

I
S
S
U
E

#3

W
I
N
T
E
R

2
0
1
9



"Always make the audience suffer as
much as possible."



- Alfred Hitchcock

UNDERBELLY MAGAZINE

A MAGAZINE OF TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION
ISSUE 3, WINTER 2019

All the Jobs Are Taken – Zoltan Komor

1

Rat Pudding – James Ward Kirk

6

Ages of Man – Alexis Ames

13

Blue Flames – Vi Reaper

22

Peepshow Purgatorium – Trevor Hallam

31

The Familiar – Briar Ripley Page

44

Money Shot – Peri Nieham

54

More – Austin J. Dalton

64

Jay North – Will Bernardara, Jr.

76

H.J. Bartels & A. Fletcher Harper – Editors

A.W. Cobbett – Logo Design & Interior Doodles

UNDERBELLY MAGAZINE is published quarterly by H.J. Bartels & A. Fletcher Harper. The contents of this magazine are copyrighted by the authors and artists herein and may not be reproduced in any manner without prior written consent of the author/artist.

THIS PUBLICATION IS INTENDED FOR MATURE READERS ONLY. Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the publishers. Visit our website at:

<http://underbellymagazine.blogspot.com> and our Facebook page at <http://facebook.com/underbellyzine>.

All the Jobs Are Taken

Zoltan Komor

*Zoltan Komor was born in 1986 and lives in Hungary. He writes surreal short stories and has been published in several literary magazines (**Horror, Sleaze and Trash; Drabblecast; The Phantom Drift; Gone Lawn; Bizarro Central; Bizarrocast; Thrice Fiction Magazine; The Missing Slate; The Gap-Toothed Madness; Wilderness House Literary Review; Kafka Review; Holy Shit**, etc.) His first English book, titled **Flamingos in the Ashtray: 25 Bizarro Short Stories**, was released by Burning Bulb Publishing in 2014. His second English book, titled **Tumour-djinn**, was released by MorbidbookS in the same year, and his third collection, **Turdmummy**, was released by StrangeHouse Books in 2016.*

In my final bitterness, I decide to kill myself after my next unsuccessful job interview. So, I go to the meeting with a loaded gun in my pocket and I try to nod excitedly when the interviewer—this young brat in a fancy suit—asks me if I would lie to my own dear mother if that would serve the interests of the company. I feel like I'm winning, so it comes to me as a surprise when finally he tells me that he's really sorry for wasting my time, but the job is already filled. So, I get my gun out and, placing the barrel in my mouth, I pull the trigger. The window of the office shakes from the sharp bang, and bloody pieces of my brain splash all over the white walls.



In the next moment, I'm on a cloud. In front of me there's a man with a shiny glory over his head sitting behind a desk. He looks hunchbacked as he tucks his wings under a fancy suit. He's reading my CV with a bored look on his face, then, shaking his head, he tells me, "I'm sorry! We would really like to hire you, but currently there are no open positions with our company. You should try again next month!"

"But... but..." I stutter. "Does this mean I have to stay alive?"

"I'm afraid so, yes." The angel nods and hands back my CV.

I wake up in the previous office, where the job interviewer just stares at me, mouth hanging open. My brain is still oozing down the wall. I clear my throat in embarrassment, then I apologize for making a mess in the room, offering to clean up my remains somehow. But, the man in the suit interrupts me.

"Could... could you do that again?"

I'm unsure. I look at the smoking gun between my fingers, then I remember what the angel told me, and nod.

"Great!" The man claps his hands together. "We have a department just perfect for applicants like you! Welcome aboard!"



We sign the contract. The job is quite easy: I have to shoot myself in the head at least four times a day. It's a proper job, they pay my health insurance, not to mention that they finance the bullets. I get my own desk, but I have to share the office with another worker, a middle-aged lady who introduces herself as Bertha. Her palms look white, but her face is bronzed like she's carrying the shadow of something on her cheeks. After we shake hands, she hangs herself with a rope that dangles from the ceiling. As the rope creaks and her body swings left to right, her legs kicking the air, I realize we're going to get along just fine. But, when I take my gun and blow my brains out, she cuts herself down from the rope and asks me to buy a silencer because the noise breaks her concentration. The next day, I bring her a pair of earplugs and I also promise to buy a silencer as soon as my first paycheck arrives. This makes her so happy that she immediately hugs me, and while the odor of her perfume wafts into my nose, I can't help it, I ask her out for supper.

"What a great idea!" Her smile widens. "But I want to cook the meal!"

"Sounds good." I smile back.



At eight o'clock that night, I ring Bertha's doorbell with a bottle of red wine under my armpit. She opens the door, wearing an elegant cocktail dress and a pretty pearl necklace around her bruised neck. I'm covering my damaged, splintery skull with a cheap wig that makes me look like some porn star from the '70s. A roasted chicken greets me from the table, its steam dancing around in the narrow kitchen.

The night slowly becomes more and more awkward for me. No matter how hard I try to change the subject, she keeps talking about work.

"Isn't it great working for a company like this?" she cheers. She doesn't even notice as her fingers wrap around the knife, and she begins to cut her wrists with it like she's slicing bread.

I look away, confused. When blood soaks the tablecloth, Bertha puts the knife down.

"I'm so sorry," she apologizes. "Everyone tells me not to bring work home, but I can't stop it."

I realize the woman is a workaholic, but I just smile at her. In fact, I'm a bit jealous that she finds so much satisfaction in her job. I watch her taking out a box of Xanax from under the table, and she slowly drops the pills into her glass of wine, one by one. Then she looks at me. Her pupils are like wicks ready to catch flame.

"You want some too?" she asks seductively.

And I do. Soon, we drop dead with faces in the mashed potatoes. Then, after another unsuccessful job interview in the afterworld, we come back to life and share a passionate kiss.

"Nothing is sexier than beating death!" she pants into my ear, tearing my shirt. She guides me to her bedroom. My awful wig falls to the ground, curling into itself like a scared little animal. Bertha is fondling the bullet holes in my skull — occasionally sticking her fingers inside the caverns. Then she kisses my neck, licking my ear and forehead, and I feel her tongue disappear into one of my bullet wounds. My penis becomes hard as she licks the remains of my pasty brain, pushing back and forth a bullet that's stuck inside my grey matter. I climb over her, penetrate her, and the bed screams under us.

"Fuck me! Kill me!" she yells, and I look around, slightly bewildered, searching for something I can kill her with. Finally, I pull the pillow out from under her head and press it to her face, smothering her, not stopping as I pump into her. She shakes, scraping the sheets with her painted nails, beating my back with her other hand, and when she finally stiffens and I feel her heart stop, I cum inside of her. I'm catching my breath, dripping with sweat. All of a sudden, I wish I died with her during climax. I glimpse a pair of nail-scissors on the night-stand. I take a deep breath, reach for it and drive it into my neck.

In the morning, we wake up in each other's arms. The sheets around us are bloody. I crawl out of bed and ask where I can find the bathroom.

"Feel free to use the shower. The water will be dead cold at first, but after a while it'll heat up." Then she adds, "Oh, and you can find some razor blades in the top drawer."

"I wasn't really planning to shave," I reply, scratching my chin.

"Well, I wasn't thinking about shaving." She giggles, stretching her naked body. It's covered with old scars.

U.B

I don't know how many times I've been here this week, sitting on the cloud in front of the hunchbacked angel, his shining glory blinding me. He tells me in a strict voice: "Stop coming back! There are no open positions!"

I stop listening. In my mind, I'm with Bertha again. She told me yesterday that she bought a cyanide capsule and she's going to stick it under my foreskin before giving me a deadly blowjob.

"We'll call you if we have an opening!" the angel growls. "Hopefully this time it gets through your brain..."

I look at the drying brain pieces on my clothes. Bertha's red lips smile back at me.

U.B

The next day, I decide to go to the office earlier than usual, just to surprise Bertha. She always starts her shift early in the morning and finishes it late at night, taking as much

overtime as possible. But when I step into our office, my jaw hangs open. Bertha's body hangs from the ceiling — as usual — but this time, she isn't wearing her skirt, and the boss — the disgusting-looking young fellow — fucks her corpse from behind. He's so into it that he doesn't even notice me. Or he simply doesn't care. Bertha — when she comes to life — yells, "This... This isn't what it seems!"

She cuts herself down from the rope using a pair of scissors from the table. I back away. I run to the elevator. I'm beating the call-button. When the metal sarcophagus arrives, I hurry inside. Standing there, I see Bertha running out of the office, heading towards me, the rope dangling around her neck like a grotesque tie. I have to decide where I wanna go. Up or down? I push a button and the door closes. The elevator falls towards the center of the Earth.



At home, two new messages await me on the answering machine. My first thought is that I should delete them without listening. But finally, I press the play button. Bertha's shaky voice fills my room. The words "sorry", "forgive" and "love" circle around my ear like hungry little vultures. What a cursed Möbius strip.

"I love you, forgive me!" the answering machine begs. "What you saw... I'm so ashamed, but I was only doing it to get myself a promotion! I really, really want it! You know, the third floor! They say they have their own electric chairs there..."

I delete the message. I would like to kill myself now, but even suicide reminds me of her. The red light on the machine keeps blinking. I almost forgot about the second message. I'm sure it's Bertha too, so my fingers are dancing on the delete button. But eventually, I push play. To my surprise, the voice of the angel fills my ear, "Hello?" he murmurs. "Um, I just wanted to notify you that we have some openings, and if you're still interested in a job, please come to the office. Don't think too much about it though, the spaces are filling up fast around here."

I look at the night-stand. There's a razor blade next to the digital clock and a bottle of pills next to it. I've still got a gun in my pocket. Great menu. The message arrived twenty minutes ago, there's a good chance that a job is still open. I take out my gun, staring at it for a while. Then, grabbing the phone, I dial Bertha's number.

"Hi, it's me," I say when she finally picks up.

"Oh God, I was so worried that you'd never speak to me again! Please, forgive me!" she cries.

"I can't stay mad at you." I lie. "I just can't... get you out of my head." The words keep dropping from my mouth like regurgitated pills. They taste like Xanax. "As a matter of fact, I was just thinking about you. I'm sitting here in my room with a gun pointed at my chest. And I wish you were here too, so you could die with me now."

"I love you!" Bertha screams. "Want me to go there? Like, now?"

"No, no. I don't want to wait, I wanna die now!" I say, and the honesty of my words surprises me.

"Wait. I'll get a gun too. We could do this over the phone together..." I hear her searching through the drawers. I bet her other hand is in her panties now. What weird telephone sex. Pointing my gun at the ceiling, I pull the trigger and drop the phone. I kneel over the machine and listen as a sharp bang comes from the other side. Then, silence. Eternal silence.

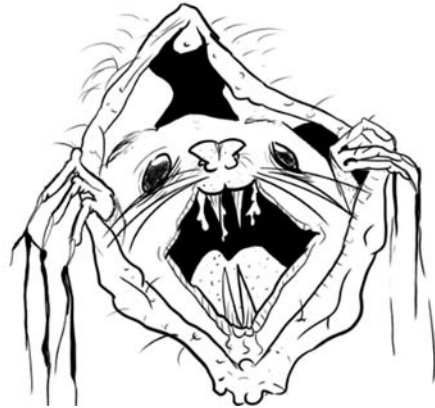
Later in the afternoon, three new messages arrive. The first one—of course—is from the angel, who tells me that all the jobs are taken. The second one is my boss, who tells me I'm fired because I left the office this morning. And the third one is me. I left a goodbye message for myself. Now I can start to live.

Rat Pudding

James Ward Kirk

*James Ward Kirk had his first novel published in January 2018, entitled **Metamorphosis: A Monica McDowney Novel**. He also has a collection of short fiction titled **Death Anxiety**, which is also available on Amazon. He is also the proprietor and editor for James Ward Kirk Publishing (jwkfiction.com). He lives in Indianapolis with his lovely wife of twenty-eight years, and Abby, who rescued us all. You can also find him on Facebook as James Ward Kirk.*

Winston Benjamin looked like a rat. He was happy with it. He wore a slight mustache to accentuate his two large front teeth. He had never shaved so the hair on his cheeks was soft. His hair was dark, and he applied a lot of product to make it sleek and shiny, and he wore it long around his pockmarked face. Winston was a mouth-breather and a smoker, and he often sucked in his cheeks as he breathed. When he wanted to, he could tap his tongue against the gums of his top teeth, imitating the sound of a rat perfectly. He could perform a hungry rat, an angry rat, and a lustful rat. There were others, but he saved those for special occasions. Winston was a rat expert.



He loved going to malls. He loved looking at all the pretty people and envisaging rape and blood and murder. Winston was heterosexual and something of a pedophile, and he loved mind-fucking teen girls just past puberty. He could find his prey easy enough. Girls enjoyed the scent of food, especially because they feared eating it. Being a fat teen girl was just out of the question.

Winston sniffed the air and scented caramel popcorn. He followed the odor. He was wearing a black suit, a white shirt, and a thin red tie. He took a bench in front of a clothing store for fashionable men but held a clear line of vision on two girls in the area of fourteen years of age, sitting on a bench behind the caramel popcorn maker.

Both girls wore short black skirts and white button-up shirts. Their hair was the color of strong black coffee, although one wore her hair long and the other in a bob. Their legs were bare, their faces flush as they noticed boys their age passing by and looking at them. They crossed their legs nervously each time a boy's eyes contacted theirs. Winston enjoyed the flashes of white panties.

Winston named the girls Heather and Judy. He personalized them. Heather was excellent with mathematics, Judy a student of the Classics and especially enjoyed Poe. They both had posters of female fronted rock bands on their bedroom walls. Heather kept her room neat and organized while Judy was a slob. Judy was a daddy's girl and Heather loved her mom the most. Heather wanted to fuck Judy.

Winston was thirty years old. He worked as a gravedigger, so his body, slight as it was, carried muscle. He grew up in poverty. He often woke up at night with rats in his bed. One

time he woke to the tickle of rat whiskers on his cheek. The rats never bit him. He checked his room and found a hole in the wall where the rats entered at night. The old farmhouse he lived in with his family was a large, two-story wood frame structure with an attic. The rats made their way to Winston's room via the attic and a large hole in the plaster wall of his bedroom. These were barn rats, finding refuge in the warmer house in winter. Winston didn't bother to complain to his parents. They didn't care. They were like the barn rats, happy to have a warm home in the winter.

Winston would lie in bed quietly, enjoying the chatter and soft movements of the rats, waiting patiently for the sounds of his parents fucking in the next room to diminish and the eventual quiet that would follow.

When certain his parents were sleeping, Winston took the stairs quietly and made his way to the kitchen. Dad loved white bread so there were always several loaves in the cupboard above the sink. He pulled a loaf down and tucked it under his left arm. There were boxes of saltines on top of the fridge, his lunch food as school was not in session for the Holidays. He took a row of packaged crackers and made his way back upstairs where he fed his rats. He ripped each slice of bread into four squares and tossed them about his bedroom. Even in their feeding frenzy they remained mostly quiet, as if they were conspiring with Winston's actions to operate while his parents slept. Some rats would actually take the food from his hand.

After each feeding, Winston crawled back into bed, knowing sleep would not come until he masturbated. The familiar erection arrived. He used his thumb and forefinger, moving the skin on his tiny penis up and down, legs spread wide. He quickly looked down at his crotch, at his ejaculation. That was when he saw her. She was larger than the other rats, and pregnant. She looked at Winston's semen and moved up to Winston's eyes. He understood. Getting as much semen as he could on his forefinger, he reached out to the pregnant rat and allowed her to lick his finger clean. The soft warm wetness of her tongue threw Winston into orgasm again. He fell asleep. When he awoke, there was no dried jism.

The grown-up Winston jerked from his reverie. He noticed his erection, but not the throbbing. Rather, shame robbed him of it, and shame wafted from him like skunk spray. A man dressed in a suit exited the clothing store. Winston came in his pants but no ecstasy for him. Instead, shame erupted from the tip of his penis. Another man in a suit left the clothing store, an expensively dressed man with a bag of clothes in his left hand. Winston paid them no attention.

Winston locked eyes with Heather and Judy. He would not let go of their gaze and the girls could not pull away. He transferred his shame to them as if he was throwing rocks; he was also in their virgin minds. He projected to them the filth and shame secreted in the soft folds of their vaginas. He showed them how they would cheat on their future husbands, fucking their hubby's best friends while hubbies were at work, offering them another man's baby. Abortions at age sixteen lurked in the corner of their eyes while their drunken boyfriends fucked them. I dismembered two cunts just like you. Look in the trunk of my car. I dare you.

Heather started weeping. Judy puked.

Winston had lost them. However, he had finished with them, so, whistling softly, he stood and moved down the mall, smug, listening to the Carpenters slinking from hidden speakers.

Heather committed suicide. Judy never married.

Winston settled onto a bench outside Victoria's Secret, placed there for men to sit and wait like trained seals while their wives, girlfriends or the married women they were fucking worked hard to satisfy their lust, and their lust to be wanted; women desire to be desired.

Winston knew their secret, though. The men's fantasies, as they sat sodden with sexual appetite, were on the other women entering and exiting the store. And sometimes the men sitting next to them, to fuck them or to murder them.

Winston was a predator and, like most predators, recognized others when he saw them. Jackson, eater of family pets, followed a family from the pet store. The little blonde girl with big blue eyes was holding a goldfish bag in front of her, chattering away at her new friend. Across the way at the Foot Locker, a man stood in the entrance, dressed like a referee, patting boys on the butts as they entered, coaching them, selling shoes. The little boys sensed something, that perhaps the grip was a little too long, a bit too harsh a touch, and for a moment felt like crying. Only for a moment as the thought of new sneakers excited them, the scents of fresh leather strong and their young minds moved on like the minds of children do.

Winston wasn't interested in the women entering and exiting the women's store. He was watching the ones on the far side of the walkway, the women too fat or too ugly or too fat and ugly to buy lingerie. The kind that would go out of their way not to cross in front of the display window because of the sexy mannequins splayed out like the women they scorned, for their cheerleader beauty, a beauty pageant in motion, and their easy choice in men.

The man sitting next to Winston said, "What are you doing here?" He was wearing Khakis and a green shirt with a tiny sailboat label on the front.

Winston produced a knife like a magician. He cut the nail on his left pinkie finger, making sure he cut the skin underneath to produce blood. He slurped the blood. The man next to him went quiet.

Winston scrutinized the passing fat people on the other side of the aisle like a dog with its penis on display. Winston loved fat women. They smelled as if they had just crawled from the ocean, dead octopus, a fat squid, and, if he listened close enough, he could hear their mating squeals.

She was perfect. A squat woman, around five foot and four inches, about three hundred and fifty pounds, she squished down the aisle sucking a chocolate bar like a nympho gobbles cock. White, limp, and greasy brown hair, no matter how often she shampooed, dressed in pink spandex, strutting as if the universe evolved solely to suit her. She was perhaps twenty-five years old and sported the brown promise of a mustache. Winston liked a mustache on a woman, and hairy arms, as it was a scientific fact abundant body hair on a woman guaranteed a pronounced sex drive. She was braless; her breasts shaped like squash that hung over her abdomen like sweaty socks. She was healthy.

Winston walked to the middle of the aisle and stopped as she passed by. He saw enough ass-crack to drop a small pizza into and watch it disappear. She moved like pudding. Yes, like vanilla pudding. I shall name her Pudding.

Winston had an erection when he caught up with Pudding. He moved his right arm slightly, and his shoulder. As he moved even with her, he rubbed his cock against her thigh.

Pudding said, "I'm not impressed."

Winston smiled and unrolled his tongue.

"Now I'm impressed."

Winston giggled.

“What’s your name?”

“Winston.”

The woman stopped walking in front of the candy store. Winston stopped and then moved closer to face her, looking at her eyes.

“My name is Mary. Mary Worth.” She smiled at Winston. Her tongue was black with chocolate.

“Do you mind if I call you Pudding?” Winston’s voice sounded like a snake slithering across desert sand. He thought it his worse quality.

“Why would you want to call me that?” Mary didn’t sound angry or hurt. She sounded horny.

“Isn’t it obvious? You look delicious. I want to eat you up.”

“You’re place or mine?” She squeezed her thighs together, as best she could, and crossed her arms in an attempt to hide her erect nipples and failing, nevertheless.

Winston said, “Let’s go to my house. I just bought groceries. We can spend a lot of time together. I want to lick every inch of your body.”

Pudding laughed. “That’s a lot of licking.”

Winston took Pudding by the hand. “Let’s go, sweetie. I want you bad.”

“What’s your last name, Winston?” She squeezed his hand.

“It’s embarrassing,” Winston said.

“I promise not to laugh.”

“Churchill, my family name is Churchill.”

Pudding laughed and tugged at Winston’s hand. “Let’s go, Winston Churchill. You have an upward battle to fight.”

Winston purchased six pounds of fudge—chocolate, maple, and peanut butter, and then led her to the south entrance. No. You have a battle to fight. You look strong but you will lose.

On the way home, Pudding asked Winston what he did for a living.

“I’m a pediatrician.”

Pudding estimated him. Winston could see the dollar signs in her eyes.

“What do you do, Pudding?”

“I’m between jobs, right now. I draw unemployment and get welfare. I get by.”

“Don’t you have any family to help?”

Pudding said, “No, not really. I have a sister that lives in Los Angeles. She just did a dog food commercial. She’s skinny and beautiful and I embarrass her, so we never talk.”

Los Angeles is a long way from Indianapolis.

Winston drove his white Chevy van down a long driveway leading to a two-story Tudor type house. The lawn was immaculate. Winston kept the hummingbird feeder full of sugar water. The home’s owners, The Smiths, both in their eighties, lay scrunched into a freezer in the basement. There was lots of space left for ice cream. The phone for the residence hadn’t rung even once in the five weeks since Winston murdered the Smiths.

Pudding lay spread out wide, face down on the king-sized mattress, her tremendous weight on her knees and elbows, her ass high in the air like a pear split down the middle. Her flesh shared the same consistency as a pear. Wax paper lay next to her head, crumbs of chocolate sprinkling the wax-like rat droppings. Mary’s mouth and nipples shined with chewed and slobbered chocolate drooled from her mouth.

She looks like tapioca pudding. Winston's face lay buried deep within her crevice. His nose sometimes penetrated her anus as he licked and sucked and licked. In his mind, he heard the cries of seabirds, the whooshing of the ocean rhythmic with his licking. She smelled like a gutted fish and hemorrhoids sprouted from her ass like shark fins in the surf off a beach in Australia.

He saw Pudding reaching for his head, but her arms were too short to succeed. He pulled his head out from within her cavern. "Is everything okay, Pudding?" Her body lay limp, spent, and looked like a helpless turtle turned upside down. He stroked her back, softly, seductively. The Ramones sang about girls from the stereo in the living room.

"You can fuck me now."

He mounted her, nibbling at the back of her neck. Winston's tiny penis barely made it past Pudding's labia minora and into her vagina. His ejaculation, however, was for the ages. He shot hard and deep, so copiously that sperm spilled from Pudding's vagina as the tunnel became backed-up. Winston squealed. He reached in, pulled out a handful of cum, and handed it to Pudding.

She said, "It looks like tapioca pudding," and then she ate it.

When she missed her period two days later, Winston stopped fucking her. He was satiated. Nevertheless, he was always there to satisfy Pudding's desires.

By the end of Pudding's first trimester, she weighed four hundred and ten pounds. Winston had discovered some motion sickness medicine in a dusty suitcase, a reminder of better times for the Smiths. He ground the pills up and mixed it in with her ice cream, even though the bottle warned of possible birth defects for pregnant women. Birth defects were not an issue for Winston. Cleaning up puke was. Wiping her ass was one thing, but he drew the line at vomit. She'd lay in it for all he cared. He heard Pudding call out just as he was entering the bedroom with her breakfast tray—fried chicken, fried potatoes, and a Dutch apple pie.

"Winston! I have to shit."

"Okay, Pudding." Winston set the tray down on the table beside the bed. He went to the foot of the bed and climbed on. "Reach your arms out, Pudding." She did, and he pulled her into a sitting position, straining, sick of her staring at him, red-faced from exertion, and of the absurd oil painting of orange tulips hanging over the headboard. "I hope this helps."

Pudding grabbed a chicken leg off the plate and sucked the meat and gristle off before Winston could even reach the side of the bed. He grabbed her by the wrists and Pudding reached her feet.

Through a mouthful of chicken, Pudding said, "Thank you, Winston."

"Anything for you, Pudding; after all, you are the mother of my children."

