

WORMEAT

Issue #2

Autumn 2018



Nine more tales of transgressive fiction



"The ego is not master in its own house."

- Sigmund Freud

UNDERBELLY MAGAZINE

A magazine of transgressive fiction
Issue 2, Fall 2018

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Free Lunch

Kevin Berg

An enormous growl erupts from my stomach and echoes from the sweaty walls of the dingy apartment.

Of course.

My first day in the field and I forgot to bring a lunch.

Another deep rumble in the quiet rattles filthy dishes in the sink; down the hall I hear pictures shake from the wall and crash to the floor. My eyes slam shut and force the snarl of hunger deep inside, far from where it can continue to interfere with work. When they open, repugnance stretches across the face that turns to walk away from me.

My awkward chuckle follows across the linoleum to the stained carpet, "When's lunch?"

Nothing.

I smooth a wrinkle from the collar of my shirt, *Trauma Cleaning Specialist* burns red below my name in an inverted stare, matching the spatter and smears that decorate the crime scene we have been assigned. I brush lint from the letters and pull a deep breath through gritted teeth. I've got this.

Jumbled nerves and sleep deprivation surrender to the job; everything I've learned steps in front of the embarrassment from earlier, which quickly disappears in the busy morning. Deep crimson slowly fades from the counters, rubbery bits of grey and chalky white brush into the bag, and I am in front of the fridge.

Stink slaps me in the face from the darkness.

I move in close, everything wilted and rotten under the dim light from behind me. As I clear the sticky boxes of leftover curry and twisted slices of pizza

blanketed with mold, a shaft of light spears the gloom and pulls my eyes to the glimmer of cellophane from the top shelf. A carton of lumpy milk slides to the side and the spotlight intensifies, highlighting the splendor hidden between the shadows of decomposition. Illumination sweeps across the devastation as I shift my weight and fades to leave the silhouette of a sandwich in the cozy, warm glow.

Absolutely miraculous.

Hours blend and fade to nothingness, everything around me disappears. My focus burns through the moist, fetid air while condensation clings to the plastic - before droplets form, adjust, and slip into the darkness below.

A cough splits the silence and startles me, tearing my tired, bloodshot eyes from the magnificence to watch the door slam behind my coworker.

Lunch time.

I keep scrubbing.

Money's been tight before, so I know that sometimes it's easiest to silence the hunger pangs through distraction and avoidance. If I stay busy, if I concentrate on the task at hand, maybe I can forget the twinge that pinches and pulls at my gut. Quick and uninterrupted work soon leaves everything clean in the fridge, the refuse all waiting in a bag at my feet. All except the sandwich.

Somehow, still surprisingly fresh amidst all the rot and ruin.

Pride swells in my chest at a job well done, first day jitters only a distant memory. The rest of the place still looks and smells like a slaughterhouse, of course, but the kitchen is pristine. Like new.

Intense hunger rips my attention back to the only surviving trace of the past.

A reminder roars from my stomach, and I try to silence the protest,

but it swells to swallow the entirety of the empty residence. An overwhelming urge pushes my eyes closed, and when they open the free lunch is there, smiling back at me from the counter.

A quick glance over the shoulder ensures my solitude, and shaky fingers carefully peel back a corner of the plastic. A gasp tumbles from my lips as eager eyes climb the scrumptious layers:

The bottom slice of thick, crusty white bread, lightly toasted.

A fat bed of creamy mayonnaise, slathered over the crunchy grooves of the foundation.

Two juicy red slices of tomato.

The cool, crisp greens of romaine lettuce.

Folds of pink that overlap and stack with thick slabs of aromatic and appetizing meat piled high.

A perfect slice of sharp cheddar, crumbling at the edges, peeled from a block of the finest gourmet cheese.

All topped with a spicy smear of tangy Dijon mustard and buried beneath the upper layer of toasted bread.

Thunder booms from my belly, windows shake and blood screams in my ears, leaving me deaf to the silent warning that burns in my brain.

Don't do it. Stupid.

Delicate flavor explodes into unadulterated joy, pieces of heaven are torn and crushed between my molars, then squeeze through the esophagus into the burbling vat of an empty stomach.

I eat the entire sandwich before breathing again, nearly choking on the euphoria that overflows from within. I sputter and gasp for air as the room dims and happiness burns deep in my soul, gazing into the face of God while the angels sound their trumpets and He reveals the meaning of life. A giant, gaping beard shouts until my ears sting

and bleed, I lick my lips but dare not wipe the divine spittle that coats my face.

I mean, I *did* go to Sunday school.

The squeak of a handle and slam of a door wrench me from His presence, and I am back in the apartment, staring into the pock-marked jowls that droop and wiggle questions at me. My tongue finds a piece of meat wedged between my teeth, I crumple and dispose of the plastic wrap quickly and quietly as he asks again.

"All finished in here?"

"Kitchen's done," I finally free the captive chunk of pure bliss, and swallow as a smile spreads across my face.

"Good work. Oh, by the way, I found out whose apartment this was from a neighbor." His eyes dance with the excitement of revelation, "You know, the dispatchers never tell us, something about personal feelings interfering with the job, or whatever. So I asked around," he smiles as I start on the carpet, "A killer. THE killer. Guy all over the news, what do they call him? The Butcher?"

"The Bendy Butcher?"

"Yeah, that one. Something.

Anyway, they found all the bodies with no legs," his index finger pushes a dimple into his chin as he recalls the latest news report, "Something about him being tired of the gym, ended up going to a yoga class."

"Hot yoga," I interrupt.

"Yeah man, whatever. Like that makes it better. So he really gets into it, even starts to fall for one of the women in his class, says the whole thing that set it off was the Squatting Dog pose or whatever—"

"Rear Leg Raise, yeah, I remember seeing the story now. Said all the 'beautiful, glistening thighs' would literally make his mouth water," I smile inwardly at the connection we are making, though morbid.

“Right, and she was the first to disappear, the girl he liked. Then the class kept getting smaller,” he chuckles and shakes his head, “This crazy world. At least the story was intriguing.”

“Because they never found the legs?”

“Well, yeah. He told them where they were, though,” a devilish smile paints his face, “He ate them.”

Realization hits something like indigestion and heartburn.

“You remember? He removed the legs after he killed them... and cooked them.” He clicks his tongue and sucks air through his teeth, a pretty damn good impression of Doctor Lecter if you ask me.

“That’s right,” I say. Beads of sweat rush to my brow, and I stop scrubbing as we run through this part of the news report together.

“He told investigators that he got the idea from pigs, that the rear leg is a great roasting joint, especially when rubbed with a garlic paste and served with baby potatoes and all that.”

Silence is my only response.

“So he liked that, but apparently he tried it a couple different ways,” he snorts a laugh and runs chubby fingers through his hair before he continues, “I don’t remember, how many did he kill again? I guess it was only a few.”

“Four,” the number springs from my mouth, eager to participate in the discussion of a modern monster. Then it hits me, I mean, really hits me.

Ham is from the thigh.

My brain vomits tasty memories that swirl and swallow my thoughts.

Smoked, cured, and evenly sliced, right between the lettuce and cheese.

“But it didn’t quite taste like ham,” the thought rolls from my tongue before I

can stop it, and hangs in the air between us.

“What?” Bushy eyebrows push to his hairline.

“Nothing,” I return to scrubbing and finish the thought in my head.

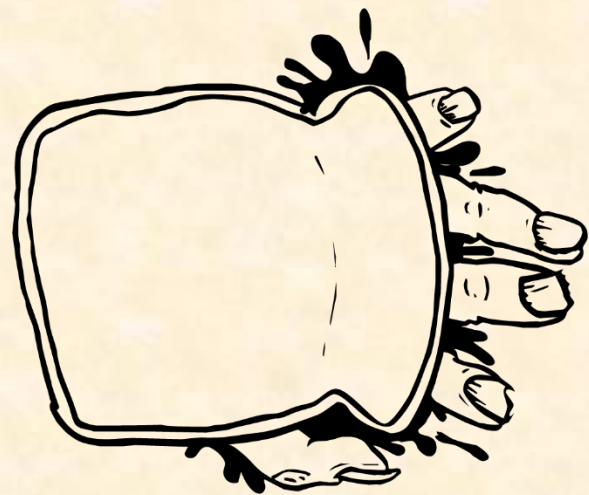
Actually, it lies somewhere in the delicious middle between pork and veal, sweet and savory flavors that melt on the tongue.

“Yeah, so they never did find the legs, and he’s in prison now, there’s no way he is talking unless he gets a book deal or they make a movie or something.” He starts to walk away and pauses to ask over a shoulder, “Anyway, sorry to duck out so quickly before, I had to run an errand over lunch. Didn’t see that you brought food, did you find anything good close by?”

Indigestion and heartburn intensify, then succumb to the power of *apotheosis* as my insides answer with a spectacular *gurgle* and *blorp*, and my mouth pushes up into a smile.

Kevin Berg is the author of Indifference and Daddy Monster. His shorts can be found at Pulp Metal Magazine, Near to the Knuckle, The Blood Red Experiment, and Horror Sleaze Trash, among others. Look for him on Goodreads and Facebook, let him know what you think.

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Man Enough

J. Edward Tremlett

Even though he was blindfolded, Charley could tell when the thugs were coming back for another beating.

The door to the room he and Mole were hogtied in was mostly soundproofed. When it opened, a thick and loud wall of Spanish radio would erupt from whatever lay beyond it. A second later there would be mean laughter, coupled with the smell of cheap cigarettes.

And the heavy, meaty sound of someone being punched in the gut.

Fortunately for Charley, Mole had been the thugs' only target; they hadn't even *touched* him since the abduction. Between that and the fact that they were clearly holding back – doing just enough damage, but no more – he decided to keep his mouth shut, and hope they got to the point before they either got bored with Mole or tired of letting them live.

But then, given who might *really* be responsible for their predicament, it could be better to be slowly beaten to death by these bastards than handed over to him.

What had they done to deserve this? Charley had a few ideas – none of them good.

He'd grown up Catholic and carried a long mental list of sins. Just being gay probably got him halfway down the ladder to Hell, to hear his mother tell it. As for Mole, he'd done so many thoughtless things in his short life it was hard to point to just one.

But Charley figured it had to be their film careers, if you wanted to call it that.

True, he and Mole were hardly the only pornographers active in Miami. They weren't even the only gonzo operators in

town. But *Bug Chasers* provided a very specialized service – one that set them well apart from their colleagues.

Where else could you watch someone try to give themselves a death sentence by fucking?

Their tagline – “Are you man enough to fuck death?” – was pure, post-AIDS gay macho bullshit. Charley asked their “boys” that twice each film, using the gravelly voice he'd become known for: once outside the club they picked them up at, when they explained that Mole had HIV, and once more at the studio, just before the bareback action started.

Once the scene was over, Charley would do a soft-lens shot of Mole and his new friend hugging. As they faded to black he would announce, off-camera, that their boy was now a man. The End.

Except *that* was as much bullshit as their tagline.

Mole *was* Positive, yes, but so were the young men they pretended to pick up at random. Charley would cruise the usual hangouts every week and talk to other carriers. He would then court the ones who had what he called ‘the look’– eyes like windows waiting to break.

If they sounded interested but not *too* desperate, and he thought they might be able to act like professionals, Charley would bring them back to his apartment to meet Mole in the guest room studio. If they liked what was up – and could deal with Mole's bullshit – they'd sign Charley's very exacting legal papers, and arrange a date.

After that, it was just automatic motions: a meet-up and set-up, money shots and remuneration, edits and upload. Over and over, week after week.

In and out and back again.

When confronted by fellow operators, Charley had to be honest: it *was* a pretty repulsive gimmick. But honestly?

If sick fucks were willing to pay good money to watch Mole pretend to spread the plague, why *shouldn't* they take advantage?

It would be almost criminal *not* to. Still, every so often he felt something akin to shame. It usually came around when he read the weird and gloomy emails they got from fans who *wanted* to be on the show. Sad men who wanted to be given what he and Mole pretended to offer.

The ones who sent in pathetic photos were the worst. The look on their faces reminded him of the late-night TV ads to feed starving kids overseas, only those stumbling stick-children wanted food. The people who wrote in to *Bug Chasers* were hungry for *death*.

Charley wouldn't help them with that. He might be a lot of things, but he wasn't a monster – not yet.

There *was* a line – there *had* to be.

But as soon as a new show went up, and the eyeballs and credit reports started trickling in, Charley's shame melted away. He started making plans for the next show, preparing to start the cycle all over again...

Wondering all the while – if there really *was* a ladder leading down to Hell, how far from the bottom rung was he, right about now?

A sudden blare of music woke Charley from uncertain dreams. The thugs had returned.

"Hey, could we get some water?" Mole asked, maybe too thirsty to care about being hurt.

Someone laughed, and there was a meaty smack.

"Guys, come on..." Mole whimpered: "Please..."

There was more laughter, more smacks. Mole cried out, wetly: "Let me talk to the man. Tell him Mole needs to–"

"Shut your mouth, faggot," one of the thugs barked. "The man, he tell *you*, okay? You tell him nothing."

A few more smacks, a few more wet cries, and then they left the room. The heavy door slammed shut, and once more there were only the very faint sounds of music from next door and Mole whimpering.

"Mole," Charley said, trying to keep an even tone. "I think it would be better if you just shut up when they came in."

"But, Jesus, Charley... I gotta do something–"

"Do *nothing*, okay? Best thing we can do is sit tight and let them call the shots. Just for now. Okay?"

More whimpering.

"Okay?"

"...okay."

"Good," Charley breathed, even though that was also a lie. There was *nothing* good about this – nothing at all.

And they had Mole's stupidity to thank for that.

They had been about their business when it had happened – two, maybe three nights ago. Between the chloroform, the darkness, and the beatings, it was hard to be sure what day it was anymore.

They rendezvoused with a skinny-faced leather weasel named Ramon at The Bounce, over on West 7th. They had to go outside sooner than Charley would have liked, thanks to the brick shithouse of a bouncer who saw them filming. Thankfully, the exterior shots went without a hitch.

"Okay, faggot, you know the deal," Charley growled as he captured the two of them in a close shot, above the

waist. "You know what he's got and what he's offering. You say you want the gift, but I want the truth here. No lies, no bullshit – are you man enough to fuck death?"

Ramon nodded, sniffing Mole's cheek.

"Hey, I wanna hear you *say* it, faggot," Charley demanded. "*Are you man enough to fuck death?*"

"Yes," the weasel said, looking a little peeved. "I want it."

"Alright then, let's go," Charley pulled away, turning the camera off. Ramon laughed, all tension vanishing the second the camera was off his face.

"Damn! What you do to get that voice?" Ramon asked: "You sound like you already dead."

Charley just walked away – eager to get this over with and be done with the idiot.

Back at the apartment, Charley was prepared to get down to business. The lights and acoustics were perfect, the equipment was good, and the setting was ready. The play was the same as always: a little dialogue followed by a suck and fuck, with the money shot going straight into Ramon's asshole. That was the plan, anyway.

But at the bar that night, Ramon indicated that he'd like to be disciplined a little. So, he and Mole were negotiating what and how hard, which was too far off the contract for Charley's liking.

"Can't you just spank his ass a couple times and call it good?" he'd sighed, after wasting a half hour discussing this.

"Because there's some respect issues, here, Charley," Mole said. "You don't want to go in expecting a flogging and get pierced, right?"

"Bloodplay is also cool," Ramon grinned. "I am totally into that."

"You like a little pain, huh?" Mole grinned right back.

"I don't want any blood on my fucking carpet," Charley growled.

"Um, someone usually winds up bleeding, anyway," Mole reminded him.

"Man, he just doesn't know how to live," Ramon laughed.

That was when the door got kicked in.

Four meat-faced, gun-toting thugs stormed into the apartment, cursing in Spanish, smashing things apart, and throwing kicks and punches left, right, and sideways. Charley tried to react but got pistol-whipped right in the nose and went down on the floor.

"*Dios Mio!* Please don't hurt me!" Ramon yelled as they dragged him off the floor. One of the thugs kicked him in the junk on the way up, and he puked all the way out the door. Mole and Charley were quickly pulled to their feet and pushed after him, trying not to slip in his vomit.

Two rough turns down the hallway, and then they got kicked down the back stairs. At their bottom waited a rusty, old panel van with Georgia license plates. Yet another thug stood by its doors, smoking and impatient.

As the others dragged the three of them over to the van, the driver called out to them – something about two versus three, judging by their gestures. Ramon got even more hysterical then, arguing for his life in Spanish and English.

For a moment, Charley thought they might just let the idiot go with a beating. But then the thug by the van whipped a very small gun out of the front of his pants and made a very large hole in Ramon's forehead. A red gout flew out the back of his skull like a bad sneeze, and he went down – eyes staring in different directions.

Mole had just enough time to throw up before the pair of them were head-bagged, duct-taped around the wrists and ankles, and dragged into the back of the van. All the while Charley heard a weird *crumping* noise; he thought it might be someone stomping on what was left of Ramon's head.

"Charley, I'm sorry, okay?" Mole had stammered out as the engine kicked in. "I'm sorry... so fucking sorry-"

"What the hell is going on here?" Charley shouted.

"Look, I needed money, okay? I was getting really low and needed to pay Big Tony back for a few things..."

"Mole, what the fuck did you do?"

"They said they needed a cameraman, Charley. And I told them you were the best, but I never thought-

"Told who?"

"*El Tiburón*," Mole had replied, his voice shaking: "A guy who works for *El Tiburón*."

Charley tried to respond, but a padded hand closed over the bag, and the stink of chloroform sent him to a dark, unhappy sleep. Throughout it, he'd wished to God the thugs would have shot them dead and left them on the pavement with Ramon.

They'd have been better off.

"You know why you here?" the voice asked – heavy and deformed.

"No... I don't," Charley replied, realizing his life was most likely over.

A few minutes ago the thugs had stomped back into the room to work on Mole again. But this time they weren't holding back: the thuds, smacks, and whumps were harder, deeper, and occasionally *wetter* than before.

Eventually, Charley realized it wasn't going to end until Mole was either permanently fucked up or dead. Part of

him wanted to cry out for them to stop, but a larger, louder part told him to keep his damn mouth shut.

That part won out, and eventually Mole stopped whimpering. A few minutes later there was the sound of a body hitting the floor. A few more smacks and thuds followed, then something was dragged from the room.

The door slammed shut and Charley exhaled with relief.

But then he heard other sounds: a different set of footsteps – deliberately slow – going from the door to where he sat. There was the smell of cloying, sweet cigar smoke, right up close.

And then that *voice* – like the promise of a knife in the gut.

"Your friend..." it went on. "He did not tell you?"

"He told me... he said you needed a cameraman," Charley answered. "But that's gotta be bullshit. I mean, you could get any cameraman you wanted, right?"

Another chuckle: "That is smart. That is good, you smart. Maybe we can do business."

Charley just nodded. What else could he say?

El Tiburón was a legend in the porn world – just not the good kind.

