

**Flash Fiction 40**

**An Anthology of 40 Winning Flash Fiction Stories**

**Sponsored by [Editor Unleashed](#) and [Smashwords](#)**

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2009, [Editor Unleashed](#) and [Smashwords](#) partnered to sponsor The Flash Fiction 40 Contest. Any writer could post a story of 1,000 words or fewer on the Editor Unleashed forum, and the members would get a chance to read and rank all of the stories.

More than 280 writers took up the challenge and posted a story. It was a dynamic experiment in what is quickly becoming the new wave of publishing: crowd sourcing and open review.

Both the forum members and editors who made the final cut chose the same story as the Grand Prize winner—a dark, astonishing piece of magical realism titled “Fairy Tales” by Laurel Wilczek. You can read about Laurel and her inspiration for her flash fiction in profiles on both [Editor Unleashed](#) and at the [Smashwords](#) Blog.

In this anthology, you’ll find “Fairy Tales” as well as 39 other winning stories from the Flash Fiction 40 Contest. These stories encompass every genre—from literary to horror and beyond—and are 40 outstanding examples of the rapidly evolving flash fiction form. Savor the stories one at a time or spend a few leisurely hours reading the collection in whole. I know you’ll enjoy reading these 40 great flash fiction pieces as much as I did.

-Maria Schneider, [Editor Unleashed](#)

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Grand Prize: Fairy Tales, by Laurel Wilczek

At Last, By Nina Perez-Bauschka

Being a Cop, Langley McKelvy

Blind Justice, Jessica A. Weiss

The Brain Eaters, Terri Lynn Coop

Buck and the Twee Fairies of Interstate 20, Gary Cuba

Circles, David Gillett

Defection, Linda Wastila

Dreaming Lies to Change the Truth, kaolin fire

Fate's Heavy Hand, Jim Bernheimer

Food of the Gods, judy b.

Frangible Choices, Kemari M. Howell

Grief Observed, Laurita Miller

Guardian Demon, Jeanne Tomlin

Mirror, Mirror, Greta Igl

Monday, Selena Kitt

Night Becomes the City, M.P. Berry

In the Nuthouse, d o'brien

Parklife, AlanBaxter

Pirated Twinkies, Shannon Esposito

Pure White, Stephen Book

Reflection, R.J. Keller

Rough Trade, Stephen Nicholson

Running on the Iron Rooster, Michael J. Solender

Sales Call, Graham Storrs

Savor the Moment, Greg Stoll

Sign Language, Linda Courtland

Sportsmen, John Towler

Ten One-hundreds of a Second, Deborah Bundy

The Distraction, Donald Conrad

The Mercantile Exchange, Kim Beck

The Nearest Thing, John Wiswell

The Vial, Tom Bentley

The Vigil of Clouds, Eros-Alegra Clarke

Time for a Change, Carol Benedict

'Tis the Season, John Marfink

Unscrambling Love, Angel Zapata

Wake up, Please, Jemma Everyhope

What's in a Name, Mark Souza

When Don Cristobal Eduardo Stabbed his Wife and her Lover,  
Christopher Sutcliffe

## Fairy Tales

By Laurel Wilczek <http://www.ravenlaw.wordpress.com/>

She knows it won't be long before they come. Once they've discovered the abandoned bed and the unraveled bandages on the floor. They'll figure she's running loose, having escaped the hum of round-the-clock monitors, the clatter of equipment pushed up and down the corridor and the sobbing breath of the battered woman who shares the room with her. They'll know she slipped out the emergency door and up the stairs to the roof, when a patient down the hallway, an old man unwilling to die no matter how tired his heart might be, pressed the call button and summoned the nurses away from their work areas.

Moonlight crawls over the city, its brightness filtered by grey-bellied clouds. Her feet are numb, her arms and legs riddled with goose bumps under the hospital gown. She inhales. Cold air flows into her nose and mouth. It hurts. It hurts. One hand presses against her abdomen, the other floats in space. Her legs are spread like tent poles. Her toes dig into the concrete ledge.

Down in the stairwell, a door opens.

"She's up on the roof. I told the nurses to stop taping the latch. Goddamn nicotine addicts."

"Shouldn't we wait for the doctor?"

"Screw that, he'll write me up on a safety violation even though that's not part of my job description. I'm a janitor, not security. What's her name?"

"Jane Doe."

She hears their footsteps on the stairs and thinks about the night when the midnight fairies found her. Years after her father's curfews ended. A decade after her mother whispered tales about evil fairies who kidnapped little girls under a full moon. She remembers feeling astonished that—just after she walked two city blocks and arrived, without incident, on the doorstep of her apartment, just after she glanced up and down the street and saw nothing but a ginger cat hunched against the base of a trash can, just as she slipped her keys out of her purse—fingers tangled in her hair and yanked hard. She toppled off the steps into strange hands. Her keys clinked onto the sidewalk. One of her shoes popped off as they dragged her around the corner of the building and into an alley.

"Be careful, Freddie, she's drugged to the gills."

"I know what I'm doing. Hey there, Janie."

That isn't her name. She would tell them if she could, but the fairies are snarling deep-throated notes and her voice is locked inside her chest. They surround her, submerging her in the odor of stale

cigarettes and beer. She sees their faces. Eyes black as licorice. Slack mouths, huffing steam into the refrigerated darkness.

"Stop Freddie! She's too close to the edge."

"You stand still, Janie Girl, you hear?"

The moon above the alley is a hollow eye gouged out of the face of night. The fairies take her wallet and toss the purse aside. They ride her down to the ground. Tear at her clothing until her breasts and thighs are iced by moonlight. Laughter falls like sleet upon her nakedness.

"Oh man, I think she's crying."

"Shut up, Bobby! Here, girlie, take my hand."

She touches her mouth, her cheeks and her forehead. Probes the stitches zigzagging through her flesh. Tries to scream. But her jaws are wired shut and all her terror, all her fury, all her grief, pools beneath her tongue. She swallows, tastes blood and wonders who will ever love her now that she is broken?

A spurt of wind slips under her gown. The thin fabric rustles like paper wings.

"Don't you do this on my shift," Freddie whispers.

Two stories below the ledge, a man stands on the sidewalk, the tip of his cigar a firefly caught in the sheath of wintry lamplight. He's wearing his best Sunday suit. The one he wore for her First Holy

Communion. The one he was buried in after her sixteenth birthday.

"Come along, Grace," her father calls in a wisp of smoke. "It's late. Your mother is waiting for us."

## **At Last**

By Nina Perez-Bauschka

He sat at his usual table—second row, far left. It afforded him a clear view of the stage. It was Thursday night, and he arrived at 7:30 sharp as he had every Thursday night for the past three months. She didn't go on until 8:30, but he liked to get his table and order two drinks before she did. He would have another two while she sang, but never more than that.

He wasn't the only regular there.

Two tables to his right was Kris Kringle. It wasn't his real name, of course. Just a nickname given because of his perpetually rosy cheeks and wet eyes as if he had just entered from the cold. It was 7:45 and Kris had been there at least an hour. He would look like that way the whole night—red-faced, and watering eyes, shaky hands tossing back drink after drink. He remained sober through perhaps half of the set and sat through the rest in a whiskey-induced fog. Shortly before closing, Silus the bartender would close out his check and put Kris Kringle in a cab.

He found this most undignified.

At 8:15 he felt her before he saw her. Her presence was as

palpable as a heartbeat. She entered the room from the blue door behind him marked, "Employees Only."

He heard her before he saw her. She was greeted by Rachel, the waitress with the buck teeth and crooked nose. They exchanged the usual pleasantries and then she laughed at something Rachel said. It was a laugh that washed over his arms and caused heat to rise up his neck. He tightened his grip on his cocktail glass, hoping the ice cubes would reverse the effect up his arm, across his shoulder, through his neck, and over his face which was as red as Kris Kringle's.

