down a bit off the seat, tippin' up my ball cap so he could better view my eyes. "I dunno," I mumbled, "just keep your mouth shut and don't go listenin' to any more pirates."

"You can count on that Bosco," he said, "maybe you should go talk ta somebody ya know, you gotta be carryin' alot under the surface, I'm sorry I've caused ya pain, last thing I ever wanted ta do y'know?"

"Ok, Red, you take care too," was all I could think to say.

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I got home about an hour later, Shirley's is only ten minutes from my house, but I felt the need to take a drive out to Salt Creek where that sinkhole usta be. The County had brought in some fill dirt and in their usual half assed way had covered it up. There was still a depression in the surface a good four or five feet below the rest of the ground around it. They'd thrown some grass seed on top of it and Melinda's girlfriends had put up a fencepost cross as a memorial in the middle of it. Some folks had planted flowers and candles around that when it first happened. I had been out there a few times but didn't make a habit of it, thinkin' I might run into Billy out there, which was the last thing I wanted. Melinda had her gravestone in the cemetery on the other side of town and that's where I paid respects. There wasn't much left of the fencepost cross. The nails was rusty and the crossarm just kinda hung loose on 'em. I had my toolbox in the back of the truck, but I didn't see the use of tryin' to fix it, I figured nature would take its course eventually anyhow.

I was walkin' back to the truck when I felt the phone vibratin' in my back pocket. I pulled it out and saw Harry Franks name at the top of the screen. "What the hell?" I said to myself. I'd forgotten to take his name out of my contacts and it had been a year and a half since I'd ask him to show himself outta my house, so I was sorta shocked they would still want him to try talkin' to me.

"What?" was all I could think to say.

"This Fred Traynor?" squawked the voice on the other end.

"You know it is Franks, what's so important that you're in my face again," I gruffed back at him.

"Mr. Traynor, I hate to bother you again, but there's been some new development's in Billy Downs' claim on his

mine subsidence policy, I've got something I need to show you, if I could just have a few minutes of your time, I'll let you name the place and time."

"My place, in twenty minutes, you know where it is, I ain't moved."

Harry Franks pulled into my driveway in his company owned Volvo sedan right on time. He was the same nerdy lookin' geek I remembered kickin' out of my house a year and a half ago. He was wearin' some high water khakis with tennis shoes and a button down shirt with a pocket protector that reminded me of what my high school math teacher wore to class twenty five years ago, 'cept he carried way more pens in that pocket than my math teacher ever did.

He carried a briefcase of the fake alligator skin variety and paced up the driveway like he was goin' to a fire. I opened the door and got outta his way. He braked long enough to spit out "May I?" as he approached the front stoop. I extended my arm in the direction of my livin' room and took a step back.

Soon as he sat down he flipped the locks on his case and pulled out a one page piece of letterhead.

His gaze went back to the piece of letterhead. "Back on the date of the claim event, were you working for a temporary employment placement firm called Job Finder, Inc. ?

"Mighta been, I think I was with them for a few months and they found me a job or two," I said.

"Was one of those jobs with a company called Gillette Sand and Gravel over in Gillette County?" He continued.

"Yeah, I worked there for a while 'bout two or three years ago, why?"

"Did the Sand and Gravel firm mine limestone out of quarry on their main plant site over in Gillette?"

"Yeah, they do but what's that gotta do with this claim?" I insisted.

"How'd that job end for you Mr. Traynor?"

"Well, they didn't like my work I guess, 'cause they let me go, but damn Harry how's that got anything to do with what killed my wife?"

Franks glared at me and pulled a pair of reading glasses out of his pocket protector. "Let me read this letter from the Human Resources Department of Gillette to your supervisor at Job Finder, Inc." He cleared his throat and pulled the letter up close to his face.

"Given Mr. Traynor's failure to provide an adequate explanation for the disappearance of the dynamite from the storage facility that he was working in as the sole employee with access on the date of its disappearance, we have no other option other than to terminate his employment with our concern and to bar him from further entry onto our property..."

"Does that sound familiar to you, Mr. Traynor?"

"Uh...yeah, I guess it does," was all I could think to say.

## Five-Dollar Bill

Julia Nunnally Duncan

Jimmy liked his coffee black.

In the mornings, he would come by my house for a cup. If the coffee was too hot, he asked me to add an ice cube to cool it down.

“My grandpa used to pour his coffee into a saucer to cool it,” I said as I dropped an ice cube into his cup.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, which was usually how Jimmy answered me—“Yes, ma’am” or “No, ma’am.”

Jimmy’s schooling had been brief. I remembered riding on the school bus with him for a year or so, but then the teachers gave up on him, and he stayed home while the rest of us kids in the neighborhood spent our days at school.

When Jimmy was a teenager, he got a job as an attendant at a gas station within walking distance of our street.

“Fill ‘er up, Jimbo,” a customer would say, “and clean my windshield while you’re at it.” Jimmy especially enjoyed cleaning windshields, spraying and wiping the glass till it was crystal clear. He was proud of his work and the few dollars he took home at the end of the week.

Jimmy was as good-natured a person as you could find. But he had a temper.

One evening he had been sitting on a neighbor’s front porch, smoking cigarettes and watching the world go by. He was in no hurry to leave.

“You better head on home now, Jimmy,” the man coaxed, knowing it was near suppertime.

“Okay, I go home!” Jimmy said, his feelings hurt and his blue eyes glaring. And on the way out of the man’s yard, he kicked a tree stump in defiance. Then he headed home, limping and muttering angrily that he wouldn’t be back.

But the next day, like clockwork, Jimmy made a beeline to the neighbor’s house, sitting and smoking with him on the front porch.

In time, Jimmy stopped working at the gas station. The full-service pumps turned into self-service ones, and Jimmy wasn’t needed anymore.

“Do you miss working, Jimmy?” I asked him one day over a cup of coffee.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Each year on a particular summer day, Jimmy walked around our block announcing his birthday to all the neighbors.

“How old are you now, Jimmy?” I asked on one of these days as I handed him a five-dollar bill, the gift he wanted.

“I seventeen,” he said, as he would say every year.

“That’s a good age,” I said, which was true—I wished I were seventeen again, instead of forty-something.

As the years passed, Jimmy’s health declined, and he began staying inside his house more. I would occasionally see him standing behind his front screen door, wearing pajamas and bedroom slippers. I waved at him, and he waved back, grinning.

One day I stopped by and said, “I miss you coming down for coffee, Jimmy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“You remember when we used to play hide-and-seek in your yard?” I asked, recalling summer evenings when the neighborhood kids gathered in one yard or another to play games.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

One day in December, a week before Christmas, the neighbor who had once told Jimmy to go home—Jimmy’s best friend—told me, “If you want to see Jimmy again, you better go now. They’re not expecting him to live. His heart’s failing.”

I went right away. Jimmy sat in his living room in a wheelchair, breathing oxygen through a nasal cannula. His family had gathered around him, and in a corner of

the room, a Christmas tree stood, its colored lights twinkling. During my visit, the conversation was cheerful, and everyone wore a happy face for Jimmy, though we all knew how grave his condition was.

"Are you looking forward to Santa Claus coming?" I asked him, knowing he still believed in Santa Claus.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

I handed him a Christmas card with a ten-dollar bill inside. I gave him a little extra money this time, thinking it would please him. Later, however, I realized he probably was disappointed getting something other than the expected five-dollar bill.

Jimmy lived to see Christmas and even a Santa Claus whom his family arranged to come visit him at home. But he didn't live to see the New Year. I cried when I heard the news, grieving more than I even imagined I would. Jimmy had been a friend for decades, and his innocence made his passing all the more poignant. Our street would never be the same without him.

At the funeral home, as I stood at Jimmy's casket, I noticed the mementos his family had placed alongside his body: a teddy bear, a coloring book and crayons, and a five-dollar bill.

My heart heavy, I thought, *Jimmy, I'll sure miss you. Will you miss me, too?*

*Yes, ma'am, I knew he would answer if he could.*

## Varieties of Religious Experience

Chris Daly

I had a Bay Area feeling when encountering the group outside the club, though we didn't really talk until we got inside the bar, myself after paying admission to a young, gifted and formal door guy, the three of them by way of the kitchen.

"We're in the biz," explained Roni. Her friends, a couple named Joan and Richard, nodded while looking around. He was a head taller than most, we were all in the aisle between the bar stools and the tables, the stage was across the way. The fairly immortal double-bill that had gotten me on the freeway on Saturday night was Horace Silver and Gerald Wilson, but preceding them was an older comedian, somewhat vain and stylish and long-winded, when not succinct and crude and personally offensive about "dating ugly", who closed with a serious, sentimental poem about the "funny man".

"What biz is that?"

"The restaurant biz," said Roni, putting a hand on my arm to tell me about it. Between sets we were being jostled continually by a river of very well-dressed people. "Basically it's a breakfast joint. Joan and I do everything ourselves. Richard doesn't get up in the morning."

"Who's going to be minding the store while you're down here?"

"Nobody. We locked up early today and made it down in nine hours."

"How's business?"

"All right."

"What brings you to town?"

"Just checking things out. We're open to opportunities."

"I'm in business, too. I'm embarrassed to say what kind."

"Don't be embarrassed," said Roni the San Franciscan. "Tell me what it is. Is it porn? Richard, this clean-cut guy makes porn films."

"Right on, guy," said Richard, shaking me hand for the second time.

"Is there good money in that?" asked Joan.

"Probably is. But my business is tanning."

"What?" Roni and Joan were alternating questions.

"I have a tanning store in the San Fernando Valley."

"So why is that embarrassing?"

"Because," I lowered my voice, "we're the only people in this room who aren't black."

"So? I don't understand why that would be embarrassing."

"Why is anything embarrassing? It just is."

"How's business?"

"It's competitive. They all tan up there. Mostly a younger crowd."

"So why don't you have a tan?"

"Don't feel like it. Besides, it's bad for you."

"It doesn't bother you to have a business that's bad for people?"

"No. You think this stuff we're drinking is good for you? Like liquor, tanning is just another way to facilitate interesting types of activity."

"So let me ask again: why don't you have a tan?"

"Good question. Richard, these women have a great nice cop, mean cop."

Horace's band was in the process of getting it together on stage.

"I've copped a bust or two," admitted Richard, who nodded to two or three people whenever he spoke. Twice he'd already disappeared on social or scouting missions. At their spot along the bar the three of them had established a certain presence. The people who responded to them verbally tended to be smooth. In some situations liberation can come across as disrespect, at times

they crossed the line of familiarity and got looks for it. They were lucky that two of them were women.

I don't embarrass that easily, but I noticed that I was the only one in the room (including my new friends from up north) wearing brown. Good thing I had a nice head on from a little pot, some booze. Traveling alone is never all bad.

Richard rolled his eyes, nodded at me and three other people.

Roni had her hand on my arm again.

"Be right back," she said, and just before the music started she was. "Where are your friends tonight?"

"I don't have any."

"Don't say that. It'll come true."

"It already has."

"You live in the Valley?"

"No. Long Beach. The other way. Where are you all staying?"

"As of right now, our car."

Not long after the music kicked off there was a commotion on our flank as some fundamental type Muslims, an elder with four male and four female specimens, immaculate to the detail, took their seats, the men with African semi-tall cylindrical caps (somewhat Masonic, actually) in front of them on two or three tables where they sat in a row with their backs to the row of four women, which scandalized Roni and Joan, but definitely added something to the room.

Horace Silver was in fine, funky, live, intense form, evoking the island life and cutting through or around all interruptions, hunched over on the piano bench till he sweated thorough his shirt. His two horn players looked conservative and intellectual but you knew they could blow their disciplined asses off and they did.

After the set the two ladies and I finally got seats at the bar, with Richard still standing along with a somewhat regular individual who held up the white person's tradition of the

night of dressing with absolutely no style. Ignore does not describe the attitude towards us of the elder Muslim, who cruised freely, like a visiting dignitary.

Roni checked out the new guy Richard had befriended and turned to me.

“So what do you really do?”

“A little writing.”

“What do you write?”

“Porn movies.”

“No, you don’t. You like to dodge the truth.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m being invaded.”

“What’s that like?”

“Sometimes it’s okay. What’s it like to be on the march?”

“It’s a nice change.”

“Is it a change?”

“Are you psychic?”

“Psychotic?”

“I know you’re not that. Psychotics are not inhibited.”

“I thought that was the key ingredient.”

“It’s not.”

“What is?”

“Their mothers.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

“Yes, you can. You argue with everything.”

“That’s a charge that cannot be responded to.”

“Because it’s true. I know why I like you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m just like you.”

She had her hand on my arm again, but Richard pulled her into another conversation, which included the regular guy, who mentioned being from some part of LA. I headed to the bathroom for a sip from my secret bottle and a toke in the stall. I was there for the sounds but I was moving into intox zone two, where shit happens. Was there any way to detach Roni? Probably not. Did I want to bring the three of them back to my small apartment? Nah. Was the fucking music great? Yes, it was. How many opportunities had come my way lately? Not many. Was I stared at when I emerged from the stall? You tell me.

The conversation was general when I got back, and included everyone. Roni and Joan had not gotten over the Muslim women with their underling / princess routine so when the four of them went to the ladies room Roni followed to lay some shit on them. I don’t know what happened in there but it didn’t take long before Roni was back with her mouth for once clamped very fucking shut.

A little later everyone declined to join me at one of the tables opened up front, but I was tired of being on display at the bar and behind the main line of departure so I took it myself, and sat there with eyes half closed while the band tuned up.

Around the twenty-fifth thing I noticed about the Gerald Wilson orchestra of the decade was that the regular Joe from the bar and some part of town was third from the left in the trumpet section. He stood to take the briefest of solos, and over at a table near there, sitting alone, was Roni.

On the way out I mumbled drunken compliments to the maestro, who has such a fine personal style of writing, and who paused in the middle of a good, short, late set to speak with humorous respect about the goddess Calafia, devourer of men, after whom one of his tunes and our state was named.

## Treasure Hunter

Chris George

Everything is dead here, or close to it. Even the RV won't start now. David said the thing would die before I got too far, and he was right, like always. I hadn't even escaped the county line before the thing cramped up on me. I'd parked it in a gravel runoff on some country road before it finally gave in. That was almost a month ago now. Rumor is David's still trying to catch my scent and hunt me down, but he hasn't found me yet.

