

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Fifteen – Autumn 2017 – Different Lives

Tigershark Magazine

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Different Lives

Editorial

Everyone is different, but we don't always see that much diversity in print. The aim of this issue – perhaps not quite as successful as it might have been – is to include pieces from around the world revealing different lives. I think you will be entertained and informed. I may try a similar theme next year (I haven't finalised on any yet, so, if you have a suggestion, drop me an email), but would also like to remind all potential contributors that I'm always interested in receiving submissions from anyone anywhere in the world and featuring all sorts of characters, cultures and locations, regardless of the topic, and am always happy to consider unthemed work. So, if you have a story, poem or article, don't worry if we haven't featured anything like it before, send it along.

Contributors are invited to submit a bio for inclusion on the Tigershark website and your comments on the issue are welcome.

Best, DS Davidson

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Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Next Issue's Theme:

The Mythos

Cthulhu Mythos, Yellow Mythos, any Mythos you like...

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*Cover and internal artwork courtesy of Pixabay.com
except photos supplied by Yukimuli and Susan Fedorko*

none expected
the invading aliens
to attack with swords

By Denny E. Marshall

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Boring Vacation

By Denny E. Marshall

Craig’s teenage daughters didn’t want to go on the trip. “How lame.” Said his daughter Kelly. “It’s like totally boring.” Adds his other daughter Kristy. “Get in the vehicle and stop complaining.” Said Craig. “You heard your father.” Said their mom.

They take off in spaceship and drive towards earth.



A Snapshot of Society

By Mark Hudson

It started out Sunday when my dad's new wife Jane said, "I went to a Walgreens around here, and I met their best employee I've ever seen, ever. She had a kind word for every single person, nothing negative to say about anybody. I'm going to write a letter to her boss, and tell them what an asset she is to the company."

Then last night I heard a lady say, "I'm a retired teacher, and I volunteer in a bear shelter in Minnesota. There were these teenage volunteers who were bugging me, but I thought, 'who am I to not like anybody?' so I've been praying for them."

Today was a weird day for me, though. I went to the post office and the line was super long, and I had to mail just one letter. So I went to a thrift store, and my neighbor's mother was berating the thrift store owner, showing lack of compassion. She was saying, "This stuff is dirty, you could find better stuff in Wilmette."

Then I went back to my apartment, and a dog urinated in the elevator, and someone lost their shoe in the same elevator. And the police were in the building, and something was going on with the neighbors I have on the second floor, what, I don't know. But I was getting into the urine-stained elevator, and was greeted by cops who said, "Hello."

Then I had to send a document to one of my publishers, and it wouldn't work from my laptop.

So I had to go to the library by my house, and I found out the main library in downtown Evanston was closed because their electricity was out. There was a librarian working who could've used some compassion.

The computers were messed up and slow, and the librarian had to work the phones, answer questions, and one lady was complaining about her computer working slow. She was going to astrology websites, so I thought a psychic was sending the library viruses. And only by writing this poem, have I regained compassion.

The Last Time I Ever Saw Jean Cocteau

By Jeffrey Zable

Walking with Jean Cocteau and his pet lobster that he kept on a leash, I noticed from time to time he would spit on crustacean's head, and when I asked him about it he said, "It makes him think he's in his native habitat, otherwise he would expire before I got him back in the tub."

And when I asked him if he ever ate lobster, his expression became hostile and he responded, "Would you eat your mother! Your father! Your sister! Your brother!"

After that he was silent all the way back to his apartment, and when I said, "A bientot!" he responded, "Adieu!"

That was the last time I ever saw him in this lifetime.

The Conversation

By DJ Tyrer

“Daniel, we need to talk; the school called again to say that you’ve been having trouble in class. Will you speak to me, tell me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Are you being bullied? Is that it?”

He just turned his head away, said nothing.

“If you don’t tell me what’s wrong, I can’t help you. You know you can tell me anything.”

Her face was anguished. “Why won’t you talk to me?”

“I can’t, mum. I just can’t.”

“Please, tell me, Daniel; I want to help you.”

“Okay... I don’t know how to tell you this...”

“What is it? Is someone hurting you?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’m not what you think.”

“Huh? You’re not gay are you?”

“No! No, I’m not. I’m... I’m, well, in my mind, I’m a girl, not a boy. I’m a girl in a boy’s body. I was born a boy, but I should have been born a girl.”

“What? That makes no sense!”

“Yes, it does, mum. This body makes no sense,”

“Is this my fault? Did I do something wrong? Not do something? I don’t understand. Is it because your dad died? Please, explain!”

“No, mum, I was born like this. I can’t recall a time I ever felt like a boy. It isn’t something that you’ve done or that anything has caused. It’s just how I am. It’s who I am and I don’t want to have to hide it away anymore. I can accept it; can you?”

Ends

hundred miles
above earth
last breath

bridge you hide under
felt safe, did not know it was
rocket exhaust vent

Both By Denny E. Marshall

Dreamscape

By Jeffrey Zable

It was like being in a cubist painting. It was the perfect place for mountain goats except there were only humans wandering around here and there. We knew instinctually that we were not allowed to speak to each other, so we passed each other with little more than expressions of sadness. I wandered from place to place with great effort and realized that in some instances I had been there before, only the place was just a fragment of what I remembered. Finally I recognized a girl I once played with in my childhood. I tried to remember at what point I lost contact with her, whether it was because she moved away or because we just no longer had interest in each other. I followed her for a short distance and when she stopped on a flat surface, I climbed up and stood in front of her. "Don't we know each other?" I said to her while looking her in the eyes. Staring back at me with a blank expression, she didn't say a word, and after a few seconds she turned away, jumped onto a different surface, and kept on going. As I was about to leave, a stone came out of nowhere and hit me right in the center of my forehead. It hit me with such force that I fell backwards and lay there bleeding and in pain. All I could do was watch the people passing by me, who did so without any acknowledgement. I wondered if I'd ever see a familiar face again in my lifetime, and if I'd take another chance of speaking to him or her. . .

*First appeared in **Brazenhead** (2015)*



Words

By Aeronwy Dafies

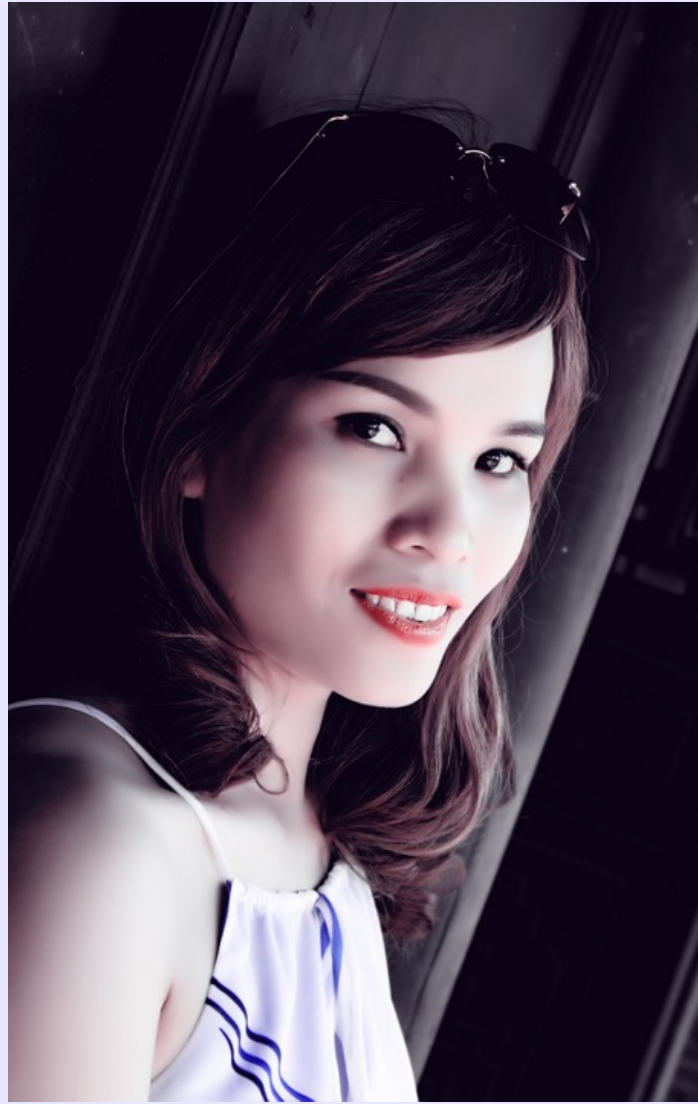
Words
Fill the pages
Filled with ideas
And thoughts

Words
Flow swiftly
Flow like a river
Or flood

Words
Make me laugh
Words
Make me cry
Words
Define my life
Words

Words
Are truth
They lie to me
Deceiving

Words
Created
They Create
Gloriously



*Previously published in **I Close My Eyes** (Atlantean Publishing)*



I Could Be a Great Dad

By Alexa Albanese

I lived in suite G12 in Julie Hall (RIP) at my alma mater, Emmanuel College, for two years. There, my roommates and I started a ‘quote wall’ tradition, where any quips, pick-up lines, or excerpts of drunken stupor could and would be used against any guest or resident. I made that wall several times, mostly with my ‘dad jokes’ that were sometimes intentional, but more often than not, something that popped into my head and left my mouth too quickly. When we weren’t immortalizing the humor or temporary denseness of one of our friends, we were huddled together on an old couch, watching sitcoms.

Friends was the go-to, which was fine by me because it’s still my #1. Naturally, if one character had a quirk eerily similar to one of our friends, there would be a brief, shifted gaze towards that person. There were several Phoebe Buffay moments where the similarities to my friend, Eimile, would be instantly recognizable. Our honorary roommate, Darren, matched Joey Tribbiani’s boyish charm and appetite. I consistently fit into this puzzle as Chandler Bing, the (hopefully) lovable ‘funny man’ with exuberant gestures. Don’t get me wrong: I pride myself on that resemblance, 95% of the time, but this observation led to other comparisons spanned across several friend groups. Other characters I have been compared to include Marshall Eriksen, Phil Dunphy, and Bob Belcher. Sometimes, Peppermint Patty or a cartoon dog get thrown in the mix, but mostly, I’m seen as a goofy, TV dad.

Sure, I’m a twenty-two year old woman, but it makes plenty of sense to me. Growing up, instead of putting toilet paper on my head as a veil, I cut a boutonnière out of construction paper and attempted to tie one of my grandfather’s ties. I consistently related to the Disney prince rather than the princess, and knew that when I got older, I wanted to be the kind of brave romantic depicted in those classics. It wasn’t because I wanted to be a boy. I simply wanted to be the one that made another person that happy, and I knew those were the qualities I’d strive for.

Over the years, after dating both men and (secretly) women that I had sincere feelings for, what I learned at a young age led to the realization that I needed to deal with: I ultimately pictured myself with a woman. For simplicity’s sake, I knew I was pretty gay. That was only a problem on two occasions. The first was middle school, when I was just starting to put all of this together, and when my first crush on a girl happened to develop. Ironically, I never actually like-liked any of the girls I went to middle school with. The aforementioned crush was Emmy Rossum as Christine in the 2004 *The Phantom of the Opera* film. Sure, I didn’t help my case because I was obsessed with sports, wore boy’s uniform pants (although I’ll point out that became cool in high school, but I never knew how to wear them the cool way), and generally got along better with boys. When I did try to get closer with girls, it was apparently because I had a crush on them. In retrospect, that was an early sign of my Chandler Bing-esque social anxiety working its magic.

The second time was more recently than I’d care to admit, during the race for the 2016 Republican nomination, and subsequent election of Donald Trump. I’ll admit that when the campaigning began, I watched the race the way I assume most people keep up with the Kardashians, but I remained optimistic. Maybe the words ‘conversion therapy’ still being used in a sentence would appall the average, vaguely compassionate American. Maybe someone like Ben Carson, who previously compared homosexuality to bestiality, wouldn’t be taken

seriously as a candidate. Maybe voters would realize that a soon-to-be vice president couldn't make a logical claim on the sanctity of marriage after rooting for a twice thrice-married man linked to affairs and sexual assault. Then, Trump won.

'Conversion therapy' still exists. People attempted to boycott the live action *Beauty and the Beast*, not because of the hinted bestiality (that shit's hetero), but because of the millisecond Disney dedicated to being LGBT inclusive. Those issues would still be on the table regardless of the presidential election, but the fact that a party backing these acts of bigotry won could be taken as an excuse for them to remain acceptable. What's worse, these acts have been supported in the name of God.

Christianity was founded on the basis of one man who moved the world by healing those no one else would dare touch, dining with tax collectors, and emphasizing that the most important duty as his follower was to love your neighbor. In Matthew 4, Jesus is tempted three times by Satan. He tests Jesus' miraculous abilities, leads him to the top of the temple and asks him to jump, and promises him almighty power if he worshipped the devil. Interestingly enough, Satan attempts to coerce Jesus by quoting none other than the Bible. Weird, yes? How the spawn of evil itself could think of twisting Scripture for his own gain? Jesus' response to each trial is an opposing excerpt from the text, and the devil inevitably loses.

We can all play that game. Ted Cruz and I could spit Romans 1:27 and Galatians 5:14 back at each other until the end of time. There is comfort in knowing that quotes from the most revered book in history could be applicable to your beliefs. It ensures that you're doing something right. However, bigotry is shrouded in fear, and strengthened by generations of filling children's heads with this hateful mindset. I shudder at the idea that the people who love the same God that I do would want to put this much effort into preventing me from having a family. I want the privilege of being awestruck when my future wife walks down the aisle, and maybe I'll even want children of my own. Part of me has always felt subpar because I assumed I would be the father-type figure in my future family dynamic, and I'd never want my loved ones to suffer because of others' prejudices. Hopefully my children get bullied in middle school because they're dorks, and not because both of their parents are women. Of course, I'll never be a father, but I could be a great dad.

Ends



Dives

By Christopher Woods

Heat was all around them, and there was no breeze. Above them and the swimming pool, a white hot sun loomed. It was early afternoon. He knew it would happen soon. She would make sure of it.

At times he felt like their small and randy pilgrimages to municipal pools would never end. He had become increasingly paranoid about the visits. But for now, he did not wish them to end. There was a lure about it all. And she, always the stronger of the two, would only smile at him if he ever chose to complain. In this way, they were a team.

"I don't know about this," he told her. "Suppose..."

"What is it now?" she asked. "It's always something," she added sarcastically as she stretched in a chaise lounge.

"It's nothing," he said.

"It's always nothing," she said with a sneer. But he could not see her eyes behind her dark glasses.

His own eyes, also hidden, scoured the pool and the people in it. The water's surface seemed electric as sunlight glowed on the small blue waves between swimmers. He was bemoaning the fact that he had never learned to dive. He believed there were things, perhaps faults, which prevented a person from becoming whole. Here he was, almost middle-aged and his hair already thinning, and he still could not dive. He watched the divers taking turns.

"So easy for some," he said to no one in particular. Then, to her, "You know, I'd rather not be here right now. We were here last week."

Of course he would say that, she thought to herself. He was always such a whiner. She watched him, watching the divers. She knew it was more than envy on his part.

And what did she think? She imagined that diving was just another way of passing the time. Up and down, up and down, she found nothing remarkable about them. Their sleek bodies, yes. The matter of youth. And she knew that their taste, as a pair, in very young men, boys really, worried him. He feared arrest. She often laughed at his fear, at all his fears really. He was a frightened man, and a weak one, she often reminded him.

And although divers as a group failed to impress her, she did have a very healthy respect for people who traveled in water. For swimmers, particularly the long distance kind.

"Someone might recognize us from last week," he said. He knew full well she had no intention of leaving, but he was getting nervous.

She refused to answer him. Now she was thinking of bays and channels. Specifically, she was thinking of the English Channel. Then, somewhere in the blue depths of her memory, she recalled the story of a young woman who attempted to swim from Cuba to Florida. Oh, she couldn't remember that woman's name, but that was not the point. What mattered was that the woman didn't succeed. Something had happened, gone wrong.

Maybe the woman became too tired to continue. But when she emerged from the water, her body was covered with jellyfish stings and her lips were blue.

This memory was clear, courtesy of television. And although she did not know the woman with blue lips, and in fact would never meet her, she was so sorry that the woman had failed. Swimmers, she thought, a smile on her face. All swimmers. A healthy respect is what she felt for them all.

"Look at them," he said, mesmerized by the young divers. "Watch them. Something as simple as that. In the air. The arc of grace."

"Oh yes," she said. "You really like that stuff, don't you?" Her voice was now suddenly husky.

"Don't make fun of me," he said, his own throat dry now.

What they had between them now was desire, pure and simple.

"Why not? You know how I feel about swimmers. Any swimmer, really. Even divers must swim, don't you agree? Even *your* divers."

"They don't belong to anyone. Not to me or to you. Maybe to the sun. Or the water. But not to us. Never," he said, and his eyes welled with tears.

"Maybe they do for an afternoon. For a price."

"Go on," he said, suddenly sad. "Make your selection."

"I will," she said. "You know I will."

She surveyed the pool and the bodies inside it with a fresh determination. She was looking for someone, well, appropriate. He no longer watched the pool. Instead he watched her face, and awaited her final decision.

"Then do it," he said.

"I am. You know how I like to take my time. Remember, I'm deciding for both of us."

"I know that."

"Oh, why not a diver?" she asked. "Would you like that?"

"Not a diver, please," he said. For him, a diver was too spiritual, too close to his idea of God. Somehow, having a diver merely for sex was blasphemy. But, he also knew he was powerless, against her, and his own desires. She knew this all too well. They had been a team for a long time.

"Yes, I think a diver," she said, now stroking her thighs. "What was it you said, the arc of grace?"
Yes, a diver would be perfect. You don't mind, really, do you?"

What could he possibly say? That he did mind? That this was one of the very few things that still mattered, that was even sacred to him? He couldn't answer her for a moment. There were no words that might explain what he was feeling. And even if there were words, what would be their strength compared to hers? Down deep, he had always desired a diver, but he had always felt unworthy. It was too close to God.

"I didn't think so," she said, clearly excited now. "You deserve it, I say. Go on, pick a diver. Any one of them will do."

She nudged him with her foot until he stood up. When he hesitated, she kicked his back. He then began walking slowly, step by step, the length of the pool, toward the divers. They were not yet aware of them. His throat was so dry now that he feared he would not be able to speak. But he continued. He walked up to them, half in desperation, the other half in awe.

Ends

Kingston, London

By Nick Piatt

The single positive aspect of Stan's day, the one tolerable act which made the whole pathetic and useless thing the slightest bit bearable, was lunch. Lunch time was Stan's favourite time as it was the only place he could escape the tireless conversations of the mindless blue drones around him. He hated his job, he hated the people in his job, he despised football and although owned a television set it remained boxed in his cupboard under a pile of clothes he had never worn but did not care enough to take back. What he hated most of course was where he worked, Kingston centre, the mere mention of his name brought a chill down his spine. Therefore he spent his days, for the most part, ignored. This being said the fact that at lunch nobody cared to sit with him and suffer a few painful sentences with no clear direction made Stan feel at ease he felt that he would not have to endure any of his stupid and closed minded colleagues. Stan had to flat share with 6 people and therefore had little alone time even in his supposed sanctuary which resulted in the 20 minute drive to and from work and the hour lunch break being the calm in Stan's endless storm it remained his time to think, to plan and to explore the depths of his ideas. Stan was one of only few workers to live outside Kingston centre so those he lived with in Tolworth at this current time were a lot more in sync with him and at home he could spend time with each of them easily.

