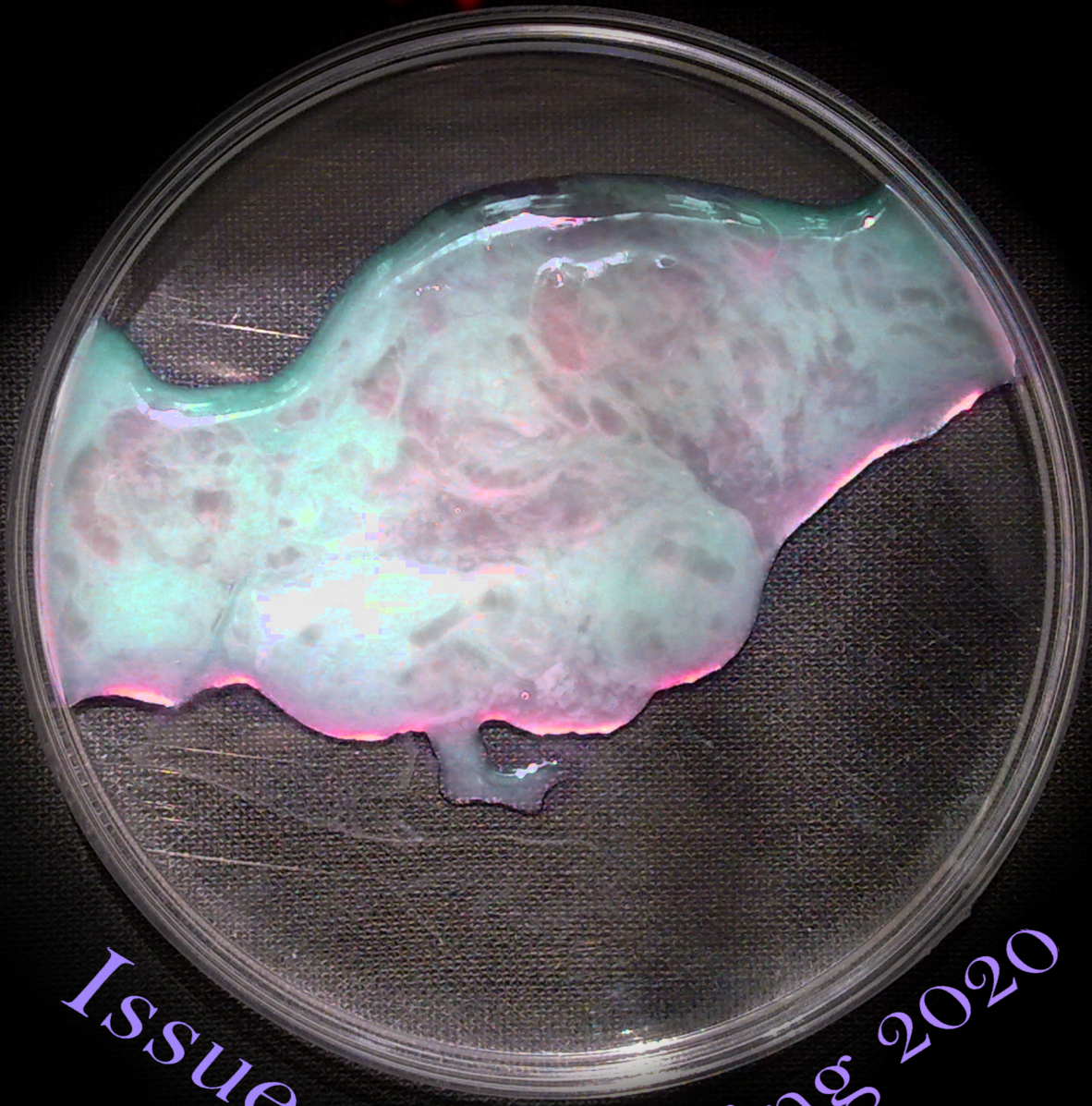


MONSTERFELL



Issue #5

Spring 2020

*10 more stories of
transformation and transgression*

*A woman is like a tea bag,
you can't tell how strong she
is until you put her in hot water.*

- Eleanor Roosevelt



UNDERBELLY MAGAZINE

A MAGAZINE OF TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION
ISSUE 5, SPRING 2020

The Comfort of Wolves and Lilies – Quebecoiswolf

1

Rules – Zither P. Oxblood

18

New Homes for Sale – Albert Sotelo

23

The Thing Down the Drain – Anna K. Scott

33

Sex Object – Cobalt Jade

40

Ethen Goody and the Higher Power – Easton Birchfield

52

Bad Seed – Connor Greenaway

59

At Roadside – Gregory L. Norris

66

Straight Through to the Centre of the Earth – Andrew Wilmot

73

Goat Cheese – Clint Collins

82

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

A.W. Cobbett – Logo Design & Interior Doodles
<https://www.man-outdoors.com/>

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>.

The Comfort of Wolves and Lilies

Quebecoiswolf

Quebecoiswolf is a writer who works exclusively in the werewolf genre and makes top quality pasta marinara. He's been published in Werewolves Versus Issues 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 as well as Werewolves Versus Fascism.

You can find more of his work here:

<https://twitter.com/Quebecoiswolf>

<https://www.deviantart.com/quebecoiswolf>

<https://werewolvesversus.com/>

I've attended two royal weddings and countless noble marriages. I've watched other highborn girls marry every imaginable suitor from old, bald men to handsome young knights. But never in my life have I been to a *divine* wedding; the marriage of a peasant girl to the Goddess-Queen of the Werewolves. Or at least that's what the beasts and peasants say she is. The Faith of the Father has only one word to describe her: *witch*.

I stand with my lord father and lady mother in a place of honor behind the bride. We've come to a clearing in the Evergreen Forest, a great bed of pine needles among the trees in which lies a great gray rock the size of a carriage decorated in weathered runes. Behind us are my father's men-at-arms and behind them is the common rabble of peasants, woodsmen, and assorted townsfolk. The commoners whisper like pilgrims at a shrine, seemingly forgetting that my father commanded them to abandon their heathen ways.

But I have eyes only for the bride. She hasn't stopped smiling from the moment that my lord father gave her permission to proceed with this heretical ceremony. And not only does this wedding lack a chapel, a priest, and bridesmaids; it also lacks a wedding dress. The bride is nude aside from a crown atop her head woven of green vines and pink lily flowers that seems to shimmer in the afternoon sunlight. She's beautiful in a common sort of way, with long blonde hair and a body hard with muscle from laboring in the fields. I can't stop looking at her, even if I know that it's a grave sin to lust for another woman.

"Where are the beasts?" growls my father. He scratches the gray beard on his chin. "If I'm to tolerate this madness, they can at least be punctual."

My father fought in the Second Great Crusade before he came north to marry my mother. He swore on his wedding day to cleanse Evergreen Forest of the wolves and their



witch, but three winters later, he had nothing to show for it but a few werewolf pelts, dozens of missing men, and two fewer fingers on his left hand. In truth, I can hardly blame him for making peace.

The trees shake. Pine needles rustle like the wings of insects. The men-at-arms tighten their grips around their spears and swords. And then dozens of werewolves emerge from the tree line, striding with the confidence of predatory beasts. Some look like savage men in crude fur clothing or half-naked women with long, bedraggled hair. Others are great two-legged wolves clad in leather loincloths, their fur decorated with bones and roughhewn beads. Leading the horde is a great she-beast as tall as a man on horseback and as bulky as a bull grizzly. Her fur is as dark as charcoal, serving as a backdrop for the blood-red runes painted on her body that glow like a fire's embers. Like the bride, she is nude, lacking even the crude clothes of the wolves. For a moment, I wonder if she's the witch, but there's a collar around her neck woven of green vines and pink lilies. This must be one of the witch's other three wives. The peasants say that the witch claims wolves and women alike; that her appetites are insatiable. I should be disgusted and yet... I find myself morbidly curious how wives are chosen.

The other wives join her: a towering gray she-wolf with scars on her muzzle and a bear-like brown bitch with a golden anklet, both decorated in runes and collared in flowers. They touch each other's bodies without restraint. The gray one fondles the black wolf's breasts. And then I notice that there are studs of carved bone piercing her nipples... all eight of them.

My cheeks are afire. I look down, pretending to study the carpet of dried pine needles. Do they have no shame? Do they have no regard for morality? ...and what do those piercings feel like?

"Whores," hisses my father, spitting on the ground. "Demons take them all."

My mother touches his shoulder, trying to tame him, but to no avail. A mere woman will never restrain a powerful lord like him and most certainly not when profligate beasts flaunt their sins. I certainly can't imagine that there will be such immoral things at my wedding. No, my wedding will be an alliance between noble houses and celebrated with all the joy of an accounting of incomes and duties. Nothing like this, not unless...

My mind turns to the unthinkable: *does the witch ever marry highborn girls?*

I spare a glance to the three collared she-wolves, now cuddled together, nuzzling one another like massive hounds. But they aren't wives. They're merely the pleasure slaves of a false god. Surely, I can think of a better future for myself.

"Finally!" barks my father. "She took her damned time."

What emerges from the trees is a monster even taller than the wives, her body as hard and muscled as if it were a colossus carved from stone. Her ruddy red fur is the color of autumn leaves and her eyes glow like steel pulled from a forge. All across her body are green vines with white, pink, and red lily flowers, the bangle jewelry of an ancient queen.

In an instant, her fur vanishes, like leaves swept aside by the wind. She shrinks down to human size, her adornments transforming with her, until what stands before me is a naked woman with a great mane of red hair, the furred arms and legs of a werewolf, and bright lupine eyes. This is the witch, a mere mortal woman as the priests say, yet I can't help but

study her, as if I were a naturalist. Her body is wiry with muscle, the air around her shimmering with unseen fire. My eyes wander to her tight, compact breasts and the thin, tapered hair on her womanly mound. I quickly look away, praying that no one noticed my leering.

The werewolves drop down onto their haunches, like great dogs in prayer, but the wives... they don't kneel. They lie down before their witch-queen, spreading their legs to offer themselves. The witch lavishes each of them with attention, teasing between their legs with a paw or reaching down to fondle their breasts.

I force myself to look away, to appear disgusted like a proper lady. My heart thuds slowly. I huff for breath. This is madness. Why are they doing this? Do they know of my aberrant lusts? Are they tempting me with such sinful displays?

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, the witch speaks: "Rise!"

The wolves obey as commanded. They watch intently as the witch approaches her bride-to-be, the wives edging closer like eager hunting hounds straining against their master's leash. The witch smiles, shamelessly scrutinizing the peasant's body, and then she speaks loud enough for all of us to hear:

"Rawen of Evergreen: you have come to me as I commanded, stripped of all human comforts and decorations. I offer you my hand in marriage and an eternity at my side. Do you accept?"

Rawen the peasant woman looks over her shoulder at us, as if seeking approval. I can't imagine that she finds any from my father. She lowers her head and then she mutters something.

"Speak up, my dear," commands the witch.

"YES!" shouts Rawen. "Please, Goddess! I love you! Please make me yours!"

The witch chuckles, taking Rawen's flower and vine crown, placing it atop her own head, and then pulling her into a deep kiss. In a way, I suppose that this isn't entirely different from a royal wedding. But then she and Rawen climb up the rock together, hand-in-hand. The witch's three wives giggle, whispering to one another like gossiping tavern girls. Rawen lies down, spreading her legs. I bite my lip. Is this... a bedding ceremony?

The ground shudders under my feet and great, gnarled roots sprout from the earth like the tendrils of a massive demon. I scream. The commoners shout in panic – or religious ecstasy. But the wolves make not a single sound. Before my eyes, the roots wrap around Rawen's ankles and wrists, pulling her tight. Are they going to tear her apart as a sacrifice?

And then Rawen *moans*. Not moans of agony. Moans like the ones that I stifle when I pleasure myself in bed. I squirm on my feet. The witch takes hold of her wife's leg and then, without warning, she drags one of her claws over Rawen's ankle. Rawen's skin rips open. Blood pours from the wound.

I look to my father for explanation. Why is he allowing this? Was allowing the witch to mutilate this poor girl the price of peace? But my father just grimaces in open disgust, not even looking at me.

The witch continues to cut, moving her claw up Rawen's shin, circling her kneecap. Blood drips down her leg like water from an overflowing rain barrel. And then Rawen moans again, nearly screaming in pleasure. Her body shudders, the roots that bind her

holding tight. But then her wounds begin to glow like lines of fire. Blonde fur grows on her skin. Her feet become great, clawed paws and her legs swell with muscle.

And then I understand what kind of ceremony this is. I know I should look away. I should be disgusted. This is evil and wrong... yet I can feel slickness between my legs. Quickly, I press my thighs together, praying that the wolves can't smell it.

The witch smiles and continues to cut upwards along Rawen's thighs and hips. Fur and muscle follow the glowing wounds like a ship's wake. The witch draws little swirls along Rawen's belly and chest. Rows of growing breasts form eight islands in a sea of luxuriant fur. As the witch continues to cut, Rawen's hands turn to paws and her shoulders widen, the binding roots shifting to accommodate her growing bulk. As the transformation nears its end, the witch slices along her cheeks and draws jagged, glowing runes on her forehead. Rawen's face expands, gaining a lupine muzzle and tall, triangular ears. Her womanly moans transform into the deep, desperate yowls of a bitch in heat.

But I finally understand what I am truly watching. Rawen isn't turning into a beast. She's ascending to become something great, powerful, and... free. This isn't a ritual. This is a miracle. I am witnessing the work of a Goddess.

Flowery green vines emerge from the earth, slithering along the rock like a snake formed of plants. They wrap around Rawen's massive, heavily furred neck and weave themselves into a collar. Rawen shudders and then *howls* in deep, all-consuming pleasure. I smell a musky scent that I know by heart. Finally, the roots release her from her grip and Rawen rises to her knees to receive her Goddess' kiss. The other wives rush forward to embrace their lovers. They kiss one another without shame, touching Rawen and the Goddess alike.

This wedding is a sin, yes, but not because it is love between women nor because it turns innocent girls into lustful she-wolves. It is a sin because showing this to me is like forcing a starving man to watch others feast.

After the kiss, the Goddess steps forward, standing atop the rock to address us like a queen from her royal balcony.

"Thank you for attending my wedding," she declares. "And to complete the ceremony, I shall present the bouquet."

She removes the crown of vines and pink lilies from her head. I'm surprised that the Goddess practices this common tradition. Or perhaps it's the Faith which has adopted *her* tradition of presenting the wedding bouquet to the next woman to be married. The Goddess climbs down from the rock, walking towards us. *Towards me.*

My body goes as rigid as stone. I know that the time of my wedding is approaching. I bleed every moon and men's eyes linger on me more than they should. But surely my wedding can't be so soon! Thoughts come unbidden to my mind. I imagine standing at the altar with an old man with liver spots upon his bald head. I imagine bedding him; hearing him pant and wheeze like an old bull. I imagine my body swelling up with child, like a bloated corpse...

The Goddess stops in front of me. She raises the crown over my head like an incoming barrage of arrows.

"Lady Anya," she says. "I present this to you."

I want to scream that our weddings are not like hers; that highborn girls marry on their father's orders, not for love. I want to tell her that it's cruel to show me that there can be a wedding between women. But I can't. Not here, not in front of my father.

The Goddess touches my cheek. The pads on her fingers are as warm and soft as lambskin. I close my eyes, feeling tears well up. But the Goddess laughs softly, leaning forward to kiss my forehead. It only serves to remind me of what I cannot have.

"Oh, you poor thing," she says. "This isn't for a wedding arranged by your father. This is for you and I."

And in a heartbeat, everything I presumed about my future is proven false. My father has no control over me. *I am to be wed to a beautiful Goddess.* I should throw myself to my knees and beg her to marry me right now. I should-

"NO!" bellows my father, grabbing me by the shoulder and pulling me back. My mother's eyes go wide, but she steps aside without a word of protest. "You have no right to my daughter, whore!"

My father snatches the shimmering crown off my head and throws it away.

The Goddess snaps to attention like a captain on parade. Her orange eyes grow bright, divine flames burning with fury. The wives leap from the rock, surrounding their Goddess like housecarls facing an assassin. Their fur bristles and their dagger-sized fangs gnash. My father's guards hurry to his side, clanking with mail and plate, taking positions around us like a wall. Swordsmen brandish steel. Spearmen brace their weapons against the ground, aiming their steel at the Goddess and her wolves.

For a moment, I wonder if the war is about to reignite. But my father walks backward, his guards moving with him, and pulls me along. I don't want to follow him! I want to stay with the Goddess! I want... I want... *I want to be a she-wolf!* I want to be strong and powerful and free to love!

But I'm not a she-wolf. I'm just a highborn girl. And I don't resist as my father drags me away.



By evenfall, I find myself standing next to the musty bookshelf in my father's study. He barks orders at the Captain of the Guard, one of his gray-bearded old cronies from the Crusades. I'm not sure what is to be done with me. My father hasn't let me out of his sight, as if he fears that the Goddess will appear from thin air like a specter and snatch me away.

"Anya," says my father, dismissing his captain. "Come hither."

I obey, moving to my father's side. He smiles softly, reaching out to take my hand.

"Anya, my sweet dove, you have nothing to fear from that witch nor her animals. What happened to that peasant girl won't happen to you. I swear it on my soul." He smiles confidently at me, looking like some court painter's vision of paternal strength. "Father save us."

I want to tell him that the Goddess isn't a witch and her people aren't animals. I want to tell him that I don't fear the Goddess. And most of all, I want to tell him that I feel only the deepest envy for the blessing that she bestowed upon Rawen.

But all I find the courage to say is: "Father save us."

"Father save us," repeats my mother, sitting quietly at my father's side.

Since the wedding, she's been as lively as the old statues in the catacombs. Surely, she must know what an honor it is to marry the Goddess. Is she as I am: knowing the truth, but too afraid to speak it?

"I'll always protect you," says my father. "I promise. Now kiss your mother goodnight."

For a moment, I think to argue. Perhaps I could appeal to his senses by saying that letting me marry would avoid war with the wolves. Perhaps I could even appeal to his vanity by saying that a Goddess would be the greatest of all possible wedding matches and would bring untold honor to the family. But I know he won't listen to me. So, I do as I'm told, like a good daughter.

I walk back to my chamber in silence, wishing I could clear my mind. I think of roots, of blood, of lustful howls and kisses... and my failure. *Why can't I say anything to my father?* What kind of she-wolf allows herself to be cowed into submission by an old man?

I open the door to my chamber and step inside, barring it behind me like the gate of a besieged fortress. The servants have left the room mostly dark to spare the candles. I welcome it. For within the darkness, I am safe to pursue my lusts as I see fit. I begin to remove my dress and—

There's movement in the shadows. Hurriedly, I pick up a candle and peer into the darkness. There's someone here! A hooded crone in the corner! I've never seen her. I open my mouth to shout at her to leave, but she speaks first.

"My apologies for intruding, Lady Anya," she whispers.

Her voice is as soft as the warm summer wind and her eyes glow like hearth fires. In an instant, her threadbare brown clothes vanish from her body, swept away like leaves in the wind. And there before me stands the Goddess, nude aside from her flowers that decorate her body, the crown atop her head, and the fur on her lupine arms and legs. *She's come to save me!*

I fall immediately to my knees, crawling forward to kiss her paw. Surely now, she'll understand how committed I am! She'll understand and she'll take me with her.

But the Goddess merely sighs. "Stand up, Anya."

I freeze. *She's disappointed in me.* I look up to see her towering over me like a colossus.

"Please, Goddess!" I say. "I'm sorry!"

Two strong, pawlike hands take hold of my shoulders, gently pulling me up.

"Oh Anya," she says. "It pains me to see you so broken. But I can help. I've come to return what your father took from you."

She removes the crown of lilies and vines from her head. It glows in the darkness of the room. Every nerve on my body thrums as I am crowned, and the Goddess renews her promise to marry me.

I open my mouth to thank her and she pulls me into a kiss. Not a courtly kiss like in the knightly tales. A kiss like I saw at the wedding. Her tongue slides between my lips, thrusting

into my mouth with such force that I can do nothing but submit. Her mouth tastes of honey. The scents of flowers and warm, womanly flesh fill my nose. Her bare breasts press against my chest. *I am kissing a Goddess.* I moan into her lips. My cheeks are burning, and my ears are on fire. Never in my fantasies did I imagine that a kiss could be like this. I don't want this to ever end. I want her to carry me away so that I can have her for all eternity.

But then she breaks away. I whimper like a cowering dog and look into her glowing eyes.

"Take me with you," I say. "I'll never leave this castle otherwise, Goddess! I just can't!"

She sighs, brushing my hair with her claws.

"No," she says. "I will not carry you into the night like a witch robbing a creche."

I whimper again, but the Goddess kisses my lips to silence me.

"I have foreseen it," she says. "If I steal away with you, you will become little better than a dog, licking my feet for eternity. That is not the fate I wish for you, Anya. I believe that you can be so much more."

And then she releases me, giving me a final kiss on the forehead. I know it's wrong to doubt the words of a divine being, but... I don't feel them to be true. How can I possibly escape on my own?

"Free yourself," she says. "Rid yourself of your clothes and human comforts, come to the sacred place, and I swear to the heavens that you will gain your fur." She smiles at me.

"You are a she-wolf in your heart, my love. And soon, you will be one in body."

The Goddess turns around, giving me a view of her back and her buttocks, partly covered by lupine tail. She unlatches my window and opens it to the howling wind. Where is she going?

"Wait! Please, Goddess! I want to be yours!"

"And you will be," she says with a smirk. "When the time is right, I will be waiting for you."

She leaps out of the window. I rush after her, reaching for her hand. I'm too late! I see her nude body plummet towards the courtyard below. *NO!* But there's a rush of wind. The Goddess is gone, and a great black crow soars away. I watch her fly, wishing I had wings of my own. It would be so easy to escape, so easy to join her. But I have no powers. I don't even have my fur. And as the Goddess disappears into the darkness, I am alone again.

I collapse onto my bed. I can smell the flowers in my crown and the lingering, earthy scent of the Goddess. What can I do now? I'll have to hide the crown, I know that. There's a perfect spot beneath the floorboards under my armoire for that purpose. But then what? How do I, a woman with no training, no weapons, and no allies, leave this castle? And in the nude, no less?

I bite my lip, trying to imagine walking naked in the castle, flaunting my body before the servants as the Goddess' wives do. I suppose I have imagined such things – in strange, embarrassing dreams. But in dreams, the servants never notice. I doubt that will bear any resemblance to reality.

Still, the Goddess said that she has foreseen me escaping which presumably means running naked through the castle. Perhaps... perhaps I could try? She certainly never seems bothered by her own nudity.

Quickly, I undress, struggling out of my bodice and skirt. I shiver at the chill of autumn wind blowing through the open window. My skin turns to gooseflesh and my nipples stiffen to the point of pain. I try to imagine having fur, of being warm even in a blizzard, but another gust of wind whistles through my window and sets my teeth to chattering.

This was folly.

I wrap myself in fur blankets, huffing desperately for breath and shivering. Perhaps I should wait until summer. The Goddess never told me when we would marry after all.

But even after my failure, the crown remains atop my head and my nose is filled by the fragrance of lilies. Impossible as it may seem, this will one day become a familiar scent. Soon, very soon, I will wear a collar of flowers. Pleasure will become my life's purpose. No man will ever touch me. Age will never despoil my body. I will be truly free. And *that* I can imagine, for I have seen it with my own eyes. My hands begin to wander along my body. My thighs part like the gates of a great fortress. I imagine my Goddess' fingers sliding between my legs to claim my virginity.

I am a she-wolf. And I love my Goddess.



I sit beside my father at the lord's table, pretending to listen as he prattles about ranging and road tolls. But in my mind, I am with my fellow wives, lying before our Goddess to receive her blessings. I hold Rawen's paw as she is lavished with pleasure. There is no envy between us. Love is not a finite resource like steel or grain. For we are sisters bound together in the Goddess' eternal service and we know of nothing but love.

A smile stretches over my face and warmth fills my cheeks.

"Anya!" whispers my mother in my ear. "Pay attention!"

I shudder. Does she know where my mind was? My mother frowns at me but says nothing. Her duty is only to birth the children, not to see to their discipline. I can't help but pity her – and thank the Goddess that I will not suffer the same fate.

Meanwhile, my father stands up from his seat, bracing himself against the table to loom over the vassal lords, petty freeholders, and knights sitting in front of us. I know all of them, especially the widowers and bachelors who pester my father for my hand in marriage like flies in the summer.

"As for the last matter of concern," my father says, "as you know, I made peace with the wolves and allowed the witch to enslave an orphan girl in that sickening display. It was a grave error, one unbecoming of a lord and for which the Father will no doubt account of me in the afterlife. But my daughter is innocent and deserves not to suffer for my sins!" He grunts like an agitated bull, smacking the table with his fist. "From henceforth, I offer a bounty of five Crowns per werewolf pelt and fifty Crowns for the pelt of any of the witch's anointed whores."

I want to ask my father if he's gone mad. Has he learned nothing from the past war? There's a murmur around the room, but not grunts of disapproval. Men smile and nod.

Most of them are zealous converts of the Faith of the Father, men elevated for their loyalty and choice of god. They've rankled at my father's peace and no doubt delight in returning to war. Not to mention that the promise of gold can make even the most fearful of knights come alive like a freezing man given brandy.

"And lastly," continues my father, glancing briefly at me, "my daughter has no deeper wish than to be free of the curse placed upon her. To that end, she has sworn a holy oath to marry the man who slays the witch."

In an instant, my blood turns to ice. How can he say such things? Even the Father objects to such brazen lies! But before I can even try to deny it, the hall explodes into a cacophony. Men applaud, banging their tankards upon their table. An old knight with a ragged scar over his eye stands up and swears that he shall not sleep until every wolf is dead. Lord Tarrington's son declares that he'll bring the Goddess' head atop a platter. More and more men join the raucous sea of voices, each making a more grandiose promise than the last.

I have to stop this! I just have to get them to notice me! I could slap my father. That would surely get their attention. I could overturn the table. I could throw a cup of wine. But then what? They might notice me, but they would think me nothing more than a hysterical woman.

No... no, I just need to leave this hall. I need to do as the Goddess commanded and go to her. I could walk out of the castle before this madness begins and make my escape. But my legs feel like stone and I can't even muster the strength to stand. I look to my mother for help – for even a sign of support. Her cheeks are wet with tears, but she stares straight ahead like a gargoyle on the ramparts. She's been broken and her faith is gone.