Pudding said, "Children?" She took one ponderous step toward the bathroom.

"I heard more than one heartbeat, dear Pudding." Winston took Pudding's arm to hurry her along. She'd already shit on the floor once.

Winston got Pudding to the toilet in time. Immediately following a long blast of wind from her ass, she said, "I'm having more than one baby?"

"Indeed."

"Oh, Winston, that's wonderful." Her bowels moved, hard and long, then soft and long.

"I'm done, Winston." Pudding stood and leaned over. "Get in there good, sweetie. Don't be shy. You're not going to hurt me.

That's what you think. Winston dug in.

By the end of the second trimester, Winston could no longer get Pudding off the bed and into the bathroom. For a while, an ironing board made a great tool for getting her upright into a sitting position. He'd then put the board under ass, and, working together, she could waddle to the bathroom, piss, and shit to her heart's content.

Of course, she was showing. She weighed more than six hundred pounds, and her baby-bump looked like scooped up pus on a festering wound.

Pudding was eating seven full meals a day, not counting ice cream, doughnuts, candy bars, and other treats. "I need to keep my energy up. I am eating for three, you know."

Winston was tireless when it came to keeping Pudding with a tray of hot food in front of her at all times. He would say, "You're so beautiful," and meant it.

"Winston, I have to shit."

"I'll be right back."

"Hurry, Winston. I don't know if I can wait much longer."

In only a moment, Winston returned with a turkey roaster sans lid. He helped Pudding get things situated and then sat back, listening to her explode. Things are going perfect.

At eight months gestation, Pudding was well on her way to seven hundred pounds. Winston had fabricated a baby bed of sorts, working in the garage while Pudding slept, and had moved it next to her bed. He swaddled her perfectly with blankets and towels, preparing a nest for her. She would birth more confidently with the extra materials, as the placement of the items would feed her confidence in his ability to deliver the baby when the situation arose.

Winston noticed the vaginal discharge as soon as he entered the room. It smelled of blood and lubrication. He grabbed the discharge with his hand and dropped into Pudding's makeshift stool. It floated.

She was bed bound, unable to move. She had bedsores the size of dollar bills, but that was the least of her problems. Winston said, "You're cresting."

"What does cresting mean?"

Winston reached between Pudding's enormous thighs, the size and shape of huge turkeys, overfed growth hormone, grabbed the baby boy by the head, and yanked it out. He handed the small squalling baby to Pudding. "Bite through its umbilical cord"

"Winston, can't you just cut it?"

"There are special nutrients in the cord your body requires. Bite through the cord."

Winston dropped his smiling, adoring mask the moment the vaginal discharge was visible.

Pudding did as she was told. Her mouth was red and greasy from chomping the cord in half.

Winston dropped the baby into the makeshift crib built in the Smith's cellar.

Pudding cried out. "I want to hold my baby." She was naked under the blanket, and the blanket was already wet with milk where her breasts hung down.

He heard a plop. "No. There's another baby coming already." Winston walked to the end of the bed and found a baby girl floating in Pudding's turkey roaster, covered in shit and soaked in piss. He stretched the baby over Pudding's huge gelatin abdomen. He said, "Bite."

Pudding did as was told. She was wavering in an out of consciousness. The bottle of Xanax he put in her chocolate milk was having its way with her.

Four more babies, four more bites. The makeshift crib was teeming with screaming newborn babies. There were five female babies in the crib, and one male—the firstborn.

Pudding was bleeding profusely from her vagina. She would die soon.

Winston counted six pups. There's one more. I can feel him calling to me.

Winston returned to the end of the bed and stared at Pudding's vagina. He rolled up his sleeve and thrust his arm deep inside her. There. I can feel it."

Winston grabbed the baby's leg and pulled him from his mother's womb. The runt; I shall name him Alexander.

Winston produced a knife and cut the cord. This one is mine. The baby was malformed, missing its right arm and left leg. Its eyes and mouth were slits. There was barely a nose. The baby didn't scream, but breathed deeply, confident that many more were to come. Winston laid him on the floor.

He took the placenta and forced it into Pudding's throat. She was barely alive, nearly overdosed. She struggled, but her efforts were without hope as Winston used his hands to close her nose and mouth. She struggled, even managed to get the placenta down, but to no avail. Pudding died. Her babies squalled in their crib, swarming over each other like maggots. Winston grabbed Alexander by his one leg and carried him downstairs. They paused at the doorway. Winston picked up a telephone and dialed 9-1-1. He gave the dispatcher the address and told her to send several ambulances. He wanted his progeny to live. He ended the call before the dispatcher might ask any further questions.

Winston lifted Alexander up to eye level. They met eye to eye, although Alexander looked at his father from upside down. Winston emitted a series of chittering sounds. He finished and then spoke in words. "I know of this perfectly isolated, seedy motel where we can go and hide out for a while."

Winston and his son disappeared.

Ages of Man

Alexis Ames

Alexis first picked up a pen when she was eleven years old and hasn't put it down since. Science fiction is her preferred genre—more specifically, exploring the intersection of humanity and artificial intelligence—though she has been known to also write fantasy, steampunk, and horror. In her spare time, she runs, hikes, reads, and explores her adopted state. She can be found on Twitter at @alexis_writes1, and her blog is located at www.alexisames.home.blog.

Nothing lives on the edge of the solar system.

Nothing organic, at least, which is why AX-983 has to run a quick diagnostic to make sure his photoreceptors aren't malfunctioning. They aren't; the data his brain is receiving is accurate. An adult human male is strapped to the table. A *real* human—one who is alive, breathing, and visibly frightened.



"He's perfectly healthy. There were no errors in the DNA at all," the trader, B-423, tells AX-983 as AX-983 inspects the human. The human's eyes, a dull gray, track AX-983 warily.

"DNA?" AX-983 asks. "Where did you get it?"

It had to have come from Earth, of course, but how had it managed to survive for almost two hundred years? The DNA sample must have been in some kind of stasis, perhaps a cryo-chamber. It doesn't matter, not really. What matters is that AX-983 is seeing a human for the first time in two hundred years, and he isn't hallucinating.

B-423 doesn't answer. "I grew him a year ago."

"Can he speak?"

"Yes, of course. He's been taught three different Earth languages."

"You haven't taken proper care of his body." AX-983 notes how thin the human is, how his legs and arms are atrophied and how AX-983 can count every rib through his paper-thin skin.

"I feed him nutrition supplements every day," B-423 says. He senses AX-983's interest, and adds, "His body is functional, his organs are healthy. He should have a normal human lifespan of a century or so. I'll sell him to you for the price of your ship."

He's a fine specimen, perfectly average, and AX-983 knows that he will never get another chance at this.

"How many others know about him?"

"Only me."

"That's unfortunate for you." AX-983 shoots him in his central processing unit, and B-423 crumples to the deck. "But I thank you for that."

The human stares at him, wide-eyed.

"Don't hurt me," he whispers. "Please, I don't -"

"Hush." AX-983 approaches him, cups the human's face in both hands. The human's warm flesh heats his mechanical fingers and the human shivers at his touch. "I would never kill you. You're very special to me. You're going to come back with me to my ship, and I will give you a wonderful life. You're going to be my Joachim."



For as long as AX-983 had known him, Joachim sported a jagged scar along one cheekbone. He could have had it repaired—a few minutes with a dermal regenerator would have been more than sufficient—but outright refused. It had nothing to do with his dislike of medical procedures, which AX-983 knew all too well. Rather, Joachim had always said that the scar made him look rugged, and the memory of how he had received it was not one he wanted to erase. Keeping the scar honored it.

This new Joachim has no such scar, of course. His skin is the same tender, pale pink of a newborn infant's, smooth and unblemished, unmarked by a lifetime of wear. There are specialized UV lights on board the spaceship that AX-983 will use to give him the same tan that Joachim's skin held even in the winter months, of course, but the scar is another matter.

"Please hold still," AX-983 tells him. Unnecessary, of course, given that a thick strap across his forehead and another across his chin holds Joachim's head in place. AX-983 strokes his thumb across the unmarred cheekbone.

The brand-new human, who has likely never felt pain in his short life, screams behind closed teeth as AX-983 gouges out a chunk of his flesh. After, AX-983 cleans and dresses the wound—no sense in giving this new human body an unnecessary infection—and smooths his hair from his forehead.

"There, now," he murmurs. "Was that so difficult?"

"You said—you said you wouldn't—"

"I said that I would never kill you, and I promise that is true," AX-983 tells him. "This pain is necessary, but it is also only temporary. Once I finish all the modifications, you will be free of it. Trust me. It's all I ask of you."



The human's eyes are wrong.

AX-983 grows a new pair of eyes in the lab for him. It takes him weeks to get the color right. Joachim's eyes had been the deep blue of a summer's day, the vibrant azure of Neptune, the cobalt of Earth's oceans. Temperamental, mercurial, changing constantly with his moods. This new human—this new Joachim—has eyes the color of slate, as dull as the deck plating and walls of the ship.

Joachim screams when AX-983 blinds him. The sound crests and breaks, redoubles as AX-983 scrapes the excess matter out of his eye sockets, becomes surreal and unhinged. The noise stops only when AX-983 turns off his auditory receptors, and after that, the human

passes out. Thankfully, he remains unconscious as AX-983 carefully inserts the new eyes, deploying thousands of nanobots to connect the optic nerves and repair the damaged tissue.

He wakes after almost twenty-four hours, and bloodshot eyes blink up at AX-983. Beautiful eyes, gentle eyes, Joachim's eyes.

"Hello, Joachim." AX-983 strokes a thumb across his jaw, feels the ripple as he shudders. "It's so good to see you again."

The healing process for humans is a lengthy one, and every human body responds differently to trauma. Joachim sleeps, wakes, and then sleeps again. AX-983 brings him sustenance every six hours and helps him eat, as the restraints prevent him from holding the spoon himself.

"Would you like anything else, Joachim?"

"Why do you keep calling me that?" His voice is a thin rasp.

"It is your name."

"B-423 never called me that."

"B-423 was a fool who didn't realize what treasure he had in you," AX-983 says firmly. "You are Joachim."

"I don't understand." He looks distressed, and AX-983 wishes he could make this easier for him. "Who is Joachim?"

"It's the name of a human I once knew," AX-983 says. "Someone who was important to me. Now, it is a name that belongs to you."

"What happened to him?"

"He died," AX-983 says simply.

Obviously, Joachim has some concept of death, no doubt due to the unsavory trader who ruled over the first year of his life. He visibly pales.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"It's the nature of things," AX-983 says, though the first Joachim died much too young. He had at least four decades left to live, AX-983 estimates, before he was robbed of his life.

"I will die, too," Joachim says softly.

"Not for a long time," AX-983 says firmly. "I will make sure of it."

"But I'm not him."

"Not yet," AX-983 agrees. "But you will be. I'll make sure of that, too."

Joachim swallows hard, and he flinches away when AX-983 reaches out to him.



After the eyes, the most glaring issue with Joachim is his height. He stands six centimeters shorter than his namesake, so that will need to be fixed as well.

"What're you doing?" Joachim's speech is slurred, and he's valiantly fighting the medication AX-983 had injected in order to render him unconscious. The drugs are costly, and AX-983 would prefer to use them only when absolutely necessary. As Joachim fights to stay awake, AX-983 allows himself a brief moment of fond reflection. The original Joachim had hated hospitals and medical procedures as well – at least when he was the one on the other end of the procedures. The new Joachim's struggles will eventually prove fruitless, of course, but AX-983 is heartened to see this spark in him.

"Hush," AX-983 murmurs. "Relax."

Joachim wrenches at the restraints that keep him bound to the table, using what remains of his flagging strength for one last burst of power. It's useless, of course, and he soon falls unconscious.

It takes AX-983 almost ten hours to insert the metal rods into Joachim's spine and legs that will add the necessary centimeters. It's longer than he expected, and Joachim starts to come around after only half that time. AX-983 doesn't have more of the anesthesia to spare, and so he's forced to mix chemicals from the engines in order to make chloroform. It's primitive, but it will have to do.

He doesn't dare render Joachim fully unconscious with the chemical, not with the medication already in his system, so he administers it to Joachim in small doses. Joachim floats in a twilight haze, not fully aware of his surroundings and not completely unconscious, mumbling under his breath and twisting weakly against the restraints. AX-983 cuts through flesh and sinew, muscle and bone, inserting the rods quickly and efficiently.

When he's finished, he stitches Joachim back together and uses a dermal regenerator to smooth over the incisions. The marks are erased completely from his skin, as though they were never there.



There are few places on the spaceship that the new human can go, and there is certainly no escape for him. Nonetheless, AX-983 keeps him restrained in the lab. Joachim is unfamiliar with this world and its technology, and AX-983 isn't available to watch over him every moment of every day.

Someday, when Joachim is ready. Someday, AX-983 can let him free.

AX-983 adds what comforts to the lab he can. He installs a bed, with the kind of plush mattress Joachim always preferred. He makes sure that the temperature remains a steady seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit during the day, and at night drops it to sixty-eight. He provides this new Joachim with an abundance of soft, warm blankets at night.

A stray memory file surfaces, of Joachim curling up against AX-983 in the middle of the night, savoring the warmth that his mechanical body put off. AX-983 allows himself to replay the memory file twice through before carefully filing it away again. Someday, perhaps, this Joachim will seek the same kind of comfort in him, and AX-983 will be only too happy to provide it.

"Good morning," AX-983 says. "How are you feeling today?"

Joachim licks dry lips.

"Hurts," he murmurs.

"Excellent. That means that your nerves are transmitting signals properly to your brain." AX-983 peels back the bandage on his face, inspecting the initial wound. Precise as he had tried to be, the injury is half a centimeter too short. At least that is an issue with an easy remedy. He pulls out his knife and digs out an extra half-centimeter of flesh, holding Joachim's head still with his other hand while he gasps and tries to recoil. "Now, now, none of that. I'm doing this because it is necessary, you must realize that. Hold still—there. Much better."

Tears leak out of the corners of Joachim's eyes. AX-983 brushes the moisture away with his thumbs.



Joachim needs a new face.

Or, more accurately, Joachim needs to *look* like Joachim. The strand of DNA had grown a human, but he is a random human, one that looks very little like Joachim. His facial structure is all wrong. His features must be altered. Higher cheekbones, ones that are more prominent. A stronger jaw. Slightly crooked incisors. More hair, and strands that curl instead of the ones that currently lay limp across Joachim's forehead. AX-983 scans Joachim's ears and compares them to the photographs he has of his Joachim in his databases. He's pleased to discover that the ears, at least, won't need to be altered much. He will need to trim down the lobes, but that's an easy procedure.

AX-983 operates twelve times on Joachim's face, breaking bone and inserting metal plates, widening his face and squaring his jaw and bringing out his zygomatics so they are more prominent. A dermal regenerator seals the incisions and erases the scars that would have inevitably formed, but the operations take their toll. Joachim's face becomes swollen, bloated, red and angry.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Joachim speaks the words from vocal cords that are raw from screaming. "What have I done?"

His face is swathed in bandages. AX-983 spends hours at his bedside, alternating between pressing cold and warm compresses against his face, trying to bring down the swelling and ease the pain. He hates that he has to put Joachim through this ordeal.

"It's only temporary, my dear," he murmurs. "We are so close to being finished. Please, try to relax. You will heal faster if you rest. Would you like some soup?"

"I want to go."

"Go?" AX-983 asks, puzzled. "Where would you go? This is your *home*. You belong here, with me. I will take care of you always."

Joachim lets out a broken sob, and AX-983 kisses his forehead soothingly.



Joachim's shoulders are too narrow. AX-983 snaps his clavicles, operates once again in order to insert metal rods that stretch his shoulders and chest. When he's properly healed, exercise will build up the muscle that the original Joachim carried naturally on his broad frame.

AX-983 then turns his attention to Joachim's hands. The rod of Asclepius is easy enough to ink onto the inside of Joachim's left wrist, precisely where the tattoo had been on the original Joachim's body. Dark hair already peppers the backs of his hands, which is as it should be, but his fingers don't betray the lifetime of hard work that the original Joachim's did. AX-983 uses a hammer to shatter the bones of his left wrist. Joachim howls.

"Hush, my love," AX-983 murmurs. "This, too, will heal. The human body shows a remarkable capacity for resilience, haven't you realized that yet?"

He takes Joachim's right forefinger and snaps it, and then breaks Joachim's third finger in two different places. He sets them, and though they will heal, the evidence of pat injury will always be there.

How often AX-983 had studied the original Joachim's hands! He found them endlessly fascinating, which was odd because they weren't wholly remarkable except for the fact that they were Joachim's. His were hands that stitched broken and torn humans back together, hands that soothed, hands that brought mewling infants into the world or ushered elderly patients into death. AX-983 had loved those hands. He knows he will come to love these as well.



The scars on the original Joachim's back had been cut into his skin with a whip.

AX-983 purchases a similar one at an underground market on Oberon. He suspends Joachim from the ceiling of the lab, in a harness he designed precisely for this purpose. Joachim's back is bare, exposed, and a cry is punched from his chest with the first blow.

"The original Joachim, the one whose name you carry," AX-983 says between blows, "was drafted into a war. Humans were always fighting wars. It's one of the reasons they died out as a species."

Three more blows in rapid succession and Joachim screams.

"He was captured, and he was tortured. I must replicate those injuries on you," AX-983 says apologetically. "I assure you, this is not enjoyable for me."

He whips Joachim until the deep welts on his back split open and leak blood. Joachim screams himself hoarse. By the time AX-983 is finished, he has run out of air, and he will be hoarse for days. AX-983 cleans the wounds and dresses them. He could have numbed Joachim for this, but it wouldn't have been an authentic experience. The original Joachim hadn't been anesthetized before his torture, and so this one couldn't be, either. He will carry the memory of this pain with him forever, as his namesake did.

"I'm not him." Joachim's head hangs limp, chin touching his chest. He speaks to his abdomen, his words thin and brittle. Sweat-damp hair falls about his face. "I am not Joachim."

AX-983 places a finger gently under the human's chin and tilts his head up. His pupils are wide and black, nearly eclipsing the not-quite-blue of his irises.

"Not quite yet," he agrees. "But almost."



"I have another adjustment to make," AX-983 tells Joachim one morning.

He finds it fascinating that the moment the words have left his vocal processors, perspiration breaks out across Joachim's forehead. The psychosomatic response is swift, which is a good sign. Joachim's cognitive functions appear to be completely intact, which is nothing short of incredible, considering how long that strand of DNA must have been in stasis before B-423 got his hands on it.

"Please—no more, I can't—"

Joachim breaks off with a choked cry as AX-983 cracks the pipe across his face, breaking his nose in three places. This is a relatively easy adjustment, at least. He had been with the original Joachim when his nose was broken and still has the complete memory file of that incident. From that, he was able to calculate the precise angle of the blow, the amount of force that he would need to exert, the exact location he would need to strike.

"There," he says soothingly, wiping the blood from Joachim's face. He sets the break imperfectly and then uses cold compresses to soothe the worst of the pain. The original Joachim's nose had healed badly, so this one must as well.

"He's dead," Joachim says thickly.

"Yes, he is."

"He's dead, I don't understand why I have to be him, why I have to be *here* - "

"You are here," AX-983 interrupts, "because I will not allow time to get the better of me."

"I don't understand—"

"I spit in the face of time," AX-983 snarls abruptly. Even he is surprised at the anger that surges through his circuits. "Time took him from me. That fragile, *useless* human body broke down, withered, died. He promised me he would be at my side forever, and he *died*. So I have resurrected you, Joachim. And I will store your genetic material so that I may grow another when you die, and then another, and another after that. Each time, you will be Joachim. Each time, I will make you perfect."

Joachim stares at him.

"I'm sorry that he died," he whispers. "But I can't *be* him. I can't—I'm not—"

"Then what are you?" AX-983 demands. "*Who* are you?"

"I—" But Joachim falls silent, closing his mouth abruptly over the words. He's staring at AX-983, wide-eyed and alarmed. "I'm—"

He doesn't know. He doesn't know, because he's never *been* anything, not until AX-983 brought him on board this ship and gave him a name, a face, a purpose.

"You are Joachim," he says. "And you are mine."



Joachim has nightmares.

AX-983 had cameras and other surveillance devices installed in the lab so he can monitor Joachim's condition from anywhere on the ship. The human tries to keep himself awake, and always inevitably fails. He sleeps in fits and spurts throughout the day, never for more than a few hours at a time, and always jolts awake.

Sometimes, however, his mind traps him in the nightmare. He thrashes on the table, writhing against his restraints, and doesn't wake up. AX-983, who can't stand his obvious anguish, wakes him when it becomes apparent Joachim won't be able to do it on his own.

"What was it about this time?" he murmurs, using a damp cloth to wipe the sweat from Joachim's forehead.

"Nothing."

"You can tell me."

Joachim closes his eyes and leans slightly into the touch. AX-983 is startled, and no less thrilled.

"I was trapped," he murmurs. He opens his eyes but can't meet AX-983's gaze. "It was dark—I couldn't move. The walls started to close in. I tried to push them away -"

He breaks off.

"You're safe now," AX-983 tells him. "I promise. Nothing will happen to you on this ship. I will always be here to take care of you."

Slowly, carefully, AX-983 loosens and then releases the restraints. For the first time in months, Joachim is able to move his arms and legs freely. He looks at AX-983 blankly, and then slowly sits up. He swings his legs over the edge of the bed and lets his feet dangle. As tall as he is now, the bed is still high, and his toes don't quite brush the floor.

"Thank you," he murmurs. His shoulder brushes AX-983's, and he doesn't pull away.



Joachim takes his first tentative steps in the lab. When he stumbles and falls, AX-983 is there to catch him. He sits there for several seconds, his breathing ragged, half in AX-983's lap and half on the floor.

"I can't—"

"You can," AX-983 murmurs against the shell of his ear, eliciting a shiver from Joachim. "You will. It takes practice."

Joachim huffs. "You make it look so easy."

"It will someday come as naturally to you as breathing," AX-983 helps him to his feet. He keeps his hands under Joachim's elbows, just in case. "Let's try it again."

Eventually, Joachim walks. Soon, he's exploring the ship with AX-983, investigating all the nooks and crannies, asking questions about literally every bit of technology that he sees. He's entranced by the cockpit, by the auto-doc, by the powerful engines that cut through the vacuum. He's struck speechless, though, by the view from the portholes. There had been none on the trader's ship. He's never seen the stars before.

"It's beautiful," he breathes, fingers pressed lightly against the glass, as though he means to brush them against the glittering black.

The original Joachim had loved the stars, too, but he had been forced to love them from afar. He was bound to the Earth. AX-983 never got to show him this, never had the chance to take him into the desolate, empty, beautiful void.

"Can we visit them?"

"The stars?" AX-983 asks. "No, they're much too far away. It would take many years to get there."

Joachim frowns. He still has trouble grasping concepts like the passage of time, and aging. With no seasons, and no turn of the Earth to govern his days, time has little meaning for him.

"There is one star we can visit," AX-983 says, and Joachim looks at him, hopeful.

"Yes?"

"It's called Sol. It's the star that gave life to your ancestors."

Another blank look. Another concept that has no meaning for him. No matter. Joachim will learn. AX-983 will teach him. They have an entire human lifetime together.



Earth has largely recovered from the blight of humanity. The air is breathable, the oceans are thriving, the forests are returning. Billions of species populate the planet, from the highest arid peak to the crushing depths of the ocean, and not one of them is human. Not one of them *remembers* a human.

AX-983 lands the shuttle by the coast, less than a mile from where the original Joachim was raised and helps the human who now wears his face down the short ramp. Joachim stands and stares for a long while at the water, the sky, the stretch of pebble-strewn beach.

Two hundred years after the last human walked the Earth, Joachim sinks his toes into soft sand, closes his eyes, and draws in a lungful of salt-laden air. The water laps at his feet.

"I am from here," he says. *I am*, AX-983 notes. Not *he was*.

"Yes," he says. "You are."

"It's beautiful." Joachim frowns. "But there are no stars."

"Not during the day. The light is too bright. You will see them at night when the sun goes down." AX-983 rests a hand on the small of his back, and Joachim leans into the touch. "This is where we will live."

"Yes," Joachim murmurs. "We will live here."

He begins to walk up the beach, strolling in the direction of a strip of rocky land that juts out into the sea. AX-983 follows. The salt air isn't good for his joints, but Joachim is content here, and that's all that he cares about. Joachim is *here*, with him, and after two centuries, his world has finally been put right again.

"Who are you?" he calls to Joachim's back. The human throws a mischievous look over his shoulder.