Since the 80's, he'd been court pornographer to Miami's jaded upper class: making porn to order for thousands of dollars and being willing to film *anything* they asked for. They say he was called "the Shark" both on account of his teeth – which were reputedly grotesque – and an appetite that wasn't much better.

But it was *how* he did business that made people whisper his name with admiration and fear.

He had dozens of folks on the payroll, all engaging in massive spectacles. "Actresses" were usually recruited off the

streets at gunpoint, and while guys worked for money, it was commonly known that if you swam with *El Tiburón*, you might get eaten. (Maybe literally, if the stories about his appetite were true.)

When the internet came along, The Shark took his operation to a whole new level. He made millions accepting commissions for others' horrifying personal fantasies – now sent off as electronic files instead of videotapes. He even auctioned off some of his own unique creations.

His operation was finally shut down after a massive raid in Miami. The story went that the Feds interrupted a film in progress, and what they found was so gruesome – so horribly, terribly *wrong* – that those Agents first on the scene started shooting at anything that was still alive.

Anything to make it just *stop*.

The final death toll stood at 200: mostly “actors” and their victims, shot dead at the scene. Several officers were suspended for their actions, and many needed psychiatric hospitalization for years afterward.

Of course, in the confusion, *El Tiburón* swam away.

That was several years ago. In the meantime, festering in the darkness, he became an even greater legend. Starfucking assholes at porn conventions namedropped him, saying they knew someone who'd survived working with him. There were even some idiots who went so far as to claim to *be* him but wilted like weeds when pressed for specifics.

Not that anyone really had a lot to go on.

So it was little surprise that Mole didn't think twice about signing on with someone calling himself by *that* name. He'd always been a naïve fool – part of how he'd gotten the bug in the first place –

and he always needed money for his blockers. He wouldn't have realized anything was wrong until his world had been kicked down, along with the door.

And now here they were – both swimming with the shark.



There was sudden movement, and then the bag was off Charley's head.

The light, dim as it was, hurt his eyes for a moment. When he opened them back up again he saw he was in a small room full of wooden and cardboard boxes.

Sitting across from him, in a floral print shirt and oversized blue jeans, puffing on a cigar, was the owner of the ugliest mouth he'd ever seen.

El Tiburón was Hispanic, fat, and somewhere in his sixties – only puffy instead of wrinkled. His grey, slicked-back hair was thick and full. His lips were thin and much wider than they should have been.

And his teeth were long, thick, and very badly overlapped.

“I can get any camera I want,” he said, his voice almost fighting to get around those teeth. “What I *need*... I need inspiration.”

"Inspiration?" Charley repeated, not sure what else to say.

"Yeah. I got new opportunity," The Shark said, bringing out a bottle of water and unscrewing the cap. "But I need advice. I need to... work the angle, yes?"

"Why me?"

"Well, you partner, Mole... he tells my friend about this site you have," *El Tiburón* explained, ready to pour water into Charley's mouth. "So I go, I look, I think, hey, this is pretty good. I ain't into fag fucking, no, but I like the *idea*. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah. I mean, thanks..." Charley said, taking a mouthful of the water.

"Too bad it's fucking fake."

Charley swallowed – hard.

"The *idea*, I like. But you don't really spread the disease. All make-believe for the camera, yes?"

Charley nodded. "Yeah. We just... well, we didn't want to get busted."

El Tiburón laughed, wide and great, showing Charley just how many teeth he had.

"Your porn ain't illegal, you ain't doing it right," he laughed, leaning back and taking another puff. "There gotta be danger, friend. It's what makes it what it is, eh?"

"Please, what do you want?"

Charley asked, trying not to whimper. "I mean, look, I'll do anything–"

"*Anything?*" the ugly man asked, his eyes getting wide.

Charley kept his mouth shut, realizing what he'd just said. *El Tiburón* laughed and slapped him on the knee.

"See? You smart. *Now* we do business."

He looked at the door and barked a few words in Spanish. The thugs came back in and roughly untied Charley. Then one of them grabbed his arms from behind

and marched him down the hall outside – three respectful steps behind *El Tiburón*.

"Maybe you site is fucking fake," the man said, pouring the rest of the water bottle on the floor behind him. "But I like the *idea*, friend. Maybe you help me get idea for mine."

The hallway was long and windowless and painted dark green. It was lit by sputtering, naked bulbs and filled with identical, heavy doors. The loud music was coming from a radio plugged into the wall, sitting on a stool at the dead end nearest the door they'd just come from.

The reason for the radio soon became apparent. As they passed each door, Charley could hear screaming and moaning from behind them. The scrabbling of fingernails on wood. Pleadings for release, for mercy. For anything.

"Funny how things happen," *El Tiburón* said, chomping on his cigar as they walked along. "I was rich, I could do anything, but I was bored. Always the same thing, you know? Make new movie, get the money. Over and over again."

He stopped without warning, listened to the door on his left, and then pounded it. There was a bright, piercing scream from within – "NO! Please NO!" – and he laughed, continuing on.

"But then government crashes my party, eh? I have to drop fucking everything and run for my life. The first time in years, I feel alive. Just like I'm off the boat."

He turned and grinned, displaying that awful smile to Charley. "So close to death, it makes you feel you heartbeat, eh?"

He put his hand on Charley's chest and patted it to the time of a heartbeat: "Dum-dum. Dum-dum. Dum-dum."

The hallway ended in a door, heavier than the others and painted black. A man stood outside it, cradling a submachine gun in his hands. He nodded and stepped aside as *El Tiburón* came up to it, fishing a key out of his pants.

"So I lose everything. I go to Haiti, where I got an old friend. While I am there, my friend, he treats me like a king. Gets me whatever I need, shows me around, teaches me new tricks."

He opened up the door and let Charley and his escort inside. It was dark as night, and something inside smelled horrible.

"This, my friend?" *El Tiburon* said, proud as a parent. "*This* is the new trick."

The Shark flicked a switch. Powerful, heavy lights came on with a loud *clack*.

Charley screamed.

Charley had no idea how long he was out for.

He had fitful dreams of blackness and worms, followed by seamless tableaux of all of the people he'd ever filmed fucking. Everything he'd done since he'd been kicked out of film school for stealing equipment.

Money shot after money shot, webpage after webpage, until come became pus became blood. Rib-skinny man-boys sucked, then chewed, and then bit the pricks right off at the stump. Sweaty, cock-pounded asses rippled and split open, disgorging flyblown, sticky guts.

And there was Charley, right in the middle – filming it all as the bodies fell this way and that, rotting as they hit the floor. The sighs, grunts, and sounds of skin slapping skin gave way to the rustling sound of maggots chewing through flesh, just as the sour scents of sweat and come

were replaced with the awful, sweet smell of decay.

Then there was a deep, guttural growl – the world groaning on its hinge as it prepared to tip over into the abyss. Charley slid and fell, still holding onto the camera. He twisted around to capture the other bodies falling alongside him. The smell got worse, and the growling got louder.

At the end, he was holding onto the last rung of the ladder with one hand, filming with the other. And as the stink, the noise, and the blackness all threatened to take him, he opened his eyes outside the dream...

...and he screamed yet again, scrabbling back and away from what he saw.

It was a dead man, growling.

Its face was like a mask: puffed out and then turned brown and grey – wet and shiny, like decaying leather. Its nose was gone, replaced by a seething, festering mass of maggots. Its eyes started from their sockets, glassy and slimy, threatening to fall down its cheeks with every twitch.

It growled, deep and wet. It was all it could do. Its mouth had been sewn shut with thick, black thread, going ear to ear. Long, loving loops dangled from both sides of the head like obscene pigtails.

Charley screamed again and crawled backward, slamming up against a wall. The thing tried to come after him, but couldn't. A wide, heavy belt was wrapped tightly around its festering, bloating belly, which was chained to a thick, metal pole in the center of the square room.

As he watched the thing strain against its bonds, Charley saw that rolls of gut and loops of intestine were puffing out above and below the belt.

"What you think, eh?" *El Tiburón* called from up above. Charley looked up and saw a grated, metal walkway that went around the length of the square room. His host was up there with his thugs, having a laugh.

"What the... what the *fuck*?" Charley screamed. It was all he could do.

"That is one real zombie," *El Tiburón* announced. "Direct from Haiti. My friend, he gives it to me as going-away present. He got too many already."

Charley looked back at the thing, straining at the end of the chain, trying to get him. It moved a lot faster than he thought it should be able to – maybe faster than him.

"So, you see my opportunity," *El Tiburón* said, coming down a ladder bolted to the wall. "I got this thing, but what do I do with it? What can *El Tiburón* make with this thing, eh?"

As soon as *El Tiburón* was on the ground, the zombie turned and ran straight for him. The chain jerked taut well before the thing could reach the ladder, and a sneeze of maggots flew forward, almost hitting the man's shoes.

The Shark didn't so much as blink. "What can you suggest, eh?"

Charley opened and closed his mouth like a fish. What on earth could he say? This couldn't be real. He was still dreaming – had to be. The dead stayed dead in their graves, boxed and buried in the cold, hard earth, quietly melting into worms and mud.

And yet here was this thing, chained up to a pole. And someone wanted to use it for porn?

In spite of everything, Charley had to *not* laugh. All along, he'd been reluctant to go too far – to cross that line. But here was a *real* monster, kept chained up by someone even worse.

What was that line in the presence of such beings?

Charley was so busy not laughing that he didn't even see the ridiculously large gun in *El Tiburón's* hand – not until a bullet slammed into the wall above him.

"You gonna talk to me, friend?" he asked. "We *can* do business, yes?"

Charley looked at the man, and the gun, and the monster struggling to reach this new meal.

His head moved up and down.

Showtime was an hour later, on the dot.

Chainsaws sat on a table, nearby, gleaming under the harsh lights. Actors in white, plastic aprons, thick heavy boots, safety masks, and nothing else stood near them, ready to play their part.

Someone screamed, off-screen, but Charley wasn't looking at him. Just at the men, and how they lined up like priests in a row – waiting, hands clasped over their erections.

Camera in hand, he filmed.

See, I want that heart to beat, El Tiburón had demanded, earlier: *Like in you chest, when you see my zombie. Dum-dum, eh? I want them to feel alive again.*

No mat on the floor, just a staging area halfway between the door and the pole, out of frame of the chainsaws and their wielders.

No gaffers, fluffers, or assistants – just armed thugs, above and below.

No props, either. Just the zombie, his chain pulled tight by another chain, held up above by *El Tiburón*.

The zombie, he is always hungry, but he cannot eat. This is why there is thread across the mouth. But he is stupid in hunger and does not know. He will tear a man apart even if he cannot eat him.

Mole was up against the wall, naked and bloody. They'd beaten him so

badly it was a wonder he could still stand. He swayed and sweated under the heat of the lights--too far gone to scream, too weak to try and run.

They should know they can die. They should know this. But they should think also, hey, maybe if I do this thing, they let me go. They should think this, too.

The screaming was coming from a naked, older man, duct taped immobile and held at gunpoint next to Mole. He was paunchy and balding – cock shrunk all the way into his groin, piss stains on his legs. He screamed and begged for his life; something about money he owed, something about his grandkids.

He'd do anything. *Anything.*

So here is my question to you. How do I make this thing happen? Do I show them the zombie and say hey, you fuck like I want or I let him have you? Do I say you come in five minutes or I let him have you? Do I let him have them anyway, or use something else?

I got all kinds of things to use, now... all kinds of new toys.

Charley looked at the table of chainsaws, and then up at *El Tiburón*. He turned off the camera and nodded blankly: they were ready.

El Tiburón, in turn, nodded to his thugs, and they brought Mole forward into the staging area. They cut the older guy out of most of his duct tape and threw him onto the floor. He screamed and cried as he struck the concrete, buttocks jiggling as he begged for his life.

So, what do we do here, you and me? How do we make this movie? You give me a good movie, I let you live. This is my promise to you.

Give me the gift of death, Charley, and you live.

Charley turned the camera back on, so he could record what was said. It was part of the script they'd agreed upon, he and The Shark.

"Here is the deal," *El Tiburón* announced, leaning over the catwalk. "You both have made me angry. I have you lives in my hand.

"My friend, he is hungry. I have the chain. One of you goes to him. The other does not.

"I decide who is best, fucker or fucked. You get ten minutes from go."

The older guy screamed again – struggling against the duct tape on his wrists, trying to get to his feet. Mole stumbled over to him and crouched down behind him.

Charley knelt before them, the camera still on, composing the shot on the fly. He could hear the rattle of the chain and see the zombie growling behind them. *El Tiburón* let the chain loose just a little bit, so the thing could surge forward and then be jerked back, flailing at the meat just out of reach.

And as Charley zoomed in the camera, looking at each face in turn – fucker and fucked – he wanted to tell Mole he was sorry. But he didn't. Partially because he couldn't edit that out before *El Tiburón* saw it.

But mostly because he couldn't feel anything at all.

"Let's go, faggot boys!" *El Tiburón* said, shooting his gun into the ceiling as he let the zombie go loose: "Let's make some fucking movies, eh?"

Charley nodded and zoomed in on Mole – careful to get the dead thing in the frame as it strained against its bonds.

"Tell me, faggot," Charley demanded: "Are you man enough to fuck death?"

"I am," Mole insisted over his new partner's screams.

And then, it began.

When it was over, Charley was still grinning. His head felt full of thick, heavy

soup, just like what remained of Mole and the old guy after the chainsaws and the zombie, respectively.

Just soup and bones, needing a mop, bucket, and bag.

Charlie had just seen something beyond his imagining – something *extraordinary*. In his last ever scene, fucking just outside of the monster's reach, Mole had become almost angelic. *El Tiburón's* gun may have ended his life (cleanly, as promised) but he'd already abandoned that sick shell of meat well before the bullet struck his forehead.

He'd *transcended*, right before Charlie's eyes – leaving his partner behind, and now able to see the world for how small and rotten it was.

Almost blinded by putrescence, Charley was only half-aware of subsequent development. He must have given the camera to *El Tiburón* because he listened to the man gush over the good technique. He must have also been told to get out and forget where he'd been, but wasn't sure who'd stuffed his shirt pocket full of C-notes.

Then someone was pushing him down the green hall – past the heavy doors, screaming, and Spanish music – towards the door by the radio. There, in the room he and Mole had been kept in, was another door he hadn't seen for the teeth of his host.

(How fitting: the exit had been right next to them, all along.)

Dank, wet concrete stairs led up to the alley behind the building. He took them one by one, slow as old blood – the escort's gun digging into the back of his scalp.

The thug pushed him one last time, driving him to his knees on the topmost step. Charley fell but didn't get up.

Was the thug going to shoot him? Wouldn't that be just *perfect*?

When he heard a loud bang, Charley laughed, thinking it was the end. But it wasn't – just the slamming of the door they'd come through.

So Charley got to his feet and stumbled down the alley. Wondering why the bullet had never come, oddly disappointed that it hadn't. Yet still smiling, ear to ear.

There was a human turd squatting in the middle of the alley. He thought of sites where people ate shit for money, and how he had thought that was so disgusting. Now he wondered what the going price was, and how their profits were.

His senses started catching back up to him on the sidewalk. Noises began to trickle back in, one at a time. Honking cars. Passersby. A bus groaning into life after a stop. People walking and talking. Shouting and laughing.

A car alarm ringing, ringing, ringing –

A pawn shop window on his right reflected the neon of the street. Behind the glass stood a dead man – staring with sunken, white eyes. His nose was missing, his lips were purple, and worms slithered through his hair to his ears.

When Charley smiled, so did the corpse – maggots squirming across receding gums. That's when he realized it was a reflection, and the rot a trick of the light. But he stood there, transfixed, for a full minute.

Laughing.

Up ahead, a skid row church beckoned, neon cross flickering in the humidity. A young priest stood below it, calling out to bums and alkies. Were they ready to take responsibility for themselves? Were they ready to claim what they had coming?

Were they man enough?

Yes, Charley thought – he *was*. He was already planning his next moves, his next movies. The money in his pocket would buy him whatever was lost in the raid.

And once he had what he needed he could start all over – only for *real* this time.

He could finally answer those desperate, fragile emails. He could make them all happy.

He could give them the gift of death, as it had been given unto him.

*J. Edward Tremlett ("the Lurker in Lansing") takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai. He was the editor of The Wraith Project and has been published via Pyramid Magazine, The End Is Nigh, and Worlds of Cthulhu, and the anthologies Echoes of Terror and Ride the Star Wind. He's also the author of the fictional blog SPYGOD's Tales and lives with two cats and enough Legos to make a Great Old One. Maybe he already has. You can see more of his work at [spygod-
tales.blogspot.com/](http://spygod-
tales.blogspot.com/) and cattail.nu/wraithproject/*

Playing with God

Paul Roche

"I'm going to make you believe in God," Jakin whispered in the man's ear, "But by then it'll be too late."

It gets old fast. The first time is like nothing else. You feel invincible, like the entire world is in your hands. And the rush of euphoria takes you higher than you ever thought possible. High, but in complete control. You do it again and again, but it's never like that first time. The high becomes your level, so you're always chasing the next time and the next time. Always chasing that first time, but only ever finding the need for the next.

After two hundred years, Jakin was constantly in withdrawal. He needed that thrill, it was the only one left to him. He couldn't enjoy food or drink anymore. And when your blood stops flowing you lose other pleasures too. He needed to find a way to make the next time more like the first.

It was harder at the start, that was part of the problem as well. It was too easy now. When he was turned first, people had so much power against him. Where Irish girls wear necklaces with their names in cursive now, they had all worn crosses in the past. He remembered his first attempt.

She was milking a cow by a shed at the edge of a field. He skulked up quietly behind her and dragged her off her stool. Her scream was lost in the cries of the cows, who despised his presence. Jakin dipped his head in towards the girl's neck, and suddenly he felt a burning pain throughout his body. It reminded him of the beginning, when every drop of blood was drained from his veins. The silver cross at the nape of her neck glowed

brightly, and he ran from it. She believed in the cross at her chest, and the cross bearer came to save her, His spirit flowing through Jakin's veins like acid.

But her God was a jealous God. He only came for those who believed in Him. God was weak, in this world, anyway. He had no power other than that which we gave Him. The Cathars weren't heretics, in fact, they'd got it right. The god of the Old Testament was Satan, he created this world to test and torture God's children. Only the souls on this Earth were created by God, the spirits of the angels that Satan dragged down to earth and imprisoned in physical bodies. There was no other hell than this hell on Earth. Our souls were condemned to it in perpetuity through reincarnation until they found unity with God. The only power God had was through the soul, and if your soul drifted from God, God drifted from you. Jakin was one of Satan's most beloved creations, a body of evil devoid of his God-given soul. In the beginning, the utterance of a Hail Mary was enough to send Jakin fleeing. Now, a rosary, a crucifix, and a Bible did nothing, because so few believed. Truly believed.