But I'm no better. I'm not a she-wolf, just an idiot highborn girl. And I am truly alone.



Winter is upon us. As I march to my father's study, I pull my shawl tightly around my shoulders, wishing I had fur. But I can't have my fur, not yet. If I leave the castle now, I will surely freeze to death in the winter snows. Though I doubt I could leave the castle without getting caught. I haven't even dared to take the Goddess' crown out of its hiding place for fear that it might be taken from me and burned, as my father did with the commoners' wolfshair necklaces. My only hope is that the Goddess will win the war and liberate me.

I'm confident, however, that she is winning. Some men have come back with pelts, but nothing of the Goddess and her wives. And my father's losses have been getting worse. So many knights, hirelings, and soldiers have ventured into the woods and never returned. I should delight in these victories, but I know some of these missing men: Mars, with his gap-tooth smile, and Walther Teal, a boy with a man's skill with a shortbow. They weren't evil. They were just soldiers doing what their lord told them. I never wanted them to die.

I have to stop this war. I have to say *something* to my father today. I just don't know what.

When I enter my father's chambers, there's a man I've never seen sharing a flagon of wine with him. He's a short, blonde-haired knight, his face tanned and pockmarked, likely from the Sandlands winds during the Crusades. He smiles when he sees me. I suspect that he's some southern lord's second son, drawn north by the promise of gold and a highborn bride. But why is he with my father? The Captain of the Guard usually manages such mercenaries.

My father clasps his hands together, smiling broadly. "Anya, this is Sir Verris Castillo, son of Lord Osteen Castillo of Golden Harbor."

Sir Verris stands up, bowing with a flourish like a foppish dandy from the capitol. "Well met, my lady. Your presence warms me on this cold night."

Oh, Goddess be good... I have to play *this* damnable game. I gather my skirt and curtsy politely, keeping my eyes downcast like a good little lamb.

"It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Sir Verris," I say. "May the Father protect your back and guide your steel."

I feel like a princess in some minstrel's farce. But thankfully, my father interrupts.

"Sir Verris has returned from fighting the wolves," he says, grinning like an imbecile and patting Verris' shoulder as if he was the son my mother never gave him.

"It was hardly a fight, my lord," says Sir Verris. "The beasts rarely give battle." He frowns, but his eyes remain bright. "Of course, the witch's whores are another matter entirely. A dozen good men died, and Sir Vadim lost his leg, but we brought one of them down."

And then, on the table, I see a large, bloodstained wicker basket and a pelt of black fur as large as a king's blanket. The pelt is decorated with swirling red runes and eight shining white studs. I know this pelt. It belonged to the first wife of the Goddess that I saw. *I never knew her name...* and now she's dead.

Every nerve and humor in my body buzzes with the fury of a crushed hornet's nest. Sir Verris smiles and I want to knock out his shining teeth. I want to tell him that when the Goddess catches him, she'll flay him alive. I want him to know that he'll have the honor of bedding me when the Goddess and I make love atop his skin.

But I say nothing. Tears well up as I gaze upon the pelt. This she-wolf, this wonderful sister, she's dead, and I complimented her killer. I asked for the Father to guide his damned weapons. This is my fault! *Why didn't I stop this? Why didn't I stand up to my father even once?*

"She has a soft heart for animals," says my father. "Show her the witch's head. Surely, that will lift her spirits."

My body turns to stone and my heart pounds like a war drum. The basket on the table. That's what this is all about. This is why my father brought me here.

Sir Verris clasps his hands together like a butcher eager to show off his best cuts. "I took her from a hundred paces with a longbow while she was fondling her concubine. A beautiful shot, if I may brag. We finished her with axes."

I can't stop my hands from shaking. NO! I can't believe it! I won't believe it! Verris probably just killed another wolf and mistook her for the Goddess. It's not possible to kill a god. Is it?

Sir Verris opens the basket and a wretched stink fills the room. Reaching inside, he grabs a thick ruff of red hair and pulls out a woman's head, placing it upon the table like a decorative vase. One of her eyes is dull orange. The other is nothing but an empty, bloody hole. Her jaw hangs slack, as if she were in a drunken stupor. Her skin is waxy and pale. I see blackened flesh around the base of her neck, a few flower petals matted to dried blood.

The Goddess's face is on my mind at all times of the day. I know her every feature. And I know, beyond question, that this is her head.

The world blurs. My arms fall to my sides. My stomach is so empty as to crumble like a husk. I feel like I'm not here in this room with my father, the killer he hired, and my Goddess' head. Instead, I'm watching this from afar. I'm in the audience as mummers perform a play about a brave knight who slays the monster and marries the cursed maiden.

Sir Verris smiles as he kneels before me, taking my right hand. There's blood under his fingernails.

"My lady," he says, "it is an honor to accept your hand in marriage. I swear to the Father that I shall guard you against any danger, whether man or beast."

I should slap him. I should spit in his face. But I don't. Defiance wouldn't save my sister, nor the Goddess, and it won't save me. There is no future for me except with this man.

Verris forces a confining golden ring onto my finger and my dream of being a she-wolf ends forever.



The world is a blur as I walk back to my chambers. I feel drunk. No, I *wish* I was drunk. I want to tell myself that everything is merely a nightmare, but I can feel the weight of the ring on my finger. How could the Goddess not foresee this? Wouldn't even the ineptest clairvoyant notice that she would be killed, and her fiancée would be forced to marry to her murderer?

Was she even a Goddess at all?

I open the door to my chambers and bar it behind me. I don't want to see anything, least of all my own body, and I blow out all the candles. Within the comfort of darkness, I collapse on my bed and bury myself in the blankets. I want to cease to be, to flicker out like a flame. I want to become nothing, leaving not even a corpse to mourn or a memory to remember.

Why didn't I do something – *anything*? For months I waited and hoped that the Goddess would win the war and rescue me. She didn't ask me to fight or be her spy. All she wanted was for me to leave this damnable castle and I couldn't even do that. What was I afraid of? The guards? The cold? *Embarrassment*? She asked for so little and yet I failed her.

I pull the blankets tight around my head. My heart pounds. I clench my fists. And then, finally, I find my voice. I scream into the blankets as loudly as I can, until my throat feels raw and my lungs can no longer draw air.

And I declare, *finally*, that I'm going to leave this castle. I won't allow a murderer to drag me into his bed and befoul me. I'm going to run into the woods, throw myself at the feet of the Goddess' surviving wives and beg for sanctuary. I must. Because to stay here is to die.

But there's so much to plan. I stare into the darkness of my chambers. I need to pack my things. I need to find winter clothes, food, a dagger, a horse... and I don't know how I'm going to get these things.

But then I notice a dull light in the darkness, something beneath the floorboards under my armoire, like the light of a candle behind a curtain. The floorboards are loose, offering a hiding place for a crown of woven vines and pink lilies. I haven't worn my crown in weeks. But the last time I saw it, it looked exactly the same as when I first saw it upon Rawen's head. How old is that crown? What magic keeps it from wilting? And is it still alive under there?

I cast off the blankets and shove my armoire aside, quickly pulling off the loose floorboard. Sweet, floral scents fill my nose and light fills my vision. The crown hasn't lost a single petal. The lilies are as soft as flowers in the springtime and the vines glow green with life.

I don't know if the Goddess is dead, alive, or has ascended to another plane, but I do know that this magic of hers, however small it may be, is here with me. Maybe this means that the Goddess has returned to life. Maybe this means nothing. But uncertainty offers a thousand times greater comfort than the certainty of my future as Sir Verris' wife.

Now I know beyond doubt what to do: I'm going to obey the Goddess' final command.

I tear the engagement ring off my finger and toss it aside, barely listening as it clinks off the floor and rolls into a dark corner. The Goddess has no use for a noblewoman's clothes and neither do I. My hands move quickly to my dress. I pull on the laces of my bodice, ripping it away and tearing at my skirt as if it were a snare. The drafty air of the castle touches my skin, as cool and fresh as water from a frozen stream. Without pausing, I rid myself of corset and chemise until I stand nude. And then, finally, I exhale a deep breath and place the crown atop my head.

My skin prickles with gooseflesh and my hand shivers, but I feel like a she-wolf and I know where I belong.

I hurry from my room, moving as fast as I can on my bare feet. My heart beats quick, like a trotting wolf on a hunt, but neither servants nor guards cross my path. I move quickly from hallway to hallway until I'm in the rearmost antechamber, peering out the window. The back gate is wide open. I can see Owen the Oaf slumped against his spear in the tower, guzzling from a skin of peasant mead to stay warm. Clearly, my father no longer fears the wolves because I see no other guards on duty. Beyond the gate are snow-covered fields, the moonlit sky, and off in the distance, the endless trees of Evergreen Forest. All I have to do is walk out that gate. Owen the Oaf is probably so drunk that he'll think me to be an illusion of his mead-soaked mind. But I'll be more careful than that. I'll stick to the shadows like—

A clatter. Behind me.

I shudder. My heart is a block of ice. I hold my breath. Did someone see me? Who is it? "Father be praised!" growls Sir Verris. "Where are your clothes?"

I turn quickly to face him. There's a goblet of spilled wine at his feet, the rich red liquid pooling like blood on the stone floor. He stares at me with narrowed eyes, his fists clenched as he lumbers forward. I have to run. But where? If I flee into the castle, he'll catch me. If I run out the door, he'll shout for Owen the Oaf to close the gate. What do I do? *Goddess, what do I do?* I won't go back, not now.

"I'm leaving," I say, the steadiness of my voice surprising me. "I don't belong to you."

"Yes, you do!" he barks. "Or do you desire to be a wolf's whore?"

His hand smacks my cheek. My skin aches. He can't do that! I'm a lady and he's a mere knight! But he did. He did and he'll do it again. His eyes glare into mine for a moment, but then he glances upwards, at my crown. For a moment, I think he's going to hit me again. Instead, he snatches the crown from my head.

"And what is this trash?" he growls. "I killed the witch, you stupid cunt!"

I don't wait. I don't think. I snarl like a wolf and grab the crown, pulling as hard as I can. Verris' eyes bulge. His jaw hangs open. He stumbles, holding tight to the crown. I wait for it to tear, but it holds as fast as rope. I pull again. Verris' fingers slip loose. I almost have it! But then he pulls back like a starving dog fighting for a scrap of meat.

I know that he's bigger than me. I know that he's stronger. But these aren't important. He is a mere hound. I am a she-wolf. Where I bite, I hold.

I pull with all my might. The crown slips free from Verris' fingers. He flies forward, slips on the spilled wine, and smashes face-first into the rough stone wall of the castle. His body collapses onto the floor with a dull, wet smack and he goes still.

I watch him, holding tight to my crown. I wait. My heart pounds. I count a dozen heartbeats. But Verris doesn't move. His chest doesn't heave. He lies like a corpse. Blood flows steadily from a gash in his head and pools at my feet, thick and warm. Is... is he... *dead?*

I should be proud. I've avenged my Goddess and my sister. I've freed myself from his claim of marriage.

And yet, I want to cry out for help. I want to check him for life and stem the bleeding in his head. I know it's madness. *I know*. But I never wanted anyone to die. Not wolves, not my sister, not Mars nor Walther Teal nor any of the hunters. All I ever wanted was to marry my Goddess.

I can't save Sir Verris or the others. But I might still be able to save myself. I place the crown atop my head, trying and failing to stop my hands from shaking. When I run out the door, the grass icy cold on my bare feet, I feel not like a she-wolf, but a rabbit fleeing predators.



I don't know how long I've been running, only that I'm deep in the forest and the sun is up. Sweat coats my forehead and my hair is frosted with snow. I shiver with every step, my bare, goosefleshed skin covered in scrapes and welts. My feet are numb and as heavy as

rocks. It's hard to think, let alone keep my sense of direction, but I keep one hand on my crown, careful not to lose it.

I push the tree branches aside, shivering as ice breaks free to patter on my back, and I finally see the clearing. Snow covers the great, decorated wedding rock like a thick wool blanket. I've arrived and... and now what? Where's the Goddess?

The wind blows softly. Pine needles rustle. I look to the trees, expecting to see a horde of wolves led by a great, beautiful she-beast in a collar of flowers. But there's no one. I wait. And wait. And wait. There's nothing here but ghosts and the wind.

"Goddess?" I say.

I could freeze to death before she arrives – *if* she arrives. I think of my father's missing fingers, claimed by frostbite during his wolf hunts. And I don't even have gloves. I hop from foot to foot, trying to shake the snow off my skin. Have I not proven my dedication? Am I not worthy? What if the Goddess truly is... *dead*?

No, no, no. I won't believe it, not after all of this! Quickly, I climb atop the rock and lie down, spreading out my arms and legs as Rawen did. The snow feels like a bed of needles on my back. I wait, shivering desperately. But the roots remain in the ground. There's no movement in the trees.

"GODDESS!" I scream. "PLEASE! Please, Goddess, please! TAKE ME!"

Suddenly, there's a rustling of branches. She's here! It must be her! My heart pounds. I try to lie still, to be patient, but I can't stop shivering. And then I see the massive blonde form of a werewolf shove her way through the trees. Her fur is covered in red runes and a brown collar guards her neck. I burst into sudden laughter like a madwoman. My sister has come to save me!

"Rawen!" I shout. "Tell the Goddess that I've come to marry her!"

Rawen's brow furrows until she looks like a tavern wench facing down a penniless drunkard. And then I realize that her collar isn't green. The flowers are wilted. Leather holds together a collection of dead and broken vines. Her runes are as dull as dried blood and her fur is matted and bristly.

"Why are you here?" she growls. Her voice is deep and savage.

"Because I love the Goddess," I say.

The trees rustle and I see wolves peeking out from behind the concealment like children hiding behind their mother's skirt.

"She's dead, you spoiled brat!" hisses Rawen. "She's dead and you swore to marry the man who killed her!" She snarls, showing me her massive fangs. "Yes, I know about that. I put one of your hunters to the question. In truth, I didn't believe it myself, but he kept saying it, even when I opened up his belly and showed him what was inside."

The Goddess isn't here, even though she promised me. One of her wives is dead. Her people are defeated. Rawen's collar has withered away. *The Goddess is dead*. It's as clear as the mathematical proofs of a wise man. How could I be so foolish? But there's nowhere left to run. No one who will shelter me. I am alone among enemies who wish to see me dead or subjugated. I have only myself.

I stand up slowly. Atop the rock, I'm nearly at Rawen's height. My heart feels as numb as my body. I don't know why, but I'm not afraid of her.

"I killed the man who murdered our Goddess," I say, my voice as cold as the snow.

Rawen stares at me, tilting her head. I can't tell if she believes me or not, but I don't care. She is my sister, not my Goddess. I don't owe her my fealty.

"My hand is promised to the Goddess," I say, loud enough for the wolves to hear. I remove my crown, holding it aloft for her to see. "I am loyal to her, whether she lives in this world or the next."

I look into Rawen's yellow eyes. One of her great, clawed hands moves to her brown collar, nudging it as if to check for life. Tears form in her yellow eyes. I don't know what she's suffered out here, but I swear to the Goddess that I'll do everything I can to help. I'll protect her people. I'll deal with my father. I'll—

I hear a whoosh, like a swooping bird. *Archer!* I flinch, dropping to all fours. But the shot wasn't aimed at me. I look for the target – and see that there's a long arrow sticking out of Rawen's throat. Blood flows from a wound above her collar, soaking into her blonde fur. She splutters for breath, slowly sinking to her haunches.

I can hear the shouts of men and the blares of hunting horns. I turn to see Sir Verris standing half a hundred paces away in his chainmail, a paper bandage wrapped around his head. He smirks at me like a cat with a songbird in its mouth. I could run to him. Perhaps he'd be merciful.

I perish the thought, drop the crown, leap down from the rock, and go to Rawen. Desperately, I try to stem the bleeding, picking up fistfuls of crimson, half-melted snow and packing into her wound. It's like trying to dam a river. Blood pours down my arms and coats my chest. Rawen pants with deep, gurgling breaths. There are bubbles in her blood. *She's going to die.* Even a beast can't bleed like this and survive.

"Rawen," I say. "I'm sorry."

She puts a massive, clawed finger to my lips that tastes of copper and places my crown atop my head. One of her claws pressing into my cheek. I wince, but I swear to the Goddess that Rawen won't have to die alone, even if it costs me a few scars. She is my sister and I will stay with her until the end. Her claws sink deeper into my skin, rending my flesh, but it doesn't hurt. Her touch is as soft and warm as a lover's. She smiles, leaning forward to lick the blood from my chin. Her eyes are dull, and her breath is slow, but the runes on her body glow brightly. I want to cry for her, but I am too exhausted to shed tears, as if they come from reservoirs that dried up long ago.

"Your face!" yells Sir Verris. "Get away from that beast!"

I turn to see him sneering at me. His men emerge from the forest behind him, clad in furs, leather, and chainmail. They tromp about the sacred place in their boots, uncaring of their steps. But I stay with Rawen, even when Sir Verris approaches me and nocks another arrow. I don't know how to save her life, but I won't allow him to hasten her death.

"Step aside!" he barks. "Have you gone daft?"

I don't move. Sir Verris looks at me for a moment, clearly unsure what to do, but with a groan, he puts his arrow back in its quiver and grabs my wrist.

I slam my other fist as hard as I can into the bandage on his head. He collapses as if hit by a mace, his longbow clattering against the rock. I have done the unthinkable: I have

struck down a heroic knight. Rawen splutters out a barking laugh. Verris' men stand together like a rabble, staring at me as if watching a troupe of performing freaks.

"ANYA!" yells my father. He pushes his way past his men, his face nearly as red as the crimson, gold-fringed doublet that he wears under his furs. "Have you gone mad?"

"No," I say.

For the first time since I saw the head of my Goddess, the world seems to be clear. I can't feel the cold on my skin. I have no fear of these pathetic men, of my red-faced father and the fallen Sir Verris. In truth, I am tired of these men. I am tired of feeling like my free will is dependent on their sufferance. I am tired of how they see all that lies before them, whether beast, girl, or goddess, as nothing but playthings for their sport. I am tired of their worship of a false god. And, perhaps most of all, I am tired of the disrespect they show to me. I am tired of it and I will *not* abide these men doing harm to my wolves, least of all in this holy place.

"If you wish to come to this sacred place," I say, my voice loud and commanding. "You will show respect as your forefathers did and kneel."

The men-at-arms stare at me, hardened warriors turned into slack-jawed children. My father scowls, shaking his head. Sir Verris groans from his place on the ground. Did I not make myself clear? Am I not the bride of the Goddess, a woman touched by the divine?

"Kneel!" I shout. "Kneel or die!"

Sir Verris forces himself put to his feet. Blood drips slowly down his forehead, coating his face like savage red warpaint.

"Men do not kneel to whores," he hisses.

He raises his gauntleted hand, this time not as an open-handed slap but as a fist. With a snarl, he lashes out. But I don't flinch. I reach out and grab it, holding him by the wrist like a mother restraining her giant child. Our eyes meet. He growls, a dog caught in a trap.

"Let go!" he shouts. "I command you, cunt!"

And then I squeeze his wrist. The steel of his gauntlet bends like cheap tin in a press. Flesh crumbles and bone crunches. Blood gushes from his armor, splattering onto my skin.

"STOP!" Tears pour from his eyes. "Let go of me!"

"You don't command me," I growl.

When I look, I see that my hand is not a woman's hand, but a great, red-furred paw with enormous scythe-like claws. Vines and pink flowers circle my massive wrist like bracelets. And I know that this is only the beginning. Bones crack and reform. Fur prickles on my skin. My muscles twitch and spasm. Sir Verris screams as my grip becomes stronger. I grow larger, rising above Sir Verris, growing taller and taller until even Rawen seems petite by comparison. The scent of blood and flowers fill my nose. A muzzle appears in my field of vision. I run my tongue over my mouth to touch massive, viciously sharp fangs.

And then, finally, I crush what remains of Sir Verris' wrist. His mangled hand tumbles into the crimson snow.

"KILL HER!" he screams, stumbling away from me. "FOR THE LOVE OF THE FATHER, KILL HER!"

"No!" shouts my father, stepping between me and his men. "Anya, resist the beast! Don't let yourself become a monster!"

But I'm not a monster. I am a *Goddess*. And I do not recognize my father's authority.

I throw back my head and howl, calling my people to arms. They answer. I can hear their howls in front of me, behind me, on my left and right. For these forests belong to the wolves, and they live in every corner. I hear another howl, loud and full-throated, mere inches away. Rawen tears the arrow from her throat and clambers to her paws. Her fur is covered in blood, but the collar around her neck blossoms with flowering life. She stands at my side like a lord's loyal bannerman, the first to present herself to me.

But she is hardly alone. From the woods slink great predatory beasts with glowing eyes. Leading them are great she-wolves with flowery collars and glowing red runes: a gray, scared she-wolf, a heavy brown bitch wearing a golden anklet, and a black beast with rows of bone piercings, called back into my service.

The men-at-arms clutch their weapons, little boys hiding behind their toys. They crowd among each other like sheep. My father turns, trying to calm them, trying to prevent a battle that will no doubt become a massacre. But one of the hunters, a young archer with darting blue eyes, grabs an arrow from his quiver. *Fool*. I point at him. The earth slithers under my paws. A great root rips free from the frozen earth, showering men in dirt and snow. But this time, I am not binding a lover. I clench my hand and the root wraps tight around the archer's chest and neck, lifting him off his feet. He kicks and struggles, a puppet tangled in his strings. I could kill him if I wanted. *I could kill all of them*.

"Anya!" shouts my father. "Please! There's no need for this!"

But clearly, there is, if my commandments aren't being followed.

"KNEEL!" I roar.

My father looks at me and then gives a deep sigh. After several long moments, he lowers himself to his knees, the snow dusting his fine cloak, and bows his head. And, true to my word, I unclench my fist and the root drops the ensnared archer.

The other men stand still, looking from me to the wolves to my penitent father. And finally, one of the men-at-arms, clad in the simple brown leather of a Fyrd levy, throws down his spear, falls to his knees, and bows his head. The others follow his example, one by one, even the young archer who dared to draw his weapon on me. All except Sir Verris.

He kicks the young archer like a kennel master punishing a hound, but the man stays on his knees. No one rises. No one offers to help. He is alone, as I once was.

"Kneel, you fool!" barks my father.

"COWARDS!" yells Sir Verris, kicking the archer once again. "You're all cowards! Demons take you all!"

He picks up a spear with his remaining hand, but I quickly knock it aside and grab him as if he were a rooster selected for the butcher's ax. Even wounded and facing death, he finds the will to spit in my face. There's something I can respect about his spirit. Something perhaps akin to what I've found within myself. He is a strong man, brave beyond question, and devout in his belief, however misguided.

It makes the taste of his heart all the sweeter.

Rules

Zither P. Oxblood

Zither P. Oxblood is a queer writer, performer, and artist, as well as the creator of the YouTube channel [Graveyard Poetry](#).

Haley hadn't meant to push her mother. It had been pure coincidence.

Haley looked down the staircase at the woman lying there, her bulk smashed against the front door. The stupid bitch just kept wheezing. The sound grated against Haley's eardrums. Her mother's eyes rolled like little panicky cue-balls in her sockets. It was strange... somehow the woman's bra had popped right off when she hit the floor at the base of the stairs. Her breasts had flopped out of her top. Haley stared at those pale, bulbous things, with their fat brown areolas. How long had it been since she'd seen her mother's tits? Her gaze drifted, taking in the whole scene. The woman's trunk-like legs, sprinkled with varicose veins, were twisted, one under her, the other splayed out to the side. The wheezing became short gasps for air, with long sighing exhales, and the woman's eyelids fluttered. Haley watched as if she was in a trance – almost hypnotized, as if this was a magic show. It was somehow less dramatic, though. Almost boring. She thought there should have been blood.

That day – the day Haley's parents died--was full of wrongness. Some energetic force was in the air and she couldn't breathe, couldn't move without that feeling that something horrible was going wrong. When she woke up that morning – although ten o'clock was barely morning; she was a teenager, after all – her left arm was dead from the way she'd slept, thrown, hyper-extended under her head. It felt wrong. She willed the blood back into her arm, dangling the limb over the side of the bed as she lay on her stomach, legs tangled in the sheets. She could barely tolerate the sharp, painful, needling sensation, as if her entire arm was being tattooed all at once. Wrong, so wrong, everything was wrong. Even after the pain subsided, she was still convinced her left hand was wrong. Too full of blood now, swollen. So, she stood in her room for an hour (even though her mother kept yelling up to her that breakfast was ready), tapping her right fist against the wall harder and harder. To even them out, of course. After a long time doing this, she finally slammed her fist home, punching a dent in the drywall, a little crumpled hole. Then, seeing the blood and ripped skin on her knuckles, it was a little better. A little more even. And she could go downstairs and have her breakfast.

See, Haley had Rules. And they were good Rules. They kept her sane. When things were wrong – when they felt wrong – a sort of hopelessness overtook her. She couldn't live that way! It was as if the entire world was twisting, shifting, becoming something else – or, no, more as if she was slipping through the cracks in the world and entering a place where everything looked the same, but it was not the same, not the same at all. A place where every crack in the wall held malicious eyes, where photographs moved when you weren't looking. A place where the people who were supposed to be your parents were just dolls,

idle puppets slouching in a dollhouse with no will, no sentience, no personality. Sometimes she could see them thinking, cold arachnoid thoughts as if they had spiders in their skulls. Those were the worst times.

So, Haley had Rules – whenever things were wrong, she had a Rule to fix them. Sometimes it took a long time. Hours. Days. But at least she knew that she could get the universe back from the brink, return to reality, for god's sake.

Today, she was trying very hard to follow her Rules, but the world seemed intent on breaking them. Everything seemed to break a little Rule, and everything was just a little bit... off. Not all the way wrong, mind you, but getting there. Getting there. So, she had to be careful, because if things went all the way wrong, if the little Rules got broken enough, well, then the Rules got drastic. When you fell through the mirror into the shadowy nightmare that was this other world, you had to do whatever it took to come back, right?

She had thought that once her hands were evened out, the day might get better. That perhaps she had forestalled the apocalypse behind the mirror. She emerged from her room and padded down the stairs like a kitten to have breakfast with her parents.

