

47-16

**SHORT FICTION AND POETRY
INSPIRED BY DAVID BOWIE**

VOLUME II

EDITED BY:

CHRIS THOMPSON

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FRONT COVER IMAGE "THE DIARY OF NATHAN ADLER" BY ALEX LEDANTE

ABOUT ALEX LEDANTE

Alex Ledante was born in Taipei but banished to the states for a crime he did not commit. Although he is a classically trained artist, Alex had been anticipating digital art for many years before it was practical to do on a desktop computer. Once the software was available, he built a 286/33 and realized his lifelong dream of making somebody else do his backgrounds while he concentrated on the foreground. The ability to have multiple copies of a single work and the undo function allowed Ledante the liberty to become a much more experimental artist than he had been with traditional media. Now he focuses his efforts on reconciling traditional art with raytraced elements

Alex invites you to visit his gallery, Afraid of Sunlight at ledante.com and follow him on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/alex.ledante>

REAR COVER IMAGE "BOWIE TRIBUTE" BY MIKE GALLAGHER

ABOUT MIKE GALLAGHER

Mike Gallagher has been creating illustrations, comic books, T-Shirt designs, logos and tattoos for more than two decades.

His art has been featured internationally in Serbia, Britain, Canada and the Netherlands. Mike has many different styles that allow me to fit in deftly with any project.

In 2014 he took the plunge, diving into the world of full time freelancing. It has been on Mike's mind for a long time as he has been producing professional artwork since 1986. In doing so Mike has found that his focus is with fantasy, science fiction, steampunk and speculative fiction illustrations and paintings. His graphic design work runs from business cards to book covers, from tattoos to advertising campaigns, including a massive bar counter design and a gated community.

Bull Spec magazine has featured his art on their covers and interiors. His comics work has been steadily published since 2005 by such publishers as Alterna comics. Young American Comics, Atlas Unleashed, Fugazi, Pilot Studios, R-Comics and Argo Comics. Rosencrantz published a graphic album, "Komunista," in Europe which Mike found quite an honor. Mike has hit almost every aspect of comics including writing, penciling, inking, coloring, lettering, editing, podcasting and owning a comic store.

His portfolio and LinkedIn profile can be found here:

<https://www.behance.net/MikeGallagher>

www.linkedin.com/in/mikegallagherart

FOR DAVID
WITH LOVE AND THANKS FROM
ALL OF US

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INTRODUCTION

CHRIS THOMPSON

WITH Volume II of 47 – 16 now in your hands, or on your screen depending upon the format in which you have chosen to read the stories and poems contained within, and Volume I now out of print, I want to take a moment to not only welcome you back (or welcome you if you missed out on the first collection) and fill you in on a bit of what has transpired between books.

The most important, and poignant, event is the loss of Liz Ferrets, whose beautiful poem “Black Star” graces the pages of both Volume I and, with permission of her family, this very book. Liz passed away after her own battle with the very same illness that took David from us, only a few days after the release of Volume I – in much the same fashion as David’s own passing only days after the release of his last album, from which Liz took her title inspiration.

With the reprinted “Black Star” I am also honored to present a beautiful poem by Steve Pease – author of Volume I’s “Drive – In Saturday” – entitled “Everyone Says “Hi”.” As with Liz’s poem, the title is quite clearly borrowed from David’s own work. Not only is this an homage to David, but a beautiful memorial to our dear friend Liz, whose support of this endeavor from start to finish really kept me going. Her loss was felt by all of us, and Steve’s poem has captured that beautifully.

Liz, we love you and miss you. I know you're hanging out with David right now, reading this over my shoulder as I write it, and enjoying a chat with the man who inspired all of us.

This volume, so much more than the first, was an incredibly challenging journey. My own health struggles (both physical and mental) were brought back to the foreground of my mind, a health scare within my family, and various other life events that I won't get into right now made it incredibly difficult to stay on task, maintain any sense of focus, and find the drive to put this together. With that in mind, I want to take a moment to thank my family and friends, all of whom have been incredibly supportive through everything. Were it not for you, I don't think this book would have been put together. So many times I considered scrapping the whole project – throwing it all away and giving up on this whole writing / editing thing – but I'm really happy that I didn't.

The book itself, the works contained within, the cover, and even the choice of font, are all quite reflective of my own mood at the time of assembly. While the selection of works between Volumes I and II was entirely random (with a couple of exceptions due to the previously mentioned loss and a few late submissions) there is a decidedly darker tone to this book than was contained in Volume I.

It is with great pride that I now bring you Volume II of 47 – 16 with a whole new collection of short stories and poems inspired by David Bowie's life, art, and music. In this collection you'll find, as with Volume I, writings that span every genre and take inspiration from numerous aspects of David's career. Everything from a

beautifully written essay, through a dark return to the world of Nathan Adler. Poems and shorts that take inspiration from David's most famous film role – if you don't know what that is, it involves a maze, a baby, and a lot of little green muppets – the name of which should be able to go without saying.

The works contained herein may not be for everyone – I really wanted to give all the writers freedom – but there should be something for anyone. If you find something you like, look the authors up and consider picking up some of our other works.

Thank you.

Enjoy!

SAVIOUR MACHINE

DAVID COURT

IF life is a performance, then let us bear silent and secret witness to the last act. The Duke lies dying, surrounded by those closest to him. The gentle percussive movements of his last breaths are accompanied by a chorus of gentle sobs and quietly murmured words. Final words are muttered in parting, sincere lamentations delivered.

His frail physical shell is failing, each breath shallower than the last. The weight of life bears down on him, as a body with no fight left to give nevertheless fights to remain a part of it. An instinct tells him that his struggle is over, and, in death as much as life, he remains one who never *could* resist an urge.

A long resounding chord sounds, shaking room, bed and occupant. The Duke is reminded of “Day in the Life” by the Beatles, and smiles at the irony. He suddenly realises that he’s alone now, the silhouettes of those who surrounded him now fading into emptiness, but he isn’t afraid. It feels like a dream, but one he’s had numerous times before.

A beat begins to sound, chaotic at first but quickly forming a regular rhythm, increasing in both volume and strength. It takes the Duke a few moments to realise that the sound is coming from him – from his own heart. Beating as new, renewed now.

He pushes himself out of the bed and onto his feet. He tentatively lifts himself up, preparing himself for a twinge of pain that

never comes. He feels strong. Even for a man who'd shed his skin countless times, he feels more renewed than ever.

There's a scent in the air, unfamiliar at first. It grows stronger and more acrid, not unpleasant but unexpected. Alcohol. Specifically, bourbon. He recognises it as he hears the sound – the leaden whoosh of the sudden displacement of air. Something has arrived. The Duke suddenly realises he's not alone, and turns to face this unexpected visitor.

Before this moment, everything had an unexpected familiarity; the déjà-vu of dreams. But the individual who stood before the Duke now broke the spell – not at all who he expected. The craggy countenance of this visitant was familiar, yet unanticipated. The visitor's eyes were hidden in the shade of a Civil war style Cavalry hat, only mutton chops and a moustached jaw visible.

“Aren't you...?” the Duke asks, suddenly surprised by the strength and volume of his own voice – that tool of his trade previously reduced to a whisper for as long as he can remember. He's interrupted before he can finish his sentence, a hearty chuckle from his new companion and a gnarled hand held out towards him.

“Too right,” comes the reply. They shake hands like brothers, and everything starts to make sense to the Duke.

“I think I'd expected... somebody else,” he laughed. “But this makes perfect sense.”

“They thought I was doing them a favour,” replied his companion in a voice as coarse as gravel, “but I thought if I got here first, I'd get to you before anybody else.”

“Anybody else?”

“They’re all up here, man. They’ll all want you. But we *need* you.”

“We?”

“It’s a cosmic jam, man. Me and Hendrix – must have made my mark when I roadied for him.”

“You still perform? Even now? Even... here?”

“*Especially* up here, man! That muse, that spark of talent? Where do you think it comes from, man? What we play filters on down – the sensitives, the passionate – they hear it, they write it and they play it. Or they sing it. Or they conduct it. The whole of planet Earth is just our cosmic covers band, baby!”

“So everything I did was just...”

The visitor leaned in closer, close enough for the Duke to smell the tobacco and whisky on his breath.

“I’ll stop you there. Not *everyone* – for some of us, the spark was already there. Something unique, something *magical*. Something that can’t be described in something as mundane as language. Something they couldn’t create up here, even if they *tried*.”

The Duke stood in silence for a few moments. Slowly those thin lips began to curve, a smile finally returned to them.

“Sounds great. I’m ready then. Let’s dance.”

Two strong hands stretched out and patted the Duke on the shoulders, their owner laughing heartily to himself.

“Watch this. They only went and let me have these.”

Great wings unfurled from the visitor, not gossamer and feather as the Duke had expected, but thick black leather, already scarred, patched and worn. He took the Duke by the hand.

The two ascended.

Lemmy Kilmeister 1945 - 2015

David Bowie 1947 – 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Court was born and resides in the Midlands, UK with his patient wife Tara and his three less patient cats. When not reading, drinking real ale, writing software for a living or practicing his poorly developed telekinetic skills, he can be found writing fiction and has had a number of short stories published in anthologies including *Fear's Accomplice*, *Terror at the Beach* and *Caped* along with contributions to the *Twisted Dark* and *Twisted Sci-fi* series of graphic novels. He's written two anthology collections - *The Shadow Cast By The World* and *Forever and Ever, Armageddon* and plans to release a third - *Scenes of Mild Peril* - in 2016. He can often be found haunting his blog at www.davidjcourt.co.uk

Editor's Note:

We sadly lost Liz to cancer shortly after Volume I was released for sale. Her beautiful and haunting poem Black Star is being reprinted, with permission of her son, here in Volume II in memoriam of our dear friend.

Liz, we love you. Thank you for your words, for your friendship, and for your support.

BLACK STAR

LIZ FERRETS

FEBRUARY 17, 1960 -

APRIL 9, 2016

BLACK Stars are falling like elder blossom in June
The Earth's really flat. The Moon's a balloon
I put up my umbrella because it keeps raining stars
They just keep falling now they're leaving scars
Here in the earthbound music bars
where the guitar playing avatars
are breaking through

It could be me
It could be you

There are spaces
There are places where we could hide out
Endure our self-loathing. Explore our self-doubt
Question our motives find out what we're about

Where we can climb trees and run with the breeze
Making holes in the knees of our Blue Jean Genies
While we wait for our stars to come from behind us
Black Stars are coming they are going to find us
The Black Star is your exit
It's time to go home and debrief your lifetime
Get out of this zone where nothing is sacred
least of all human life

All around us are problems. It's nothing but strife
Decapitations in the desert with the sweep of a knife
Or air strikes and ambush in the heat of the night
It's okay to go home now the timing is right
We have taught them nothing, nothing of worth
human is not compatible with other
life on Earth

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rat keeper. Light sleeper. In the evening she's a singer with the band. Liz Ferrets battles her demons in a quiet Sheffield UK backstreet. You can catch Liz showcasing her work on the Sheffield Spoken Word open mic circuit and lift her words from the page and screen from both the Three Drops and I Am Not a Silent Poet webzines/anthologies. Liz writes from the heart about things that make her think ... and hopes that it makes other people think too
Liz's work can be found at:

I am Not a Silent Poet

<https://iamnotasilentpoet.wordpress.com/?s=Liz+Ferrets>

Red Dress (published under the title of Self Pity)

State Secrets (published under the title The Exploitation That Dare Not Speak Its Name)

<http://threedropspoetry.co.uk/> October 2015: **Moon on the Water**
Three Drops From a Cauldron – Imbolc 2016 (anthology available through website)

Awaiting publication:

<http://threedropspoetry.co.uk/> Spring 2016: **Lament of the Spring Faerie**

Three Drops From a Cauldron – Beltane 2016 (anthology available through website from April 2016)

<https://pankhearst.wordpress.com/tag/slim-volume/> May 2016: **Noises Off**

Slim Volume – See into the Dark (Pankhurst Press) – (available through website from May 2016)

She also has a Facebook Page – Liz Ferrets Poems

EVERYONE SAYS “HI”

STEVE PEASE

I trust that you're laughing with Jonesy
maybe crafting some words to his tune
smiling down as a comrade-in-arms
reads a voice that was silenced too soon.

Yes the problems you dark-starred are with us
but I believe we can still rise above
we *can* make human life sacred
be hunky dory and find modern love.

So say goodbye to deaths in the desert
grief at Orgreave and the Leppings Lane end
I trust that you're laughing with Jonesy
rest in peace my steel-city friend.

In memory of Liz Ferrets.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

More years ago than he cares to remember, Steve Pease spent half of his first week's wage on the Ziggy Stardust album and a ticket to see David Bowie perform in Leeds, England ... life was never the same. He once had a 'proper job' drafting press-releases and briefings for British politicians - and argues, rather convincingly, that this was an ideal apprenticeship in the realms of fantasy. These days, he enjoys an idyllic lifestyle - walking his dogs by the River Derwent in Northern England (a few miles from the birthplaces of Mick Ronson, Woody Woodmansey & Trevor Bolder) and dreaming up ideas for his twin passions of story and song writing. Steve's work has previously appeared in U.K. sci-fi/fantasy magazine 'The Singularity'.

MEDALS

SYD MCGINLEY

SISTERS, we are gathered here today in this dark Winter of '16 to remember those who went before us in the tradition of Eileen. We remember them all, but we speak today of our sister who has just left us, of our still living sister who showed us a new way, of the sister who will restore the way, and our newest sister who will continue the chain.

Elizabeth Jane, whose fight is now over, was born in 1947, and, as chosen oldest sisters do, she left for the mud and the blood. She did not shirk. Elizabeth Jane of the sisterhood wore her wounds with honor. She made us proud. She was the daughter of the younger sister of Mary.

Mary, we remember for her service in the blood and mud of Arras, and, once discovered and returned to her male – given role, her service in the mud of the turnip fields. We remember her sisters of the Land Army who dug in the mud of English fields. Mary was born to the younger sister of Clarice.

We remember Clarice for her service in blood and mud as she drove ambulances at Verdun, and concealed our sister Eileen who dug in the blood and the mud of the tunnels of the Somme. Eileen — we remember as the first sister of us all — Eileen.

We remember those who have gone before: Eileen, Clarice, Mary, and Elizabeth Jane.

Elizabeth Jane's younger sister gave us Iris who left for the mud and the blood in her own way, and showed us a new way to serve. Iris — who sat in the mud outside the gates of war, and sang “take the toys away from the boys.” Iris — who sang for no more blood and mud. Iris — who endured blood and mud and wove the yarn into the wire. Iris — who honors us still with her new path. Iris had a younger sister who gave us Mae.

Mae — who is here today. Mae — who leaves today for the blood and the mud.

Mae has her boots.

Mae has her trench coat.

Mae has bought us a round of drinks.

Mae's younger sister has given us Stella, so Mae is freed to go to the blood and mud. Mae who will trace wires, undo circuits, and sweep fields. Mae — who will take away the deadly toys from the boys.

Mae, kiss Stella, our newest, prettiest star, on the forehead. Mae. Return to us from the blood and the mud so we can say once again of a sister “she's got medals.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Until leaving England in the late 1980s, Syd McGinley ran a record store. Since then Syd has lived in the American Midwest and edited at a small publishing house, researched background reports, and written thank you letters for a living. Professional gratitude having left Syd permanently grumpy, there was nothing for it but to teach English. Syd writes the Dr. Fell series and the Tarin series for Torquere Press. Visit Syd at www.sydmcginley.com.

BITCHES IN BEACHES

DANIEL DE CULLÁ

MAKING castles in Spain, as houses of sand cards

Children take many lives

Deer wishes of hunting

And Popeye's old love letters to Betty Boop

Letters from the past

Letters from a sailor....

Salty air dilates our nostrils

Sea quacking the heart

Naked bodies are as tortillas on the hot sand

As such, image

As the turtle's island.

Are we the Folks last species of the Planet?

Look here! Look before you leap:

Bitches in Beaches

Are now coming

Who have received the logic of love

As a nutrient into the universe of ourselves.

They are coming

Coming to having a whole issue of her work

Coming to act.

We, the men, dig her name:

We are senses with the multiple voiced animal

Sea printing the voice – life of Earth.

Bitches in Beaches

Have been joined to the Wo/Man of Homo sapiens

In birthing now

While children coming to act

Destroying the sand castles as Quixote's.

**Les hommes sont
stupides et les
femmes sont folles.
Mais lorsqu'ils se
rencontrent, cela
donne parfois des
choses très belles !**

Wadbuzz.com

Men are stupid

Women are mad

But if they join

Just will make

Wonderful things.

MARRIAGE WRITES WITH “L” OF LOVE

DANIEL DE CULLÁ

AN organ from a sacred or lay chapel is playing

A choir singing:

“Marriage, Love and Shroud

Get off from the Sky”

While from among green leaves

Red roses, carnations, hyacinth

And orchids, with its stems

(Fiancée’s bouquet

Hurled backwards

To the striped girlfriends in engagement)

Love shows with a triangular look

With longings for kissing
The next marriageable sweetheart
Giving a kiss
Acceding to the marrieds' enjoyment
And usage
From what will bloom harmony or no-harmony
Of two in one, and a claw
Lion's clutches
In affection of twos
Any jaws with an only tooth.
-Love me! Fuck me!, you, he-man from my heart
More, more, more
Deflowered to death
Dilated upon love's speech
With what one get into a scrape.
-Yes, my darling
Life erupts after torn to pieces
That man can pull out a flower
Withering it
Woman feeling a sweet breeze
In her cold buttocks
Announcing that
"Marriage nor domain
Don't want fury nor dash".

BOWIE ME

DANIEL DE CULLÁ

BOWIE Me

O dinamite Angel

Let me sing Lazarus, Space Oddity...

Others with You

You, our High Reverence of the Star

Swimming in our ears

Omnibenevolent Lord of Virginity

Dedicated to the Prettiest One

In Music and Life

The uproar of your hand clapping

Guitars

Meaning behind Poetry.

Maybe You are just crazy

Indeed!

But do not reject these teachings

As false

Because we are crazy!

King Love

Sit and dream

On the floor of my Rainbow

Love has gotten me into

All Your Channels. Ecstasy!

Everything I have waited for

–Birth, death, The Next Day
Is right inside this den
Of mine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel de Culla (1955) is a writer, poet, and photographer. He is also a member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, and others. Director of Gallo Tricolor Review, and Robespierre Review. He has participated in Festivals of Poetry, and Theater in Madrid, Burgos, Berlin, Minden, Hannover and Genève .He has exposed in many galleries from Madrid, Burgos, London, and Amsterdam. He is moving between North Hollywood, Madrid and Burgos, Spain. His address is in Burgos, just now. He has more than 70 published books; the last: Heartful Bird.

WHERE ONE ENDS
A STORY IN REMEMBRANCE OF DAVID BOWIE
BEN BOYD, JR.

HER hands weakly gripped the arms of the pilot commander's chair. She would try once more.

“Ground control. Ground control. This is Major Teri Thomas, Lunar Lander 077 calling. Can you hear me? Over.” She listened intently and watched for the last time as the Earth's Moon slowly slid away in the distance.

“For here I am sitting in a tin can. Far above the world. Planet Earth is blue and I think I have been screwed. Dee dee dee dee, shit, I can't believe I asked for this.” She sang her rhyme sadly into the useless microphone.

She checked her oxygen level dreading the next step, knowing full well what must be done.

“O2 is almost depleted.” She adjusted the mix for the third time hoping for a miracle. “God, I am breathing 25/75 O2 to CO/CO2. I won't last much longer at this rate. Ha! Listen to me. I won't last period unless I get a little help.” She picked up the microphone again.

“God? Could you send an angel with another tank of O2? Please? Nobody will miss one lousy tank of air back on Earth. Please don't get it from London, if you can manage.” The red light and warning signal continued to tell her she had only minutes left to breathe in her pressurized suit.

“No air in the Lander for the last three days. I’m dizzy all the time. Just need to close my eyes for a moment.”

She could see herself walking slowly into her London flat, stopping for a moment to step out of her heels. With a quick twist of her wrist, a move that had become natural over the years, she closed the clasp that would lock the door. She passed the mirror on the wall, and noticed smudged lip gloss and a little bit of mascara in the corners of her eyes. *Somebody has been crying*, she thought.

“I wish this would end soon.” Teri sighed heavily. Weeping softly still, she walked towards her bathroom unzipping her black dress. A sound made her stop and turn around. Something familiar from the front door.

A tall man with the most remarkable eyes she had ever seen stood in the doorway. With his flowing, shoulder length blond hair and dressed in a dazzling white one piece spacesuit, he looked quite handsome. He wore a white cape covered with golden glitter draped over his broad shoulders. His sudden appearance caught her off guard, but his warm, friendly smile put her at ease at once. He gestured to be allowed to enter and bowed from the waist. A golden mist surrounded him as he waited for her response.

“How did you get in?” A wee touch of excitement hinted at the edge of her voice. Excitement, mixed with shock and sudden fear. She’d locked the door. Hadn’t she?

“The door opened, and, of course, you invited me,” the man answered softly, his voice strong and thick. Teri felt her guard drop

yet further as his words enfolded her in their warm embrace. She felt instantly at ease with her strange, unexpected visitor.

How long had it been since I've had a male guest? Her thought betrayed her and she tried to focus.

“I did? Did we meet at the funeral? Sorry, but everything seems like a wispy, weepy dream.”

“No,” he stepped gracefully into the flat. “I attended, but we did not meet. I am sorry for the loss of your mother and Adele. Take great comfort in knowing they are in a better place.” He handed her his card. Centered and written in flowing golden script, it had one word - *Ziggy*.

Cosmic dust particles began pelting the tiny lunar lander and woke Teri only long enough for her to open her eyes for a moment. The shower ended in seconds and the light headed dizzy feeling quickly returned. Once again she sank deeply into her oxygen deprived, carbon dioxide fueled dream.

“Yes, I guess many people attended...uh...Ziggy,” she felt the word with her lips and tongue as it was finally given voice. “Forgive me. That is a most unusual name.”

“I am a ‘most unusual’ person. I have many names, but Ziggy will do for now. I came to help you.”

“Really?” In spite of her natural need to question, Ziggy’s response felt right. “I do need help. I’m taking medicine. Tranquilizers, I think. And I’m running out of O₂, for sure. My head is spinning.”

She poured a glass of Glenlivet Scotch whisky from the small bar next to her. She looked again at the glass. It changed into a dirty, empty, red Solo cup.

She felt thirsty.

She rubbed her eyes and peered down the long dirt road to a farm where her life began. She could see herself walking with her mother and often stopping to chat with neighbors. Mr. Tibble, her orange tabby cat, followed dutifully behind her. She felt the warmth of being loved flow all around her. Her mother smiled sweetly. It always made Teri glow inside.

She noticed the tall handsome man again. He stood close. He made her feel warm and comfortable.

“Mr. Ziggy, would you care for a drink?” Her voice sounded slurred in her own ears but she had no recollection of taking the drink.

“No, thank you. Not for me,” he said as he moved to stand closer.

“Are you waiting for something? You seem like it. Do you have another appointment?”

“Yes,” he answered softly. “I am waiting for you. No,” a gentle shake of his golden mane, “I don’t have another appointment, as yet.”

“Of course. Anyway, Glenlivet, is one word, but it could be two,” she held up the bottle between them as she refilled her glass. “He and I are new friends. There is nothing comparable to having a portable companion; an always eager lover, and someone to make you laugh all wrapped into one handy container. This Glen comes in a

bottle,” she gave it a gentle shake as if to accentuate her point. Golden light shone through the dark liquid.

Setting the bottle back on the bar, she stepped away from her guest and padded barefoot across the room to a small shelving unit where some books were on display, nestled within a small collection of compact discs and a portable player. She turned on the CD player her mother gave her on her fourteenth birthday. The music began to play. Her favorite song, *The Man Who Sold the World*. Ziggy smiled his gentle, knowing smile. He tapped his foot lightly.

“Do you know this one, Mr. Ziggy? It’s my favorite. I shall miss it terribly,” she swallowed the whisky in her glass and watched her guest.

“I have heard it a time or two. Perhaps you shan’t miss it at all. What else do you like?” His eyes, those strange, hypnotic eyes, followed Teri as she stepped away from the player and let the music fill the silence.

“Naturally, I love *Space Oddity* being an astronaut and all,” she felt herself shrug. “But like Major Tom, I think this is my last ride. Ironical isn’t it? Something went wrong and I missed the Moon. My spaceship didn’t know the way after all.” She stirred again. The new air mix dragged her down further.

“You look familiar,” she had to blink several times to clear her eyes. “I have seen you at Mass, I’m sure. Are you related to my ex-husband?”

“No,” Ziggy answered with a gentle shake of his head. “I am not related to his family.” He began to hum along with the tune. She

began to sway to the music as the effects of the tranquilizers and the booze and the CO2 kicked in harder. Her world began its final whirlpool, spinning slowly down.

“Do you dance Ziggy?” Teri moved closer to her unexpected guest. “I fancy a dance. My ex-husband never danced. I’m running out of oxygen, you know,” she stared up into his face. He was so tall. Much taller than he appeared. “Your eyes are hypnotic. I’m so sleepy all of a sudden. But you know, dancing is good exercise, I think. I wish I had more O2. We could dance longer.”

“I dance like nobody on Earth,” Ziggy replied. “How is your ex? I may be seeing him in a couple of months.” She ignored the question for a moment and put her arms out to dance with the tall handsome star dusted man as she drifted along.

“Say, you know I can barely manage around you. Are you sure you can dance? I mean you must weigh twenty-one or twenty-two stone. For God’s sake, don’t step on my foot.”

“Must be my cloak”, he said with just the right amount of humor and concern in his voice. “I’m really light as a feather,” he gently wrapped his arms around Teri’s waist and shoulders. “I don’t weigh either. Perhaps nine and a half or ten at the most,” he shrugged as Teri let her head fall against his shoulder. “I am rather thin these days. I promise to be careful.” She nodded her head slowly as they began spinning around and around.

“My ex quit the space program before he was sacked,” she blurted. “I feel sorry for him but he met Mr. Glen long before I did. He lost his nerve. That’s when he left me and Adele.”

“Is that why you volunteered to be the first woman to land on the Moon? You knew the risks. England has never sent anyone to the Moon before,” Ziggy’s voice was a cloud on which Teri continued to float.

“Well there is that, of course,” she whispered. “But, yes, I wanted to be first. I intended this mission to be the beginning of a really big change.” She began to weep softly, her shoulders shaking with each broken - hearted breath.

“I never thought my Mum and Adele would die in a motor car accident while they visited America,” tears flowed freely and dampened the front of Ziggy’s spacesuit. “I should have been there. But I’m here. I didn’t go to the funeral did I? You said you didn’t see me there. I dreamed I went. I met you afterwards,” she stopped and considered that for a second or two. “No. That isn’t right. I’ve been on this mission for many days. But you are here to help me. Right? Who are you, really, Ziggy?” The pain in her heart finally reached an unbearable level. The CO₂/CO poison did not stop her heart from breaking first.

Ziggy shook his head, no, and wrapped his arms more tightly around her. He held her close. His regal cloak became strong, sparkling wings and enveloped her completely. As they spun around and around he whispered, “Let’s go see your Mum and Adele now.”

Teri felt her body slowly relax. She sank deeper into the pilot’s seat of the Lunar Lander spacecraft. Her mind continued to spin as the darkness of unconsciousness closed in. The air mix meter read zero/zero.

For the past two weeks, the Lander had been moving helplessly off course and deeper into space. Two malfunctioning primary thrusters failed to allow her to guide the spacecraft properly to the Moon's surface.

As the oxygen decreased, Major Teri's hallucinations continued to stay with her longer; a refuge in her mind as her body slowly expired. They would cease forever in seconds. The Lander would continue on until it reached the asteroid belt between Jupiter and Saturn unless it smashed into a wayward piece of space rock or ran through a heavy meteor shower. Tragically, United Kingdom Space Agency's billion pound goal to have a woman walk on the Moon would have to wait. The unintended consequence of this catastrophic failure would set the program back for another decade. Possibly forever.

Major Teri's spirit journeyed on, but not inside the Lander.

Instantly she and Ziggy, the newest Delivery-Angel, reached her new destination.

"Is this Heaven," Teri murmured, half – asleep against her angel's chest.

"It has many names," Ziggy spoke softly into Teri's hair as he held her aloft. "Heaven is but one. Each dimension, and each belief has its own."

Teri felt her feet touch down on something warm and soft and she slowly opened her eyes. "I'm afraid," she whispered.

"Look." With one strong hand on her shoulder, Ziggy turned Teri around. His free arm extended out past her and he pointed.

As if by magic, they stood in front of Teri's Mum and daughter, Adele.

Adele dropped her Grandmother's hand and bounded into Teri's arms. She kissed her mother with the love only a five year old child knows how to give. Ziggy wiped a tear away and handed Teri a gold embossed envelope.

"It's lovely, Ziggy." When she looked up to thank him, he was gone. Only a golden mist remained.

Teri opened the envelope and read to Adele the words written in gold on the card contained inside:

When life on one world ends, another begins

Live and Love

God

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Boyd Jr. writes science fiction/fantasy/action/adventure novels and screenplays. He is a freelance author and self-publisher. He and his wife live in the Smoky Mountain foothills near Maryville, Tennessee. When he is not writing, they take care of five horses, grow organic vegetables, and make fruit wine from their small orchard. He has written and published AZ2016 NEO, The Qixi Virus, The Fears of Fire, and Invasion, Conspiracy, and The Long Ride, four novels in his The Fall of The Americas, seven novel series.

DAVID JONES

ANGELA MORRIS

YOU touched us with your stardust
Hooked us to your silver screen
With your strange dyed hair and Lycra body
You reached out to us all.
From South London to LA
You blew our minds and touched our hearts
You scattered words and knocked down walls
Don't think we didn't know how bright you shone.

You weren't so skinny then when
I was seventeen and you picked up your guitar
And played me 'Younger Girl'
We rocked around the sitting room
In those naughty London suburbs
Sweet times before you lifted off,
Called out to us from space, took centre stage
Reached out to fame, but never lost
The simple charm that caught my heart.

Now you've stepped through another door
And the stars look very different today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela Morris In Her Own Words

I was born and brought up in London. After school I attended art college where I gained a degree in 3-Dimensional Design. After working in London for a short time, I moved to Bristol where I have been teaching art and design in a college for a number of years.

A few years ago I joined a writing group, and have been writing short stories and poems as a hobby since recently retiring from full-time teaching. My other interests include film, dance, travel, playing tennis and learning Italian.

I met David Bowie in 1966, when my parents were living in Beckenham. I was about 17 years old. He came to my house with a friend one evening, brought his guitar and played to us! I've always remembered that evening.

My only published works have been a few poems included in an anthology self-published by the writing group.

DAVID BOWIE: GLAM DID NOT CARE FOR HETERONORMATIVITY

AMY LEWANSKI

DAVID Bowie is arguably the most attractive human specimen to ever exist. This probably has much to do with his androgynous appearance and dislike of conforming to socially acceptable gender roles. Bowie's love of make-up and bending gender requirements supposedly started in his childhood, as his mother recounted in an interview. She said she found a three year old David covered in make-up and when she told him that he shouldn't wear make-up, he told her "You do, Mummy" (Cann, *Any Day Now*, 14). From his mother's memory, perhaps there is an argument that he has always been a force for battling gender norms. Bowie's rise to glam fame was a perfect storm of chance and calculated marketing. As Stuart Lenig noted in his book The Twisted Tale of Glam Rock, Bowie's (and glam's) swift catapult to fame had far more to do with his agents and personal style, aided by his wife, than with his music. His wife, Angie, "...conspired with Bowie to emphasize the androgynous/bisexual/cross-dressing aspects of his appearance...Bowie already was a seasoned performer, was learning to act, was slight in build and stature, and had pronounced cheekbones and attractive girlish hair and features. He could pose as a female and produce credible results (46)".

As glam became more popular, it came under fire for the outward expression of over the top glamor. The genre and its performers were seen as horribly self-absorbed, and, of course the hedonistic overtures of the style only fueled critics to view glam as narcissistic (Lenig, 4). The wonderful irony of this criticism is that glam was pretty narcissistic. The whole aspect of the theatricity, of stage names and costumes, of Bowie's insistence of being talked to as his characters in interviews all tie together to create a highly self-referential, campy, egotistical genre that fed off of artists', especially David Bowie's, gender and sexuality – fluid methods of expression in order to gain a following and keep the media centered on his own public behavior.

His name, 'Bowie', is only his last iteration of creating characters for himself. Before he became famous, Bowie often used other names during his performances and pre-fame bands. He used the names Luther, Alexis Jay, Dave Jay and Davie Jones before creating characters for himself. He became on-stage personas of Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane and Major Tom among others. These characters were created as literal roles for Bowie to play on stage and in interviews and other media outlets. It seems appropriate to speculate that Bowie's ability to change between characters and dress up wildly allowed young people of the 70s to feel more free and able to dress and act as they felt natural, as Bowie was doing the same. Twisted Tales examined Bowie's frequent persona changes, and Lenig noted that Bowie "...[wasn't] too concerned that others would see him

as a faker, since by then he would be pursuing a different characterization. Bowie is aware that the style of one's performances has to be worn and abandoned, or else they drag the performer down into a dull sameness (44)". His characters were each created as an aspect of his career at the time, in order to reflect and enhance each stage of his musical career. Thus, Bowie was able to meld his career with his performance style in order to gain success in the industry that demands individuality, creativity and an almost constant reinvention, even though reinvention is often criticized. But, as always, Bowie somehow managed to work out what was needed each time he recreated his image, and, of course "...[his] ability to remain constant while wearing many masks is his strength (44)", as Bowie obviously understood how to change his appearance and sound, and when to change and how to keep his underlying self and message the same.

Bowie's sexuality often comes under question during a look into his influence on youth culture. When Bowie came out as a bisexual, the news was so shocking that the interview nearly went unpublished. Suddenly, with this news, David was a crazy, sexual being which made many people intensely uncomfortable, as is illustrated in the previous sentence. Once Bowie became a champion of non – heteronormative relationships, his music became controversial. His song "John, I'm Only Dancing" was not released in the United States because it was considered too risqué. Bowie actually wanted to create an anthem for bisexuals with this song (Cann, 266). The lyrics themselves are by no means risqué by current

standards, but for the time period, even the hedonistic early 1970s, the idea that a man is reassuring his male lover that he would not stray with a woman was quite shocking for audiences. Bowie did seem to have a good relationship with the burgeoning LGBT community, as gay libbers wanted a Bowie-made anthem (Block, 184), yet there seems to be no explicit gay anthem.

Similarly shocking for the public was the album cover for *The Man Who Sold the World* (1972) was a picture of him in a ball gown, reclining. This brought in many questions about gender on a much more obvious manner. While beforehand, Bowie could almost be ignored as a sexual or gender deviant, because he was just using words to describe himself, now, with this album cover, he was visually showing himself as a cross-dresser, though the image was just a statement of fact, and not one of intent. Lenig noted that the image was not actively promoting sexuality or menace, but the image was still shocking for audiences, as being as publicly gay as Bowie was acting in this photograph was just the beginning of the acceptance of gay subculture. This is reflected in Twisted Tale, that Bowie began to destroy the boxes of gender and sexuality society had been used to. Bowie was blatantly questioning the heteronormative demands by releasing images of him in drag. Bowie's picture was one more indication that the mainstream was starting to accept gay subculture even though the mainstream was still "...learning how to deal with an underground gay subculture that had it's own codes and visual symbols for communication (48)".

Related to Bowie's public coming out is his love of creating a scene. This is heavily noted by his friends who did not know how truthful he was (or still is) being about his sexuality, on account of his proclivity to enjoy shocking people. This definitely ties in to his association with the music-fashion genre of glam. This is the first subculture to borrow heavily from the gay subculture, especially in relation to the campy, over the top and theatrical dress. This thus freed all young people, gay and heterosexual alike, to either imitate Bowie and other glam or to express themselves publicly in a similar way but could not before stars like Bowie began to. As an aspect of creating his own image, it is clear that at times Bowie wished to use his personas to shock the public – reportedly, he went out to dinner once as his character Ziggy Stardust and apparently many people were very confused by this act (dinner was an uncomfortable affair for everyone except Bowie) (Cann, 267). Besides observing that people were, of course, still adjusting to the campy and overwrought styles that were popularizing both glam and gay culture, this incident also shows Bowie's penchant for creating a scene, as he obviously did not leave the house as Ziggy to not horrify and confuse the public. In Dick Hebdige's book Subculture: the meaning of style, Bowie and his fans were using the current fashions of the 1970s to create new images and ideologies to fight the standard of the day. Bowie and others “construct[ed] an alternative identity which communicated a perceived difference: an Otherness. They were, in short, challenging at a symbolic level...gender stereotypes (89).” This otherness that Bowie gravitated towards, again, was part of the gay subculture influence on

glam. It is interesting that Hebdige notes that style influences on glam also came from high fashion magazines and the commodification of feminism (88), even though there are almost no female glam artists and glam seemed to only help males change and accept their outward appearances and sexualities. Clearly the use of feminine fashion and style was to subvert and change the gender norms both genders were subjected to, though some, such as Waldrep note that the feminine is the excess. In fact, Waldrep saw the feminine side of glam as one that critiqued femininity as excess (*The Aesthetics of Self-Invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie*, 122). The excesses from feminine styles mixed with more masculine and gay styles that Bowie and other glam performers enjoyed dripped into their stage performances, where everything became a hyperbole of sexuality.

Bowie was nearly a caricature of gayness and sexuality when he was on stage. Bowie's over-the-top acting and sexuality was probably helped mightily by the British government's decision in 1968 to strip the Lord Chamberlain's office of the ability to censor anything that would be performed on a public stage (Thompson, *Children of the Revolution*, p20-21). This decision would help, of course, give artists such as Bowie the free reign to create shows and performances without the threat of censorship. And this, therefore, allowed Bowie to be as outrageous as he could possibly want in concert. For example, at one show, he simulated fellatio on band mate Mick Ronson's guitar. Interestingly, the angle that the photograph is taken at makes this moment appear to the audience as though Bowie may

actually be performing fellatio on his band member. From the faces in the audience, the young girls are enraptured, regardless of what is actually happening. It is merely the outrageous act of sexuality that is appealing to the audience.



The actual action of this photo is not clear to the audience, but it is the

implied sexuality that has them drooling.

From: <https://www.morrisonhotelgallery.com/images/medium/023-002-MIKE-ROCK.jpg>

Because the object of the act appears to be ambiguous, which only fuels Bowie's sexuality, his attractiveness to his audience only increased. Acts such as this on stage only helped Bowie's own popularity and also helped his fans and the youth culture to explore their identities, since if Bowie could do so without horrific repercussions, of course other people could do, too. Perhaps Bowie, with the aid of his band mate Ronson, played into the desires of the audience. After Bowie came out as bisexual in that interview, Bowie and his wife continually discussed and flaunted their claimed bisexuality, and this only seemed to allow the young gays of the 1970s to express themselves in a similar vein. But to Adam Block, author of "The Confessions of a Gay Rocker", whatever amount of 'gay lib' was presented in glam, it was never enough. In fact, gayness in rock for Block was a sanitized edition presented to the mainstream: "[b]ecause gays were outsiders, they could sidle up to a risky talent, inspire it, celebrate it and let it roll on out to the suburbs. The trick seemed to be that America loved the gay spirit of outrageousness for its entertainment value, as long as the sex part didn't intrude. (p185, The Rock History Reader)" This view of glam is a highly cynical one, a view that shows the sterilization of a subculture in order to sell it to the mass culture.

Yet at the same time, glam still played with sex and gender in the face of the media and mainstream culture. Glam and David Bowie paved the way for young boys to begin to forage into make – up and, on occasion, women's clothing. Block knew that teens were filching their mother's mascara, and Block intimates that Bowie's music, especially 'Rebel, Rebel', encouraged playing with gender (184). Since Bowie was always playing with his gender without explanation, it is left up to the media and audiences to understand what Bowie was trying to do. Glam was always more about gender than social classes (as genres such as punk were and are), and for this reason, Bowie especially is heralded as the performer who birthed the criticism of gender and sexual appearances through clothing. Bowie and his cohorts dressed in drag or mixed clothing styles for both genders or dressing in such a way as to emphasize the areas women accentuate such as their hips and stomachs. By doing so, Bowie, intentionally or otherwise, would call attention to the beauty standards for both genders – emphasizing a woman's curves or emphasizing a man's strong body lines – and by mixing the attractive feature for both genders, he popularized an androgynous, sensual, gender – fluid fashion. This was, in turn, used by others to “question the value and meaning of adolescence.... [through] confounding the images of men and women [during] the passage from childhood to maturity...” (Hebdige, 62).

Other critics of the time period argue vehemently against the idea that glam and its artists were really gay men or gay women.

Dave Thompson in *Children of the Revolution* claimed that there were men who were androgynous but that those men “...weren't gay. A lot of people...focus on boys fucking boys when in fact it was boys who looked like girls fucking girls” (21). Here, Thompson is clearly arguing that even though gays and bisexuals did exist, the point of glam was not to glorify or make homosexuality acceptable, but to confuse audiences and change rock n roll. While yes, glam music and Bowie's and others' style and flair changed rock n roll, it is hardly fair to suggest that glam and Bowie were only using gender to confuse the media and to sell music. Thankfully, Thompson also notes that because of the confusion glam caused the mainstream to feel, Bowie was able to hide gay culture references in his songs, such as “Queen Bitch” (8). Of course, the idea that glam was a confusing mess of music, fashion and culture that somehow became incredibly popular and still helped make the gay subculture a more accepted part of society is a much more positive suggestion than his later argument against glam. However, that is not to say that Thompson or other critics are wrong about glam, but rather, the people who do not enjoy glam or the gender bending tactics of Bowie and other musicians are only falling into the trap that was laid out for them: getting lost in the overall presentation of the subculture, and not the desire of these artists to change perceptions.

Bowie's theatrics were an integral part to his appearances and characters. This is tied tightly to his glam. Because Bowie is already unconventionally beautiful, with a mix of gendered features, which

only allows him to play up his characters and mystique since Ziggy and Aladdin are aliens, or at least from a reality much different than our own. Hebdige understands Bowie's allure as an androgynous and ambisexual individual not because of his attractiveness to all genders or lack of gender-specific sexuality, but because he had one simple 'meta'-message: "...escape – from class, from sex, from personality, from obvious commitment – into a fantasy past...or a science-fiction future" (61). Each of Bowie's on stage characters is from a Bowie idealized past or future that has removed gender as a marker of social convention. On a certain level, creating an almost non – gendered Bowie was a way for Bowie to put the audience focus on his music and not his person, though of course, body is always reflected in music. So, while a non – gendered Bowie allowed an audience to focus on his roles as character on stage, the characters he played filled in his performance through his body. His body became just as much a part of his performance as his music, as he used his body to display emotion, gendered differences, his sexuality. Then, therefore, "...the idea of the body as art...cannot help but allude to Bowie's performance with his own body" (Waldrep, *Aesthetics of Self-Invention*, 133).

Bowie's fabulous theatrics during shows created a whole new understanding of performance and style in concert. He often changed multiple times during a show, which was not a common performance style outside of theatre at the time. Costume changes during a show allowed both a further expression of style, artistry and emotion during

a performance. It also allowed Bowie to model, consciously or not, for young people, an acceptance of dapper, of constantly changing one's appearance as a statement. This moved beyond the simple step of joining a subculture group with a 'uniform', like Goth, punk or hippie, but was a movement using clothing to rebel against the kind of dictatorial way subcultures were run. Glam instead was for mixing clothes, styles and theatrics to create new imagery to address society, as a way to look at sex and relationships that so badly needed to change by the 1970s. "But the velvets, lace and dandyism of the original London underground had shifted their focus...towards sexual liberation, an awareness that the moral currents that had survived unchanged through the 20th century-so-far..." (Thompson, 20).

David Bowie has become increasingly popular as the decades have rolled by. He has been in movies: captivated audiences in Labyrinth, he judged a model – off in the movie Zoolander. He starred in the film The Man Who Fell to Earth. His music helps narrates television shows, from children's to crime dramas, to talent contests. Most recently, his pop culture sensation became immortalized when the folk music comedy duo Flight of the Conchords created a whole song about Bowie, titled "Bowies in Space", a song that reflects Bowie's own 'Space Oddity' and references Bowie's songs and frequent appearance and personal changes. Not only is Bowie popular, but the gender bending habits of his youth and glam years are almost expected. Nothing shows this as much as the joke many fans have that David Bowie and actress Tilda Swinton may

be the same person, after she once dressed up as Bowie and succeeded at looking like the 1970s Bowie.

David Bowie threw himself onto the world stage and into stardom through glam, which symbiotically also grew in popularity as Bowie did. David Bowie used gender and sexuality as a fluid medium in his music and performances. At the most cynical review, this was done to sell music. But, of course, music and Bowie is never that simple. Bowie helped create a genre of music that was self – referential, theatrical, hyperbole of gender, sexuality and culture that fought against the gender norms ironed in place in society. This style shift was accomplished by Bowie because of his near inhuman good looks that meld both genders, and by accentuating his ambiguously gendered body. Bowie moved past simply blending gender lines, he addressed sexuality and used his own stardom and behavior to pave the way for the gay community to be accepted in mainstream society.

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Amy Lewanski is Canadian and lives in San Diego, California. She earned her bachelor's degree at the University of California, San Diego. She is currently attending Antioch University in Los Angeles. Amy was brought up on Bowie and the 1970s punk scene. You can connect with Amy on her website www.amywroteit.weebly.com or follow her on Twitter at @bibliovoracious. This is her first published work.

HIS STRANGE FASCINATION, STILL FASCINATES ME

ADRIAN ERNESTO CEPEDA

LIKE you

I'm an oddity from space—

a lad insane,

a scary monster

a super creep

who loves earbud listening

to let's dance while dancin' in the street.

You can also call me a rock and roll suicide

this young American among the stars

like a Buddha of Suburbia—

I'm a still alive Lodger hanging

low tonight. How could I forget

my ashes to ashes? Like my heroes

I'm flicking fame with fashion,

this quicksand Hunky Dory life

in this Suffragette city

sans regrets. As my iPod shuffles

Where Are We Now? This next one

is for my Bewlay Brothers: Joe the Lion,

Rebel Rebel and the Diamond Dogs

Ziggy Stardust spinning so many changes

like Cat People putting out fires with gasoline

pondering with a match, is there
really Life on Mars? Why am I afraid
of Americans? Time is a little wonder
like a Jean Genie screaming
Over this heart's filthy lesson?
Let me loosen my Black Tie with this
white noise, share my internal
conversation pieces; will I survive
these ...hours, like Kooks in Blue Jeans?
Bring me the Disco King
this Starman will tell you: Nothing
has changed, everything
has changed; David Bowie
am I'm deranged?
Feeling unwashed and somewhat slightly dazed—
you, The Thin White Duke
told me to write this thirty eight
line poem in a Moonage Daydream.

THE CORNER OF YOUR EYES, I LONG FOREVERMORE

ADRIAN ERNESTO CEPEDA

Interviewer: Do you think that rock music could push people to take drugs?