I lay on my lumpy mattress, staring into a stain on the ceiling, round and void. A scooped out blackness peeking through an ashy and tattered socket. It's hot. I feel like I've fallen into another hole somewhere, a hole in my head. A dark spot. Like the one David drew around my eye before I left him. It still hasn't healed. It is his curse on me, his brand.

For a moment, I think about calling David. It's just a glimpse of a thought. To get him to come out and fix the RV for good so I can finally get away. Head out to Sulfur Springs where a cousin lives. We've never met, but she's been nice to me on the internet. But it wouldn't work that way. He'd trap me in his jaws again if he found me. I chase this thought until something black drips down onto my face from the ceiling, then I get up.

The sun is kicking up dust next to the road. I pour some coffee and it's cold, hardly coffee at all. Mostly water. I take a sip then spit out the window. I drink the rest of the OJ I've been saving in the back of the mini fridge. It's warm. The fridge is lifeless now.

I'm supposed to clean Gay's house today. It's the only consistent gig I have anymore. I lost most of my work after David's DUI. Stopped making it out to the rich folks' homes out in Rockwall because I was driving him all over the flatlands for his odd jobs that hardly paid. Gay is the only local loyal enough or dumb enough to keep me around. She lives way up highway 255. It would take a full day of walking to get there from here.

I find my phone under my pillow. Its face shattered and webbed. Little crooked rainbows play atop the numbers and words. I run my finger up and down my contacts, trying to find anyone with a car. I don't want to walk today. The phone warns me that it will die soon, so I call Nadine. The last time I called her we ended up stuck next

to a rotten barbed wire fence by the deer lease, both of us stripped down to our bras after getting robbed by tweakers. She's trouble, but trouble ain't always bad.

"Yello," she says through a wall of static.

"Hey girl, what you doing?"

"Picking up Momma's prescriptions. Got a little extra, if you're interested."

"You got time for me today?"

"Maybe, what you got?"

"Not much, gotta clean a house, but after I'm free."

She grunts.

"Drop me off and when I'm done we'll get into something."

The phone dies before she can reply. I abandon it in the bed and pack my things.

I wait by the road. A few trucks drive by and flash in the barrenness, flickers of life, before smudging into nothing in the distance. I got a bucket with me, hung around my ashy arms, overflowing with cleaning product bottles filled with water and dish soap. The barbed wire fence across the road has given up and fallen over in a tangle, puffed up like an untrimmed bush against the sky where a dying tree yellows the horizon. Nadine pulls into the ditch off the road. Her car leans so much on the incline that I'm afraid it might flip.

"Get in, gotta get these to Momma," she yells, holding a large prescription bag.

I get in slowly, supporting myself with my leg out the open door. The angle is so severe that I'll fall out if I'm not buckled. I slam the door shut quick before I tumble away.

"You always been slow, Baby," Nadine says. She pulls back onto the road right in front of a big red truck with bull horns strapped to the grill. The truck honks then speeds around us. A big shadow of a man flips us off as he speeds away.

"These people round here are like a bunch of fucking reptiles. No thought at all," Nadine says.

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Gay has lost her memory. She wanders around the house aimlessly, often calling for help from another room. This all happened so quickly, a matter of weeks. Dale is following her around like he might an infant. His hands hover at her hips as if she will teeter and fall.

"Help!" she yelps.

"I'm right here, Gaynor!" Dale yells back.

I scrub at the dark spots on the tiles in the shower. How did they get so filthy? They're so dark that I can almost see myself in them. My whole body curled up inside, like a hiding place.

The house has fallen apart. Laundry hangs like ghosts from the milky trim around the doorways. There's a broken glass bottle in a dank room I've never been in. Piles of magazines litter the floors. Outside, some mean looking dogs are humping the air next to Booney, Dale and Gay's blonde Labrador. Where'd these mutts come from?

Dale looks sick. He's thin now. Gaunt. His beard white where it had just been the pale red of autumn. I swear I see him crying in a dark corner, but then he's back behind Gay, his hands guiding her denimed hips through the kitchen.

I take a break and smoke out back. The fighting cocks next door screech along to loud country music.

"Have you seen my daughter?" Gay asks from an open window.

"No m'am, I can't say I have."

"She's dead, Gaynor!" Dale yells from behind her. "I told you before that she's dead!"

These people appear as visions of my own future in this place, stuck running through a series of seasons planted in the same rancid soil. My mother's mind went, too, and she was young, in her fifties. Maybe she was older. We didn't talk much. And sometimes I think I can feel that haze peering in at my wandering thoughts from an empty corner of my brain, waiting to spread like cancer to the grey trenches.

I use a lot of the brown water and scrub the floors. The kitchen is too small. An error made during a renovation. Dale tells me the story every time I come.

"The bar is 13 inches too long, exactly 13 inches," he says behind me. "Imagine that 13 inches gone, opened up. Our lives would be so different."

I run the mop's wild hair up and down, hoping to see my reflection in the white tile, a sign of my efforts, but that never happens, and it doesn't today either. I put the mop back into the blackened water, my face monstrous in the ripples. Everything smells like faded fake lemon.

"Help me, won't you, Baby," Gay says to me, then walks around a corner.

I leave the mop propped against the counter and follow her to the garage. She stands in front of a giant safe, taller than she is. It's grey and imposing like a monolith.

"Open this door," she says.

"I don't know the code."

"I don't either. It's always unlocked."

I pull at the handle and the safe opens slowly. The anemic light from the garage's hanging bulb spreads an orange sheet on several shelves. One's littered with a few guns, another is occupied by a large box.

"Pull that box inside, won't you dear?"

I lift the box, then notice the glimmer near the floor. Down on the bottom shelf golden bars shine dully, stacked up like pyramids almost to my knee.

"Anywhere inside is fine, Baby," Gay says.

I stare at the gold, my eye caught in its trap.

She leaves the door open and I bring the box inside.

I finish up with the old vacuum upstairs. I can see the blacktop driveway outside, hot even to my eyes. The glimmer of summer hovers everywhere like a fog. Where'd they get gold? I play with the thought of owning even a piece of gold until the chord gets caught up in the mouth of the vacuum and I'm brought back to reality.

"Did you put your diaper in the trash?" Dale screams downstairs.

"What diaper?" Gay asks, her voice small.

"We can't survive," Dale groans. "I can't go on."

I ask to use the phone, hiding behind the tall banister halfway up the stairs. Dale sits with his hands pressed hard against his face, his white hair gleaming in the afternoon light. He points, starkly, without looking up, toward the kitchen.

I call Nadine. Her number is one off from the Rad Law Firm's jingle that plays all day on the country station, so it's easy to remember.

"I'm done," I say into the receiver. I can hear my own breathing. The volume is too loud.

"I'll be there soon," Nadine says.

"How soon? Should I wait outside?"

She hangs up.

I don't want to bear witness to Gay and Dale's fighting any longer. I pack up my things and head toward the front door. Gay has reclined on the large red couch, her sagging arm elevated above her head. Her skin hangs above her mouth like drooping grapes.

"All done," I say, imitating cheerfulness.

Dale gets up and starts writing a check. He rips it out of the checkbook with force, as if striking at a mosquito.

"You need to get your shit together," he says to me. "We won't be around much longer."

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I'm in the ditch again, now wading knee high in weeds. It's still. The eerie breathlessness of summer circling around me like an enclosed terrarium bowl. The humidity is a boot at my neck. The only thing on the road is a lump of death. It's hard to tell what it once embodied, how it used to be shaped and defined before its end. A large bird lands beside it, ripping out some stringy innards and retreating into an evergreen.

I wait until my skin burns. I can't rely on Nadine. That's not what she's good for. She's a black hole. A place to throw yourself with disregard after a tough day. A bad idea to run with. Who knows if she'll ever show up.

After an hour, I walk back up to Gay's house. She's sitting on a little stool alone on the porch staring blankly into the trees.

"Hey Gay, listen, can I get a ride from Dale into town?"

She looks at me with venom.

"Why do you need him? I can get you there."

She isn't well. She might get killed or kill us both.

"It's okay," I say.

The only other number I know is David's. I roll the thought of calling him around in my mouth before spitting it up. Fuck it, I'll hitchhike.

I start walking up the blacktop and back into the ditch by the road. I put my thumb out to no one and nothing. A car rumbles out from the gate behind me. Gay rolls down the window of a menacing black Cadillac.

"We don't need nobody!" she yells.

I stare, a little afraid of what might happen if I get in.

"Well don't stand there looking stupid," she says. "You already got enough working against you, wearing your hair all short like that and all."

I get in. The dashboard is covered in a thick layer of dust.

"Where to?"

"You can just drop me at the end of the road. I can walk to town from there."

"Are you taking me to see my daughters?" she asks, her face suddenly blank.

"No ma'am."

"Where to, then?"

"How about I drive?"

"It's better like that," she says. "I don't quite remember the way."

We drive in silence. The world hovers up from the road like waves in the heat. I wonder if Dale would even notice if one of the gold bars went missing. The car rumbles as I drive on the little white pimples in the dividing lane.

"Careful now," Gay says. "My husband died sleeping at the wheel. Crossed over into one of those big farm trucks. Was carrying molasses. His whole body was covered in the stuff. Was almost impossible to identify him."

"You were married before Dale?"

"No, that was Dale."

"We just left Dale at the house."

"Did he get cleaned up?"

The road careens into the armpit of highway 77. I pull into the gravel where a stop sign is shakily rooted.

"Thanks, Gay. I'm thankful for your help."

She stares at me blankly for a moment.

"Well aren't you going to take me home?" she says.

"No ma'am, I thought you were going to drive yourself back."

"That's fine, just tell me the way."

"It's just back up this road until you get to the property."

"I can make it back," she says to herself.

I get out of the car and watch the little woman funnel her way into the driver's seat. She drives off down the road, her wheels tracing foreign letters in the black top as she swerves around a blind curve.

I feel sunburnt once I get to The Foxhole. I open the door to blackness, and a void of blinding nothingness circles a dark spot as my eyes try to adjust. Pool balls are drunkenly running into one another somewhere in a corner. I bump into a bar stool.

"Baby's here, everyone!" Joseph shouts. He starts filling up a glass with watery beer and hands it to me.

"I don't have money to party today," I say. He knows my situation. He tried to fix the RV last week but ended up busting things up worse and still charging me a hundred dollars.

"It's on me," Joseph says. My eyes have adjusted. His face is puffy, the rings under his eyes like putty, thick and exaggerated. Maybe he feels bad about fucking me over.

"You seen Nadine?" I ask, slurping the thin foam from the top of the glass.

"Was in the bathroom with some people for a while, you know? Don't know where they ended up after that."

I drink the beer then stand up too fast and get slapped with darting stars everywhere. The bathroom is locked and I knock hard.

"Occupied," someone calls back.

"Nadine?" I say, but no one answers. I wait until a dark-haired woman slides out the door and slithers back to a pool table.

The bathroom is muggy and smells like fresh shit and citrus spray. The toilet is full of twisted white and green logs. I gag.

On my way out I catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror. The black spot around my eye draws me in. I stare into its barrel. All my bad thoughts gather there, spinning in an evil whirlpool. Drawing me in further.

Dale wouldn't notice a thing if one of those bars walked off.

Back at the bar Joseph has a fresh beer waiting.

"I can't pay, I'm serious Joseph," I say, not looking to get juked out of more money from this grifter.

"It's on me today, Baby! Government check got me feeling loose!"

He takes a shot then howls.

I drink, and the glass is always refilled when I turn back to it.

"You're magic," I say to Joseph, then spin into another glass before ending up behind the bar hunched over a sink

and watching an old couple dance to Dolly Parton by the jukebox.

“Ah shit, Baby! When’d you get here!” Nadine says from the luminous halo at the other end of the bar.

“You bitch,” I say, laughing and falling into her big soft frame.

She caresses my face then grabs my cheeks and examines me.

“That goddamn thing ain’t never gonna heal,” she says, poking around my eye. “I’ll kill that bastard if I ever see him again.”

She hands me a pill and I wash it down with the last of a beer from an almost empty can I find on the bar. Joseph is hunkered over a bar stool.

“I ain’t sorry,” he whispers as we walk to the door.

We squeeze into Nadine’s car together. My seat is half bent forward from a bunch of metal parked behind it. Their tendrils outstretched in every direction like a rebar bouquet.

“Making money,” Nadine says, pointing to the metal.

“I got something,” I say, the dashboard twisted like a cloud against the sharp red hood.

“Yeah? Tell me, Baby.”

“I found treasure,” I say, laughing as my head runs hard into the metal behind me.

“Where you get treasure from?”

“Gay and Dale. They got golden bars in that house,” I say floatily, unknowing of myself.

“I goddamn knew it. Ain’t nobody around here buy cars with cash if they don’t got something like that hidden under their house.”

“Ain’t under the house,” I say, but bump my head again as we stop hard at a stop sign.

“Leave it to me, Baby. I got the works.”

“Just enough,” I say. “Just enough to fix things up and no more. Just a little so they won’t notice.”

“Ain’t nobody gettin’ greedy, Baby,” she slurs.

Down the straight shot road the sun hovers darkly above a blacktop. When I look away a sunspot dangles in my eyes everywhere. I try to look into the dark spot, but get distracted as we pass Gay’s car overturned in a ditch. I laugh.

“Was that Gay?”

“Fucking rednecks,” Nadine says.

I start to cry.

“What’s wrong, Baby?”

“I think I killed her.”

“Ain’t nobody killing today, Baby.”

We swerve into a driveway. A canopy of trees spins above me like a kaleidoscope, and I try to stop the swirl by closing my eyes, but that makes it worse. I burp softly when we get out of the car. The smell is terrible, even for me. Nadine is already working at the front door. We shoot into the living room like pistols. The AC is nice, and I lean against a wall and almost fall asleep when Nadine hands me a crowbar.

“Get at the floor, just shove it in then pull it up like this,” she says, shoveling the black metal into a wood panel and prying it up like a loose tooth.

I crumple onto the floor, lazily rubbing the crowbar against the wood like a cleaning rag.

“This isn’t even the right place,” I laugh.

I walk down the hallway toward the garage but get turned around when I hear the door open.

“Who the hell?” I hear Dale yell.

I turn to hide in a dark room.

Nadine is chasing him up the stairs and they disappear behind the corner. I try to follow them up with my eyes, but I get caught by a dark spot on the ceiling, perfectly rounded next to a breast-like lightbulb cover. It calls to me, and I try to come back, but I can’t. I won’t. Everything’s broken here, anyways. Everything half dead or sinking into the mud.