But breakfast did not go well. Her scrambled eggs, obscenely yellow and bland as only her parents could make them, had congealed into a tumorous mass. She poked at it with a fork, and when it squirmed gelatinously, a retch caught in her throat. She walked out of the kitchen, still holding the plate. Into the living room, where they sat at either end of the couch in bewildering silence.

These eggs are disgusting. How dare you try to poison me with this slop? Do I look like a fucking pig? She ground her teeth together. The words escaped her, and she let out a long, passive-aggressive sigh instead.

Her parents didn't even look at her. It was infuriating to watch them. Her mother, tapping away at her cell phone, playing some stupid game for old people, occasionally pushing her glasses up on her nose. They had a bad habit of sliding down her face, and then she would squint and frown before thinking to push them back up. Her father's fat fingers splayed on his laptop. He was scowling, which meant he was probably reading random news articles on whatever social media site stupid fat old people used. Without looking up, he muttered something about some politician. Haley found herself fascinated by the way his hairy gut bulged out under his too-small t-shirt. She stood there, clenching her jaw, watching his chest rise and fall.

How had she not noticed when the vents had opened, pouring a terrible unreality into this place that was so similar to her home, but wrong? Was it only this morning? Had this been happening for days? Weeks? She felt reality slipping away from her like she was watching some fucking art film about ugly, ordinary-looking people where nothing happened. She'd had to sit through half an hour of a mind-numbingly boring movie like that with Lachlan before he finally put his hands on her. Fucking pretentious prick.

Rage burned behind Haley's eyes for a moment and she stamped it out, like pouring water over a campfire.

That was one of Haley's Rules: Never let them see your rage.

She had a way to deal with the rage before her parents could see it. She raced upstairs and stripped off her clothes, plunged under the covers and took her vibrator out of its secret

place under her bed. She took it between her legs, the stimulation building and building, ripples of pleasure becoming waves, becoming an ocean, beginning to sweep her away, sweep her under – and then she wrenched the buzzing machine away, before she could really cum. Because once you came after a marathon vibrator sesh like that, you were done, and once you were done, the rage could come back, unless you really wore yourself out.

She'd learned that if she stopped soon enough, she could start again in a moment. Just wait for the waves to ease, just a little bit... Edging, the boys called it. But they were terrible at it. Sooner or later, boys always came. More often sooner, and it was always gross. But the girls knew how to do it. She'd practiced with Amber. Oh, the pleasure would last for hours and hours, until your body simply couldn't take it anymore and the pleasure turned into raw pain and you passed out. There was no space for rage then.

So, she did that for an hour, two hours, but then it started to hurt. Tender became sore and achy. She got scared. What if this became wrong, too? It was one of her only ways to forget when things started getting really, really wrong! She lay there for a moment, panting heavily, then carefully put the vibrator away and tried very hard not to worry if it was wrong.

Instead, she thought about her parents. They were wrong, she knew it. She knew it. A fear bubbled through her insides and she burped. Were they really wrong? Maybe they weren't. Maybe this was all just her mind playing tricks on her. Ever since she was a child, her mother had said that her mind liked to play tricks on her.

But no, they were wrong. She'd seen it. They'd tried to poison her with those eggs! Her mother was always trying to poison her! But Haley had a kind of preternatural sense for when things were wrong, and it kept her safe.

Oh, she knew why her mother wanted to poison her. The bitch was jealous. Haley wasn't stupid. She'd noticed the way her father looked at her now, his eyes lingering on her body when he thought no one could see, and then flicking ashamedly away. It was just that every time, she only half-saw it, catching his gaze out of her periphery, gone by the time she turned. So, she couldn't be sure. She was never fucking sure. Sometimes she tried to test him. Stretching in front of him to show her skinny belly under a crop-top; spending too much time in a skimpy towel after her shower; her bedroom door ajar just a smidge when she changed. But she could never fully catch it. Am I imagining things?

She needed to check. She needed to check him, right now. She threw herself out of bed and stood naked, thinking. Then she wiggled into a spaghetti-strap top and pulled on her Victoria's Secret sweatpants with the word BRAT emblazoned across her butt. She checked herself in the mirror. No bra. Her nipples were poking through the thin fabric. Her body smelled of sweat and pheromones and sex.

She descended the stairs and stood before them in the living room, practically prostrating herself before their royal couch. And somehow, they ignored her. This was worse than her father's stupid horny eyes. Was she invisible? He ignored her. Ever since she'd taught him how to use that fucking computer. Now he just wanted to be a miserable bastard, complaining about the government and ignoring his own family. What about their needs? She stood there, offering her skinny body as a sacrifice, and he ignored her.

Oh, the rage was growing now, but she was ready for it this time. Tolerating it, embracing it, holding it close. Feeding it, little by little, letting it grow, but containing it. Letting it fill her whole body until she thought she would burst, until her eyes were rimmed with tears, and then cutting it off, holding it back, letting it roil in her stomach. Edging the rage.

She stood there in front of them, waiting for dad to acknowledge her, waiting for him to see how her body was readied. Then her mother looked up from her phone and their eyes met. In that instant, Haley saw that her mother knew, she fucking knew what Haley was thinking. Somehow, she'd glimpsed Haley's rage. Maybe it was the outfit, maybe it was the reek of unfinished sex... or maybe her mother just saw her, just actually saw her for a split second...

But this went against all the Rules. Never let them see your rage.

Haley let out a tiny whimper and raced back upstairs to her room, her bare feet pounding on the wooden steps. She slammed the door behind her, and a low moan rose from her core as she threw herself down on her bed. She knows, she knows, she knows. She broke the Rules.

The sound of her mother's heavy footfalls outside her room. Fuck!

She flung the door open and pushed out into the hallway – bumping her mother, who was blocking her. “God, Mom. Get out of the way!” She threw an elbow against the woman and their eyes met. Just for a fraction of a second. But now that the Rules were broken her mother saw the rage, fully saw it, she stepped back, right there on the landing, and Haley felt like her head was going to explode, like her eyes were lasers, her body was trembling and she pushed–



After her mother finished wheezing, Haley realized she'd been standing there for a long time. Dusk. Shadows lurked over the woman's contorted form, the face shifting, mercurial. A burst of fear jolted through her. Something wasn't right about that body.

And where was her father? Why hadn't he come to look? Shouldn't he have heard the bang-and-smash of the woman's body as she freewheeled down the stairs?

Haley needed to check. She stepped down the stairs, quietly, her body scraping against the wall. Her feet went tap, tap, tap, all the way down. She stepped over the tangle of limbs in the entryway.

Back into the living room. Her father was still on the couch. He'd fallen asleep, his laptop on the floor beside him, the screen casting an eerie glow that left his face in darkness. His chest rose and fell, rose and fell. A snotty snore with every breath. She saw an obscene protuberance swelling his thin athletic shorts. Oh, things were very, very wrong. Why hadn't he heard the bitch falling down the stairs? Was any of this even real?

Haley moved closer to him. She knelt beside the couch. Her finger slowly pushed his laptop screen down. She laid her whole palm on the thing and closed it with a faint click. Sepulchral gloom entombed them.

In the darkness, as she knelt, she saw one of her mother's embroidered pillows. Her father must have kicked it off the couch. She slowly reached out a hand, felt the silky fabric, then the rough edge of the embroidery. She picked it up and straightened.

She stood there, staring at the dark form on the couch, listening to the snorting of his breath, feeling the easy weight of the pillow. Make it right.

He began to struggle at some point, but Haley told herself he never woke up at all. It was just instinct making his arms jerk and swat at her clumsily, his legs kick up and down, thudding the couch cushions. Her body was little, but she leaned her whole weight onto the pillow for a long time. Even after he stopped, she stayed like that. Her mind was consumed by the image of that grotesque thick knob she'd seen bulging his shorts, and she wanted to scream out her rage. But instead, she just leaned her whole weight onto the pillow for a long, long time.

Then she dropped the pillow on the floor again and stepped back. She was shaking. Her teeth gritted with rage. There were no more Rules, now.

She lunged out through the screen door in the kitchen. Out into the sprinkling rain. Moisture beaded on her skin, rivulets down her face. The smell of the soil, craving the rain. The screen door banged behind her and she jumped. Her whole body was pulsing. Rage left her shivering. The clouds were swollen, black and blue, like bruised sky. It was time. The worlds were colliding. Had she made things right enough?

Now she let out the rage in a long screech that burned her throat ragged. Her chest felt cavernous as she gulped air. Oh, the air was good. Oh, it was right. Her whole body shivered with the storm. She fell back against the screen door and let it take her. She let go completely. Her body trembled, heaved, her limbs twitching. She let out another sound now, an uncontrollable musical moaning that keened out of her diaphragm, and a dark wet stain grew on her pink sweatpants as she came, doubled over in the rain, falling to her knees, curling up on the moist earth, her core throbbing as she humped herself against the grass and *came*.

New Homes for Sale

Albert Sotelo

Husky, bearded Gary Fugit, decked in his Sunday finest, his shaggy, red hair concealed in a black beanie, drove the clunker through a trash-blown, vacant parking lot with his boyfriend Charlie. The tires crackled over a calloused blacktop punctured with weeds and shattered glass. They were at the edge of a city park and nobody else was around. They were meeting with a realtor to see a home.

Their previous domestic life – a ratty walk-up apartment in a sleazy corner of Hollywood from which they had been theatrically evicted – was over. Their service jobs were over. Their entire life had been consolidated into immaculately sous vide vacuum-packs and folded and labeled into boxes that took up the entire back half of their car. Only their yowling cat, distressed in a pet carrier, linked this existence to their last one. They had discarded all else. To the outsider's eye, the ingredients for hope lay in bounty, measured out in a mise en place which favored their success – they were newlyweds; young men at peak virility; explorers on a cross-country adventure; gamblers who harkened back to a time when bachelors headed west to carve out their fortunes. The fellows, however, saw differently. They had not found careers. They had little money. Their car was dying. They had no home.

And now the woman they were meeting for a pre-approved home was missing.

"Let me try calling her." Charlie, the practical one, grabbed the postcard which had started the convoluted chain of events which had led them there. The card, a glossy 8 x 5' cutout of a young family standing in front of a modest ranch-house, shimmered with the amended update of the new, organic American pastoral. Gone was the bovine suburbanism favored by generations past; the sprawling, manufactured McMansions with obscene HOA fees and manicured green lawns. In its place stood the attainable: a couple their age, caught somewhere between their fresh-faced, earnest twenties and the pragmatic, slightly desperate early thirties. The house behind them looked small, eco-friendly, and utilitarian. Nature, in the form of wild, untrimmed grass and Spanish moss, swallowed the photo whole. New homes for sale, the block print advertised. The \$20,000 or less price-tag cinched it for them. They would drive the 327 miles north to scope the place out for themselves. If the world was preparing to implode on itself within the decade, they were determined to have a proper home to die in.

As Charlie spoke into the cellphone, Gary escaped the car for some much-needed fresh air. He lit a cigarette, walked around the car, and considered the profoundly empty trajectory of his life in full. His was a timeline anathema to the American dream. Rather than achieve upward social mobility, he had stumbled four pegs down. For most of his life, he had luxuriated in his parent's inherited, old money craftsman. Then, tragedy struck. Mid-university, his parents were killed in an automobile accident. Family blood feuds left the house in probate hell and left him homeless, without a degree. His ginger good looks -- exotic by California standards -- afforded him some measure of security amongst the various

sugar daddies he alternated beds with. Hitting thirty, however, had been a wall he could not climb over. He lost his boyish looks. He became a truck driver until automation rendered him useless, and then later, an installer of solar panels which, considering the global freeze, was becoming increasingly obsolete.

"That's not a problem," he overheard his boyfriend chirp with the saccharine agreeability others more cynical found grating. He admired that about Charlie -- how exquisitely he handled strife. The genetics for enduring suffering had been encoded in his ribosome since birth. He'd been raised feral in an Okie hovel by two trailer-park methheads whose home finally exploded during Charlie's 13th year. This later prepared Charlie for a series of never-ending hardships he survived with equanimity but never surmounted. Poverty strangled him. He threw himself into work to stay afloat. He worked in factories, farms, bars, motels, greasy spoons, and most recently, at the time of his initial acquaintance with Gary, as a go-go boy at a sleazy gay strip joint.

"We'll be right over," Charlie conciliated some sort of deal with the rude, missing realtor who, by Gary's rigid code of social estimation, should have been groveling to them, and in this vein, he witnessed the crookedness of his boyfriend's smile. The facial disfigurement. A defective Korean cellphone had exploded in his face. Hundreds of tiny pieces of sharp, glass shrapnel had sliced and lodged themselves into his cheeks and lower jaw. Unwilling to bear the load of tens of thousands in medical debt, he had crudely anesthetized with Advil, wrapped his bleeding face in gauze, and drove the four hours south to Mexico, where a halfway facial reconstruction was performed. He had been left with a scar that left his mouth drooping and his go-go boy career eliminated. So great, however, was their financial desperation that Charlie, like a moral Atlas, chalked this tragedy up into the win column -- a lawsuit awarded them some dough. Enough for what they hoped was this: a home.

Charlie hung up the phone and rolled down the window. "The lady apologizes for being late, but she was stuck in some sort of yoga circle?" He ended the response as a question. "She says we can come view the homes. We just need to walk over there."

Charlie pointed the end of his finger over to a field. "The new homes for sale are that-a-way."



The 'walk' over towards the homes was a quick bushwhack over a field of thigh-high mulefat and thistles. Poky foxtails stuck themselves to the laces of their shoes. "What is this fuckery?" Gary whispered to himself, careful not to let Charlie overhear him. His misgivings were plenty. Plastic bottles and burnt trash littered the field. There was a tarp and a circle of rocks which looked like the remnants of a hobo campfire. He felt a peculiar anxiety tug at him, primal and alert, as his feet crunched over mud and discarded cigarette butts.

The field dead-ended abruptly at a bike-path that separated the field from a thick growth of wild forest. Were it not for a dilapidated sign leaned up against a lustrous oak tree, they

would have remained lost. "New Homes for Sale," the arrow-sign pointed to a footpath which led into the woods. The sign was filthy and the path looked overgrown and unkempt.

Gary's grip tightened around his boyfriend's hand. Charlie smiled back at him. "Don't worry."

Into the woods, they went. They curved their way right past a grove of elderberry bushes, and then another right, and then another right again until they heard water streaming and the jubilant cries of children playing a furious game of kickball. After some moments of ducking under tumorous tree branches, they happened upon the first sign of life: a tin shack nestled beneath an elm tree. It was hollowed out like an empty can of baked beans abandoned in the woods, rusting and tetanic, but inside and around it, it teemed with life. Moss grew over the roof. A hanging lightbulb illuminated a couple sitting idly on a couch, watching a black-and-white TV. The windowpane had no proper glass but a layer of clear vinyl tarp kept the chill out. Outside the front door was an outdoor patio and lawn chairs where a trio of children was engrossed in a game of cards. When the kids saw them, they waved. As Charlie and Gary waved back, it occurred to them that this was no toolshed.

It was a home.

"Groundsman's family?" Charlie offered, but even he had to swallow a heavy load of doubt to believe this. What community of new homes eschewed gated entrances and private lanes for parking at an empty lot, crossing a field, and having to walk through a hobo trail?

No sooner did he ponder this question than they rounded a corner and arrived at the end of the trail. A giant, cleared meadow emerged before them, the final wisps of sunlight illuminating a strung-up banner which read: Welcome to RiverGreen Community! Yet they saw no homes -- at least not in any traditional sense of the word; single-family home structures of wood-and-brick, with yards and fences and pools. What surrounded the meadow was architectural bedlam. A veritable Hooverville of canvas tents piled onto yurts constructed near shipping containers. Children ran pell-mell between an interconnected web of tarps and vegetable gardens and muddy footpaths connecting these structures. A few tiny homes sat perched, regal and luxurious, in the near distance. In lieu of feng shui-ing their furniture inside their tiny, cramped abodes, everybody seemed in favor of exposing their decorative skills to scrutiny and the natural elements: perched in front of yards were old sideboards, fiberglass garden tables, love seats, hammocks, Twister mats, and kid pools. Gary made no effort to conceal his immediate disgust. "Is this a fucking joke?" He had seen communities like this off of the freeway onramps of Los Angeles -- they were considered homeless encampments and they were filled with drug addicts and the criminally insane.

In the middle of the meadow, a crowd was huddled around a massive bonfire, the size of which seemed appropriate for the solstice festivals of yore. They were all dressed in the drag of Hollywood cinema hobos, smoky beanies and drab rain-jackets. Some were sitting in lawn chairs staring mesmerized into the flames, while others perched at fire's edge, warming up their bare hands. A few kids roasted marshmallows on wires. Various others threw bundles of paperwork and envelopes into the flames. One man in filthy-haired dreads, of a type they both knew from California beach boardwalks, strummed a guitar.

"Oh, brother," Gary groaned. "You've got to be kidding me!"

From this motley diaspora, a mousy and anorexic woman emerged, heading their way. She wore a Mexican peasant blouse with a mismatched Indian deva skirt which flowed behind her like a red sash. Charlie expected her to invite them to the impromptu drum circle which was now taking place. Instead, she bowed to them.

"Charlie? Gary?" She said in a whispered near eastern accent. She was of indeterminate age, either a well-pickled 40something, or their age and ravaged by the new climate. She had laugh lines and wild, black eyes. "Namaste. I'm Liz Grates, the realtor of RiverGreen Community Homes." She bowed to them, and then went in for a hug which pressed a waft of marijuana up their nose.

Gary cut straight to the point. "Yeah. Hi. So what the hell is this place?"

All at once the smile etched itself off her face. "I know how it looks and what you're thinking, but you've caught us during a moment of transition. We're sprucing up the landscape maintenance here next week."

They stared out at the dystopian abyss and she caught their frowns.

"Follow me, I'll show you to your brand new home." Her tone was the clipped, rapid, breathy, promotional pitch so known to Gary from the call center he worked at. The telemarketer girls employed it all the time. Perky automatons. Caution lay under each tsk and click of the tongue. Gary's doubts grew exponentially.

"Yes," Liz said, "Ours is a bit of an unconventional community." She walked them right by the periphery of the bonfire, where two guys lit up a joint and a third puffed from a glass pipe before sprawling out, spread-eagle, on the grass. Gary was relieved Liz hadn't attempted an introduction.

"Stargazer," she motioned to the spaced-out man, as if reading his mind.

"So what's the deal with the hobo fire?"

Liz laughed at the unexpected comment. "That's funny, Mr. Fugit. Actually, the communal bonfire is a recent development. We've found that our tenants love having an open space for socializing and games."

"Is using drugs in the open commonplace here?"

"Unlike other communities in other parts of the country, we choose not to judge what our tenants do in their spare time." Her voice had taken on a more cutting, stilted tone. "So long as they're not hurting anyone, I see no problem, do you?"

"Of course not." Charlie shot Gary a glare and saddled up right in between them. "What Gary meant is that we are just a little worried that we may not fit in? We're looking for a home with privacy and not necessarily a commune?"

Liz raised a dismissive hand as she walked them through a grove of shady elms. "Not to worry. We're not any type of cult that requires communal living. You can choose to interact as little or as much as you want, and our tenants come from all over the country and all walks of life. We have doctors, lawyers, marijuana growers, former athletes, artisanal chefs, baristas, survivalists, and former gang members all living in one place. That's the beauty of our community -- the richness of our diversity and the lack of judgment. The only caveat is that you belong to the younger, underqualified generation -- the millennials. A stipulation that you two obviously qualify for."

Charlie nodded, following her finger which pointed at a row of tiny cabins decorated in a variety of styles -- rustic cabin, sardine tin trailers, a mini Japanese dojo complete with a rock garden. Trees and foliage separated yards and bedroom windows from each other. Some had picket fences. Others had none.

"We've already taken into account your need for privacy, so we placed you here, in our quieter and more private community quarters. Your house is right over there."

She pointed towards a corner slot to the very right of the row of homes. Nestled beneath a drooping elm, their house sprouted like a wild, elfin toadstool in a field of moss. It was a caricature of a hobbit's cabin, wooden and round in shape, its dimensions perfect for the whimsy of Disneyland. A mound of grass and vines surrounded the sides and swallowed the roof whole. Even from afar, it was apparent that the twee decorations were meant to mask the reality: their house was a wooden shack. A tiny wooden hut. Older generations housed chattel in larger quarters.

Liz stamped up the gravel walkway with excitement. "Isn't it just adorable?" A bough filled with cherries hung over the front patio door. She swatted it out of her way as she unlocked the padlock and opened the door.

"Fellas, your new home." She announced, walking in with the arm-swinging grandeur of a concert maestro.

Gary had to duck to avoid hitting his head with the top of the threshold.

The house was not so much a collection of separate rooms than a flimsy matchbox of labyrinthine cubicles divided by bookcases and beaded curtains. Every part of the house could be viewed from the front door. To the left was the open toilet and shower, and next to it a staircase which ascended to the loft bedroom space. The kitchen had space enough for a cutting board deck and a sink. The parlor was a chaotic mishmash of different furnishings from different eras, all bought second-hand from a Goodwill -- shag carpeting, leather furniture, a coffee table, and an entertainment center. There was a kitchen nook with just enough knee-room for two people to eat.

"This isn't a home! This is a fucking dollhouse." Gary said aloud without even thinking.

"One of the better perks of our living facility is that you get free WiFi, Netflix, Alexa, and Roku." Liz, having decided to ignore the outburst, announced with the automatic perkiness of a Stepford wife.

"It's too small!"

"It's really quite nifty. Here, let me walk you through your home. There's more space than meets the eye." She opened cupboards, lifted floorboards, yanked pulleys, converted sofas into guest-beds, all with the grace and deft hand meant to show how the shack consolidated secret spaces inside of other secret spaces. Their house was a matryoshka doll of architectural surprises. Liz, to her credit, hawked the virtues of the hovel with true conviction. Every detail held secret value *en vogue* to their generation. The shower was heated via solar energy. The ratty, full-sized bed on coils and beams had mattresses padded with organic mulch or sheep's wool. The toilet was compostable and odor-free and only had to be disposed of twice per month.

Gary put the kibosh on her Pollyanna spiel with a sternly raised right hand. "We will not take it. This is an insult."

Liz broke character and the gravity of losing a client seemed to shake from her the rasta, rah-rah, hippie-go-lucky airs she had been putting on. Her brows swelled. The smile disappeared from her lips.

"Look, guys, I know this place is... small, and that it can be challenging for a couple. We're idealists trying for a new community, a new way, and it's the only thing we can afford in this country."

"But what if we have kids or need more space?"

"You can build additions to your property."

"But --"

"But, but, but." Liz shushed him with a smile. "Look, it's getting late and I know you guys don't want to drive or spend a night in your car. Just try this place out. Stay here for the weekend, even longer if you need. See if you like it."

Charlie smiled.

"There's food in the fridge and linens and blankets for your bed. All on us." She walked over the doorway and let herself out of their home. "I'll leave you guys be. If you need anything, just give me a ring." She bowed to them and then departed into the smoky darkness of the burgeoning night.

"We're leaving."

"We are not. Where will we go?"

"Who cares? Not here."

"In this rain?"

"Why stay somewhere we are not buying."

"Where else will we go? We have no money to stay anywhere else."

"We can live like kings in Bangladesh or Bolivia."

"Even a flight to Bangladesh involves money we don't have."

And so went the battle, fraught with accusations, tangents, guilt, hubris, finger-pointing, the virtues of buying vs. renting, and then ultimately, yelling and tears.



Later, after the skirmish, acquiescence. Gary surrendered his pride for the sake of peace and agreed to stay the one night. The pelting rain promised a slick, miserable commute anyhow. So they fetched the cat, a bottle of wine, pajamas, and sacks of toiletries and sank themselves into the theater of domesticity. Charlie cooked the meal -- soy chicken and chickpea couscous smothered in harissa sauce -- with less difficulty finding the spare kitchen utensils (they were all provided) than creating enough space to work in. They ate under the covered outdoor patio and watched the rain attack a family of opossums, and then retired to the loft bed, where they engaged in a bout of ram-rutting sex and then watched an entire streaming series on Netflix. The show was a middling tragicomedy that they both simultaneously dozed off to.

Gary had a vivid, realistic nightmare.

In it, he re-lived their disastrous last meeting with a realtor. They had driven 100 miles to see a home of which the state of advanced rot was its most auspicious feature. When the realtor -- a fat, jowly woman bursting from the seams of her business suit -- showed them the house, the level of dilapidation did not disappoint: it was an abandoned, two-story, wooden Tudor in an inner-city ghetto. Insulation and copper wiring had been stripped. The west-facing wall was riddled with bullet holes. Plumbing, mold removal, mice, and central heating remained unresolved problems. Because it was a domestic lemon, they were sure it was theirs. The price tag was \$75,000 cash.

So certain were all three of an assured, pre-approved mortgage that the woman had them sign a five-page long contract in ink on the spot.

It wasn't until the drive home that the bad news hit them like a tsunami in the guise of a cellphone call, the gist of which was this:

The house was not theirs. A credit check was run and owing to arrears on rent at previous addresses, Charlie was disqualified. Owing to arrears on student loan default, Gary, too, was stricken as a mortgage candidate. A default judgment had been placed on his name. There were liens. The only way the house could be theirs was via payment in full; cold, hard cash up front. \$70,000 -- all or nothing.

Gary cursed the woman out in this alternate, REM version of reality. He had made it as far as the word 'slumlord' before a knock at the door awakened both of them from their slumber.

Gary answered the door in a tank top, boxers, and slippers.

"Hi there, I'm sorry to disturb you guys." The interloper at the door was a young, redheaded woman with a toddler in tow. Her pale face carried a smattering of freckles and stress wrinkles made worse by her wide smile. "My name is Sage, and I just wanted to introduce myself as your next-door neighbor." Gary stared at her finger and saw hers was the tin trailer next door with blowing lawn daffodil ornaments.

She held out a hand that Gary took limply. "Oh, but we're not staying. We're just travelers passing through town."

She fixed him with a skeptical look. "Well, we hope you stay. We were in the same boat as you guys too, and well, I just stopped by to let you know that today is Breakfast Saturday. Free for the whole community in the main square. We hope to see you boys there."

Charlie, who was blessed with a natural gift for gab, thanked Sage profusely and made gah-gah, goo-goo noises at the baby who seemed of talking age. "Sure, we'll see you guys there!"

