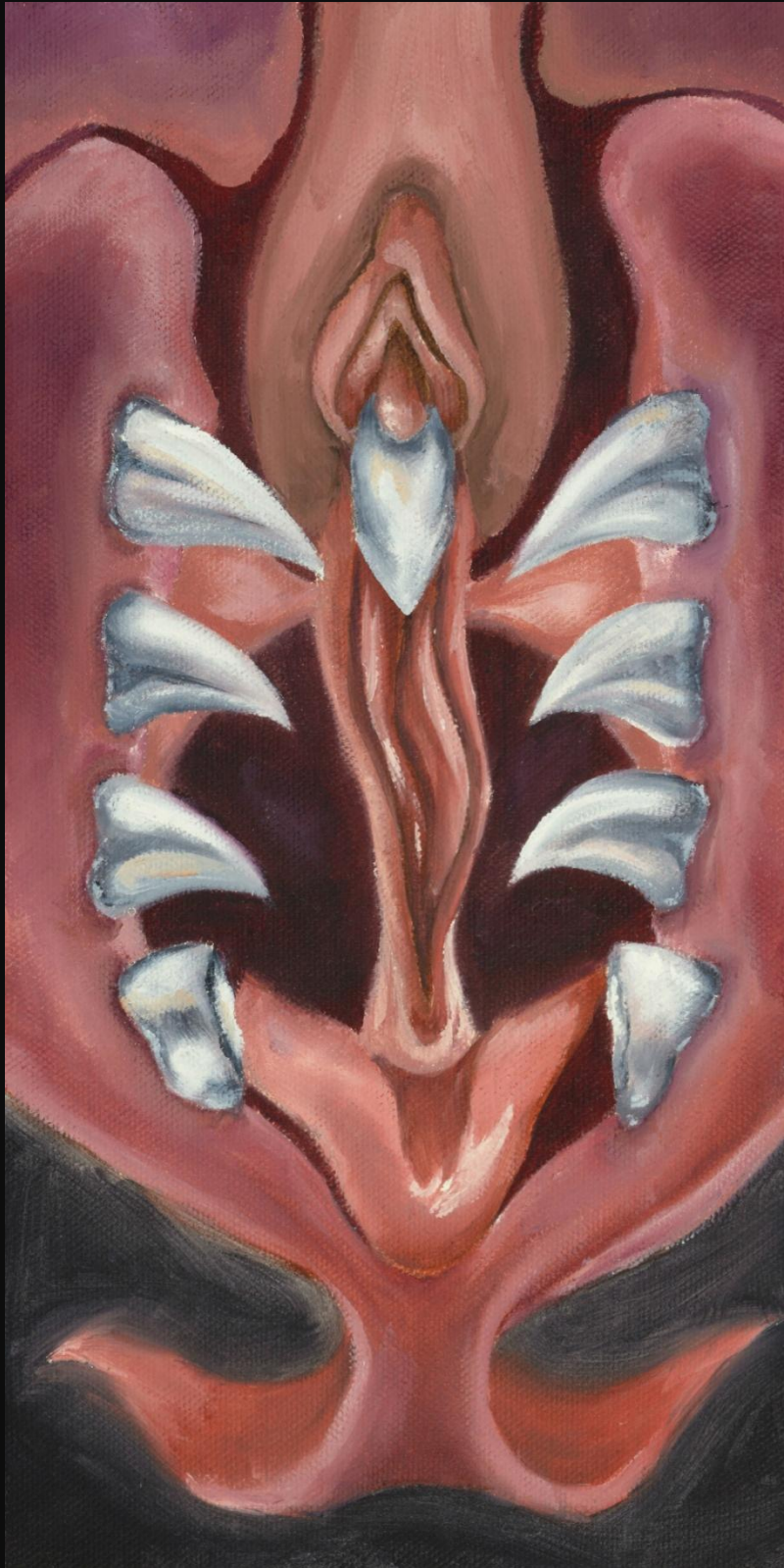


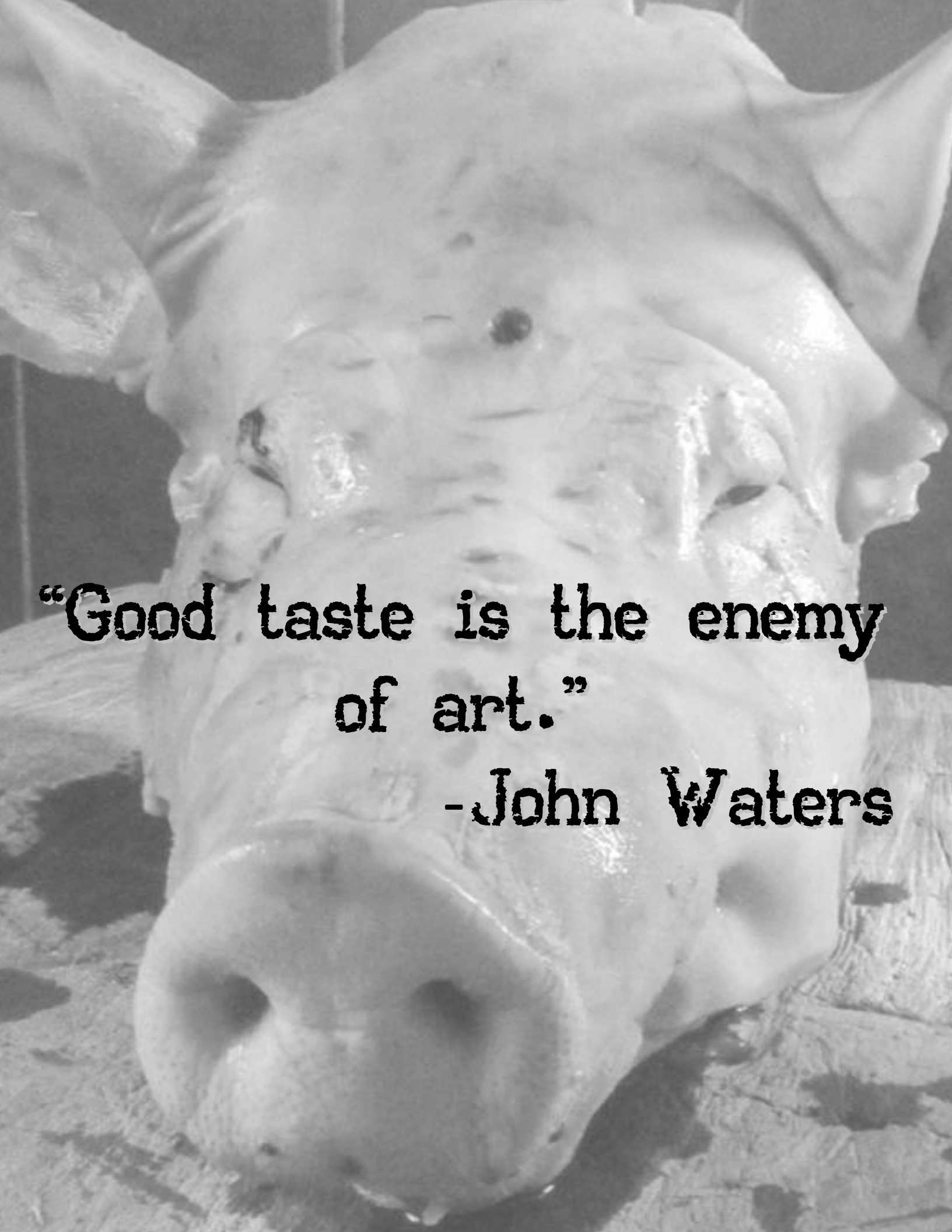
UNDERBELLY

ISSUE #1

SUMMER 2018



Nine Stories of Transgressive Fiction!



**“Good taste is the enemy
of art.”**

-John Waters

UNDERBELLY MAGAZINE

A magazine of transgressive fiction
Issue 1, Summer 2018

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Close Your Eyes and Think of Something Human

Brandon Cracraft

Sergeant Lionel Carrington took a deep breath and thrust off his underpants as quickly as possible. Eyes shut tight enough to hurt, he didn't want to think about what he was doing. Even so, he couldn't block out the sound: a skittering in the darkness, the thunder of a thousand feet dancing... pacing... hungry for him and his seminal fluids.

He licked his lips, wishing his commanding officers hadn't locked his booze away. He never thought of himself as an alcoholic, but a little liquid courage helped him push his conscience and his nerves through battle. There had been no booze for the last 78 hours and Carrington was painfully sober, but he couldn't save the world if he got a case of whiskey dick.

The aliens were nicknamed "Pill Bugs" shortly after they were discovered, though NATO had called an emergency meeting (wasting billions of dollars of their member nations' taxes) to come up with a less offensive name. Not that it mattered: the aliens had squat, segmented bodies and hundreds of constantly moving legs, and the name had stuck. Most humans, Carrington among them, referred to them with a capital P and a capital B.

Pill Bugs.

"Be gentle with me," Carrington said. Ten years fighting in North Africa had done nothing to tame his thick, Bostonian accent, nor put the slightest tint to his pale skin. "It's my first time." The sergeant laughed at his own joke, certain that some of the scientists watching him trying to get a hard-on were giggling too.

Carrington opened his eyes a slit, enough to see if the Pill Bugs understood his attempt at humor. Lacking vocal

cords, Pill Bugs expressed emotion by the color of their carapace. Most were neutral gray, a couple black. One particularly large female (at least, that's what Carrington assumed she was) had turned a bright flamingo pink.

"Finally," he said, lips curling into a grin. "A woman who gets me."

Carrington shut his eyes and began to caress his flaccid penis. He missed his pubes. For his own safety, he was ordered to shave from the waist down. Thin, blond wispy hairs still poked from his nipples and grew thick on his forearms. His head was kept in its typical high and tight, his hair so light that he sometimes looked bald in certain lights.

"Don't think about what's going to happen." It was a mantra Carrington had repeated too many times to count. His rubbing became more furious. His hands smelled of gun oil lubricant.

The image of the bright pink Pill Bug and her furious dancing stared back at him from the inside of his eyelids. He wondered if she had gone full crimson yet. That was how they ended up when they were sufficiently hungry and horny.

No wonder both male and female bit the heads off the strange non-sexual Pill Bugs that acted as go-between for the sperm and eggs during mating.

"Give me a minute," Carrington said, more to the scientists than the Pill Bugs.

He forced the image of the Pill Bugs out of his mind, trying to convince himself that the violent tapping was something other than the females competing for him. It was flattering to think that two dozen women were fighting for his dick until he remembered how immune and violent his potential suitors were.

"Just think of something human," Carrington reminded himself.

Like most boys, Carrington got his first erection long before his father got a chance to explain why his body loathed him. It popped up at the worst time and caused him agony as it stretched his sensitive shaft to its limit and scraped his circumcised tip against the waistband of his tighty-whites.

He was still a year away from graduating from GoodNites when he had his first wet dream: his English teacher Miss Toyama bending over and revealing her love of black, satin panties. The exact same pair that Carrington had seen a model wear in one of his dad's secret stash of magazines under the bed.

Carrington's first directed hard-on happened on his thirteenth birthday when Coach Monroe changed in his swimsuit so that he could take the PE class to the pool. He was thankful for the cold water for diminishing his out-of-control boyhood.

Stacy Jenkins was his first girlfriend, sophomore year of high school. They never did anything, not even kiss, but when he was back in his bedroom, alone, he played with himself while he imagined the phenomenal sex he was having with her.

Carrington accepted his bisexuality thanks to Mikey Colin: red hair, green eyes, and devoid of any sense of style normally acquainted to the high school's resident queer. When he kissed Mikey, he felt the other boy's erection as their bodies touched. Unfortunately, they got too drunk off of an insane concoction that only a seventeen year old could dream up to go as far as Carrington wanted to at the winter formal.

Release from virginity happened at senior prom with Alyssa Sakai. It was terrible. She had told him so.

Carrington decided that he didn't want to think about her anymore, even if she did have beautiful thighs and a fetish

for garter belts. A fetish that Lionel Carrington shared and would introduce as many women as possible to.

Sex became enjoyable in college thanks to Kasumi Watanabe. His friends made fun of him for pursuing the shy, lanky library science major instead of a busty sorority girl, but they didn't know about shy girls. Kasumi had a list of fetishes as long as her arm. Their mutual lack of experience gave them a will to experiment, try things that thirty-year-old Lionel Carrington never would've dared. Kasumi taught him the wonders of a knotted rope, and he no longer considered a bare butt spanking to be a punishment... at least, not a punishment that he didn't secretly desire.

Shortly after dropping out of college, Carrington fell into the military and marriage. Things didn't end well with Debbie Morrison Carrington, so he pushed her out of her mind as quickly as possible.

Lieutenant Marina Yeboah was another story. Jack Nicolson was right about pussy that a man had to salute. Not that the officer let the sergeant anywhere near her precious. Vaginal sex was forbidden, so Carrington mastered the art of anal and oral. His favorite thing was rubbing his manhood between her breasts. The largest tits he ever encountered that weren't the product of a plastic surgeon's scalpel.

A Marine's dress uniform unlocked a lot of panties, so Carrington was never short on sex. If he mentioned that he was bisexual and could deadlift 210 pounds, the panties exploded. Things were even easier at the gay bars.

When Carrington tried to picture their faces, they were a blur of breasts, penises, and orifices. He moved on.

His next partner of any importance was a prostitute named Fatima during his

time in North Africa. She refused to indulge any of his fetishes, but she enjoyed the size and curve of his penis. She smelled ready for sex, and her vagina let out a gentle heat. Fatima challenged Carrington to pierce her deeper and deeper. Since she never said anything, Carrington assumed it was just business. When he discovered that she was charging him less than the others, he became instantly aroused.

Carrington had an active fantasy life. Even when sex was plentiful, he enjoyed playing with himself.

His favorite image of the Cavanaugh twins entered his mind. James and Simon, nineteen, red-haired, mischievous, and headed for a long military career despite never earning a single stripe on their arm.

Carrington imaged dressing the two of them like schoolboys and giving them the spanking they deserved, their cocks pushing against his uniform pants as he delivered swat after swat against their freckled bottoms.

Carrington felt his erection squirm and stiffen to its full length. He bit his lip, clenched his hands into fists, anticipating a surge of pleasure. Yeah... any second now...

A surge of agony ran up his chest and down his thighs, forcing his eyes open.

Pill Bugs never did anything for pleasure. Everything was either a religious ritual to honor their ancestor-gods or practical. Sexual intercourse was no exception.

When humans first encountered the Xer, they assumed they were Pill Bug drones, especially since the females complained that fewer Pill Bugs were

being born male. They had no visual sexual organs, and the females had wide, winking vaginas that moved in a way no human sex organ could. Xer had their own sexual organs and were an integral part of procreation.

One of the things that terrified humans about Pill Bugs was their cannibalism. When one of their kind died, they performed a strange dancing ritual that ended with the corpse being completely devoured. It dishonored their life to leave even so much as a scrap of flesh or a sliver of antennae uneaten.

Lacking mouths, Pill Bugs ate with their feet like horseshoe crabs. When the Xer attached itself to Carrington's penis, several of its feet bit into the human's tender thighs. Rivulets of blood oozed down his legs, leaving crimson puddles at his feet. It was the Pill Bug equivalent of pre-cum.

The Xer's sexual organs were interlaced strips of flesh that wrapped around a male's penis while prehensile flagella massaged and held the testicles in place. The wound in his thighs would doubtless need stitches, but Carrington was surprised that he was actually enjoying what was happening in

his groin.

Then it became fiercer, the rhythm increasing until it began to pull and stretch the sensitive parts of his anatomy. The six-foot-two, heavily-muscled Marine let out a scream of pain, tears leaking from his eyes and sweat pouring from his body, making it difficult to stand.

He thought of Lance Corporal Johnny Dixon. They were young, wild, angry, passionate, and terrified that each day would end with a rain of bullets turning their skulls to jelly. Their sex reflected their love: brutal and hurried.



Dixon never waited for Carrington to get undressed. The small man pulled Carrington's trousers to his knees and ripped off his underwear before engulfing him.

The fantasy didn't last long. Sex with Pill Bugs was nothing like human lovemaking. Pill Bugs had emotions, had more emotions than humans if some social scientists were to be believed. This had nothing to do with emotion. It was simply procreation.

The corpses of several females littered the ground. The huge female honored those she had defeated by eating their corpses. Behind her, the feet of the Pill Bugs thundered. The first mating with a human was a sacred event necessary to the survival of the species.

Despite appearances, human sperm was ninety-seven percent compatible with Pill Bugs. Their leaders had made their intentions clear: Mankind could furnish them with a handful of volunteers, or they would harvest the species' sperm by force. Pill Bug religion denied the practice of artificial insemination and they killed the scientist that suggested it and left his body uneaten.

Carrington held fast. He knew that he would not be allowed to cum until all the dead had been honored. He hoped he wouldn't pass out or puke. If he dishonored the act he would have to start it from the beginning tomorrow.

It was an hour before the female was prepared. She swelled to twice her length, over ten feet long. Instead of one vagina, she now had three. Carrington winced when he realized he would be expected to inseminate all three holes.

The Xer sensed his fear and turned a soothing color. Carrington looked down. Pill Bugs had no pupils or irises, and their eyes changed color with the rest of them.

"Ready when you are, buddy," Carrington said, caressing the alien's carapace. "Work your magic."

The female's vagina sucked at both Carrington and the Xer's organs like a vacuum before engulfing them. Both Pill Bugs turned black and fresh wounds opened all over Carrington's lower body. He hurt too much to know if there was any pleasure in the act.

Carrington heard a crunch. Humans thought that devouring the Xer was optional. Carrington laughed. They should've known better. Nothing was optional with Pill Bugs. Everything they did was important.

The Xer looked at Carrington and turned ivory white. Carrington's amber eyes widened in terror. "You cannot be fucking serious, buddy," he said. "I'm not going to eat you."

The female stopped, glowing black with fury. If Carrington didn't eat the head of the Xer to force orgasm, she planned on eating them both and starting over with a new human tomorrow. This one might not be so open to fathering a hybrid alien race.

Carrington bit down on the Xer's antennae. He expected it to taste like any bug that ever flew into his mouth. It was closer to alligator but gamey as squirrel. There was an under taste, something sweet. It took the human a few seconds to recognize it.

"Barbecue sauce?" Carrington asked, looking directly into the Xer's eyes. "Did you try to make yourself tasty for me?" Even though the gesture was unnatural for the alien, the Pill Bug gave him a nod.

"Too bad this whole thing has to end like it does," Carrington said, trying to ease his nerve. "I'd marry you, buddy."

Carrington bit again, surprised at how easy it was to pierce the shell.