I fall into the dark spot, this time climbing in and curling myself into the arch of its curves. It's warm and wet and comfortable. On the other side I hear yelling, then banging. There's a shot. Silence falls down everywhere like the little crystalized snow those rich kids in Rockwall sweep from their speckled ceilings, dangling in the air like glitter until their parents run them off screaming about asbestos rotting them out like hollow trees.

## **Pantalette Rose**

### **Rob Maxwell**

Over single-malt egg-nogs that New Year's Eve, I reminded Mitch Judy of that pre-cruise liberty run we made way back yonder during our heyday. We'd started off in the Hillcrest District at a gay bar, near Balboa Park, where Mitch rented half of a duplex bungalow. Then we took a bus ride into downtown San Diego decked out in 70's mufti --- bell-bottoms and Hawaiian shirts, mine festooned (it still sticks in memory) with fetching wahinis. True, we were a bit light of hoof, yet not really in the bag either. No need to get fucked-up drunk. We traveled as a threesome - pure shore leave instinct - to watch each other's backs. In Horton Plaza we landed at Pantalette Rose's, a holdover from the city's burlesque era. The girls there were for the looking but not for the touching, a sort of faux-French place where the ladies danced the can-can, threw up their skirts and everybody hooted and hollered. A place full of rodomontade and good spirits. Rose herself, a redhaired buxom beauty still in her twenties, came out in Valkyrie bra, knee length jodhpurs and sequined stilettos and teased the crowd with ribald humor, to catcalls all around. The things memories are made of.

Our running mate Scooter McGruder got up and sang. That's being generous: he looked like a ruffled bird and croaked like a toad - *Frere Jacques*, to the amusement of no one. No, belay that, that's just not true - everybody howled at the spectacle of it. Two drinks of bootleg absinthe later - or at least I hope it was no more - things got as cloudy as the green liquor itself. Tulips and butterflies seemed to float down from everywhere, the scene fading to a diaphanous dream. After a brief (yet intense) converse with the green fairy, everything just slipped away.

How Mitch Judy and I wound up back in our racks aboard the USS Ranger with full sea bags remains a mystery. Scooter, if he were lucky, had perhaps made it back to his camper in Lemon Grove to his bewitching Bonnie, a suicide blond with numerous piercings, facial and genital (according to Scooter), among her other charms. Earlier that year, during workups off San Clemente Island, he'd bailed on the Navy - put in his letter -- and was now a full-fledged member of CivPac. A rockhound - a geology major from Pepperdine - he now contented himself with taking his camper and Bonnie out to the Salton Sea, to plink away - exactly to what purpose I never completely understood.

Safely aboard ship and underway, we thanked heaven that neither of us had the squadron duty that day, for that would've been parlous. Overhead my rack, flight ops had begun with the whoosh and roar of jet engines, the cacophony of catapult shots, the din of tailhooks catching wires and ricocheting off the flight deck, the barked orders of the Air Boss. Freed of obligations for the afternoon, I gave the rack monster his due, pulled my pillow over my weary head and crashed.

Later, at some ill-defined hour, Cog --from Encognito, Judy's callsign --mustered himself sufficiently to traipse down to the officers' mess and cage some midrats (midnight rations) from a hapless petty officer working the graveyard shift. What recompense Cog offered him in trade I never asked about or cared to know. Yet, famished, we devoured it. Fresh-baked bread, pure leavened heaven, and rations of chunky peanut butter and jam -- contraband and ambrosial. After this feast, Cog, all recuperated -- he seemed to have a natural immunity to hangovers -- broke out his backgammon board and was hot to trot.

"You okay, bud," Judy said, shuffling backgammon pieces around on his board. "Fancy a game?"

"No more games," I answered. *You truly are Satan*, I thought. With his trimmed Van Dyke and supercilious sneer, he very much looked the Mephistophelian part. *Pack sand, Cog. Just pack sand.*

The ship's klaxon awoke me violently and I had to haul ass up to my GQ --general quarters -- station, which meant hustling forward starboard and up five sets of ladders to make it on time. It was quite the rush, to get dressed and make it there in three minutes before they set Condition Zebra, battened down the hatches. If you didn't make it, you were hosed and stuck for the duration. I made it. For some reason, I always made it. Probably because I had to.

Fortunately, this time it was only a drill, so I penned a note to Scooter McGruder, whom we'd left on the beach, exactly where I couldn't say, as my last memory of him was lost in the absinthe fog of Pantalette Rose's. A nubilous haze obscures my recollection -- its context -- yet a clear image of him persists: Scooter in a Mardi Gras mask, tufts of his blonde hair sticking straight up, smoking a maduro, hunkered down over a poker hand, a wahini sweetie at his shoulder, no doubt giving away his hand. Or perhaps I imagined it. Either way, I felt confident that between the three of us, he'd somehow gotten back to his camper and Bonnie in Lemon Grove. At least I hoped so. I

knew how much Scooter liked to pick on big guys when he was in his cups, classic little-man syndrome. Pardon me, but he is.

I asked Mitch if he might know where Scooter wound up.

"Beats me." Mitch said, shrugging. "Yet I'm sure he yet lives."

"You know this how?" I asked.

"Because I haven't killed him yet."

"That joke was old the first time I heard it."

"Can't you see I'm busy here?" Mitch shuffled his backgammon pieces around some more.

"Think I'll just step out for a little air."

"We're on a ship, asshole," Mitch chortled.

"All the more challenging," I said.

I zippered myself up in my zoom bag and hoofed it down to a sponson, to seek surcease from the overhead pounding of Air Ops. The limitless expanse of the ocean soothed me. Perhaps if I were lucky, a pod of whales would frolic near the bow of the aircraft carrier, a not uncommon sight.

After a brief respite out on the sponson, I shuffled my way back inside the ship, up an escalator to the O-3 level and headed aft toward Ready Room 8, where my squadron's flyers hung out, dodging knee-knockers the whole way. I floundered in just as a jet overhead caught a wire, its engines whining. I was greeted by my favorite jet jock, my bud Birddog.

"Spy!" He said, flashing his pearly whites. "You live!"

"That's the rumor," I admitted.

"You ready to go aloft. Hacksaw's hard down with the trots, so there's a slot."

"Hell yes to that."

What else could you ask from the Navy? You've got the whole ocean and the sky right there as your own personal playground. Questions?

## Sic Transit Gloria Mundi

Rob Maxwell

I figured to go West, to regain something from my former youth, perhaps. Maybe to see the UFO lights in the deserts of West Texas and then on to, say, the salmon waters of Puget Sound. Along the way an overnight sojourn in Rosarita Beach, Baja California near the frigid Pacific could conjure fond memories, although the fantasy Mexico of my younger imagination no longer beckoned, all those escapist tequila dreams and agave sunsets.

Where had all the wanderlust of long ago come from, after all?

Certainly, it was grounded in a longing to get away, perhaps that was the greater part of it – to flee from the stultifying grind of the quotidian – yet there is the notion that one must be going to something and this was most often put on the back burner when the urge to hit the road overcame me. It was the 80's and much was tied up with my (limited) reading: Henry Miller's *Tropics*, Bukowski at *Terror Street* and *Agony Way*, Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, Kerouac's *On the Road*. All these spoke to my desire to be a writer, certainly the biggest fantasy of all, no doubt, which was tied up with a call to distant adventure – to get out there— and the certainty that my literary efforts (about which I knew little) would be crowned with success, full accolades and glory, massive plaudits all around. The world stood waiting, after all, and its role, quite simply, was to cheer.

Such was my naivete.

Only later would it dawn on me that these were successful writers. They were the exceptions. They had made it. And only after arduous struggles.

Unheralded, and most certainly little on my radar then, were the legions of lost souls, the misbegotten strewn along the literary highway, Mad Max wreckage and rubble littering the landscape.

So unaware was I of the merciless quality of the territory which I'd lit out for. I've still got a smidgen of wanderlust left and these days if I need to go I buy me a bus ticket, my BMW bike long ago retired. I prefer Trailways; they have more leg room.

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I disembark in Marfa, Texas in the trans-Pecos where UFO lights are said to spark over the Chinati Mountains on the dark and lugubrious night. Back in the 50's, they made the movie *Giant* here, starring Rock Hudson, Liz Taylor, and James Dean and the place still retains a retro vibe with the Hollywood set and pops up in the occasional movie or TV show. Marfa even has a campground

where you can rent a yurt; yaks are optional, I suppose.

I grab a cheeseburger and onion rings and down it all with an ice-cold Shiner boch at a place called *Hermano's*. I further indulge myself with an order of refritos and *pico de gallo*, enjoying the change from the road-fare I've gotten used to. Sometimes I could even make do with a moonpie.

The meal relaxes me, makes me pensive, as I wonder what past event I might want to repeat. Then I think of my recent bus trip, the people you meet, in particular this one guy who was obsessed with going to Area 51, that place where they supposedly took the aliens when they crashed in Roswell during the Eisenhower era.

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Trust me, as a former intelligence officer I can say, with confidence, that there are not now -- nor have there ever been -- any aliens at Area 51. Not that I've been there and I certainly don't mean to burst anyone's bubble. I enjoy all the extra-terrestrial tropes, have seen most of the movies (loved *Mars Attacks*) and have binge-watched the whole *X-Files* series on Netflix. Area 51 is a highly classified facility where they test spy planes and such -- the SR-71 *Blackbird*, the *Stealth* aircraft and so on -- and should be avoided.

I mention this as that fellow bus traveler, who'd long ago misplaced his aluminum hat, was dead set on going there. He'd gotten ramped up this past September with all the Storm Area 51 hoopla on the internet. This event, thankfully, fizzled out (only about seventy-five people showed up, two arrested), yet this guy was all fired up to give it a second go. I did tell him that trying to crash the gate at Area 51 would be a good way to be shot stone cold dead.

"You might have better luck fishing at Groom Lake," I tell him.

"Groom Lake?"

"Yes, it's part of the Area 51 complex."

He takes out his notepad and scratches in it, furtively, like a squirrel hiding a nut.

"You can go fishing there?" He's actually holding his breath. "You'll need a permit."

He scratches this down also.

"And if you're ever anywhere near San Diego, you might try your luck at the Salton Sea."

I know this is a crappy thing to say to someone who's lost his metallic headgear, but the guy had worn me down to the nub with Area 51 this, Area 51 that. It made for a long trip.

Crappy, like I say. Groom Lake is a salt flat. In my defense, the Salton Sea, though only a few feet deep, does have tilapia and pupfish.

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There's a purple and orange haze on the distant hills when I leave the restaurant. I find the Area 51 dude leaning against a decorative horse rail, nursing the dregs of a bottle of mescal. He looks to be chewing on the mescal worm or maybe working a dip of Copenhagen. He's sort of dozing in and out, so I give him a nudge.

"Hey, fella," I say. "You okay?"

He mumbles some gibberish at me, his eyes at half mast and without the shock of recognition. I give his shoulder a shake and he looks up at me, trying to focus.

"Remember me? From the bus?" Then he starts to cry, mewling quietly.

"My name's Percy. They call me Perce." "Don't know nothing about no purse."

"Say, why don't we stand you up, get a breath of fresh air in you."

I'm encouraged that he's semi-coherent. With effort, I heft him up. He's fairly small, Barney Fife skinny, but he's limp and dead weight. Plus, I'm not young.

"I've got a problem," he lisps. "That why you're drinking?" "Kinda sorta."

"Well, let's get some coffee in you, then you can tell me."

"You don't understand. I've got a flat mirror!" he blurts out and sobs some more.

"Most of them are," I say. "Take it easy."

"Gonna have to go into architectural drafting."

How this relates to Area 51, flat mirrors or anything else under the sun, I haven't a clue.

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I flag down some good ole boys in a cherry red Ranchero with chrome mags, flashing yellow under the neon lights. Their dog, a chocolate Australian shepherd, is having a grand time, its forepaws propped up on the cab, its fur flying, tongue lolling out. The driver, a six-footer missing his two front teeth, gives me a wide grin.

"Where you headed?" "Figured on the Dairy Queen."

"Splendid idea. The DQ it is. Hop on in the back. Don't mind Marley, he don't bite."

I finagle us into the back and the Ranchero grabs some rubber as we peel out. Area 51 is still snuffling yet seems to have calmed down. Derek and Dirk introduce themselves and deposit us at the dining area.

"Hey," Derek asks before he pulls up to the drive-thru.

"What's up with your podjo?"

"A woman, I think."

"Ain't it always. Well, got to head on. Ya'll take her any way you can get her, you hear?"

"Roger that."

Derek squeals his wheels as he leaves.

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In the DQ, I pile Area 51 -- whose name is Stu -- into a booth and get us a couple of milk shakes, a cheeseburger for Stu. He's still lachrymose, yet he's not weepy anymore, I'm grateful for that.

"I can't take it anymore," he says. "Sure you can, man. Tell me about it." He wipes his nose on his sleeve.

"I've been rejected," he moans.

As I first thought, a woman.

"Listen, we've all been rejected. In time, you'll get over her." Stu gets animated, his right hand starts trembling like he's got Parkinson's. Well, here's one thing we know for sure, I think. We're not going to be giving Barney any bullets.

"No, man, no. You don't understand," --waving his quivering index finger for emphasis. "I'm a writer!"

Oh, holy hell, I think. Mother of God. A writer.

Not another writer. Everybody's a writer in America these days. You can't swing a dead cat over your head without hitting one.

"I'm a writer, Perse . . ."

"Perse."

He gives me this strange querulous look. "Sorry," I say. "Please continue." Seriously, don't.

He opens both shaky palms as if to make an important announcement. He looks to have a bad case of it. If only it were about extra-terrestrials there might be hope.

"I'm a writer, amigo. Don't you know what that means?"

"No, Stu, I don't," I lie.

"Rejections, man. Endless rejections!"

The rejected, the dejected, the wannabes, those "in-the-program," the tenured and the emeriti, they're all crawling out of the woodwork.

"We all get rejections, from everywhere, all the time."

"This is different!"

He stands suddenly and almost knocks over our milk shakes. I lean over and put my hand on his shoulder to steady him. I finally get us seated. I decide to try another tact.

"Hey, Stu, right down the road in Alpine, Texas is a fine university. Sul Ross. Perhaps you could take a course in creative writing."

"But I've already got a terminal degree. I've got an M.F.A. !!"