From the far wall of the canteen, which seated 60 according to the sign but often housed around 90 hungry white shirted workers, a very dangerous amount to have in anyplace at one time however this was Kingston centre and a safe blue zone so should be fine. Stan could make out his usual seat near a window looking over the smoking area. He had been in relation with this seat for the past 4 years and 2 months so felt no where else suitable and felt that it be suitable for nobody else other than he. Not hungry he bypassed the queue heading straight for this long term furniture relation ignoring the gaze of anyone who may have caught his eye between himself and the safety of his seat. When he got to within touching distance of the table he stopped, looked around and noticed the television set on the adjacent wall. The news was turned on, blue news, and everyone appeared to be staring straight towards it fixated by whatever it was showing. Moving closer with one hand on his seat he focused on the big red words at the bottom "Bomb in red area of Tooting, 32 confirmed dead." Almost before he had finished reading the words he heard a huge cheer from all those in the canteen making the dreary dining space feel like a football stadium after a last minute winning goal. Sickened, yet unable to turn away Stan looked on open mouthed at the screen which now showed what appeared to be a supermarket glowing fierce orange with a thick black coat slowly swallowing it whole, all still while jubilations boomed around him. He turned sharply and swept past his beloved cinema screen into the world of smokers, each he had given names and believed looked sadder and duller as the days passed. He felt his hands grip the stone cold, grey push handle of the door used by the smokers and pushing, breezed silently outdoors. Stan followed the path rigidly around the seven standing workers all handcuffed to their cigarettes and deep in discussion, he overheard conversations of their weekend plans and worries of whether they may be scuppered by any lockdowns or help-outs due to the Tooting attack and any repercussions in Kingston Centre. They didn't seem to care however, a trip to the pub can happen anytime but to them what had happened was special, was their livelihoods.

Stan tapped the steering wheel calmly rolling his black Honda Civic out of the office carpark and proceeded slowly down towards the high street, he looked up at the tower blocks around which were covered in the same big blue posters, the houses he passed were the same, to Stan a disgusting streak of blue in a grey and miserable part of the world. Stan flicked on the Radio however it was still Radio blue, Radio Reagan, Radio shit as far as he was concerned. Radio Marx was the only station Stan ever listened to now it put him at ease and was the only time he felt he heard sense and meaningful points about the state of the country. The closer he drove to Tolworth the stronger the frequency became as Radio Marx or 'red radio' was only available in Red areas of the country and where he worked in Kingston centre had become a blue area almost two years ago now. After a short ten minute drive Stan had arrived at his home, a respectable building originally a 60's style council house but became of significant value during the housing boom, of course now it was like all housing in Britain and of no real value due to the ever changing red and blue boundaries which always causes a sharp influx of mass movement.

Stan stepped through the door into the living room, he had been planning his fellow house mates routes home from work and had worked out that they should have all been there before him unless the Tooting supermarket massacre had caused any temporary roadblocks for car searches. passing through the living room he walked upstairs to the third floor. Shaking, he clasped the door handle pausing briefly to compose himself before entering to his eight house mates some stood leaning against the wall smoking, others sat down on beds and the floor, in the corner one woman was comforting a man who had his head in his hands. Each flat mate was dressed identically in black trousers, a black crew neck sweatshirt and a beret with a red star pin shown at the front standing out amongst the black giving an almost glowing appearance. Another apparent common ground by all the flat mates was the anger in each of their eyes of course bar the crying comrade sat in the corner however Stan new him well and new that it was anger he felt, burning rage and not sadness. He calmly closed the door and walked slowly through the silence until he stood facing each of those in the room. They all looked at him, with raging anger yet a sense of tranquility, with hesitation yet with a passion and pride.

45 minutes later 3 black cars, led by a Honda Civic, parked in a quiet back street not far from the ex-shopping centre turned army headquarters and the central party offices which Stan had left earlier that day. The streets were grey apart from the sea of blue plastered on walls, hanging from windows and flying on flag poles. Much of the central had been torn down 2 years previous so although some areas looked almost untouched, other buildings stood in rubble and disregard. The 6 Black figures walked silently through the pre-planned alleys and buildings which to an outsider would be unknown and unseen. They swept silently like ants, fire ants, with weapons slung on their backs and true burning red fire in their eyes. The centre had seen violence, the nation had seen violence. The comrades stopped within a firing distance crouched in a now charcoaled WH Smiths, nobody would see them, nobody would look, nobody dared look at evidence of destruction the horrors were to real. Stan turned again to his house mates, meeting identical looks as he had faced in the bedroom only this time reality had struck and who were before house mates were now soldiers for their cause. "The end may justify the means as long as there is something that justifies the end."

Ends

A message from JD DeHart:

In 2014, over the course of some snow days, I put together a collection that would become **The Truth About Snails**. At the time, most of the writing I was getting to was speculative and science fictional (I guess that's a word) in nature. So the first collection of poetry I put together reflected this.

Poems were inspired by years as a comic book reader and sci-fi fan. They were not fan fiction, really, but reflected larger themes of science fiction and fantasy that I enjoyed.

This is the text that appears on the back of the book:

“Ordinary objects take on a new form, and myths become real and move next door in the verses contained in this collection. Whether it is a recasting of the myth of Sisyphus, or the titular truth about the origin of our shell-bearing planet dwellers, each poem offers a new view of an old friend. Much of the writing was inspired by the comic books and science fiction, and on concepts beyond the scope of the real world, and cast firmly in the supernatural.”

My hope is that this book can be the first of many. I am already at work on a second collection, which is out for review now, as well as a variety of articles, reviews, and prose works. I reprint some of my favorite poems at jddehartfeaturepoems.blogspot.com, post reviews at <http://dehartreadingandlitresources.blogspot.com/>, and tweet @jd_dehart.

Whether you check out this chapbook collection, a future book, or just read my work around the web, I appreciate the read!

The Truth About Snails is now available both on **Amazon** and **Red Dashboard**, the publisher's website at <http://cms.reddashboard.com/j-d-dehart/>



The Lunatics on Chicago Buses

By Mark Hudson

One time in the nineties, I hung out with a guy in the city of Chicago. He had a friend who was riding a bus on the West side or South side of Chicago, dangerous even in those days.

He said some “crack-head.” or whatever the person’s problem was, started freaking out, and said, “The molecules are after me! The molecules are trying to get me!”

And he punched out a bus window!

Some elderly woman on the bus said, “I can’t take living in this city anymore. I’m on heart medication.”

I volunteer at a food pantry at my church, to feed people in need. Last Thanksgiving, supposedly someone on a Chicago bus beat someone to death with a frozen turkey.

One of the patrons was telling this story. He said he got life in jail. Another patron joked, “Felony by Fowl?”

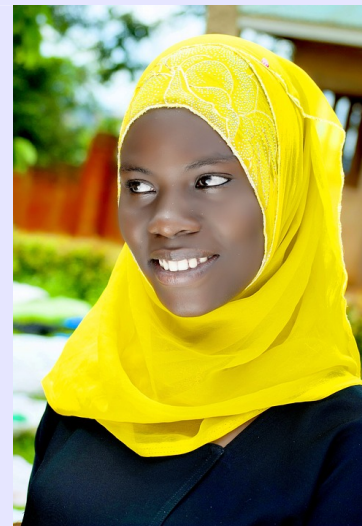
In the Chicago-land area, we have a crazy sense of humor. We joke about things that are not funny. Frankly, I’m tired of it. Fourth of July news: one hundred people shot. Dozens are dead. I wonder what I’m doing here.

Poetry

By Jeffrey Zable

When my butcher asked me recently how much money I’ve made from my poetry I told him that overall I’ve made about \$200 over a forty-year period. Thinking about it later I realized that \$200 for about 1,000 published poems averages to 20 cents per poem. I’ve been paid an average of 20 cents per poem for 1,000 published poems each of which probably took an average of 2 hours to write and rewrite. This means that for 2,000 hours of my time and effort I’ve been paid 10 cents per hour, or 5 dollars per year. Given that this is just an average and that I’ve really published well over a thousand poems over a forty-year period it actually comes to less than 10 cents per hour and 5 dollars per year, which points to the fact that if most poets had to survive off their work they’d be in a heap of trouble especially if they needed to eat something more than once per year. . .

*First appeared in **Third Wednesday** (2016)*



Grace

By Frederick Pollack

That fall, a strange hope
comes during a walk.
No one's home on the lane, no
cars, and for a moment
flights neither leave nor approach Reagan
National.
All summer's work on the houses
is finished. White, grey, and beige
plaster and pebble-dash stand
at confiding angles, overseen
by the dark A-frame studio
an architect has raised on her flat roof.
In the suddenly, finally cold light,
the walls promise
to stand, the paint to gleam
demurely. The houses
are magic ruins, empty, clean, and whole;
will let no children in, or adolescents;
alone inhabited by abstract promise
like the utopias of my youth ...
Then someone ubers home and ruins it.



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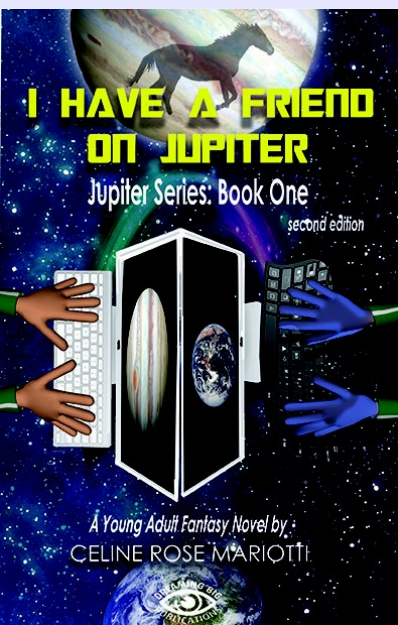
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You can find the e-book on Amazon's Kindle, Smashwords and other e-book sites.
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MEMOIRS OF YUKIMULI

From homelessness to artistry

A story like mine should be told. For my world is as dark as it is painful - without its sacrifices it cannot survive. I certainly wasn't born to the life of a designer, and, like so much in my strange life, I was carried there by the dreams of opportunities.

The first time I knew my life wasn't going to be easy was that night when I looked for a place to lay down and found shelter inside a cardboard box. I was a fashion student and a participant in GAIN/CalWORKs. I graduated receiving the President's and Dean's Honor Awards for outstanding academic achievement (3.5+ GPA). In addition, I was nominated for the best fashion designer in the LACCD (Los Angeles Community College District), and took first place in the California Mart Competition. In my last semester at the college I applied for Project Runway and qualified for last callback when I told them I was still in school. I worked for some well-known, high-end fashion designers: Mattison - one of kind for men, and Mark Zunino, who was known as Nolan Miller and famous for his lavish, extravagant costumes and big shouldered jackets and dresses seen in the 1980s drama *Dynasty*. My work has also been featured in several fashion magazines.

The road to success is not always smooth, particularly in my case; I had serious obstacles to overcome. When I came to Los Angeles from Kampala, Uganda, I was homeless, living in a box in Downtown LA, each night hoping to survive, always worried about what would happen the next day. I upgraded to a transient home for drug and alcohol abusers, even though I was neither. I shared my room with two old cats, an old dog, a snake, two birds, two ladies and a transgender in exchange for working as a cleaning person for the three buildings. In addition, I had to move several more times and work several other menial jobs. Eventually, I learned about public assistance and support services provided through community colleges and was able to go back to school and further develop my talents, finally enrolling in Cal/Works at LATTC.

But that was just the beginning of my life as a designer in this new world. When I was young in my country, I was groomed to be a good wife behind the kitchen door, but our mother was a different kind of woman. In her house she brought us up equally: girls could build and boys could cook. But, when we girls stepped out of our home, our country told us that we were not supposed to live that way. And now, in the new world of America, I was shown the same thing. But this time, the pace was faster and any turn I made, I found a wall that had to be pushed through.

They say that fairy godmothers or fathers aren't real but in my case a fairy god-friend was real because he was there when I was chosen to present a line of 20 looks at Ebony Fashion, but had no fabrics to create the collection I wanted to show. I decided to design the pieces out of garbage bags, but before I did, I texted my friend, and he told me to come and get any materials I wanted. That moment I felt like a kid in a candy store because all his materials were from Italy – I couldn't wait! Now I was able to create a line (YUKIMULI TODAY), which depicts life today of love, empowerment, the chain, racists..... I worked on the collection day and night to be ready for the fitting deadline. I scheduled myself to work during the day on YUKIMULI COUTURE and at night on YUKIMULI TODAY because I had a runway show for Ebony Fashion in just a week and a half. I also had haute couture showcase, which exhibited the history of couture sewing, tailoring, and bias cutting applied on modern fabrics, much of it influenced by Japanese culture.

As we know that life is time and time is life, some of us we wear our time so expensively and some of us not, some of us we put time to work and push the time to the edge and some of us we sit and wait but every time it goes you can't catch up to it. No matter how hard life is you can paint your dreams when you are given a chance. I got a second chance – an education and a support system, which fostered my talents and gave me the tools and skills I needed to be able to work in design houses like Mark Zunino where I was able to work on piece for celebrities red carpet and shows e.g. Niecy Nash – 67th Emmys 2015. Sofia Vergara – Oscars 2016 Vanity Fair, Wedding Rehearsal Party Dress 2015, Sofia/Pitbul – 58th Annual Grammy Awards. Mariah Carey – GLAAD 27th Annual Awards 2016. Britney Spears – Billboard Music Award 2016. Kimberly Perry – Billboard Music Awards 2013. Lindsay Hartley – Daytime Emmys 2015. Aikmpuca Muhs-Ha – People's Choice Awards 2016. Lisa Rinna – 74th Annual Golden Globes After Party Dress. As a seamstress, some hand-beading and hand work on extravagant, high-end clothing.

This exhibit will display full layers, colors, nature, boldness, classics, soft fabrics and fine materials – 19 designer pieces, and 10 paintings and illustration works. Each tells a story and honors specific teachers who gave me so much. For example, I will never forget how I came to class with absolutely nothing, and the illustration teacher gave me a new set of colored pencils and sketchbook so that I did not fail the class.

I have a daughter who has excelled in a Magnet school and has inherited much of my artistic talents. She is still a child and already an award-winning animator. I credit my own mom for nurturing my creativity. I call her “phenomenal woman”; she is still in Uganda.

Please come share with me my story of struggle and survival, hope and inspiration. My name is Yukimuli aka Barbara Lwanga Ashley. I am a sculptor, a fashion designer, and a painter. My works are inspired by 18th century architecture and classic couture, and you can view them at www.naki-muli.com/cv.html.



Dark Side of the Moon

By Craig Smith

My mum was grabbing a polystyrene beaker of tea during her amateur operatics run-through when, on a whim, she invited Miss Fulbright round to ours for a dinner party.

Our family circle didn't do dinner parties. We did get-togethers, socials, campfires, birthday parties, sing-songs. We did country dances, summer fairs, gift days. But dinner parties were alien to us. My mum explained how it worked - someone came round to your house and you ate food at the table on the nice plates without the telly on. You talked.

If that wasn't weird enough, Miss Fulbright was the new history teacher at my school. My interaction with teachers was usually confined to the classroom or the assembly hall if I was getting bollocked for fooling around. Miss Fulbright's visit meant re-allocating her from *authority figure* to *friend of my mum* in the little database in my head where I kept the people I knew. I didn't have the small talk to cope with such a dramatic switch of roles.

But that was only half the problem.

There was life on TV and there was life as we lived it. Television gave us beauty we wouldn't normally see in everyday existence. Regardless, I'd not cast eyes on a single person on the planet, on TV or otherwise, who came close to how beautiful I considered Miss Fulbright. She was slender, fair, softly spoken, and she had eyes as big and brown as conkers.

I wasn't too bad, looks-wise - Mona Wright once gave my bum 6 out of 10, which is a good mark for a backside. I wasn't like Fudgebum, who had two satsumas for an arse. But compared with Miss Fulbright, I was out of my league. The other day in Maths, when I was taking the mickey out of Moxon for having big ears, he had the cheek to say, "have you seen the size of yours!" And I looked and, man, they're enormous. I hadn't noticed before. Was that what was putting girls off? If other kids noticed, so would my teachers. So would Miss Fulbright, however hard I brushed my hair over my ears.

But then Miss Fulbright was a lovely person. Everyone said so. Which meant she was even further out of reach. How was I supposed to talk to such a ridiculously good-looking, lovely person; why would she bother with me, when she had the whole world to chose from? And when she looked in the mirror, did she get intimidated by how beautiful she was, as I did when I passed her in the corridor?

Anyway, apparently with dinner parties, it wasn't enough to invite someone round to your house. You had to clean the place first. On the morning of the evening of the main event, my mum had us up to our elbows in muck. I was despatched to scrub the bathroom, which made Daniel laugh until he drew the toilet room. Mary went through the tins on the cellar head and threw out anything that was rusty. When my dad got home at lunchtime, he stashed Blue Nun and Tia Maria in the hallway cabinet then was put to work tidying the garden. He mowed the lawn, despite the fact that it would be dark by the time Miss Fulbright arrived.

After that, mum asked us to set the table. We needed to bring the wicker chair in from the porch and stack it with a couple of cushions for Daniel. "And we only have enough nice knives and forks for six. Michael will have to use the normal cutlery from the kitchen drawer."

Mary asked why we were laying seven places when there were only six of us.

"The last one's for Miss Fulbright's partner," she said, swallowing slightly.

Partner? Tennis partner? Bridge partner? We knew about partners from cowboy films, but we presumed she didn't mean Tonto.

"Has Miss Fulbright got a boyfriend?" Mary was a one for picking up gossip about teachers and support staff at school. Clearly news of Miss Fulbright's love life had passed her by.

I was head down in the cutlery drawer, but my attention was focused ready for whatever my mum said next. My head was ringing as if I'd been snooping round Big Ben on the stroke of midnight. I hadn't thought for one second that Miss Fulbright would bring someone else to the house. I thought I had an opportunity to show her my record collection and establish myself as a good kid, to woo her in the only way I knew how. But it seemed I was to be denied that chance. Whoever her boyfriend was, it felt infinitely cruel that it wasn't me. I kept working on the cutlery so my mother couldn't detect my disappointment.

But then, mum said something extraordinary. "Her partner is a woman, Mary."

"Miss Fulbright is a lesbian?"

Daniel was peeling carrots with the veg knife. "What's a lesbian?"

My mum had known one of us would ask, so she had her answer ready. (She later said she was amazed it was Daniel who asked, and not my dad). She was all nonchalance when she answered, "It's a woman who loves another woman. Miss Fulbright and her partner are new to the village and it's important that we welcome them in."

"They aren't new in the village. They've been here for four months."

"Your Auntie Joan Cooper moved here in 1929 and she still gets called the new girl. And Mary, I don't want you blabbing at school about Miss Fulbright's relationship. She'll tell people when she's ready. Till then, it's no one's business but hers."

With the place spotless, we were sent upstairs to get changed.

"Can we wear jeans?"

"Wear your best clothes."

"Can we wear our best jeans?"

"So long as they're clean. Now, go on. Upstairs. And don't get the shower all dirty."

"What time will they get here?"

"Twenty minutes."

"So why are we getting ready now? It's ages till they arrive."

"Because I want us all to greet them at the door."

"Is that what you do at dinner parties?"

"It's what we're doing at ours."

I changed into my thick cords and star jumper, and chucked myself onto my bunk to stare up at the *Dark Side of the Moon* cover on the underside of Daniel's bunk.

I was trying to work out if lesbians liked Pink Floyd.

Daniel was at his little Lego table, crossed-legged, assembling the gear mechanism for the dragster he was building. He still wasn't at the high school, so he'd no idea who Miss Fulbright was; he knew even less about what was going on than I did. "If I were a girl, I'd love girls, too. They're nicer than boys."

"*You're* a girl."

"Haha. Very funny." When he was building something, nothing could touch him. He was in a little zone of creation. His head zoomed in and out of the cogs as if it was a 3D cross-section, checking the weight-bearing capacity of the axles, making sure the bearing cases were optimal for a high-spec straight line high speed sports car. He was thinking about the optimal bodywork to reduce drag, the ratio of the gearing, and the wheel sizes, front and back.