David Bowie: "I'll go the other way on that. If I had a fan of mine got an [MFA Degree] from a university, would I also get the credit for that please?"

(Source Unknown)

YES, David you get the credit
for all the words, I love to explore.
More than the songs we all adore,
your fascination so strange, will
always fascinate me. Thank You
for all your inspiration and telling
me to write the thirty-eight-line
poem, and all the times you sang
“[...] we’re strangers when we
meet,” in my Moonage Daydreams;
I will miss your invisible spark,
the headphones encores of “Miracle
Goodnight—” especially the
sounds of your smokiest laughter,
and all of the voices you shared with

my tears, so long, and for so much more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian Ernesto Cepeda is an LA Poet who is currently enrolled in the MFA Graduate program at Antioch University in Los Angeles where he lives with his wife and their cat Woody Gold. His poetry has been featured in *The Yellow Chair Review*, *Thick With Conviction*, *Silver Birch Press* and one of his poems was named *Cultured Vultures'* Top 3 Poems of the Week. You can connect with Adrian on his website:

<http://www.adrianernestocepeda.com/>

STARDOUST CORPORATION

SHERI VELARDE

BACK in the days of old, in the days that are only remembered in books, people had rights. People voted, they helped one another, they had choices. People ruled the government, they ruled themselves. That was before the corporations took over, before they became the government and told people what to do, what to think. My uncle even claimed that they began pumping drugs into our water so that they could control us, make us into “worker bees” as he likes to say. I don’t know if any of that is true, but it seems it could be.

I wish I had been born back in that time, when I could have been anything, I could have been an individual. Now there are no more “I’s” only the collective which does the will of the Stardust Corporation. In this current society I am nothing, I don’t even have a name. I’m a number and a code word. 47Star, what kind of name is that I ask? Once upon a time people had names, like David, Michael, Sara, Darlene. Oh how I wish I had a name like that. I was not even allowed to grow up with my parents, I was raised in a collective school with all the other children in my age group, so as to not have too deep of an attachment to the family unit. I did not make friends at the school, we were not allowed to be friends, just coworkers, drones who did what we were told. I had a hard time dealing with the orders, I always asked questions, and needless to say I got to know punishment quite well.

I have never fit in. I was too curious. I read too much. I craved knowledge. I cut my hair and dressed differently, well as differently as I could with limited resources. We were all supposed to blend in with one another, never stick out, and most especially never be an individual. I should not have been born into this time, I don't belong here. I guess it's good that there soon might not be a here. Rumor has it that Stardust Corporation has sold us, all of us, the entire world. Not that we were supposed to know that. Actually I'm not sure many of the people care, they are numb to the world as is.

* * * * *

For some reason my family is not numb. We are not zombies. We think for ourselves and that has made us a danger to the Stardust Corporation. My father and uncle have been seeking others like us, others who want to stop Stardust Corporation and let people live free. Tonight we've snuck out to meet the others, to start what I guess would once have been called a rebellion, we will save the world. Our code name is Operation Savior Machine. We meet in the one place where Stardust won't see us, in the sewers, the very bowels of the city. Here things look as they should, like shit, none of the pristine sameness of above.

My father worked in a propaganda unit, a newspaper. Some of the heads of the Stardust Corporation came in weekly to tell them what to print. They also talked in private with their representative there, the so – called editor. My father worked next door to the

editor's office and could hear everything through the vents. That's how we learned of the sale. That's what we were here to discuss tonight.

Uncle 16Bow took the stage, well the box we were using as a stage, always having a way with words and people, "We are all here tonight because we know that the Stardust Corporation lies to us on a daily basis. What we did not know before was the extent of those lies. What I am about to tell you will shock you, will seem unbelievable, but it is all true, heard from the mouth pieces of the Stardust Corporation when they thought us unimportant people weren't listening." He paused and grabbed a contraband book that we had in our secret library. "We all know that once mankind traveled to space, to the moon and beyond. The Stardust Corporation tried to cover that up, but we now know that this is the truth, for there are others out there in space."

"Others?" A woman up front asked. "What do you mean by others?"

"The old term used was extraterrestrials I believe," I piped up, this subject had always fascinated me.

"Being from other planets?" someone towards the back asked.

"Yes. Very advanced beings and apparently very wealthy, for they are buying this world." My uncle answered.

"How can they buy the world? What about us?" Another shout came out.

"Stardust Corporation in essence own everything, they have made a deal to sell the world, humans included with the exception of

themselves of course. They are to be relocated to an undisclosed location. We will be left to fend for ourselves against unknown odds.” Uncle 16Bow said.

Conversations erupted all over the room, people were worried and angry.

“This has to be stopped.”

“How can we stop this?”

“We need to take down Stardust Corporation.”

“The sale must be stopped.”

“What kind of monsters try to sell the world?”

It went on and on. Finally I spoke up again. “We have to attack the Stardust Corporation and destroy them before the sale takes place. We all know where their headquarters is. Some of us even have access. But first we need more clearheaded people. We need to get to the water filtration system, see if people are being forced to ingest drugs and stop it if we can. If the others wake up to the reality of the world...well...there are too many of us to stop. If we control the world, well then we can stop anything.”

Funny, everyone listened to me even though I was the youngest one in attendance. Something inside of me had awoken, I just knew what needed to be done and if I had to lead so be it.

The next week we filled with nothing but planning. We had limited time, but we couldn’t get caught or all would be lost. Those who worked in the Stardust Corporation headquarters kept spying and searching for vulnerabilities. Same went for the workers at the water filtration center. The best thing about the corporate monsters thinking

we were mindless drones was the fact that they never suspected anything.

Exactly one week after Operation Savior Machine commenced, four of us snuck into the water filtration plant. My uncle had worked there all his life and knew his way around the dank and leaking building. He had also lifted a set of keys unnoticed by the Stardust Corporation rep who ran the plant. The security guards had been drones, easily taken care of though none of us relishing harming others. Sure enough once we got into the “top secret” room where only the corporate manager went, drugs were found. Working quickly we replaced them with what my mother called placebos, she worked in the hospital system and said they were quite common. They looked exactly like the pills being deposited in the water system and should go undetected by the Stardust Corporation until it was too late.

As we left I pondered why some of us weren’t affected by the drugs, but my mother said some people just built up natural resistance. That’s why whole families seemed to be immune. I shook my head and thought about the more important matter at hand. Hopefully once others were clear minded like us, well they would see what had to be done.

Phase one competed, all we could do for now was plan and wait for the drugs to exit from peoples’ systems. According to what we had managed to learn, we only had a few weeks to prevent the sale and possible destruction of our planet. Weapons had been gathered, plans were being made, and soon we would have the numbers that we needed. Then we would make our stand. Even if we lost, we would

make sure that Stardust Corporation lost as well. No one would sell my home, my people. I'd destroy us all before I let that happen.

* * * * *

After only a day we began to see a change in the people around us. People began to wake up for the first time in their lives. As they did, someone from Operation Savior Machine would be there to tell them the truth, to tell them they needed to fight. One week later we had a full – fledged army. Time to make out move.

While some people worked at the Stardust Corporation headquarters, there were none alive that had entered the inner portion of the compound, the place where the leaders lived. Even many of their own had never seen these leaders, the ones who controlled everything. Tonight they would be unmasked and shown for what they really were, monsters who had enslaved an entire population.

Somehow I had become the leader, the rallying point. My father guessed it might be my slightly unconventional look, the fact that I had been defying the Stardust Corporation little by little since the very beginning. I was seen as a rebel and I was okay with that. I would lead the charge gladly and if had to die for others to have freedom, I would be ready.

They had to know we were coming. They had the best surveillance around their headquarters, the tall white beacon of a building in the very center of our culture, and most of the population moving towards one location would be rather hard to miss. We had

taken the liberty of arming ourselves thanks to the very guards who usually patrolled the perimeter, leaving the Stardust Corporation virtually unguarded. Sure we would have to break through their technology, but they had gotten too arrogant, thinking that they controlled all humans, to think we would be a threat. Big mistake.

The actual storming of the headquarters took very little time. Soon the walls were breached and our mob was busy rounding up any and all the elite of Stardust Corporation. It took some time to breach the inner sanctum, as the halls were like mazes, but it's amazing how quickly things fall when most of the population is behind the rebellion. My uncle and I were making sure that the perimeter had been secured and that there was no secret means of escaping, so we entered the room holding the leaders of the corporation a bit late.

We were confused by the eerie silence that met us, eyes followed us as we made our way further into the room. Since the two of us had somehow become the unofficial leaders of the rebellion, a path cleared for us as we passed by. Once we got to our captives we both stopped, shocked. I immediately looked towards my parents who were near us, they looked back the same expression of disbelief in their eyes.

"We've been waiting for you," one of the captives said, a sadistic smile on her face. I couldn't take my eyes off of her, it was like looking into the mirror. We could have been twins. She was surrounded by other familiar faces, those of my family and the others who had been resistant to the drugs in the water. Yet those people were standing next to me, these were look – a – likes in better clothes.

When none of us said anything she continued. “You didn’t really think that we were so oblivious to not know about your little uprising, did you? Surely you must have expected that everything went too smoothly. We let you in.”

“Why?” I asked, the word almost catching in my throat. Had this all really been a set up? But why? To what purpose?

“Because the rumor that we sold the world was just to see if you were ready, if you were smart enough to be put to good use,” a man that looked like my uncle said.

“Tomorrow the drugs will go back in the water and most of the people in your rebellion will forget everything, go back to their lives we see fit for them to lead. But a special few of you...well we have other plans for you,” the first woman said.

“What kind of plans?” I asked, proud that my voice was louder this time.

“Well there is a sale taking place, not the world per se, but you will never be seen in these walls again,” my clone continued.

“You’re selling us? You can’t do that!” I burst forth, trying to reach her. An unseen force threw me back.

“Oh you will do as we say, as you can see we have far superior protection that you ever dreamed of. Plus we have the added bonus that we know how you will react, for we were you once upon a time.”

I shook my head no. “That can’t be. We are nothing like you. We are trying to save the world, to save our people, not control and manipulate them.”

My double laughed. “Do you honestly think this is the first Operation Savior Machine? That is how all our colonies start, the strongest rising to the top and proving that they are ready to lead. Your resistance to our drugs are part of you, the part of you that is us. Same goes for the implanted memories of the past, of how to rebel, of the operation that proves your worthiness. You will be sent out to colonize another location, to start a new corporation on behalf of those who purchased you. Soon you will be exactly like us, genetically engineered to rule, to stay young and live longer than most. You are chosen, you should be consider yourself lucky.”

“Lucky? You are selling us like slaves! I won’t do it. You can’t turn us into monster like you!” I screamed, trying to make a break for it.

The unseen force once again took hold of me, this time restraining me and dragging towards a door in the back. I screamed, but no one could hear me anymore. Just before we got to the door I heard a melodic voice in head, “Welcome to the future, this may hurt a little.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheri Velarde, a cancer survivor herself, lives in New Mexico with her husband and their two dogs.

Being an avid reader since an early age, she has wanted to be a writer for as long as she can remember. She has been writing all her life, but only recently started to actually try to pursue her dream of writing for a living. She specializes in all things paranormal and that go bump in the night. Her heart truly lies in exploring unknown worlds or adding the supernatural to our world. If it goes bump in the night or has magical connotations, Sheri writes about it.

She is constantly putting out new material with various publishers, so it is best to keep up with her on her website

www.sherivelarde.weebly.com.

In her spare time Sheri is an artist, jewelry designer, independent comic writer/artist and freelance non-fiction writer. Hiking in the mountains, going to live concerts, art openings, museums, and hosting intimate dinner parties.

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Other works by Sheri Velarde:

Quest for Redemption – April 2016

Welcome to Oceanside Inn – April 2016

Code Black – March 2016

Looted – March 2016

Blood, Lust and Love: A Collection of Vampire Shorts – February 2016

Rumpled Sheets (Part of Twisted Fables Anthology) – February 2016

Lust, Sex and Tattoos – January 2016

To Melt a Frozen Heart (Part of the Snowed In F/F Anthology) – January 2016

Not So Silent Night – November 2015

Taking Pleasure Where You Can (Duty, Honor, Desire Anthology for Help for Heroes) – November 2015

Possessed by Love (Part of Haunted Hotties Vol. 1 Anthology) – October 2015

GHOST STAR

MICHAEL MCCORMICK

GHOST in a cage
Of veins and nerves

Star in spotlight
Of sound and vision

Thin white ghost
Becomes black star

A wild mutation
Just for one day

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael McCormick is a writer living in Saint Paul, Minnesota, with his beloved wife, cats, and vinyl records. His published work includes poetry, science fiction, literary fiction, and reviews. For this poem Mike thanks his sister Elin. When he was a teenager she brought home a couple David Bowie records and played them LOUD. *Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* and *Station to Station* instantaneously activated a part of Mike's brain he wasn't previously aware of, a wild mutation which thankfully persists to this day.

Also By Michael McCormick:

Recent poems include "Wounded Sky" (Writer's Digest anthology), "Monkey No Monkey" (Whistling Shade), and "Willow" (Talking Stick). Short stories include "Book of Changes" (Plaza), "Shipwreck" (Libido), and "Boy in the Giant Robot" (Daily Science Fiction). Mike is a member of the League of Minnesota Poets (LOMP), Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA), and Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA).

A DANCE OF MAGIC

TOM HASWELL

A long, long time ago, at least as far back as last Thursday, there was a little boy who missed his mommy. He really didn't understand why she left, or where she went. The adults in his life could only tell him that she had gone away, and that she wouldn't be coming back. He knew they were serious, because everyone was in their fancy clothes. He always wondered why everyone's fancy clothes were often black.

The little boy managed to sneak away, as little boys are often want to do. The big impressive building that everyone had gathered in to discuss mommy's trip had a large lawn in front, walled off by a giant hedge. Behind the building was a field where, as close as he could tell, they grew stones. Row after row of stones had been planted there, creating a maze that seemed to go on forever. Not that the maze of stones concerned him at all. He was too preoccupied playing with his marbles. He played with them all the time, whenever he could. He knew that you were supposed to play marbles with other people, but he didn't really have any friends. The only one who ever had time to play with him was Mommy, and now she had gone away. He thought of her long, soft, brown – almost – black hair and how it tickled his neck when she hugged him tight. He missed his mommy.

With the marbles laid out around the circle, he shot his perfectly clear striker at a blue-and-green swirly, and watched as the smaller ball received the force of the collision. With the clacking sound of glass on glass, it catapulted into the tall grass. As the marble

landed, the boy heard a strange sound. It was a small sound, a small voice, but it most certainly yelled "Ouch!" He crawled over to the grass where the noise had come from, and he saw a small faerie sitting in the grass, rubbing a swiftly increasing bruise on the side of its head. It sat on the ground, nestled in a bunch of soft, green grass.

"I'm sorry, did I hit you with my marble?" the boy asked. He studied the tiny creature for a moment, unable to tell if it was a boy, or a girl. Come to think of it, he wasn't really sure if something so strange had boys and girls at all. The mysterious thing was about the size of his hand from the tip of his longest finger to the bottom of his palm. It was thin and pale white, aside from the quickly reddening bump made by the marble. Butterfly wings as thin as tissue paper moved slowly on its back.

"If not you, than whoever you were playing with," the faerie replied. "Don't you know to watch where you aim those things?"

The boy scratched his head. "Well, to be honest, I never expected anyone to be in the grass."

The faerie seemed to pause at that, then continued. "What are you doing out here anyway?"

The boy settled himself down on the ground, so he could try to be closer to eye level with the little sprite. "Well, there's no point being inside. All the adults are 'whisper-talking', which means none of them really want to talk to me anyway. It's sit in a corner inside and be ignored, or sit outside and be ignored. No point in being inside."

"Ignoring you, a powerful babe such as yourself?" the faerie asked. "How can that be?"

"People always ignore me," the boy replied. "Except for Mommy, but they say she's gone away on a trip, and won't be coming back."

"Ahh... I see. My condolences then, little human."

"Your what?" he asked, cocking his head oddly to the side. His light amber hair swayed like wheat with the movement.

"Condolences. It means I am sorry that things are the way they are. Fairness seems never to abound in the human world."

The boy suddenly made a connection. "Hey, you're a faerie, aren't you?"

The little sprite smiled, and gave a little bow. "Yes," it nodded its tiny head which sent a small puff of brightly colored dust into the air. "Yes I am."

"Are you a girl faerie?" the boy asked, his cheeks glowing pink. "You're kinda pretty, so you must be a girl faerie."

The faerie did not reply. It simply shrugged its tiny shoulders, which caused the brightly colored wings to twitch gently.

"My mommy used to tell me if I found a faerie, I would get three wishes," the boy continued as if he had not asked the last question.

"Your mother is correct. However, you should probably wait until later to use them..."

The poor sprite did not even have time to finish its sentence. The tiny creature's reflexes must have been slowed by the crack on

the head, because the little boy was able to snatch it up in his hand. "Oh no you don't! That's a faerie trick to get out of giving wishes," the boy glared. "I want my wishes now!"

The faerie struggled, but could not escape the child's grasp. After a minute of trying, it sighed and relented. "As you wish, we'll do it now. You will have three wishes. Only three. And I can't take them back. A word of warning: wishes cannot solve your problems, my boy, no matter how much you think they will. Only one force in the universe can do that."

"I wish for a big castle!" the boy exclaimed. Before he could even blink, faerie dust blinded his eyes. When he cleared them, he was in a great castle, at the top of great a hill, overlooking a great countryside. The boy released the faerie from his grasp and raced around the castle, happy for the moment. It had towers and walls. It had thrones and giant staircases. It was the biggest castle that had ever stood. He ran back towards the faerie. "I have a castle! I have a castle!"

"Yes you do," the faerie said with a sigh. "Your first wish is complete. You wanted a place where no one could hurt you again. A place where no one could leave you again. It has been granted," a tiny, glistening tear appeared on the faerie's cheek. It was too small for the boy to see, even if he had been looking for it. Which he had not. "Sadly, your wish can't make you happy, because the only way no one can hurt you is if no one can reach you. Your wish cannot fulfill your desires, young human."

The boy ran around and around the castle, looking for someone to share his joy with. He found no one. He ran up to the faerie again. "Why is the castle empty?"

"Because, in your young life, you have not yet found anyone to share it with. Nor have you learned how to share what you have. Without that knowledge, young human, the castle of your life will always be empty, regardless of how bright and shining it is."

"I wish to have a castle full of friends!"

The faerie looked at him sympathetically. "I know, my poor boy. Sadly, I cannot complete your wish."

"But you have to! It's what I want!"

"It was what you wanted before your first wish, too. However, I cannot change how others will see you. Only you have that power," the faerie fluttered its wings and rose up so in order to look the boy in the eye as it continued to speak. "Riches do not change a person. Neither does power, nor fame, nor accomplishments. Only your choice to change can make you the person who can attract what you want."

"I WANT FRIENDS!" The force of the young boy's outburst sent the faerie tumbling backward through the air. After a minute or so, it was able to straighten herself out and fly back to him.

The faerie landed gently on the boy's shoulder and touched the side of his face with one tiny, warm hand and tried to calm the boy. "There are many kinds of magic in the world. Wish magic is but one. Wizardry is another. However, no form of magic has total

mastery over the world. Friendship is a magic all its own. Take time to learn it in your life."

The boy was enraged, and would not listen to reason. "Stupid faerie! Make me a wizard with powerful magic, and I'll make my own friends!" Again the faerie dust swirled in his eyes, and when it cleared he was indeed a Wizard. He felt the ebb and flow of energies around himself. He understood how to change shape into animals, how to create objects, and how to destroy them. As his first wish had offered him protection, his second wish had given him power. Power enough to take what he wanted from the world.

"You now have the magical powers you had wished for," the faerie floated down from the boy's shoulder to stand on the arm of the nearest throne. "However, it will not bring you friends. It will not bring you respect. It will only bring you more pain, and more isolation; not that which you truly want."

"People will respect me," the boy stated with great confidence. "I am a mighty wizard."

"No," the faerie replied without feeling. "They will only fear you."

The boy summoned a high backed throne from another room, and flung himself into it. "I have a castle!" he raised a finger. "I have magical powers!" a second finger. "I am King of all I see! People will like me!"

"Castles and titles do not make one likable. Neither wizardly power nor wishes will make you happy. The only magic that can do that, is how you treat others."

The boy – king thrust an angry finger at the sprite. "If you can grant wishes, why can't you grant what I truly want?"

"Because," the faerie said. "Even with all the power of all the faeries and all the wizards in all the world, wishes cannot fulfill dreams. Only the magic of humans can do that."

"Humans have no magic!" The newly crowned Wizard King waved his hand in frustration, barely missing the faerie as it ducked.

The fey took offense. "Oh, that's far from the truth. Humans have the greatest magics of all. The problem humans have is that they are just constantly surrounded by it. Being constantly surrounded by it makes them blind to the magic in their lives."

"It's not fair!" the boy sulked and slumped deeper into the throne.

"Wishes, by their nature, are not fair," the faerie spoke softly and gently. "They are a thing for nothing. The fact that their 'nothing' cannot grant you the thing you want, is actually the fairest thing in all the world."

The boy-king sat straighter, determined. His leg swung back and forth in the air as it hung over the side of the throne. "I will get what I want from magic, you'll see."

The sprite flew to him, and stood on the arm of the throne, near his knee. "I'm so sorry, young human, but you will not. You cannot. Magic comes from within. It is yourself applied to the universe. If you lack inside you what you need to gain friends, magic cannot solve that. Your magic will be ugly, and it will create only ugliness," a sorrow deeper than the deepest ocean filled the tiny

creature. "Magic – be it either the magic of faeries or of wizards – cannot change the universe. It can only change the conditions the universe works in."

"Fine," the boy said. "Then I want what will gain me friends!" The faerie was about to object, to caution once again, when the faerie dust whipped up. To the astonishment of both of them, the young human was now fully grown into a man. He looked at his new body, confused. "What have you done, faerie?"

"Faeries do not control the wishes we grant, as I've told you. You wished for something that could not be granted...directly. No magic can make you something you are not. The magic did the next best thing... it made you immortal. You will keep this form, in this age, until you understand. I am sorry, young human."

The man-king sneered. His voice was deeper now, with a resonance not unlike a large brass bowl, musical in tone even when his words were not. "What are you sorry for, you miserable faerie?"

"I am sorry that you achieved everything you wished for," the faerie sniffled and wiped its tiny nose with the back of a tiny hand.

Lightning crackled in the eyes of the man-king. "Leave my castle!" he shouted at the fey. It gave another little bow, and flew out through an open window at the side of the room.

Time passed in an odd way for the immortal wizard living within the faerie realms. Some days he felt like a million years had passed, and others it seemed he had played with his marbles just last week.

The faerie had been wrong. His magic had brought him many friends, and allowed him to fill his castle many times over. He lacked for nothing. He had power, and wealth, and the friends he had "made."

No, that wasn't entirely true. He lacked for one thing. Something so long ago in his mind that it echoed like a rolling crash of clouds in the mountains, floating in the nearly opaque memories of his life in the human world. Something always just out of reach. Something that no matter how many new friends he brought to the castle, it faded from him again as soon as they were residents.

It bothered him that he could not think of what it was. He stormed around the castle, throwing objects and kicking at the walls. He cursed and yelled and sulked, but no matter what he tried, or what he did, the thing that was missing never appeared.

"What is it?" he asked his friends as they gathered around him. "Is my castle not great?"

"The greatest to ever stand," his friends replied.

"Are my powers not grand?" he asked.

"The grandest to ever be had," they cheered back.

"I shall try something new," he decided and stood from his throne.

"What?" his friends asked as one.

"I shall bring humans here," he collected his cloak of white feathers from the back of the throne and draped it across his shoulders. "Whenever they call, they shall be brought."

And so it was, for many years. Humans would call out to him, through desire or in error, he did not care which, and he would bring them to his great castle and display his grand powers. At first, his new guests would be excited, but slowly, over time, they, too, would lose interest.

The wizard king grew bored of them and soon forgot what it was that he had been searching for. He moved on and began to think up new and more interesting things to do with the humans who called to him. He created great challenges for them. Puzzles for them to solve, quests and adventures for them to undertake for his amusement.

With each new arrival, he would meet and speak the details of the tasks laid out. With each new arrival he would feel powerful, strong, as they cowered before his great strength and his mighty appearance.

He might have never remembered what it was that he had been seeking so long ago, had he not been watching the dark haired girl as she traversed his halls. She was... different. She reminded him of someone, of something lost so long ago. She fought for her child, a boy with amber hair that was so like his own. She risked her life, sacrificed her future, and was dedicated to his rescue. Not out of any advancement of herself, not out of any need for herself, but out of the needs of the child. He sneered at the uselessness of it all. Her attempts mattered not, for all her dedication was fruitless.

She entered the final hall. The wizard was very proud of this hall. He had designed it to be an impossible test. Gravity meant nothing. Walls would twist and turn and move on their own. One

minute the girl would be right way up, running down the hall; the next she would be upside down and climbing a staircase to nowhere. The hall itself made reaching the child impossible for anyone but a wizard. She would stand there and watch the final minutes of her challenge fade away, drifting from her even as his elusive memory drifted as well.

He watched as she caught sight of the boy in his rumpled and dirty clothes, as he played intently with his marbles on the stone floor. A rough circle had been drawn there with white chalk.

The girl looked up in order to look down at the floor. The wizard knew she would be dizzy and confused and scared and ready to give up. He bent forward on his throne, anticipation etched onto his face. All around him, his friends mirrored his movement and expression.

Then she did the unthinkable. She jumped.

The Hall existed in a place where only magic could counter its chaos. It was designed to be inescapable, undefeatable. Only someone with magic within them could defeat it. The young mother was not a wizard, nor was she a faerie. She was a human. It was in that moment the man-king remembered the faerie's words, and that humans had a magic all their own. This human's magic had allowed her to leap from the ledge, to defeat the hall just long enough to try to grasp what mattered most to her.

Gravity was not a thing to be understood in the Hall, especially by a mere human. Her jump, while it seemed short, would certainly kill her. He wondered if she knew. Wondered if she would

still have jumped anyway had she known. He called upon the power of his magic to destroy the hall, to make Time and Space a thing under his control in this moment. Even in the faerie realm, such things were not supposed to happen, and the toll of it nearly killed him. He had known the risks. He had done it anyway. Not out of any advancement of himself, not out of any need for himself, but out of needs of the girl.

The world was struck by his power. The Hall unraveled; his castle fell away. He brought all three – himself, the girl, and her son – safely to the ground. He approached her again. And yet, he approached her for the first time as well, for he stood before her not as a King, but as... he had no words for it. He offered. He pleaded. It mattered not, her human eyes still only saw the creature he had been. Had been...for the moment he had acted in her defense, he had changed.

Faerie magic is a strange thing. It is all at once timeless, yet as frail as eggshells. The girl's ability to rebuke him, to defeat his task, had shattered the magic of the wishes, and he was flung through time and space. His castle was gone, his magic had left him, and his age rapidly decreased. He knew not where he was going. He cared not where. He had changed. After all this time, he had changed. He understood why the castle and the wizardry had never made him happy. After all this time, he had finally learned.

* * * * *

"Push," the doctors and nurses urged. "You need to push!"

The woman on the hospital bed screamed in effort. The world in that moment was a jumble of noise and light. The doctors gave orders. The nurses assisted. The woman cried out. Another cry, a small cry, made itself known.

The nurse cleaned the baby, and brought it to the mother. "He's a boy," she said, smiling softly.

The exhausted woman looked down, holding her boy in her arms.

"A boy. A life. It's so magical."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Haswell is an independent Science Fiction and Fantasy writer from Philadelphia, PA. A long time SF/F fan and describer of himself in the third person, he has many published credits as a backstory writer in the wargaming community, having worked on wargames in the popular Mutant Chronicles/Warzone, Devil's Run: Route 666, and Aliens vs. Predator properties.

He has taken the plunge to being a full-time writer, with the hopes of one day being able to afford first person pronouns. His standalone sci-fi works include the cyber noir serial Absolute Valentine by Monolith, and War Eternal available on Channillo.com

JANUARY 10, 2016

WRYLY T MCCUTCHEN

My brain hurts like a warehouse, it has no room to spare

I have David Bowie to thank
for the very first time I ever waxed
philosophical on the penis.
At age ten I remember his shimmering
codpiece as if it took up 2/3s of the screen.
And maybe it did.

It's been years since I first watched him,
but this morning I awoke hungry for his
peach, and nothing else will do.
I especially want the worm
inside. His was the first force
to awaken the dreaming worm of strange
beneath all my sweet
curvatures and juice. The first to offer
polychromatic hints that my pit
might be something much more tricky.

Sophomore year of college, YouTube
still a novelty. Once I found him

seducing Mick Jagger into shaking
his ass and pressing fiery foreheads together,
I watched the "Dancing in the Street"
video 300 times that winter.
I forced all of my friends to watch too.
It kept us warm.
It doesn't matter that in the 90's
they both took their passions back
in respective interviews. Evidence for their
overwritten queerness still exists.
I still love him.
I already miss him through my lack
of forgiveness. I would still go
down on his ego. Gladly.

First time I heard "Space Oddity"
I almost cried, then the key change
saved me from folding in like my mother
was prone to. Confident jerking guitar pulls
brought oxygen back to the chest cavity
his solemn space opera had thrust
into vacuum. After that
I never again remembered how to breathe normally.

This morning I full – on sobbed before ground control
came in to save me. (The Mothership would've been proud).

It's time to leave the capsule if you dare.

He dared and dared and dared.

His flaring match head lit the wick of my need to risk
and now I've left my capsule too.

He, mystical glittery beast, unweaving
himself each musical season, and saying
"Yes" to every possible version of himself
he, sex on two milky-thin matchsticks,
shattered the panicky distance between us and alien.

He put a shine on the planets
my adolescence feared and ached for
Sex
Loss
& Otherness.

His limelight life a 50 – year
adolescence for public consumption.

Now that he's gone the way only his space ship knows to go;
now that his bright flare of earthly puberty has ended
we're finding ourselves far too grown up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wryly T. McCutchen is a language-loving cyclist and all around trouble maker born and raised in the Puget Sound. They love bikes and anything else with simple exposed mechanics. Natural history museums are their preferred habitat. They're brimming with adventurous, bewildering impulses. They're aching to coaxing your skin into a new tattoo. In 2013 Wryly was a finalist in Write Bloody's publishing competition. Their poetry and nonfiction has appeared in *Wilde Magazine*, *Alive With Vigor*, *The Prague Revue*, and *Raven Chronicles*. Wryly currently runs a personal/political blog called *Meet Me in the Margins*. Their first poetry collection *My Ugly and Other Love Snarls* is available from University of Hell Press.

LET'S DANCE

A. HENRY KEENE

“PUT on your red shoes.” I hit the bottle, winked, and waited for Constance to smile, but she didn’t. Instead, she let the dope smoke flow, stared at me, and shook her head. I was more than a little drunk, and she didn’t like it when I drank before we made love. Said it made me sloppy. All tongue and spit. I half smiled, refilled my glass, and blurted, “I found the poem you wrote last night.” The words slipped and slurred across my numb lips. “It can’t be true.” My voice cracked. “You went with him?”

I teetered before her. Half melted ice cubes jingled in my glass, and pain grew like a vine from my heart, spread through my body. Tears blurred my vision until she became a vague outline rising from the grey couch.

“I’ve got drama.” She walked past me to the bedroom. “That can’t be stolen.”

Flabbergasted, I followed. “What?”

“I feel tragic like Marlon Brando.”

“Tragic?”

“Sometimes I cry my heart to sleep.”

I caught up, reached out, and spun her around.

“There’s never gonna be enough money.” She smirked.

“There’s never gonna be enough drugs.”

I shook my head. “Why? Why’d you go with him?”

“When the sun goes down and the die is cast and you have no choice.”

“Love is lost. Lost is love.” I sniffed. “Oh what have you done?”

“Live with the best times. Live with the worst.”

I held her and looked into her wild eyes. “If you can see me I can see you.”

“I’ve danced with you too long.”

“Oh, baby, just you shut your mouth.” I kissed her. All tongue and spit. She kissed me back then spread herself across the bed.

“David Bowie died. We’re all gonna die.” She grinned.

“Let’s dance the blues.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Henry Keene writes pulp fiction with literary intent.

Also by:

For noir with hints of horror check out "Peekaboo."

I HEAR YOU, WARSAW

NORBERT GORÅ

Inspired by "Warszawa"

CITY arteries pulsate from the sounds
of squealing tires, flow with shrieking
horns, like blood in veins.

Thousands of stranger faces
come to the surface,
perpetual motion created
by human hand.

Multicolored dominos on roads,
release the poisonous shapes of smoke,
engines furiously roar.

I can hear words
woven with contemporary,
but they dance
on the wind of the past.

Pavements touched by the finger
of Second World War, music of Warsaw Uprising
hidden in the clouds, hearts beating for an idea.

Tears washed away the blood path,
the city arose from the ruins like a hero.

Metropolis made of glass,
soaked with globalism,
shimmers in the glow
of golden sun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norbert Gora is a 25-year old poet and writer from Poland. Many of his horror, SF and romance short stories have been published in his home country. He is also the author of poems in many English-language poetry anthologies around the world like Axes of Evil, Wolf Warriors II, Bad Neighborhood, My Cruel Invention, Lovecraft After Dark and Jalada's anthology.

<http://jalada.org/2015/09/15/language-the-loop-of-the-world-by-norbert-gora/>

<http://www.horrorsleazetrash.com/flash-fiction/norbert-gora-a-talking-silver-stool/>

THE SANEST ALADDIN

JOHN BOOEN

THE man on the table is dead. His fish belly flesh is cool and the bruising has already begun on the lower points. Doctor Jones sits on the floor, face in his hands and weeps. All about him are used sponges and bloody gauze. A dropped pair of clamps and a scissor litter the floor. His tears flow fast and quiet. The nurses would be back directly to take away the corpse and clean the room for the next surgery. Jones stands and lays a gloved hand on the man's shoulder. "We're not going anywhere, are we?" He pats the cold flesh and leaves the room.

* * * * *

-Bromley, England; 1953

Father brought home some little records. American forties, he called them. We laid them out on the floor and read the labels. Fats Domino. The Platters, Little Richard. They were so shiny, so black. Father got out the portable and set to putting one of the records on. "This one is called 'Tutti Frutti,' David." He turned up the volume a bit.

After a few seconds of crackle the walloping cacophony of piano came from the speaker. Then the vocals came, banshee wailing and yelling. Young David's hair stood on end. His skin prickled, he

had never heard such a din. He felt his mouth, the smile that had been there in anticipation, wilt and turn to a sneer, almost a frown. He took a small step forward and switched off the player. "Not much for music in America, are they Dad?" The boy turned and went back down the hall to his room. The door closed and the father just looked at the records and shook his head.

* * * * *

Dr. Jones sits at his desk and fills out the forms. He has just returned from breaking the news to Mrs. Jacobs about her husband. That never got any easier. He grips the pen so tightly his fingertips threaten hemorrhage. He stops, mid letter and thinks back to his school days. He thinks about the Frampton boy and others. He has saved lives, hundreds if not more. What was their boast, eh? Playing a bunch of silly songs to drunken hoodlums at the pub? He resumes writing and then drops the pen on the blotter. He sits back and tilts his slender neck, it cracks like a twig in the small, quiet room. He spins the chair and looks in the mirror that hangs behind him.

His dirty blonde hair is cut close to the skull. The angular shape of his cheekbones and his long face are the stuff of film legend. He looks at his eyes. Those eyes. He wasn't sure he had ever really forgiven that Underwood boy for his disfigurement. And over a girl, no less. One punch and then four months in the hospital and he had that fucked up left eye as a memento. The pupil permanently dilated. People always thought he had two differently colored eyes, which was

not true. The pupil just made the left so much darker than the right. He rakes long fingers over his head, combing back the hair and breathing loudly through his teeth. "Still I can see."

* * * * *

-Bromley Technical School; 1960

David Jones stood alone, by the fountain. He watched the boys laugh and walk toward the arts wing. Peter Frampton looked at him and smiled. "You should come along, Davey." David turned away. "Wastrels," he mumbled and leaned to sip from the fountain. The water was ice cold and tasted of metal. He walked in the other direction and thought about those boys wasting all their time and efforts on that musical rubbish. He would be a surgeon one day, saving lives as those boys would be on the dole. Or in the gutter. He smiled a superior smile and went into the class room.

* * * * *

David Jones is at home. He has a glass on the table beside him. The ice long melted, the scotch watered to the color of dark urine. His eyes are almost closed. He rubs the graying hair at his temples. He sits up a bit straighter and stares at the wall, at the medical degrees and awards that adorn it. He sees the keys to his BMW on the phone

table with his wallet and watch. He sighs and walks over to the stereo. He punches the button and the music flows from the speakers. A rollicking piano. A soulful yet raw voice wailing, "A – Whomp – Bam – Boom!" He falls back onto the sofa and shakes his head. He stops and sits quite still. A wave of visual thoughts slamming into him like a seraphim wave. In another life, he could have been another man. He could have been the boy who found the bottle. Who let the genie out? The genie who would show him what the world craved. He could have been the one to write the songs, shred the rules and burn the temples to the ground. He could have been spaceman, a duke or the sanest Aladdin. He walks to the window and stares out at the night sky. The stars look very different today. He feels shaken, and man – made of cracked glass. Fragile and fierce.

He closes his eyes and feels a tear roll down a pale cheek. All he had done was save some lives when he could have saved the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

On a cold winter's day in 1970, John Boden was born. The years since have been filled with Star Wars action figures, cartoons, books, family, life and love. He currently resides in Pennsylvania, between the capitol and Three Mile Island. A bakery worker by day, his evenings are spent with his beautiful wife and sons and working with Shock Totem Publications. He writes when he can and reads all the time, working sleep in wherever.

Also by John Boden:

"*Intruder*" in the John Skipp edited PSYCHOS anthology

"*Possessed By A Broken Window*" in Lamplight Volume 3, Issue 3

"*Night Games*" in Blight Digest Volume 1

"*Down By The Ocean*" in Splatterpunk #5

"*Pin*" in Once Upon An Apocalypse Volume 1 anthology

"*Them Iron Eyes Cody Blues*" and "*Sentinel*" in the Robbed Of Sleep Vol. 1 anthology

"*Dominoes*" a Little Horror book from Shock Totem publications

BOWIE POEM

ALEX S. JOHNSON

I'D love to talk, I'll meet you there
somewhere cool and quiet, out of the sun
while the kids rained chaos, bits from a shattered rose
we met the jester, my wasn't it fun

Talking of money and making us stars
everyone had motorcars
delivered to their room at the Beverly
loaded with drugs, wasn't it heavenly

Boys and girls made a new-minted gender
what glitters ain't gold, it's sure not legal tender
then moonlight screamed and smashed the bus
a bit of a scrape for us

So we made a mask of alien sex
and signed all our contracts with blood and a hex
painting our dreams on your faces like canvas
while somewhere, dim waking, the hammers struck anvils
and sparks flew like stardust, split sun pouring lies
but wasn't it fine?

And we shrugged on our spacesuits
the better to travel
Arcturus, Montreaux, the judge banged his gavel
and the hexpapers drew all the gold to our hands
Ziggy sucked up the paper that split up the band

The Detroit papers said, boy, it's gone to his head
when personas were scrapped, the artist was dead
and Major Tom's ass got bit by a monkey
who wasn't his boss, just some sort of flunky

Another occasion for laughs and champagne
the money turned powder and clogged up the drain
the ex was still screaming her raucous reprise
which wasn't all lies
which wasn't all lies

But all of the meat is pressed down in the platters
the grooves tell the story
it's music that matters
and Goblins and Gnomes are the ones who laugh last
of feast there is plenty, come join our repast
lift a glass to the mimes, fools and troubadours
while the Main Man locks bolts
there are still many doors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex S. Johnson is the author of several books of weird fiction, Bizarro, erotica and horror, including *The Pit and the Void*, *Fucked Up Shit!* (with Berti Walker), *Bad Sunset*, *Doctor Flesh* and *The Doom Hippies* (all except FUS! from Johnson's Nocturnicorn Books/Darkest Wine Media; FUS from Insolitus Publishing). Among many projects he is involved with this year are the monthly series *Fucked Up Fairy Tales*, featuring Johnson, Berti Walker and one special guest every issue, the "Evil Tracks" scary music blog for horroraddicts.net--to which he also contributes fiction and reviews--and a novel -- length homage to 80s slasher flicks entitled *DeadKiss*. Among the books slated for publication from Nocturnicorn this year are: *Cherry Nose Armageddon: An Anthology of Clown Horror*; *Mary of the Chance Encounters*, a collection of weird fiction by Margaret Elysia Garcia and *Dreams of Fire and Steel*, a sword and sorcery anthology edited by Juan Julio Gutierrez. Johnson is an Active Member of Horror Writers Association and participates in their Mentor program.

2. INSIDE

ALEX KREITNER

AS the interest drugs shoot through my body and the sweet-bitter taste of the pills evaporate in my mouth I stretch my limbs in the front seat of my car and repeat to myself, like a mantra:

“I am Jonas Deville. I work part time for the cops as a Meaning Consultant for art crimes, but the rest of the time I own an Art Gallery / Esoteric Curiosities shop. I’m here to take a look at a supposed ‘art crime’.”

I keep repeating this as the drug takes hold, keeping the focus on what I need to do. Otherwise I get confused and I start thinking a bit too fast. Plus, I don’t want to start zeroing in on some pebble of asphalt in the parking lot and find I’ve been staring at it in rapt wonder for the last half a day.

Climbing out of my car, I laugh at myself as I have to tear my concentration away from one of those pebbles. I force myself to remember my mantra. But I’m still laughing obsessively to myself when I reach the first uniformed guard dog a few feet from the door of the warehouse, at the edge of the police tape.

“Meaning Consultant,” I tell him, showing my lanyard. He grunts and keeps his eyes forward, but I see his gaze slide back my way when I mumble to myself: “A warehouse; already promising.”

I duck under the tape and pass by a couple more cops standing around drinking their coffees and laughing with each other. The cops don’t think much of art crime, which around here, they really

shouldn't. They see it as just a bunch of low-life thugs trying to come up with a better excuse for getting their sick jollies off of mutilating people. Come to think of it, for the most part, they're probably right. Though I didn't move to this city because of its high quality of art crime. My business does a killing here with the college crowd and I just do this consulting stuff to make my lifestyle cushier.

Sometimes, when I think of the crimes they're putting up in Paris, and London, I get a little jealous and it makes me want to pack my bags and turn my side job into a main job.

Coming up on the scene itself, the canvas as I like to think of it, I can see more groups of patrolmen milling around in little cliques, still just talking. As I approach a pair of detectives, I start to really focus in. I'm being paid after all, and though no one is really coming down too hard on the interest drugs, I don't want to come off as too fried.

Which I am; but I'm in control.

The first cop turns to me and gives me a clinical once-over. He looks sort of familiar.

"Detective Jameson," he says, and shakes my hand, seeing the hanging ID card with the corporate logo and my smiling picture. "This is my partner, Detective Cussler."

The other, younger guy looks up from my ID with a ready-made scowl and gives my hand a cursory grab. Then he looks back at the scene, trying to forget that I'm here. "Go to it, buddy," he says.

"Absolutely," I reply.

Turning from the crowd to the main attraction my senses really begin to kick in, along with the high from the pills. That Stone woman is scary as hell, but she's pushing some great stuff.

My gaze is steady but quick as I circle around what looks like a vignette set in the middle of the empty warehouse floor, on top of a white tarp. I move carefully around the figures, my mind flashing faster than logical thought through a catalog of symbols and correspondences as I look over the piece.

My first impression: It's not as bad as I thought it was going to be.

There is certainly a sense of composition to it. Three figures, and by figures I mean bodies, are positioned in three different poses in a circle. As I traverse the outside of the piece I start to think that perhaps they are actually describing a perfect circle, or as perfect a circle as three human bodies are going to get standing back to back. Each has their hands positioned very carefully. I note that one of them has one hand raised with two fingers pointed up and the other with two fingers pointed down.

This guy certainly knows something. Or girl?

As I pass the two detectives I catch a couple snippets of whispers from Detective Cussler. Something along the lines of "I can't believe this..." and "we have to..." Out of the corner of my eye I see Detective Jameson shrug in response. Then it hits me where I remember him. I stop and turn toward him.

"You were Adler's partner when he was on the force, right?"

"Yes. You knew Adler?"

I, too, shrug a sort of affirmative shrug-nod and go back to the piece.

The more I look at it the more excited I'm becoming. I can see the shades of color in the three outfits that bleed into each other; one black, one red, one white, not exactly solid colors and the shifting from one to another was obviously intended. I observe their interplay as I walk the circle clockwise. Still more details woven or painted onto the fabric and even tattooed on the skin, but clearly fresh and not original to the owners of the bodies. I follow one set of notes up the scale, around the circle, and find myself back at the beginning, but now changed. The artist didn't even go with the usual electronic additions that one would expect from something derivative of modern art crime.

No, this is old time, esoteric language I'm reading.

I start to experiment. I walk back around the piece one way, then another. Then I stare through each of the openings without looking directly at any of the figures. I can hear my pulse in my ear and the audible frustrations of Detective Cussler fade further into the background. Finally I begin to mimic the stances, starting appropriately at the black one.

I diligently duplicate each pose, even mimicking the facial expressions of the corpses, all of which the artist consciously molded as they are not the slack face of a peaceful body or the contorted face of a tortured victim. One by one I replicate each pose until I reach the red one, and then it all comes apart.

"Oh," is all I'm able to say.

Turning from the masterpiece, I walk quickly toward the open warehouse door. I find my mind busy and powerfully clear at the same time. Images play across my vision, super-imposing over the police officers that have now all turned to look at me as I rush toward the exit. Part of me is surprised that none of them are grabbing me and I'm more and more grateful that I have the time to process what is happening to me with every frozen cop I pass.

Of course such a coarse crowd could never appreciate my experience and soon enough one of them, in fact I recognize him as the original guard dog that let me pass the tape, grips my arm and stops me to let the two detectives behind me catch up.

As some more of the outside world begins to pour back in I become aware that they have been yelling at me for some time; especially Detective Cussler. Since I have enough wherewithal to realize that I can't get away with escaping from them without a conversation, I grit my teeth and try to talk to them first before they can get too accusatory.

Though Cussler still manages to get out: "The hell is wrong with you? You can't run away from a crime scene!"

I simply speak louder.

"Do you know what you have there?" I ask, jabbing a finger back at the masterpiece.

Their blank looks are hurting me, and I know that any explanation I give is going to take forever and never get through. But still, I try, after all: it's my job.

“That, right there, is what is called ‘objective art’,” I say, although all I want to do is get back to the rush of feelings and knowledge that is still flooding into my mind. Some of it is disturbing, some of it is amazing, but I can’t pick anything out while I’m still under an obligation to explain the unexplainable to fools.

“I don’t know what that is,” Detective Jameson says in an even voice while his partner sputters.

“I’ve never even seen any art that I could call objective, outside of maybe a Paris cathedral or the Egyptian monuments,” I continue.

“Mr. Deville,” he says, “please slow down and explain what you mean by ‘objective art’.”