It's worse than I thought. Terminal, yes. Old Stu's ready for the boneyard. I let the letters roll off my tongue -- em-eff-ai -- and sound them out in my head in my best Hannibal Lector voice.

That's when, to change the subject -- and knowing better - - I decide to ask Stu about flat mirrors and maybe Area 51.

Stu, to my surprise, perhaps because he's sobering up, shifts into a different mode. Suddenly, he's erudite and lecturing. I can't help but remember he used a double negative earlier on.

"The flat mirror is a metaphor for art and life," he tells me. "Or the artist and life, better said. The artist is supposed to hold the mirror up to life, right?"

"I'm with you."

"To quote Rick DeMarinis, a Texas writer: 'Let us say, for the moment, that art must hold the mirror up to life. Not the flat mirror. Avoid the flat mirror at all costs.'"

"What's wrong with the flat mirror?"

"Forgive me," he says. "I memorized this: 'Life is not a perfect grid, marked off, leveled, easy to look at, predictable. Hold the mirror up. But first, make sure your mirror has an honest bend to it: It must always reflect more, and sometimes less, than is 'out there'."

"So art must somehow be refracted, transmuted, through the unique consciousness and experience of the writer?"

"Are you sure you're not a writer?"

"Interested layman. Postcards only." Who sends postcards anymore?

"So tell me this," I continue. "What happens if you have a flat mirror?"

"As a writer, you're fucked."

“And we each only have one mirror?” “Correcto.”

I scratch my head with my milk shake straw.

“Well,” I say. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. You’re probably just going through a dry spell.”

“How can you say that?” “A hunch. That’s all.”

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Probably for the best, I never do get to ask Stu anything more about Area 51. Nor, after talking to sober Stu do I think he needs a metal helmet to block alien brain waves.

Stu and I have breakfast one last time at the DQ -- I have a sausage biscuit and an Oreo Blizzard for dessert -- and then walk Stu to his bus. I remind him that my advice about catching tilapia and pupfish at the Salton Sea hadn’t been a bum steer.

For my part, I’m thinking about heading on down the road to that university in Alpine, Texas. Maybe sign up for a refresher course in creative writing.

## Claim To Fame

### David Larsen

There were two bars in Dos Pesos, Texas, and Clay Whitaker had been eighty-sixed from both of them. He hated drinking at home, alone. And no one, not any of his friends, nor even acquaintances, was willing to come to his house. If there were any strangers in town he would’ve invited them, but in a community of twelve hundred people, strangers were few and far between.

Clay straddled the barstool and placed his gnarled hands on the polished surface of the bar. Arthritis was getting the better of him. Too many F-chords, but he couldn’t avoid the key of C just because one chord gave him fits. His left hand looked like a chunk of mesquite, twisted and weathered. Even *he* thought it was downright grotesque. And from what? Forty years of plucking a damned guitar. He could see it if he had held a wrench all day or sawed timber. But the mahogany neck of an old HD-28 shouldn’t have done this much damage.

“Letty,” he said in his best drawl, “I think I’ll have me a Miller Lite.”

The tan-skinned woman behind the bar shook her head, then drew a bottle from the cooler. Nothing changed. Every day, without fail, the fifty-seven-year-old, lanky good-for-nothing ordered the same beer and every day she yanked one from the cooler and plopped it down in front of him. Every single day he took the first gulp and followed it with an irritating a-a-ah along with his most winning smile. It was a ritual Clay relished, and he knew Letty hated.

Leticia, good-humored and enticing, was the daytime, sometimes nighttime, bartender at the Green Tree Bar and Grill. She allowed Clay to hang around whenever Buzz Snyder, the prickly owner, was out of town, and Clay appreciated it, but it wasn’t regular enough to suit him. Even though he was banished from the bar, he expected more. He was most comfortable when he functioned within a settled routine, and when it came to drinking beer, he liked to stay on a pretty tight schedule. He had established a regimen and he aimed to stick to it. Part of his agreement with the dark-eyed Letty was that he had to limit himself to drinking beer, not really a problem—he preferred beer—with a maximum of two per visit, and when she told him enough was enough, he’d be on his way without any argument. She was the same in bed; she liked

to establish the guidelines, though the parameters she set were not so strictly adhered to. He didn't mind *that* so much, her establishing the boundaries in bed, but when it came to beer drinking, he was uncomfortable with any restrictions of any sort.

Letty, a no-nonsense forty-four-year-old who looked downright fine in her tight jeans, had spent several nights in Clay's bedroom over the past few years, but she warned him, after the last episode, that she wouldn't return until he laundered his bedding and cleaned up the bathroom. Clay decided that he could do without female company, if need be. It wasn't that he opposed cleanliness. It was just that he had a lazy streak in him that he couldn't overcome, even if it meant celibacy.

"I suspect that if you apologized to Buzz, he'd let you come around here again," said Letty. There were only three other customers at the bar. Clay hadn't had any trouble with any of them, so things should go smoothly. Buzz was in Odessa for the day. Letty had been kind enough to call Clay to let him know that the coast was clear. She missed him, he assumed.

"Apologize for what?" snarled Clay. He smiled at the bartender and took an exaggerated hit from his Miller Lite. In the back of his mind was the notion that he might like to go to Letty's house on the Mexican side of town after she got off work at two in the morning, since his house had been declared off limits. Her two teenage kids, a likeable enough boy and a smart-mouthed girl, would be sound asleep, and he could be out of there before they got up to go off to school. It had been more than two months since his last encounter with Leticia; she must be as horny as he was.

She laughed. "You might start with telling him that you're sorry for calling him an asshole. And maybe you might offer to pay for the broken window in the men's room."

"I would apologize for calling him an asshole, if he wasn't such an asshole. But from everything I've seen, he is what he is. Not much I can do about that." Clay glared across the room at the dormant jukebox. If he had any quarters in the pockets of his Wranglers, he would have played something by Dwight Yoakam, just to liven up the place.

"He may be an asshole," said Letty, "but he's got you by the balls, Cowboy."

Clay grimaced. The bartender knew all too well that her calling him *Cowboy* bugged the crap out of him. He'd

never even been on a horse. His only claim to fame was being a decent enough picker and singer. The number of times he and his band had played right there in the Green Tree he couldn't count, but it had to be in the hundreds. Owning a straw Stetson and a pair of scuffed boots doesn't make one a shitkicker. Nor does crooning old cheating songs.

"And I'm not about to pay for his damned window. He should make the other guy pay for it. He started the fight by telling me he knew all there was to know about country music." Clay downed the last swallow of his beer. He wanted to ask for another, but he didn't dare press his luck.

Letty stared into his eyes. He knew the look too well. Maybe there was some chance for tonight. Her dark eyes were two chunks of coal in the dim lights of the barroom. In bed, they became the eyes of a cat, spooky, enchanting.

"That wasn't a fight, Cowboy. That was you getting your ass kicked. A fight is when two guys actually try to hurt each other. Not when one guy lets the other guy beat the shit out of him without defending himself. Don't you ever think that it might be smart to hit back?"

Clay laughed. "I've never claimed to be Evander Holyfield. And the guy sucker punched me. He was the one that broke the damned window. He just happened to use my head to do it. Tell Buzz that he needs to put his windows up higher."

"Text him," spouted Letty. "I'm sure he'd love to hear from you. He might just welcome any suggestions from you on how to improve this place. Of course, you *could* do your drinking down at Nacho's, but I hear even Ignacio has told you to stay away." Letty wiped the bar with a rag. She knew how to get his goat, and he didn't much care for giving anyone that power over him, but, on the other hand, it was all in good fun.

"I could," said Clay. "But Ignacio Ramirez doesn't hire as good-looking bartenders as my buddy Buzz does. And my disagreement with Nacho is monetary, not personal. Who would have guessed the Dallas Cowboys could beat the Saints? They even beat the spread."

"I know more about football than you do, you old fool." Letty said it loudly enough for the other three ne're do wells to hear. They each smiled drolly, then slunk back into their solitude.

“What I do know is that Drew Breese is a hell of a lot better quarterback than Tony Romo is.”

“Then why is it you owe Nacho money?” she asked. “And, besides, if you did your drinking down at Nacho’s you could flirt with Angie. I knew her in high school. She’d go for an old coot like you.”

Clay balked. “I can’t hit on any woman that calls me *sir*. She’s always giving me a *yes sir* or a *no sir*. I don’t want a woman doing anything like that when I’m trying to seduce her.”

“Unless Angie’s changed, she doesn’t say *no sir* all that often.” Letty smiled broadly. “Maybe you should go after older women. They won’t call you *sir*. Have you ever gone after a woman older than you?”

Clay grinned and looked at the playful bartender out of the corner of his eye. “One time,” he said slyly. “A long time ago. She was my eleventh-grade English teacher. I got an A in that class.”

Leticia laughed heartily. “You’re a lying sack of shit. You know it? You never bagged any teacher. And you sure as hell never got an A in your life.”

“I may not have slept with her. But I thought about it a lot. I could barely stand up when the bell rang at the end of her class.” Clay surveyed the room. The other three drinkers were in their own worlds. “I was thinking that maybe I could stop by your place after you got off work tonight.”

“You know damn well I live with my mother. When I suggested older women, I didn’t mean for you to go after my own mother.” Again, she laughed.

“Your kids will be asleep,” he whispered. “And your mama will sleep right through everything. Old people sleep soundly.”

“Old people! My mother’s only seven years older than you are. Old people, for god’s sake, Clay. You are a case. And I know, all too well, how old people sleep. Remember, I’ve slept with an old man. And it’s not all that great.”

“You might want to think about it,” chided Clay. “It’s been two months.”

“The best two months of *my* life,” Letty countered. “Did you know Brenda’s in town. She was in here asking about you yesterday.”

“Good god,” moaned Clay, “that’s all I need. To be pestered by my ex-wife. I hope you told her I’d died.”

“I told her that you’d been banned from here. That she might try Nacho’s.”

Nacho’s Bar was smaller than the Green Tree and drinks were more reasonable. Ignacio Ramirez was an all-right guy, even Clay had to admit it. The Mexican was behind the bar with the supposedly “easy” Angie when Clay came through the door. The arthritic picker sat on a stool and placed a fifty-dollar bill on the fake-wood bar. He was the only customer.

“Here’s the blood money I owe you,” said Clay coarsely.

Ignacio walked over and smiled. “And you now admit that Tony Romo’s better than Drew Breese? Otherwise, you’ve learned nothing from this fiasco.”

“I admit no such thing.” Clay scowled. “What I admit is that the damned Cowboys are about the luckiest bunch of half-ass players in the world.”

“Some people...they’re incapable of learning.” Ignacio paused. “But at least you pay what you owe. For that I’ll buy you a beer.”

“Miller Lite,” said Clay to wide-eyed Angie who had been listening from behind the cash register. If the broad-hipped woman was as willing as Letty had suggested she was, maybe he should consider hitting on her. What did he have to lose?

“Yes, sir. Miller Lite.”

The magic of the moment was gone.

A free beer always tasted better than a beer Clay had to pay for, and this one tasted pretty darned good.

“Are you playing music?” asked Ignacio.

“Not lately,” answered Clay, “the pedal-steel player went off to Memphis. He thinks he’s going to hit the bigtime. He’ll be back.”

“And you can’t hire another one?”

Clay chuckled. “Not around here. And it’s damn hard to get someone to move to West Texas to play for peanuts. Anyway, live music’s going the way of the buggy whip.”

“Then how do you pay your rent? Certainly not from gambling on football.” Ignacio grinned through his thick, dark mustache. Pancho Villa in a white apron.

Clay couldn’t help but like the man, wrong as he was about football.

It was Clay’s turn to play the Cheshire cat. “Have you ever heard the song ‘The Last Night in Phoenix’? By Cody Lee Pharr? Or ‘Walking Through a Dream’ by Brandy Kingman? I wrote those songs. Plus a few others that were lesser hits.”

“Everybody’s heard them,” Ignacio exclaimed. “You must be rich.”

Clay smiled at Angie. He wanted to make sure she heard what he had to say. There was still a chance with her, in spite of her politeness.

“Far from rich. If I was rich, would I be living in that little house on Fourth Street in a town like Dos Pesos? I get royalties. I own the copyrights. But with the goddamned internet, copyrights don’t mean shit. Everybody’s pilfering music right and left. The songwriter gets squat. Lucky for me, the Brandy Kingman version of the one song was used in a movie with Sean Penn and Nicole Kidman. Trust me, that helps to pay the rent.”

“You know Nicole Kidman?” asked Angie eagerly.

“I know my two ex-wives. I know my sister in Lubbock. But, no, I don’t know Nicole Kidman. I’ve never even met Brandy Kingman. No one knows the songwriter. Like Mick Jagger said, ‘it’s the singer, not the song’. And, no, Angie, I don’t know Mick Jagger either.”

“No, sir. I didn’t think you did.” The waitress blushed.

Broad hips or not, Clay just knew he wasn’t even going to try.

“Thanks for the cerveza, Ignacio. Next week it’s the Eagles. I don’t think I want to make that bet. Goddamned Cowboys. The easiest schedule in football.” Clay eased himself from the stool. He turned and asked the Cowboy-

loving owner of the bar, “Has my ex-wife been in here? A blond, with long legs and a taste for blood.”

“Yesterday.” His amigo smiled, a little too knowingly. “A woman, a blond with, as you say, long legs, was in and she asked if you ever came in. I told her you were ashamed to show your face in here since you owed a lot of money from foolish bets.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She was nice. That was all.”

“Well, thank you, senior. And thank you, Angie.” Clay clomped to the door.

“And thank you, sir,” chirped Angie.

Clay knew where to find Brenda. She always stayed at the Royal Suites in San Angelo, an hour drive from Dos Pesos. His pickup rattled a lot but still ran, luckily for him, and the afternoon was pleasant. The ride through the desert hills was one Clay always enjoyed. He just hoped Brenda was alone, that she left that goofball she married, her third husband, back in San Marcos.

Room seventeen, her favorite. Clay rapped lightly. He wished she wouldn’t be there. He could say that he tried and that would be that.

Still a blond, still tall, still a knockout, Brenda smiled warmly when she opened the door. As cruel as the years had been to Clay, they were kinder to his ex-wife.

“I knew you’d show up,” she said. She hadn’t lost her nasal Waxahachie twang, always a turn-on to Clay. “You look like a goddamned old man. Come on in. We need to talk.”

“I don’t want to intrude if what’s his name’s around. What is that idiot’s name?”