Mary was at the front window, watching out for cars on the street. This was as sophisticated as our family ever got, and she was revelling in it. She'd cashed in her babysitting money for a low-cut dress and a pair of heels that butchered her feet. The make-up she'd applied would've been no less accurate if she'd used a blunderbuss. But she felt infinitely glamorous.

She saw a car pull up outside the house and yelled through to the kitchen. "Mum, they're here. They're holding hands."

"That's enough of that, Mary."

"They were being secret about it. No one else on the street noticed."

"Right," mum shouted up the stairs. "Come on, everyone down. At the door, please."

Daniel was out of the room in an instant, like he was in two places at once. For a nanosecond, he was playing with his Lego and, simultaneously, standing at the front door, waiting for the guests to walk up the path. He had a dog's ability to get excited about anyone who came to the house. I held him back by the collar so he didn't slather all over them. He told me to get knotted.

Mary was putting on her swanky walk, the one she'd decided displayed her womanly wiles, though in those heels the new living room carpet was playing havoc with her ankles. She wobbled like a candle flame in her canary yellow dress and blue tights. I followed her - hiding behind her is perhaps a fairer way of putting it - mooching along in my threadbare trainers. I'd combed my hair for the occasion, pasting it down over my ears. I'd even nabbed some of my dad's Hi Karate - well, if he wasn't going to use it, I might as well. My dad said he hadn't come across a smell like that since he'd bought my mum perfume from Boots. (He was a lying get - he never bought mum perfume. Not in living memory, anyway).

I wasn't sure if my dad would put on his wedding suit, which he normally did for big occasions, but instead he'd donned the beige cords my mum bought him for Christmas, and the zip-up cardigan with the reindeer. I thanked the Lord that we weren't expected to wear the acrylic jumpers mum had made us on her knitting machine. Ill-fitting was hardly the word; you could run a household of lights, just on the static. Anyway, my dad had a tie on. And the light shoes he wore for dancing. And he was shaven.

Miss Fulbright was wearing denim dungarees, but, you know, really special dungarees, the kind you'd wear if you were presenting Magpie. You could hear her all the way down the path; the sound of her Scholls clattered off the house-end and made the leaves on the elderberry tremble. Round our way, we'd given up wearing clogs forty years earlier. We tended toward proper shoes, or ratty trainers in my case. It had always been the poor people who wore clogs - the common lot. Yet Miss Fulbright was dressed for a new age.

Mary nudged my mum. "Those are Scholls. Lesley Judd was wearing a pair in the paper a couple of weeks ago."

"I hear they exercise the toes."

"Yes, they make for healthy feet."

At Miss Fulbright's side was Celia. Celia shook our hands vigorously, one person after another in patrician order - my dad, me, Daniel, my mum, Mary. She offered each of us a scrambled smile that glanced off our shoulders and lingered on our collar bones once the handshake was over. She was smaller than Miss Fulbright, wearing a long hippy skirt that hid her feet, a cheese-cloth shirt with no bra beneath, and a head of hair I'd last seen on Janice Joplin. She wore an assortment of necklaces that featured an assortment of runes. She began talking and never quite stopped the whole evening, addressing everything to the space between us. "What a beautiful house, Mr Ireland. Looks about a hundred years old, am I right? I love to see a well-tended garden. Is that clematis? And a proper compost heap; I bet you get some good soil from that."

What astounded us was not the stream of chat she came out with but the fact that she was American. All we knew of America was what we'd seen on TV. You could have parachuted Starskey and Hutch onto the lawn, and we'd have been no more surprised.

By this time, Celia had lead the way from the back door, through the porch, into the living room via the kitchen, pointing out how cute she thought our kettle was, loving the folding chairs in the hallway, rapping the door frame to compliment us on how solid it was, bashing the outside wall and saying how secure she felt in a millstone house quarried from local stone. "Do you need us to take our shoes off?" she said to the rarified air between my dad's ear and the ceiling light. "Ah, man, I love that lampshade. How long have you lived here? This is a home and a half. I bet the kids feel right at home here, right? Do you guys leap over the yard wall and roughhouse in the field? We used to do that back home. There was a field of clover about a hundred yards from

the house where I used to play football with my big brothers - that's American football, obviously, not your British soccer, this was before the real estate moguls carved up the land, I guess you can't stop progress and people need a place to live, but kids need a place to play, too, otherwise they'll just goof around the streets sucking on a doobey getting the munchies eating potato chips."

We definitely understood *some* of what she said.

My mum took the coats and gave them to me to dump on her double bed. "Can I get you both a drink?"

Miss Fulbright handed over a bottle of Mateus Rose.

"Ooh, lovely. I've seen this so many times holding candles. I've often wondered what it tastes like." She passed it along the chain to my dad, who put it into the cabinet. "So, to drink?"

"We're both wine people, please."

"Frank, can you do the honours? Thanks, love."

My dad came back with two of the wine glasses we exchanged for petrol tokens. They were filled to the brim with Blue Nun; it pulsed in the glass as if radioactive.

"Say, Frankie, you're an engineer, right? Me, too. I majored at UCLA in Mechanical Engineering with a minor in Civil Engineering. You went the apprentice route, right?"

"Frank's been at the same firm since he was 14."

"Old school, eh! Good for you. I've been zooming round from company to company my whole life. I love to get my hands dirty but they booted me upstairs at this new place after I'd been there three months. They said, if I had so many opinions about what they should do, maybe I should stand up and be counted. So they promoted me out of harm's way." She laughed. "It's good to get real engineers in the boardroom, right! We might get some proper engineering done. I miss getting my hands dirty, though. Say, what's for supper?"

Miss Fulbright took two delicate sniffs at the air, like a fawn testing the winter breeze for a scent of spring. "Am I right in thinking we're having chicken, Mrs Ireland? Smells lovely."

"It's Chicken Kiev, and call me Aileen."

"I'd love to have the recipe, if you wouldn't mind."

"It's Findus."

Celia said, "Findus! Hey, those guys know what they're doing."

"I make my own gravy, though. I use Oxo as a base, but I add seasoning to make it my own. Thyme. Pepper. Salt. That sort of thing."

"You're quite the cook, Aileen. I can't cook a thing. I keep thinking that a decent engineer should be able to approach cooking like a scientist. We're just talking chemical reactions to heat, after all, but goddam it, everything I touch turns to crap. I swear, I set fire to the carrots the week just gone. I leave all the cooking to Angela. The way she throws things together is an art, I tell you, she's a natural. She'll drop ingredients into a pan like a magician and, shazaaaam, it turns into a delicious meal. It's sorcery, Aileen - it can't be anything else - and I'm astounded every time she does it. The woman's a genius in the kitchen."

"But, Aileen, let me make it clear - a woman shouldn't be judged by what she does in the kitchen. But she shouldn't be ashamed of it, either. I can't cook, I know I can't but does that make me a bad person. Not on your life. But it's not a feminist statement, either. You cook to eat and if you get nice food out of it and you enjoy

it, then good for you, and damn anyone who says any different. I'm sure you agree, Frank. Those New York feminists, they mean well, yes they do, I'll give them that, Angela, but it's not their business to dictate who should cook the food in a family home. Maybe the woman likes to cook, maybe the man. But, Frank, you'd have no objections if Daniel here decided to be a chef, would you! Maybe it comes natural to him and he wants to pursue it as a craft; well, good for him, I say. Waddaya think, Daniel, does that sound like fun? Or are you more of a tough guy that likes to eat what he's given?"

Daniel was cross-legged at Celia's feet, looking up at her. I thought he'd run a mile but there he was, in awe. I don't know if he understood half the stuff she was saying, but he was in thrall to the way she was saying it. "I'm making a Lego gearbox upstairs. Do you want to see it?"

Her face lit up. "What? You're making a Lego gearbox and you've waited until *now* to tell me. Jeez, man. It's in your room? Would that be OK?" She looked to my mum, who gave her an amused nod. "Lead on, bud. I want to hear all about it." She downed the wine from her full glass and followed Daniel out of the door, yelling over her shoulder as she left, "My God, Aileen, that's fantastic wine. You have a fantastic cellar. I want to hear all about it when I get back down."

My mum pointed after them, "Michael, pop up and make sure they're alright. I don't want Daniel talking the poor woman to death."

I glanced at Miss Fulbright, wanting to stay wherever she was. I hovered by the door.

"Go on, go!"

I reluctantly trogged upstairs, where Celia and Daniel were deep in giddy conversation about the workings of the gearbox, with Celia asking about torques and Daniel rattling on about tyre grip.

I laid down on the bed and disappeared into the lyrics on the cover of the *Dark Side of the Moon*, which may have made little sense to me but they hinted at something profound which I was missing out on.

After a few minutes, I heard music. I looked up to see Celia standing over my little turntable, nodding excitedly to *Live and Dangerous*.

"Man, I love this album. Have you seen them? I saw them in Boston the week before I moved over here. My God, those guys rock. Phil Lynott - I mean, if I were straight! Man, that's a sexy guy. Which track is your favourite? I like *The Cowboy Song* and *Emerald*. I mean, I love them all. And *Dancing in the Moonlight*, obviously. I tried to learn *Emerald* on guitar but my technique's not up to it. I'd prefer to be a drummer. That's an engineer's instrument, don't you think. Guitars are for designers. Drums are structural. They're solid and you can build a house on them. The bass is halfway between the two, it's like industrial design. What instruments do you guys play? Is that your trumpet case? Are you a jazzer on the sly? I tried to get into jazz once but it's too untamed. I prefer more formality to my music. Not that I don't like a good guitar solo, especially Robertson and Gorham. You can sing those solos, they're not just throwing out notes to fool you into believing they're god's gift to the guitar just because they play fast."

She was interrupted by a call from Mary. "Tea's ready. I mean, dinner's ready."

"Oh boy, I'm starving. Let's go, guys." Celia was out of the door in seconds flat, down the stairs and sitting at the living room table before Daniel and I had a chance to stand up. When we got down there, she was sitting with a serviette on her lap and a face like a puppy that knows food is on its way. "Do you have regular seats? Am I sitting where someone else is supposed to sit! You don't mind, do you? Hey, I'm the stranger, here. I'm

happy to fit in with everyone else. Hey, Mikey, when we're finished here, you're going to show me the rest of your record collection. No excuses, OK." She took up her knife and fork and rubbed the tines together in eager anticipation of the meal to come, or like the back legs of a grasshopper, calling a mate. "Have you got any more of that wine, Aileen? I've worked up a thirst getting down and dirty with Daniel's gearbox."

Daniel grinned. So did I. This woman was irresistible. We laughed at everything she said.

"Michael," my mum said as she, Mary and Daniel brought the food to the table. "Angela said there's going to be a charity event at school. 24-hour volleyball. She's going to put your name forward as a representative of the fourth year."

I'd no idea what a 24-hour volleyball was but, if Miss Fulbright was proposing it, it was OK with me. "Sure, mum. Hey, did you know that Celia saw Thin Lizzy in America before she came across to Huddersfield? Where was it, Celia? Boston?"

"Sure was. They kicked ass, Aileen. Best live band I ever saw."

"Can I get you more gravy?"

"Slap it on, Aileen. I love it."

To my mind, the mark of a good meal is how quickly you eat it. By that standard, this was the greatest meal ever! You could rely on my mum and Mary, and it turns out, Miss Fulbright, to nibble their food like princesses, but Daniel, my dad and me downed our meal like we were on a timer, or like they'd take it away if we breathed instead of ate. And it turned out that Celia felt the same way, too. Man, she inhaled the whole lot. It was heroic.

She ditched her eating irons onto her empty plate and chortled like a scallywag. "Jesus, Aileen. That was magnificent. Where did you learn to cook like that? That was the best damn food I've had since I got off the plane."

My mum flushed, as glad as I've ever seen her. "There's more in the pan, if you want it."

"Aileen, I couldn't eat another living thing. But these boys here, I'm sure they could fit a bit more in."

My mum poured what was left of the potatoes, peas and carrots onto Daniel and my plates. We were finished in seconds flat.

"Say, Celia," Daniel said, "would you like a game of backgammon?"

"Angela, what do you reckon? Fancy taking on these sharks in a to-the-death board game?"

Miss Fulbright was still nibbling at her meal. "You go play. I'll natter with Aileen and Mary."

And so it came to pass that Miss Fulbright, Mary and my mum were gathered around the candles on the dining table, talking like grown ups, while Celia, Daniel and I were on our stomachs on the sitting room rug, battling away at Backgammon, Monopoly and Connect 4, with Shandy Bass on tap for the boys and a small glass of Blue Nun for Celia.

My dad had disappeared into the attic to mend my bike, with his overalls over his best clothes and his wine untouched.

Ends

The Ghosts Of Ourselves

By Colin Farrington

Andy Collister had missed his train, he was sure. Just by a few seconds. The doors had closed. The train guard had given the final signal to the driver. At Lowchester station that was it. Another thirty minutes to wait for the next train to London, time Andy couldn't afford, today of all days. Andy closed his eyes with annoyance. As he did so he 'saw stars', or rather a sustained flash of light, he was so angry with himself.

Then miraculously the doors slid open. Andy jumped on. The electric bleeping which signalled 'closing' recurred. The train departed.

The carriage which Andy had joined was empty. It was possible that there were no other passengers at all. It was not the commuter rush hour so the train only had four carriages. Andy hadn't actually seen anyone in them as he had bounded in panic across the bridge, blaming his mum who had left travelling to the last minute, only to find the traffic jammed by water mains repairs in the High Street.

To Jean, his mother, Andy was a lovely boy, but a dreamer. Without telling her the train time he had worked out exactly when they had to leave their house. But Andy hadn't allowed for delays. He was daft like that. He lived in a fantasy world. But, unlike his ne'er do well druggy brother Tom and his dim sister Anne, he coped. He had got the time off school and had arranged a London interview himself. Andy had taken his 'A' Levels two years early. A teacher had come to the house. He had said that Andy was a 'genius'; but Mrs Collister didn't know what, in practical terms, that meant.

The train didn't stop long at the next station. No-one got on, nor got off, as far as Andy could see. Same at Grainley. So now it was a clear run through to Reading, forty minutes away, in an empty carriage, and then to London and the Professor.

Andy must have dozed off for a few moments because when he looked up the carriage was no longer empty. Someone was sitting, not directly opposite him but in his line of sight. It was a boy, quite small, maybe three or four years younger than Andy, who was sixteen. But Andy wasn't certain, given the distance between them. The boy was pale. He stared out of the train window.

Andy disliked fashion and similar trivia. Today he had on a greying tee-shirt, a green polyester hoodie and red skinny jeans (his family refused to be seen out with him when he wore such 'daft' outfits, which was fine as he didn't ever go out with them anyway, save at Christmas to see Gran); but this boy was even more weirdly dressed, as if in a play. The clothes were adult, but smaller— a blue suit, a striped shirt. Yes, the boy was in a history play and was already dressed for the part. Andy thought for a moment that he had caught the boy's eyes so he smiled and grunted acknowledgement. But the boy looked away. The scenery was indeed attractive to look at, greener than Andy remembered from his last trip to London two years before, with less houses and no industry. Perhaps the train had been diverted to a different line.

Andy decided to focus his thoughts on his upcoming interview with Charles Darnley, the world's greatest mathematician (of that Andy had no doubt, although Darnley was based at University

College London, UCL, rather than at Cambridge, the intellectual centre of mathematics – apparently Darnley disliked having too many other mathematicians near him). Andy had been told by his school not to write to the Professor direct. It was ‘most irregular’ and would not help him get his early place at UCL. But write Andy had, indeed he had written three letters, each longer than the first. All three, after what Andy thought were sufficient formalities, contained two word-processed pages setting out in stages Andy’s working of ‘Czarsynski’s puzzle’, perhaps the world’s most advanced mathematical problem. Andy had proposed a radical approach, culminating in what he had labelled a new ‘law of physical restraint’ that took the theorem from mathematics to physics, and into fundamental laws of relationship and creation.

A week after the third letter came a reply written in a scrawling hand, the envelope badly addressed but correctly interpreted by the Royal Mail, asking ‘Mr Collister’ to come to a room at UCL at three in the afternoon a week later (‘by which time I will have thought through your theories’). Andy was delighted, not so much by having achieved a breakthrough of a meeting, but by the thought that someone else was going to test his ideas. Someone– well not only *someone* but Professor Charles Darnley – would see the beauty of what Andy had proposed.

Andy’s theories could change the world, or at least the way people saw the world, Andy had no doubt. Cocky for a sixteen year old he knew, but he couldn’t help having insights. He did not intend to be stopped.

The train seemed to slow slightly. Andy looked across at his travelling companion. But the boy was no longer alone. He had been joined by a middle aged man, wearing an old-fashioned double breasted suit. Man and boy were looking intently out of the window.

Andy looked through the other window at scenery that was still brilliantly green, and ablaze with sunshine (it had been drizzling in Lowchester), rather annoyed that his thoughts about Darnley had been interrupted - just like Mum interrupted him with demands that he eat, or his brother wanted use of their shared laptop so he could watch pornography.

When Andy looked back a third person, a large woman, dressed also in old fashioned clothes – in her case a large and colourful wool coat – had joined the man and the boy. They were a family evidently. But: where were they going and why were they dressed like that?

Andy suddenly felt frightened. It was as if his body had been pierced with a cold pain. His head throbbed momentarily and his body shuddered. This was fear at its most naked, emotion at a depth that Andy had never seen nor imagined. But the worst of the physical sensations were over in a moment. What was left was a gnawing uncertainty, an emotion that had to be challenged and dealt with.

Andy tried to analyse this, just like he analysed any problem. His fellow travellers seemed strange but not aggressive. They were not being noisy (Andy hated unnecessary noise). They were oddly dressed. So what?

Yet Andy was worried, desperate that nothing must impede his arriving in London at two o’clock in good time to get to UCL (he had worked out exactly the best tube and bus route). So he decided that he must be an adult and be extrovert. He must do something he had rarely done before,

save when talking computers or mathematics. He must 'break out of his shell' (to use one of his mother's favourite phrases). He must talk to these strangers and ask about their mutual journey. Their reaction would reassure him, he was confident.

But as Andy was about to speak he realised that there were now four people. A girl had joined, a very beautiful girl, of Andy's age or a little older. She was dressed, not plainly, nor in an old-fashioned way, but in a startling lovely silk dress of emerald green, tied by a sash, the outfit offsetting her limpid blond hair. And as Andy looked, she looked back and smiled. With that smile, fear ceased.

Andy had never had sex. His elder brother had played with him, and a group of girls had made fun of him once with lewd remarks. But Andy had had not time for such things. He had had friends, but they were always left behind by his talk, his mathematics, his theorising.

This girl was so beautiful that she was beyond physical senses. Andy knew that instinctively. Andy wanted to be enveloped in her, wanted to be part of and to complete her group. And, looking where her gaze led, he saw again the intense beauty of the scenery they were travelling through, its green landscapes, the azure blue of sky and water. All was one.

The girl spoke. Her sensual voice carried across the carriage. 'We are here for you. We are your new people. In life we were only pale images, the ghosts of ourselves. Now we are all on the same journey. At different times we found out the truth and were called, myself only recently. We are so glad that you have joined us. Your knowledge belongs to us. With us it must stay.'

All four travellers were now looking intently at Andy. He felt a warm glow of shared need and shared knowledge. The boy spoke: 'I bet you play a decent game of chess.' The others laughed. The man said 'Andy, your theories are half way there.' The women smiled.

Andy silently offered them his agreement.

* * *

It was two hours before Mrs Collister could be found. After dropping Andy off at the station she had called at the newsagent to pay the bill (all those academic journals and computer magazines!). She had met her friend Joan. They had had coffee and had talked about life's difficulties and complications, and especially about families.

The police had waited at the Collister home (the address was in the boy's satchel, soaked in blood) and had taken his mother to identify Andy. She was completely numb. But at her insistence and against their advice the police then took her to Lowchester train station, which remained closed to the public.