Coppery, human tasting blood hit his tongue and then ran down his throat. He only had to eat the Xer's head, but he had to eat the entire head. The Female got to eat the rest. She needed the rest for the hundreds of babies she was about to have.

Once, after a six pack and a half, a bunch of Carrington's buddies convinced him to eat a serving of monkey brains from a silver salver. There was no beer to wash out the taste and give him an excuse for being sick the next day. Bitterness, meatiness, and a little bit of barbecue sauce that leaked onto the sweet meat.

Pill Bugs had two brains and three hearts. When the Xer finally died, it released Carrington to cum. Carrington had no idea that he contained so much fluid. His legs shook and he tasted bile mixing with bits of Pill Bug as what felt like a gallon shot into each of the female's vaginas.

Carrington fell to his knees, tasting his own blood and sweat. He considered himself in shape. The military demanded it. His muscles ached like he had just tried running for the first time in years.

"Someone get me out of here," Carrington said between ragged breaths. "I don't think I can walk."

Lionel Carrington slept for over twenty-four hours after his ordeal, not even caring when he had an accident in his bed. There was a war going on in his stomach, and the marine was losing this war.

He managed to crawl his way to the shower and let the warm water wash over him. There were fresh stitches up and down his lower body, so he was careful as he scrubbed the stink of the Pill Bugs off him.

Carrington treated himself by wearing silk bikini briefs under his

uniform. He wanted to feel desirable to humans.

"You're a braver man than I," Lieutenant Martinez said, handing the non-commissioned officer a coffee. "Of course, you're also a bigger pervert. I don't get into that whole whips and chains nonsense."

"It wasn't anything like that," Carrington said, staring at the coffee with disgust. The last thing he wanted to taste was something bitter. He decided to go with hot chocolate, pouring in some extra sugar.

"The female, the one the white coats call Rainbow." Pill Bugs referred to each other by a specific beating of their many legs. Nicknames were a necessity on both sides for better human/Pill Bug relations. "She's been asking about you."

Carrington downed the hot chocolate. "I'm not looking for another wife," he said. "The last one chewed me up and spat me out." He laughed at the irony of his statement.

"It's not that, Lionel." Carrington winced. It was never a good sign when an officer called him by his first name. "Pill Bug females die after they gave birth. I guess that makes sense after a couple hundred kids pop out of you."

Carrington's mouth dropped open. "You can't be fucking serious."

"When she dies, you will be expected to eat her corpse." Lieutenant Martinez lifted his coffee cup in a toast. "Bon appétit."

Brandon Cracraft lives in Tucson, Arizona with husband, dog, and cat. His short stories have appeared in various anthologies and magazines throughout the years. His first novel, FAMILY VALUES, is available in paperback and e-book format. He is working on his second novel.

Remembering Baby-Bald

Clark Roberts

“You ready for the five hundredth episode?” Davis asked.

Lita glanced across the room at him. He was busy mounting the new video recorder to the tripod. The lens was trained on her. Jesus, she felt ridiculous.

When she was apparently silent for too long, Davis looked up from his task, tilted his head, and frowned. “Come on, Lita, this is a celebration. It’s number five hundred!” He smiled and pumped a fist in encouragement. “Think about that for a second. Five... hun... dred!”

“Five hundred,” she mumbled. She turned her attention to the world outside the window. From this vista, the miles of sprawling lights were a testament to manmade beauty.

From the highest suite of the highest downtown hotel, she watched the pods of people make their way from one destination to another. Cars like lighted bugs played follow the leader, a constant scuttle in the pursuit of entertainment. On and on it went.

They were all so small and insignificant from this height. She imagined she could squish any one of them with her finger.

Lita was prepared to supply some of that opium deemed entertainment. Silently, she admitted she felt worse than ridiculous; she felt pitiful.

Five hundred.

She turned from the window and took in her reflection from the mirror on the nearest wall. Had she actually agreed to this for episode five hundred? Was she really supposed to resemble the Statue of Liberty?

“You remember the first?” Davis asked, breaking her train of thought.

“Remember Baby-Bald? How nervous he was when he first saw you?”

“Yeah, I remember him.” She lit a cigarette, drew off it, and held the smoke in. Of course she remembered Baby-Bald. She expelled the smoke and was momentarily soothed when her reflection was shrouded.

“He answered the ad, and then showed up thinking we were going to rob him. Fucking Baby-Bald.” Davis was now fidgeting with the cords, making sure all connections were tight. The new recorder was top of the line, and why not? The money was there. Davis had promised it would be no problem to operate, but apparently, it was a hell of an ordeal to set up. Was he stalling?

Lita took another drag from the cigarette, again blew the smoke at her reflection and momentarily felt better. The smoke dissipated, and she felt like shit again. Lady-Liberty wouldn’t be caught dead tramped up in this trashy outfit.

“I mean, who willingly shows up to what they assume is a robbery? Apparently guys like Baby-Bald.” Davis had his palms up to the ceiling to amplify the absurdity of the notion. “Am I right? Am I right?”

“You’re right, Davis.” She stamped the unfinished cigarette out in her reflection’s eye. Lady-Liberty didn’t smoke. Then again, Lady-Liberty also didn’t wear a silver latex mini cut so low and tight her chest bulged like squeezed water balloons. Lady-Liberty wouldn’t have entertained the idea of coating every inch of her body with glittery body paint either. No way.

“He asked you to pet his head to calm him down. Remember that? That’s why you started calling him Baby-Bald. Remember? Because when you were a little girl...”

"I remember," Lita said, annoyed. "When I was a little girl I nursed a baby bald eagle with a broken wing back to health. Why wouldn't I remember? I'm the one who told you to put the story up in my bio because it would make me seem more patriotic, more personable, more approachable. Remember? Remember? Remember?"

"Is that a true story?"

"Does it matter, Davis? Does it? I mean, I'm standing here costumed like The Statue of freaking Liberty. I'm waiting for you to finish toying around with your new gizmo so you can lay me and display it to the world so everyone can experience a romp in the sheets with Uncle Sam's wife, daughter, cousin or whatever the hell they want to make-believe. I don't think it matters one iota if I told the truth or lied way back at the start."

"Sorry. But Baby-Bald, I mean that first shoot was one of the best, a classic. Remember?"

"Sure I do." But her thoughts weren't focused on Baby-Bald the man, but the eagle. The story was true. She had nursed the young eagle back to health as a little girl. Her stepfather had said it was pointless because, *see, the wing isn't just broken; it's completely crumpled. The bird might as well be a dead goose.* But Lita had been steadfast in her care, even setting mouse traps in the barn and then feeding the quarry to the caged bird. When the eagle's health was restored she'd opened the cage and offered the world back to it. She'd watched with mixed feelings as it soared up, off and away in the brilliant blue sky. There was a secret part of her that had hoped the eagle would struggle, that the wing had been irreparably damaged, that she could've nursed it forever.

A week later she'd found the eagle on the back porch. A bullet hole through its breast.

Her stepfather's rifle resting against the house.

She'd picked the eagle up and examined it for a long time, even probed a finger into the wound. Was there a lesson in this?

She'd cried herself to sleep that night, wondering how her stepfather could be so cruel. Even in her dreams the tears had streamed, and whatever was left of her innocence had washed out with them.

"You think Baby-Bald became a lifelong fan?" Davis asked. "I'll bet he did. I'll bet he even recognizes me, 'Hey, ain't that guy boffing her supposed to be holding the camera?' Right? Right? Don't you think a lot of people will be thinking that? So many are going to watch it. I mean we're talking episode five hundred."

"Episode five hundred," Lita repeated. Lady-Liberty didn't get it on with strangers. She hadn't fucked five hundred nameless men. And she certainly didn't dress in clothes that screamed for attention.

Lady-Liberty strutted by you in her flowing gown and didn't speak one damn word; her jutting jaw said it all. *Better watch out, Honey, 'cause I'm not stopping. No heels here, but these sandals will trample your sassy ass just the same. You're welcome to trade in your stilettos and follow if you like, or even blaze your own trail. Better yet, just step aside cutely and mutely and teeter on those stupid heels, 'cause these sandals are done with the chit-chat.* A woman wearing those sandals knew beauty's depth didn't stop or begin with the makeup and accessories. To find beauty one had to saw through the bone or burrow into the heart in search of that abstract which cannot be measured with any earthly opinions—the soul. A woman

wearing those sandals with that gown was confident about the days ahead.

In the mirror, Davis approached from behind. His eyes gleamed with glee. "You look..." he started to say, but paused as if pensively conjuring the right word.

For a moment Lita thought he might say beautiful. She yearned for that word. Not that it had never been said of her, not that Davis had never used it before, but something momentous was trying to birth inside her, something that just needed a little nudge or pull or crack of the egg. If he had said it she would have sat him on the bed right then and called it off. Forget the fans and their memberships, forget the money. I'm better than this! You're better than this! How long do you plan on filming me in this filth? What the hell do you tell your wife? Or is she so caught up in the wealth this entertainment brings to blindly stare beneath it?

In an anxious breath, Davis repeated "You look... good enough to eat."

Lita couldn't imagine anything more repulsive. It panged her and the thing inside died.

Now, in the reflection, an arm snaked around her torso. A hand formed a talon-like claw and latched onto her left breast.

Lita whirled on Davis and shoved hard into his chest. He lurched backward, grasped out for the corner of the bed and thumped on his ass.

"You don't ever touch me unless the camera is rolling!" Her hand was trembling with fury even as she pointed it at him. "It might be a low form of entertainment, the lowest in the world maybe, but it's all business to me. When you hit record you can grope all you want, you can huff and puff, but I swear on my

own life if you try anything before or after I'll call the cops."

Davis stared up in disbelief, his jaw hanging slack, but it was his eyes that made her giggle, his eyes so wide like a frightened schoolboy being harshly reprimanded for the first time. Eyes were windows to the soul and like the previous four hundred and ninety-nine, his were a trembling reminder that the brazen advances were just a facade.

The giggle started small on her lips. Davis must have heard it though, because now his eyes blinked rapidly. He was on the verge of tears! How funny was that? This man had filmed some of the worst debaucheries ever to be uploaded onto the World Wide Web. This man was about to actually get his chance after four hundred and ninety-nine times of being behind the camera and he was about to cry. It was too much! Lita covered her mouth to stifle it, but his fear... his nerves... his eyes were too much. Before she knew it she was braying laughter and sitting on the bed to keep from joining him on the floor.

"I'm sorry," she said, with the hand back up as if it could catch the last of the giggles. "I really don't mean to laugh."

From the floor, his reply was silence. His mouth closed in a firm line. His eyes narrowed in contempt. Her threat of calling the cops, brimming with conviction as it was, didn't hold any sway in the situation. *Oh yes, Mr. Officer, it most certainly was rape. I would never let a man treat me anything less than a lady. How do I explain the fuck me shoes? How do I explain the mini-skirt, the body paint? Yes, I know on my website you'll find a mountain of hypocritical evidence, but that was all entertainment, all for the money, the Benjamins baby, the Benjamins! Besides, I wear sensible sandals in my everyday life. Shouldn't that count for something?*

"What are you looking at, Davis? I said I was sorry. Are you going to use your fists on Lady-Liberty? Are you going to manhandle her to the floor and show her who's boss?"

Now, he did begin to cry, his hands rushed to hide the tears, and there was nothing comical about it. She felt sorry for him, because years ago he had only started filming and designing her website for the quick bucks to supplement his regular income. He probably hadn't planned five years down the road that he'd have quit his day job and would still be doing this.

He was pathetic.

Just like her.

They were both pathetic.

"Look at me, Davis."

He splayed his fingers and peeked.

"I really am sorry I laughed.

Maybe it's this costume, but I just don't feel myself tonight. I'm having strange thoughts. Kind of, I don't know, regretting the last five years. Like you keep saying, it's five hundred. Two men twice a week for five years. Jesus, when I say it out loud it sounds ludicrous. Five hundred men have answered the call and we probably ignore that many every month... and they were all strangers."

"But I'm not a stranger."

"No. You're not." She said, and offered a hand. He took it and sat next to her. "I'm thinking my life should have been more than whatever this is. Your life should have been more."

"My wife doesn't even care anymore." It was an odd opening to a confession and one Lita wasn't sure she was prepared for, but Davis continued.

"When she and I were just dating she used to get jealous of you. She always fretted that there was something going on between you and me. Isn't that funny? When we married and she saw how much

money I was making she stopped worrying. Sometimes when she's asleep I sneak down to the basement and weep."

There was an uncomfortable silence and Lita sensed he was debating saying more. Then, "She even knows I'm the talent tonight. She can't wait to watch it together."

"That's enough. I don't want to hear about you and your wife."

"How did it get this far, Lita? To episode five hundred?"

"It was too easy," Lita said. "It was the money. In the first week after filming with Baby-Bald the site had ten thousand hits. It validated me as a woman, because, let's be honest, none of those faceless strangers were watching Baby-Bald."

"No," Davis agreed. "They wanted you."

"Do you think I'm beautiful, Davis? Do you think there is a man out there who could still love me after all of this?"

"I do."

After all these years she was still seeking validation. She said, "Get the mask, and turn the camera on."

Davis did. She'd agreed to kinkier shit than this before, but the full head mask of the bald eagle Davis pulled over was somehow the eeriest yet.

He wasn't very large and had no trouble entering her. He started out with jerking pumps and was panting hard behind the rubber mask within a half-minute. Lita imagined his upper lip breaking out with beads of sweat. To her, the sensation was nothing more than a dull, repetitive thudding. Episode five hundred was going to be a bust.

She reminded herself who she was at this moment. She was the porn persona of Lady-Liberty.

‘...A mighty woman with a torch, whose
flame
is the imprisoned lightning, and her name,
Mother of Exiles...’

‘...Give me your tired, your poor,
your huddled masses yearning to breathe
free.’

Lady-Liberty could make true men
out of the meek. Stripped to the bare
bones, Lita knew this was the fantasy her
craving fans wished to sate.

“Oh baby...” she moaned. She
pulled the front of her dress down and
exposed her shining breasts. “Ohhh
baaabyyy...”

Davis began to thrust with more
force, but she could still feel him shrinking
flaccid. He was grunting terribly, and Lita
imagined his face behind the mask was a
twisted mélange of frustration and earnest
concentration. Couldn’t he stay hard?

The fans had been promised an
over the top extravaganza. If they didn’t
get their money’s worth on episode five
hundred they would feel duped, leave
nasty comments about her. Call her a
fraud, a has-been whore, and maybe she
deserved it. She simply took from the fans
the validation she needed. They clicked
on the site religiously, spilling endless
amounts of dollars from their checking
accounts and filling hers. She was not an
acquaintance of any of them and all they
cared for her was the performance. They
would feel cheated for this sad display,
and she couldn’t let that happen.

It wasn’t over yet. Somehow she
had to draw out the animal in Davis.
“OOHH!” she squealed. Maybe Davis
was like her and just needed more of a
persona to hide beneath. She reached up
and began massaging the back of Davis’s
head, petting him the way she had the first

stranger. “OOOOOHHHHH, Baaaaaby-
Baaallld!”

Inside she felt him grow. It felt
good to Lita; it felt like home.

“That’s it Baby-Bald, right there;
you know what you’re doing,” she cooed.
“Lady-Liberty needs your screaming
eagle. Give it to me, Baby-Bald.
YEEEESSS—OOOHHH—BAAABY-
BALD!”

Davis was a mad flurry now, and
Lita realized neither one of them was
acting anymore. This was the real deal.
They were both putting the gusto into it,
letting out the last five years of numbness
in one final take. There would be a take,
the take of money that would roll in, and
her fans would be left with nothing but a
mess to sop up.

She felt him grow more, stretching
her inner walls like elastic. Just how huge
could he get that thing of his?

“It’s coming out!” Davis roared,
his voice garbled. Sweat was dripping out
from the mask. “I can feel it coming out!”

There was a tearing noise like
Velcro being ripped apart. A bright pain
exploded within Lita.

“Pull out!” she screamed.

He did.

She looked down at her
womanhood and screamed in horror.
Nothing was left but a bloody massacre.

But the worse horror was what had
happened to Davis. A bloodied head of a
bald eagle had replaced his penis. A chunk
of meat dangled from the hooked beak.
That’s me, Lita thought, that’s my flesh. The
head of the eagle bobbed, and the flesh
disappeared down its gullet. The eagle
screeched. With each wriggle of its head
more and more of it grew from Davis’s
body. It stretched forward, hungry for
another bite, and suddenly, a wing flapped
free. The second wing was just seconds
from being loose, and then what? Lita

bunched her legs up and kicked. She struck Davis in his belly and in a burst of blood the eagle took flight. For the second time that night, backward Davis lurched. He crashed into the T.V. and bleeding out, slid to the floor.

Lita scrambled off the bed to her feet. The eagle continued screeching and crashed into the walls, leaving smears of blood. The bird was scared and confused. She saw this as her chance and turned, running for the door. Before she could reach it a heavy weight struck the back of her head. She reached up and tried to yank the eagle loose, but it was strong and the talons had tangled her hair and bit her scalp. Its head bobbed upside down in her sight. It screeched again and began to pound its beak into her face. Her nose blossomed; her eyes broke. She fought blindly, twisting around the room. She dug her nails into the predator, was only able to rip away feathers.

A breaking of glass, a rush of cold air. She pitched outward first, and then down, down.

"You ever see anything like this?"

From his squatting position Detective Vance looked up at his partner. He replied, "Not quite."

"What do you make of it?"

"Murder-suicide," Vance said. It sounded right.

Sounded right but didn't feel that way.

"Yeah," his partner nodded, then smirked. "You recognize the jumper, the woman?"

There was an impulse to lie, but what was the point? Obviously, his partner knew who she was. Vance acknowledged he did as well.

His partner laughed. "My wife and I get on her site from time to time. Spruce things up a bit."

"Not anymore you don't," Vance said. He picked up one of the numerous feathers scattered throughout the room, let it dangle from his index and thumb. "I can't figure what the deal is with these—or that damned mask." He nodded in the direction of the corpse on the floor.

He knew the feather was from a bald eagle. In high school, he'd written a report arguing it was a poor choice for the national bird. Bald eagles were scavengers, carrion eaters.

"She was one kinky broad." His partner shrugged as if it explained everything. "At least the camera was rolling the whole time. I bet it'll answer all of our questions. Probably entertaining to boot."

Vance let the feather float back down to the floor. He got up, approached the broken window. The one remaining curtain breathed the cold air.

"I'm going to take the camera down to the car," his partner said.

Without turning, Vance nodded and heard the door open and shut. The window overlooked the entire city. Far below, Lady-Liberty was being carted away in a body bag. Every day was the same—cleaning up someone else's mess. He sighed.

Out in the distance, the full moon suspended. The silhouette of a large bird swooped past it. It barely registered in Vance's sight. He was staring too deeply and ruminating.