"I am yours."

Blue Flames

Vi Reaper

Vi Reaper's Twitter can be found @ViReaper.

The day hadn't started well for Colin. There was a very specific order that things had to be done in. A strict timetable by which he lived his life. Down to the hour and, in some cases, the minute. These daily rituals kept him safe and secure. Any variation sent him into a tailspin of panic and fear as he believed that only bad things would come out of the invasion of normalcy. So, when an almighty crash from the neighbors' in the apartment above woke Colin half an hour early, a mere glance at the three bedside clocks sent his heart into a spasm. Gooseflesh prickled his arms as he stared at the clocks, hoping they would state a different time, his normal time. When they didn't his mind quickly split in two. One side screamed in despair, imagining all the horrible things that might occur because of the disturbance, while the other half skipped through all the possible ways to put this right. Another bump from above sent flakes of paint and plaster down upon him. Letting out a small whimper, Colin lay back down and pulled the covers over him like a child scared of a spook. Closing his eyes, he willed himself back to sleep.



Just half an hour, he begged, just thirty minutes, just one thousand eight hundred seconds to fix my world, please.

Maybe just lying there still with eyes closed would be enough to ward off any bad omens brought about by his rude awakening. Maybe he could trick his mind into not cursing the day that lay just half an hour away. Yet more bumps and bangs from above shook his bedroom, and Colin stuck his fingers in his ears. All of this was not and never had been a start to any day he could remember, and that thought alone terrified him. Curled up, he peeked out of the covers just enough to see the digital clock's green numbers and watched as each digit changed, bringing him into a day that was ruined before it began.

By the time the alarms sounded, Colin was so on edge he was shaking, but as much as the disturbance of his rituals could crush him, he also knew those same rituals, if applied at the correct time in the correct way, could rescue him from all the imagined tragedy that could be ahead. With that in mind, Colin rose at exactly seven o'clock and turned off the alarms in the same order that he always did. Then he put on his slippers, left foot first, then right, then stood and made the bed, pulling the covers taut over the pillows just like he always did. Doing so, he noticed that debris from the ceiling covered his sheets. This made him pause as he imagined all the germs that could lie in this dust. Germs and the possibility of picking up disease was a big problem for Colin and something that plagued his thoughts. He knew he could not change his bed coverings today as it was not an 'odd day,' meaning

that it was the 20th of the month and he could only change sheets, towels, and clothing on an odd number on the calendar. He weighed up in his mind the idea of possible contamination from the dust versus the possible horrors that could occur if he changed this tradition. He came to the conclusion that after already breaking one ritual today it was simply not worth the risk. He would add the sheets to his daily house cleaning in some other way to compensate. In the kitchen, he stood and ate a precise portion of cereal with a precise portion of milk and exactly one and a half cups of black coffee. As he washed and dried the bowl and mug, replacing them back into the correct position in the cupboard above the sink, Colin started to relax. The tension that had plagued him this morning was starting to release. Nothing bad had happened as a result of his broken sleep schedule. He hadn't choked on his cereal. He hadn't tripped and broken his neck. He didn't feel like he was getting the flu or any major diseases. It was all fine, his day was mapped in front of him and he was certain that this would keep him safe, just like it always did. In the bathroom, he peed, checking that there was no sign of blood in his urine, then showered in cold water, counting out the seconds until he reached two hundred and one, then got out. Drying off, he then brushed his teeth for exactly twenty-one seconds and checked for blood in the toothpaste spit, then combed his hair, first with a parting on the right, then brushing it all over again so the parting was on the left. Today was Monday. He never shaved on a Monday or Friday, but he did check his face and body for possible lumps, tumors or funny looking moles that may signal cancer. Happy that all looked normal, he went back into his bedroom to change into the exact same clothes he wore yesterday, except for fresh undies. Checking the clock, all appeared to be right on schedule, and Colin felt a palpable sense of relief. Despite this, an undeniable itch of dread lingered at the back of his mind. Pushing the thoughts away, Colin got on with his strict daily order.

Living this way was exhausting, but Colin could not break the spell of his timetabled lifestyle. As a boy, he remembered having these habits and getting upset if things ever changed. His mother, whom he had adored, had tried her best to rid him of these irrational feelings of doom that occurred when life threw a curveball. Doctors and therapists each had different ways of trying to rid Colin of his hang-ups, but despite the therapy, the talking, the hypnosis and medication, and even his mother's tears and frustrated screams, nothing could dislodge his belief that safety only resided in his habits. Of course, over his thirty-five years, there had been major breaks from the norm, as happens with anyone on any given day in any given lifetime. The biggest of all was losing his mother to cancer. For three years after her death, unable to cope with the momentous changes that had taken place, he had resided in a mental institution which, despite the initial upheaval, had suited him with the structured days that places like that had to have. On release, the doctors sent him back to the apartment alone and set him up with a job. To be back home was great, but the job didn't last. Shift work at a factory where the hours were forever changing, and unpredictable days were too much for Colin. Understanding that the doctors had set him up with this type of work for the reason of constant change had angered Colin and sent him back to his structured world. The walls of the apartment shrouded him, and soon not only was the job gone, but also his ties to the outside world. At this point, he had ongoing medical leave and hadn't left the apartment complex in nearly five years. The doctors' plan had backfired terribly, and now they let him be, having given up all hope of breaking the cycles that trapped him. In all honesty, Colin was glad for the solitude. People were unpredictable, and that was something he had no wish for.

After breakfast, he allowed himself a solid hour of television, carefully staying clear of news channels, sports or anything else where the ending or content was unforeseeable. Often, he watched re-runs of old shows that he had seen so many times that he could quote lines of dialogue by heart. After television, it was cleaning time. When it came to the apartment, Colin was stuck somewhere between fastidious cleanliness and habitual hoarding. Anything that came into the house had to stay in if it entered on an 'even day'. Anything that entered on an 'odd day' could be safely disposed of. This had caused some problems with unwanted junk mail being delivered daily, and then there were times when Colin was desperate for groceries and had been forced to ring up the local store for a delivery, but then had to deal with the packaging. As such, the spare bedroom was filled with junk. Towers of leaflets, takeaway pamphlets, and dusty newspapers filled the room. It used to be his mother's room, and he felt somewhat guilty at filling her space with rubbish, but it had to go somewhere, so there it went. The door to that room always stayed shut, and if Colin was forced to go in there to dispose of more crap, well, he held his breath to avoid the grimy air that circulated the room. But as mucky and untidy as that room was, every other room in the place was immaculate. Every day, everything was washed, wiped, disinfected, and organized. It was, however, upsetting to Colin that, despite his strict cleaning regime, the apartment building itself was crumbling. The stone tower block hadn't been of the highest standard when Colin and his mother had moved in, and the severe lack of upkeep and maintenance had only exacerbated the degradation of the building. Now, water damage crept from corners and along the ceilings. The walls, always thin and never anywhere close to soundproof, showed hairline cracks that streaked down like faint bolts of lightning. Whenever he noticed something new going to shit, he felt like crying because he feared that the day would come when the place was so rotten that the building would be shut down and he would be forced out. There was nothing scarier, more petrifying for him than life outside of these walls.

Lost in these thoughts, Colin didn't notice the sparks that spat out of the socket as he tried to plug in the vacuum. The loud crackle brought him back to reality just in time to pull his hand away as more yellow sparks exploded outward. Colin screamed as a few of the sparks caught on the cream carpet, singeing it and letting off tiny puffs of black smoke. Stamping out the embers, he looked around as more hazy bluish smoke seemed to be rising from somewhere. In a panic, he scanned the rest of the floor for the source of the smoke. Colin flipped the bedcovers over, sure that an errant spark must have made it across the room and caught on the bed, but he saw nothing. It was only when he reached to check the pillows that he noticed two blue flames quivering at the end of his hand. Pulling back, he assumed the flames were on the bed, but they disappeared. Reaching again, the flames came back into view. He froze as his mind made slow sense of the impossibility of inch-tall flames emanating from the index and middle fingers of his right hand. There was no pain, no sensation of crisping flesh and smoldering skin, just light blue flames and the smoke that cast off them. Colin shook his hand, but the flames remained. Shaking his hand again, Colin screamed a high-pitched terrified wail, leaping over the bed and into the bathroom, burning hand extended. Plunging his hand under cold water caused an audible hiss as the flames went out. Colin expected pain. He had heard that sometimes burn victims felt no pain as the nerve endings were shredded by the heat, but as he examined the tips of his fingers there was no blackening or even reddening of the skin. His fingertips and nails were perfect. The only part of him that hurt was his eyes. A panicked sweat had set upon him and rolled down

his brow, stinging them. Blinking through the pain, he held his fingers close to his face, inspecting them for any sign of what he just saw, and with no physical proof presenting itself and fear still quaking his body, the horrible thought of insanity crept into his mind. His fingers had been on fire. In the reflection he saw his bedroom, where the blue smoke remained. He had seen the flames. He had seen them. Hadn't he?

Colin slumped onto the closed toilet seat as his wobbling legs gave way. His heart thundered in his eardrums and he hung his head as light-headedness threw white static in his brain. Gulping in air, he tried to calm himself, but he kept those two fingers in front of him just in case they exploded in blue flame once again. The apartment was quiet for a moment as he slowly relaxed, but then came another crash from above, followed by two more bangs, as if something heavy bounced across the ceiling. Colin looked up and heard raised voices again. They were unintelligible, but from the pitch and tone of the yelling, he could tell it was a man and a woman arguing. Then came another noise, something closer, yet fainter, like something small and hard hitting a surface. Colin looked around the room and, as it happened again, something small hit his foot. Looking down, Colin saw two teeth on the floor. Jumping up, he opened his mouth and looked in the mirror above the sink. One of his top front teeth and one on the bottom were glaring omissions in his smile. Just then, another tooth popped out, literally jumping from the gum line and falling into the sink, where it skittered around in a downward spiral before becoming lodged in the drain. There was no blood either on the teeth or his mouth. The teeth had left the gum clean, as if some invisible force was yanking them out of his head. Feeling something hard on his tongue, he retched and spat a molar, root still attached, into the sink. It glistened in a bed of mucus. Colin clamped his hand over his mouth and cried as he ran to the phone and speed-dialed his doctor. Dr. Satti was a good doctor who, fully aware of Colin's mental conditions, always made house calls when needed. The title of 'hypochondriac' had hung over Colin's head since he was a small boy. Maybe some of that had been warranted in the past. He was highly aware of changes in his body and became paranoid of possible health conditions those changes could indicate. The call seemed to take forever to connect and even longer to be picked up. When it was, he recognized the voice at the other end of the line and his heart, already in a fit of fear, dropped a little bit more. Doctor Satti's receptionist, Sheila, was a bitch. One of those people who thought that answering phones all day long made her a very important person. Colin would never usually call on the days he knew Sheila was working. He took his hand from his mouth just enough to ask for Dr. Satti and explain it was an emergency. Sheila's tone changed immediately, from the cheery falsetto that she had initially answered with to the smirking, mocking tone she now had. Calling Colin by his first name without a hint of respect that a patient should get, she informed him that the doctor was very busy. Already sobbing, with shredded nerves, Colin didn't want a fight. He didn't want his hand to stray from his mouth for too long for fear of more teeth abandoning his head, so he tried to explain again that it was an emergency. Her retort was that, for Colin, everything was an emergency, and that Dr. Satti's time couldn't be monopolized by one patient. Knowing of no other way to get his point across, Colin begged, sobbing down the phone, explaining that his teeth were falling out. Sheila, with laughter in her voice, told him if that was so, then he needed a dentist, not a doctor, and hung up. Left with the line buzzing in his ear, Colin picked up the phone and threw it across the room, ripping out the cord. He coughed again as he felt another loose tooth in his

mouth. Spitting it into his cupped hand, he cried and explored the growing number of gaps in his gums with his tongue.

What was this? Some awful, vicious disease that acts quickly upon the body. Some virulent strain of something caught from somewhere. New diseases were discovered every day, that was true, but Colin hadn't left the apartment in years. He hadn't touched or even talked to anyone new in years. He never even opened the windows anymore for fear that something invisible and vile would come floating in. All the seals on his food were checked before consumption. He washed his hands numerous times a day with a disinfectant hand sanitizer. He'd kept to his rigid schedules that kept him safe for all these years, apart from this morning, of course, but that wasn't his fault. Could this slight blip in his day be the cause of all this? How could waking up half an hour earlier than normal cause teeth to drop from his mouth? But it was the only thing that made sense to him.

As he spat more teeth into his palm, he realized something. What had changed lately? What or, more importantly, who was different in his life? The neighbors above. In Colin's mind, it all fell into place, creating a perfect path in front of him that led to one conclusion: the new couple in the apartment above were doing this to him. It had to be. There was no other explanation and, as if in agreement, a huge bang from above shook Colin's entire bedroom. More paint and plaster dust showered down upon him, and one of the fine cracks in the wall widened and spread.

Fetching a plastic food bag from the kitchen, Colin bagged all his lost teeth. He didn't know why he was keeping them, it just seemed like the right thing to do. As he was fishing out the tooth that was stuck in the drain, he noticed something else odd about his face. He didn't pinpoint what it was at first. His mouth was already starting to pucker up like an old person with their dentures removed, but something else was off. Leaning closer to the mirror, he inspected his face and realized what it was. He was missing an eyebrow. The left one was gone. With a shaky hand, Colin wiped at the smooth skin where the brown hair once was. There wasn't even any stubble, just smooth skin. Moving his hand, he dragged his finger across the right eyebrow. The hair fell away at the merest touch, sprinkling down and peppering his cheek in fine strands. Frightened tears stung his eyes, and Colin blinked through blurred vision. His eyelashes tangled with his tears and slipped away, rolling down his face. He bawled like a baby and checked other places where hair should be. He stripped off his clothes. His armpits and the thin tuft of chest hair he normally had were gone. He felt some hope, as it appeared his leg hair remained, until he realized that it was his pubic hair that had shed from its rightful place and gotten stuck to his legs. Cries hitched deep inside him as his head hair, normally so thick, started to fall. It was like some invisible razor was being scraped across his dome, shearing him clean to his shiny scalp. He just watched this happen, and within the space of five minutes, he became as hairless as a new-born. The white-tiled floor was littered with Colin's hair. Some curly, some thick, some thin, some long and some short, it looked like a crazy bathmat at his feet.

Colin lay down and curled up, wrapping his arms around his knees as he cried. He rocked as the cold tile bit into him, raising gooseflesh. With no hair to protect him and trap air, he felt the slightest breeze over his skin. He began to dither, rattled by chills, the few teeth remaining in his head chinking against each other as he clenched his jaw against the cold. The question of why this was happening and what he had done to deserve this left him. He had been so scared for so long, spending his entire life setting up things to stave off an unknown impending doom. He had lost so much because of his lifestyle. He had never

been in love or been loved. He never had friends, learned to drive, been in a plane, seen another country, walked in a park on a summer's day, had the satisfaction of finding a job he was good at and enjoyed, or even had a pet to call his own. Despite the exclusion of these things for the sake of safety, he was now a toothless, hairless wreck of a human being, crying like a nightmare-stricken child on the bathroom floor. He felt death close by and, despite fearing it above all things for as long as he could remember, Colin didn't care if his heart stopped beating and his body gave way. In fact, he welcomed it.

Above, the woman screamed, a piercing sound that made it through the walls without much loss of volume. It lingered and echoed around Colin. The sound bashed off the tiled walls and floor, pinging off the ceramic sink, toilet, and bathtub. A second later, another scream sang out, followed by the sound of a man yelling. Colin stuck his fingers in his ears, convinced that whoever these people were, they had been sent to torture him, destroy him, and kill him. He didn't know why, and it didn't have to make sense for him to come to this conclusion, he just knew it. Everything was fine until these people showed up. Now came a rhythmic banging that Colin could hear, despite him blocking his ears. The banging paused for just a moment before starting again. Until now, the erosion of his body caused no pain, but this loud banging vibrated inside his brain, sending shockwaves of sharp, cold pain radiating from the center of his mind. Colin stuck his fingers deeper into his ears, but it did no good. The noise defied his attempts to silence it, only strengthening. They had somehow managed to get their noise to resound inside his brain. How, he didn't know, but they had. Why were they doing this? Just as he thought his head would split in two, the banging stopped. Colin waited for it to start again, and when it didn't, he let out a long breath.

Pulling his fingers away, he felt something lodged in his ear canal. Plucking at the obstruction, he inspected the hard, misty-colored, odd-shaped thing he found, unable to tell what it was. The banging resumed, and he realized that it was a fingernail. Checking his hand, he discovered it was from his right index finger. The exposed nail bed was rosy pink and rippled like a newly formed scar. Feeling the other nails, he discovered that all of them were loose, so he pulled at them, peeling them off his fingers and dropping the shards to the ground. His toenails also came away easily, leaving behind the same shiny, wrinkled skin. The pounding from above continued, and Colin growled in pain as the rhythm exploded in his head. In agony, he clenched at his temples, praying for it to stop.

After a while, it finally let up, giving Colin some relief. Moving back into his bedroom, he perched on the end of the bed. Glancing at the bedside clocks, he scoffed with laughter, thinking of the daily rituals that had been neglected. Panic did not rise within him at this realization. There was no desperation to grab for the safety of order and schedules. He just didn't care. It was all meaningless. It always had been, and it had taken this absurdity for him to realize it. Maybe that's what the people above wanted, to show what a waste his life had been all this time.

Colin considered suicide. He couldn't go on like this. What else was going to drop off or fall out? Would he begin to rot? By this time tomorrow, would there be nothing left of him but a mushy mess or a dried-out husk? It was going to hurt, he knew. How could it not? Just because he had gotten through this nightmare so far without much physical discomfort didn't mean that pain wasn't on the way. This headache could be just the start. On cue, more bumping above had Colin grabbing his head and squirming. That sound, which Colin was now sure was that of someone hammering, was going to make him insane with agony if it carried on much longer. Colin had to make it stop, had to make those people stop. They

were the reason behind all this, he was certain of it. The why and how eluded him, but that was not important. Maybe they thought that he should be dead by now and they were getting desperate. Failing to kill him by making his body disintegrate, they now laid down the pain in a final attempt to finish him. Anger rose inside, boiling rage that powered him through the final few bangs until peace reigned again. Knowing it was only a matter of time before the hammering would resume, Colin, strengthened by his ire, left his apartment.

Stepping out, Colin expected his powerful phobia of the outside world to drive him back inside. He waited for the panic, the inability to swallow, the tightening of his chest, the rush of his heartbeat, all the things that happened to him when he tried to leave, only this time, there was nothing. Emboldened, he headed for the stairs, but movement caught his eye. He peered into the gloom of the badly lit hallway and spied a little grey-haired old woman poking her head out of the apartment across from his. Her wrinkled face was stiff with shock, her eyes bulged as they moved up and down his body. It was only now that Colin realized he was naked. He was a naked, hairless, toothless mess, and, although he understood her shock, the only thing that popped into his head to say was, "What the fuck you looking at?"

A harsh response for sure, but Colin had spent his whole life avoiding people, not causing a fuss, not being a bother to anyone, and look where it had gotten him. It felt good to be rude. The old woman inhaled sharply, tucked her head in and slammed the door. Colin's smile would have beamed if he had teeth. Instead, he only managed a slack-faced pucker of his lips. Taking the stairs, he headed up. The cracked, stained, seaweed green linoleum that coated the floors dug into his feet with each step. This building was truly a dump. He could smell the sharp stench of ammonia which came from urine, mixed with the varying concoctions of food cooked by the residents. The paint in the halls had lost the original coloring long ago and was now a water-blemished, faded shade of beige. Graffiti lined the walls with tags, obscene pictures, and phrases. Spots of black mold clustered along the ceilings. Dust and litter formed hills in every crack and corner. The last time Colin had seen all this, everything was aged, but clean. The floors faded, but polished. The walls unmarked. It was just half a lifetime ago, but the building had aged tenfold.

Reaching the floor above, Colin walked to the apartment directly above his. The screams from inside were clearer up here, and as he moved closer to the front door, he saw what the hammering had been about. Thick nails protruded through the door, splintering the wood. Whoever they were, they had nailed themselves in. Looking down the hall, Colin wondered why none of his neighbors were complaining about this. Maybe they didn't care. They already lived in a shithole, what was the use in arguing with the other flies crawling around here with you? As Colin reached up to knock, more banging erupted, and the steel point of another nail poked through the door near the brass hinges. Screaming in pain, Colin pounded on the door. The hammering stopped immediately, but Colin carried on screaming and punching. His knuckles were bruised and crunched, but he didn't stop until his arms were heavy with exhaustion. Panting, Colin yelled for whoever was inside to open up, and then cursed them and called them names when he was met with silence. There was no spy hole or crack beneath the door for him to get a glimpse of whoever was standing inches away from him on the other side. Some strength came back to his arms, and he punched the door again. As he was swinging away, something snagged his right hand. As he tried to pull his fist away, something pulled at his skin. Angling his head, he saw that a nail had punched through his skin. There was no blood or pain, but he could see the nail had gone through

the webbing between his fingers. He tried again to pull himself free, but his hand was stuck in a fist, knuckles flat to the door. Tugging and twisting, Colin put one foot flat against the door as leverage and put all his might behind it. There was an odd wet tearing sound and his hand came free, but the skin remained nailed to the door.

Colin screamed, his hand skinned down to the bone. White tendons showed, with thick, glistening blue and red veins wrapping around the muscles of his fingers. Dark red blood splattered to the floor, pooling around his feet. Without thinking, Colin pulled back even more, and the wet sloughing sound continued as Colin skinned himself. The skin split all the way down the length of his arm. Then, as he spun sideways, the split splintered across his chest and abdomen, up his neck, across the base of his skull, over his face, and down his groin and legs. Turning and pulling, Colin stepped out of his skin and left it hanging from the nail like a bloody trench coat hanging from a hook. Slipping in the mess that covered the floor around him, Colin looked down at himself. When he moved, he saw the rippling of his wet muscles. Ivory bones were visible on his hips, knees, and shoulders, and a highway of bulging veins and twisted tendons wrapped around him. Looking down at his chest, he could see lungs behind his ribs, inflating and deflating with every breath. His pulse vibrated across him, sending the cloudy, jelly-like fat quivering. Colin gagged, and when he did, his gut muscles tensed and relaxed. This movement made a small loop of intestine come free, unravelling and drooping down over his knees. Colin yelped as he scooped it up and tried to push it back in place with his bony fingertips. This only loosened more coils of gut, and soon he was juggling a long, thick, and slimy rope of intestine with both hands. Managing to stuff most of it back, Colin hurried for the stairs.

Without the skin on the soles of his feet he slipped and came down hard on his back with a wet slap. Flipping over, Colin tried to stand but couldn't find his footing in the bloody pulp surrounding him. He crawled to the stairs, slipping and sliding, leaving a slimy black trail behind him like a human slug. Pulling himself downstairs, he was aware that he was leaving ropes of his gut behind, so he stopped every couple of seconds to yank up the slack before continuing to crawl. His wet body picked up all the empty snack packets and used cigarette butts as he dragged himself down the final steps and towards his apartment door. His whole underside was caked black with dirt, drying up some of the body slop, and as he reached for the door handle it puffed a small cloud of muck in his face. In an instant, he learned why you automatically close your eyes when you sneeze, because with no eyelids the sneeze dislodged both eyeballs from their sockets. His vision went from straight ahead to swinging down as they came to rest on his cheek muscles. Pulling the door open, Colin fell into his apartment. He tried lifting his head to see where he was going, but his vision was blurry and clouded. What he did manage to see was the red mess he was making on his cream carpeting, and the absurd thought of the lack of cleanliness entered his head. Blindly reaching down, he pulled in his trail of guts and kicked the door shut with one slimy foot.

Exhausted, Colin rolled onto his back, splaying his arms and legs. Despite everything, a strange calmness settled upon him. A total lack of concern. He didn't know what had happened to him today or what, if any, goal it achieved for someone, and he didn't care. He was going to die, and that was okay. He felt no pain, and the constant thundering and screaming that had haunted his day had ceased. In a life ruled by worry, fret, and an often-overwhelming fear, it was the only peace he had ever had. Sinew pulled and muscle tightened as he pulled a toothless, lipless smile.

If Colin could have seen, he would have noticed the two little blue flames that appeared, one on each shoulder. The flames flickered, growing as his breaths grew shallow. His heartbeat slowed and the flames slithered across his chest, crawling down his arms and legs. To Colin, in his final moments, it was like being held warm and safe in loving arms. As a final sigh left his lungs the flames exploded from him. Blue liquid fire coated the walls, floor, and ceiling, with Colin in the middle. The blue flames then turned orange and yellow and began to act like proper fire, destroying, burning and melting. Growing as it gathered more fuel and air, it roared, devouring the apartment and feasting on the rest of the building.