The owner, a short repulsive man built like a fire hydrant, slid from his bar stool and put an arm around her waist. He could see this from the corner of his eye and it caused him to grip his glass tighter.

"Are you ready, doll?"

Doll. What an insult. She was an angel. She was perfection. She was too good for this place with its chipped tables, smoky interior, and menu that consisted of Buffalo wings, potato skins, and a curious dish called an Onion Bloom.

She walked by him in a wave of lilac. He inhaled deeply hoping the scent would last until she passed again. Some nights she'd walk the tables as she sang, occasionally pausing to pay special attention to a fortunate male patron. In three months, she had never stopped at his table. He did not mind. Unlike the others, who fawned over her

with unabashed adoration, he did not need special attention. In fact, he preferred it this way. Anonymous. Special in its own way.

She began to sing promptly at 8:30. She sang the blues with the experience of someone twenty years her senior. She sang the blues as if her heart had been broken a thousand times. He wanted to protect her. Mend her heart. Right the wrongs. From the look on the faces of the other men in attendance he was not the only one. She cast her spell with each note. A spell that lasted long after the final song.

Tonight she was covered in a sea of jade that complemented the red flames that cradled her face and fell to her shoulders in a cascade of curls. She was curvaceous and full as a woman should be. Soft and vulnerable; yet, filled with passion and fire. With the lights dimmed low, and a soft light behind her, her silhouette was outlined in a halo. She was indeed an angel.

He signaled for Rachel to bring another drink. Though he wanted one more after, this would be the last. Routine and order were important. It made life predictable, and he liked that. Morgan's on Thursdays to hear her sing. Fridays he visited Mother at the home. On Tuesdays he ate pork chops. And should he ever sway from this order, and try something new, he corrected himself by making it a part of his routine. Like the first night he had followed her home. It was so unlike him. So spontaneous, yet she had asked him to. Not directly, but the

night she changed her final song to "At Last," by Etta James he knew.

"At last, my love will come along ...," she sang, and he knew.

She may have piercing green eyes, and a confident demeanor, but he knew underneath she was like him. Shy and polite. She would never be so undignified as to ask him to her home. Instead, she sang to him in code. She sang to him in secret. And though to the others it may seem as if she were singing to them, he knew otherwise.

"My lonely days are over and life is like a song ..."

The first time he followed her he watched the windows of the first floor garden apartment from his car. He watched until the last light went out. The next time, he stayed a little longer, and the time after that a little longer still. Before long, he was watching till the sun rose and she left to run her errands. He would visit mother soon after with eyes red from lack of sleep and smelling of cigarette smoke and regret.

This night, as her set came to a close, and Kris Kringle clapped loudly before stumbling to the bar, he decided that tonight he would approach her window. Just to get a better look. He would not intrude. He would not be so undignified. Not this night. Tonight he would silently watch, and next Thursday, well maybe next Thursday he'd enter.

## Being a Cop

By Langley McKelvy <http://www.langleymckelvy.blogspot.com>

David paused near the stoop of an aging brownstone long enough to ruffle the hair of a small boy playing jacks on the sidewalk. He returned the child's broad smile with one of his own and continued down the street. He had not been a policeman long, and was new to this beat; consequently he was in the process of learning his way around the neighborhood.

"I like being a cop," David said aloud to no one.

The child was one of many people he encountered this morning and all of them had treated him with courtesy, if not outright kindness. He recalled policemen from his youth; their dark blue uniforms sprinkled with glittering buttons, the shiny badge and, of course, the hidden power of the gun safely in its holster.

Perhaps, he mused, *it really is the uniform that makes the cop.*

He glanced down at the badge on his chest with pleasure and noticed how it caught and reflected the sunlight. An equally reflective name tag balanced out the traditional accouterments, but one small detail marred the otherwise iconic fabric landscape. A neat round bullet hole was visible about a half inch in from the badge, over his

heart.

David touched the torn fabric gently, remembering the incident. He survived the encounter, but decided not to repair the hole. It reminded him of the fragility of life, and served as something of a cautionary tale about keeping one's eyes on the hands of people who solicit directions from cops.

He walked into Hargrave Park, admiring the natural beauty of the place. His plan was to make a full circuit of the many greenbelt trails, which turned lazily through the trees, occasionally fetching up to one of four large ponds. He selected a path at random and as he approached the first pond, David heard voices coming off the trail to his left. One was raised in anger, the other fear.

After a moment's consideration, he stepped off the trail and made his way into the underbrush toward the source of the disturbance. He reached a small clearing and observed two men. One man was on his knees, clutching a briefcase to his chest and begging for his life. The other was a rather large, ugly man who held an equally large and ugly pistol. David immediately realized he had stumbled upon a robbery that was deteriorating rapidly into a murder. He drew his pistol and advanced carefully.

The victim caught sight of his uniform and stopped pleading; his eyes flew open wide with a mixture of surprise and relief. The robber

immediately spun around, but far too slowly. David's Glock 23 expelled two rounds of fiery copper, striking him first in the chest and then in the center of his forehead. He went down without making a sound.

The other man dropped his briefcase and began to weep, thanking him between sobs. David walked over to him, stopped and picked up the crook's weapon and tucked it into his waistband.

"What's your name?" David asked, trying to put that man at ease.

"R ... Roger ... ," the man choked out "Roger Coleman."

"Are you okay, Roger?"

"I... I think so. Thank you... God! He was going to kill me!" His breathing was starting to slow down now, but he kept glancing down at his assailant.

"Don't worry, he's dead. What were you doing out here anyway?"

"I was cutting through the park, running late. I was going to try and catch the number 36 bus to work." His voice was nearly back to normal now.

"Really? What kind of work do you do?"

"Real estate ... I'm a real estate agent."

David then raised his pistol and shot Roger Coleman, once in the chest and once in the forehead. The man slumped to the ground with a

look of astonishment frozen on his face.

“I like being a cop,” he said aloud to the two bodies. He holstered his pistol and picked up the briefcase. Then he knelt beside Coleman’s body and began unbuttoning the man’s jacket. He smiled and gently touched the bullet hole next to the pocket.

*Yes, he thought, I like being a cop. Tomorrow I think I’ll be a real estate agent.*

## **Blind Justice**

By Jessica A. Weiss

You look like a beaten dog, shaking and nervous. Don't be scared, this is what you've been wanting from me for years. Sit down and relax, let me give you what you came here for. See the clock? Time's running out and we've got business to finish.

You're here because you believe I shouldn't be treated this way, that I don't deserve this. By the law of man I am where I belong and must be punished. You think I'm innocent but I'm telling you that I'm guilty of murder. I turned myself in because I have blood on my hands.

Best to start at the beginning. I can't give you all their names, there were too many and it was years ago. With some research you can fill in the gaps. That is what you do, isn't it? Dig up juicy stories for the public.

Anyways, you know the carnival down by the mouth of the river, along the marshes? The one that is actually built there and never closes? That's where I grew up and that's where all of this madness started. All those young kids acting like fools, having a good time, not a care in the world. Their laughter was like a drug; their sweet faces

candy for the taking.

The haunted house was the children's favorite. Outside the faded building, the barker, who'd worked there for decades, would draw them in with promises of real ghosts and spooks. Local legends of murders and suicides thrilled the kids. The boys would act tough to impress the girls and the girls would act scared so the boys would protect them. In the end, they all screamed. Some louder than others, those were the unlucky ones.

When the first girl went missing, there was mild panic. She'd been on a trip with the local orphanage. With no parents the search died down quickly. Officers wrote it off as a runaway. As if a twelve year old would run away.

The second girl caused a bigger stir. She'd been visiting with her parents from out of town. Lots of questions that time, the search for her lasted a few months. Thought the cops would find her for sure. But again, not one clue found, no trace left behind.

Over the next three years, ten beautiful little girls disappeared. Some were locals, others tourists, some were runaways who'd run the wrong way. Besides their age and gender, the only connection they shared was the last place they'd been seen alive, the haunted house.