He brought the man back to the bomb shelter. It was just a hole in the ground with walls and a roof that some fool had built in a field in Kildare during the Cold War. It could protect you from a strong wind, but not much else. Jakin drank that fuckwit dry in the seventies. The secret of the bomb shelter had died with him.

Jakin kicked aside the bones of the disappeared as he dragged the man over to the steel chair that was welded to the floor. The chloroform had begun to wear off on the drive from Dublin to Kildare. The man was beginning to regain consciousness as Jakin cut the ropes that bound his hands. He sat the man on the

chair and wrapped a rope around his arms and chest, binding him to the chair.

Jakin tapped his face lightly as he began to groan. "Come on, wake up," he said. The man continued to groan and squirm. Jakin lost patience with him and slapped him hard across the face. The man jumped slightly, bound too tightly in the chair. His eyes shot open and looked straight up at Jakin. It took a moment for his confusion to turn to fear.

"Do you believe in God?" Jakin asked.

The man's eyes were wide and terrified. They searched Jakin's gaze, looking for an answer. "What?" he asked.

"Do you believe in God?" Jakin repeated.

"Y... -es?" he said, like a grade-schooler called upon for an answer to a question he hadn't heard.

Jakin wore a solid gold cross around his neck. He wore it as an affront to God. A testament to His lack of power. It was what had given him the inspiration for his game. Jakin had been hunting downtown on a busy night. There were always those who gave up on waiting for a cab and took the long walk home. Jakin did the decent thing and made the walk a little shorter. This one little guy, in his twenties but hardly five foot seven, had given him pause. Jakin pulled him into a council estate underpass. Jakin held him down, looking into his eyes, savoring the moment.

"Help!" he cried. "Oh, please, God, help me!"

The cross around Jakin's neck began to glow, and he felt His power. The little runt had found God in his final moments. But the moment was too final.

Jakin didn't give his faith a chance to grow.

In the bomb shelter, the cross sat coolly against Jakin's skin.

"You're a terrible liar," Jakin said. "I'll know if you're lying, so don't bother. Now, tell me, do you believe in God?"

The man visibly shook in the chair. He couldn't hold Jakin's awful gaze, so he looked around him. He saw the greying bones that littered the floor, the fetid remains in differing states of decomposition. He saw the red, black, and green death that covered the

floor. Suddenly, Jakin's gaze wasn't so awful. He looked him dead in the eye.

"What do you want me to say?" he whimpered.

"The truth. The truth will set you free. So, do you believe in God?" Jakin asked.

"No."

"Good," Jakin said. He dragged the only other chair over to him, letting the bones clatter in its wake. He sat down in front of him, inches from his face.

"Why not?" he asked.

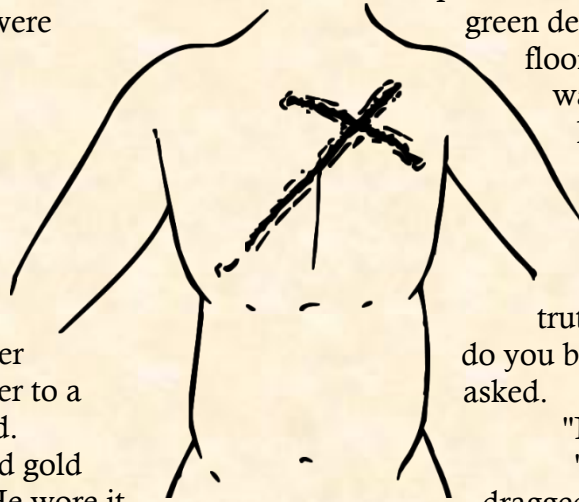
"What?" the man asked.

"What do you mean, 'what'?" Jakin asked. "God is your one and only savior. Satan put you on this hell-on-Earth, and only God can save you from living in this hell forever. You better have a good reason not to believe in Him."

"Well, it doesn't make sense—God."

"How so?"

"Like, the whole creator thing. Who created God? If he doesn't need a creator, why do we? It doesn't make sense."



"Fair answer," Jakin said, "But you know you're wrong, right?"

"I don't know! I don't care!" He burst into hysterical tears.

"No, no, no," Jakin said, getting up out of his chair. "That's not the game we're playing here." He started to pace the floor, from one side of the narrow room to the other. He kicked the bones as he walked, kicked them so hard they hit the man's legs.

"You people are so narrow-minded. He gave your soul life, and yet the dead have to teach you the lesson. Logic, that's where you all go. You're not the first person I've asked, and that's not the first time I've heard that answer. You're so fucking full of yourselves."

Jakin picked a femur up off the ground and lunged at him with it. He cracked him across the face with it and didn't stop until each wall either side was stained with his blood. Jakin's nose tempted him with the smell of fresh blood, but he'd learned decades ago to delay gratification.

He broke the femur over his knee and pressed one jagged end against the man's neck.

"Did you ever stop to think that your creator is more complex than your fucking mind is capable of conceiving?!"

"I doh know!" he cried, the blood and the broken nose muddling his speech. "I 'ust annered yer keshchun!"

Jakin removed the bone shard from his neck and stepped back. "You're right, I'm sorry. I was too hard on you." He turned his back to him and flipped the femur round in the air and caught it again. "So, do you believe in God?"

"'Es! 'Es! I beheeve!"

But the crucifix stayed cold at Jakin's chest. Jakin shook his head, flipped the bone shard again and caught it.

He let his fangs bear down out of his jaw, got them slick and wet with saliva, and opened his eyes so wide they protruded from their sockets. Then he flashed round and hissed in the man's face, wetting his cheeks with his venom.

He opened his mouth wide and went down for the man's neck. The man screamed so shrilly it pierced Jakin's ears. At the last moment, Jakin drew up from his neck and whispered in his ear: "What about now?"

It took a good thirty seconds for his pitiful whimpering to form words. "I... I b-beheeve."

The cross got warm, but only that.

"God, you're pathetic," Jakin said, falling back into his chair. "You'd honestly rather perpetuate your living hell than sacrifice your beliefs? Beliefs that I've proven false, just by my own fucking existence."

The man was crying full on now, shaking his head from side to side.

"You're going to die tonight," Jakin said, but the man kept swaying from side to side, not listening. Jakin grabbed him by the jaw, pulled him close, wrapped his mouth around the man's and bit him. The man screamed, and Jakin felt the exhalation of air rush through his mouth. He breathed in his pain.

The pain snapped the man back to reality. Jakin kept the man's face in his hand. "You're going to die, you know that, right?"

His face dragged softly up and down.

"We're in the middle of nowhere. We're in a bomb shelter that no one alive knows about. You believe me, don't you?"

The man let his head fall in a nod.

"But you won't sacrifice your beliefs? There's no one on this Earth who can save you, you know that?"

The man's face, streaming with blood, tottered forward again.

"There's another life after. I'm proof of that. You know what I am, right? You've seen the movies. You get to decide, right now, which life you choose. Who knows, He might save you from this hell. All you have to do is believe."

The cross grew hotter at his chest, but it was nothing. Jakin placed two fingers under the man's chin and leveled his head with his own, but the man kept his eyes closed. Jakin grabbed him by the jaw and shook his head until he looked Jakin in the eyes.

"He can save you. All you have to do is believe. *Believe*. It's all you have left. It's all you ever had! *Believe*, you ignorant fool."

The man's eyes drifted away, but the heat of the cross rose to a burn and began to emanate through Jakin's chest. When the heat burned his every corner, he relished it like the first time. He felt it like a cutter dragging a razor blade across their forearm. God was intervening, He was entering Jakin, trying to rip him from the world to which he'd been bound.

He soaked up the pain. God had him in his grip. He was at one with God.

"Too late," he said, and shoved the jagged femur into the man's neck. The blood leapt into the air, and God lost his grip on Jakin.

Jakin let the stream of blood fall on his face for a moment, and then stemmed the flow. He took little pleasure in drinking blood anymore. It was like living on bread and water for two hundred years. Taking away God's power tasted much sweeter.

Paul Roche is a writer of horror and crime fiction from Dublin, Ireland. His writing has previously featured in Schlock! magazine, the edition of which you can find at this link: <https://amzn.to/2KOs4XD>.



Seeking Perfection

Cary Osborne

Erin picked up the length of tubing, prepared to try again. The red Dirt Devil sat on the floor, waiting. Once she finished the adjustments, it would do the job. But first, she had to get the goddamned hose adapted. It was such a short hose, too; the right size for a hand-held vacuum cleaner, and she figured, suitable for the job she had in mind. Or it would be if everything would cooperate.

It had all been so easy when she was young. Mama had taken care of everything for the beauty pageants: makeup, dresses, moral support. Winning contests had confirmed what everyone said, from family to friends, all feeding her childish vanity. It had never occurred to her that she might lose one day. The first loss came in the Miss Virginia contest. She was nineteen, and never won a significant pageant afterward.

She fitted the round piece of Styrofoam back into the metal end of the hose. It still fit, in spite of its having pulled free moments earlier when she tried inserting the tubing. The add-on was smaller around than the hose itself, and the hole cut in the center of the disk was just slightly too big. Modeling clay should fix that. It might even help keep the

Styrofoam in the hose, she thought suddenly. She pulled a small plug from the pliable gray lump, rolled it between her palms, and pressed it around the opening as evenly as she could.

Carefully, she coaxed the Styrofoam into the now narrower opening, twisting, pushing. Ever so gently... for God's sake, don't break it. Cutting the damned circle had proved difficult, and she had no patience for doing it again.

Washed up at nineteen; she fumed over the memory. Eventually, of course, she had taken stock of herself, studied herself in mirrors, found numerous problems: a little loose flesh under her chin, was that a trace of a mustache over her lip? And that mole on her cheek, no longer a beauty spot. Her parents didn't understand the depression that took hold of her. Although confused, they continued to support her financially, what little they could.

Now, three years later, she had decided it was time to do everything necessary to regain her beauty. Without money, it would be difficult. All she had was courage and imagination. And a Dirt Devil vacuum cleaner.

At last, the Styrofoam disk and vacuum hose seemed stable enough. She used more clay to seal the edge, then started covering the disk itself. Vacuum meant vacuum – no air leakage.

Erin studied her handiwork thus far, thinking back to when she'd first gotten the idea. The credit didn't all go to her, but to a stand-up comic at a comedy club in the City two weeks ago. She hadn't realized, then, just how difficult it would be to make the thing work. What a woman went through for beauty!

She wiggled her bare left foot in remembrance. She'd started there, the second toe, now flopping limply. It had

always been longer than the big toe, so much so that she had needed a left shoe half a size larger than the right. Now it was so limp that she could fold it under, and both shoes were the same size. That was thanks to John, who'd sucked her toe as part of their foreplay one night. None too gently. The toe she'd hated ever since she was old enough to know it wasn't normal. It had appealed to him, but not when she *asked* for it. Still, she talked him into chewing and sucking on that toe until the bone disintegrated.

It had taken two whole months. The pain had been – what had she heard in that movie a long time ago – exquisite. Yeah, exquisite. John got off on it, too. He hadn't wanted to stop, wanted to do another toe, and another, until they were all floppy bits of skin. When he wouldn't give it up, she had given *him* a pain, just as exquisite, right where it hurt most. He had nearly fallen out of bed and had disappeared from her life that night.

Erin added a little more clay and pushed the end of the plastic tubing through the center hole, just a little. Not too much. More clay to hold it tight. Don't get any inside the tip. Otherwise, there'd be no suction.

Straightening, she glanced over at a mirror hung low on the wall, about eight inches by ten. One of the cheaper ones that distorted her reflection just a little. Next to it hung a hand mirror, magnifying side out.

Slender as ever. Weight had never been her problem.

But there was something on her cheek. She squinted, couldn't make it out, and ran into the bathroom where the light was better. In the medicine cabinet mirror, she found it was only a small pimple that would go away on its own, without another thought, so she went back to work.

She stretched out the tubing and decided to leave it long so she could gradually adjust it for strong suction – assuming, of course, that strong suction was best. Experimenting with different treatments was one of the most interesting things in her life. Trying different machines, various methods, determining what would do the best job, be least painful. Near failures she remembered well; the more painful ones she remembered best. But then, they'd all hurt some.

The scar where the mole used to be was an example of only partial success. Someday, she'd have to do something about it. She touched her cheek, not far from the new pimple; the flesh felt thick under fingertips. A little nip and tuck would take care of that.

She went into the kitchen, got the can of Comet cleanser from under the sink. The mirror over the sink was one of the better ones in the house. Was that... yes, crow's feet. And a couple of lines between her brows? She made a note to check that later.

Back in the living room, she sprinkled Comet on the carpet, its light green color showing well against the brown nap. She turned on the Dirt Devil. The motor whined and she tested the tip of the tubing against her fingertip. Nothing. She nipped off a section of tubing with the barber's shears, then another, until the suction gripped her skin. The vacuum picked up some of the Comet, but very slowly. A few more nips and the powder disappeared faster and more evenly. One more cut to angle the end, and she felt satisfied; she moved to the black garbage bag spread across the carpet.

She hesitated. There would be pain. She could handle that. She always had. No time to chicken out.

She plucked the X-Acto knife from the glass of alcohol. No way of knowing how much blood there might be, but she could handle that, too. The plastic garbage bag would protect the carpet. And, when it was all over, she would be more beautiful. That was all she wanted.

She cut a small slit high on her thigh. A sheen of sweat broke out on her forehead. Not too much blood. Should she probe with the knife or the tubing? The knife would do it more quickly; she slipped the point under the skin.

It burned! She applied a cotton ball soaked with peroxide. The clear liquid trickled down her leg, puddling on the plastic. More blood oozed, turning the dripping peroxide pink, then red. She pried with the tip.

Breathe deep. Fight back those tears or you won't be able to see. She turned on the Dirt Devil again. The cut was large enough for the tubing to fit under the skin.

It slurped, burned. Oh, God, it hurt!

Hurry cellulite, fat cells.

Slurp.

Clear white, red-spotted globs moved up the tubing, one bit following another, each bloodier than the last. She thought she could hear fat slapping the sides of the vacuum bag.

This is bad. Worse than any of the others. Hurry. Don't want to pass out.

Erin pulled up the second thigh-high stocking. Her thumb accidentally pressed against the swollen scar, and she winced. Still tender. The stocking didn't fit quite right, either. But with a little more work, that hole would even out, and the scar would almost disappear once it healed.

What she learned most was that liposuction would take more than one

treatment, and the pain was worse than any of the other treatments.

She pressed the skin higher on her thigh. Lumpy cellulite cells bulged slightly under the surface. Two more treatments on that thigh... then she could start on the other one.

And the little scar on her cheek after that – maybe sandpaper.

Cary Osborne is novelist and short story author in several genres – science fiction, fantasy, horror, and mystery. She received awards from Writers of the Future, Missouri Writers Group, and Oklahoma Writers federation, Inc. Recent publications include short stories in "Like a Spider in the Middle of Her Web" in Pick Your Poison, "The Fountain" in Hydrophobia.

Published novels include Iroshi, The Glaive, Persea, Deathweave, Darkloom, Winter Queen, When God Was Stolen, Oklahoma Winds, and Black Ice.

Her blog is at <http://iroshioftheglaive.blogspot.com>, and her author page on Facebook. Her work is listed on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other online sources.

Mantle of Boys

Kyle E. Miller

*Bubbles of flesh float in the dark,
Their skins bind time, space, and season:
Joo Pitter and Yraniss, Rrrth, Satyrn, and
Soul,
Floating in the black of the void,
Colored with glowing rainbow balls
Of heat and glass, gas and rock.
In the void, flesh seeks flesh:
Rrrth the blue-eyed boy and
Satyrn the wild one around which lost orbs
gather.
These boys made love, invented it.
Rrrth pours himself into Satyrn,
Satyrn fills Rrrth's void until
Satyrn's tongue finds a pink and perfect star
His last words echoing through an asteroid:
"I could fit my whole head in here!"
And now he wanders somewhere inside,
Causing chaos, making wild.
Lonely Rrrth looks to rainbow orbs for love.
One small and chalky white,
One big, blue, and wet.
"Why not?" he says, and sits,
He keeps them wrapped up tight
They feel so good inside,
And time, space, and seasons
Begin their slow work on the world,
This old world,
Where me and you and all the little critters
Sit, shit, eat, and sleep.*

Saint Daddy called him back from midday dreaming. A dream echoed: another songstory beating its wings through the thick dust of sleep. Wings that grew clumsy with accumulated dust, wings fragile as onion skin, perforated near the rim of the world. The songstory drifted back down to the dim country of sleep and Wick forgot every little thing.

"You think you can sleep until you wake up pretty? It's not gonna happen, so get outta bed!"

Wick heard the chuckling of the door handle somewhere below. From his bedroom loft, he could see that Saint Daddy's hollering had already drawn a crowd like a tankard of blond beer: the whole community pouring into the clearing and staring skyward, their golden sun-stained faces wrinkled against the bright of the summer sky. Saint Daddy would wake every boy, man, and beast in the Blooming, but he would never come inside without Wick's permission. Even Saint Daddy had manners.

"Fuck off!" Wick shouted. "I'm still sleeping!"

"You caught something on your skyhooks, boy! Like a fish on a hook, but you're fishing in the sky, and you caught one ugly little sucker, some bottom feeder like yourself."

"The fuck are you talking about?"

And then he was being dragged naked out of bed and down the stairs, cock hard but going soft, into the leisure room, and out, and it was only thanks to the Prince of Summer that he grabbed hold of the frayed hem of some acolyte's lost robe. He stood dazzled in the morning sun for a moment before wrapping his nakedness in the shift of autumn colored cloth. He learned something new about Saint Daddy every day.

"What are you staring at?" he asked Saint Daddy. "It's nothing you've never seen. Get out of here." He tried to shoo the crowd away, but they didn't notice. They were looking at the roof.

"Huh?"

A creature half bee and half boy had impaled itself on the forest of antennas growing on the roof of Wick's house.

"Oh, fuck me sleeping."

"Only if you put your head in a pillowcase," Saint Daddy said. "But you know, I wouldn't mind if this busy little bee happened to be reborn in my bed. Maybe as something with a little more meat on it?"

"What were you last life, Saint Daddy? A leech? A wood tick?"

Saint Daddy swatted at Wick, missed. "I ain't a necro, though I won't stop you from trying. When they're dead they can't say no." He laughed, and on his breath, Wick could smell Saint Daddy's morning beer, drawn from a musty cellar keg and taken to his own roof, where he had glimpsed the beeboy from afar.

"What is it, anyway?"

"Only the King knows. Or should I say Queen?" Saint Daddy had his meaty hand wrapped around Wick's upper arm again.

"Will you fuck off already, Saint Daddy?"

"You watch yourself, boy."

"Or what?"

But Saint Daddy said nothing and sashayed out of the clearing, mumbling to himself or cursing the Queen of Summer or the King of some other season. He took the crowd with him.

Wick was alone again.

"Now what?"

He climbed to the roof, swearing and already sweating, his round little tummy poking out the front of the robe. He couldn't remember the autumn acolyte who might have left the robe behind. The last time he had anyone over for any sort of fun was last summer and... Last summer? Had it really been an entire season?