He waved goodbye to them and then closed the door behind them. To Gary, he turned and declared: "We are going."

Gary, in no need of an early morning quarrel and feeling the first pangs of hunger, did not argue against free food.



Into the town square they went, where the scene played out half-picnic, half-soup kitchen. Throngs of bundled-up bodies sat on lawn chairs, hunched over bowls of steaming gruel. The other half queued, cafeteria-style, around an elaborate kitchen setup of tables, burner stoves, boiling pots, and solemn volunteers splattering gruel into bowls. One fat man, off to the side, handed aluminum-wrapped balls from a steam cart. The icy morning weather necessitated gloves and scarves today. Everybody either shivered and ate or shivered and waited to eat. A lucky few had jostled themselves into an enviable position around the roaring campfire.

"Hey boys, over here!" It was their neighbor friend, Sage, the redhead mother. "I saved you two seats here by the fire." She patted two chairs directly in the line of fire.

They ambled over and were introduced to over a dozen new, friendly, smiling faces.

"Everyone, this is Gary and Charlie. They are new to RiverGreen."

"Hi, Gary and Charlie."

They sat and volleyed lightly prying, introductory questions about themselves and the circumstances of how they found themselves in their remote community.

They had not needed to queue in line for rations because the breakfast was brought out to them on cafeteria trays. Chia seed cream of wheat, toast, and freshly chopped fruit salad. The coffee was dark and herbally aromatic. It burnt pleasantly down their throats.

After the novelty of greeting potential new neighbors wore off, Gary and Charlie communicated with a handful of people immediately adjacent to where they were sitting. One trio of people in particular -- two lumbering Slavic-looking male models and a mousy woman -- piqued their interest: they boldly announced themselves as a throuple -- a declaration met with a refreshing dose of blasé disinterest. Jack, Mack, and Jill were their names and they thrust in front of them enough children to field a Little League baseball team. The kids wore dusty clothes with holes nattered through the ratty fabric. Gary envisioned them as a trio of johnny-come-latelys to the Burning Man hippie caravan lifestyle. After that scene burnt out, so too did they.

"We've lived here for five years now. Right after the recession hit." The woman announced as if reading Gary's mind. "We met in med school. We're doing our residency while Mack here minds the children."

The pronouncement of their careers had a peculiarly chilling effect on Gary's opinion of the place. The realtor was right. Professionals did live in the Hooverville, and for all of their vocational glory, this is where they ended up? And yet as other people opened up about themselves -- different people, different faces, forgettable names -- they discovered the throuple were no outliers. The place teemed with both professionals and tradespeople alike: tax accountants, nurses, barbers, butchers, doulas. Little continuity existed between them all except for the common thread which had brought the boys there: finding housing was impossible; only this place existed.

"We trade skills to help one another."

"Free dental checkups for a haircut."

"Swedish massage for tax filings."

"We're not communists."

“Or socialists either.”

“We just help each other out.”

The voices came out in a rapid-fire Greek chorus of agreeability. It all seemed scripted. Gary recognized this -- the hive mind pile-on specific to their generation, the well-meaning, cherry-picked fragments of socialism, too. Charlie smiled too. He was being hypnotized under their spell.

His body made the physical exertion of one about to stand up and excuse himself for a smoke until a hand rested itself upon his shoulder like a leaden weight. It was not Charlie's.

“I'm sorry,” he turned towards the hand. It belonged to a woman who was obscenely pregnant and jaundiced. Liver spots pockmarked portions of her scalp. “I just need a smoke.”

“If you leave here now, you won't find anything better.” Her declaration was blunt.

“Excuse me? How do you know that?”

“We were in the same boat as you.” She lowered her face closer to his so that her mouth was eye-level to him. Gary could see her chipped, missing teeth. Years of dental neglect had caused the abscess and disrepair. He couldn't help but stare at her ailment. She looked a hard forty-eight in this community of millennials. “I used to be an ER nurse until the recession hit. Then my husband and I spent five years searching. We drove all around the country applying for loans and asking to see homes. We did hard labor in workhouses. We pooled our savings together from our years working at the hospital. We lived in our van. We spent months in jail for being considered derelicts. All of that shit took its toll on us.”

Gary looked doubtfully at this hobo woman. He could not imagine her employed anywhere as glamorous as a hospital. He sooner envisioned her smoking meth in a tent and was ashamed to admit to himself that he felt revulsion.

“Not one single place took us in. It was door after door slammed in our faces. Until we came here.” She spun around. “Trust me, there is nothing else out there. There is no other place like this.”

“How old are you guys?” Gary found himself wondering weakly.

“We're both 36.” She pointed to a little, gnarled rooster of a man with sunken cheeks and a bald pinhead. He waved back, a toothless grin swallowing his face whole.

“I'm sorry, please excuse me.” Gary barely stumbled away from her, walking away from the group in a huff. Across the lawn, he jaunted almost drunkenly, when Charlie noticed his departure.

“Gary!” Charlie called after him, following as his husband's quick walk became a jog and then a run back to their home.

But Gary would not be dissuaded back. Into their home, he barged in, plucking up his gym bag and stuffing it full of the clothes and toiletries laying around.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I'm doing? I'm packing. We're leaving this dump.” He tossed his duffel bag to the front door. He searched his pockets and then the table nook for his car keys but could not find them. In a fit of clumsiness, he knocked over a vase of roses. The dirty maroon water spilled to their feet as the vase comically rolled around the entire, short length of the kitchen. Gary let out a laugh of frustration. “This whole thing is a farce.”

The house was silent as a mausoleum for that moment. Gary expected his partner to erupt into his usual method of defense -- the kicked-puppy yelps, the chortles. The deep, teary, suffocating chortles about the unfairness of life, of being unable to fulfill his one dream of owning a home versus the futility of renting shanties. Gary prepared for the torrential verbiage, but nothing came. Instead, Charlie said nothing. He eyed Gary sympathetically, which instead both infuriated Gary and sent him into a sweaty spasm of anxiety. The indifference made him feel tiny. He shrunk into the floorboards.

"We can't live like this. What if we decide to have kids?" He stammered. Gary did not want to live in this pile of mounded earth, this wooden vertebra of a garden shack with its precious Barbie doll compartments. He thought of the middle-aged adults of his childhood -- his parents, the teachers, the gardeners, the factory workers -- who purchased sprawling palatial estates on high school graduate salaries and zero-down credit. He felt gypped. He seethed with righteous envy.

Charlie shook his head. "You know that's not possible right now."

Gary opened the door as if to leave in melodramatic act of finality, except he found he could not make it beyond the awning over the front porch. The weather had transformed for the worse. The wind was up, swaying the treetops like balloons, threatening to strip shingles from the roofs of houses. Dark rain left the earth a mess of wet clinging leaves and dripping branches. Gary imagined the nightmare conditions of the highway: the road closures and rockfalls. He suddenly felt old, like Methuselah. Exhausted and hopeless.

Charlie stopped him. "But the land. The house. It will be ours. And nobody can take it away from us. We can fix the house up. Put in some additions. It's all just bricks and lumber and glass."

The blood-red sun shined under a layer of campfire smoke. Gary saw their mailbox. It had both their names stenciled on it in neat black letters.

Gary mouthed feebly: "There is another place for us." But his voice was a weak breath that doubted the existence of this other, better place. He only knew what that other place meant for tonight, and then the next few nights. Nights spent asleep in their jalopy. The sound of traffic and trains would awaken them from their sleep a half dozen times. When the sun rose, his arms would be wrapped around the gear shift, his body aching from the discomfort. Fog from their breath would drip from the windows and wet their undershirts. Cops might rap on the window, urging them to move on, asking for identification, which he would have to find underneath the brake pedal. If they were lucky, they would find a rest stop and use the lavatory. They would both look like hell.

He grabbed Charlie in a hug. "We'll take it." he said, his voice filled with longing and acceptance, yearning for their new coffin-like little home.

The Thing Down the Drain

Anna K. Scott

I first learned of the thing down the drain's existence when I was six, watching the water swirl down the plughole, a tiny vortex ending with a slurp and a glug. I peered through the grate, wondering where the water went, and something peered back.

Mum was busy fussing over her hair in the toothpaste-spotted mirror, licking the lipstick off her teeth. She laughed when I told her something was inside the sink. "Nicola, it's just the light playing tricks on you. You don't get eyes down the drain, silly."

I used to believe everything she told me, but maybe that was when I first started to doubt her. I checked again before bed, going up on tiptoes, pressing my face as close as I could to the sink's drain. A bead of water dripped down into the abyss, light playing across its surface. Just a reflection.



The thing didn't appear again for several years. Not to me, anyway. We'd moved to another house by then, always chasing the cheapest rent. This one had a bath as well as a shower. Mum didn't seem happy about it and told me it was off-limits.

I'd never experienced a bath before. I'd seen them in adverts on TV, in films. Rose petals and candles, pretty women, bubbles hiding their best bits, eating chocolate like it was sex. I waited until my mother was out one Saturday afternoon, then I ran the taps. We didn't have bubble-bath, so I rubbed a bar of scented soap until its suds spread across the surface. Pretend luxury.

The tub squeaked every time I shifted. Water sloshed over the side onto the peeling lino floor. I ducked my head under the water, daring myself to stay there until my lungs burst, but in the end, instinct forced me to resurface. I reached between my legs, feeling that familiar tingling warmth. The same thing happened when I buried my head in my pillows at night. What had started as a method to muffle any sounds had turned into an unexpected way to heighten the pleasure. Shame made it extra special. My little secret.

When I'd finished, I looked down to see something red curling in the water like smoke. My period had come early again. I settled my head against the edge of the tub. Tired, but not satisfied, like an itch I couldn't scratch because I couldn't even tell where the itch was.

Hot water turned lukewarm by the time I pulled the plug. More of my blood had tinted the water, cramps setting in. I probably would've stayed longer, let all the water turn red and cold, but I knew mum would be home soon.

As I dried myself on a stiff towel, an old memory resurfaced. On a whim, I bent forward. Water dripped down the drain. Hair and dirty soap scum. Nothing out of the ordinary.

And then I saw the eyes. They did look like light bouncing off the water, at first. The pop music grew quiet to my ears, replaced by a long, increasingly loud hiss coming from the plughole. I couldn't pick out any words, but I sensed the message was right there, at the tip of my understanding. Frustrated, I pushed my ear to the hole.

The front door banged against the wall downstairs and I jerked up. Sights and sounds returned in a rush, but beneath it, I thought I could still hear the sibilance. It was unsatisfied, just like me.



"There's something in the bath, mum."

From the look on my mother's face — guilt, fear — she knew exactly what I was talking about. Of course, she pretended she didn't. "What?"

I pointed my fork at her, a slimy piece of microwave noodle dropping into my lap. Tried to sound knowing, sly. "I thought you might have an idea."

She choked, dabbed at her chin with her sleeve. Calmly, she said, "I'm not discussing this with you."

"But why?" I wanted to be cool, reasonable, but I sounded whiny.

"Just don't. Drop it."

"So I'm supposed to pretend there's nothing down the pipe?"

"What? What are you on about?"

I screamed in frustration. My dinner fell to the floor, congealing noodles plopping onto the carpet, but I didn't care. She didn't shout after me when I stormed off to my room. That's how I knew I was right.



We moved as soon as the lease allowed. The new flat was more expensive, but it didn't have a bath. When blood washed down my legs in the shower, down the drain, I thought I could see teeth. Smiling. I should've been afraid, but whatever it was following us all these years, it hadn't hurt us. I started to whisper to it, hoping one day it might whisper back.



I never met my father.

That's not entirely true. Baby-me met him. I don't know if he held me, rocked me to sleep in his arms. My family always said he was a great man, full of smiles and laughter, hard-working, never had a bad word to say about anyone. Probably shat puppies and puked kittens. Other kids at the support group tended to deify their dead parent, romanticise the idea of them. They put flowers on their grave every year, wrote lovey-dovey poetry. My father's ghost meant nothing to me.

He died when I was three. Mum refused to talk about it, so I heard the story from others, from my cousin Laura, from kids in school. He died in the bath. Suicide. Some said he used one of those old-timey razor blades, like the blunt replicas the emo girls wore on necklaces. Others said it was just a regular kitchen knife. The bath was empty of water, filled instead with the blood that pumped from his wrists.

Maybe that's when the thing first appeared, called by my father's blood. Maybe father had seen it too and wanted to feed it. He didn't leave a note, so I guess I'll never know.



My first kiss was with one of the boys from the support group. I'd not gone since I was a child, but we messaged each other now and again. Aaron was different, like me. Touched by death, although neither of us even remembered the death that was supposed to have affected us so profoundly. Our parents' deaths followed us like a bad fart; the people around us were the ones most affected by it. We were different because others made us be, wanted us to be.

I was fifteen, Aaron seventeen. He asked if I wanted to meet up. I thought about it. I'd not seen him in person since I was eight; too thin, a silly haircut, his mother hovering around protectively. His messenger profile picture was an anime character. I said yes anyway.

Aaron met me at the shopping centre. He was still skinny, still had bad hair, and now he had acne and wonky teeth to top it off. I didn't think I was much to look at either, but he gazed at me like no other boy had, like he wanted to swallow me whole. We wandered around aimlessly, ending up in a car park stairwell. It stank of piss, stank worse than your average public toilet. That's where I had my first snog. Aaron smelled of rank sweat in the way only teenage boys with an aversion to deodorant seem to.

He shoved his hand down my jeans, digging around like a kid in a sandpit. It didn't feel good, but I didn't say anything. I felt like I was moving up the social ladder, even if it was just with Aaron Davison. We broke apart every time we heard footsteps echoing on the stairs, awkward, guilty grins on our faces, waiting until they were out of sight before latching onto each other again.



We sent each other constant horny messages, describing all the things we never got round to doing. Blinded by my own urgent needs, I confided one of my secrets to him. I thought he might be open to it because he was like me. Different.

Apparently not that different. He told someone, who told another someone, who knew a girl from my class, and soon I was getting heckled every day as I made the walk of shame from school to the bus stop. Guys I didn't even know recognised me on the street, told me to gag on their dicks, pressed their bags to their faces or pretended to strangle themselves, gasping for air.

Later in the shower, I'd tell the thing down the drain all the witty comebacks and nasty insults I could never think of at the time. Confessed how their taunts aroused me as much as they hurt. It lapped up my shame, my tears, ate them up and spewed them back out.



My former friends didn't want to be seen with me, as if bullying was a disease that could spread to them. It *had* infected them, just not in the way they feared.

Only one person made school bearable in those days of endless exams and loneliness. Miss Williams. She pulled me aside and asked if I wanted to talk. Apparently even teachers weren't immune to gossip. We sat in the counselling room with tea and biscuits, and she told me about her bonsais, her cats, and her kayaking. I told her about the rock music I liked, the film scripts I wrote in my head, the sixteenth birthday my mum had almost forgotten.

When Miss Williams asked if I wanted to meet up over the summer, I didn't report her. Instead, I told the thing down the drain, and it hissed its approval. I texted her back.



The first time I went to her house, wearing a hoodie to hide my face despite the warm weather, Miss Williams gave me fruity tea and chocolates. Unlike in the counselling room, she sat beside me. Her thigh brushed mine and I ached to run my hands over the bare skin beneath her skirt, but I was too shy. I wasn't even sure we wanted the same thing.

She took my half-empty cup from my hands, her fingers trembling as she placed it on the table. She inhaled a deep breath like she was just as nervous as I was. Ten years didn't seem such an insurmountable gap between us after all.

Miss Williams — Jenny — taught me about safe words and signals I could do with my hands when I couldn't speak. We didn't have sex. Not the traditional kind, though I wanted to. But we did other things, things most people would probably deem worse.

It became a weekly routine. I'd walk to the park, she'd pick me up in her car, and we'd go back to her place. When I came home, I'd shower straight away. I'd borrowed a small knife from Jenny's collection and would make shallow cuts on my body, next to the bruises, offering the thing my blood and my stories. The thing was greedy for both, but it was never enough. It desired more. It wanted to grow fat on my shame.

It turned out having someone else hold the pillow, or wrap their hands around your throat, is even better than when you do it yourself. You don't control their actions. You don't know what they're going to do next. The delightful fear that they might not stop.

Sometimes I didn't give the sign, but Jenny always sensed when we were about to go too far. She'd give me this look of fear, and maybe a bit of awe, like she knew I'd gone further off the edge than she'd ever be willing to go.



Summer fizzled out with a shoulder squeeze and a promise to call soon. Jenny had gone to teach at a new school on the other side of London. I tried texting her a few times — ok, more than just a few — but didn't hear back. Like most people who get ghosted, I didn't understand why at the time. The thing in the drain swallowed my frustration, fed my hunger with its own.



I was twenty-two before I found someone to make me forget Jenny. The thing in the drain hissed in discontent throughout those long years. It wanted more than I was willing to give of myself.

Danny was perfect. She picked me out from the crowd in the smoking area at the local nightclub. I sometimes wondered if my past clung to me, screamed 'victim' no matter how skilled I became with foundation. Or perhaps she read me by how I was lingering on the edge, smiling inanely at the jokes of a group of guys I barely knew, hoping one would take me home, no cigarette in my hand because I didn't smoke, hated it, actually.

She complimented my hair. Offered me a puff of her roll-up. I accepted, holding it like the noob I was, wanting to impress her. Then I grabbed her drink and knocked it back,

flashing a cheeky smile. Suggested she buy me another. Obnoxious confidence hid my desperation like the last few strands of hair stretched across a bald man's scalp.

I didn't need to teach her anything. She was rough and cruel, and I loved it, loved her from the moment she dug her painted nails into me, drew blood with her teeth and let me do the same. For the first time in a while, my gut didn't twist at the thought of Jenny's name.

Danny tasted like ashes and peppermint gum. She wore purple lipstick and dyed her hair wine-red. We studied each other's scars, like maps to our souls. I wondered how much she could tell just by reading me. We were rarely apart except for work. Within weeks I'd moved in with her, ignoring my mother's warnings again.

Danny had strange tastes, but I liked that about her. I liked when she brought her old Brownie's sash out, held it across my chest and compared badges of achievement.

"This was my promise badge," she'd tell me, pointing to a metal pin. Each time she'd bite down hard on me, giving me my own promise token.

"This was for stargazing," she'd explain, staring into my eyes until we cracked up laughing.

Dance, her tongue skating across my body. Finding Your Way, her fingers exploring my holes. Writer, her knife scratching my skin.

Once Danny pointed to her cooking badge, a mischievous curve to her lips, then held her lighter to my thighs. It wasn't the kind of pain I liked, but I was too smitten to protest, and it seemed hard to explain. Yes, I'm fine with you suffocating me, beating me, whipping me... but burning me? That's too far. It sounded silly when I thought of it like that.

Perhaps I should've known better. I think, really, I did know better. But I didn't want to go back to life before Danny. Who else would let me bleed them, offer them up to the thing down the drain, take the edge off its hunger? Danny didn't look at me with disgust when I asked. She cuddled me in the bath as our blood mixed with the lavender bubbles I'd always wanted.



The honeymoon period died slowly, slow enough that I could pretend not to notice. Sullen silences. Bickering. Snide remarks about my reliance on makeup; accusations of laziness when I stopped wearing it. Once, she blew up at me for not wanting to let her snoop around my phone. She won that fight but found nothing to justify her paranoia.

Another time I came home to find her on the floor surrounded by notebooks of all the scripts I'd ever written. The ones I'd stashed in a box under the bed and asked her never to touch. Red pen marked some pages; others were crumpled up in balls. Tears ran down her cheeks as she laughed. None of them were comedies. I swallowed her giggled apologies like poisoned honey.

When she started hurting me, not for our mutual pleasure, but out of rage, spite, or punishment, it was hard to convince myself that it was wrong. When her belt bit into the back of my thighs as I washed the dishes, I cried out in shock. I spun to see her smirking, belt hanging loose at her side. I told her it wasn't okay, and she frowned. How was it fine in the bedroom, in the bathroom, but not here? She didn't hear me complaining *then*. I think that's when I began to love her a little less.

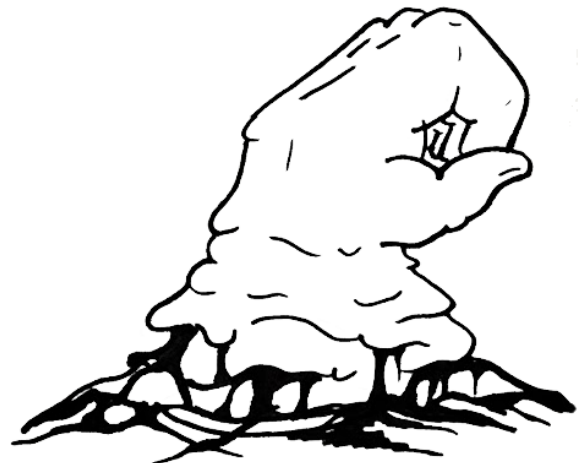


The hissing from the pipe had grown louder over the past few days, insistent. My feeble blood offerings were no longer enough. It harassed me at all times, even at work, a constant angry buzzing in my ears. I'd look around the office, wondering why I was the only one who could hear it. I was tired, from lack of sleep, from giving so much of myself to Danny and getting shit in return.

We were in the bath, unwinding after another big fight over nothing. Candles flickered. I popped a piece of chocolate in Danny's mouth and she swiped at the bubbles on my breasts. Smiling, I asked Danny to give me her hands. No hesitation. I drew the blade deep across her wrists—one of those old-timey razors—and held her to my chest as she bled out, screaming. With my foot, I pulled the plug out and sighed, relieved, as the hissing stopped. Both of us, satisfied at last.



I developed a new theory. My dad didn't commit suicide; Mum sacrificed him to the thing down the drain. To finally scratch that itch. Little clues gave me the idea. The strange fear she had of the police, refusing to call them even when she got beaten up and her bag stolen. Her aversion to baths. Her reluctance to talk about the thing in the drain. I didn't confront her; she'd never have admitted to it. But I liked my version of the truth anyway. I only wished I could ask her: was she like me, or did she stop at just one?



Sex Object

Cobalt Jade

I am a GenX writer who lives in Seattle, Washington. I have written science fiction and fantasy for many years, with an extra love for erotica and horror. My short stories have appeared in MASHED: The Culinary Delights of Twisted Erotic Horror, Beautiful Truths, Painful Lies Vol. II, the Transformed anthology from Pen and Kink Press, and Alternities: Endgame from BCubed Press.

Interview with the Statue, Part 1

Do you think it's strange to talk to a statue?

It's just as strange for me, a statue, to talk to you. Especially as I am not really talking at all. It's been years since I last communicated with another soul, but in truth, I have not missed it. I have never been a particularly talkative person.

This alarms you? There are more than a few of us in the world. You extroverts, the talkers, you do not see us. But we know we are here.

Anyway, since you don't have much time, let's proceed with the interview. I, of course, have all the time in the world. It is the one commodity of a statue.

How, and why, did I achieve this transformation?

I volunteered for it.

Some people parachute out of airplanes or bungee jump. Others act out sexually with fantasies of ropes and leather. I was one of the more extreme of these. Statuephiles, some call us. Those with a fetish of being turned to stone.

I had fantasized about it for years, so when the opportunity came, I took it. The attraction was called Medusa's Minions. "A full-body virtual reality experience," the ads said. It was as close to reality as I was likely to get.

I registered and paid the fee. A bus picked me up along with many others and took us to an old factory at the edge of town.

After signing the waivers, I was directed to a long, low tunnel with a black conveyer belt running through it. Plastic bins containing discarded clothing lined the walls. The girl standing near me was stripping herself and tossing her bra and panties into one, and I deduced I was to also. An attendant gave us a plastic bracelet to wear coded to the bin where we put our identification and belongings. Later I realized it was how they tracked us. Not that it mattered to me, but for the company, it did.

Yes, there was a business attached to this fantastic enterprise. I'll get around to that.

There were stars printed on the rubber surface of the conveyer belt, each spaced about five feet apart. The attendant indicated we were to position ourselves on them so we would be evenly distributed for... whatever. Breathing deeply, I took my position on the next star that drifted past, kneeling like a naked sacrifice to some demon god.

I glided along at a pace faster than walking, yet slower than a run. Not knowing what awaited intrigued rather than troubled me. A sensual languor came upon me. Yet I also knew I was free to leave. A few minutes into my journey I saw a naked redhead walking down the tunnel towards me, her fiery bush winking with her strides. I passed her swiftly and she continued to walk, to retrieve her bin of clothes and re-enter the upper world. I'm sure no one stopped her. She may be out there to this day, cursing her decision, or blessing her luck. Who is to say?

The lights overhead ballooned to brightness, passed, then dimmed as we traveled along the tunnel. After some minutes a second tunnel appeared, with a similar conveyer, and a similar cargo of naked women. It merged with mine, doubling its capacity. The smell of female bodies grew stronger and my hands wandered over my own flesh.

Yes, I began to masturbate. But this seemed entirely natural. Think of Ingres' paintings of Turkish harems and you will have an idea of what it was like, the collective sensuality with the private pleasures sprinkled here and there.

No, I was not thinking of my normal life at all. Was there some drug in the tunnel, distributed in the air? Perhaps.

A bright light appeared ahead through the slits of a flap. We were moving out of the tunnel, into open air and noise.

We were still underground but in a vast underground space. A network of catwalks and girders ran above us and around us as if we were in an industrial plant used for making cars or processing steel. Ahead were three huge machines, each with a conveyer snaking into its open mouth. We were being treated as manufactured goods, and that aroused me even more. I was pulling my nipples by now, pinching them hard. This was exactly what I had paid for. All of us were doing that.

The conveyer divided and a paddle swept me towards the right. Even then I might have escaped. The conveyer belt was low to the ground and it traveled slowly. But to leave meant destroying the fantasy I had spent years of my life building, like waking from a lovely dream before its time. I stayed where I was.

Up close the machine was terrifying. It clanged and clashed and let off bursts of vapor with loud hissing noises like an old cartoon. I might have laughed at it in my other life. But I was beyond all that now, lost in my pleasure. I'm sorry to say I entered the maw crotch-first, legs spread wide like a whore.

In retrospect, how the technicians staffing these things must have laughed at us! Or not; it might have been routine for them. I don't know which would be more humiliating.

It was hot inside, like an oven. Lights flashed, disorienting me, and gauges and dials flickered and flew. Not that I paid much attention. I was very close to coming by now, in spite of the fear and heat.