If only the police had looked harder, they would've seen the truth.

See that place was really scary, looked like the Mad Hatter had a bloody tea party in there. Blood on the walls, body parts scattered about. Furniture made of bones, even a few heads popping out of cabinets. Only not all of it was fake.

Are you alright? You look a bit pale. Do you need a drink of water? Maybe a cigarette? You sure you want to hear the rest?

Okay. So for years I'd been telling the police who was taking these precious girls. I'd seen every one of them go in and not come out. When a disappearance happened, I'd go to the police. But they didn't believe me. They said I had no proof. Without proof they wouldn't investigate. They even accused me of having a personal grievance against this person.

What could I do? By the time I could get a cop to come with me, there would be nothing to find. All evidence gone by the time they got there. After awhile they started to investigate me! Can you believe it? I was the one under suspicion because I knew too much about each victim.

I guess I did. I knew what each of them had been wearing the day they disappeared. Even the fact that every one of them had long, beautiful hair with hair clips. Their smiles had been beautiful with voices sweet as the spring. Anyways, for being innocent I knew too much.

The cops wouldn't arrest the guilty one, they were focused on me. I knew others would die if someone didn't do something. I've never thought of myself as a vigilante, and killing a person wasn't something I thought I could do. So I waited and I searched for proof.

They say that all killers keep trophies from their kills, to revisit the thrill. I've only had experience with one murderer. I don't know why the locks of hair were kept in the hair bows, but I found a box full of them. I'd finally found the evidence to put him away.

I was on my way to the cops when my whole world changed.

Coming down the stairs, sprawled on the floor like a forgotten doll, I found the body of my daughter, April, in my living room. Blood seemed to come from everywhere, puddles and rivers all around. I don't think there was any left in her little body.

On the floor next to her, a lock of her blond curls clasped neatly in a hair bow.

Blood. Anger. Pain. Fury. All of them red. Red is all I saw as I made my way to the kitchen. The smug bastard sat there eating a ham sandwich, calm as can be.

Death was too good for him, but putting that knife into him made me feel good. Watching his blood spill was a release for me. As the good book says 'an eye for an eye' and all that.

So you see, I am guilty. I killed my husband, but not those little

angels.

His body? Oh, I put it with the bodies of his victims, so their ghosts can torture him.

The clocks run down, it's midnight and man's law states it's time for me to die. Ironic, don't you think?

Reporters Note: The bodies of serial killer David Fellman and several young females were discovered deep in the marshes, exactly where Kaitlynn Fellman said they'd be.

## **The Brain Eaters**

By Terri Lynn Coop

It took me seven years to decide to kill my husband.

Before I get to "the how," let me briefly tell you about "the why."

I met Kevin in college. We were literature majors and fell in love over Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. We talked endlessly of writing husband-and-wife "whodunits" that would reflect the best of suspense fiction. Our wedding reception was on the Orient Express Mystery Murder Train. It was a dream come true.

Until "The Brain-Eaters."

The what?

Let me explain. We were poor. Few make a living writing fiction, and we were no exception. We sold some short stories, and won a few contests, but that didn't pay the bills. I took a job teaching high school English, and Kevin took any freelance job he could find.

That's how he met Rick. That bastard.

Kevin and Rick regularly freelanced for a heavy metal rag called "Slimy Groove." They reviewed records by bands such as "Smashed Flat Shit," and "Necrotic Virginity." They reported on rock concerts and wrote advertising copy for head shops. It was disgusting, but it paid

the bills.

One night, they got together and wrote a short story called "The Brain-Eaters." It was about a heavy metal band made up of cannibalistic zombies. It was the perfect gag. The band only worked at night, and had no problem getting victims to come backstage after the show. I'll leave the rest to your imagination.

It sold.

It sold tens of thousands of copies. The magazine ended up doing twenty reprints of the initial story. A first edition of the story sells for up to \$800 in mint condition.

"The Brain-Eaters" spawned several generations of demon seed. "Brain-Eaters II: Zombies Gone Wild," "Brain-Eaters III: Revenge of the Zombies." All the way up to "Brain-Eaters X: Zombies Go to College."

Did I mention the franchise was picked up by Hollywood and made into movies? Dreadful movies. Movies played to packed houses of stoned and screaming teens and college students. Disgraceful.

At first, I was fine with it. The money was good and Kevin was happy. We didn't talk as much, and instead of spending Friday nights cuddled up with our well-worn copy of "The Maltese Falcon," Kevin usually had a promotional event. I willingly put aside my own literary aspirations to further Kevin's career.

However, I knew that it had to end the day I went into the butcher shop and asked for two pounds of pork chops. The butcher leaned across the counter and said, "We don't have any pork chops, but we have some incredible BRAAAAAIIIIINNNNNSSSSS!" He then held out a copy of Slimy Groove and asked me if Kevin would autograph it for him. I smiled and found another butcher.

That's the first time I fantasized about killing Kevin. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. It's not like I knew him anymore.

It wasn't just about the money. In fact, Kevin and his zombie franchise was probably worth more to me with him alive than dead. It's just that I was disgusted by our life and the man that I'd married.

But, how to do it?

I went about it in my best Agatha Christie fashion. An obscure poison would be best. Preferably one that accentuated Kevin's mild heart condition and would pass for a heart attack.

I studied and studied and finally found the compound I needed. A rare plant from India produced a poisonous seed that when baked into bread caused heart failure. Bless the Internet. In less than a month, I had the seedlings in my hand.

However, I wasn't content with just the seedlings. As a mystery writer, I studied crime and police procedure. I knew how sophisticated

forensics had become and that I would have to be crafty to produce an undetectable poison.

Well, I won't bore you with details. I crossbred the original plant with another and another and in a few generations had a toxin that when bonded with the gluten in wheat flour was as close to undetectable as a poison could be.

I practiced on stray animals. At first, they convulsed and foamed at the mouth. Too much. Then, the animals revived and recovered after a day or so. Too little. Finally, a dog ate my bread, shivered for a few moments, yelped, and fell still. Just right. I took the dog to a vet in another town and ordered a necropsy and toxicology screen on the pretense that I believed my evil neighbor had poisoned poor Fluffy. The results? No toxic substances. Death by heart attack.

I was ready.

Kevin liked home-baked cloverleaf dinner rolls. In fact, he swore by them and insisted on them at every meal. I was an expert. Every stinking day, I rolled out dough, and dropped three little dough balls into each compartment of the damned muffin tin.

Except last night, I added a special surprise ingredient.

I put out the pot roast, potatoes, salad, and rolls. I hadn't served pork chops since my visit to the brain-loving butcher so many years ago.

Kevin took two helpings of meat and some salad. I passed him the rolls and he said, "no thanks."

"NO THANKS?"

When I asked him why he doesn't want any of the rolls he has insisted on every damned day for the last ten years, he answered, "Atkins."

"ATKINS?"

He then told me he'd put on some weight and was cutting carbs on the Atkins Diet until he slimmed down, and that I could stand to lose a few pounds as well, and would I like some pot roast?

I insisted he have a roll.

He resisted.

I insisted.

He resisted.

I won that argument, although it took a baseball bat to do it. And you know what, Mr. Detective? When licked off your fingers, brains aren't all that bad after all.

## **Buck and the Twee Fairies of Interstate 20**

By Gary Cuba <http://www.thefoggiestnotion.com>

Buck Logan pulled his semi off the side of the road, brought it to a lurching halt, and heaved his bulky body out of the cab. It was time to scrape the latest accumulated layer of splattered fairy carcasses off his windshield.

He'd been forced to do the same thing only ten miles back. They were damned thick along this stretch, all the way between Aiken and Atlanta. His windshield washers couldn't keep up, and only ended up smearing the stuff into a near-opaque coating. He muttered to himself as traffic streamed by, slipping and sliding on the slick roadway of Interstate 20, which in spots was covered over completely with fairy guts.