Just what the hell had become of this country?

Clark Roberts writes fiction in the genres of horror and fantasy. His work has appeared in over twenty publications, including Dark Recesses Press, Anotherrealm, Nocturnal Ooze, Alienskin, and Peaks and Valleys. He is not a New York Times bestselling author, and he's okay with that. Mr. Roberts lives in Michigan with his wife and two children. Besides reading and writing, he enjoys spending time in the outdoors hunting and fishing. He particularly enjoys fishing in the hours of dusk when trout streams whisper, and eyes open in the surrounding woods.

Sobriquet

Gregory L. Norris

A wise man once said that to live by the sword meant to die by the sword. I can tell you for a fact that the same holds true for the cock.

Call me whatever you want. C.S. works—that's what so many men have called me. Cock Sucker. This is my confession.

I went to the Los Angeles National Cemetery in search of my first love. *Love* might be a bit of a stretch. The first time I ever jerked off and shot my wad into a sweaty sock was in front of the TV, Halloween week, while the old black-and-white classic *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* played. Richard Denning as blond, gruff 'Mark Williams' and his hunky pal, actor Richard Carlson in the guise of 'Doctor David Reed,' frolicked in the mysterious waters located somewhere in tropical South America. Both men were stripped down to their tight, ass-hugging shorts and showing plenty of skin.

I was instantly smitten with lust for Carlson's incredible physique, his athlete's legs and chest there on the screen but then gone too soon. Fantasies of an intensity I'd never before experienced possessed my imagination—and my cock. Energy cycloned out of my erection, knocking down the walls of reality. When the wave finished crashing over me, I was a mess. What I felt for the man on the screen—now fully clothed—confused me. Love? Something very much like it, at least.

Seven years later, far less confused but no less hungry, I stepped out of the cab as the sun began to set and late afternoon shadows crept in.

"I'll find my way back," I assured the driver. "Don't worry, I'm here to see an old friend."

I'd already memorized the way: Section 17A, Row C, Space 3. Chills gossiped over my flesh despite the balmy breeze. Richard Dutoit Carlson, born April 29, 1912, died November 24, 1977. I gazed down at the oblong, timeworn gray stone marker set into the grass and my insides ignited. The late actor had once served in the military according to the epigram—knowledge I was already conscious of, and fodder for so many past fantasies. Three rows up, a towering obelisk constructed out of gray blocks soared twenty feet up into the darkening sky. My mind transformed the structure into a massive stone cock, a tribute to the painfully handsome actor, star of my carnal dreams and the reason I'd traveled three thousand miles west from all that was familiar.

"I'm here, my love," I said.

I knelt on the grass, lowered, and kissed the grave marker, which was still warm from the retreating sun. It was blasphemous, I know, but reaching into my loose-fit cotton shorts, I released my complaining erection and stroked, reliving memories of that scene from the movie, which defined my life.

And also, it turned out, my death.

I had looked around the cemetery, making sure I was alone. The late afternoon had surrendered to dusk. Shadows pooled around me. But I knew I was being watched.

I moaned Richard's name, which had become an incantation to me, and sensed my approaching climax, quickened by the eyes nearby. I looked up at the giant gray cock made of stone, and there he stood: a man with dark hair and eyes

that glowed blue, like a wolf's. He was naked.

"*Mine*," the man growled in a voice that was both whisper and shout at the same time.

He strutted toward me, his cock metronoming with his strides. At first, he was Richard Carlson, returned to me from the dead. Time slipped off its tracks. Seconds became hours, and hours shortened into seconds. Still on my knees, I accepted his thickness into my mouth. Hot male scent filled my shallow sips for breath. A dream, surely...

Happiness flooded my insides. I remember thinking that every cell within my body had transformed after filling up with cosmic light. My entire body was orgasming. I was *all cock*.

And then I was bent over a length of gray stone that hadn't been exposed to sunlight and sat cold in the darkness. The air around me renounced its sweet quality. My next shallow sip of breath filled with a dank, dusty smell that my imagination identified as belonging to a sepulcher.

Pain flared in my guts, timed to the fuck-thrusts of the weight drilling into me from behind. I turned, and the shadow looming over me, claiming me as its own, no longer looked like my handsome obsession. Two glowing red eyes lit the shadows. My lungs filled with the fetor of decayed flesh. I tried to scream, to detach, but only got a step or two away when the shadow caught up and sank its teeth into my throat.

I woke, broken, but somehow still conscious, aware of the damage done to me. My lungs were shutting down, my spine cracked. The last of my blood seeped from my throat and ravaged asshole. The ravager had dumped me behind the walls of one of the cemetery's ornate crypts, according to the moonlight

oozing in through the peach, ruby red, and forest green garden scene of a stained glass window.

And I wasn't alone in that space. There were other bodies, at least four that my dying eyes counted. All male, judging by the shreds of clothes attached to the desiccated corpses. And there were parts of bodies as well.

Pain trumped terror. As my lungs gave out and my body suffocated, I grew aware of my pulse, slowing down as my heart attempted to pump what was no longer there. Agonizing seconds—or it could have been hours—later, time stopped completely.

I woke hungry.

Air filled my lungs, the breath heavy with the rotting stink of the mausoleum. At first, the emptiness inside me made thinking impossible. I was ravenous and enraged. But as my memory scrolled through images of my favorite foods—Chinese takeout, coffee ice cream, and anything with blueberries in it—my nausea flared. I doubled over and retched. My eyes settled on the gallery of corpses tossed like rag dolls into the crypt for disposal and, to both my satisfaction and disgust, I licked my icy lips.

Then, aware that I'd also grown erect to the point of pain, I turned toward the slab sealing me in and began to hammer at it with my fists.

He meant to kill me. A thousand years of walking the Earth and taking what he wanted hadn't made my maker any more talented at dealing death. No, he'd grown lazy, sloppy.

I staggered out of the crypt, my head hanging on my neck at an angle, everything else in agony. The emptiness in my guts stretched farther than the night sky over my head. He was close.

"I see you survived," said a throaty baritone.

I tracked it toward the line of tall oaks guarding the edge of the cemetery. A lone figure stood in the darkness, as clear to me as though it were noon on a cloudless L.A. day.

"I'll kill you," I spat.

The daemon answered with a humorless laugh. "And I should let you. But no, that's never the way it works. You won't kill me, because I won't allow it. But you'll kill plenty of other men throughout the long dusks to come."

I hastened toward him, the night flying past, the air kicked up into a screaming wind by my speed. When I reached the shade trees, he was gone.

On my knees, I attempted prayer, pleading to be delivered from the thing I'd become. My hunger surged, as did the misery of my butchered corpse. My pulse quickened and grew audible beyond the confines of my body. With it, my cock pulsed.

Rising, I turned toward the streetlights glowing beyond the cemetery. I started stalking toward them, all thoughts of prayer abandoned. A few steps later, I heard myself growling.

We'll call him Trask. Trask is as good a nickname as any. Trask reminded me of a guy I knew in high school, a tall, mean jock with a class clown's smile and attitude. Trask was one of the first to call me a cock sucker, so there was something poetic about the encounter.

From that fateful night when I watched *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* until my murder in the cemetery, I'd fallen for males of Richard Carlson's type: rugged athletes with hairy legs and chests, dark hair, and manly swagger. Military, police, blue-collar modern cavemen, pure

alphas, cocks with feet. I spied Trask from the shadows.

He waited at a traffic light, sitting behind the wheel of a new-model pickup truck. His attractiveness came clearly to me: dark hair, a prickle of five o'clock scruff coating his chin, blue eyes aimed up at the red light. He drummed the wheel, hummed the angry rap pouring from satellite radio while waiting for the light to change.

I slid into the front passenger's seat.

"*Mine*," I whispered.

All of Trask's righteous anger and shock evaporated. He smiled, his eyes dreamy, like a sleepwalker's. He was mine.

"I hate that shit," I mouthed, and ordered him to kill the radio.

Right before the red light changed to green, I broke focus with the handsome plaything behind the wheel and noticed two eyes, as blood-bright as the traffic light, reflected in the windshield.

Men. Men who were eager to give me all that I wanted from them, whenever I wanted it—as I *demand*ed it.

I loved men, loved their masculine bodies, worshipped every inch of their skin, and I now had the power to take what I wanted from as many men as I desired. My dead heart galloped. Reaching Trask's apartment on North Whitley seemed to take an eternity.

He lived alone, I discovered, when my frenzied mind connected with his. As part of my first act of feeding, I exhumed the filthiest of my prey's thoughts and took on the form of his ultimate female body in order to fully seduce him. It was the same trick my maker had used on me. We reached the building, a garden-style unit on the edge of Hollywood Boulevard. I followed him up the stairs, a shadow on

his heels. At long last, we reached the bed. Its disheveled sheets reeked of sex.

Trask jumped onto the bed, all smiles.

He was a painfully handsome man in his late twenties. And he was more than aware of this fact. There were mirrors everywhere in his bedroom, but they denied me a look at what I'd become.

That came when I peered past his glazed eyes and, for a splinter of a second, removed my glamour. The chill I had suffered since waking in the crypt deepened lower than flesh, into what I instantly thought of as my soul, and I wanted to flee.

Before my arrival at the Los Angeles National Cemetery, I used to play this game late at night or early in the morning, when my hard cock shocked me awake. I would imagine myself phasing through the walls and into the bedrooms of all the attractive men that I wanted to go down on. I'd jerk off to visions of getting whomever I lusted after, any way that I wanted them. I would lick them from sweaty toes to sweatier balls, and gorge myself on their hyper-masculine seed. I'd bust two, sometimes three times every morning before getting out of bed. In my fantasies, I was capable of seducing anyone I wanted, from the late, iconic actor in a classic monster movie to the baseball players I watched on TV to the handsome cop who lived two streets over on Dean Avenue.

It was a hunger that consumed me. But it paled in comparison to the starvation I knew after my visit to Richard Carlson's grave.

"*Incubus*," I whispered around Trask's straining cock.

Then I closed both my physical and mental eyes and fed.

I walked away from the garden apartment and down the sidewalk of an unfamiliar city, dazed. Some unaffected register inside my scattered consciousness noted that my neck had straightened out, and my internal injuries seemed to have sewn themselves up. But it was counterfeit healing, because my body was dead, cold, cursed by a contrasting fire born of sexual hunger.

Blood soaked my face. I licked my mouth. Eyes closed, I'd mistaken his moans for pleasure. When I had looked, my gorge long last breaking, I saw the gore-soaked patch of hairy flesh, vacant of his cock and balls.

I'd eaten them.

Renfield was wrong, at least in my case. It wasn't their blood that sustained me, but their nectar, their seed. Hundreds of men. *Thousands*, as I made my way back east, traveling at night. New England wasn't my home anymore, but after the incident in Hollywood, I was desperate to leave Los Angeles. I had taken one life and sold myself on the lie that there wouldn't be a second.

Yes, the seed ejaculated out of the balls of masculine, handsome men sustained me, though never fully, and never for long, no matter how much I ingested. And there was so much that I savored, thanks to the power of such simple commands like "*Yes*" and "*Now*" and "*Mine*". And when I had drained them, I simply whispered, "*Forget*" and left before giving in to other hungers, or before the sun rose.

In Connecticut, in my old neighborhood, I passed a sign taped to a telephone pole and backtracked.

The words read, "Have you seen this man?"

"Man?" I laughed. "Not for some while."

The photograph was an unflattering snapshot of me from unknown weeks or years or centuries back, taken on a relative's phone.

"Christopher Smith, last seen..."

C.S.—I much preferred 'Cock Sucker' to my former, anemic name.

"That's you," said a man's voice.

I turned around, and what a man I beheld, clad in old jeans and older sneakers on big feet, a crisp white T-shirt, and a baseball cap with the bill aimed forward. Despite the prickle of dark scruff, his handsome face was like clean-cut Richard Carlson's. He was magnificent.

"What?" I gasped.

"The picture—you've returned."

I narrowed my eyes. An October breeze kicked up around us, perfumed by autumn leaves. "Yes," I growled.

"You better tell someone so they stop worrying."

The man brushed past me. I stared at the wall of his back and his perfect, athletic ass as it walked away. At first, the shock that he'd not fallen under my glamour and at my feet didn't register. Then, I pursued.

"*Mine*," I snarled.

"Don't try that mumbo-jumbo incubus bullshit on me, Christopher. It doesn't work."

Heat sliced through the cold that infused my dead flesh. "How did you-?"

The man tipped a look over his shoulder. "You want some of *this*, you've gotta earn it the old-fashioned way, not through daemonic trickery."

"You know?"

The man with Richard Carlson's face chuckled. "About you? Fuck yeah. And a lot more."

"Who are you?"

"What's in a name? Or a nickname?"

"Are you like me?"

"An *incubo*, as they used to say in Latin? A nightmare? No."

The man stepped off the sidewalk, into the patch of scrubby woods that eventually led to the abandoned quarry, where the original Trask and four of his jock buddies once passed me around. I turned and pursued, but the handsome man was always one step ahead of me, a fast-moving shadow among the trees.

I hurried into the woods, my progress tracked by the grinning jack-o'-lantern full moon floating in the new night's sky.

"Wait!" I called. "I don't even know your name!"

I emerged in a clearing. The magnificent man stood at the center of the small meadow. His attire had altered. Now, he wore a golden breastplate decorated in arcane symbols, a white breechcloth, and sandals that showcased handsome feet and hairy athletic legs.

"Call me 'Richard', if you want. I heard your prayer, but you left before I could answer."

I moved before him and knelt. He permitted my caresses of his legs and didn't stop me when I worked his breechcloth open, exposing not one but two erect cocks over double the usual number of balls for me to worship.

"Before you go further," Richard said. "Do you have anything you wish to confess?"

And so I told him everything.

"Will it hurt?" I asked.

Richard nodded. I saw his hand shift to the pommel of the jeweled angel's sword sheathed in its scabbard. "Yes, but not before I, at long last, satisfy your hunger and set you free."

I wrapped my lips around one of his cock's heads and grew high on the scent of his male skin while stroking his second erection. I thought only of Richard's cocks, and how much I hungered for his seed, not of his sword or the mercy of oblivion soon to follow.

Gregory L. Norris was reared on a healthy diet of creature double features and classic TV. He credits Barnabas Collins from the dreamy daytime gothic soap opera Dark Shadows as his first real crush, and one of the influences that led him to pick up his pen and put it to paper. Norris has written short stories, novellas, novels, nonfiction for numerous national magazines, the occasional episode for TV, and thus far one produced feature film. Follow his literary adventures at www.gregorylnorris.blogspot.com.

Warm Corpses

Sarah Liddle

Maybe it was nothing.

I tried for so long to think about what caused it and why. I thought maybe it was the snowstorm. Maybe the first snowfall of the winter froze everyone with it. And no, that's not just my pretentious ass trying to be poetic with some clever metaphor. I mean that everyone froze, and I wanted to believe that it happened at the precise moment the storm began, though I guess I can't be sure. There's comfort in believing the events were connected. Because if not, well, then it just happened, and I don't really know what to make of that either.

But maybe it *was* nothing.

All I know is I woke up without a clue in the world. I kissed the glass jar on my nightstand, walked downstairs to get something for breakfast, and there she was standing by the stove, bacon burning in the pan.

"Clara, Jesus Christ," I said, and laughed as I entered the room. "Since when do you like your bacon well done?"

She said nothing.

I came closer. She was turned toward the stove so I couldn't see her face. Her hand hovered above the handle of the pan, with a spatula in the other.

"You okay?" I mumbled, approaching.

The air was growing hazy with smoke. It rose in thin streaks from the pan to the ceiling. The motion was fluid and calm; the room was silent except for the bacon crackling on the pan. The smoky smell filled the gaps of the room.

"Clara." My voice was hard. I walked to the counter beside her and grazed my hand along the small of her back, kissing her shoulder, then digging

my nails into her skin at her upper shoulders. It drew blood, and I smiled, satisfied, but she didn't flinch. Her gaze was pasted down on the bacon. I leaned forward, tilting my head so that I could look up at her face. Her eyes were those of a corpse. "Clara?"

I nudged her shoulder. It jostled her body, but after a brief sway she stilled, hand stuck to the spatula. Something shifted inside me: a panic, sort of, that sent my blood twisting in my veins. If she was gone... if she was, god forbid, dead but she's not dead she's breathing still

then I'd have to go back to life as before. New girl almost every other night? It's hard to maintain. Hard to clean up. Her masochism kept us both - not sane, no - placated. Filled. And I did love her. If such a thing exists.

"Clara, seriously. What the hell are you doing?" I ripped her hand away from the spatula. It was easy, her grasp was loose, but she didn't lower her arms once they were free. I turned off the stove and pulled her shoulders to face me, and still her elbows were at ninety-degree angles and her stare pointed downward. I pulled her head up so that she faced me, but her eyes were still a little off, not quite focused. I ran my fingers through her hair and pressed my forehead against hers.

"Babe, are you okay?"

I felt her heart beating and the soft pull of her breath against my face - the only indication she wasn't a floating corpse. I pulled away, a sudden realization dawning on me.

"If you're messing with me, it's not funny."

Silence. I frowned.

"Unless you want to be punished?"

Maybe that was it.

Of course that was it.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, you dumb bitch." Not even a smile. Damn, she was good. "You think anyone will care? You think you mean anything to anyone?" I slapped her across the face. Hard. Her head turned, but still, she stayed frozen. I laughed without smiling and picked up the pan.

I held it above her head and let some of the scorching grease drip down through her hair, over her shoulders. Not even a twitch. My eyes narrowed, accepting the challenge.

I brought the pan down to her cleavage and held it just above her skin. Hmm, maybe not, I liked those intact.

I moved the pan to her arm, winked, and pressed it to her skin. It made a light searing noise. She didn't move.

"Clara?" I could feel the smugness slipping from my blood, and replacing it was the tingling sensation of restrained panic. I pressed the pan harder into her, the smell of burning flesh thickening in the air.

If anyone were to walk into my apartment ten minutes after that, they would have found the front door wide open. They would have walked upstairs maybe, to investigate the slowly diluting smoky smell. They would have found her, still in the same place, same position, staring through the walls. Her hair would be singed, some of it covering her face, and third-degree burns would be forming on her arm. The bacon would be beside the stove, burnt. And the only movement would be the snow falling on the other side of the window, making the day look fuzzy, like a TV without a signal and a radio full of static.

There were no neighbors home? I found it hard to believe. It took me a while to get up the courage to knock, and when I did, there was no answer. So I

went to the next door down, and same thing. I continued through the whole floor of the apartment complex and still, nothing.

After the last one, I backed up to the railing, holding my hands over my face and massaging it. I could hear my heartbeat in my neck, rocking my body with each pulse. The cold air pinched my skin.