His cock was stiffening again from catching the fabric of the robe on its head. Yes, it had been that long.

Even in death, the beeboy was beautiful. He was a prince, lithe and perfect down to his buttonless belly and just below, where his flesh turned to chitin, or whatever bees were made of, Wick didn't know. And the flaccid cock somewhere below the skin, like the stinger: hidden until the time was right.

Wick had thought to prevent the ingress of all winged things with a frame of thin hexagonal wire bent around his antennas, but he hadn't imagined those things having hands. Living on the borders of the Blooming, he should have known better.

The beeboy had forced his way through the wire cage. The tiny wire hexagons were torn apart. He wanted so badly to touch the antennas with his four perfect hands, now slashed and torn. Wick wiped the beeboy's cheek. Dried blood flaked away on the wind.

That beautiful cheek.

Wick looked out on the land below and beyond, anything to draw his mind (his cock?) from the beeboy. The sun was pulling fog off the maize fields like blankets from a lover's limbs. Beyond, a ribbon of glimmer like a river: the bank of black panels that gave the village power. Closer, the clearing in which his house stood, and then Saint Daddy's little village: twenty, thirty houses built from whatever the Blooming would give them. Lumber, silk, clay, and stones to be polished and pushed into the ground to make a floor.

But his cock drew him back to the beeboy, like the needle on a compass. Maybe he hadn't really awakened yet. Maybe he could do what he liked to the beeboy, as if in a dream.

He held first one hand, then another, then another, then-

But no, the beeboy would never have wanted him. He looked at his

shadow painted on the roof: his body curved in the wrong places, his head like a melon with a stem on either side: his ears, deformed from birth. His body wasn't built for muscle.

A starhawk threw a spear of laughter onto the roof, and Wick almost lost his balance. He looked at the beeboy again, hands outstretched, desperation frozen on the dead face, and Wick wished he could sing the poor thing to proper sleep.

Wick had been sending out his storysongs for five seasons. He could do nothing else. Even Saint Daddy had had to show him how to set up the antennas, get them to grow, how to prune them and nurture them until they forested his roof. Five seasons, and no one had listened except this sad, tortured creature who may have been the last of his kind. He had strayed from his home and gotten as close as he could to that which had drawn him away, and it had killed him.

"What is this life?"

Wick pulled on the black and yellow banded thorax, and it began to come apart in his hands. The creature's blood and oils stuck to his palms, and when he tried from another angle, the stinger probed his wrist and went in.

Wick cried out, not in pain, but in arousal, instant and overwhelming. He doubled over, fell, and then fell again, this time to the ground.

He had buttercups and dirt in his mouth, and his body was bruising, but still, he had an erection that even Saint Daddy would give a second look. He groaned and watched dragonflies wheel above him until he saw a ribbon of red float down from the roof and trail away into the Blooming.

"What? Hullo?"

The ribbon led him through the village. He wrapped himself in it like a

scarf and followed it through the Oh Well meadow with its rusty brewing machine, past the field of hops, past Saint Daddy's house, and past the whispers of his neighbors and their creeping questions, their lingering hands, even past the concerned, wrinkled face of the drunk summer acolyte who was always just passing through. Past them all and into the Blooming with only a robe between him and the wild.

He followed a trail of scarlet through the forest. He could see the smell, if that's what it was. It was like one of his autumn incense visions: a slice of the world you can only see in certain seasons. He was never sure what was real, but he depended on the things that had always been there, like the cock between his thighs. He could touch that (and he did) and he could touch the tree trunks, so he lurched from bole to bole, trying to keep in touch with the world. And this was how he followed the scarlet trail far inside the Blooming, where forest hares poked their heads above waves of yellow whistling grass, where wild grapes weighed down the vines with ripeness, where long silver rains burnished every leaf and thorn and pooled in the leaves of teacup trees.

Wick took a drink and let the leaf drift away. He could relax a moment. He had found it.

The hive swung high in the tallest homeworld tree Wick had ever found. It was a pale, ghostly globe (a whole world, he would later wonder; a whole season) invisibly attached to the branches of the tree and beckoning him with a smell, a must, a mélange of armpit, crotch, ass crack, and cock. And then he heard the hum, and already he was dreaming up a songstory with which to celebrate that sound: a hymn to the hive, sugary

melodies, an homage to the joy it would bring him. Already, he knew it would never be as sweet as the hive itself.

The scarlet wound its way around the limbs and leaves like shining silk and into an opening in the side of the hive.

"I'm coming," he said, and repeated as he climbed. It was a mantra, a hope for a future that didn't yet exist, and in that way, he forgot the present and the past, and he climbed.

"Every step disturbs an ancient queen."

"Huh?"

Wick looked down, and a tawny Blooming bear looked up. Those eyes told tales. A ribbon of saliva fell to the forest floor.

Wick had heard that Blooming bears had been given the gift of speech by the King or Queen of this season or that, for some reason or other. Probably he had heard it from Saint Daddy, who told more stories than the *duodecim anni tempora*, but Wick had never thought much of those stories and now, when they may have been of use, he could not remember the details.

"Fuck off, bear, I'm busy," and Wick crawled into a world of milky white light and a tangle of corridors and hexagonal cells, each one occupied by a beautiful beeboy glistening with the oils and syrups of the hive. It smelled like sex and sounded like the village on festival night: the sounds of lovemaking and the hum of summer mosquitoes by the thousands. Here the scarlet ribbon was tied in an impossible knot, and if there was something caught in the middle, Wick was going to unravel the knot and find it.

He walked into the first cell he saw, and one two three four arms embraced him.

"Hey there. Hey. Whoa."

The beeboy gave him a gentle sting in the ass and pulled the robe away. Wick never saw it again.

"Well, this is different." He chuckled.

The fingers of one hand grasped his ass, a few fingers slipping inside his hole, grasping from within.

"You're fun," Wick said, and he giggled.

He giggled with wonder and delight and the thought that so many others were left for him to discover, and - thinking how easy it had all been thus far - he fell into it, lost himself, gave in to a whole summer's worth of emptiness, loneliness, bereavement, and he fucked, and he was fucked, and he only wanted more, more to fill up the summer past and the summer coming too because only the King knew if anyone would find him beautiful enough to hold onto, and all faded into milky ghostliness and was gone.

"Fuck me."

But no one and nothing did.

"Hullo?"

Wick was in the corridor, naked and bemused, his cock sore, as if there were weights tied to the end and left dangling, swinging in the wind. He no longer saw the scarlet trails beeboys left behind, and he wondered if that was because he was part of it now. Would he leave a trail of his own when he left the hive?

Leave the hive? He laughed at that.

When he got to his feet, he peered into other cells and explored. There were other humans there. He watched one couple with a beeboy, yelp as the stinger went in, and fall into milky warmth and light. Wick pulled on his cock a little. He watched and - still in the corridor, his right hand gripping the rim of the cell, his

toes pumping - came as they came. And then the beeboy nudged the limp and slumbering boy, pushed him slowly and patiently into the corridor, and began smoothing the walls of his cell without a word. His eyes were unfocused, lost.

"Hey. Hey! Hey!"

But the beeboy ignored him. They all did, turning about in their cells or else sitting there dumb and hollow. Wick turned around, tried to find the cell from which he had been pushed. But they were all the same and built for one thing: to last and last. Dumb, blind, deaf: the beeboys were idiots. And they were made that way. Those mouths were made for pleasure, not speech. Those eyes weren't made for sight. They were no better at that than the black circles on a forest moth's wings, meant to confuse and frighten those that hunted it.

Were poor souls wasted on these things? Were children and poets and grandmothers and butterflies reborn in such hollow empty husks?

Wick ran to the end of the corridor, turned, ended up in another, and at the end of that one he could see a circle of green, and he leaned out and threw up all over the leaves of the homeworld tree. Slumbering moths beat their wings away.

Wick wanted to go home. But:

"Every step awakens an ancient queen."

A gliding otter tucked its wing flaps away and nestled into a crook in the branches, its tail wrapped around a limb. Moss agate eyes never looked Wick's way.

"Hullo?" Wick watched the beast fall asleep, but he wondered... "Hullo?"

And then he was turning around, or being turned around, and another beeboy was taking him inside a cell. He was warm again. Things weren't so bad after all. The world was a warm and comforting space full of life and careful,

patient motion. One two three four hands held him. They turned him around, he felt a little sting and then a sweetness under the skin, like a squirt of flashfruit juice on the tongue. He gave in to everything the beeboy could give him, and then he was waking up in the corridor outside, watching the beeboy pad the walls of his cell with the semen he had given him.

"Well, fuck you, too." He crawled to his feet and walked on. He slid down a ramp into another level of the hive and found the hallways dark and suffocating, summer hot.

And then he was turning around, or being turned around, and another beeboy was taking him inside his cell, and he was warm again. All was not lost. It was a game, the sweetest game in the whole hive, and he wanted to play forever. There was still warmth and comfort to be found in the world, and it was here, away from Saint Daddy, away from the village, away from the lonely wood, away from summer, from all the seasons.

Maybe one day he would conquer the whole hive. He would let them come to him all at once and cover him like cloth.

So he gave in and fell into the dreams of the hive.

Again.

And again.

And each step... each step...

"I'm coming," he said. "I'm coming."

But something gave him pause. It may have been the growl of a forest bear or the sharp bark of a gliding otter or maybe only the motion of the seasonal cycle, turning now toward harvest time, the end of one summer and the beginning of another. Cooler days, colder nights, a little spice in the air. Something reminded

him of the moment, and in that moment, he was tired.

How many times had he been dumped into the maze of corridors after spraying his seed on the walls, dribbling it into a beeboy's palm, spreading it up and down a stinger?

A wild rage caught him, and he swore he was going to get out. He was going to leave and never lift his chin high enough to see what might be swinging in the trees again. He would leave summer and find a season in which hives swung dead and empty in a cold blue wind if they hung at all. He would tell the whole village, Saint Daddy and his neighbors and all the rest, and they would force their way into the Blooming with fire on their minds and in their hands. Pinecones dipped in pitch and set aflame, catapulted into the limbs of the homeworld tree, Saint Daddy's mouth gaping in a laugh as the first one strikes and spreads its color, his beery breath feeding the flames. Yes, he was leaving, he was leaving, and they would bring the whole hive down.

They were bringing in the maize. Stalks pulled from molasses dark soil and bound with blue twine. They were set out to dry in the sun. Baskets brimming with cobs still wrapped tight in leaves, a little silk or a pale kernel peeking out here or there. Saint Daddy had two halves of a melon in his hands and between bites - pale pink juice falling down his chin, through his beard, and onto his fish scale vest - ordered baskets placed here and there, bundles stacked against this house or-

"Not there! A little to the left. Got it, walk away. Beautiful."

Saint Daddy had designs in his head to which no one was privy, ideas dragged from the depths of the *duodecim anni tempora* - the sacred words of the

seasons - like a bucket from a bottomless well. The same place he got his tales, though others had read the words and found less. Only Saint Daddy could pull story after story from the bucket: the history of frog and toad, the beast boy caught in a maze, the boys who turned into trees, the ark, and the first rebirth. And that was why they kept him around. No one but Saint Daddy had yet seen inside the bucket, but he could see something. They were like snakes, he said, like snakes in the grass.

"Boy! Boy! Where you been, trying to find a bed that isn't empty?"

And Wick had to wonder why he had allowed Saint Daddy to design a life for him.

"Good for nothing, come here. It's the end of the summer, beginning of another. I got something special for you."

Oh. That was it. He was good for nothing. He had almost forgotten, in the hive.

"Boy!"

His youth had been wasted in a country of beds and now that he was older, and that country seemed so distant - filled with younger, stronger, more beautiful boys - he had nothing left. He had nothing else, except his songstories, and even those were beginning to seem distant and worthless. Silly, he thought. They were silly. The silly dreams of a naive little boy.

"Boy, I want you to-"

"Do you even know my name?"

Wick said, and he took a step toward Saint Daddy.

"What?"

"What's my name?" He took a few more steps, swatting at a wasp drunk on harvest time. "What's my name?"

"Get outta my face, boy. Get home now."

"No."

Saint Daddy laughed. "Boy, you're edging toward winter." He tossed the melon into the weeds one half at a time and stuck a sticky finger in Wick's face. "What's gotten into you? The boy bee?" He laughed again, his mouth so wide Wick could see the melon seed stuck between his bottom teeth.

"It is! Ha! Bug off! You think he was trying to get to your little story? No, boy. He was trying to get it to shut up, now bug off."

Why had no one prepared him for this?

Maybe there were places where people taught you how to live, many seasons away. Maybe there were teachers, magicians, grandmothers, sages in winter or fall or spring who prepared you for the wilderness of relationships you wander into later in life. But they weren't here. No one had prepared him for Saint Daddy, for the hostility, the alienation, for growing old and not recognizing the people around him or even himself, seen for a moment in the river before minnows muddled the water with their noses.

He had built his house with doubt. He had been gathering scraps his whole life, and now he was surrounded on all sides. He knew nothing. His place in the world was defined by the six sides of his home, and each was split into six slightly smaller walls, spiraling inward endlessly. Each step he took was a step toward further meaninglessness and loss of soul. Soul: where would his go? Where was it going? He was already spinning, lifting off the ground, headed back to the wheel before his time, before his flesh collapsed. He was floating away.

He knew what he

would be next life.

And then he knew he would return, not at that moment perhaps, but soon, he would return.

"Dammit, not yet," he said, pushing the inky black stinger away. It was almost transparent in places, and he thought he could see the venom within like a current in a river. The stinger slid back inside for a moment and then reappeared. "Anyway, then Saint Daddy dunked me in the river. Do you know the River Wisp? Flown over it? Well, I've seen it from underneath, and it's great. Just great. The sky, seen through the river, was like, I dunno, another season. The thirteenth season. So beautiful. And I made a songstory about it, and that's the one that-

"Ah!"

He reeled, tittered, doubled over, and was lost before he could begin to fight.

He fucked the beeboy and the beeboy fucked him, but Wick managed to stay awake this time, tried to finish his story, and the beeboy nudged him and pushed him into the corridor so he could patch the holes their wild sex had made.

"What are you doing?"

The beeboy cleaned its antennas, passing them through his hands, moistened with saliva, again and again.

How had he ever thought of this as a game? It was the opposite: tedium, struggle,

labor. It was an industry of degradation. They put him in a cell and defined him by the places he felt pleasure. What seductive reduction. What drudgery.

"You don't even know my name. You don't even know my name!"



And he felt suddenly suffocated, choked on all the spit and cum in the hive. He wanted to throw up, but he was afraid of what would come out. He saw twin antennae erupting below his nose. They were slick, the deepest ebony, shining with his saliva, and that was only the beginning. That was how they were born, that must be how they are born.

He was suffocating, and he had to get out. On his way, he saw a boy that hadn't been there before. A human boy, his face burned or deeply freckled, a footprint of the sun. He had the eyes of some soft, small mammal, and they followed Wick for as long as he looked. And then he was climbing down.

They were barreling the beer. Saint Daddy was telling a story from the top of a pyramid of sealed barrels. He held a rubbed tankard capped with froth. He paused, put it to his lips, and sighed.

"But men made the King of Spring into something he never was. They made him into an image of what they always wanted to be. The absolute ruler of his own mind and body."

"Saint Daddy," Wick called up to him. "We have to talk."

"Shut up. Anyway, this is his body here, and that's his mind up there. Except Summer is king for us now. For all of us."

No one was listening. They were busy with the beer, popping open barrels and filling others. The whole meadow smelled like hops and the flavors with which they blended it: maple and honey, maize and flashfruit. The carpenter burned the sigil of a stag leaping through a hoop of hops into every barrel.

"Saint Daddy. Have any boys gone missing? Has anyone gone missing?"

"Leave it alone, Wick," the carpenter said. He had skin like willow bark. He was one of the dark Superior

people, come off their wintery lake for a life of summer. "He's gonna hurt you."

"Well, have you noticed anyone missing? There's an ancient queen in the forest that-"

Saint Daddy laughed at that and went on with his story.

"And she's sending out these boy bees to take humans. You remember the thing caught on my roof, right?"

"You're the only one gone missing lately, Wick." The carpenter gave him a sad smile and put his brand back into the coals of the fire they had made. A good old meadow fire under the evening sun. They would all tell stories after Saint Daddy fell quiet in his cups, and they would partner off (sometimes in threes and fours) and make love in the peace of the meadow, the fire crackling along and moths flitting through naked limbs.

Wick missed those summers. Summers long ago when he was unafraid to join them at the fire in a merry ring, buoyed by beer and warm darkness. Long ago, before he cared what others thought. Before he was conscious of his own being. Before he felt the eyes and judgments of others on his skin like one endless, winding centipede, choking on its own tail.

Wick turned around and tried not to look into the Blooming.

The freckled boy was gone, or else he had moved on to another cell, and Wick found himself wandering down the corridors wondering where a queen might hide, or where the beeboys might hide one. What a coward, he thought, to play some obscene role in all this and yet never surface, never appear except to the initiated, the few beeboys who had lived the longest or who completed some mad ritual or bowed the farthest to the floor.

"Hullo? Hullo!"

Wick yawned and wondered how long ago the beeboy had impaled himself on his antennae. He knew it was probably longer or shorter than the few days it felt like.

"Hey."

He had reached a new part of the hive, a stretch of uninhabited corridor, not yet vaulted with cells. Wick poked the wall with his foot and felt his big toe sink into the milky sludge of the hive. He dug his fingers in and scooped out a handful. He put it to his tongue and gagged: grotesquely salty sweet, tepid and wet.

Maybe the freckled boy would come...

Wick didn't have the sun and moon to tell him how long it took to carve out a space of his own. Six sides, deep and wide enough for two. He settled in, slept, awoke.

"Hullo?"

He could wait.

But no one came, not even a beeboy.

Maybe they were born another way.

Anger and shame pooled inside Wick like warm honey.

He had never felt so ugly.

He looked down at his naked self and the brown fuzz spread gracelessly across his soft stomach. The wimpy arms and chewed fingernails, the ghostly stripes of stretch marks, the too-dark freckles, the inverted nipples like sad little mouths. He had been born that way. That was it. Maybe next life he would be something everyone knew was beautiful. A butterfly, an orchid, a wild Blooming cat.

Wick stepped out of his cell and something inside threw off dream and sleep dust and beat its ancient wings. One two three four ancient and enduring wings.

The hive couldn't contain him.

His left hoof punched through the floor of the hive. His right hoof punched through the floor of the hive, and he pulled them up and walked on. He couldn't know that he was storysing as he tore a wall away. As he ran down the corridor and thrust his curled horns into the wall, letting in two bolts of bright green light.

"Remember the green where we were born."

He would remember that.

And he cut the impossible scarlet knot on the razor edge of his horns.