"Damn things are gettin' to be a nuisance around these parts. Worse than the love bug season in Florida. A real twee pestilence, ya ask me!"

The air was thick with them, thicker than dragonflies on a stagnant Carolina pond in the springtime. One of the critters landed on his ear, apparently having fallen in love with its fat, fleshy lobe. The thing whispered something to Buck, which, by the time it crossed his

corpus callosum and registered in his higher brain centers, got interpreted there as a very indecent proposition.

"Like hell I will, you ... you *prevert!*" Buck said, swatting at the fairy. "Besides, what would my dear wife Ida think, if she ever found out? Ya'll need to take your twee niminy-piminy asses back to wherever ya'll came from. You're costin' me money, here!"

And that was a fact: miles defined his livelihood, and he wasn't racking them up quickly enough along this stretch. And Ida? Well, that was always a thought worth serious rumination. She'd slap him silly if she ever found out about him messing around. Hell's fury, she outweighed him by a good 50 pounds!

Buck pulled himself back up inside his cab and arranged his massive, protruding belly properly and comfortably behind the wheel. Shoot, he thought. There's a truck stop ten more miles up the road, might as well stop there, drain the dragon, take a shower, get some grub, shut down. Closing in on the day's log limit, anyhow. Today turned out to be a real bust, no twee ways about it.

Buck shook his head vigorously. Two ways! Jeezus.

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Buck cleaned himself up and headed to the truck stop's restaurant. He paused outside the cafe's entrance for a moment and farted loudly there before entering, exercising a modicum of thoughtfulness for any

of his colleagues who might be chowing down inside. Not that the food in this hash house was any more appealing than a good juicy fart, he thought, chuckling.

He spotted a trucker friend inside, Myron Smoat, who he knew ran a route for Sysco, delivering cheap consumer goods to cheap discount stores, earmarked for consumption by cheap people living equally cheap lives. Myron looked up and hailed Buck over to his booth.

"Looks like you're off-schedule too, Buck," Myron said.

"Goddamned fairies. Somethin' oughta be done about 'em." Buck hitched up his jeans and eased his buttocks onto the sticky bench seat opposite Myron. The foam padding already trying to escape its cracked vinyl covering made another increment of progress toward ultimate freedom.

Myron wiped his beard with his napkin, missing a spot of mayonnaise. "I know they tried fogging this stretch with insecticide. Didn't do squat. And I also read where some scientists down in Atlanta are trying to concoct a designer hormone spray that'll make the things sterile."

Buck knew that Myron was once a professor at some fancy college, although he couldn't remember which one. Was it Georgia Tech? In Buck's book, he was definitely a smart guy—not the least for

realizing that medium-haul trucking could bring him a hell of a lot more income than babysitting rich kids. Buck had always been impressed with Myron's intellectual grasp on things. "The things do seem a might overly interested in sexual matters—or so I've noted."

"Best to maintain a withdrawn attitude about that, Buck."

"Anybody know where they came from?"

Myron took another bite out of his BLT sandwich and stared into space, somewhere in between here and there. "Where, indeed? Or more importantly, why? I have some ideas on that score. But since they're strictly in the realm of speculation, I hesitate to share them."

"Oh, come on, Myron! I ain't one of your ivory tusk-tower cronies. I'm just askin' you casual-like, one buddy to another.

*Sheesh!*"

Myron's eyes fixed on Buck. "Some species of cicadas only come out every seventeen years. Fairies? Maybe they gestate for a lot longer, maybe a millennium or more. It's just their time, friend. Their time to do whatever Mother Nature intends for them to do. That's all I'll say on the matter. Don't let the things get under your skin, is what I advise. However twee they may be."

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Buck lifted himself back into his truck and prepared to ease off into slumberland as he nestled back into his sleeper. He called to check in

with Ida, then cut on his LCD TV and watched a little bit of the nightly news. All of it was people killing each other in one fashion or another, so far as Buck could tell. He grunted and shut the thing off, set his alarm clock, turned off the tiny cab light, and pulled a spread over his portly frame. He belched one time, a long, wet one. Damned hash. He closed his eyes.

And somewhere in that mystical gap between waking apprehension and unconscious reverie, he thought he heard a buzzing. A buzzing with a mincing lilt to it. A twee sound, inside the cab. But he was too tired to care. The dream he began having was too lucid, too exquisite to ever want to wake up from. Ida would kill him, if she only knew.

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Myron noticed Buck's semi on his next run, still parked in the same exact spot it had occupied the week before. After banging on the door and checking the truck stop thoroughly, he notified the Highway Patrol. They jimmied open the cab, but found no trace of Buck inside.

Myron shook his head sadly. The twee fairies of I-20 had claimed another one.

## Circles

By David Gillett

Earl pushed back his chair from the kitchen table and bent down to pick up his knapsack. His wife glared at him from the full sink, arms clasped, and not caring that soap suds dripped off her wrists. He had seen the look before and it never ended well.

“Honey, I’ve got to do something. We’ve talked about this a hundred times,” he explained. “We’ve called the police and you know that they can’t do anything about it. It’s going to cost us thousands of dollars just like last year and the year before. I’m not going to take it anymore.”

“What are you going to do if there are a dozen of them? What if they are armed?” she asked and looked out the window into the expanse of cornfields beyond the tractors. The sun had set hours ago and the tall stalks were only swaying shadows now.

“I’ve got my phone with me. Besides these are just punk kids. They aren’t the type to have weapons. I’m going to scare them off and that will be it,” he swung the sack over his shoulder. She didn’t look convinced.

“What if my brother is right?” she asked.

"No offense but your brother is a little off his rocker," he said and opened the door.

Stepping off the porch, Earl headed down the gravel path towards the cornfield. He rummaged through the sack for the loaded revolver and jammed it into his jacket. Taking a deep breath, he turned on the flashlight and headed into the darkness. He knew where to go.

Cupping the end of the flashlight to dim the light, he made his way down the narrow rows of corn, listening for any noise. Within minutes he heard a distinct snapping of stalks and he turned off the flashlight. His heart pounded and he forced himself to relax. The sound grew louder and he noticed that it was coming right at him. He fumbled for his gun, but it was too late. Someone crashed through the corn and knocked him over. He grabbed the person and they both tumbled to the ground. He felt fists strike him in the head but he had the leverage and held the figure down. It was too dark to see who it was, but he leaned all his weight on the man's arms.

"Don't you move," Earl yelled. "I'm armed."

"Earl? Is that you?" asked the stranger and Earl instantly recognized the voice. It was Junior, his neighbor and cattle rancher.

"What are you doing here?" Earl asked.

"Get off me, you big buffoon. I can't breathe," Junior

harrumphed. Earl got up and dusted himself off. Junior coughed as he rose and proceeded to circle around him. "What's in the sack?"

"Why?" Earl answered and held the bag to his chest.

"Just show me?" Junior asked and Earl complied.

"It's just some bullets. I had my gun and flashlight in it. Now why are you in my field?"

"I'm chasing someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know but someone has been slaughtering my cattle."

"You saw them run in here?"

"Well no, but the last couple of years my cows have shown up dead on this exact day. The only way they could get to them without my dogs getting wind of them is through this field. I was going to catch 'em in the act," Junior said.

Just as Junior finished, a whirling noise came from the center of the cornfield. They both looked at each other and ran towards the sound. As they tiptoed towards the noise, a light shined through the stalks. They came to a row of cornstalks that formed a circle. In the center of the circle hovered a round silver craft. Two humanoid figures with elongated necks and large dark eyes waddled about in the dim light emanating from the ship's base. They dragged a box and placed it near a hole in the side of the craft. One of the creatures opened the

box and smoke rose from inside it. The other figure grabbed what looked like bloody steaks and began to load it into the box. When they finished, they stuffed ears of corn into the box. When that was done, they closed the lid and the box floated into the ship. They followed the box through the hole and in a flash the craft was gone.

Earl looked over at Junior whose mouth was wide open. He didn't know what to say.