I know he’s handling me, and his partner doesn’t even know what to say to me, which all things considered is probably reasonable as I think I’m crying as well as babbling.

“Alright, alright,” I start. “Pretty much anything you could call art is as the old adage says ‘in the eye of the beholder’, you understand?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well, that isn’t,” I explain, pointing between the two. “That art is not someone’s opinions or emotions. It is truth; and it is art.”

“So you’re saying that whoever did this is an especially educated individual?”

“That’s one way to look at it,” I say, running my hand through my hair. I’m practically hyper-ventilating by this point and I can’t tell

what is the drugs and what is the by-product of the piece, but to the detectives in front of me it probably all looks like drugs.

“How would *you* say it, Deville?” Cussler asks, finally managing to spit out something coherent.

I speak very carefully in response, wanting to make my point clear, avoiding unfamiliar ideas or distortion.

“I would say that the person who did that would be the most extraordinary person I, or any of us, have ever encountered. You’re looking for an awakened man.” I start to realize I’m not using terminology they’d understand. “Okay, okay, you’re looking for someone...enlightened.”

“Gandhi did this, is that what you’re saying?” Jameson asks, his scowl back.

“Gandhi was a pacifist, so, no. But this person would make Gandhi look like a simple child.”

“Whatever,” Jameson says, throwing his hands in the air.

“What would you say the meaning of the piece is?” his partner asks.

“You’re missing the point. It’s not trying to get across a perspective or the artist’s state of mind. It simply is. It’s knowledge.” They both look blankly at me, though Jameson is peering at me in a troublingly focused way. “*Fine*,” I think, but say: “If I were forced to come up with a theme for it, I would say it’s the meaning of life.”

“Thank you, Mr. Deville,” Detective Jameson finally says. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“Great. I can go?”

“You can go. We have your number if we have any other questions.”

“Glad to help,” I say with a smile more of relief than friendliness and turn to leave again, giving the guard dog in the front a wide berth lest he think to detain me again.

The images and thoughts rush back in without the outside pressure of the need to speak and be heard, to which I am very grateful as I had thought those two had chased away my gnosis entirely. The parking lot is a gray blur with blobs of color on either side of me as my mind, enhanced by the interest drugs, tries to process the stream of information opened up by the masterpiece in the warehouse. I feel my hands shaking and my breath is coming in faster and faster gasps.

I stumble to my car, lock the doors, and cradle myself in a ball while trying not to fight the information that has come flooding in. One image, from before, comes back in full force. I see the installation of the artwork, the preparation of the figures and the difficulties involved. But I see it through my own eyes and, unlike most murders I’ve seen the results of, this was not being done in a haze of rage or despair. My (His? Her? Our?) eyes were wide open and I was fully aware as I dismantled and reassembled the bodies into their present positions. The cold surety of the act shakes me. I rock back and forth to try to work through it before finally pushing open my car door into the car next to me and throwing up on the asphalt.

Before I can look even more suspicious, I start the engine and back very carefully out of the lot to get home, which is all I can think

of doing right now. This isn't the first time I've gotten behind the wheel when I shouldn't have, but this has to be the worst. But I can't stay and it doesn't help that I've started feeling painfully guilty, as if I was the one that left that masterpiece back there.

But I couldn't ever create anything so revelatory. Besides, I tell myself, I know where I was last night. Don't I? I start laughing. Of course I know where I was. And I know I'm very far from being able to create something with that kind of impact. After all, I didn't own an art gallery because I was a genius artist.

What's that they say? If you can't do, teach. If you can't teach, become a critic. That probably includes dealers, right?

I can't stop laughing and the images just keep coming, some of it in symbols, and some of it in chunks of pre-packaged knowledge. Questions I've had for years, or things I've seen or read, suddenly become childishly simple and obvious to me as the machinations of the world reveal themselves to my mental eye.

I'm laughing, crying, and driving along when I start to realize that some of the images have transitioned from the past and the installation of the art crime to this moment, not just here, but everywhere. It's overwhelming as I try be aware and be present in everything. This must be what it feels like to be God.

But before I can make sense of the expansiveness of All That Is, the visions finally start to cycle ahead and I start to see things that have yet to happen. Now my hands are sweaty on the wheel and my laughter is gone and the blurry world that was rolling by at a slow pace around my car snaps into painful clarity. I can not only see the

molecules making up the cars around me and the clockwork people on the streets, but interpenetrating it all is what will be. Everything looks like flipbook action stuck in place.

I push down the accelerator, my heart pumping and my stomach turning sour. Everything has laid itself out in front of me and I see my life and my illusions for what they are. My car screeches to a stop in the parking garage of my apartment building, and I jerk upright as I realize I was staring at the glass of my windshield and trying to differentiate the plastic sheet from the sandwiched glass while driving.

I stumble out of the vehicle and to the elevator; falling against its wall and watching bleakly as the numbers inexorably climb to the 14th floor where I reside as the visions continue. I try to shut my eyes to them, but of course that only cuts off my compulsive focus on the diodes that make up the floor numbers, and puts the visions into greater clarity. But I no longer want to see them. I no longer want knowledge; I no longer want certainty; I only want my ignorant oblivion back.

Crashing my way through my front door, I just barely manage to turn to close and lock it. Then I scramble at the refrigerator door and pull out a bottle of synthetic alcohol and fling its cap from me in disgust. Chugging it, faster than I would normally to take the edge off the drugs, I pull at my clothes and jab my music player's on button to try and drown out the visions with noise.

As I lay in my bed, drinking myself into a stupor, I try desperately to focus all my attention on the music, and my last thought

as I drift off to a merciful unconsciousness is: “He’s wrong; it’s happening inside.”

* * * * *

I wake up scared.

I’ve never woken up scared before, at least not this way. It’s not the lingering dread and pounding heart of a post-nightmare jolt. It’s a deep, anxious fear that is complete and total. Everything around me makes me feel afraid. In staring at the clock at my bedside, the time brings more anxiety and I feel as if I’m late for something important. Deathly important. But it’s a weekend and my gallery isn’t open and I am completely free, yet I can’t seem to shake this constant fear.

I crawl out of bed to look around and find a second set of my clothes crumpled and piled on the ground. I grab both sets and cram them into my hamper, accidentally slamming the lid too loudly, in a rush that feels like a guilty child hiding evidence. It takes a lot of focus to throw on a new set of clothes, which I know that I am not wearing well, even though my mind is not fuzzy and there are no lingering after-effects from drugs or alcohol as I would expect there to be.

Instead, everything feels very dull and cold, ominously so. I realize that the only positive change is that the visions have stopped and my mind is terrified, but empty.

After taking my bearings I walk into the living room of my apartment to find it much the same as it always looks, but still things seem off. I notice that the front door is just slightly open, though I'm quite confident that I closed and locked it last night. A quick peek toward the open bathroom door shows piles of what look like wet towels on the ground, which is disconcerting in what should be a very neat and sterile-looking bathroom.

I don't feel strong enough to deal with it though, so I walk away and plan to land myself on the couch and see if the television can burn away my mounting terror. At this point I notice that my cellphone is ringing, and has been ringing for a while now. It's even possible that it woke me up.

I hustle to my bedroom and grab it off the dresser, stare for a second trying to understand why the number displayed is not one I know, and answer it. The voice on the other end is a very annoyed sounding Detective Cussler.

"Are you kidding me, Deville? Do you know how many times I've called you?"

"I'm sorry," is all I can mumble.

"We need you to get over here, now."

"You have more, umm...questions?"

"We have more bodies. Meet me at this address," he says and reads off an address in Oxford and hangs up.

For a few minutes I just stare at the quiet phone and wonder what I'm supposed to do. I eventually get ready to go, more from impulse than any conscious decision. It will take quite a while to get

to the little town, and I keep thinking that I should turn around and go back home, or just run away. I keep telling myself that the idea is foolish; I'm not being called down the station, I'm being asked to consult on a crime.

None of which helps my terror and as the cold and crowded city streets make way to the open roads and little towns; any enjoyment I used to take in the quaint little New England houses and brick-laden official buildings has been stripped away. As my anxiety climbs, each new face I fly past looks squat and accusatory as they watch me approach what must be some form of personal doom.

I finally find the house, made conveniently conspicuous by the lines of yellow tape and cop cars surrounding it, and stop to take a deep breath. I can feel sweat dampening my armpits and my shirt underneath my jacket, even though it is a cool, spring day. This time I won't be popping any interest drugs to help me focus. I know that going into a high in this kind of mental state is a horrible idea.

Sober, sick to my stomach, and shaking in a way that I hope isn't obvious, I exit my car and head to the little Colonial house with its manicured lawn and trim little garden. I reach the tape and flash my ID - which I feel very lucky to have remembered - and I'm ushered under the tape by what I swear has to be the exact same cop as yesterday, even though we're in a different jurisdiction. But all the faces start to blur together for me, and they look like lines of identical mannequins standing around in counterfeit uniforms, pretending to look official.

Detective Jameson exits the house with Cussler trailing behind him, clearly notified of my arrival. I try as surreptitiously as possible to wipe my hands dry before they reach me.

“It’s about time,” Cussler barks from behind. “You look like crap.”

“Thank you, Mr. Deville,” Jameson says, ignoring his partner and shaking my hand again. “I see you found the place.”

“Yes, yes I did,” I reply.

“Did you have much trouble?”

“No.”

“Have you been to Oxford before?”

“No, I can’t say I have,” I say, wondering if he is grilling me or making small talk as we approach the front door. I try to remind myself that any given conversation with a detective is bound to sound like both.

“It happened late last night; we think it’s related.”

“The same guy?”

He shrugs, he seems to like to do that.

As a trio we file past the foyer and down a short hall full of pictures of a young couple and generic knick-knacks and step into a carpeted living room that ruins the picturesque little home image. My first instinct is the smallest degree of relief and I blurt out: “You think *this* is the same guy?”

“As I said, we think it’s related,” Jameson infuriatingly repeats, and toes a corner of white tarp near us whose color can barely be seen through the mess across it.

“Oh, I see, the same canvas. I guess white tarps aren’t all that common.”

“Did you say ‘*canvas*’?” Cussler asks.

“It’s white, but it’s not the same tarp,” Jameson responds, again ignoring his partner.

I start to look around at the disarray spread across the almost-identical covering. Despite what looks like absolute chaos, among what is identifiable as the pieces of what were once a man and a woman, there doesn’t appear to be any mess covering anything not protected by the tarp. It occurs to me that, if nothing bled through, the entire tarp could simply be picked up and no one would know what had happened here. But while I might have laughed inappropriately at that a day before, I instinctively restrain myself in the sight of all the blood. Reflexively, I look down at my own hands and have to blink my eyes a few times to be sure that I wasn’t seeing blood covering them. The inexplicable guilt is so strong that I restrain myself from actually holding up my hands before my face to examine them.

Walking back and forth at the edge of the carpet I try to focus on the scene in front of me and try to tease a meaning out of it. So much disorder can’t be the same person, but there is something about it that seems so familiar. Without my usual rush of chemically-induced interest, combined with a crippling sense of impending peril, I’m having a lot of trouble paying attention to what is in front of me. I can only think of what I should say that makes it look as least like me as possible.

After staring intently for long enough that my vision focuses beyond the surface of the parts, I suddenly see the pattern in it.

“I see!” I exclaim.

“What do you see, Mr. Deville?”

“He originally laid them both out next to each other,” I explain, moving my hands in front of me to describe the placements, “with each part in descending order of occult interest, carefully arranging them in a flow chart of higher to lower energy. Then he picked pieces at random and rearranged them to mask the order, to veil the meaning from casual, intellectual analysis. It’s so clear!”

It is absolutely not clear. How could I know this? Can I really blame my gnosis from the night before for this revelation? Is it really possible that I woke up in the middle of the night and drove down to a strange town and did all this with such careful precision? No, it absolutely isn’t possible; I could never have done this, even if the timing fit.

I look up to see that the two detectives are staring at me. Cussler is scowling deeper than before and Jameson is giving me his same eye-squinting look of suspicion.

“Well, it’s clear to me,” I say, opening my hands out in front of me. “It’s definitely the same guy, too,” I add, which must put me in the clear since I know I have some sort of alibi for two nights ago.

Don’t I?

“So, what’s the meaning of this one?” Jameson asks, to which I am very relieved to answer.

“Well, similar to the last. It’s an energetic anatomical model, an objective path toward enlightenment.”

“But you said he obscured it by moving the pieces. The last one didn’t look obscured.”

“No, it wasn’t,” I say, stuttering a bit. “But maybe you have to see the last to understand this one,” I offer, hoping they’ll bite.

“But we’re the only ones who saw it. It wasn’t in a public place.”

“I don’t know! I’m just here for meaning, not motive,” I say, which I know is going to piss them off, but at the moment I’m just hoping they’ll throw me out in disgust and I can get far away from the scene at our feet.

“Fair enough. Is there anything else you can tell us about it?”

“Umm...” I start, turning around and pretending to look over the artwork once more, trying not to take it all in, lest I see something *too* familiar about it. Despite myself, some of the revelations from the night before start to slide their way back into my conscious awareness, not visions as before but more like memories, and I start to know too much, but before I let them get too far I quickly say: “I don’t believe so, no.”

“Alright, thank you for your help, once again. We’ll call again if we need you.”

“Yeah, don’t go too far,” Cussler blurts out. His partner turns to look at him, without speaking, and Cussler adds, “just in case we need more help.”

“Thank you,” I say, my smile stretched and weak at the same time.

Without hesitation I glide back away and leave the two detectives watching me as the rest of the forensic team close in to begin to take apart and catalogue the gigantic mess in this cozy little home. They know to leave the crime scene completely intact when it comes to art crime, so the Meaning Consultant can see it *in situ*. I try not to think how pissed off and suspicious they must have been having to wait for me to pick up my phone and then drive down.

As I exit the house and pass through the ranks of uniformed men, who all seem to be staring at me, I feel as if a giant mouth is closing in on me. I keep expecting to feel a sense of release once I’m past the tape, but no such luck, it only gets worse. My head down, I walk as professionally as I can to my car that is parked unreasonably far away.

I drive back home wrapped in a shrinking blanket of terror and apprehension. I now know what I am heading toward, but for the life of me I can’t understand why I am not turning tail. That said, I’m quite certain that every car that turns in behind me is a cop, tailing me to see if I’m going to my serial killer hideout, or whatever it is they do when they leave the scene of the crime. I know they are suspicious of me - hell, *I’m* suspicious of me - but I feel like they’re following me. And I think to myself: “You should know if they are following you, right? You should know everything.”

But I don’t and do at the same time. Still, I’m being driven through the same claustrophobic, pathetic little towns and back roads,

by some sick imp of the perverse that cares not for all my plans that I foolishly shared with it.

It seems like it takes forever to get back to my apartment, but when I look at the dashboard clock it is exactly the time I expected it to be. A car pulls into a spot across from mine and I hurry down the sloping, cement floor to the elevator before anyone can join me inside.

The same sense of awful *déjà vu* follows me up the elevator and down the barren hall to my front door. I gaze at the dull gray carpet and the bland tan door with a strange new interest, examining them closely as if they could somehow save me from my mind and my awful, new knowledge. Of course they can't and I'm eventually forced to open the door and expose my equally unhelpful, yet still oddly tidy apartment, alone.

I shuffle to the center of the floor and let my keys drop to the side table with a limp carefulness to the point where I feel the metal tug at my hand as gravity gently claims the keys and draws them to the glass surface. My stomach is so sick with fear that I think I'm going to throw up for the second day in a row, but there's nothing in there and I don't bother.

I find that my apartment is much smaller than I thought it was and my walk to the bathroom takes far too little time. I resist the urge to look at the fallen towels and what might be staining them. I grab what I need and snap out the piece I came for. By now, I know that the police are coming for me, but I can't figure out why they let me go to begin with. Perhaps they are hoping I'll lead them to something more damning, but I don't think I have. Unless it's the soaked towels on the

floor that I step over, or the dirty laundry I don't look toward, sitting in my bedroom hamper.

Did I do it? Did I do both pieces? Does it matter? My body is screaming at me to flee, to flee somewhere, anywhere, and never stop until my energy completely gives out. I know my life is over, I know my business will fail, and all my work has been for nothing. I had always wanted to know everything so badly, but I had no idea what that meant.

Then something breaks inside of me. I hear it, like the muffled snap of a joint.

The fear is completely gone. I suddenly realize why this is so inevitable; and not just inevitable, but beautiful in its order.

The Three returned to the Two returns to the One. The active affirms, the passive denies, but the third, reconciles, and is needed to create. Without my display of art, nothing happens.

I remove an extra sheet from the closet and lay the canvas down in the middle of my living room. As I bend down to smooth out the wrinkles, the knocking starts at the door. I realize they've caught up with me, but I don't hurry because I know exactly how much time I have, and soon I'll be free.

I lie down on the sheet and arrange myself before drawing my designs with the blade. The pounding on the door reaches a frantic pace as my consciousness narrows. My last thought is the realization:

I have no control, but that's how it's all arranged.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Kreitner is a full-time data analyst and part-time editor for the *Lovecraft eZine*, an online publication dedicated to the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Alongside Lovecraft, he has been a fan of David Bowie for many years and has taken inspiration from both for his writing. His work has appeared in various contests and websites online, as well as in the *King in Yellow* anthology by Atlantean Publishing. He also writes articles on various esoteric subjects, including keeping a blog on the subject at: <https://thequestwithinblog.wordpress.com/>. He is originally a native of Seattle, but now lives with his wife and two children in the New England one-time whaling town of New Bedford.

ON THE DAY DAVID DIED

JOHN KANIECKI

MAJOR Tom got promoted

Soaring, searching, stars

A wander lust

To which he was devoted

And Ziggy Stardust

Is jamming in a garage

Larger than life

Larger than large

Diamond dogs growl

As heroes howl

So rest your eyes rebel, rebel

I love you too much to tell

A sparkling tear I cried

On the day David died

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Kaniecki is a poet and writer residing in Montclair, New Jersey with his lovely wife of over eleven years Sylvia. Both are very active in the Church of Christ at Chancellor Avenue in Newark, NJ.

John of course is a David Bowie fan. Back in the day of tape cassettes John would run with a tape. One of the songs featured was Bowie's "Heroes".

John is a firm believer of the power of art to change the world for the better. John's poetry has appeared in over sixty outlets and his prose in over a dozen. John aspires to be a professional writer.

John's poem Tea With Joe Hill was the 2012 winner of the Joe Hill Labor Poetry. It is the poem that will never die.

John has two poetry books out and an anthology of science fiction stories.

Murmurings of a Mad Man published by eLectio Publishing

<http://johnkanecki.weebly.com/murmurings-of-a-mad-man.html>

Poet to the Poor, Poems of Hope for the Bottom One Percent published by Dreaming Big Productions.

<http://johnkanecki.weebly.com/poet-to-the-poor.html>

Words of the Future published by Witty Bard Publishing

<http://johnkanecki.weebly.com/words-of-the-future.html>

BOWIE

RICH YOUNG

THE star hung from its string in the center of the room. The baby was sleeping underneath. Bathed in soft yellow tones from the hazy afternoon sun flowing through the window, the room looked like an old sepia photograph. It was late August, warm still, and the window was cracked open. A slow breeze moved the curtains. When I looked towards the movement, I could just see between the two panels of billowing fabric to make out the shape of a man's face standing outside the window. I jumped, startled, as there was no one besides us for miles. I hadn't heard a car, and the house was much too far out of the way for an accidental visitor.

I walked three steps or so to the curtains and peered through. There was a man standing in the grass beside the house. His presence was surprising, but I was instantly at peace with it. He was tall, handsome, and wore an expensive looking tweed suit complete with a vest and pocket watch chain. His hat was situated just so on his head to show a full head of hair underneath. I would put him in his thirties – maybe closer to thirty-five. His eyes met mine through the small space between the curtains. I knew him. I was overcome with emotion, tears wetting my eyes and cheeks. I hadn't seen this man since I was a child myself. I had all but forgotten him in my busy years of adulthood. Though, he had visited my dreams throughout those years.

"David," I said aloud. David smiled a crooked smile. He

looked no different that he had when I was a child.

"Hello, my love," he answered. I opened the curtains and told him I would be outside straight away.

We talked there in the tall grass outside the window then moved inside when the wind picked up. Daisy awoke and met David. They were fast friends. She was usually hesitant around strangers but sat on his lap after having only just met. He was remarkably the same after so many years. When I asked how he had not aged, he politely shook his head and changed the subject. When he casually inquired about Daisy's father, I had to tell the tale that none had believed before and that had labeled me as the crazy lady in town. There was no father. I hadn't been with anyone, yet here Daisy lives. Not only did she come from such odd circumstances, but she was incredibly intelligent and perceptive. David did not seem surprised at any part of the story.

When I saw them together that day, I couldn't believe how much Daisy favored him. They shared the same facial features and blond hair. She could have been his daughter. I invited him to stay for dinner but he could not. He was on important business and wanted only to say hello to an old friend. He promised to stop by again if he was in town. Before he started walking towards the road that led to town, he handed me a wooden box with worn edges. His request was to wait until he was gone before opening the box. He left as swiftly as he must have come. A few months later, I was pregnant again and, a few months after that, George was born. He looked just like his father whom I now knew was David even though we never made love. I

knew he was Daisy's father as well. I don't know how, but I know it to be true.

I did not see David again for many years. The children grew, moved away, and had children of their own. They were smart and happy, and I could not have been more proud of them and their happiness and their accomplishments in life. The long day of my life was soon reaching its sunset. I went into my bedroom and pulled the wooden box that had been given to me so many years ago. I had examined its contents shortly after David left that day in summer. Inside was a small green and blue globe covered with countries and oceans with names that I had never heard. The accompanying letter called the planet Earth, and described the events that led to David living there. He was from somewhere much further out in the stars but enjoyed the people and culture of the planet Earth. The letter also gave details on where to find him and how to contact him when I was ready to leave this life.

I followed his instructions, walking this way and that, calling out words that meant nothing to me but felt powerful on my lips. I held the small globe in my weathered hands and felt warmth from deep inside. The heat turned to light and the globe was vibrant and alive. I closed my eyes as the blinding light grew and grew, encompassing and swallowing me. I was now only soul, leaving body behind. I was raised up over my world and flew away from it into the sky. Soaring faster through space, I passed planets and suns and whole galaxies.

Suddenly, I was no longer alone. David was there with me.

Our souls became one, and we live on in this way forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rich Young is a guitar-playing, genius-wrangling, cat-wrassling, trouble-making author from Michigan. He is business analyst by day and rockstar and inkslinger by night. He has one novel completed and almost ready to publish, and a collection of Tales of the Scraping short horror stories that have been published in various online and print formats.

THE ENEMY
CHARLES BAUDELAIRE
TRANSLATED BY REBECCA BATES

MY youth was nothing more than a dark and vicious storm
Shot through from time to time by a sullen burst of sun
I planted fruits and flowers, but wind and rain soon turned
My fertile lands to ruin before spring had scarce begun.

Now that winter comes upon me, I must gather all I own.
I work my ravaged lands in a final fight to save
The few and stunted flowers that with such hope were sown
This saturated earth, where floods carve holes like open graves.

Yes, I dream of flowers that will one day come bursting forth,
But in my sodden garden that the storms have torn apart
How could a seed find sustenance within this withered earth?

This is our true sorrow: Time takes all that is alive,
A ceaseless, silent enemy who gnaws away our hearts
Ticks steadily each soul to dust, and on our lifeblood thrives!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca is a linguist, poet, chemist, and forensic scientist, with a dash of diva thrown in. She has worked for over 20 years in the field of Ontology, which is so boring it's not worth looking up. For fun, she enjoys reading (natch), running, karaoke, science museums, and the Vampire Diaries.

Rebecca has been fascinated with foreign language and translation since a very young age. In high school, she vowed to translate "Les Fleurs du Mal" in its entirety, and has been meaning to get around to it someday ever since. She was also obsessed with David Bowie throughout her childhood and adolescence. She chose to translate Charles Baudelaire's "L'ennemi" as a tribute for David Bowie, as it expresses anger over the futility of life and the certainty of death, which is exactly how his passing made her feel.

Although Rebecca lives in Denver, Colorado, she does not hike, camp, snowboard or ski. She lives downtown with her two cats, Newton and Thor, and is secretly contemplating acquiring 10 more. She is happily single and will remain so until she meets a man that she likes as much as she likes her cats.

L'ENNEMI

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

Ma jeunesse ne fut qu'un ténébreux orage,
Traversé çà et là par de brillants soleils;
Le tonnerre et la pluie ont fait un tel ravage,
Qu'il reste en mon jardin bien peu de fruits vermeils.

Voilà que j'ai touché l'automne des idées,
Et qu'il faut employer la pelle et les râteaux
Pour rassembler à neuf les terres inondées,
Où l'eau creuse des trous grands comme des tombeaux.

Et qui sait si les fleurs nouvelles que je rêve
Trouveront dans ce sol lavé comme une grève
Le mystique aliment qui ferait leur vigueur?

— Ô douleur! ô douleur! Le Temps mange la vie,
Et l'obscur Ennemi qui nous ronge le coeur
Du sang que nous perdons croît et se fortifie!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Pierre Baudelaire (April 9, 1821 – August 31, 1867) was a French poet who also produced notable work as an essayist, art critic, and pioneering translator of Edgar Allan Poe.

His most famous work, *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), expresses the changing nature of beauty in modern, industrializing Paris during the 19th century. Baudelaire's highly original style of prose-poetry influenced a whole generation of poets including Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé among many others. He is credited with coining the term "modernity" (*modernité*) to designate the fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis, and the responsibility art has to capture that experience.

HOUSE OF SECRETS

KATY LORMAN

WE were in Indiana now, the third state this day, and we had to get to a fourth one before sundown. We were all exhausted, but this was a mandatory Gathering of the Faithful. The great archangel Saint Jibril had just arrived! He was dreamy, with curly copper hair, strong tall form, a sublimely beautiful face. His rich swoony voice and the way it stopped everyone and made them listen...even on the radio, as he was now...

Except for one certain teenage boy who thought he was Jibril's equal. His voice put my nerves on end. "Shut Up! Do you really need to talk 24/7?" I yelled right in his ear, interrupting him in mid-blather.

"Girl, for the last time – stop questioning your brother!"

Mother slapped me.

Really? The whipped dog had a bark? I slapped her back.

"No! Faridoon's dumb as a dog; everything he says is questionable. The only reason you love him is because he's got a dick. Fundies like him are an insult to Allah."

Faridoon punched my face.

"Damn you, goat-sucker!" I screamed as I clawed his face so hard, he'd have scars.

"That's it!" Father roared. "I have had enough of your mouthy ways and attitude. Your sisters are proper young women, but you? You...you're not my child. Yes, you are now a stranger."

What? I moved to talk back, but he was pulling into a parking lot before an abandoned amusement park. As I tried to burrow inwards, he opened my door, grabbed me, and flung me against the snow-covered fence. He spit on my face. I slipped on black ice and fell hard. My sisters, brother and mother laughed.

“You can’t!” I cried. “I...the Gathering...archangel Jibril protects all Muslims; He said so...”

“You’re no Muslim; you never submit.” He kicked my side twice, went back to the car and drove away.

I was abandoned.

Snow began speed – falling hard. I dared not cry. My tears would freeze. Just like my heart.

* * * * *

It was twilight. I hadn’t moved. The thin coat was just enough cover, and if I huddled close to myself, my ribs didn’t hurt anymore. Used to hunger, my belly was silent. Still, snowy silence was nurturing.

A feeling as if the world blossomed, revealing an unknown center. “Poor little Water Lily,” a voice like frozen vanilla pudding drifted downwards, fluttering like a hummingbird.

I looked up in surprise.

A blond man stood above me, surrounded by smiling children. He was so beautiful, wearing purple clothes – skin-tight striped pants, a tight vest and frilly shirt, and his beautiful golden hair was long with

the top cut jaggedly short. Leaning over, he wiped my face clean. “Come Home, baby peri. Forget that heartless man. I am your Father, now.”

I felt such love from him. I couldn't resist holding out my arms.

Lifting me with strong arms, he carried me through the park, past race tracks with mini race-cars, roller coasters, a fenced-in area full of trampolines over pits. Up a hill to a spooky old house with towers, lots of windows and an onion dome. Inside. Impressions of tall staircases, wide doorways, pale walls, white plush furniture, and a huge white fireplace. Before me was placed creamy soup, hot chocolate, and a teddy bear to snuggle. I ate, drank, snuggled and listened to the children telling happy little stories. The man, who insisted I call him Jareth, sang a song about stars being out tonight as he rocked me in his arms. Somehow, my ribs were healed, and I had no idea how. I wanted to ask, but sleep was upon me.

* * * * *

Jareth wore tight pants, but they were flat, nothing menacing like the men in Iran whose tight pants held bulging danger. He smiled at me, but his smile was sincere, not predatory. “I am as safe as an angel,” he said soothingly. “You will not be sold. You will not be bred ‘til you die. I love you, my Water Lily.” I went into his arms, and he wrapped me in blankets of soft green and lilac. And we danced

amongst beautiful people wearing elaborate costumes, in a white and glass ballroom. A dark-haired woman in white spun by, weeping, but Jareth wouldn't even look at her.

* * * * *

A flash of light. My eyes flew open, and I gasped in wonder. I was covered in color: race-car red, indigo, flamingo pink, orange lollipop orange, the emerald green of Saint Jibril's aura... Looking up, I saw stained glass windows, a tiled fireplace decorated with fantastic creatures, old dark wood floor, rocking horses, dollhouses, and glass-door-enclosed shelves full of bells, china dolls, jewelry, gemstones, wind instruments and small gold-framed pictures. My bed was satin and lace, with twisty pillars and lots of pillows. It was the bedroom of my dreams.

The children raced in as if they sensed me waking, screaming with joy. "She stayed, she stayed!" said a tiny red-haired girl with bright green eyes, jumping up and down on the shoulders of a big simple teenage dude. A small knot of white-blond boys pounded on their bared bellies, howling. Another boy, with green hair, showed me a blade, sliced the air and grinned ferally. I grinned back at him, and showed my nails. Instant respect. A golden-haired girl, who had a trail of littler sisters waiting shyly behind her, took my hand and led me downstairs.

After an enormous breakfast in a pretty blue-violet room, with food I didn't recognize, they showed me around the house. I fell in

love with this haven of intriguing rooms. There was a glossy marble kitchen where a strange chained shaggy dog slept in a cupboard, a steamy conservatory full of alien plants, a purple two-story music room, glass cases full of ancient instruments, and much more. School was held in an attic full of old Civil War clothes, locked trunks, cupboards stuffed with even older dresses, gilded birdcages, covered furniture, a roll-top desk, a Chinese apothecary chest, giant wigs with sailboats or birds or fairies on them, swords, maces, halberds, books, records, rolled-up carpets...

Everything was allowed to me. There were no taboos. I could take anything I wanted, if I could carry it. I could dance on tables, chairs, fireplaces and the stairs. I could question everything. If I wanted to slide down the banister, I could. If I swore, using all the horrible words that used to get me a mouthful of soap, they would laugh and teach me their swear words. I could have cake for breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner, because Chef always had pastries poised around the house under glass domes. When I asked for macaroni and cheese pizza, Chef grinned widely and happily obliged.

There was only one rule in the house: go to bed at ten, don't wake until sunrise. But what was one rule compared to the thousands that the Muslim clerics, elders, ex-parents and even ex-brother pushed?

* * * * *

When I slept, I dreamed of Jareth again. His hair was cut in a bowl shape, and he was lying on his back, in a white ship, flying into space. He looked so alone. Was he being exiled? I reached out to him, and he sang softly as he gathered me close. "Water Lily, I am your Ziggy." He rubbed my back. His eyebrows were arched, with points, and his eyes...so like outer space. "I am your Starman and you are my Water Princess. I am the Sexless Wonder, and you are the Wonderful Artist."

"Forever?" I asked.

"Forever," he vowed.

* * * * *

Golden-haired May Eve became my best friend, and her silent sisters tailed us like miniature blond comets. I loved them all. When we weren't exploring, eating 3 – minute cabbage with melty butter (May Eve's favorite dish) and cakes, at school or reading, we were dancing. May Eve's room was a pink dancing studio with mirrors on every wall and a bed tucked behind a screen. We played loud techno for hours, dancing ourselves to exhaustion. Sometimes she danced so fast that her hair looked like a lion's mane. Seriously. Another time, her nails looked like claws. Her reflection was always...odd. But who cared? Next to her I was a little dark girl with frazzled black hair barely controlled by braids, a hawk's hooked beak of a nose, and yellow eyes.

We were both lanky, all legs and arms, and neither of us had grown breasts or bled yet, even though we were 19.

Digby O'Doyle, the green-haired punk, was my best guy friend. Where May Eve danced, he created mischief; where she stayed in, he always wanted to escape the house. He made all sorts of plans, but was always foiled. He was, it turned out, under House Arrest because he'd pranked his family in a Very Important Court Event. Huh – he was royalty? Didn't look it.

Jareth was the best teacher, ever. He knew about everything, and made it all easy to understand: math, history, music, literature, social studies. I learned things in days, not months, so he moved me up the grades really fast. He also taught us Celtic martial arts, mythology and magic. I loved hearing about the fae of the five waves, and declared the noble goblin warriors to be my favorites. Oh, and Puck, the mystery trickster figure, the only one of the Partholonians left alive. He had an Heiress at long last, Jareth told us, a girl named Maeve. The angels wanted her, he said, but when it was summer, we would go into Green Onion City (what norms called Chicago) to rescue her.

Oh, yes, and everyone wanted me to draw. I'd borrowed a blank book and drawn May Eve dancing one icy day, and when she told everyone, they demanded to see...then posed for me. I soon had a book full of drawings of May Eve, the silent sisters, lion-maned girls with big teeth and sting-tails, Jareth in space, Jareth in costume, Digby doing pranks, Digby looking bored at a huge royal event in an underground palace, the house's many rooms, all sorts of pretty things,

herbs, flowers, Puck, Jibril of course, other angels, the fae and dancs. Lots of dancs. I carried it with me always.

* * * * *

As winter passed, so did my unhappiness, fear and nervousness. I felt like a child again, but smarter, wiser. I was learning so much. I was having so much fun. I had friends, now, people who liked me, and a parent who encouraged my every dream. My dreams were all about May Eve, Celtic fae, working magic and seeing the artworks of my future. I was apparently going to draw, paint and do pastel works of giant flowers in stylized ways, in brilliant colors. They were so intoxicating.

So was life. I discovered more rooms in the house, and began wondering if it was growing. But houses didn't grow. But I once thought angels were spirits, and magic was imaginary. Who knew what was real, what was possible, what might happen?

But the one constant in my life, the one thing that never changed, was my new father's love.

Jareth was always there for me, with books, presents, art supplies and pretty dresses. Whenever he saw me, he smiled. He started singing every day, and it made the plants in the conservatory dance. What a wonder! He was the best father, so I drew him pictures, dressed up for him, jollied him when he looked sad, pulled friendly pranks when he brooded. When he looked at images of a

brown-haired girl in a poufy white dress, I rubbed his shoulders and said he'd find the perfect woman. If he said he was too old for women, I would kiss him on the cheek and remind him that I loved him.

* * * * *

March finally got past the muddy stage, and the first blooms emerged shyly. And with them came – pixies! Teeny tiny little men and women with long dragonfly iridescent wings. I couldn't believe it. But I could. May Eve pointed them out through windows, and we laughed when they caught us and, glaring, threw tiny things at us. Could they not realize we were safe from anything they threw?

I still looked forward to going to Green Onion City to meet my favorite angel, to save the girl. When I was 21, I could go back to the City to learn art, and when I was famous, I would travel the world with May Eve and Digby. Maybe we could all three get married, find a palace in Ireland, and move in. Go Underground, now that it was attached to Earth again.

* * * * *

Was he the old man, or the young curly-haired woman? Who was the older blond woman with him, or the young blond woman in drag? Why were the old ones scared of the young ones? And why, when I

came into the room, did all four of them come to me with hands reaching for me? I didn't want to dance the way they wanted to dance, with clothes falling off and kisses burning black brands onto shoulders. The one woman had blades for fingernails!

But when I tried to flee, snakes wrapped around me, and I couldn't run to the glowing emerald knight waiting for me outside. "You promised me," the Jareths whispered, "and a promise to fae lasts forever."

"What if I was promised to another?" I asked.

Vines wrapped around me, and I was pulled deep underground. One Jareth stood there, bare-chested, velvet blue pants hugging his masculinity too tightly, with a whip of vines in one hand. "You will honor your promise. There is no other man for you."

And he whipped me.

But the whip tickled, teased, and soon I was laughing...and yearning...and blushing. I felt something awaken in me, and tried to fight it. I wasn't ready! I was a baby! But then his arms were around me, and I was melting, thawing after a long winter of the soul, and I...I liked it.

* * * * *

Spring was fully upon us! Birds singing, flowers growing, leaves unfurling from tight buds on the trees. I started getting out of the house to soak in the sunshine and fresh air, and found the children chasing me around. We found a hedge maze, a garage with

apartments on top, a fountain, and a hill with grape vines everywhere. Bees sleepily hummed around us, but decided we were friendly and left.

“Children, it's time!” Jareth said, and the others shouted. “We're opening the park!” he told me, and I was as excited as they were.

We ran around looking at all the rides – two big roller coasters, the mini race-track, a set of big slides one rode down on a carpet, the bumper car ride, a small square with take your chances games, the trampolines, the 3 – room building with a room full of old video games, a billiards room and a cafe with jukeboxes and a lunch counter, the mini golf course – and were happy to see a new building set up. An old-timey roller rink where you used skates with four wheels! Now I could see what aunt Gelsomina meant that skating was the only time she'd been alive...before the fundies took over our country and ruined it for women.

As I watched, Jareth's hand on my shoulder, the children ran around fixing things so fast, I only saw blurs. A tail here, long ears there, four arms elsewhere...was I hallucinating from pixie dust? Because I'd just been bombed by a shrilly laughing trio with no clothes on.

“All is well,” Jareth said, staring hard after the pixies. They picked up speed and fled down the street, heading for a house not ours. Guess they were never coming back.

Moments later, all the fixes were done. Everything gleamed, shined and sparkled, the colors fresh and bright again. A new sign sat

before the lot-encircling tall metal fence. “Dizzy Raindrops Amusement Park.” We all trooped into the cafe, and found Chef frying burgers. Popcorn popped in a red and white machine, cotton candy spun pink and blue in another, cheese sauce was melting, hot dogs were spinning, and pretzels were rising. There was an ice cream bar with seventeen flavors, a slushy machine with ten, and a pop machine with real glass bottles of familiar and strange sodas. We ate and ate and ate, then tested out the equipment.

“Everything works. Everything is fine,” Jareth said, hugging me close. “We’ll have a fine life, now.”

* * * * *

The amusement park opened the next day, just as Digby was given limited time out. He was mad-happy, and immediately dragged me out of the house and to the yard of trampolines. As children raced around us, we ran and grabbed a trampoline to begin jumping. He was in a crazy mood, though, and the more we bounced, the worse he got. He started nipping at my neck. He landed on top of me, hard. He sniffed loudly, screamed, “I smell the salty sea of tarnished youth!” and tried to cram his nose...oh!

Jareth was instantly there. He pulled him off of me, face full of rage, and carried him back to the house. The front door slammed, I heard a terrifying scream, then...nothing.

As May Eve hugged me, I shivered. “Why did Digby do that? He was so nice!”

“You're becoming a woman, darling. He has no self-control. Then again, he is only a grem...” She smiled mysteriously. “A young punk. Come, let us prepare you.”

We went to her room, and she opened a door to reveal a bathroom. She showed me certain cloths to catch the moon's blood, then had me sit on the toilet with my panties down. There were three red drops, like a nightmare snowman, in the hammock-shaped middle.

“But I'm a child,” I protested, even though I technically wasn't. “I don't want this. I'm not ready.”

“I will protect you,” she soothed. A wave of her hand had the blood raise from the cloth and vanish. She showed me how to use the menstrual cloth, then left so I could use the restroom. When I came out, she hugged me, had me lie down on her bed, and gave me a dish of Turkish delight. As the gummy rich tastes of rose, cinnamon, mint, apricot, chocolate and plum teased me, she massaged my back and hips and buttocks. The tension flew away, and I purred like a cat.

She turned me over to rub my belly, my chest and thighs, and I found two peaks rising on my chest. When touched, another peak, between my legs, also stirred.

“Yes?” she asked.

Sleepy, happy and curious, I said yes.

* * * * *

I didn't see Digby again. For a while, I didn't see the children, either: it was just May Eve and me, playing with the visiting children in the park by day, playing with each other at night. She had all sorts of drawings of naked men, as well as photographs, and we giggled together over them. Some of them were of a famous actor and musician who used to sing about aliens, Mars, stars, dancing, goblins and love. He looked just like Jareth, except sadder sometimes, or wicked. I loved his music. And the pictures. They made me blush and think of inappropriate things.

Before I went to bed, I prayed to the archangel Jibril, but it felt like my prayers stopped at the front door and withered. Maybe I was no longer good enough for him.

The idea hurt my heart.

* * * * *

“Confess,” the archangel Jibril whispered, circling me. We were in the new chapel under the second onion dome, colored by windows. He looked like one of those Catholic clerics dressed in red – a cardinal – and the boys in the choir stand all looked like priests. The girls and I were dressed like prostitutes in corsets and tiny panties, and May Eve like a Seer in her long gown and veil with black roses. I felt so naked. I wanted to hide behind her. But I also wanted Jibril.

Jareth, dressed in tan and gold like a hermit, snarled.

“Confess what? She was given to me.”

“Confess your sin,” he whispered again, and suddenly he had a whip ready.

“He has nothing to confess,” May Eve stated. “You weren't there for her when she was thrown away. He was. It's all over for you.” She hissed at him. He snarled and flicked his whip at her face. She whipped a tail forth, tearing the dress. A scorpion's tail, with a huge stinger dripping green poison.

Jibril crouched, running his whip over his palm. “This will be easy, Manticore Bitch,” he rasped, flaring out enormous wings.

“Yes, it will, alien bird,” May Eve purred, revealing three rows of teeth.

“But I love you both,” I whimpered.

They all vanished; only Jareth was left behind. He grabbed me close to him, and snarled, “The angel cannot find you, and I will not let the manticore touch you again if you bond with her.”

“Why?” I wondered. “I thought you were my new father.”

“Don't question Me wench! I own your soul!” he roared, and horns rose from his temples. His skin was leathery, now, and deep green. His eyes were huge, hypnotic, violet-purple with cat pupils. “May Eve touched you only to prepare you for me.”

“No! I never wanted this. You know I see you as father.”

Picking me up, he mashed his mouth to mine. Small tusks ground at my lower lip, and his snorts made me terrified. I struggled free, and ran...

** * * * **

...and woke up, sweating hard. I clasped my arms around my legs. The only problem with being allowed to question everything is...you learn to question *everything*. Especially when things were going as wrong as they were going now. Why was Jareth so possessive of me? Why did I keep dreaming of him, anyhow? What happened to Digby? Who was blocking my prayers to Jibril? Why? Why did I feel like I should be with him?

Why did I have to keep to my room all night?

That one had me freeze. I felt like I was in real trouble, now.

But nothing happened. And when you're like me, you have to find answers to those questions. So...I lay awake, watching, listening.

* * * * *

Midnight. Slowly, the silence was broken by tiny voices, giggles and “shhh!” Someone sneezed, and got hit. “Ow!” was followed by, “Shut up, you'll wake her, you dunce!” and, “Uhhh, sorry,” in a really dumb-sounding voice. I heard a shriek most un – childlike and certainly inhuman. “Seriously, dude!” someone else hissed. “No need to show off.” Scuffling sounds. Another “ow!” followed by a flurry of them, and then a solid thunk. “Stop goofing around, boys, this is serious work we intend to do. We have to rescue Digby,” a voice rasped. Someone farted in ascending notes, and they all snickered furiously. I had to cover my mouth to hide my laughter. More giggles, more “shhh-es,” and doors began to open.

I stayed very still, so no one would know I was awake, and watched with equal parts curiosity and fear. Soon they began to pass by, and I had to repress a scream. What were they? Children, or monsters? Some of them were lanky, with big ears, fanged grins and weird clawed hands. The big teenage boy had to walk hunched over, for he had grown, and he dragged a club the size of a small tree behind him. Something with a boar's snout scuttled by on hard feet, breathing "Hreeeeee." It made my spine shudder. More and more figures passed by. Some had horns. Some had big tusks. One was too thin, with extra arms. I saw a lion with a scorpion's tail in the lead, followed by many miniature ones, and slipped under my covers. Was this a house of...of fae? Like a boarding school, maybe? Is that why there was the taboo? So I wouldn't get scared? The idea of my best friend being a...manticore...was intimidating. But I knew the Celtic stories, and I should trust my friends. If they were dangerous to me, why be so nice?

Grabbing my sketchbook and pencils, I drew the image of the children sneaking by.

* * * * *

12:21. Silence. I had to see what was going on. Maybe help.

Sneaking from my room, I crept downstairs. With the excuse that I needed a snack in mind, in case I got busted, I slithered into the butler's pantry and peeked into the kitchen. Long blue shadows stretched across the floor. Copper pans and pots swung lazily. A

deep voice was grumbling, and dust flew with spilled flour and coffee grounds and...

I snuck backwards and carefully eased the swinging door shut. Dogs do not have small furry bodies with limbs that long. Nor do they clean house. Or sing.

The conservatory was buzzing with pixies with tiny weapons; again I backed slowly away. They looked ready to stab anyone who interrupted their meeting. The tiny shouts and curses confirmed it.

The dining room had places set for fifty – more people than I'd seen here. Were there secret students? Like, ones who couldn't pass, or couldn't be up at day? What mysteries did this house of secrets hold? I looked at the serving bowls, and reeled back with my hands over my face. Bloody meat, tiny limbs and large sauce-and-blood-soaked ribs, a tangle of kidneys, an enormous red liver, and gray pulsing blobs that looked like brains. Ew! Not even the corn, pumpkin pie, cakes and cabbage made me feel better. In fact, the three-minute cabbage had me wondering if May Eve ate fairies, pixies...and humans. Was I her friend, or a future meal? Was she in the hunt? Was Jareth?

* * * * *

A hand on my back. I jumped, whirled. One of the blond boys was now impossibly tall, like head – bumping – the – ceiling tall. He glared at me, baring small tusks, and snarled, “You've ruined it for everyone, Norm! Thanks a lot. If Jareth knows that you know, it'll be

game over. So, here's the deal. I'll give you thirty minutes. You can do one of three things: try to escape, submit to us, or try to find Jareth. You find him and tell, we'll kill you for snacks. You submit, and we'll be...nice. Escape, and you can never come back. Or tell anyone. You tell, we torture you before we eat you alive.”

Somehow, the idea of him being nice seemed impossible. I fled for the door.