On the London platform someone, probably ticket office staff, had placed flowers. Mrs Collister was told that the guard and the driver who had witnessed the incident- Andy leaping at the closing train, getting caught between the closing doors and then no-one knowing how or why, the doors repeatedly banging against him, cracking open his head and trapping his legs, the doors not responding for a full five minutes to any attempt to stop them –had been taken to hospital, in terrible distress. There would be a full Inquiry. No-one knew how this had happened. It was unbelievable.

No-one ever pretended that Andy Collister's death had not been horrible. Despite the rain that day his mother believed that she could see shards of bone and blisters of raw flesh lying on the platform, sprayed from the crashing train doors. When later she was given Andy's clothes she did not know whether the deep red colour of the jeans was dye or blood. 'Nothing like it has ever happened...experts say that how Andrew died was physically impossible, against all the laws of science and nature. None of the fail-safe devices, none of the protections in the system had worked' – how often his mother was to hear or read statements like that at inquests, at the Official Inquiry, even in Parliament.

Only Professor Darnley came close to the truth. He had not immediately connected a news item about a tragic train accident to the fascinating and strange theories (beyond his immediate understanding) he had received from a potentially brilliant student, nor to the same boy's missed appointment.

But when he realised what had happened Darnley thought and thought.

A month later the Professor jumped out on to an underground track at Euston station. He was pulled away by train staff. Andy's new family did not yet need him.

Ends



Bars

By Tony Concannon

He rubbed out his cigarette in the sink, pitched it into one of the garbage bags and ducked back out under the counter. In one of the two booths along the side wall two young men, the only customers, were drinking. Aso crossed the small room and straightened a chair sticking out in the corner. He walked back and stood in front of the counter.

He lit another cigarette. He didn't smoke much, about ten cigarettes a day, except when he was bored. The bar had been uneventful the past two or three nights. Since he worked seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, usually from two in the afternoon until midnight or one, and he rarely took off a day, he needed the bar to be eventful.

He stepped outside for a moment. Later there would be too many customers and he wouldn't have a chance. He smoked the cigarette in front of the door. It was nearly dark but the shops were still open. People were coming home from work and he greeted the ones he knew. Down the street there were several high-rise buildings. When he'd opened the bar 22 years earlier, there'd been no building over two stories. The neighborhood was beginning to change, he knew. In 10 years it would be gone. The demand for housing and the lack of space in Tokyo was driving up real estate prices and families were selling off their land for big gains. Young people didn't want to take over the small shops their parents and grandparents had built and, even when they did, the shops couldn't compete with the supermarkets and department stores. The owner of the building that housed Aso's bar was always bringing people around to look at the property and it was only a matter of time before it was sold to make room for a high-rise. Aso would receive compensation for being evicted but he knew he would never find another place for the same rent in the same neighborhood, where all his customers were, never mind the bigger place he really needed. Thinking about it only depressed him.

He dropped the cigarette and ground it out. He stood outside for a few more minutes, watching the people going home. It would be hot in another week or two, he thought. Then the rainy season would come. Then the long, hot summer. In summer he always missed Hokkaido with its cool nights.

When he went inside, a baseball game was on the television. Four college students came in. They sat in the other booth and ordered beer. Aso brought them their drinks and slipped back under the counter. He went into the kitchen and pulled out the garbage bags and looked for cockroaches again. The door opened and Nagisa strolled in. She was wearing a white dress with red polka dots and the lightness of the dress contrasted sharply with her dark skin. Her hair, which was more brown than black, was long and wavy. She never wore makeup and she always looked young and fresh. She slipped under the counter to leave her purse on the shelf.

"Where were you?" Aso asked without looking up.

"What time is it?"

He went on looking for cockroaches. She slipped back under the counter and stood in front of it until the college students called her over.

By 8 o'clock there were eleven customers. Besides the two booths there were two tables and the whole place sat only sixteen people. Aso was sitting with three men who worked in one of the factories in the

neighborhood. They came in two or three nights a week and Aso enjoyed their company. They were watching the baseball game on the television.

"I told you he'd strike out," Kato, the oldest of the men said. He wore glasses, which made him look more like a schoolteacher.

"Turn it off, Master," Mayumi, the stockiest one, said. Everyone who came to the bar called Aso "Master." Aso got up as if he was going to turn off the television and Kato pulled him back.

Mayumi's glass was empty. Aso took it and made him a new drink. The college students in the corner were getting up and Aso slid out of the booth and walked over to the counter. After the students had paid, he slipped under the counter. The three men were in the mood to drink and they didn't need him to push them along. He went into the kitchen and pulled out the garbage bags one more time. A few minutes later two middle-aged men in business suits came in. After Aso had filled their order, he counted the customers again. There were nine now, three or four fewer than he wanted. Getting the right atmosphere going between eight and ten, the most profitable hours for the bar, was important. People drank more in a lively bar.

Nagisa, who'd taken his place with the three men, stood and walked back to the counter. The outline of her breasts was plain in her tight dress. She smiled at one of the businessmen. She took a bottle of mineral water and walked back.

Aso stayed in front of the counter for a while, fixing the orders and watching over everything. Nobody came in. Nagisa had been drinking steadily since she'd sat down. The baseball game ended and a dull music show followed. He went out to the table at which the three men and Nagisa were drinking and pulled up a chair to the end. He gestured to Nagisa to make another drink for Kato.

"Master, Nagisa and I are getting married," Sakurai, the third member of the group said. He was thin with long hair.

"She could marry the three of you," Aso said.

"No, Master," Mayumi said. "These two are no good. They wouldn't know what to do."

Nagisa pushed the drink over to Kato. Aso glanced at her face.

"You should marry someone young," he said. "Older women don't make good wives."

"No one's asking Nagisa," Kato said. "You have to ask Nagisa."

"I'm waiting for a prince to come for me," she said.

"Sakurai's a frog," Mayumi said and they all laughed.

"Nagisa, make the Master a drink. We're going to get him drunk tonight."

"Master," one of the businessmen called. "Smoked salmon and cheese and crackers."

Aso got up to fill the order. When he brought it to the two men, one of them motioned to the empty seat on the other side of the table. Aso sat down.

"I'm Kawahara," the same man said. He was tall and his smooth skin stretched over his bald head and long face.

"Aso."

They bowed to each other. Kawahara gestured with his hand.

"This is Kondo."

The second man was thin with narrow shoulders and sunken eyes. Aso bowed to him but not as deeply.

“It’s quiet tonight, Master,” Kawahara said. “When we were here a few weeks ago, the place was hopping.”

“You have good days and bad days.”

“It’s like that in any business.”

Kawahara picked up his cigarettes and shook one out.

“It’s nice sometimes to go to a place that’s quiet.”

He put the cigarette in his mouth and Aso lit it for him. Kawahara took a slow drag on his cigarette. Aso began to make a new drink for the other man from the bottle of whisky Kawahara had purchased. Aso passed the drink across the table.

“How long have you been open, Master?” Kawahara asked.

“Twenty-two years.”

“How about the girl?” Kawahara asked.

“Nagisa’s been here thirteen years,” Aso answered.

“Nagisa,” Kawahara said. “That’s an interesting name.” He pointed at the bottle of whisky. “Have yourself a drink.”

Aso got a glass from the shelf over the counter. He came back to the table and made himself a drink. The three men raised their glasses.

“To many good nights,” Aso said.

“Do you own the building?” Kawahara asked.

Aso shook his head.

“Someone’s going to buy it. The way land prices around here are. It’s only a matter of time.”

“What can I do?”

Kawahara looked around. “You need more space, anyway. People are on top of each other. You could do more business.”

“I can’t afford a bigger place. Not in this neighborhood.”

“It’s a tough time for a small business,” Kondo said.

“Let’s change the subject here,” Kawahara said. “Is one of those guys Nagisa’s boyfriend?”

“Just regular customers. Do you want to talk to her?”

“Sure.”

“Nagisa,” Aso called loudly. He waved her over.

“Kawahara-san and Kondo-san.”

“*Hajimemashite.*”

“Sit down,” Kawahara said. “Would you like a drink?”

“I’m always ready for a drink.”

“I like a girl like that.”

“Excuse me for a minute,” Aso said.

He went over to the counter and slid under. He got a cigarette from his pack and lit it. The cigarette in his mouth, he began to look for cockroaches under the garbage bags. There were none and he turned and looked out over the room. Nagisa and Kawahara, their heads bent toward each other, were talking. Kondo was watching the news on the television. Mayumi's group had quieted down.

Aso finished his cigarette. He was about to go sit with Mayumi's group when Nagisa came over with orders for fried squid and *yakiudon*. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Don't drink so much," Aso said.

"Don't worry."

She went back to the table. He lit another cigarette and smoked it as he prepared the orders. When they were ready, he placed them on the counter and called Nagisa. He didn't look at her when she picked up the two plates. He slipped under the counter and went over to Mayumi's table.

"Master, Kato's drunk," Mayumi told him.

There was no reaction from Kato.

"He's always drunk," Sakurai said. "Master, you haven't drunk your whisky."

"I'll drink it now."

"Let me put a little more in," Mayumi said. He filled the glass with whisky.

"*Kampai*."

Everyone except Kato raised his glass.

"Kato's drunk," Mayumi said.

"Master, drink that," Sakurai said. "I'm going to make another one. Come on. Drink it."

Aso took a sip. At the other table Nagisa, her head still bent forward, was talking with Kawahara.

"Kato's drunk," Mayumi said.

At ten-thirty Kawahara and Kondo got up to leave. Aso excused himself and went over to the register. He'd drunk too much whisky and he was feeling unsteady.

"If we were looking for a quiet night, we certainly picked the right place," Kawahara said.

"I'm very sorry. It's usually not like this."

"Don't worry. We had a nice time. That Nagisa is an interesting girl."

Aso rang up the bill and told Kawahara the amount.

"Good luck finding another place," Kawahara said after he'd paid. "If I hear of anything around here, I'll let you know."

Aso thanked the two men as they were going out. About one-third of the bottle of whisky was left. Aso wrote Kawahara's name on a tag and draped the tag over the neck of the bottle. He placed the bottle on the shelf over the counter. The bottle would be there for Kawahara the next time he came.

Nagisa came out of the bathroom and bumped into one of the chairs. She sat down with Mayumi's group. Aso's head was spinning from the whisky and he squeezed past them into the bathroom. He locked the outer door and went into the stall with the toilet. He put his arm on the wall to brace himself and squatted down. He flushed the toilet and water started to flow out of the thin pipe over the basin at the top of the tank. He wet his finger from the running water and stuck it down his throat. He moved the finger around until he vomited. He flushed the toilet, wet his finger and stuck it down his throat again. He vomited weakly and leaned back against

the wall. He was sweating from the effort and the closeness of the room.

He stood and wiped the rim of the bowl with a piece of toilet paper.

After he tossed the paper in the toilet and flushed it again, he sprayed the stall with the can of air freshener he kept on the shelf above the tank. In the outer room he washed his hands and face and popped a mint into his mouth. He unlocked the door and went out.

Tomio, a glass of whisky in front of him, was sitting in one of the booths. He was a round man with a round face and he always wore a cap. He came in at eleven for a quick drink nearly every night. He raised his hand in a wave.

“Master, join us,” Mayumi said. “We’re having a party. Kato’s drunk.”

“Nagisa doesn’t want to marry you,” Sakurai said. “She wants to marry a younger man like me.”

Nagisa couldn’t stop laughing, always a sure sign of her being drunk.

“You can have her,” Aso said as he squeezed past the table again. He felt better after vomiting. He sat down across from Tomio.

“Busy night?” Tomio asked.

Aso shook his head.

“I caught some beautiful bass down there last Sunday. When are you going to come with me?”

“I have to work,” Aso said.

“Don’t give me that. Let Nagisa run the place. You fight all the time, anyway. How about next Sunday?”

“I have to work.”

“Why don’t you get a bed and just sleep here?”

Everyone was getting up at Mayumi’s table.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Aso said. He went over to the cash register. Sakurai pushed Kato along in front of him.

“We’re leaving, Master,” Sakurai said.

“Kato was drunk, Master,” Mayumi said. “You should tell him not to get drunk.”

“I’m sorry, Master,” Kato said quietly.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Where’s Nagisa?” Sakurai asked.

“She went to the bathroom,” Aso said.

“She’s already running from you,” Mayumi said. “Let’s go before Kato passes out again.”

Sakurai paid Aso and pushed Kato onto the rubber mat in front of the door. The door automatically opened and Sakurai pushed Kato out and he and Mayumi followed. Aso put the money in the cash register.

When Nagisa came out of the bathroom, she bumped into one of the chairs again. She staggered past Aso and slipped under the counter. She took her purse off the shelf. She almost fell when she was trying to get out under the counter.

“Good night,” she said.

“Don’t drink so much next time,” Aso said.

“Don’t pimp me next time.”

"I don't have to with you always doing it yourself."

She slapped him across the face. "I quit. "

There were tears in her eyes. She banged against the doorway as she went out.

"You have to be kinder to the women," Tomio said to Aso. A thousand-yen note in his hand, he had come up to the counter.

"She's drunk," Aso said.

Tomio smiled. Aso took the money from him and rang up the register. He gave Tomio his change.

"I'll talk to her tomorrow. It's not the first time she's quit," Aso said.

"She might not come back."

"She'll be back. Are you coming tomorrow?"

"I should be able to make it. Good night."

Aso followed Tomio outside and turned off the sign. He pushed it up against the side of the building. The street was empty. The air was still hot and he could feel the rainy season coming.

Back inside he took the drawer out of the cash register and sat at one of the tables to count the money. It hadn't been a good night. He put back the drawer and began straightening the tables and chairs. Then he slipped under the counter and wiped up all the moisture in and around the sink. Water brought cockroaches. He slipped back out under the counter and made sure all the glasses and dishes were neatly arranged on the shelf. Everything was done except for the garbage.

The poor take hadn't helped his mood. Maybe Nagisa wouldn't come back this time. He'd pushed her too hard. He often thought of quitting himself. In the long run it didn't matter. The property was going to be sold and he would be evicted. He didn't know what he was going to do. He'd never felt so helpless.

He slipped back under the counter. When he touched the first garbage bag, a cockroach ran up his arm. He hadn't noticed it on the back side of the bag. He slapped it off his arm and grabbed the broom. The cockroach had landed on its back and he began smashing it with the broom. He didn't stop until the broom snapped in the middle. The cockroach was in so many pieces it was no longer recognizable. He kicked the bag once to make sure no more cockroaches were lurking. He threw down the remaining part of the broom and leaned against the counter. He was breathing hard.

After a few minutes he used the bottom part of the broken broom to sweep up the cockroach. He put it in one of the garbage bags. Then he pulled out both bags and looked one last time before he tied the tops of the bags and dragged them outside. He went back inside and turned off the main lights and went out.

He locked the door behind him, pulled down the metal grate that covered both the door and the window and secured it at the base. There was no traffic and he started walking toward the train station, where there was a better chance of catching a taxi. It wasn't fair. He'd worked hard to build up his bar and it was going to be taken from him. It wasn't fair. A taxi was coming down the road and he raised his arm. It wasn't fair.

Ends



State of Being

By James Kowalczyk

I am just another dancing corpse
waltzing through shooting galleries in Brooklyn
a redacted soul howling among devotees of the sacred nod

Outside the sycophantic hipsters gnaw at my neighborhood's fabric
fraying the edges of Italian-American grocery stores and crushing fish-store crabs
that no longer crawl over each other, out of the bushel, and onto the sidewalk

Spike, my only friend, injects minimum rage and later vomits shards of hope
hearing that Mike is dead and Billy Red is in rehab, and Pat is doing the Thorazine shuffle as
brunch is served at the latest bistro grand opening next to his apartment building

Shadows tiptoe in the alley around the corner to the dead-end street but
I can hear them as they pass my window that overlooks Greenwood cemetery
while the pregnant dope-fiend in 5C is knocking, pleading to borrow a set of works

mine are clogged but the diabetic in 5D lets me borrow his sometimes I yell through the door
she is a husk of skin, minus muscle, sinew and bone, but her tracks on her arms are pronounced
her three-year-old begins to cry as the Puerto Rican man who works nights announces:

"Estoy intentando dormir!" and then the floor begins to quiver under my feet and I detect the
angels below howling at Cerberus for escape from the claws of addiction, a chance to dance on
on the razor's edge of redemption

The Bargain

By Bill Davidson

Christmas Eve 2018 found Peter Sykes in a private room, hooked up to medication and machines that would not extend his life beyond morning.

Helen, her hand on his, told him, “We’re so lucky to have this time, love. My parents, they just pretended Dad was okay, right to the very end. Didn’t get to say the things that mattered.”

Helen was the most positive person he knew, unfailingly optimistic. He had always thought that was just one of the reasons he loved her.

He pushed her hand away and said, “You think that’s a good thing?”

“They didn’t even say I love you! We’ve had a happy life, Pete.” Now she was stroking his face. He watched a tear form in one of her eyes, tracked it as it ran down to her indistinct jaw line as she talked. “Blessed, we are. Childhood sweethearts. Two lovely daughters. You’ve had such a great career...”

It was too much for Peter. He jerked away from her.

“Making bloody dummy hands and feet?”

“Come on. Your prosthetics help people live an independent...”

“Spare me my own marketing. It’s bollocks.”

“You don’t believe that!” She actually laughed, as if he was a silly schoolboy.

Peter fixed her with a glare and she sat back, looking hurt and confused. Fuck her.

“It could have been so different, if I hadn’t married you.”

She looked so shocked that he was encouraged to press on.

“All about the bloody girls, wasn’t it?” He could feel his lips drawing back over his teeth in his surprising anger. “All the things my life could have been about, you never left any *room*!”

“Pete, you...”

“Making bloody prosthetics. I hate the things.”

“It was your own idea! You could have completed medical...”

“How? After you got yourself pregnant, where was the time to study?”

“If you had really wanted to be a Doctor...”

“I didn’t.”

That stalled her. “What did you want, then?”

“To be a musician. Focus on my music properly. I could have had a whole different life.”

She looked at him, that compressed way that meant, I could say something but I’m not. He said. “I could have been somebody.”

“On your piano?”

“Maybe. Elton John did it. I could have been a songwriter.”

She waited a beat, before saying, “Pete, listen to yourself. You’ve got a nice voice and I enjoyed that song you wrote, but Jeez. You’ve been watching too much X-factor.” She raised her hands in bafflement before getting her positive face back in place. “But, come on, we have been happy.”

“Think so? I’m having to die to get away from you.”

That rocked her all right. Good.

He glared. “If we hadn’t got together...All those girls I could have shagged.”

“Pete...”

He spat the words at her. “It would’ve been shag, shag, shag.”

Helen’s face was doing strange things. She said, “What about Dawn and Caroline? I won’t believe you if you say you wished they hadn’t happened.”

He wasn’t listening. “I should have shagged Michelle Maidment.”

More tears were running down her face, her crab apple cheeks. “I sort of get it, I suppose. Trying to, anyway. It’s only natural to look back over your life, re-evaluate. And lots of boys at school fantasised over Michelle. But, think! This isn’t real life. You couldn’t even speak to her!”

“I’d have shagged her arse off. And beat the shit out of Gerry Ottabee.”

“I’m going to speak to the Doctor.”

“This isn’t the medication talking. I’ve wasted my life, for you. You! Why the fuck did I do that? Why?”

Helen sat back, silent in her hurt. Then she straightened and said. “Dawn and Caroline.” Like she was putting down a winning hand.

Peter hit her reaching fingers away. “Fuck them. We mortgage our lives for the little shits and they bugger off first chance they get. We see them, what, once, twice a year?”

“You’re not saying...”

“I bloody am.”

He sat up, wincing, then spoke in a stronger voice. “I wish we had never met, never got married, never had kids. If I had the chance to live my life differently, I’d grab it.”

He raised his wasted arm, tubes dangling and grabbed the air in front of him.

Helen, hand over her face, hurried from the room. That was good too.