Suddenly a pointed nozzle swooped on me from above. It looked like a dragon's head, with five huge fangs that looked poised to eat me. Before I could recoil a wavering light shot from it and hit me right in my midsection, freezing me solid in one heart-stopping moment.

This is it, I thought.

My long-building orgasm came to full climax. My cry was lost in all the other industrial noise as roll after roll, wave after wave, of silver energy radiated through my flesh. As I

quivered there, caught in stasis, a neon-blue curtain passed over my body. It started at my outthrust foot and worked its way up my leg. Before it, my skin was healthy and flushed; but behind it, I had paled to white and developed veins of gray... I was turning to stone!

The transformation took as long as my final cry, its demarcation passing swiftly up my legs, belly, ribs. I marveled at the realism of it even as I sought to escape. A series of spasms overtook me as my breathing halted and my mouth froze open. White filmed over my eyes as the blue curtain swept over my face and up my scalp, and in the blink of an eye, the last fontanelle was gone.

A complete and utter silence came.

I had been petrified!

The last of my spasms echoed away hollowly. That was good, that was really good, I thought. Then, I wonder how they did that?

A few seconds later: And what is to happen now?

A vibration beneath my buttocks told me the conveyer was once again carrying me along, in my awkward and unbalanced pose, to a narrow tunnel where jets of water played over my surface, washing me. I could see clearly again, the white film being only stone dust and not an actual covering over my eyes.

Yes, it's interesting I can still see, isn't it? I can still hear too, and have remained conscious and capable of thought. What miracle of technology is able to preserve a human mind requiring blood vessels and neurons in solid stone? One day I would like to know the answer to that question.

As I travelled along, a set of air blowers dried me. Then I was trundling through a flap down a ramp, at the end of which I landed gently.

I was beyond the machines now and in a sort of staging area. Statues from the two other machines were being brought here too, some plastic, others bronze. All were caught in self-pleasure, poses ranging from coy to explicit. I sat with them for a while — I could do nothing else — wondering when we would be changed back. Then it dawned on me that we wouldn't. This was it, folks.

Oh my god, what have I done to myself, I thought.

I tried to remember what was in that waiver form. Surely not this?

Perhaps it was this.

Panic set in and I tried to scream, move... to no effect of course. I'm sure the other statues were trying also. Had someone been watching us, they would have seen nothing. That is one of the drawbacks of being a statue.

My mental tirade grew tiring, and I stopped. Some workers in white jumpsuits came in. They carried the plastic girls over to a tent where they began to paint them, using industrial sprayers, in bright neon hues. They were all male and I was wanton enough to check for erections, but there were none. We were nothing to them, just part of their job. They laughed as they worked, talking about sports or weekend activities, but not about us. It was at once demoralizing and liberating.

You're surprised, aren't you? In truth, after the initial shock of it, I did feel free. The very sum of me, my sexual essence, had been made clear, and in this state, there was no past or

future, just an eternal present. No responsibilities, no failures or untested dreams. I simply was.

That said, it took a while to get used to. A forklift came round to fetch me—for, being marble, I was quite heavy—and took me to be further processed. There, in the mirrors, I saw what I had become. I sat balanced on my buttocks with my legs raised and open, one hand pinching a nipple, the other above my sex. My mouth was stretched in a cry, my eyes blank as if caught in something greater than myself. Most degrading of all, my female organs were fully on display.

Humiliation washed over me. Yet it was over within an instant. Humiliation requires identity, personhood. I had divorced myself from that.

The men went to work on me. They use small files, drills, and chisels to refine my appearance, removing all the small yet unique imperfections of my human body. This might have depressed me if I had thoughts of rescue, but, as I've said, I had come to terms with the permanence of what had happened. It was what I had yearned for, after all. Still, it was sad in a way. In the background, I saw them preparing a plinth, my new home, and in a bucket the cement that would adhere me to it.

It was not painful to be sanded and chiseled, by the way. I did feel the rasp of the tools, but only as vibration. Human fingers touching me carried a vibration also, perhaps from the bioelectric fields that all living matter has. Not quite a touch, but pleasant, nonetheless. A hammer hitting me hard, I don't want to think about.

Little by little my identity was erased. The bump on the bridge of my nose, my fingernails, my pubic hair. I became more refined, yet also more anonymous. For the final touch, they injected masonry caulking inside my mouth and sex, sealing them closed. I suppose it was so no one would ever peer inside those orifices and suspect I was ever anything but a statue. I confess I came again when the concrete was set inside me. Indeed, I was so debilitated I was not fully aware when they cemented me to my plinth.

(Laughs) Oh yes, I can orgasm as a statue. The feeling has nowhere to go — no outlet in cry or spasm — so it just rings round and round the body like a struck bell until it peters out. A single orgasm can last for hours. That's one of the high points of my transformation.

When I was aware again, I had been put into a storage area. Beside me, all around me, were dozens of other statues, attractive females as I was. The lights switched off. We were left alone in the darkness.



Interview with the Statue, Part 2

You have found me again! I am glad.

As you see I am no longer in the casino but by this pool, under a palm tree. A Hollywood producer bought me and the shenanigans at his parties amuse me greatly. I like it here by the hot tub, and the sunsets are fabulous.

Unfortunately, the movers were clumsy, and my left arm was damaged. It's been mended by an art restorer so you can barely see the gouge. But I know it's there, and it worries me. Water can seep in beyond the patch, create cracks. Unlike a human, statues cannot heal themselves.

Beyond that, it doesn't bother me. It's just part and parcel of being a statue, I guess.

Well, humans break their arms too, don't they?

I don't see there is much of a difference.

No, I don't regret my decision. People make life-changing decisions all the time. An investment banker becomes a Buddhist monk. A shy housewife, a killer. How was my choice to become a statue any different? Because I have no choice now, no agency? Most humans have none either. They just let life's events carry them along.

Anyway, this is a dead-end discussion and I don't want to pursue it.

Where did we leave off? Oh yes, being sold.

Hours later—or days, without biological processes it was hard to keep track of time—I was retrieved from the storeroom and taken to a studio where I was photographed. The photographer chatted with my handlers as he worked, making reference to the “company” and the bonuses they would all get. They did not know I could hear them or was capable of hearing at all. I glimpsed a brochure that said something-something Stoneworks with a logo matching the one on the paperwork fastened to my big toe, and I understood then that I was part of the inventory of this company and destined to be sold.

It seems fantastic, doesn't it, that a company with such a large, transportable plant and advanced technology, with shareholders and employees who gossiped, could operate entirely underground, as it were, and dispose of so many missing women. But it happened.

If I'd been human, I would have felt outraged at their means of profit, but that was behind me now. I felt only an irrational disappointment that I was to be sold online and not from an art gallery window.

I was wheeled back to the storeroom. Once again, I waited in the darkness, light and activity returning only as another statue was added to, or taken from, our ranks.

Finally, it was my turn. I was brought out of storage and oh so carefully packaged and put inside a large crate where I knew darkness for a long time. By the vibration and changes in air pressure — one of the new senses I was developing as a statue — I knew I was traveling, and anticipation coiled inside me. Finally, the lid of my prison was yanked off and I saw my new home.

A casino! The one where you first met me.

It was a private one in some Mediterranean country, and I was placed in one of the gambling rooms above the baccarat tables. I knew day and night from the skylight above me, but no other signs of time. Like all casinos, the outside world was shut out so the gamblers could ply their vice without distraction. The clientele were exclusive, rich men and their women. Activity went on around the clock, and at first, I was pleased and excited to be part of this environment.

Later I experienced the drawbacks. My eroticism, let's say, was not as fully appreciated as it could have been, for my high perch was out of the reach of human touch. I was also not dusted as frequently as I might be, for the staff had to haul a ladder over to get to me, whereas they could water the plants that flanked me by a long siphon hose.

But, overall, I had few complaints. I no longer had the urgencies of the flesh and found it easy to be patient.

Was it tedious, you ask?

Oh, no, on the contrary. Understand I have rarely been bored as a statue. Over the years my mind has developed the means to conserve and entertain itself, and with this lovely talent, I was content to be just another element of the scenery, melting into the background with the chandeliers and draperies. My day's distractions were the shuffle of cards, the brays of triumph or dismay. Every once in a while, a patron would see me at my perch and smile, and that would be enough for me.

After a while, the casino underwent a remodel and the owners moved me to men's lounge. I enjoyed it there, the private strokes I got, the patrician appreciation of my delights. I faced a window so I could mark the passage of the seasons, though in a Mediterranean country it was hard to tell.

But all good things come to an end. The casino ran into trouble and went out of business, and so I was set alongside the other fine and luxurious furnishings to be auctioned off. The notoriety of the failure had galvanized the public, so thousands came to gawk and stare. It was the first time I had been on display to the general public. Men and women both pointed at my open legs and busy fingers, laughing at the expression on my face. For the first time as a statue, I knew shame. Yet I also wanted more of it, for it proved my power to arouse and provoke. I had never felt that way in my human life. Shame can taste quite as delicious as pride when it is extreme and inevitable.

How surprised the bidders would have been if they knew what I felt as they made their tactile inspections. The orgasms lasted all that night and into the next day.

When I could think again, I had been sold.

(Pause)

No, I don't mind you backtracking. Ask me anything you like.

Yes, I'm sure my family was worried about me when I disappeared. But I don't really remember them. Don't ask me my name. I've forgotten that too.

Shocked? It doesn't bother me. Why should a statue have a name?



Interview with the Statue, Part 3

You again! It's been a long time, hasn't it? What, only five years? I must pay better attention.

My producer committed suicide. It was sad. I would have cried if I could. His estate was settled quickly, which is how I wound up in this gallery. It is perhaps not the best art gallery in the city, but it suffices. After all, I am third hand by now, with a patched forearm and elbow. I feel lichen growing behind it, and that worries me. It came from the steam of the hot tub.

Anyway, here is something I have wanted to ask you. How is that we communicate as we do?

Ah, a device of some kind. Did you make it yourself?

You don't want to tell me. That is all right. Even if, sealed in stone, I cannot tell anyone else. Unless there are more than one of those things...?

All right, all right. I'll let you keep your secrets.

As I said, my producer killed himself. I heard the gunshot, but I could not turn my head. Even so, I sensed a life had been extinguished. An element that had always been there suddenly wasn't anymore, and I knew grief for the first time.

His family came to sell the estate, scowling when they saw. I was quickly hooded with a blanket.

I did not see anything again until the estate settler came, or whoever it was that cleaned up these messes. With her was an appraiser to evaluate my late owner's precious objects: gold jewelry, Persian carpets, and the like...and me. I shivered in delight as they ran their hands along my marble flesh, anticipation quivering: What would they do with me? What would happen to me next?

"This work is too fine," the appraiser said. "Let's look at the bottom."

Not my bottom, but the plinth's. It took some workmen to tip me over. I suppose they were looking for a trademark, like those on a piece of Spode or Wedgwood china. The appraiser read off a series of numbers and said, "This is a Stoneworks girl."

"So?"

"Are you crazy? No one will want this. These things are hot now."

The settler frowned. She was a chic woman in her fifties, with upswept hair and small rectangular glasses. She took them off to peer at my seal of quality. "I don't understand."

"That company's in legal trouble. There's radioactive dust in these things and they issued a recall. It's been in the news, haven't you heard?"

I was puzzled. I did not know about this, but then I did not follow the news, having never been positioned near a TV or radio.

"Cancers have been linked to them. There's talk of the FDA getting involved."

I see, from the look on your face, that you know this was a lie. Am I right in saying the true nature of we statues is becoming known, and that our maker is trying to conceal that truth...?

I thought so.

At the time, though, the news disturbed me, for I did not want to go back to the production plant I came from. What would happen to me there? I wanted a new home, to be on display as I was accustomed to.

The lady sighed. I sensed her mind working on a solution. "Take it off the plinth. You can do that, can't you?"

"Eh..."

"I'll pay you extra. I don't want trouble. Just take it off find a discrete place to sell it. I want cash for it, no commissions."

The appraiser whined again deep in his throat.

"For god's sake, you don't have to be afraid. Wear some gloves."

So, I was removed from the plinth that had been my home base for so long. In truth, I prefer being a freestanding sculpture. I still have a patch of old adhesive sticking to my butt-cheek though.

The appraiser knew the local dealers and found one that gave the estate settler cash for me, so here I am, with the art deco dressers and vintage Fiestaware. I am truly nameless now since I no longer have my serial number. You can just call me Statue, I guess. Or "it" as they did.

I like it here, though it is not a permanent home. The gallery owner is affable and has many friends, and my mind is well occupied with their sharp, witty discussion. It's a busy little place and I am not neglected. I can watch the street and often customers will leave newspapers and magazines lying around so I can keep up on events in the world. That is how I know the investigation my disposers alluded to has become a Federal one because traces of human DNA have been found in the statues.

What scandal! Will the Stoneworks company find itself responsible for the deaths of untold thousands of sexually adventurous, masturbating women? Or not, since we aren't dead at all, merely altered?

And what of the fact most of us volunteered for it?

Interesting questions, all of them!

My story has taken some exciting turns. I am but a mere observer of it, nameless and without agency, but cheerfully I await my next adventure.



Interview with the Statue, Part 4

Hi there! Statue here. Or Torso, I should call myself now. I was altered over the years. I don't know where my lower body is. Some Eurotrash did it.

No, there was no pain. I felt a sense of incompleteness for a while, but I am used to that now.

Let me fill you in on my life since the last time we met. Let's see, I was at that little gallery, wasn't I? The one in Los Angeles.

A friend of the owner bought me, the Eurotrash who I spoke of, though I did not think of him that way at the time. He was opening up a private restaurant and thought I would make

interesting decor. There was haggling between the two, and I was let go for less than my price. I will not say what it was because I still take pride in myself, even in my truncated state, but it was a fraction of what I had been appraised at.

My new owner's club specialized in Apuleius-like feasts complete with sexual entertainment. Membership was exclusive, the setting lush. Rent boys and girls served up music and videos, sex toys, their own open mouths and willing organs. I was to serve as a table at these events, a position of honor.

Ah, I cannot tell you how enjoyable it was! Sometimes fruit was draped on me for consumption, a bunch of grapes in my open mouth, strawberries between my legs. Or sushi, or small chocolate candies... it was erotic to feel these things on me and the touch of fingers as they were plucked, with tweaks of my nipples or labia. When I was not being dined from, I observed the carnal activity on the couches and rugs: women and men, men and men, beautiful girls like bonbons offering solo and paired exhibitions of lust. I might be utilized in some of these, a platform for a writhing body held down by strong straps.

I became a mere toy of and for pleasure. Little by little I felt myself being erased from the world, drifting in an erotic haze with no reason or intellect. I enjoyed every minute of it.

Then my owner got the bright idea to put me on top of a fountain.

It stood at the center of the dining hall, a white marble basin with spouting dolphins. He thought I would look interesting in the center of it, with water or champagne cascading over me. If I could, I would have convinced him otherwise. But that is the drawback of being a statue; one can't communicate at all!

So I was put on top of this thing and a fairly ridiculous picture I made. I couldn't see as much as I had because I was now staring directly at the ceiling, and when the water was turned on, I couldn't hear much either.

I no longer had the sensual attention I received as a table and had been rendered almost blind and deaf to boot. Desperately I hoped my owner would change his mind. But it seemed I was a hit. Liquid chocolate oozed over me at times, or champagne, or the water was colored, and lights played upon it. I made a spectacular display, but it was hell for me, and very bad for my right arm with its patching. One day it gave way entirely, the entire thing clunking off and falling in the basin.

My owner grabbed a ladder and stared at me in betrayal. Then he saw the damage the water and other substances had caused to me. I was no longer so smooth-surfaced; I had bits of mold growing here and there. "Oh, for Christ's sake..." he muttered.

I confess I wasn't as alarmed as he. I had been repaired before, surely, I would be again?

I had liked this guy. I really did. But what he did to me next was a blasphemy.

He took me to a stone shop and had me cut in half.

My lower body would continue to serve as an erotic attraction—after all, it held my most important assets—while my torso, since it was missing an arm, would be discarded, or sold. I pleaded as much as a statue could, trying to project my thoughts, but of course, it was no use. That was the only time I have ever wished I was human again, though of course a real human woman wouldn't be cut in half.

There was no pain. I felt the wheel slicing through me, spitting chunks of me behind it. At the end, I felt an alarming lack of mass. I literally felt like half the thing I had been. The

stonecutter admired my upper body and accepted it as payment for his work. He had no interest in the arm that had fallen off. Maybe the Eurotrash still has it.

I was put on display in the stonecutter's workshop along with other pieces of bric-a-brac he had saved.

It was the lowest moment of my life, and the only time I questioned what I had let happen to me. If I had stayed human, I would have lived a nice long life by now. True, I would not have been taken to Monte Carlo, or wherever it was, or Hollywood, or had the erotic adventures I had. But I would have been free to choose my fate. I had not chosen to be part of a workshop's clutter where I collected dust.

Dark years passed. There was no one but me to blame for it.

But, as people travel over life's bumps and recover from them, so do objects. One day I was seen and admired by a visitor to the workshop, money changed hands, and life once again took a turn for the better.

My new owner was a woman. She took me to a much-needed art restorer who shaved the stump of my broken arm and torso, giving them a classical look like a Greek statue, and used chemicals to flush out the remains of sushi and chocolate from my skin. He did a good job and I felt like I had a new lease on life. Then I was shipped to my new owner's house.

She lived in some gray, rainy city. Seattle or Portland. She kept me in her bedroom. I liked her, but in truth, it was a somewhat boring position. She did not keep a television or other distractions in her bedroom and though I faced a window there was not much to see outside, save trees and some water. My only stimulation was her lovers, and though I had seen much in the erotic eatery, I saw even more.

In time, my owner started a business, this little gourmet chocolate shop, and as you see I am one of its decorations, a scrap of velvet draped across my nipple tweaking hand, so I don't offend anyone.

It's not so bad here. I can't complain.

I wish more people would touch me, though.



Interview with the Statue, Part 5

Is it you? It's so hard for me to remember.

You are much older.

So am I.

I thought, as a statue, I would have a lifespan much longer than a human's. But marble ages like anything else. I have myself as evidence. As you see, I have lost even more of my body. You can call me Head now. Or Noggin. I still have my sense of humor.

Strange to say, I've forgotten how I lost it. There were several owners after the... candy store? flower shop? ...And one of them must have been careless. I know, like aged humans,

there is not much appeal left in me. I remain finely made, but my expression, now that I'm missing the parts that made me erotic, is strange. Mouth wide, eyes slit, like something from an old amusement pier, the carved mask of gaiety, or terror, looking down from a corner.

But I have no regrets. If I'd been locked in a museum case, I would still be intact, but I wouldn't have had much of a life. Even as a statue, I have lived. And I live now, even as I sit in this dull little curio shop, a mockery of what I once was.

The owner is elderly. Soon he will die, and I will be taken to the landfill.

That I do not want. It is an ugly end, undignified. But there is not much I can do to prevent it. In that, I am still human. None of us can prevent death and the final humiliation of our remains, whether it is worms or the crush of a garbage compactor.

Wait. You say... there is a way to restore me?

You have... my pieces?

Ah, I see. You don't need the pieces. Just a scrap of my DNA for molecular regeneration.

How interesting.

(Long pause)

I think I'll decline, though.

Why the shock? I'm not interested in being human. I never was.

Yes, I know what happened to the Stoneworks company. My owner keeps a TV here and I know of the scandal. But I'm not much interested. I'd rather be a statue, or the statue I was, though that's an impossibility now, of course.

Is that why you kept track of me all these years? To offer a rescue when the time was right? I can see it in your eyes. I think it was a fetish of yours to play Pygmalion, kiss the maiden and bring her to life, as it was mine to be a statue. But one is not compatible with the other.

I do ask you a favor though.

Buy me.

Don't make those disgusted faces at me.

I am not a human slave, and this is not a human market. I am a statue and I give you leave to dispose of me. We are near the water. Rent a boat and take me to the deepest part of it. Throw me in. I should sink within seconds.

Wait! Where are you going?

I didn't mean to shock you. I only wanted a funeral with some respect.

Come back! I'm sorry.

Whew, you scared me. So I am yours now? Wonderful! Let's go.

(Time passes)

Take me out of the sack, please. I want to see.

Ah, the water. It is not as isolated as I thought. What are all those buildings and boats doing there? I don't want anyone dredging me up.

I know there is wilderness nearby. Take me there.

Is there a shovel in your trunk? Good. This is what I want you to do.

Drive to the mountains. When you get there, choose a quiet trail and hike as far as you can in the daylight. At the end of it, dig a deep hole.

When you have finished place me there. Fill in the dirt and pack it tight. Disguise the surface well.

Then walk away and don't look back, so I can be alone in the quiet and the dark.

Ethen Goody and the Higher Power

Easton Birchfield

Easton Birchfield lives in Ohio with her husband, a spoiled Pomeranian, and a haunted grandfather clock. She enjoys tea, cats, and postmortem photography. Send really nice comments or hate mail to her at c.easton.birchfield@gmail.com.

Half a block down to Ethen Goody's left, the court-ordered Narcotics Anonymous meeting at Saint Mark's would start in five minutes. Half a block down to his right, the abandoned, twenty-story Palmer building loomed, silhouetted against the cloudy November sky. The sounds of the city filled up his brain — cars and people and life everywhere — but his heart remained empty.

He used to be an honor-roll student, a college-bound baseball player, and a beloved little brother. Now he was just a heroin-addicted gutter punk with a dead girlfriend and serious jail time hovering above his head.

His sponsor would've told him to "Work the program," and "Focus on today," and "Use the steps." But when Ethen glanced left and saw his twitching, hollow-faced brethren gathered outside the church, he got his "Moment of Clarity," and knew which direction to turn.

This was him Surrendering to a Higher Power. The higher power waiting for him on the unsecured roof of the Palmer building. The higher power waiting for him at the end of his fall from that roof. The higher power waiting for him in the darkness after death.

The other pedestrians ignored him as he walked towards the Palmer. His spectacular downward spiral had made him into the type most people ignored. Just another pesky street kid with a studded jean jacket, a cardboard sign, and shitty, hand-poked tattoos, spare-changing in hopes of avoiding dope sickness. But he didn't need their charity anymore, so he welcomed their dismissals — it meant they would ignore him while he sneaked into the Palmer.

He stopped at the chain-link fence outside the building. Dingy white tarps were anchored to the metal, concealing what remained of the Palmer's exterior — well, what remained of the first floor anyway. Ethen walked along the fence, running his hand across the tarps, feeling for a gap. He'd gone the whole length of the building's front and turned the corner into the alley when he spotted a possible entrance.

Soggy, crumbly NO TRESPASSING signs hung haphazardly across the chained gate next to a demolition notice. He read the notice and felt a strained smile stretch his face — the Palmer building would meet its higher power in less than a month.

"Me first, buddy. Me first." Ethen clapped a hand over his mouth, worried about the noise. Then he worried about cameras and security alarms and guard patrols. But what did it matter? His business here would be over with before anyone had a chance to respond, if they even bothered.

A meaty padlock secured the chain on the gate, but there was enough slack in the chain for him to squeeze through the opening. He picked his way across a stretch of weed-clogged concrete and debris leading to the entrance. Plywood slabs covered the front doors, but when he wrenched on one, it crumble-split into three pieces, revealing the shadowy alcove beyond. A draft of moldy air wafted over him. The place stank of dust and rust and abandonment. Ethen flicked on his cheap phone's flashlight and stepped inside.

When he was a kid, he'd been in the Palmer once — some bullshit errand with his bullshit father — and the memory of the layout flooded back into his brain. A long row of reception on one side of the lobby, elevators across from there, and offices in the back. All the furniture was gone now. The tiny light from his phone was no match for the utter blackness. The stillness and silence of the space pressed on him like a mildewed blanket. He crossed the lobby, stepping over random trash and other shadows. The place would've been a squatters' paradise, but he didn't see any signs of life. After one circuit around, he found what he'd been looking for — the door to the emergency stairs.

Nothing and no one blocked his path up the stairwell. It would've been nice to use the elevator, though, instead of wheezing his way up the endless flights of stairs. The sound of his steps and his panting pinballed around him, bouncing off the cold, concrete walls and into his face.

On the tenth-floor landing, he had to stop. He sank down to a step and wilted there for a minute to catch his breath.

He used to lift weights, he used to eat protein, he used to flex in front of a mirror to check his muscle definition. Now he was just a skinny junkie in baggy pants with bad circulation and a map of scars up and down both arms.

Ethen eventually managed to stumble and gasp his way up, all the way up, to the door marked ROOF ACCESS. He pushed the door open onto the night. The star-killing glow of the city reached up to a layer of milky, gray clouds. Distance muffled the chaotic cacophony of the street, but he still heard it grumble up from below. A gust of wind carried the scent of exhaust fumes and fast food across the roof and into his lungs.

His chosen precipice overlooked the alley between the Palmer and its neighbor. Most people — the street-smart ones anyway — didn't go into alleys at night, especially alleys around a demolition site. His body might not even get discovered until the workers came in the morning. He kind of felt bad about the mental damage his corpse might cause someone, but then he remembered the kind of damage he'd already done to everyone around him and shrugged it off.

Another Moment of Clarity — one dead Ethen equaled less mess for everyone alive.

He walked to the ledge and glanced over the side. The alley was empty, so he dropped his phone to the roof and hoisted himself up to crouch on the ledge, readying his brain and heart for the task ahead, for the last leap.

"Wanna trade?"

Ethen swiveled so fast he almost pitched backward over the edge in what would have been the most anti-climactic end ever. "Who said that?"

"Me." The shadow of the nearest AC unit shifted and a person broke free of the blackness. "I know it sounds insane, but I wanna trade bodies with you." The clunky thunk

of white platform stilettos preceded the woman. A hooker? Mile-long, muscular legs ended in black, leather shorts and a mangy faux-fur coat. “I have to get out of this herpes-infested slime hole as soon as possible.” A snaggle-toothed smile spread across her face. She stuck out her gloved hand. “Strawberry Parfait, formerly known as Alex, formerly known as Jeremy. I got fucked into this body — literally, broken condom, skin touched skin — and I need an out.”

Ethen leaned away from her and her outstretched hand. “Take your crazy elsewhere, Strawberry, I’ve got enough of my own.”