* * * * *

The house did not approve. Somehow I got turned around, and fled into the conservatory. Plants reached to hold me fast, and pixies strafed me with trailing purple clouds of dust. Sneezing, I staggered into the music room, where all the music instruments were dancing, playing themselves in a cacophony meant to freak me out. I went into the hall, and the stairs banister turned into a great milky snake zipping at me. I ran for the parlor, and somehow ended up in the attic school room, where the silent sisters clapped chalkboard erasers at me. It was scary, and I ran from attic to basement, then fell down another set of stairs. Past a library full of flapping books, past children who were goblins, past a room full of human bodies hung like sheep in a meat locker.

When I finally stopped falling, I was in a deep dark room full of the sound of dripping water. A hissing sound, and the horrible buzzing noise. “Hahhh-sss-sss-ssssss,” echoed across the room.

Suddenly a manticore was before me, tail raised, poison dripping. May Eve! Her expression terrified me as she loomed over me; her fangs were gnashing, dripping poison, and she was growling. I dropped my book, and scrambled up the stairs with hands and feet.

Wait, wait, I wasn't, I felt/heard in my mind, and that scared me more. She could talk into my mind?

Upstairs. Upstairs. Upstairs. How many basements were there? Upstairs still, now praying to Jibril. "Save me, please, Radiant Messenger! Please! I will give anything for You in thanks, my loving Lord," I wept, as the goblin-children were at my heels.

* * * * *

Timespace...shifted. My head and belly spinning, I went from basement to outside, from house to the gate out, into the arms of the mighty archangel Jibril.

"Thank Father I've found you," He said, lifting me with powerful arms. "I've been looking for you for half a year! Curses on that cur of a man who sired you, and the bitch of a mother! When I find him, he's getting a public whipping. She'll be given to someone who can tame her tongue, I assure you. Your sisters will have safe homes. As for the disgusting thing who called himself brother, he is already dead from a beating. He dared join My army, and his arrogance...when I heard of what he did to you as a child, My wrath knew no end. Know that you have been fully avenged, little one."

I clung to him, breath fast, heart hammering. “Why...why were You looking for me, great one? I'm only a child, one of millions. I'm not even pretty.”

How he laughed. “Not pretty? You're radiant, Water Lily! Hair like raven's wings, skin like caramel, eyes like golden topazes, and such a slender little form. I can't *begin* to resist. You're Mine, Water Lily, a gift from Father. You were *always* supposed to be Mine. Come Home, Water Lily. You'll only know My Love. That's all I'll ever ask of you.”

I looked back; Jareth was screaming, hands pulling at his face, and he looked like a stereotyped goblin from the so-called slander fairy tale books; big pointy ears, big pointy nose, sharp pointy fangs, green leathery skin and a scrawny body with finger and toe claws. “You promised!” he screamed.

“I promised to be your daughter!” I screamed back. “You broke your promise when you tried to be something else.”

His eyes grew wide, and he slumped to his hands and knees. The children stood by him, wailing and gnashing their fangs. No more fun. No more victim.

* * * * *

Then they turned, and jumped-ran towards the house. May Eve was running for us, my sketchbook in her hands. “Take me with you! They made me stay here to train me for a man I do not love. Please, Water Lily, please Gabriel of the Copper Horn...take me with you!”

I looked at Jibril; he smiled. “She's meant for Raphael, who you call Israfil. Come, girl!” he called, and spread his wings. Three beats, and the pixies were flung far away; three more, and the silent sisters couldn't cling to the ground; three more, and the goblins were lost, too.

May Eve jumped, and Jibril caught her. With both of us pressed close, and our arms all around each other, he launched into the air, rose, and flew. The park was soon too far below and away to see, and we were breathlessly riding in wind currents. Fast, fast, faster...

As I was about to pass out, I thought of Jibril's greedy expression, and wondered: “Question...if Jareth said he was as safe as an angel, does it mean that being chosen by one might be a dangerous thing?

But then I was out, and the choice was, once again, made for me. I could only dream, and this time, I knew the dream was reality.

* * * * *

Jareth stood weeping, watching the fae hunter vanish with his love and his ward. What was he going to do without his new little love? The fae women wouldn't have him anymore, because he pursued human women; Water Lily and the Sad – Eyed Girl with the long, flowing hair had not been the first. But most women lacked the sweet innocence they used to have; even the teenagers were jaded and dirty with experience. “Please, Puck,” he prayed, “Help me steal them

back from the angels. I vowed I would rescue your Heiress; if you help me, I will abandon my post and get her back within a month.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katy Lohman is a passionate fantasy/horror writer and artist whose favorite questions are “What if?” and “Why?” She loves writing about the fae, dangerous angels, ancient gods, demons and other subjects. Her writing can be controversial, as she challenges conventions, religious beliefs and writes from a queer/poly standpoint.

When not writing or drawing, she can be found researching various topics, reading, taking online classes, gaming and exploring Chicagoland. You can find her writing under the name Mabthorn on Fan Fiction (<https://www.fanfiction.net/>) and Literotica (<https://www.literotica.com/>). If you're curious, her art can be found on Deviant Art (<http://www.deviantart.com/>), under the name Shantikami...her art inspires her writing, and vice versa.

GOBLIN KING

VONNIE WINSLOW CRIST

SAIL home, beautiful hunter,
with your fringed feathers muffling sound –
the moon has set
and the birds of dawn have begun
their sweet aubade.

Settle in, mysterious denizen of night,
in an abandoned castle or hollow tree
for your diurnal sleep –
the sky has already swallowed the stars
and morning draws near.

Close your forward-seeing eyes,
magical fortune-teller,
and listen for daybreak's footsteps
with your flatten facial disks
and asymmetrical ears.

Dream away the bright hours,
legendary king.
Then, awoken with the evening breezes
and flood the air
with your haunting songs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vonnie Winslow Crist, MS Professional Writing, is a Pushcart Prize Nominee and SFWA member who also happens to be a fan of David Bowie. A clover-hand who has found so many four-leafed clovers she keeps them in jars, she would have stayed with *The Labyrinth's* Goblin King rather than return to this mundane world. An award-winning author and illustrator, Vonnie's poetry has been published in Italy, Finland, Canada, Australia, the UK and USA. She strives to celebrate the power of myth in her writing and art.

Also by Vonnie Winslow Crist: *The Enchanted Skeep* (Compton Crook Award Finalist), *Owl Light*, *The Greener Forest*, *River of Stars*, *Essential Fables*, *Leprechaun Cake & Other Tales*, and other books.

THE MEDITATION CENTER AT THE CORNER OF THE DARK DAO UNIVERSE

MARY MADIGAN

"I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it." -- Mark Twain

THE Director gathered herself into human form and used her freshly sculpted hand to enter the Meditation room. She wobbled as she walked. It was hard to stay balanced while encased in a temporary body with limited sensation. There was also the problem that vexed her to no end when she'd been alive. What to wear?

The butler, Chor, had hung two robes up for her. One was translucent, flowing with every color in the spectrum. The other was an early – twentieth century peignoir, silky blue. The translucent one signified the future and the past, their existence beyond. The blue was comforting, a reminder of the home they left behind, earth, sky and sea. Since this was a meeting of *Recovering Earthlings: The Formerly Famous*, a comfort color would be best. She chose the blue.

Chor entered the room and greeted her with a chirrup of his forewings. Chor had worn human and other mammalian skins before, but his happiest earth – life was as a bumblebee.

The Director hoped the new arrival wouldn't be put off by a six-foot tall bee in a bowler and spats. Since he was famous on earth for being somewhat of a 'space oddity,' she guessed he wouldn't be.

As he prepared the coffee, Chor neurally transmitted observations about the weather. The suns were darker than yesterday, the wind wouldn't quit and the lightning was wreaking havoc with his electroreceptors.

"Not good for bees or humans," the Director said. When she existed as a soul, a particle of consciousness, she was aware of every color in the spectrum, from shimmering radio waves to hot gamma. But in human form there were so few colors, it was like the world was coated in dust. When the weather was bad, it was even more depressing. Another problem with assuming human form: emotions tended to catch in her throat, fill her eyes with liquid.

But she would have to push those feelings aside. A therapist, like an actress, needs to play her part, no matter what she's really feeling. The show must go on. She lit a patchouli candle, sat in the lotus position, closed her eyes and focused her energies on sending a message to the members. The message was: "*Be on time for once. Living outside the boundaries of time and space is no excuse for letting the coffee go cold.*"

The newest member, Amy W, arrived first. Her eyeliner was perfect and her beehive was in place, despite the wind. Mark T and F. Scott followed, arguing as always. Amelia E and Leonardo D followed, talking about the routes they'd taken to get here.

They were late, but the Director didn't say anything, just let the smell of burnt coffee silently chastise them. Henry V arrived last. His skin was ruddy and he smelled of cigarettes, as if he'd been putting off his entrance until the last minute. He dropped his sword

onto the ground, resolutely straightened his back and, with the demeanor of a man serving a prison sentence, chose a yoga mat.

"Namaste," the Director greeted everyone with a gentle bow as they rolled out their mats. "We'll start with a sun salutation. Stand tall and breathe."

Chor took off his spats and joined them.

"Expand your belly – those without bellies, breathe in through your frontal abdomen, breath out through your lower."

She assumed the lotus position, tossed her precisely curled brown hair over her shoulder and said, "We are stardust. Everything is and always was created from the same data. Fame, blood and bone are transitory. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

"We're here to greet one of ours, a traveler returned. I'm sending his image via neural interface. Is everyone receiving?"

Da Vinci grinned, "His smile is a mystery. Reminds me of a certain someone I painted."

"Bowie. I guess he's gone back to black," Winehouse said as she slouched out of lotus position to lie on the floor. She pulled a cigarette from her shirt pocket, snapped her fingers and lit it with the resulting flame. "Still, he had a good run."

"That's the thing about our kind – we're not long lived," Earhart reflected, her gaze lost in memory.

"That's because we're born fearless," the Director replied with a nod to each of them. "Our lives tend to be short, but we have good stories to tell."

"Our lives are too short," F. Scott piped up. "If it wasn't for reincarnation, I think I'd go mad. Never to hear a genuine human voice again, never to touch real, human skin..."

"I've gone back many times," Leonardo stated reverently, pride in his tone. "In my first reincarnation, I was a balloonist in the South of France."

"What happened?" Amy asked.

"I trusted the weatherman to tell me where the wind blew. In the life that followed, I was an American lineman, bringing electricity to the rural south."

"And..."

"Wires got crossed. In the next life, I was a wingsuit flier..."

Amy sighed. She knew what was coming next.

"I think fame is a curse. My life as Da Vinci was stellar, but it was all downhill from there."

The Director resumed her chant: "Nothing is lost; everything is transformed."

"When the famous die, we're transformed from something into nothing," Henry V spat, as if the taste of the words disgusted him.

"Our eternal existence is spent trying to retrieve what we lost."

F. Scott considered for a moment, then spoke: "This Bowie fellow over – invested in glamour. No second acts in his life."

"He had a second, third and fourth. He contained multitudes," Twain observed calmly.

"That's not what I meant – I was trying to say he didn't have time to reflect... "

"I know what you meant," Twain snapped back, his face reddening. "You champagne – swilling whippersnapper."

"Fusty curmudgeon," F. Scott bit out the words, clenching his fists.

"He did reflect. In his songs," Amy cut in, breaking the tension between the two men. "Starmen, Spiders from Mars..."

"What you folks would call ordinary life," Twain said to Chor. Chor thoughtfully stroked his mandible.

"Why did he adopt so many personas?" Amelia asked, gazing at the others.

"I guess it helped him create," the Director said. "Like actors who can only express themselves in character. He couldn't write for David Jones, but he could write for Ziggy Stardust, The Thin White Duke..."

F. Scott said "His wife said that she loved the real David Jones. A love like that would be hard to lose."

The Director held out a hand that disappeared in a wisp of smoke "Let's not concentrate on what's lost. Be in the now. Clear your cells. Clear your mind."

Squinting with the effort, Twain tried, but he stayed solid. "Never was much good at this hooey," he turned to the Director. "You said he passed on? Lost his life on Earth?"

"Yes," her irritation slid through the incense. Leading this group was like herding quarks.

"Well, shouldn't he be here by now?"

"Hmm...yes. He should."

"He could be lost," Earhart stated, though not with concern.

"Why don't we meditate on that? Assume the pose and chant with me. Here I stand, foot in hand, talking to my wall."

All but Amy followed. She walked around the candle, her hips swaying to a song she hummed softly.

Henry fell to the floor as he tried to assume the pose.

"Winsome wench!" he shouted at Amy, his face a hot mix of anger, embarrassment and frustration. "Stop distracting me."

She ignored him. He picked up his sword.

Amelia stepped in front of him, arms crossed over her chest.

"Leave her alone."

"Stand aside, woman! Death and destruction are mother's milk to me!"

"I'm just as dead as you are, buddy," Amelia stated. "And I can be twice as mean."

The Director threw up her hands in frustration, angelic sleeves fluttering blue. Perhaps she should have worn the other dress.

Amy stopped in mid hum and said, "I know where he is! His songs...they weren't just songs. They were a method"

"A method?" F. Scott looked confused. "For what?"

"How to die without really dying. A way to be Bowie, watching over the ones he loves – forever." Amy leaned over the light. "Stands a solitary candle. At the center of it all...Though I'm past one hundred thousand miles...I'm feeling very still...And I think my spaceship knows which way to go."

The Director collated and analyzed the songs. "It's not mathematics. It's beyond that."

"Nothing goes beyond mathematics," Amelia stood resolute, arms still crossed.

"Imagination," Da Vinci whispered with awe and trepidation in equal balance.

"Laws of God and Man," Henry said.

"It could be done, but it's against the rules," the Director said.

"Some pretty big strings would have to be pulled."

Henry shrugged, "He *was* involved in negotiations with several different agencies. Supposedly over rights to one of his songs. When the clerics speak of one law, they're snaking their way around another." he leaned on his sword thoughtfully. "I used that to my advantage a few times."

"You think he's a...?"

"A satellite."

"Of sorts."

"They couldn't see him, but they could sense him," Leonardo whispered as he cast his eyes heavenward.

"Like a dream"

"But why?"

"Because he knows it's all worthwhile," Amelia sniffed, barely holding back tears.

"You go, Starman," Amy's tears flowed freely, mascara streaks on pale skin. "Blow their minds."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Madigan grew up in Northern New Jersey, where real-life residents inspired the TV series "The Sopranos" and "The Americans". This may be why she likes to write about currents of crime, politics and intrigue running through apparently ordinary lives. She's thrilled to participate in this anthology. David Bowie's music explored over-currents, metaphysically "out-there" ideas, yet in interviews he was surprisingly down-to-earth. He inspired a new generation of thinkers and doers.

Mary is currently working on "Murmuration", a book series about an American family before and after the Singularity. Her short story "Devil's Spit" is part of the Visions III: Inside the Kuiper Belt anthology. Other stories, "For Better or Worse" and "Welcome to the Jungle" can be found at Liberty Island Magazine. Her main site is marypmadigan.com.

NOT SO MAJOR TOM

JIM LANDWEHR

WANNABE astronauts

We build a rocket

To the solar summer sky

It is a “green” craft

Eco-friendly

Recycled from junk

In the alley

We squat

Assembling pyrotechnic joy

Orange juice can

Firecracker

Tuna can - add water

Fuse is lit

Runaway to countdown

3-2-1...

Kablam!

It lifts off

And takes us

From earth to heaven

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Landwehr enjoys writing creative non-fiction, fiction, and poetry. His poetry collection, *Written Life*, was released by eLectio Publishing in March of 2015. His first book, *Dirty Shirt: A Boundary Waters Memoir* was published by eLectio Publishing in 2014. He has non-fiction stories published in *Main Street Rag*, *Prairie Rose Publications*, *Boundary Waters Journal*, *Forge Journal*, *MidWest Outdoors Magazine* and others. His poetry has been featured in *Verse Wisconsin*, *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Echoes Poetry Journal*, *Wisconsin People and Ideas Magazine*, the *Wisconsin Poets Calendar*, *Off the Coast Poetry Journal*, and many others. He enjoys fishing, kayaking, biking and camping with his kids in the remote regions of Minnesota. Jim lives and works in Waukesha, Wisconsin with his wife Donna, and their two children Sarah and Ben. He works as a Geographic Information Systems Analyst for the Waukesha County Department of Parks and Land Use.

Also by Jim Landwehr:

Books:

Dirty Shirt: A Boundary Waters Memoir - June, 2014

Written Life: A Poetry Collection - March, 2015 (Sample)

Anthologies:

Creatures of Habitat - Closet Pyromaniac - March 2015

Memories from Maple Street, USA - The Best Christmas Ever - December, 2015

Memories from Maple Street, USA - Leaving Childhood Behind -
October, 2015

Forge Journal - Greased Lightning - July, 2012

Memoir/Nonfiction:

MidWest Outdoors Magazine - Slap Tales: The Allure of a Lure June,
2013

Zest Literary Journal - Just Add Water: Issue 4 - May, 2014

Neutrons Protons Magazine - Fat Cat: May, 2014

MidWest Outdoors Magazine - Brothers Through Thick and Fin:
August, 2013

MidWest Outdoors Magazine- Passing it On - May, 2013

MidWest Outdoors Magazine - One and Done - February, 2013

MidWest Outdoors Magazine - Muskie Bitten - December, 2012

Boundary Waters Journal - Senior Tripped - Winter, 2011

Poetry:

Handwritten Work - January, 2016

Fox Adoption Magazine - January, 2016

Five2One Magazine - October, 2015

Story64 - October, 2015

Little Eagle ReVerse - September, 2015

The Gambler Mag - April 2015 Issue

Torrid Literature Journal, Volume XIV (Chaos) - April, 2015 edition

Parody Poetry Journal - Vol. 3 Issue 2. October 31st, 2014

Tattooed Poets Project - April 13th, 2014

Your Daily Poem - Forthcoming, June 28th, 2015 and February 1,
2016

Little Eagle's RE/VERSE - March, 2014
The Gambler Mag - February 2014 Issue
Off the Coast Poetry Journal - Fall, 2013 issue
Verse Wisconsin October, 2013 Issue 112
Torrid Literature Journal Volume VII (Breakthrough) - July, 2013 edition
Torrid Literature Journal Volume VI (Erosion) - April, 2013 edition
Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets Calendar - 2013 edition
Echoes Anthology - 2002-2012, December 2012
Amperсанд Review - September 2012
Verse Wisconsin November, 2011 Issue 107
Heavy Bear Magazine - December, 2010 Issue No. 10
Wisconsin People and Ideas Magazine - Fall 2010, Vol. 56 No. 4
Echoes Poetry Journal - Spring/Summer 2010, Issue No. 10
Verse Wisconsin July, 2010 Issue 103

Flash Fiction:

101 Words - Tweety- December 28th, 2015
81 Words - Rewritten Book- November 13th, 2015
101 Words - ReCreation- October 9th, 2015
101 Words - Boxed- July 20th, 2015
101 Words - Deerly Beloved- July 17th, 2015
101 Words - BiKing- May 15th, 2015
101 Words - Running from It - April 24th, 2015
101 Words - Tracked - March 13th, 2015
101 Words - The Year of Intended Pursuit - November 20th, 2014

Free Zombie Flash Fiction Blog - Phantom Camp II: Validation - July, 2014 issue

Free Zombie Fiction Blog - Phantom Camp - March, 2014 issue

Recognitions/Awards/Misc.

Flash Fiction Sunday Edition, 101 Words - 12/13/2015.

Quiet Revolutionaries feature, 6/3/2015.

Lakefly Writers Contest Winner - 2nd Place, Flash Fiction - 5/8/2015

We Wanted To Be Writers, Poem in your Pocket - 4/2015

Woodland Pattern Poetry Month Blog - Woodland Pattern Book Center 4/15/2015

Best Lists of 2014 - Neutrons/Protons Magazine 1/5/2015

Just Read It - Wisconsin State Journal 12/21/2014

Books by Jim Landwehr's Bed - August, 2014

Torrid Literature Hall of Fame Inductee – 2014

MR. JONES AND THE BLUE BIRD

SONIA ROMIEU – ACONCHA

ONCE upon a time a little blue bird was born,
with eyes of blue, with eyes of brown,
fierce as an alligator, and smart as a cat
Giving his world on a wing only for a kiss
ready to sell the world for not die alone, for not die at all.

Little blue bird, sometimes you get so lonely!
And sometimes you just are so in love
like a little soldier catching butterflies,
search Mr. Jones, The Starman,
he is a wizard, an alien, a mama papa,
he will teach you how to wear disguises,
how to escape to death,
and how to clip your wings in the heat of the morning,
- There is a price? – asked the little blue bird.
- You can lose your real self among thousand disguises,
- And then, what I have to do? replied Little Blue Bird
- Find The Black Star.

Moon and suns come and go
Blue Bird became a disguise master,
sometimes an astronaut, sometimes a Duke
a “beep – beep” was enough to conquer the world

just by throwing darts in lovers' eyes,
One day he saw the most beautiful creature in the world,
it was the Black Star!!!

He offers her a magical moment, eyes of blue and brown,
and a bird who wanted to rule the word,
but Black Star said – sh – sh – shhh, I only want Mr. Jones. -
Blue Bird was astonished,
that disguise was forbidden, forgotten,
he took away every feather, every pain, every sorrow,
he uncovered the ultimate suit, the one of Mr. Jones;
Blue Bird was smiling and waving and looking so fine,
that Black Star kissed him as they thought nothing could fall.
He looked in the mirror, and he realized he was the mama papa all the
time!
A wizard that collected, ideas, disguises, stories, 'til finding the right
star for him.

It's been a while now that I haven't seen this little blue bird,
I guess he is in heaven and he understood he cannot change the time,
But I guess he is free, because the wizards like Merlin or Mr. Jones
never die,
they just go back to their Avalons.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sonia Romieu-Aconcha is a Colombian Freelance writer, international speaker and Financial Consultant based in France.

She hates author bios and wishes the editors would stop asking for them. Just kidding.

Sonia is a travel addict, after backpacking the four corners of the world she dedicates a good deal of her time to the search for the perfect next hidden paradise destination, wine and dish. She is a self-appointed Fan of The Beatles and Bowie and a Sci-Fi lover.

Nowadays she participates in different projects such as giving lectures for the Colombian Chamber of Commerce about the new trends of fine food. This is detailed in her Hospitality Master thesis about the experience of working for one the best restaurants in the world. On the other hand her story about Kaliman the multicultural superhero is going to be published by The Washington Smithsonian Museum as part of a Comics collection book from Stan Lee and Michael Uslan. Finally some fiction stories ideas hopefully are to be developed in her next Bowie pilgrimage to Berlin.

SOME ARTICLES AND PUBLICATIONS

My website: Addicted Anonymous Writers circle.

<https://addictedwriters.wordpress.com>. Page under construction.

Colombian food and Migration: Love marriage. Print story presented in exhibit “Roannais d'ici et d'ailleurs”. From Roanne Public Library. 2015.

Life of an international consultant. (French). 2014

<http://masters.inseec.com/actu-msc-mba/index.php/sonia-promo-2014-consultante-en-projets-internationaux>

Conference about the New Trends of Wine and Cheese (Spanish)

<https://ccduitama.org.co/comunicados/Programa%20Salon%202014.pdf>

Kaliman a multicultural hero. Story included in e-book *The Rise of Superheroes and Their Impact On Pop Culture book* . From Smithsonian Institution to be published in 2016.

SPACE AGE CHAMELEON

ANTHONY CROWLEY

A distant dreamer overseeing an earthly crowd
an eternal changing illuminating face
a planetary thinker refreshingly awakens
a golden space boy with reflective eyes from Mars
Shining with a fashionable smile
the composing of terrestrial music
voiced within the comfort of the stars

Unwrapped visual spectacles
In an age of a curious kind
Cupid's one-willed, arrowed explorer
Pierces humanity with a social accepting glow
Returning to Mars with an inventive suitcase in hand
once a living astral nomad
other worlds begin to cheer
a new age deliverance
from a space age hero
composing the words of life
the Duke's arrival of glitter from sand

Dancing from a new born sun
solar spectators with Icarus wings open wide
a new world tomorrow upon the black star ride

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Crowley (born 1979, Birmingham in U.K). From a young age of 6, Anthony began to take an interest in English literature and Poetry from an early childhood. Then throughout his teenage years he studied music and achieving song-writing skills, whilst still creating his visions. He also achieved a diploma in creative writing with a college located in Oxford, England. Anthony has also written short stories for student newsletters, horror monthly's and appears on the 'A LIST' of the IDPA (International Directory of Published Authors), NFAA (Non Fiction Authors Association). The present day Anthony Crowley is also a featured contributor to 'Haunted after Dark' with his very own dark haven of 'Crowley's Crypt' and has written many works of literature & poetry for publications such as Massacre Magazine, The Horror Zine, Sanitarium magazine, HelloHorror, Sub-Verse and Fiction Terrifica. Anthony Crowley has also appeared as an official Judge for the 'British Horror Film Festival 2014' and recently his forthcoming anthology of Horror tales 'Doomsday After Midnight' is nominated at the 'AuthorsdB' BOOK AWARDS 2014. The dark verse of 'The Fallen Angel' featured in Sanitarium Magazine-issue 14. The work itself was mentioned via a live radio podcast on the evening of Halloween 2013. 'The Devils Foot Soldier' was another dark verse which was inspired by the 'Slasher Icon' movie of 2011 'The Orphan Killer' which was positively recognised by the movies creators and the written piece is now featured at American based Blood Born Magazine several more features and frequent media interviews and

being ranked as "one of the best Modern Authors in recent years" Horror-Web described him by the following statement 'Anthony Crowley is one of the most prolific and talented authors of dark prose and poetry During a recent interview on the 'Sinister Scribblings' Mr Crowley has been placed amongst the likes of Poe, Lovecraft and Clarke Ashton Smith. Forthcoming Novella 'The Mirrored Room' was ranked in the 'Semi-Finals' at 'AuthorsdB' Book Awards of 2013, and ranked four times in the 'Top 100' list of popular Authors and not forgetting being a trending Author for many consecutive months and a featured Author on numerous literature and Horror themed websites and more. Presently, Anthony Crowley has published best-selling Horror anthology 'Tombstones' which was described by US Horror podcast show 'The Mouths of Madness' as "Beautiful Dark Prose", Anthony Crowley dubbed 'the Master of Realities' is always creating new and exciting projects within the subjects of speculative literature and Horror, Occult and Historic, general fiction and LGBT references & themes. He has also contributed literary works and interviews to many publications, such as Sanitarium Magazine, Massacre Magazine, Zero Signal Magazine, Art Decades Magazine, Haunted After Dark Magazine, Sub-Verse Magazine, HelloHorror Magazine, Haunted Magazine. And recently he's a contributor to the award-winning FEAR Magazine, featuring his interview with the iconic screenwriter and best-selling author Jack Ketchum, featured in Fear Magazine- Issue 35. Currently Anthony is about to release his second full length poetry collection "Libro De Lumine", which means 'The Book of the Light'. The collection will be themed around the beginnings of life

until death and beyond afterlife's superstitions. Anthony is also about to release his first full length fiction collection "Doomsday After Midnight" and various contributions to anthologies, including "The Roads of Mars" which will be featured in "The Sun Machine-a literary tribute to David Bowie". Anthony is currently residing in England.

WHEN I LIVE MY DREAM

LAURIE TREACY

*“And I'm going to make my dream
Tell them I will live my dream
Tell them they can laugh at me
But don't forget your date with me
When I live my dream”*

-from “When I Live My Dream,” David Bowie

Thank you, Mr. Jones, for everything you gifted us with.

A steel grey – gloved hand reaches out, hovering, afraid to touch the body or pool of hair spread out on the ground. The gentle rise and fall of the material lets him know she lives. With concern etched across his features, he studies the slumbering female from his kneeling position. A shy smile tugs at the corners of his sensual lips before he gets to his feet and claps once.

“Let us begin!”

* * * * *

Mrs. Miller yawns and stretches, one arm reaches out for reassurance. When her fingers touch air, she sits up, expecting to see the wood slats

and green covered canopy. There is no bassinet. She twists, her husband's name on her lips. His side of the bed is empty. In fact, there is no bed. Only earth and brick walls surround her.

Fully awake, she jumps to a standing position. The hem of her nightgown grazes her calves. A glance reassures her. This is the pretty white floral gown she'd picked up on sale at Kohl's last week. Good, she was returning to claim herself from her kids. After Rosamund and Avalon had fallen asleep and Tristan — finally sleeping for six – hour blocks — had drifted off after a feeding, she'd grabbed a drink and quick shower.

Wait, where is she? She peers up, examining the dark yellow brick walls resembling baby spit – up. She'd worn enough shirts stained with breast milk and formula ever since her first daughter was born six years ago. The walls line both sides, and after she spins around for verification, the front and back as well. Their height is massive, at least, ten feet. An orange moon casts an eerie shadow across every surface. The silence is welcoming.

“It's a dream. Yay me,” she groans, dusting reddish – brown soil from her gown. “Mental note: don't buy that cheap, pink, boxed wine ever again.” Hands slip to rest on her hips while she figures out what to do.

Glancing down, she doesn't want to walk barefoot in dirt and mud. Her sister splurged on mani/pedis for them both just two days ago.

There's a flash of light and her feet are encased in comfy pink ballerina flats, similar to the ones she loved as a girl. “O – kay. This

is a childhood dream. A return to innocence? The supposed ‘good old days’?” Not every part of her youth was great, but she clamps down on not letting that ‘incident’ resurface.

“What am I supposed to do?” Mumbling, she begins to search for answers. Walking past row after brick row, she tires of the same scenery.

“Hello,” a feminine voice chirps.

Mrs. Miller stops, unsure of what she heard.

“Welcome.”

Directly in front of her, a tiny white sparrow with dark spots perches on a branch.

Eyes widening, she smiles. “How’s it going?” she says, as though speaking to wildlife is an everyday occurrence. “Hey, where am I?”

“The Labyrinth.” The bird hops across the knobby surface, one eye watching her.

“Of course! It’s because of that movie!” Smacking the side of her head, she realizes the connection between last week’s event and this dream.

“I watched it with my girls. It starred the one with....Oh, what’s his name?” Whizzing up and down like a pinball, she snaps her fingers as if doing some lame kind of magic dance will help jar her memory. “That Ziggy dude in tights singing with the Muppets.”

The bird cheeps, wings fluttering. “You’re an idiot.”

Bewildered, she watches her chance for assistance fly away. “Nothing like an insult and run.”

Resuming her walk, she turns left and spots a patch of ivy growing across a section of the wall. Their verdant leaves act as a border for a makeshift sign painted by hand in neat penmanship. She reads its black ink message out loud: “Time is different here. Do not ask for help. Do not break bricks.”

“Damned wine,” she snaps. “Making me travel through some hideous maze dream. I only had one glass.” Exhaling, she makes a face. “I hate puzzles!”

Minute by minute passes each other. More walking ensues. Same backdrop. Not a soul in sight.

“Oh, this is ridiculous! Can I wake up now? I have so much to do!” she whines. When she quickens her steps, she begins to count down her to – do list. “It’s Tuesday. Gotta get the girls ready, drop them at daycare...oh, the dog at the groomers. Tristan has a well – baby appointment.” Reaching the end of another row, she turns to the right and continues rushing and ranting.

“On the way back, order checks at the bank. Run to the supermarket for dinner. I also need to work on the art for my next project. Lunch. Nurse. Get some yoga in. Then the girls have dance...” Stopping for both a breath and rest, she takes her worries out on her bottom lip, knowing there’s something she’s forgotten to mention.

Frustrated, she yells, arms outstretched for dramatic purpose, “I don’t have time for this!” The warm air turns chilly. An owl hoots in the distance. Goosebumps break out across her skin. If only she was home with a nice cup of tea, toasty from cuddling with Jeremy.

There's another weird burst of light and a pale pink shawl hangs across her shoulders, the ends tucked around her elbows. A giggle bursts forth. "Too bad I can't do this!"

The brief moment of giddiness over, she comes to the end of another row. Something tugs at her memory. Stroking the shawl's fringe, she considers her options. If this blasted maze goes on and on...

"That movie. The girl or someone said to —" Nodding at no one, her fingers flex open and closed as her excitement builds. "Why not?"

Twisting around, she scans the bricks for a hint of something different, an opportunity to leave. A few feet away a crooked line of moss covers a section of wall. "If I remember correctly you simply —"

With both palms extended out in front of her, Mrs. Miller rushes forward and pushes. Upon contact, the hard surface doesn't yield. The ground does.

* * * * *

An alarm sounds. He checks the glass globe beside the throne for the exact location.

"Our guest is in the keep," he announces. "Right on time."

* * * * *

She lands on her butt, creating a dirt cloud, and coughs. This is how that Linus kid felt walking around all the time with those squiggly lines above his head. All she has above hers is light filtering through the slotted cover. Where is she now? An underground cellar of some kind. Empty.

“Rude birds. Trap doors. Still not awake,” she grumbles, getting up.

“Welcome home, Sadie.”

The voice comes out of nowhere and everywhere, wreaking havoc with her nerves and stomach. Memories fight for release. Blurry images form a cyclone in her mind. Grasping the sides of her head, she yearns to scream. Under all the weight she stumbles, back connecting with the wall and, in an act of acquiescence, she slides down to the ground. “I don’t care if I have to pull a Jimmy Stewart and beg for my life back,” she mumbles, rocking in place. “Please let me wake up from this nightmare.”

From some unseen spot on the ground, something jumps into existence. Landing softly with the grace of a ballet dancer, Mrs. Miller stares up at an unearthly creature.

Alien? Human? Mrs. Miller doesn’t care at this point. Still dealing with post – partum hormones, all she knows is he *is* a man. The species is inconsequential.

The imposing figure is clad entirely in gunmetal gray, so dark it could be mistaken for black.

He certainly wears enough to keep her eyes busy. Her breasts wake up from mommy mode, ready for prime – time. Isn't that what got her three kids in the first place?

That 'bad girl' voice she occasionally hears pipes up. "It's not real. Don't feel guilty about the hubby."

That part of her conscience does make a valid point. She decides to feast on the visitor. Promising to keep quiet, naughty girl settles for a front row seat on her shoulder.

First up, she takes in the jagged-trimmed cape with a fur collar. From neck down, he's covered in this material resembling snakeskin. A metal plate is strung across his broad chest and a matching set protects his knees. Whatever for?

Nothing in this world needs explanation. Something akin to a skirt hangs from his hips to knees. Blacksmith? Knee – high boots and long gloves in that textured substance boast spiky grommets to complete his strange appearance. Kinky, but cool.

Trying not to laugh, she says, "Viking. Medieval soldier. *Outlander* extra. Are you an actor or a member of a '80s metal hair tribute band?"

She digs his long silver hair. Striking. And then she notices the metal crown on top.

Throughout her obvious perusal of him, he merely stands still.

"Who are you?" she asks. "A prince? It's all those Disney cartoons my kids love, isn't it?"

The stranger's thin lips spread out into a knowing grin. "You don't know?"

Mrs. Miller shakes her head.

He steps forward, one hand outstretched.

To quiet her inner ruckus, she accepts his help. When their fingers connect, she recoils from the building pressure of her memories, but he won't release her. Instead, the stranger increases his grip on her elbow and gently lifts her to her feet. "Welcome. I am Varick."

Mere inches apart, they study each other.

She speaks first. "You have beautiful gray eyes. Are you the king of the goblins?"

He chuckles. "I'm in charge of many things. I can be your king."

"My king? I don't need a king." She looks away, embarrassed. He *is* hot in an otherworldly way. Something electrical stings the air.

With one finger elevating her chin, he regains her attention. "You did once. Remember?"

She moves away, but not fast enough. Slipping an arm in hers, he says, "Let's go for a stroll. I will escort you out of my labyrinth."

Again accepting, she asks, "Yours?"

"Yes. The maze protects my castle from certain undesirables." With his free hand, he settles her drooping shawl back in place.

"Are you magic, like a fairy?"

They exit the keep. With each step, fireflies gather to illuminate the way.

“I am what I am,” he answers. His voice reassures her with its soothing tone. “I have no need for labels. For you, my love, I can be anything.” There is an emphasis on the last word.

Did he call her his *love*? Her cheeks warm, she cough – gasps to hide her pleasure. “I have a husband.”

“Yes,” he directs her down another hall. “Jeremy. Nice name for a jerk.”

“How —”

They walk up a flight of stone steps in synch. “I know everything about you.”

Of course — it’s a dream. She smiles to herself.

“Don’t be fooled. You think this is a dream. Check the scratch on your ankle when you awaken.”

Guiding her outside, they keep perfect pace.

“Your milk will let down soon. We need to get you back. How is my son?”

Outraged, Mrs. Miller sputters, “W – what? Tristan is Jeremy’s son!”

Chuckling, Varick kisses the top of her hand. “My love, how easily you forget. You had that fight with Jeremy, accused him of straying. Accusations he did not deny.”

Nodding, she recollects that night. The girls were at her parents’ visiting. Jeremy had to work but when she went to surprise him, he wasn’t there. He’d lied about his whereabouts.

“You fought. He walked out. And you wished for me.” His tone shifts from knowing to conspiratorial. “Always, I obey.”

When they reach the castle wall, Varick clasps her arms, drawing her closer. “The answers are within you. Let the memories return. Then you will understand. The witch’s spell is weakening.”

Witches, spells, the way he gazes at her with such intimate recognition. If he kisses her, she’s reciprocating.

“I’ve suffered without you long enough.” His gloved hands glide down the sides of her gown as he clasps her hips. “It’s time to come home, my queen.”

His eyes, his voice, his touch is pure emotion. Instead of denying or calling him names, she stays quiet. Somewhere inside of her hides the evidence of her knowing him.

No longer resisting, she gives in to the urge and shuts her eyes.

Varick murmurs into her ear, “Help them find release, my love.”

His warm breath caresses her skin. She shudders and the dam begins to crack. Memories unfurl like burning rolls of film. *Their courtship. Falling in love. The wedding. Births of their children. The reveal of her father, the King, and his treachery. The Grand Witch vexes him. Jumping out in front to save her beloved papa. Shock as the spell rocks her body. It searches her mind. It’s poison, like ribbons, gathers cherished memories together and steals them away.*

Tears dampen her cheeks. “Varick! I remember!”

He draws her chin up so their lips can be reacquainted.

Their embrace, decades in the making, lasts minutes before the ugly draw of reality tugs at her to return.

But she just got here! “Varick! Come for me, please! Help me get out of there!”

With panic – stricken eyes, her husband reaches for her, but she is already being removed from his world. “My love! My queen!”

* * * * *

Individuals visit with family members inside the Great Room located on the third floor of The Alistair Home for the Mentally Ill. Two cousins watch as three orderlies try to restrain a woman in a white gown with long, black hair. Minutes earlier, she’d begun beating on the windows, crying out for an invisible lover.

One woman whispers to the other, “Poor thing. What a shame.”

“Such a beautiful girl,” the other agrees. “So young.”

The woman in question tries to fend off the thieves who ripped her away from Varick. Screeching, she digs her nails into the soft flesh of their arms.

They play a brief game of grab – and – slip. Stronger than she looks and resourceful, she fights back.

Another orderly hustles over, needle in hand. “Hold her! I know how to calm the fairy girl down. No more gold horses and castle – speak from you.”

Kicking, the woman tries to bite him. The other men find success at keeping her limbs still.

His own cast iron grip holds her arm in place as he swabs the vein with alcohol.

“Nooo! I can’t forget our date!” she yells at him.

“Our date? Are you ready to give our love a try, Sadie?” he asks, his voice mocking.

The guys laugh.

“You! You’re responsible!” She reads his name tag and titters. “Your name isn’t Jay! You have them fooled, don’t you?”

“Now, Sadie, what has happened? You’ve been so good for weeks. Who set you back?” he asks.

She watches how easily he maneuvers the used swab in one hand, switching the position of the needle across his fingers with the speed and skill of a juggler. He draws it closer.

“I know how to stop you,” she says calmly, staring at his spiky blond hair, at his thin lips and straight into his cruel eyes. “You’ve lost your power, the hold you once had on me. On us.”

While the others let up on their tenure and begin to step back, he exerts pressure on his grip. “Power? I’m simply here to help you. I am yours to do what you want.” Jay answers, looking up at his co – workers who don’t mind this entertaining moment. They take breaks wherever they can.

The needle tip slides into her vein. “We will defeat you. I will return to him,” she lowers her voice so only Jay can hear. Then the slumbering poison their captors administer to the ones who regain their truth is released into her bloodstream. Flinching at its frigid invasion, Sadie gathers her recently retrieved memories and stores them somewhere safe.

For when she awakens, there’s a way to travel through mirrors.

In seconds, her words slur, her muscles turn to gelatin and she loses control of herself.

She collapses into the arms of the waiting orderly.

Jay props her up on the nearest sofa, knowing from experience how she can fake the effects of the drugs and then take off running.

Someone begins screaming across the room. Another joins in. A fight breaks out. A nurse flags the workers over.

Before the trio of men takes off to offer their assistance, they tap his shoulders.

“Good save, dude. Thanks.”

“Gotta take care of your little jewel, guy.”

“You’re the man, Jay. Card game’s on tonight. See you at my place.”

Nodding, Jay says, “As usual, I’ve got this,” waving them away. Each worker has a patient or two they develop a special bond with. Sadie is his. His attention never wavers from her face. “You are getting stronger. What am I going to do with you?” Jay slips onto the seat beside her to wait. They’re in a quiet section, at the opposite

end of the room, away from the elevators and foot traffic from the nurse's station.

"I am not yours," Sadie says, head sliding sideways.

"Make it easier on all of us. Say the words. Be mine. And this torture will end," he whispers, eyes glistening with emotion. "I don't like seeing you this way. Tell me you love me and we can go home."

"I was already home," she hoarsely whispers, trying to stay awake. "It makes sense now, Jar —"

"It does?" he interrupts. "Enlighten me, dear Sadie." His fingers reach out, about to touch her cheek, but at the last second, he withdraws.

Blinking slowly, Sadie is losing her fight. "I love..."

Jay leans in, his excitement visible. "Yes?"

Breaking into a small, brief smile, Sadie says, "I love him. Not you." And she gives into the meds, shoulders and head slumping into Jay's chest.

Something resembling bitterness passes over his face as he picks her up. "So be it. For now."

He whisks the woman, Mrs. Miller, out and down the corridor to Room 215. No one pays attention. Not here.

Shoving the door open with his boot, he places her down on the metal framed bed. "You won't exhaust me again, Sadie, you heartless – eyed girl," his smug voice informs her resting form. "I promised you the moon, the stars. You've fallen for the last time."

Drawing the blanket from the footboard across her body, he notices a new scratch on her ankle. The dried blood is caked in reddish – brown dirt.

Laughing, he covers her up and kisses her cheek.

With a check at the empty doorway, he walks over to the mirror above the regulation dresser and withdraws a small round glass ball from his uniform pocket. In his hands, it expands until it is the size he seeks. Holding it up to see his own reflection, he laughs low. “Varick, my brother, you hollow man,” his voice chastising. Shaking his head, he touches the globe. “Still nursing your shattered heart? Still trying to retrieve your queen?”

With one final laugh, he places the transformed object down on the dresser.

“Here, in case you think me selfish. A front – row seat! Watch and suffer, always the dreamer.” He blows upon the snow globe and when his breath clears from it, upon a hill a castle stands majestic, under a night sky filled with stars. Below it lies a golden maze.

He shuffles his gift towards the back, past a stuffed bear and scraggly dog, a Venetian half – mask, a rock collection, books, and the framed photo of a happy family — a husband and wife, along with their three children.

“She says she doesn’t love me. Me? Imagine that.” Jay glances at his watch. The shift is over.

He stares at his reflection in the mirror. “Rejected again,” he tells himself. “Never gets easy.” He allows the flash of pain across

his different colored eyes before he shakes it off. From there his demeanor deviates into something else. The overhead light sizzles brighter then dims.

Shifting his focus, he watches her sleep while his smile turns smug. One might describe it as maleficent.

“She’s lost, I’m lonely. Truth is, I asked for forever.” Jay says to no one and everyone. Bitterness overcomes smugness. With a finger wave at the partially ajar door, it closes shut. “No more games.”

There’s an announcement summoning a doctor to the fourth floor. Irritated at the interruption, he makes a chopping motion in the air. In response, the speaker across the room breaks in two.

His anger is now palpable.

A few feet from the window a stroke of lightning separates a tree from its base. Its body lands on parked cars in an explosion of sounds and debris. A thunderous boom echoes in the distance. Alarms sound throughout the home.

In Room 215 Jay transforms into his true self.

His body stretches until he’s back at his proper height, over six feet tall.

His mop of sandy hair lengthens, the tendrils spreading out and down his shoulders.

The white of his uniform darkens into a tight – fitting brown tunic and pants. Satisfied with what he sees, he says, “I take what I want. Forever begins now.” He turns and scoops both the blanket and Sadie into his arms.

“Our path is clear, my precious girl,” he tells the sleeping form. With one final sweeping gesture, Jay opens the portal and steps into the now elongated mirror, taking along his claimed prize. Sadie’s belongings rise, floating behind the two figures. “SADIE WILLIAMS MILLER” disappears from the nameplate on the door.

The power of magic.

After taking a handful of steps, Jay whispers a spell, releasing Sadie. The blanket stretches out and stiffens its weaving tight like a rug. Her body rests on top, suspended mid – air. Jay turns and snaps his fingers to close the gateway.

“Welcome back to the Underground, my love. Home of the Goblin King.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurie Treacy is an author of YA and NA fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary romance. She also writes for children. A graduate of Marist College, she lives in New York's picturesque Hudson Valley with her husband, three children, and various pets. A lifelong fan of anything supernatural, she enjoys urban exploring and photographing forgotten places. When not book blogging, she's a proud Whovian, Miyazaki fan girl, loves reading, playing Zelda games and Netflix marathons with lots of frozen Goobers.

Her short stories appear in various anthologies published by Roane Publishing, Creative Prose Publishing, Indie Style Press and others. She is currently working on a YA novel and revising two picture books. A member of the SCBWI, RWA and YARWA, Laurie can be found at local writer's events and conferences and online at www.laurietreacy.com and www.readergirlsblog.com

Also by Laurie Treacy:

Wished Away (from Urban Harvest)

Sometimes wishes do come true. How they're handled—that's scary.

College freshman Maire returns home for Thanksgiving break to discover her abusive father is missing, and mom has redecorated. All she's ever wished for is to see an end to the fighting. A close friend, Colton, hints that a mysterious urban legend might be real. In order for it to work, she has to be an active participant. Could this be the

solution she seeks? If she doesn't get involved, and her father returns, will things go back to the way they were? Maire struggles to make the right decision—for her long suffering family and herself.

Just One Bite (from In Vein)

Another's vision of happiness isn't necessarily your own.

Dental hygienist, Ada Murray, doesn't believe in love at first sight. So why is she drawn to her patient, the mysterious gentleman, Mr. Ulach? Something primitive stirs inside her whenever he is around. An older, world traveler, he is different from the guys she usually likes. Should Ada trust her heart and allow herself to fall for him, or should she follow her practical mind?

Powerless (from Stalkers: A Collection)

Could the ghost in her present hold the key to her lost past?

After surviving a traumatic event that stole her childhood memories, college student Cat learned to live day by day. School work, a part-time job, and her boyfriend fill most of her days. Ghost hunting takes up some of her nights, but this 'hobby' begins to dominate her life. A ghost stalks her and leaves her creepy gifts. Then the strange dreams begin. By the time she discovers the ghost's *real* intentions, it might be too late.