After a few seconds, Junior said, "I think that I'll head home."

"Yeah, same here. Nice seeing you," Earl replied and put the gun into the sack.

"See you in church?"

"We'll be there. Say hello to Darlene for me."

"Will do." And with that Junior disappeared into the pitch.

Earl slumped up the porch steps and into the kitchen where his wife was putting the dishes into the cupboards. He put the sack down and bent to take off his shoes.

"Back already?" she asked, still wielding the glare. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything is fine, honey. Just fine. I'm tired. I think I'll head to bed," he said and made his way towards the liquor cabinet.

## Defection

By Linda Wastila <http://linda-leftbrainwrite.blogspot.com>

Life feels tiny 35,000 feet over the Atlantic. Unencumbered for the first time in a decade, I travel to Italy for an international mental health summit. Once there, I will check into the *Grand Hotel et du Milan* where, after two days of silk suits, pumps and polite shop talk, I will pack two smaller bags of necessary items—laptop, notebooks, a small photo album, jewelry, and bank account information—and board the *Cisalpino*. The train will carry me over viaducts spanning ravines and through tunnels forging ages-old granite to Geneva.

I left husband and daughter well prepared for my departure: lasagna in the freezer, lunch money taped into envelopes, clothes laid out for the school week. The month's bills slid into stamped envelopes.

Ellie was disconsolate.

"It's only a trip," I told her. "Just like Mommy's other business meetings." But there was something about journeying over the wide swath of sea, which her five-year self could not fathom. Her apprehension was instinctive and prescient, reminding me of deer crashing through our brambled forest before a storm's onslaught.

Yesterday we sat at the kitchen table with pink construction

paper, purple markers, and smiley-face stickers. Chubby fingers gripping the felt-tip, Ellie drew the shaky outline of a calendar. Today is Saturday. Every night before bed she will dutifully plop a sticker into the correct square. I return home in six smiley faces.

Jonathan was more sanguine. Although terrified of being the lone parent, expressing fears of spiking fevers, refusals to eat dinner, and night terrors, he appeared relieved at the prospect of my absence. I wondered when he would squeeze Sandy into his busy schedule—while Ellie was in kindergarten? Would he spare time away from his precious lab? Would he desecrate our bed? I kept these worries to myself.

“You’ll get used to the routine,” I said, interrupting his morbid line of ‘what ifs’. “And don’t forget the spring concert Wednesday night. At six. Ellie will wear her flower dress, white tights, and pink Barbie shoes.”

The man beside me snores a comforting background melody, today's *La Repubblica* folded over an ample stomach swelling with exhalations. Black curlicues wedge through his shirt collar. The chest hair, the noisy sleeping sounds provide familiar comfort—I might get some sleep on this cramped plane. To make sure, I contemplate the amber liquid swirling in the plastic cup before bolting it back. The liquor sears my throat before fading to tolerable warmth. As a rule, I

don't drink Scotch, but this is my second and rules are made to be broken. On top of two glasses of Amarone quaffed with dinner, I feel nicely anesthetized.

The attendant approaches. I raise my index finger, point to the empty cup. The leather seat envelopes me. Outside, the plane's lights reflect on the murky dark of the ocean.

There is something about turning 49 that makes everything loom as question marks: the future, the past. Lost loves, decisions made. Regrets, of course. Always regrets. A younger friend, an astrologist in between writing memoirs and waiting tables, tells me my angst is due to the confluence of birth date and planet alignment. My more practical gynecologist blames whacked-out hormones and pushes medical miracles to build bone mass, reduce depression, and calm the constant thrumming of my heart. I refuse medications, preferring my raging libido and the way my mind has suddenly burst from its rational confines into a Technicolor-infused existence of words, meaning, and sensation. I feel alive, the way I felt when I was Ellie's age. Still innocent, still questing. I feel ... bold.

Well, I've always been brave. My pluck is one reason for my mother's cool distance, or so asserts my shrink. I only hope I wasn't what drove her to drink. But Mother was courageous in her way—she raised me on two bar-keeping jobs and the paltry contributions of the

occasional man passing through. She passed on her gallantry through genetic code and her three-point credo trumpeted so frequently she may as well have tattooed it on me at birth: you can do anything you want, you can have it all, and you don't need a prince. I've adopted these inviolable principles as my own. For they are truths, truer than taxes, than grief, than God; only death is more certain.

So tell me—why am I, esteemed professor, prolific poet, devoted mother and wife, sitting on this wide-body jet hurtling through the heavens to Geneva? I giggle at my audacity, giddy from booze, hormones, and the knowledge my thoroughly modern mother was mostly right: I can do anything and have everything—including a Prince.

And I have found him.

The next drink appears. Golden nectar filters through me, imbuing me with a grace not otherwise present. I open the Moleskine resting on my lap. A picture of Ellie drops out; she's in the garden hiding in the peonies, lips strawberry-stained, blond hair wispy in the sun. Pressure slides beneath my breastbone, just below the granular smudge highlighted on last week's CAT scan. I slide her photograph into the back flap pocket, click my Montblanc, and soothe my fears, my hopes, my depraved desires.

I close the journal, bookmark the entry with my one-way *Alitalia*

ticket.

## **Dreaming Lies to Change the Truth**

By kaolin fire <http://www.erif.org/>

She wove lies of leaves and fruit as she crawled about the tree; it had rotted and split, but her webbing held it whole. She wove eight-faceted apples that glistened like negative prisms, sucking in all heat and life. Her manifold legs danced swiftly, all angles and jabs; chitin claws embraced, for brief moments, dry and cracking branches; her bulbous body swayed slowly in counterpoint.

And as she wove, she dreamed. She dreamed of truths, dark and gruesome; dreamed of fruit she should have never sampled—that cold stone of clarity in her heart. Her love was gone, long gone into the world of men, and dead, and she had not changed so much that she did not miss him—she had pulled his rib from her body, and she dreamed of an ache in her chest where it once had lain.

Outside, abandoned, she had tried to work her way as God, in his anger and disappointment, had intended. She'd been a wife, a mother, and much more—but the knowledge in her had burned and chafed. Her knowledge of good and evil went far deeper than she could admit—even to herself, at first; and she saw its depths with awful clarity. The knowledge, like a beast, had gnawed on her bones and

soul, made malleable her flesh and her very being.

So when the one she had been made for was gone and buried, her grief and passion strengthened knowledge; and she bent under its weight. And bent, she had followed its path, and made its path her own. She left the rib to rest beside him so that no other would know her to have gone; in death, she made him whole again.

Centuries passed while she called the powers of creation to remake her. Beliefs came and went, and she became other: something outside God's realm, that had not been, could not be, banned. The angels, alert only for man or woman, said nothing when she scampered in on the eight dainty legs that held her heavy body. And so she strode into the garden, Queen as anything, and surveyed the shambles.

Around the tree, she found serpent sheddings, long decayed. The adversary had stayed in the garden for a time, but he too had done God's bidding in the end, had left to test those souls damned to roam the world outside. Finding no one, then, she fell once again upon the forbidden fruit—and finding its taste and truths unpleasant, she gorged herself on them, seeking to silence the noise with cacophony. Good and Evil was only the simplest fruit it had to offer—further in the flesh, in its very proto-soul like marrow, lay the foundations of knowledge itself.

And then—all-knowing and nigh all-powerful, it came to her. She had sucked the tree of knowledge dry and had the power of knowledge itself. She wrapped her tree in silken lies, spun promise-dreams of innocence, beguiling the fetid flies that were the souls of her progeny generations upon generations gone. And one by one, those souls crept to her bosom through the deep roots of pride and lust, no angel left in those depths to notice or care—and she made of them eight-faceted apples that glistened like negative prisms, each soul gone leaving another dreamless automaton alone in the world outside.