I jolted upwards, a sudden observation dawning on me. I turned around to find that the road behind the apartment complex, usually alive with traffic, was still. Not silent though, I realized. A soft purr of turning engines permeated the air. And I noticed a car in the parking lot: a small grey one that had backed into a parked truck. The engine was alive and rumbling, but the car was still. The exhaust from the tail end was visible in the cold and trailed up to the sky.

Once I began paying attention, each rumble grew louder in my head. I looked back to main road; cars with running engines were stopped diagonally against the curb. Some were stopped against each other. I looked away - tried not let my brain recognize them as more than just objects. If I had, I would have asked myself, why all of the cars were strewn across the road, stopped, but engines running?

Seems like we already knew the answer.

I called the cops because this wasn't happening, this wasn't happening. Yeah, that's how desperate I was. Calling the cops. It was funny almost, how even after five minutes of the other end ringing, that I still convinced myself they might pick up at any moment. At some point, I hung up. I guess I laughed too.

It was hitting me then, that yeah, this was happening, whether I could make

myself comprehend it or not. Somehow, everyone had fallen still - the world still moving but their bodies frozen inside it. I began wandering, not wanting to be still, not knowing what to do. I walked to the courtyard at the center of the apartment complex, where the pool and the picnic tables were. The snow fell heavy like rain, and it seemed to be sticking. The pool was sealed up, but the hot tub was open, and its steam rose up into the falling snow. As I walked closer, I saw it wasn't empty, that there was someone sitting inside of it.

But this someone was frozen too, and his body must have slumped over in the wind. His head floated on its side, half submerged. His mouth was open, and the water had crept inside. And I know, I know, I should've run over to pull him out, but at that moment, I was frozen too. Not frozen like them, but I just... I didn't know what to do.

And maybe you think I'm lying, lying about the sadness I felt seeing him dead or my thoughts about keeping him alive. But you're wrong. There's a difference, see, between wanting to kill people and wanting them dead. I don't want anyone dead, not at all.

Clara, you know, she was frozen, but I could feel her breath on my skin. But him - there were no ripples in the water of the hot tub, not even where the water entered his mouth. I watched the fat snowflakes fall against his skin, his hair. Some melted, but little by little, the storm slowly folded him into a layer of white.

I don't know. What do you want me to say? I tried a lot of things, okay? I mean, I didn't just give up, go home. But what was there to do? I didn't really have anyone to call, to find. My boss was the only contact in my phone besides Clara. He didn't answer. I tried all the numbers

on the take-out menus we had stored away in the kitchen. Nothing.

I drove around, past the parks, the malls... hell, I even went to the police department after a few hours of contemplation.

Then I called everyone a second time, and no one answered. So yeah, maybe that's not impossible, maybe it's normal, but then again, I had a feeling maybe not.

So I went home.

I carried Clara over to the couch and laid her down and pressed her eyelids shut. It crossed my mind that I had never done that to a girl and how strange it felt. I felt the curve of her eyeballs beneath the skin and thought back to all those girls with dead eyes who I deliberately left staring at the sky. Or the dirt.

Didn't matter. I shook my head. I wasn't going to leave her standing like that, and I sure as hell wasn't going to leave her eyes open. I walked into my room and locked the door.

Night came shortly after, relieving my worry that maybe the world itself had frozen and took everyone with it. But no. The world continued, as it always had and as it would.

I stared at the glass jar and tried to masturbate before going to bed. It didn't work.

The snow had stopped by the next morning. The world was covered in white powder, all of it fresh and untouched. I hadn't really thought about it before it happened - how still the world would become once the snowfall had ceased. But it made things worse, let me tell you. I was in a graveyard that stretched across the length of the universe, and there were no visitors.

I tried to pour water down Clara's throat, though I can't be sure how

successful it was. It was melted snow, really - not water - as I discovered that the power and the water didn't work, which I suppose didn't surprise me. I only did a little, since I wouldn't really be able to tell if it was going into her throat or her lungs. I pictured the man sunken over in the hot tub, his stillness more final than the rest.

But I figured everyone would die in about three days. I guess two, now. Without water. And I didn't know how long this would last, but I thought at some point, it would have to stop just as quickly as it started. But if everyone was already dead, what good would that be?

And after today... no. No. I couldn't survive off only frozen torture, their silent pain. I can't live like this. If I only had the means of keeping a few people alive, and if everyone died except one, it'd need to be someone who could continue to give me my fix, not just a one-time deal. And that was Clara.

I mean, if everyone went back to normal now, that'd be fine too. I just don't know if they will. The thing with Clara is, she's great because she says she wants the pain, and she likes me because she doesn't have to feel like she's doing it to herself. Says she feels like it's not really her fault. But I feel her die inside every time. That's what it's about. You can see she hates herself when her blood spills and she looks up at me with those helpless eyes. She smiles but you just know she wants to die every second.

But before her, things were fine too. I mean, my cravings got pretty insistent, and it's no easy task to hide from two or three murders a week. The thing is, it's about the rape, not the murder. They fight back initially once you're inside them, but a few minutes in when they realize they can't escape, that this is happening, you feel them die. You've

taken them from themselves, and it's so much better than taking a life.

It just so happens that it's cleaner to kill them at the end. Less chance you'll get caught. And yeah, it's a lot of work to not get caught, but the trick is to eliminate the patterns. Don't pick the girls for any particular reason, and never take more of them back with you than a strand of hair to keep in the glass jar by the bed. The trophy isn't enough but I have to limit myself.

I can't say it's a great strategy. Not enough to keep me from getting caught. But you have to consider, all we are, all we'll ever be, are creatures amongst an incalculable chaos. The only things that hold us together and allow us to delude ourselves into believing otherwise are the patterns we create for ourselves amidst that chaos. So you don't kill people you know; the people you pick to take their lives, to take everything they have... well there's got to be no reason at all. Because once you take away that one thing, the pattern, people are just floating around in the dust. They don't know who you are or where to find you.

Without the patterns, it's almost like you don't exist at all.

After shoving a few handfuls of dried cereal down my throat, I got in my car and drove all over town looking for someone. It didn't seem promising. There weren't even any footprints in the snow or tire tracks on the road, besides mine, I guess.

So instead of continuing to drive around looking for someone like me, I gave into looking for someone frozen instead.

Okay.

I mean, I had to try, right? Because there's no way things were going to last otherwise. I mean, I'd gone longer

without my fix in the past - that wasn't the problem. The problem was not knowing when the next one would be. So I had to try. Okay.

Okay. Random girl. Found her in one of the local coffee shops - one of the small ones with walls of bookshelves and a single barista in her early twenties trying to take care of a line fifteen customers long.

The girl was at one of the tables, her hand resting on its edge, the mug between her fingers. She had dark, straight hair and a tight-fitting black skirt so you knew she was all business. The kind of woman who stared at you like she hated you. Those were the best kinds to watch suffer.

I sat on the opposite end of the table and reached over to grab her hand. Her skin was cold, and the room was cold too. The heat wasn't working, and there was only so much the walls could do. But I leaned forward and pressed my fingers against her neck and felt that small, lively pulse. Not dead yet.

I wondered if she could see me or if she was aware of this. If any of them were. I looked around at the crowded café. No one was looking anywhere in particular, all of them were just sort of frozen in the middle of pretending like none of the people around them really existed.

If I took her, right now, in the middle of this coffee shop, would they all be able to see me in their frozen state? Seems like maybe they would, but I don't know, it's not like they could say anything.

I'm not stupid too, I mean, I was wearing a mask. Just a boring, plastic white one I got at the craft store meant for kids to paint on or something. But it works.

That's how it kind of is with these things though. Not the mask but the people. I mean, I don't usually take girls in the middle of a coffee shop, but nevertheless, screams are loud. You can hear them from far away. But people always seem to ignore it. Just one of those things. Raped a girl in a public restroom once, at a football game. Once one person hears the scuffle and decides to walk away, everyone else just kind of thinks nothing's *really* happening, and they go too.

It's a lonely world.

I picked her up - the businesswoman at the coffee shop. She looked about thirty. I pushed her so that her torso was resting on the table. I forgot about her mug; I hit it with her body and sent it crashing to the floor, shattering.

The sound was so strange in the silence. I stared at the white ceramic triangles, the brown pooling around them. And I looked back at the girl, folded over the table with her ass in the air. Looked at all the frozen people. Lifted her skirt up over her torso and pulled her panties down to her ankles.

I could do anything to you right now. You know that?

And I did.

No no no no no

It didn't work. Fuck, it didn't work. She's there, see? Patches of blood smeared on the top of her inner thighs, still bent over the table with her skirt up, but she didn't *die*, see. Not really. There was no moment when the life left her stare and her muscles fell weak, and there was no moment when she hated herself. She was frozen that's all she'll ever be is frozen and what am I going to do how will I hide?

I took one of the blenders behind the counter of the coffee shop and

smashed it, leaving a few jagged blades of glass attached. And I swung it at every goddamn person in that place. Bodies crashed to the ground at the slightest contact, and I kneeled over them, slashing their pretty faces. There was this girl - maybe fifteen - she had dark hair and the brightest blue eyes. I cut right through them. Watched the eyeballs cave in, blood pooling in the wound and cascading down the skin like claws reaching down her face. I sliced pieces of her scalp, the insides of her mouth, her ears - ripped them all off. Threw them at the other bodies. And nobody fucking moved. No one.

I was alone here. I was all alone with all the ripe bodies and none of them would do a goddamned thing.

I raped that fifteen-year-old girl with her face nothing more than hollowed out flesh pooling with blood.

And it didn't even feel good.

I told you. I told you. It's not about them being dead, it's about feeling them die. But what's the point if they're already just a frozen mind inside a corpse? What's the point? What if they never come back?

A few days later, everyone was dead. Bodies already deep in rigor mortis, and when I cut skin, blood barely spilled. There was this girl in her bed, maybe five years old. I broke into her house and I laid there with her, holding her hand in mine. I wanted to pretend I loved her, because isn't that the best way to hurt people? I kissed her when we made love, felt her cold lips under my tongue. I tried to crawl over her while getting off the bed and my knee broke through her skin into her belly and sunk deep into her corpse. I felt the dead organs squish beneath my weight.

Not even that fixed me.

Listen.

I think I've figured this shit out. But no, not why everyone froze and why I didn't. Don't know if I'll ever know why that happened.

But I did figure out how to survive this thing.

Yeah.

See, it's pretty simple if you think about it. There's only one person left for me to hurt.

You think I can stop? You think I can just live without this? Well, I can't. If there's no one to hurt, I *can't*. Who are we without our stupid patterns?

There's one person left who I'll be able to feel die beneath my hands. And he's gonna fucking hate it, let me tell you.

but

a hair falls. Between the glass. The strand is short and dark; yeah, I guess it's mine. I see it from so close, eyelashes touching the glass. It almost looks like ice.

But something's wrong.

There's too many. So still at the bottom of the jar. One falls, yes - still falling. Floating above a thin layer of those identical to it. It's just about to land, to sink into the rest and melt into their form. I feel the space between them disappear; I feel the breath between their touch.

Before they do, everything goes dark. Cold.

And again the snow will fall.

Sarah Liddle is a student at the University of Colorado in Boulder and writes anything that will make her roommates nervous about living with her.

Otherwise, she's usually exploring the Rockies, painting something creepy - at least attempting to - or bothering her cat, Pants. She's had work published in LitroOnline, has many more stories and a couple novels in the works and is excited to be part of the first issue of Underbelly.

Zoo Punch

Will Bernardara Jr.

In 1953 I was five years old and knew nothing of suffering.

My father would take me to town fairs now and then when he had days off and the celebration had popped up with its Ferris wheel cynosure and butter churning contests. At that age, I was most fond of the petting zoo. Looking back now, the peculiarity of my dad's enthusiasm for the fair is glaringly obvious, for what did a fair have for a man like him other than draft beer?

I loved the scents the fair begot. Country aromas. Animals. Cigar smoke. Fried midway snacks.

I liked feeding the livestock. They'd nibble the sheared grass right from your palm.

I was inches from our DuMont TV, a black-and-white, watching Candid Camera or Martin Kane, Private Eye – I can't remember which program exactly, which is strange, because I'd never forget much about the rest of that afternoon. My father came through the screen door; I picked up on his gusto right away.

"About ready?"

My older brother had gone cruising Main Street with his pals. My mom was fixing meatloaf. My father and me though, we were going to the fair.

I turned from the television and watched my father hug my mother in the kitchen before calling to me, "Let's skedaddle, son."

The drive to the fair was memorable, droning with anticipation and crackly with potential and mystery as it was. My dad would let me fiddle with the radio while the pickup grumbled over

bumps and ruts in the dirt road. Muggy agrarian air perfused the cab. The countryside changed gradually from clotted wilderness to festive glade.

Thinking back on it, most of our town's men – millworkers and farmers and hard drinkers – preferred the fair to hunting or bars. To anything really.

The exhibition never had borders – the fair was assembled in a clearing – but it did have a ticket booth composed of a livestock gate and a tubby redhead gal, freckle-faced and wearing overalls, who took your money in exchange for a torn orange stub.

"Busy night?" my dad asked the farmer's daughter.

"Sure is," the redhead said, tearing two tickets for me and my father. "Couple monkey bites. First aid tent's had its hands full."

The monkeys would lope over and snatch the coins from your hand. They sometimes nipped a person but –

"These bites was bad," the ticket-taker said. "Gonna need stitches."

The smells of hay and horse, mud and BBQ were intoxicating. The unusual odor of the myriad animals was more comforting than unpleasant.

"Here, son," my father said, giving me a fistful of pennies, nickels, and dimes. I marveled, as I invariably did, at my dad's leathery hands. As though they'd been carved out of hard wax. They reminded me of a cigar-store Indian's hands.

I jogged over to the pen of ostriches and chickens. My father disappeared someplace; I guess I assumed he and the other men at the fair would go off and drink corn whiskey, leaving us kids to the petting and feeding.

I dashed from pen to pen until I found the goats. They were my favorite.

After wrenching up a wad of grass, I stuck my hand through the corral bars. An agile black kid called Shub toddled over. Its black tongue slurped up the offered green. I patted the baby goat's soft, sturdy head as it munched contentedly. Shub chewed and looked at me. Its eyes seemed to glister. Then the kid smiled, or at least appeared to.

"Dad!" I shouted. "Dad! The goat smiled at me!"

I turned around, exhilarated. It was one of those moments of childhood that seems to horripilate with magic. Then I remembered that my father wasn't behind me. I darted off to find him and tell him about the smirking ruminant.

I ran past monkeys dancing to minstrel music, displays of antique agricultural equipment, and a statue of Eisenhower carved out of butter. I zagged around the legs of ambling adults. It felt like I looked everywhere for my dad. Breath expended, I squatted near some show tractors.

Then I noticed a tarp-opaque tent at the fair's margin. I could make out, faintly, yelling and cheering coming from this tent. Some kind of furor.

I rose and slowly followed the sound, which swelled in volume the closer I got to the tent. The shelter had pegs and cords and poles but no entry flap. I was small and wiry then, so I crouched and wiggled beneath the taut cloth.

The stench of sweat-exudation overwhelmed my olfactory faculties. Men perspiring. Men howling like stoked incubi.

Beneath the tent was a horde of approximately thirty men. I recognized a few as acquaintances of my father's – coworkers and neighbors. They formed a broken, imprecise line. There were no children or women present, and I felt a

surge of shock, a feeling of not belonging here.

The men had their shirtsleeves rolled up, burly, pilose arms raised and fists clenched. I couldn't see over the crowd to what lay at the front of the crude chain.

I heard only the clamor of men:

"Lay into her, John!"

"Pretend she's your nag of a wife!"

"Give it all you got, Edward!"

Afraid and confused, I finally spotted my dad and ran to his side. He didn't notice me at first, bewitched as he was with whatever the line was for. His eyes looked vitreous with rage.

"Dad?"

I took my father's hand. The knuckles appeared swollen and discolored.

When my dad looked down at me, the anger seemed to withdraw from his eyes, replaced by concern or perhaps worry.

"Son," my father said. "You ain't supposed to be back here. No kids. Go outside and wait for me now."

I froze, not understanding.

"Go on. Get," my dad ordered, shoving me away lightly.

I stumbled away, as told, but instinctively left the tent via the furtive shelter's north side, where I'd have an unhindered view of whatever waited at the head of the raucous queue.

There was a livestock gate – the ramshackle, rusted recipient of the men's bedlam – situated at the front of the line.

I remember the eyes of it first and best.

Brutally chained to the top rail, choked and immobile, was a cow, a Holstein Friesian, its white markings snout-down like a bib of blood. Its protuberant, ever-staring eyes were graphic, ocular disquisitions on agony –

trauma-pools. The tormented animal's monochrome coat was matted wet with blood, erubescant as crimson ink. Its snout appeared smashed in; one of its bulging eyes lay mashed and jellied within a ruined socket. The cow's distress grafted itself onto me. I began weeping.

I watched, immobile as the animal, as my father's friend Edward drew his right arm back and punched the cow's face – a hard right cross. Dots of blood splattered a nearby packed pile of hay. Stunned, the animal chewed at the air reflexively. The men cheered and blood dripped from the cow's crushed mouth. The beast looked as though it wanted to cry but could not.

Isaac Hunt, the dad of a childhood friend, moved Edward aside. Edward shook off the pain in his smarting fist. Isaac took his turn, kicking the animal's trapped face, breaking things inside it.

I ran then. As fast as my underdeveloped legs would carry me. I looked back once more but cold terror showed me only the cow's big frightened eyes and the blood, so bright...

I scrambled beneath the flap and out into sunlight. There was some horrible, bottled release happening beneath that tent, some sort of catharsis, one I didn't understand and still don't.

On the drive home, my father didn't say a word. I watched his worn hand stabilize the steering wheel. I watched him clean the blood from his knuckles with a handkerchief.

Stories and Broadsworand Blasters. A very long story of his will appear in The Society of Misfit Stories in October 2018. Mr. Bernardara lives in Detroit and is at work on his second novel.



Will Bernardara Jr. is a writer of experimental fiction. His first novel, America, will soon be published by Nihilism Revised Press. His stories have appeared in places such as Bewildering

The Isle of Loki

John Grover

Charlie furrowed his brow. "I don't like the look of it. Not at all." He stared at the row of dark clouds moving quickly over the horizon. They started to blot out the sun and the waves were getting bigger, more than he liked. He tightened his palms. His nostrils flared and he sucked in some air. The salty taste rolled over his tongue and tickled his lips. None of this helped, but he did it every time he was stressed. This one he was not expecting. It was not in the forecast.

Damn it, this was supposed to be a perfect afternoon. It was supposed to be a romantic boat ride with Sam. Now it looked as if everything would be ruined. They'd barely been out an hour, but they were far enough away from land for the storm to be a pain in the ass and more than a bit alarming.