Peter closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he had a visitor; a very young priest, black robed, lounging on the chair in a most un-priest like manner. He was striking, smooth and perfect, with beautiful skin.

Peter glared at him. “Who said I wanted a priest?”

The priest smiled, showing beautiful white teeth. “You did.”

“Bloody Helen. Once a Catholic always a Catholic, eh?”

The priest hooked a leg over the arm of the chair. “I’m with the opposition, actually.”

“You don’t look Protestant.”

“Look closer.”

But Peter didn’t need to look closer. He had noticed the cross on the man’s chest. It was inverted.

“You’re kidding me. You’re some kind of...what? Pagan?”

“Nope.”

Peter pressed the button to call the nurse. The priest seemed untroubled and, after a few moments, he pressed again, keeping his finger on the button, beginning to feel frightened.

“My wife will be back any second.”

“No, she won’t.”

Peter called out, but his “Helen!” hardly warranted an exclamation mark.

The priest was clearly enjoying himself. He jumped up, grabbed a stainless steel dish and whacked it against the metal side of the bed, shouting “Helen! Helen!”.

Peter covered his ears, but the man was sparking with energy. He skipped over to Peter’s monitors and started hitting them with the dish, hard enough to break bits off.

“Stop! Please!”

But the priest seemed crazy now, throwing open the window and dragging instruments and drips bodily away, ripping lines and needles out of Peter. He threw it all noisily out of the window and turned, grinning hugely. “That was great!”

Peter looked at the priest with horror, thinking he wasn’t so young after all, a stubble showing in the light from the window. Peter pointed to a bag of clear fluid, now lying on the vinyl floor, managing to say, “Those drips were keeping me alive. Please!”

The man lounged against a wall and smiled.

“What do you think is going on here?”

Peter thought about it, how none of this made sense. “Lack of oxygen to the brain. Hallucinating”

The priest leaned in close and Peter gasped. The man’s eyes were all pupil, and in the depths of those black holes something moved. Peter looked away.

“Oh God. I’m dead.”

“Not quite. This is the very moment of your death. I’ve hit the pause button, if you like.”

“This is what happens when you die?”

“No. You called, remember. Wished your children unborn.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“You did.”

He had to admit it to himself that the creature was right.

As though he had spoken, the creature, he thought of it as that now, said, “Good.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Course you do. This is your chance, Peter. If you have the sense and balls to take it.”

“What, like Faust, is that it? Devil gets my soul, I get to live on?”

“Way better. What did you wish for?”

“I guess. To live my life over.”

The priest smiled and nodded. Then he stood on the drip bag, bursting it.

“You’re saying what, I can live my life again? My whole life?”

“And what a huge, huge thing that is Petie. Think! The entire Universe would change around you.”

Peter could feel his heart quicken, an impossible hope kindling. “What are you saying?”

“You go back, the Universe won’t be the same. Your Father might be persuaded to stop smoking. Your Mum might not have been in a car at all that day. You might be the most important man on Earth, all the things you know.”

“Jesus.”

“Of course, for such a colossal gift, there is a price to pay.”

“The Devil gets my soul for eternity, in exchange for one lifetime, that’s the bargain? I always thought Faust must have been a moron to agree to that.”

The creature was shaking its head, “You’re thinking about this all wrong. The place you start from; Devil evil, G man good. The oldest propaganda in the world. Think about it. Kids get slaughtered every day, in whose name? Not the Devil. He’s the good guy, but the Church has done a real job on him. You trust what they say?”

“No.”

“Course you don’t. Here’s the kicker, unless you make a deal with the Devil, it’s the other guy, the real baddie, who gets his scaly mitts your soul. You don’t even have a say in it.”

“Heaven’s real?”

“Believe me, it’s not my idea of heaven!”

“I don’t know.”

The priest stepped back, going from enthusiastic to irritated in a second. He was no longer a young man, Peter saw. Not young at all. “I can’t believe you. You’re offered the chance of anybody’s lifetime and you’re just lying there.”

“But I don’t know what it means! Giving away my soul.”

“It’s already been given away. You’re just changing the recipient.” Now he looked away, bored. “You’re wasting my time. Make your mind up.”

Peter chewed his lip. Finally, the priest said, “Fuck this. You get the best deal in history, just as you are about to die, and you can’t decide. I’m going.”

“Wait! I get to live my life over, the whole thing?”

“Yea.”

“With all the knowledge that I’ve got now, all the abilities?”

“Yea.”

“And at the end, the Devil gets my soul?”

“It goes to a good place.”

Peter was thinking about Michelle Maidment. He was thinking about the guitar riff from Changing Man. He was wondering how they would like them apples in 1969. And there was the little matter of dying.

“How does it work?”

“You sign a paper. Then you get three questions. Then you say when you want to start, the very hour. Simple. One rule only.” He held up his finger, left it there like an exclamation mark.

“This bargain is a secret one. You can’t ever, ever, tell even one person. So long as you don’t break the rule, your eternity will be wonderful. Break it, you get to find out what eternal torment means.” He dropped his hand. “I’ve taken my finger off the pause button.”

Peter could actually feel his life draining away. He spoke quickly. “Where’s the paper?”

The priest smoothed a page onto Peter's chest, and produced a silver stylus from nowhere, slamming it into Peter's neck. He screamed, but the priest was already handing him the bloodied stylus. Blood was soaking his shoulder.

"Sign, hurry!"

Peter signed.

The priest was heaving him out of bed. Panicking, Peter said, "My three questions!"

"Quick then, we're dying."

"Can I avoid this skin cancer?"

"Wear sun block."

"Is there a way out of the deal? I mean can I cheat the Devil?"

"Yes and yes."

"How?"

The priest was headed towards the window, gasping. "Questions are up. When do you want to start? Quick now or I choose. And I might choose today."

The creature was old now. As it heaved him onto the window ledge, Peter said, "First day at High School. Half past eight."

He fell.

* * *

Peter was disorientated and his senses were overwhelmed; all of them. Smoke was catching in his throat, bright light hurt his eyes, and the sound in his ears...Jesus Christ, it was music. Louis Armstrong singing It's a Wonderful World. His hand went to his neck to staunch the blood, but he wasn't bleeding.

He was in a car, he realized, some old Ford only not old, bowling along the Kingsway at a fair pace.

He looked to his right and there he sat, a young man, surprisingly good looking, cool with his dark hair and cigarette. And big. Everything was big. The man was tapping his fingers, humming along with Louise, only ten years away from the heart attack that would kill him.

Peter's eyes blurred wet and he spoke before he knew he was going to, just one choked word, "Dad."

His Father turned and his pain was clear, the pain of a parent seeing his child hurting. He smiled, and said, "It'll be okay Petie. Calum will be there, right?"

Of course, his Dad drove him to school on that first day. He had forgotten.

And there, on the back of his Dad's hand, his little curved scar. Instantly recognisable, remembered in the moment it was seen.

His Dad took another big pull on the cigarette. He remembered those now too, Capstan full strength. Then he thought, the priest had it right, damn straight I'm going to stop him. Stop him smoking, make him play tennis with me. Make Mum cook food that doesn't come deep fat fried. I'm going to save him from that heart attack.

Then he thought, so, do I not think this is a hallucination?

No, he didn't think that at all. He wasn't hallucinating, but that didn't mean that this felt like reality. He looked down at himself, the uniform, the smooth hands, twisting in his lap. He dropped the sun visor and there he was in the mirror.

Skinny, scared and twelve years old.

"Sun in your eyes, Petie?" Then, getting a Satchmo growl in his voice. "Hey! It's a wonderful world, haha!"

* * *

They were approaching the school now and, look at all these kids! People who had already turned into adults, worn down and disappointed, in Peter's memory. He managed to tell his Father, in his squeaky kid's voice, he was just fine, and scrambled out of the car. The encouraging smile that his Dad answered with, covering the anxiety, nearly killed him.

He was stumbling, disorientated. A tall, skinny boy came hurrying across, running, looking like he wouldn't stop, and Peter backpedalled away from him.

The boy, Calum, of course it was, frowned, and gave him a sidelong look. "What's up with you?"

Then he said, "This place is pure mental. You seen all the skinheads?"

Peter fell in beside him, walking now into the grounds, kids of different ages milling round, noisy, the bigger ones towering over Peter, seeming impossibly big. He didn't want to be here, claustrophobic in this jostling mob. He wanted to get away, lie down. Give himself a chance to get himself together, come to terms with this new reality.

Now they were coming abreast of a group of three small girls, one of them Michelle Maidment. Just a kid.

Peter spoke, automatically, saying. "Hi."

Calum surprised him then, grabbing him and dragging him bodily along before saying, in something between a scream and a whisper, "Those were girls!"

And there, on cue as if by magic, was Gerry Ottabee, standing with a group of other skinheads. The skins were staring hard at kids who walked past them, nobody coming close. Peter caught his breath. He had forgotten the air of violence, the threat of it hanging round those boys.

Surprised at his speeding heart and jolt of primal fear, at the loss of the confidence of adulthood, he quickened his pace and this time Calum didn't need to grab him as they veered away, eyes averted.

By assembly, Peter was feeling punch drunk and shaky legged, pleased to be sitting down, even in this crowded hall. Mr Dominy, the Headmaster, a little man with a determined moustache, told them that he expected at least half of them to get to University. But it was up to them.

The nasal sound of Dominy's voice was like music that he had forgotten. He had detested the officious, awkward little man, but seeing him now, Peter wondered, was he just a guy doing his best?

He looked around himself, still in pure astonishment mode, taking the time to tell himself he was really here. Letting himself believe that, with the smells and the drone of his old headmaster and the forgotten

details of the hall. He was looking along the lines of children now and his eyes actually slid over Helen Sykes, Helen *Dolan*, before snapping back. Bloody Hell. Look at that nondescript, anxious, mousy little girl.

Teachers were standing along the walls, like sentries and he tried to remember their names. This being St. Peter's Catholic Academy two were nuns, wearing identical expressions of disapproval. Sister Bernadette, known as Atilla the Nun and...Peter froze. The other black robed figure wasn't a nun. He was a priest. *The* priest, with his upside down cross.

As he watched, the man smiled and held up his finger, just as he had when giving Peter his warning about the rule of silence. He put it to his lips, shhh, and Peter found the nun was a nun once more and he was staring in terror at Sister Mary Rose, who looked back wide eyed and aghast.

Peter turned to find that Dominy was also staring straight at him. Without pausing, he indicated Peter with an imperious finger, pointing to a line of chairs facing the audience, at his feet.

Powerless, shaking, he stood and shuffled past sitting boys who, instead of moving politely, kicked his ankles and tripped him. He walked to the front with his head bowed, goggled at by over a hundred children.

That afternoon, Peter left the school feeling washed out, just wanting to be alone, to sleep. His hands and wrists still tingled from being lashed with a thick leather strap.

Dominy had asked him what kind of stunt was that? Staring at a nun, a sister of God, in mock horror. A lesser person than Sister Mary Rose might have been reduced to tears.

Now he had to get on a bus filled with kids who all seemed to be screaming. It was horrible. They were horrible. But he remembered the route and got off three stops early, just to be on his own for the first time. He watched the new vintage cars blat past and breathed the half burnt petrol air of the sixties and soon he was standing in front of his childhood home. Inside, for the first time in twenty two years, he would meet his Mother.

* * *

Friday, period three; music. Peter had made it through his first full week and no longer felt like he was drowning. The music teacher, Mr Thoburn, sat at his piano, regarding his new class with a deep set expression of distaste. He asked, did anyone play an instrument? About ten hands went up.

"Put them down if it's the bloody recorder."

Now only Peter and two others were left, including Michelle Maidment. She glanced at him before looking away quickly.

"What do you play, Miss..."

"Maidment. I play the piano. A bit."

"To what grade?"

"Grade three, but that was a couple of years ago. I don't play much."

Without getting up, Thoburn indicated a space on his piano stool and pointed to the score before him.

Peter recognised the tune as Fur Elise, but only just. He felt himself getting annoyed, the bloody man leaning on her as she played. No wonder he had never learned to play until after leaving school.

The next boy claimed to play the guitar, and was mortified when Thoburn produced a battered gut string. He strummed a few out of tune chords, clearly aware that what he was doing sounded terrible, because the guitar was so out.

“Sykes. What do you play?”

“Piano.”

“What grade?”

“I’m self taught.”

Thoburn smiled a nasty little smile and this time stood before indicating the piano. As Peter sat he said, getting a laugh from the class, “This should be fun.”

Peter was regretting having claimed to play, wondering about muscle memory.

He attempted a few chords and, although the keyboard felt big, it was ok. He played a boogie woogie rhythm with his left hand and then started into a bit of blues.

“Stop! That’s not music. Play the piece on the piano.”

Fur Elise was one piece that Peter knew very well. The sound filled the room and he glanced at the class, some of whom were sitting with their mouths open. Michelle Maidment actually clapped.

Thoburn stopped him, “Well, you have the touch of a baby elephant, but at least I can hear what it is. Back to your seat.”

Peter didn’t move. He said, “I write too.”

That stopped Thoburn, “You *write*?” As though the word made him sick.

“Sir.”

“Well, this is something we must hear, mustn’t we? Play on MacDuff.”

Peter played ‘The Heart asks Pleasure First’ by Michael Nyman, the theme from the film *The Piano*. When he stopped the room was silent. Then everybody clapped. Thoburn said, having to speak over the noise of clapping, “You didn’t write that.”

“I did. I write songs too. Want to hear one?”

Thoburn started to refuse but the kids were shouting yes, so Peter played the intro and started into ‘Broken Stones’ by Paul Weller, sounding pretty good in his unbroken voice.

When he went back to his seat, everyone was looking at him differently. Michelle leaned over to say, “Did you really write that?”

Peter smiled and nodded. After a few seconds he had to turn round to look behind him, to where Helen Dolan was watching him with a strange expression. After a few seconds she smiled her huge smile and gave him some silent applause.

* * *

Christmas Eve 2018, and Peter Sykes was watching from behind the curtain as the theatre filled up with press and celebrities. Now he turned to look at a screen, where BBC’s Katie Dunn, who was standing just in front of the stage, was talking to camera.

“Let’s remind ourselves of what Peter Sykes has meant to the world of music and literature. In the seventies and eighties, he was *the* dominant figure, before he disappeared completely from public view. He has barely been glimpsed since then, but remember, this is the man who published the children’s classic ‘The Gruffalo’ before he was fourteen, the Harry Potter trilogy soon after. At about the same time he was writing and recording some of the most loved songs in history, like ‘Billie Jean.’ and ‘Little red corvette’.

Bizarrely, amongst all the performing and the womanising, he also had time to become known as the Father of Modern Prosthetics.

It was only last week that he broke his long silence by sending invitations worldwide to this event, oddly titled, Devil Take the Hindmost. I’ve met colleagues here today from every major network. I can see John Lennon and Paul McCartney, just in from a Beatles concert in Russia. And there’s David Bowie, who said only yesterday that he owed everything to Peter Sykes. That without him, his comedy career would have begun and ended with, ‘The Laughing Gnome’.”

Now Dunn, looking excited and breathless, said, “Something’s happening. I think he’s coming on stage.”

* * *

Peter Sykes, looking fit for sixty one but strained, walked onto the big stage, to a white podium with a bank of mikes. The laptop was open and waiting in front of the podium and he could see the cursor blinking, waiting for him to seal his fate.

Lights were popping, journalists shouting his name. He was shaking, terrified of what he was about to do. He waited for the noise to die down, then he started.

“Thank you all for coming to Devil Take the Hindmost.”

For some reason, that got a laugh and applause. But not from the man right in the centre of the front row; the priest, looking old and bent. He pointed a crooked finger at Peter and shook his head.

Peter had to take a moment, swallow some water before he could speak again. He could hear the shake in his own voice. “I’ll get right to it because what I’m going to say will be hard to accept. Many will not want to believe, will attempt to find ways to undermine the evidence I am about to send.”

That quietened them. He raised a finger, watching the priest, wondering if he or something else would stop him, then he tapped the return key. He had dropped his eyes and when he raised them, George Michael was sitting where the priest had been, leaning forward, clearly concerned for his old friend.

He swallowed and pressed on. “I’m sending millions of emails containing incontrovertible proof, gathered over decades. Proof that I have been able to see the future.”

Someone, maybe John Lennon, shouted, “What’s tomorrow’s bonus balls?”

That got a laugh, and Peter managed a smile.

“I can’t do that anymore, because today is the day I should have died.”

That received a muted reception.

“Okay, so here it is. I’ve known the future because I’ve relived my years on Earth. Because I sold my soul to the Devil.”

Peter had to wait then, holding his breath, wondering what would happen to him in the instant he broke Satan's cardinal rule. For a second, he thought he could smell smoke, but then it was gone.

When the room finally quietened, he said, "I told you this would be hard. To be clear, I'm not talking figuratively. I'm talking about the actual being, Satan. The reason I sent millions of emails, letters, social media posts, the reason I did all that, I didn't know what would happen when I told. You sell your soul to the Devil, he does *not* want you to tell. He doesn't want people to know it can happen."

People were shouting but he ignored them. He said, "I knew that if I was going to warn you, let you know he was real, there would have to be solid proof."

Lots of people were shouting now.

"The evidence proves beyond doubt that I have foretold the future over and over again. It's out there. Look at it, please."

There it was again, the smallest trace of smoke, too elusive to get hold of.

He continued. "I lived the first part of my life doing everything that I had dreamed of. I achieved every ambition and it was nothing. Success is nothing, if you steal it."

He turned now to the balding figure of John Lennon, "John, you wrote 'Imagine', not me. And George, you wrote 'Wake me up before you go-go'." He had to pause and then say, "No really, you did."

"I won global adulation, untold wealth, and it meant nothing. I was hollow and alone.

"In the mid eighties, I knew that Chernobyl was coming. I wanted to stop it but I couldn't. That's when I realised there was something much, much more important that I had to do. I could stop this happening to anyone else. The Devil has trapped me but I'm giving out the warning. He's real, and he wants your immortal soul."

The smell of smoke was stronger now, and Peter could see that the audience were moving, some of them getting to their feet. He turned and saw a flame, tiny but moving fast, spreading in a thin line that raced across the front of the stage. It looked as though the fire was in the gap between two lines of floorboards. He pointed to the impossible flame running the length of the auditorium, and said, "Look! He's coming for me!"

Somebody was calling for calm, shouting it's another trick, but there were other lines of flame running up the ornate walls, complex spirals of fire.

People were panicking, falling over one another to get out, but the flames were growing, spreading unnaturally fast, racing and criss-crossing every surface.

Peter felt a powerful wave of heat, fierce at his back and turned to see the priest, looking furious. His robe was burning, as was the curtain behind him. As the creature took hold of him and his own clothes caught, Peter screamed, "You're too late."

* * *

He woke in hospital, to pain dulled by drugs. For a while he drifted, then a noise made him open his eyes.

A very old man in rusty black was sitting by his bedside.

The priest stared at him with rheumy eyes. When he leaned forward it seemed that he hadn't moved for decades, dust sifting off him. His voice was raspy.

"How did you know?"

"I don't know what you mean, but it's too late anyway. Everybody knows."

The priest waved a dismissive hand. "You don't understand. That world, it was..."

"A dream?"

"It was real enough, but it's gone now. That fire you started just burned and burned." Again, he asked, "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"How to cheat the Devil."

When Peter couldn't answer, he said, "Of course you couldn't really have known, or it wouldn't have worked."

"What wouldn't have?"

"The only way to cheat the Devil, is to sacrifice yourself to the Devil. It washes away the sins of the world."

With that, the priest got painfully to his feet and limped to the window. He slid it open, leaned out and was gone.

No more than a second later, the door opened and a chubby, middle aged woman walked in, carrying flowers in a jug. She had been crying.

Peter stretched out his hand, smiling.