Wick shook the hive to its core. On his path to the top, Wick wrenched the freckled boy - limp, cold, dumb with pleasure - from a cell and put him in the limbs of the homeworld tree. Wick tore through the ceiling and snipped the warped thread from which it hung in the tallest homeworld tree he had ever found.

The hive fell.

It fell to ragged pieces on the way down, bludgeoned on the limbs of the homeworld tree, twigs and sticks and leaves and little lives thrust inside and pulled out again, perforating the phantom globe and bringing ruin to its insides. When it finally passed through the lowest limbs and struck the ground - a season passing, a stream of souls running back to the wheel - the whole hive cracked: starhawks took flight, sonic ivy bloomed, pinecones released their seeds, tiny rodents shrieked and burrowed through a forest of roots. Beeboys lay dazed or dead in the milky white ruins. And there, the queen of the lost season, seen only as scraps in the wreckage now, like black and yellow curtains billowing out a window.

The forest bears were moving in.

The freckled boy awakened on the limbs above. He scampered down, limped away, and wandered into the Blooming, a

little bewildered and a little lost, but
watched over by a face in the forest.

Insects gathered around twin horns
and alighted there, crowding to touch the
tips.

And someone, somewhere, heard
this story like a song.

*Kyle currently lives, writes, and wanders across
Michigan's bountiful lakes and forests. His fiction has
previously appeared in Betwixt Magazine,
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others. He has plans to become a hermit soon. His
work is gathered
at <https://fishesleapinggeeseflying.wordpress.com/>.*

Demontia

Anthony Ferguson

The aural narrative of asphalt disappearing under the wheels of the car almost lulled Matt to sleep. The route between his house and his mother's, the old family home, had become so familiar he could have driven there with his eyes closed.

It was a mixture of anger and guilt which propelled him on the all too familiar journey. He chided himself for resenting her refusal to pull up stumps and move into a home after his father's death. Yet he loathed having to drive so far, so often, to complete the mundane tasks she could no longer perform for herself.

Having never learned to drive, she couldn't get to the shops, and the fact that she lived on an incline meant she couldn't even wheel her rubbish bin down the drive. Matt had to come over and do it for her. Yet she was stubborn and set in her ways, so she stayed put, a willing captive to her physical incapacity.

Matt shook himself out of the stupor as the old neighbourhood came into sight. He eased into the drive, got out, and stretched, nodding to old Bill Jeffries, who loitered over his hedge with a pair of shears. He was almost of his mother's vintage but enjoyed greater mobility.

Matt picked the local newspaper off the driveway and walked up the rise to the front door. He saw through the flyscreen that it was open, and watched his mother shuffle toward him from the dining room adjoining the lounge room. The faded aroma of pipe tobacco lingered like a memory. *Old Rogue* had been his father's brand. Rather appropriate, Matt had thought.

"It's okay, Ma, I can let myself in." Matt used his own key to unlock the screen door. He walked inside and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim closed-curtained interior.

His father's passing had hit his mother hard. The whole house was a shrine to the old man. The cluttered paraphernalia that constituted his life still dominated. Pictures of Dad in his best suit, belting out a tune at the local club; Dad with his golf buddies on the first tee, Dad's coffee mug, Dad's pipe and ashtray; even the book he was reading when he passed still sat on the small table next to his favourite old armchair.

Edna Rogers held out her withered arms. It was all she could do to remain upright. Matt hugged her gently.

"Matthew. What brings you out this way?"

Matt edged past her into the dining room. She followed.

"You asked me to come over." Matt sat at the dining table and pushed a small mountain of papers, bills, prescriptions and old magazines aside. It looked like a scene from an apocalyptic film, where the inhabitants had vanished and left everything to rot.

His mother hovered at his side. "Did I?"

Matt held in a sigh. "You called me, remember?"

A light bulb switched on in her head and she reached for a piece of paper held down by a stained cup half-filled with tepid liquid.

"I need you to get a few things for me at the shops if that's okay. Then change the filters in the pond and water the roses. Oh, and feed Mr. Binks. Cup of tea, dear?"

Matt looked at the empty pet dish by the stove. "The cat died, Ma. About ten years ago."

She looked puzzled. "Oh, did he?"
"Yeah. We buried him out the back." He rose and moved to the small kitchenette. "Don't worry, I'll make the tea." He filled the stained jug and switched it on, then busied himself piling up a stack of newspapers and faded periodicals.

When they had drained their cups, Matt readied himself to drive to the local mall. He picked up the list of items to collect. It was the length of his arm, written in her familiar cursive scrawl.

"Jesus, Ma. All this?"

She fiddled with her purse and muttered "S'alright, I'll pay for it." She pulled a great wad of notes out and held them in her pale fist. Most were fifties with a few twenties thrown in.

"Jeez! What did you do, rob a bank?"

"You know I only go to the bank when I can. I don't like to be caught short." She limped toward the bench with the empty cups. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"We *just* had one. You wanna be careful someone doesn't knock you on the head. All this cash lying around. I showed you how to use your card to pay for stuff. Don't you remember?" As he spoke, Matt's attention was drawn to his mother's shopping cart, which sat against a cabinet with produce overflowing from the lid. Matt started pulling it out. "What's all this stuff? Groceries, cat food, medical supplies..." He held a container of pills up toward her. "Mum, have you been to the shops?"

Edna gave him a blank look. "Ooh... that's right. The home help came last week."

Matt smiled. "Hopeless. I'll take this rubbish out to the bin." He picked up the pile of magazines and newspapers and made his way out front, where the bin had

yet to be returned from the verge. Bill Jeffries looked up from his rose bushes.

"How's your mother, young Matthew? I worry about her a lot."

Matt dumped the periodicals and wiped his hands down his shirt. "She's hanging in there, Bill. She appreciates your company."

"I was gonna wheel that bin back up the drive for her later."

"That's okay." Matt smiled. Was it possible Bill was keen on his mother? He was a spinster too after all. He thought about it, about them, *together*, and shuddered. He was a nice old guy though. "Still wearing that hat I see."

Bill looked up. "Eh?"

Matt pointed. "Your old fishing hat. You've had it since I was a kid. Don't tell me you've still got the boat."

Bill took the hat off and held it in his hands. "No, I had to get rid of it when Ruby passed on. To help pay for things..."

Matt's face dropped. "Oh, I'm sorry, Bill." He hated making the old guy sad. He hadn't meant to dredge up those memories. "Come over later for a chat?"

Bill lodged the hat back in place. "Sounds good, son." Matt hoped he had already forgotten the previous line of thought. Old folk often did.

He pulled the bin up the drive and went back inside. He found his mother in the lounge room. She eased herself down into a frayed armchair. Matt rescued the remote before it had a chance to jab into her scrawny backside and set it on the coffee table. He contemplated sitting in his father's chair, thought better of it and chose the couch. He pushed a bunch of cushions aside and found himself staring into his father's face in an old photo propped up on the busy coffee table. Dad in the Seventies, his dark hair slicked back, terrible moustache, big toothy grin,

decked out in a powder blue safari suit. It looked like he was about to wink at the camera, his eyes twinkled with life.

"He up to his old tricks again, eh?"

"Huh?" said Matt with a start.

"Bloody Jeffries," she said. "He's not getting the house."

"I don't think it's the house he's after, Ma. He's got his own. I think it's your body he wants."

"Don't be daft," she snorted. Matt looked up to see her reach for the television remote. As she leaned forward he noticed a trickle of blood running down the side of her head toward her neckline.

"Ma! What the hell happened to your head?"

"Oh, that dear? It's nothing to worry about. I think I recorded *Frost* last night. Let's put that on, eh?" She started fiddling with the remote, pushing a range of buttons.

"Nothing to worry about?" Matt snatched the remote from her hands. "There's a big gash on your head. What happened?"

He held the remote away from her, demanding an explanation.

"I had a fall. That's all. I fell and hit my head."

"Had a fall where?"

She thought for a long time; her gaze darted around the room. "Outside. Just out by the front door. I was trying to pick up a flyer that blew onto the lawn. I hit my head on a rock in the garden... remote. Let's watch *Frost*."

"Christ, Ma, gimme a look." He handed her the remote and stood behind her to examine the wound. Blood had dribbled down her wrinkled neck and stained the shoulder of her flowered nightdress. He cursed himself for not noticing it before and pulled the curtains open. His fingers lingered above the

wound, aching to pick at it, but not wanting to add to the damage. She leaned forward as the screen flickered to life.

"Leave it, Matt. I'm not hurt."

"Jesus, it doesn't look like it. What if you've fractured your skull? Why didn't you call an ambulance, or call me?"

"I did call you."

"You didn't tell me you'd cracked your scone!" Matt probed around the wound with an inquisitive finger. It came back red and sticky.

"Ow! Leave it, Matthew. I'm fine."

"Why didn't you use that personal alarm system I rigged up for you? All you gotta do is push the button and they send help straight away."

"What alarm, dear?"

Matt looked across toward the telephone where the alarm system sat, disconnected, a jumble of plastic cords. "Are you even wearing the device?" He checked her neck where the strap should have hung. The flesh was unencumbered by technology.

"I don't like that thing hanging around my neck. It stops me sleeping."

"It's there to keep you alive, you stubborn old goat!" Matt reached for the phone. She hobbled after him, pleading.

"Honest, love, I'm right as rain. Besides, I don't trust those doctors. They messed my pills up last time, almost killed me."

He stopped dialing. "You took the wrong dose, Mother, it wasn't the doctor's fault."

Her lip began to quiver. "Take their side. You were in on it, can't wait to get rid of your old mother, get your hands on the house."

Matt sighed. "Don't cry, Mum. You know that's not true."

She reached out and gripped his jumper. "Please don't make me go back to

hospital again, son. Don't let them do me in. I just want to stay here in my own home. Where your father and I..."

Matt shook his head. "Why are you so stubborn? I'm going to fix you some food, but I'm keeping an eye on you." He went through to the kitchen and spoke to her through the doorway as he fiddled with pots and pans.

"These dishes are all dirty, Ma. You need a bloody maid. Listen, I should take you to the doctor to get that thing checked out. It could get infected..."

Matt walked through the doorway with a plate of food for his mother to find her lying prostrate on the floor in front of the flickering screen, where DI Frost leaned over the body of an old woman. He dropped the plate and rushed to his mother's side.

"Ma!" He fell to his knees and grabbed her flimsy wrist, checking for a pulse. He leaned his ear over her open mouth and felt her shallow breath.

"I'm alright, love."

"Christ!" He jolted backwards. "You gave me a scare."

"I'm just having a rest, dear."

"On the floor?"

"I'll be alright in a minute."

It was then that Matt saw it, growing out of the side of her head from the wound; a great glutinous mass, bloody and throbbing, trying to take shape. Matt pictured a snake trying to force its way out a sac made of veiny membrane.

His mother let out a series of low moans, sending him into a fresh bout of panic.

"Ma! What the fuck is happening?" Matt grabbed a wad of tea towels and wiped the blood from around the edges of the thing that pulsed from the side of his mother's head. It looked like something was trying to tunnel its way out of her skull.

Matt grabbed his mobile off the table. "That's it, Mum. I'm calling a fucking ambulance."

Her eyes flared and a hand shot out and grabbed his ankle in a vice-like grip. He yelped and dropped the phone.

"No ambulance, no bloody doctors. A... another trip to the hospital would just about do me in." She placed her hand over her heart in a dramatic gesture. "I'm okay, Matthew. Just let me rest here for a bit, please." The calm finality of her tone somehow terrified him.

"Are... are you sure?"

Tears formed in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"I'm 83, son. If it's my time, so be it. Besides, I miss your father. Can you just... get me a pillow?"

Numb with shock, Matt stood and looked down on the scene before him: his mother flat out on the old faded carpet, the foetus growing out of her head, the growing pool of blood and the useless crumpled crimson tea towels with stained images of familiar landmarks visited long ago. He swallowed and went to fetch her a pillow.

Hours later, Matt watched over his sleeping mother. Her shallow chest rising and falling, head propped on a stained red pillow. The growth still attached to her, throbbing and pulsing. Perhaps it was feeding off her like some vampiric parasite. A wave of panic flooded his mind and he contemplated grabbing the old man's axe from the shed and cutting the bastard off, but to do so might kill her.

Matt switched on the table lamp as the evening grew dark, bathing the scene in sallow light, then reached down and pulled up his trouser leg to examine where she had grabbed his ankle. He was shocked to see a red welt forming. Where did she get the strength? He looked across at her serene sleeping features, and

mopped the perspiration from her forehead with a damp cloth, eliciting a soft moan. Matt pushed back the snow white hair now stained a pink hue. Her lips moved and the occasional word slipped out from her dreams. He heard his father's name.

Dad's last days had been hard on them both. Many a night he had sat by the old man's hospital bed, listening to stories of his boyhood during the war. That was before he got worse, and Matt only had the hiss and beep of the life support machines for company. Matt missed his father too, but the old boy had a good run. It had been over a year; his mother needed to start letting go.

When the hour grew late Matt took a blanket from his parents' bedroom and lay it over his mother. She murmured in her sleep. He grabbed one for himself and hunkered down on the couch beside her. The thought of sleeping in his old room didn't appeal, too many ghosts. In the morning he would call the boss and ask for a week or two of carer's leave. Tony would understand. He lay with his phone in his hands, fingers paused over the buttons, and fell asleep. His father visited him in his dreams too. This was his bad dad, shouting dad, brandishing his belt. "You've always been weak, son. Letting people walk all over you. No wonder Susan left you."

Matt woke with a start from an awful nightmare to find his mother leaning on her elbow, staring at him. The morning sun streamed through a crack in the curtains, shedding light on the scene. The growth that had been attached to his mother's head was gone.

"Christ, Ma! Stop doing that. You look a bit better. Where's it gone?"

His mother cast her eyes to one side, and Matt followed her gaze. Like a

newborn burst from its foetal sac, bloody and raw, the growth lay on the floor. It opened a mouth like an aperture and let out a tiny wail, and Matt found himself both fascinated and repulsed.

"Matthew, I think it's hungry."

Matt restrained his mother as she moved toward it.

"Ma, don't go near it."

She tutted at him. "Don't be silly. You can see it's helpless. It's a newborn and it needs me."

Stunned, Matt relinquished his hold on her shoulder. "At least let me check your head."

With some impatience she let him probe her skull, never taking her eyes off the formless shape on the carpet as it struggled and kicked with ill-formed appendages. "I feel a lot better now."

"Weird, that wound seems to be healing itself."

Matt sat back on his haunches with a puzzled expression and watched his mother push herself to her feet with the aid of the armrest of the closest chair. "I think I've got some hamburger in the fridge."

"Hamburger... you're not seriously going to feed that thing?"

She returned with a packet of raw meat in her hands, moved to the wailing progeny's side and squatted down with ease. "Oh, hush now, Matthew. I'm a mother. Mums never forget how to do this, just like I raised you."

Matt edged closer as the monstrosity caught the scent and stretched itself toward the dripping mass in his mother's wrinkled hand. A serpentine tongue snaked out and licked at the offering. His mother cooed and dropped the morsel into the opening. Matt's mouth opened just as wide.

"Fuck me, it's got teeth!"

"Matthew!" she scolded.

Matt took some time off to nurse his mother following her ordeal. After a week she began to carry her strange offspring around, strapped to her side. He acquiesced to her request to fetch a supply of mincemeat from the butchers, but a few nights of watching her feed the thing, and even more disconcerting, seeing it grow and take a vaguely anthropomorphic shape, was enough for Matt. He went back to work.

When he returned a few days later he was relieved to see it was no longer strapped to his mother's hip.

"Oh no, dear, he's getting way too big for me to carry him around now," she said as she buzzed around, dusting the lounge room.

"*He?* It's a *he* now?" Matt couldn't help but notice the lack of clutter and general cleanliness of the place. "Who tidied up? Has the home care been?"

She stopped mid-wipe and grinned at him. "No dear, I... dispensed with their services. I cleaned the place myself. I've got a new lease on life. I think I enjoy being a mother again."

Matt rubbed his temples. "But you're *not* a mum again, Ma. That thing isn't human. Where is it, anyway?"

She folded her arms. "*He* is in the cellar. He seems to like it down there, living among your father's old stuff."

Matt scanned the room. His eyes came to rest on the door leading down to the cellar, where his dad used to love hanging out. To one side sat a folded pile of clothing, topped by a familiar looking hat. A pair of brogues sat next to the pile. Matt walked over and examined it. He held the hat in his hands, looking at the silhouette of an angler casting a line out to sea.

"What's this stuff doing here, Ma?" Matt twirled the hat between his fingers.

She gave him a sheepish look. "Oh... just some old clothes of your fathers. I've been meaning to take them to the op-shop."

"Is that right? You haven't thrown away a single thing of Dad's since he died. I know who this hat belongs to. What is going on?" As if on cue, a sound rose up from beyond the cellar door; a noise like something large being dragged along the floor.

Matt motioned toward the door. "It's okay, Ma. I'm a grown man. I understand if you and Bill have got a thing going on. Now what's he doing down there?"

Edna darted between Matt and the door. "Don't go down there, Matthew."

"Now you're being silly. What, is he walking around naked? I'll shout down to him to put his pants on." Matt glanced at the hat again and noticed blood around its rim. He picked it up and held it toward the light.

As he did so the cellar door was flung open, and a bloody, broken face thrust itself into the light. Matt found himself staring into Bill Jeffries' ruined visage.

"Help me!" Bill gasped.

Matt looked from his mother to the neighbour, just as a large sinuous tentacle stretched up from below and curled around Bill's waist.

"Fuck!" said Matt, and as Jeffries grabbed at his arm, he lifted his foot and stuck it into Bill's midriff and shoved him back into the dark, slamming the door shut. There followed a muffled scream and then silence.

His mother looked placid. "He was hungry, dear. You know how it is. When

children get hungry, nothing else matters.”

Matt dropped the hat back on the tidy pile. “Jesus, Mother! What the hell?”

She strode toward the kitchen. “Oh, come on, Matthew, it’s not as if anyone is going to miss Bill. Let’s have some tea.”

Matt regarded the discarded clothing and shuddered. He followed his mother into the kitchen, where she fussed around filling the kettle and spooning sugar into two mugs. His nasal passages were assailed by the stench of rancid meat. Another subterranean thump echoed up through the floorboards, making Matt jump.

“Mum, just how big is this thing?”

Edna Rogers proved as recalcitrant over her new companion as she had been overhanging onto her husband’s memory. Matt was numbed by the peculiar turn of events and paled at his part in the demise of poor old Bill. The next time he dropped by, he found the homecare nurse’s white Ford stored in the garage. Her glasses sitting on top of her discarded uniform in a neat pile by the cellar door. The following month he found a girl guide uniform, two boxes of cookies and a half-full collection tin.

Fresh flowers littered the disinfected lounge room and kitchen. Their cloying scent fought for attention with the overpowering aroma of rotting meat. Edna started taking long walks in the fresh air, a testament to her growing vitality, and Matt quailed at the rumours that began to circulate around the old neighbourhood. Rumours that she did not always return home alone.