Creep (from Wild Cards)

Everybody has at least one secret they don't dare share.

High school junior Zach has heard a secret voice in his head ever since he could remember. Always with him, this voice comments, keeps him in line, and makes him laugh. The conversations between them are creepy, yet cool. After discovering a family secret, Zach wonders if the voice is a figment of his imagination or something other.

Into the Dark (originally appeared in Lacing Shadows)

She never knew that by saving him, she would find her true self.

College freshman Holly Barclay finds herself home alone on winter break with plans to do some soul-searching. Being a Good Samaritan to a handsome wounded stranger, this human girl not only endangers her heart but quite possibly her life. The holidays suddenly get a lot more exciting.

Writer's Note: As an experiment in poetic verse, and as tribute to David, each line of this poem contains the title of one of David's albums – presented in chronological order.

MY GOLDEN GOBLIN KING

KIM ACRYLIC

THE space oddity is where he has teleported us in his magical, make-believe lands

The man who sold the world now has our tainted earth in the palm of his hands

His hunky dory stance erases the pain of his unforgiving poison that ate him alive

The rise and fall came in heartbreaking waves, but my Ziggy must forever survive

Aladdin sane, ebbs and flows the spirit of our uncontrolled, animal madness

Pinups weep without their legend to wipe away their plastic tears of sadness

Diamond Dogs feast on the souls of the left over mourners with smeared makeup

Young Americans wail to the sky with broken hearts like a teenage breakup

Station to station we search for a palimpsest of his soul to hold dear

Low is the sullen mood of the other-worldly souls that see it all too clear

Heroes sing to the stars, and cry to the moon in hopes of answers

Stage, front and center to witness the opening act of the cancers

Lodgers fall to grace in the wake of this black death of beauty

Scary monsters shake with terror for the world has stripped them of their duty

Let's dance in celebration of the blessing of melodies we have been gifted

Tonight we kiss away the pain to embrace the imaginary persona that has drifted

Never let me down, My Sweet Prince, you will dream for us in a blue sunset

Buddha of Suburbia will accept you with your open, glittery arms that we must never forget

Black tie white noise will be your attire as you drift in and out of mystical time

Outside where the earth is green and the sky dances around with your rhyme

Earthling, please don't forget this shape-shifting muse for he had been planned

Hours go by as he orbits our sorrows in what is left of our musical wasteland

Heathen, choke on your inspirations, do not forget this pretty beast of love

Reality sets in, dream hard to make him hear your creations, sing them to him above

The next day arrives with purple and black doubt, be kind to the moods of isolation

Black star, Black Star, ride it far and high, my Goblin King you are now in your space station.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Acrylic, from Seattle Washington is a Poet/ Recording Artist/indie Music Journalist, who dedicated her life to poetry at age 15. Since then she has worked for several online music and poetry magazines and has been published in several anthologies including Little Episode's first volume of poetry "Back In 5 Minutes" She also collaborated post-death with Andy Warhol for the New Britain Museum Of Modern Art by writing a poem inspired by his painting of Manray for the book "Visions, Voices, and verses" As of to date Kim has two CDs out "Fan Fare Melt Down" and "Techno Eyes. She just released her first novel, Rock 'N' Roll Melancholy, and she continues to collaborate to this day with artists all over the world.

Also by Kim Acrylic:

Poetry book:

http://www.amazon.com/Myth-Behind-All-Truth-Requiem-ebook/dp/B00L8IJ4OG/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1453600531&sr=8-2&keywords=kim+acrylic

Novel:

http://www.amazon.com/Rock-Roll-Melancholy-Kim-Acrylic-ebook/dp/B012HZC4JA/ref=pd_sim_351_1?ie=UTF8&dpID=51XDdVv4WiL&dpSrc=sims&preST=_UX300_PJku-sticker-v3%2CTopRight%2C0%2C-

[44 AC UL160 SR107%2C160 &refRID=1B7C26T69B8XKS4BW](#)

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WORMHOLE

JOSEPH J. MADDEN

AS its umbilicals disconnected with a jolt, the prototype hyperspace starship *Yeager* dropped away from the support tender and floated free in space.

At the controls, Major Christi Thom surveyed her readouts. “All systems showing green,” she reported. “Everything looks good from this end, Control.”

“We copy that, Major,” the controller aboard McKinley Station replied. “You are go for pre-test maneuvers.”

“Roger that.” She threw a wave out her cockpit window at McKinley: a wasted gesture, since McKinley was three kilometers distant, but it was part of her routine.

Another voice cut in on her helmet speaker: “Godspeed, Christi. See you when you get home. First round is on me.” This was Jim Matthews, pilot of *Yeager*’s support tender. The tender ship continued to fill the view above her as it began to move away.

“Thanks, Jim,” Christi smiled. “And thanks for the vote of confidence.”

She was truly grateful for that. Her historic first flight was actually the third attempt at a manned faster – than – light spaceflight. The initial unmanned flights had gone off without incident, flying out from Earth to Saturn in a matter of minutes. Enthusiasm ran high for a future of interstellar spaceflight.

The phrase “Man plans and God laughs” once again held true. Man’s great plans were dashed the moment a live pilot was placed inside the cockpit. XP-1 exploded as soon as its faster – than – light engines – dubbed the “Wormhole drive” – were brought online. Little more than dust remained of the ship and its pilot.

Eighteen months and another successful unmanned test flight later, XP-2 was launched. This time the flight looked to be a success, until the time came for the ship to revert to normal space. XP-2 dropped out of hyperspace, and promptly tore itself apart.

That had been two years ago. Christi had trained for XP-2 with pilot Bill Chiang and was to be his backup should he become incapacitated. What still gave her nightmares wasn’t the fact that she could have been the one killed, or that Bill’s body had never been recovered. It was the fact that pilots who ran shuttles to and from the mining colonies on Saturn’s moons reported that they could still hear his screams over their comm units months after the incident.

On the eve of his flight, a reporter interviewing Bill had asked him why a husband and father of four would attempt such a risky endeavor. Bill had replied in his usual to-the-point style.

“Risk is inconsequential. Each and every one of us is at risk every moment of our lives. You could step outside your home and get struck by lightning, or slip and break your neck in the shower. The only reason people take note of the risks on a mission like this is because it’s big news to everyone watching. Risk is all around us. The only time you’re truly safe is when you’re dead.

“Without risk, we wouldn’t be where we are today. The first life on Earth took the risk of venturing from the oceans to try life on land. Columbus risked disaster by crossing the Atlantic to the Americas. Armstrong risked leaving the safety of his lunar lander to walk on the moon. The risk we take with this mission, whether successful or not, will propel us, even marginally, toward the next stage of our evolution as a race.

“Without risk,” Bill summed up, “we wouldn’t even exist. So there’s no point in worrying about the risk. It’s always been there. We just have to face it.”

By the next afternoon Bill would be dead, and the program, already teetering on the brink of being discontinued, was put on hold once more. More unmanned flights were run, all successful, with only minor glitches. Despite much controversy, construction had begun on the third, manned hyperspace ship. And Christi had been chosen as pilot.

And so now she sat in the cockpit of XP-3, waiting to face the risk. She had christened the ship the *Yeager*, thinking that using a real name, other than the ship’s technical designation, might bring her a touch more luck. In her younger years, Chuck Yeager had been her idol, and the reason she had become a test pilot in the first place. Inwardly she wondered if years from now, she might serve as the inspiration for future generations of space explorers.

As the countdown continued, she ran through her pre-flight checklist for the umpteenth time since she had climbed aboard. That damned fuel monitor light was still glowing red and she tapped it

several times with her finger until it reverted to normal. “State of the art,” she mumbled aloud.

Her eyes fell upon the lenticular photo of her husband Graham and their four year old son Benjamin that she had wedged onto the instrument panel. Her checklist momentarily forgotten, Christi gazed into her son’s coffee brown eyes and had a flash of honest fear. The thought that something could go wrong and Benny would be left motherless was so great at that moment, she seriously thought of aborting the mission. *To Hell with science*, she thought. *To Hell with knowledge and expanding human boundaries. I want to play ball with my boy.*

“T – minus ninety seconds,” the voice of the controller aboard McKinley Station startled Christi from her inner ranting.

“Confirm, Control,” she replied, her voice shaky with the sudden surprise.

Despite her misgivings, she was still surprised to find her hands shaking as Control brought the Wormhole Drive online, and knew it was not from the vibration of the engines. Closing her eyes, Christi drew in a deep breath. When she released it, her hands were steady once more.

The controller aboard McKinley called off the sixty-second mark.

Christi’s hand unconsciously went to the crucifix she wore around her neck; the one Graham had given to her on their first anniversary. Though her flight suit and gloves blocked her from

actually touching it, the pressure of it pressing against her breastbone was reassuring and gave her some degree of comfort.

At thirty seconds, the slightest tremors of panic began to set in, like the feeling of being aboard one of those old-style wooden roller coasters just as it was about to crest the top of the highest drop. This was no roller coaster; it was the real deal, and the adrenaline rush was unlike anything Christi had ever felt before. Her hands were tingling, and she could actually hear the blood rushing through her veins. She didn't know if she would break out in giddy, hysterical laughter or begin sobbing uncontrollably.

"Fifteen seconds," a new voice came through the speakers. It was the Wormhole project director, Samantha Dovonovich, the woman who had developed the Wormhole Drive. Christi had expected to hear from her. There was no way Sami Dovonovich would let this moment go by without saying something quotable for the history books. "Good luck and Godspeed, Major Christi Thom."

Christi had hoped she would say something different. Sami had said those same words to the last two pilots just before their missions went awry. It was like a bad omen.

Ten seconds. *I shouldn't have eaten breakfast.* Christi mentally ticked off with the countdown clock. As it struck one, she heard herself, as if from a great distance, whisper "No, wait!" Then the universe exploded around her.

Not in the literal sense, of course. The flash from the Wormhole Drive was blinding, even through the polarized cockpit windows. The ship bucked, Christi was jammed back into her seat,

and the stars went from pinpricks to elongated shafts, which then transformed into a swirling vortex of light. The “wormhole” had opened.

The sensation was dazzling. The spinning whirlpool of light charged through every color of the spectrum before it collapsed inward on itself, the star lines flattening into a single horizontal shaft of light before exploding again into the vortex.

Christi glanced at the ship’s chronometer. She was already one minute into what was to be a five minute voyage. All control lights showed green. Thus far, this test was more of a success than the two previous flights. *Please, please let this be the one where everything goes right.*

Then something through the viewshield caught her attention. It was a light, brighter than the star shafts surrounding her ship. It was softly strobing, or was it spinning? Then a too familiar thought piqued in her mind.

The light at the end of the tunnel. The one that calls you to Heaven.

Panic began to engulf her as the light grew larger as the *Yeager* closed in on it. She stabbed a finger at the abort switch, found it inoperative. Grabbing the control yoke, she gave it a sharp jerk back in her direction, realizing full well that performing such a maneuver could result in the *Yeager* destroying itself, much as Bill Chiang’s ship had.

Christi did not care. Every fiber of her being screamed at her not to enter into that softly beckoning light.

Her concern was futile. The control yoke responded exactly as the abort switch had. Absolutely no response.

The light was so close now that it completely filled her cockpit windows. A final image flashed through her mind, that of little Benny standing next to her empty, flag-draped casket as it was lowered into a false grave.

I'm so sorry, Baby, she called out to him across the universe as the light engulfed her, sweeping away *Yeager's* cockpit. She shut her eyes, and gave herself over to it.

* * * * *

Her eyes opened once again, and when they focused, *Yeager's* cockpit had disappeared. She was floating free of restraints, surrounded by a surreal pearlescent mist, intensely bright, yet not blinding. There was no sensation of direction or movement; no sense of up or down. She imagined the sensation was akin to that of a feather set adrift in the middle of a cloud.

Yep. I'm dead, she thought.

"No, you're not dead, Major," a voice replied, proceeding to answer her next, unspoken question. "And no, this is not Heaven. You are very much alive."

Christi's sense of direction was still askew. She had no way of telling where the voice had come from. There was a vaguely familiar tonality to the voice, and something told her she knew it from

somewhere, but it was different enough that she could not nail down a definite face with it.

“Who’s there?” she called. “Who are you?”

“Our true name would be quite unpronounceable to you,” the voice came back. “In the interest of keeping things simple, you may call us Watchers.”

“And you’ve been watching . . . me?” Christi asked, confused. She had a vaguely creepy feeling up and down her spine, like someone was watching her in the shower.

The voice sounded amused. “We have been watching your people. A most interesting race, you humans are. No matter what system you are from, you all develop along the same lines.”

Christi’s head was swimming. “Are you saying that there are other humans out there already? On other worlds?”

When it replied, the Watcher’s voice sounded as surprised as her own. “Of course. There are billions of you out there, scattered like stars across the cosmos. Quite a tenacious race. You all seem to thrive on adversity. No matter how great the setback you always continue to push ever onward.”

At this, a thought occurred to her, and again the Watcher answered before she could give voice to the question. “No, we are not responsible for the loss of your other two craft. As our name implies, we merely observe. We take no action, directly or indirectly. It would be vain of us to think we have a right to interfere in another race’s destiny. Your mistakes are yours to make freely, otherwise you could never truly mature as a race.”

The voice altered, became more familiar now. *“The risk we take with this mission, whether successful or not, will propel us, even marginally, toward the next stage of our evolution as a race.”*

A figure came into view through the mists, spectral at first, then, like the voice, became much more familiar. *“Without risk,”* Bill Chiang said as he faced Christi, *“we wouldn’t even exist. So there’s no point in worrying about the risk. It’s always been there. We just have to face it.”*

“Such wise words,” the Bill simulacrum added after a pause, “and so true. Your people have risked much.”

Christi saw images begin to flash in the mists all around them. Columbus’ ships crossing the Atlantic. Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight. Yeager’s *Glamorous Glennis* breaking the sound barrier. Armstrong stepping onto the moon.

She saw her ship as it entered hyperspace.

“And there is much more risk ahead. We see great triumphs for your people, but also great tragedy.”

More images flashed, less familiar to her now. Christi saw more starships, far larger than hers voyaging through space, their crews making contact with other races. Colonies being established on unfamiliar worlds.

A singular image caught her attention. A planet in flames. Was it Earth? The image passed too quickly, replaced by a blazing battle in space; massive starships exchanging fire with one another. Humans and alien beings fighting and dying.

“But always will you persevere.”

The first images returned, of starships of all designs leaping into hyperspace, flinging themselves far into the void.

Christi turned back to the simulation of Bill Chiang. “So it *is* worth the risk.”

Chiang smiled. “Now our time here is done.”

He turned as if to leave. Christi reached for his arm, her hand passing through it. “Wait,” she cried. “Is that all?”

Another smile. “We have watched you long enough. It is time for us to move on, to begin watching other, less advanced civilizations. We are pleased with your progress.”

“But I have so many questions.”

“And you will have to find the answers on your own.”

The image of Bill Chiang flickered, going out of focus, morphing. The next form the Watcher took was known to her as well, but it was not of any being she knew from experience. The gray skin. Large, dark, expressionless eyes. Skeletal limbs. Christi had seen beings like this before, in science fiction movies, on television documentaries.

In her dreams.

Now she felt the voice more than heard it. *Farewell Major Christi Thom. We shall not meet again.*

The Watcher disappeared in a brilliant flash of light and Christi shut her eyes against the glare.

* * * * *

When the flash spots had cleared from her vision, Christi found herself back inside *Yeager's* cockpit. The Wormhole Drive had shut down automatically as it had been programmed to, and she could see Saturn out her port window, its rings reflecting the faint light of the far off sun. All the interior monitors were glowing their tranquil green. The test had been successful.

According to the countdown clock, only four minutes and forty five seconds had elapsed since she had blacked out. *No, that's not right. It wasn't a blackout. It was. . .*

It had to be a dream, Christi shook her head to clear away the cobwebs.

The motion made her realize that her headset had somehow slipped off and she quickly repositioned it. The McKinley controller was all but shouting through the earpiece. "Major Thom? Can you hear me? Can you hear me, Major Thom?"

Christi's throat was suddenly dry as she croaked a response. "McKinley station, this is the *Yeager*. Happy to report that ship and pilot are doing fine."

The resultant shouts of joy coming over the headset almost deafened her, and she scrambled to pull the unit off again. As she did, she caught a glimmer of movement out of the corner of her eye. At first she thought it was her imagination – her eyes playing tricks on her as some residual effect of the hyperspace jump – but as she turned to look, she saw it was definitely something more than space dust.

It was a ship, kilometers distant, but still visible enough to be made out by the naked eye. It was an elongated disc, spinning slowly,

and moving steadily away. It accelerated suddenly, lights flickering off, then back on briefly before streaking off into the void.

A galactic wink of the eye? Christi wondered, smiling inwardly at the notion. *So I didn't dream the whole thing.*

She replaced her headset again. The ruckus on the other end had died down. "Major Thom," McKinley control was saying. "We read you as go for the return flight. Do you concur?"

Christi paused before replying, gazing out the window to where she had last seen the Watcher ship. She winked back.

"Affirmative, McKinley station," Major Christi Thom replied as she turned her ship onto its return vector. "I'm coming home."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph J. Madden is the author of the science-fiction series *The Starhawk Chronicles* and the anthology *Other Worlds: A Collection of Science-Fiction, Fantasy, and Epic Silliness*. Born and raised in Queens, N.Y., he now lives with his wife and three daughters in Sheboygan, WI. In addition to writing, he enjoys movies, attending science fiction conventions, and is awaiting the return of the Mothership to carry him home.

CARINDA 1983

MAURITS ZWANKHUIZEN

HEAT dances on both sides
of spider-dusted walls.

Nothing changes.

Inside

or out.

Same shit, different flies.

Young Brixtonian
ghosting the bar,
white as a sheet
of unwritten music.

Light playing to shadows.

Features sharp and white,
broken glass
cutting
the grime of race
with bleach-blond face,
biting air hardened with heat & hate.

Dust devils dance

down hot ramp down to hotter dust,
they're dancing in a street of rust
where black and white wear shoes of red

and rainbowy rebels
scatter like ashes
into the space
 of a black star dust night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maurits Zwankhuizen is a freelance writer from Canberra, Australia, who enjoys writing in all forms and genres. He has self-published two volumes of poetry; a streetzine titled *Indie Visible*; *Cain*, a novel; two humorous novellas concerning the adventures of the eccentric Englishman, Alf Marmot: *Marmot & Asparagus* and *Marmot & Auk*; as well as several other e-books. Maurits has had several short stories published in journals, and two articles each in the *The Huffington Post* and *New Matilda*. He is currently working on a second novel but still writes poetry when inspired, as he was by Mr. Bowie.

OUR NEW YEAR EVE

(OR: GLOW JOB)

MAHENDRA WAGHELA

“TAK takk takakat tttttt tkat.”

That was Willy knocking the door with his Mustang’s keys but I didn’t want to burn the omelette. I removed the frying pan from the stove and placed it on the kitchen table before opening the door. He walked in with his air of ownership.

I poured some melted butter on the yellowed rim of the omelette and put the frying pan back on the flame. Onion fumes filled the room.

“All papers in order? Let’s go figure out the place,” he said.

“Let’s have some grub and then,” I turned the omelette.

“Okay.” Willy came near me and sniffed the spices.

That giraffe-like bend and sniffing habit have not changed. Otherwise, he has begun to button his florescent shirts. The gaps between his teeth have widened. His outlandish long hair has lost most of its sheen. Those guitar-fondling fingers are now roughed up with cable handling. His rum-drinking days are over. Three stretched out stays at the public hospital to cure his ‘mild touch of liver infection’ have taught him that. Now he drinks only beer. In Willy’s Bible, beer doesn’t have enough alcohol content to affect him. I know better than to get in an argument with him for something like that.

Willy doesn't swing into his rhyming moods any more. For the bad weather, he used to say 'slime clime'. For a knocking session, he would say 'chic prick.' For a wild drive in the country air, 'windy sandy.' For a good foot-tapping guitar riff, 'footsy cutesy'. Not anymore. He is all dried up and brittle and sour now.

His changeover has taken a long decade to arrive. From the heights of wannabe music stars to the scruffy hirers of speakers, strobes, and light equipment; this is a big, nasty slide of ours. He still has his prima donna ways from our bohemian days. We lose a lot of business because of that. The thing that still doesn't get inside Willy's drug-fucked head is the fact that you can't behave like Elvis without Elvis' voice and Elvis' success. Our equipment is hired because of my buffer-buffoon skills, my contacts. Some crowds in this business still have corners and crumbs for us.

We had our fifteen minutes of fame, when we arrived on the music scene. We were all fired up, hot, hot, hot. Were it not for Willy's cussed skulduggery with the record company and the police raid on our pad for drug possession, we might have pulled off a big one. The real New York – Paris – London concert circuit stuff. We could have blasted our kind of music to the big blue sky. Some stuff that Willy wrote was solid gold: things about dirt life in the street; lonely nights in the last subway train; heartbreaks in the flophouses. Our songs were edged with dark dirt and grime. Kind of gritty-weird. But then, they might have been lapped up just for that.

We had already recorded five songs. Then the record company's marketing VP came up with this fuckfix caveat of dividing

their risk. The Armani clad vampire wanted just three songs, to promote with two other new bands in a single CD package. That kind of deal was too much for Willy's Everest – size ego. Willy went wild and damn near strangled the suit right there in the company's marketing office. Willy overdid it all right, but who is normal in this sickfuck music business anyway?

The second break was less spectacular but it was a break of sorts, no doubt. We had done the scratch recording of another eight songs for a demo purpose. So, we started making the rounds and plugged the demo cassettes all around. In this business, pimps find the whores, not the other way. One thing led to the other, the buzz went out the door, and we were one day from a three nights a week contract with a glitzy, big time nightclub. We decided to celebrate in advance. Ever the street cat, Willy brought eight vials of real, quality stuff.

That same fucking night the drug enforcement people broke in and caught us doped. The six unopened vials were still on the coffee table, waiting to be booked when they barged in. For his own reasons, Willy has only hazy details of the raid, but I remember myself toppling down the dingy stairs in the wee hours of that chilled morning. We were handcuffed and pushed into a NYPD van. All the way, I tried to wake up Tony C, who was so zonked that he had to be carried from the van to the police station. The buzz was that the cops got the tip-off from the record company we had tangled with. After a while, you got to be philosophical about these snakefuck things.

So, 3 – somethree (Willy, me and Tony C), the fusion-cult band was grounded before it could take off. I never got to wear my satin pants and leather thong and brass studded thigh-length boots. I recently traded them in a pawnshop, and bought a toolbox. Those days are like ugly old scars that don't hurt any more, but you have to look at them in the mirror every day.

Tony Tchaikovsky, our piano guy (Willy never acknowledged him as a co-writer) killed himself. Some say because of the troubles that his spitfire girlfriend gave him, but I know better. Tony C was an ok guy. He should have got somewhere with his songs and piano but he swallowed 30 Mandrax instead. He had called me the night before the suicide: "Have you read *The Catastrophe Of Success*? This is like the HUAC fucking Capra under McCarthy, I don't want any of this."

Tony C was from a very upper crust, white-collar, Russian immigrant family. Probably some second-generation aristocrats, he never spilled his back story. If Willy was the right brain of the band, Tony C was the left. He had this maddening, uncanny way of whipping Willy's unwieldy, shapeless lyrics into something fine-tuned and music worthy. Every time Willy wrote a song, Tony C disappeared with the stuff, for weeks at times. Then he showed up with his version. Willy and Tony C would be locked in a battle, haggling over each stanza; each word; each note; each pause. Tony C simply refused to sit on the piano stool until he made Willy see his way. He could cut Willy's song in half, or transform it beyond recognition. If you knew Willy, that took lot of balls. Tony C would sit quietly and politely, and wouldn't budge an inch. A riled up Willy

would finally say, “Ok, let’s twistfuck this your way.” In the final recording, Willy would call all the shots, but the studio would not be booked until Tony C had fiddled with the song enough.

When the police busted our place and slammed us in, it was Tony C’s first and last run-in with the law. He was a family reputation type. The nights he spent in lockup screwed up the wiring inside his head. If that was not enough, this local yellow rag did a little story on us, photographs and all, quoted our songs, going as far to call us closet communists. Overnight we became red poison for the record companies in the entire U. S. of A.

Every week or so, Tony C comes in my dreams. He wears these Gothic wigs and dark flowing robes. Sometimes he is dressed as a transvestite cowboy and sings like John Denver. ‘Country roads take me home... to the place where I belong...’ He and his huge Steinway sway on the clouds, his long, feminine fingers float, moving like liquid porcelain. Sometimes he just smothers the white piano keys without making a sound.

Willy went to the hospital for his advanced cirrhosis and I was drifting a bit after the jail episode. But Tony C’s death had really rattled me. I wanted to make a connection to the real, sane world. I had no fancy ideas about my drumming talent. You know it when you have a gift, and you know it when you are a foreman working shifts in a fucking assembly line. I looked around and latched on to the guys who used to give us the lights and equipment at the club where we occasionally played. I grease-worked the entire concert circuit with them. By the time Willy came about from his liver treatment, I had a

rough business plan ready. It was an awful comedown for Willy. Took him almost two years to realize that rum had finished his voice; that no one but he saw any potential in our kind of rant. We shelled out some money together, bought the speakers and other equipment. My deaf cousin came along to handle the lights. That is how our equipment-hiring business got going.

Back to present. We finished eating the onion omelettes and toast I had cooked, and hit the road. Willy drove the beat-up Mustang with his reckless bravado and flung us on the location in record time. I showed the contract papers to the wrinkled sentry huddled at the gate. He let us in. The place had the silent charge of deserted public premises. We crossed the snow-covered compound, and entered from the side door of the huge modern structure.

The star-like clusters of halogen lights dangled from the dome ceiling at least a hundred feet above us. Our shoes squeaked on the shining floor. A keyboard piano, some guitar cases, drums, an African bongo set, microphone stands, and spools of wire on the stage platform looked like small toys from here. The circular, stadium-like place was big enough to hold a dozen tennis tournaments simultaneously. “The kind of place we always dreamt to gig in,” I almost said aloud as I looked at the awesome interior.

“Here,” Willy’s gruff voice boomed, echoless. I walked along the circular border of the floor clockwise while he shuffled anticlockwise from the same point, keeping an eye for my pace. I checked my watch. It took us almost seven minutes to complete the circle and face each other roughly at the same spot where we started.

Willy handed me the end of a measure tape and crossed towards the opposite side, unspooling the reel in his hand. He made sure that the tape touched the centre of the floor area; the figure gave him the radius of the circular floor. The measurements helped him decide on the speaker's capacity, number of strobes, and electricity requirements for the big concert night – the New Year's Eve.

The place filled up with the excited cries of a colourful, wild, wanton crowd. After the firecrackers and laser show, the stoned, long-haired, leather clad zombies emerged on the stage one by one in artificial clouds of candyfloss colours. "Ladeees and gentlemen" the lead singer paused to remember what else to say, but the shrieks from the audience compelled him to signal his band right on. His spittle flew, the microphone danced, the bass guitars swung in wide shining arcs, the key – boardist plunked with fervour, and the drumsticks went berserk. The psychedelic lights roamed the concave spaces in the ceiling and laser beams cut through the over – excited air. That yell – your – guts – out – and – punish – your – instruments routine.

They started with their 'Riders of the Storm' imitation. Soon, the young crowd on the floor begun to sway with the high voltage flow from our mammoth speakers. They lit their happy joints, opened their cans and bottles, and tilted. The sharp, sweet needles found their home in the warm-blooded veins. The gyrating youth worked up a frenzy, like a big cattle on the run. The fluorescent shirts and leather jackets flew overhead. They all danced like maniacs. The songs, the sounds, the screams, and the noise rose and fell in big crashing waves. They sang along, sweated, their bodies moving with frantic energy.

Stoned-out couples clutched each other fiercely and lusted for more. As the night screamed on, so did the pounding on the floor. The dozen bouncers and armed security men tried their bit to make sure that no one got mauled or gang raped. By two a.m., the mad crowd still stamping, the floor was covered under the gum wrappers, empty cigarettes packs, chewed-up reefers, empty liquor bottle, Ecstasy blisters, twisted syringes, crushed vials, condoms, and occasional bras and broken sandals.

We are perched here, in the closet size box above the stage, with a sound engineer sitting on the equalizer and blinking controls. My deaf cousin handles the strobe lights with this fixed look on the crowd. For every new song, he mutters “Thrill – fuck them all anyway,” and throws down a fistful of confetti on the sea of pulsating bodies.

Grim faced, Willy and I pass my battered binoculars between us and look down from the glass partition. Willy as usual, resolutely ignores the band playing on the razzle-dazzle stage.

We search our gaunt faces, our outraged music, our gross excesses, and our bitter bygone youth in the mad, milling crowd below.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mahendra Waghela writes and reviews stories / screenplays. His work has appeared in Wordweavers (first prize for short story), Open Road Review, Orange Literary Review, Woman's Era, Suite101 (55-word story prize), Apollo's Lyre (flash fiction prize), 69 Flavours of Paranoia, Vagabonds (short fiction anthology) and Stories at the Coffee Table among others. Mumbai Mantra 100 Storytellers Screenplay contest (finalist).

IT'S ALL SPACE, BOY

K.W. TAYLOR

ASCEND up into a rocket and out through a door, emerge from a closet, revel in the stars,

And float, something different, gazing upon things no man should ever see,

As your breath is sucked from your lungs and you spy nebula and planets and feel

The sun, even as you freeze to death.

She knows.

It's space. All space, boy.

Descend down from a rocket and out through its door, emerge from a closet, revel in the marks

You leave and run, something different, gazing out through a mere mortal's eyes,

As your hands are crushed and your body is battered and you spy evil and pain and feel

The sun, even as you're beaten to death.

Tell her, you whisper, but

She knows.

It's space. All space, boy.

Float, aimless and driftless and shiftless and clouded by chemicals.

Strung like a string on a mandolin, you have to keep it together

For your tiny astronaut,

For your rotting heart's

True north.

Tell her, you whisper, but

Find her, you whisper, but

She knows.

She knows.

It's space. All space, boy.

Strip it down to its acoustic core,

Just a space boy with a guitar,

Pure and confused and purely amused.

You want to stay and to go, the black skull jeweled upon your writing desk.

The skies call again.

Ascent up through the tree limbs and out through a door, put your silver things in the closet, feel the stars' glow upon your face,

And float, something different,

As your breath is sucked from your lungs and you spy nebula and pain and feel

She knows.

She knows.

It's all space, boy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.W. Taylor's first science fiction novel, *The Curiosity Killers*, comes out in the spring of 2016 from Dog Star Books. Her debut novel, *The Red Eye*, combines urban fantasy and horror (Alliteration Ink, 2014). Taylor focused on horror for her novellas *The House on Concordia Drive* (Alliteration Ink, 2014) and *We Shadows Have Offended* (Etopa Press 2011). Anthology appearances include *Life after Ashes* (Alliteration Ink 2015), *The Grotesquerie* (Mocha Memoirs Press, 2014), *100 Worlds* (Dreamscape Press, 2013), *Sidekicks!* (Alliteration Ink, 2013), and *Once Bitten, Never Die* (Wicked East Press, 2011). Taylor holds an MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University, an MA in literature, and teaches college in Ohio. A lifelong Bowie fan, she also pays tribute to him in "Alter Ego," a piece in her short story collection *Grimacing Cracks* (Dioscuri Books 2015). She blogs at kwtaylorwriter.com.

Also By K.W. Taylor:

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MODERN LOVE

C.S ANDERSON

“WE could be heroes.” Ziggy whispers as he crouches next to me as I line the shot up through the advanced military grade scope on the sniper rifle that had been waiting for me on the Amsterdam rooftop we currently found ourselves on.

“Not our mission.” I tell him in the usual alchemy of patience and exasperation that has come to define our relationship.

Through the scope I can see the chariot drawn by nine diamond dogs leading the slow parade fanning out behind it. In the chariot I can see our target. Throngs of young Americans line the street cheering for him as he comes by. Major Tom gives a practiced parade wave as he passes by. Soon he will speak to the crowd and have them all dancing in the damn streets.

Elbow elbow wrist wrist.

He smiles and keeps on waving the same practiced wave. The crowd eats it up, almost like he is bloody royalty, some kind of thin white duke or something. Stupid bastard admitted that he was an idiot, he went and said all the science I don’t understand...

Not his fault really, fame is always something of a death sentence after all. His misadventures caught the public fancy and then he went and got tangled up in politics. It’s almost as if he thought that he was still living in the golden years, not in the bleak and empty times that we live in now.

Hope is a dangerous message.

Offering hope is like holding out a double edged sword.
People grasp at it and it wounds exactly as often as it rewards.

And hey man, Suffargete City's finest mingle with the
crowd busting folks who can't afford the ticket back to wherever they
came from.

Wham bam thank you ma'am.

Instant good arrest record busting the usual suspects.

They taunt the crowd as they round them all up and load
them into vans with the security symbol of a large black star on the
side.

Rebel rebel, you've torn your dress, rebel rebel your face is
a mess.

Especially after they break your fucking nose.

Ziggy tugs urgently on my arm and I know he wants me to
take the shot. He used to play guitar with some band called The
Spiders from Mars before they broke his sweet hands. A distinct
flavor of rage burns in his veins that I have never completely
understood.

"Please David, please take the damn shot, take it now."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.S Anderson has been writing since he could form written letters and is the author of The Black Irish Chronicles as well as the Dark Molly series of books and one of the founders of Alucard Press. He lives in the Pacific Northwest with his lovely wife who just so happens to be his editor. He loves to hear from readers and can be reached at alucardpress@yahoo.com . He is honored to be in this anthology as he is a huge Bowie fan. Alucard Press is very active on the Comic Con/Horror Con circuit so if you see us in your city at a con please come up and say hi.

KELLY'S LABYRINTH

VERONICA SMITH

IT was Friday night again but Kelly didn't know if he could handle another lonely weekend. Tomorrow was six months to the day and he figured he would have to drown out his memories in alcohol. Any kind would work – just whatever helped him forget for a brief time. In the background David Bowie's *China Girl* played softly on the record player; Bowie was meant to be played on vinyl. That was their favorite song. They would sing it together while staring into each other's eyes. He poured himself a glass of whiskey and left the bottle uncapped on the counter – he knew he'd be back for more. He took it in the living room, grabbing the framed picture from the wall on the way to the sofa. As he sat down on the worn cushion he took a long swallow and put the glass down on the table. His fingers gently flowed over the faces in the frame, tracing every line by memory. He sobbed and his tears splattered on the glass; wailed aloud then covered his mouth. His misery was his own and he didn't want any neighbors coming by at the sound. Six months ago they were a godsend; supportive and comforting to him. They still came by to check on him even now but now he brushed aside their concern – instead choosing his isolation.

After two glasses of whiskey he cooked himself a can of soup, watched the contents come to a gentle boil atop the stove before emptying the pot into a chipped, white bowl which he carried gently to back to the sofa. He wasn't hungry and had been losing too much

weight but knew he needed to eat something. The record ended and he moved to the player and flipped it over. *Cat People* was playing.

Kelly knew he was only torturing himself by listening to this album but he listened to it over and over. He returned to the sofa and pushed aside the bowl of soup, only half eaten, and again picked up the picture. He raised it to his face, pressing it against his forehead. The tears fell again and he swigged down yet another glass of whiskey. "I can't do it anymore," he whispered to the picture. "I can't." He put it on the cushion next to him and got up to get a bottle from his bedroom.

He turned the bottle over and over in his hands. *Zolpidem 10mg*. He read it every time the label came into view. The message never changed. He opened it up and poured them all into his hands. There were at least two dozen of the little white pills. Some nights he used them to sleep but he'd been halving the dosage to save them up. Kelly knew the amount that would be lethal, it was amazing what could be found with a few minutes of web browsing, and made sure he had more than enough in the bottle. He shook the pills, watching them roll around in his palm. He shook his head and poured them back into the bottle then took another drink from his glass. *Did he have the guts to do this? Could he do this?*

The clock ticked quietly in the apartment. The record finished and the player turned off automatically. The only other noise was Kelly lightly snoring where he fell asleep on the sofa; passed out actually. The bottle of pills was still full but now rested on its side on the floor where it fell from his hand when he fell asleep. The picture

in the frame was on the table where he set it down reverently. The faces of himself with his wife and son smiled brightly under the glass, mocking him in his sleep. The half empty glass of whiskey on the table was his fourth.

And Kelly dreamed.

He was walking down the street but it was warm out. It was summertime instead of the cold that was in the air right now. He looked at the street signs and realized where he was. *No! It wasn't fair to make him go through this again.* Although he hadn't been there when it happened, he had been there many times in his nightmares. He heard the tires screech and turned in time to see the pickup truck skidding through the intersection to slam into the car carrying his wife and son. That impact, in turn, slammed the car into a tree. Screaming metal and shattering glass filled the air.

Nooo!

He screamed silently. Suddenly he was at the front door of his house, the police officer, somber faced and full of sympathy, was telling him his wife and son were dead. He crumpled to the ground, shaking uncontrollably.

And...

Looked up to find he was inside a lush, green labyrinth. The bushes were at least ten feet tall and thick. As he turned around he saw there were three directions to choose from. The grass under his feet was fresh and straight, with no worn path to give any indication which way he should go. Kelly looked at the branching paths for several minutes before choosing the one on the right. He walked

slowly at first, taking in his surroundings and wishing he had something to use as markers so he wouldn't get lost. He turned right, then left, then came to a "T" and continued going to the right. When he kept turning with no end in sight he began to get nervous. He sped up to a light trot and began to hear voices in the distance. His trotting turned into running and when he turned at the last left he slid to a stop.

Instantly, Kelly wasn't in the labyrinth any longer. He was back in his apartment. The apartment he took after he sold his house; he couldn't live there anymore – the memories tortured him. He was seated near the window watching his door being kicked in. The neighbor from next door ran in first and was immediately pushed aside by the pair of EMTs who ran directly to the couch. His heart nearly burst from his chest when he saw himself lying on the couch. The bottle of Zolpidem, capless and empty, was on the floor near his hand. *But I didn't take them! I hadn't decided to do that yet!* He watched in trepidation as the EMTs tried in vain to revive him but it was too late. The neighbor began crying and picked up the framed picture of his family. *Put that down! It's not yours! They weren't yours!* He was crying himself now. His vision blurred with his tears and as he wiped them free...

He found himself at the junction in the labyrinth again.

Disoriented for only a few seconds, Kelly chose the left path. He didn't try to keep track of the turns – there was no way to remember them all. He walked briskly, holding his hand out and brushing the leaves like a child. They felt so real, warm and damp with dew. He walked for what felt like hours.

When he finally emerged from a turn he found himself on a sidewalk in front of a small house. He looked behind him but the labyrinth had disappeared. What awaited him was a street with a single, dim streetlight. In his hands were two pieces of paper. The first, a newspaper clipping of the accident with a name circled. Kelly recognized the name – it was the man who killed his family. The other paper had the same name written on it along with a street address. He read it and looked around. He was there. This was the murderer's house.

He released the papers and let them flutter to the ground as he walked towards the door on shaky legs. *How long had he dreamed that he might be able to do this; to exact the justice on the drunken killer?* Somehow he had made bail and was still at home, waiting for the long line of court cases to be tried until it was his turn. Kelly climbed the porch and reached into his pocket. He was surprised but not disappointed to find a gun now in his hand. He turned quickly to the left when he thought he saw movement in the window of the house next door. Nothing there. With a shrug, he disregarded it; it wouldn't change the outcome anyway. He turned the doorknob and found it locked. He bent down and lifted up the welcome mat. There was a single key lying there. He quickly unlocked the door and went inside.

Once inside he covered his mouth from the smell. Empty beer bottles and cans littered the living room. Pizza boxes with moldy slices were stacked on a chair. It looked like the accident hadn't given this man a change of heart to improve his lifestyle. Kelly quietly went into the first room and saw it was empty except for a few boxes; like

the owner had never finished unpacking. He passed the open doorway to a bathroom and stepped into the next room. He turned on the light and the sleeping man muttered and pulled the covers over his face – not at all worried that someone could be in his house. As Kelly got closer he could smell the alcohol emanating from the bed and realized the man was sleeping off a drunk; obviously not his first. In a rage he yanked the covers off the bed revealing a fat belly over stained boxers. He kicked the bed frame hard enough to shake the whole thing.

“What?” the man slurred. “What time is it?”

Kelly hit him in the head with the butt of the gun.

“You killed them!” he cried hoarsely. “You took them from me!”

“Who the hell are you man?” The man whined as he rubbed his painful head. “Ow, that frigging hurt!”

“I’m the man whose family you killed!” Kelly screamed at him. “They were all I had!”

“Don’t remember,” the man muttered as he reached for the beer on the table next to the bed.

Seeing that, Kelly lost it and fired his gun, striking the man in the chest three times. Flabby flesh shook as blossoms of red appeared on pale, greasy skin.

“You took them from me,” he sobbed. “You bastard!” He looked at the dead eyes of the man that killed his family and felt even more morose. He thought he would feel vindicated; feel something.

He walked slowly to the front door, head down; tears streaming from his eyes. When he opened it he was blinded by a bright light.

“Drop the gun now!” It was the police. He was right about the neighbor; he was seen. But it didn’t matter. He’d done what he’d come to do. There was only one thing left to do now.

He raised his gun...

And found himself back at the junction in the labyrinth; facing the only path he hadn’t taken yet.

Kelly didn’t care where this one led him; he knew it would only end the same. Time had no meaning as he walked this path. He didn’t remember any turns and could swear this time it was a straight line to a dim glow he could see ahead. He could hear music playing as he got closer. It was familiar, comforting. He felt safe. *This is Major Tom to Ground Control. I'm stepping through the door. And I'm floating in a most peculiar way. And the stars look very different today.* He didn’t rush; there was no point. When he reached the glow, he saw it was the middle of the labyrinth. He sat on the ground and cried.

“Kelly?” A familiar voice, low, distant. He knew it. Hadn’t heard it in so long.

“Kathy?” He looked up and saw his beautiful wife shimmering in a silver glow. She smiled at him as she stepped aside and his son, Steven, stepped next to her.

“Hi Daddy,” he smiled, his small face radiant and glowing.

“I miss you both so much,” he said. Kelly was crying so hard he was having trouble forming the words. “I can’t live without you. I’ve tried,” he sniffed and wiped at his nose and eyes. “I can’t.”

“But you must,” Kathy said. “It’s not your time. This is the way it was meant to be. You can keep our memories alive and in that way we’ll still live.”

“Please don’t do this Daddy,” Steven said to him as he reached a glowing hand to Kelly’s face.

“You need to go back,” Kathy spoke as she laid her hand on his Kelly’s head. “It’s not your time. Go back now. Wake up.”

“Wake up Daddy!”

“Wake up Kelly!”

“Wake up Kelly!” There was pounding at the door to his apartment. “Kelly, wake up! Fire! There’s a fire! Kelly!!”

Kelly jerked awake for just a moment. He’d been breathing in the poisonous smoke since the fire started after he passed out. He forgot to turn the burner off after making his soup and he’d left a dish towel too close to the burner. Now his kitchen was engulfed in flames. The fire was licking at the edges of the living room but the entire apartment had been filled with smoke long before that. He saw the framed picture on the table and grabbed it up, pressing it to his chest protectively. “Got to get you out of here,” he said, still drunk and now disoriented from the smoke he’s been breathing. He stood up and staggered for the door. But the higher his head was the more he breathed in the toxic fumes. The flames and smoke were everywhere now and he could feel the heat. The hair on his arms singed and he

turned around and around in panic. *Where was the door?* He waved an arm in front of his face to clear the air and saw the door, not afire yet but would be soon.

He ran towards it, clutching his family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Veronica Smith lives in Katy, Texas, a suburb west of Houston and has been married to her husband for over 25 years. She also has a son who is in college. She's always loved writing and although her overall school grades were only average, she always got A's in English. Her first self-published novella, **Chalk Outline**, is available on Amazon. Her current project is a horror novel for *Helheim Games Studios* that is based on the world of **Survive: Zombie Apocalypse CCG**.

Veronica has had several short stories published in anthologies: *A Very Zombie Christmas*, *Bite Sized Offerings*, *Crossroads in the Dark*, *Eight Deadly Kisses*, *Fifty Shades of Slay* and *Grynn Anthology*. Look for more of her stories in anthologies to be published soon: *Dead Silent Zombies*, *Edge of Darkness*, *Kids Volume Two*, *ODDisms*, *Twisted Tea Party*, and *Unleashing the Voices Within*. She is also an editor for Stitched Smile Publications.

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QUEST

SARA THOMPSON

IT'S hard to pedal my bike with so many layers of clothes; every inch of skin is covered and protected making it hard to move, but I continue to pedal as fast as I can. Goggles for my eyes and even a scarf expertly wrapped covering my nose and mouth standard protection for venturing outside. Completely normal, like the decaying bodies that line the streets. The latest victims are bloated with glassy eyes the older bodies look like they are made of blackened leather, some are covered with blankets preserving what is left of their Earthly dignity, that is until a feral animal comes along. No one talks about how many bodies have been dragged away by dogs looking for a quick meal. I don't need to stop, not to inspect the bodies or to try and bury them. Months ago when this started, when I saw my first dead human I would have, at first I was fascinated. I would try in vain to bury them all, but they were dying so fast no one could keep up. Now this is just another Thursday. At least I think it's Thursday.

I crawl through the hole in the fence, reaching my safe haven after my morning ride. Lucky for me no one has tried to loot my house. Guess no one thinks to loot a poor neighborhood, and they would be right. I didn't have much to call my own before this started, and now by some looting of my own — let's just say life got a little easier. I light a candle and begin taking off the layers, I'm safe here don't need the extra padding. Grabbing the candle off the table I head up from the basement into my room. Trees in front of the house block

all the windows, and I tell myself to not be afraid. I don't use much of the house, it's only me and I like keeping doors between the outside world and me. Closing the door to my sanctuary from the other side of the bed I'm hidden from the door, just how I like it. Protected.

I sit on the floor and pull out my one luxury a record player; I managed to rig it to a car battery. There is also a record, a giant square sleeve showing a man standing under a street lamp, sign over his head reading, "K. West." I know every inch of the vinyl by heart, right down to the scratches that causes the needle to skip. I place the needle down near the start, at my favorite part to listen to, after my rides. A voice calls out quietly since that would attract the gangs. My only friend calls out against time and place, "News guys wept and told us earth was really dying..." I listen captivated, he predicted so much of the before I sit hoping I missed something to know where to go from here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Thompson's feet have always itched for travel so she's usually on the move. Armed with her fountain pen and notebook she thrives off of creating immersive worlds where her readers can escape, just as others did for her. When she is not writing Sara can usually be found splitting her time between a vast amount of creative endeavors, currently that obsession is knitting for anyone who needs some warmth. Sara can be found on Facebook and twitter as @SaraTWrites.

LAZARUS RISING

S. R. MANEV

THE glass tumbles from his hand and smashes upon the floor.

Vaguely, as if from very far away, he hears, “Master? Are you unwell?” He opens his lips to reply, but his tongue feels thick and swollen in his mouth.