Charlie was used to getting what he wanted. Having very rich parents didn't hurt either. His every desire was fulfilled by money. Money his mother and father gladly lavished on their only son. So when Charlie hired Jay to take him and Sam out for a boat ride, he thought he'd get what he wanted again, Sam in his arms. Things weren't going according to plan.

They never seemed to when it came to men. The one thing Charlie couldn't buy. Sure, he could buy a man for a night, an escort, have anonymous sex, a night of fun, but those meant nothing. He wanted romance and fireworks. He wanted to be needed, appreciated... loved. Money couldn't buy that. It never did. For one reason or another they always left him. Not one of his relationships made it past the three month test, Charlie's way of gauging a

serious connection. If someone stuck around for more than three months then they must have feelings for him.

It worked for all of his friends. It seemed after three months their relationships blossomed, went to the next level. There was happiness there, genuine caring, bonding, passion. How he longed to feel that, just once.

"Fucking storm." Charlie turned away from the ocean and headed down inside the boat. Ahead of him, Jay fiddled with switches and gears, keeping a tight hold on the steering wheel. Sam stood beside him, fascinated, a bottle of beer in his hand.

Jay noticed Charlie's arrival. He turned. "Sorry Chuck, looks like we're going to have to turn around."

"Charlie. Call me Charlie, not Chuck. You know I hate that."

"Do you prefer rich boy?" Sam laughed, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Sam, I've been nothing but nice to you."

"I'm just kidding. You've been great."

"I'm really sorry about this. I wanted to take you out for an evening ride. The moon on the water is so beautiful."

"It's okay, really. There'll be other times."

"Really?"

"Sure there will. You can't get rid of me that easy. It's gonna take more than a sea storm to do that."

Charlie smiled. He walked over to Sam and kissed him. They'd been dating for two months now and so far everything was fine. *One month to go.* This was the night that was meant to keep it that way. The night things got serious. Now Charlie wasn't sure what to think. He just prayed it lasted.

"Okay, Jay," Charlie said. "Let's get out of here."

Jay said nothing. He flipped a couple more switches and turned the wheel.

Charlie put his arm around Sam and ushered him from the cabin and into the bedroom. There was a small loveseat there and the two of them sat. "Let's have a nice dinner when we get back to shore."

"Sounds like a great idea," Sam said, and kissed Charlie on his neck.

It sent chills up and down Charlie's spine. He reached up to touch Sam's face when the boat lurched.

"Christ, Jay, what the hell was that?"

"The storm," Jay yelled. "It's right on top of us! Hold on to something!"

"What do you mean—"

Charlie's words were cut off as the boat pitched and the wind howled right outside the windows. The storm descended with a vengeance. A bottle of rum and four glasses flipped from the bedroom's mini-bar and smashed onto the floor.

Waves tore past the windows and Charlie jumped up. He ran back to Jay, with Sam right behind him. A huge wave washed over the front of the boat, and for a few seconds they saw nothing. Sailing blind.

The instruments in the boat went haywire. The lights flickered. Thunder resonated in a series of deafening crashes. Quick. Raging. Charlie almost threw his hands over his ears, but he refrained because of Sam. He noticed the color draining from Sam's face.

He went to him and placed his arms around him. Softly, he said, "We're going to be all right."

"I know. I'm fine," Sam replied bluntly.

The boat veered again. The wind sighed. The clouds lit up with flashes of lightning. Charlie felt as if the boat was spinning. He hardly ever got seasick, having practically grown up on yachts, but right now, he wouldn't be surprised if he heaved all over the floor.

Charlie ran above deck to tie down everything he could, despite the threat of being swept out into the dark ocean. He did it mostly for Sam's benefit. He wanted to look strong and brave. Dependable. Not just a pretty rich boy.

He checked the life vests and made it back to the stairs as water came rushing over him, soaking his back. He pulled the hatch closed and latched it.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked.

"Yes."

"That was a stupid move."

"I had to make sure we were prepared."

"You could have been lost. Don't do that again by yourself."

Charlie smiled and a thump rocked the side of the boat. Water trickled into the room.

"Jesus!" Jay called. "I can't hold her much longer. Hold on to something!"

"What's going on?" Charlie yelled. His heart pounded against his chest. His palms were damp.

"I don't know, feels like we're being pulled by something. I can't steer us out of this."

Just as he finished speaking, their eyes locked onto the monstrous wave roaring toward them. Charlie gasped as it came down.

Charlie spit saltwater out of his mouth. There was sand on his face, in between his fingers. He opened his eyes and found himself lying on a beach. Looking up, he saw the stars winking at him and a half moon glowing bright. It

was night. There should have been a few more hours of daylight. *How long have I been out?*

He sat up. A pleasant scent tickled his nose, like what the air would smell like after a good rain, clean and intoxicating. He looked around the beach and saw Sam a few feet away, lying on his stomach. "Oh God... no," Charlie gasped. His heart thumped, and then Sam stirred. Relieved, Charlie jumped up and ran to him.

Sam groaned as Charlie's hands caressed his back. Sam turned over slowly. "My head hurts." He rubbed his temples.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so." Sam scanned their surroundings. "Where are we?"

"I'm not sure. We're on some kind of beach. I can't see the boat anywhere. Shit, where's Jay?"

"Do you think the boat sank with him in it?"

"I hope not. We should start looking around. Can you get up?"

"I think so." Sam took Charlie's hand and pulled himself up. He flinched a bit. "My back hurts like hell."

"Sorry." Charlie rubbed Sam's shoulders and kissed him.

Sam managed a half smile and moved sluggishly into exploration mode. The two of them looked around and saw a dark forest across the shore. Thick trees stretched high, moonlight kissing their branches. Brush shimmered in a light sea breeze. A groan resounded in the brush.

Charlie spotted Jay first and ran to his side, Sam in pursuit. They saw Jay struggle to get up, writhing and coughing. Bruises peppered his face. A gash glistened on his forehead. "Jay!" Charlie cried, diving to the ground and throwing his arms around him. "You're lucky to be alive."

They pulled the shaken man to his feet. Sweat dampened his face and his clothes were soaked with saltwater. He looked at them in a daze. Charlie wasn't sure he recognized them.

"Jay, it's us," Charlie said. "Are you alright? Talk to me."

"I-I-I'm okay... I think."

"How did you get way in here?"

"Beats the shit out of me. How the hell did any of us get here? Where are we?"

"We don't know," Sam replied.

"It's some kind of island," Charlie offered. "But what island is anyone's guess."

"What are you talking about?"

There were no islands where we were. We weren't even that far out of the bay."

"Well, we're on some sort of beach then," Charlie said.

"Where's the boat?"

No one answered.

Jay pushed past the two men and stormed out onto the beach. "Where the hell is it? Where's my boat?"

"We don't know," replied Charlie.

"It's gone, just like that?" Jay looked around, stepping closer to the ocean. "If it sank, then how did we get here? What the hell is going on? There's no other land around at all, no other shorelines. Nothing. We weren't that far out. We weren't."

"Calm down." Charlie placed his hand on Jay's shoulder. "We'll figure this out. Let's find out where we are."

"How can the boat just be gone? Just gone." He didn't look at Charlie. He just stared out at the dark waters.

"Jay? Jay..." Charlie looked at Sam. An awkward silence put a wall between them.

Jay turned around slowly and glanced at both of them. "Yeah... okay. Let's do it."

Charlie managed a smile. Inside he was scared, but he didn't want Sam to see it. "Great, buddy. Everything's gonna be okay. Why don't we head down the beach and see if we can get around the forest?"

"Whatever," Jay muttered.

The three started down the beach. The horizon was a blanket of stars. Charlie gave Sam a grin and took his hand. Sam held on tight. That made Charlie feel good, as if everything *would* be alright. They'd get to the other side of the island and find a resort or something.

"There's nothing else out there," Jay said from behind them. "This is it. Just this island. I looked out there. Nothing but water. Just this island in the middle of it."

Charlie tried not to listen to him. It was obvious the crash was affecting him. It was just his way of coping. They continued on, Jay trailing behind.

They reached a small hill that circumvented the forest. The moon hung directly above it, bathing the top of the trees in milky light. Charlie thought it would be best to climb to the top and see what was on the other side. It also might give them a vantage point on the island where they'd be able to get the lay of the land.

"It's a miracle," Sam said as they ascended.

"What?" Charlie asked.

"The three of us. We're alive. We survived the storm, the boat sinking. It's a miracle."

"It's a miracle that you're still by my side."

"You should stop putting yourself down. There's nothing wrong with you."

Charlie didn't respond. No one had ever said that to him before. Not even his parents. The air changed again as they neared the top. It was sweet now, smoky too. It was like the scent of those clove

cigarettes people were into at one time. He used to do them too, when he did the club scene. He thought he was so cool but when he found out they were worse for you than regular cigarettes, he got rid of them. He didn't want to leave this life any quicker. There were too many cute guys out there. Like the one he was leading up the hill.

The air suddenly grew more humid. Nothing terrible, but there was definitely moisture in the air. Charlie saw light flickering. Shadows moving. He reached the top of the hill and halted in disbelief.

A bonfire raged in the middle of a grove. In the firelight, men frolicked, played, danced. Ten, maybe fifteen naked men. It was hard to count in the shadowy light.

Charlie stood glued to the scene, watching it heighten. The men weren't really dancing. It was chasing, catching, fondling. Bodies writhed, mingled, and intertwined. They moved onto the ground, rolling in the grass and going down on one another.

Charlie's jaw dropped. It was a gay man's fantasy—an orgy, but not just any orgy. It was like something out of a movie. Every gay man's dream was there. Men of all types sucked each other, jerked each other and kissed deeply, swimmer's builds, twinkies, masculine, dominant men, passive men, muscle gods, waifs, blondes, brunettes, auburn locks, bald, tattooed, pierced.

The bodies became one, a mass of flesh clawing at each other as grunts and groans of ecstasy rose. Slurping, drinking, rubbing. Ass play commenced, fucking came next. Men entered one another, some men receiving two at once, threesomes, foursomes, some holding others down. Passion unlimited, every craving fulfilled.

The heat in the air was palpable. Charlie smelled their sex. It was euphoric, filling his senses. He found himself wiping drool from his mouth.

"Charlie," Sam said with a mixture of fear and fascination. "We shouldn't be watching this."

The moans grew above their whispers. Charlie couldn't tear himself away from the sight. He felt his dick harden and pulse race. His chest heaved. He turned to Sam and put one hand on his chest and the other on Sam's crotch.

"Oh God..." Sam sighed. He brought his mouth to Charlie's and Charlie accepted his warm tongue.

"Guys, for Christ's sake," Jay interrupted. As if breaking a spell, the two men stopped. "What the hell are you doing?" He reached the top and spotted the orgy culminating below. "Shit... what the hell is going on? Are you kidding me?" He turned away.

"Sam, I'm sorry," Charlie began.

"Look," Jay interrupted again. "I have no issues with you guys, you know that, Charlie. I love you like a brother, but down there... you know that is not right. It's not just because I'm straight. You know something's wrong."

"You're right," said Charlie. "We should find another way. Let's go back down. I..."

"It's all right," a voice called from the darkness.

The three men turned and saw a man walk to the top of the hill. He wore a loincloth around his waist, but he was otherwise naked. Earrings glinted in both ears. His dark hair glowed with moonlight. His smile smoldered.

"There's no need to feel ashamed. We are all lovers here. You can continue to watch if you like, or you can join us. There is nothing to fear."

"We're sorry. It's not really for us," Charlie said. "We didn't mean to intrude."

"There is no intrusion. We welcome other men. Anytime. We are all free here."

"We need help," Sam said. "We've been in an accident. Our boat was lost and we were shipwrecked on this island."

"Are you hurt?"

"Just some bruises and cuts," Charlie said. "It's nothing really."

"I'm so sorry. We can fix you up in no time. They're nearly done." He looked over Charlie's shoulder to the orgy below. "Why don't you come with me to our commune?"

"We don't want to be a burden."

"You are far from a burden. You are welcome here. All of you." The mysterious man turned to Jay. "We want you to come with us. You shouldn't be out all night. You need shelter. Any man is welcome. Come." He put his hand on Jay's shoulder.

"Please don't touch me," Jay said, removing the stranger's hand. "No offense. I'm not like that."

"It's all right." The stranger moved closer to Jay. "You can be whoever you want here. There are no roles. There are no faces. There is no judgment. You can be the man you want to be here. Just like the rest of us. Here, no one is an outsider. No one is different. No hiding anything deep inside. Free from burying the truth. Free from the shackles of a society that could never understand. Just us, plain and simple. You are among brothers here. Be what you are."

"I know who I am," Jay said, swallowing air. "And I'm fine with it."

The stranger smiled. "Of course." He turned back to Charlie. "We have food and water. You'd be safer with us."

"You're probably right," Charlie said, noticing the profound silence surrounding them. The orgy had stopped. "Thank you for your hospitality. We'd be happy to get a good night's rest."

"Charlie, not sure that's a good idea," Jay said. "We don't know this guy. We don't know any of them."

Charlie saw fear in Jay's eyes but chose to ignore it. "It'll be okay, Jay. Really. They're just trying to help. I think we should take them up on it."

"Something's not right. What are they doing here? How did they get here?"

"I don't know. Maybe he owns the island. Maybe it's a gay tourist island. What are you so afraid of? Do gay men bother you that much? You've known me most of your life. Why is this different?"

"It just is."

"Why, because there are more of them than you? Too many gay men in one place? I didn't know we were more dangerous in numbers."

"It's not like that, Charlie, and you know it."

"Then what is it? Explain it to me. Is it because you know me but not them? You're only comfortable when I keep it discreet and away from you?"

"No, I-, I-"

"Why don't you relax? They're only trying to help. I swear, everything will be fine. Let's go. We need the help."

Charlie went over to Sam and took his hand. "You okay?"

Sam nodded.

"Good. We're ready to go."

"Splendid," the stranger said. His smile was wide, his eyes glinted. "I'm so happy to meet you. I know the others are going to love you."

They followed the man down the hill. The grove was empty. The fire was out. The members of the orgy were nowhere in sight. Jay struggled behind

them, searching for his motivation, leery of his surroundings. Charlie hoped he'd come around. Their exchange left a bad taste in his mouth. None of it mattered. When he looked at Sam, he couldn't help but smile. When he glanced at the stranger leading them, he couldn't help but feel... aroused.

They followed a trail through the dark forest. Tree trunks grew thick and twisted, looking ancient, stretching endlessly into the night sky. The brush rustled in a breeze laced with sweet scents, and hollow reeds whistled.

The trail wound to the right and the left and descended even further down the island. Charlie could no longer hear the sound of the ocean. Finally, they arrived at the compound, a series of connected buildings not unlike a village out of the Old West. A well, which provided drinking water, sat dormant in the compound's center.

The roofs of the compound's buildings seemed thatched, or maybe they were cobbled together with shells. They could have even been turtle shells, but Charlie wasn't quite sure. Amber light glowed in some of the windows. Charlie spotted shadowy movement in the light but it was fleeting.

Their host brought them to a hut at the end of the compound. He showed the three of them to a trio of beds, as if they had been set up just for them. Charlie saw a table in the middle of the room filled with grapes, figs, apples and wedges of cheese. He didn't recall seeing that type of fruit or trees on their walk through the island.

"Here we are. You'll find the beds quite comfortable." Their host smiled and drew down the blankets on Charlie's bed. He then walked to the table and popped two grapes into his mouth. "The food is

clean as well. No need to fear. In case you were wondering." He glanced at Jay.

"Thank you so much for everything," Charlie said. "Um... I never got your-"

"Luk. It's Luk, and you are very welcome. I'll send someone in to tend to your wounds." Without another word, he left the room.

Jay walked around the room and pulled a cord dangling from the ceiling. They were instantly bathed in amber light.

"Seems nice here," Sam said. He moved beside Charlie and placed his head on his shoulder.

"It's not the Ritz-Carlton but it does have a rustic charm." He chuckled.

Sam mimicked him.

"How can you two joke?" Jay said. "We don't know where we are. We don't know who they are. This is insane."

"Jay, if they wanted to hurt us they would have by now," said Charlie. "It's just one of those communities. You know, that pull together all of their resources, live off the grid, grow their own food."

"Right. In the middle of the ocean. No boats or TVs or phones."

"Look, in the morning we'll ask them to give us transportation off the island. There must be something here they use."

"Really?" Sam said. "This place is interesting. Kind of fun in a mysterious way. Did you see those guys? Absolutely beautiful."

"I know. Maybe we could spend a day or two getting to know them before we leave."

"Fuck that," Jay called. "I want off this island tomorrow morning."

"No one's holding you here, Jay," Charlie grumbled. "Christ."

Silence fell between the three of them as a man with bandages and a bowl

of water appeared in the doorway. "Am I intruding?"

"No, sorry, not at all," Charlie said. "Come on in."

"I've been sent to tend to your wounds."

"Sure, why don't you start with my friend?" Charlie put his hands on Sam's shoulders.

"Such a giver," Sam joked.

"Please, lie down on your bed."

The man walked over to the center bed and sat down on it.

Sam followed him and climbed onto it.

"Take off your shirt."

Sam complied.

Charlie sat down on his own bed and watched. The medicine man had auburn red hair, a slender and toned body. Five o'clock shadow caressed his cheeks and chin. One ear was pierced with a silver ring. Charlie could smell the sex on him. It was intoxicating. It filled him full of passion. He felt his temperature going up. Just the act of this man touching his partner was driving him crazy. Sam seemed to be enjoying it as well.

"You're all so nice," Charlie managed to say.

"We're just doing what is right. What we would do for any man." He looked over at Charlie and smiled. "My name is Tal."

"Nice to meet you Tal. I'm Charlie. Tal, in the morning, do you think we could ask to borrow one of your boats or whatever transportation to get back home?"

Tal cocked his head and gave Charlie a quizzical look. "I'm afraid we got rid of all of our boats. We see no reason to ever leave the island. It's where we belong. We keep no boats."

"Well that's just great," Jay said. "What the hell are we supposed to do?"

You guys have any cell phones? Land lines? Telegraphs, for Christ's sake?"

Tal just smiled and shook his head.

Charlie rolled his eyes. "It'll be all right, Jay. We'll find another way. I'll talk to Luk tomorrow, he seems to be the leader."

Jay just shook his head. Tal finished with Sam and moved over to Charlie. He wiped Charlie's face with some water, then cleaned the scratches. His touch was gentle, sensual and warm. Charlie looked into Tal's hazel eyes. They twinkled.

When Tal finished with Charlie he got up and approached Jay. "Please, lie down on your bed."