The tree itself fed upon those fruits, transmuting her dreams, their dreams, to substance—to truth. And when it had fed upon all the souls of man, when naught was left but empty fleshly vessels, a new fruit would appear. And she would feed on that, and either time would cease or it would run back and be undone—she did not care—such was the dream that she sang.

## **Fate's Heavy Hand**

By Jim Bernheimer <http://www.jimbernheimer.com>

The woman entered the empty chapel just as the minister was speaking. His monotone voice said, "If anyone present can show just cause why they may not lawfully be married, speak now; or forever hold your peace."

Coughing, she cleared her throat and drew their attention.

"Who are you?" The groom demanded.

"Why Sir Byron," the woman said stepping into the faint light, "don't you recognize your wife?"

The pronouncement brought a startled cry from the woman standing next to the groom. "Liar!"

The woman threw back her hood causing yet another gasp. Her face was older and the raven tresses were beginning to lighten with age, but the woman was the spitting image of the bride.

"Technically, you are right. I'm not your wife yet, and if I get my way, I never will be!"

While Sir Byron and his intended gaped, the Minister and his wife both made protective signs. They stepped back and the holy man spoke, "This is witchcraft and it has no place in the house of the Lord.

Be gone!"

"Aye," the woman agreed, "it is witchcraft that has brought me to the past. Holding my peace forever was becoming tiresome. But tell me, man of the cloth, if I sacrifice my immortal soul to save my immortal soul, am I truly damned?"

She let the Minister ponder that riddle and turned her attention to the knight and the pretty maiden at his side.

"It isn't all you hoped for dear. There are those long, lonely nights in that drafty manor, as he spends months laying siege to a castle for some cause you never understand. And the children, he treats them either like a burden or servants and promises are broken without a second thought. Take a good look, Victoria. This is what your happily ever after looks like."

"Impossible," the younger woman stammered. "You can't be me!"

"Trust me, I wish I wasn't," the cloaked woman answered with a leer, resting a hand on one of the pews, while shaking a single finger from the other at the young woman, like she was correcting a schoolchild.

"My love for Victoria is true. I would do anything for her."

"Oh there was a time that I would have believed that drivel, Byron, but that ship has sailed. I was just the wife on your arm, a

symbol of status. You should have just hired someone to manage your estate! But you got out of that by marrying me. Still, I'm not here for you! I'm here to talk some sense into me and stop myself from making a mistake that will lead to a dark path."

The uncertain bride-to-be stepped closer, "I don't know what to think ... "

"You deserve better than this lout. Anything would be an improvement! Don't marry him. He might look promising now, but I am proof that he will ruin you!"

Byron also stepped forward, but he was angry and grabbed the hilt of his sword in warning.

He spat, "Do not listen to this creature! It speaks lies."

"See how quick he is to anger. If you don't, you will soon, but I know how to convince you once and for all. He says he will do anything for you, so it's time you take him up on it."

Glaring, the knight hissed his answer, "There is nothing you can demand of me."

The older Victoria answered his accusing look and said, "Very well, dear Byron, renounce your title. If your bride means more to you than everything else, prove it! Aren't you here, getting married ahead of schedule, because of the rumors that war will soon be on the land? You're already putting your king ahead of her ... me. Are you to be a

husband first or a knight of the realm?"

"My word is my honor! To ask me to betray it is too much, Victoria."

The young woman protested, "Byron, I'm not asking you, she is!"

Her older doppelganger laughed, "But you are. Allow this marriage to be consummated and I am the result, a bitter, angry woman, driven to witchcraft. Is this what you want for your new bride, Byron?"

The man appeared torn. He stared long at the family crest emblazoned on his tunic and reached a decision. "Perhaps it is best that we do not proceed. If this is your future, I care for you too much to see you end up like this."

"Byron! No! Wait!" The younger woman called out, but Sir Byron broke from her desperate grasp, marshaled his pride, and walked out the entrance leaving four people in his wake. A moment of stunned silence ensued before the jilted bride collapsed, sobbing her pain for the world to hear. The Minister and his wife continued to stare at the woman in the cloak.

She shrugged off their frightened gazes. "I have delivered my warning. The past is changed and soon I will be gone. Goodbye."

Turning, the woman walked out into the night. After a hundred

paces, she looked back at the chapel to make certain no one was watching. The witch allowed the illusion to disappear. She was lucky. The prophecy that a child, born of their union, would cause her downfall would never be fulfilled. The knight could be eliminated easily enough in the coming war. There would be no reconciliation. Her safety was assured.

Cackling, she mounted her broom and flew into the night.

Back in the chapel, Victoria slowly regained her composure. The Minister and his wife offered what comfort they could, before vowing to never speak of the night's events.

Victoria thought about a life without Byron and how she would go on. She didn't even have a chance to tell him that she was already pregnant. Their child would be born out of wedlock and her life was ruined ... all because of witchcraft! She would never forget this and neither would her baby.

## **Food of the Gods**

By judy b. <http://onze productions.com/Site/Home.html>

Austin knows he'll have to make up for this, storming out before the argument is over. They'll have to talk about it, which means he'll have to listen—again—hear how insensitive he is, how he belittles her work, her goals. It's true: he doesn't like to listen. He's a professor; he imparts knowledge. He likes to talk. OK, hold forth. Well, she knew that when she took up with him. She knew what he was like.

Austin has a Ph.D. in American History from one Midwestern university and he teaches at another. He met Josie his first night in town; she was waiting tables at a nice restaurant someone had told him was a good place for dinner. He'd flirted with her, thinking she was younger than he and not as wise. After a year, he's still not ready to concede the latter point.

His route to the U never varies, though his mode of transport does. He sometimes rides his bike, more often walks, but today he is piloting a 10-year-old import, because of the rain. Cold rain that in a month will be snow. He is starting his second year at the university, entering his second year of life with Josie. She moved in last month.

Their argument was over, of all things, fruit.

Austin made a remark about the persimmons Josie had in a blue bowl: "Ah, persimmons," he'd said, "food of the gods." Then he'd offered a short history lesson on how the English couldn't wait until winter to eat the bitter fruit the American Indians called "pessamin," didn't realize it ripened and sweetened in the cold. How the Native Americans shared with Hernando de Soto a kind of bread made with what the conquistador thought was prunes. Austin had picked one up, and Josie told him it wasn't ripe.

"I wasn't going to eat it."

"Of course not. You were going to pontificate on it, ruminate over it to the point that I no longer want to look at it, let alone bake a tea bread with it—which I definitely won't want to give you a taste of, because I'd just get a lecture on the history of tea, the beverage, the meal, the ritual, the ... the ... oh, fuck it, Austin, just go to work. Go lecture the people who don't know anything yet. Talk to the people who want to listen." She threw a handful of spoons into a mixing bowl filled with water in the sink and walked away.

They've had this conversation before, about how he can't just enjoy a thing, appreciate the look, the feel, the taste of something. Why couldn't he just observe how striking the contrast of the orange persimmons in the cobalt bowl, if he had to say anything at 7:30 in the morning? He knows this is what she's thinking.

Austin understands it's particularly annoying when the topic is food, because Josie herself is a professor, of sorts, of the culinary arts. She is now the chef at that restaurant where they first met. She was not a student back then, but a graduate of the California Culinary Academy and the veteran of several different San Francisco cafés, bistros, and one major restaurant he'd never heard of but evidently should have. She snagged him with her white apron, but she hooked him with her handmade pizza crust. She knows something better than he does, and yes, this troubles him a little, but he's big enough to know his resistance is ridiculous. He's working on it.

The other thing they argue about is his driving to work, when they live only a mile from campus. She wants him to walk or ride the bike or catch the bus. It's a waste of gas, especially considering he always stops at Brady's café halfway in for a coffee and a muffin, where he's standing right now. It occurs to him just then that before he remarked on the persimmons, he had smelled something in the oven. She had baked him muffins. She'd been talking about it, but usually started her mornings later than he, because she was at the restaurant so late. He hadn't even said good morning or told her how nice it was to see her awake, first thing.