Fire hoses blasted water from multiple directions. The apartment block had gone up rapidly, helped by the lack of fire doors or a sprinkler system. The fire engines had arrived within minutes, and most of the residents had gotten out with only smoke inhalation and minor burns. In all, it took over thirteen hours to douse the flames, leaving only a smoldering, blackened shell that spilled its charcoaled insides onto the street. Residents picked through the mess, trying to find any personal items that survived. The firemen counted heads and reported three people still missing. One man from the apartment where the initial fire had started, and two other people who had perished in the apartment above who, for some reason, had refused to leave. Despite their best efforts, the firemen never discovered how the fire started or, more strangely, how Colin's body was found. Around it, everything was burnt down to ash, yet the body was untouched by heat or flame. The only thing wrong was the lack of skin anywhere on the corpse.

Peepshow Purgatorium, or: What's Faith Got to do with a Porn Shop?

Trevor Hallam

*Trevor Hallam is a Canadian writer of poetry and dark fiction who has been published in various anthologies and online magazines. His novella, **God Damned**, and two poetry collections, **Inevitable Crisis Intolerable** and **The Sunlight Always Made Me Sneeze**, are available through his Amazon Author page. Much of his short fiction, poetry and miscellaneous works, can be discovered in the forthcoming collections, **Not Without Remorse: Collected Sins and Peculiarities of Temperament**.*

PRE-SHOW

A scratched and age-stained metal divider slid upward with a whir. Behind the glass partition, the woman's scathed breasts heaved with her distress. She was tied, ropes criss-crossed over her chest and midriff, between her battered bosom. Her racked torso twitched and took on spasms as blood splashed down from the ragged incision opening her throat. Before her violent convulsions steadied, the metal divider screeched shut.

The room was in darkness.



ACT I.

Brian opened his eyes and straightened the black-rimmed specs on his nose. His surroundings confused him. The neon lighting hurt his head. He heard obscene sounds of congress; heavy groaning, placid moaning. They were recorded sounds, coming from a curtained doorway. The sofa was leather and felt sickly, like a fever-stained blanket, so he stood and looked around. The aisles were stocked with sex toys and video merchandise. Posters of the latest in adult XXX entertainment clung to the walls. There seemed to be no windows in the shop but there was a caged door with an EXIT sign over it. He glanced that way but moved toward a counter with dildos lined up on the glass top. Dozens of video cassettes and DVD's filled the shelves behind the counter on one side of the curtained doorway. On the other side was a display of whips and ticklers.

There was a bronze plaque over the door:

Perversion is the Pleasure and Pain of Gods.

One hell of a way to spend his birthday.

He heard gentle voices and turned around. Two women stood at the door where no one had been moments earlier. The younger woman opened the door. Her friend was crying.

They hugged and the older lady stepped out. The one who remained closed the door and turned to Brian. Her face was close to a scowl as she regarded him. As she approached the counter, he smiled and stepped aside.

"Hi. Some night."

She stepped behind the counter and sat on a stool. Brian waited for her to say something, but she paid him no interest and started flipping through a magazine on Home Décor.

There was a little tin bell on the counter, and he palmed it. The woman sighed at the *DING* and set her magazine down. Brian grinned but she wasn't amused.

"You shouldn't be here."

He actually agreed with her, though he was intrigued.

"I guess not. I'm not really sure... I mean, I was with some buddies. We had some drinks. I'm Brian, by the way."

She waited.

"Anyway, I remember we were going to some bar. Then I woke up here."

"Your friends left you here. You were passed out."

"Fuckers."

He laughed, though. His attention moved to the beaded curtain and the lurid recordings from beyond.

"I'm Hannah. If you had any sense, Brian, you'd walk out the front door this second."

"Well. . ."

He looked at the plaque above the door, smiled.

"I guess I'm kinda the non-sensible type."

"Take it on faith."

She touched his hand. He felt it, but when he looked down, his hands were at his sides, and hers still held the magazine. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans, adjusted his glasses.

"What's faith got to do with a porn shop?"

A man in a slick suit seeped through the curtain and smiled warmly.

"Yes. What *faith*?"

Brian took his offered hand.

"No need for something so trivial, am I right, Brian?"

"How'd you know—?"

"Overheard you speaking with Hannah. I'm Elestor, shop's proprietor. My two brothers and I own this establishment."

"Where are they?"

"My brothers? Incognito, I'm afraid. Perhaps you'll meet them. They're never far."

Elestor tapped the spread pages of Hannah's magazine, widening his smile.

"Hannah, my dear."

"Fuck off, El."

"Very well. So, my friend. What's your pleasure and/or pain, Brian? Perhaps a video?"

Elestor motioned to the shelves.

"We're overstocked with the best titles. *Monster Members Part 5*, *Cum Chuggin' Chubbies*, *Lezbo Lepers*, and one of my own faves, *Doggie Lovers 3: Throwin' A Bone*."

"No thanks, I think I should just..."

He glimpsed the girl through a fold in the beads, no more than a sliver of sight into the corridor beyond, but somehow, he saw her in the darkness. She was pretty and full of

youthful spunk; her demeanor, anyway. He couldn't know from just a glimpse... but he did. He knew she'd seen him, too, and was waiting for him.

Brian shook his head. Was he drunk still?

Hannah looked at her magazine, but he saw her eyes momentarily roll back like she was annoyed. With him, he was sure. It made him angry that she would judge him without knowing anything about him.

Elestor was still smiling, waiting patiently.

"Maybe I could have a look in the back?"

The proprietor held out his hand.

"Twenty-dollar cover, please."

"Sure."

Brian took a bill from his wallet.

Hannah set a jar of brass coins on the counter.

"Ten dollars gets you fifty tokens."

She refused to look at him. He wanted to tear the magazine from her hands.

"This way, please."

Elestor held the curtain aside.

Brian took his tokens and stepped over the threshold.

Along the corridor were small rooms, viewing booths. They could hear all manner of perversion and ecstasy trailing along the hallway. Brian glanced into each room they passed, looking for the girl. He heard a raucous banging coming from one of the rooms and saw a man angrily thrusting his pelvis against a wall, penetrating a rendered orifice, and likely something softer and warmer on the other side. In the next room, a man sat in a chair and watched a showing of two lusty ladies behind a glass partition. His back was to Brian, but there seemed something odd about his stiff posture, slightly leaning, head cocked at an obscure angle. Elestor led him on and the patron was out of sight.

"What're your turn-ons, Brian? Anything specific?"

Still looking for the girl.

"Not really, I guess. I mean, I don't really know."

Men jerked off in the rooms or sat quietly while performers looked bored and unremarkable on the other side of the glass.

Elestor's arm slid casually over Brian's shoulders, like a snake.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find something to your liking."

Brian shrugged loose the arm and saw the girl at a sideways glance, standing in the viewing booth. A metal divider swooshed shut and she was hidden.

Elestor kept on as he drifted into the empty room.

"You mind?"

The shopkeeper turned, smiled.

"By all means."

Brian hadn't heard. The man was already forgotten and had he turned to bid him farewell, he no longer would have seen him there.

He moved to the wall where a square hole shielded by a metal door was inset. Beneath was a coin slot. He took out one of the tokens and slid it into place. It slipped in and made a CLINK. A soft whir could be heard somewhere in the walls and the divider slowly moved up. Brian sat on the chair and ignored the cracking noise it made under his weight.

Her body was revealed slowly, tanned skin, sleek shape, hips rounded in a sitting posture, waistline sculpted, tummy trim, a small jewel inset in her belly button. The breasts were round and perky, looking as though gravity had ceased to exist on the other side of the glass. Already, Brian's frown indicated he knew this was not *his* girl, the one he'd seen in passing, but with the metal raised into the ceiling and the woman fully exposed, her face was the big giveaway. The woman wore a ridiculous red-colored afro wig and was painted in clownish grease-paint, all white with red around her mouth and a squishy red ball on her nose. Her eyes were large and gawked at him. Faintly, he heard circus music; trumpets, tubas, and whistles. His annoyance became amused confusion, and he forgot the girl with the cute smile and tiny skirt.

Clown lady was wearing oversized gloves with fat fingers and she started caressing her boobs, making circles around the raised nipples before squeezing them like balloons. Brian was beside himself and tried to shake the squeaky balloon sound from his ears. He shook his head and chuckled, readying himself to escape this lunacy, but the clown held up a finger, buying more time. The goofy gloved hand walked fingers down her impressive torso and the hand dipped out of sight beneath the bottom edge of the viewing glass. Her lips pursed into an *oopsy-daisy* expression and she lifted her hand, which held a red, rubber ball. She bounced it off the glass and caught it, pantomimed laughter, and threw it over her shoulder. Brian shook his head, astonished as she walked her fingers back to her nether region, poked and prodded, and came up with another rubber ball. She did this two, three, half a dozen more times, a new rubber ball extracted, and with these balls produced, she began to juggle them.

Brian slumped in his chair, silent, unable to look away or fully grasp what was going on. Then he started laughing, and couldn't stop, even when his belly began to hurt, and he could barely see for the tears in his eyes.

ACT II.

Jessica woke and looked around at the porn shop from where she was slumped on the sofa. A woman was watching her from the counter at the front of the shop.

She sat up, rigid, concern melting and aging her face.

"How'd I get here?"

Hannah stood as the distraught woman rushed over but Elestor appeared before she could respond.

"I'm the proprietor. What's the last thing you remember?"

Jessica gave it frantic thought, fingers pulling her hairline and scratching the scalp.

"I—I was making supper. I think... It was hamburger night. My son's favorite. Allan. Where's Allan?"

"Your son?"

Hannah glared at Elestor, whose snide smile taunted her.

"What else, dear?"

"I started having an asthma attack. I couldn't catch my breath. That's all I remember."

Elestor held his arm out and gestured her toward the doorway to the viewing booths. Jessica balked, cringing at the sounds emanating beyond.

"This way, Jessica. Or do you prefer Jess?"

"How do you—? Where's my son?"

"Haven't seen him. Perhaps, in the back. Playing."

She looked to the hidden entrance, revulsion in her frantic gaze.

"He shouldn't be back there."

"Quite right. You should go fetch him before some undesirable does first."

She didn't need more motivation and pressed toward the curtain. Hannah reached out and touched her wrist, ignoring Elestor's scowl.

"Don't. Your little boy's not back there."

Her eyes pleaded with Hannah, filled with wet doubt and agonizing regret.

"But what if he is?"

She shook her arm free and pushed through the beads.

Hannah regressed to her stool and turned from Elestor's scolding reproach.

"You're a real cum stain, you know that, El?"

"You're upset, Hannah. Why don't you take a break? Go have a smoke."

"You can't have her. You know that."

"We'll see, sweet angel. We'll see."

In the dimmed lighting, Jessica used the wall to guide her, ignoring the sights in the rooms she passed, sick to her stomach with anxiety. She hoped the woman was right and Allan was not back here, bearing witness to such degradation. Someone was laughing, and the chortler stumbled from one of the viewing booths and nearly collided with her. He steadied himself and wiped tears from his face.

"Sorry. Wasn't watching where I was going. Wouldn't fuckin' believe..."

"Excuse me."

"I'm Brian. How'd you get thrown into this? Not really my thing but, you know..."

She didn't.

"Have you seen a little boy back here?"

"Boy? No. Sorry."

"Excuse me."

She left Brian, careful not to touch him—he looked sweaty and deranged—and continued on.

He watched her go, nearly cured of the giggles. As she turned a corner, he saw his catch come from the same direction, flashing him a smile and stepping into the farthest room. A passing tremor came and went, the illusion that the girl had appeared from shadow, unseen by the nervous woman who passed her in the hall but didn't seem to notice anyone in her path. Had they seen one another, would the former have not asked about her missing child? The concern had been enough that she'd spoken to him, a derelict in a porn shop, by all appearances. But then his thoughts steadied and returned to the girl. She'd escaped his grasp once already, he didn't intend for her to get away again.

She was waiting for him when he walked in, leaning against the panel, one leg propped on the chair, raising her already-short skirt to the height of her thigh. Her smile held mischief, a nubile Cheshire Cat, top opened in front, displaying the subtle swell of bosom.

"Bout time, silly boy."

"Brian."

"I'm Amy. Come on in."

Jessica hadn't seen the girl in the hall. Other than Brian, she hadn't seen anyone, and couldn't bring herself to enter any of the rooms for fear of what she might find. Her eyes had become accustomed to the dank lighting and she moved swiftly, calling her son's name, hoping he wasn't playing Hide n' Seek, praying he wasn't being held in silence by a pervert. She came to the end of the corridor, a black wall, dead end. Frazzled, she turned to go back,

heard grunting from the room closest to her and looked in at a man who looked ancient enough to be God. He was no guiding light, however, just a creepy geezer furiously stroking his wilted prick. Through the glass, an S&M scene played out between two leather-clad vixens and a beaten-bloody male slave. He was tied to a wooden plank and the dominatrices were lashing him with prong-tipped whips.

Jessica felt nauseated and started to move along when Allan suddenly leapt from a corner of the room, out the door and raced away.

"Allan."

She chased after.

ACT III.

Hannah sat at the counter, flipping through another uninspired magazine, glancing at the pictures and ignoring the articles. She was more interested in the new arrival on the sofa. He was coming around and she set the mag down. His name was Aaron. He was expected. She waited for him to come to her, knowing he'd not as much as glance the other way, at the EXIT.

Handsome, but pale and unclean. Still, a woman had urges, and Aaron was her type, for reasons she could not explain.

"Can I help you, Aaron?"

He was looking past her, to the back.

"Don't bother. I know exactly why I'm here."

Elestor was nowhere to be seen or heard from. He knew a sure thing well before they did.

She took his money and gave him his tokens, then Aaron was gone, fully aware of what he'd been brought to the shop for.

"Hope you find what you're looking for, Aaron."

Another of the shop's patrons had found what he'd been looking for, seated in front of young, pretty Amy, his lips in need of moistening. She straddled him, setting her butt firmly in his lap.

"Had my eye on you, Brian. Been watching a long time, now."

"I just got here."

She took his glasses off and let them drop to the floor.

"Silly. I've been watching longer than you know. Know what I've always wondered?"

Her hand slid between them. He tensed and his eyes rolled into heaven.

"Mmm, you don't disappoint, Daddy."

She toyed with him, then stood and moved around behind him, massaging his shoulders. A token flashed in front of his eyes, held in her delicate fingers.

"I wanna watch the show, Daddy. Slide it in for me?"

He was intoxicated all over again, sliding the token into the slot. Amy kneaded his shoulders, her fingers working the tendons in his neck, pushing the stress out, making the blood flow through him at lightspeed. He was lightheaded, noticeably aroused. She leaned close, nibbled his ear while her hands glided down his front and teased the bulge below.

"Enjoy the show, Daddy."

The divider panel slid up and a light glowed behind the glass.

A young girl, younger than Amy, was tied to a chair, the ropes crisscrossing her small breasts and pressing her torso tightly enough to make the revealed skin bulge. She was trembling, noticeably, and her face was bruised. The lights became more intense. The girl

wincing and Brian squinted. He was suddenly unsure, but Amy pressed into him, her hands squeezing him through his pants, her lips tasting his anxiousness.

"So young. Pretty. Innocent."

Her whispers hot in his ear, sending pleasuring currents into his nerves.

The girl behind the glass whimpered. Two large men stepped into the space on either side of her. They were naked but for masks and leather harnesses strapped around their torsos. Their erections were monstrous, making Brian's look like a child's, in comparison.

"Uh-oh. She's in trouble, now."

Amy's fingers unburdened him, practically ripping the front of his pants to get at it.

Tears streamed darkly down the poor girl's cheeks, wet eyes looking out of her cell to Brian, pleading for rescue. The brutes slapped her, not too hard at first. Gradually they got rougher, with open-palmed strikes becoming rock-solid fists. They beat and degraded her, hitting her with fists and with heavy erections that seemed to cause as much pain.

"What the fuck..."

Brian shifted in his seat, but Amy's hands stroked and squeezed him, rendering him no hero. They watched the beating together. They watched her be raped.

"She wants it, Daddy. You know she does."

Amy's grasp had him squirming, bringing him ever closer to an end. It felt so good, but wrong. So wrong. Not the pleasure, the act; the whole scenario. He knew something dreadful would overcome him if he allowed Amy to bring him to climax.

"Give it to me, Daddy."

Her hands moved over him, her mouth on his neck thrilled him. He hardly felt when she sank teeth into the artery. The victim screamed, teeth mostly gone, bloodied, torn holes gushing in her gums.

Brian felt the orgasm welling up as blood squirted from the vein into Amy's gullet. The lights dimmed and his head swelled, then everything went fuzzy and his erection spurted, shivers racking his body in the ultimate release. He thought he heard a trombone groaning somewhere.

Amy was laughing, hands moving up and down furiously, taking all they could from him.

The metal panel slammed shut, putting an end to the show.

ACT IV.

She saw Allan dart into one of the rooms but when she stepped in, it was empty.

"Allan?"

There was no one in the small room but her. Jessica nearly turned to leave but saw a token on the chair and one of the playing cards from Allan's deck, the Jack of Diamonds, only the theme was forest animals and the Jack was a weasel. She took the card and the token, holding them next to each other, as though a message would come from doing so. The only insight she could muster was to put the token to use. She put it into the slot on the wall and waited for the divider to rise. Part of her dreaded to see what was on display, but she was also nervously expectant, like it might be revealed that her young son was playing an elaborate prank, and he'd be on the other side, waiting to reveal the secret hidden doorway between rooms. That was the only reasonable explanation for how he'd slipped her grasp.

Blood was smeared across the glass on the other side. Jessica had to bend slightly to see through a sliver of space not obscured by the mess. The booth looked empty and she couldn't see a door or any other exit. She banged her fist on the pane.

"Allan, are you in there? Answer me."

The metal partition closed, suddenly. Her fingers felt wet, gummy. She held out the playing card and saw it was dipped in blood; it was slimy and coated her fingers. She let the card fall to the scummy floor and backed into the hallway.

Amy reached from behind her and touched Jessica's cheek with her fingertips. The touch felt wet, silky and obscene, and she recoiled from it. The young girl held her fingers to her lips and giggled.

"Sorry I scared you. Lost?"

"I'm looking for my son. He's too young to be in this place."

The girl sucked on a finger, putting on an act of innocent youth.

"Gotta get 'em started early, miss. Don't want him to grow up some kind of repressed sexual freak, do ya?"

"Excuse me."

Jessica began to move on, already tired of the girl's taunts.

"Sorry. Didn't mean anything by it. I saw him going toward the front desk."

"The front desk?"

"Yeah. I'm sure he's there with Hannah. She's good with kids."

"Oh. Thank you."

She left the girl, thinking she was a kid, herself. *What's a girl like that doing here?*

The corridor was dark again. A light had burned out. Jessica was thinking it seemed a much longer walk back to the storefront when she came to the corridor's conclusion; a wall, dead end. Had she gotten herself turned around and gone the wrong way? She turned back and walked the long stretch, finding the familiar turn and further length of hall. Allan will be there, she thought. With the kind, gentle-looking woman: Hannah. The noises were more frenzied than before. The lurid clientele was evermore despicable than she could have imagined. She refused to look upon their discretions, though her peripherals tried to defy her. *Where the hell is the beaded curtain? It wasn't this far, was it?*

As she was fighting not to notice the two men performing fellatio upon one another in one of the rooms she passed, and the baldheaded woman furiously masturbating to a display of old women dancing naked—slow and lovingly, it appeared, non-sexual despite their shared nudity—and shouting obscenities, Jessica could see the daunting deceit of the passage before she reached the wall that blocked her way.

"What is this?"

It was another prank. There had to be a way out. Some other passage she'd missed the first time through.

A whir and scrape dragged her attention to the room nearest and Jessica looked inside as the divider struggled to rise. Through the glass partition was her son, Allan, sweet boy, smiling and waving. She hurried to him, hands pressed to the glass.

"Baby? What are you doing in there? Let me in, please. Allan, sweetie. Honey, how do I get in?"

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

She spun and faced the proprietor. He was smiling pleasantly but he stunk, like gasoline and dead skunk.

"Give me my son."

"Sit and watch the show."

The divider slid closed. She slammed her fists against it.

"No! *Allan*. Give me my son!"

Elestor held a token, offered it to her.

"Free of charge. Welcome to the Purgatorium!"

Jessica stared at the tiny piece of brass, trembling, reaching to take it.

Hannah stepped around the shop owner and snatched the coin from his pointy fingertips. He stepped back and hissed, like a snake. His skin rippled and darkened with blood-filled veins. Hannah held his anger, then turned from it and dropped the token into the slot. The metal shield lifted, and Jessica's son reappeared.

"Allan."

Hannah took her hand, rubbed circles with her thumb.

"It's an illusion, Jess. A sick gag. Your son's not with us. He's home. Where he belongs."

She set a hand over Jessica's forehead and the boy in the viewing booth changed shape, became something monstrous and otherworldly; a slimy, formless muck oozing onto the floor and slinking away through cracks and crevices.

Jessica was revolted, then relieved.

"Where he belongs?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Where do I belong?"

The beautiful desk clerk smiled thinly, sighed deeply.

"Let me take you."

Aaron stepped out of a room into Hannah's and Jessica's path and sneered at them.

"Can't say I'm impressed."

"What did you expect?"

His eyes scanned Hannah, top to bottom and back up again. He glanced at Jessica.

"What's her problem?"

"She has faith."

He laughed.

"Faith? In a place like this?"

"You may not think of it as faith, but it's your faith that keeps you here. Her faith takes her someplace else. For some, perversion is faith."

"Who am I to argue?"

He brushed past them and sank deeper into the bowels of his faith.

Hannah could feel Elestor in her thoughts, prying. *Why not join him? You could be what he's looking for.* She would have almost considered it, but for the woman by her side. She led Jessica through the shop, embraced her, then opened the caged door and saw her through.

In time, Hannah returned, alone.

Elestor was waiting when she sat down. He grabbed one of the dildos—a purple 8-incher—and flung it across the store at the EXIT sign.

"How *dare* you interfere."

"You had no right to her, El. Pull your panties out of your crack."

"My brothers will hear of this."

"They don't want to be bothered, El. You know that. You and your little lowlife sycophant; Amy? You two are the only ones who care about this place, anymore. Your brothers were the smart ones for getting out of the biz."

"They still hold shares."

Hannah rolled her eyes and picked up the closest magazine, some modern living rag that made her scrunch her nose in disgust.

"Besides El, you still got one more in there."

"No challenge. He wants to be here."

"Lost cause, then."

"You know, you're not so pure-of-heart as you pretend to be. Why else would you be in a place like this?"

"Certainly not for the company."

Elestor smiled, clapped his hands together.

"Well, then. Some of us have a business to run."

"Onward, then."

He slipped away. The beads never shifted though he passed right through them.

ACT V.

Aaron kept searching for the thing to make the trip worthwhile. He saw degradation and pain, lust and sick perversion in each and every room, but not that which would give his life and subsequent death the meaning he'd longed for.

He found Amy alone in one of the rooms and she took the thoughts out of his head.

"Cheer up. Things can only get worse."

"Starting to have my doubts."

"Give it time, Daddy."

He gave her the room, moved on to the next. He had to step around excrement on the floor to sit and put a token in the slot. On display was a rotund man with a hole in his sizeable belly and a length of large intestine pulled loose. He was gnawing on it, letting the juices spill over his hairy breasts.

Aaron watched, felt nothing. The scene did not disturb him. It did not impress him. He sensed the presence of someone in the room with him. Not the spunky demon-chick. Likely the proprietor, *what's-his-name?*

"Elestor's the name, if you recall."

"Had we met."

"Yes. Quite right."

The metal slide closed, hiding the self-cannibalizing fat man.

"I might save you the time of seeking meaning, Aaron."

"It's here. Somewhere. I'll find it."

"Oh, you'll find plenty, but you won't discover a purpose. Just an endless corridor of missed opportunities. You'll become so bored with it all, you'll wish to kill yourself again."

Aaron hurried out, moving onto the next attraction. Elestor was waiting for him when he stepped into the next room.

"Cute trick."

He put a token in the slot, watched the banal execution of an armless, legless man, kept onto the next show. Elestor trailed him to some, preceded him to others, a reminder of the futility of his search.