Without warning a blinding pain explodes inside his head. Blood pours from his nose and drips off his chin. He tries to rise, but his muscles don’t work right.

Panting, he fights the darkness crowding his vision, struggling to remain conscious. For an instant, his gaze focuses on the man sitting at the other end of the table, watching him passively. And suddenly he knows.

“You...” he sputters, barely managing to get the words out. “You did this...”

Impotent rage fills his chest; there is only one poison that can cripple him. He’s been careless, and now he is suffering the consequences.

A hand settles on his shoulder. “Try not to fight it. The more you struggle the worse it’ll be. For you.” He can almost hear the mockery in the mothman’s voice. “Pretty soon it’ll all be over.”

He is lying, and they both know it. White Widow poisoning is a horrible way to die. It will be hours before the toxin reaches his heart and stills it for good.

But that doesn't matter. He is Prime and knows how to embrace pain. Fear and death mean nothing to him.

One corner of his mouth twitches slightly, as if he is going to smile. A dangerous glint of dark fire flashes in his eyes.

Then his lips part and he seems to exhale his discomfort. "Fools," he mutters as a spell starts to take shape in his mind. "Damned fools..."

* * * * *

The face she saw in the mirror was gaunt and pale, with bags under the eyes. She could barely recognize it as her own.

"You look beautiful, my lady," Lucy gushed. "Truly beautiful."

Ignoring the compliment, Emily Hale waited patiently while her maid finished pinning her hair into a coiffure fit for a wedding. "I believe I'll wear mama's necklace, the emerald one – will you bring it to me, please?"

"Of course, my lady," replied Lucy, and a flush coloured her cheeks. "I wish your mother could have seen you today. You're the prettiest bride ever."

Emily's mouth smiled, but her golden eyes didn't follow. "You're such a darling. Now hurry up and let's finish this charade—"

A knock at the door interrupted her and she half-turned ready to tell whoever it was to go away, but the words died in her throat.

“Lord Lazarus,” Emily breathed, “what are you doing here? Don’t you know it’s bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony?”

Standing frozen in the doorway, Lucien Lazarus didn’t seem to hear her reproach. He was a tall, slender man in his mid-thirties, with raven-black hair and cool eyes the colour of steel. A long, curving scar marred the left side of his face, giving him a sinister appearance.

“Emily,” he started, “you look—”

“Why are you here?” she snapped.

Shocked by this outburst, Lucy gasped and swayed as if about to faint. Emily would have said more, but she noticed her maid’s wan expression. “Leave us,” she ordered. “We need a moment alone.”

For a few seconds, Lucy didn’t react. Then she blurted out, “Yes, my lady.”

Without further delay, the maid turned and fled from the room, leaving Emily and Lucien unchaperoned. An awkward silence filled the space between them.

Finally, her ladyship sighed. “Forgive me. I shouldn’t have been so abrupt—”

“I know you don’t want to marry me,” interrupted Lucien, his tone carefully controlled and even. “But what have I done to make you hate me so much?”

Emily looked at him for a long, sour moment. “I don’t hate you,” she said at last. “I hate the law that forces me to marry so I can keep my father’s lands and title.”

Disinclined to further conversation, she lifted her chin haughtily and turned back to the mirror. “Was there anything else?”

Lucien started to reply, but stopped himself. “No,” he said flatly. “Nothing that matters.”

As he turned to leave, Emily spoke again, “Why did you agree to marry me, Lord Lazarus? You’re a man of means and high rank. Even the King couldn’t force you into a union.” Her voice became bitter. “I, on the other hand, am without choice.”

Lucien hesitated so long that she thought he wasn’t going to answer her. When he did respond, he said merely, “I wasn’t forced into anything I didn’t desire.”

* * * * *

The dream was always the same: the winding staircase, the candle-lit chamber, the body on the altar. Then the quiet, sly voice beckoning her to come forward. She had never heard it before, but it startled her from sleep every night.

This time, though, the nightmare didn’t end... If anything, it grew more real. She tried to force her eyes open, tried to wake herself up, but couldn’t.

The voice called to her again. The pull on her whole being was magnetic.

Slowly, tentatively, Emily walked towards the altar-steps, black skirts swishing about her ankles. Her heels raced over the

marble floor. In the candlelight, shadows flickered and died across her face.

Finally, she reached the altar and gazed down at the body that lay upon it clad in what must have once been a dressing-gown of grey silk. Her eyes widened a little. The man she saw looked like a younger version of Lucien, but without the scar.

“Why are you haunting me?” she murmured as her gaze swept from his head to his bare feet.

Then something caught her attention: a large pendant hung from his neck. It was shaped like a looped serpent with an eagle’s head, eating its own tail. There was an eerie...aura...about it. It made her skin crawl.

Following a sudden urge, Emily reached out to touch the pendant. The instant her fingers closed around it, she heard the whispering voice again. Beyond that, everything seemed to happen simultaneously.

The man’s eyes snapped open and his hand snaked out to grab Emily’s arm, pulling her towards him. She jerked away, but he had an iron-like grip. As he caught her startled gaze a long slow sigh eased from between his dry lips.

Emily felt her heart skip a beat. His eyes were the same golden colour as her own. “Who are you?” she gasped.

His grip on her arm tightened. “Arc—” he croaked, his voice barely above a whisper. “The a-arch...”

Emily shook her head. “Who are you?” she repeated eagerly.

He seemed not to hear her. “Come...” His voice was growing stronger. “Come under the ivy.” Something flickered in his eyes, and just for an instant, they glowed like flames. “Set me free.”

“Who are—”

“Set me free!”

Those last words echoed inside her skull as Emily awoke to the cawing of crows just outside her bedroom window.

Her heart hammering like a caged bird, she sat up and tried to get her bearings. It took her a moment to remember where she was. Lazarus Court. Lucien was sleeping in his bedroom next to hers, and his mastiff was sprawled beside her. Outside, the predawn light was turning the sky into a shade of pale orange, while a heavy ground fog gave everything a surreal, haunted look.

Emily was about to lie back down when she realised there was something in her hand...

Her breath caught. She didn’t need to look to recognize the strange shape. It was the pendant from her dream.

* * * * *

“More tea, my lady?”

Emily didn’t seem to hear the question. She was staring into the fire, a faraway look in her eyes. Absently her fingers toyed with the pendant around her neck. “Would you like more tea, my lady?”

“Pardon...?” Emily started as if she’d only just noticed Alwyn, who was hovering beside her chair. The silver-haired butler

smiled, but it didn't reach his amethyst eyes. They remained as piercing as ever.

“Forgive me. I didn't mean to startle you—”

“No apologies needed. I was caught up in my own thoughts...” But she didn't finish, sighing. Her fingers wrapped around the pendant, like she was trying to hide it.

Noticing the gesture, Alwyn arched one bushy eyebrow. “Is anything the matter, my lady?”

Emily's knuckles turned as white as her pristine dress as she suddenly straightened in her chair. “My mind's a little preoccupied this morning,” she said curtly, her tone making it clear that the topic was closed. “More tea would be fine, Alwyn. Thank you.”

As the butler poured her another cup, adding a drop of milk and a spoonful of honey, Emily turned her gaze towards the tall windows overlooking the Lazarus estate's private grounds. The fog had lifted and the pale autumn sun drifted across the sky.

“Alwyn,” she said finally, after taking a sip of tea. “What do you know about the old stone arch in the north gardens?”

Upon hearing the question, the butler looked up sharply. “Sorry?” he asked, eyes darkening.

“The arch,” repeated Emily, watching him closely. “How long has it been there? Do you know who built it?”

“Why the sudden interest?”

Emily's smile was as false as her next words. “I'm planning on hosting a garden-party this coming week.”

“Maybe you should reconsider the location...*my lady*.”

The two looked at each other narrowly. The room grew thick and the air heavy with tension. Just then the door opened and Lucien came into the breakfast parlour, followed by Lucy. He was dressed handsomely in a silver-and-gold waistcoat, a cream-coloured shirt, and black trousers that fitted him neatly. His knee-high boots were worn and scuffed.

Noticing that, Alwyn scowled at the offensive footwear. “Shall I fetch you a pair of patched stockings to go with the boots, my lord?”

His tone was so serious that for a moment Lucien wasn’t sure if he was teasing or not. Then the corner of the butler’s mouth twitched as if suppressing a smile.

Lucien barked out a laugh. “Bite me, old chap.”

“Hardly appropriate, my lord,” came the dry reply.

Emily followed the exchange with an impassive expression while sipping her tea. She was still holding the pendant in her clenched fist. “I hope you had a good night’s sleep, my lord,” she said.

Lucien stiffly offered her a bow. “I did indeed,” he muttered as he took his usual seat at the head of the table. “And you, my darling?”

Emily cringed at the endearment. “You’re late for breakfast this morning.”

“I’m afraid I’m to blame for that, my lady,” Lucy said suddenly, drawing all eyes towards her. “After I did your hair for you, I went out into the garden for a breath of fresh air and—”

“I found her unconscious,” supplied Lucien. “She was so white, I thought she’d died.”

“I don’t know what came over me,” mumbled Lucy, her gaze turned downward, hands clasped in her lap. “I must have fainted. Please don’t be mad at Lord Lucien.”

Emily’s forehead creased a little, but she held back her retort. Her eyes searched Lucy’s face. Spots of feverish colour brightened the maid’s cheeks, but otherwise her complexion was ashen. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her lips looked almost blue.

“Do you need a doctor, my dear?” she asked.

“I’m just tired is all, my lady.”

“Tired? Are you certain there’s nothing else?”

Lucy gulped nervously. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

Before Emily could inquire further, Alwyn stepped beside Lucien’s chair and said in a deadpan voice. “My lady was just telling me she’s planning to host a garden-party next week. It would be the event of the Winter Season.”

Lucien looked up from his toast and marmalade, startled. “A party? With guests? Here?” He sounded positively shocked. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

Emily arched a slender eyebrow at him. “It wouldn’t be a party without guests now would it?”

“No. I suppose not. But—”

“Why, what’s the matter, *my love*?” she purred. “Is there a reason why we shouldn’t entertain guests?”

Lucien opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. Biting his lip, he looked to Alwyn for help. The butler's gaze was set on Emily's clenched fist. He seemed uncharacteristically tense. "Is that a new necklace, my lady?" he asked keenly.

She stiffened. "You could say that, yes."

"May we see it?"

A moment's hesitation, then: "If it pleases my lord and husband." She practically spat the words out.

Somewhat startled by Emily's abrupt tone, Lucien put down his toast and marmalade and cleared his throat awkwardly. "Well, yes... It would please me greatly."

She nodded. "Very well."

Locking her eyes with his, Emily slowly uncurled her fingers and withdrew her hand. The pendant caught the glare of the sun streaming through the windows and flashed like a beacon.

And then chaos erupted as Lucien shot up to his feet, knocking over his chair. All the colour had drained from his face. "Where did you find this?" he demanded in a strangled voice.

"You know what it is, don't you?" she returned softly.

"Don't play games with me, Emily! Just answer my question. Who gave you this pendant?"

She rose out of her chair. "I think we both know the answer to that."

With a sudden growl, Lucien came across the room at her, much faster than she'd anticipated, and reached for the pendant, to

yank it from her neck. When she tried to step back, he clasped her arm...

It happened in an instant: Emily's golden eyes flashed like fire, and the windows shattered into a shower of glass. Shards flew everywhere, drawing blood.

Lucien heard his clothes tear and felt his skin rip just as an invisible force tossed him back across the floor to slam into a wall. His breath rushed out of his lungs. Red agony exploded down his back. "Emily," he rasped. "Stop this. You don't understand—"

"How dare you!" she cut him off. "How dare you lay your hands on me?"

Lucien tried to rise to his knees, but fell back. His head throbbed, his back stung from the cuts, and he tasted blood on his tongue. "You're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have grabbed you like that," he acquiesced. "But you need to listen to me—"

"No," she replied as her fingers wrapped around the pendant again. "I don't want to hear another word."

Nearly growling in frustration, Lucien stared at her clenched fist. "He got inside your head, didn't he?" He snorted angrily through his nose. "Fine, have it your way then." His voice went utterly cold. "Alwyn, subdue her."

"As you wish, my lord," was the gentle reply.

Startled, Emily turned towards the butler. His face was a little paler than usual, but otherwise he didn't have a scratch on him. When he spoke, his voice was carefully even. "My lady," he said, "let's not make a scene, shall we?"

“It’s a little late for that,” Emily replied after a moment, her eyes flashing.

Alwyn started to smile as he stepped towards her... Suddenly the brass and crystal chandelier hanging from the gilded ceiling crashed to the floor, falling on top of the butler. Glittering shards of crystal flew in all directions: Lucien swore, covering his face to protect it.

Emily felt something like content, and realized it was coming from the pendant around her neck. But before she could think on it further, Lucy grabbed her gently by the arm. “Come, my lady,” she urged. “We must get out of here. Now.”

For once, Emily didn’t argue, just nodded and did as she was told.

* * * * *

The crows watched them from the branches of the pines. In the sky above, dark clouds gathered and hid the sun.

As they dashed through the trees, Lucy’s foot caught in a root and she almost fell. “Slow down, my lady,” she pleaded breathlessly. “You’re going to injure yourself!”

Emily threw her a quick glance over her shoulder. “We’re almost there,” she said, sounding more certain than she felt. “It’s right up ahead.”

Sure enough, the trees soon gave way to a clearing overgrown with weeds and brush. Reddish flowers grew in scattered patches and

long, spindly roots snaked through the dirt. Blackened, crumbling stone pillars stood like sentries, forming the points of a triangle.

In the middle of the clearing was an old arch, covered in moss and ivy. The air around it seemed to shimmer and hum, as if charged with electricity.

Emily stopped at the edge of the trees and motioned for Lucy to do the same. Shoulder to shoulder, the two women watched as the shimmering air beneath the arch became distorted, like a reflection in a funhouse mirror, and a dark shape appeared out of nowhere. The crows in the branches overhead began to bustle, cawing loudly.

Abruptly lightning split the sky, illuminating the clearing, and thunder crashed. Then a downpour started.

For what felt like an eternity, the dark shape hovered beneath the arch, motionless, then in a sudden flash it turned towards where Emily and Lucy stood. Startled, the maid stumbled backwards. “What is this, my lady?” she gasped. “Where did it come from?”

Her ladyship toyed with the pendant around her neck. “*This*,” she said, head tilted, as if listening to a voice only she could hear, “is an invitation.”

And without saying anything further, Emily hiked up her skirts and started walking. She was soaking wet and her dress clung to her body, almost transparent in the blinding flashes of light. White-faced and grim, Lucy hurried at her heels, looking equally wretched.

As they came closer, the dark shape elongated and changed, becoming human-like in form, though its limbs were too long and the chest too broad. Its sharp-angled face was like a mannequin’s.

Straightening her spine, Emily slowed down her pace until she was a foot away from the arch. Then she stopped and stared into the dark figure's gaze, unblinking and unafraid.

Suddenly, one of the Shade's unnaturally long arms shot forward like a serpent striking and its thin, bony fingers wrapped around the pendant. Before Emily could react, a sense of power engulfed her and she disappeared through the open Gate under the arch. It led on to a small landing that gave way to a descending staircase of narrow width.

Feeling dizzy, Emily put a hand to her head and turned to check up on Lucy. She was worried the sickly maid might have fainted again...

Her breath caught in her throat. The only thing she saw was a gilded floor-to-ceiling mirror of black glass. Its frame was carved in the same intricate shape as her pendant.

"This way, Lady Lazarus," a familiar voice said from behind her.

Emily spun around, and for a moment she thought she must be seeing a ghost. "Father," she whispered, feeling her eyes grow hot.

The old gentleman inclined his head toward her in the same way he'd always done. But there was something different about him. His face was as pale as a corpse's and his eyes looked dull, like unpolished stones; in his hands he was holding a candelabrum.

As their gazes met, he turned and slowly raised the flaming candles, then started down into the darkness.

"Father!" she called after him, but he didn't look back.

Picking up her skirts, Emily followed him. Dust lay thick on the steps, but she noticed her boots left no print on them. The realization made her shudder.

At the bottom of the stairs there was another small landing, then a set of heavy double doors with iron handles directly ahead. The design of the eagle-headed serpent swallowing its own tail was engraved on them, too.

Before Emily could catch up to her father's apparition, the great doors opened on their own to let them pass, revealing a brightly lit chamber with an altar at the far end. A row of ancient, elaborately carved pillars supported the vaulted ceiling on both sides, while dozens of candles burned in gilded sconces. The floor was blood-red tiles, polished and waxed and glistening.

Upon seeing the familiar chamber, Emily's feet froze at the threshold. "It's all real," she said as if to convince herself. "I didn't dream any of it."

But even as she spoke those words, her mind screamed that she couldn't believe what her eyes were showing her.

He got inside your head, didn't he?

Lucien's warning came back to her. Was it possible he was right?

"Enough games," said Emily as she took a step forward. Her gaze was fixated on her father's apparition, standing a few feet before the altar with his back towards her. "Tell me who you are and what you want?"

Without replying, he slowly turned to face her... In a blink, his image distorted, revealing the human-like Shade. Then the moment passed and Emily was looking at her father again.

“What is this?” she demanded.

“This way, Lady Lazarus,” repeated the Shade in the same hollow, matter – of – fact tone that sent a chill down her spine. “This way—”

Emily cut him off with an abrupt hand gesture. “Show me.”

Nodding once, he turned with a liquid grace and continued towards the altar. The click of his heels echoed through the chamber.

Taking a deep breath, Emily followed him, a few steps behind. There was a heavy scent in the air – sharp and spicy and sweet all at once – and it reminded her of the old chapel at Lazarus Court.

When they reached the altar-steps, the Shade moved to the side and gestured for Emily to come forward. Grudgingly, she obliged.

With her heart thumping in her breast, she lifted the front of her white skirts and climbed the marble steps carefully. At last her gaze fell on the lifeless body on the altar...

Gasping, Emily stumbled backwards and almost fell. “What in—” she started, but couldn’t find the words to finish. “Why would you bring me here?”

Ignoring her outburst, the Shade said, “Set me free.”

She looked at him as if he’d gone mad, then turned back to the... mummy... on the altar. Bile rose in her throat. The ghastly

figure was little more than a skeleton with thin, leathery skin stretched over a bony frame, clad in a grey, dilapidated dressing – gown and a dirty loincloth. The skull was hairless, the features beneath it desiccating into something ugly and terrifying. The mouth was half – open in a frozen scream. Emily would have thought the man was dead except his dry, shrivelled lips were moving, whispering over and over, “Lady Lazarus.”

“Who are you?” she uttered, daring to take a step closer.

“Emily!” Suddenly, Lucien’s voice rang through the chamber, loud and strong. “Get away from him!”

Startled by the interruption, the Shade whirled around to face the intruders. Emily turned as well, and her eyes narrowed when she saw Lucien, who stood at the entrance of the chamber, with Lucy and Alwyn at his side. In his hand he held a sheathed sword, the blade slightly curved.

Anger rose inside her. Anger and outrage. “What is the meaning of this?” she snapped as she gestured to the mummy on the altar. “Who is this man? Why has he been haunting my dreams?”

Lucien shook his head. “Not here. It’s not safe. Please, we must leave, now.”

Before Emily could protest, the Shade stepped before her, blocking her way. “She’s mine,” he said softly and confidently. “You’ve lost.”

At those words, the illusion of her father disappeared and the Shade loomed forward, breaking gently and easily into many different

shadows, which rushed through the chamber like a gale. All at once, the candles all went out.

In the next instant Emily heard a groan, then the heavy thud of a body slamming into a wall. Startled, she stumbled down the steps but caught herself.

A moment later, the sound of a sword being drawn echoed thinly in the pitch-black chamber.

Cold with sudden dread, Emily tried to make out something in the darkness, but it was too thick. A sense of urgency rose in her. She needed illumination of some kind.

She'd barely formed the thought when images of fire flashed in her mind's eye, and the candles flickered back to life, casting a pool of wavering light.

The first thing she saw was Alwyn lying crumpled in a heap on the floor by the wall. One of his eyes was swollen shut, and his hair was matted with blood. From where she stood, Emily couldn't tell if he was breathing.

Before she could worry about that, she heard the clash of steel on steel. Turning, she saw Lucien duelling with the Shade, who wielded a sword that seemed to be made of shadows.

As she watched, Lucien parried a blow to his midriff and returned with a swipe to his opponent's head, ripping an oozing gash down the side of his face. The Shade stepped back, eyes narrowed. Lucien lunged again. Their swords met with a loud, jarring clang, sparks flying between them.

“Lady Lazarus?” Emily started and spun around. Lucy stood on the top step of the altar, her red-gold hair like liquid copper in the bright candlelight. “Come, my lady. Now’s our chance.”

“How did you...” Emily began, but didn’t finish. Lucien’s words came back to her again, “He got inside your head, didn’t he?” Gazing into Lucy’s foggy eyes, she knew it to be true. “Who are you?” she asked coldly.

“Later, please. My master has waited long enough.”

Shaking her head, Emily took a step back, her gaze never leaving Lucy’s. “I’m done playing your games. Whoever you are, reveal yourself.”

A curious expression passed over the maid’s face, and a dim spark of gold light flickered in her eyes. “Insolent girl,” she rasped in a voice that was not entirely her own. “I’ve been waiting for you or someone like you for a long time.”

Emily felt power gathering around the altar, dark and dangerous, and an icy shiver crept through her. “What do you want from me?” she demanded.

Suddenly, the distance between them just wasn’t there anymore. “You have the eyes of the magi,” Lucy crooned sweetly. “My master says the old blood runs strong in you.”

Emily tried to respond, to say something, but found herself transfixed, paralysed by the mad fire in the maid’s gaze.

A look of gleeful malice spread over Lucy’s face. “We’re one and the same, you and I,” she rasped. “Your blood will restore me...”

In the next moment, a small blade flashed in the candlelight, and with one swift motion Lucy cut Emily's throat. Blood gushed out, splattering her face and dress.

Then, before Emily had time to realize what was happening, the maid seized her by the hair and forcefully bent her over the altar. Almost simultaneously, the mummy croaked, and his piercing gold eyes opened to stare at her. Slowly, his gaze slid downward to her throat.

"Drink, master," Lucy cooed. "Drink and rise up."

Grunting hoarsely, the mummy pressed his mouth to the gash and sucked on the blood like a leech. His skeletal arms wrapped around Emily's shoulders, holding her tightly against him.

Images flashed through her ladyship's mind. She saw ashes blowing and reforming. Heard the cry of a raptor before a column of fire shot into the star-studded sky.

Then darkness rushed in and the chamber around her faded.

Licking the blood off his lips, the mummy threw Emily's body aside and lifted himself from the altar. Every movement seemed to pain him greatly, but he pressed his teeth together and hesitantly, shakily stepped forward.

With a look of devout reverence, Lucy prostrated herself at his feet, her forehead almost touching the floor. "Master, you're awake."

The mummy didn't pay her any attention. His burning gold eyes swept through the chamber before settling on Lucien. "Doppelgänger," he croaked in a voice like dried leaves.

As if feeling his presence, Lucien stumbled and barely managed to parry the Shade's next thrust, which was heading for his heart. He stabbed forward in response, but missed. Their blades met once more, only to separate again a moment later. Lucien stepped aside and swung—

The Shade lost substance and melted into a puddle at his feet. Then it spread across the floor like ink blots on paper, until finally merging with the mummy's shadow.

Abruptly, Lucien was seized by an invisible power. It lifted him off his feet and flung him against the wall. He lost his breath as he crashed against the stones and the sword fell from his numb fingers. Groaning, he slid down to the floor, but before he could regain his senses, he felt himself being dragged across the tiles by phantom hands.

Finally, he collapsed at the bottom of the altar-steps, drifting on the edge of consciousness. His face was bruised and bleeding, and he wheezed when he breathed. A metallic taste coated his mouth.

Slowly, the mummy came down the steps towards him, supported by Lucy's arm. His legs were shaky and his body weak, but the dark light of triumph burned in his eyes. "It's been far too long since I've beheld one of my doppelgängers," he croaked through dry lips.

Lucien spat blood and propped himself up into a sitting position. "Mordyn," he said, trying not to show his fear. "You look like hell."

A rusty, painful sound that must have been laughter came out of the mummy's parched throat. "I feel worse. But not for long now."

And with a gesture he lifted Lucien off the floor and dangled him in midair, like a puppet suspended by invisible strings. Their eyes met and held – one pair golden, the other as grey as fog. When Mordyn spoke next, his voice was hollow and distant.

"I remember the day your ancestor betrayed me, my doppelgänger." A dark shadow passed over his face. "He should have known better than to think he could murder me."

"Spare me the posturing," Lucien spat the words at him. "You're not immortal. You're just too proud to die."

The mummy made a low growling noise and stumbled forward, pushing Lucy's arm away to stand on his own. "You owe everything to me," he hissed. "I was the one who created your doppelgänger bloodline. Now you'll serve your purpose." Golden fire filled his eyes. "I will cast your soul into the deepest, darkest pit of hell, and claim your body as my own. I will be young again—"

"No." Alwyn's low, pain-filled voice stopped him midsentence. "You'll do nothing of the sort. The House of Lazarus doesn't need you anymore."

Mordyn turned his hateful eyes on the butler and lifted his chin defiantly. "You forget your place, old *friend*. I am master here."

At that an almost sad smile curved Alwyn's lips. "Not any longer."

The words had barely left his mouth when a sudden burst of power smashed into the mummy, taking him off his feet. He flew backwards and slammed into a pillar, cracking his skull.

Gasping, Lucien fell to his knees. The air around him crackled like a living thing, making his ears ring and his eyesight blur. Blinking the darkness away, he forced himself to rise up, forced himself to look at the roaring column of fire that had appeared out of nothingness and engulfed the altar.

For a long moment, he couldn't make out anything more within the flames than the shape of a woman. But he knew who it was.

Staggering, Alwyn got to his feet and went to stand beside Lucien. Bathed in the fiery light, the butler's face looked like it was carved from diamond.

As they watched, Emily materialized out of the fire. The pendant around her neck had melted, and now the burning liquid poured into the wound on her throat, knitting the flesh together. She was naked as the day she was born and all her hair had burnt off.

When she spoke, her voice wasn't her own. It was ageless. "I am the Ouroboros," she said, "the Phoenix Rising."

A hoarse cry came out of Mordyn's throat, while he struggled to stand up. "Impossible! I am Sorcerer Prime—"

His words were cut off when Emily's power slammed into his chest, tossing him across the chamber like an irritating book. Pain filled him as he heard his bones break. He fell on his back and lay there, arms and legs bent in impossible ways, neck broken.

On the steps of the altar, Lucy cried out like a wounded animal. “No! No, master!”

In a fit of blind rage, she turned and threw herself at Emily, trying to stab her with her knife. But she never stood a chance.

With a backhanded gesture, Emily blasted Lucy off her feet. The maid somersaulted through the air like a rag doll, hit the floor and didn’t move again.

Dead silence reigned for a moment in the chamber. Alwyn finally cleared his throat and asked in a professional manner, “My lady?”

For a second or two, Emily seemed not to have heard him at all. Then she blinked and was back to herself again. “He still lives,” was the first thing she said. “I broke every bone in his body and...” Her voice trailed off into silence.

Lucien appeared at her side as if he were afraid she would collapse. “Emily—”

“Your sword,” she interrupted him curtly, her gaze on Mordyn’s twisted form. “Get your sword, Lucien.”

Before he could ask why, Emily strode forward, her back straight and her head held high.

The mummy didn’t try to look up at her; he merely blinked his eyes for a half – second. “Emily...” His broken voice echoed in her skull. “Do you want to know why Lucien was so willing to marry you?” He paused for a moment as if deciding whether to go on or not. “It was your blood. My doppelgängers crave magi blood. I made them that way. I made—“

Instead of continuing, Mordyn giggled like a mad thing. The sound was horrible. Emily felt it with her whole being, and a wave of nausea rose up from the pit of her stomach. “Enough chatter,” she said aloud, at the same time taking the sword from Lucien’s hands. “I’m out of patience with you...”

Without finishing, she swung the heavy weapon in a crashing arc and cut off the mummy’s head. Sparks flew as the blade’s edge struck the floor, but Emily didn’t even wince.

A tight smile touched her lips. “There, that’s better,” she said, handing the sword back to Lucien. “Now, do exactly as I tell you. Dismember his body and bury the parts, in different graves, throughout the estate grounds.” She paused for a moment, then added thoughtfully: “When it’s done, bring me his head. I want to borrow his brain, such as it is.”

* * * * *

Her ladyship slept. At first, her dreams were peaceful. She was with her father. Patiently he was teaching her to waltz in the Music Room of his mansion in the Ariséian countryside. They were laughing, and she was so happy.

Then, in the span of a single heartbeat, her father wavered and stumbled as if his legs were giving way under him. Coughing blood, he pulled back, and his body turned almost transparent, like a reflection in glass. She reached for his hand, but he vanished.

The Music Room dissolved around her. Immediately the air became stale, smelling faintly of mould. She found herself in a dark stone hallway leading to a heavy oak door, which stood ajar.

Picking up her skirts, Emily carefully stepped forward, her breath coming out in white puffs. In the stillness she could hear the sounds of splashing water and a man cursing. After a moment, she recognized the voice as Lucien's.

A shudder went through her. There was something strange about this dream – it felt too real. Too intense.

Pushing the thought away, Emily walked toward the door at the end of the hallway. Lucien's cries were getting louder and more insistent. She heard water spilling onto the floor, followed by what sounded like the cracking of ice.

Then a quiet voice said, rather bluntly, "My lord, be still; you're acting childish."

Whatever Lucien hissed in reply was lost in the wet chuckle of yet more water. No one spoke after that.

Squaring her shoulders, Emily stood motionless for a second or two, then reached for the door handle... Her fingers passed through it like smoke, and this time she knew she wasn't dreaming. Somehow, she had left her sleeping body and had ventured into the vaults of Lazarus Court.

Before she could dwell on the idea, the door swung open and Emily found herself eye to eye with Alwyn, who looked uncharacteristically pale and frazzled. His hair was dripping wet, as if he'd just bathed, and his tie had come unknotted. Fat drops of water

ran down his face. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to reveal a red and gold phoenix on one forearm.

“Lady Lazarus...” he started, but didn’t finish the sentence. A look of understanding spread across his face and he smiled. “Why, my lady, don’t you know it’s impolite to eavesdrop?”

Emily didn’t seem to hear his question. Her gaze was set on the large brass tub behind him. Lucien was inside it, white-blue ice and water covering him to shoulder level. His skin had the pallor of the dead and he was barely breathing, but his eyes were wide open. They were bloodshot and pain-wracked. A trail of blood dripped from the corner of his mouth to his chin.

Shaken, Emily tried to go into the chamber, but Alwyn barred her way. “That’s not a good idea at the moment.”

“What’s wrong with him?” she demanded, in a tone trembling with alarm.

“What’s wrong is that he’s burning with the bloodlust,” the butler retorted impatiently. “I’ve been trying to bring the fever down with cool baths, but it’s taking longer than usual.” After a pause, he added, “The mastiff’s dead.”

At those words Emily suddenly felt sick. “Bloodlust,” she repeated hollowly. “He’s hungry for my—”

“The cold should help us contain the cravings and keep you both alive,” Alwyn reassured her. “He’ll be fine by morning.”

“How long has this been going on?”

A grim smile curled the butler’s mouth. “Don’t flatter yourself, my lady. His lordship’s been afflicted with the bloodlust for

far longer than he's been your husband." He nodded towards the tub.
"This is Mordyn's last revenge on the doppelgänger bloodline."

Emily swallowed. "Can he see me?" she queried.

"No. As far as he's aware, you're not here at all."

"How did *you* know?"

Alwyn smirked. "I have many gifts, Lady Lazarus. This is one of them." As he spoke, a slight note of challenge crept into his voice. "Now, if there's nothing else—"

Emily didn't hear the rest of what he said. A sudden image flashed into her mind, of a tall, spindly being with diamond skin and great wings that glittered like rainbows. It was so like a human moth! At the time she'd thought it merely a figment of her imagination. Now, however, she knew that it hadn't been.

"I saw you," she heard herself say almost numbly. "When the Ouroboros took me over. I saw your true face."

Abruptly Alwyn's smile faded, and his eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid I don't follow your meaning."

Emily's gaze bore into his. "I am Prime. Do not attempt to lie to me," she warned. "I know the truth of what I saw."

"And what is that, Lady Lazarus?"

Her voice lowered a fraction. "You're not human."

Before Alwyn could respond, they both heard the splashing of ice water and looked in time to see Lucien rise from the tub, a triumphant, bloodthirsty madness in his eyes. For an instant he seemed to stare straight at Emily – then he snarled and lunged forward, his teeth bared like an animal.

Everything happened in a blink of time. As Alwyn started to turn, Lucien jumped on his back and plunged his teeth into his neck, tearing flesh to get at his carotid artery. An otherworldly glow filled his eyes and he tasted warm blood in his mouth. It drove him completely mad.

With a sharp jerk of his head and a crimson spray, Lucien ripped out the butler's throat with his teeth. Alwyn's body collapsed on the floor at Emily's feet. Blood splattered over the hem of her dress, but fell through it like it was made of mist. She didn't even notice. A cold numbness had taken hold of her; in morbid fascination, she watched as Lucien feasted on the butler's blood, his Adam's apple moving as he swallowed.

Finally, licking his lips like a dog, he pushed Alwyn's body away and crawled to the wall. With a grunt, he brought himself up into a sitting position.

For an instant, his face looked up at hers, pale and anxious, and Emily could swear that he saw her transparent form watching him.

Then the red glow of bloodlust faded from his eyes and he collapsed into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Emily awoke with a start, her heart racing and her breath short. She sat up, damp with sweat, and ran a hand over her face, shivering as the blanket slid from her naked body. Outside, rain beat against the windows and the wind rattled the panes. Lightning lit the sky. It

illuminated the bedroom just as a tremendous crack of thunder shook the walls.

In the flash, Emily saw twin fires smouldering in the deep eye-sockets of Mordyn's severed head, which rested on a shelf above the fireplace. A malicious, triumphant smile twisted the dead sorcerer's face.

In that moment she knew that Alwyn's demise hadn't been an act of fate. Mordyn had orchestrated it all. He had used his last ounce of power to fuel Lucien's bloodlust, forcing him to kill his friend.

Shuddering, Emily rose and went to stand before the fireplace. A mixture of emotions stirred inside her – disbelief at the lengths to which Mordyn would go to punish anyone who denied him what he wanted, followed by a sense of relief in knowing that Alwyn could no longer be a threat to her authority.

“You're a handful, you know that?” she told the dead sorcerer, her tone half-mocking. “I'd be wise to cast your head into the fireplace and be done with it. But I won't. Instead, I'll make you an offer.” As she spoke, a bolt of lightning lit the window, and claps of thunder rattled the glass. Emily continued: “Teach me the diabolic arts, and when I'm ready, I'll put your soul to rest.” Impatience laced her voice. “Just make no mistake – you're no longer master here.”

At that, Mordyn's mouth curled into a hateful grimace and he uttered something incomprehensible, his voice sounding like sandpaper. A flash of gold fire flickered in his eyes.

Holding his gaze steadily, Emily leaned closer and said, “Think on my offer. I'm sure you'll come to the correct decision.” A

sardonic smile spread across her face and her next words echoed inside his skull. “After all, we’re the same, you and I.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. R. Manev is a writer and an avid reader who has a passion for languages, the Victorian era, and everything Gothic and retro. He is currently completing a MA in English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Ulster. His short fiction has appeared in journals such as Holdfast Magazine in the UK and Shadowdance and Fantasy Factor in Bulgaria. He has also contributed a story to Mountain Springs House's second annual Halloween anthology. He is a member of the Derry Playhouse Writers and the Varna Earthsea Club. When not writing or reading the odd novel, he is obsessed with history and French cinema, especially Christophe Honoré's movies. He also enjoys a good cup of coffee. Follow him on twitter at @SRManev

GUIZHOU GIRL

S.L. KERNS

IGGY had his head over on the hospital bed next to him, his crown wedged almost completely under the back of his lifeless lover. He tried to hold onto the feeling of having her, not wanting to let go. This would be the last chance he could hold her close, her body still a little warm. Almost sleeping, not quite gone.

“Don’t leave me,” he sobbed. “You hear me, Ling? Don’t you leave me!”

They didn’t have a proper hospital nearby, just a clinic – and there was nothing proper about it. The flickering light in the narrow, filthy room matched the thumping of his heart, sporadic. Pushing his head in a little closer, he thought of his nearly two-year love affair with Ling. The first time he saw her was at the Lantern Festival in 1977. The dark sky lit up with hundreds, maybe thousands, of paper lanterns. Ling, in blue, was doing a traditional dance in the center of the village. There were many pretty young women stepping to the beat of the big drums along with her, and Iggy stood in a trance from the music. It wasn’t until the song stopped that he realized he had been staring at the slender girl on the far left, her porcelain face, thick eyebrows, and chubby pink cheeks mesmerizing him. At the end of the traditional dance he introduced himself to her in broken Mandarin. She looked into his blue eyes – the first she had ever seen – and giggled, all the while wondering if he was blind. That moment they both felt they had found someone truly special.

As he stared at her pale face, the pinkness of her cheeks turning blue, he began blaming himself for her tragic death. And the baby's critical condition.

Having busted all of his cash moving to China, he couldn't afford to get her proper health care. He came on a whim one day when he decided he could no longer stand his menial job as a mechanic in Kentucky. His grades had always been good, but not good enough to earn him a scholarship, and raising tobacco with his dad never amounted to enough money to pay for his enrollment in university.

He had always dreamed of seeing the world and really didn't care where he started. Wanting shock and major change, he decided on Asia. One day he read an article about an older American male from New York who had spent the last 15 years teaching English all around Southeast Asia. Iggy had a little fear of starting off in Southeast Asia; after all, this was the seventies, the war with Vietnam remained fresh on his mind. Bruce Lee had been in the news a lot back then and Iggy was a fan. He knew Bruce was from Hong Kong, but figured it was all China anyway; plus, the vastness of the country would give him a better chance of landing a job.

Ling's absent family were of no help with the medical expenses; they had a house full of tobacco farmers, too, and were barely scraping by in China's poorest province, Guizhou. In the beginning, Iggy felt her family had hated him. The only communication they had was interpreted through Ling and body language. It wasn't until Iggy joined her father on the tobacco farm

that her family started to warm up to him. It started with her father. After he discovered Iggy knew a thing or two about tobacco, his scolding eyes turned bright and he smiled for the first time.

None of that lasted very long.

The news of Ling's pregnancy brought shame to her family; they feared losing face to the locals. Ling's enraged father told her to "get out of his sight" and sent her packing. Being shunned by the family wasn't the only problem. They both knew pregnancy outside of wedlock was punishable by a hefty fine, so they did their best to keep off the local law enforcement's radar until after the wedding.

Despite all the drama they had inevitably faced, Iggy and Ling embraced each other with ecstasy and thoughts of their new, little family. "I'll always love you," she had said.

Squeezing Ling's cold hands, tears ran down Iggy's cheeks as he recalled how sad his lover had been when she came knocking on his door with a small bag of clothes. She stood pouting and soaking wet in the rain, her makeup smeared. He swore to himself to make sure her decision to be with him was a good one. They signed marriage papers a month later with only Ling's youngest sister, and Iggy's boss present.

Those 8 months they had lived together, made them more connected than ever. Iggy went to work in the local elementary school 5 days a week, and Ling quit her job at the toy factory. She took it easy at home and helped prepare her husband's meals. The culture shunned any kind of public display of affection, but in their free time they often strolled shoulder-to-shoulder through the narrow

dirt roads, the trees on both sides forming a natural canopy above them, enjoying the fresh air of Guizhou. Their communication had improved. Ling helped Iggy with his Mandarin through basic conversation, and Iggy introduced her to a lot of American movies and music. Her English improved tremendously. She took an interest in hard rock and punk; she had never heard anything like them. Iggy used to tease her about how southern her accent was becoming from too many Marlon Brando flicks; she couldn't get enough of him, especially the one where he fell in love with the Japanese actress.

Iggy sat on the edge of the clinic bed, leaned down to her ear, and whispered, "I wish I could hear your best Brando accent now." More tears streaked down his face and dropped on her hair.

Their baby didn't even have a name yet. They were waiting to see her first. It was the way things were done in China, and Iggy felt it made a lot of sense to get a feel of her personality before giving her a name.

The doctor knocked on the open door before stepping in the room. Iggy looked up expecting to see his baby.

The short, chubby doctor stood motionless. His eyes stared into Iggy's briefly, a frown on his face. "I'm sorry," he said.

Iggy stopped breathing. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He wished Ling would raise up and pinch him.

"May I see her," Iggy asked.

The doctor nodded his head and, with a gentle wave of his hand, invited Iggy to follow him.

He was led down the gloomy corridor to a small room with a large glass window. The doctor stepped inside and left Iggy waiting by the door. The place was packed, still Iggy heard nothing but his own pulse.

The doctor returned and handed Iggy his baby wrapped in a pink towel, her tiny body stiff. She had her mother's eyebrows and chubby cheeks, his sharp nose. Iggy's teardrops rolled off his chin and onto his unnamed firstborn.

He carried her back to Ling's room. Lying beside his wife, he placed his daughter on her chest and held them both. The stress of the day caught up to him, and he fell asleep.

The doctor returned a half hour later with a piece of paper in his hand. He tapped Iggy on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir," he said.

Iggy's eyes opened. He saw his wife beside him, confusion set in and for a second he forgot she was gone.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I need you to sign some papers," the doctor said. He put a few sheets of paper on the table beside Iggy. "Take your time. I'll come back later to pick them up." He left.

Iggy sat up and grabbed the papers. There were three sheets: one birth certificate, and two death certificates. He started with the birth certificate. He looked at his daughter in eternal sleep on her mother's chest. He wrote down the name Ling and signed it. He left the death certificates unsigned for several hours. Holding his family tightly in his arms, he made a decision; his wife and daughter would be cremated and kept in the same urn.

* * * * *

A month later, Iggy wandered aimlessly outside with a scruffy beard on his face and his white Bowie shirt on, now browned from excessive use. The people of the town steered clear of him. He staggered under the natural canopy of the narrow dirt road, a bottle of Baijiu in his hand. He stopped. His body swaying, he unscrewed the cap and took a swig of “the White Devil.” Iggy couldn’t remember the last time he had been sober. He hoped he never would. Remembering that might cause him to remember the emotional pain of his past. All he wanted now was any kind of physical pain to keep him distracted.

The evening rolled on and Iggy found himself sitting on the ground, leaned up against the wall of a shanty. The doors were open and he listened to a group of men inside. The booze was flowing as they bickered over a game of Mahjong. Iggy laughed to himself when he heard hands slam down on the table and a man shout in Mandarin “Fuck this.”

The sound of footsteps neared Iggy, still hunkered down by the wall. The sore loser stepped out of the shanty. He stood shirtless, his belly hanging over his belt buckle. Cigarette smoke poisoned the air around him. The extravagant gold chain hanging from this poor specimen’s neck made Iggy chuckle. This man’s appearance reminded Iggy of his dickhead father-in-law. *The son of a bitch never even made it to the funeral*, he thought.

The shirtless man turned to Iggy and beamed down at him. “Something funny?” he asked.

Iggy raised his bottle of Baijiu to his lips and finished it off. Using the wall to support him, he slowly rose to his feet. “Maybe,” he slurred.

The shirtless man stepped towards Iggy, and pointed his finger in Iggy’s face. “Why don’t you get out of my sight?”

Those were the same words Ling said her father had used when he kicked her out. Iggy boiled inside. He smacked the man’s finger out of his face. The man grabbed Iggy by his shirt and pulled him up closer to him. He spat in Iggy’s face. Iggy sent a knee into the man’s groin, and watched him hit the ground. The ruckus from the scuffle must have grabbed the attention of the other Mahjong players because they came barreling out the door.

“What the hell is going on here?” said a younger man through several missing teeth.

“Get his ass,” shouted a stocky guy with a long white beard, his skin all dried up from years of farming.

Five guys surrounded Iggy. The shirtless man got back to his feet and took a swing at him. Iggy dodged it, and threw a jab. It connected with the man’s nose and blood gushed out. Iggy felt a blow to the back of his head. His legs lost feeling and he hit the dirt. A bare foot struck him in the face. He curled up, trying to protect himself as the five men surrounded him and beat the hell out of him. He was in a tremendous amount of pain bleeding all over. They continued kicking him.

He thought about his lovely wife Ling and the precious daughter he never got a chance to know. Their chubby, pink cheeks.

Another kick caught him in his chin and he nearly blacked out.

The first time he met Ling she was dancing in blue.

He felt his face swelling up. He thought if he could see himself, he'd probably look like the elephant man. Another kick came in. Iggy could no longer breathe.

A smile came across his face. "I'll always love you," she had said.

That was the last thought Iggy had before the end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.L. Kerns may have his roots planted in Kentucky, but he has branched out to a life in Asia. In 2009, he moved to Bangkok, Thailand and spent over 5 years there. He can speak, read, and write in Thai and is now working on learning Japanese, with his Thai wife, at his current home in Takamatsu, Japan. He loves reading, bodybuilding, playing punk rock on bass guitar, and soaking in the stories of anyone who's got one to tell. Always with a book in his hands, he got tired of hearing his friends and family tell him he needed to try writing, and so in late 2015 he began by using his surplus of wild experiences to fuel his works. He fell in love with writing, and has written several short stories since. His first ever submission, *Scrap Metal Memories*, was published by Flash Fiction Magazine, and a few others are out, over at 101 Words, entitled *Think and Drive*, *Pastalosophy*, and *Loudmouth*. He is a graduate of Western Kentucky University, where he majored in Sociology and minored in Criminology. Currently, he is a full-time English instructor, and a blogger for Muay Thai Lab.

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LOON AGE DAYDREAM

CHAD LUTZKE

"THE world needs another duke."

My friend John said to me as we pushed through the double doors of Underwood High School and out into the first day of life without school. A summer vacation for some, but for the seniors it was true freedom after serving a 12-year sentence.

I knew right away John was referencing David Bowie – the musician for whom my friend held an almost uncomfortable obsession. The poor guy's grades had actually dropped significantly after hearing of Bowie's death earlier that year. And while I myself was a bit bummed about the music world losing someone as great as Mr. Bowie, I found myself nowhere near the condition John was. He was now shedding tears regularly and spending long, silent moments daydreaming out the window, while carving lyrical scribbles into the chairs and tables at school. The rest of that year, John gathered more than a few odd looks and strongly opinionated remarks.

The next time I saw John was a week later. He didn't look well. And though the summer sun was providing its beaming ultraviolet rays on our little town, he caught none of it. If anything, he was paler than usual and perhaps even a little ill appearing. His newly dyed bright orange hair certainly didn't compliment his complexion, and I could plainly see by the butchered cut that he was paying homage to his dearly departed favorite musician.

He'd caught me staring at his hair, winked and said "Dig the screwed down hairdo?"

John just wasn't the same, and each time I saw him he seemed to have lost a bit more of himself.