Matt sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. Edna stood at the bench slicing through some thick red slabs of meat with a large knife.

“Matthew?”

He spoke without looking at her. “Ma... you just can’t go around killing people. It’s not right. You have to stop.”

The sound of blade on chopping board ceased. “You wouldn’t turn us in, would you, son? Your own flesh and blood.”

Matt jerked his head up. His mother stood over him with the bloody knife in her hand.

He jumped to his feet, the chair scraping along the floor. “Jesus!”

Edna looked at the knife as if she had forgotten she was carrying it. “Oh... no... Matthew... I wouldn’t.”

Matt ran for the door, her pleading voice rang in his ears as he slammed it behind him. “I love you, son...”

For several weeks Matt avoided his mother’s house and its basement, afraid of what he might see down there. Terrified of what her demonic progeny had become, and just as afraid of what his mother was becoming. He fought a constant mental battle between his desire to call the authorities and his fear of what they would do to his mum. She was way too old to do time. He was also ashamed to admit his own fear of what her bloodthirsty companion might do to him if his mother let it.

It was the recurring nightmare that sent him back. His father, younger and returned to vigour, leaning over him. “I know why she left you, boy. You couldn’t give her what she wanted, could you? The sound of tiny pattering feet...” The voice nagged him until he turned the car off the road, away from his office, and accelerated toward his boyhood home. He burst into the old house and stood before the cellar door, blood pounding in his throat.

“Matt?” His mother’s voice came from her bedroom doorway. He didn’t

turn to look at her. He heard her bare feet pad down the hallway toward him.

"What?"

"If you're looking for him, he doesn't live down there anymore."

Filled with sudden inconceivable hope, Matt turned. His mother wore a skimpy nightie. Her body somehow full and ripe, like it had been when he was younger. Her hair dyed a blazing red. For a brief moment, he almost forgot she was his mother.

"Where is it, then? Gone, I hope."

A sly grin spread across his mother's face. She did not reply but glanced over her shoulder toward the bedroom. Matt saw her nipples were erect and straining at the thin material. He raised a hand to his mouth and backed toward the lounge. "Oh, God!"

An odd smell permeated the room. Through a wave of nausea, Matt strained to place it.

"Won't you join us for breakfast, Matt?" his mother implored as she followed him, pulling a dressing gown around her near naked form.

"Won't you join us for breakfast, Matt?" another voice echoed. It too was familiar, a deep throaty baritone. A voice hued from years of inhaling tobacco.

Then Matt recognised the stench in the air. *Old Rogue*.

He turned to see a figure sitting in his father's favourite armchair, garbed in Dad's old tartan dressing gown and obscured by the morning paper, held in misshapen hands. A languid plume of tobacco smoke curled toward the ceiling. In the doorway, his mother began to croon an old tune he remembered from his schooldays. A rich masculine voice joined in on the harmony. The paper lowered and a melted parody of his father's face curled its wet lips around the

stem of Dad's old pipe, winked at him and said, "Morning, son."

*Anthony Ferguson has published over forty short stories and non-fiction articles in a range of magazines and anthologies in Australia, Britain and the United States. He authored the non-fiction book, *The Sex Doll: A History* (McFarland 2010), and edited the short story collection *Devil Dolls and Duplicates in Australian Horror* (Equilibrium 2011). A committee member of the AHWA, he has judged at various times the AHWA Awards and Australian Shadows Awards. He was shortlisted in the Australian Shadows Awards for best short story in 2016 and for best edited work in the Australian Shadows and the Aurealis Awards for 2017.*



What Keeps Mankind Alive

Teege Braune

When Gregory awoke, he discovered that his father had died during the night. The old man lay on the small cot, his features distorted, arms and legs twisted in rigor mortis. He had been sick for days, shaking violently and shitting uncontrollably in his bed.

Gregory found a small hatchet in the closet and chopped off his father's leg. The wound secreted a thin trickle of brown, oily fluid. Using some cardboard and a piece of an old wooden stool, he made a small fire in the center of the room. Holding his father's leg by the foot, he roasted the appendage for a few minutes and took a bite from the thigh. The skin was papery and the meat, the little that was there, was tough and acetic. The old man was inedible, so Gregory went to work on the dirty, half-eaten peppermint stick he had been keeping in his pocket. He unpeeled the plastic wrap and shoved the candy in his mouth where it bulged, pressing against the inside of this cheek.

He peered out of his hovel into the side alley, which was so narrow the door clattered against the building opposite. Gregory squeezed out of the opening and scurried down the dark corridor. For some time he passed only the occasional doorway or dark window. Glimpses inside told him only death and emptiness lay within. A sharp wind was blowing against him, piercing him through his thin, stiff jacket. He caught a whiff of fecal odor and followed the scent to an alcove in which lay a small pile of dry, grayish-brown excrement. Gregory picked up a turd and held it under his nose. He nibbled its edge. The shit was old, but it meant that food was nearby.

The alley came to a dead end at a sheer brick wall. Ten feet up, there was a fire escape and above that a window. Gregory smelled food behind the glass. He inched his way up the wall, gripping the bricks' nooks and edges with spindly fingers, and pulled himself onto the fire escape. He lay on the metal platform catching his breath until the rich aroma of food got him moving once again. The window was closed but unlocked, so he pushed open the frame and climbed inside.

The apartment was a palace compared to his one-room hovel, but he took little notice of the furnishings and, without bothering to turn on the light, went straight to the icebox. He found a partially eaten portion of roast beef and a block of pungent cheese, both of which he quickly consumed before slurping down the remains of a carton of half-melted vanilla ice cream. He went through the cupboards and was munching from a loaf of stale rye bread, washing it down with the remnants of a bottle of sour red wine, when he discovered a case of warm beer. Only a couple bottles were missing, and he finished the rest.

Satiated for the moment, Gregory wandered aimlessly around the house in the dark. He found a wad of cash in a drawer and, having enjoyed the smell and texture of the crumpled paper, he stuffed it in his pocket. He found an old phonograph and put the needle down on a record that played a loud marching tune. The noise sent Gregory scrambling around the house looking for a place to hide. He ransacked the closets, tossing aside socks and underwear, dresses and suits, but couldn't find a suitable burrow to conceal himself. Before long the music stopped, so Gregory, calm now and worn out from the excitement, lay down on the

floor. His new home was cozy if not lonesome.

When a light came on sometime later, Gregory tried to crawl under a sofa that was too low for him and lay with only his head buried beneath. A woman screamed and the heavy footsteps that clomped across the floor shook the living room. The man grabbed Gregory by his long hair and dragged him out from under the sofa. As he clung to a handful of Gregory's hair, the man hit him repeatedly in the face and chest with a hard, heavy fist. Gregory wriggled free and ran towards the still open doorway before the man could catch him.

As he bounded down the stairs, the man shouted after him. "If I see you again, I'll fucking kill you!"

Panicking, Gregory darted from the building only to find himself in the middle of a busy sidewalk. He stumbled and cowered, trying to escape the crowds that trudged by him. A man shoved him aside, jabbing him in the chest with a sharp elbow. The pedestrians that noticed him went out of their way to avoid him as they hurried past. His beating had left his face bruised and bloody, and his scalp was bleeding where the man had ripped out a chunk of his hair. He hurried inside the first door he found unlocked.

A man stood behind a counter counting coins. Distracted, he failed to notice Gregory scurry to the back of the shop and hide behind the furs and flannels hanging from a coat rack. Gregory peered between the fabrics into the dingy collection of odds and ends. The few customers therein scrounged through the wares. Frowning, they all seemed eager to smash someone like Gregory should he be stupid enough to emerge, but then he saw a shelf that was entirely filled from the floor ceiling with candy: row after row of gumdrops, gobstoppers, bonbons, malted-

milk balls, lemon drops, multicolored wafers, licorice whips, red hot cinnamon balls, and there in the middle of it all, glistening and heavenly, a glass jar filled with peppermint sticks. The thick red and white striped rods lured him away from his safety. Gregory emptied the jar and filled his pockets.

He already had one unwrapped and was shoving it in his mouth when the owner caught sight of him and shouted at him from across the room. The commotion sent Gregory hurtling towards the back door, but the owner had him by the jacket before he could reach it. He was a fat, burly man, hairy but for his bald head. Gregory struggled to break free, but the owner hugged him against his dirty apron.

"Where do you think you're going, asshole?"

Gregory squirmed unable to slip his grasp.

"You gonna pay for that candy or what?"

Fearing the man would take his peppermint sticks, Gregory thrust his hands in his pockets to cling to his treasures but felt something lumpy there with them. He removed the wad of cash he had taken from the apartment and presented it to his captor. The store owner took the cash from him and let Gregory go. As the fat man counted the money, Gregory ran towards the back door.

"Hey, thanks, buddy!" the owner shouted, laughing. "Take all the candy you want."

Back in the dark alley, Gregory was cold but safe. He half buried himself in a pile of garbage and sucked peppermint stick after peppermint stick until he fell asleep with one of the sweets hanging out of his mouth. He did not dream. He awoke to something rustling against him. Someone was reaching into

his pockets to steal his candy. Gregory snatched them away, preparing to run off again, when he realized the culprit was a young girl about his age. She wasn't pretty, but Gregory's heart warmed, and he gave her a candy cane. She unwrapped it slowly and sucked on the end, never taking her eyes off of him. He stood in the garbage and, without remembering where he had heard it, whistled the same marching tune that had scared him in the apartment. The girl giggled and took him by the hand.

She led him a few yards through the alley until they came to a doorway draped with a stained and greasy curtain. The room inside was dark and warm, and a crowd of people huddled together around a radiator in the center. There were children nestled against the elderly who licked their sores and lesions. There were young people his own age dressed in rags. A woman suckled an infant, its intact umbilical cord stretching up under her dress. Gregory felt safe and at home with this family. He didn't mind that they didn't greet him or even seem to notice his presence.

The young woman who had brought him there took him to a corner of the room. She took off his jacket, removed her thin sweater, and pulled her threadbare dress over her head. She was skinny, dirty, and homely, and Gregory was no different. He took off his pants and ran his hand along her groin. Though Gregory's member was not diminutive, an old wound had left it, when erect, bending backward between his thighs rather than up and out, but the young woman was unperturbed by the deformity. She and Gregory crouched on the floor, buttocks against buttocks, and by smacking their ends together they copulated, each reaching orgasm in their turn, back and

forth, until they grew tired and collapsed on the filthy ground.

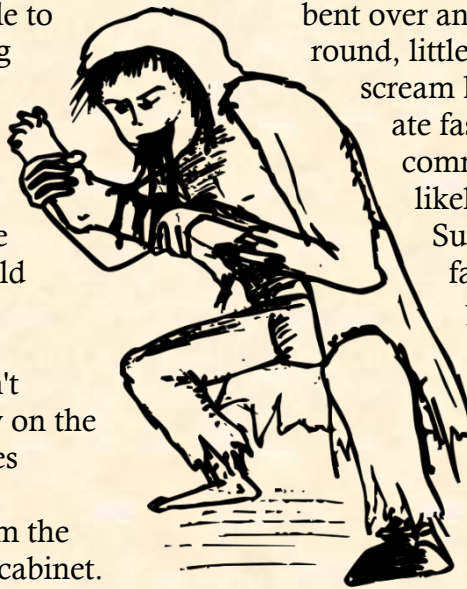
Once they redressed and joined the others in the corner, Gregory pulled the young woman close to him on one side and on the other cradled under his jacket a shivering child wearing a burlap sack as a shift. Lethargic from the cold, the family dozed while others whispered to each other in hushed tones, speaking no real language. They passed food around: raw cauliflower, melon rinds, gristly chicken bones, a pig's spleen, a human hand with a little meat clinging to the fingers. Each nibbled his or her fair portion before passing the grub along to their neighbor, and Gregory soon became unpopular for taking more than his share. No one confronted him, but they grumbled to themselves and tried to skip over him as they passed their scraps. Gregory would not tolerate the slight and managed to pluck most of what he wanted from the child sitting next to him. It wasn't long before his indulgence depleted the group's provisions.

Gregory was satiated for a period of time in which he faded in and out of consciousness. He tried whistling the same marching tune to the young woman beside him, but neither she nor any of the other women wanted anything to do with him. When he was hungry again, he reached for one of the peppermint sticks in his pocket but found that someone had stolen them during his nap. No one seemed inclined to go out in search of food. Gregory was famished, restless, and irritated at being left to his own devices. He got up to rummage around the small room, but quickly realized that there was little to discover and even less to eat; the icebox was empty and the cupboards bare. Under a pile of rags, he found a small section from a ribcage, but it was picked

clean, meatless, and the bones were dusty and dry.

In one cabinet he found some granite, a few pieces of paper, and a bottle of glue. He crumpled up a sheet of paper, shoved it in his mouth, and chewed slowly, allowing his saliva to soften the tough, coarse material. After a while, his jaw began to ache, and the paper was a fibrous, pulpy wad. He tried to swallow it, but the lump lodged in his throat. He choked and gagged but could not cough it up. Turning blue, he groped towards the family gathered around the radiator, but they ignored him. Watching him sidelong, they did nothing to help Gregory as he thrashed on the floor with gaping mouth and bulging bloodshot eyes. He beat his fists against his chest, unable to evacuate the matter choking him to death. With a final surge of strength, he flung himself backward against the wall and spat the wad of paper violently across the room. It bounced off the bald head of an old man who scratched at the spot for a moment but otherwise didn't seem to notice. Gregory lay on the floor gasping for air, his eyes stinging, his throat raw.

After recovering from the episode, he returned to the cabinet. Avoiding the remaining sheets of paper, he turned instead to the glue and squeezed a couple globules of the creamy, beige substance onto his tongue. The sensation of the glue clinging to his teeth and gums was far from pleasant, and it caused him to salivate uncontrollably. His hunger unassuaged, he made his way to the washroom where he found a near-empty tube of toothpaste and ate the rest of it. He found a sliver of dried, cracked soap and ate that too.



When he returned to the group huddled around the little radiator, no one scooted aside to make room for him as they had when he first joined them. They refused to look at him, and when he tried to nudge his way into their ranks, they pushed back and wouldn't budge, so he sat outside of the circle. He was cold, hungry, and felt sorry for himself. No longer willing to tolerate this neglect, he scooped up one of the children no one seemed to be minding. The toddler, though malnourished, still had a thin layer of baby fat on it. It squirmed in his hands but did not cry. Gregory waited for one of the adults to react, but as no one paid any attention to what he was doing, he stretched the baby out across his lap. He bent over and took a large bite out of its round, little belly. The child began to scream high pitched wails. Gregory ate faster knowing with all the commotion that his meal would likely come to an abrupt end.

Sure enough, members of the family were fast upon him. The young woman with whom he had copulated grabbed the baby by its legs and tried to yank it away from Gregory, but he held fast to its arms as he dug into the baby's belly with his sharp teeth. An old man, his bony physique belying a surprising strength, wrestled Gregory to the ground, but could not pry his fingers off the child's chubby arms. The baby screamed louder now, and the wound Gregory had made in its torso began to split wider as it was being torn in two opposite directions. With a snap of its spine, it stopped screaming and went slack. Gregory let go of it in order to fight off two crones who repeatedly hit him on his face and head with open palms while the young woman, now screaming as loud

as the baby had, much to Gregory's annoyance, scooped up the two pieces of the child and, clutching them to her chest, sobbed over them. The rest of the family, once and for all fed up with Gregory's many outrages, hissed and scratched as they descended upon him. Kicking at bony claws, he fought his way to the door. They tried to drag him back inside to maul and batter him, but once he freed himself from their grasp, no one followed him outside.

Gregory had no use for these people who would rather shrivel and starve than strike out on their own. He scurried through the alley, his senses drawn inexorably towards food and warmth. He turned a corner and found a man relieving himself in the gutter. Gregory crept down into the shadows, but before he could slink by, the man shouted at him.

"Hey, boy!" he called.

Gregory broke into a run, but the man was upon him and held him fast by his hair. He had straight black whiskers and wore a black suit with a tarnished brass badge pinned to the lapel.

"Didn't you hear me calling you?" the cop asked, swatting Gregory in the face.

He struggled impotently in the officer's grip.

"Why don't you answer me, boy?" The cop punched Gregory in the stomach, causing him to vomit on his captor's shiny, black suit.

"Now you've done it, you fucking reprobate!" The cop pulled a squat wooden club from his belt and hit Gregory hard on the head. Gregory fell to the ground and began to crawl away, but the cop kicked him in the ribs with his solid leather boot. Another cop wearing white kid gloves approached, interrupting Gregory's punishment.

"Officer Cuddles, I presume," he said to his colleague. "What do we have here?"

"Evening, Officer Mittens. This son of a bitch puked all over my suit. And I just cleaned it."

"Let's have a look at the perpetrator." With his boot, Officer Mittens rolled Gregory onto his back. "He's got blood all over him. He must have murdered somebody!"

"I knew you were up to no good! This is what we do to murderers in my city!" Cuddles shouted, kicking him again.

The two cops took turns beating Gregory until he lost control of his bowels and defecated.

"What's that horrible smell?" Cuddles asked. "The scoundrel's shit himself."

"Repugnant! He'll be dead by morning," Mittens said. "I hate to see trash littering our city streets."

The pair of officers rolled Gregory's limp body into a pile of garbage in the back of the alley.

"No one will notice him here," Mittens said. The cops wiped their hands and strode away chuckling.

Gregory was too injured to move, so he lay in the garbage with an old, brown banana peel draped flaccidly across his face. He lay still, hungry and hurting, until the bitter cold fell below freezing and numbed both his pain and his will to ever move again.

In the dim light of morning, a blizzard blew in, and an opaque torrent of snow fell on the city. Grim citizens peeked out of windows to see nothing but a wall of white. The rich bundled together around hearths to keep warm, while the poor shivered in their unheated tenement buildings. Infants, the elderly and infirm froze to death in their slum shelters. When

a bright, icy sun finally appeared several days later, the city was buried under a suffocating blanket of clean, white snow.

Then the snow was shoveled aside to clear the streets. What didn't turn to slush was piled up in the corners of gutters and back alleys. The heaps were several stories high in some places, and those whose doors were blocked by the mounds dug their way out or starved to death entombed in their sarcophagi.

Gregory spent the long, bitterly cold winter buried under a mountain of salt, snow, and garbage. He lay in the same place for weeks without thoughts or dreams, neither sleeping nor awake, his blood frozen solid in his veins, some dim ember inside of him waiting.

One morning the freeze broke as a tepid sun rose above the city. Gregory lay still while consciousness slowly returned. By mid-afternoon, he had completely thawed, but neither knew nor cared how much time had passed. He no longer remembered his father or the rich man's house. He had forgotten about the candy store, the young woman, and the family who had turned against him. He had no memory of the two cops who had beaten him nearly to death, but he remembered the banana peel and, lifting a weak but steady arm, he grabbed it, shoved it in his mouth, and ate it.