"That's ok, buddy. Just don't touch me. Leave the stuff, I'll clean up myself."

"As you wish." Tal set the items down on the table and left.

"You don't have to be rude," Charlie said. "I know you're upset about your boat, but..."

"It's not about the boat. It's about any boat. You heard them. No boats, no phones. It's BS. They're not keeping us here."

"God, there's no talking to you right now. We'll talk in the morning when you've calmed down."

"I can't calm down." Jay paced across the room over and over.

Charlie exhaled, then rubbed his face. Sam smiled at him from his bed.

"It's too bad these beds are only big enough for one person," Sam said. "I want to sleep next to you right now." He reached his hand out to Charlie.

He's so sweet. Charlie beamed inside. He reached back to Sam and the two held on tight.

Jay continued to pace over and over. He dragged his feet. Huffed and puffed. He stomped over to his bed and sat down. A moment later he was asleep.

Charlie and Sam heard his snoring off and on all night.

"Charlie... Charlie... wake up."

Jay sounded desperate.

Charlie rubbed his eyes and yawned. A blurred image of his friend's face came into view. "Jay, what's wrong?"

"A ship. I saw a ship out in the ocean. C'mon." He pulled Charlie's arm.

It was nearly dawn. The shade of night lifted in smoky patches of purple as orange and crimson painted the horizon. The air was cool. Charlie let Jay lead him all the way back to the beach.

Jay scrambled amidst the sand, rummaging around a circle of rocks and twigs.

"What is it, Jay?" Charlie cupped his hand over his eyes and stared. "What am I supposed to be seeing? There's not a ship out there."

"Not now, but there was." Jay sounded excited. "Don't you see?"

Charlie was confused. "No."

"It means we're not in the middle of nowhere. We're not lost. We can get off this island. More ships will come and they will see us. We just need to leave a fire burning, then come back and keep checking it, all of us." Jay arranged twigs and branches into a pyramid and struck a match.

The tide bolted in. Calm water became violent, and a stream sought out Jay's circle of rocks and soaked it, snuffing out the first igniting embers.

"You see that," Jay cried. "Did you just see that? The water came right up and put it out."

"What are you talking about?" Charlie shook his head. "You're too close to the shoreline."

"No I'm not, I made sure. That tide shouldn't have reached us." He struck another match and lowered it to the rocks.

More water swirled, dousing the match. "See that? Fuck! This island doesn't want us to leave."

"Jay, this is nuts. You're tired. Look at yourself. You can barely stand. The fire is too close to the incoming tide. Let's get some more sleep and you can try again later, after we all wake up."

Jay stumbled around and put his face in his hands. Charlie wondered if he was actually going to break down in tears. "Okay. But first thing, I'm coming back here."

"You got it, buddy."

Charlie started back to the compound. He heard Jay muttering behind him.

The sunlight warmed Charlie's face. It was nice waking to the sensation, as if being bathed in gentle waters, soothed by compassionate hands. He opened his eyes to find Sam staring down at him. Charlie reached out and Sam took his hand.

Sam climbed on top of Charlie and kissed him. They stared into each other's eyes. Charlie's heart started beating a bit faster. Sam's fingers tickled his belly, and then caressed his legs.

"Glad you two are having a good time," Jay interrupted. "We need to go down to the beach and start the fire again. We can't let the water smother it again."

"What are you talking about?" Charlie looked over Sam's shoulder.

"The ship, the fire I showed you early this morning." Jay's voice rose. "You remember? The water stopping me from starting a fire."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I wasn't on the beach with you this morning."

"Charlie, yes you were. We went together. I... I... damn it. Fine, stay here with your boyfriend. I'll take care of it as

usual. I'll get us off this goddamn island." Jay stormed out of the room and ran through the compound.

"What's his problem?" asked Sam.

"Beats me." He kissed Sam again.

"Come," Sam said. "The guys are waiting to have breakfast with us."

"Really? How do you know?"

"I was with them, chatting, getting to know them."

"Aren't you the social butterfly?"

"Just come on." Sam pulled him from the bed by both hands.

They walked to the center of the compound where all the others had gathered. They sat on the ground, some laid their heads in the laps of others. They caressed one another, ran fingers through each other's hair, ate fruit and bread together.

Sam led Charlie to their circle and the two sat down with the rest. Charlie saw Luk and Tal there, sitting across from them. Luk passed Charlie an apple and a bowl of strawberries. Sam took the strawberries and fed one to Charlie, just as the others were doing. Charlie smiled.

"Good morning," Luk said. "We are happy to have you join us."

"Again, you are too kind. Thank you so much." He looked around watching the men nuzzle and kiss. They basked in each other's presence. "Is this all you guys do here? Eat and..."

"Play?" Luk smiled. "No, there are many other things. There is celebration, dancing, building community. Growing food."

"I see. And are you the leader here, Luk?"

"Leader? No. We are all equal here. There is no leader."

"Except for Loki."

"Loki?" Charlie asked. "You mean like the Norse God?"

"The trickster," Tal said.

"The wild one," someone else said.
"He is our patron," Luk said.
"He is freedom," another voice called.

"He is jubilee, he is nature, he is sex, he is all of us."

"I don't understand," Charlie said.
"You worship him?"

"In a way." Luk said. "We are his sons. He made all of this for us. Where we could be one, and celebrate who we are. A place to love one another in our true nature. I know it seems new and strange. But you'll understand. Here," Luk offered Charlie a bottle.

"What is it?"

"Wine."

"In the morning?"

"There are no limits here. It's dandelion wine. All natural."

Charlie chuckled. "I didn't see any dandelions on the island."

"Because we've harvested them all."

"Go ahead," Sam urged, putting his arms around Charlie. "You'll love it. It's so delicious."

He looked at Sam and smiled. Sam winked at him. "Sure, what the hell. We're on an island full of men in the middle of nowhere. No place to be." Charlie took a swig. His eyes widened. "Wow," he stared at the bottle as wine trickled down his chin. "This is good." He drank more... then more.

Around him the others smiled and kissed one another. In the background the sound of a flute wafted through the air.

Sam carried Charlie back to their hut. He felt weak but euphoric. The dandelion wine was unlike anything he'd ever had. A strange sensation filled him. Tingling shot down his limbs and from the tips of his fingers and toes.

Night settled on them again. "That was fast," Charlie remarked. "Where did the day go? I can only remember breakfast and..." He noticed Jay was nowhere to be found and his bed was empty.

"Where's Jay?" Charlie asked Sam.

"Not sure. I think he's at the beach."

"Okay... where are my pants?" Charlie chuckled as he looked down and saw he was wearing nothing but his underwear. He laughed. Sam kissed him, sliding his tongue into his mouth. Charlie reciprocated. They kissed deeply as Sam guided them to the floor.

Charlie's entire body surged with electricity. Sam licked his neck, suckled his nipples and moved down to his underwear. He nibbled on the edge of it. Charlie grew hard immediately and Sam grabbed his cock, jerking it quickly.

Charlie's entire body bucked and his back arched as Sam went down on him. The shadow of night swallowed the room as the moon rose. Charlie gasped for air, short and quick as Sam pleased him. He ran his fingers over Sam's head and back and looked up to see the other men standing in the room. A moment of panic seized him but he let it go as his ecstasy heightened.

They all watched. Some in the room, others watching through the windows. None said a word. There was deafening silence, only that of his and Sam's lovemaking resounded. This was strange but liberating at the same time. Normally he would stop, protest, but he just let go. He let them watch and let Sam do anything he wanted, no matter what it was.

Charlie searched the beach for Jay the next morning. Footprints littered the

sand but there was no Jay. *I hope he's all right. Where would he go?*

He looked out at the ocean. Nothing but water for miles and miles. There was rustling in the trees. Charlie waited for a moment but nothing surfaced. He walked back to the compound.

Sam lay naked on his bed, napping. Charlie stared at him, remembering their passion the night before. A hazy memory at best, the wine still surging through his system. Sam stirred at his presence. He looked at Charlie and smiled with a wink.

"Where've you been?" Sam asked.

"Looking for Jay. I still don't know where he is."

"Why is it such an issue? Let him be."

"Sam, how can you say that?"

"He's not like us, Charlie." Sam got up. "He says he understands and accepts us but he really doesn't. He's been nothing but rude and ignorant to the guys here since we got here and they've been nothing but sweet."

"I know but..."

"But nothing. He doesn't belong here."

"Sam, neither do we. Don't you think it's time we tried to find a way home?"

"No."

"We can't stay here forever. Our lives are back home. Our families, your job."

"Why not? Charlie, think about it." He walked up to Charlie and took his hands. "This place was made for us. What is there back in that life for us? Seriously. We belong here. That world doesn't understand us. Here we're free. You and I can love here and be loved. Among our brothers. How many times have you heard straight people say we should all be

on an island together? Well, here it is. We can live our lives without fear, without judgment, with others of our kind. We should stay."

"You sound just like them already."

"They have a good life here. We can too."

"It's not that simple, Sam."

"Yes it is. Just give it a chance. Give them a chance." He stared deeply into Charlie's eyes. Charlie didn't want to look away. He didn't want to lose Sam. They'd grown so close through all this.

The sound of drums filled the air. Flutes followed. A melody played in Charlie's head, echoing around the island.

"Let's join them," Sam said.

"They're honoring Loki with song and play."

"All they do is play. And this Loki thing, don't you think it's a little weird?"

"It's just their spirituality. I just humor them. C'mon. It'll be fun." He put his hand out.

He hesitated at first, but ultimately, Charlie took Sam's hand and let him guide him to the music, the song and the play.

The beat of drums woke Charlie. He realized it was the dead of night when he opened his eyes and saw Sam standing above him, staring.

"They're doing it again," Sam whispered excitedly.

"Wh-what?" Charlie croaked and sat up.

"Orgy, another orgy. C'mon, let's go watch."

Charlie waved him off. "Seen one, seen 'em all."

"Please Charlie, it was so hot last time. Remember? And we were interrupted before we could finish. We

should do it again. We need to do it again. It'd be so freeing."

Can't resist those puppy dog eyes.

Charlie grinned, unable to take his gaze off of Sam. That angelic face, that boyish look. *It was fun.* An irresistible lust.

"Okay."

They climbed to the top of the hill. Charlie saw the flickering of firelight before they even reached it. Shadows danced across the horizon. He looked down to see naked bodies writhing, men frolicking. They kissed and licked and caressed. Fingers explored smooth flesh, hungry mouths tasted one another.

Charlie heard drums beating, flutes singing and rattles humming softly, but couldn't tell who was playing. Too much movement, too many men twisting into each other. He listened to the melody, hypnotic, trance-like, until he grew aroused and sweat dampened his face, his hands, until Sam slid his hand down his pants and over his ass.

Sam stuck his tongue in Charlie's ear and a moan escaped him as he watched the orgy grow into a frenzy... something changed. Something strange happened. He saw Jay appear in the center of the crowd. Naked, the men laid him down on his back and kissed him, he responded hungrily, greedily, kissing deeply, madly.

Charlie took hold of Sam, halting him. Stunned, his eyes widened, his heart thumped. "It's Jay... but then... what's he doing? He's straight! Sam, you see? What the hell got into him? This is nuts!"

He watched as the men took turns going down on Jay, running their hands over him again and again, Jay's eyes seemed glazed. His mouth hung open. Was that pleasure or pain? Then the impossible happened. Charlie saw one of the men bite Jay. Then another. And

another. They bit down hard, drawing blood.

Charlie opened his mouth to scream but nothing came out. He watched, helpless, as the men bit and tore, mouths sank deep into flesh, rivers of blood flowed. Teeth gnashed, tongues licked. Like a pack of wolves, they consumed him.

"What the fuck are they doing?" Charlie finally found his voice. "They're eating him!" Charlie screamed. "Jesus Christ, they're eating him! Jesus Christ!"

Down below, the men's bodies were drenched with blood, and some of them began to take on odd shapes, limbs transformed in the firelight. Arms sprouted fur, legs grew scales. One man grew a tail like a lizard, another a snout like a wolf. Feet became hooves. Snarls, snorts, howls filled the air. A man-wolf crawled on all fours. A goat scurried in circles, a lizard slithered in the blood-soaked dirt.

Charlie gagged, fighting back the urge to vomit. His heart dropped into his stomach and something inside him shattered. He watched a shadow step out of the bonfire, a silhouette of a man, a man taller than all the others. The outline of antlers crowned his massive head. He walked among them, towering, and they bowed down to him. The smoke of the fire curled around the shadow figure, clinging to it like skin.

His sanity unraveled and Charlie bolted. He pulled Sam with him and barreled down the hill. "We have to go... we have to get off this island! Oh God... Jay... God... they're going to kill us!"

"Charlie, it's okay." Sam soothed, pulling back. "It's all right. We're one of them. They won't hurt us."

Charlie stopped and looked at Sam. Sam's eyes glinted and his face was

veiled in shadow. "What are you saying? Are you crazy?"

"It's okay, my love. We belong here. We cannot leave. This is our home."

"Sam, they killed Jay. They're sick... do you see them?"

"It was Jay's fate. He wasn't like them or us. It was the natural order of things. I don't want to leave. I don't want you to leave either. They've welcomed us in. Don't you see, Charlie?"

"No Sam... don't do this, please. Come with me. We have to find a way off this island."

"Loki made this for us. There is no way off. We're his sons."

"God, Sam... what have they done to you?"

"You don't understand. Loki is the only male God to give birth to children. Us... all of us. The gays. The queers. He's called us home. Stay with me, Jay..." Sam put out his hand. It was spotted with blood and dirt. Sam was naked now, face obscured in the dark, eyes burning with ethereal light. In the dark, Charlie knew he was smiling. A gleeful smile. A dark smile.

"You're not Sam." Charlie turned his back on him and ran as fast as he could, as hard as he could. Tears flowed in torrents. The life he longed for withered. The love he had died. He felt it slip away as he hit the beach, his legs wracked with pain, his chest heaving, body exhausted. He fell to his knees and looked out at the water.

A man rose out of the ocean, he lifted above the gentle waves and walked on top of the water. He was tall and slender, his skin pale with a hint of blue, a mane of long silver hair crowned his head and white antlers sprouted from it. Passion and heat radiated around him like an aura. His walk was sensual, his gaze capricious. The air grew thick around

Charlie. The salty breeze mixed with earthen notes, the scent of forests, wild things, of men and sex.

The stranger stepped onto the beach and smiled at Charlie. He sat frozen, trembling. The stranger placed his hand on top of Charlie's head. "I hope you won't leave, my son."

Charlie looked up at him and wept. His lips trembled. His hands twitched.

"I—I—just want to go h-h-home."

"You are home."

Charlie shook his head.

"Tell me, Charlie. What does that world hold for you?" He gestured his arm toward the ocean. "There is nothing there for you. It is a straight world. You don't belong in it. You never have. They don't understand you. They don't feel what we feel." Loki bent to him and whispered: "Think of it. No more queer bashing. No more 'faggot'. None of them will find you here. No straights, no breeders. No hate. None of it exists on my island."

Charlie listened to the sound of the waves. He scanned the ocean and the black horizon.

"You don't have to be afraid anymore. You'll never be alone here. You will be surrounded by the love of your brothers. You can have anything or any man you want."

"I want Sam..."

"He was always yours."

Charlie looked up and saw Sam's face smiling down at him. "No, you're not Sam. You can't be Sam."

"I am anything you want me to be, Charlie. Stay with us. It is where you belong. There is no judgment. No right or wrong. Live among your own kind, in peace. Aren't you tired of feeling different? Of always searching for something? Here we are one, there's no rich or poor, no ugly or sick, no pain or

suffering. Your brothers have been waiting for you.”

“You brought me here.” Charlie looked up into his face. “Loki... the trickster. You were Sam, you were on the boat, the storm.”

“I guided you here. Like I have all of my sons. I just wanted you to be happy. And all you have to do is take my hand.” Loki opened his palm and offered it to Charlie.

Charlie wiped the tears from his cheeks. A sea breeze caressed his face. He listened to the sound of the waves. “I will become like them? A monster?”

“The world already thinks you are. To me you are beautiful. You are my son. You always have been.” He smiled, something chilling yet seductive in it. His blue eyes glittered.

He stared at Loki’s outstretched hand. He thought of Sam, the thrill of being with him, the togetherness, the community, and took the hand before him. Charlie stood up and walked hand in hand with Loki back to the hill and the bonfire. He turned and noticed Loki was now Sam, smiling warmly at him, his beautiful, boyish face, his innocent, non-judgmental eyes. “Will I forget my old world?” He asked.

“No,” the now naked Sam answered. “But in time, you won’t want to remember it.”

They walked back to their brothers who welcomed them with open arms and joined them in dancing, making music, loving and playing into the endless night.

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Dracula Goes Down

V. Fay

She wasn't about to complain.

This promised to be a great gig: an old-school Eastern European sugar daddy, complete with exotic accent and a big, fat bank account. So what if he had a micro-penis? He had style and eyes so gorgeous you couldn't look away; plus, he took her anywhere—and everywhere—she wanted to go, with no objection to cost. It was perfect. Well, almost.

Chloe had heard this man preferred to be called Draakar, playing off both his head of luxurious black hair (she'd been told "draakar" was Celtic for 'black hair'), and his family's motto: "*ego sum draco*"—which translated from Latin meant "I am the Dragon." Or some such thing. Wacky Europeans. Still, Chloe wasn't about to turn her nose up at the opportunity to play with some of that old money. Rumor had it his ancestral home was an honest-to-god medieval castle out in the Romanian hinterland. Could trace his lineage, on his father's side, all the way back to—? Some battle-hardened count or something. She heard the ancestor had a nasty reputation for orgies with beautiful virgins rounded up from the local villages—and more especially for inflicting grotesque, sadistic tortures on war-time enemies. Like he had their living bodies run through with giant wooden spikes—spikes up the butt and out the mouth—then set ablaze to act as torches for his dinner parties. Charming. Chloe usually lost interest when the denizens of



the Euro-jet set began spouting off about their connections to this or that royal family, and their moldy, centuries-long histories. She was an American, for fuck's sake. She was more interested in what the monied class was doing *today*. Like where were they going on their next vacation? And were they interested in a gorgeous, unfettered female companion—some delicious arm-candy sure to make their peers bristle with jealousy?

So Chloe didn't blink when she heard the stories about this Draakar character having a few, ah, unusual proclivities. Like only coming out at night, like a taste for bondage, like food issues, like a blood fetish, and like cycling through his playmates with all the finesse of a spoiled brat with too many toys. Surely he wasn't spoiled—imagine a descendant of European royalty being spoiled! Ugh. Chloe hated spoiled grown men; they always end up being so weak and whiny. She'd rather like to believe this Draakar person was maybe just easily bored with the modern cosmopolitan scene. Though she was very much a part of that milieu, she prided herself in being anything but boring. She worked hard at being unpredictable.