Another two weeks went by and I saw John at the record store picking up some vinyl he'd ordered. It was profoundly clear that he had lost at least 20 pounds and was pale as ever, with sporadic red blemishes on his arms and neck. This time I had to confront him. I approached him in a rather timid manner but brought up his changes nonetheless. I flat out asked him about his pale skin and weight loss and asked if he was okay.

"I've never felt more alive, Richard."

"It's just that you look a little...ill."

"You mean my snow-white tan?"

"Well, yes. That and your obvious weight loss."

"A thin, white duke can't very well be a thin, white duke without being both thin and white can he?"

I said nothing. I couldn't.

"The tan is a bleaching process. These little imperfections you see," he pointed to a few of the irritated areas on his arms, "will eventually work themselves out."

There wasn't a whole lot to say. John had truly gone down a different path. Bowie's music certainly had an unhealthy amount of influence over his unstable mind. But if I'm to be honest, I was curious as to just how far he was going to take this.

It would only be another week before my curiosity was satisfied and I would begin to truly fear for my friend's safety.

John had called me late at night and asked that I meet him at Jones Park—a dimly-lit area with swings and a monument acknowledging a local historical figure; a place we often frequented through our school years together. Before the changes.

When I got to the park, John was waiting on a bench, a hood covering his head. Only the beer light from the store across the street illuminated the area.

“Hey, man. What's up?” I spoke like an intimidated stranger. I didn't know John anymore, and him sitting shrouded in a hoodie at night in the park added to my already guarded demeanor.

John stood abruptly and threw back his hood. “He could lick ‘em by smiling!” His voice boomed in the dark, startling me. But it was his smile and the bolt of missing skin across his face that made me turn away in disgust and fear. The thought of John having peeled his own skin to form a Bowie – esque lightning bolt from his hairline to his jaw disturbed me to the point of near panic. Poor John was helplessly out of his mind and deeply escalating into self-mutilating behavior that was beyond frightening. He had become his own Dr. Frankenstein of sorts, unconventionally giving birth to something that was supposed to be dead – the persona of one David Bowie.

John saw me look away and screamed violently. “Turn and face the strange, Richard!”

I looked. Impressively so, the edges of the wound were cut with great precision. Yet, it was no less hideous. I'd seen this type of

modification before, though normally something small and tribal on an arm or leg. My own face burned as I gazed upon the large, angry red wound.

“That’s right, Richard. Keep your ‘lectric eye on me.”

I went from wanting to turn away to not being able to, as the beer light flashed red and blue across my friend’s insanity.

I tried my best to keep my composure and express my concern once again. “John, I’m worried about you. I like Bowie too. I like...*liked*...him a lot. But he’s gone and I think we should celebrate the art he left behind by just appreciating it...with our ears and eyes. And that’s it.”

John’s face brightened, awakened, as though a brilliant idea had just been formed. “I think you’re right, man! Why didn’t I think of it before?”

His enthusiastic tone and spacey stare told me we weren’t on the same page.

“Screwed up eyes!” He said without looking at me but glaring trance-like at the blinking beer light.

“What?”

“To go with my screwed down hairdo.”

John walked over to me and stood close to my face. “Punch me!”

“What are you doing?”

“With your class ring. Punch me with it. In my left eye. Make sure the ring hits me in the eye.”

I then recalled a story I'd heard concerning Bowie's left eye and his permanently dilated pupil due to a fight he'd gotten into with his friend.

"I'm not doing that, John. No way!"

"Hit me!"

"I said no, man. Get a grip."

John shoved me hard. Hard enough to nearly knock me to the ground. And for a moment I thought I *would* hit him. But that face. His mutilated, glistening wet face. *Blue. Red. Blue. Red.*

I turned to leave and John snatched at my coat, pulling me back. A pen I had in my jacket fell out and onto the ground. John let go of my coat and grabbed the pen. He looked at me and then back at the pen and held it near his eye.

I didn't watch him. And as I walked away I heard the pain-filled screams of my demented friend as he descended further into madness, suffering at his own hand. I didn't need to look back to know the next time I saw him he'd be short an eye and even further from reality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chad Lutzke lives in Battle Creek, MI. with his wife and children where he works as a medical language specialist. For over two decades, he has been a contributor to several different outlets in the independent music and film scene including articles, reviews, and artwork. Chad loves music, rain, sarcasm, dry humor, and cheese. He has a strong disdain for dishonesty and hard-boiled eggs. He has written for Famous Monsters of Filmland, Rue Morgue and Scream magazine. He is a regular contributor to Horror Novel Reviews, Halloween Forevermore and Heavy Planet. You can find his fictional work in Shadows & Light #3, #4, #5 A Merry Scary Christmas, Devolution Z Magazine #3, Straight to Video II: The Sequel, Straight to Video III: Conquest of the Planet of the Tapes, Toys in the Attic: A Collection of Evil Playthings, and his Double Feature Collection series, including books I, II, & III: Two Before Dawn, Little Ones of Wood & Hair, and Death Dealers: Aid from the Elderly. Chad's 18-story horror anthology Night as a Catalyst was released in spring 2015. In 2016 several more releases will be added to Lutzke's body of work, including Car Nex: From Hell they Came and Cadence in Decay and What Goes Around...anthologies. He can be found lurking the internet at the following address:

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PIN UPS

ROSS WEST

ROXY sat in the big leather chair, Roland's chair, staring vaguely at the muted TV, swirling a half-empty can of beer in a slow circle. She sipped, aimed the remote, and pushed the button. Commercial. Soap opera. *The Price is Right*. Commercial. Commercial. *I Love Lucy*. Sports. CNN—the bold letters caught her eye, *BREAKING NEWS*—CHILD ASCENDS IN RUNAWAY BALLOON.

She unmuted. A six-year-old kid in Colorado. The parents are frantic. Authorities are scrambling—Larimer County sheriff's deputies, the FAA. Some kind of homemade flying saucer.

A final gulp finished the beer. That poor little boy, Falcon, gone, taken by the hand of God or fate or whatever. She tossed the can to the floor with the others, where it landed with a hollow aluminum ping.

The telephone in the kitchen rang. Nobody she wants to talk to. It rang again and again. She stood and strode toward the insistent squawk. Grabbing the cordless receiver, she grunted, almost a word.

"Hi, it's me."

Nancy. Probably wants to know how Roland's doing. Roxy ran her fingers through her uncombed hair. How do you *think* he's doing, Nance? She turned and paced back to the living room, rubbing at one of her eyes.

"Are you there?" Nancy asked.

“Um.”

“How’d it go yesterday? Any change?”

“Miracle recovery. He’s writing his damn memoirs.”

“Yeah, okay...well look, Rox, the thing is, the nurse called. She said you were out of it ...again.”

“The fat cow.”

“This is hell for you—for all of us—but mostly you. I get that. But this isn’t good— and it’s not just the nurse. We’ve all seen it, for weeks now.”

Roxy plopped into the big chair. She looked around at the cans scattered on the floor. Shits from some huge metal dog.

“Rox? Are you there?”

“Where am I gonna go?” She scrunched her eyes and brought her thumb to her mouth, biting at the nail.

“We’re concerned. Me and Dave. Molly and Carl. Paula, Sandy.”

“Mind your own business.”

“We’re coming over. Tonight.”

“Huh?” Then it clicked; she saw the movie. Her friends gathered to tell her how they in their infinite caring wisdom have decided how she should and shouldn’t be living her life. “*That ...is NOT ...happening.*”

“This isn’t working for you,” Nancy said. “And Dave knows this counselor who specializes—”

“You’re the one with the problem. All of you. You go see Dave’s fucking counselor!”

“We’re just trying—”

“I’m fifty-two years old. You’re not my mother,” she yelled, then jumped from the chair and stomped back toward the kitchen holding the handset in front of her face, her mouth drawn into a fierce scowl. Nancy’s faraway voice came from the phone’s tiny speaker, “Rox, we’ll get this fixed. Just don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

She slammed the phone down, strode around and around in tight circles until she slowed and stopped. She glanced from the piles of dirty dishes in the sink to the cluster of empties on the counter to the stacks of unopened mail heaped on the table. They would be coming—once Nancy set her mind to something—tonight, tomorrow, sooner or later. Better not to be around. She cracked another beer.

In the bathroom, she searched the medicine cabinet for the small plastic prescription bottle of Xanax—two pills rattled inside the amber tube. She swallowed one of them then went to the night table next to the bed, opened the drawer, and got out the cigar box where Roland kept their stash. Nothing much left—pipe, rolling papers, a baggie with a few crumbs of weed in it.

She ran a brush through her hair, put drops in her eyes, and gargled. She dressed quickly and searched for her purse buried in the covers of the unmade bed. Keys. Phone.

Plenty of cash. She tossed in the Xanax bottle.

Hurrying through the house, she paused in the living room to stare at the television where a silver balloon that looked like a

Jiffy Pop bag sailed through a cloudless blue sky. She grabbed the remote, pushed the off button.

Using her foot like a broom, she swept the empty beer cans together, knelt, and with deft hands carefully stacked the cans in a pyramid, one row of four at the base, then three, two, and one on top. Rising to her feet, she stared at the little monument, then around the still and silent room to the black rectangle of the TV, Roland's empty chair. She turned abruptly and pulled a pair of large sunglasses from her big sack of a purse, pushed them onto her face. Car keys in hand, she walked to the kitchen, got a fifth of vodka, and headed out the front door.

She drove the sedan down the twisting turns of the hillside neighborhood. Rounding a high corner, she looked out over the city. Two days of rain had washed the smog away, leaving the noontime air unusually clear, already in the low 80s and heading higher. After crossing the bridge spanning the Los Angeles River, she entered an industrial area where Roland had been so excited to find all the room he needed for the business. She turned into the parking lot at *ROLL CITY—Custom, Speed, Paint & Repair*. Inside the window of the manager's office, Herman the German looked up from his desk and, seeing her, hurried out—stout and ruddy, a big smile on his face.

She untangled herself from the seatbelt and stepped from the car.

“Hey-hey, Roxy,” he said. “Good to see you back.”

“I want the cabriolet.”

He stiffened.

“Get it,” she demanded.

His pale-blue eyes narrowed. “That’s Roland’s baby. Nobody drives it but—”

“He’s not gonna be doing any more *driving*,” she barked. “I don’t wanna argue about it. Just bring it out.” She folded her arms across her chest.

Herman puffed out his cheeks and blew. “Oker-doker.” He scratched above his ear.

“It’s gonna take me a little while to get ’er set to go.”

She didn’t respond and he shuffled off toward the storage building behind the paint sheds.

She called after him, “Is Miguel around?”

“Try the garage. Bay 3.”

She entered the shop’s front showroom, where a pair of low-slung custom choppers gleamed, one midnight purple and the other cherry-red metal flake. Their gas tanks were adorned with Roland’s trademark “feathery filigree” pin striping, insanely intricate patterns of curlicue lines he created with endless patience and a steady hand. Pushing open the swinging doors to the garage, she heard the echoing sounds of a radio, the clank of tools, and Miguel’s easy laugh. He was screwing in a taillight and pattering with someone working underneath the car. Thin, dark, and about twenty-five, his neck bore a snake tattoo twisting from under the collar of his neat shop coveralls. He saw her and his face lit up.

“Roxy, *mi amiga*!” He slipped the screwdriver into his pocket, pulled out a red rag, and wiped his hands.

She smiled and beckoned him with a wave. When he was near she leaned in close.

“I want something,” she said. “Can you fix me up?”

His eyebrows rose, “Something ...like what?”

“Those pills you got me that time—those were good. Or anything else. But now, right now.”

“Yeah, sure, I—” he began, but then caught himself. “You okay? Whassup behind them glasses?”

She reached into her purse and pulled out three hundred-dollar bills. “Here,” she pushed the money into his hand. “Help me out.”

“You sure?”

She nodded.

“Okay. You’re the boss,” he said. “I’ll make a call. Shouldn’t take long.”

She returned to the showroom and crossed it on her way to the back offices.

Herman’s radio, tuned as always to an oldies station, played the 5th Dimension’s “Up, Up, and Away.” She paused in front of her office. How long had she been away? Since her birthday, but how long had that been? Two weeks, three? A blur.

She dug the key from her purse, and unlocked the door. Inside, everything seemed different somehow, altered. It was the same place she’d come for years, the same desk and computer where she’d kept the books, logged checks, done payroll, and paid suppliers, but now it was all out of kilter, like in a dream. She

looked at the framed photo on the file cabinet—she and Roland on their honeymoon in Hawaii, leis, aloha shirts, and umbrella drinks, behind them the palm trees and ocean and a sunset sky throbbing with Froot Loop colors. It looked alien, unreal, a horrible garish travel poster—as if somebody faked the whole thing on Photoshop.

Out of the desk's top drawer she got a plastic keychain—*PRESTIGE PAINTS*—holding a single key. She walked down the hallway to the last door, inserted the key. The lock clicked and she waited, took a deep breath, and steadied herself.

She pulled the dark glasses from her eyes and stepped into the dark room—the air was cool, stale, beginning to smell of mildew. It had been almost six months. Half a year. Impossible.

She switched on the overhead neon tubes that flickered to life and bathed the large windowless room in a greenish light. Brick-and-board shelves lined the two long sidewalls. On the left, hundreds of books of various sizes and shapes, were neatly organized like in a library—fine art books and motor head books about cars, engines, designers; comic books and Vargas and Bettie Page; catalogs for specialty parts; technical manuals for cars and motorcycles and air brushes and machine tools. And on the right, what Roland called “the goods,” shelf after shelf of photo albums containing thousands of pictures of every custom piece he'd ever done, from back in the early days to all his work at Roll City.

Filling most of the floor space were the rows of work benches Roland built specially to hold his magazines—somewhere around 12,000 in all: *Hot Rod*, *Bike*, *Custom Rod*, *Chopper*,

Airbrush Action, vintage *Speed Age* issues, dozens more, in perfect stacks, not a single one out of place—all “neat as a pin and hammered tight,” as he liked to say. On the benches to her right was the heart of his collection, every issue of *Street Rodder* and *Easyriders* since they started publishing in the early Seventies. His sacred repository vault—a vast catalog, hundreds of thousands of pages of articles and photos, photos, and more photos, feeding him, giving him ideas, inspiring him. He liked to quote Picasso about how good artists copy, great artists steal.

And somehow, using some incomprehensible filing system, he kept it all in his head. He would be talking to Herman about how he wanted a certain job to look and he’d go straight to the right stack, the right magazine, the right page, the right picture. “I’m thinking something just about like this, but with two-tone paint, lowered, with a chopped-back custom grille.” He called the room his brain.

She pulled a folding chair from against the wall and sat down in the middle of the benches, surrounded by the expanse of magazines.

She thought of the customers who came back again and again. If Roland had an idea for how to paint your car, you knew you were going to get something special—an original. Big or small, it didn’t matter to him—a \$10,000 job or lowballing an estimate to help a kid trick-out some crappy little Sentra. Seen it over and over. How many times had she told him it was no way to run a business?

He'd just laugh it off and say, "That's the Devil talkin'." End of discussion.

She stood and gently brushed her fingers across a stack of *Easyriders*. The magazine's custom cover bike and the half-naked model straddling it were coated with a thin layer of dust and, as she noticed when she looked around, so was everything in the room. Cobwebs laced the neon lights and rounded the hard angles of the bookshelves. From her purse she pulled out the bottle, tilted back a slug, and squeezed her eyes tight.

* * * * *

It's his keys again, those goddam keys. We search the car and his coat and the driveway in case he dropped them coming into the house, and we comb through every room he's been in or might have been in. *Where do you remember having them last?* He forgets Nancy and Dave's kids' names and he can't open the combination lock on the shed. Sometimes he pretends it is nothing, just a senior moment, and other times he flies into a frustrated rage, angry at himself, at the world. Something's wrong, I can see it, but I don't know what to say. When we're around other people he tries his damndest to cover for the lapses or make excuses, and I try to cover for him, too.

Finally he admits to wondering if maybe something isn't right. We talk about seeing a doctor, but decide to first check it out on the Internet. That leads to the weird diet with all the vegetables

and fruit juices, the vitamins, and the exercise routine. He's up early every day jogging through the neighborhood before breakfast.

Then the night he doesn't come home. I'm starting to worry and when the cop car pulls into the driveway. I can just make out Roland's shadowed outline in the back seat. Before they get him out, the one cop tells me they found him walking along the highway, no idea of where he was or where he was going. *Does he have any medical conditions?*

When they finally bring him up and I get a good look at him in the porch light ...He doesn't know what's going on, doesn't know why the cops are here, why they've brought him home, or from where. Confused, disoriented, and frightened. Big old Roland, scared of nothing—but now he's scared all right, I can see it in his eyes. He knows that the diet, the exercise, the vitamins, none of it is working. He knows he is losing his grip. And maybe worst of all, he still has it together enough to know he's on a one-way street.

Two weeks of doctors and tests and consultation and *blah, blah, blah*. Genetics, exposure to chemicals in Vietnam, drugs, the lead in the paint dust he stripped off a thousand vintage cars, inhaling solvents and paints at the shop. *Did he always wear a respirator?* The doctor gives us the diagnosis—"aggressive early onset dementia, of unknown etiology." And not a damn thing we can do about it. Nothing. So, just like that, it's time to move him into the care facility. The first of May. May Day. What the pilot says before the plane crashes.

* * * * *

She turned out the lights, pulled the library door shut, and leaned her forehead against the frame. She didn't move until Herman's voice boomed from the other end of the hall,

“The Ford's ready.”

She set the lock and got her sunglasses back in place, then made her way down the hall and out the door into the blazing sunlight. Herman stood across the broad asphalt lot, next to the '34 cabriolet. The two-seater hot rod's deep velvety maroon paint glowed warmly under the soft French vanilla of its cloth top. The chrome glistened on the car's big headlamps, peering out from either side of the engine housing. She took her time making her way toward it.

* * * * *

Roland hears about an old Ford for sale and he can't stop talking about it. It is a classic roadster and the perfect car for the full restoration he's always dreamed of doing. Over the course of a few phone calls with the owner, he gets more and more excited. Pretty soon he and Hermann are driving the flatbed up to someplace in eastern Oregon to pick up the car that's been out in a barn for forty years. When they get back, he's jubilant. All I see is the dusty outline of an ancient heap with a cracked windshield, caked with

more bird shit than I've ever seen. And all he keeps saying is "Oh, she's a beauty.

Hardly any rust at all."

He works three years of weekends and late nights at the shop—and loves every minute of it. "Painting my masterpiece," he says. The write up in *Hot Rodder* gushes about the restoration, the exquisite craftsmanship. It says the car is like a Stradivarius, a comparison Herman has to explain, which leads to the rod's nickname, the Stradahoovious.

* * * * *

Herman wiped a soft white cloth over the chromed hood ornament, a charging greyhound. "Roland always says 'the handling on that cabrio's a bitch,'" he explained, sounding like a concerned uncle. "Like fighting a bear." He opened the hood and leaned over the gleaming motor, wiggling wires and hoses. "The clutch is a hair trigger, too, y'know—let 'er out too fast and she jumps, or—*ppfftt*—that big engine'll grind up this beautiful gearbox." He shuddered, rubbing his thumb and fingers together as if feeling the shredded metal.

She opened the rear-hinged door and slid behind the wheel. "I'll be careful as a little lamb." With a quick turn of the key she fired up the engine and checked the play in the Hurst shifter.

Herman stepped around to her window. “Have you been thinking any about coming back? Things are kinda piling up in the office.” She stared straight ahead.

“Yah, okay. When you’re ready.” He patted her shoulder. “Take care.”

She pushed her sunglasses higher on her nose, forced her lips into something resembling a smile and made a little sound that could pass for a response. She shifted into first. No problem with the clutch. The roadster rolled ahead a few car lengths then stopped. She gunned the gutsy motor, pumping the gas pedal once, twice, three times and reached her hand out the window, dismissing him with a flip of her wrist. “Don’t wait up.”

She drove around to the big bay doors of the garage. Miguel came trotting out, sizing up the roadster and cracking an appreciative smile. Standing at her window, he gave a quick glance around then inched toward her. “Christmas in October—ho, ho, ho,” he said, and stealthily slipped her a baggie containing about twenty small green pills and one large shiny red one. “They’re pain pills, same as I got you before, but like a smaller dose—same good stuff, you just take more.”

“What’s the red one?”

His face brightened. “That’s from me. Private reserve, special for you,” he said, proud of his generosity. “Real ass kicker. Save that bad boy for just the right time.” He winked. “You got some change here, too.”

“Keep it,” she said. “You’re a good friend. Thanks.” She revved the engine and brought a smile to Miguel’s face. When she backed off on the gas, the powerful block vibrated on its mounts, shaking the car. She tossed the baggie onto the passenger side of the bench seat and drove across the lot toward the street. In the rear-view mirror she saw Miguel waving, the thumb and little finger of his hand extended. *Hang loose*. He brought the hand in close and slowly tapped it against his chest.

Roxy merged into the heavy traffic. At the first red light she grabbed one of the little green pills and popped it in her mouth. A Harley stopped in the next lane. Its rider, a bull of a guy with wrap-around shades and a ZZ Top beard, gave the roadster an appraising once over, a faint bob of the head, a smile, and a twist of the throttle.

* * * * *

From the outside, we probably just look like two people riding on a big motorcycle down Sunset Boulevard late on a hot summer night. But inside, oh Jesus, it’s a neon merry-go-round in la-la-land. How do we even stay upright on the Kawasaki? How long has it been since the concert, and we’re still sailing. The shriveled up mushrooms we ate before the show had unfolded inside, come alive, and *WHOA*, everything morphed into an undulating ocean of throbbing prismatic colors and dancing geometric shapes. And how I just *loved, Loved, LOVED* them like a million teddy bears.

The motorcycle shaking beneath me is so *FUNNY*. Out its tailpipe comes these giant explosions *BLAT, BLAT, BLAT*, but in slow motion farts that look like glowing orange bubbles in a lava lamp. I have my eyes closed and I want to look back to see if they are really behind us floating up in the sky, but I have to hold on—the crazy

Kawasaki spaceship Jet Ski is flying through the wild, wild cosmos. *Banshee Comanche! Banshee Comanche!*—I keep thinking those words—where the hell do they come from? And with them floods in a whole Indian museum of shapes and colors, beads and feathers and drums and rattles, shaking my head to their rhythm and the more I think of them the more they break up, floating away like purple sparks shooting from a volcano.

When Roland gears down to a stop at an intersection, the roar subsides, and I look up—*oh God!* Staring down at us, a hundred feet tall, is this huge dog with a man's head, the Diamond Dog, David Bowie, pulsating, shimmering. The squiggles above him slowly resolve into words: *UNIVERSAL AMPHITHEATER SEPT. 2–8*. Unbelievable pleasure shoots through me like nothing I have ever known; everything in the universe has come full circle, everything suddenly makes total sense. We were *there* with him at the amphitheater and now he's *here* with us. It's all connected like some crystalline clockwork. Perfect timing. The universe is definitely conspiring for my bliss.

Roland guns the motor and the spaceship takes flight again, accelerating so fast that he pulls away from me like a stretching

rubber band and I am falling farther and farther backwards until I pull hard around his torso to hold on, to unstretch the rubber band. He is the only thing on the street that isn't liquid and color—everything else is a smear, elongated bright blurs against the blackness of the night—street lights and headlights and gas station lights and traffic lights and the glowing neon of bars and liquor stores, all buzzing past in electric lines that leave tracers on my retinas. His long hair is blowing against my face, a thousand tiny puppy tongues tickling and I giggle like a little girl.

Then something is happening, what is it? His voice—he's saying something, but I can't hear over the roar of the wind and the engine.

“What?”

“I'm ...too ...fucked up ...to turn,” he yells while laughing hysterically. He cackles for a block or ten blocks or five hundred years and I hold him tighter, his frame solid in my arms. I pull in as close as I can, press my ear against his back and hear the *thump, thump, thump* of his beating heart.

* * * * *

She made the slow curving jog to the left along Sunset Boulevard. Should be right around here—gotta be getting close ...here's the Strip, the Whiskey A Go-Go ...the Roxy, that Roland liked because of the name. She craned her neck and scanned the bustling street. Signs of every shape and size and color screamed for attention. It

should be just past an intersection ...up and to the right. Huge. Couldn't miss it if you tried.

There!

She cranked the hot rod's steering wheel hard to the right, into the parking lot of an office building. Neither of the mirrors or the tiny rear window was of much help as she twisted and turned and struggled to get the car backed into the parking spot that had the view she wanted. She finished the job with her head poked out the window. Perfect—if the car was about two feet to the left. Close enough for Rox 'n' Rol.

The billboard fit in relation to the surrounding buildings exactly how she remembered it. But there were no streaming electric colors and no titillating grotesque half-man-half-dog Bowie staring down at her, no motorcycle engine howling in her ears, and no Roland.

The huge sign now bore a picture of a sleek metal and black glass telephone.

It's here. The new iPhone 3G.

Twice as fast. Half the price.

She looked at the baggie and started to reach for it, but instead grabbed her purse and pulled out the amber bottle of Xanax. She uncapped it, popped the last pill, ran her finger around the inside of the tube, and licked off the chalky dust. Keeping the vodka bottle low, she filled the little cup with a shot and tossed it back. She refilled, popped one of the green pills, and washed it down with more vodka.

“Ready for blast off, Miguel,” she said softly. She sucked in a long slow breath and settled lower into the seat.

The billboard glowed like a field of snow, the lettering so annoyingly crisp and snappy, so peppy and insufferably perky. And the immaculate little phone itself, the offspring of a computer and a TV, new and shiny, just delivered, a totally perfect birth with no pain.

She closed her eyes and rolled her head from side to side. She could feel something in the muscles of her shoulders, something coming on. She stayed with it, all loose and melty, and started to sway like kelp in warm, warm water.

* * * * *

Roland guides the big Kawasaki to a stop in the amphitheater’s vast parking lot. We walk with the other concertgoers toward the entrance as the searchlight beams sweep back and forth in the sky, announcing that something BIG is happening. I think of Nance and feel a little guilty—she’s out there along with the thousands of other kids sitting in their rooms listening to radios tuned to the poor-man’s Bowie concert. And here I am, at the real show—the princess who gets to go to the ball.

Roland and I are talking and I’m so nervous and want so badly to make him think I’m experienced and mature that when he asks me about other shows I’ve seen I tell him, *sure, I’ve seen plenty of bands*. What a little liar.

He holds the funny pile of shriveled mushrooms in the palm of his hand and shows me how to chew them slowly, filling my mouth with that dusty-musty taste. Nothing seems to happen for a while, until a tingling feeling starts to come on like nothing I've ever felt before—a tickle in the stomach, then strange flashes and traces out of the corner of my eye. Bowie is about to come on, the lights dim and the crowd is going crazy. Roland reaches over and squeezes my hand—then all hell breaks loose.

First the sound, the waves and waves of music—vast, shimmering curtains of thunder. The stage lights come on in a blazing explosion of color, and there he is, BOWIE! Gloriously thin; gold and orange hair; sharp white suit and suspenders; now in a big floppy beret, now a giant red overcoat. In front of his face he's holding a kabuki mask on a stick. Now he's got a skull in his hands—a *skull!*—and he's singing to it. Now he's kissing it! *Did he just do that? I am so totally high.* The show goes on *forever* and we dance wildly in our seats, *on our seats*, in the aisle. The crescendo. The screams. The encore. Then it is over and for a second I think we are at the end of the night—*wow, great show, time to go home.*

But I'm in some different sort of reality now. There is no end, only a liquid transition, melting from one moment to the next. I look at Roland. His wild long hair seems to be moving around his face with a mind of its own—his unbelievably handsome face. Then—it's so funny—he has his tongue stuck out, but it isn't his tongue, it's like a big button, brown and gold with some purple threads in it. Holding the button between his teeth in the middle of a

big grin, he says, “The party rolls on,” then leans in close and ever so gently strokes my lips and I know that it is a mushroom, and it’s for me, and as I take it from him his lips linger on mine. I feel the heat of his face. I close my eyes and all that seems to exist is our lips, our huge red loving lips that have been made for each other and have been waiting for this exact moment, waiting for a thousand years.

Something behind me is intruding on the dream. Noises. Words. I turn to see an usher, a black guy with a round pumpkin head and a big toothy smile full of the whitest teeth I’ve ever seen. “Everybody else is leavin’,” he says. “You folks have a good night.” It’s a hymn, a choir, a blessing.

Exiting the theater feels like some titanic migration, thousands of us, and miles and miles of complicated walking with stairs and turns and doorways. I have no idea where the parking lot is, but somehow Roland does, so I follow him, my eyes on his wide shoulders, my hands on his hips.

* * * * *

A big boxy FedEx truck eased to a stop directly in front of the cabriolet. Its parking lights flashed on and off as the driver wrestled boxes out of the back and dollied them into the office building. He returned and the truck chugged away, restoring her view.

Two Hollywood street kids walked toward her on the sidewalk holding hands. They were small and thin, with dark hair as

wild as it was carefully coiffed. They could be in a rock band, costumed for a guitar solo in their scarves and cast-offs and animal prints.

Tight leggings, vests, boots. Their wrists encircled with a menagerie of bracelets.

Androgynous.

* * * * *

It's the word used in every magazine story about Bowie. I ask Nancy what it means and even the brainiac doesn't know, so we get her mom's big dictionary and look it up. *Uniting the characteristics of both sexes. Hermaphrodite.* In a second we flip to the Hs. I heft the big book and read: *A being possessing the reproductive organs usually associated with both sexes.*

Nancy shrieks, "That's *so* gross," though she's thrilled at our discovery. "You're blushing," I tease.

"You're androgynous."

"Am not. No way."

"Androgynous. Androgynous. Androgynous."

God, what a great summer. No school. Me and Nance going to the beach all the time in her beat-to-hell Dodge Dart. Smoking a million cigarettes. Wearing the grooves off our Bowie records—*Hunky Dory*, *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane*, *Pin Ups*, and more than any other, his newest, *Diamond Dogs*. Those songs play

over and over as we talk and gossip and laugh and dream of getting on with our lives and, mostly, getting the hell out of Garbage Grove.

We pore over lyrics on album covers like holy texts, digging out clues for what to think, how to talk, who to be. We want to walk on the wild side with Lou Reed but secretly we're scared that we're nobodies from nowhere. The fan-mag photos of rock stars getting off an airplane or hustling into a limo or partying after a show—each is a fashion catalog, full of clothes and poses and makeup and hair styles. What kinds of sunglasses look cool? How to hold a cigarette.

But the one single picture that holds us completely spellbound is the cover photo of the *Pin Ups* album. It's absolutely elemental, otherworldly. Just the two of them, Twiggy and Bowie, the goddess fashion model and the space alien rock star—their heads and bare shoulders, staring straight out at you with enigmatic looks from behind masks literally painted on their faces. Who or what are they behind those masks? What do their amazing eyes see, what wild places and times and people? What aren't they saying? Unafraid, unbored, they are anybody they want to be. They're our myth, our magic, our hope.

We decide to make our own *Pin Ups* cover photo. I get to be Bowie since I have the full-on Ziggy Stardust haircut—dyed electric crimson, long in the back, short and blow-dried into a spikey puff in the front. It's a good likeness—he's ten years older than me, twenty-seven, but his features are so fine, he looks like a girl. Nancy is taller, thinner—plays volleyball—is pretty enough to be a

model. She ties on a spangled gypsy scarf that traces her hairline and outlines her face, just like Twiggy.

We spend hours in her bathroom applying gobs of make-up to ourselves and to each other, trying to get the eyes and cheekbones and lips just like Bowie and Twig. Nancy gets her mom's little instamatic camera and snaps the flashcube on top. The sliding door of her bedroom closet is a full-length mirror and we pose in front of it with the album leaned against the wall so we can see it and get every angle and expression right, every hair in just the right place.

Click.

Weeks later, we get back the developed pictures and tear open the little paper packet. We impatiently flip past her mom's dorky snapshots of flowers and family gatherings and finally we get to our photo—and it's a dud. The print's white border encloses nothing more than a grainy dark field of an ugly green-black color with the flare of our flashbulb weirdly illuminating the bottom left corner of the rectangle and, at the upper right, very faintly, the rounded silhouette of my Ziggy cut. Why didn't it come out right? We are crushed for a while then get our stuff and go to the beach. On the way, with the radio blaring and the windows down and the hot summer air blowing around us, we laugh our heads off about the photo and decide that no camera can capture us cuz we're just too unbelievably cool and bitchen.

* * * * *

Roland finds our way out of the amphitheater and through the parking lot's endless acres of cars to the motorcycle. I watch him dig the key out of his pocket. He moves with a lithe animal grace, swaying back and forth, his eyes closed, the music, it seems, still in his ears.

And I'm hearing it, too. The insistent guitar riff from "Rebel Rebel" is pounding in my brain. I call out to him, "Hey," but he doesn't hear, so I say it again, louder. He swivels around in a flowing motion and looks at me, his pretty green eyes with their huge pupils aglow under very stoned lids. "Did all that really just happen?" I ask. The words are just out of my mouth when I suddenly feel horrible, stupid and small, a spaz who's never taken mushrooms before. Oh god, what's he thinking of me, his kid sister's geeky freak friend?

He mounts the bike and fires the engine. Is he pissed? Is he going to take off and just leave me standing here?

Finally he starts to laugh and says "Absolutely." With a fluttery wave of his hand, like a magician or a sorcerer, he invites me to get on. "*Laissez les bons temps rouler!*"

I hop onto the seat and wrap my arms around him, leaning into his warm body, resting my cheek against his back. I hadn't blown it, hadn't wrecked the perfect night.

He wheels the bike into a long line of cars inching their way out of the lot.

How weird it is that we've just met. It feels like I've known him forever, not just since this afternoon—how many millions of years ago was that?

Nance and I are on her bed, eating Doritos and smoking and listening to, what else, *Diamond Dogs*, when we hear the sound of a motorcycle and she jumps up and runs out the door excitedly yelling “No way!” I follow her to the driveway, where she throws her arms around him. He is tall and lean like Nance, and looks like Robert Plant's darker brother, with his wavy brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. He wears a gray T-shirt with the Rolling Stones tongue-and-lips on it, showing off his tan and his muscled frame. Nance adores him and had talked about him a lot—a total gearhead as a teenager then drafted and sent over to Vietnam as a medic's aid. After he got home, he took off on his motorcycle and from time to time would call or come by, but not often.

We sit around their kitchen table and listen to him. He's been in Mexico with a bunch of surfer friends camping on the beach. He's gonna crash here for just a couple of days then head north of San Francisco to Sears Point Raceway to compete on his bike. After that, he says, he'll have to see where the flame burns brightest.

He asks what we're up to. We tell him how excited we are that Bowie is here in LA, how tonight is the first show of a sold-out run of performances, and how this evening KROQ is going to play three hours of nothing but Bowie.

“Sounds cool,” he says, then he seems to think of something and gets up and walks to the wall phone and makes a call, during

which he nonchalantly twirls the receiver's extra-long kinky cord. When he hangs up, he looks at us with a shit-eating grin and holds up two fingers in a peace sign, daring us to ask what's up. We do, and he says a friend had been able to come up with two tickets.

“No way!” Nance says.

“I shit you not.”

She and I look at each other, hoping, hoping...

“One of you fine ladies wanna come along?”

We almost die on the spot.

He says he's gonna leave it to us to figure out who gets the ticket, and he heads to the supermarket for some beer. While he's gone it quickly becomes clear that for one of us this is definitely going to be the most important night of our life. And just as clear, there is no way to decide other than to throw ourselves to fate. We settle on a coin toss.

As we hear the motorcycle returning, we make an oath that no matter what, whoever gets to go, we won't fight and we won't let it wreck our friendship—not now, not in a million years. Neither of us imagines we won't be the one at the show, so we swear up and down, friends forever and ever, God strike us dead.

* * * * *

The cabriolet rolled easily straight up Santa Monica Boulevard to the Hollywood Freeway then across town to Alvarado and into the

old neighborhood. She looked for the bright orange Sonny's Bail Bonds sign that marked the turn to their street. No Sonny's—gone—now a *taqueria*. The four housepainters sitting at an outside table stopped eating and eyed the flashy roadster as Roxy made the turn.

Three blocks up, fourth house on the left. She pulled to the curb and stopped with a good view of the two-bedroom bungalow that Roland loved because of the big garage out back and she loved because it wasn't her mom's trailer in Garbage Grove and it wasn't the cramped studio she and Roland had first lived in, with the drippy plumbing and the mattress on the floor. The house seemed so huge when the landlord walked them through—the sound of their steps on the creaky floors echoing in the empty rooms. After they moved in, their stuff hardly filled the space. But it was theirs, all theirs.

It looked so small now. The color was different. A cone-shaped fir tree towered above the roofline and obscured the garage. It had been Roland's idea to plant a Christmas tree outside the living room's sliding glass doors so they could enjoy it year after year, watch it grow. The little waist-high sapling in the plastic bucket, the shovel, the hole he dug. Eleven years it grew.

She refilled the amber shot glass and drank. The afternoon sun beat on the convertible's cloth roof. She reached across the bench seat and rolled down the passenger-side window. A soft warm breeze brushed her cheek.

* * * * *

Could it be more perfect? Could we possibly be more in love? Roland knows so many people, mechanics and painters he does custom work for, surfers, all the guys he knows from Garden Grove High and the army. And they have girlfriends and wives and we all swirl together for picnics at the beach or potlucks or parties—margaritas and Harvey Wall bangers and sangria, coolers full of beer, so much weed and coke—all of a sudden coke is everywhere. These people love to party and Roland loves to be around partying people. More the merrier.

He lands a job as an EMT. Bags and bags of groceries and cases and cases of Bud. We buy the spindly little table at the second-hand so the little TV doesn't sit on a milk crate anymore. He's so happy—working night shifts gives him lots of time to hang out during the day in his garage out back. He builds the paint shed and starts doing specialty jobs, pin striping and airbrush work on vans. We go to car and motorcycle shows, races out at the speedway, and a thousand swap meets looking for old car parts and magazines and tools. That funny fat guy Vincent, who looks like a hardass biker, but he's always so shy around me and so nice. He brings weed down from Humboldt.

Then we hear he's dead.

* * * * *

She held up her little cup and toasted, "To Vincent." She sipped.

Looking up and down the street, she saw no movement. Nothing going on. Nobody in sight. The afternoon breeze was gentle but steady, moving the branches on the trees.

She turned on the radio.

“—have you heard about this *ca-ra*zy kid?” the disk jockey said. “Fort Collins,

Colorado, a six-year-old takes his dad’s helium balloon for a joy ride—I’m talkin’ 10,000 feet. Now *that’s* good parenting. The news report I’m getting says dad is *distraught*. Duh!

“Well, a tip of the ol’ sombrero to Balloon Boy—we love you, sky pilot! And here’s a double shot of “99 Balloons,” an oldie-but-goodie by the German band Nena— she got a last name?—and Paul Simon’s “Boy in the Bubble.”

* * * * *

The sun slants in all warm and buttery through the bungalow’s open window and the gauzy white curtains lift and settle on that perfect spring morning. Eight months pregnant—round as could be—like carrying a watermelon. But happy, happy, happy. Roland lies next to me on the big bed, kissing my belly. “Ground Control calling Major Tom,” he sings in a bad Bowie-Brit “Space Oddity” imitation, while tapping lightly on the watermelon. “Earth to Major Tom...Do you read me, Major Tom?” Soon he’s up, dancing around the room in his plaid boxer shorts, ecstatic. He grabs an empty long necked beer bottle from the nightstand and holds it in front of his mouth like

a microphone—“Oh, it’s time for your spacewalk, buddy. You’re a Pop-Tart and it’s time to leave the toaster if you dare.” Then he looks at me with big moony eyes and sings in a twangy mishmash of Elvis and Buck Owens, “*Oh I luuuuuv you, darlin’.*” Bliss.

* * * * *

She pulled another pill from the baggie, set it on her tongue. Rolled the little ball around, the taste was acrid, sharp, and metallic. Her saliva softened it and spread the caustic bite. She closed her eyes and in the darkness was absolutely still, absolutely alone. Her face tightened into a grimace. *Time to leave the toaster if you dare.* Slowly, slowly the pill disintegrated, melted into a harsh sludge of sizzling bile. She used her tongue to push it into every part of her mouth.

Try again. Try again. That’s what they all said, all those helpful friends. But they weren’t in the delivery room. They didn’t see the lifeless blob of wet wax that was Major Tom. Their breasts didn’t leak milk for weeks for a baby who wasn’t there. They didn’t sneak off to the funeral home and sit in the parking lot, alone, washing down Percocet with tequila, watching the gray-black smoke rise out of the crematorium chimney, taking with it something from inside that would never come back.

Tears dripped from her nose; her breaths came in choppy jerks. The chemicals in her mouth stung for a long time, then she swallowed and the venom burned all the way down her throat.

* * * * *

We get both barrels, *BAM-BAM*, first the baby, and then just a few months later, Roland loses his job. The boss says it's the bad economy, says the recession making things tight all around. The slimy son of a bitch still has *his* job.

Day-old bread and big pots of split-pea soup. Roland searches through the want ads in the newspaper every day looking for work as an EMT or ambulance assistant, even an emergency room orderly. He applies, but so do fifty other guys. For a while he scares up some under-the-table jobs with his motor head friends, but fewer and fewer as winter comes on. He just sort of withers, gives up, his spirit goes flat. The little job I get at the dry cleaners, the bookkeeping class I start taking—all part of some fuzzy future I hope will work out for us. I do what I can to help him, but nothing makes any difference.

Then it finally comes to a head. I stop at Thrifty Mart after work and on the 80% off table find a 10-pack of ruby-red Christmas tree ornaments, sparkly with silver glitter in snowflake patterns. Two of the fragile glass ornaments are shattered, but the rest look okay. The happy red balls might cheer him up. At home, in the fading gray twilight that softens all the colors in our back yard, I hang the surprise on our Charlie Brown Christmas tree. It is scrawny and sags under even the nearly weightless ornaments, but it's sweet and it's ours.

I head toward the sliding glass doors and as I get close I can see the television flickering in the dark room—*The Flintstones*. Roland is splayed in a chair, staring dully at the TV. I slide open the door, the cartoon's jumping light illuminates a torn-open case of Budweiser next to his chair, empties strewn around his feet. "You okay?" Nothing.

"I thought you were going to talk to Diesel and those guys about painting that van."

He mumbles something, maybe "I dunno."

The frustration that had been building in me for weeks explodes, "Oh fuck, Roland, c'mon. This isn't working. You gotta do something."

He raises an unsteady finger, "I did zat."

I look where he's pointing, to the floor across the room and a pyramid of empty beer cans stacked four-three-two-one. They are meticulously aligned and balanced, all positioned at exactly the same angle like a display in a store or a photo in a magazine. I can see him there, on his knees, shitfaced drunk, placing the cans just so, with the eye of an artist and the hand of a surgeon.

I want to scream, but it wouldn't help. He's too loaded to talk—best just to put him to bed, and I do. His muffled snores rise and fall in the darkness as I watch him and worry.

After a while, I make a mug of tea and pace slowly from room to room, pondering what to do. A heavy rain begins to rumble on the roof. I go to the sliding doors and turn on the porch light, illuminating the droplets slanting down in the wind. The little

Christmas tree sways back and forth, its dangling red ornaments swinging in tight arcs. The rain is washing away the glue that holds the glitter—it drips from the balls in sparkling, twinkling drops.

In the morning, when he finally drags his sorry ass out of bed, he looks sheepish in his bare feet and boxers, a blanket around his shoulders, his long hair a tangled mess. I tell him we have to talk. He grunts and slumps at the kitchen table, nursing a mug of black coffee and downing the four aspirin I give him. Is he hung over or sick or depressed or all of the above—it doesn't matter, I know what I have to say.

The EMT thing isn't happening and besides, your heart was never in it. What *do* you love? Cars, bikes, paint. You gotta go with *that*. And you're *so good* at it. I tell him the names of guys he's worked for, things he could do for them: painting, pin striping, prepping, bodywork and sanding, repairs, welding, interiors—*anything*, it doesn't matter. You just need to get *something* going.

But it's useless. The more I talk, the more beaten and hopeless he looks, fiddling with the handle on his coffee mug, rubbing at his eyes, running his hand over his stubbly jaw. He frowns and says "How 'bout we talk later?" His chair scoots back making little scratching sounds.

"No!" I reach across the table and grab his wrist. "We gotta do this now."

He raises and drops his shoulders like a whipped dog. Whatever thoughts he has, they aren't coming out.

“You can’t run away,” I say, but he doesn’t respond with even a twitch of recognition. It sends me over the edge. I slap the table hard with my palm—the mugs and the salt and pepper shakers and napkin holder all jump and clatter. “I’ll go.” The words come out of nowhere, no premeditation, not part of any plan. But I have to get through to him. “If you don’t want this, I’ll just go. I will. I’ll go.” I aim a fierce face at him—yes or no, now or never.

I’m on the end of a high diving board, no handholds, no safety rails, no turning back. Slowly he seems to focus, looking me in the eye for the first time in a long time. In the silence, I try to read his stare. I wonder if any of what I said is getting through or if our life together is over, if he is going to say the wrong thing, wreck everything, call it quits.

But he doesn’t say anything.

The silence is driving me crazy. “I swear to God, Roland,” I say, pushing at him more, trying to get him to react, anything. “I swear to God, I’ll go.”

He looks down at his hands for a while, runs them over his face and through his wild hair. He mumbles something so quietly I can’t tell what he’s saying.

“What?”

He sits up straight in the chair and clears his throat and says in a soft and calm voice, “Okay.”

That’s it. I can’t believe it. No fight, no nothin’. He gets cleaned up and an hour later he is out the door, off to find work. Just like that, the spark is back, the old Roland.

What the hell?

Later, when we talk, he tells me I saved his life—says he was a derailed train and I got him back on the tracks. And when he speaks, I hold my face still, not showing anything. I listen, let him say what he has to say, work out what he has to work out, but inside, I'm back out there alone on that high dive. What if he knew it was all bluster, all a bluff? I could never leave. Where was I going to go? What if he knew?

He starts calling me *strong mama*. And I let him think that. I even allow myself to think I had the strength, the toughness, that I had strung together the right magic words to get him out of his funk. But deep down I know this is a big fat lie. I hadn't saved anybody. He'd crashed, and it took a while for him to heal up—like when a bird flies into a window and gets knocked out cold. You think it's dead, but then, after a while, it perks back to life and flies away in its own good time. He was looking to get his shit back together—he just needed something to trigger it. My threat to leave had given him the chance to save himself. And he took it. He was the strong one.

Until he wasn't.

* * * * *

She looked at the house again, so very small and fragile. An earthquake or a fire, even a big wind could come out of nowhere and blow it away.

When she reached for the key on the steering column, her fingers missed it once, twice. She blinked, focused, tried again. The engine roared and the needle on the tachometer arced around the dial into the red zone.

Finding the way back to the freeway was more confusing than she remembered. A couple of wrong turns. Circling back. Finally. Heading up the drag strip of an onramp, the supercharger engaged and the roadster rocketed forward. She came up fast on a pokey motorhome and whipped the wheel hard to get around it—*rapido*, asshole.

Who's honking?