He emerged from his burial mound renewed. His old wounds no longer bothered him, and the melting snow that left him soaked was the closest thing to a bath that he had had in his entire life. A breeze blew down the alley. Gregory felt like a child. Spring was in the air. He was hungry and ready to eat.

He rummaged through the pile of garbage that had been his bed throughout the winter but found nothing else that was edible. As citizens began to dump a

winter's worth of accumulated refuse out of windows that had heretofore been frozen shut, Gregory scurried up and down the street enjoying a smorgasbord of discarded vittles. He nibbled on apple cores and cobs of corn. He sucked marrow from bones and ground his teeth on gristly bits of fat. He wolfed down some dead rats and a small dog. As he cleaned out the piles of garbage lining the alley, he caught a whiff of a wonderful aroma, something better than all the reeking garbage in the world. He followed the scent into a shadowy corner where an enormous man stood next to a young girl who was holding her swollen stomach and breathing heavily as if in pain. Gregory turned to run away, but the man called to him.

"You, lad, come here, please. I mean you no harm," he shouted with a booming but friendly voice. "See what I have?"

Clutched in the man's giant hand was the largest peppermint stick Gregory had ever seen. Gregory licked his lips and regarded this would-be patron. He was massive but did not appear threatening. He was dressed fashionably for springtime in a bright topcoat over an ornate black and yellow striped vest and had a stylish cap cocked to one side of his head. His warm smile was framed by a long, oiled mustache that curled up around the sides of his face. The girl was wearing an alluring dress, sweated profusely, and moaned, but Gregory paid little attention to her, intent as he was on the peppermint.

"Do you like candy?" the man asked.

Slavering, arms outstretched, Gregory approached.

"It's a gift from me to you if only I could procure your assistance for just a moment."

Once Gregory was near, the man handed over the peppermint with a flourish. Gregory snatched it greedily and began to lick it all over. Meanwhile, the generous stranger, casually and unnoticed, removed from his pocket a kit that included a vial of cloudy liquid and a hypodermic needle. With his bare fist, he hit Gregory hard between the eyes. As Gregory stumbled, dizzy and stunned, the man grabbed him by his arm and plunged the needle into his vein.

The prick stung, but before Gregory had the chance to run away, a warm, calm feeling passed over him. The throbbing in his forehead began to recede. It still hurt where the man had hit him, but in a distant sort of way, he didn't seem to mind. He knew he was in danger, that he should be afraid, but found himself caring less and less what happened next. Instead, he felt wonderful. Better, in fact, than he could ever remember feeling before. Like he was floating in the sea, which he had never seen but could recall somehow. He could almost hear the soothing, rhythmic crash of the surf and smell the salty air. The tranquil waves lapped over him, and it was like being in his mother's womb. He couldn't remember his mother's face or anything else about her, but suddenly he was with her again, in utero. The cramped but protective space felt like infinity, its boundaries inseparable from his own existence. He became infinite, a passive but cozy deity uninterested in creating anything. Safe in his solitary oneness, neither frightened nor hungry, but having been frightened and hungry almost constantly since his mother expelled him from her Edenic womb and finally, after all these years, being truly and completely free and reprieved of fear and suffering, Gregory felt something he had never felt before, namely gratitude, and knowing neither to whom nor what

he should be grateful, he thanked himself for this joy he could call his own and had no desire to share it with anyone.

Gregory lay on the ground. The man grabbed him by his hair and dragged him deeper into the dark alcove. The woman was there lying beside him with her dress up around her waist. She was screaming at the top of her lungs, but Gregory hardly noticed the cacophony. Soon her cries were accompanied by another voice wailing at a higher pitch.

The large man picked the baby up by its legs, cut its umbilical cord with a pair of silver scissors, and smacked it soundly on its ass. The woman, drenched in sweat, with a pool of blood between her legs, lay in a swoon and neither reached towards the baby nor called for it.

The man used the same pair of scissors to cut open first Gregory's jacket and then his stomach. He could feel the blades slicing open his skin and tissue, but couldn't seem to comprehend what he ought to do about it. He had no desire to rise or move ever again. Once he had made a significant gash in Gregory's belly, the man shoved the baby, drenched in blood and afterbirth, inside of him. Without a second look, he hoisted the woman up over his shoulder and strode away. Swaddled as it was in Gregory's guts, the baby stopped crying. It nourished itself on his blood and viscera and cooed as it drifted to sleep.

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Looky-Loo

Matthew Lyons

Jess first feels it Thursday morning in the shower, before work—that gross, oily creeping between her shoulder blades that years of being an adult woman have taught her means she's being ogled. The fuck? She shifts in place, rolling her arms to try and banish the sensation because she knows it's not real, just an echo from a bad dream she can't remember. She turns around and closes her eyes and lets the hot water slough the shampoo suds from her face and hair while the warm summer morning floats in through the open shower window and the drain by her feet gurgles hungrily. She's got to hurry up or she's going to be late.

Summers always run long in the city. The heat and humidity get trapped inside the bones of the place like a fever, churning up all the filth and pollution and bitterness it has to offer. There's madness in the misery. People lash out in ways they normally wouldn't, move way faster or way slower, talk less, drink more. Anything to escape the suck. Everybody keeps an air conditioner in their window, but nobody has the money to run it for more than a couple minutes at a stretch, so they have to get creative with other solutions. Some of her friends live in bars every night after work; some of them retreat to their parents' homes for the weekends. Jess takes two showers a day, a hot one in the mornings, a cold one before bed. Sometimes more. It's a Band-Aid, but it keeps her patched together most days.

She strips off all her clothes the second she gets back to her apartment, leaving them in a quarry trail leading to her bathroom. Holy shit, what a day. It's like the A/C at the office wasn't working

at all—the second the sun hit the side of the building, the whole place turned into a pressure cooker. She actually managed to sweat through two different shirts before quitting time. Makes her feel gross and awful, and she's sure the creepy guy in the cubicle next to hers—Dan—noticed the costume changes. She throws the knob in the tub and futzes with it to get the water to just the right level of cool before switching it over to the showerhead and hopping in.

Mother of God, it's perfect.

The water washes all over her body, clotting her long hair to her face and swicking the day from her skin, chuckling as it swirls down the drain and away forever. That full-body wave of relief, a little bit of respite from the grime and mess of reality. For a second, it's everything she needs in the entire stupid world.

Then, she feels it again.

That tingle. That creep. Like an oversized tongue gliding over all her body, warm and wet and pulsing, moving inch by inch. Savoring. Someone's watching her again. Jesus Christ. She leans close to the open window, nearly pressing her face against the grubby old plastic screen, looking out into the early dark, trying to see who the fuck is even doing it. Out across the alley in the next building over, all the windows are black, all the curtains drawn and still. Quiet outside, not counting the sirens in the distance and the scuttling of rats in the trashcans three floors down.

"Getting a good look, fucker?!" she shouts into the silence, quavering anger pulled haphazardly over discomfort. "Good for you! Eat shit and die!"

Nobody answers her. As if anybody would.

Fuck.

She adjusts the showerhead so she's less in front of the window, but it's no use. The moment's ruined, the relief snatched away for the rest of the night. She rinses off quickly and steps out of the tub, wrapping herself in a mildewy towel and retreating to her bed to air-dry away from any and all open windows.

The next day, Jess calls her sister in New Jersey and tells her all about it.

"Ew, Jesus, gross," Stacy says on the other end of the line. "Gross and weird. Do you have any idea who's been doing it?"

"No, like I told you, I haven't actually *seen* anything, it's just... this feeling I get. You know the feeling, right?"

"Yeah, I do, and it's gross. Gross and weird."

"Trust me, I know."

"What about just closing the window, though? Seems like a simple enough fix to me."

"Stace, you've been to my apartment. That bathroom turns into a sauna if you go pee or brush your teeth for too long, even in the winter. I have to keep the window open just to make sure I don't pass out and die."

"Shit, yeah. Right. That sucks."

"I'm aware."

"You could always come back here to shower. I'm sure Mom would be cool with it. She'd like to see you more anyway, so..."

Jess scoffs. "Yeah, totally. Just commute to Weehawken from Greenpoint every day. Two and a half hours one way. Totally, Stace. Good call."

"Jess, it's not that far, come on." She can hear the hurt in her sister's voice, now. Fuck.

"It's far enough to be unreasonable. Thanks for the suggestion, though. Sorry for being a dick."

"No, no, I get it. It's cool. You gotta deal with it in your own way. I know."

"Thanks."

"Just be careful, alright? Lots of creepers in the city, and between the two of us, you're definitely the one that got the looks."

"Thanks, Stace. I love you, too."

It happens every time she showers for the next three days. Not always immediately, but sometimes. Other times when she's just finishing up, or in the middle. No pattern to it, really, other than that it keeps happening, that quiet little inkling that blooms into a full-blown paranoid episode. Staring out through the window, Jess becomes convinced it's the fake-smiley stoners who live just one building over, blunted out of their minds and jerking off together in their darkened living room, huddled around the big picture window that faces the alley and, by extension, her bathroom window. When she's not bathing she watches them from her other windows, taking mental notes of their comings (ew) and goings.

It's them. It has to be them. There's no other reasonable explanation.

She calls in sick to work for the rest of the week and glues herself to the glass, avoids bathing altogether until she's sure all the beard-bros are gone for the day. It takes until Friday, but when she sees all three of them leave late morning? It's like an orgasm. Shit, it's better than an orgasm, because she gets to take a shower at the end of it. So actually it's like a really good orgasm.

She treats it like a ritual: she shuts off all the lights in the apartment and strips down in the little dark her place is ever afforded from the blue ambient morning light. She pads across the hardwood floor to the bathroom, still

twilit from the outside and pulls the shower knob until the water is good and screaming hot. It's supposed to feel like a cleansing.

Jess stands there in the relative dim, listening to the roar of the water pounding against the porcelain for the longest time, lost in the sound, mercifully alone for the first time in a week or more. She breathes in the steam, spreads her fingers and cuts evaporating trails through it as it fills up the tiny, tiled room. Showers used to be her favorite place. Showers used to be her vacation.

She pulls the polka-dotted vinyl curtain open, steps into the stream and starts to glow from the heat. It's like sweet knives biting into every inch of her skin, all at once, and she sucks air through clenched teeth until her body gets used to the scorching. When it starts to normalize, Jess starts to laugh, and clap, and splash around, and stamp her feet. Just like she was a kid again, playing in the sprinkler in her mom's front yard. She has fun. This is what fun is supposed to feel like.

"Don't stop," someone says.

Jess yelps and recoils and freezes, and as the fear alchemizes into blind rage behind her ribs, she snaps her eyes this way and that, trying to find the soon-to-be-dead motherfucker who would even dare. The water from the showerhead buzzes against the tub floor and splatters against Jess's feet and legs, and she slaps her palms against the slick, cool tile in a panicked attempt at counter-intimidation.

"Don't stop," the mystery freak grunts again, his voice rough and not nearly distant enough. "Don't stop, girl." Jess shrieks again, turning around, trying to see who the fuck's saying it when her eye falls on the drain itself, still chuckling as the water spins down and through. She



leans to peer into it, and she sees it: a bloodshot yellow eye on the underside of the drain, wide and

desperate and hungry, frantically looking up and down her soaking, naked body, lingering on the delicate parts, leering at her face, twitching madly, its gaze awful and mucousy and pornographic.

"Keep going," the drain mutters. "Scrub for me. *Scrub*."

A tongue, red and plump, slips through the metal ring of the drain and waggles obscenely in her direction, and this time when she starts to scream, people can hear her from two streets over.

Matthew Lyons is probably taller than you, not that it's a competition or anything. His work has appeared in Black Dandy, Kzine, Abstract Jam and more, as well as in the 2018 edition of Best American Short Stories. Born in Colorado, he lives in New York City with his wife. Complaints can be lodged on Twitter at [@cannibalghosts](https://twitter.com/cannibalghosts) or at www.matthewlyonsauthor.com.

Rubbing One Out

Ken Goldman

"A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe..."

- William Shakespeare on masturbation,
Sonnet 129

Le Petit Morte: 'The Little Death'

- The literary French term for orgasm

"Don't knock masturbation. It's sex with someone you love."

- Woody Allen, comic and film
director

*Pocket pool... Pickle paddling... Choking the chicken... and that perennial favorite, **jerking off!***

Marty Willamar, seventeen, had raised to an art form his intense moments of stimulation and release. Scenes often repeated from the boy's online fantasies varied little:

"You filthy little slut. Let's see you use your stuff. That's it, dirty whore. Use it, use it good. That's it, pig! That's it! That's... IT!!!"

A grunt or two, a spurt of thick spunk. Then Marty sat back, relaxed. The Eagle had landed.

So went the sessions for Willamar enjoying his online porn; it didn't take long, either. As was his habit, he savored the moments afterward, shutting down his laptop until the next time. That time would come soon.

So would he.

Marty passed hours exercising his right hand. Whether considered pleasure or abuse, his obsession mattered little because masturbation felt so damned good. Realistically, sex with his comely former high school classmates never seemed an option. Most girls responded as

if Marty were a living chunk of Limburger cheese.

For Willamar, fantasy females were the way to go, probably the only way. In his personal fantasyland of flesh, he often blew his wad before he could even reach for the Kleenex. On a good day he probably could ejaculate to the Muppets, but while his erection lasted he preferred some semblance to reality.

Remembering John Lennon's quote, "Time enjoyed isn't time wasted," Marty never considered these hours wasted. Why would he? With some imagination, he had his selection of online beauties at the same fingertips that worked mightily to get the job done. True, his hyper-sexed organ never received proper in-the-flesh female recognition because no female alive had seen it, and having no nubile partner with whom to play, Marty chose *himself*. But wasn't masturbation just cutting out the middleman - more precisely, an actual female? It seemed easier and more efficient, and you didn't have to pay for dinner.

No other options appeared. Marty saw no point in lurching from the shadows, surprising some unsuspecting cheerleader while whipping out his manhood. Exposing himself like some teenaged Harvey Weinstein seemed gross, unnecessary, and creepy. Where was the payoff, the sublime release? Maybe a serial rapist-in-training could get himself off that way, but not him. Besides, any young woman educated in self-defense might drop kick his pecker clear across the street. Behind his bedroom's locked door a galaxy of naked women awaited Marty Willamar on Porn Cam, MoFo Sex, and Viva Las Snatch. Little else mattered. Screw Trump, the Middle East, and marching women wearing pussy hats, when there was penis to pull. It was a

good plan and it hurt no one - until one awful moment.

"You filthy pig... whore... Ahhh... Owww!!"

Willamar finally had beat himself raw, and his obsession had created some serious pain. Lubricants helped, maybe a slap of Mom's Vaseline jelly, but the resulting itch of tender skin caused him to duck-walk for days like a poor man's Chuck Berry, not an easy thing to explain. Of course, he'd feel embarrassed admitting his fixation to Dr. Myers, the therapist his parents had insisted he see weekly because they'd worried why Marty showed no interest in anything beyond his bedroom door. Their cluelessness convinced him that the old wives' tale had got it wrong. Masturbation didn't cause him to go blind; it made his parents go blind.

After his first year of therapy, it seemed unlikely Marty would quit his habit completely. He also realized he'd best cool it before he diddled his manhood to the width of a pencil.

"-and I'm up to four, maybe six times a day, Dr. Myers. I used to force myself not to cream my shorts during class, and I probably could jerk off right now!" Marty snickered like a little kid revealing a dirty secret, hoping to pass off his self-pleasuring habit as a joke, although it really wasn't.

Dr. Myers didn't bat an eye. "How long have you been masturbating, Martin?" The therapist's nonjudgmental directness revealed no shock or revulsion. That helped a little; any judgment would have quickly shut the boy's mouth, but not his zipper.

"I started at twelve. I guess that's normal, right? That first time, *damn!* I mean, when I realized I could - that *it* could - it felt so good, you know? Like I'd

discovered some secret talent that was just mine! But since graduation, it's all I want to do." No snicker this time. No eye contact either, as if Marty had confessed to cold-blooded murder. Probably Myers' reaction to that would have been the same.

"You do like girls, don't you, Martin? I mean, as people, not objects? Boys your age sometimes have difficulty with that. Some older men too." The therapist offered a rare smile that Marty ignored.

"Sure I like girls. I mean, I'm not gay or anything like that. But it's easier on my own, the sex thing. Look. I'm not ugly, I know that. I just can't seem to connect with real... with anyone who - *Fuck!*"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm not fooling myself, Doctor. I know this self-gratification thing is playing 'let's pretend' with my head, but for those few moments, my body believes it's all real. And the payoff is about as real as it gets."

"For three seconds."

"Yeah, but it's the best three seconds in the universe. And I haven't grown any hair on my palm like the old superstitions warned. I did get it caught in my zipper once."

While Myers scribbled on his pad, Marty realized his own hands rested on his lap. He corrected himself fast. He was no misogynist; he *did* like girls, dammit! But being with them, touching them? Maybe when his skin cleared up, but now? Not bloody likely.

"The sex urge is the most powerful drive there is, Martin, and masturbation can be an effective tension reliever. It's not easy to prescribe a drug to lessen it. Besides, I'm not sure that's the underlying cause of your - your problem."

"Is it a problem? See, it's the only thing that makes me feel alive, Doctor. The thing is, I worry it's also slowly killing me, at least on the inside, and now maybe on the outside too. It's all about the release, you know? But lately, my penis resembles a raw steak."

Penis. There, he'd said it. He felt embarrassed, but he'd said the word!

Did Myers smirk? Hard to tell.

"Anything that becomes an obsession is like a drug, Martin, and drugs can be very - well, I guess you know that much. But I agree, you may need something to deter your motivation." He reached for his prescription pad. "Maybe this *will* help. It's new, a sort of low dosage anti-depressant that also might--"

"I'm not depressed."

Managing another vague smile, Myers held out the paper. "Cyproterone acetate is also for hypersexuality. The dosage is mild, so it won't turn you into a eunuch. Promise. Just go easy on it, okay?"

"Will I wake up thinking I'm Richard Simmons?"

Myers gave no reaction.

Marty took the paper.

A quick trip to the Rite Aid, then home to his laptop, that was the plan. It looked like rain was coming, and the thickening storm clouds reflected Marty's mood. Swallowing two of the doctor's capsules, he headed for his room, locking the door while outside the thunder grumbles increased. He awakened his Mac and went online. New emails rarely appeared addressed to him, excepting those idiot penis enlargement ads: **GAIN SIX INCHES OVERNIGHT!** Damned ironic, when you thought about it. Another six inches while he was erect and he'd never get his pants on.

Marty located his bookmarked porn sites. The logo for Porn4U.com flashed onscreen, its font displaying assorted women's parted legs forming the lettering with a nipple replacing the dot before the com. Marty snickered. Dot *cum* would be more accurate.

A young girl appeared on the monitor, gorgeous to the extreme while twerking on a pole, some butt naked Miley Cyrus wannabe. Her profile claimed her name was Taffy Licks, clearly her porn tag. She was far too beautiful, an easy quick-to-the-Kleenex exercise. Marty reconsidered his selection. Maybe someone not quite as inspiring.