She knew all of this about him, beforehand. Word gets around in the elite dating scene. Sometimes that word is a bit distorted and conflicting—but that just makes the gossip all the more titillating, and tempting. Chloe was just as tempted as she was tempting.

It was easy to catch his eye—Chloe was a magnet for the lustful male gaze. She not only knew this, she used it to her advantage. After all, was she not

competing for attention—and thereby the attainment of status and resources—with every other hot young thing in this world? It would be stupid for her not to use those natural assets that nature gave her. And a few it didn't, but she was astute enough to cultivate. So she wore too-snug, too-short dresses to accentuate her too perfect figure, she lined her big brown eyes in sparkles, she glazed her naturally full, pouty lips in slick shades of pink. Her long fingernails she shellacked in glossy black polish, dotted with petite Swarovski crystals. She rocked sky-high heels which made her tanned and oiled legs look impossibly long.

She just *knew* he'd come her way; how could he resist? Happily, she realized he'd already entered her subconscious, like a slinky cat burglar in a villa crammed with gold gilt goodies—and by purposely leaving the door of her mind ajar, she drew him in. How better to capture a rogue like that than to allow him to think he was a master of manipulation? So when their eyes met across a noisy, crowded dance floor, she played the easily-flattered, wide-eyed ingénue, more than willing to accept his invitation to dance. More than willing to accompany this Continental sophisticate back to his no doubt swinging bachelor pad for drinks, and whatever, afterward.

Draakar took her back to his penthouse apartment—condo, he corrected her, as it was *not* a rental. And what a swinging pad it was, too. The place was amazing, if a bit Elvis-tacky. But she was not about to criticize the polished white marble floors, the heavy gold velvet curtains—always kept closed, he said, waving his hand dismissively, due to the annoying paparazzi. Every stick of furniture was a shade of white trimmed in gold—authentic Louis XIV, he informed her,

expecting her to be impressed, and though she oohed and ahed, she had no idea who that was.

He took her small hand in his bejeweled fingers and led her over to a polar bear skin rug, where he gently laid her down before a crackling fire—which he started with a snap of his fingers. Now *that* impressed her. He himself brought up the issue of his tiny penis. "Look at the beautiful male form carved in marble—from ancient Greece and Rome—and you'll find heroes with baby cocks," Draakar asserted, slamming his fist into his open palm. "It was more than a fashion," he continued to rant, his eyes blazing, "It was the *ideal*!"

He managed to calm himself down before he went on. "You must understand, size truly doesn't matter," he murmured to Chloe as he took her in his strong, cold arms. Nuzzling the soft, warm skin of her neck, he whispered, "I possess something that I guarantee will make you forget everything you ever cared about—especially where a gentleman's member is concerned."

Chloe had her doubts—and this conversation was making her uncomfortable. Just how tiny was this dick? She'd been with smaller-than-average guys before, and she knew how to clench and squeeze—she practiced her kegels religiously, after all—so as to make the experience more satisfying for both. But Draakar made her ill at ease with all this defensive preliminary talk. Maybe he was too insecure to have sex with—or maybe, and she had seen this many times before in other men, his insecurity was what propelled him to sleep with every woman who crossed his path. Chloe decided to lure him into a blow job—what man would say no to *that*? Especially with her soft, plump lips. She was rather famous in her little party circle for her lip-

smackin' abilities. Legendary, even; rumor had it that she could swallow swords. So Chloe was fine if that was the limit of their sex; she wasn't quite sure how emotionally involved she wanted to get with this odd duck, anyway.

While she was lost in these thoughts, Draakar deftly pushed her designer mini dress up over her hips and parted her smooth, tanned legs, positioning himself in between them.

"Hey, what—," Chloe giggled in happy surprise. This would be a treat, she mused, being on the receiving end.

"Just lie back and enjoy," he whispered, parting her warming, swelling lady-lips with his cool, slender fingers. Before she could comment, he had his mouth on her and his tongue—which was long and thick—working its sinuous way up inside her. She had never experienced *anything* like this before. She wriggled with pleasure; he completely filled her, and his tongue moved around inside in a way no cock ever could.

Before she knew it, she was on the brink, teetering on the edge of the orgasmic abyss—when his tongue reached deep into her, so deep he hit her tender cervix. And there, at that point, Chloe felt a small, sharp prick—not just on the roof of her love shack, but also all the up to the back of her soft palate, as if a nerve ran from deep in her pussy to the roof of her gasping mouth. And with this tiny pinprick, she was flooded with a shot of endorphins stronger than a hit of liquid ecstasy. She moaned, helpless in the grip of such intense sexual satisfaction. Sparks flashed and subsided and flashed again behind her closed eyes; her body trembled as the rush of pleasure hit her mind like an incendiary bomb, burning down to smoldering ash the memory of everything she had ever felt before. She was lost.

Draakar sat back on his heels and wiped his wet mouth with the back of his hand. He was smiling when she opened her eyes.

A breathless "Wow," was all she could manage to say afterward. Chloe was entirely drained. Sated and still riding that wave of post-climax bliss, she barely noticed how red his lips were, how white they made his teeth look. Coming back to herself, she decided she should wash up, keep herself attractive, in hopes he'd want her to spend the night. Not call a cab for her and then shuffle her out the door, as if she was just another used up plaything to be discarded. What he had just done to her—she wanted more. And often. She wasn't about to let this one get away. She excused herself and tiptoed away—an action that mimicked her wearing high heels, which she knew made her appear helplessly attractive to most men, like foot-binding in olden times. It was in that gleaming-tiled bathroom that she realized for the first time there was not a mirror in sight. If she could have seen herself, she would have seen a woman who looked like she'd been trolling truck stop parking lots all night. Hair disheveled and face pallid, make-up smudged into raccoon rings under her red-rimmed eyes. Not her best look.

She splashed water on her face and then drank deeply from the cold water faucet—she was so thirsty! Chloe remembered reading in a woman's magazine that great sex would do that to you. Though she drank so much she feared she'd throw up, she was still parched. Perhaps Draakar would offer her something besides water to drink. An expensive champagne would be nice, she giggled to herself.

Chloe rejoined him on the polar bear skin rug. She ran her hands through the thick fur. "Is this legal to have?" she

asked him without thinking. She seemed to have lost contact with her internal editor in the lubricious flood of her orgasm.

"There are many things I have—and do—which challenge the modern concept of *legal*," he laughed. Draakar reclined on his elbows and watched her, his expression reminiscent of a hungry, calculating wolf. Chloe crawled over to him on her hands and knees, grinning like a wicked child. "Now, it's your turn," she cooed and playfully cocking an eyebrow, unzipped his pants in one smooth, practiced motion. For the first time since they'd met, he seemed uneasy, but said nothing.

His cock was even smaller than she'd imagined. But being a trooper on the front lines of the never-ending sexual revolution, she enveloped his member with her pillowy lips and took him completely into her mouth. She tried to think positive thoughts about this little penis but kept coming back to the idea that she was blowing a half-eaten gummy worm. Chloe had to remind herself over and over, that however long it was taking—which, honestly, seemed like hours—that what he had done to her was *amazing*. It was only polite to return the favor.

And so she labored, until—at last!—his whole body convulsed like a bad cramp, and he cried out, at the same time roughly pushing her off and away from him.

His cock shot blood everywhere. No warm, pearly, creamy man-gravy. The rug, the sofa, the tiles, Chloe—all that gleaming whiteness covered in sticky, almost-black blood. Before she could speak, before she could show concern, ask him if he was okay, he got on his hands and knees and in a state of pure animal frenzy, lapped up that darkly glistening

splatter. He sucked the fur rug until he'd reclaimed every last drop. Meanwhile, Chloe, dripping with his crimson ooze, could only watch in mute astonishment. What was he—why was he—she never finished these thoughts. Abruptly, Draakar turned to Chloe, flashing his wolf-grin, and wiped his blood-wet lips. He held his hand out to her, and like a frightened but obedient child, she sheepishly joined him.

Draakar took her head in his hands and gave her the cobra-stare—his most dangerously seductive look, the look that allowed his mind to insinuate itself further into the deepest, tightest crevices of her consciousness, where he positioned his hooks in her, well and good. She could not resist—well, that's what she pretended, anyway. Did he really think she was so easily hypnotized, like some hay-seed volunteer at a county fair magic show? Baww, baww, now she was a chicken. She bit her tongue to keep from giggling at his efforts during this intense moment and chastised herself to play along. In fact, she allowed him to brusquely push her head down on his still wiggling little cock. In a voice that boomed in the marble-tiled echo chamber of her mind like an announcement that this train was boarding *now*, Draakar instructed her to suck out all the remaining blood. Every last drop. She did so, greedily. It quenched her thirst.

She should have been horrified. But she wasn't. When he touched her, she knew what he had just done—what *they* had just done—was completely acceptable in his world. Natural, even. She understood why all his women were obsessed—no, addicted—to him. He was a bit goofy, by American standards, and took himself way too seriously, as most Europeans did—but he was a *god*. From

that moment on, Chloe would willingly be both his food and his follower.

And she was okay with that. After all, who wouldn't love to have an old-school Eastern European sugar daddy, complete with exotic accent and a big, fat bank account? She could do worse.

V. Fay is a buxom gal who decided to start writing short stories ten years ago and has now had over 70 stories published under her other name, which she declines to reveal here. If you've read "Dracula Goes Down," you'll understand why. Hey, even Anne Rice wrote nasty tales under a nom de plume. When not writing, V. Fay paints everything she can get her hands on. She lives in the Sonora Desert area of southern Arizona.

Funny Girl, Sad Story

Stuart D. Monroe

My ex-wife was a fucking clown; true story. A coworker once asked me why I was so happy when Barnum & Bailey folded their tent in 2017. I laughed.

"You didn't have to deal with my ex-wife," I said with what was (undoubtedly) a vitriol I could not hide. "She was a clown. Every day was like a trip to the circus. You can't imagine it. Believe you, me; I have my reasons."

I could feel my eyes rolling a bit too wildly at this last statement. I always got carried away on the subject of clowns in general and my ex-wife in particular. Anyone who knows me well will tell you that I am more than a little bit fanatical on the subject.

Allow me to explain.

My ex-wife, Loretta, is (as I previously stated) a clown. However, I don't want you misunderstanding me. She isn't a goofy woman. She isn't a "comedienne". She isn't one of those ladies who had an overly enthusiastic sense of humor or a penchant for bright clothing and balloon animals. That's not what I mean to say at all.

She is, quite literally, a clown. It's not talked about much in the mainstream media, but clown is an actual subspecies of human beings (*Cloynus Sapien*). Their tribe is very small. She once told me that the estimated number of honest-to-goodness clowns left in the world was less than one hundred! She was a rare breed, to say the least.

We met while I was in college at Cornell University. I was majoring in Ancient Civilizations, and she was majoring in Art Appreciation (a clown subject if there ever was one). Like everyone else in the room I was curious

about her when she first came into class, and as I watched her I quickly became mesmerized. By the end of that first day of Biology 101, I suspected that I might be in love. It happened fast.

She took my breath away. Her fashion sense was casually pretty and not at all what you would expect of a clown. She favored tight blue jeans and tee-shirts with funny sayings on them such as "I'm not trying to be difficult... it just comes naturally" and "I want you to know that someone cares... not me, but someone". She clearly had a fantastic sense of humor, but what else would you expect from a clown?

The casual dress did nothing to hide her ghostly white skin, red nose, and bright red hair. She straightened it, but it was still an unnatural shade that I had never seen before on anyone else. The noticeable differences between her and most everyone else did nothing to hide her amazing natural beauty. She was head and shoulders above all of the other girls in the class. Hell, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen!

Her mouth was generous and soft, her lips (of course) a deep red. When she smiled, her eyes (a cotton candy blue) danced and sparkled. She had a round, cherubic face and rosy cheeks that begged to be pinched... or kissed. She was cute in that way that trumped classic beauty and sex appeal, yet still exuded all of those qualities. She was unlike any woman I had ever seen before, and you could tell that she had the same effect on all of the other men (and a couple of the women) in the class.

None of these typical clown accoutrements did anything to hide the fact that under that getup was a first class, dynamite body: hourglass hips and thighs, certifiable "junk in the trunk," a slim waist, proud and upright posture, and

boobs that looked big enough for a small child to hide between.

I was struck dumb at first sight. I couldn't stop staring. I think my mouth was actually watering, God help me. And, of course, my hard-on was chiseled out of granite. I felt like a perverted teenager who's seen his first real live naked girl - *AND SHE WASN'T EVEN NAKED!*

I knew that I had to have her or die trying. It took me a week of borderline stalking to work up the nerve to speak to her. When I finally did I made a bumbling fool of myself, but I think she found that sweet and endearing. A fool's luck, you might say. And you'd be right.

She was surprised by my clear attraction to her. I found her to be so charming and sweet that I couldn't understand why she was taken aback by my affections.

She clarified that one for me.

As we got to know each other she explained some of the history of clowns and the persecution they suffered across the globe. Do you remember learning about the concentration camps? Sure you do. Do you remember hearing about the one-hundred thousand or so clowns that were gassed, burned, experimented on and shot? That's because they aren't talked about in the history books *at all*. They are erased from history, and I don't mean erased in a figurative sense. They were completely forgotten about.

Many of the remaining members of The Tribe can only safely take one job in the "real world," so they become rodeo clowns, horror movie villains, and amusements for children. They live by the adage that the best place to hide is in plain sight, and they communicate covertly through social media and even snail mail. If you've ever seen one of those TV shows about crazy people who have unusual obsessions and you thought to yourself

"That crazy motherfucker really believes he's a clown?!" chances are you were actually seeing one of The Tribe hiding in plain sight.

My mind was blown. My heart was already aching for this tender creature who had already spent her whole life being gawked at and picked on.

After a few days, I knew I was falling in love with her. There was no doubt. She was all I thought about, all I dreamt about. I texted her as soon as I woke. I couldn't concentrate on anything that was going on in class because I simply couldn't take my eyes off of her. She had twisted my heart into knots like a giraffe-shaped balloon.

We were married the following spring before the next school year had even begun. I was swept off my feet. I know that traditionally works the other way around, with the man sweeping the woman off her feet, but nothing was traditional with Loretta.

The first year of our marriage was straight out of a storybook. The sex was unbelievable. Her energy was boundless and her mind was almost appallingly filthy. She could make my balloon do things you couldn't even possibly imagine. She was also a natural contortionist, a trait of all clowns. Oh, brother... she did things that were illegal the world over with that cute red nose of hers honking all the while. Did you know that a clown's nose honks when they have an orgasm?

But enough about the sex.

My parents disowned me the day they met Loretta. I took her back to Atlanta to meet them. The ink was still drying on the marriage certificate, and we were positively glowing. I felt sure that my Dad (a lifelong construction worker) and my Mom (a lifelong housewife) would be

thrilled to know they had a daughter-in-law who was so beautiful and different.

I couldn't have been any more wrong.

It took me an hour just to get them to understand that she wasn't a crazy person and that clown is an actual type of human being. I suppose my mistake was in explaining that they are a subspecies of human. Mom sat in stunned silence. Dad started spouting off about blasphemy and interspecies sex acts, as if I were fucking the family dog. I tried to elaborate and explain that for all intents and purposes Loretta was merely of a different race, but that didn't ease their mind to think of her that way.

I never knew until that moment that my parents were such close-minded bigots. It was a moment of stark realization that I'll never escape.

We quickly made our exit, and I haven't seen my parents since.

The "honeymoon period," as it's called, was just that for us. The sex was limitless and exhausting. I had to pay for a prescription for Viagra just to keep up with her appetites. We didn't fight; hell, we didn't even have a tense moment. It was all sunshine and roses and filthy sex and breakfast in bed.

That is until the day she broke the big news to me.

It was during dinner of our 1st anniversary when she broke the news to me. I was already thinking of what was to come after dinner while I was lost in her milky-white cleavage when she hit me with the mother of all bombshells.

"Pookiebear, I'm pregnant!" she exclaimed with glee.

I was snapped back into reality and out of my reverie of filth to come. My head felt light and dizzy. The room swam around me for a moment. I honestly

thought I might faint. This showed rather clearly on my face. For the first time in our marriage, I saw thunderclouds forming on her brow and they were directed at me.

It was a little bit frightening, but I was eventually able to speak.

"Sweetie, how is that possible? You said that clowns and-"

She cut me off - "Say *normal* and I'll cut your fucking balls off!"

I continued more cautiously. "That's not what I was going to say, if you'd stop putting words in my mouth. What I was going to say was that you told me clowns and humans can't have children! You said that the Nazis conducted experiments in the camps and it was deemed to be physically impossible."

She looked excited, but there was something else below the surface... something beneath the excitement that I couldn't define until much later.

"That's true, Pookie. I can't explain it. That's what my Ma and Pa always told me, but I'm definitely pregnant. My period came today and it's a swirly blue and pink - that means boys and girls!"

She was ecstatic, and I couldn't help but love the look of unbridled joy on her face. She was just so damn cute!

It's not that I didn't want children. I was more concerned with the fact that we had yet to finish our classes. Also, we were pretty damn poor. We were the definition of broke-ass college students living off of ramen noodles.

I expressed my concern.

"But what will we do, sweetie? We don't have the proverbial pot to piss in or window to throw it out of. And didn't you tell me that multiple births are commonplace for clowns?" I tried to keep the fear out of my voice.

"Don't sound so scared, Pookie. Multiple births are a given for clown women; single births are rarer than sextuplets for you *normal* humans." She said it with a hint of venom and an impish smile.

"Very funny," I fired back, "you're a real comedienne. I deserve that shot, I suppose, but you get my point. More mouths to feed means more cost to bear. How in the hell are we going to be able to get by? We can't even keep ourselves fed well right now, and there's just two of us!"

Loretta stood up and began to pace back and forth. I watched her ass swing in her tiny little black dress (which contrasted beautifully with her white skin) and lost my concentration on the task at hand. Her pacing continued, which told me that she was about to offer ideas about what to do. She always paced when she was working out a problem or presenting an idea.

"I've already talked to The Tribe. They'll be coming down to help us. You know, they say it takes a village to raise a child, right? Well, we'll have a village and we'll need them. I was one of seven kids my Mom gave birth to."

I didn't realize I had passed out until after she splashed the water on my face and I awoke to the sight of her bright smile and breathtaking cleavage leaning over me and my overturned chair.

Life is funny sometimes.

Skip ahead a few months more and she's a whale. The Goodyear Blimp covered in white paint with a big red cabin on the front. I had never seen a pregnant woman so... pregnant. Again, the doctors were shocked at the oddness of the pregnancy and the couple. When it was time for the babies, I stayed. The anxiety of not knowing what to suspect was enough to keep me in there.