Brenda clicked her tongue. The third-grade teacher being patient with the doltish student. “His name’s Walker. And you know it.”

“Walker’s a last name. What’s his damned first name?”

“You never give up, do you? His name is Walker Parker. But it doesn’t matter. I’m divorced now.”

"You're better off. Anyone with two verbs for a name must be too smart for his own good." Clay smiled. "Brenda Parker. It just doesn't make it, does it?"

"I'm still Brenda Whitaker. It's about all I got out of being married to you. A good name. Every once in a while, some weirdo will ask me if I'm related to the infamous Clay Whitaker and I can tell them that I used to be married to the asshole. It's all about bragging rights."

"You're fifty-two years old, Brenda. You should try a little harder. Being my ex isn't going to get you very far in life."

The woman sat on the bed and allowed her blue robe to open enough for Clay to get a gander at the legs he used to marvel at. She hadn't put on any weight and she still had that way about her that drove him to distraction. He always believed that he would have been more successful if he hadn't spent so much time pawing at her through the best years of his life, what should have been his most productive period. She motioned for him to sit next to her.

"I needed to see you," she began in her most serious voice. The playful banter was over. It was time to get down to business. "The other day I heard one of your songs on the radio. It was the one about the cheating wife and the laundry. You know the one I'm talking about. The wife trying to wash the other man's aftershave out of the bedsheets?"

"The song was called 'Aftershave'. I was always clever with titles."

Brenda shushed him. "Well, some rock and roll band has recorded it and I think it's doing well. That means you're going to have some money coming your way."

"I do remember that someone called and asked if they could record it. About a year ago. I said they could, and never gave it another thought. Why were you listening to a rock station?"

She laughed. "I don't really care that much for your hillbilly crap. I never did. I just put up with it when we were married. But what I wanted to talk to you about is that, if you remember, I was the inspiration for that song. So, maybe I should get a little of the royalties."

Clay slowly shook his head and looked at the woman in disbelief. "You mean, that because you screwed around on me, and I wrote some song about it, that you should be rewarded for it?"

The blue robe opened wider. She wore nothing underneath it. The timer inside Clay's head began to tick. Why not? They were once married. And the sex had been good, as best he could recall.

"I almost cowrote that song. Anyone could plainly see that the woman in the song is me."

"I wrote that one after you ran off with that dingleberry dooper. You were nowhere around."

Brenda frowned. Clay noticed the lines that had formed around her gray eyes and her strawberry lips, dried creek beds from too many cigarettes and too many hours beside swimming pools. He thought about what Leticia had said about older women. Brenda wasn't older than he was but she was older than what he'd become accustomed to.

Dos Pesos was pretty much locked down by the time Clay drove through town to get to his house. The neon lights in front of the Green Tree were still on and a half a mile down Main he could see that Ignacio had shut down early. It was past one o'clock. Clay was worn out. He wasn't as young as he used to be. He thought about all the times he and the band left one town and drove through the night to make it to the next town by afternoon to set up and get a sound check. They caught a few winks, played again, then loaded up to take off to another town. Being a traveling musician was a young man's game. It wasn't for a crippled-up old-timer like him.

There were no beers in the refrigerator; he was trying to cut down, though he didn't want anyone to know it. The burger he bought when he left San Angelo sat heavy in his gut.

When he went to brush his teeth, to futilely try to whiten away the years, his bathroom was immaculate. The shower had been scrubbed, the towels, freshly washed, were neatly folded, even the shower curtain was devoid of the blackish mold or whatever it was that had formed at the bottom edges. Leticia had a key to the house. And she once mentioned that her niece cleaned houses. In the bedroom the bed was made; Clay was in the habit of leaving the house without even bothering to straighten the sheets and bedspread.

The fresh clean sheets felt wonderful. They smelled like his mother's garden back in Wichita Falls before the family moved into the dreary apartment in Ft. Worth. Clay

turned out the lamp beside the bed and thought about the day. He was sober and he was content, a rare combination for him.

The three taps at his front door brought him out of the near-sleep he had slipped into. In his plaid boxers he lumbered to the door. When he opened it, the silhouetted figure didn't say anything for a moment, then, in a small polite voice, asked, "Mr. Whitaker, sir. Would it be all right if I came in?"

## Retail Therapy

### Alex McMillin

This is maybe the sixth or seventh time you've gone shopping for a rope. You've never gotten to the point of actually *buying* a rope, but you feel like this time might be different. After all, you've already spent far too much money on a big steak and an expensive bottle of wine. You're so broke that you had to check your bank account to ensure that you had enough for a suitable rope.

Thankfully, 30 feet of 550 paracord only costs \$5 at the local Target. Though the slim black cord in your hand doesn't look like much, the package claims that it'll hold up to 550 lbs. of static weight. You've put on a little weight lately, but you're still about 350 pounds below the cord's limit.

"But we're never actually going to go camping," says a girl from a few yards away. You look up, a little startled to find people so close by. She's maybe 22, blonde from a bottle, skin-tight yoga pants and a cropped Metallica tee that shows just a hint of tanned midriff. She catches you looking at her and holds your gaze for a moment with sad blue-green eyes, her expression hard to read.

"I just told you. Me and the boys are gonna go camping this weekend," says an exasperated male voice. She turns to a guy of about the same age, who doesn't look up from his phone. He's undeniably better looking than you, though you find it a little disconcerting that his hair, skin, and eyes are roughly the same shade of light brown.

"Me and the boys," she says, mocking him with a caricature of his own voice.

You look back down at the paracord in your hands with a slight smile tugging at the corners of your mouth.

"Shut up," he says, half-joking.

"What?" she says with obvious pleasure. "That's what you sound like."

He sighs. "Whatever. Let's just get this sleeping bag and get out of here."

"We don't have to get out of here right away. They have some cute tops on sale."

"I don't want to wait for, like, an hour while you try on clothes."

"Oh, it won't be an hour. And if you don't bitch too much, I might even let you come into the changing room with me."

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"Yeah, I thought that'd get your attention."

They giggle and you hear the sound of lips smacking. This seems like a good time to head toward the front of the store.

That girl knows what she's doing. She probably even has her guy thinking that he calls the shots.

You look down at the paracord in your hands like you don't remember why you're buying it. Then it all hits you at once and smashes you into a million razor-edged shards. Your pace quickens. It can all be over today.

As you approach the checkout area, you notice the restrooms off to one side. You realize that you could use a piss.

There's a sign that says "NO MERCHANDISE ALLOWED." You drop the cord on a nearby bench and go into the men's room.

They're probably fooling around in the changing room right now.

The men's room is empty. You take the handicapped stall, latch the door behind yourself, and look in the mirror. Hair matted with grease, three-day stubble, and bleary eyes. What did you expect?

You do your business and wash your hands, taking pains not to look in the mirror again. You keep seeing the girl's face at the moment your eyes met. You got the sense that she's treading water in the same ocean you're drowning in.

You leave the bathroom like a condemned man on his way to the gallows. You're a bit disappointed to find that the cord is still on the bench where you left it.

There are only two checkout lanes open, both on the far side of the row.

You're almost to the near lane when a display of "Made for TV" kitsch catches your eye. Among the items on offer is a sort of air rifle designed to kill flies with rock salt projectiles. It's on sale for only \$59.99, including bonus laser sight.

There is a near-perpetual swarm of flies outside of your apartment, courtesy of the old guy next door who always leaves his garbage bags on the walkway.

You pull the gun out of the pile of shit like you're really thinking about buying it. Just then the girl and her boyfriend walk by you and into the near checkout lane.

"See, I told you it wouldn't take that long," she says.

"You said you would let me come into the changing room."

"I said *maybe*."

"Whatever," the guy says, and pulls out his phone.

You get into line behind them. She's so close that you can smell her shampoo.

It would be natural for her to pull out her own phone, but instead she just stands there. She looks a little lost. After a moment, she turns—your heart jumps—and eyes the shelves of candy lining the aisle. She picks up a Snickers, puts it down, and picks up a bar of Hershey's white chocolate. After a second she puts down the Hershey's bar and stands with her hands on her narrow hips.

"I'd go with the white chocolate, myself."

It takes you a second to realize that the voice you just heard was your own. She looks at you and beams a smile right into your heart.

"You're a white chocolate guy, huh?"

You nod, too terrified to speak.

"Yeah, white chocolate's always good when you need a little... something."

You manage to say, "Yeah."

She grabs the white chocolate bar, spares you a little grin, and spins back to her boyfriend.

And that's all it takes.

She buys her shit and leaves your life forever with her boyfriend close behind. You find yourself standing in front of the cashier, a Haitian girl who looks too young to be working anywhere.

“Umm... actually...” you say as she prepares to ring up the cord. “I don’t need that after all. Sorry.” She shrugs and puts the cord aside.

You shuffle away from the register, trying to figure out what to do next. You should probably return the wine and the steak. Maybe then you can come back for the bug gun.

## A Hunting Party

**Mark Mellon**

The XOX Ranch was relatively small even by Hill Country standards, only three sections, but all good land for cattle, well watered with several creeks. Homesteaded by Maury’s great-grandfather in ’52, the XOX started the Fontaine fortune, but was later eclipsed by their West Texas oil holdings. Preoccupied with oil and his social whirl, Maury let the ranch go to seed. The livestock were removed and the place ran wild so Maury could use it as a hunting preserve.

Although less than a hundred miles from San Antonio, it still took most of the day to get there. They left early on 87 North, Maury and Tolly in their cars with Ben’s pickup in the rear. Krepp rode with Tolly. Truck farmers headed to market honked their horns as they passed. They reached Kerrville after two hours. Hungover, Krepp insisted they stop at a diner to slurp down coffee and donuts.

Past Kerrville, the paved road gave way to construction with frequent, long delays while graders and bulldozers rumbled by. Once past the construction, on a good road, they had to stop again when Tolly flagged them over to let Krepp vomit. He squatted by a ditch, head between his knees, loudly retching.

Maury walked up to the truck. He smiled through the open window. “Did you ever see a more pitiful milk cow than Winnie?”

Ben chuckled. “I ain’t saying.”

Maury returned to his Cadillac to quiet the dogs. Krepp got back in the Nash. They drove off. Ben shifted into first and followed. They reached Kimble County near noon. Maury turned left off 27 onto a dirt road. Ben drove well behind the Nash to keep his windshield free from dust.

The late October day was crisp and clear, only seventy-five degrees, a blessing after the summer’s killing heat. They passed small ranches and dairy farms. Far off in a huge pasture, a young cowhand tended beeves lazily munching grass. He spotted them passing, whipped off his broad brimmed hat, and waved a greeting. They honked their horns and waved back from open windows.

Forty miles took another two hours over a washed out dirt road, riddled with small gullies and dips. There was nothing but empty countryside and barbed wire fences. In

a broad valley, Maury stuck his straw boss hat out of the window and waved for them to turn. Ben bounced up and down on the seat as he drove over the livestock barrier and onto the graveled road.

Another mile down the narrow road led to the ranch home, a two story, box and strip wood house whose roof fell in years ago. They stopped and got out, stretched and lit smokes. Dolph rode up on a paint.

"Howdy, Mr. Fontaine. I was starting to wonder where y'all were. Took a right smart to get here, huh?"

"Hello, Dolph," Maury said. "We hit some construction. I see you got my message and got the tents set up, the fire pit dug, and some wood cut. Good job. Help Ben, will you?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Fontaine."

Ben and Dolph unpacked the Model A's bed, carefully loaded with food, alcohol, and other important supplies. Maury let his dogs out from the Cadillac. Beside themselves with eagerness, overjoyed at returning to the camp, they barked and yipped, chased their tails, and otherwise carried on. Maury scratched their heads, stroked their sides, and praised them.

"You going to catch me some game, son? Fetch me a wild javelina? Yes, sir, sure enough you are."

Tolly held up his rifle. "Sun's still high enough to get us some venison. Ben cooks a mean whitetail haunch. Let's mount up, Maury."

"Well, if you can stand it, I guess I can too. Dolph, tack up some mounts."

"Already waiting for you, Mr. Fontaine."

"You're a star hand, Dolph. Come on, boys, let's get us a doe. Where's Winnie?"

Ben set down a wooden crate full of canned goods. "Where do you think? Passed out in that tent."

Maury laughed. "Why'd I even ask? Come on, Tolly. You ride along too, Dolph. Hell, you're a better shot than either of us."

"Thanks, Mr. Fontaine."

Maury kept five horses on the ranch. Aside from evicting trespassing poachers, Dolph's other most important duty was to keep them healthy and exercised. Tolly and Maury slipped their rifles into leather scabbards, put their feet to the stirrups, and mounted up. Restive, unused to the riders, the horses crow hopped a bit, but were soon brought to rein.

They trotted into the heavy woods and brush, the dogs racing ahead, eagerly sniffing for prey. Ben put on his butcher's apron. He took chuck beef wrapped in muslin, cut it into chunks with a razor sharp knife on a wooden board, and browned it in bacon grease in a dutch oven suspended by wooden forks over hot mesquite charcoal.

Ben added canned tomatoes, diced chilies, and seasonings. He put the lid on and raised the oven to a set of higher forks to simmer. Ben put a case of Mexican beer bottles in the creek to cool. He mixed cornmeal, milk, eggs, baking soda, and butter in another, smaller, greased dutch oven that he also set over the fire.

Rifle shots echoed through the hills. The dogs faintly barked in triumph. Delicious scents of cooking food filled the air. The sky's broad blue bowl assumed a darker tinge as a purple smudge formed on the western horizon. Ben lit a kerosene lantern and hung it from a tree branch to illuminate the camp. Krepp emerged from the tent looking better, but not by much.

"Did the other fellows go hunting?"

"Yep."

"And you ain't got the stomach for it as usual. Jesus, is there anything to drink around here?"

"That beer in the creek should be cool by now."

Krepp fished a bottle from the fast rushing water and opened it with a church key he kept in his pocket. He chugged half the beer.

"Damn, I was sure thirsty."

"Don't hit it too hard. We're playing poker."

"Huh. As if I can't take the lot of you at poker or any other game, drunk or sober."

The hunters returned, a whitetail doe strapped behind Dolph's saddle. Pleased and excited, they laughed as they dismounted. Dolph untied the doe and brought it to Ben.

"Put her up."

Dolph tied a loop in his lariat and threw it over a live oak branch. He fastened the loop around the neck and pulled until the doe hung in the air, then tied off the lariat. Ben took his long knife and disemboweled the doe. He threw the offal to the dogs who greedily devoured the raw guts and organs.