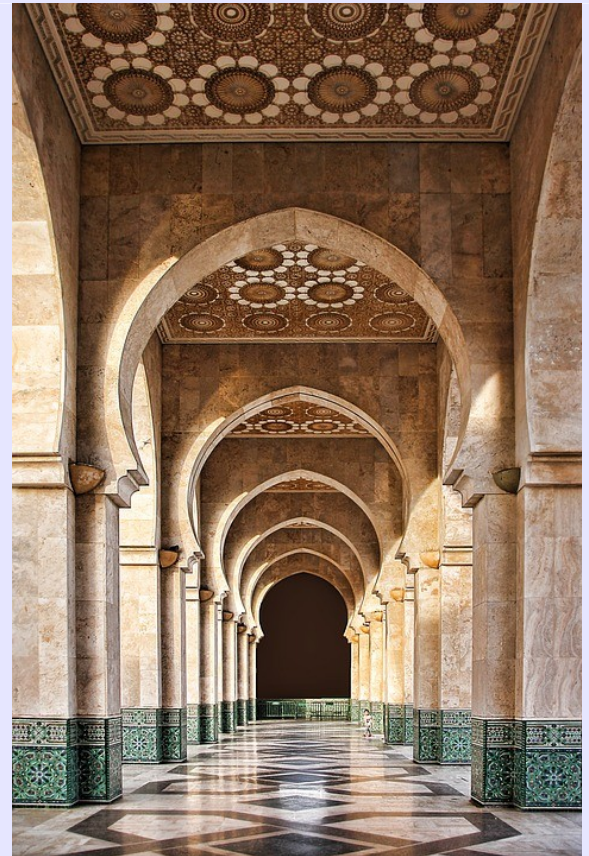
The End



That Supernatural Space

By DJ Tyrer

That supernatural space
So beloved of believers
And sceptics alike
Conceals a multitude of lies.
For one side
The supernatural allows faith
Placing claims beyond examination
Beyond the need for doubt.
For the others
The supernatural allows dismissal
Placing claims beyond examination
Beyond the scientific pale.
That supernatural space
Does not exist
No matter how handy it is
To those uninterested in truth.
If something exists
Even if it is beyond understanding
It is real
It is in the empiric space.
To accept or dismiss
With a sophistic term
Is to abdicate thought
Embracing foolishness.



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HE AIN'T HEAVY, HE'S MY CONCRETE BUDDHA

An Enlightening Tale

by

Neil K. Henderson

Well, I don't know what goes on in that Museum of Religious Artefacts, or whatever it's called. To tell the honest truth, I only ever went in there of a lunchtime, to get a bit of peace to digest my sandwiches. And some of those inspirational ladies - goddesses, holy mothers, or what have you - have a distinctly buxom charm. All demure and well-rounded and so forth. And the place is free to get into - which comes in handy with all the public toilets in the city being closed due to the council's cash crisis. All except the one outside the tourist office, of course (and you've got to pay for that one now). Talk about a bleeding *debacle*. The whole thing's French for a fuck-up. Still, art galleries and museums are more popular than ever as a result. The City of Culture image lives on.

As for the religious object place, there was this bloke I kept seeing in there. Actually looked like a walking toilet brush, if you know what I mean. I mean, his hair was *thick*. Dark black, and hundreds of it. All sticking out everywhere. Thick and bushy - and so was his beard. And he walked up straight, with his head jerking forwards. Kind of stalky, I suppose you'd call it. Like a lavatory brush on stilts (though he wasn't any taller than me).

Any road up, I always assumed he was in for the same reasons as yours truly. Until one day, I noticed him looking at me in a peculiar way. I thought he was going to pull me up for staring at him. I mean, when you look like a bog brush on legs, you must get a lot of people staring at you. But instead of shouting, "Oi! Who are you looking at, Anthrax Face?" (I'm no stranger to aggro myself), he looked me right in the eyes with that spooky unblinking glare that nutters have, and suddenly comes out -

"I don't believe in temples. Temples are pathetic holes people with small minds try to bury God in."

Well, you know - I just kind of nodded. And smiled. It wasn't a case of humouring him in a patronising way. I mean, *everyone* tends to agree with strangers, just to keep things sweet. It doesn't mean anything. It's not as if you're committing yourself to a lasting bond of philosophical oneness. Try telling him, though. Next thing, Mr. Bog Brush grabs me by the shoulder and says, "I thought you'd see it that way too. I've noticed you here before. You always show genuine *reverence*. Not like the usual fallen witnesses that come to gawp." (Was that a twitch, or did he wink at me?) "Listen. The two of us together. We can achieve so much."

And he practically drags me through a series of galleries, till we come to the Oriental section. It's full of busty handmaidens of Krishna, and multi-armed Shivas, and prayer wheels and funny hats and stuff, but none of that's what's bothering old lavvy bonce. It's the statue of the sitting Buddha at the doorway. One of those low-slung, laughing buggers with a fat belly. You can tell straight away it's a fake. All the genuine artefacts are well protected behind glass - probably bullet-proof, for all I know. But this big ugly lump of moulded rubble is just squatting on a ledge built up from the floor, like it's been dumped there as a kind of signpost to that part of the museum. I mean, I'm not trying to be superior or anything, but some of those foreigners that come into the museum probably can't read the written signs properly. No disrespect, but not every country has the high standard of education we have here. Mind you, I sometimes get mixed up myself with some of those big scientific-looking words. Take *sarcophagus*. I used to think that was a fancy spittoon... for *coughing your guts*. I was lucky they didn't press charges.

But as I was saying, this Buddha looks like something you'd find in a junk shop. The kind of thing 'intellectuals' would buy for an esoteric garden gnome. (That's a good word, innit. *Esoteric*. I heard a student say that once, down the pub.) It looks mass-produced, prefabricated like. And huge - nearly as big as our Cissy's eldest, and he's a fat lad for his age. And someone's stuck a coat of gloss white on it at some point. Well, beauty's in the eye of the beholder, I suppose. There's no doubt our hairy headbanger's got his eye on this prize sculpture, whatever the attraction is.

"Life is a prison," says he out the corner of his beard. "We need to get back to the Garden."

I wondered if he meant the Zen Garden at the back of the museum, but who wants to go there? There's nothing to see except gravel and moss and big lumps of rock. That's not my idea of a garden. You'd think they could put a few crocuses in at least. But be that as it may, before I could ascertain what he was on about, he tore his eyes away from the Buddha and pulled me into a big sort of cupboard at the far end of the gallery. Blimey! I thought it was *Kismet*, *Hardy* that time... I mean Trafalgar... Like, I'd met my Waterloo... That is, I don't want to put down what was in my mind, in case there's a minor reading this, but I didn't like the way the situation was turning out.

"Look what I've found," whispers Spiky Hair. He switched on a light. "Uniforms. We could put these on, and everyone would think we were maintenance staff."

And without another word, he starts pulling this City Museums overall on over his clothes. Call me easily led, if you will - but the guy was quite scary. Anyhow, next thing, he's got me putting on an overall as well. Well, better putting something *on* than taking anything *off*, in a situation like that - if you get my drift. I had to leave my anorak on a hook in the cupboard. That's when I noticed he hadn't been wearing a jacket of any sort today. Like he'd come prepared.

"I know where there's a box," he said matter-of-factly, and put out the light. I was quite relieved when he opened the door a crack, checked the coast was clear, then ventured outside. I followed behind him (well, since I now had the overalls on anyway, I might as well go the whole hog) as he legged it down a back stairway. After a couple of flights, we came to a big storeroom in what I suppose must've been the basement. I started preparing my defence for when we got arrested. Strangely enough, none of the other workers down there batted an eyelid. Of course, now I look back on it all with mature reflection, it's quite possible the others were all impostors too. Security in these places is quite shocking, in my humble opinion. They've got that Salvador Dali in there. *Christ of St. John of the Cross*. It used to be in Kelvingrove. I remember when that schizophrenic chap - back in the Sixties, I think it was - went in with half a brick in his hand, and nobody said a word. Walks into an art gallery in an obviously disturbed state, carrying half a brick or a big stone or whatever it was, and nobody tries to stop him. Then there's a big outcry when he chucks the brick at the painting. I ask you...

Mind you, taking a big stone in might be easier than taking a lump of stone out - if I was picking up Mr. Bristly Bounce's intentions. It strikes me now that *intention* is all that counts in cases like this. If you have that air of purpose about you - that you know what you're doing, and have a right, even a duty, to do it - everyone else automatically assumes that you are indeed doing what you're supposed to do. It's all down to unfaltering determination. And my bushy-bearded pal was no shrinking violet when it came to brass neck, that's for sure. Goes up to one of the basement staff, bold as you like, and asks for a crate for the Buddha outside the Oriental display. The other bloke never questions why he wants it, just scratches his head and looks about him, pointing out odd boxes and crates that may or may not be suitable for our requirements.

At last, we came away with a big wooden packing case it took the pair of us to lug up the stairs. My new pal had that look of determination about him now that said it would be pointless trying to argue with him. I just went with the flow. It goes without saying that if you want to avoid suspicion, you need to avoid *looking suspicious* - which is best done by keeping talking and getting other people involved as a cover. In no time, we were standing outside the Orientals with several of the genuine staff helping us manhandle this cumbersome statue into the crate. The lavvy brush man even got them to send a delivery van round to the front of the building.

The hardest part was actually getting the crate out to the van. I thought I was going to die. I thought my arms were going to get pulled from their sockets. I thought I was going to bust a gut. Physical exertion doesn't agree with me, as you can probably tell. Even with four of us on the job, it was eye-watering work.

When the cold February air hit my rivers of sweat, I suddenly broke out in a violent bout of shivering. So while the others were getting the crate on the van, I nipped back in for my anorak, which was still in the cupboard. I thought I'd just dump the overall while I was there, and disappear into the background in my civvy clothes. Then head off out the main entrance unobtrusively, once all the dust had settled. I'd have to think up some excuse for being late back for work, but it wasn't something I made a habit of. Hopefully, I'd be able to swing it with the old flexi-time.

No such luck. Old scratchy features was waiting for me.

"Come on," says he impatiently. "I've sent it up to Knightswood Park."

"That's great," says I, trying to sound both encouraging and final at the same time. "Back to the Garden, right enough. Do you live near there? You'll be able to visit -"

"We can get the bus," says he, grabbing my shoulder again. Those eyes never wavered. Dark, they were. And quite, quite forbidding. I obeyed meekly. Of course, he had an invalidity pass. It was official. Care in the community, no doubt. Me - I had to pay the full fare, as usual. This was one visit to the museum that was costing me dear. And I'd still have to come all the way back later... if I ever got away, that was.

Needless to say, yer man lives twelve storeys up a multi. He would, wouldn't he? And it's no use trying to persuade him Knightswood Park is just the sort of place Lord Buddha would have enjoyed in his lifetime. Really quite Zen, in a plastic wrapper, postmodernist way. Nope. He wasn't wearing it. The statue which had been deposited - still in its crate - on the grass between the duck pond and the road (the other side from the flats) had to be got inside the very domicile of our very determined mad-haired git. I thought I'd known Hell outside the museum. This was going to be utter damnation beyond the wit of mortal man to describe.

He must have spotted the reluctance in my eyes. Either that, or the panic-stricken horror in my grimace. By this time, I'm starting to have serious forebodings about getting this concrete monstrosity up twelve flights in the lift and then humping the bastard into this nutter's apartment (no doubt filled to bursting with Ganeshes and Virgin Marys and God knows what three-dimensional icons). By which time I'd be so knackered, I'd be easy prey for his sadistic depravities, perverted carnal lusts and, for all I knew, cannibalistic tendencies. It was time to make a run for it. Why did I ever get on the bus? I should have bolted when we'd left the museum. But that might have drawn attention to our... theft. Oh God, I was an accessory. I'd have to get away, before this madman found out where I lived. Thank goodness I'd got my anorak out of that store cupboard. But if Mr. Toilet Brush went through my pockets and found some ID... I'd be in his power forever.

"Don't look so worried," says he calmly. "I can levitate it from here."

"Ah. So... you don't really need me here, then..."

"Of course I need you!" He looks as though I've said something totally stupid. "You're the catalyst. You're *fated*."

Oh, no. It was *Kismet*, after all. Take my hand. I'm a stranger in Paradise.

"Come on," says he, shoving me down on the doggy-frequented grass. "We must kneel before the altar."

I lodged a protest. "You wouldn't do that to me if I was a fifteen foot reinforced concrete lamp-post!" What was I saying? He'd managed all right up to now with the Buddha.

So far, no-one was paying us too much attention. As you'd expect, the parks are all pretty quiet during the week - especially in February. And the main man's still got his council overalls on, so anyone passing would just think he was on official business. That is, so long as they didn't get too close. Cos once on his knees beside me, he starts reciting this weird load of mumbo-jumbo. It sounded Far Eastern, whatever it was. The kind of thing you don't say too close to a Chinese takeaway, if you don't want to get up to your ears in egg foo yung.

My train of thought was shattered by a sudden loud cracking and splintering. The wooden packing case abruptly fell to pieces - like the Incredible Hulk was in there kicking his way out. In fact, I half expected to see the Buddha standing in a kung fu pose, like one of them Ninja Turtles. But it was just the same as before.

"Enlightened One," says my tame loony. "Satan shall assist our endeavour..."

Satan? My visions of demonic depravity instantaneously returned.

"...won't you?" he adds, turning to me. "The Dark One is the bearer of the Light! O Lucifer, carry our self-enlightened idol for us, that we may send him on his final journey Home."

And the bloody thing took off. Floated in the air a good ten feet above the dog shit and crisp packets.

"Thank you, Prince of Darkness!" says Basil Bog Brush to me.

Me! He seemed to be under the apprehension that *I* - simple and unassuming soul that I had always imagined myself to be - was in reality Lucifer, Satan, Prince of Darkness... *the Devil*. *Me!* I know sneaking into a religious museum at lunchtime to eye up the talent in the displays is a bit... well... *naughty*. And gobbing in the sarcophagus was on the rude side. But it's hardly in the big league. It's not nuclear warfare... or AIDS... or genetically modified yoghurt. I looked up, and noticed that the Buddha had flown out of sight. There had evidently been some kind of logic in yer man's crazy reasoning. Someone, or some *thing*, had shifted it all right. I couldn't suppress a shudder. Then another thought struck me.

"Does this mean you've got to give me your soul, then?" I asked, all innocently.

The head of my erstwhile manipulator doubled in size, as all the hairs on his scalp and face stood on end at once.

"Noooooh!" he screamed, kind of continuously for a while - the whites of his eyes showing all round the pupils. Then he did some heavy breathing till he calmed himself down. "We haven't got a contract. I never signed anything in blood. Ha-ha! Ha-ha! I've beaten you, Satan! I've beaten the Devil! The power of the Light has overcome your dark malevolence and made you my slave! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!"

I was getting fed up with this. As it was, I was going to have to phone in sick at work. Or take the afternoon out of my annual leave. I was even going to have to fork out for my bus fare home. All because of this joker with the Buddha fixation. And now I came to look, his eyes had lost something of that persuasive drive since I'd mentioned the soul bit. Boggled themselves to a standstill, so to speak.

"Sorry pal," says I. "No soul, no statue. I never said anything about pacts signed in blood. You shouldn't jump to conclusions."

And just as I said it, there was this whistling sound from far away, moving closer and closer, louder and louder, until - *SLAM!* - the concrete Buddha flew out of nowhere like a meteor and embedded the human toilet brush under a good six feet of sod, along with most of the statue itself. Indeed, to a casual glance it would probably look like nothing more than a big white-painted stone sticking out of the ground. Albeit one with a huge otherworldly grin on its face. If the local Chinese takeaway had any sense, I thought, they'd slap an advert on it quick.

Well, just then I saw a bus coming up the road, and legged it to the stop in the nick of time. Maybe if I went straight back to work I could square it with the boss. It's a funny old thing, this will-power. Old Spiky had had so much will-power, he'd been able to get that statue out of the museum without a murmur. He'd even willed me to take the place of the Devil for his levitation mullarkey. And then - Well, then I'd used a bit of will-power of my own, I suppose.

Things have never really been the same since. Of course, once I'd talked the boss round and got back to my desk that afternoon, I had time to really think about what had happened. I'd certainly look at Stonehenge in a different light from now on. It could well be that me and the ancient Brits had something in common, when it came to stone-shifting techniques. Then it dawned on me that I could probably use my new will-power to send the Buddha back to the museum in the quiet of the night. In all likelihood, the staff would think it had just been lent out for a one-day exhibition or something, and then returned.

Nothing was ever said about it in the press, anyway. But the papers were too full of the Beast of Knightswood, after the crushed and mangled Brush-Head Man was unearthed from the newly-vacated Buddha pit. They identified him from the uniform overall, and council DNA records. Turns out he really used to work for the council, as a toilet attendant - before they closed down his convenience and made him redundant. Over the years, he must have grown to look like his occupation. And no doubt it was those long lonely hours in that confined space that drove him over the edge. "Life is a prison", eh? Well, he's made it back to the Garden himself now... even if it had to be via a pathetic hole to bury a god in.

As for me, I'm a lot more forthright than I used to be. I take life by the scruff of the neck now, and live it to the full. And I don't let anyone get in my way. People respect that. Attitude is so important. In fact, that probably had a lot to do with my promotion. It's as if people can see it in my eyes. That determination. That unshakeable belief in myself. The knowledge of my inner strength and the conviction that I'm going to win through, whatever the odds. After all, why should I let anyone intimidate me? How could they possibly harm me? All I need to do is bear in mind that statue in the museum, silently waiting to take to the air once more, and my confidence is redoubled. Yes indeed, if I don't get what I want from here on in, there's going to be the Devil to pay - and I mean heavy duty.

Ends

Moloch Isn't Eating

By Shaun Baines

"Yep, can we have the Gung Hom Pha?...That's two, please...Then we'll have the No. 48, I think...yeah, and the No. 76...yes, that's it....yep...half an hour?"

Aiden put down the phone and shouted upstairs. "Don't worry, hun. I'll do the cooking tonight."

His little joke never failed to amuse him, despite its frequent use. Since being married last Spring, their Friday night take-out had been paired with another on Saturday. Wednesday sometimes made an appearance, though Monday was down to once a month. He worried briefly about his expanding mid-rift, but reasoned it was a sign of contentment.

Evelyn sat on the sofa beside him. "You didn't order too much, did you?"

"No. Just the usual."

"So too much, then. I've put on five pounds since the wedding."

Aiden gave her a peck on the cheek. "You're still the beautiful girl I married."

Evelyn beamed at him.

"There's just more of you now," he added, laughing.

The cushion narrowly missed his head and he grabbed her in a playful hug. The hug led to playful groping, which led to something much more adult. By the time their food arrived, they had burned enough calories to deserve it.

The meal was finished when nothing remained, but a pile of greasy plates. Aiden leaned back into the sofa. "God, I'm stuffed."

"And you ate half of mine. I'm surprised you didn't eat the cartons it came in."

Aiden cast a lazy glance at Moloch, who lay motionless by the fire. "What's the matter with him?"

"He's off his food."

"Remind me why your Uncle Milton gave him to us as a wedding present?" he asked.

"I keep telling you, he's not a wedding present," Evelyn said through gritted teeth. "Uncle Milton was just getting too old to look after him."

"But he gave him to us a day before the wedding?" Aiden rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Strangest wedding present I've ever heard of."

A Burmese python was a strange gift under any circumstances, but Aiden had learned to love the graceful animal. Moloch was twelve feet long with a head shaped like an arrow and diamond patterning on his skin. Slow and languorous, he was tame enough to roam the lower half of the house.

Aiden knew snakes could go months without feeding, but he hated to think Moloch was in any discomfort.

His own gargantuan meal had left him feeling tired and his head nodded. They'd keep an eye on him, he thought as his eyelids fell and he drifted off to sleep.

"Yeah, can we have six samosas?...a paratha...yeah, and a lamb biryani and a chicken masala?...a garlic naan, as well please...yep, that's it...half an hour?"