She managed the circular off-ramp back onto Sunset Boulevard with three choppy right turns then straight on through a blur of blocks and intersections until she saw the Chateau Marmont looming on the hillside like a haunted castle full of ghosts. Past the Strip and the rusty-looking House of Blues, then into Beverly Hills and Brentwood with the mansions and lush trees and the grass strip down the center of the road. Through all the winding canyons and ups and downs and arounds and arounds—is this fucking road ever going to end?—and finally she saw the ocean.

The turn onto the northbound coast highway came up fast and she took it too wide, but jerked the hot rod back onto the right side of the line. The crowded built-up city blocks of cement and stucco and asphalt gave way more and more to steep scrub covered hillsides and canyons that fell down to the sea. It's around here someplace...just past Arroyo Topanga ...*There*.

She recognized the horseshoe cluster of weathered little cottages, but not the name on the sign, Pacific Hideaway Lodgettes. Maybe they had a different name back then. She drove the roadster into the parking lot, rolling slowly over the crunching gravel, trying to remember where he'd parked the motorcycle, but there was no memory of that. She felt the impulse to pee and eyed the sign at the far end of the lot—*SEAFOOD • RESTAURANT • LOUNGE*—then pulled the car to a stop in a parking space butted up to a telephone pole.

* * * * *

How different everything sounds when Roland shuts off the motorcycle's motor. As my ears adjust, I begin to hear the breaking waves crashing on the other side of the highway. While he gets the room, I meander around the lot and smoke a cigarette. It is unlike anything I've ever puffed, billows of heat wrapping around my tongue and the sweet menthol like a cough drop smoldering in my throat. I exhale a stream of smoke that glows against the black sky above the ocean until it vanishes, revealing the stars that come to life and twinkle brighter and more numerous than I've ever seen. One of them suddenly slices a short line in the sky and disappears.

Roland approaches, chuckling and dangling the absurdly large brass number 7 attached to the key. We aren't in the room a minute before we have our clothes off and we hop into the cramped shower stall. With all the soap and shampoo on our bodies, we are

happy slippery seals, sliding past and around and through each other in the glorious stream of hot water—giggling like kids splashing in a wading pool.

Roland has an idea to make the bathroom into a sauna—he winds the little timer dial turning on the infrared heat lamp, and blasts the shower and the sink so they’re billowing steam. We have towels wrapped around ourselves and one pushed up against the crack at the bottom of the door until the room fills with swirling hot clouds. He turns off the hissing water and in the quiet we look into the fogged mirror. The two of us, in our white towels under the crazily bright light, our bodies so young and lean and tanned.

We are beautiful.

He raises his finger to the condensation on the glass and writes *I WOKE UP TODAY IN MEXICO*. With a few quick strokes he adds a simple sketch of a half-circle sitting on a horizon line emanating some wiggly sunrise rays. He grins at me with a look that says *your turn*.

I wipe away the last two words he’s written and feel like I am wiping away a whole shitty lifetime. I laugh like I have never laughed before, lean into him and kiss him and pull the towels free. We make out slowly and for a long time, the only sounds our soft moans and the *tick-tick-ticking* of the heat lamp timer. When we can stand the sauna no longer, we burst out of the bathroom, fall in a heap on the bed. Roland gets out a pipe and we smoke. Just a few puffs and I am tripping hard again and making love with him—a fractured movie of skin and hair and sweat.

In the morning, in the drowsy dim warmth of the big bed, we make love again. Afterwards, Roland cracks open the window and in comes the ocean's soft scented breeze. Every once in a while a semi chugs past on the highway. We stay in that bed for hours. Lying in his arms, stroking his chest, I want to stay right there forever.

* * * * *

The urge to pee was now more pronounced, pressing, persistent. She adjusted the mirror to see herself, pushed a few windblown strands above her eyes back into place. She gathered her purse and got out of the car, standing on rubbery legs, clutching at the door for support. Miguel wasn't bullshitting with those pills. She set her sights on the lounge door and launched. One foot in front of the other—that's the way we do it. Her stomach was light, rolling. Easy does it. Almost there. She grabbed the door's heavy rope handle.

She hurried to the restroom and made it into the stall. The toilet paper roll was new.

She scratched at it with her fingernail, finally tearing deep enough to get a decent hold.

She pulled away a wad of frayed sheets.

At the sink, she turned on the water and was reaching out for the soap dispenser when the unsettled feeling in her stomach suddenly boiled up—half the stream splashed onto the counter, half

in the basin. She spat and wiped at her mouth then used her hand like a squeegee on the countertop to direct most of the liquid into the sink. Some of the splatter dotted the bottom of her blouse. She wetted a paper towel and dabbed at the stains. Good as new.

Feeling much better now, she found a table in the small lounge.

A waitress walked up—young, with lots of hair piled and clipped on her head.

“What’ll you have?” she asked.

Roxy ordered a vodka martini. The TV above the bar showed the Jiffy Pop spaceship sailing in the sky—*PURSUIT CHOPPER VIDEO*. The anchorman, WOLF BLITZER, with white hair and a carefully trimmed white beard, delivered the *BREAKING NEWS*.

A tall man standing at the bar—thinning dark hair and goatee—shook his head in disgust, “Breaking news, my ass,” he snorted. “More like breaking wind.” He sipped at his pint. “One day it’s a quarter million dead from the tsunami in Indonesia and then this nonsense. Same teleprompter, same oh-so-serious look on his face—fillin’ airtime with ‘*content*’”—he made air quotes with his fingers. Catching the skinny barkeep’s attention, he tapped his glass, “*Uno más, por favor.*”

The barkeep took the glass and said, “But you gotta admit, the balloon’s pretty cool.”

Goatee snorted, “It’s been *hours* since it crashed with no kid inside. *No kid, no story.* And look,” he pointed at the TV, “they’re

still showing the goddam thing up in the air. That constitutes knowingly perpetuating a mass hallucination.”

The waitress brought the martini, noticed Roxy staring at the silvery balloon on the screen. “Isn’t it just creepy?” she said, setting down a napkin and the drink. “Can you imagine what that little boy’s parents are going through? I just love this stuff.”

Condensation clung to the glass. Roxie removed the little plastic sword that impaled a fat olive stuffed with a red pimento, set it aside, took a sip.

Goatee was on a roll, “—a bonfire of the vanities. Old Tom Wolfe had it exactly right—everybody’s gettin’ their own slice of the pie.”

The barkeep cracked a wide smile, said, “A while ago they showed a guy selling T-shirts that say ‘OCTOBER 15, 2009—A DAY WE’LL NEVER FORGET.’ Pretty funny. And

I mean, jeez, how did he get ’em printed up so fast?”

Roxy was watching the waitress load cocktails from the bar onto her tray—an amazing balancing job—when the phone in her purse rang. She looked to see who was calling. Nancy. No thank you.

“We’re witnessing a conspiracy in broad daylight,” Goatee declared, “Media whores selling their souls and laughing all the way to the bank.” He yelled at the TV, “Blow it out your ass, Blitzer, you scrotum-faced piece of shit.”

She tilted back the end of her martini. Enough of this. She looked for a ten but found a twenty, put it on the table. Walking

past the bar, she heard Goatee say, “— bread and circuses, textbook misdirection—reminds me of the Zapruder film—”

When Roxy let out the clutch, the cabriolet lurched forward, smashing into the telephone pole, jolting her into the steering wheel. She got out of the car and saw one of the big chromed headlamps, knocked from its mounting, dangling by electrical wires. The bumper was bent, too, tilted at an off angle, and the round haunch of the driver’s-side fender was dented badly and pushed against the tire. She grabbed and tugged, nothing, yanked harder, the metal gave, bending back away from the wheel. Her left wrist began to throb. She rotated it, flexed her hand. Not broken. When did that happen?

The Ford still ran okay, and she aimed it north onto the coast highway. The winding road climbed higher in elevation, revealing vistas of the ocean at each turn. Then she saw her landmark, the triangular stack of gray rock jutting up from the sea like a huge fin. She steered toward the pullout for the overlook’s empty gravel lot, cutting a lazy diagonal across the southbound lane. An SUV barreling toward her swerved, its horn blaring. *Yeah, yeah, yeah.*

The roadster skidded to a stop next to a line of boulders that formed a low retaining wall atop the cliff—beyond it, only air, the view out to Catalina Island, and the near vertical precipice, three hundred feet to the sea crashing against the rocks.

She cut the ignition.

End of the line, baby cakes.

Another pill, another hard slug from the bottle. Roland knew about this place from a stunt driver friend who did work in the movies. The guy said this was where they used to film those scenes where the car crashes over the embankment and tumbles and flips down the steep mountainside ending in a fiery explosion.

She hit from the bottle again. Her face slowly contorted, eyes squeezed shut, mouth pinched into a tight knot. She closed her hand around the neck of the bottle with every bit of strength she had.

* * * * *

I'm carrying a cake in one hand and one of those shiny balloons and a funny card in the other as I'm walking down the hall toward his room at the care facility. It's my birthday not his, but who cares, it'll give us something to celebrate. When I knock on the open door, he's sitting on the bed. He looks up—I can tell right away something is wrong. I sit next to him and we talk. His face is right there, right in front of me, staring straight into my eyes, but nothing is registering, not a single memory, not the faintest recognition. A whole lifetime together—and nothing. I can read him like a book and what he is doing is playing it cool while trying to figure out why this lady is staring at him. And all I can do is dig, dig, dig my fingernails into my palms and not blink. Don't scare him. Just smile, be the nice lady who's come for a visit. "Don't worry, sweetie, it's all okay. Maybe you should take your nap now. Okay? Yeah, that's it, just lie back.

Here's the cover, get you all tucked in. I love you sweetie. I love you *so* much."

And there he is, lying down, clutching the blanket at his chin, those big old green eyes on me, watching every move. A nice, nice lady.

* * * * *

She grabbed at her sunglasses and flung them out the window, pounded her fists against the steering wheel, convulsed in spasms of furious rage. We were so much more. Through clenched teeth she made a sound, a low guttural growl—it rumbled and gurgled and grew into a wretched, desolate wail that filled the car, the lot, and drifted out over the great ocean.

So much more.

She leaned back and sank low in her seat. Her breathing slowed, her muscles slackened. There was no thought in her head until she came to a dim awareness that she wasn't thinking anything anymore. All that remained was a buzzing numbness in her body, the residue of something past, the shimmering red edge of paper just burned to ash.

The sun hung low in the sky, reflecting ever more intensely off the water, painfully bright. She opened the door and found her glasses in the dirt, wiped off most of the dust, and put them back on. Something was bent. In the mirror, she saw they were sitting

crooked on her nose. Her hair was going everywhere. Her face was bloated, red, blotchy, and painfully old.

We were so much more.

* * * * *

“Big day,” Roland says as we get ready for the road trip up to Santa Barbara. “Going to see *the man*.”

He takes a long time in the shower, singing. He has three different shirts on the bed, holds each one up in front of himself, assesses the look in the mirror, and chooses his best retro bowling shirt, the silk one he wears to auto shows when one of his custom jobs is on display. I brush his thick hair straight back, past his shoulders—a little more gray every year—then split it into three parts and work them into a neat braid.

As we get in the cabriolet, he says, “Let’s drive up the coast, we have plenty of time,” and off we go. When we pass the little cottages, he takes my hand and squeezes. He’s grinning and starts singing that old song “Sugar Shack.” The sun sinks behind the wispy clouds over the ocean and the colors deepen into a spectacular sunset.

He tells me what he knows about Sharkey, which isn’t much—he’s only dealt with him over the telephone. “East coast accent. Knows his cars—definitely an ace mechanic. Calls himself an *automotive curator*.” Roland pronounces it sarcastically—his nose always quick to sniff out pompous bullshit. I ask what Sharkey

does and he explains that big collectors with a lot of money like to have somebody overseeing their cars, finding the right guys for modifications and maintenance, tracking down original parts, making sure the detailing is right. And Sharkey's the guy they use to get it done.

He works only with the big boys, Roland says, the guy who owns the Dodgers, Oprah's boyfriend, Leno.

There are other stories he's heard about Sharkey, too, about what a snarly prick he can be, how he got in a beef with a parts supplier over a bill and pulled a gun. "But you never know. Guys tell their stories. Who knows what's what?" he shrugs. "On the custom job I did for him, everything went slicky-do."

By the time we get to Santa Barbara, it's dark and Roland's scribbled directions take us into an industrial district and a driveway blocked by a tall metal gate topped with coils of razor wire. After he cuts the motor, we hear deep throaty barking from what sounds like a huge guard dog.

A voice on the other side of the fence calls out over the menacing howls, "That you, Roland?"

"All the way from lovely Los Angeles."

The gate swings open and we see a uniformed watchman wrestling a snarling beast into a pen. Sharkey steps in front of the car and is illuminated in the headlights— crisp white shirt, slicked-back hair, and shiny shoes, more Wall Street than gearhead.

He gestures us inside to a parking lot, its neatly painted yellow lines glowing under security floodlights mounted on the side

of a warehouse-sized building. We make introductions and shake Sharkey's hand—soft and moist. He backs off a few feet and eyes the roadster. “Whoa, *that* is one nice unit. A *very* sweet '34 rag top.” He chuckles,

“Gotta love the balls of a car with suicide doors.”

Roland guides Sharkey around the interior of the cabriolet, highlighting some of the original gear he's proudest of, the glove-box radio and the little clock on the side of the rear-view mirror. Sharkey gushes praise and runs his hands over the walnut and the leather.

“Show me what you got underneath.”

Roland opens the hood. “59AB Flathead block.” The engine radiates heat and makes ticking noises as the cooling metal contracts.

“Speed parts and vintage components ...Judson vane supercharger, nice,”

Sharkey bobs his head. “Clean enough to lick. Beautiful resto, man.”

We walk to the building's steel-reinforced door, where Sharkey punches in a security code on the keypad. Inside, it is pitch dark until he flips one switch, then another, and another, firing up banks of lights that recede far into the vast cavern of gleaming white walls and polished white floor. Rows and rows of cars fill the great hall—seventy-five, a hundred, way too many to count.

Sharkey tours us from one immaculate machine to the next: racers, classics, each a museum specimen. He clicks off the names

as we stroll the aisle: Maserati, Lamborghini, McLaren, Bentley, Rolls Royce. He stops to tell us in more detail about a few of the most jaw-dropping of the cars: a sleek Jaguar XK-120 that raced extensively in Europe and won the 1951 Dutch Tulip Rally; the twelve-cylinder Hispano-Suiza, a mile-long touring car once owned by the Maharaja of Indore; and

Sharkey's favorite, the curviest, sexiest car I have ever seen, a 1938 Bugatti 575C Atlantic that he tells us is the twin of the one owned by Ralph Lauren.

Roland is in awe. He inhales deeply of the smells of oil and tires and car wax and leather and wood polish. "Heaven," he says, spreading his arms. "This is it, right here. Heaven."

We stroll a bit further, turn a corner. "And *this*, this is one of our very finest," Sharkey says, making a big show of sweeping his hand toward a stretch-fork chopper with gleaming ape-hanger handlebars and a stars-and-stripes gas tank. "A better-than-original replica of the pan head Harley Peter Fonda rode in *Easy Rider*." He bends in close, examining the gas tank, "Exquisite work, thanks to *you*, my friend." "We try," Roland says humbly.

"So did the other two shops I asked to do the job—both of which..." he frowns, "let me down. But not you." He runs his finger along the curve of the tank, "Just red, white, and blue—simple, right? But trust me, the simpler the design the louder the imperfections squeal. For my clients, it's gotta be 100 percent." He

turns and speaks directly to me, “Your husband is a *very* talented man.”

Roland beams at the compliment—so different from the frowns and furrowed brows I’d seen on him as he struggled for days in the shop fixated on getting every detail exactly right, poring over photos, sketching, making a dozen test runs to see how the masking worked, getting just the right shades, saturation, balanced reflectivity.

“I wanted to show you all this, so you know the quality I deal with,” he says. “I’m always looking for the best, the very best, and for guys who can deliver it. I’m thinking you and me, we can do some serious business.” They shake hands.

As we leave Sharkey and his warehouse, Roland is glowing, drumming on the steering wheel, as stoked as I’ve ever seen him. He drives us straight to the Biltmore and gets a fancy suite with a balcony overlooking the beach and the lapping waves, the coast stretching out before us forever. We have room service bring champagne, and, looking at the lights twinkling on the sea, we dream big dreams.

* * * * *

She struggled to capture a pill in the baggie, trapped it, pinched it hard, and brought it to her mouth. She twisted open the bottle and as she downed the pill with a slug the cap slipped from her fingers. She searched for it all around her thighs and on the floorboard, then

opened the door and contorted herself to find it under the seat, just out of reach. She set the bottle near brake pedal, got out of the car, bent, reached, and grabbed the cap.

Standing beside the hot rod in the narrow strip next to the cliff, she took in a deep breath of the ocean air. The low sun rested its heat on her face and she closed her eyes...the rhythm of the waves rumbling below....She drifted.

Tumbling awkwardly toward the gravel, she tried to break the fall. A sharp pebble dug into her palm and a bolt of pain shot from her sore wrist. Getting to her knees, she crawled onto the roadster's wide running board and sat. Breathing hard and trying to collect herself, she reached for the bottle, knocked it over and watched it roll out of the car and onto the dirt—*glug, glug, glug*.

A quick grab with her right hand saved what remained and she cradled the bottle in the crook of her left arm. She blinked and blinked again, felt suddenly dizzy and tried to find her balance. She looked at her feet, the brown leather shoes with the little buckles, firmly planted on the slowly swaying ground. Beneath the shoes, the gravel. Beyond it, the sea. A gull cawed from the air beyond the cliff. She watched it rise on an updraft in a slow graceful arc that took it ever further out to sea. Serene and smaller and smaller until it disappeared.

She looked at the baggie on the seat. The red pill. Wash it down with the vodka.

Float away. Forget his vacant, empty stare. She closed her eyes.

Just sail away...

The world grew serene. The ocean breeze blew softly across her face.

Just sail away...

From somewhere in the barely conscious darkness she heard a voice, clear, deep, and resonant, unmistakably his, “Strong mama.” Her eyes popped open and she looked for him, jerking her head to the left, the right. She called his name and listened hard for a reply. A car whizzed by on the highway, its passing whine ebbed away, leaving only the sound of the hissing waves.

It was his voice, calling out to her. He needed her. She couldn’t leave him. Not now. Not alone.

Setting the bottle on the dirt, she rose from the running board and stood. The ground beneath her feet was still now. She brushed her palms together, removing dust and sand, but each swipe became slower and slower until her hands stopped. The car. She looked across the hood to the dangling headlamp, the mashed bumper, the crease in the fender. Her shoulders slumped as she sighed. She slid onto the seat and gripped the wheel, biting her lip, staring pensively through the windshield.

Suddenly, her eyes widened. Sharkey. Perfect. He could fix it—and nobody would know. The sky glowed with the setting sun, casting a mellow golden light on all that she could see. Tell Nance. Tell her it’s all okay. Everything’s okay now.

She grabbed her purse, found the little phone and called.

“Nance,” she said, excitedly, “gonna drive Sam’Barbara...see Shargey.”

“*What?* No. You sound—” Nancy said. “No. I’ll come get you.”

“He-gan fix uh car...”

“What’s wrong with the car? Where are you? Tell me.”

“Stratum-barious...Shargey.” She burped, her head was spinning again. “Sell uh car to Shargey.” The phone slipped from her hand. She looked around and saw it in the dust.

Holding the wheel for support, she leaned down, picked it up, and brought it to her ear.

“—there? Roxy? Roxy, are you there?”

“Slip right oudda my...han’,” she mumbled. “No handle—phones useda have.

“Hardda hol’ on.” She burped and bitter-tasting gorge rose halfway into her throat.

“Sam’Barbara. Give Shargey the car. Clean all up—ev’thing. Slicky-do.”

“You are *not* going to Santa Barbara. Promise me. I want you—Roxy, listen to me, goddamit, this is serious. You gotta—”

“I ’on’t feel so good, Nance.” She gagged, vomit streamed from her mouth and splattered on her shoes. A long silvery strand hung from her lower lip. She pawed at it and began to whimper. Then the tears came, with more and more force until she was bawling uncontrollably. She clutched the phone in her lap, where it

emitted Nancy's tiny voice calling out like a slow but persistent heartbeat, "Roxy...Roxy...Roxy."

She wiped at the tears and snot on her face. "Nance," she cried. "Nance." She raised the phone to her ear. "You there, Nance?"

"Yeah, Rox, I'm here."

Between the sobs she whispered, "Beam me up, Twig."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ross West studied literature at UC Santa Barbara's College of Creative Studies then earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Oregon (1984). For the following decade he was a freelance writer and journalist—his work appeared in publications such as *Orion*, *Nature Quarterly*, *New Realities*, *ICON Thoughtstyle*, and *The Journal of Recreational Linguistics*. His writing has been published regularly in *Oregon Quarterly* (circ. 100,000), where he worked as senior managing editor for eleven years; before that, he served eight years as senior writer and editor in chief for the UO's research magazine, *Inquiry*. He was text editor for the *Atlas of Oregon* and the *Atlas of Yellowstone*. His essays have been anthologized in *Illness & Grace*, *Terror & Transformation* and *Best Essays NW*. He is currently shopping his third novel, *I Win Again*.

BONUS

TRACK

"fingers"

an art intelligence
agency field report
from the desk of
special agent david
samuel king

by B. McLean



Entry: (one) Walther PPK/e. Previously Fired.
Handle modified.
(one) cartridge/clip. (three) 9mm rounds.

Whole thing started right there on my desk. Russian Walther PPK/e in a zip bag staring back at me from the report on last week's Art Sketch Homicide, doing the vid data entry as my coffee gets cold.

Midtown cop makes an arrest about smeared shepherd 's blood on canvas, sometime yesterday; got a new bag of dogs' eyes to add to my file and this used handgun. They busted the daughter of German immigrants, American born, lives in a blockade apartment that's government owned. Broke two of her ribs in lock-up telling someone they'd "make a great Spic if they didn't look so Jackie Chan". Surprised they didn't snap that kid's neck.

Another Art Case, this Verochka J. Ulyanov kid. Nobody just kills people these days. Somehow, here in the big future, everything has to have meaning and make a higher statement from the people in the gutters shouting back up to the men and women of the high castle. It's all about vid-feed and follower-base, if you'd believe that.

Eat the Rich, and sell that gold defecation back to their sister to hang on the wall, or some bullshit excuse like that. Fuck if I know. Profiling criminals half a decade now. Art was not my thing. Promoted 'cause I get results. Just follow the leads, bring in the bad guys. Don't want to get in their heads. Never safe to profile your serial-murderers too long, lest you become one.

can't let the sickness in. don't let the monsters win.

That's standard psyche training, the Mantra they give crash-course to the beat cops that get emergency promoted to AIA as a liaison. That's because too many other Detectives and Art Agents have been shot on the job. Some of those cops get a vacation, some are stored in the produce-section of the state hospital, and a bunch more end up in the dirt.



All of this isn't really about Verochka though. We have her ass. It's the Art-hack who she wants to sell out; that's what got me called into this circus for. A hush, hush circus.

Shooting dogs 'over canvas' to sell it to rich folk isn't exactly high art. It's that kind of street art that people with money think is original because of 'where' they had to get it. Same game as

shark-fin soup and snuff porn. Me and my team get all the parties here.

There are some seriously sick Art people in the world. The plan is to catch them all, the buyers and sellers...that's just so some people can sleep at night. Maybe I'll redeem my own sins from some former life in the process.

We've been chasing a serial artist for a few months now, but leads only turn up randomly... we have three pieces in custody, but we know there is more out there. Finally, we get a break with this Ulyanov kid. Said she knows the 'fingers' guy.

The fingers profile reads as an Artist, high end art, lacquered body parts, human fingers. All untraceable as the prints are gone and somehow DNA doesn't register. Victims must be born homeless people because they'd be the only humans we couldn't trace these days. Let me tell you, in three giant painting-sculptures, eighty-seven different fingers is a hell of a lot of people to try to account for. So the Perp must be a street kid or homeless beggar in the cardboard cities, underground of either Chicago or San Fran. San Francisco; our jurisdiction...or as Bruti calls it, our 'Beautiful Responsibility'.

This Ulyanov said we've got it all wrong, and she'll give it up if we plea bargain some deal. Well, the Great State doesn't do that, yet that doesn't mean I had to tell her that. Got what we wanted out of her, and so she's already off to a Los Angeles Maxi in time for supper on the block.

Now, just waiting for Bruti to show up so we can run this lead. Been thinking this is all small time work, chasing Artists, so maybe I could get a better pay cheque working the Japan Net or in Somalia trafficking slaves for the VR-trade.

Sadly, my mother taught me some ethics over her years with us, rest her soul, and Pop had a badge longer than the economy's been unstable. So it's in the blood, gonna stick this gig out.

It turns high noon and right on schedule, our man enters the office. Vincent Bruti, former SWAT negotiator, looks like a retired boxer, hired to our unit of the West Fed Art Intelligence Agency two years ago.

I look like a wiry, black-skinned bird in a suit when I'm beside him. Makes us more of a scary cop, skinny-cop duo. They dropped Bruti to our division as he's a natural with arms hacking, has the data ports in his neck to prove it. Best agent to have if you are ever going into a live-fire situation, let me tell ya. Can spot any gun tracers or anti-tech within five miles. He doesn't work the show anymore because he's addicted to trans-pain killers.

Had a good chunk of his upper torso blown apart in the Crash Riots a decade or so ago. That's all thanks to friendly fire when our National Guard rolled over everyone to put an end to that particular civil uprising. Bruti is half carbon-neoprene thanks to the government that owns those parts. You never want to be in hock to a Federal Branch like he is, yet needs must when the devil drives, hey?

All kinds of degenerates best fit on our unit. Used to be called Special Homicide Division back in old town San Fran, but after a few years, we all knew it was just Art cases...and then the Feds fell apart when the country split into red and blue. Was chaos everywhere for almost a decade but even then corporations bought up the rest of the government criminal investigation divisions when policing went privatized.

Walking towards me, I nod to Bruti, pass him the vid update, "Hey."

He plugs in, starts saying gruffly, "King, man... oh wait," he touches a finger to the side of his neck. "Oh she gave it up, we get to go mid-town. Sounds like fun."

"Yup, just waiting on you to get the party started," I'm standing and pulling on my suit coat, checking my pistol, "unless you've

got something pressing, thought we'd go for a little tour in cardboard city."

Bruti nods his head affirmative, then my chimer in the back of my head goes off, and it's Taylor.

"Need a ride-along boys?" a cheery voice bleeds into my thoughts.

Bruti responds faster than I can, "For sure, Taylor. Not like any of us get a choice anyhow." He shrugs looking at me.

"You know, you could pretend to be happy about it, Vincent."

"I could, but you already know the statistics on what I'd have to say about all that fluffy happiness stuff," and Bruti stops, sarcastically dropping the topic.

Taylor Chávez usually gets assigned to be our life guard. Most Watchers are like her, half human and half merged Ai. The Artificials still can't get being human. They can fake it, schedule your vacations, balance your cheque book, but they can't save lives, so those straight up Ai, they make for shitty backup to us field agents.

Guess something about being human is still more beast than brain. So bringing in that human touch is Taylor, 'cause her Ghost talks to the Central-ware, which is our Intel network of all open Security channels. Nothing she can't tell us...well as long as it's not above her pay-grade.

I must have got lost in thought, because Bruti stares me down, points towards the exit, "Time to get rolling, big man."

All that leads to a wet rainy overhang near the Pier 39 docks and cardboard central somewhere down below in the abandoned subways.

Bruti starts opening a metal gate, breaking a rusty lock and chain off in his hands, "Looks like this the access way Ulyanov was going on about. Hope this pans out." He steps forward, a wedge of stairs laid below us. "Any clue what that Forty-seven to Sixteen bit she was going on about means?"

Letting a deep sigh out into the foggy air as I step passed him, "Sounded like a service tunnel. Just hoping it's not buried by the homeless zombies or sealed up when we get there."



We start down the trash covered staircase. I remember, back on the beat as a rookie, I saw two cops bleed out down here, so I'm not particularly thrilled to be back in cardboard town.

Bruti follows me down the stairs silently, watching for signs of tech or trouble. We pass a few sentries to the gates of the underground. Squatters don't like cops, not that they should, but the corporate spooks we are, they treat us as boogiemens, pretending we don't exist.

We cross over broken turnstiles and the further down we go into the subway, the more people we pass, all in huts and shelters built out of left over garbage, starting to crowd together. We just travel through the other homeless and the ramshackle paper houses like ghosts, trying to not upset the balance.



Eventually we get to a second platform where a junction would have crossed. Multiple train cars are piled up, like two trains collided and no one came to clear up the mess. It's so crowded with people now, just going about their business in and around the broken trains. Here we don't stand out as much, unless they notice how clean our clothes are. Guess we found the common area people meet to argue or trade things. Not really sure, but it certainly smells like a market with open fires smoking up this underground.

It's a twenty first century Bosch painting down here, more neon, less demons, but the sense of purgatory is in the air.

Keeping my eyes on the crowd in case things go sour, I ask "See anything?"

"There is a lot of tech in here. Maybe three or four VR-taps for drug users; Twenty-something illegal side-arms, lot of bi-local

hacking, nothing targeted on us. Well, nothing dangerous anyways. Most people hardwired down here.” He gestures upward, “seem to have some service numbers all around, they look like they count down that corridor.” Bruti nods westward. “Definitely more crowded that way.”

“Yeah, let’s check that out. If the GPS matches the old blue prints, it should be right,” and I try to make a path towards the other tunnel.

Walking on, more and more faces won’t look us in the eye, like we’d become giants and looking skyward would draw our unwanted-attention, and they don’t want to get stepped on. The crowded tunnel thins out, and without incident, we eventually clamber overtop of some iron fencing and end up in a corridor I’m guessing goes south, just so we can keep following the bread-crumbs of numbers.

My partner is looking around, sensing no more people. We must have found the part of the underground no one wants to be in. I’m sure that is a bad sign when the homeless avoid a place. A train line used to go through this tunnel, but if there was a set of tracks below us, it’s flooded over now. Only a service ladder and path leading on further down the tunnel along the subterranean river.

It’s wet down here, like the rain leaked in through every crack, either that or the stations flood every day at high tide. Man, I hope that isn’t true if we are still around then.

“Hey Bruti, maybe we should’ve brought a boat?”

He chortles and doesn’t look back as he continues leading me along the narrow walk way.

We shuffle along, counting down the service tunnels and doorways. The path moves up and down and we have a few spots we get soaked crossing, where the passage turns into cascading waterfalls of sewage and rain-swell.

Silently cursing myself for wearing my good shoes today, we climb to the far side onto a catwalk to get to higher ground. About another quarter mile down, we finally make it to a door labelled 47-16.



Nodding, Bruti breaks the silence, as he stares at the electronic swipe pad. "Looks like our stop." He tries the door, but it doesn't budge under his weight. He starts peering around, likely using his tech sights. "Ah, special locks. Looks rigged to explode but it's just a pressurized canister, maybe a spay-can, not actual bomb-grade chemicals, so nothing dangerous if we break in." He shakes his head, "Might need more tools to get in there. I actually can't read anything after about twenty-feet ahead though, some dampeners must be jerry-rigged. Definitely the place for our party."

"Hang on". I reach around the wired console, jiggle something, pull a wire or two out, then the door pops open. "There we go. Old tech doesn't have encryption; it just has flaws to exploit, buddy." I gesture to the open door: "After you?"

"Sure." He steps past me into the darkened hall. There is an eerie glow ahead of us and I pull out my pistol, "Just something in the air here. Not getting a good feeling."

Bruti's eyes light up the black-space in white-blue, as he looks back at me, grunts to acknowledge my point is valid, and we quietly move through the dark.

Eventually we walk into an open area, must be a large room about half the size of a warehouse and just as high. The room is glowing a sickly green, like a monster fun house at Hallowe'en. No fog machines though, but a lot of halogen lamps or boxes. Can't really tell.

"King, I see a source-box, I'm gonna go hit the main lights."

I step ahead to take point, keeping my gun down but ready, while Bruti finds the switches. He doesn't take long and room goes bright white.

As my eyes adjust, everywhere I look are fat medical tanks.

Literally, everywhere. Fat tanks filled with green-glowing jelly and moving shapes, starting from my feet to the ceiling of the warehouse, while cables and tubes are running all over the floors and climbing into the rafters. There are just columns of these shapes in tanks, creating archways and halls, and I feel dizzy just trying to get my bearings.

We slowly realize these are people. Well, mostly 'parts' of people. Torsos and appendages swimming in green goo, almost every surface of skin has fingers clawing their way through the flesh. All of them moving in sickly-swaying motion.

We are clearly in a factory of fingers growing out of bodies. Just forms of porcupines with quill-like fingers growing in lines over each fleshy bulge. They are all growing in some kind of algae riddled fluids and the tubes seem to be feeding everything, leading towards the centre of the room.



“Are these real people? Are these just organ bags so the bendy fingers can grow?” Bruti is tapping at the glass on different containers, must be too confused or shocked to actually to have said anything for a few minutes. We just carefully walk around the rows and rows of bodies.

It’s grotesque, and if any of these creatures have skin or even faces, fingers grow and extend out of them while they are moving, breathing. More and more fingers, bending like insect mandibles out of mouths shaping screams or gasping for breath. Well it seems like that. It’s too much to take it all in, what are essentially anemones made out of humans. I’m kinda creeped out, and man have I seen some terrible shit before this.

“Are they awake or aware?”

“Man, I hope not.

“Thinking, this whole thing is too big an Op for one person, like how does anyone get all this gear down here?”

We enter what looks like the main room and all the connections lead to some consoles and machines pumping fluids out.

As I look upwards, my eyes white-out...A Flash-BANG and we’re out on the floor in the heart of the room. I get kicked in the

face at some point as I'm trying to stand up but all my nerves have shut-off apparently.

Something more powerful than a standard SWAT grenade – light and sound reverberate all around me. Muscles don't the way they're supposed to. I try to move again and get a knee pressed into my back, forcing me to the floor. Something pricks my neck; sharp and fast. I have neither the time nor the interest to figure out what it is. Everything around me has turned to shit.

Well, deeper shit.

Someone is talking at me; voice raised in an attempt to penetrate the left over noise filling the room.

Shouting commands at two temporarily deaf men/androids is pretty useless, "Faces down...Who the fuck are you?"

"We're the Feds! Who's in charge here?" from the ground a flash badge from Bruti.

The Head dude pulls out an ID, Bruti says on our in-comm it's fake and he already knows them.



Oh, Fuck me.

Taylor's update flashes in my vid-stream. Face is a match as Hugh Henders. This schmuck is the second son of Governor Henders, our west-state Owner and all his dirty money built on the empire as the new porn-king of the NextWeb. If that's true, we are in deep shit, even if we have a legal right to bust some ass here.

Getting caught by these Political gangsters as a Fed-Agent is bad luck. Usually you don't live past that day, 'cause no one wants their secrets spilt. Like in Roman times or something...three men can keep a secret if two are dead, right?

I calmly smile, looking up, "Well you guys are under arrest until we can sort this mess out."

Hender's goon has some Taser pointed at us, "I doubt that cop. You're out of your depth down here." As he chuckles, Bruti grunts twice, the sign to stop talking shit.

We didn't come down here to dick around though. I flex my arms swiftly, and spin upwards off the ground. Then I knee Henders in the stomach fast enough that he goes down. Bruti took out his other goon, unconscious at his feet, before I can look up again.

Knee on the back of Henders neck to hold him in place. I cough, must have swallowed something on the ground. "Gonna have to take you guys in for some questioning about the illegal Artwork this is all connected to...I'd read you your rights, but we don't need to do that anymore thanks to your Daddy, ironically enough."

Grunting and squirming, Henders keeps swearing, "Fuck you cop. You have no clue what hornet's nest you just kicked over. I'm gonna have my buddies cut your neck off and shit down your throat and hang you on a wall."

As I'm cuffing Henders, his wrist flips and some kind of scalpel rips upward into the flesh of my palm, severing from metacarpal

of my left hand out to the tips of my fingers. Blood spraying, he is up and moving.

Faster than I can tell, some kind of lightning reaches out and strikes Bruti in the face; screaming out, toppling him over a table.

I swing my gun around, but he's running. And I mean, gone. He is twice as fast as an Olympian. So I bolt too, and at least I've got some tech in my body to catch up. He runs left towards a corridor and ducks out of sight.

I turn the same corner and a giant metal carrier slams where my head would have been. He keeps going and I just leap another table and go, go, go.

Running after his ugly mug... no one is that strong, serious enhancements going on, suspect must be MOSH.

(Mostly Original Substrate Human)

I call it in. I'm no idiot. "Hey Taylor, we've got a runner." I gasp, "Oops, jeezus, fuck," I curse it out as I trip over another box and slam my open wound into the ground trying to stay upright and get back to running, blood everywhere... "Taay-Tay, you got all this?"

She picks up my line. She already knows more about this than I do. "Always do, Sam. Your perp is fifty feet ahead, climbing some ladder to the top-side, sending you the feed and map, n-n-n-now."

"Got it." I'm staring at this mess of data that switches back to green, to indicate our target. The map rights itself north / south to my facing directions, and then red lights glow to show best routes.

Feet moving, I'm yelling to Taylor, "Ain't no way this guy is normal. Any black market tech from Chiba city, Shinjuku, to even Chicago, can't fake what this guy is doing. Daddy's money

paid for most of that I'm sure. Can you trace what he is doing so we can map it back to the manufacturer?"

"On it. If I find a flaw, I'll feed it to you."



I hit the ladder with enough force to send vibrations through my arms and into my shoulders. Hands up, the metal is hot and dry and flaking something loose and scratchy into the open gash in my palm. I try not to think about it, even in this modern age, infection can be a bitch of a thing to take care of. Meds are not cheap, and those who supply them can rarely be trusted for much more than the crooks they are.

My hand drops to my waist and I'm rubbing it absently on the leg of my trousers before I realize they're probably not much cleaner than the ladder. Warm, thick, liquid heat soaks into the thin material and I feel it on my thigh.

Ignoring the heat and the blood and the pain, I'm up the ladder and onto the street just as Henders vanishes around a corner, the little green blip in my vision keeps me on track and I'm tearing up the pavement before I can think of where the blind alley may lead.

In my eye, the map expands around me as I run. The first time we tested it, I stumbled and fell with every second or third step

– unable, or unwilling, to let my focus split between real and virtual.

“Just a learning curve,” the lab techs all said as they tapped little notes into my file. “You’ll get it soon enough.”

“Sam?” Taylor’s voice in my head.

“Still here,” I huff as my feet skid on something loose and very nearly fly out from under me. Instinct has my hand up on the wall before I know it and I’m around the corner into the alley. “Fuck! Dead end!”

“That’s what I was about to tell you,” I can hear Tay as she shakes her head. I see the thick, shiny, black tresses of her hair flipping around her shoulders in my mind. “Someone’s hacked us. Can’t get a proper bead on your runner.”

“The hell does that mean?” I’m turning, looking everywhere at once. Stinking, dripping, slime coated trash lays on the ground, strewn about all around me. The heat sensitive infra-system on my left eye flashes wildly as things move about in the mess. Directly in front of me, a thick wall of cracked and faded brick – bright colours spray/layered all across it flashing the names of taggers long past. It’s topped with heavy shards of glass and rows of glowing electric-razor wire, the heat from the current turning them white under my scrutiny.

“Not sure,” Taylor comes back to me. “Whatever he’s accessing is well beyond what I’ve got.” She’s working something in the background. I can hear it. “Stealth maybe? Or something else...”

“Give me something,” I’m turning in place, breathing hard, heart pounding. My body starts to quiver, knees shaking. Adrenaline is wearing off now that I’m stagnant.

The alley comes into clear relief, colours brighten and edges become sharper. I know then that I’ve been drugged and my

hand goes to my neck, rubbing gently at the spot where I was pricked earlier. Someone pumped something into me – slow acting or simply overridden by the rush of the chase?

I hear the gentle rustle of my sock inside my shoe as the knitted cotton settles. My blood, dripping thick from my hand, tastes of metallic tang in the air around me.

All around me, generations have lived and died behind the cracked and faded brick, standing since before I was born. I can hear the traces of their lives.

Perception Enhancers. Some cocktail of random chemical pumped into my blood bringing the world around me to life. Why?

A distraction. The drugs in my blood take my attention from my goal. If I can't focus I can't do my job.

Mind floods with information. Sight, sound, smell, taste...It's all there and it's all overwhelming. I'm on my knees – the decibel level of my pant legs on the pavement is ear shattering. I want to scream. I want to block everything out.

I don't.

Metal rattles just above me – sounds closer than it is thanks to the PerEn in my system. My eyes snap up before I consciously ask them to and I catch Henders as he steps over the edge and vanishes. Again.

"Tay," a metal wrung is just above head height on the left. It's in my hand before I know what I'm doing and I'm flying up a creaking, rusting, barely secure fire escape. "I got him. Rooftop. My location."



“Sorry, Sam,” she comes back, the slim trace of accent in her voice has increased and she rolls her “r”s as she speaks. “Can’t see him, but I have something for you.”

“Give it to me,” my legs pump and I’m taking the rattling steps up the building three at a time.

She taps something in the background then speaks quickly, “Tech sale. Underground. Out of Phnom Penh. 6...No...7 months ago,” things are clicking and I’m passing the fifth floor window looking at a cat and a girl and a thirty – year – old television playing static. “Seems to fit what we’re seeing. Sat blockers. Bio-enhancers. The works.”

“Sounds right,” I’m at the roof. Stop. Look over the lip. Grey cement, old, cracked, smells of rain and wind and filth. Henders is maybe half way across the space. “Can you crack it? Maybe slow the bastard down?”

“Working on it,” she snaps. Pressure.

I hit the roof, gravel crunches under my soles.

"Henders!" Gun's in my hand, fingers wrapped around the grip, gentle pressure on the trigger. PerEn concoction makes the rubber grip rough in my hand, trigger smooth on my finger. "Stop where you are! Hands up!" Feet apart, shoulder wide. Two – handed grip on the gun, right wrapped around the butt left to hold it steady. Blood's warm and slick in my palm.

Henders turns and gives me a smirk, daring me to take the shot we both know I can't make.

"Taylor..."

"Not yet," she's breathing hard, maybe as hard as me. "Almost there."

"On your knees," I step forward, gun steady, unmoving. The feed in my left eye shifts and I'm seeing what the gun sees; tiny red "x" marks the spot just above Henders' left pectoral implant. "Now!"

Henders shrugs, "Sorry. Not today."

"Got something," Taylor's back in my head and I feel a rush of relief at the sound of her voice. "Ten seconds."

I cock the gun, pulling the hammer back and down with an audible "click" that, to me, echoes round and round, bouncing from building to building. Henders hears it and his bravado falters for an instant.

"I said," I raise my voice, deadly calm but loud enough for him to hear. "On. Your. Knees."

"Fuck! Lost it," Tay throws something across whatever room they keep her in when we're in the field. It hits a wall. I shouldn't be able to hear it through the in-comm, but I do. "Your friend has a guardian angel. Out hacked my hack."

Bastard must have seen my hesitation.

He turns on the spot, no longer concerned by the gun in my hand or the look on my face, and, in two rapid strides, he's at the edge and into the air.

"What's on the other side of this building?" I'm starting across even as I ask the question.

"Nothing," Taylor comes back instantly – her calm, collected voice back in place – like the tiny tantrum never happened. "Skyway off ramp. City exit," she pauses and I'm at the midpoint of the roof. "Why?"

Before I can even put an answer together, I'm met with a shiny black pool, stark against the polluted, glowing evening. Black on black on black, there's not a hint of anything but night and shine as the A-Car rises on hidden, gently whirring repulsor fans.

I shift my aim and pull the trigger – just a gentle contraction of the muscles in my finger. Powder explodes with a pop and a flash and my perception shifts. Left eye tracks the bullet like I'm sitting on the thing. It's a hell of a ride from barrel to the smooth side of the rapidly rising car where my round finds a home.



“Tagged a car,” I snap at Taylor for no good reason, excitement and frustration getting the best of me. “Don’t let it out of your sight.”

“What car?” Taylor can’t read it. “I lost the signal just after your took the shot.”

Fucking stealth. Definitely a governor’s car. Mutherfucker.

The car’s out of sight but I can still feel Henders’ eyes on me. Mocking me.

I sit down. Bleeding. Breathing hard. Bruti quietly walks up beside me. Sometime between Henders splitting and my partner arriving, the filthy clouds started weeping tiny needles of harsh, salty rain.

From up here I can make out ocean-liners alongside Oil tankers cruising through the water, passing the jagged outline of Alcatraz, morosely greying in the bay. The tragedy is that time eats away our histories, yours and mine, eh?

“Damn, son. That’s a lot of blood.” He points with his gun at my feet where it’s just pooling around me.

We both look up to the airspace where our feed is just showing the trailing distance of the black A-Car. Perception Enhancers are wearing off. Everything’s back to boring old normal. No reason really to get back up just now.

Think I hear an ambulance coming our way. That Taylor-girl is always on the ball. I’m dizzy so I kinda come in and out of the black, until some Bot I don’t recall arriving gives me an adrenaline shot. The soup of endorphins and pain killers and fluids rushes into my drained veins.

Man, the games we play. The governor will get to deny any knowledge of this shit, doesn't know what his son does with his money or time etc etc.

Others labs are out there, we're sure of that, and I'm starting to think that lab wasn't just about making fingers. Something more is going on here. Just gotta make the connections.

That Henders is gonna be even more underground now that we ID'd him isn't even a question. He'll be gone. Someplace that has no extradition. Someplace he can hide out until Daddy calls him back. Our job might just be getting started.

Fuck.

"Get the monks on that shit down there," I nod vaguely in the direction of the lab where we left it behind. "They love that sort of thing. Should be enough down there to mine Terra Bytes worth of information."

"I don't get them," Bruti takes a seat next to me.

Staring at the open bones and meat of my split palm as a MedBot sutures it back together and re-grafts the fleshy part, I'm feeling way better. Might be the cocktail of meds kicking in, but hoping it's the bust we made. "You say something?" I give the big man a sidelong glance.

"The monks," he mumbles. "Could you do it? Give up everything and just work tech for the rest of your life?"

"What?" I raise my newly sealed hand and flex the fresh skin a couple of times. It feels like a leather glove – tight and stiff. I'm pretty sure I hear it creak. "And lose all this?"

Bruti grunts something that sounds like an answer but I've already moved on from the conversation. I stare back into the grey-black sky as the rain keeps falling on me.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing content and poetry for over fifteen years, Bryan McLean, has many creations and web published work, including such collections as The Syndrome Papers, and (1)ne Night Stand. Originally trained as a fine artist, his work studies themes such as culture, technology, music, literature, buddhism, spirituality and photography. Raised and educated in Ontario, he has lived in various locations and worked for various corporations all across Canada. Bryan is a literary artist that brings us dark, exciting writing in a deep language that shows all of us as a generation fighting to live under great transition. You can follow along with his project, The Open Air: a dark urban fantasy about the light, and his continued work on his annual poetry project #100days of Poetry for his studio site, Lyinghere.com