“Dude, you’re the first person who’s been in this building and I really, really don’t want to go out there like this. I’m cold, I’m tired, and these platforms are fucking killing me. In two more hours, I’m stuck in her for good. And I can’t go after her in this body because she’ll see me and take off. One touch, skin to skin, and I could take it from you anyway, but I don’t want you to get shafted — literally — like I did. That’s not how it’s supposed to go. You’re supposed to trade up. Now I’ve got a twenty-dollar hooker driving around in my brand-new sports car with access to my wallet and I need to remedy the situation pronto.” She stepped closer. The city’s growing glow painted her face in shades of washed-out neon. “You get four trades. I got Alex first, then this mess. Now I need your body so I can go find my last body and get it back.”

Couldn’t a man kill himself in peace? And why did she look like a woman, but sound like a frat boy on bath salts? “Leave me alone.”

“I’m afraid you don’t understand,” She stepped even closer. “You only get twenty-four hours to finish your trades. I have two trades and two hours left or a goddamn hooker will get the body I wanted to keep forever. Alex had money, a penthouse, and looked like a movie star. He was perfect and I want him back. I was lucky. Got him on the first trade.”

Go along with crazy, or argue? It wasn’t how Ethen had envisioned his last moments. He should be in control, at peace, and unbothered. “Go. Away.”

“Can’t say I didn’t warn you, dude.” She yanked off one of her gloves, launched herself at him, and smacked him right in the mouth.

It all happened too fast for him to process the details. He got three things:

The sharp crack of her hand impacting with his face.

The pain.

The suction.

And then he was staring at...

Himself?

Wait. What?

He — she — what had just happened? Ethen looked down at himself and saw the peaks of bare female breasts jutting from the front of his chest, high above the toes of white, platform stilettos.

No. Not possible. Not reality.

Desperation, revulsion, and a panicky, terrified need to escape swamped his brain. But the emotions weren’t his — shock had paralyzed his emotions. No, the feelings seemed to be soaking into him from the body—

From Strawberry?

Or Alex?

Or Jeremy?

—invading his senses and taking over. He felt like a stranger in his own skin. His arms and legs felt disjointed, floaty like limb-shaped balloons.

Then he watched the man-woman-Strawberry Parfait — Strawberry wearing him, wearing his scrawny body — gallop away across the rooftop. The stairwell door closed behind his escaping body with a boom. But Ethen didn't, couldn't follow. Slow, slow, slowly he reached a hand up his front, feeling the swell of breasts, his fingers creeping up over the foreign planes, stopping when he felt the tickle of false eyelashes. His heart rattled around inside him — inside the new body — like an avocado pit in an empty gas can.

Dead. He was dead. He had already jumped, and these were the irrational last firings of his hell-bound synapses. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for death to reach for him, but nothing happened.

He traced his memory in search of something, anything to make sense of current events. A scary-intense, final-hurrah relapse hallucination? An overdose? Or the desperate dreams of his dying brain?

He tried to step down from the edge of the roof, but his ankles waltzed out from under him like the frantic first steps of a newborn foal and he fell forward onto the rooftop. When he landed, the rough surface ground the skin off his exposed knees. His new breasts swung out of the coat and the cold air hardened his nipples.

If this were a dying dream, why were the scrapes on his knees burning? If this were a dying dream, why were his nipples hard?

Ethen yanked off the shoes. A grimace twisted his lips at the sight of the hooker's yellow toenails. He stood and wobbled back over to the ledge. He expected to see his corpse in a bloody puddle on the pavement, but no body — no Ethen — lay in the alley below.

So.

So.

So, could it be? What if it was real, this thing, this trading-bodies thing? But it couldn't be real, right? It had to be a dream.

The thing was though, Ethen loved dreams, had since he'd been little. Dreams had allowed him an escape from his rotten home life and, as an adult, dreams had given him something a million times better than living a junkie's reality. If this was the last dream he'd ever get to have, he wanted to have it. He wanted to go along for one last ride and going along meant chasing and reclaiming his body, so he ran to, and then through the stairwell door.

Heavy footfalls echoed up to him from below. He wasn't too far behind. He raced down the flights, grateful for the body's agility and speed. Whoever Strawberry had been, at least she was in good enough shape for cardio.

Ethen-as-Strawberry blasted through the lobby and outside. The city night squealed around him. He slipped through the fence and spotted Strawberry-as-Ethen as he/she ran around the corner of the fence. He sprinted down the alley after her... him... the goddamn body snatcher.

Back onto the street. Ethen paused, searching the crowd for... himself. People were everywhere, clogging the sidewalks, bumping into him. Car horns blasted, conversations filled the air, and street vendors solicited their merchandise. There were so many people in his dream, so many noises, so much stuff mucking up his senses, he didn't know if he'd be able to find — there. He spotted the body snatcher, running ahead, past St. Mark's and around the next corner.

He ran after. The deep thump of bass from a passing car vibrated the ground under his bare feet. He ignored the car, ignored the shouts from people he knocked into, not caring about anything but chasing after his body.

But then, the car popped up onto the curb, blocking his path.

A guy climbed out of the passenger door. The butt of a handgun stuck out of his waistband. His out-of-place designer clothes rippled in the wind. "You better have my money."

Oh, shit. Not good. Ethen-as-Strawberry tried to dodge right, but the pimp grabbed his exposed wrist.

An electric charge jolted up Ethen's arm when their skins collided.

Then pain.

Then suction.

And then he was looking at Strawberry's body. Terror arched her penciled brows and her too-red lips made a giant O.

A surge of lust and brutality greeted Ethen in the new body. The pimp had meant to teach his girl a lesson. An aggressive and hard and violent lesson. The terrifying force of the sensation catapulted Ethen-as-Pimp into a wild run down the sidewalk and away into the night. He veered onto a side street where it was darker, quieter, and easier to hide.

Ethen was looking back over his shoulder, praying Pimp-as-Strawberry wasn't chasing him, when he collided with a woman. She fell to the ground and scrambled away, her long blonde hair twisted around her face. On instinct, he rushed forward and put his hand out to help her up.

"Oh, thank god," she said. "Thank god you're here."

Her sweat-slicked palm slided across his fingertips.

And then the pain.

And then the suction.

And then he was staring up at the pimp. He thought he saw relief flash in the pimp's eyes, but that didn't make any sense. Relief about what?

Fear coursed through the woman's body — his new home. She had been on the run from something, from someone. Her heart raced and terror sped through her blood, spurring him to his feet and into a frantic dash down the block. He ducked into the nearest alley to try to get a handle on things and to try to separate himself from her alien emotions. Ethen-as-Woman slid behind a dumpster and collapsed against its cold, stinky flank. This dream was starting to not be fun at all.

A soft scuff of shoe on asphalt whispered from the alley's darkness. He straightened, listening, the woman's heart pounded behind her ribs. Ethen started to stand and head back

towards the street, but he didn't make it — something sharp and hard cracked him on the back of the head.



Ethen came to, not gradually, but with a sudden and abominable Moment of Clarity. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. He couldn't close his mouth. Something soft, and stiff, and slick slid out from between his lips. His tongue felt slimy, tasted rubbery...

Oh, Jesus. Oh, fucking God.

The man in front of him turned away, slipping off a condom and buttoning his pants. He wore some kind of blue, denim shirt and... suspenders? Most of his face hid in the shadow cast by a black, broad-brimmed hat. The edges of a weirdly trimmed beard jutted from his chin. The delirious, ludicrous, singular thought Ethen had was he'd just been orally violated by an Amish man. A very tall Amish man.

He was still Ethen-as-Woman. Not awake and not dead either. He sat naked, strapped into some kind of chair. His arms were bound to the chair's arms and his legs were forced apart by shackles — the edges bit into his wrists and ankles. Some kind of strap across his forehead held him in place so he couldn't turn his head in any direction. From the corners of his eyes, he saw metal on either side of his face, caging him in.

"You're awake," the Amish man said. He walked away, off to the side where Ethen couldn't see. "Good. I have to start, and I never start until they're awake."

Ethen thrashed against his bonds. He wanted out, out of the dream. He wanted to be dying. He wanted to be dead. Anywhere but trapped in this place.

The Amish man came back into view. A blaring overhead light kept his face in shadow, but Ethen could clearly see the savage-looking device in his hand.

"Oh, God. Oh, no. No. No. No," the female voice cried out of Ethen. He didn't want to feel, didn't want to be in the woman's body anymore, didn't want to know what would happen next.

But then he learned what happened next.

The pain, when it came, exploded outward, searing through him. Warm wetness pooled between his legs and beneath him. Some vital part of his guts tore. Vomit surged into his throat.

The Amish man's gloved fingers pressed on Ethen's face, pushing his chin down. "No asphyxiation. Let it out."

Ethen did, but his position only allowed the vomit to run down over his chin. And the vomit, for some inexplicable reason, did it — convinced him of the truth. This was not a dream. He was dead and this was hell.

This was his Rock Bottom.

The pain blinded him now. He wouldn't survive unless he detached, mentally ran away and sank back into what remained of himself inside the woman's body. Could he escape

from this hell? Was the escape hidden in what Strawberry had said to him? She had told him skin to skin contact. She had also said four trades, four trades and twenty-four hours. There were no windows in the room. He had no sense of time. How long had he been unconscious?

Another lightning-hot spear of pain shot up through him, but he curled farther into himself away from it.

If Strawberry had been his first, then the Pimp was second, and the woman — this woman who was slowly bleeding to death — third. How much time did he have to make another trade?

He used to be a person. He used to be a heroin addict. He used to be a heroin-addicted person seeking death, chasing the high to keep his memories and pain from scorching him. Now he was just a victim strapped to a chair with a new reality, a new world stealing the air from his lungs.

But.

If he accepted the new reality, he had a chance to be something different. To be someone different. To escape.

Ethen could Surrender to a Higher Power.

The higher power of the Amish man.

The higher power of a trade.

If this was hell, Ethen wanted to be the highest power.

And all he needed was skin to skin.

While Ethen had hidden from the pain, the Amish man had moved away, but now he returned with a knife in his hand. For some reason, he'd taken off his gloves. Maybe he liked to feel the blood. Maybe it was part of his particular kink. Maybe he wanted a little skin-to-skin action as well.

Ethen stilled, smiled, and stretched towards the Amish man's caress.

Bad Seed

Connor Greenaway

Ben didn't really want to do it in the first place, he hadn't even thought about sex until Derwent Japp and Pinny Brennan down at the meat packing factory brought it up on their smoke break out back.

"You should really bang Tanya, Benny Boy," Derwent said between puffs. He had a walleye, and always looked at people from a funny angle. Ben blinked.

"She wants it, man," Pinny said. He was called that because he was so lanky and thin, he looked like a pipe cleaner. He took long drags that inched the cigarettes down into his lungs and barely seemed to exhale anything back out.

"What do you mean?" Ben said, toeing his boots into the gravel next to the grit box. He didn't smoke but always joined Derwent and Pinny on break.

"She wants you to fuck her, bro!" Derwent grabbed his balls for emphasis. Pinny had started to hoist his groin in the air as if humping the invisible man. "Put your penis in her pussy, man," he said, almost swallowing his cigarette in the process.

"Oh yeah," Ben said, and that had been the end of it for him. Derwent and Pinny went on among themselves about Tanya's sweet tits and her tight little tush and the balls and arches of her feet, but Ben had checked out. He hadn't been sure about going with a woman, especially one as nice as Tanya Goddard. He had always known that he was different, *special*, some might say, with varying tones and intentions. His mother had told him, the doctors had told him. All the kids at school seemed to take the time to tell him, often and with extreme prejudice. He never had a father to tell him this, but Ben was aware that wasn't something that made him very different, a lot of people didn't have fathers. His mother never explained the circumstances of his conception, and he had never asked. Not that it would have made any difference if he had, because no amount of questioning would ever make Beulah Goldstace speak of the strange grey things that probed her in her camp tent at Hutson Lake when she was only seventeen. The question of the pregnancy was easily solved. Everyone knew that she had been dating a boy, this jock who worked at the cinema, but the young lovers knew between them that Beulah was making him wait until they were engaged before they did anything like that – hands and mouths aside. He dropped her for cheating him and moved out of town, she told everyone he was a runaway.

So, it was just them, Beulah and Ben and Cookie the dog and the occasional uncle that he had never met before – all in the tiny house that sat opposite a liquor store; where Ben grew up being told he was different. It wasn't until he was sixteen he realised exactly why he was different – it wasn't that he was *No sharper than a sponge* as his mother was fond of saying, not taking the cue of the one or two doctors who actually took to using the word *retarded* instead. It wasn't his webbed feet or his extra teeth, it was his testicles. They looked like the Langoliers from that cheap Stephen King flick – shrivelled grey meatballs that cracked and oozed. As a baby and throughout childhood nobody had noticed anything wrong with his genitals, but once Ben went through his late puberty, he had developed the mouldering sacs that stunk and ruined his underwear. And then, when he was sixteen years old, he awoke one morning with his first erection.

It wasn't of spectacular standing and looked no different from any other smaller-than-average penis, it was just his balls that heaved and juiced, but still, he was fascinated with his member, unaware of the normalcy of his new obsession. He thumbed it and flicked it and constantly tried to lick it, but it took him a few weeks of this futile chimpish exploration before he finally got the hang of himself. A day that changed his life forever.

He was staring at the fruit bowl in the front room one day, playing with himself while Beulah was upstairs with one of those uncles he didn't recognise, when he had started to pick up a rhythm. He had no idea why he hadn't thought of it before, it hurt a little with all the tugging, but it felt kind of good too. He just locked his eyes on the fruit bowl, going back and forth, back and forth while his eyes went over the curves of the apples and pears and the plump peaches so soft and full of juice-

"Ughhhhhhhh," he let out with his first orgasm, and his balls wheezed as they let out something too – something grey and slimy as camel's snot. It slopped against the sofa cushion in glistening globs, coating the velvety surface in thick, smelly stuff that stank like a fish market on a hot July day. It had a smell that buzzed and made him gag. It bubbled vividly and began to smoke like a chemistry trick he had seen in school. He looked on with open-mouthed fascination, his wet willy still in his hand, as the cushion began to dissolve and reform with slimy effervescence – making the sounds of a boiling swamp and smelling now of ammonia. *Was this normal?* The cushion changed to the colour of blush, it grew a stem and leaked juices from its soft, furry skin. Before Ben's unbelieving eyes his mother's sofa cushion, which she'd bought in a set of six at the discount store two years before, was becoming a peach. A growling, fuming peach with horrible brown teeth in-between its vertical cleft that groaned and lurched towards him, gnashing its rotten dentition with fronds of tobacco-coloured saliva that stuck to the sofa leaving yellow hissing stains.

"Urghhhhhh," he let out again, but this time the noise was much less sure of itself. The peach was trying for him, it wanted him, that much he could tell. The maw of the peach-thing was seeking out his flesh and drooled in deluges when it got near. Ben jumped off the sofa and sprung a kick at the flank of the thing. He had been born with the kind of physical strength that went in tandem with his mental weakness, and his size ten foot went straight through the gurgling monster. He drew his foot back out. The creature's innards were a mix of tiny pillow feathers and steaming gunk, his socks were tarred and feathered with the mix which began to eat through the cotton but stopped when the creature died whimpering. He was sure that he heard it whisper, "*Bennnnnnn, Bennnnnn,*" as it crumpled in on itself.

Upstairs the nap was getting noisier – it sounded like they were jumping on the bed up there. He could hear his mother giggling. Ben looked at the thing he had created and then killed – it had gone the colour and feel of dead tree bark. He couldn't leave that mess for his mother to find. She'd whup him raw in front of the uncle he barely knew. He picked it up, a desiccated husk that oozed and growled and gnashed no longer and buried it in the back yard – an unloved wasteland of weeds and dog turds where his mother would never notice the patch of naked soil. Cookie the dog watched with a cocked head as he patted the soil down with a rusty spade that he found among the rotten boards that were once the garden shed. He put a finger to his lips, imploring the dog to secrecy, to not dig up the buried thing and expose him to his mother. "*Shhhhhhh!*"

He went to the bathroom to check himself, on the verge of tears with worry that he had broken something. He checked over and over, his underwear had melted a little where he

had gotten the gunk on it, but otherwise, his penis seemed fine – nonetheless he resolved that he would never ever do that again. *Ever*. It just wasn't worth the risk.

Naturally, once Ben had discovered masturbation, he was physically unable to stop. A few days after his first time, once the sheer terror was overtaken by his raging, lustful hormones he began jerking himself to completion several times a day. By this time, he had worked out a system of shooting that life-giving load into a tissue, where he could strangle the hungry, mewling creations as they formed and flush them down the toilet as soon as they were dead. He kept this up for a few months, in that time he had discovered a nudie mag which he lifted from the top shelf at the store when no one was looking, and the tissues started taking on the howling forms of screaming tits and blowjob lips and the strange front-bottoms that were sometimes silky smooth and other times massed with writhing, frenzied black hair. One time he missed the tissue and inadvertently shook himself out onto the carpet. It had a face and a buxom chest and a huge round ass but had no arms or legs. The furry fuck-doll presented its biting holes up to him, inviting him in with a few seductive shakes, its blank face rearing up to him whispering, "Fffffuck Meeeeee Bennnnnn, Fffffuckkk Meeeeeeee," through the short pile. It was lucky for him that he would be limp for the next ten minutes or so, otherwise he would have been unable to resist the temptation of the carpet slut that would have bitten him off and chewed him up as soon as he entered it. This one was not so easy to kill, by the time he had come back upstairs with the carpet knife to cut it out, Cookie the dog had already investigated the gyrating lump of floor, leaving only a collar dripping with thick, gloopy blood. His mother raged at him until his buttocks were raw and he cried insensibly over the missing patch of carpet as much as the missing dog. He kept saying, "It wasn't my fault," but that's all she got out of her idiot son, and it only pissed her off more.

After that, he really had kept the promise to himself that he'd never touch himself like that again, and it was a testament to his will that every time he found himself stiff, he struggled tooth and nail to abstain from putting his hands on himself. Thinking of his mother helped at first, and then it didn't help at all. He thought of birds and bees and bushes and trees though, eventually, each image would only go on to stoke his need to stroke. But he girded his loins manfully and never once gave in. Occasionally he would awake in the middle of the night, having spat his dreams into his underwear and he would have to deal with sticky permutations of whatever he was dreaming about. Once, he met the president in his sleep only to meet him moments later under his sheets – the writhing face of the commander-in-chief birthed spitting and hissing in the dripping runnels that his comforter degenerated into. Apart from the thick bedwetting, he was entirely without incident for the next three years, his hormones adjusted to his dead-end libido and the night-time incidents tapered off and he found himself almost entirely without temptation.

Entirely without incident, until he acquiesced to Derwent and Pinny's thrusting exhortations that he should go to Tanya's house after work. She had a chair that she needed moving. She could never decide on where she wanted the chair because he had moved it twice for her already, but she still insisted on his coming over to move it again.

"Here?" he asked after moving the chair to where she pointed, three inches closer to the window.

"That's perfect," she said brightly. "Sorry I'm just so darn picky." She thought it was cute that he still pretended not to get the hint. She loved it when they played hard to get, but she planned to make it *real* simple for him this time.

"That's okay, it's a nice chair," he said, unable to think of much else to say. "You have a nice house."

"Thank you! You're such a gentleman. You must be so thirsty after all that hard work. Here, take a seat and I'll get you a drink. I've got beer in the fridge." Her voice hushed, and her eyes shone a deep chestnut.

"Do you have any milk?" he asked.

"Uh yeah, sure. Let me just get that for you." Tanya smiled and fluttered her eyes and shook her ass as she walked out of the room. He started to think about what Derwent and Pinny had said to him – *Put your Penis in her Pussy, man!* He remembered the thrusting motions they demonstrated, he thought he knew what to do. Tanya danced back into the room with a spring in her step and a drink in each hand. She handed Ben his milk and then began to drink from her glass of juice that smelt like nail polisher remover. They each took a few silent drinks before putting the glasses on the coffee table.

"Boy are my legs tired!" She said with a flourish. "It's a shame there's only one chair in this room." He went to get up, but she pushed him back down with a hand that lingered on his flannel shirt. "Don't be silly! You need a rest, here I'll just sit on your lap if that's okay. Let me know if I'm too heavy." She sat down on Ben and looked into his eyes – blue and wide and full of nervousness, waiting for him to say something about her not being fat.

"Uh, no you're fine," he mumbled with difficulty

"Gosh, you're so strong! Can I feel your muscles? They're huge." She spoke with her lips pouted and eyes closed and began tracing her fingers over his body before he could say anything. She circled his top shirt button with one French manicured nail and rocked her hips forward into his. She undid the button and reached into his shirt to feel his chest muscles. Ben had no more words. The rock-hard erection in his pants would be a much more eloquent expressive device, so he put his hands on her hips. He knew what to do. Tanya could feel him expressing himself through his jeans and gasped just loud enough to hear as she rocked forward on it. She brought her lips to his, teasing him with pants of excitement. He gripped her hips tighter and pulled her into him, reaching for her lips, he'd never kissed a girl before and now... Tanya Goddard. After so much anticipation, he had the taste of her in his mouth, he couldn't believe it, he felt his cock jump and then – *Fuck!* His little runner had just jumped the love gun, and he was leaking into his underwear.

"Ughhhh oh fffffuckkkk," he groaned into Tanya's neck.

"I know, baby, I'm so hot for you too," her words hushed in his ear like velvet. Luckily there wasn't much but he could feel the damp in his underwear. He had to get to the bathroom quick.

"Hey Tanya, where's your b-..."

"I thought you'd never ask, I have something to show you," she gasped as she got off on his hard-on through her jeans, unaware of exactly what was going on under his.

She slid off the chair with a coy look in her eye, took his hand and led him to her bedroom. She turned around on him with a hungry look.

"Hmmm okay, just wait a second for me will you, it will be worth it, trust me." A smile twisted on her face and she ran her palm up his crotch, she didn't feel the churning that was taking place on the other side of the denim. "The bathroom's just over there if you want to freshen up a little." Ben nodded dumbly; he couldn't get away quick enough.

He locked the bathroom door behind him and tore his trousers off. The stench of his ejaculate as it ran down his leg wafted up as he struggled to get the jeans off his feet. He

took his underwear off and saw the face of Tanya in the melting mess of the cotton and elastic. The tiny Tanya-copy was trying to kiss him, her lips quivered. He crushed the sticky underwear in his hands, hearing a tiny scream as he crumpled the face inside. He tried to flush the underwear, but they just clogged the toilet, so he had to take them out dripping, and stuff them into the back pockets of his jeans – he'd have to dispose of them after he left.

There was no way he could go through with it. Not now. What would happen to Tanya if he made a mess? His splooge didn't seem to affect him, maybe she would be okay, but he didn't want to risk it. The sensible thing would be to make an excuse, say sorry and leave. His balls ached and dripped, they had shrunk and were shaking like a whipped dog. He realised then that this was beyond his control. He couldn't just up and leave. *They* wanted this too bad, and Tanya clearly did too. It wouldn't be nice to let her down. He began washing himself off in the sink and came up with a plan. He snatched some toilet paper and balled it into one of his pockets. He would put his penis in her pussy as Pinny and Derwent told him to, and when the time comes, so would he - into a tissue. He could crush the creation before it formed like he had so many times before and stuff it back into his pockets and no one would be any the wiser.

"Ben! I'm waiting..." Tanya called from the next room. It was time. He left the bathroom, feeling his wet and ruined underwear soaking through his back pocket onto his ass, he hoped that she didn't notice and think he'd wet himself. He opened the door, and there she was, dressed in a sheer black babydoll, her knees on the rose-patterned duvet. Her eyes, hungry, on him. "Do you like it?" she said as she ran a hand up her thigh, revealing her milky white skin, and more. Ben's eyes bulged, so did his trousers. He fingered the balled-up tissue paper in his pocket.

"V-very much," he gulped.

"Good," she cooed. "Look what I've got." She playfully tugged on a leather strap she had cuffed to the bedpost. "I hope you don't mind, but I like to be tied up." His heart skipped a couple of beats, it was finally going to happen, he was going to put his penis in her pussy. What the fuck would Derwent and Pinny say to that!? He grinned and got on the bed, taking himself out through his fly, careful not to expose his hideous alien testicles. "Uhm, why don't you take your clothes off for me cowboy?" Tanya blinked, pretending not to notice the very ripe smell coming from his crotch, hadn't she told this idiot to freshen up? She'd meant to start off with her mouth, but he could forget that in a hurry.

Ben had a look on his face like he was working out a difficult maths sum. "No, I'm fine, thank you, I get cold without my clothes." Tanya offered him a smile. *Boy is this one useless.*

"Hey, I've got an idea to loosen you up a little," she said and wrapped her palm around him, he flinched and nearly came all over her fingers. "Lie down on the bed."

Her voice was firm, and he obeyed instantly. She helped him get comfy with some pillows and then took his hands and strapped his wrists into the leather cuffs. "Let me show you how it's done, big boy".

He was incapable of words. Instead, his communications rod signalled his excitement in dancing circles, beating off his stomach. She took hold of him and mounted, cowgirl style. She gasped as she lowered herself onto him, keeping him steady with her hand as she put him inside her. It was the longest few seconds of his life, and then it was done. He had done it, he had put his Penis in Her Pussy, although he realised that she had actually done it and not him. But, he still couldn't wait to tell Derwent and Pinny.

He was so lost with the excitement of telling them, that was all he could think about as she started riding him. He didn't hear her soft moans of *Yes! Yes!* Otherwise, he might have understood why he'd heard that before when his mother was entertaining an uncle. Instead, all he could hear was him saying *Guys I did it! I put my Penis inside Tanya Goddard's Pussy! I did it!* He could picture the scene now – them both sucking cigarettes out the back of the meat packing factory, swallowing down the smoke and nicotine with green fascination in their eyes, wanting to hear all the details.

Dreaming of this victory, he reached the point of no return. *Fuck* he thought in a flash of letters, there was no time for the tissue, he couldn't stop her from riding him, he couldn't stop himself from coming.

"Wait," Tanya said, she had stopped her motions, but he was still juddering inside her. "Did you just cum?"

"Ughhhhhh," Ben said, "Ughhhhhh, arghhhh, hngggggg."

He was sputtering at both ends, his brain had practically liquefied and seeped out with the rest of him for all the sense Tanya could get out of him. She hopped off and checked.