("You may need something to deter your motivation...")

Right now a classmate from his high school yearbook could prove a better choice. No cheerleader type, but maybe some girl from the Chess Club, certainly not someone ugly, but nothing to easily stroke off to either. That could slow down his release, and maybe fewer strokes could decrease his yearning without derailing it. A logical plan, it seemed.

He thumbed through his yearbook's pages. Debbie Decker appeared a good choice. Plain and gawky, she also was titless, too tall and freckled for Marty's liking. But the photo she'd selected for her yearbook pose was flattering. She had listed her Facebook page beneath the photo. Marty reawakened his laptop and found plenty of less-than-inspiring photos of Debbie, several alongside a red convertible Chevy, probably a graduation present from her loving Dad. Another photo, a recent two-piece swimsuit shot of the girl frolicking in the surf, would provide his litmus test. Marty unzipped and went to work.

"Wonder what you're doing right now, Debbie, you skanky piece of-" The

words just came. He couldn't help himself. They were part of the procedure.

The summer storm had worsened and rain pelted the bedroom window. Lightning flashed, followed by a sharp thunderclap that sent a bolt of hot energy through the cord of the laptop. Shock traveled to Marty's free hand still resting on the keyboard, a burst of static electricity surging through him like Frankenstein's monster. Marty pulled himself from the smoking keyboard the same moment one powerful electrified ejaculation exploded inside his pants. Almost knocking him from his chair, this seemed his strongest one yet.

...inspired by Debbie Decker, for Chrissake!

"... you fucking pig!"

Marty had made a mess on himself, but at least the computer seemed all right. Climbing out of his BVD's, he stood before the mirror certain he could illuminate a light bulb held between his teeth. The thought caused a nervous giggle. "Don't count your chickens before they're choked, lad," he mumbled to his reflection, not clear about what his own witticism meant.

He crawled naked into his bed, wondering if maybe he'd experienced some divine retribution from a pissed off God determined to make him hornier than ever, tossing thunderbolts at his penis like an enraged Zeus. Unable to sleep, he turned on the local news. Trump was making the usual ass of himself. Nothing new there, and following that, field reporter Taryn Friedman's comments seemed ghostly sentence fragments echoing inside Marty's head...

"Fatal accident on the Interstate - young woman driver killed - expressway traffic snarled for miles-"

What had been a red convertible appeared onscreen; what remained was a

misshapen crush of metal smeared across the Interstate leaving chunks of crimson debris its wake. The familiar photo accompanying the image took a moment to register. Marty sprang to the Sony as Friedman pronounced the victim's name. The photo displayed was the same one from Marty's yearbook.

Debbie Decker, all freckles and smiles, wearing her two piece swimsuit!

"...young local woman killed instantly..."

Marty shook the fuzz from his brain. This was some insane coincidence, impossible and absurd. And yet...

Between his legs, he again felt the throbbing begin. He looked down to make certain, touched himself.

He was hard as granite.

An uneasy half hour passed before Marty felt himself drifting off, not easy to accomplish on his stomach while nursing a stiffy. The late Debbie Decker faded to nothingness. Finally, sleep came, and with it a new scenario...

*Dream Marty watches a beautiful young blonde woman sipping coffee at the local Starbucks. Often he's visited this place to ogle the school girls at their laptops, and he knows he's seen this woman before, but not in Starbucks. Hell yes, he remembers her! She'd been a centerfold in some nudie magazine he'd long ago kept hidden beneath his mattress, one of the many fuck rags he had used to beat off. It makes no sense that the woman is seated here, but does anything make sense in an erotic dream? Marty hasn't consciously thought of her for years, but she'd provided many nights of pocket pool when he was younger. Now here she sits sipping her java, as young and shapely as he remembers her. She gestures for him to come join her. She wants him to talk to her. No, more than that! She wants **him!***

The girl's low ride shorts and tank top disappear like vapor. By the time he gets to her,

she's curled on her comfy Starbucks couch completely naked. No one but him notices this or seems to care, but Marty sure as hell does. His manhood twitches with the sight of her. She notices this, of course. How could she not, with the pup tent protruding through his shorts? Putting down her coffee mug, she giggles.

"Remember me, Marty? Hurricane Katrina, men call me. Wanna see?" She blows her warm breath into his ear. "Just like a summer breeze before the storm, don't you think, Marty?"

(Oh God, yes...)

...yes, Katrina! That's her name! Katrina Karr. The glossy magazine's photo spread had contained the snarky headline: HURRICANE KATRINA WILL BLOW YOU AWAY!

He sits alongside her, studying her nakedness. Saying not another word, she guides his fingers to her thigh, and Marty's hand travels to her warm spot. Pulling him close, she kisses him, kisses him hard. The sensation is electric. Feverish, he feels the surge!

(...like that hot juice coursing through his body during tonight's thunderstorm...)

'Hurricane Katrina' does indeed blow him away, and Marty (again!) explodes all over himself, explodes right there in his dream, thick gobs of spunk spreading sticky pools into his sheets.

(So good... so good...)

Marty awoke, the vivid memory of the centerfold's mouth working him like a power tool. Even if the whole episode remained only a damp fantasy, what trickled down Marty's leg was real. He smiled with the erotic memory. Then he remembered Debbie Decker. That freak coincidence had to be just that. Still...

A late night Google search revealed nothing, but Miss Katrina Karr had never been a big name. It probably wasn't her real name anyway. He Googled other women named Katrina Karr scattered

throughout the country, none of them dead nor centerfold material.

(Ridiculous to consider a death-link connection. But, only minutes had passed since his dream, too soon for a notice to appear.)

No, the thought was too ridiculous. Marty returned to a deep sleep. It came easier this time, and the night's second feature began.

...but Marty isn't its principal player. No, he's an observer watching a young woman who's standing unsteadily before her bathroom mirror. Her eyes puffy, her skin blotched and pale, she writes something in smeared lipstick on the glass. She seems hesitant, uncertain.

I'M SORRY

The lipstick snaps from its tube, a useless nub remaining. The blotched letters are crooked, hurried. The woman stares at them, maybe wanting to add more, although the lipstick is gone and time is short.

She's Katrina Karr (back again!) although the former centerfold looks god awful, much older than she appeared in Marty's erotic dream. Her eyes are dark and haunted, her breasts sag, and her skin is sickly pale. The pink bath towel she's draped around herself drops to the floor and she's completely naked, but this time she's not easy to look at. Needle tracks punctuate her arm like small stitches. Retrieving a long kitchen knife from the vanity table she mutters a single word, zombie-like, as if her actions are not her own choice.

"Shit..."

It's as if Marty is watching some sappy soaper whose events he can't control. He utters the same word the woman has spoken. ("Shit!") but other words fill his brain, unsought words he can't bring himself to speak.

(Filthy little slut... Dirty piggyish whore...)

...and the serrated blade slices the woman's wrist, leaving only a bubbling scratch during its first pass. She studies the thin red track the knife leaves. It isn't good enough, not deep enough. She tries a second time, the forced pressure much more pronounced. This time blood spurts from her wrist like a fountain that won't stop. Puddling the floor, blood also freckles the mirror, almost obliterating the two words written there.

The fountain becomes a geyser, and Katrina Karr slumps to the tile, her butchered arm ingloriously flopping over the open toilet seat, dangling in a position in which no sane woman would want herself to be discovered. Marty can do no more than watch the remaining bubbles of blood smear her pale skin. His erection disappears.

"Jeez! So fucking real!"

The morning sun broke through his bedroom window as Marty headed again for his laptop. Typing *Katrina Karr* into his search engine, he corrected this with ***Hurricane*** Katrina Karr. He expected -- no, he *hoped* -- to find nothing about her except maybe for some more naked videos. The coincidence with Debbie Decker was just that. It seemed almost laughable.

Nothing to see here, nothing at all...

Marty's certainty didn't last long. There she was on several websites, although Katrina Karr never existed, at least not the real-life version of the young woman. Her actual name could have belonged to a Mississippi farm girl. She was Kathy Ann Barrister from some small Jersey town he'd never heard of. But in the photo online, the woman appeared well past 30, as Marty had seen in his dream. She had been discovered during the night by some recent lover, but no heroin or speedball concoction had finished her. Kathy Ann Barrister had slashed her wrist, giving no indication

she'd planned her sudden exit except for a few lipstick smeared words on her bathroom mirror. Marty knew what words she wrote. He'd seen them.

A single thought rattled his brain.

"My own jizz! The stuff of life -- and death?"

(How...?)

There had to be some insane cause/effect connection, a cosmic Butterfly Effect, the random craziness of a universe with a sick sense of humor. Or maybe last night's lightning strike, added to his erection-snuffing medication, somehow created within his sperm some kind of super spermasaurus. Whether an inexplicable phenomenon, some celestial game of dominos, or the hand of God, what did it matter? In only a few hours, once he 'came,' two women ***went!***

Onscreen, the bath towel-clad photo of Kathy Ann Barrister seemed to stare back.

(I didn't want this. You did this to me, Marty Willamar!)

The hand of God? No, it was *his* hand! On *his* prick!

Marty felt the surge of a new sensation, undeniable and strong. Yes, there was guilt, he felt plenty of that. But something else too, something he couldn't pretend he didn't feel.

Power!

Damn, could he really kill just like that, pop off any woman at any time, in any place, remaining unsuspected and blameless? Sherlock Holmes couldn't pin the rap on him! He possessed the jizz of death!

(Sorry, Officer. I was home and far away from the scene, just doing my thing.)

Marty's newfound talent's possibilities seemed endless. Kim Kardashian? Hell, maybe *all* the Kardashians one by one, and toss in Caitlyn Jenner too, assuming a stiffy

could be had over her! No, even better - Melania or Ivanka on Airforce One, maybe bring down the whole shebang along with half the government in the bargain! Casey Anthony, Jodi Arias, even Madonna just for the hell of it! Toast, all of them!

Dead, dead, dead!

SUCH INCREDIBLE POWER!

He was getting carried away, Marty knew this. Was he cut out for these thoughts? But maybe, just maybe - one more litmus test, to be certain.

But who?

Marty waited until his parents left for work. Ready for some web surfing and a little rub-a-dub-dub, he popped two of Dr. Myers' capsules, thought it over, then popped two more. Maybe this was cruel and cowardly, but he had to know. Porn sites featured women desperate for cash, probably money those poor skanks needed to support their own kids, or, more likely, their habits. That was sad, tragic. But did they deserve to die?

Fuck that. They were strangers, anonymous nobodies.

(I can do this. I have to know.)

During the past hours Marty had been through a workout, and his member lay limp as a dying worm. But that could be remedied with some enthusiastic encouragement. He went at it.

...and then he stopped. To know for sure, he'd need to see the results with his own eyes, would need to witness those results close up. His cheerleading neighbor, Lindsey Gold, pedaled her bike past his house every morning on her way to yoga, and she always wore tight ass-tugging white bicycle shorts over which she slipped into a pair of jeans after her class. A quick glimpse at the busty teen would do the trick, all right, but Marty hesitated. Lindsey Gold *wasn't* a stranger. Hell, she lived next door; she knew him.

Did he really want to do this to her? She'd done nothing to him; worse, her father was a cop. Marty noticed the man often watched him suspiciously, although he had no idea why. Anyway, did the girl deserve - *this*?

Well, oh hell yeah, maybe she did! So often Marty had muttered a nervous hello to her, but did Lindsey break her stride, did she even look at him? What would one lousy 'hello' from her have cost? She didn't even offer a half-assed smile, as if he were invisible. Okay, then, if Lindsey pedaled into a truck or got ripped to shreds by a pack of rabid pit bulls, he would have his answer.

(No loss here. Just another skank whore, right? No one said life was fair, Lindsey...)

"I can do this... because I *can* do this!" Stepping to the patio outside, Marty unzipped, waited. Sure enough, Lindsey entered her driveway, her majestic ass mounting the high seat of her racer. Eyes on the prize, Marty could have disgraced his BVDs right there, but he took his time. The girl applied some make-up and checked her tires, bending from her seat almost in downward dog position, giving Marty an eyeful of ass. If she knew he was watching, she didn't seem to care.

It was show time.

(Just another skank... just another pig whore...)

Marty muttered "Aw, shit!" as Lindsey pedaled past, although his hand remained in the danger zone. He couldn't bring himself to do it, even if Lindsey Gold deserved it. He just couldn't-

"Hold it right there, Willamar!"

In full uniform, Lindsey's old man (the cop!) stood alongside the patio with a clear view of what Marty had been up to. Although Officer Gold might have selected a better choice of words, Marty knew he'd been caught red-handed, so to speak.

"Mr. Gold, I wasn't - I swear I wasn't doing-"

Lame, really lame.

"I know exactly what you were doing, Mr. Willamar. And that happens to be my daughter you tried flashing! Thank Christ she didn't look over to see your junk hanging out for anyone to see. The school bus is due any second, you little creep!"

"Honest Mr. Gold, I didn't-"

Marty found himself in the back seat of Officer Gold's squad car. Lindsey's dad didn't even allow him to zip up.

"Indecent exposure."

The two words echoed inside Marty Willamar's head as the Senova Juvenile Center's judge spoke. At seventeen, Marty legally remained a minor, so jail wasn't going to happen. But a month at 'juvie' might cure him of his "filthy habit," the old magistrate informed him, adding "Had you been eighteen, son, you wouldn't have been so lucky." The sentencing took maybe ten minutes, but Marty didn't feel lucky at all, and he doubted a cure waited for him at Senova Juvie, either. Maybe Dr. Myers would come to save the day, maybe he'd give the judge some psycho-babbled explanation, but until then...

Whoever selected Francis Botta for Marty's roommate must have been a sadist. At seventeen and close to 300 pounds, the ape had approximately six working teeth in his mouth and probably a rap sheet as long as his arm. The way Botta eyed Marty told him he was in for one rough first night. The two lay on small cots whose mattresses smelled like piss.

Hoping to save his own teeth, Marty broke the silence first. "Is your real name Francis? The name, it's not what I'd picture someone like you - well, you

know." More silence. "So, why'd they stick you here?"

"None of your fucking business, faggot. Call me Francis again and I'll kick your ass into next Thursday." Not a good start, but then Botta felt like talking. "I beat the shit out of my old lady right in her kitchen, okay? Knocked her stinking teeth out in the sink. I'd do it again." He laughed like a maniac. "You?"

"You really want to know?"

"I asked, didn't I?"

"I showed my dick to a cop's daughter."

Botta laughed. Maybe that was a good thing, maybe not. "You do that shit often?"

"Once was enough." Marty managed a weak smirk.

"This place sucks, you know."

Marty knew. "So, where do they keep the girls?"

"Girls? Ain't no girls for ten miles. At least none worth fucking or jerking off to."

Marty faced Botta and lied. "Doesn't matter, I guess."

"Nope. So, let's see it."

"See what?"

"Your dick, dip shit. It got you in here, so it must be worth seeing."

Again, not good...

"Listen, I don't think-"

"Did I ask you to think?" He climbed off the cot.

The latch of the door snapped open. Marty thanked Christ for the interruption.

"That's got to be Leon," Botta said.

A ring of keys in his hand, Senova's night floor supervisor entered the room, a huge guy who could have passed for a sumo wrestler. He looked half Asian, half black, probably was neither. Marty had no doubt the man could break him in half.

"Bed check time. You boys playin' nice, are you?"

"Newbie wants to show me his dick, Leon," Botta said.

"*I didn't say-!*" Marty started, but sumo guy shut him up.

"Well, if he wants to show his giant cock to us, I think we should let him. Don't you think so, new boy?"

No, this wasn't good at all. "Look, I just want to go to slee-"

"I'm thinking you're not hearing me," Leon added, his voice friendly as if he were Marty's new best pal. "See, I'm thinking you really oughta show me what you're packing, and while I'm at it, I'd best make sure you're not concealing any illegal drugs up your butt. Let's say it's all part of your bed check before lights out. And Mr. Botta here, he's curious too. I'm not wrong, am I, new boy? On your feet!" He pulled Marty from the cot.

Some supervisor this guy was, and probably he had this initiation arrangement with the juvie residents, as if this teenaged prison were a rehearsal for the real deal in a few years. Marty had no choice. Before his sweatpants hit the floor Leon slipped behind him, slapped his ass, then spread his cheeks wide.

"I believe you've dropped something else, new boy. Keys, maybe, some cash?"

"I don't see any."

Botta grabbed Marty's hair. "The man wants you to bend over, faggot, see what fell out of your ass..."

"*There's nothing-*"

"Hit the lights, Botta," Leon said, tightening his hold of Marty's behind. He whispered close to his ear, "Too bad life ain't fair, ain't that so, new boy?" The pain was awful as Leon shoved himself inside, but that was only the first surprise. Crouched before him, Botta took Marty full into his mouth and went to work. Against the sharp sting of the kid's broken teeth on his privates, Marty shut his eyes.

Don't let it happen. Not like this. Please, not like this...

That heated rush was coming, and he felt the electric surge, familiar and hot. His ass hurt plenty, but against his will, Marty felt something more disturbing.

Not possible... can't be possible...

The sumo guy was ripping his behind to shreds! And Botta was going at him like a rabid dog. Marty's thoughts ricocheted like pinballs.

Think of anything, anything but what's happening right now...

Debbie Decker, Katrina Karr...

Any fucking skanks... pigs... living or dead...

Dead. Two young women lay dead, but these two guys - *one in front and one behind!* - they were very much alive! If he spilled himself again, he could never explain the consequences, could never say anything a sane person would believe.

Picture someone else, anyone else but these fucking gorillas!

Marty bit down on his lip, but still, he grew hard.

There were two of them - *two of them!* - one in front, one in the rear, each increasing speed with incredible synchronicity. The words came out of Marty's mouth before he could stop them.

"Fucking pigs!"

He felt his rear tighten, heard the man behind him shout.

"What the-? Hey! Hey!"

Leon's member had trapped itself in a butt-cheeked stranglehold as if caught inside a vice. Warm blood trickled down the back of Marty's leg as the man struggled to pull himself loose. At Marty's knee, Botta's blow job had become something else. He was gagging, but he wasn't letting go.

No, that wasn't true. Grunting like a wild boar, he *couldn't* let go.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

They'll find us like this. Jesus Fucking Christ!

Can't hold it... Can't...

The burning rush came. A sound escaped from deep inside Marty's throat. It wasn't a scream. Not even close.

"Ahhhh..."

But screams were coming...

Ken Goldman, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories have appeared in over 890 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia with over thirty due for publication in 2018. Since 1993 Ken's tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written three anthologies of short stories, *YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!!* (Sam's Dot Publishers), *DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE* (A/A Productions) and *STAR-CROSSED* (Vampires 2); a novella, *DESIREE*, (Damnation Books and eXcessica on Kindle); and two novels: *OF A FEATHER* (Horrific Tales Publishing), and *SINKHOLE* (Bloodshot Books).



Here are some links to his work:

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