"Just can't help but watch, can you?"

"I am enjoying myself, Aaron. Thank you."

Hannah had grown weary of reading magazines. There hadn't been a new arrival and none were immediately expected, so she went exploring, avoiding thoughts of Aaron. He was a lost cause, she still believed, concerned with an endless search for something he could never hope to acquire. She peeked into some of the rooms, losing interest with the zombies unable to look away, wondering how far along Aaron was.

Amy stepped into her path.

"Well, well. Look who came out to play."

"I don't play with children."

"I can pretend to be older, if that'll turn you on."

The young succubus closed the distance between them. Hannah felt her heat. Their lips grazed, shy of a kiss.

"Shouldn't you be tempting some old man, somewhere?"

"They ain't all old, Haniel. Oops, sorry. I know you hate it when we call you that."

Amy let her form slip, just enough to show her true self. A thin tail trailed up and around Hannah's thigh from between the demon's legs and her hairline receded and exposed pointed ridges on the scalp.

"Have you ever wondered, Hannah-Banana? What it would be like to open yourself up to darker experiences?"

The tip of her tail inched further inward.

"Amy, please. Look at me. I could do better."

The tail was covered in sharp bristles. It retracted swiftly and tore a piece of Hannah's thigh. Amy laughed and dashed from sight, her voice an echo in the corridor.

"Vanity's sinful, Hannah-Banana."

She tended to her leg and then followed the passage until she spotted Aaron. He saw her and his strain went away, the lines clearing from his glossy face.

"I'll find it. You can show me."

"Are you sure you want me to, Aaron? You don't look well."

He smiled.

"I'm fine. Show me."

Hannah motioned to the nearest room. Aaron stepped inside. The walls were plastered red and sticky, the floors held puddles, and the blood dripped over them. He sat and stared at the pane, which was obscured by the pouring plasma.

"I can't see."

"You have to look closer, Aaron."

Her hand clutched the back of his neck, crackled bones. She raised him from the chair and thrust him toward the glass. His head crashed through, scalp split and spilling blood down his face. Hannah let him go, stepped back. He crawled through the hole, dazed, pained, but determined. There was a door in the otherwise empty viewing booth, large, made of steel. There wasn't a handle, just a flat, slate surface.

"What's beyond the door?"

Hannah's voice appeared in his mind, a thought; a warning.

Bliss. Or agony.

It was his decision. He wiped blood from his opened hairline and smeared it on the surface of the door. It opened and he stepped through.

Elestor peered into the bloody room behind Hannah.

"This place is making a mess of you, dear."

She joined him in the hall and the blood vanished from her clothes and hair. Together, they walked to the shop.

"Do you ever tire of the game, my angel?"

"I never thought I was playing a game."

She took her place behind the counter.

"God's a prankster. You know that, Haniel. Better than most, I'd suspect."

Hannah frowned, to which Elestor raised his hands defensively, in truce, then took his leave as she picked up her magazine.

ENCORE

I.

Aaron went through the door and found nothing on the other side. Nothing except for the long, low-lit corridor of the peepshow. He turned back and met a wall, so he moved in the direction handed to him, discovering no viewing booths, no exits, just a long, dreary hallway, seemingly endless, with not so much as a bloodletting, rape or sacrifice to distract him from his panic. He'd come too far for it to be like this, with no meaning or anything at all. He shouted and swore, cried and howled laughter, seeking what could never be found there, but he kept on. He had nothing else to do. Nowhere else to go.

II.

The women stepped through the door. Jessica understood her life had ended, and she was saved. Her angel took her to the Promised Land. Her face shone, the heat sudden and intense, lighting up her eyes, the glint of catastrophe. The vast sky was red as blood, billowing with black clouds of destruction. Fire swelled, impossibly, over the entirety of horizon. She saw forms soaring through the haze of chaos, winged creatures colliding, decimating one another. Surely this was Hell, and the creatures at war were devil moths, wretched and lusting for carnage, but no, she knew the truth of things. Hannah told her so. The heavens burned, and ashes fell upon the Earth below.

Her skin was red and sizzling, the heat of destruction slow-cooking her. She felt no physical pain, only regret, that endless sensation, and utter grief. Jessica gazed at the erupted Empire, apathetic to its demise, even as her hair caught fire. Without speaking, only her thoughts wild and vibrant in Hannah's, she enquired: *What's happening?*

Hannah didn't leave it to thought.

"Heaven is at war."

They watched the burning. Hannah sent the disciple to her kingdom under fire. It was horrible and wondrous.

"God made man in His own image."

III.

Brian was stiff and aching, wondering how he'd gotten to the disco hall. Lights shone and flickered, neon havoc. A mirrorball turned slowly, scattering the floor with beams that seemed to cut through the crowd, an odd assortment of dancers, moving in slow motion,

trancelike and methodic. The music was shrill and upbeat, catchy and completely tedious in an insidious way. It hurt his already throbbing head. He looked upon himself in the mirrored ceiling and was startled to see how ghastly his appearance was, even beneath the glare of flashing, dazzling spectacle. And what was he wearing? A disco suit straight out of the movement's prime era.

He didn't like the faces of the dancers. They were off, somehow. Like skin masks not set properly over misshapen heads. They all dressed like him. At the front of the dancehall were a stage, and a large throne. Seated there was a dragon in a polyester suit, flipped collar and opened shirt, bellbottoms and platform shoes taller than he was. No exaggeration, the man, or monster was gigantic, a Luciferian Travolta in some demented *Saturday Night Fever*.

Amy danced upon the dragon's knee, hardly more than a speck. Horns sprouted from her hairline and a tail swirled around her hips as she bounced and threw her hands to the air, enthralled and energetic. Brian wanted none of this lunacy. As if disco wasn't bad enough. He started looking for an exit but found *her* instead, the first attraction he'd laid eyes on: the clown lady. She wasn't juggling, and she wasn't smiling. He didn't think she looked jolly at all. He tried to run but was grabbed by two creatures with faces drooping lifelessly from their real guises. The naked clown waddled over and arched her back, tilting her head and reaching between grease-painted lips to extract a long blade from her throat. It came out shiny and dripping with juices.

"I'll dance. Is that what you want? I'll fucking dance if you want."

Laughter erupted and the clown lady made a face, shaking her head in exaggerated disappointment. She posed with the blade outstretched, lunged and pierced Brian's belly. Hobble-stepping closer, she punched her oversized, gloved hand into the bloodless wound and began pulling objects out of his stomach: a couple of balls she juggled briefly; a horn that went *honk*; ropes of silk cloth; a pigeon that flew into the lights and exploded; a beach ball, which gave them both a bit of trouble. It went on, and the music became louder. Brian felt a sick weight pressing low in his guts and thought he could hear an elephant trumpet seconds before one's trunk slunk out of the hole in his belly.

It was quite the crowd-pleaser.

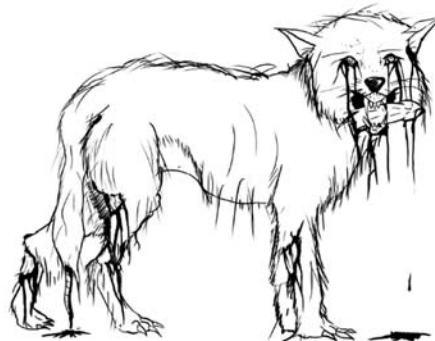
The Familiar

Briar Ripley Page

Briar Ripley Page is a former janitor and current university student who lives in Central Pennsylvania with a tuxedo cat and a plethora of inner demons. Find them at BriarRipley@mastodon.cloud.

The woman at the end of the bar wore red, and the blood crimson glitter of her dress was the first sign that things would be different that night.

She came in every Thursday at eight, two hours before the restaurant closed. She never ordered food, and between that and her physique, I thought she might be anorexic. She wasn't emaciated, though, only thin. It was something in the sharp points of her shoulders and wrists, and of her canine teeth when she opened her mouth.



This woman looked like she ached with a powerful hunger, like she was about ready to devour the world. Instead, she always ordered one cocktail from the bartender. She took an incredibly long time to finish a single drink, nursing it for forty minutes or more as people wandered into the restaurant, were seated at tables or sat themselves at the bar, ate and drank and hurried away and were replaced by new faces, new voices, new orders for me to deliver on trays balanced one-handed as I moved between the kitchen and the front of Ignatio's Bar and Dining.

It gave me time to watch her.

She never spoke, except to order her drink, but she often smiled wolfishly. Her hair was a tangle of thick black waves. The black was the flat black of cheap hair dye, and it should have looked bad, especially with the inch or so of brown roots that always showed at the top of her head. It didn't look bad. It looked like that was the way her hair was supposed to be. Besides, it matched her clothes.

"Hey Tess," snickered John, my least favorite bartender, as I turned to go back into the kitchen one Thursday night, having just deposited a platter of firecracker shrimp in front of a middle-aged couple in matching football team sweatshirts, "I think Wednesday Addams over there just winked at you. Watch out; she might be a lesbian." He looked me up and down. "Then again, maybe you don't care."

I gave him the finger, but I couldn't help sneaking a last glance at the woman in black before I retreated through the door. She was swirling a maraschino cherry around the rim of her glass. She looked up and met my gaze. In the dim light her eyes looked as obsidian as her hair. She smiled one of her lupine smiles, and this time there was no question it was aimed straight at me. My cheeks and neck flushed hot, and I turned away, too shy to do anything else.



And so things went until the night in June, almost a year after I began working at Ignatio's, when she sat down at the bar and instead of a shadow, she was the struck end of a match. Head to toe in red. Her hair was up in a complicated, braided bun held in place by a lot of silver pins.

She sat in her usual seat and ordered her drink, but this time, in another shocking departure from tradition, she also ordered a slice of pie. I made sure I was the one to bring it to her.

"I've seen you around," she said as I set the plate down. "I've been wanting to talk to you since forever, but, well, it's an awkward situation, isn't it? You work here; you're always so busy..."

"Oh," I stammered, cursing the ease with which I blushed, "oh, no. I mean, it's fine. I've noticed you, too. I've thought... I've thought of asking your name."

She reached her hand across the counter. For one disorienting moment, I wondered if she expected me to kiss it.

"Vega."

"Pardon?"

"Vega," she repeated. "It's my name. Vega Skelly."

"Oh," I said. I shook her hand.

"And do you have a name?"

"Tess Ackerman." I hated my given name, but after a short-lived attempt to get people to call me by my initials only resulted in ribbing about "tits and ass" from my cruder co-workers and from Devin, my roommate, I'd resigned myself to being Tess.

She smiled. "What are you doing after work, Tess?"

"I'm going to smoke a cigarette next to the dumpsters out back."

"Would you mind if I kept you company while you smoked?"

"Well, no," I said. My face was burning.



It was ten when I clocked out, and the sun hadn't set long before. As promised, Vega Skelly was waiting for me by the dumpsters in the parking lot behind Ignatio's.

"Hi," I said, flicking my lighter. "Thanks for waiting." I took the first drag of my cigarette.

"Those'll give you cancer, you know."

"Of course I know." I blew out a rueful stream of smoke.

"I've never smoked cigarettes, myself," she said, pulling a joint from her miniature backpack. "I prefer weed. Can I borrow your lighter?"

I handed it to her. I watched as she lit the joint and took a long toke. The resiny scent filled the air, masking the odors of garbage and gasoline.

"Want some?" asked Vega. "You sure look like you want some."

I was wary of consuming any drug that might significantly alter my perceptions or lower my inhibitions— pot, alcohol, even Nyquil or Sudafed when I was sick. My inhibitions were important to me.

But the smell was so strong, and so compelling, and Vega's eyes were twinkling with an unspoken dare.

"It's much better for you than a cigarette," she said.

I dropped my cigarette on the pavement and ground it out under my boot. "What the hell."

I took the joint from her outstretched hand, put it in my mouth, inhaled, and coughed. The smoke seemed heavier than I was used to, invading my mouth and the back of my throat in a way cigarettes didn't, coating my tongue and uvula. I thought I felt tendrils of smoke curling up through my sinuses.

"See? Doesn't that taste good?" said Vega. Above our heads, the stars were making their debut in the clear dark sky. "Do you walk home, Tess?"

"Yeah," I said, still coughing a little. "It's only about five blocks away, and I don't have a car."

"Where do you live?"

"Pine Hill Apartments."

"I live out that way, too. But further. I could walk with you..."

"I'd love the company," I said. I wondered if she was lying about where she lived. There wasn't much beyond Pine Hill Apartments— a couple gas stations, a strip mall, abandoned buildings, forest. The smoke in my head made my wondering distant and purely speculative, no reason for suspicion or alarm. Vega took another drag on the joint and passed it to me; I did the same.

An animal howled nearby. It was a long, luminous sound. I could almost see it in the air. *A dog?* I wondered. But we weren't in a residential area, and our town didn't exactly have packs of strays roaming the vacant lots and back alleys at night. It wasn't that kind of place. *A wolf?* I considered. That was even less likely.

"What if it's a coyote?" I asked aloud.

"That howling, you mean? What makes you think it isn't just a dog?"

"Have you ever seen a dog in this part of town?" Pot smoking, it seemed, loosened my tongue. "I read an article online a few weeks ago. It was about how Eastern coyotes are spreading throughout the state and into urban areas, more and more each year. They could be anywhere. They could be everywhere."

"Coyotes, huh?"

"Coyotes," I agreed.

"Do you want to know what I think?" She leaned in towards me as she passed me the joint.

"What do you think?"

"I think it's a witch's familiar on the prowl."

"A witch's what?"

"A witch's familiar spirit. A magical being that can take the form of an animal. It accompanies the witch. Helps and protects them. It's as intelligent as a human and it has powers of its own: shapeshifting and telepathy and such. In folklore, it's usually a cat, or maybe a toad or a bird. But it can be anything, any animal."

"Are you one of those new-age Wicca types?"

"Not hardly. I'm a free agent when it comes to witchcraft."

I laughed. It felt good. "You can finish this," I said, handing what was left of the joint back to Vega. The flesh of my arms felt like it was buzzing with tiny electrical currents. I realized, suddenly, how exposed we were.

The howl came again, sounding closer than it had before. I shuddered.

"We'd better start home," I said.

"Oh, silly," she said. "*He* won't hurt you. He's *my* familiar, after all."

"No jokes," I said. "Coyotes can be very dangerous." Without thinking, I took her hand. She let me lead her away.



Vega kept asking me questions about myself while we walked. I told her how I had barely left this town in the twenty-two years I'd been alive so far. I told her that I wasn't close with my family. I had acquaintances, but few friends. I had Devin, I told her.

I didn't like thinking about Devin the way he was now, the way he'd been more and more since I'd come back from my abortive attempt at college and moved in with him, so I told Vega about Devin when we were in seventh grade and he sat with me at lunch so I wouldn't have to eat in a girl's bathroom stall by myself. I told her about Devin when we were in eleventh grade and we went to the junior prom together. I wore my dad's old tux, badly adjusted so it wouldn't drag on the ground, and Devin squeezed into a frothy thrift store gown. As a joke, Devin had kept saying. I didn't want to think the idea of myself in a suit, or of Devin in a dress for that matter, was really much of a laugh riot, but I supposed it was. I had to admit as much when I made myself look at the prom pictures, or at my reflection in the mirror.

"I think you'd look dashing in a suit," said Vega. We'd reached my apartment building. "Don't be so mean to yourself." She squeezed my hand. I heard the coyote howling again.

"Do you want to come inside with me?" I found myself asking.

"What about your roommate?"

"He won't mind," I said. I didn't sound very convincing.

"Well," said Vega, "if you're sure..."

"I'm sure," I said. I walked her to the front of the building. We pushed through the door and walked halfway down the hall until we came to a second door, this one distinguished by a rusty metal plate reading 4A screwed into it at about Vega's eye level, just above the top of my head. I could hear the throb of nu-metal through the wood.

"Hang on," I said. "I'll go in first." I unlocked the door. "Hey!" I shouted as I stepped through. "Hey, DEVIN! I'm done with work! I brought a friend!"

Devin was sitting cross-legged and barefoot on the living room couch, typing on his laptop.

"What-ho, firecrotch," he said, turning his music down to a barely discernible mumble. I ran a hand through the ginger curls at the back of my head. "For fuck's sake," I said. "I told you not to call me that."

"It's just a joke, Tess. You used to be able to take a joke." He twisted his body without moving his legs out of their position. I tried not to look at the flat plane of his chest and

stomach through the thin fabric of his t-shirt, but looking at his smirking, square jaw wasn't much better.

"Hel-loooo," said Devin, seeing Vega. "I didn't know Tess had other friends. What's the deal? You single?"

Vega ignored him. "Tess," she asked, striding over to me and linking her arm with mine, "do you have a room?"

"Yeah." I motioned in the direction of my bedroom with my other hand. "Through there."

"We'll get out of your way, then," she said to Devin.

He scowled, then brightened. "Hey, don't rush. I didn't mean to offend you. Stick around a minute. A friend of Tess's is a friend of mine." He closed his laptop and put it to the side. "Don't you want to see my snake?"

Vega curled her lip. "No," I explained hurriedly, "he means an *actual snake*. She's his pet."

"She is indeed," confirmed Devin. He pulled himself up off the couch and meandered over to the boa constrictor's cage, a glass box that sat near our only apartment window. The snake was curled inside it, a pile of many sinuous, folded loops. Devin opened the top of the box and lifted her out.

I concentrated on the snake's face. It was cute, with rounded contours and a mouth that almost appeared to be smiling. If I only looked at her *face*, and not at her scaly body sliding around on Devin's arm...

"...won't touch Twister, ever." Devin was saying to Vega. I snapped back into the moment, aware that he was talking about me. "Tess is *scared*. For someone who dresses like a butch dyke, she's such a *girl* sometimes, I swear. No offense. I mean, I can tell you're cool about this stuff. And Twister's cool. Say hi!"

"I don't think I *will* touch her, thanks," Vega said. "Although she is a lovely beast."

"Suit yourself," said Devin, annoyed. Twister and I made uncomfortable eye contact. It was uncomfortable for me, at least. I had no idea how the snake felt.



"Wow," Vega said as I turned on the light. "Is this a repurposed closet?"

"I don't think so. It's just small. I don't mind; I don't need a lot of space."

"You're lucky I'm not claustrophobic." She scanned the room, and I tried to see it through her eyes. My bed was a mattress pushed up against the wall. I had a dresser for my clothes, scavenged from my childhood bedroom and sized for a child, studded with miscellaneous stickers. There was no other furniture, only haphazard stacks of paperback books all over the floor, a portable electric fan, and my laptop charging in the wall outlet.

"Um," I said. "Sorry about this. I don't entertain much."

Vega was examining the stacks of books now. "Harlan Ellison, huh?" she said. Her nose scrunched up. "Well, at least it's not Ayn Rand, or Orson Scott Card. I'd be outta here."

"Hey!" I protested. "I didn't bring you into my bedroom so you could insult my taste in literature!" I paused, considering. "Besides, what's wrong with Ellison?"

"Sorry, sorry," she said, sitting down on my mattress and making herself at home. "I'm a judgmental bitch sometimes."

"No way," I said, plunking myself beside her. "You meant it, and I want to hear your explanation."

We spent a long time sitting on my mattress, half conversing and half arguing about books, and then movies and music as well; what we loved and what we hated. Throughout, we heard Devin messing around in the rest of the apartment. He'd turned his music back on. He clomped through the hallway several times. *He's going to his bedroom*, I thought. *Now the bathroom. Now the bedroom again.*

Then, as I'd expected, the grind of the music cut off abruptly, disorienting us with its sudden absence. The front door of the apartment slammed. Vega turned to me, an inquisitive wrinkle between her eyebrows.

"He's gone out," I explained. "Clubbing. He does that. Sometimes he picks up girls and brings them home."

"Should I leave?" asked Vega, though she made no movement to do so.

"He won't be back for a while," I assured her.

She leaned forward until her face was inches from mine.

I caught my breath.

We both leaned further in at the same time. Vega's mouth was warm and damp and it tasted like pot smoke and sugar.

She tumbled backwards on the mattress, pulling me down on top of her. I slipped the silver pins from her hair and watched it loosen and spread around her face. When our mouths met again, she slipped her tongue between my lips in a ticklish little darting motion. I tried to mimic it. I reached around Vega's skinny back and clasped her to me. Our breasts touched and ached with the pressure of each other. Lower down, I felt something I wasn't expecting.

"Vega," I whispered. "Uh, do you have a boner right now?" I wished I could think of a sexier word for it but thinking in words at all was becoming difficult.

"Yeah," she breathed into my ear. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No," I said. I discovered that I was telling the truth as I said it. I moved against her. "I was just surprised, is all."

"I'm full of surprises." She licked the side of my chin like a dog.

"Augh!" I shoved her playfully.

"I'm hungry," she whispered. "Witches never stop being hungry, not really. We could eat the whole world."

She grabbed me and kissed me again. "You, too," she continued. "You're one of us. You could eat the whole world, and you'd still be hungry again later. But you'll find ways to satisfy yourself, for a while. I promise that you will."

I was unglued, unmoored, adrift in space and time and a massive perpetual unfolding of color and texture and sensation. Things tangled together the way they do in dreams. I thought I could hear the coyote howling again. First it was far away, outside the walls. Then it was so near it might have been right in the room with us, and then I thought it was Vega howling, and then I thought she was singing, some song I'd never heard before, some song in another language. And she was shedding her red dress and her black underwear. She was standing naked in the middle of the room, and she was what she'd said about Twister, a lovely beast, and then I was standing too, and I was also naked.

I felt the barest whisper of shame, but I tried to stand as proud as Vega, who looked so at home in her own skin. The air in the room was stale, and as she took my hand and opened

the door, it was disturbed. The dust on the floor rose up and licked my ankles like hundreds of small tongues, and we walked out into the living room.

"Vega, what are we doing?"

"We need more space," she said, kneeling. She was scratching something into the floorboards beside the couch with a fingernail. "It's the summer solstice, Tess. It's the best time of the year for a witch's initiation. Especially for people like us, ruled by the element of fire. Hot starlight. Bright moonlight. The transfiguring flame. I thought you might be like me, and now I know. I've tasted you. I've looked into your secret heart."

"What?" I asked. I felt like I was falling down a kaleidoscope. I had thought it was the pot, or maybe the heady promise of sex, but I began to suspect something else. "Vega, you didn't... *give* me anything, did you?"

"I give you nothing but gifts, Tess. Nothing you don't want." She paused, standing, finished creating her design, an elaborate thing of swirls and triangles. "Anything you're feeling now is something your mind and body are producing for themselves." She reached out to me, and our hands clutched each other again. The design on the floor was shining. She pulled me onto the couch with her.

The front door opened.

We sprang apart. Vega covered her crotch with one of the couch pillows. I tried to hide myself with my hands.

"Hey," said Devin, sounding a little drunk. (How much time had passed? Did it make sense for him to be back already? I wasn't sure.) There was a girl on his arm who looked more than just a little drunk. In fact, she was barely conscious. "I'd ask if I could watch," he said, glancing at us and then quickly looking elsewhere, "but I've got my own catch right here. Stay like that, though, and maybe we can have a four-way later."

The girl was leaning on Devin as though she couldn't stand unsupported. Her eyelids fluttered. Her mouth was slack. A tiny bead of drool was forming in one corner, leaking out from between her slightly parted lips.

Devin was steering her towards his room.

"Wait," I croaked. Everything in the world was fast spinning me from dream into nightmare. "Devin."

They were nearly to the door of Devin's room. He hadn't heard me.

"DEVIN, WAIT!" I shouted, finding my voice. "She's fucking plastered! She's about to pass out! She probably doesn't know where she is!"

He had opened the door. He was half guiding, half pushing the girl through it. He'd heard me; he just didn't care.

"You're going to fucking *rape* her, Devin!" I yelled, hauling myself up from the couch, forgetting I was naked. I ran towards him and the semi-conscious girl just as he was closing the door. The lock clicked. I kicked the door, succeeding only in hurting my foot. "*DEVIN!*"

"Shhh," said Vega, creeping up behind me, putting her hands on my shoulders as I trembled with fear and fury. "It looks bad now, but he'll reap what he sows."

There were noises coming from inside Devin's room. Shuffling. Something like a stifled moan. I shrugged out of Vega's grasp and pounded on the door with my fists.

The noises became louder. A light grew beneath the door, leaking into the hallway, red like a spotlight, spotlight, blood crimson glitter. I blinked.