Ben skinned the doe with Dolph's help. He butchered the deer and roasted the meat over mesquite wood, seasoning it with salt, pepper, and spices. The horses untacked and corralled, Tolly set up a camp table and folding chairs. Maury set down four tin cups and a bottle of Macallan scotch.

"Two hundred dollars for a bottle of this stuff, smuggled up from Nuevo Laredo. This here Prohibition is just killing me."

"And you're still going to vote for Hoover," Ben said.

"Aw, leave Maury alone," Tolly said. "You know how much he likes to complain about spending money."

Ben laughed, loud, deep, stertorous gasps, like a strangled man fighting for breath, frightening to those who didn't know him. Krepp sat at the table, unscrewed the bottle's cap, and poured a stiff belt.

"Glad you like my Macallan, Winnie."

Krepp drank. "OK. Please may I have a drink, Maury? I kind of need one. Y'all were there last night so you dern well know why."

"You mean you need a drink because you tried to pick up another man's wife at the Menger Hotel while he was sitting right there with her?" Tolly said. "Yeah, we saw that. Still can't believe it happened, but we saw it all right."

"You're just lucky that fellow was a damn Yankee, Win," Maury said. "A good old boy would have whomped you. All he did was get you thrown out."

"And us too in the bargain. Good going, Winnie."

"Oh, why don't you two just shut the hell up."

Tolly and Maury laughed. Ben served chili and cornbread.

"I'm glad I was tending bar last night so I wasn't seen with you, Krepp. You're an embarrassment. Here, eat something before you pass out again."

Ben thinly sliced the roast venison and piled it high on their plates, Dolph included. Hungry after a long day on the road, they dug into the food, any tensions or disagreements between them forgotten in a shared meal's quiet harmony. They drank beer from bottles, cold after long immersion in the creek. Maury leaned back and patted his small pot gut.

"Boy howdy, Ben, you sure can cook."

"Self taught too, just like I learned shorthand and how to type."

"Yeah and you still ain't got the sand to kill a flea."

"I can beat the line-backed shit out of you, Krepp, if you keep needling me like that. You're talking to the middleweight boxing champ of the North Sea Mine Laying Fleet!"

Maury laughed and held out his arms as if to separate two men in a fight. "Whoa. Hold on there, fellows. It's only the first night in camp. We're here to have fun and relax, remember? Come on, let's play poker."

Dolph cleared off the plates and cutlery. Maury opened a new deck. The four men played poker. As usual, Ben mostly won. Maury made sure the bottle was passed. Dolph brought up fresh beer from the creek. Everyone relaxed. The night grew cool and they put on plaid hunting jackets.

Masculine sounds and smells filled the air, loud, uproarious laughter, cursing, shouts of triumph for a winning hand, booze and beer, lit cigars and pipe tobacco, the things Ben enjoyed in the wild among his friends, far from his workaday world.

"I still say Roosevelt is nothing but a Socialist," Maury said.

"Damn straight," Krepp said.

"And Hoover's just a fool," Ben replied.

"Ain't you the one complaining about Prohibition a while back, Maury?" Tolly said.

"I've got two pair so I guess I win this hand."

"Hold on, Winston. I've got three of a kind."

Ben laid his cards on the table. Krepp scowled and shoved the pot his way. He stood up, yawned, and stretched only to almost fall over. Maury and Tolly laughed again. Krepp angrily waved an arm at them.

"Yeah, the hell with y'all too. Reckon I'll just go sleep it off if you're going to be like that."

"What about tomorrow?" Maury said. "You're going to hunt wild turkey with us, right?"

"Sure enough I will. Hearing all this talk about Roosevelt makes me want to shoot something."

"Go to bed, Winston," Ben said.

Krepp snarled at him, but nonetheless stumbled off to his tent. Maury finished his scotch and stood.

"I'm tired too after all that driving and hearing Winnie piss and moan. I guess I'll check on my dogs and then hit the hay too."

"Well, look at the party pooper," Tolly said. "I guess you're right to call it a night though, especially since the bottle's pretty near a dead soldier. What about you, Ben?"

"I'll be up for a while to clean up."

"I'd be glad to help, sir."

"No need for that, Dolph. Ben'll do fine."

Dolph and Ben washed the dutch ovens, tin plates, cups, and cutlery in the creek with powdered bleach and long handled wooden scrubbers. They set them to dry in a rack Ben brought from the bar. He wrapped the leftover deer meat in a muslin bag that Dolph hung by his lariat from a branch so animals couldn't reach it.

The work done, Ben uncapped two beers and handed one to Dolph.

"Thanks, Ben. I was thirsty."

"Me too. Have a seat."

They sat at the table. Ben poured out the last of the scotch. Dolph nursed his beer.

"Is it true like Mr. Fontaine says you used to be a barnstormer, Ben?"

"Sure it is. I bought a used Curtiss Jenny with my Navy pay and flew all over the South and Mid-West. Wing walking, going through barns, I did it all."

"Wow. That sure must have been something."

"I had fun. What's Maury pay you for working out here alone, Dolph?"

"Seventy-five a month, but I send most to my mother. She's in Bandera."

"Not much wages."

"I'm just glad of a job. There's no work for a hand where I'm from, especially nowadays."

"Hell, I'll give you a job, Dolph. I'll pay a hundred fifty a month to start and you'll get to live in town."

Dolph's face brightened as a huge grin slowly formed. "Sure enough? You'd do that for me?"

"I need a hard worker to help run the bar. Don't worry about not earning the money. You'll have to wait on tables, tend bar, and cook on the grill, but I'll teach you the ropes."

"Say, that sounds great, Ben, but what will Mr. Fontaine think?"

"Don't worry about Maury, Dolph. He's a good joe, but cheap like every other rich guy I know. He'll just find somebody else to work here. Maury won't mind a bit."

"Well, OK then, Ben. I'm sure enough game."

"Good. I'll take you back with me to San Antonio."

"Yeah, but what about the horses?"

Ben laughed, another deep rasp, and finished his scotch. "Maury can watch them until he finds someone new, I guess. Go on, Dolph, hit the hay. We'll work things out tomorrow."

Wild, desperate yowls sounded nearby, full of hunger, anxiety, and desperation. Other cries arose in response from further on, a deranged, feral chorus that reached a peak of manic intensity. The beasts screamed to one another and the world at large of their pressing, keening needs, for food, a mate, and the endless urge to roam.

"Damned coyotes," Dolph said.

"Get some sleep."

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Ben woke early. He started a fire, boiled water, and shaved his angular face with a straight razor sharpened on a leather strop. Dolph joined him after he washed up in the creek, sun reddened face bright from cold water. Ben sliced up the remaining deer meat and cooked it in a skillet, adding eggs carefully transported in a cotton stuffed crate. The omelet's scent drew the others from their tents, even Krepp, surly and hungover as usual.

They ate the omelet with coffee, fresh baked biscuits, and navel oranges from the Rio Grande Valley. Ben slathered his eggs in pepper and Tabasco sauce. Maury wiped his unshaven face with a paper napkin that he crumpled and tossed to the ground.

"No point fiddle fucking around. Where's the best place to scare us up some wild turkeys, Dolph?"

"It's still early enough we might find them out by Turtle Creek hunting breakfast. There's a mess of big pecan trees there. I seen them roosting."

"Hell, we can drive there in the truck," Tolly said.

"You can drive," Ben said.

"There goes Mr. Sensitive again," Krepp said. "Too damn refined to see some stupid bird get killed."

"Ben, I'd appreciate it if you came along," Maury said. "After all, it's your truck. Nobody drives it better than you."

Ben scowled. "All right. Load up then."

Maury grinned. Tolly howled a rebel yell. He and Krepp fetched their shotguns and piled into the truck bed with the dogs. Krepp argued with Tolly about where to sit.

Dolph jumped in and closed the gate. Maury also got his shotgun and sat in the cab with Ben.

They drove through what was once pasture, steadily being overgrown by live oaks, pines, post oaks, dagger plants, and barrel cactus. Ben carefully threaded his way over the remaining open ground, headed toward a narrow silver seam. A dog bumped against Krepp. He angrily shoved him away.

"Tell me something, Maury. Just what do you like so much about that son of a bitch Krepp?"

"Quiet, Ben. He might hear you. That raspy voice of yours is so dern loud."

"I don't care if he does hear me. Why don't you answer my question?"

Maury rolled up the window and spoke in a low voice that was hard to hear. "I know Winston's a damn pain in the ass, but I need him. His family owns most of the acreage where my oil leases are. He'll inherit it all soon. I have to stay on his good side."

"OK. That's a reason."

"Ben, I need you to do me a favor. Don't go riling Winston like you been doing."

"Don't ask for miracles, Fontaine."

The early morning was alive with bird calls, the doves' lonesome coos, a blackbird's musical whistle. The sun, a bloody red orb, broke free from the horizon and cast the live oaks' massive, gnarled branches in stark light. Horned toads and long tailed lizards scurried from under the truck's rolling tires. Tolly pulled his jacket tight against the early morning chill. Krepp took a long pull from his hip flask.

Maury had Ben stop half a mile from the creek. "I know you don't like seeing animals killed, Ben, but I'd appreciate it if you came along. I need help watching Winston."

"So now I'm his goddamned keeper?"

He still got out. Maury brought the dogs down from the bed and hushed them. Well trained, they kept silent, eager to sink their teeth in fresh killed prey.

Maury whispered, "Dolph. Go on ahead and set the decoys. Get up in a tree and blow a few calls to fetch us some toms. Got me?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Fontaine."

Dolph took the decoys from the bed and walked off with them tucked under his arms. After he set the decoys up by the rushing creek's near bank, Dolph shinnied up a pecan tree. The men followed him. They hid with the dogs in a mesquite thicket near the creek.

The birds' cries grew louder and more excited as the rising sun's light strengthened. A low cluck sounded from the pecan tree followed by a rolling, staccato purr, the call of a hen ready to mate, mimicked by Dolph. Krepp hit his flask again.

Ben said, "Maury, get that shotgun away from Winston. He's already drunk."

"Ben, will you hush like I asked? What's to worry? All he'll do is just miss like he always does."

Dolph played the hen call again and then twice more. The hunters squatted in the thicket, shotguns tightly gripped, the dogs like statues, in wait for the signal to come alive. Loud, short gobbles erupted from pecan trees on the creek's opposite bank. Dolph returned the toms' cries with his own seductive cluck and purr.

Great balls of multicolored feathers erupted from the trees' branches. Wings fully spread, five big toms gracefully descended to the ground. One arched his tail feathers fully to form an enormous brown fan. He extended pied black and white feathers to make himself seem larger. His bright blue face and wattled neck were vivid in the early morning sun, a bulging, bright red gorget at the neck's bottom.

The other toms also assumed full courting display. They strutted down to the creek, ignorant of their upcoming doom, lured by the decoys and Dolph's well timed calls. The toms were only fifty yards away now.

"Wait until they get to the creek," Maury hissed. "Don't fire until then."

Seconds crept by with agonizing slowness as the toms approached. A tom stood at the creek's edge, gobbled, then hopped across. Maury, Tolly, and Krepp stood and leveled their shotguns. Ben turned away, unable to watch such magnificent animals die.

A piercing scream of agony cut through the burnt cordite reek. Dolph dropped from the tree to the ground.

"Jesus Christ, Krepp, just what in hell have you gone and done now?" Tolly shouted.

"That wasn't my fault. I got that tom over there. You must have done it."

"Get out of my way, goddamn you."

Ben shoved Krepp aside and ran from the thicket. Long legs flying, he hurried to Dolph. His face was covered with blood. He moaned from the pain. Ben stooped down, picked Dolph up, and draped him over his broad shoulders. He hustled the wounded man over to the truck and laid him down on the bed.

"I ain't dying, am I?"

"Don't worry. You're OK."

Ben took a towel and wiped the blood from Dolph's face. Four red divots dotted his left cheek, the uppermost half an inch from his eye. Blood streamed down again. Ben wrapped the towel around Dolph's cheek and tied it behind his head.

"He needs to see a doctor. Where's the nearest one?"

"That'd be Doc Watkins, out by Rio Seco. That's only twenty some miles north of here. Come on, we'll use the Caddy."

"I'll take him. Get him in the cab."

"But, Ben--"

"Goddamnit, do as I say!"

Ben's jet black eyes blazed fire. Maury draped Dolph's arm over his shoulders and helped him into the cab. Ben fetched the leather strop he used to sharpen his razor and knives. He doubled the strop and slapped it hard against his left hand's palm.

"You almost blinded that poor boy. I said I'd beat the line-backed shit out of you and I meant it, you goddamned, no good, drunken son of a bitch!"

Ben pinned Krepp's right shoulder in an iron vise. He slammed the strop across Krepp's face. His head reeled from the blow.

"Yeah, Ben. I guess you don't at that."

"Goddamn you, Ben. Let me go--"

Ben backhanded him with the strop. Krepp tried to fight back, but Ben held him at arm's length while he methodically whipped Krepp from head to toe. Maury ran to stop Ben. Tolly held him back, his arms wrapped around Maury.

"Let me go, goddamn it, Tolly! That's five million dollars in oil leases."

"Uh-uh, Maury. The son of a bitch has it coming."

Ben dropped Krepp. He fell to the ground and whimpered, curled into a fetal ball. Ben picked him up with both hands and heaved him into the truck bed.

"Tolly, get in the back with the dogs. Never mind those goddamned birds. Let's get going."

Tolly meekly did as Ben said. He drove as fast as he could over the uneven terrain. Maury held Dolph in his arms. He was semi-conscious. Krepp loudly moaned and wept in the back.

"I'll drop them off at the camp and then we'll go to the doc."

"What about Krepp? You roughed him up pretty good there."

"He can lump it, the goddamn drunk. I've got no room for his kind."

Ben fought with the steering wheel as he negotiated a steep rise. Blood smeared onto Maury's clean shirt. He wiped at it uselessly.

"What you did wasn't too smart, Ben. The Krepps got a lot of pull in Austin and won't be any too happy when they learn you whipped the dog piss out of the heir apparent."

"See if I give a good goddamn about them or anyone else in this whole wide state, Maury."

They reached the camp. Ben hit the gas and sped down the hill. Maury laughed.

## Charm City

J.M. Jordan

I.