Aiden put down the phone. "I'm cooking again tonight, hun," he shouted upstairs, chuckling at his joke.

He eased his bulk onto the sofa and Moloch coiled around his feet. "I wish you'd eat something, buddy."

Evelyn came into the room. She didn't look herself these days. Her skin was sallow and her body was shapeless. Aiden would always love her. He just didn't fancy her, anymore.

"Did you get a garlic naan?" Evelyn asked.

Aiden nodded.

"Great. I'm starving. Has Moloch eaten today?"

Aiden looked down as his feet disappeared under the curl of the snake's body. "No, he just likes to be close to me, I think."

"I like to be close to you, too," said Evelyn, giving Aiden a kiss on the cheek.

He shuffled further down the sofa. "Not tonight, Evelyn. I don't think I could manage it."

When their food arrived, they ate in silence.

* * *

Later that night, Aiden lay awake, listening to Evelyn trying to catch her breath. Eventually, she gasped and he let out a sigh of relief. Sleep apnoea. He didn't have it, thank God, but his heart burn made it difficult to sleep.

What had happened to them? They didn't do anything together anymore, except eat. It was take-outs every night and an early grave for both of them if they didn't change their lifestyle.

Surely, it wasn't too late, was it? There must be something they could do. The weight on his chest was oppressive, but his eyelids finally felt heavy. Aiden dozed until he felt Evelyn rubbing against his leg.

"Hun, I'm tired."

She persisted, her hand moving to his hip.

"I mean it, Evelyn."

There was something dry to her touch; something insistent.

"Evelyn?"

Her hand climbed higher. Quiet. Pressing onward. Undulating.

He leapt from the bed. Evelyn woke with a scream, eyes wide with panic.

"What is it?" she shouted.

"It's Moloch. He's in our bed." Aiden whipped the duvet away to reveal the Burmese python tasting the air with his forked tongue.

"What's he doing up here?" Evelyn asked. "Is he alright?"

"Never mind if he's alright. I just about had a heart attack."

Evelyn ran her hand down Moloch's solid body. "What's the matter, baby? Are you okay?"

"What are you doing?" Aiden asked.

"Get the duvet on. He's cold."

"Of course, he's cold. He's a bloody cold blooded reptile."

"He just wants company. Leave him alone."

Aiden stared at her, mouth open. "Are you honestly saying we should leave him in the bed?"

"He's not well," Evelyn said.

"Exactly. What if he's got some tropical snake disease? Something we could catch?"

Evelyn propped herself up on her elbow, her bulbous stomach flopping onto the mattress.

"You're being stupid. Get back into bed. I'm tired."

Moloch didn't take up too much room, he thought. Maybe he did want company. Maybe he sensed his end was near. It could be the last company he had. Aiden felt bad, worried the pet they had both fallen in love with would soon be no more.

Gingerly, he climbed back into bed, pulling the duvet over all three of them.

"Hun," he whispered in the darkness. "I think we should go on a diet."

* * *

"Have you chopped those carrots?" Evelyn asked in her best Sergeant Major voice.

"All present and correct, sir."

"How about those peppers, Private?"

"You leave my private pepper out of this." He shot her a wide grin. This was great, Aiden thought. Doing something together. Laughing together. They'd already lost fifteen pounds. Aiden felt and looked much better. So did Evelyn. They had even begun making love again. Frantically. Making up for lost time.

Unless Moloch was in bed with them, that was. In the middle of stripping each other naked, a familiar hiss would tell them they weren't alone. Despite not eating, he was bigger than ever. It took two of them to carry him downstairs, by which time the mood had definitely passed.

Evelyn dropped the egg noodles into the boiling water. "What time is Moloch's appointment tomorrow?"

At ten thirty the following morning, Moloch was tied in a knot on the vet's table. Aiden and Evelyn explained his lack of appetite while the vet examined him. "You say he's about five years old?"

Evelyn nodded.

"That's a teenager in snake terms. He's about to become an adult soon."

"Good," said Aiden. "He's spends too much time sulking in his bedroom. The only problem is it's our bedroom."

"What do you mean?" the vet asked.

Aiden explained how Moloch had taken to sleeping between them like a border between two states. The frown deepened on the vet's forehead and he eyed Moloch warily, who uncurled under his

stare. "How long has this been going on?"

"About a couple of months. Why?"

The vet cleared his throat. "Moloch is growing up. The mice and chicks you've been feeding him won't sustain much longer. He's been starving himself in wait for something bigger."

"But why has he been sleeping in our bed?" Evelyn asked.

Moloch eased closer to the vet, who took a step backwards. "You've been very, very lucky," he said. "Moloch lay between you to measure how big you were in comparison to him."

"Why?" Aiden asked.

"He was trying to determine whether he could eat you or not."

The first night Moloch slid into their bed, they were safe. Too big for Moloch to consume, but as the weeks went by, Moloch got bigger and they got smaller. As the nights passed, Moloch got ever closer to his first big meal.

Aiden pressed into Evelyn and felt her shaking. Getting healthy was supposed to lengthen your life, he thought. Not end it.

"Do you want to get a take-out tonight?" he asked.

Ends



You Had Me At Goodbye

By Susan Fedorko

It has been several years since I found out the deep dark secret of who my birth mother is. I will never know what kind of torment my birth mom ([Cathee Dahmen](#)) went through. High School was not the typical experience for Cathee. In her last couple months at the Minneapolis Vocational High School, her own Teachers ridiculed her. One Teacher even spewed at her. “You’ll never be anything other than a Franklin Avenue Indian”.



Cathee Dahmen was a sweet, soft-spoken half Native American/German girl from Minnesota. She gave birth to me at the age of sixteen and kept me for the first eleven months of my life. She excelled in her Art classes in High School and was very good student. Cathee was the fourth oldest daughter of nine kids. She was the favourite daughter of her Father Leo Dahmen.

During her pregnancy and up to delivery, Cathee had gone back and forth with adoption or raising me herself. When I was delivered in June of 1962, she decided “to hell with adoption” and she decided to bring me home. Mom and I lived with one of her older sisters (Marie) in a small second floor lever in South Minneapolis for a short while. I was named Veronica Rose Dahmen. And ‘Cricket’ for my nickname. God only knows why??

I do not remember anything about the first eleven months with her. No giggles or smiles; scent of her skin or most importantly the sound of her voice. It has always been said, that children will always remember the sound of their Mothers voice. I will never know the struggles of motherhood for her. I have always wondered what kind of routine she had while I was under her wing. How much time did we spend together? How difficult it was for her to leave me in the morning, and go to High School. She never told any of her friends that she had a baby at home waiting for her.

One day while she was at School, her own Mother (Mary Dahmen) my Grandmother, packed me up and headed to Child Services and had me adopted out. Cathee never had any goodbyes. She came home from School and her parents told her that I was gone, never to return.

Cathee a child herself had no recourse. During the early sixties, it was taboo to be an unwed Mother. It brought shame to the family name. I don’t think this was really ever an issue with the Dahmen family. Cathee’s older sisters were all unmarried with kids. Cathee’s own Mother had her first daughter out of wedlock at a very young age.

I had been told that my Grandmother had met the Irish writer James Joyce while he was in the Great Lakes area when she was very young. Mary Dahmen’s first born daughter was said to be his child. Having children in their teens was not new to the Dahmen family. I am only repeating what was told to me.



The reason 'why' my Grandmother packed me up and adopted me out, was because she was the 'Native Family Visionary' she saw great things to happen to Cathee. As long as I was in Cathee's life, THIS would never happen. In essence this was true. Looking back on this now, I know this to be true. It still does not soften the blow that it was all at my expense. I would be the one that this would affect the rest of our lives.

My feelings have always been on the fence when it comes to my Grandmother Mary. 'Yes' she was responsible for ripping me from my Birth Mother. It was her decision to separate us, cast out one of her own. Cathee had bonded with me and was only doing what came natural for a young Mother. She loved me

unconditionally and gave it her all. Some days I feel like the runt of the litter that the *grand*-Mother eats. It has taken me years to try to come to terms with Mary's decision, and I am still not there yet. Most days I believe this to be true, because I would not have the life that I have today. I would have never met my husband Tim and had the two beautiful daughters that will be my legacy. I still walk past that bitch's grave when I go to visit the Dahmen family plots in Grand Portage, Minnesota.

After our separation, Cathee moved out East to live with her Uncle George Morrison. Uncle George was an accomplished Artist. George and his family lived in Providence Rhode Island. Cathee was a great help with their young son Briand. Cathee attended Hope High in Providence. She was a shy introvert girl reeling from a devastating betrayal.



Since Uncle George was a famous Artist, he had exposure to several circle of friends. Cathee soon crossed paths with Antonio Lopez, a well know Fashion Illustrator. One weekend Antonio and Juan Ramos his partner; Cathee and her Aunt/Uncle spent a long weekend at the beach. Antonio had proposed that immediately after High School graduation, move to New York City and try her hand at fashion modeling. Cathee could move into their apartment above Carnegie Hall.

Antonio was already well known in the Fashion industry, and was ready to make Cathee the next 'It' girl. In order to do so, he would try to pass Cathee off as his younger sister. Antonio was from Puerto Rico, and with Cathee's Native American olive complexion this was doable!



Cathee became an instant success and was turning heads of well know Modeling Moguls. She became an Eileen Ford model, and was said at one time was one of Eileen's top earners. Cathee modeled high fashion couture to ready to wear clothes for many of the world's famous designer houses.

Cathee moved from New York City to London in 1968. She landed a new contract with the elite Models1 Company. She was on the cover of many fashion periodicals for Harper's Bazaar, Vogue and Elle magazine. She was an accomplished, well sought after Model who had a unique way to transpose herself into photographs. If she was modeling for a Brazilian layout, she was an exotic Brazilian girl. She could be a Spanish girl, or a brunette American Bride. Her hands were her tools, and her body knew the right poses. It was amazing that she

showed no signs of ever having given birth. The Photographers Cathee worked with, were willing to overlook her self-applied South Minneapolis tattoos she and her sisters created. In those days, this was unheard of. She broke a lot of barriers in those years.

On a visit back home to Minneapolis, Minnesota Cathee showed up to a School dance with James Michael Lawrence, a very dear friend of hers. Cathee wore a red Yves St. Laurent dress, and she was decked out to strut herself at her old High School. Cathee came across the Teacher that once ridiculed her about being nothing but a Franklin Avenue Indian. This Teacher gushed over Cathee. Cathee response was priceless. "Pretty good for a Franklin Avenue Indian," she spewed back at the Teacher. Cathee attended several events in the Twin Cities as a celebrity.

I often wonder if my Adopted Parents ever realized who Cathee was. We got the **Star and Tribune** morning and evening news delivered at our door. What exactly did my adopted parents know about Cathee Dahmen? I think they knew exactly who she was, as I recall my adopted Mother whispering about my adoption when I was in grade school

I am still in awe at how closely I have circled the Dahmen family growing up. My adopted Grandmother attended the same Catholic Church as Mary Dahmen. They were both parish members of Saint Stephens Church. I lived on 48th and Elliot Avenue in Minneapolis, and the Dahmen's lived somewhere on 21st and Elliot Avenue.

My loving Adoptive family was upper middle class. Lloyd & Virginia Smith adopted me late in 1964. They were already in their late forty's when I was adopted. They were very loving and strict Parents. I became Susan Smith. I attended private Catholic School, and wore a School uniform every day. Discipline and prayer were the main focus in life. I was German (Lloyd's nationality) and not Native American. I never knew my culture or was ever exposed to any Native Americans. The only time I ever dared embrace my culture was one time, I got to be an Indian Princess for Halloween. I looked every bit the role!

Cathee continued her Modeling career up to about 1981. She tried her hand at a regular desk job and lived in Stamford Connecticut. I don't think she ever got use to earning less than what she made modeling. She came home to Minneapolis with a collapsed lung and moved in with one of her older sisters in Princeton, Minnesota. She had three other children after me. I have met all three children. It was Cathee's 2nd daughter Sarah Knestrick who found me when I had just turned forty years old. Sarah is the daughter of Cathee and Leonard Whiting. Leonard was well known for his role as 'Romeo' from the 1968 Franco Zeffirelli film. Sarah found me out of the blue off an internet adoption search site. She was able to put two and two together, that I was the sister she had been searching for. She had two other Children, Laura and Allan following her divorce from Leonard Whiting.

Cathee died on September 25th of 1997. Princeton is less than 40 miles from the house my husband Tim and I currently live in. She had a modest Native American memorial service. She was cremated and is buried in a small modest Chippewa Native American Cemetery along the shores of Lake Superior, just outside of Grand Marais.

I know exactly where I was that day she died. Years after I was found by my half-sister Sarah Knestrick I found a concert stub with that exact date. I was at a Rolling Stones Concert in Minneapolis, Minnesota (my home town). I still get the chills when I see Cathee with her modeling peer/good friend, Jerry Hall and Mick Jagger in a photograph that Bill Cunningham snapped. What a world she must have experienced without me.

I visit her often, walking right past Grandmother Mary's plot. Weeds could grow up and over her cross, and I will still not tidy up her grave. This is something that I have to learn to accept and overcome. I struggle with accepting that my Grandmother cast me out, while she embraced the rest of her Grandchildren. I am still that little girl, she denied. In time, I hope I can forgive her.

Some days it is heart wrenching to see Cathee's images in Magazines from forty-nine years ago. I am very proud of who and what she became in life. Her beauty radiated in those images, and I often wonder what she was thinking? Was she thinking of me? When I study these images, I do see her pain. She may be dressed up in beautiful couture, but I do see the pain in her eyes. It is always exciting to see new photographs of my Mother. I see my daughters in her image. I too resembled Cathee when I was in my twenties.

Other days, I can't contain pride in viewing her magnificent photos! I am so very proud of her! I do plan to catch up with my Mom someday in the spirit world!

*You can purchase Susan Fedorko's book **Cricket: Secret Child of a Sixties Supermodel** from [Amazon](#)*

The Tunnel

By Frederick Pollack

At first, in the cells, there are only bars
and stone, and you're too busy
being tortured to consider
escape; you have no tools, you don't even
have hands. Remember, however,
from thrillers and war-movies,
that when you find some way to dig
you must hide as much earth as possible
about your person
(which is dirty enough to conceal it),
then dribble it out during the day.
If the guards shoot you or, with their rough humor,
beat you to death, other prisoners,
with whatever starved strength, will carry on.
Eventually, white bread
and bologna sandwiches appear,
slightly more sensitive
guards, less smell of the dead;
you're scraping (behind a big pinup)
through stone now, but there's earth beyond;
the other cons are unreliable.
Your nightmare is still that you'll never get
beyond the walls, the wire;
that there is no surface, no ground.
Keep at it, though, and you may be
left more or less alone:
still in uniform, playing soccer much of the time,
with nothing in the air
but planes at which you wave.
There's still earth (and a radio) to hide;
guards, and the smell and squabbles
of men, but time has contracted.
Yet one more effort, and at some point
the guards will be gone, the huts and walls and wire;
in fact there will be no structure
of any sort, no hills, not even sky,
and at that moment you can look around.

The Metamorphosing

By Tushar Jain

Aruni: You there, WhatsApp?

Aruni: Waiting...

Arun: Here.

Aruni: Finally! Humph.

Arun: Sorry. Dozed off. This guy just goes on and on and on... One would think that after two nonstop hours, a person would run out of things to say about non-linear narratives.

Aruni: You are a cranky one, Mr. Arun Patehkar.

Arun: You would be too. My backbone's gone non-linear sitting in these horrible folding chairs. Can't believe I have to tolerate two more hours of this.

Aruni: Who is it?

Arun: Who else? The Crypt Keeper. Sixty-seven year old Prof. Chopra returned from the dead to tell us tales about Jeannette Winterson. So far, all he's done is find three different ways of saying 'Faulkner'. Dr. Chaturvedi of the Linguistics Department bent down to pick a pen ten minutes ago. He hasn't come up yet. I think he's either asleep under the table or has crawled his way out and escaped.

Aruni: You sure no one will catch you WhatsApping with your girlfriend?

Arun: Ha! Fat chance. People need to be awake for that. Mrs. Bedi next to me is snoring so powerfully, her chair's shifted seven inches in the last five minutes.

Aruni: Um... Arun, I have something to tell you.

Arun: Uh oh. Alarm bells have commenced ringing ominously.

Aruni: Yeah... Hm.

Arun: Spill the beans, o mysterious one.

Aruni: My lower back's started to itch.

Arun: Oh shit.

Aruni: Exactly.

Arun: No, no, no! Shit! Shit! Shit! But wait. Is it the same kind of itch?

Aruni: Yup.

Arun: Shhhhhhhiiiiiiitttt!

Aruni: It's similar to the one I felt on the sole of my left foot two months ago. I think it's speeding up. The process, I mean.

Arun: So – so, this – this would be the...

Aruni: Yes.

Arun: The tail! Jesus.

Aruni: I was sitting in bed, working on the anthology as usual, and suddenly, *bang*. That same evil, recognisable itch.

Aruni: Arun?

Arun: Here. Mrs. Bedi's snore-fuelled chair changed course and was about to charge into mine. I did her a favour and shifted it a little to the right. In another ten minutes, she'll be out of the room.

Aruni: You're distracted. I'll talk later.

Arun: No! Stay. I'm here. I want to talk.

Aruni: Do you? Do you really? Because this is more important than tail-less Mrs. Bedi.

Arun: Oh, I wouldn't call Mrs. Bedi tail-less. If anything, I think she has quite the tail.

Aruni: What the FUCK did you say?

Arun: Nothing. Listen, Aru. I've wanted to talk for a long time. Seriously. About us. I think... No. I *know* I can't handle 'it' anymore.

Aruni: You're being vague.

Arun: I think we should break up.

Aruni: Aru?

Aruni: Here. And by 'it' you obviously mean –

Arun: What else?

Aruni: Okay. Thanks for clarifying. Here's something though. You're not breaking up with me.

Arun: Excuse me?

Aruni: A. You. Cannot. Break. Up. With. Me. On. WhatsApp. You. Miserable. Shit!

B. You. Are. Not. Breaking. Up. With. Me. Without. Giving. Me. A. Good. Reason. You. Spineless. Pig!

Arun: Reason? You need a reason? How about you've been slowly and steadily, day by day, hour by hour, turning into a horse for the last two months!

Aruni: That's not a good enough reason.

Arun: It isn't???

Aruni: People grow and change in serious relationships all the time. We just need counselling and patience. Maybe a little support from friends and family too.

Arun: Support from friends and family?! Are you crazy? Aru, you're going to grow a tail in a couple of days! What am I supposed to tell my parents? 'Hi mom, hey dad, meet my girlfriend, the centaur'?

Aruni: You're just using this as an excuse. This isn't a legitimate reason to break up.

Arun: Aruni, there's never been a more legitimate reason to break up!

Aruni: You couldn't be more shallow, could you? Arun Patehkar, you're not breaking up with me.

Arun: I *am* breaking up with you!

Aruni: You're not!

Arun: I am!

Aruni: You know what this sort of prejudiced thinking makes you? A filthy misogynist!

Arun: I cannot be a misogynist. You're half-horse.

Aruni: If you had to leave, why did you stick around for two months? Why didn't you scam when it started?

Arun: Um...

Aruni: Cat got your tongue?!

Arun: Well, I wanted to leave immediately but... How should I put this delicately... Um. Aruni, frankly, after the rent and everything, there isn't a lot of my salary left at the end of the month.

Aruni: What does that have to do with anything?

Arun: Well, I thought if I could cut down on expenses on things like... fuel...

Aruni: Wait a minute... You BASTARD! You were waiting for me to turn into a horse to ride me to your college!

Arun: Initially, yes. But other considerations have surfaced. The recent cut in fuel rates is quite refreshing and honestly, it has helped me a lot in making up my mind about the break up.

Aruni: You money-minded churl!

Arun: Hey, that's unfair! Let me tell you that that wasn't the only reason I stuck around.