The girl behind the counter says hello to him, but he turns away, plods back to the car in a daze. He considers driving home and

apologizing, but running through that narrative in his mind, he realizes it's forced, contrived, implausible. Better to play out the role of the idiot male and take what's coming when she gets home at midnight. He doesn't notice the two persimmons sitting on the roof until he is unlocking the door. There is a note, written on a crumpled receipt, rain droplets gluing it to the driver's side window:

*Hey, Professor. Some goddess loves you.*

A plastic bag hangs from the door handle. She had to have decided in a second what she would do, snatched the persimmons from the bowl, found a bag for the muffins, scribbled a note, all before jumping on the bike, riding like mad. Did she take the time to grab a coat? Austin stands there in the drizzle, thinking.

## Frangible Choices

By Kemari M. Howell

July unleashed a furious calidity as I sat on the side of the road in my overheated, rusty Toyota hatchback, waiting to see if there were two pink lines instead of one. It was the kind of summer that glued clothes to bodies within minutes of the heat's exposure. I could taste the thickness of the air as I inhaled. I'd bought the test as an afterthought; stopping at a drugstore to pee, passing by that aisle of taboo feminine products. *I'd thought, maybe I should take a pregnancy test.* But I always thought that after he and I had been together, because I liked the idea of taking pregnancy tests. I bought the test, forgetting about my need to urinate until the car started to overheat and I had to pull to the side of the road.

Humidity has a way of enhancing feelings to frenzying degrees. My skin was flushed and my clothes were soggy with sweat as I waited for the steam to stop billowing out from beneath the hood. My bladder reminded me of its needs. I peed on the stick and threw it in the passenger's seat. There were three ice cubes left from the cola I'd bought at a McDonald's a few miles back and I chewed on them to keep me cool. My vehicular irritation boiled beneath my skin but I did

my *nei kung* exercises because Tai Chi is all about inner serenity. The engine cooled in time with my temper. I started the car and reached for my sunglasses. I picked up the pregnancy test instead.

There were already lies between he and I; lies and secrets and things that build indestructible walls between people. I was no longer willing to climb those walls; they were getting too high. There were no illusions that the conception of a child would only lay more bricks on the wall between us, regardless of the decision I might make whether to keep the child. The lies and the secrets were his, and so I turned the car around with a secret of my own; a secret that would be mine alone for the short time I might have to endure it. Because I couldn't have a baby. People who have babies need money. I worked for a palm reader, fishing for information before she took them into her blue-and-gold painted room. She paid me a hundred dollars a week, not enough to feed a baby, not enough to feed myself. If I spent nine months attached to another life, I would never be able to walk away from it. The only option was the one that left a sour, swamp gas feeling in the pit of my stomach. They call it guilt.

Maybe I made the appointment because I knew I couldn't offer a baby any kind of stability. I told myself that, but maybe I made it because some secret part of me hoped that if I erased the evidence, I could go back and find my innocence and naiveté. Maybe I hoped that

a barren womb might bring back the irresponsibility of being with him. There were labels now, to he and I; I wanted to erase those labels. He was no longer just a guy. I needed him to be a nameless mistake that I could brush under the carpet. There could be no titles. He couldn't be the *Child's Father*. I couldn't be the *Child's Mother*. Because really, how could I be anyone's mother?

In the clinic waiting room, I sat alone with my decision. The receptionist stayed behind the safety of her sliding glass window, answering calls without regard to the swirling tornado of indecision and guilt beyond the glass. The ghosts of choices past hovered in the corners of the room, haunting me. It is the general consensus that a man should share the burden of a child. I did not want to share it. Inside of me, in the secret depths of my female legacy, webs were being spun; threads of silken flesh cocooning itself around an egg. These renovations were not public property; it was my body that would be scoured and scooped. We'd planted a seed together, but I would be doing the landscaping alone.

There was the question of viability, standard procedure you see. I bent knees to chest as two nurses rolled the bulbous transducer probe across the plane of my stomach. They don't tell you that a fetus' heartbeat sounds like a cotton candy machine; they don't tell you that you'll conjure up the sickly sweet taste of sugary cotton and want to

vomit. Years later, you'll smell cotton candy and hear that sound, and still the feeling of being violated and gutted will assault you in ways that cripple you.

Rubber-gloved hands were fluttering above my face; gestures of urgency and unexpected portent. Their poker faces were immovable. I felt like a child who couldn't read, listening to adults spell out their plans. *Tell me what is wrong, I implored.* Because there was fear that something was wrong, even on the table waiting to be pillaged from the inside out. It was ice water through my veins and then one nurse spoke of the wonderment in my belly. And the prayers that were flattened between clenched teeth were set free, answered by a God I didn't realize I'd been praying to; a God I didn't know I believed in until that moment.

In the parking lot, in the rusty old hatchback, I curved my fists over the frangible skin of my belly. Drops of sweat dripped down from my brows, mixing with tears. I licked my lips, the salinity settling itself in my memory, tasting like ocean. Beneath my palm, two seeds were nestled in the lacuna of my femininity, growing into complex beings; sprouting wings that fluttered and sighed against my velvet canal.

In the rearview mirror, I watched my lips form a single word: twins.

## **Grief Observed**

By Laurita Miller <http://ringkeeper.blogspot.com/>

The morning was washed in grey and dampness crept through every crack in the house. She pulled the sweater tight around her and put the kettle on the stove.

Even as she moved to the window she could hear the wail. It could have been the wind moaning around the harbour but for the raw anguish in it. She lifted the heavy drapes and watched the scene below.

A small group stood on the weathered dock, among them a man, his arms wrapped protectively around a woman, her face partially buried in his chest. The distance made it impossible to distinguish facial features, but body language spoke of fear and sorrow. Two men knelt on the dock, arms stretched toward the dark water. Another stood on the beams below, working a rope through his hands. Others joined them, the curious and the concerned, hands to mouths, eyes cast down upon the waves.

Suddenly the woman cried out, buried her face deeper into her protector's chest, then spun away and lurched toward the edge of the dock. Below them a blue toy boat bobbed on the water.

She let the curtain fall.

## **My Guardian Demon**

By Jeanne Tomlin <http://www.jeannetomlin.com>

On the warmest afternoon in August, I sold my soul.

The sun shone through the slats of the blinds in dusty bars. Sweat tickled as it ran down my face since I couldn't afford to run up the electric bill by turning on the air. I held the statement from the bursar's office in my hand.

I'd known I wouldn't have the money for the next semester but kept hoping that the money would come in from somewhere—a grant, some unexpected scholarship. Now here it was. Four thousand dollars or I was out on the street with my doctorate only half finished. My transcript would be good for paper training a puppy—if I'd had one.

There had to be something I could do. Anything! I'd been a good girl all my life. Studied. Hardly ever got drunk. Never did drugs. Top grades. Never cheated. Even went to church with my parents whenever I went home. Damn it, this wasn't fair.

I smelled the cigarette smoke and jerked my head up. I didn't smoke. The building didn't allow it anyway. What the ...?

A soft chuckle made me leap to my feet. My desk chair skittered away. A man stood in half shadow just inside the closed door of my

apartment. I gasped and grabbed my chest as my heart leaped. Then the cigarette gave off an orange light, and I could see his face. It was an unearthly white—blank typewriter-paper white. He was bald and wore round-lens dark sunglasses and had a half-smile on his lips.

I looked around frantically. Textbooks ... stapler ... the stupid bill ... The only possible weapon within reach was the gooseneck lamp on my desk. When I grabbed it, he chuckled again. The silver bars that dangled from each of his earlobes jiggled, catching the faint light.

He held up a thin hand, palm outward. "It's all right, Mary."

I shuddered. His fingernails were long—more like talons than nails.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Aza if you like." He took the cigarette from his mouth and smiled exposing pointed, shark-like teeth. His cigarette burned even brighter as he held it between his long fingers, lighting up that entire side of the room.