It's after dark. You're headed home at last.  
The lamps that light the way are ordered well  
according to their duty, and the noise  
of late rush-hour traffic simply hums  
a rather pleasant setting for your steps,  
a backdrop for your reverie.

But then  
some incident or accident up ahead,  
some tragic scene or jumbled-up confusion  
of flashing lights and yellow warning signs  
impedes you on your travels.

So you step  
from off the usual route into a maze  
of unlit cuts and jacked-up alleyways,  
of dark backdoors and open cellar shafts  
that cough up sudden clouds of groans  
and rotten beer and random waves of heat.  
But you press on until you pop out in  
a different neighborhood entirely,  
an old familiar patch of cluttered store-fronts,  
of dusty curio shops and corner joints  
and plastic saints in windows framed by stringlights.  
And suddenly, there it is: the wooden door,  
the neon cocktail glass, the grubby windows –  
the locus of a thousand mythic nights,  
the old much-storied haunt of younger days.

You haven't drunk in bars in years, but now  
the old thirst comes back, and you can taste

the memories of juniper and oak,  
of acrid smoke and rye and cheap perfume  
unrolling in the space behind your eyes.  
You're parched, of course. You drop in on a lark.

The faces all seem younger, less inspired  
and more professional. The old jukebox  
is missing (taking with it, you assume,  
Loretta, Conway, Merle: the voices of  
the flinty folk that came down from the hills  
to work the billowing mills between the wars).  
But still the spot retains its shabby charm.  
The bust of Sitting Bull still looms above  
the antique register and strings of lights  
illuminate the patches of the social clubs  
that thronged this place before the docks shut down:  
each little golden pool a small vignette  
of threadbare glory and a world now gone.

You take a seat and order an Old Fashioned  
and laugh at your own joke. You settle in,  
swirling the ice around the lowball glass,  
then look around and take the action in:  
the shining girls, the stern serious hipsters  
enrapt in their own perfect orbs. You are  
quite comfortably outside the stories now,  
quite safe to sit and recollect.

But then  
your blood goes cold; your body shivers as  
a flicker in the mirror draws your eye,  
an image at the end of the barroom slipping  
from the dark space of the old wood phonebooth:  
an unforgotten ghost in a short black dress.

You know you should just up and leave. You should  
just shoot your fancy cocktail, drop a ten  
and walk into the hum-drum night, but then  
she always made falling down feel so good.

She slides up like a snake. You breathe her in.  
She pauses, scans the barroom like a thief  
about to make an old well-practiced move,  
then leans in close, her whisper like the sound  
a knife makes slowly slipping from its sheath.

## II.

It's half past 10. The angry morning sun  
is drying out the damp spots on the bed  
as the little room comes slowly into focus:  
a room key on a fob, a twisted matchbook,  
an almost-finished pint of Rebel Yell  
beside an empty claret bottle on  
the nightstand, and another on the floor.  
A pile of smoky clothes. A grim unease  
that sifts among dim drifting images  
of smudged mascara and spectral skin.

Alone, you find the floor with shaky feet  
then shuffle to the window and look out  
across the empty parking lot. The block  
is empty, lifeless, peaceful as a tomb.  
You know it's coming though around the corner,  
the raucous march, the deviant parade:  
the grubby little mysteries, the piecemeal  
entanglements that issue forth en masse  
like tiny spiders from a stove-in spore,  
the silver lies, the bleary side-eye looks,

the seedy scent that cannot be explained.

O yes, you know it's gonna take some time,  
some good old fashioned grunting shovel work  
to dig yourself from under this disaster,  
to make sure in the end that this is just  
a dirty hole and not some open grave  
you leapt in like a twenty-year-old fool.  
It's gonna take a scamming scheming push  
to peel yourself from out this sticky web  
you spun together with a febrile thing  
you should have let alone and left to die.

You splash a little water on your face,  
pull on your clothes and gather up your things  
then step into the daylight like a stranger  
trespassing under watchful wary eyes.  
The little office window by the street  
is mercifully shaded, so you stop  
and rent the trashy room for three more nights,  
fire off a little lie or two by text  
then head into the day in search of coffee.

## III.

The little bell above the bar door rings.  
You step into the darkness. There she is,  
behind the counter, counting dollar bills.  
*It's Only Make Believe.* She mouths the words  
in silence to herself, her skin as pale  
as marble or the edges of old photos  
but strangely freshened in the barroom light.  
*My hopes, my dreams come true. My life I give  
for you.* The aged anthem weaves a spell,

as shimmering motes turn in the smoky air -  
a proper background for the daytime crowd  
that hides out from the unrelenting sun.

She doesn't lift her head, so you slip by  
and spy an empty barstool. Waiting there:  
an untouched cocktail just the way you like it.  
You hang your hat and take your place among  
the wounded soldiers and the stevedores,  
the burned out street kids and the local drunks,  
the molls, the old detectives and the drifters,  
and all the other ghosts that never left her.

## Some True Things About Top Surgery

### Benjamin Rhodes

*Tombstone* was playing on the hospital TV while the doctor marked me up. Permanent marker around my nipples. *You just gonna stand there and bleed?* When it came time to wheel me out, those two cowboy friends were playing cards on one of their deathbeds, the real one this time, not the one where he got the badge then rode out and shot the bad guy before his partner got there. *I'll be your huckleberry.* Sorry, I can never remember actors' or characters' names. If you've seen the movie you know what I'm talking about.

We'd watched almost the whole thing waiting in that pre-op room, all of my clothes in a plastic bag, except my winter coat just over a chair, my body wearing a thin gown that tied in the back in two places, grey gummy-bottomed socks on my feet. No undies, no binder. An IV needle socket stuck out of the inside of my forearm, taped down, and sore in that way where it didn't quite hurt, but my nervous system constantly made sure I was aware of it. *Hey, you've got something here that doesn't belong.* Tell me about it.

The lady with a computer on wheels who let us know how much farther back I was in the surgery queue called me *she*, then her eyes got real big and she stopped talking for a second. She avoided pronouns in somersaults and only looked at my friend for the rest of the time she was there. I thought it kinda funny, and fitting, though my laminated bracelet had an *M* printed on it. Trick of the insurance, my license had an *F*, still has an *F* at the moment of writing this, try not to see it as a mark of failure.

I wore my cowboy boots to the hospital for strength. Not even a month owned, Christmas gift from Dad. We had to drive across the river to find a store that sold them in my size, little feet, small man. Cowboy boots take learning to walk in. I wasn't quite there by the time I got surgery, slow going down the hallways, hips jutted, steady clap-clap of a pretender. It was winter in Cleveland, there was snow. Leather isn't waterproof.

## Cowboy's Guide to Top Surgery

### Benjamin Rhodes

First thing you should know is it hurts like hell. The doctors'll give you what they can, but it'll only help so much for so long. I'd suggest biting on your belt or a piece of wood while they cut you, otherwise you'll break a tooth.

You may think that getting blackout drunk would distract you from the pain, but that isn't true. Drink before they cut you and you'll bleed out in no time. Drink afterwards and you'll just puke, which won't do much to help your stitches.

The good news is, you'll pass clean out after they first slice and fold back your skin. You may wake back up when they carve up your tits like pot roast, scoop away serving after serving till it's gobbled up. You'll probably pass out again when they snip off the extra skin, wake up towards the end of sewing in stitches.

You won't be able to move at all for about a week. Lay in a bed while a nurse feeds you soup, puts a bed pan under you, wipes your ass. If you don't catch a fever during this time, you'll probably live. If you do catch a fever, and you're a fighter, you should make it out the other side. If you get bad enough, though, there's nothing anyone can do for you.

Stay very strong when the doctor comes to bleed you. He'll prick and slice a little opening in your side, let out the bad blood, bandage you back up. The skin on your chest will be numb during this, will be numb for a while after, may never gain feeling again, so this won't necessarily hurt, but it ain't gonna feel good either. Try not to think about it too much. Be grateful for a flat chest and your life.

After a week's up, you'll be able to move around freely, but you won't be able to work for another month or two. You better live somewhere that'll let you freeload, maybe a hotel if you have the money. Don't count on the charity of family and relatives. No one else will know how much it hurts. They'll expect more out of you than you can give. Best to stay on your own, unless you have a woman to take care of you. I personally didn't.

You should be able to use your arms like normal after a month, be able to lift things after two. Light work can be accomplished, such as in a stable or general store. Depending on your constitution, you may be able to

handle farming and wrangling after two months. For most folks, I'd say you'll need about four, maybe six if you're a real scrawny fella.

Be sure you eat fair amounts of meat, especially beef steak, to regain strength. Avoid drinking and smoking for as long as possible, though you should be able to enjoy both vices again around the same time you return to work.

## Finding Thalia

Terri Lynn Coop

My father has had six months to live for the last ten years.

Because of this, my sister and I make our annual pilgrimage to the house on the hill just outside of Archer City, Texas. We pay our respects, apologize for our shortcomings, and sign the legal documents that give us our yearly nibble from the family trust.

As sole trustee, Dad refused to handle the paperwork ritual through the mail, or even better, let the family lawyer take care of it. I've always believed that he knew if he released his iron grip on the trust, for even a moment, he'd never see either of us again.

He was right.

The drive from Chicago was pleasant, as always. My latest novel involves Route 66, so I milked the trip for tax-deductible research. The last leg, on TX-79 from Wichita Falls, wound through the Texas countryside with the sky a great blue bowl stretching to all points of the horizon. Too soon, signs of human habitation started to intrude. The first hint of the outskirts of Archer City is a car wash. Shortly after that, a Dollar General confirms that this is a small town on the plains.

The highway morphed into Center Street, crossing Evergreen, Hackberry, Elm, and Pecan. Then it reached Main, where the dark stone courthouse towered over the crumbling shell that birthed not only Larry McMurtry, but also a writer who rode a sociological analysis of *Texasville* and the Duane Moore series to an MFA over a decade earlier.

In those days, it felt like the town that had modeled Thalia might survive and even thrive. That feeling was gone now. As I passed the dark locked *Booked Up* building, I could sense the spirit of our most famous son brooding.

It matched my mood as I contemplated the meeting with my father. This year was going to be particularly bad because I would face it alone. My younger sister, Sarah, had just had her third baby with her Marine husband. When I'd talked to her on the phone, the unspoken message was simple; unless it was for a funeral, she had

no desire to drop everything to come to Texas for the annual supplicant dance.

In my briefcase, I had her power of attorney, leaving me, the oldest child and prodigal son, an adjunct professor who moonlights as a midlist author, to pry loose the crumbs from our late mother's fortune.

I was early, so I pulled into a parking space close to Murn's Café. For the past several years, the bright red storefront had been a beacon of life in the dusty downtown. As I settled back into a vinyl booth with a late lunch of burger and fries, I watched the social life of Archer City play out.

A white-haired cowboy jingle-jangled by me.

*If his name isn't Gus, it's a crime.*

The researcher in me knew the Augustus McCrae was loosely based on a historical figure. However, as an artist and writer, I also believed that McMurtry infused a bit of Archer City into every character.

As I ate, conversation swirled around me.

*Don't hug me, Hun; I'm sweaty from fussing in the garden.*

*Yeah, she was out there for fifteen whole minutes.*

*Hey Sweetie, don't you ever be ashamed of sweating. It's a sign of honest work. In fact, I'd like to meet a sweaty man. It's been way too long.*

Amused, a passage from my thesis ran through my head: *Thalia isn't a place. It's a state of mind.*

In a better humor than I'd felt in a week, I paid the check and left a tip just short of ostentatious. I planned on walking around the square and adding a few pages to my sketchbook before facing what waited for me at the house on the hill just south of town.

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The sun was heading for the horizon when I parked in the portcullis. From the highway, the house didn't look like much. Mom wanted it that way. Her gardens and pool were on the other side, safe from nosey neighbors and curious strangers. However, time and lack of care had taken its toll on her beloved grotto. I paused briefly to take in the slime-choked koi pond that hadn't been capable of

sustaining aquatic life since I'd been in college. It seemed an apt metaphor.

Grabbing my bag, I walked around to the front. I was expected and knew I needed to present myself to my father in his den. I was a courtier on my way to an audience with the king.

The brass handle still held the day's heat as I lifted it and pushed open the double door.

"Dad? It's me."

"Come on in, Robert, and have a drink with your old decrepit father. I'm sure you want one."

The oily venom in his voice told me I was in for a long night.

The bottle on the bar was from the middle tier of the liquor cabinet rather than the bottom shelf usually reserved for guests. I poured two fingers of the 1991 Lagavulin Distillers Edition. I was tempted to pour four, just to irritate him, but I needed to keep my wits sharp. The sweet notes rolled across my tongue. A much different experience than the swill I limited myself to at home.

Fortified, I turned and surveyed the room. Not a thing had changed, other than whoever the agency was sending didn't think dusting was a priority. Dad was in the same place as always, his antique carved chair backlit by the setting sun. My chair, smaller and less ornate, waited for me under the harsh light of an over-bright art déco floor lamp.

The hot seat: literally and figuratively.

I noticed that the even-smaller chair, usually reserved for my sister, was shoved into a dark corner.

My voice was surprisingly small as I asked, "Can I get you anything?"

He lifted his glass, sniffed the amber liquid, and took a small sip. "No, I'm good."

That's when I suspected his glass contained the 1985 Sherry Cask. It was nice to know that I rated the \$800 scotch, but not the \$6000 scotch. Dad always was about priorities.

I knew we had an hour before he suggested we retire to the dining room for whatever cold supper his daytime attendant had prepared. I sat in my chair and silently sipped my drink. I might have to do the dance, but I didn't have to make it easy on him.

He broke first.

"So, how was your trip? I take it you drove? It's such a long way from Chicago."

*Not long enough*, I thought.

"I'm a mere adjunct professor. I can't afford a plane ticket and car rental. Plus, it's good for researching my next novel."

"Well, when I'm dead, you'll be able to afford first class."

Only one drink and the gauntlet was thrown. I picked it up with my reply: "And when might that be?"

He laughed. The most genuine show of humor I'd seen from him in years. "Robert, since it's just us, answer me one question."

I shifted in my chair. "Anything for you."

"Why?"

That single word was a loaded shotgun between us. He'd never asked so directly before, but I knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Dad, I thought you'd figured it out. I did it to annoy you. I knew our education was funded through a separate line item in the trust and you had no control over it. All we had to do was present our acceptance paperwork to the lawyer, and he'd take care of all those pesky tuition invoices and dining hall bills."