"Yup." There was a lot of it, she had not exactly expected that reaction, or at least not so much and so quick. She looked down at him, his features all out of sync with each other, grunting while his stupid face pulled funny red shapes. *All the same*, she thought. *Big, Dumb, and Full of Cum.* On the heels of that, her next thought was *Jesus Christ this guy's junk STINKS!* He stared up at her with goggled eyes and a bent smile.

"I didn't mean to do that," he said dimly.

"Why does it smell so bad?" She was gagging on the thickness of the stench – dead fish and battery acid. Ben stared at Tanya with horror.

"Is that not normal?" his voice was mouse-small.

"No! None of this is normal! It's not supposed to come out like that!" She was getting hysterical, swiping at her thighs, at the bubbling gloop that hissed and reacted on her skin. Inside of her. "Fuck it's burning! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She screamed. He lost colour as the blood drained from his face, and lost length and girth when it drained from his penis. *This is not okay* was all he could think. *This is not okay This is not okay This is not-* His wrists strained against the leather straps cuffing him to the bedpost. His fingers went white. This was going bad. It was going to get *very bad*. He needed to leave, he needed to get out. Go, Now. He needed to *fucking-*

"Oh God, I feel so sick. What the fuck is happening? I feel..." She was clutching her stomach, which bulged outwards. Something was kneading it from the inside like pizza dough. "OH MY GOD WHAT THE FUCK? *WHAT THE F-*," and then her screaming was cut off as she burped a throatful of vomit down herself. It was steaming and grey and glistened in thick, chunky globs in-between her breasts. It ran down her black babydoll, leaving a snail trail of slime on the way down her swelling belly. Mascara



ran in tear tracks down her face and she was sobbing between mouthfuls of vomit. The skin on her stomach bruised and stretched as she bulged from within, like a balloon being inflated.

Ben knew what was happening, but it was too late to do anything. She was changing – from the inside out. The slime ran from her nostrils like a snotty nosebleed. Her tears were thick with the gunk that was welling up behind her eyes, drowning and suffocating her brain. Her babydoll grew tight and then tore down the seams as she outgrew it, lying in slimy rags around her ballooning stomach. Her eyeballs bulged, threatening to blow from their sockets as the pressure in her skull built up. She tore at her own face as she could feel it about to burst, screaming with whatever air she could get between mouthfuls of slime.

He had never seen anything like this before – cushions and tissues and carpets were one thing, but this is... *was*... Tanya Goddard. He suddenly noticed the greasy substance leaking in between her legs, and this was entirely new to him. She was birthing something, something that screamed and raged from inside its fetid placenta. He was watching the thing in the sac starting to kick its way out when he heard a horrible, wet *RRRRRRRIIIIIIP!*

He looked up, expecting to see her face blown out and hanging off her chest; but instead, there was a huge gash rent in her overstretched stomach. He saw the horror that had bit and torn its way out of the womb. It howled as it clamped together its needle teeth. Another one was freeing itself, chewing through the grey, bloody placenta. He had been busy thinking about Derwent and Pinny when he sowed his seed inside Tanya, and it was them. Grey waxwork babies with the faces of the grown men emerged, screaming and murderous, from her now bloated corpse.

Ben cried and thrashed against his restraints; they were going to have him this time. He went crazy, kicking and screaming. They were going to fucking eat him with those horrible brown teeth, they were finally going to do it. They hissed and drooled and took hold of his skin with their rotting teeth and tore scraps of flesh and tissue. He was still screaming when they ate his face, and still straining against the straps as they gnawed into his stomach. He held for seven minutes while they ate him alive.

When they finally licked the blood off his bones, the only other thing that remained of him was his balls. The creatures fed from the trough of bodily gore, playing among the remains of the incubator as the testicles prepared for change, the gestation was now complete. They shivered and creaked, these oozing grey meatballs that had, in their emancipation from the host, grown to the size of a man's head. The ridges of their surface shook and perspired. The cocoon first broke at the top, and a hatchling slithered out, the same species of slug-like grey thing that had probed Ms. Beulah Goldstace so many years ago, but now in the forms of the Derwent and Pinny Man-Babies. The cocoon continued to break and more of the litter emerged, ready to begin their own journey to fertilise and spread. Most would not make it alive long enough to achieve this singular goal, but some would find a way – they'd find a female, and they'd sow a seed or two.

At Roadside

Gregory L. Norris

Gregory L. Norris lives and writes at the outer limits of New Hampshire's North Country. Raised on a healthy diet of creature double features and classic SF TV, his work appears in national magazines, anthologies, novels, and the occasional episode for television or film. Follow his literary adventures at www.gregorylnorris.blogspot.com.

He's the kind of man-made for film noir — looks great in black and white through the filter of your imagination, with a smile that can melt the most glacial of hearts. You meet on a scorcher of a dog day, right as the late afternoon is waning to dusk. You hear the rumble from his motorcycle's engine and think a summer storm had snuck up on you as you trudge through the heat. No, the thunder is his Gold Wing GL 1800 touring bike.

"You need a lift?" he asks.

And then, removing his helmet, he flashes you that smile. Part of you ignites and, at nineteen, you feel reborn. Part of you also dies, because you know, just know, standing on the side of Cluff's Crossing between the sun-baked strip of pine woods and the heat radiating off the leather seats and chrome, that you will never be the same. His smile, wreathed in the prickle of several days' worth of growth, transforms a sad, long face into the illusion of happiness. Maybe he is happy, just this once. His eyes seem to project joy, blue and sparkling in the last of the day's light. He's handsome, with his thatch of dark cowlicks and spikes freed from the motorcycle helmet. So much so, it's almost painful to gaze at him, like staring up at the sun.

T-shirt, the pits damp with sweat, you catch the clean scent of his skin mixed with deodorant on your next shallow sip of breath. Hesitating from answering the man's question, you absorb the rest of his details: blue jeans, old boots on big feet, a hint of clean white sock at the leg cuff. A real man's man, he'd probably clean up great and look at home in a three-piece suit as easily as a torn hoodie.

"So?"

"Sure," you stammer.

He instructs you to get on, hands you the helmet. You steal a hint of his male scent while donning his gift. He revs the engine. You climb on, suddenly aware of the heat his body radiates. The closeness — you're sure you'll burn up!

"Hold onto me," he says.

You slide your arms around his waist, feeling the taut muscles beneath that thin layer of cotton.

"What's your name?" he asks, leaning back enough so you see his smile close up and melt.

"Sal," you reply above the angry noise of thunderheads. "You?"

"Joe. Joe Rhodes."

“Rhodes? Like the Colossus?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He drives forward, through the sweltering landscape. The miles on foot are normally slow and arduous but now fly past too quickly on the back of his Gold Wing.



“So, what were you doing out there?” he asks.

Naked, sore, sweating despite the frigid gusts from the air conditioner, you think about telling him the truth: shitty retail job, no wheels, gotta pay the old man room and board now that high school’s done and college short-sheeted you on scholarships.

“I was in search of a story,” you settle for instead.

Joe stands, smoking a cigarette. The noxious, ashy stink should disgust you but doesn’t. On him, it’s curiously sexy. He’s erect again — maybe always has been. Only your confession, you’re convinced, is now the cause of his excitement.

“A story?”

“Sure. Why the fuck else would anybody be crazy enough to be out wandering that road in the middle of an August heatwave?”

Joe’s shoulder tattoo, that of a sundial face, records the late hour in swoops of shadow. He’s smiling again, but in the setting of his apartment above the garage, the melancholy is more pronounced.

“Am I your story?” he asks, scratching at his chin.

“Maybe.”

It’s a nice thought. You don’t ponder what your old man must be thinking—you were due home hours ago, though that house, pistachio-green with black shutters, has never felt like home. For a second that robs you of breath, you dream that Joe’s place could be your home. There one moment, the notion evaporates in the time it takes to blink. This is a temporary place defined by the lone plate in the sink and the sofa cushions beneath your bare ass used for a bed. It’s a world of fast living and constantly changing visitors. You pegged him as mostly straight on the drive from Cluff’s Crossing to here, an apartment above a garage somewhere off Geremonty Drive. He told you he spent much of the summer doing work on motorcycles for the mechanic he rents from. There are no feminine touches in his man’s world. Still, you’ve gathered proof of their presence in *him*, the way he ravaged you, fucked you. Joe’s a great lover, so he must have gotten plenty of practice.

But you’re just a distraction, something different. A bit of diversion from the well-traveled road that is his life.

“There’s a book in me, I swear,” Joe says, sitting on the sofa beside you.

“We should find it, write it together,” you offer, and hope flares all too briefly when, puffing on his cigarette, he fixes you with those eyes, kisses you on the mouth, hard. A

curlicue of gray smoke forms a question mark in the air above his head. So many questions. Too many.

“Yeah, sure,” he says.

But it’s his version to you of all those answers to all those women who were here before you. The ones about, will he call? Will there be a second chance at making something like love with the hottest man on Planet Earth? This one, tailored just for you, evokes images of Haley’s Comet, out there in the distances of the desolate cosmos, coming around once in a lifetime if you should be so lucky to glimpse it.

“Sure,” you parrot. “Yeah, you and me, in search of the story.”

It’s a nice dream.

Less than an hour later he’s dropped you off at the top of Colonial Drive, and you’re making your walk of shame toward Juniper Road, and that pistachio-green house.



Joe fixed you. And then he ruined you.

Maybe you were already damaged, and that one chance meeting on a day that now seems impossibly far behind you sealed your fate. Every time you hear a motorcycle, your pulse gallops. Every scent triggers breathless arousal—morning sunlight, afternoon rain, the cheap candles in glass jars sold at work, the acrid traces of cigarette smoke that cling to customers’ clothes.

Every work shift, you worry you’ll see him, that he’ll come strutting up to your register to buy smokes or a package of new crew socks — basic manly stuff. And that he’ll ignore you. Perhaps he won’t recognize you, because you’re a phantom to him now. You’ve been forgotten. Worse, you worry that you won’t see him again. You have, in your mind’s way of thinking, climaxed at nineteen. There will never be anyone better than Joe Rhodes, the Colossus. Everything and everyone else will be a disappointment by comparison.

So you walk that stretch of Cluff’s Crossing, away from the city’s downtown, in no particular hurry when the workday ends. Hoping somehow that fate will again maneuver you both into crossing paths. He’ll pull over, flash you that smoldering smile. You’ll run your fingers through his dark cowlicks like you did when he first entered you, and the pain was almost more than you could take. He’ll tell you to hold on, the way he did then, and, eventually, the pressure will crackle out, filling you with concentric waves of thrilling pleasure. He’ll whisk you back to the garage on his motorcycle. The ride will shake you up, like coasting on a cloud of summer thunder, every cell and molecule in your physiology affected by his power, the sheer *balls* of Joe Rhodes.

Autumn arrives and wanes. You crunch home through the fallen leaves. Still, no appearance by Joe. It gets darker sooner. A freezing rain falls. You trudge, mile after mile, your ears waiting, listening. And then one night it snows.

A storm chugs behind you, growing steadily louder on that long, remote stretch of Cluff's Crossing. Just one more chance to be with him, that's all you'll need to either earn his love or to move on. After all, he chose *you* on that balmy summer night, light-years in the past. You gave him your everything. And there's still so much more you could if only he'd let you.

Lights are coming around the bend, a supernova partially eclipsed by the falling snow. It doesn't strike you that the chances of him riding his bike in this early November mess aren't likely. Desperate, you only see him, Joe. Joe is the light.

"Yes," you sigh and invoke his name once more. A colossus is coming your way. This time, the outcome will be so very different, you're certain, and you turn toward the light, which bathes you in its blinding glow.

You get the call late one afternoon while you're contemplating how wonderful it would be to fall off the wagon like you did off the seat of your Gold Wing, which started this whole mess, this new life for you. Yeah, wash down a fat handful of pills with a cold brew. Doesn't matter the type or the milligram; one of those bad boys, you swore, tasted like black licorice, which you abhor, and there are still times when you swear you'd sell your soul for just one more. What's left of it, at least.

"Joe Rhodes?" the voice asks, a woman's.

"Yeah."

"This is Beatrice Clifford — I'm the Events Coordinator at the library. I'm putting together a local author's night program for the month of September and would love to include you. Have you share some of *Pain Pill Purgatory*."

Sure, why not? Most of your travails were laid open to the world after you took that spill, hit that patch of wet leaves, ripped open a leg at the side of the road. The rest of your life was made public after the pain pills seduced you and made you their bitch. You got the idea for a book, all right. The intense, true-life struggle of an everyman to break the chains of addiction sold decently. It didn't hurt that the front cover showed you in crisp black and white astride the back of your Gold Wing. What was left of it following the crash graced the back. Dented and dinged up, just like you. But oh, how handsome you look in that photograph.

You got a scar, but leg hair covers that up, mostly. You feel the hunger for a hit of pharmaceuticals more than the lingering aches, except on rainy days and nights. Hell, you got a book deal out of that crash, a real book that a publisher paid you for, a publisher with an office in Boston, not a company based out of a computer in a spare bedroom.

You got a new bike out of the deal, too—between the advance money, royalties, and insurance. You sleep in an actual bed now. When you're not fucking, that is.

It's raining on the night of the reading. You worry that the audience will feature age-inappropriate members but are pleased to see that the thirty or so faces all look over eighteen. Your leg feels tender — change in air pressure, you've been told and warned. Your bones are older now in that leg than the rest of your body.

You take the podium to a loud gush of applause. You tell yourself you'll remember that sound later when you're buried deep inside whatever choice piece of tail is granted the honor of following you home. You secretly love the attention, the adoration. Your dick

pulses—with very little effort, you'd throw an erection, you in your old blue jeans, crisp new white T-shirt, vintage leather jacket, and brand-name sneakers, also new. They fucking love you.

“It wasn’t the motorcycle that nearly killed me,” you say, the book opened to a moment of high tension, though you hardly glance at the text, “but the scrips. That Percocet went straight to my heart. Oxy, my soul...”

You have them hooked. Some of them you guess, as the scent of rain on your skin works its magic, get wet. You thrust the words as you so often do your hips, make love to all of them after a fashion.

“One day, you wake up. It’s foggy outside. Then you realize the fog is really in the room with you, but you aren’t. You’re not there.”

Some of the listeners gasp. Others, you imagine, orgasm. You flash that grin, showing a length of clean white teeth. The gesture’s more wolf’s snarl than smile, someone once told you. That dude you picked up at the side of the road, long ago. Sam or Steve—

You cast a glance into the rows of folding seats set up in the Cartwright Reading Room, so named after one of the town library’s rich benefactors, and a chill slices through the sexual heat radiating off your flesh. The young dude — Sam or Steve — has jumped out of your memory and is now sitting at the back of the audience, by himself in a corner chair.

“Um,” Joe Rhodes, Author, stutters. You crave a cigarette, but you gave up smokes along with the pills. The words vanish from your concentration. Mercifully, they’re still in the book. “I thought I knew what pain was. But the definition got rewritten just after three o’clock on a stormy autumn afternoon...”

A mirage, it has to be. The dude still looks nineteen. Half a decade’s passed, long enough for patches of silver to have sprouted in your hair above both ears. *Distinguished*, you’ve been told by more than one lay sweating and gyrating beneath your naked body.

The chill tickles you unpleasantly behind the balls, and your injured leg throbs with a kind of cold that is sometimes hot. You remember the music from his MP 3 player that night, before you had enough and sensed the romantic overtones creeping into his thoughts when sex, hot sex, was all you offered: the eerie melody from the movie *Taxi Driver*, something from Kate Bush about a man with a child in his eyes, the Dream Academy’s ‘The Love Parade’. Mushy stuff. But you’d allowed it because your needs hadn’t yet been fully met. It had felt good at the time. Everything had felt good that night, except the part about it continuing into the next morning.

The raw emotion at seeing him again helps your performance. “Sorry, this isn’t easy,” you say.

And you can see by their faces that the misinterpretation of what you project works in your favor. You’re Joe Rhodes, who created his own modern mythology. A tragic fallen god in search of redemption and followers. They worship you.

The young dude listens, alone in that corner. Somehow, you make it through your fifteen minutes; you were made for the stage. Part of you wonders, however, if making it to the next morning with him would have been so bad.

You break away from the crowd. “Hey, wait—!”

The young dude doesn't listen and continues down the sidewalk, into the rain. You excuse yourself from the fans, the patrons who've bought copies of the book, all those potential lays — you had your pick tonight, could have taken home the choicest in twos, maybe threes. Only all you want is to be with him again.

You jump on your new motorcycle, which you rode in the rain tonight as a badge of honor. The storm has let up some; enough rain falls to remind you of drops of sweat, which you imagine conjuring over him tonight. If you can catch up quickly and don't lose sight of the apparition fading into the darkness.

"Sal," you remember, having one of those *Eureka!* moments, likely only because it serves your particular needs.

Names haven't meant much to you before. This one does as you start the motorcycle, balance its weight beneath your mighty stones, start that rugged, chugging momentum forward. Mythmaker, your motorcycle rockets on in search of a former follower you fucked once and will again, you decide.

First, you have to find him.



You comb the old streets, the ones you stopped taking for fear you might pass him walking at roadside in search of his story or—and here's the real impetus—a ride. A repeat performance in your bed; ironic, now it's all you can think of, all you desire.

The narcotic green fragrance of the last of summer helps keep your erection hard and itchy in your jeans, which are suddenly too tight to accommodate your maleness. Whenever you sensed a problem with one of your lays wanting more than you were willing to give, you found new directions to take, creating fresh street maps for your convenience and in order to circumnavigate potential problems.

A shiver teases the fine hairs at the nape of your neck when you turn onto Cluff's Crossing, which you once loved traveling for its remoteness and long verdant stretches leading into the downtown. According to a road sign and to your remorse, you discover that a slimy conglomerate, likely from someplace far out west, has just started chopping up the place into condominiums.

A hot lay, and he'd seemed genuinely interested in the dream you let slip. Must be proud that you wrote your book, that you found your story. You wonder if Sal found his.

The headlight touches upon empty roadside. And then, there he is—Sal, walking with his head held low, hair damp from the rain. Your heart attempts to jump into your throat. You pull over, idle your ride, and adjust your dick.

"Hey," you call. "Remember me?"

Sal glances up and smiles. You mostly see that beautiful mouth and what it can do for you, not the raw human emotion behind his expression.

"Joe," he says.

The wind carries the lone word up and around you on a sweet breeze, giving it an echo.

"So, you do," you say, real smooth.

"Of course."

You smile, too. "I saw you tonight. In the audience."

Sal's eyes lock with yours. In that bottled gaze, whole conversations pass seemingly without the need for words. "I looked for your garage. I walked through neighborhood after neighborhood out near Geremonty Drive, but couldn't find you again, Joe."

There's an odd resonance to the statement. "And I heard you went away. New York City or Hollywood. That's what your old man told people after you vanished. Said you were reading that book by Kerouac—*On the Road*."

"No."

You flash that foolproof smile. "Hey, whatever—you're here. And you look great. Haven't aged a bit. You want a ride somewhere?"

"Somewhere," he sighs.

You unhook your chinstrap and offer him your helmet. Sal hesitates and holds up his hand. You see the gamut of emotion in his eyes—hope, lust, romance. You'll enjoy one of them tonight, worry about the rest later. Maybe, this time you'll let him stay for breakfast.

"I don't live there anymore. Got a new place, bigger now. If you want, I'll show you," you say.

He jumps on, wraps his hands around your waist. His touch is icy, his weight against your spine ethereal, like the gossiping of breezes. As you begin to accelerate, he says a single word.

It sounds like: "Snowplow."

You tear around the corner, toward the new condo development, hot and chilled at the same time, itchy all over, aroused and then unnerved, for you realize you are all alone on the back of your motorcycle.

Days later, the construction crew on Cluff's Crossing discovers human skeletal remains tangled up in the overgrowth at the roadside.

Straight Through to the Centre of the Earth

Andrew Wilmot

Andrew Wilmot is an award-winning Toronto-based author and editor, and co-publisher of the magazine Anathema: Spec from the Margins. Their fiction has appeared in a variety of places, both online and in print. Further details at andrewwilmot.ca. Their first novel, The Death Scene Artist, is available from Wolsak & Wynn/Buckrider Books.

The mountain's name was Hobbes.

Patrick hadn't asked for it, and he hadn't given his in return.

"It's okay," Hobbes said. They'd get there; they'd get to know each other eventually. Time was, after all, on their side. "The one thing we all got plenty of, right? Well, 'cept for this guy." And, still recording, Hobbes placed his phone on a desk, or maybe, Patrick thought, a low chair, and returned to his work: he pulled the claw hammer from his belt and, with his other hand, lifted a man off the ground by only his hair. A man whose face was beaten right through in spots, so much that it looked like he'd been turned inside out and was wearing raw hamburger as makeup. Patrick had just enough time to squint, to see — Mister

Johannes? Yes, without doubt, poor Mister Johannes — when Hobbes hooked the more fuck-you-up side of the claw hammer under the man's upper jaw and pulled as hard as he could. Slow, not a shock of pressure but a prolonged effort followed by a plastic-sounding *snap*. Mister Johannes garbled consonants as if doing an impression of a motorboat, until suddenly he wasn't anymore.

Job done, Hobbes, panting, let his long arms droop at his sides. He was still clutching the hammer and the lifeless head and body of what had been Mister Johannes. He dropped both then and lumbered over to the phone. Picked it up — the speaker crackled where he touched it with his fist of a thumb. "Sweet dreams, kid," he said, and ended the video.

Patrick watched it a second time, and then a third. Bile inched up his throat; his heart raced. He didn't know quite what he was feeling: if he should throw up, if that would make him feel better about not feeling worse. He charged his phone and put it face down on the nightstand next to his bed before pulling the covers up over his head. Outside his room, a fissure in the night — his parents screeched at one another, still, like they had been for



hours, and he thought of how it sounded when Mister Johannes died and wasn't sure which was worse.



Patrick met the mountain called Hobbes just a few weeks prior. He'd come home from school to find his father half-asleep on the couch, reeking of warm Coors Light and leaning into his why-can't-yous and in-my-days and you-don't-know-how-good-you-have-its, every slurred sentence more incomprehensible than the one before.

Not wanting to deal with it, not then, not again, Patrick went for a walk in the forest behind their home. It was autumn, and the ground was awash in orange, red, and gold. He kick-swished his way through the leaves like he was trying, limply, to sweep the forest floor, before arriving at a makeshift shelter he'd constructed consisting of a weather-shredded flap of tent hoisted atop four thick branches dug into the earth. There was also a plastic record crate filled with comic books and a rolled-up sleeping bag that he sometimes used as a pillow. He sat down inside the shelter, fell over onto the sleeping bag, and wondered if his father would pass out and swallow his tongue.

Patrick woke sometime later, without knowing he'd fallen asleep, to the sounds of footsteps — not swishing through the leaves but crunching them underfoot, a crackling immediately silenced by the weight of whatever, or whoever was approaching. Another sound: a long scrape like something being pulled across the ground. Patrick sat up, frightened, and pulled his knees to his chest, hoping to remain out of sight.

The noise intensified until, finally, Patrick witnessed the source: two large stump-like legs appeared from the woods like the trunks of trees. To the right of them was a man, dead, arms splayed behind him on the ground. Looking up, Patrick saw the corpse's legs in the grip of a single, meaty, blood-stained hand. Farther still, a face: crags and deep, jutting canyons, and anger staring death directly at him. The mountain breathed television static. Patrick wrinkled his nose; the enormous man stunk of wet fur and rust and grease. The man, the walking threat, released his grip on the body and shifted so that he faced Patrick, who couldn't have made his lanky teenage body any smaller and tighter if he'd tried.

"I... didn't see anything." Patrick said after several tense seconds. His voice was barely a scratch.

"Yeah, you did." The mountain punched the words. Stared at Patrick — watched as the boy's eyes darted every which way, like he was searching the ground for someplace, some small patch of land in which he could vanish without a trace.

"You can look," the man said. "You should. I know you want to. Don't matter now, do it?"

Slowly, saying *no no no no no* to himself the entire time, Patrick raised his head. Stared at the body, which just lay there with two holes where his eyes should have been, and a third

where his nose had been pushed all the way into his brain. As if he'd been picked up like a bowling ball.

Patrick swallowed. "He... doesn't look human."

"That's 'cause he's not anymore. Maybe never was. Who knows?"

"What did he... I mean, why did you..."

"Does it matter?"

Patrick stared from corpse to killer. The large man's eyes were nestled deep in his face, the lower half of which was covered by a grey and black scraggle of steel wool. Patrick shook his head.

The man stared at Patrick as if deciding what to do next. Patrick stared right back, a curious mix of fear and... intrigue, maybe? Is that what it was, this needling in his chest?

"Give me your phone," the mountain barked.

"What?"

"Your phone, kid. Let's see it." Reluctantly, Patrick pulled his smartphone from his pocket and passed it to the man, who immediately started typing with a single sausage-y finger. He quickly finished and returned the phone. Patrick checked and saw that the man had texted himself and added his name in the contacts list.

"Hobbes?"

The man knelt, slow, like a creaking medieval contraption, and picked up the body again, one hand wrapping almost all the way around both ankles. He continued on, dragging the body behind him again. Said, "See you around, kid," and disappeared like a phantom, deeper into the woods. Patrick waited until the sounds faded entirely before jumping to his feet and sprinting home.



Hobbes sent the first text a week later. Photos: two of another victim, one of himself, posing with his kill. Both wore wide straw hats as if it were a vacation shot from a tropical island somewhere in the South Pacific.

#BestBuds, it was captioned.

Patrick searched the *Bellingham Herald* for any reports of disappearances or unfortunate grisly discoveries but found nothing. It didn't make any sense — Bellingham was too small, too quiet for such things to go unnoticed.

It was only a few days later when the first video arrived. Earlier that night, Patrick had gotten in the way of a dish aimed at his father's head and had to run to the washroom, to dab the blood from his bottom lip. From inside, he heard his mother weeping apologies through the door, heard the slam of the front door as his father left, far too drunk to walk, let alone drive. Patrick waited until his mother retreated inside her room before quietly making his way upstairs.

Once inside his room, he noticed his phone on the nightstand, the screen bright with Push notifications. The lock screen was a sea of texts, all from Hobbes:

Just sent you something <3

Hope you like it.

It feels so good to have someone to share this with.

Maybe we could hang out together again sometime?

Confused and... honestly more curious than concerned, Patrick scrolled to the first message — the video — and, briefly hesitating, pressed play.