My fists on the door had a rhythm, and it was like the rhythm of struggle taking place on the other side. Someone was screaming and I was shouting every combination of swear

words and threats I could think of. Then I realized that the screaming belonged to Devin, that Devin in anguish.

I froze with my hands clenched in the air. Devin screamed and screamed, not seeming to draw breath. His scream became a howl, and then it stopped all at once. I noticed that the light in the hall was all red, that everything I could see was cast in that light, that the electricity had gone out. Vega was behind me again, easing my hands down, loosening my fingers. There were wet, nauseating sounds from inside the room. Then the door was swinging open.

I didn't want to see what was on the other side.

I knew I had to see what was on the other side.

There was no sign of the girl, but an animal like a big dog bounded out of the room. It grinned, tongue lolling out of its mouth, and its muzzle and paws and the fur on its chest were sticky with blood. The dog-thing was wagging its tail and leaving streaky paw prints on the floorboards.

"Good boy," said Vega, scratching it between the ears, and then, in a normal voice, as though she were speaking to a human being, "Thank you. You did very well."

The dog-thing yawped happily. I turned back to the open door. Devin was lying on the floor, flat on his back, arms thrown across his face, his throat torn open, a ruin of meat. I wanted to cry, or be sick, or at least avert my eyes.

I didn't cry, and I wasn't sick, and I refused to avert my eyes. Did Devin deserve this? I didn't know. It didn't matter. He was dead now. Blood pooled thick as syrup in the wreckage of his neck.

Vega stepped across the threshold and hoisted Devin's corpse up by its shoulders. "Will you help me?" she asked. "We need to bring him to the sigil."

I could think of nothing to do except walk around the other side of Devin's body to grab its legs. Devin was much heavier than he looked, but between the two of us we carried him into the living room and laid him down beside the sign Vega had carved into the floor. It was shining so much that I couldn't look at it. Twister watched the proceedings from her cage. I felt a surge of compassion for the snake. What would she do without Devin? I supposed that I would have to take care of her now. Let her draw warmth from my arm. Feed her mice.

"You've been brave," said Vega softly. I turned to her. "It's hard. It's always hard. Transformation cannot come without blood, and pain, and sacrifice. Sometimes, this means a death." She dipped one finger in Devin's blood. She stood, bent, and used it to trace a circle around the sigil, and me, and Devin's body on the floor. The dog-thing capered about her feet.

"It's time," Vega announced. The circle of blood flared up, became a ring of fire. I began to sweat. Devin's handsome face, frozen in an expression of terror, glowed in the firelight. I wished I could smooth his fear away with my hands. Something in me did, after all, love him still.

"Time for what?" I asked Vega, and then, "What do I need to do?"

"You must eat his heart," she said.

"How?" I asked. I put my hands on his unmoving chest.

"Try," said Vega.

I dug my fingertips into Devin's flesh, and it parted like plasticine. I pried his ribs apart without effort, admired their curved elegance even as I felt the stinging salt of tears and snot

running down my face. I kept crying as I reached Devin's heart and wrenched it dripping from its home and put it to my lips. I kissed it. Then, bathed in blood crimson glitter, baptized by the light of magic flames, I bit into it. I chewed. I swallowed. I took another bite, bigger this time. I heard a shattering sound behind me, and I knew it was Twister's cage breaking into a thousand sharp pieces. I also knew that the snake was unhurt, that she was untwining her long body and slipping free into some dark, warm corner, and I sensed the dog-thing cocking its head to follow her slithering progress. I felt Vega Skelly standing in the firelight, watching me with approval, a teacher bringing an initiate into the fold. I chewed and I swallowed with my eyes closed, feeling the blood on my hands and the blood in my mouth as I ate and I ate and I ate Devin's heart until there was nothing left. Until it was all inside me, and the red world flared and vanished into a long, peaceful blackness.



I woke up sprawled naked on the couch. Groaning, I struggled upright. The living room was clear and calm in the early light.

The floor wasn't clean, but it was no dirtier than usual. No smears of gore. No paw prints tracked through the dust and grime. No sigil carved into the old wood boards. No broken glass, although Twister's cage seemed to have vanished in the night. The snake herself was nowhere to be seen, either. Nor was Vega, although I called her name, first softly, then louder, part of me worried I'd wake Devin, part of me not caring if I did, and part of me knowing that, whatever had really transpired, Devin was no longer in his room to wake, and he would not be back again.

My mouth was dry. When I ran my tongue over my teeth, I thought they felt sharper than they had been.

I opened the door to the bathroom and faced the mirror.

I hadn't changed in any physical way another person would have noticed, but I felt like I was reflected in the mirror for the first time. I looked, and I saw a short, stocky boy with a mess of red-gold hair and an honest, open face. Blue eyes with shadows beneath them. Freckles scattered like stars or ash across the bridge of his nose. I did not see ugliness, and, even with my breasts exposed, I did not see a girl, a woman. I only saw myself.

"My name's not Tess," I said out loud to my reflection. "My name's..." I paused, but only for a fraction of a second. The name was hanging in the air in front of me, waiting for me to pluck it like a piece of ripe fruit and claim it as my own.

"My name is Blaze," I said to my reflection. The name felt a little ridiculous, but also felt right.

I heard a soft rustle on the floor near my feet. I looked down. Twister had come back from wherever she'd been. Her tongue flickered in and out of her friendly mouth, a delicate stutter-dance. I stooped, extended my arm.

"Hello, Twister," I said. "I'm glad you're safe."

Hello, Blaze, she said, winding her way up my arm, seeking my heat. She didn't use human language, but I found I got the sense of it. *You're awake at last.*

"I am," I agreed. Something occurred to me. "Devin named you Twister," I said. "What's your real name, if you have one? I mean, isn't there something you'd prefer to be called?"

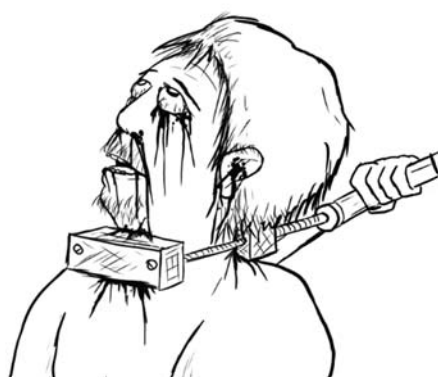
There is, concurred my familiar. And she told me what it was.

Money Shot

Peri Nieham

All Peri Nieham wishes to reveal is that they are based in the UK.

In his forty-one years of life, Parker Cranfield had imagined a lot of things, some of them quite nasty, but he had never imagined hearing Meryl instruct a stranger to: “Smash his teeth in and shove your cock down his throat until he chokes and keep it there.” He certainly hadn’t expected those to be among the last words he would ever hear. To be fair, who *would* expect that? And to be fair to Meryl, she was his ex-wife by then.



U.B

Sometimes when Parker was building towards spurting in the women’s faces, instead of the scene he was watching, he imagined he was taking part in a bukkake session—an unlikely bukkake session in which his was not the smallest cock.

In reality, it was more than body image that kept him away from bukkake, even on his computer—which was the only place he met willing women these days. With two specific exceptions, he would never subject anybody to anything so degrading. The exceptions were his ex-wife Meryl and her lesbian lover Angela. Parker would have paid a lot to watch those two surrounded by an endless parade of masturbating demons until they literally drowned in rank, acidic cum—even though Angela was already dead.

So, no hard feelings there, then. *It’s not as if it still chews me up to remember Meryl saying she would rather be with someone who had no dick than spend another second with the owner of mine.* After eight years, he still felt the need to remind himself he was over it. One day, he might be convincing.

Parker took a metaphorical grip on himself (He already had a physical grip and was close to orgasm). He would never have to see that double-crossing bitch again, so what was the point of getting upset? And—*Aaaghh! Fuck!*

Most of his jizz ran down the screen of his MacBook and splattered the dishtowel he used to protect the keyboard (*I wouldn’t want to have **that** conversation at the repair shop*) but some dripped onto the carpet. He had become much drippier since he entered his forties. It didn’t matter. There was no longer anybody in the house to complain about stains.

Parker didn’t understand why Meryl had objected so strongly to his use of porn. It was free, and it was his only hobby, if you discounted dehydrating himself so his wee would be dark yellow, then adding small quantities of blue toilet bleach to see what shades of green he

could produce. No one could object to that; it was art, and it wasn't as if he made her look at the photographs.

She probably didn't really mind the porn; it was just material to support her decision to leave. The same could be said about her affair with Angela. Otherwise, why didn't she come back when the predatory lesbian bitch killed herself? During the first six months, he would have taken her back.

Like everybody, Parker always fantasized he was in the room, skin on skin, with the girls on his screen. But if he was honest, he doubted he would be able to get hard for those intimidatingly gorgeous women who, at half his age, were more experienced than he would ever be, and who were used to monster dicks attached to toned bodies. Parker tried never to be honest with himself, especially about sexual matters or his divorce, but from time to time reality crept up and caught him out.

He was removing the dishtowel so he could leave the site and check his email when the video menu was replaced by a woman in a business suit. She appeared to look him in the eyes and said. "Hi, Parker. Nice shirt. Green suits you. As you are a frequent visitor to our site, we would like to make you a special offer."

She got no further because he slammed down the lid of the computer. His heart tried to batter its way out through his mouth and probably only failed because he was shaking so much that it missed the hole. What the hell was going on?



When he calmed down (assisted by two lemon and poppy seed muffins), Parker realized there was nothing extraordinary about what had just happened. Websites all used cookies to hit you with targeted advertising. They were supposed to ask your permission but that didn't seem to worry them. Presumably, enforcement was lax. He wasn't interested in whatever somebody was trying to sell him with their "special offer", and the effrontery of their hijacking his viewing time annoyed him, but he didn't want to stop using his favorite site. *Click-Suck-Fuck* gave him what he wanted and, as far as he was aware, didn't dump any malicious crap on his hard drive.

When he logged back in, the woman in the suit was still there, frozen with a white "Play" arrow superimposed between her collarbones. His cursor hovered over the "close" button, but he was curious. And what was the worst that could happen?

The picture blacked out for a few seconds before reappearing. The woman put down her coffee and smiled at him. "Welcome back, Parker. I'm Stephanie Shaw, and I have an amazing offer for you. If you click the button on the bottom right of your screen, it'll make this a two-way conversation. Don't worry; I don't want to sell you anything."

As if they didn't all say that! There were probably a dozen reasons not to click the button, but Parker rarely-going-on-never got an opportunity to chat with young women who looked like Stephanie Shaw. He went ahead and clicked. Sadly, that was the most daring thing he had done in ten years, since leaving the States to accompany Meryl on her "Great English Adventure". Then, after two years of what he thought was happiness, she left him for Angie, who apparently had more balls than he did. He hadn't been able to watch girl-on-girl since. To make everything worse, Meryl didn't leave him with nothing when she departed

on her Great Lesbian Adventure; she left him with a house, a mortgage and a shitty job that barely covered the bills without her income.

But that was a stick to beat himself with on another day.

"That's better; I can see and hear you now," Stephanie said. "That really is a great shirt. Is it Armani?"

"Top Shop, I think."

"I'm not sure if we have that in California. On Rodeo Drive, maybe?"

"I'm from New York, Stephanie. Bullshit won't work on me."

Her smile grew wider, displaying even more expensive dentistry. "Well, Parker, there's a lot we could talk about right there, but we'll save that for future chats. Is it okay to call you Parker? That doesn't seem too intimate after some of the things you've watched me doing."

Had he? Possibly. She wasn't one of his regular favorites, but she certainly looked the part.

"Yes, I used to be talent," she said. "Of course, I didn't perform as Stephanie Shaw, which is my real name, by the way. If you don't mind, I won't tell you my stage name just now because I need you to concentrate on the business at hand—Pun intended and, as you will see, relevant."

She waited, and Parker surprised himself by remembering the question. "By all means, use my first name," he said. "It's real."

"And you're based in England now, right?"

Of course, she would have that information. He had long since ceased to marvel at the number of hookers who appeared on the right-hand side of his monitor, and who apparently lived within two miles of his small-town home.

"So, Parker, do you masturbate while you're watching the films, or afterward in the bathroom?"

Parker felt the tops of his ears go red. Nobody had ever asked him anything like that before, especially not a hot woman. Even in high school, when the other guys had discussed the minutiae of their sexual experiences, they always excluded him as being too geeky—and because they could tell he hadn't had any experiences. But Stephanie came right out with it thirty seconds after wondering if using his first name would be too personal. He supposed that was the nature of the business she was in.

"I do it afterward," he said, unsure why he was lying. Probably because it seemed less depraved than the truth.

Stephanie raised an eyebrow. "Parker, really? Do you think I could work in this industry for as long as I have without learning to read men?"

"All right, I cover the keyboard and cum on the screen."

She nodded, her smile approving. "How would you like to get paid for that? Good money for doing what you would do anyway for free."

This was not the sales pitch he had expected. "And you would film me?"

"Via your laptop's camera. Premium subscribers will pay to have an insert on their screens when they watch the same video you're watching."

"Who would want to watch me?"

"Plenty of people. Why don't you let us worry about that?"

"I'm not porn-sized."

"That's a bonus. Ordinary guys will identify with you and bigger ones will feel smug. What do you care anyway? You won't care when you look at your bank account."

If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. Parker knew that, but he also knew there were a lot of mega-wealthy superstars who had gotten their big break through pure luck. "How much would you pay me?"

"Do you wish to handle the financial side yourself or would you prefer we deal with your professional legal representative?"

What a horrifying thought! "I'll handle the negotiations. What would be the ballpark figure?"

"Initially, we would require two performances a week. For that, we will pay you \$2000 for the first month. Then we will reassess. If the slot is popular, the fee will increase as a fixed percentage of our revenue. If it isn't popular, we'll call it a day."

He noticed how she had slipped from the conditional future tense, what they "would" do, into what "will" happen. It was an old psychological trick. He heard the sales team at work doing it all the time to get customers invested in the product because, subconsciously, the "marks", as they called them, felt it was a done deal.

"The fee will be significantly higher," Stephanie continued, "if you agree to show your face."

That was a non-starter. Parker didn't want anybody, here or back home, to know about this.

"No problem, Parker. As you settle into it and become more relaxed with the process, you may change your mind. No pressure. It may even be an advantage to build the mystery. Reveals are a big ratings generator. Do we have a deal in principle? If so, I'll email you a contract."

While it lasted, an extra \$2000 a month would be very useful. And that was only the starting salary! If it went well, he might eventually be able to ditch the pointless office job and consider himself a professional porn star. He probably wouldn't put that on official documents, though.

"Can I have twenty-four hours to think it over?"

"Of course. That's my personal number at the bottom of the screen. Call me when you've decided, but don't leave it too long. We're eager to move forward with this and although I like you and you're my first choice, we aren't short of candidates. Click-Suck-Fuck is a business and we remain in business by being efficient and timely. Also, remember there's an eight-hour time difference between the Valley and where you are."

He had to ask. "How do I know this isn't a scam?"

Stephanie's brow wrinkled—so no Botox yet, at least not there. "We're not asking you for any money and you can set up a separate PayPal account for us to pay your salary. Move the money out as soon as you get it if you're worried."

"No, I mean how can I be sure you're not pulling a candid camera-type thing or an R-rated version of *Impractical Jokers*?"

"Would it ease your fears if we pay up front? In fact, we'll advance you half on receipt of your verbal agreement."

He nodded and she cut the connection.



Parker closed the laptop in case the camera was still operating. How could you tell? If he was really going to do this, he would need to find out. As Stephanie said, this was a business deal and he wouldn't want to give them any freebies. It didn't occur to him that she had known the color of his shirt before he gave her access to his computer's camera. Life was finally looking up, after eight shitty years. Maybe, if it took off, he would trace Meryl and gloat about it.

What would it matter if he cashed in by showing his face? His parents in Brooklyn didn't know anybody who would see him or recognize him if they did. As for the losers at the office—what were they doing with their lives? If asked, most of them wouldn't be able to tell you the purpose of their job. Like him, they pointlessly moved paper about and forwarded phone calls.

Still, maybe he should start out anonymous, to be on the safe side.

Okay, assuming I go ahead, what preparations do I need to make? A mask in case I get carried away and accidentally show my face? Viagra would be helpful, especially the first time when I'm bound to be extra anxious about being watched. I'm sure I read somewhere that you can now get Viagra in the UK without prescription. Open a new PayPal account, which I'll use only for this. Then if they rip me off, my other money is safe.

And with that, Parker Cranfield accepted that he had made up his mind to become a porn performer. The careers advisors in high school had never suggested that as a possibility! What *were* they paid for?

The next evening, Parker phoned Stephanie Shaw with his acceptance, checked that his new account had been credited with \$2000, and digitally signed the contract.



A week later, Parker Cranfield began his dream job. No, it was more than that. This was beyond anything he had ever realistically expected could ever happen to him.

It had long been his habit to jerk off in front of the computer at least once every day. He would be paid for only two of these each week, to “avoid saturating the market” (pun no doubt intended.) So, in his off-the-clock time, he searched out films he particularly liked so he could revisit them on paydays and give a better on-camera performance. To that end, he wondered if he should ease off on the non-paying sessions so he would have more to squirt. In a couple of days, he would ask Stephanie what sort of feedback they'd had.

He quickly learned the best way to stand, or occasionally lie, to maximize the apparent size of his knob. And he remembered to keep his face out of shot (not having bothered with a mask.) *I'm a pro now; I have to consider everything.*

By the end of the first week, Parker was thinking like a DP (Director of Photography) and was evaluating backgrounds. His was a modern house devoid of interesting nooks and crannies, but he found he could create a variety of environments by turning his laptop slightly. If he used every room in his little house, he could go for months without repeating himself.

The people who watched Click-Suck-Fuck wouldn't care about the artistic quality of his shot composition but during the next two weeks, he justified the effort by comparing his efforts with *Doctor Who*. Most of that show's viewers wouldn't understand that when the first female Doctor arrived on earth without a sonic screwdriver, it symbolized her lack of a

penis. So, should the BBC not have bothered? Of course they should. And so would Parker Cranfield.

If he got the opportunity. Allowing viewers to see his reaction to what they were watching was an experiment. There was no guarantee that his contract would be extended beyond the first month, the end of which was now less than a week away. He had to enhance his USP to make himself more valuable.

The obvious answer seemed to be to show his face. If Click-Suck-Fuck was prepared to pay “significantly” extra for that, it must be important to them. No problem. Parker now had no reservations on that score. He had nothing to be ashamed of. He was using his talent to make money. He didn’t look down on the girls for doing that, so why should he look down on himself? And unlike many people in insurance, he wasn’t hurting anybody.

The only serious remaining worry concerned HMRC, the UK equivalent of the IRS. If he came to their attention, they would demand retrospective taxes as well as a cut of future earnings. They might even prosecute for tax evasion. Being able to claim his dishtowels and screen wipes as business expenses would be a poor compensation. Nevertheless, he needed to come into the open, so to speak. It was the only way to make his job more secure.

So, that Thursday evening, Parker not only looked into the camera full face, he spoke as well, keeping up a witty commentary.

The next morning, he found an extra \$350 had been paid into his account. Now he had a different worry. The cash was welcome, but he didn’t want to price himself out of the market. Maybe he should call Stephanie and suggest she hold off on giving him a raise until she could confirm increased viewing figures. Or would she interpret that as him trying to tell her how to do her job?



“You’ve had an outstanding month,” Stephanie told a beaming Parker when she rang him on Monday.

Then he remembered to make his smile a little more enigmatic so as not to suffer by comparison with her Beverly Hills dental work.

“Would you consider doing an extra session a week?” she asked. “Paid pro rata, of course.”

“That would be perfect, and much appreciated.” He was beating away every night anyway.

“As you’ve taken so well to speaking on camera, I would like to put you on live, instead of with recorded videos. That way the girls will be able to see you and respond to your commands.”

“I can tell them what to do?”

“And they will react to what you are doing. Of course, with the time difference, performing live will mean changing your work hours.”

In the circumstances, he didn’t mind that at all.

“And if all goes well over the next month, how would you like to come over to LA and get down to some in-person action with the talent of your choice?”

Parker was sure his heart had stopped while he replayed Stephanie’s words to check he hadn’t imagined them. “For real? I get to—”

“Fuck them. Yes, absolutely for real—but it isn’t compulsory.”

Was she kidding? “I am definitely in.”

“Excellent. We’ll fly you business class and pick you up at LAX. But, one step at a time.”

Parker could not imagine life getting better than this. Just a few short weeks ago, he would have been intimidated by the super-hot women, but now he knew he could do it, even without the assistance of his little blue friends.

“Brandi said to tell you she’s excited about you coming over, and she’ll be happy to rehearse off camera as much as you want.”

Could this get any better?! Brandi was his all-time favorite. And it seemed that terminating his contract was not on the agenda.



Parker was timidly polite when he started the live internet sessions: “If you wouldn’t mind perhaps moving your knee slightly to the left...” and so forth.

Stephanie suggested it was the result of living in rural England for ten years. The Southern Californian clearly didn’t believe New Yorkers possessed inherent politeness.

Whatever the truth of that, it wasn’t long until Parker was shouting: “Suck my cock, bitch. No! Don’t just move your mouth up and down on it, fucking SUCK, like on a straw.”

After the session, Stephanie advised him to rein in the aggression a little. Parker was instantly mortified and asked to apologize to the actress.

“There’s no need,” Stephanie said. “Everybody gets carried away at first and Eva understands. She’s had worse and she’s fine.”

“I’m really not that sort of man.”

“I know.”

“It’s just—”

“Parker, it’s fine. Life isn’t something you always get right the first time. Long as you learn from your mistakes, it’s cool. Nobody died.”

That didn’t stop Parker lying awake most of the night, worrying. He had never spoken that way to a woman in his life. In fact, he had slept with only two women and never asked either of them to do anything. Instead, he just hoped they would tune in to his unexpressed desires. When she left, Meryl told him he was the most boring, unadventurous lover she’d ever had. Her predecessor Jane may have felt the same.

What if C-S-F terminated his contract because of his behavior? Oh God, what would he do then? Stephanie had smiled and reassured him that everything was all right, but that was what business people did—right before they cut you off. He knew how business people operated; he worked in an office; his parents were business people.

By the end of his second chocolate chip cookie, he had calmed down enough to think practically. There were two more sessions remaining before the end of the month. He had time to turn this around, to convince them he had been acting (which was probably fine) and not revealing his true nature (not fine).



The next session involved anal. Parker had never managed to do that in real life. He had tried twice with Meryl and bounced off both times. He was too shy to suggest it (or anything else) to the girlfriend he had before her, believing she would refuse and would be shocked that he was thinking about anything so disgusting. So, he was really looking forward to exploring that in LA. That changed on this shoot.

On all previous occasions that he had watched anal, the guy had pulled out so the camera could get the money shot. This time, probably by accident, the guy came inside the woman's ass. For the recording, they would cut in a retake where he spurted over her back and genitals (*Hark at me, the porn pro!*) but this was live.

The guy's semen mixed with, and softened, shit that had worked through the girl's bowel since the pre-shoot enema, with the result that his dick came out smeared brown. There was also a dollop of blood on it.

Parker's erection vanished. The on-screen section that featured him cut to a medium shot of his face—and the masked man standing behind him.



Parker started to turn but froze when he felt the wire noose around his neck. The intruder pulled it tight enough to be uncomfortable, but Parker was not yet in danger of losing consciousness, so he tried to struggle. That was wasted energy because the man was much stronger and held him without apparent effort.

"Stephanie!" Parker screamed. "You're seeing this, right? Call the police. It's 999 over here, not 911."

"Look at the screen," the man whispered in his ear.

The porn performers were gone. The right-hand side of the screen showed Parker and his assailant. The left side was divided between Stephanie—and Meryl! Despite the unexpected turn of events, his confusion and fear, Parker was able to acknowledge that his ex-wife looked good, even standing next to the gorgeous sex bomb that was Stephanie Shaw.

"For reasons that should be obvious," Stephanie said, "you are the only one who can see or hear me and your ex. For everybody else, it's all about you."

When he tried to speak, the noose tightened, suggesting his vocal input was not required at this point.

Stephanie waited until he looked at her. "This is how it works," she said. "Our basic videos are free, as you know. Premium subscribers pay a monthly fee for which they get additional services. For the last few weeks, those services have included watching you. We also have Elite Extra subscribers who pay more to get more. They are watching you now. Smile for your fans." She paused. Parker didn't smile; he could barely breathe. She continued, "Obviously, we don't sign talent without checking them out. Then we contacted Meryl to see if there was anything she might like to purchase."