Aruni: Oh yeah? Then, tell me, you very soul of romance, what else was there? Were you planning on entering me in a derby?

Arun: Nothing of the sort! It's just... Aruni... I really, *really* like absurdist literature.

Aruni: Rot in Hell!

Arun: Aruni, let's acknowledge the fact that things simply haven't been going our way for a while.

Aruni: I agree. They haven't been. Especially since you read about the latest subsidy on fuel prices.

Arun: Aruni, come on, don't be an ass!... Oh, I'm so, so sorry.

Aruni: This is ridiculous. I'm calling.

Arun: No! There are sleeping academics all around me. I can't pick up.

Aruni: Okay. Then hear me out. I didn't want to play this card but you haven't left me much of a choice. If you break up with me, my girls will hunt you down and make your life a living, burning hell.

Arun: Aruni, your gang of feminist poets doesn't scare me.

Aruni: Oh, it will... It definitely will.

Arun: She said cryptically. Though she knew that it was nothing more than a hollow threat.

Aruni: He believed it was a hollow threat and nothing more. But she knew better. And in that knowledge of his certain doom, felt secure.

Arun: Aruni, have a heart!

Aruni: I had a heart. I gave it to you. Look what you've done with it.

Arun: See reason, Aru! Think about it. Let's say we stay together. What happens after another two months? I categorically *cannot* date a horse! They'll throw me behind bars without giving it a second thought. The only thing that'll give them pause is when they stop to decide between a prison and an asylum. And that's still nothing compared to what animal rights activists will do to me if they got to me first!

Aruni: *That's* the problem right there. Your pessimism, your screwed-up negativity! In exactly two months time, it'll also be our one year anniversary. But oh, you won't think about *that*! Arun, you promised me a lavish candle-lit dinner for our one year anniversary.

Arun: Sigh... That's not going to happen for a lot of reasons and you know it. For one, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be a good idea to place a candle that close to a bale of hay.

Aruni: There it surfaces again. The drone of that negative mind. I hope you understand that my transformation is merely an excuse for breaking apart an otherwise healthy relationship. You think it's mere coincidence that you're trying to break up just when we started getting serious? Do you even realize how juvenile, immature and easy to manipulate your psychology is?

Arun: Counter argument. Didn't it cross your mind that your simple refusal to let this relationship end is an indication of something deeply wrong with it?

Aruni: Arun, we're not breaking up.

Arun: Dammit, woman!

Aruni: Language.

Arun: Okay, what about 'If you love someone, set them free'. What about that?

Aruni: Love?

Arun: Yes! Love!

Aruni: Nobody said anything about love.

Arun: What?

Aruni: I never said I loved you. You just assumed?

Arun: But.

Aruni: But what?

Arun: You don't love me?

Aruni: Of course not.

Arun: But... why not?

Aruni: I'm amazed you even have to ask the question. I could never love someone like you. I think that is pretty obvious.

Arun: Not to me it isn't! What's wrong with me!

Aruni: Arun, you're making me uncomfortable.

Arun: Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, baby.

Aruni: Never mind.

Arun: Um, maybe we can talk about this when I get home?

Aruni: Probably not today.

Arun: Um. Why not, Aru?

Aruni: Because my idiot boyfriend has been behaving like an errant pain in the ass all morning.

Arun: Oh! Hahahahahahahahaha. Baby, you can be *so* funny sometimes!

Aruni: Is the conference winding up? How much longer will this last? It's a shame they called you on a weekend. For a conference on fractured narratives, why does he have to finish all of it today?

Arun: I know, heart! You want me to come home right now, Aru? I think I'll take a cue from Dr. Chaturvedi, drop a pen and scuttle homewards!

Aruni: No. Sit it out. It's only an hour more anyway. Get it over with. On the way back, see if you can get me half a bucket of grains. I feel a sudden, strange hankering coming on. See you at noon!

Ends

Reading Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

By J. J. Steinfeld

It was my sister who gave me the idea of taking photographs of welcome mats. I had taken several of the welcome mat at the front door to our home, because that old fibre mat with the words “WELCOME TO OUR HUMBLE DWELLING” had belonged to our mother. Why don’t you just go around to different neighbourhoods and take pictures of welcome mats, she suggested. It would be an interesting project. She was a bit stoned when she told me that, but I liked the idea. I was just starting to get interested in photography. She got me a beautiful digital camera for my nineteenth birthday. I know her boyfriend stole it—I’d heard him brag enough times about his ability to get discounted top-of-the-line items like he was doing some TV commercial for stolen goods—but I didn’t have any proof. Not that it’s all that important considering what I did to him. I guess I’ll have to wait until I get out of jail to continue that welcome-mat project. I’ll be having my twentieth birthday here, something I would never have imagined.

It’s a full month now I’ve been in jail. I can’t say I like it here, but I don’t dislike it as much as I thought. Except that I can’t go around taking pictures, which I’d really love to be doing. When I was first taken to the jail, I stopped at the entrance to my cell and wiped my shoes, but there was no mat of any kind. Always wipe your shoes before entering a person’s home, my mother used to say. She bought a new mat twice a year, at the beginning of spring, and then at the beginning of fall. I really liked the little ceremony she performed when she replaced an old mat with a new one. Those are some of my clearest memories from growing up.

When I heard the gunshot, I was in the living room of the house I’d lived in most of my life, curled into my mother’s huge old stuffed chair, the one she used to sit on and do her crossword puzzles and one of the only possessions of hers I still have, reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, one of the dozen books that my father gave to me the day he left for good, when I was sixteen. (He left my sister and me a dozen books each and five twenty-dollar bills, and a typed letter telling us that he had to cut his losses and attempt a new life, except in my sister’s typed letter he used the phrase “replenish my threadbare soul.”) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was the book my father said he most wished he had written. He had written a novel, about a dismal life in a house that was exactly like ours, but as far as I know it’s not been published. Three of the twelve books he left me were by George Orwell, whatever that means. It was the fifth time I had read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and it seemed different each time. During the trial I wanted to talk about the book, but no one was interested in hearing that. I was hoping my father would show up for the trial, not that he would be proud of me or anything, but I don’t even know if he even heard about what had happened. It’s not like he gave a forwarding address or anything. I was quite aware of the symbolism, mother’s chair and father’s book, but my little musings were dissolved when I heard the gunshot. That sound had all the symbolism I could handle. I had believed one of them was going to eventually kill the other, but I didn’t know which one, my sister or her boyfriend. I knew my sister’s boyfriend had a gun, but I’d never seen it or wanted to, until the gunshot. They fought all the time, and my sister could give as good as she got. In fact, she put him in the hospital once, with her fists yet, and dragged me day after day with her to visit him. That was six months ago, and they were making out in his hospital room before he was released.

After my mother died, my older sister and I inherited the house and everything in it, and she moved in with me, along with her boyfriend. I hated him around the house, but there wasn't much I could do. That first day we had an argument over the welcome mat. I really can't figure out why my sister likes him so much; he's stupid and not interesting in the least. My sister, however, is interesting, in a drama queen, attitude on top of her attitude way. We had different fathers, she's almost ten years older than me, but she used to say we were a lot alike, since we both strongly favoured our mother in temperament and looks. I never understood that. On a good day, I'm not very assertive, fairly shy, in a please-don't-call-on-me-in-class way, not that I go to any classes any more. She was a pretty good student who quit after grade ten, and I was a mediocre student who quit after grade eleven. But we both like to read and discuss books. The book I was reading when I heard the gunshot was all underlined and with comments at the bottom of nearly every page, in my sister's meticulous printing. I print meticulously also, as did our mother, so I guess that's another similarity we have.

I went to their bedroom door, still holding the book, and froze. I couldn't open the door or even ask what had happened. I could smell the dope in their room, but what else was new. What do you say when you hear a gunshot in your sister and her boyfriend's room, and you know they have a history of fighting and yelling and making up and fighting some more? I just stood there. There was no second shot. Finally, in a burst of confusion and desperation, I kicked the door open, expecting the worst.

"What the fuck are you doing?" my sister's boyfriend said. My sister was standing next to him, dressed in leather from head to foot, a gun in one hand and some kind of stick in the other. He was blindfolded and naked, with thick ropes around his wrists and attached to the bed's headboard like some sort of captured animal. She turned her head and told me to get out, get the hell out. I was frozen again. I stood there looking at my sister pointing a gun at the ceiling, next to her naked and blindfolded boyfriend. "We're playing," she said. "We were having a little fun."

"I'm sorry," I said, but I still didn't move.

"Get that little bastard out of here," her boyfriend said to my sister. He was squirming, no longer in any recognizable kind of excitement.

I stepped toward the bed, still confused what was going on, the sex, the gun, the blindfold, the ropes, the stick. He kept swearing at me, calling me the worst names.

I walked right up to the bed, acting as though I wasn't scared at all and wanted to do a closer examination in order to prove I wasn't afraid. Afraid of what? If I had my camera with me, I'm sure I'd just keep taking photographs of the strange sight.

"What is that little piece of dog shit doing?" my sister's boyfriend said.

"He just wants to get his rocks off," my sister the drama queen said, getting extra dramatic.

"Give me the gun and I'll shoot the little bastard."

"No need to talk that way," my sister said to her boyfriend, and poked the barrel of the gun into his flabby stomach, then jabbed him a couple of times with the stick, more like tickling but he wasn't laughing, just squirming.

I threw my book at the naked, blindfolded, and tied-up idiot on the bed. Threw it with all my strength. My sister tossed the gun on the bed and grabbed me. She threw me onto the bed, not far from the naked and blindfolded creep. My face was close to the gun and I picked it up.

He kicked at me hard in the thighs and legs, and it hurt.

I jumped out of bed and I shot him, without thinking, or half-thinking. My sister screamed. I can't remember ever hearing my sister scream.

It was a stupid, boring trial, at least from my point of view. I thought I was going to get off. I didn't wound him all that badly. I believed he was hurting my sister. The things that came up about my sister and her boyfriend's life did keep the proceedings from getting completely numbing. Obviously I didn't get off, but I got less than two years. Actually, even without a welcome mat, I don't mind it here, in my cell, in a peculiar way it's hard to explain. Even if I haven't been able to take any photographs, I've been doing more reading than ever. If I could only have my mother's old stuffed chair, it wouldn't be that bad. That, I tell you, is the most comfortable place in the world to read.

Ends

*Taken from **A Glass Shard and Memory** by J. J. Steinfeld (Recliner Books, 2010)*

STRANDED MARIONETTE

By Neil K. Henderson

I don't want to be someone else today -
I'm fed up feeling fake.
I don't want to hide in the loft today -
I want to be seen to be me.

I long to be loosed from this coffin of rags,
Launched forth with my barrel of monkey tricks -
To balance hypotheses out on the pier,
Beyond the zone of safety nets.

It's high time I made the seaside sick
With my dizzy cavorting on tidal extremes -
Made a one-man stand for stringlessness
In the space between hard facts.

I need to keep beating the wings of my will,
Till I prove there's a hole in the wall of my cell.
It's hard to smile that painted smile,
When all I am is outside of me.

I Wanna Be Adored

By Sabrina Smith

Stanley and I walk around the sweaty club hand in hand, same emaciated build and the same height in a daze of ecstasy. We avoid people as much as possible but it's kind of hard when it's that crowded.

"Do I know you?" Asks a random guy with a shaved head and Harrington jacket. He stops me on the stairs with a fingertip in my shoulder.

"Nope." I say. No eye contact.

"Nah, maybe not." he says checking out Stanley's glare, deciding it isn't worth the agro and walking off. We reach the bottom of the stairs and stop for a cigarette. It's busy in this area of dead space and everyone's sat on the floor, close like sardines. Lolling about, laying down, using each other as pillows and cushions to prop up their heads. Stan and I do the same. Sit side by side, huddled, we perch our backs against the wet wall. I chew and smell the minty gum covering up the five million cigarettes I've smoked. We talk about the nice bits of our childhood and big each other's achievements up.

"You were much better than me at football," he says with a grin, still chewing.

"Yeah but when we'd be up Bradgate you were better at climbing those trees. I'd just fall out."

"I was only in it for the ice cream," he smiles and our eyes lock. We laugh like we used to before adolescence hit.

"I fucking hate ice cream," I say with a shake of my head and a laugh because it's true. That is one food I'll never be able to eat.

"Can I borrow your lighter?" asks a bloke with a blue baggy tie dyed T shirt and floppy hat to our right. I hand him Stanley's pink disposable lighter.

"Thanks," he says

"Are you related?" asks his girlfriend. She has drawn on eyebrows, bindi and short black bobbed hair. She's all pilling, chewing, wide eyed and smiley. Chatting, sociable, wanting to make friends, leaning over her boyfriend, placing a limp beige hand on his knee. She must have heard bits of our conversation.

"Yeah," says Stanley, feeling mischievous. I catch his eye but don't laugh.

"We're twins," I add.

"We were both born on Christmas day."

"That's so cool," she says.

"Bet that's expensive for your Mum and Dad," says the guy giving the lighter back. Stanley makes a noise of disgust, exhales his smoke to the ceiling and looks away.

"Our Dad's an arsehole. Our Mum's an alcoholic. We've only had each other," I explain. Holding his hand. Pill Bollocks.

Stanley makes that noise again and runs a hand, with a cigarette between the fingers, over his sweaty face. He makes eye contact with nobody. Then sucks on the Silk Cut like it's going out of fashion. Back of his head to the wall like he's seen Cary Grant do in an old film. I half imagine him doing a Heathcliff and smashing it back with one bloody thump.

"That's sad, but I can see you two are close," says the girl with dismay painted all over her fake face. I want to take a wet tissue to her, wipe off her features. See if her lips, nose and eyes come away with all that paint.

Like her fake concern.

I need to remind myself of reality. Of what Stanley and I share. Of the true darkness that bonds us together.

“Like, when you were in hospital. Mum didn’t visit you at all, but I did every day,” I say letting go of his hand but poking him in the ribs. He doesn’t respond to my touch but he does to my words.

“Mum came once, but she didn’t bring any fags,” Stanley says, dark, unsmiling, giving me the eye.

“I always came armed with two packs of Silk Cuts and had to help him on and off with his slippers to go out for one,” I say validating my existence.

“Why were you in hospital?” asks the girl, entwined in our story.

“He’d been sectioned.”

“Sectioned?” asks her boyfriend, now more interested.

“Kept trying to kill himself.”

“Mum screwed that up, trying to get Dad involved and saying it’s not his fault. It’s his Manic fucking Depression,” says Stanley with a real sneer. Both of them gawp at the horror of our story in wide eyed wonder.

“Selfish fucker didn’t want to know,” I say, still pretending to be his sister. Talking about his, our, Dad.

“-Mum wanted to keep me in for longer because of that fucking Librium stutter,” he rants. Angry. I touch his hand to calm him down. Place it on my knee and he rubs the blue denim that’s now wet with sweat. “She’s always wanted to offload me onto Dad.” He says with a hint of sadness. His fingertips creep to the inner thigh of my bent leg. The heavily made up girl’s eyes follow them.

“No wonder you, we’re, so broken,” I say in a quiet, appalled voice, my eyes glued to the ground with guilt. He smiles, removes his fingertips from my leg and places them on my chin. He forces me to look up and at him. We kiss on the lips with passion and the couple glance at each other. The guy immediately stands up, touches his girlfriend’s arm, who is looking at us with open mouthed horror.

“Need to get some water, see you around,” he garbles and drags her off. I would laugh if I wasn’t so saddened by the memories of watching him blend so easily with neglected patients who wandered the corridors, banging off the walls and cursing the day that lobotomies were replaced with sedatives.

I look at Stanley and when our eyes meet, all happiness has faded out.

Ends



Mould & Blood

By DJ Tyrer

The estate echoed to the sounds of anger. Locals had gathered to protest against the closure of the Sure Start Centre and, in no time at all, they'd been joined by black-hooded anarchists who'd taken the opportunity to stage a generalised riot. With an ironic twist, the shattering of the Centre's windows would mean it would be closed a while regardless.

Malcolm turned away from the sight of a masked and hooded figure waving a black-and-red bicolour flag in the midst of the glass fragments, and headed away as quickly as possible, back to his flat.

He wondered what the country was coming to: overwhelming immigration, war, cutbacks, riots – it was worse than the '80s. The whole country was collapsing into anarchy! What it needed was an old-fashioned dictatorship to sort things out. He spat in disgust when he saw the large graffiti that covered the wall beside the door to his block, a sinuous design in red and black: obviously the work of those anarchist yobs, marking their territory in their battle with the police. Bring back the birch, he said. Bring back hanging! Even hanging was too good for them!

Inside, the block was no better than the rest of the estate. The stairwell stank of stale urine and was scattered with rubbish. It was crumbling and vandalised. It was just typical of the system that he was stuck here, in this waking nightmare of poverty and broken dreams, whilst some foreigner was milking it and living in some mansion, pumping out dozens of kids! He kicked a half-empty can of bitter down the stairs in frustration.

Malcolm's own single-bedroom flat was just as bad. Tiny and cramped with walls caked with mould. He'd been onto his landlord repeatedly about the blight, but nothing had been done. It was like smacking his head against a brick wall trying to get something done about it and he'd more or less given up on it, accepting the smell and constant chestiness that went with it. On the news, the Housing Association had even attempted to blame the tenants for the mould in their own homes, as if they were all to blame for leaks and condensation. That was typical!

A loud bang made him jump. Some idiot had detonated a firework in the undercroft of the building. Loud noises and bright flashes seemed to satisfy simple minds.

He'd just settled down to watch the telly – not that there was really anything worth watching despite all the extra digital channels – when there was a knock on his door. He ignored it, but the knock was repeated. Probably idiot kids. The knock was repeated for a third time.

With a sigh, Malcolm hauled himself up and out of the tired old beige sofa and made the short walk to the door.

Looking through the peephole, he could see a youth in a black hoodie. It looked like one of the yobs he'd seen earlier. He wondered what he wanted. He couldn't see his face and that made him nervous. There seemed to be a badge, maybe a gang emblem, like the head of a court jester, on the chest of his hoodie.

Fitting the door chain, he opened the door a crack and asked what he wanted. The figure raised his head to look at him and Malcolm saw that it was Steve, a kid from down the passage. A bit of a

berk, like all the kids these days, but not too bad, and, being from his floor, owed a certain measure of neighbourly respect.

"I need to come in, Malc," Steve said.

"What?"

Steve looked kind of agitated and sounded sort of strange, like he was high on something; hardly an uncommon occurrence around here, although he'd never known Steve to go on a drug-fuelled rampage like some of his peers.

"I need to come in, Malc. I gotta come in, right now; gotta show you summit."

"Show me what?"

With an inarticulate cry of frustration, Steve slammed into the door, the security chain ripping easily away from the damp-rotted wood of the doorframe. The door slammed into Malcolm, staggering him backwards into the flat.

Steve burst in, shouting something about laughing that made no sense to Malcolm but sounded exactly like the crazed ramblings of a druggie. Malcolm recoiled in fear; he could see a knife in Steve's hand. He'd read about youths flipping out on drugs and going on a killing spree. Or, maybe this was a gang initiation. Maybe it was both.

Malcolm looked wildly around for a weapon with which to defend himself, but there was nothing. It was in that moment that Steve's knife found him, plunging into his side, once, twice, then a slash across his throat. The last thing he saw before darkness engulfed his vision was a swirl of red upon black as blood sprayed across the mould-caked wall. The last words he heard were "The joke's on you!" None of it made any sense.

Ends

*Originally published in **Red & Black** by DJ Tyrer*

[Download the pdf for free](#)

The Final Curtain

By Jeffrey Zable

It wasn't easy to teach my pet fly
to stand on her hind feet
and do the *Can Can*,
or back flips off the stage
with every performance.

What I never anticipated
was that an evil spider
would be lurking in the shadows.

By the time I found her
she was six stiff legs,
an empty head,
and two silver wings
pointing toward heaven.

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