I could never have anticipated what I got that day. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, TEN! There were ten babies hiding inside her amazing uterus! Don't get me wrong; she looked VERY pregnant, but ten babies pregnant?! Until that moment I couldn't even fathom that number. My mind swam as I tried to think of what the Guinness World Record was. I made a mental note to look that up as soon as it was appropriate to take out my phone.

I sat at the edge of the delivery room as one after another of our babies entered the world. Her parents ran around the table (Dad was a Sad Hobo Clown and Mom was a French Mime), thoroughly frustrating the team of doctors. One of The Tribe was, in fact, a doctor himself who did his normal work at a children's hospital for burn victims and amputees. He advised the human doctors on how to clean them all up properly and determine their gender and dietary needs.

Female clowns have star-shaped anuses and male clowns have triangular-shaped anuses. I already knew one of those facts, but the other was a bit of a revelation. Also, the two sexes have drastically different dietary needs. Males breast-feed while females eat nothing but oatmeal.

It was turning into a day full of new information and new suspicions.

Only one of the children looked as if it weren't full-blooded clown. The last child to pop out (and yes, they literally make a popping sound like a party favor) was a boy I immediately named Robert after my grandfather. His anus was barely triangular, and his skin was pale but not ghost white. He even had my eyes.

The others, however, were clearly full-blooded clown - white as a sheet with bright red, blue, or pink hair and crazy shaped assholes. How could nine of them

be straight clown and only one of them even remotely resemble me?

I felt the suspicion plant itself into my brain and I knew it wasn't going anywhere any time soon. I hated that feeling, but I couldn't deny it.

A few months went by and The Brood (as I thought of them) were growing at a rapid pace. There's another interesting little tidbit for you - clowns age faster than humans do. You're welcome.

New parents often get frustrated by the number of toys, clothes and general baby detritus that accumulates when their lives have imploded. Let me tell you that you couldn't begin to imagine the circus (pun intended) that our house turned into. I had ten little ones to deal with, and they were clowns.

Everything in the house was bright and zany. Toys without number were constantly getting underfoot and tripping me up. There was an endless parade of clown caretakers wandering in and out at all hours (no two kids had the same sleep schedule). I offered to finance a van to drive all of us around, but she insisted we could all fit into her 1966 VW Beetle. On top of that, she was constantly stopping to pick up some of her clown friends, fitting twelve, sometimes fifteen into our tiny car. I was often crushed and twisted in painful positions as we pattered around town.

I began to wonder where all of these clowns were coming from if there were so few left in the world. I still suspected her infidelity, but I was too busy with all of the babies to worry too much about it. Hell, I was beginning to doubt a lot of what she had told me about the history of clowns.

Another thing I was not prepared for is that clown babies don't cry like normal babies, instead, they make this

creepy maniacal laughing sound and honk their tiny red noses, and they were constantly bonking each other over the head with oversized rattles and inflatable baby hammers. It was sheer madness. On most days, I could feel my sanity slipping from its moorings (and I don't mean this in a figurative sense).

The sex died down considerably. When we finally had the opportunity it just wasn't the same. Her vagina was too stretched out after pushing out those ten little monsters, and no matter how hard I tried I just couldn't make her have nose honking orgasms anymore. I often ended up just having to finish myself off with iPorn in the bathroom. My suspicions about her infidelity eventually died down for the most part, though I would occasionally catch the scent of some hobo clown when I walked into the bathroom. Then, one day I found a yellow bowtie with green and blue polka dots, the kind that only male Contra-Auguste clowns wear, under the bed. When I confronted her about it her pale white cheeks turned bright red with blush. She smiled her most charming and disarming smile and told me that she was "trying out a new look".

She quickly changed the subject, insisting that we snuggle in bed and watch her favorite movie, a filmed adaptation of the opera *Pagliacci*, the story of a clown whose wife is unfaithful to him. As I watched the sad clown sing arias about his tragic life, I wondered if I was the real clown in this relationship.

I knew, sexual doubts aside, that I wasn't anywhere near "clown enough" to raise all of these children even with the help. It was too much of an assault on the senses. Also, I was seeing less and less of Loretta. For a woman who was so happy to be a mother, she had become awfully scarce.

I finally worked up the gumption to tell her how I felt, but first I had to know if my suspicions were founded on anything other than paranoia and repressed prejudice. I set out on my mission to see if I could catch her in the act... if there was any act to catch her in.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I would discover.

I told her I would be working late and not to wait up for me. I called in sick at the office, then drove my car down the block and left it. I walked back to the house and hunched down in the bushes with a sandwich and a bottle of water, ready to wait it out. About an hour later, one of the "nannies" came out of the house with all of the children in their chain of strollers and piled them into the VW Bug.

She had the whole place to herself.

I didn't have to wait too long before a Fiat 500 rolled into the driveway. Out climbed twenty male clowns, one by one - hobo clowns, midgets, several white-faced and Auguste clowns and one French mime. I watched with mounting rage and horror as they all filed in a line through our circus tent front door. One of them was carrying a toolbox. Another carried a picnic lunch.

I gave it another ten minutes for things to develop and strolled up the sidewalk to my front yard. I could hear giggling and honking from inside. It sounded like furniture was being moved around as well. There was banging and what sounded like a compressor or generator being fired up.

I walked back over to the Fiat and peered inside. The cramped interior was spotlessly clean; no sign of their intentions. Slightly disappointed, I turned back to the house when a piece of paper

blew against my shoe and stuck. When I pulled it off and read it my heart sank.

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I swear to you, I really didn't want to go inside and look. My brain was already tormenting me with images of the most vile and depraved sort.

Unfortunately, there is this little maniac running around in my head and cavorting from shoulder to shoulder (no need for an angel in this scenario) telling me "You've got to see this!"

I could feel the grin spreading across my face as I walked up to the front door. I knew my life was about to be turned totally upside down, but I really didn't care. I wanted out anyway, didn't I? Besides, I was armed with a plan that would swing things back in my favor. I also had a feeling that what I was going to see would confirm to me that those shitty little pale-faced brats weren't mine in the first place. I thought that was kind of a shame because I'd really taken a shine to little Robert, though. With a pang of fatherly sadness, I silently slid my key into the lock and crept inside.

The scene I was faced with in my living room would have made the butt-pluggers of Sodom and Gomorrah blush and run for the nearest confessional booth.

The furniture was pushed rudely against the walls. The floor was covered in a series of interconnected Twister mats greased with some kind of lubricant that smelled strongly of strawberries and

cream. There were fat, bright pink helium tanks positioned strategically on and around the mats (my spinning brain noticed they were only placed on the blue squares - was this significant?). Protruding from the tanks were nozzles shaped like bulbous clown penises (*SPECIAL ORDER*, my mind screamed) in various colors. Writhing on the end of each of these happy dildos was a clown, nose honking merrily away. One of them popped off the end of his canary yellow dildo as a spray of greasy confetti burst from his star-shaped anus. The confetti was (you guessed it) triangular.

The real spectacle, however, was my wife.

A bright red, spinning sex swing was hanging from the ceiling where the light fixture used to be. In it sat my wife, her eyes closed in a state of extreme ecstasy. The honking from her swollen, veiny nose was so rapid fire it sounded like an M60 blasting on full automatic.

Her cherry red pubic hair was plastered to her skin and nearly obscured by her gaping vagina. Every time she spun back to my direction I could see movement inside. On the 4th pass, the French Mime poked his head out and winked at me. On the 5th pass, he fell out in a spray of strawberries and cream juices. No sooner had he hit the mat than one of the clowns who busy impaling himself on massive plaid dildo dived right in... that is to say he literally dove forward with his hands clasped in front of him like he was praying and slid between her swollen lips with a cute popping sound.

They were all so enthralled with their orgy that they never noticed me standing just inside the doorway behind the large fern. They remained blissfully unaware as I pulled out my cell phone and began to record.

I managed to get ten minutes of "raw" footage (pun very much intended) before I slipped out the door, down the street, and back to my car.

I got everything - the house, the car, the shared assets. I was even able to secure a court order for a paternity test. This time it was a lie by omission. The results revealed that each child had a different father, and Robert was indeed mine.

It turns out that clowns can have multiples from many different fathers.

During our divorce, she wept and pleaded for understanding from the stone-faced old judge. She said she was feeling very disconnected from her heritage after the honeymoon period was over, and all of the promiscuity was her way of getting back in touch with her roots. I laughed out loud in the court and barely restrained myself from a bad penis joke.

I think the judge was a good, old-fashioned bigot (although he certainly wouldn't show it). In the end, it didn't really matter. I had ten minutes of footage that made for an easy slam-dunk for my lawyer. I was granted full custody of Robert and she was free to go back to her life of debauchery and weird clown customs.



She and her tribe disappeared. It was the freakiest thing, too - one day they were all there in the house and the next minute every sign of them had vanished

completely, save one deflated balloon sitting in the corner and the lingering smell of strawberries and cream. It took me years to get that smell out.

I have really grown to love the boy. He looks almost nothing like his mother. He is sweet, intelligent, and is a gifted writer. He is a very solemn boy, though. Sometimes he stares at me for long periods of time. Other times he seems to go almost blank, as if he is receiving some kind of radio signal that only he can hear. That is a trait that he did pick up from his mother.

I'm sure it doesn't mean anything. He loves me and hardly remembers her. She's out of his life for good.

Stuart D. Monroe is a movie critic, author, father, & husband from Clemson, South Carolina who now resides outside Dallas-Ft. Worth, TX. His short story, "From the Drop", was previously published in "9Tales Told in the Dark #21". He reviews movies for <http://www.HorrorTalk.com> as well as his own review/rant site, <http://www.getonmydamnlevel.com>. His opinions are endorsed by absolutely no one, though many people secretly agree with them. He'll talk your ears off about his love of horror and the 2016 National Champion Clemson Tigers.

Go Pick the Berries

Alex Franco

My brother tastes of summer, light and sweet on my tongue. Beneath the shade of the blackberry bush, dappled shadows dance across the swell of his bare belly. I lick the fruit out of the dip of his navel, and he giggles, soft and high, like a girl.

My heart fell when we pulled up to the cabin half-past nightfall. Even in the dim light of the moon, I could tell the place was a dump. A *shithole*, Dad would say. We'd been driving for over eight hours, barely stopping to piss, so it was a relief of sorts, the chance at least to stretch our legs. Dad took the bags in, told me to take care of Scotty. I cradled him in my arms, bird-bone thin, careful not to rouse him. I carried him over the rotten threshold into a cloud of dust and the smell of mold. What remained of the floorboards creaked beneath our weight.

"Yeah, this is good, this'll do."

Dad paced like an animal too long caged. He dropped the bags in what should have been the living room, leaned on the mantle over the hollowed out shell of the fireplace, cold and coated with decades of ash. He eyed the kitchen, little more than a rusted sink and a single, beaten stove top. In what would be our room, I laid Scotty down on the threadbare mattress. I pulled the moth-nibbled blanket over the bone knife of his shoulders. His eyes did not so much as flutter. "Get the rest of the stuff out of the trunk, would ya?"

The night air ran cool fingers up my calves. Overhead the stars winked, so much spilled salt, the sky the blue of crushed velvet. We were a long way from anywhere. I grabbed everything on the first trip, dropped it in the middle of the room. Dad knelt by the fireplace, head

hidden in shadows. I flicked the switch on the wall by the door, on off, on off. No power.

"Could get cold. Might want to check for firewood. You boys gunna be okay?"

"Yessir." I had not failed to notice there was only one bed. "Scotty runs hot."

Dad emerged soot-streaked, an edge to his smile, a knowing narrowing of his eyes. "If someone comes knocking—"

"Don't open the door for no badge."

He looked at me, hard, the way a man studies a horse he intends to bet on. When he nodded, once, it was with something akin to pride. He did not say goodbye before he left.

I put away the canned goods and dried food. I checked to see if the front door had a lock—it did not. I stripped down to my boxers, leaving a breadcrumb trail to the bedroom. I slipped between the sheets, curled myself against the question mark of my brother's back.

In the distance, wolves howled.

Mother dies when I am four.

Scotty makes her sick. She pours all her love into him and has none left for herself. We bury her outside St. Louis. At night, Dad still talks to her.

She smelled like honey.

Scotty woke a little past ten to the smell of eggs. He padded across the floorboards, rubbing sleep from his eyes. His too-skinny arms wrapped around my middle; I almost dropped the pan in surprise.

"Smells good."

"Sleep well?"

He shrugged with one shoulder, sat at the kitchen table. The food was gone almost as soon as I set it down. I watched him eat, runny yolks disappearing past the

plump of his mouth, yellow against pink. He is always hungry, always growing. Soon he will be taller than me, tall as a tree. Something to climb.

"When's Dad coming home?"

"Soon." We both knew it was a lie. "Real soon."

Scotty slipped off his chair. His socked feet slid easily across to me. He molded his chest to mine, soft and warm, his arms a noose around my neck. He stood on his tip toes and pouted.

I pressed my mouth to his.

We move a lot now that Mother's gone. Dad sold the house, took us out of school. I've crossed more state lines than classrooms. Dinners in gas stations, squatting in abandoned buildings, money thin and running thinner. The gnaw of hunger, the quiet of solitude. The taste of my brother in my mouth.

We are running, always trying to keep one step ahead.

I know what my father does.

"I want you to fuck me."

Scotty, sprawled across my lap, the hard grain of the kitchen chair against my back. Lips against my ear, breath warm on my cheek.

I have made promises, compromises, deals with the devil and myself. *This, but not that*. Bargains against innocence and its loss. I felt the spider plucking her web.

"We can't."

He stared at me, cherubic face offset by eyes cold with determination. His hips rutted gently against my thigh.

"I want it. I'm old enough." It was almost enough to make me laugh. Because he was a child still, because I knew all the twisted roads *want* could lead you down, to the dark midnight of the soul, lost without a map. The hard line of

his mouth reminded me of Dad's. He looked, suddenly, beyond his years. "If you won't, someone else will."

It is not a threat. It's a promise.

The first time, in Kansas. Dad gone for over a week when he'd said it'd be no more than a day. Scotty still soft with baby fat, barely up to my chest, with that sweet, pubescent swell of his belly. The food runs out after four days. I steal what I can from the supermarket. I run home, feet beating against scorched asphalt, even with no one chasing me.

The house is empty, Scotty in the backyard. I watch him through the smudged glass of the sliding door. He kneels on the ground, forcing something in the mouth of the neighbor's dog. It lies on its side, breathing labored. Its tail does not wag.

"I just wanted to feed it." He sounds neither sad nor remorseful. I take the berries from him, toss them in the bushes. I carry him home and put him to bed. I drag the dog into the garage, wait till nightfall, and bury it.

I wash and stand in the doorway of our bedroom. I watch Scotty sleep, the slow rise and fall of his chest. I climb in beside him, fit my body around his. In an hour Dad will come home, will wake us, whiskey doing push-ups on his breath. We will pack without words and leave under the cover of night.

I listened for the sound of an approaching car. We lived, always, with the fear of discovery. I knew too well what would happen if we got caught.

I had seen them, the homes scattered across the country. Words like *visitation* and *abuse* adorned them like brands. They were where bad boys were sent, the dark holes into which they disappeared. All this Dad told us, again

and again, reminding us what would happen if we weren't careful, if we slipped up, let on who our father was, what he was doing.

"I'm bored." Scotty dangled off me, arms heavy on my neck, dragging me down, dragging our mouths together. He tasted of milk and burnt toast.

"What do you want to do?"

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts and pulled them down around his ankles.

In Daytona, Dad kills a cop. I see it on the news. Not him, not his face—he's too clever by half—but I know all the same. We don't even bother to pack. He grabs Scotty by his wrist and throws him in the car. I am an afterthought.

By the time we hit the highway, Scotty's crying for his stuffed bear. Dad knuckles over the steering wheel, bloodshot, telling Scotty to *shut up just shut the fuck up*. I pull him into my lap, promise to buy him ten bears if he'll just be quiet, *please just hush*.

We drive all through the day and all through the night. Dad doesn't stop, not even to pee. Scotty wets himself, whimpering in a puddle of his own mess. I kiss his ear and tell him it's okay. We pull off onto the side of the road somewhere outside of Birmingham. Dad opens the car door and wanders into the woods. Overhead the moon is heavy and full; its light glints on the metal of the hood.

For many minutes we hear only silence. I eye the keys dangling from the ignition. I know how to drive. There's a thousand dollars in a brown paper bag under the passenger seat. There's jerky and water in a cooler in the trunk. There's a gun in the glove compartment.

It would be easy.

Dad stumbles back into the glare of the headlights, bleary-eyed, hand raised to

shield his face. He falls into the driver's seat, slams the door shut, tears off down the road. Scotty's head lolls onto my shoulder, fast asleep.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. We had moved to the bed. Scotty glistened, wet and open beneath me, halo of hair on the pillow. He reached down between us, grabbed me, positioned me, knowing how when he shouldn't have, *couldn't* have.

I lifted his ankles—*so thin, my whole hand wrapped around them, fingers kissing*—onto my shoulders. I entered him easy as breathing in. I entered him and he arched off the bed, wet circle of his mouth open in a soundless moan.

We moved together, slow at first, afraid to hurt him. I wrapped him in my arms, covered his face with my lips. His eyes were shut. I watched him the whole time.

A sudden tensing, my belly warm, toes curled in the sheets. I filled him like water fills a cup. Brushed the hair from his eyes. He grabbed my face, pulled me down. Kissed me.

"Let's run away."

High school is hard. We are hiding, laying low. It would appear strange, attract attention, if we were not enrolled. Scotty tries to make friends. I do not.

Boys my own age bore me. All they want to do is sneak a peek up some girl's skirt. They crowd and jostle, planning parties in homes of parents away on business, child and liquor cabinet left behind. They offer me cigarettes and call me a pussy when I say no. I do not tell them that I have watched a man die. That I have washed blood—others and mine—out of more shirts than they own.

In class, I doodle concentric circles over my history notes. I am uninterested in the past. One day, one day soon, we will have a home of our own. People will know our names.

Scotty knows this is temporary, that the friends he makes will be left just as quickly. I pretend not to notice his tears when we drive away, Dad having come to collect us in the middle of fourth period. We are footnotes in their story, mentioned in passing and forgotten.

I will make Scotty a novel.

After, we laid together, legs tangled. I gathered Scotty in my arms; he winced, resettled, head on my chest. My fingers ran down his spine.

“Where will we go?”

“Anywhere.”

“Dad won’t let us.”

Scotty stiffened atop me. He lifted onto his elbows, stared down at me, *through* me. He sat up, reached beneath the bed. He pressed something heavy and metal into my hands. The slick smell of gun oil choked my nostrils.

“He won’t be able to stop us.”

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