A drum roll. An actual fucking drum roll!

"I'm pleased to tell you that you and Meryl have provided us with our highest grossing Elite Experience *ever*."

Meryl took a bow and smiled at Parker. It was the first genuine expression of happiness she had aimed at him since their first year together.

He, understandably feeling less pleased about the situation, looked at Stephanie. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"Many of our elite subscribers are women, and a high percentage of them are gay, like your beautiful ex."

"I thought this would be appropriate," Meryl said, taking her cue from Stephanie. "When we had sex you always imagined you were with someone prettier, with a better body."

"That's not true, I—"

"And you were so homophobic when I told you I was leaving you for Angela."

"I wasn't homophobic, I was *Angela*-phobic. For fuck's sake!"

The wire around his neck tightened and Parker saw red dots floating in front of his eyes.

"The lady paid to say her piece," the masked man growled quietly into his ear. "You've been paid to shut the fuck up."

Stephanie said, "Roger the Gay Porn Star (not his actual surname) finds homophobia somewhat vexing."

"I am not..."

The wire tightened some more, and Parker watched the world flapping in and out of focus.

Meryl leaned forward. "Ease up a little please, Roger. I want that piece of shit conscious and fully aware of what's happening to him."

Parker was sufficiently aware to be worried by that. The wire loosened a fraction.

"You destroyed our love," Meryl said.

"I wasn't the one who walked out."

"Not you and me!" she screamed. "That wasn't love. That was a huge mistake. Angela couldn't forget the hurtful things you said to her. It was never the same between us after that. We struggled on for a couple of months and then she slit her wrists in the bath—because of you. Because of how you made her feel."

In the silence that followed while Meryl wiped her eyes and got her breathing under control, Stephanie said, "Please don't take this personally, Parker. Click-Suck-Fuck is a business, and like all businesses, it exists to make a profit. I hope you understand that."

"Stick it in his ass please Roger," Meryl said. "Give the homophobe a real rough pounding."

"Sorry, Ma'am, no can do. He's shat himself."

In happier times, Parker might have enjoyed how upset Meryl would have been about *that* stain on the carpet. Now she scowled with frustration.

"Then smash his teeth out and shove your cock down his throat until he chokes and keep it there till he's dead."

"Too risky with sharp spicules of root sticking out of the gums."

"Can you suck him, then?"

"With biting?"

"I'll let you know."

Roger got to work on Parker's limp dick. Meryl watched for ten seconds before deciding she had seen enough. "Okay, bored now; kill the son of a bitch. Wind that wire so tight his fucking head falls off."

The last thing Parker was aware of as the lights went out was that, like many hanged men before him, he had ejaculated. There was a certain pride in that. Unlike the guy whose

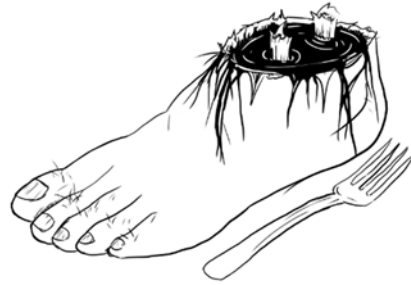
performance he had just watched, he hadn't messed up the money shot. He had been professional to the end.

More Austin J. Dalton

*Austin J. Dalton is a college senior living in the Pacific Northwest. He comes from a little bit of everywhere on the westernmost hemisphere of his country, born and raised in the American South but since having lived (and experienced adventures!) in places such as southern Illinois, Albuquerque and the remote reaches of Colorado. He has had several pieces published in both **Vanishing Point**, his college's literary magazine, and the e-journal **Literary Yard**. He enjoys writing pieces that playfully blend a bit of historical fact, quasi-autobiographical lived experience and – of course – utter fabrication.*

Why didn't Jeffrey Dahmer like kitsch artists?
Because he found them to be in bad taste!"

Ms. Istanbul had never heard that joke before I told it to her the other day, and she got a chuckle out of it. It used to be one of my favorites to break out at a social occasion with people I was truly comfortable with – in other words, I haven't recited it out loud many times.



Questions about where my fixation began, and how I went so long without acting on it, are kind of useless. It's a Hollywood-cliché approach that makes people want to search through a person's past and ask, "Where's the foreshadowing at?" as though it was so simple. Maybe it was when I bit Scott Sheridan in his chubby forearm during a schoolyard donnybrook in the fourth grade, the feeling of power over him as he squealed and the slow-rise climax of excitement as I knew that if I latched on a little bit longer, I just might break the skin. I knew he could feel the same pressure rising, right before the adults intervened. It could have been that first kiss of mine, the one that went south as soon I introduced my teeth into the equation and caused her to never speak to me again. Or, it could just be a sickness that's always been with me.

Sometimes, my teeth ache a bit around the edges of where they've been chipped over the years, and my tongue will thrash at these imperfections ceaselessly. Then, I will become thirsty and be convinced that a drink of water will solve my problem, except of course that it never does. Is it a cup of coffee that I need? Maybe a soft drink? Such things only keep the thirst at bay briefly. I don't like alcohol, so it's unlikely that such a thing would be my first choice to scratch the itch. Somewhere in those panicked episodes of thirst, the hunger sets in.

My first job was at a Portland delicatessen, at the age of nineteen. These days, I am afraid of being outed less because of the legal consequences than because of the obligatory wave of obnoxious jokes that this fact would no doubt inspire. The shop carried a hyper-bloody London Broil that was always my favorite to slice up. That way the slab is always so heavy and squishy that if you close your eyes and let it sit there in your hand as you secure it and cut into it, it almost feels like it has a pulse. The smell of a good slab of meat seems to

double as you slice it open, be it with a spinning electronic blade or more directly with a cleaver. That *stuff*, once an animal's life essence, spills out into the air like natural gasses being fracked from the ground. I knew I had a problem when I could smell those fluids and have my heart rate go a little haywire, exactly like when you lock lips with a pretty stranger who has had your attention for some time.

At the time, I didn't even like red meat.

Anyway, I'm not nineteen anymore. I still work a service position, but it involves a Skype connection and a desk. I'm a counter clerk by a different name now. Even though my life is boring, I still recognize that I have a lot to risk by putting this confession out there so forgive in advance some of my frustratingly vague descriptions.

Tempting though it is, I shouldn't describe the circumstances that eventually led me to Club Valhalla – there's a chance that if I do, I'll disclose some names I oughtn't. It came to my attention incrementally, not through one cryptic conversation or “a friend of a friend” or the murmurs of the Dark Web or anything so linear as that.

About two years ago, I began spending my evenings taking the bus up to Seattle, which – from where I live near the state's capital – is not a terribly expensive round trip. I'd get into the heart of Seattle and spend half the time traversing the sidewalk and the other half glaring at my phone screen to make sure that Google Maps was pointing me toward my desired district. Bars are not my thing, so the first time that a bouncer at one of those clubs studied me up and down when I first walked in, my face must have gone vermillion with embarrassment. My first clubs were for the proletariat kinkster, not slick name-on-the-list joints by any means. I'd get a drink at the bar, usually just a Cuba Libre or two to mitigate my crushing shyness, and then once I felt brave, I'd see who I'd have to talk to before I could find some quirky delight in the mosaic of the nightlife.

On one of those first nights exploring that environment, I saw things that I'd always slightly suspected to be television clichés: handcuffs, buff men strapped to St. Andrew's Crosses, hogtie bondage, black blindfolds. Earnest but banal, typical services for getting hurt in very typical ways. I got plenty of advertisements for domination services floated my way, but boy howdy, it's a little harder to receive satisfaction if your interests flow to the other side of the equation.

I won't explain the chain leading me from simple old-fashioned bondage joints to *the* club of clubs, Valhalla –which, no, is not what it's really called. All I can say is that should you visit any middlebrow tavern in Seattle and you just happen to know who to talk to, then you're probably sitting at about three or four degrees of separation.

They're pragmatic types, the people who run Valhalla. It's members only, and let me tell you, applying for a passport doesn't take as long as Valhalla's due diligence process. How it works is, once you have membership, you can pay to have any number of fantasies actualized. Since they're not open to clients on a regular basis and spend a great deal of time masquerading as a normal fetish club, specific requests can take longer than others. It's a bit of an open secret – though nobody can ever prove anything – that Valhalla is a place to fulfill fantasies that are not, strictly speaking, legal. Their first and last concern is consent; keeping this fact a secret is probably a very close second. If you want 'safe' and 'sane', well, there's the door.

The minute a person signs themselves into Valhalla to be a "bottom" — and I have no earthly idea how they find these people – they agree to put both their lives and welfare at hazard for the gratification of strangers. There are no safe words, no age restrictions, no

questions asked so long as both parties know what they're getting into.

For the "top" part of any given arrangement, it's a long hard road of waivers, waivers, and waivers. No real names, if you know what's good for you. You sign this and that, you agree that whatever you do in the privacy of your reserved fetish chamber is your responsibility and not Valhalla's. You agree not to divulge anything to the outside world. Then, the night comes, and you'd better be ready to show up or no there's no refund for you.

My first night in the club, I signed in and the usher led me down to the building's basement. There were multitudes of doors on either side of the hallway, as in the corridor of some subterranean concrete hotel. The walls muffle the sounds of beatings and violations in the other rooms. Finally, the usher brought me to the one reserved for me.

A man waited for us in front of the door, wearing a black toque that went down all the way around his head like a ski-mask or executioner's hood. Painted, or perhaps stenciled, on the front of that toque was a skull face, one conveying sadness with the brow bones slanted downward and the eye-sockets elongated with despair. That man is, from what I understand, the last part of the due diligence process. His job is to ask and re-ask all the liability questions that seem like they've already been covered to death. He asked if I really wanted to go through with this and reminded me that it was not too late to simply turn back and forget this place. I politely but firmly declined his offer and moved forward.

I vividly remember entering my reserved room because of what a calculated assault on the senses the whole thing was. There was an overwhelming smell of chlorine and the room was extraordinarily cramped. The problem was less the lack of space and more the poor utilization of it, like if someone tried to fit their entire bedroom into their bathroom. In a room with the inner area of maybe two standard elevator cars, there was the twin-size bed, the strobe light on the ceiling pulsating very slowly, the wooden dresser off to the side, and on the opposite side a metal footstool with several austere instruments laid across it.

The naked man lying on the bed, fixed in a come-hither pose, looked just slightly younger than me. He sat up and asked me if everything was alright, addressing me as "handsome" at every turn. The lights overhead produced all the colors of the rainbow, just enough light for me to not only see the young man but also to see his smile, to see in his eyes that he was serious when he knelt upward to touch me and assure me that it was "okay" and that he was ready.

I took the leather belt from the wooden footstool and he turned his back to me on all fours. The surge of power as I threw the belt around his neck and squeezed with every joule of energy in my upper torso was really sexy, don't get me wrong, but after a few minutes I sensed that the young man was getting more pleasure than I was – even *if* he was the one who had discouraged any safe words and assured me that he wouldn't give a damn if he ended up dead or a vegetable for the rest of his life.

He lost consciousness a couple of times but always came to a few minutes later. On one such occasion, I figured I'd up the ante. I looked at the metal footstool and saw the cord of a phone charger. For the next round of strangling this guy, I used a spare hand to also lash him across the ass with the cord. He appreciated my imagination, and I started to ease up and have some fun. Eventually, I went on to ditch the belt and choke the guy with the cord, and then I improvised something else; I gave him a nice bite on the back of his smooth, sweaty neck. I don't mean any love nip, either. He was so far gone with the lack of oxygen to his brain, though, he didn't mind.

All told, I did some damage to him that night, but as far as I'm aware, he lived. It turns

out, he didn't sign on to be a bottom in our little arrangement so that he could die, but so that he could have some fun with the option very much open – the typical Valhalla ethos.

On the bus ride home that night thinking the whole thing over, I felt much like I did the first time I ever smoked marijuana; what was the fuss about? It's not that I didn't enjoy myself, but besides the potential manslaughter, what was so exclusive about that experience that I couldn't have gotten at any of the other John Q. Kinkster clubs in Seattle?



After that first experience, I returned a few more times. Naturally, the first time – despite my reservations – stood out as the most exciting. In the first place, realizing that a place like Club Valhalla even exists is enough to send a fetishist's adrenaline into overdrive. Once the shock of discovery wears off, of course, what's left is just more. See more of what the club offers, satiate the hunger a few more times, get more and more in pursuit of the day where you don't need anymore. The minute it's all over, the first thoughts are about how to get back in, how pleasurable it would be for it to be done differently the next time, how to raise the money for price of admission. What can be sold? What can be pawned? How long can I wait before the yearning becomes too much for my nervous system to handle? When will the Club be able to hook me up again?

These return visits were fun, sure, but I think the real purpose of them was to gradually eschew my shyness. Once a certain amount of time went by, I talked to a manager at Valhalla again and told him in very frank terms what I *really* wanted.

The manager – a tall, mustachioed man in his late 40's or so – seemed taken aback, but it was probably no more depraved than anything else he'd heard dozens of times before. He didn't immediately phone the police, in any case. He told me it could be arranged, but, “Number one: the act itself ain't taking place at my club. Number two, it's going to take a while. Them's the breaks.”

Valhalla was going to actualize my fantasy, but they were going to do it while keeping that actualization at arm's length. What I paid them in advance was a finder's fee; they'd hook me up with my “bottom”, but we wouldn't be allowed to act out our fantasy anywhere near the club's property. My guess is that it was a “plausible deniability” thing.

I received a call from that same manager on an early November afternoon. There was no mistaking his voice. He wanted me up in Seattle at the Club as soon as possible.

Thankfully I'd found myself a car by this point.

When I arrived at the club three hours later, the manager walked me into his office and introduced me to the young man who liked to be called “Jamie”. Jamie was likely a fellow Millennial if I had to guess his age. His face was clean-shaven, and his hair was a little long, and though he didn't say much when we first shook hands in that office, the fact that we were both here under these circumstances probably told us everything we needed to know.

The manager gave us some opaque verbal instructions and then handed us a dossier “to be opened later”, including the address and key for an extravagant apartment near Sunset Hill.

Jamie and I left the club around twilight and part of my brain pondered if all of this could be some elaborate put-on or police sting. With every passing second, the opposite seemed to

be true and it began to register with me that this was really going to happen. Jamie stood close by my side as we discussed how we wanted to spend the day before heading back down south to my apartment later. For reasons that would be apparent later, he didn't want to eat or drink anything.

The whole day that I spent with him, walking near the water and briefly perusing the graphic novel section at Barnes & Noble before it closed, we were both well aware of how we would be ending our night together, but we kept ourselves busy with trivialities about how our trips up here had been on the nightmarish I-5 commute, how he had thrown away his cell phone three days ago and tried his best to erase any trace of himself on social media. We didn't bother getting to know one another very well, we just talked in that way that friends who have known each other for eons tend to do naturally. Neither of us ever questioned whether this made sense. I could have asked him more questions about himself, of course, but I considered that I would be prying too much. Trying to extract even the most minute details, about who he really was and what twists and turns in life had brought him to me, could be too much. After all, Valhalla had put the word out and he had responded with the sort of unfettered enthusiasm that seemed to make even the very seasoned higher-ups at the club slightly uncomfortable.

Night fell, and we made our way to the apartment that Valhalla had acquired for us. The closer we got, the more questions I began asking him apropos of nothing. He didn't let it show, but I must have annoyed him with this torrent of questions – if he hadn't contacted anyone in three days, shouldn't there already be someone out there looking for him? How had he managed to cover his tracks? We really *were* on the same page about how this was all going down, right?

We got inside and took the elevator up. As he suggested it would be, the apartment was totally empty, as though it was currently being remodeled; very few possessions in sight except for a bucket of white paint on the kitchen counter, some basic cutlery and other cooking instruments, a telephone mounted on the wall and a hefty baton laying against the far wall. The curtains were drawn on every window.

Jamie set the dossier on the kitchen counter. He brushed off my questions with something nebulous to the effect of, "It's been dealt with", and then he took my hand and led me to the heart of the living room. I asked him if there was any way that anyone could trace him here after he disappeared – what if his family had hired a private investigator? – and he put a finger up to my lips and hushed me. "Just enjoy," he said to me.

That's so stupid, isn't it? I understand that it's just an affectionate gesture, but it's so impractical. It doesn't actually hush anyone. Not unless you put your whole hand over their mouth. A person can still speak very fluently with a finger to their lips. Silly.

A little past eleven, we had a shower together and he assured me this is where it was meant to happen. We disrobed and he stepped one foot into the tub at a time with no intention of ever stepping back out. For the time being, I set the baton on the edge of the tub. I rubbed the shampoo across the thin hairs of his chest and laid him down in the tub. He nodded at me with tears welling and a sweet smile on his face, then he closed his eyes and said no more. It took, to my surprise, only one hearty blow to the head. His convulsions ended soon after. He didn't seem to be in a great deal of pain, just very disoriented until he drew his last breath. Seeing his body in that very lively state of vulnerability as his mind had already gone was, to say the least, exciting. Having never seen anyone expire before, I did not expect for his body to keep gently tossing and turning although the light had already

drained from his eyes. The mental image I had had before acting this thing out was that maybe he might lose control of his bowels and that was part of why he chose the shower for our special spot. Besides blood, he didn't lose much of anything, that I could tell. His penis did go granite, however, popping up like the sternest exclamation mark with the shock, way past that reticent semi-hard state that the anticipation had put him in.

Oh, man. For a second, I assumed that consciousness leaving the body would be about as good as any tenderizer. I remember my half-hysterical mixture of sobbing and laughing as I went for the neck. My misguided attempt to bite right into him damn near broke my molars. Don't try this.

When I remembered the instructions they had written up for me, which he'd left on the kitchen counter, I turned the shower off and dragged him by the ankles back out into the hallway. After pacing back and forth so fervently for a while that the downstairs inhabitants must've wanted to devour *my* flesh, I fetched the envelope and jumped into the dirty work.

I approached his limbs basically the same way you approach a turkey leg, cutting off small morsels and frying them up in one of the few pans available in the cupboard. While waiting for the meat to cook all the way through, I left a healthy number of hickeys across Jamie's damp and paling upper back.

My heart nearly stopped when the landline in the kitchen rang at a quarter to midnight. I let it ring the first time, but within minutes it rang again. Reluctantly, I picked up. On the other line, the familiar voice of the manager asked me how it was all going. When I didn't respond, he instructed me to clean myself up as much as humanly possible and clear out of the apartment before 1:30. "Just leave," he said. "It'll be dealt with."

When I found the nerve to speak, I just said that it was a little messy in the apartment. To this, the manager simply repeated himself.

With that, I laid down on the living room carpet next to my friend and tried to cuddle with the unbloodied side of him, attempting my best also to lock his stiff fingers around my own. There was still warmth there. I couldn't believe that, after all this, our time together would be so unceremoniously truncated.

I put my clothes back on and walked out of that apartment, downstairs, found my back to the lot where I'd parked and booked it out of the city as quickly as I could without drawing the attention of any nocturnal highway patrolmen.

For the rest of the month, I patiently anticipated a SWAT team arriving at my apartment or my workplace, found myself on the verge of tears whenever I thought a cop car was following me. Not in my whole life had I consumed as much antacid as I did that week.



In February, I did something I've not done since that night with Jamie: approach Club Valhalla in broad daylight. I had spent many nights perturbed less by my actions than by how much I had sold my experience short in my timidity. All that effort for such a small payoff, for a few morsels in a frying pan. All that wasted opportunity, just because I didn't know what I was doing.

Your narrator had not trod one foot into the establishment before he was recognized, and not in an entirely positive sense. There were a couple of bouncers in the mostly-empty lobby, both a little younger than me, who immediately turned and whispered to each other

when they saw me. No sooner did I attempt to strike up a conversation with these men than the dear old manager – who had previously been so generous in our interactions – intervened.

“Sorry, *bucko*,” he raised a palm up to me as if prepared to single handedly shove me back out the door. “We don’t want any.”

Before I even had a moment to insist that my money spent as well as anyone’s, the manager manhandled me outside and gave me an entire runaround about how the staff here no longer felt comfortable with my patronage. I said nothing.

There are few forms of loneliness more degrading than being kink shamed into exile by the sketchiest club in Seattle. The twilight stretched on as I sought someplace to buy myself some comfort – a vending machine, a bar, a high-end electronics store, whatever – and eventually settled on a pub, convinced that maybe enough drink would help me forget that I didn’t really want a drink.

After sitting in a corner booth for an hour with my cider unbothered and pretending to read a book even though I couldn’t get my mind off the day’s disappointment, a hand patted my shoulder. I figured, *finally*, I would turn to see a cop and my reckoning would surely follow. Instead, I saw a tall woman with dark, long hair incompletely covered in a hoodie. If I found people attractive in the traditional sense, she probably would have been such an example. I thought I’d seen her around as I’d wandered downtown – the Barnes & Noble, the Northgate Mall, the waterfront – but I had attributed this to paranoia. Suddenly, here she was.

“What was *your* reason?” she asked before inviting herself to sit across from me. “It used to be that the customer was always right.”

I tried to get a word in edgewise, ask who the hell she was and why she’d been following me. I gained no such conversational advantage as she intently explained that she too had been effectively excommunicated from Valhalla. Before I could coy it up about not knowing what she was talking about, she told a longer, more involved story.

She arrived here from Istanbul in 2014 and found her libidinal calling rather quickly. She assured me that she’s never done the standard definition of a hard drug in her life; never snorted cocaine, never shot heroin, never even been in the same room with a crack pipe to her knowledge. She seldom drank save for rare social occasions, and even then, only as a social lubricant. And yet, the exact same sense of withdrawal was there: the feeling like an internal alarm sounding, the same bottomless sense of something being wrong, absent; desperately needed, but impossible to articulate, let alone satisfy. By her mid-twenties, she wondered if her absentee parents had been junkies who had graciously passed their pathology on to her through the magic of heredity.

Eventually, she found a better high. Ms. Istanbul first discovered her craving outside of a hardware store in L.A. This, by the way, was during her second week in the States. She was waiting in line at an ATM in the dead of night and the woman ahead of her was in a bit of a chemically-induced paranoid state. The paranoid woman became arbitrarily suspicious of the foreigner behind her and wrongly surmised that Ms. Istanbul had been rubbernecking over her shoulder, looking to steal all her pertinent bank information. When Ms. Istanbul did her best to walk away from the situation, what she received instead was a balled fist to her right ear from behind. She described the next ten minutes as a blur, but the most phenomenal blur of her entire life: a high of punches, scratches, hair-pulling, a high from which she has only incrementally come down over the years.

(By this point in the story, it was looking harder and harder for me to argue that she had the wrong guy.)

Ms. Istanbul, a woman who had gone her entire life without ever getting into a fight, suddenly came to terms with her greatest visceral pleasure right there in that otherwise empty L.A. parking lot as she gained the upper hand and pounded that strange woman's teeth into her esophagus. Even as she fled, she knew that she wanted more. The fates smiled on her, and she ended up living in Washington and becoming a regular at Valhalla.

Every few months, she would return to find a private quarter prepared for her, and some jaded soul – boy, girl, whatever — who is willing to be hurt. She never knew what happened to them after she got done with them. The younger and more physically frail they were, the better.

“I suspect that it’s like something many cage-fighters secretly fantasize about,” she said. “The, shall we say, unsportsmanlike instinct. The impunity of unleashing your balled fists on something that won’t retaliate, pounding and slugging until your knuckles bleed and your palms feel like they’re on fire. Of course, in this case, you know they want it, but it’s the fantasy that’s exciting.”

Two weeks before she and I met, however, one of her “bottoms” suffered a little last-minute reticence about being beaten within an inch of her life and tried to opt out when Ms. Istanbul entered their reserved room. Ms. Istanbul granted the girl no such reprieve and assumed the hesitation was some roleplaying thing.

Ms. Istanbul didn't clarify what exactly she did to the girl, but apparently, it led to her being asked to leave Valhalla indefinitely. I jested that maybe we could combine forces to get back into our beloved club, and she seized on the idea fervently and suggested we save each other's numbers.

When I got home that night, I got on my desktop and surfed some of the more nefarious material on some of the mainstream fap sites, and even some of the ones that put the security function on my browser ill at ease. I couldn't achieve so much as a pity hard-on for the degradation content I used to settle for, every thrashing and every fisting seemed ridiculously staged and devoid of genuine emotion. After an hour, I searched for things that didn't even turn me on, just to see if I could accidentally stumble on something interesting. Nothing.

My arm got tired, so I went to YouTube and watched a supercut of the so-called “100 Saddest Movie Moments” to see if I could at least come with my eyes. Nothing.