The way his bushy eyebrows bunched together told me I'd rung cherries. I forced a pseudo-serious tone into my voice: "So, I thought to myself, what would piss my father off the most, while making my mother proud? First, my BA in English Lit. You were clenched so tight at graduation; I'm surprised the windows didn't shatter. But it wasn't enough. I wanted more. A professor suggested I apply to some MFA programs. I honestly wasn't sure I had what it takes, but an agent liked my first novel and my

thesis practically wrote itself. Although, I came by that part honestly."

I gestured to a photo on one of the crammed bookshelves. I was a middle-schooler receiving an award from Larry McMurtry for winning the annual essay contest.

"Your mother framed that."

I decided to go for the kill shot. "There was never any doubt about that. She loved me."

I knew I'd drawn blood when he leveraged himself out of his chair and hobbled to the bar. Instead of going to the locked vault, he poured from the bottle he'd left out for me. He took one sip of the best scotch I'd ever tasted, yet he grimaced like it was out of the well.

He broke the hanging dusty silence. "You know you weren't our first, right?"

The air left my lungs. My calm, honed in front of hordes of cellphone-wielding freshman in Comp I, was the only thing that kept me from reacting. I was determined to not give him the explosion he wanted. This was news to me.

"Our first born was named Joseph. A fine big strapping boy with a pair of lungs like you wouldn't believe. Six months old when she found him cold and blue. Doctor called it crib death. She'd had so much trouble with her first pregnancy and getting over it that we'd had separate bedrooms for almost a year. One night, she came to me and begged for another baby. I was more than happy to oblige. We got you."

It was amazing how he managed to fit almost forty years of disappointment into those last three words.

I applauded.

My mind roiled with questions, but this wasn't the time. "Nice to know I annoyed you even before I suffered through two semesters of Brit Lit."

His smirk told me he wasn't totally buying my cool act. He'd evened the score.

He leaned back on one of the bar stools. "Do you ever wonder why there's ten years between you and your sister?"

"Should I?"

He went on like he hadn't heard me. "There were three miscarriages. The last one almost killed her. The doc said no more babies, but you were in Little League and always had your nose stuck in a book. She was lonely. Hell, I think she even missed me. So, then came Sarah. Your mother died three years later from pills. She was in constant pain from the pregnancies and her mind wouldn't leave her alone. You two killed my wife."

There it was. The last wall between us was breached and our lifelong competition for my mother's love and attention was finally laid bare.

I stood so fast that my heavy chair slid back a foot. I got close enough to see his face clearly in the gloom, but not close enough to lay hands on him. I didn't trust my temper.

"We were children. We loved our mother, and she loved us. Hell, we even loved you. Let's talk about you for a second. You sit in this house, a wedding gift from your father-in-law, like a medieval lord strangling us with the purse strings of our mother's legacy because we were too young to have a say when the trust was created. You're no member of the landed gentry. You were a truck driver who saw *Urban Cowboy* too many times before getting lucky when he knocked up the wealthy rancher's daughter."

Hatred flamed in his eyes. Twenty years ago, we might have ended up fist-fighting and wrestling across the lawn. Before, I'd always backed down before it got to this point. Not this time. I didn't drop my eyes. He knew the truth. He was a sick old man and no match for even his unworthy intellectual son.

I had a moment of clarity.

*How weak, small, and pathetic do you have to be to blame your loneliness on your children?*

He was of no more substance than an old bird wrapped up in boots, jeans, and a pearl snap shirt. He wasn't worth my words or my anger. And, I understood loneliness.

"Dad—"

"Go to hell."

He pushed by me and left the den.

I called out. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going upstairs. If you're hungry, I don't really care. Find something."

I downed another shot and tried to calm my emotions.

*Damn.*

When I got to the central hall, he was halfway up the stairs, leaning on his cane with every labored step. I stood at the bottom and put as much gentleness in my voice as I could muster.

"C'mon, we need to talk. Let's have another drink and you can tell me about mom when she was younger. Please."

He stopped one step short of the top, and said, "She was like watching the sun rise over the prairie in spring. Until everything changed. There, is that good enough for you?"

Tears threatened. "No, it's not. Please. Tell me more."

He sighed. "Son, for once in your sorry life, act like you're a man instead of some whiney-ass city boy. Besides, you made yourself real clear. You want to think you won? Well, you win."

I was wiping my eyes on my sleeve when a ripping sound caught my attention. I looked up just in time to see him yank the tip of his cane from a tear in the threadbare runner. He over-corrected, pin-wheeled his arms, and with a strangled cry, fell backward on the steep stairs.

My first instinct was to rush forward and catch him. However, in that split second, I saw the gray years stretching ahead for me and Sarah.

I pressed myself against the bannister and let him roll by me. I closed my eyes and cringed at the sickening thud as he hit the marble floor. When I opened them, the impossible angle of his head told me it was over.

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The detritus of death started with my 911 call.

The sheriff had poked around, asking me a few questions while the EMTs confirmed what we all knew. The smell of spilled scotch was heavy on Dad's shirt and breath and the

muttered consensus was that an old man like that should have moved his bedroom to the first floor, especially if he was going to drink. That something like this was inevitable. I nodded and smiled. The family attorney was on his way because he had the documents about medical records, and last wishes, and all the stuff that was incomprehensible to me. When he arrived, I'd let him take control.

After the ambulance and sheriff had left, he found me on the back veranda, skipping rocks in the stagnant swimming pool.

He handed me a full glass and said, "You were the prime suspect. I took care of it."

My expression must have asked the question.

With a laugh, he continued, "the sheriff hinted around about the estate and who might benefit from your father's death. I told him that you and Sarah have zero say because I'm the successor trustee and control everything."

I threw back my drink and swore under my breath. Even in death, that old bastard had his foot on our necks.

He ignored me. "I figure it'll take about ninety days to liquidate and disperse the corpus of the trust. There will be a ton of paperwork and a couple of court appearances, but I've been looking forward to this for over ten years. Once I close the book on this, I'm moving to Florida and going fishing."

"What?"

"Robert, I've been after your old man to kick loose with the cash since your sister turned twenty-one. I'm sorry for the way he treated you two. Take the money and have a good life."

I contemplated my empty glass. "Um, just how much are we talking about?"

"A very good life."

\*\*\*

I opened my computer and waited for the Zoom call to connect. My sister's face appeared on the split screen.

"Hi Sarah."

"Robbie, tell me it's true!"

"It's true. Our shares will be just shy of three million each after taxes. The detailed accounting is in the mail. Our lawyer suggests creating a separate bank account for the wire transfer. Then you can talk to a financial adviser and all that good shit."

"I just can't believe it. Ken's enlistment is up in six months. We're going to move to Fresno to be near his family. His mom needs help, and he's going to partner with his brother in the family's mechanic shop. That's after we take a real honeymoon. This accelerated our schedule by at least five years."

"Be happy, Sis. You deserve it. I have one more thing I want to talk to you about."

"Talk away."

"It's about the house."

Her eyes widened. "What about it?"

"I'd like to keep it, at least for a while. I want to sort through all the pictures and papers and put our life and childhood into perspective. There are also some very rare books and art here. I don't just want it sold at auction. There's nothing for me in Chicago anymore, and I need to reconnect. The property isn't super valuable, but I'll buy out your share if you want."

She laughed and said, "Robbie, keep it. You're the only one who can untangle that mess. I could not care less what happens to that barn. If you get really lucky on something, send me a check. I'll put it in the kids' college fund. By the way, you should come for Christmas. Ken would love to see you, and I want to introduce you to your newest niece."

"I'd like that."

As if on cue, a baby cried in the background. She looked over her shoulder and back at me. The message was clear.

"Go on now. We'll talk soon. I love you, Little Sis."

"Love you too, Big Bro."

The screen went blank, and I was alone.

But not lonely. The ghosts of Archer City were with me. I got the ornate key from its hiding place and opened the locked liquor shelf. After pouring a generous measure of Lagavulin, the 1985 Sherry Cask, this time, I went outside and sat in one of the deck chairs.

The clear, dark sky, far from the light pollution of civilization, glowed with a million stars. I lifted my glass and said, "Dad, wherever you are, I hope you're not disappointed. But, as much as you wanted to be Duane, you were really Carla: hard to love and easy to miss."

I savored the sweet liquid fire. Now that I had the place completely to myself, I had one more chore to complete. I had to destroy the bottle of poisoned scotch I'd brought from Chicago and kept hidden under my spare tire.

## Contributors

**Brian Beatty** is the author of five poetry collections: *Magpies and Crows*; *Borrowed Trouble*; *Dust and Stars: Miniatures*; *Brazil, Indiana: A Folk Poem*; and *Coyotes I Couldn't See*. Beatty's writing has appeared in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Conduit*, *CutBank*, *Evergreen Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Gigantic*, *Gulf Coast*, *Hobart*, *McSweeney's*, *The Missouri Review*, *Monkeybicycle*, *The Quarterly*, *Rattle*, *Seventeen* and *Sycamore Review*. In 2021 he released *Hobo Radio*, a spoken word album with original music by Charlie Parr. Beatty lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

**Shome Dasgupta** is the author of eleven books, including *The Seagull And The Urn* (HarperCollins India), and most recently, *Spectacles* (Word West Press) and a poetry collection, *Iron Oxide* (Assure Press). Forthcoming novels include *Cirrus Stratus* (Spuyten Duyvil), *Tentacles Numbing* (Thirty West), and *The Muu-Antiques* (Malarkey Books). His hybrid collection of prose, *Histories Of Memories*, will be published by Belle Point Press. His writing has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *New Orleans Review*, *American Book Review*, *Arkansas Review*, *X-R-A-Y*, *Magma Poetry*, and elsewhere. He is the series editor of the *Wigleaf* Top 50. He lives in Lafayette, LA and can be found at [www.shomedome.com](http://www.shomedome.com) and @laughingyeti.

**Carol Willis** received a medical doctorate from Texas A&M University College of Medicine and completed her pathology residency at Vanderbilt University. She obtained an MBA in Healthcare from George Washington University and is currently a candidate for an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her short story entitled "Laws of Attraction" was recently named the first-place winner for its category in the first round of the NYC Midnight short story contest. You can find her short stories in *Crimeucopia: Tales from the Back Porch*, *Unlikely Stories.org*, and elsewhere. She practiced medicine in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and Chicago before moving to Virginia. She lives in Charlottesville with her husband and four uppity chickens.

**Allison Barnett** is a Los Angeles-raised quasi-Southerner. A creative writing student at the University of Mississippi, she has received multiple writing awards including the Evans-Harrington Scholarship, the ENVS Writing Scholarship, and the W. Alton Bryant English Award. In her spare time, she hopes to create world peace, or at least her own peace.

**Travis Grant** lives in northern Alberta, Canada. You can talk to him on Twitter: @travisjudegrant.

**Francois Bereaud** is a husband, dad, full time math professor, mentor in the San Diego Congolese refugee community, mountain biker, and mediocre hockey player. His stories and essays have been published online and in print. His work has earned Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations. *The Counter Pharma-Terrorist & The Rebound Queen* is his published chapbook and the realization of a dream. You can find links to his writing at [francoisbereaud.com](http://francoisbereaud.com). He tweets stuff @FBereaud.

**Alfred Stifsim** is a writer of fiction and the occasional poem. A graduate of History from IUPUI (Indianapolis, 2014), he is an electrician with IBEW Local Union 481. His debut novel is *Wild Salvation* (Feb. 2022) and he has words published with *Cowboy Jamboree*, *Close to the Bone*, and *Bullshit Lit*. You can find him on Twitter: @AStifsim, Instagram: @alfredstifsim\_author, or at [alfredstifsim.com](http://alfredstifsim.com)

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*Locus* Magazine once called **John Weagly** "a new writer worth reading and following." His short fiction has been nominated for the Derringer Award, winning one in 2008, and various other accolades. As a playwright, his scripts have been produced on four continents. His latest collection of stories, *Dancing in the Knee-Deep Midnight*, is available from Close To The Bone publishing.

**Tom Funk** is a judge in the state courts of Illinois. He began writing short stories about 7 years ago after hearing thousands of them in his day job. He has been published in *Spitball*, *Altarwork* and *Anti-Heroic Chic*.

**Julia Nunnally Duncan** is a Western North Carolina author of ten books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Her most recent books are a poetry collection *A Neighborhood Changes* (Finishing Line Press) and *A Place That Was Home*, a collection of personal essays released by eLectio Publishing. She is a frequent essay contributor to *Smoky Mountain Living Magazine* and often writes about her WNC upbringing in a textile mill town in the 1960s. She

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**Rob Maxwell** grew up in Butler, Alabama, in the state's Black Belt. The son of a millwright, he is a former book reviewer for the *Mobile Press Register* and has an MFA from the University of Alabama. At the Eugene Walter Writers Festival in Mobile, he took awards in fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry. His work has appeared in *Oracle*, *Thicket*, *storySouth* and *Tartts 3*, a fiction anthology from the University of West Alabama. A retired Navy intelligence officer, he now makes his home in Daphne on the Alabama Gulf Coast.

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**Alex McMillin** has had stories published in *Misery Tourism*, *Punch Riot*, and *Defunkt*. He plans to include the story herein in a collection someday. Follow him on Twitter @McMillin\_Writer.

**Mark Mellon** is a novelist who supports his family by working as an attorney. He writes two-fisted, hardboiled, blood and guts pulp fiction and has four novels and over ninety short stories (many as reprints) published in the USA, UK, Canada, Ireland, Bulgaria, and Denmark. Short fiction by Mark has recently appeared in *Cirsova*, *Savage Realms*, *Dark Horses*, and *Mystery Magazine*. His novella, *Escape From Byzantium*, won the 2010 Independent Publisher Silver Prize for SF/Fantasy. He's a member of the HWA. "A Hunting Party" is very loosely based on stories about Mark's grandfather, Matthew "Daddy Ben" Benzaquin, a notable San Antonio character for several decades. More information about his writing is available at: [www.mellonwritesagain.com](http://www.mellonwritesagain.com).

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**Terri Lynn Coop** is a recovering lawyer who now teaches high school English to unsuspecting sophomores. Her work has appeared in two Anthony-nominated anthologies: *Just to Watch Them Die: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Johnny Cash* and *Lockdown: Tales of Crime, Terror, and Hope in a Pandemic*. Her flash fiction can also be found at classy joints like *Shotgun Honey*. Terri's mystery series, starring disgraced lawyer Juliana Martin, is available through Amazon.

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