And watched a young woman being torn to pieces.

She was already dead when Hobbes made the first cut with a rusty hacksaw, sawing through her evening gown and soft legs, segmenting her atop a workbench in what looked like a garage lit entirely in blacks and yellows.

“You know,” Hobbes said between the tearing, the sinew-snapping of metal through flesh, “I ain’t never had someone to talk to like this. I really appreciate you not saying nothin’ about, well, all of this. I mean if you did...” and he put the bloody hacksaw up to his throat and mimed slicing one side to the other. Then laughed. He swept the woman’s feet and calves and thighs off the table — they landed on the floor with a wet *schlop* — and started in on her torso, and then her arms. Patrick managed to watch the entire thing, refusing to look away. When, years later, he would press himself on this, he wouldn’t be able to say what possessed him — why he was so compelled to watch all the way to the end, only that he did. And had. And would do so again.



The videos continued like this for two weeks. Patrick didn’t reply to them, or to any of the texts he received, but Hobbes continued to send them anyway.

“I heard a story once,” Hobbes said while filming himself depositing what couldn’t have been just one person, no fucking way, into several green heavy-duty trash bags, “about this guy who fancied himself an author. Was a sorry motherfucker, though. Wasn’t any good at telling other people’s stories, or any of that made-up shit. So, he tried to write his own — whatcha call it — memoir, that’s it. He tried writing his memoirs. ’Cept he failed at it every single time. Weren’t lack of ambition. No, it’s more like he was cursed or something. Every pen, every pencil he picked up broke in two; scraps of paper just burned to ash at his touch. Still, though, he persisted. He had a story to tell — who’s to say he didn’t deserve to tell it? He even tried tattooing it on himself but the ink... it just broke up in his skin like someone trying to draw on granite with a fucking ballpoint.” Hobbes finished tying off one bag and moved on to the next. “So, he started carving his story in other places — on trees, the sides of houses... in skin. Only after a while, his hands weren’t so steady anymore and his words... they just looked like gashes.”

He finished tying off the last of the bags, put a bloodied hand to the black leather apron stretched across his wide body, and nervously drummed his fingers. He reached for his phone then, held it right up to his face. For a moment Patrick thought he could see down into the canyons of Hobbes' face like topographical graffiti. Wondered what he'd find the deeper he went, and, surprisingly, felt intrigued by the prospect.

"Guess what I'm saying is, if you can't write, do something worth being written about, yeah?"



The morning after Patrick received the first video starring Mister Johannes from down the street, Hobbes sent another — short, just five seconds of him puppeteering Mister Johannes' lifeless face and wrenched-open jaw. Said in a faux-Kermit voice, "You know, you should say something back one of these days or I'm gonna think you don't like me very much."

Later that night, Patrick, from the landing at the top of the stairs, stealthily recorded a video of his parents screeching at one another downstairs, hurling obscenities like it was a sport — complaints about finances, how long it'd been since his dad had been able to keep a job, et goddamn cetera. Without thinking, he sent the video to Hobbes. The mountain replied minutes later with a video of his own.

"Sounds like you've got yourself a monster infestation." Hobbes affected a drab Southern drawl that didn't work with his natural baritone — like a country bumpkin lost in a deep cave. "Them's the sort of thing you need to take care of good and quick, before it spreads. I can help, if you wan—"

Patrick deleted the video, paused, and then quickly deleted all the others. No. He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't go *there*. His palms sweated at the idea. There were simply some lines he wasn't willing to cross. Some thoughts he would not dare entertain.

More texts: *Who is it?*

Who's fighting?

Do you want me to come over?

Patrick responded to that last one. *No, definitely not. It's fine. I'm fine.*

Friendships are based on trust, kid.

Patrick.

Patrick Ellis of Amble Wood Drive.

Please, Patrick typed. Don't.

He watched, anxiety daggering his heart like an entire hive of bees all attacking the same target, the bouncing ellipsis of an incoming text that never came. Eventually, he put his phone on the nightstand next to his bed. Turned it face down. Slipped it into the drawer.

Put a pillow over his head and tried — and failed — to sleep. His mind was a tangle of weeds and vines that had grown over every exit.



Friends don't have secrets.

Friends should be able to tell each other everything.

Friendship is magic, Patrick.

At that, Hobbes linked to a YouTube video — the theme song for *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Patrick let it play for all of fifteen seconds before having had enough.

Why, they would ask — a mythical they, a curious someone Patrick imagined grilling him with an interrogation lamp scalding his face — didn't you put a stop to this? Why didn't you tell someone? Why did you keep watching?

Because he knew where I lived, he would say, repeatedly, until he believed it. *Because he knew my name.*

Because he knew where I went to school.

The next day, the face in the video was someone familiar — this kid in Patrick's grade named Derrick McTaggart. This arrogant fuckstick who liked to sing Sugar Ray's *Fly* at Patrick while shoving him up against a row of lockers. Patrick watched, a mix of horror and undeniable — fascination? Excitement? — as Hobbes placed Derrick's head between the two halves of a vise and started to turn the crank. Even hummed a little ditty as he worked. A little *Friendship is Magic* as Derrick screamed and started to bleed through his pores. One of his eyes burst out of its cracked socket with a cartoon *pop* like when you jammed your finger against the inside of your cheek and pulled it out again.

By the end of the video, Patrick's heart was racing. It wasn't like the first time, though, when he wasn't sure what to expect. This time, the way his insides jumped at the image of his bully brained and lifeless...

Hobbes walked out of frame, leaving Derrick's body just... hanging there, limp, head still in the vise. There was no movement for maybe ten seconds. Patrick was about to stop the video when Hobbes reappeared, an up-close shot of just his hands as he turned a grungy off-white towel brownish-red.

"You gotta share with me, kid. That's how this works. If you don't tell me who the monsters are, I'm just gonna have to whittle down the list myself."

"Why are you doing this?" Patrick shouted.

And as if, somehow, impossibly, Hobbes had heard him, the mountain added, "Because friends don't let friends fight alone."



For the rest of the week there was a new video — and a new body — every single day. Two of them Patrick recognized from school, though not from his grade. The others, both older, he'd never seen before. For the briefest of seconds, he considered asking his parents if they knew either of the two older victims. How fun that would be, he realized, trying to explain to them the body count saved to his phone.

He was ready to record a new video for Hobbes, to tell him everything, to...

Instead, nervously, he said, "I like to write, too. That is... I think I do... I like screenplays. I want to be a screenwriter."

He stopped recording, not sure what else to say or why he'd said that in the first place. *It's something*, he thought. *Maybe it'll get him to stop*. He texted the video to Hobbes, who replied right away:

Thanks for sharing, but that ain't what I asked.

Stop this, please, Patrick begged. *Before people start to ask questions.*

Tell me what I want to hear. Who're your monsters?

I'm sharing with you. Isn't that enough?

This is act three, kid. Cut. Print.

Then Hobbes sent a dozen cry-laughing emojis.

Hobbes. No more.

One star, kid. I thought you were smarter than this. This isn't how a good story ends. You wanna be a writer, you really oughtta know that.



Patrick didn't respond to Hobbes' last text. He put his phone back in his nightstand drawer and tried not to think about him at all — where he was, what he might do. He thought he'd succeeded, too, until he rolled over one night and found the mountain inexplicably in his room, towering over the foot of his bed with a naked body of a young woman on the floor by his gargantuan feet. Patrick jumped back but didn't make a sound, was not going to, even when Hobbes put a machete to his lips to signal for quiet. Patrick looked around to see how Hobbes had gotten inside — the window was closed and too small for a man of his girth, and the door to his room was locked from the inside. It should have been impossible, but there he was — and he'd brought along a project.

Hobbes pulled out his phone and started typing. Glared at Patrick as he did.

Patrick's phone buzzed inside his nightstand. Staring at Hobbes, pants-shittingly terrified and not wanting to look away, he reached to the side and, fumbling with the drawer, retrieved his phone. Glanced at the screen — two new texts:

If you won't tell me who they are

You'll have to take care of things yourself.

Patrick shook his head. More typing:

Monsters are real, Patrick.

I see them every day.

I hear them.

Then, from down the hall: a gentle sobbing.

Hobbes moved for the bedroom door, surprisingly silent for a man his size and scope. Patrick lunged forward, knelt at the end of his bed and touched Hobbes' arm. Shook his head. Mouthed, *Please, no.*

Hobbes nodded. Grabbed Patrick's left wrist and thrust the machete handle into his open palm. Held it there, tight, until Patrick made a fist around the blade's handle. He climbed down off his bed then and, heart in his throat, crouched next to the pale, lifeless woman whose face he couldn't have recognized had she still had one. He hadn't known her, and, like the others, had no idea why Hobbes had singled her out for elimination — if she was one of his monsters, or, more likely, he one of hers. But, right then, pressed with the reality of the situation, of something no longer hidden by a touchscreen, it didn't matter. He knew the mountain's mercy was not something so easily cast aside. He allowed Hobbes to guide his hand for the first cut, a ragged slice through the tough meat of the woman's shoulder blade. He felt Hobbes let go then, and knew, clearly, the full weight of the mountain's expectations.

Hobbes stood back as Patrick worked and started filming. Whispered just loud enough for Patrick to hear: "You're gonna wanna take a shower after this. The blood never washes off, not really. But it's easy enough to hide."



Later that night, having passed out from exhaustion and terror, Patrick dreamed of a desert. He didn't know its location or how he got there, only that it was vast and somehow unending. No matter which way he ran, the sun continued to rise directly in front of him. However, it never rose high enough to touch the sky: before it was halfway up a shadow appeared between he and it, a massive head climbing over the horizon like an eclipse come to Earth. He watched as a colossus of stone and flesh erupted out of the ground, pushing up massive hunks of dirt and rock as it left a hole there, straight through to the centre of the Earth. It clawed its way up out of the sand until its body had wiped out the sun, and all light, from existence. The mountain staggered forward then, and Patrick realized there was nowhere he could run. He imagined killing it, somehow, climbing to its top, scaling footholds and tufts of hair jutting out between the boulders of its legs and arms and torso until reaching its head and gouging out one or both of its eyes. Clambering into its mouth and shoving its python of a tongue all the way back down its throat.

He wondered, were he to succeed, if its body would crack and break and, as it fell to the ground, crush him beneath its considerable weight.



Patrick woke up the next morning and all evidence of the previous night's crimes had vanished. He couldn't recall the clean-up effort, or even how and when Hobbes had left. A week passed without word from the mountain. Then another. Gradually, Patrick allowed himself to believe that it was over, that he was, at last, in the clear.

"Come on," his father said one day. "I need to go to the hardware store to get a few things. Could use some help carrying shit back to the truck."

They arrived at the Home Depot twenty minutes later. Patrick jumped out of his dad's truck and stared out across the wide, mostly empty parking lot. He trailed a little behind his father as they headed inside. Stopped when his phone vibrated in his pocket. Pulled it out and checked. Hobbes had sent a message. A new video.

Reluctantly, Patrick swiped and pressed play, and... watched himself, from behind, walking through the Home Depot parking lot. He spun and immediately saw Hobbes, maybe fifty feet away, with a shopping cart filled with gardening shears and a gas-powered hedge clipper and pliers and screwdrivers of a dozen different sizes. He nodded at Patrick as if to say, *Look again*. Patrick watched the video a second time, noting that it was filmed just a little bit off centre; that the frame drifted from Patrick to his father, walking only a few feet ahead.

Two texts:

Monsters. Everywhere.

Cut. Print.

Patrick glanced up again, but Hobbes was already walking away with his purchases. He waited until Hobbes had packed up his car and driven away before turning back around and jogging, running, hurrying to catch up with his father.

He would never see the mountain again, not in person, though his words rang clear every time his hands started to itch:

The blood never washes off, not really. But it's easy enough to hide.

Goat Cheese

Clint Collins

Clint Collins's fiction can be found in the very first Horror Writers Association anthology, Under the Fang, and in other anthologies such as Fifty Shades of Decay, Bill of Frights, Cthulhurotica, Haunted, and Transformed. Clint also co-edited the anthology Snowpocalypse, featuring stories of an endless winter. Having been an editor for both the US government and private industry, Clint now lives in Indiana, a state where ghosts patiently wait in abandoned farmhouses and mysterious rituals occur deep in late-summer cornfields.

The bell over the door to the Dionysus Wine and Cheese Shop tinkled and Nikkos looked up from his inventory list to see a smiling young woman, blonde and mercilessly curvaceous, come into the store. He caught her scent before seeing her and returned her smile. It was the height of summer – when his cool white wines and Brie, Camembert, and Gouda cheeses were off to patios and balconies throughout the city – and he was grateful for the short dresses and offerings of cleavage his female customers brought into the store.

“Welcome, how may I help you today?”

Nikkos watched the jellied trembling of her bosom as she walked to the main counter. He breathed her in again. Beneath his long apron, his manhood stirred. There was promise with this one.

“Hi,” she said, folding slim arms on the counter, allowing him a generous view of dairy-white bosom. “I gotta bring some really good wine and some really good cheese to my girlfriend’s party. We’re doing this wine and cheese contest thing and I came all the way into downtown ‘cuz I heard you have the best selection, and you’re gonna help me win!”

She pointed at him for emphasis and laughed. She had also come all the way downtown as she heard a handsome man from the Mediterranean was the owner. True enough, the dark curly hair, trimmed mustache and goatee, and swarthy good looks matched the whispered description. His slightly musky cologne brought a tingle to her belly.

Nikkos laughed, too. She was close enough he could tell from the sweetness of her breath she was ready to make love. He was aching hard now and he would have to have this one.

“Well,” he said, gently patting her hand, feeling the heat of want and desire rise from her skin, “I will certainly do what I can.” He put out his hand. “I am Nikkos.”

“Ryanne,” she said, shaking his hand. “Um, if you're not out of it, I was told you might have something really special. Black Goat?” She still held his hand and pressed her thighs together, hoping the stories were true.

Nikkos nodded. “The Black Goat? Yes, still a little left. How did you hear of it?”

The woman swept back long blonde hair. “My friend Lyla told me about it. Said it would be a hit at the party.”

Nikkos smiled, remembering the redhead and the way she moaned. “Indeed, it will. Please follow me into the Tasting Room.”

After pressing a button underneath the counter, locking the entrance and turning off the “Open” sign, Nikkos unlocked a door in the rear, revealing a small windowless room with black shag carpet and a red leather loveseat. Pictures of hilly vineyards and Greek islands floating in bright blue seas adorned the walls. There was also a small refrigerator, and Nikkos took out a plate of cheese and a bottle of wine.

“This,” he said, “is a fine cheese of the Black Goat. I think you will find it most

interesting. But first, a sip of this.” He poured her a glass of Sauvignon blanc and gave her a slice of the pungent white cheese on a small plate. “But let me warn you, it is definitely something of an aphrodisiac.”

“I guess we’ll see about that.” Ryanne took a bite, smiling like Eve with her apple.

After swallowing the last creamy piece, the woman licked her lips and simply looked at him, a small flush blooming on her cheeks as her nipples eagerly rose against thin fabric.

“Oh wow.” Ryanne ran her hands slowly down her breasts, belly, and thighs. “Lyla wasn’t kidding about the cheese.”

She placed her hands on his chest and looked into his eyes.

“I really want to fuck you.” Her arms snaked around his neck. “Do me like you did Lyla. She told me all about it. Said she still gets so wet thinking about it.”

Nikkos undid his apron, letting it fall to the carpet, exposing for the first time his woolly satyr’s legs and cloven hooves.



And an enormous erection.

“Take me in your mouth.” Nikkos unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a hairy and muscular chest.

The young woman fell to her knees on the carpet and, hands gripping the shaggy thighs, put red lips around the uncircumcised head and sucked as if gasping for air. It was a pleasure she rarely gave her boyfriend, but now she wanted all of him throbbing behind her lips.

Nikkos grunted as her tongue worked at his hardness and put both hands on her head, driving his cock into the tight and clenching pussy of her throat. The satyr held his balls against her mouth until she gagged, then slowly withdrew. She looked at him with watering eyes and held up her arms as he pulled off the low-cut summer blouse.

“Take everything off,” he said, pulling her to her feet.

“Give me more of that fucking cheese first.”

After Nikkos put another small slice onto her pink tongue, Ryanne undid her bra, releasing the warm cornucopia of her D-cups into his hands. She cried out as the satyr

suckled her, her fingers clutching curly hair, then discovering the pointed ears and the nubs of two small horns that had sprouted along with his erection.

Once her shorts and panties had slid down and off the smooth, closely shaven legs, Nikkos knelt and kissed her inner thighs, then flicked a wide tongue in and around her vulva. Standing on tiptoe, legs now widely spread, Ryanne gripped his horns and rubbed her crotch against a devouring mouth, soaking his beard with the slick honey of her intimate juices.

Her body still shivering from the orgasm his tongue gifted her, Nikkos gently lay his customer on the carpet and put satin legs on his shoulders. "Time for you to be claimed, my sweet one," whispered the satyr, and slowly eased himself into her.

Ryanne's eyes went wide, then closed. She had been with many men, but no one ever filled and stretched her like this. Gasping, she squeezed his strong arms and came again with a long groan as the head of the massive goat-cock sank deeper until it pressed firmly at the waiting mouth of her womb.

"I claim thee as a sacred vessel in the name of Dionysus," breathed Nikkos.

into the glowing face of the young woman. With a grunt, the satyr began a vigorous thrusting and Ryanne held her full and wobbling breasts in her hands, red nipples still sore from his mouth. No one had ever fucked her this hard, and she never wanted it to stop.

Nikkos withdrew his member, oiled, slippery, and glistening, and gently turned Ryanne so her knees and elbows rested comfortably on the black shag carpet which had witnessed innumerable unions.

Ryanne came again as the satyr entered her from behind with a single deep thrust, heavy balls hot and snug against her skin. Nikkos reached over and grabbed the slender wrists and pulled them back along her sides, lifting Ryanne's head and breasts high off the floor. Gathering her wrists in one hand and her long blonde hair in the other, the satyr drew back Ryanne's head, making her seem like a bare-breasted mermaid prow on a seafaring frigate.

Nikkos flexed his long goat-cock seven times, swallowed whole by a pussy that answered with tight squeezes. Head and arms pulled back like a prisoner of love, Ryanne kept time with the fierce pounding of her sex with staccato "uh-uh-uhs" until Nikkos groaned out something in ancient Greek and came with a shout as the heated wash of goat-seed surged deep inside her. The combination of satyr-spunk and Black Goat cheese would keep her fucking three times a day until the next new moon.

After Nikkos released her and slowly backed out his swollen and throbbing cock, Ryanne lay quivering on the floor, vagina still clutching and pulsing, drooling thick satyr semen.

"I fucking love that cheese," she breathed.

Nikkos gave her a tender kiss on warm lips. "From the herd of Dionysus's sacred black goats. Just for you, my love." His mouth next found her breasts and then her belly, where his seed streamed like fleets of white-sailed ships to the beckoning Troy of her womb.

"More," she said, and turned with closed eyes to suckle the goat-cock offered to her. Though somewhat bitter, the goat-sperm had a hint of the cheese's flavor. "I want a fucking pound of it."

Nikkos put a kiss between breasts damp and glistening. "As your friend Lyla knows, the cheese is free. But would you consider giving yourself to me again?"

“You got yourself a deal, Nicky.”

Before RYanne left the shop with a thick package of Black Goat and three bottles of his best wine, she filled out an entry form for an all-expenses-paid trip to a Greek island. It was a small isle in the Aegean Sea given by Zeus to his son Dionysus especially for his revelries. She was already a winner. Nikkos had written her name in a small book under the counter, including her among many other winners. There she would meet and, of course, have sex with Dionysus himself and his retinue of satyrs and nymphs.

Some only stayed for the two-week trip, others longer. A few never left.

After a long shower, washing away the scent of passion, Nikkos reopened the shop. Only three more for the trip and he could return to the island himself, with another satyr taking his place. He enjoyed sex with lovely mortal women but missed the island winds and the shadowy grottoes where pale nymphs waited for him with harps, wine, cheese, and their soft bodies.

Soon, a shapely brunette came through the door. A cropped white halter top pulled a taut crease over a neatly firm bosom, revealing a pierced belly button. She walked confidently up to the cheese display in high-heeled sandals. Nikkos could already feel the long, tanned legs on his shoulders.

A pink tongue played slowly along a full lower lip before she spoke. “I’ve been told you have a wonderful cheese here. Black Goat, isn’t it? Any chance I could sample it?”

Nikkos nodded, already erect, smelling an intoxicating desire. “Oh, indeed! It’s an experience I am most eager to share.” The satyr handed her a pencil. “And please enter our contest. I would love to see you on our island.”

Later, after another shower, Nikkos sold more wine and cheese to his regulars for the upcoming weekend and was about to close when a woman came through the door. Despite the heat, she wore a long white dress.

Nikkos sniffed and rubbed his nose. Something strange and different burned the air. He breathed in deeply and the sharp and acrid scent of unrelenting chastity watered his eyes. This was not going to be good.

The woman came up to his counter. “Nikkos, I am Kathara, one of Hestia’s handmaidens.” The pale dress clung jealously to her curves and she seemed ecstasy invited, yet Nikkos knew she represented ecstasy denied.

“I am honored to have a chaste servant of the virgin goddess in my shop.” Nikkos bowed his head. “How may I be of service?”

Kathara folded her hands on the counter. “Hestia has sent me as a messenger from the gods. The activities of Dionysus with mortals has become problematic for them.”

The satyr cocked his head. “How so, if I may ask?”

The virgin smiled without warmth. “Reports of missing women prompted the Greek authorities to send a police boat to a certain island where the women were last seen heading.”

Nikkos nodded. It wasn’t uncommon for tourists to try to explore the island. A mortal woman was usually sent to tell them it was private property. “What did the police find?”

“Nothing, of course. The satyrs picked up their scent miles before they arrived. Enough time for everyone to hide and for some of the women to meet them and tell them they were fine.”

Nikkos smiled. “So, everything worked out?”

Kathara shook her head. “Not exactly. The police went away, but the gods are displeased with the interaction with these mortals. It attracts too much attention and you never know what these women might say. The gods don’t wish to be discovered.”

Nikkos shifted his weight and leaned on the counter. “Those that wish to leave are given a drink erasing all memories of the island – waking up in a very nice hotel room in Thessaloniki, first-class plane ticket in their purse.”

The virgin laughed. “The gods are more concerned about what they might say before they come to the island. More boats show up every week and we both know there will come a time when the satyrs are too busy with sex and wine to scent an arrival. It’s just a matter of time, and the gods will suffer no risks.”

Nikkos wiped his hands on his apron. “What have the gods decided?”

Kathara looked over her shoulder at the door. “Lock this place up and get us a bottle of wine.”

After taking a sip of the best Greek red he had on hand, Kathara tapped a place on a framed map of the Greek islands in the Tasting Room. “Here, just south of Skyros. Dionysus and all his nymphs and satyrs. The prison island of Philaki. A year there and then back to the island with no outside contact allowed.” Her finger slid up to northern Greece. “The few mortal women, like you said, woke up in Thessaloniki.”

Nikkos joined her by the large map on the wall. Something had changed about her scent. “I’ve heard of it. Spells keep it undiscovered and off any map.” Philaki was barren and rocky with underground cells guarded by eunuchs. A nymph’s charms would be useless there.

The satyr turned to face Hestia’s handmaiden. “So... what of me? Are you here to send me to Philaki as well? Or am I condemned to playing panpipes in the subway?”

Kathara took a seat on the lust-red loveseat and crossed long legs that had yet to open for any man. “That’s for you to decide. I have a plan that might be satisfactory to you.”

Nikkos took a slow sip. “I’m listening.” Her scent had definitely changed.

“After the police came, I was sent to the island to investigate. I had never seen satyrs with nymphs before. I want that now. No one fucks like a satyr and you’re the only one not in jail.”

Her scent was now one of desire. “I’d like it to stay that way. What do you have in mind?”

The virgin leaned back into the loveseat. “You haven’t asked about the goats.”

“I imagine they were slaughtered.”

“Dionysus feared the same. He knew punishment was coming. He allowed me to take them off the island. The entire herd is now happily grazing at an upstate farm.”

Nikkos bowed his head. “Thank you.”

“You will be safe, too, but it will require some changes.”

Nikkos crossed his arms. “Changes?”

Kathara put her wine glass on a side table and walked over to the satyr. "I need this for a moment," she said, taking his glass and setting it out of the way.

She turned to face him. "Nikkos, the gods gave me a one-time power to punish you. I'm sorry, but I have to do this."

The virgin spoke some words in ancient Greek and swept her arm at waist-level.

Nikkos dropped to the floor, hooves suddenly expanding into feet, the vanished shaggy hair revealing bare legs.

"The gods wanted you dead, Nikkos. I think this was the better option, don't you?"

The former satyr slid his hand under his apron and breathed a sigh of relief.

Kathara laughed. "No more pointed ears or horns, but I altered the spell so you could keep that amazing goat-cock. I wasn't going to lose that."

Sitting, Nikkos flexed his feet. Toes were such strange things. "Now what?"

The virgin knelt beside him, bringing their wine. "Only I know the location of this shop. No one will come looking for you. If they do, they won't find a satyr. You can go on as before – with me as your partner."

Nikkos took a long sip. "And what about you? Won't they come looking for you?"

Kathara played her fingers along his bare thigh. "The virgins of this goddess are rarely allowed into the outside world. They don't expect us to return." She reached under his apron and gently explored the member she had saved. "Anyway, if I return and I'm not a virgin, I would be buried alive." She gave the thick shaft a light squeeze. "None of us ever return to Olympus. I certainly won't."

Nikkos spent the next few minutes teaching the handmaiden how to kiss while she learned just how to stroke his erect goat-cock. After her tongue left his mouth, Kathara whispered into his ear. "I do need a favor, dear Nikkos."

The former satyr kissed her hands, grateful to be alive and not in an underground cell. "Whatever the co-owner of the Dionysus Wine and Cheese Shop wants, I will do it for her."

Kathara took his hands, kissed the palms, and placed them on untouched breasts. "Rid me of this accursed virginity."

Unwilling to test his new feet, Nikkos turned and crawled over to the small refrigerator, returning with a large slice of pungent cheese. "Since you're going to be selling it, you really ought to try some Black Goat. I think you'll like it."

Kathara began slipping off her shoes.