Ms. Istanbul seemed amazed when I sent her a text confirming that I still had her number, and eventually we graduated to phone calls. Then we began meeting for coffee every other weekend to talk about our experiences and our predicament. Then, every weekend. Then, every other day. We discussed possibly sending a joint e-mail to the manager at Valhalla, but we weren't sure what exactly to say. We both felt we'd been given a raw deal by our once-beloved club, but we weren't exactly sure how to advance that argument considering the circumstances. Did the Better Business Bureau have a special department to deal with this sort of thing?

Without the benefit of something like Valhalla, we weren't going to satisfy our needs any

time soon. We never accepted this out loud, but I think we both realized it. Maybe, I thought, we could learn something about ourselves this way, like holy folk who have been long fasting and find themselves closer to God for it.

We'd go to the movies sometimes, then take walks through Seattle or Tacoma or even my area around Olympia, and we'd pinpoint the surprising cultural commonalities between my land and hers. She'd tell me stories from her workday as a personal trainer at one of those 24-hour gyms. I delighted in introducing her to American food and television she'd never experienced, including our mutual introduction into the world of Northwest IPAs. We both also began frequenting a tea shop called Suzanne's near the Seattle waterfront – our new favorite spot in the emerald city.

I became especially fond of a black tea flavored with orange rinds. Ms. Istanbul would offer to share some of her sweetener, and I'd tell her that I liked it how it was: simple, uncorrupted. I liked the way she looked at me when I said that.

When in a more discreet setting, however, we'd sometimes talk about those peculiar things which turned us on. I told her about my incident with Jamie – not *all* of it, of course; in my version of the story, Jamie walked safely out of the apartment that night – and the taste of skin. For her, it's all about that moment when the body finally loses stamina during a fight. I asked her if that meant her body or the other person's, and she chuckled and responded, "Either way." She liked to boast about her rigorous exercise routine; she said she could bench well over her own body weight.

Ms. Istanbul and I could say these things out loud in front of one another, and it was incredibly liberating. Every moment we spent together, the less important our previously all-consuming mutual goal of regaining entry to Valhalla seemed. We realized that place will probably be exposed eventually, anyway. Those folks are living on borrowed time, and eventually, their clientele's hope of scratching their dreadful internal itch will fade.



Last Saturday evening, Ms. Istanbul and I got a drink at Dorky's in downtown Tacoma. We spend the first half-hour playing various shooter games in the arcade section before we ran out of quarters and decided to moisten our lips. We had fun, but I could tell from the moment she picked me up from my place that she was unusually preoccupied. More than once, I probed her about what was up but never received a direct answer.

Finally, a few drinks later, she confessed – I don't recall how we wandered into the subject, though I think she had been guiding it this way the entire time – that she'd never experienced carnal intimacy with anyone. When I told her that I hadn't either, she at first thought I was mocking her. Then, she suggested in her most clinical tone that we should try it sometime; mostly, "just to see what would happen". It's always been hard for me to read tone, so after she laughed and I responded in kind, I filed it away in my head as "clearly" a joke.

We were about to call it a night. I left a tip on the counter and proceeded outside into the chilly Tacoma evening, waiting for Ms. Istanbul to emerge from the ladies' room.

I didn't hear her come out. Before I was even aware of another presence, Ms. Istanbul grabbed my arm from behind and spun me toward her, then proceeded to mash her lips into mine – taking advantage of our roughly similar height – right there on the sidewalk. We said

nothing, mutually electing to give it all a moment to settle.

"That was pretty good, right?" she asked.

"I think so," I said sincerely, though I was still so rattled by the whole exchange that it might not have sounded perfectly convincing. "Maybe we should try it again."

Without the lively spontaneity of the previous attempt, we struggled. I worried about diving in with my lips too quickly, and I think she did, too. There were a solid three seconds where I missed the cue to lean the rest of the way in, and our lips were pursed in space with an awkward half-inch still between us.

She suggested that her house might provide a better space for this experiment. With that, we went back to where she'd parked. Not since the time she followed me from my embarrassing rejection from Valhalla had there been such a silence between us.

"Home" for Ms. Istanbul was a small one-story house in Tacoma's sister city of Federal Way. As we stood on the porch and she unlocked the front door, I suggested another go and she agreed. We stood up properly and leaned in for another kiss. It was an improvement, but something still didn't work. It was as though all the necessary ingredients were in place but some switch in our internal circuitry was missing or broken.

Inside, we sat down on the living room sofa, which she thought might be a better position for us. Our next attempt proved yet another improvement, but we both agreed that it needed something more. Ms. Istanbul suggested that it was the alcohol interfering with our nervous system and headed to the kitchen to fetch some tea. For a second, I remained seated. Then, controlled by some strange electricity in the air, I rose from the couch and followed her. Before she even reached the fridge, she noticed me.

We stood on the border of the living room and the kitchen and looked into each other's eyes. There was something in the air like we both intended to say something, but clearly, neither of us could articulate it, for nothing materialized from our mouths. She placed her hand on my hip, slipping one index finger under the edge of my shirt in the process, and I nodded at her to let her know I approved.

"Just *enjoy*," I nearly said to myself aloud.

Our lips met again, this time with something like a magnetic force drawing our bodies together. This time, it was a genuinely spirited kiss. This time, it was perfect. I became so utterly lost in the moment that it took me a few seconds of her smacking the side of my face to realize why it all felt so euphoric.

Ms. Istanbul pulled away from me, and I could see her bottom lip was suddenly bleeding. I was completely unaware of what I'd done.

"I'm sorry," I stammered, and took an unthinking step toward her. "Just please let me get you some ice or something –"

My world suddenly resembled the drunken terror of a merry-go-round ride as she uppercut me, damn near causing me to bite part of my tongue off. The air exited my lungs and I stumbled backward into the kitchen counter, my arms windmilling about in hope of something to grab. I flopped down onto the floor, where I could not find the wherewithal to do anything except stare down at the tiles and the small, rapidly accumulating puddle of red dripping from my face.

Ms. Istanbul kept her back pressed firmly against the corner wall, palm to her lip with her eyes on me.

What felt like an hour, but what was only a few minutes, passed. The room was completely silent except for our mutual heavy breathing. Eventually, we found the strength

to look upon each other again.

She kept panting for a little while until I realized that it was because a different sound was trying to emerge from her body. Eventually, her wounded lips curled incrementally upward and we both began laughing.

In a gesture that made her laugh even harder, I bore my bloodied teeth and hissed at her like some ridiculous opossum.

We smiled at each other. I pulled myself up by the edge of the counter and I charged across the room at her with my mouth agape. Her smile did not fade as she hooked me in the sternum and then followed up with a fist to my right cheekbone. I didn't resist, but I wanted her to see in my eyes that I would not let her have the last blow. I wanted to bite her as hard as I could, and so I found the stamina to stay on my feet.

Until around midnight, we chased each other down every hallway, through every room, over every piece of furniture. We would crash into each other, she'd hit me as hard as she could, I would sink my teeth into her exposed muscle-bound shoulder. My right eye swelled so powerfully that I became a cyclops, and at one point I bit her so hard on the left wrist that she temporarily lost all sensation in that arm. We'd alternate in who was chasing whom. One of us would lose sight of where the other was hiding, and the taunting would begin: she'd scream to me that she was going to knee my balls until they burst and punch out every tooth in my head, I'd threaten to tear her legs out of their sockets and make her watch as I gnawed the meat down to the bone. Then we'd find each other, exchange blows and attempted bites, repeat.

We laughed. We screamed. We probably both came, even though we never removed our clothes. After becoming so weary that we were dangerously close to collapse, I walked out her front door to wait for an Uber. We haven't talked much since that night.

The only memorable interaction we've had recently was when I called her on FaceTime and she answered, hesitantly. We said hi, I told her my Jeffrey Dahmer joke, she chuckled a bit, then we said good night. There was no more to say.



Most nights, I have this dream that I'm in a foggy wetland with no buildings and no trees around, only mist so thick that it's like arid smoke and soil so wet that it's like kneeling on the beach during the wet season. The problem is that something utterly important is buried beneath all that sand, and I have no shovel. I'm like a mole, blinded by the ubiquitous dew and only able to use my fingernails to get to the bottom of the soil and dig up whatever the item might be. Treasure, food, a brand-new emotion, three million dollars in cash, the answers to all the loftier questions on one little piece of paper or something more. When the mud touches my fingernails, it hurts. It erodes my skin, makes the nails want to fall right off and my bones feel on fire. Soon, I am weeping because I am in so much pain, that echoing pain that can't be pinpointed to any part of the body or the brain. There is no end to the digging. Vague shapes of people pass by in the mist because they have no choice. This is worse than just that standard dream about one's teeth decaying and falling out, which is so regular to me that I hardly even regard it as a nightmare anymore.

The more I dig, the more the gnashing of teeth and the feeling of lingering deterioration become less physically limiting. Soon enough, they are just another thing being breathed in

like the saltiness of the nearby sea or the frigid air. The more that I dig, the more overcast the perpetually falling sky above becomes and the more escape from the muck around me becomes impossible.

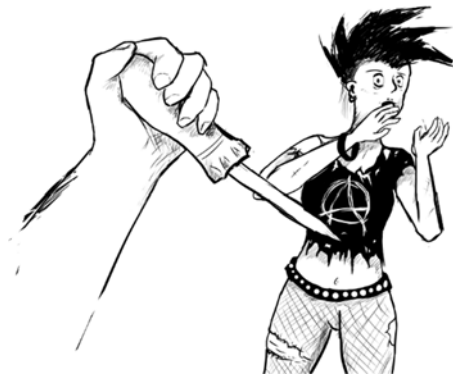
Jay North as He Stands in Relation to Rage and the Tragedy Margin

Will Bernardara Jr.

*Will Bernardara Jr. is a writer from Detroit and co-founder of the occult, criminal artist collective The Tender Wolves Society. His stories have appeared in places such as **The Society of Misfit Stories** and **Grotesque Quarterly**. In October 2018, Mr. Bernardara's debut novel, **America**, was published by voidfrontpress. He is at work on his second novel.*

For Valerie
THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION

Jay shuffles through a stack of VHS tapes in the dim quadrate of stale air and litter that is his apartment. There's *The Prowler*, which Jay has watched 14 times, as well as *Pieces*, *Silent Rage*, *Visiting Hours*, *Sweet Sixteen*, and *Calendar Girl Murders* (the latter he recorded from TV when the movie premiered a few weeks prior) – and at least a hundred or so others scattered and stacked pell-mell around the place.



Jay has several problems: he hasn't left his dismal Burbank apartment in months save to rent more slasher videos and shop for junk food; Jay eats solely junk, and the packages/boxes/wrappers/bags for things like Lik-M-Aid, McDonaldland Cookies, Hostess Ding Dongs and Choco-diles, Swanson TV dinners (the Salisbury steak is Jay's favorite), and Tostitos are ganging up on the available space; Jay is unemployed and time-saturated and the devil is in the workshop; Jay is tormented by his past to a degree that has grown unbearable.

U.B

HOLLYWOOD PIGS. HOLLYWOOD PIGS. HOLLYWOOD PIGS. TINSELTOWN TRASH. HOLLYWOOD PIGS. BABYLON BABIES. BURN YOUR FACES OFF WITH A BLOWTORCH.

U.B

Jay watches only slasher films. The slashers make him feel cued in, present; momentarily free of his past and the rottenly relentless memories. It is the only time he experiences

something close to happiness: watching fake murders. He never views the tapes of the show he starred in as a child, nor the MGM feature films, nor the voiceover animated stuff he's done. He watches *Don't Go in the House* and *The Mutilator*, cramming Twinkies into his mouth and chewing machinelike, bulged eyes unblinking, engrossed in the images on the screen.

The year is 1985.

U.B

He keeps the shades drawn. It's dark inside even when it's California-bright outside. The grotty TV screen presents a woman whose scalp is being carefully sliced off with a razor by Joe Spinell.

Jay doesn't drink or do drugs. His father was a drunk; he hasn't seen him since the age of four when his dad and mom split. The unremitting rage and the slasher movies and the junk food are Jay's drugs. And isolation. And hate. He envisions himself walking into the Screen Gems offices – Columbia Pictures' television division – and doing something inalterable. Something permanent. His career wasn't forever, but this act of vented rage would be. It would make the news, the papers: "Former child star and beloved pop culture icon goes on rampage, killing 17 TV execs" - something like that. A cry for help sublimated into a series of gunshots. More dignity in this than admitting oneself to a psychiatric ward, surely.

Marie and Hal, his aunt and uncle-in-law – he thinks about them more than the studio people. He watches Spinell stab someone to death on the television, and his imagination lays Marie's or Hal's face over that of the on-screen victim.

Killing Marie once wouldn't be enough.

U.B

"I became very serious, very morbid and very withdrawn from the world."

U.B

As a kid, Jay loved horror movies. *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *Village of the Damned*. Now though, now those relatively tame pictures don't satisfy him the way the slasher movies do. He needs the grungy viscerals, the spurting blood, the savagery of '80s basement-horror to feed whatever elemental thing rages inside him.

He abhors leaving his apartment. It's his dark womb of dead teenagers and Ho Hos. His interactions with the public are fraught with nervousness, not unlike his relations with the other students when his mom enrolled him in prep school 22 years ago. Thankfully, on the rare occasions when he does venture out, no one recognizes him from his childhood stardom. His face has grown pudgy, his eyes sullen and sunk in. The last person who approached him on the street and recognized him had recalled him from a dinner theatre

performance he'd done in Chicago in 1972 - the man had been on his honeymoon then. Jay smiled and managed a monosyllabic response to this "fan."

U.B

The Redeemer is in the VCR. Jay shovels ice cream into his mouth, eating from the carton. He thinks about the USS Iwo Jima, his brief stint in the Navy that ended in an honorable discharge. His shipmates – they were cruel beyond words to him, mocking him and poking fun and sometimes assaulting Jay, all for being a former TV icon. This happened in Norfolk, Virginia, this torture. Around '77. They were harsh.

The world's harsh.

Family's harsh.

Performing is harsh, and everything is performing.

As the movie ends and the screen goes black and then dissolves into static, Jay leafs through a heavily annotated (by Jay), highlighted, dog-eared paperback about electric-chair-executed family-murderer Steven Judy. Judy is one of Jay's obsessions.

Jay's mother, a good mother, made some savvy real estate investments with Jay's childhood earnings, and Jay is financially secure as a result. He has loads of time to read about serial killers and mass murderers, as well as devour the supermarket tabloids with their stories about part-human/part-bat babies and UFO-alien livestock-mangling.

U.B

HOLLYWOOD PIGS. MOW THEM DOWN WITH A MACHINE GUN. RAPE SOME AUDITIONING STARLET WITH A KNIFE. SET THE STUDIO ON FIRE. STAY INSIDE AND BURN AWAY AFTER.

U.B

Anger and resentment are doing a dance in Jay's brain, swirling into a burning helix. Scorching his heart and soul black. It's a feeling of utter torment, ugly and torturous – his unhappy childhood as Hollywood's plaything replayed and rewound, revisited and re-experienced every day. He has no peace, no reprieve.

All is black.

U.B

"... just vanish into the mists of time."

U.B

Torture isn't a hyperbolic adjective when describing Jay's childhood. "I'm a professional has-been," Jay says to himself. He says this often. Thinks it. The psychological tumult is a tumbler of pain and anguish, and it doesn't abate. And at the center of this psychic turmoil, the ugly eye of this cerebral hurricane, is his aunt and uncle and their golden tyranny.

Two hundred others auditioned for the role of Dennis and Jay got it. From 1959 to 1963, from the age of seven to eleven, he was slapped and threatened and choked and clawed by Aunt Marie. (When the cameras weren't rolling, of course.) His aunt would slap him across the face - her bony hand like a ceiling fan's blade - whenever he screwed up a scene or misbehaved in even the most minor way. Jay's aunt, taskmaster and warden, brutalizer and nightmare - if her standards weren't met, the emotional abuse that followed would've wilted iron. The coldest, most hateful looks she would give him... pure disgust in her eyes. He was just a boy.

Exile, self-imposed, is the end result of decades of self-loathing and unchecked rage. Rage like the sun. Jay looks in the smudgy bathroom mirror and expects to see orange coals where his eyes should be, so intense is the fury within. But he only sees a puffy, sad face staring back at him, dead eyes wreathed by blackish-gray bags. His hair has grayed and his gut has ballooned and now sags. The blond, defiant TV character with the signature cowlick is unrecognizable in this man.

U.B

"Pain and fear. Hiding inside. I was great at covering it up."

U.B

"I will get you," his aunt would say, in a voice like a winter snake's hiss. "If you ever tell anyone that I've struck you or treated you badly, I will get you, you little stain." Jay believed her. He never said a word.

Relating to real life, life outside of the demands and the studio - Jay is clueless. As a teen, his aunt forbade him from dating. Women are a mystery to him; he fears them.

Hibernating in his hell-hovel, slasher-movie-glutton, wolfing down Twinkies and guzzling cans of Tab, Jay has hunkered down in depression's abysses. If it weren't for his trust account, he'd surely be on the street, scrounging for food and work. It could be worse but Jay can't imagine worse.

Worse?

U.B

Jay contemplates suicide. Often. If he had a gun in the house, he would've done himself by now. Years ago, probably.

U.B

“... Jay North – whoever that is.”

U.B

Jay's washing machine has been broken for several weeks now, and after wolfing down two TV dinners and masturbating afterward, he musters the will to leave his apartment for the Laundromat.

Under the harsh, blanched zombie lights Jay loads a machine in a row of identical machines with funky, rank clothes. The light in here is so white the air buzzes. Morgue fluorescence.

No one is in the Laundromat with Jay except a safety-pin-faced punk girl whose hair has been dyed black and shock-pink in thick, separate swaths.

He feels uncomfortable and insecure, as if the girl can sense the wrongness about him – a black-and-pink tiger sniffing out failure and degradation.

Jay stares at the tumbling, sudsy laundry through the oval window. It's murky with filth. He feels her eyes on him. He's the only thing to survey other than the washers.

Then it's like a nightmare realized when the girl snickers, snottily, a mixture of a laugh and a scoff. “That laundry fucking *stinks*, man, my god. You sure there's not a dead animal mixed up with your socks or something?”

Jay's eyes twitch, eyeballs doing a little psycho-dance at the girl and back, at the girl and back. He never directly makes eye contact.

“Fucking freak,” the girl says, and crosses her arms, facing her washer.

The insult causes Jay's entire body to feel nauseated and quivering with violent urge. He felt fat and ugly and old a moment ago; now all he feels is a coiling rage, big enough to transgress anything and everything.

“Cunt,” Jay mutters.

The girl turns, mouth agape. “What the FUCK did you say?” She takes several confrontational, confident strides toward Jay. “Did you just fucking call me something, motherfucker?”

Jay looks at the girl, this time making eye contact. It's a rare interface for him. He doesn't see the girl – superimposed over her face is the face of Aunt Marie, lifeless and critical. The girl is rattling on now, but Jay hears only the roar of ocean and static, white noise doubled and tripled into a choir of slaughter. He has a screwdriver in his coat pocket. He doesn't need to finger it to know it's there - he feels its weight, feels its presence like something magnetic attracted to his grip.

“You're the fucking *cunt*, you fat old creep,” the girl is saying. The blood leaves Jay's head in a rush, as does the sudden surge of homicidal fury. He feels abruptly drained out, completely empty.

The girl notices something and stops dead in her haranguing. Her eyes widen, she goes a little whiter, and immediately turns and walks backward, keeping her focus on Jay. She's become animal wary. She stumbles in her clunky Doc Martens.

Jay blinks twice and looks down at what she's looking at: the screwdriver is gripped in his right hand, his knuckles gone white as raw dough with tension. He doesn't remember reaching into his pocket, much less reaching in and drawing the screwdriver. He drops it and it makes a racket on the tile.

"I'm calling the police," the girl says, bolting out the Laundromat's doors, orphaning her laundry and purse.

Shakily, Jay gathers his wet laundry and leaves. His dryer at home works.



Jay walks into the first office to his left and raises the shotgun. The TV exec, in an analog shock-version of Jay's action, raises his arm. The ungodly loud blast fragmentizes the exec's hand – bits of shredded fingers and bone and blood sprinkle the stack of scripts on the desk – and travels beyond, hitting his face. His head explodes.

Down the hall, secretaries scream - the smart ones hide under their desks. One secretary in a scant sundress tries to run across the hallway toward the exit and Jay tracks her with the shotgun, blows a hole in her back revealing a portrait of bloody, ruined spine. She drops hard and quick.

The area reeks of smoke now. Commotion-sounds saturate the studio offices.

Jay stalks down the hall, cracking open the shotgun and plucking out the spent cartridges with fat fingers. He licks the sweat from his upper lip and moves toward the screams. He is Travis Bickle. He is Mark David Chapman.

He reloads.

And wakes up. He is drenched in fear-sweat. His apartment is dark and blue, bruised. The television is on, *He Knows You're Alone* nearing its end.

"Oh god," Jay says, breathing heavy, sitting up, his upper lip glazed in sweat that shines by the TV light. "Gosh."

While his waking hours are engorged with fantasies of shooting sprees at television studios, the dreams terrify him. His heart feels near-coronary.

He always wakes from these dreams with a sense of deep relief. He didn't do it, he won't be going to prison for the rest of his life. He won't be in the papers as the freak former child star who lost it and ventilated a bunch of suits that don't even remember him anymore, weren't even born when he was working for the idiot-box honchos.

Jay scoots and lumbers out of bed. He goes to the fridge and polishes off a half-gallon of a generic brand of chocolate milk. He eats a Butterfinger and two Good Humor Strawberry Shortcake bars. After, he gnaws on the ice cream bar sticks, indenting the wood with his teeth. His sweat stinks.

He turns off the TV and darkness wins. He doesn't want to see any more violence tonight.



One morning Jay goes to a nearby pet store and buys a little terrier puppy, sandy-colored and hyper. He names the dog Herbert.

That night, Jay absentmindedly leaves the front door ajar and Herbert gets out and runs away.

Everyone leaves. Jay doesn't cry.



A week passes in a blur of cavernous sorrow, sleeplessness, delirium resulting from the sleeplessness, junk food binges, and marathon viewings of various slasher movies. Somewhere in the blur, Jay experiences a deadening inside, a total numbness. He walks about the apartment and feels like his outline is the only thing with any feeling left at all... everything inside beyond the first inch of skin is insensate, like a face after a visit to the dentist.

It's in this state, this sleep-deprived fog of confusion verging on full-blown psychosis, that Jay leaves his house with a wad of cash.

His delirium is such that it's a miracle Jay doesn't walk into traffic. He manages to get to the shop he had in mind. He has little memory of his exchange with the owner of the gun shop, other than that the man had a handlebar mustache and beady eyes and seemed very sober and unknowable.

And now Jay has a stack of weapons in the apartment, in the corner. A .410 double barrel shotgun, boxes of ammo, a .44 S&W, a 9mm Uzi, a 30.06 sniper rifle, an Ingram MAC-10, a Beretta 92, a cheap .25, a Colt Python, and two .38s. He also bought a fire ax and a Rambo knife.

This pile of widowmakers glumly occupies the corner of the apartment, illuminated by the cruddy light of VHS slasher films. It is an ominous, metal lump in the dark, an assemblage of death-dealing tools that Jay knows will, by his hand, end the lives of many, many people one day.

One day.

One day.



The year is 1990. January 20.

Jay lives in a new apartment now. His routine hasn't changed much - he's had some jobs, mainly in the food service industry. He still crams junk into his mouth and slasher movies into his brain. He's been so close to suicide so many times it's become standard operating procedure.

The phone rings, which is unusual. Jay shuffles into the kitchen in his slippers, bathrobe dirty and food-stained. He picks up and says hello.

The call is from a stranger. It's a call to inform Jay.

His childhood friend, Rusty Hammer, famous for starring in *The Danny Thomas Show*, has killed himself.

Two days ago, Rusty, 42, shot himself in the head. He'd been living in southwestern Louisiana.

Jay hangs up. A flood of warm agony, different from rage, subsumes him. There is anguish, and pain, but perhaps beneath it all is a scintilla of compassion. A longing. Jay sits in his armchair and cries uncontrollably. His whole body is racked by sobs. He cries for hours.



On the evening of the phone call, Jay opens his closet. Inside is the pile of weapons he bought in the '80s, now stacked and arranged neatly on shelves. He stares at the guns for a long time.

He thinks about different things.

And he stares.

And stares.