I gripped the lamp and raised it higher, pretending not to notice its floppy neck. "What do you want?"

He smiled even more broadly. "The Boss sent me to help you out." He nodded toward my desk. "Look at that bill you were worrying over."

I inched my fingers to the piece of paper where I'd dropped it

and slid it toward me. Now in bright red letters across it was stamped 'Paid in Full.'

I shook my head. That was impossible. It had to all be a hallucination. I'd better call Psychological Services while I was still officially a student. I reached for my cell phone where it lay next to the pile of textbooks.

"Wait," he said. "You're expecting an important call."

I narrowed my eyes. He didn't want me to make a call, so maybe this wasn't a hallucination after all. A hallucination wouldn't care. "You keep back," I said as my fingers closed around the phone.

He tilted his head, his smile not changing at all. The phone buzzed.

I flipped it open, gaped at the number and pressed the phone eagerly to my ear. "This is Mary."

"Mary, Dr. Shultz here. Great news. The grant came through after all." His voice bubbled with excitement. "You're on! With this new theory on how to use qubits, we'll re-write physics. And you're going to get a share of the credit."

I cleared my throat and managed to swallow. "Dr. Shultz. I don't know what to say. That's—wonderful doesn't cover it."

"I'll expect you in my office a nine tomorrow morning. We have schedules to set up and work to plan."

The phone clicked, and I stared at it in my hand. Lifting my eyes to my visitor's face, I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"Like I said, the Boss sent me to help you out. If you like what you've seen so far, I can do much, much more."

"You mean you'll be like ...?" My voice broke. My parents would kill me if they found out. What would my colleagues say if they knew? But he had saved my butt or at least my career. I had to find out what else he could do. "Like a guardian demon."

He stuck his cigarette back between his lips and held out his hand. "You could put it that way."

## **Mirror, Mirror**

By Greta Igl <http://www.gretaigl.blogspot.com>

The girl, perhaps six, chews a strand of dirty brown hair and eyes the doll my daughter holds. Even allowing for fluorescent light and dingy walls, the girl's marginal health is obvious. Her eyes and skin are dull and yellow from poor nutrition, her hair lank and ropy.

"That's a pretty doll," the girl says, her head tilted, assessing.

Sophia hands the doll to her. "You can have it." At three, Sophia still thinks the world is hers to give.

The girl hugs it fiercely. She lets out a satisfied huff and turns her attention back to Sophia.

"What's your name?"

"Sophia."

"Then I'm going to name her Sophia." She tosses the doll into her cart.

The mother in me can't help but ask, "Where's your mom?"

"She's here somewhere." She waves a hand generally around the thrift store, then gestures to her rusted cart. "She's going to buy all this stuff for me."

I admire her treasures: an EZ Bake oven, a chipped glass with a

spray of violets, a blush pink cardigan, and now the doll.

“Me and my mom, we come here all the time,” the girl tell us.  
“She lets me pick whatever I want.”

Sophia tugs my arm, green eyes wide under those long, long lashes. “Mommy? Can I have a cart, too?”

I smooth a hand over her hair. “Not today, honey. Just pick one thing.”

Sophia gives me the fight I expect. “But why, Mommy? That girl gets a cart. Why can’t I get one?”

“Not today, honey.”

“But I want a cart, too!”

I feel the air leave my lungs. Life is a series of fights these days. Even the hint of one on the horizon defeats me.

“I said, not today.” I grip her arm tightly as we break away from the girl and her provocative cart.

Later, Sophia holds her one thing as I strap her into her car seat. She’s picked a book, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. It’s our third version.

Sophia waves the book in my face, hitting my nose with the binding. “Can you read it to me, Mommy?”

The edges of my patience tatter. “Not now, honey!”

“But Mommy, I want to read it now.” Her voice takes on that

stubborn tone.

I adjust the chest strap on her seat, avoid her eyes. "Sophia, I said not now! I have to drive the car!"

She opens her mouth, then stops, frozen.

"Mommy, what's that girl doing?"

I turn. It's the girl from the toy section, now with her mother and grandmother. The mother is thin and wiry hard, the grandmother doughy and unkempt in a stained housedress. The girl screams as her mother drags her by her hair, crab scuttling, to a rusted four door sedan. The mother whips the door open and throws the girl in. As the girl tries to escape, the door nearly slams on her leg. The girl screams-sobs over and over, "I want my doll!"

My heart pounds. I watch the mother grab one kicking leg, shove it in the car. Again. Again. Again. The girl kicks her mother and earns a hard slap on her bare leg. "I want my doll!" she screams again. Again. Again.

*"I said get in the goddamn car!"*

The girl screams viscerally. She flails, snarls.

The grandmother stands several feet away, watching.

"Mommy," Sophia whispers. "What did that girl do?"

I swallow the burning fire in my gut. We are caught on a thin border, all of us.

"Mommy?" Sophia repeats, louder.

I think of the girl with her cart of toys, her dirty face, her optimistic assurance her mother will buy her whatever she wants. She is kicking the window now. I cringe, imagining one tennis shoe crashing through the window, shredded flesh, glass shards spraying everywhere.

"I don't like this, Mommy." Sophia's voice wavers.

I vacillate with her, wondering what to do. There's a little girl in danger. My own little girl stands at the edge of it. If I interfere...

The options spider web into a million tragic endings.

Across the aisle, car doors slam like gunfire. The engine roars with a rumbling growl. The transmission thunks, then the car reverses blind and fast, before squealing across the lot.

I swallow, knowing my chance to intervene evaporates. Even as my mind fumbles with logistics of license plates and calling the police, the car screeches out onto the highway.

"Why was she like that, Mommy?" Sophia's face crumples and she starts to cry.

"I don't know," I tell her. But, God help me, I do.

The parking lot is quiet now. Sophia still cries, her pudgy hands bunched, scrubbing her eyes. Beyond the trees at the edge of the lot,

the river trips past, here then gone. I think of my own ebb and flow of patience. I worry for all of us, the girl and her mother, Sophia and me.

A cardinal sings from somewhere in the branchy throng.

I unbuckle Sophia's car seat and pull her toward me. She melts, warm and pliable, into my arms.

"Let's read that book, honey," I whisper into her hair.

## **Monday**

By Selena Kitt

Susan hid deep in the back of the closet, behind shoes and baskets overflowing with dirty laundry. She buried herself under piles of closet-things, breathing hard into her mother's long dresses. She didn't recognize the voice of the man who'd entered their kitchen that morning, interrupting her cinnamon toast breakfast while her mother, tired but smiling at the other end of the table, drank coffee from a jelly jar.

Susan had school today and, for once, she was going. Her mother had promised, and had even gotten up to wash a bowl and spoon to make her breakfast. Susan normally ate whatever she could find on Monday morning—a piece of bread, crackers, cookies if she could find them, with water she could get from the tap. The milk jug was still too heavy for her to lift.

She never went to school on Mondays, but today was the holiday party, and her mother kept her promise and grumbled only a little instead of yelling when Susan pushed and prodded her off the couch.

Susan's heart thudded in her chest, her breathing just beginning slow as she strained to hear a sound, anything beyond the walls of the

closet. Everything was muffled, like when she held her breath and slipped under the water in the bathtub. Would he hurt her? Susan's breath went away at the thought.

He had filled the kitchen, blocking the sunlight he'd let in when he entered. She could still see her mother's face, drawn and pale, her mouth a thin line at the sight of him in the doorway.

"You owe me," was all he said in that rough voice she didn't know.

Susan knew there would be no school again today when her mother said: "Go to your room, Sue, and don't you dare come out. I mean it or I'll get the belt, I swear I will."

So she went, hiding in the closet behind her mother's clothes. Her own clothes filled the dresser next to the twin bed she and her mother sometimes shared—although more often than not, her mother slept on the couch.

She remembered everything; although she would claim then and years later to her mother she saw nothing.

First, she heard the scream, shrill and fast. Fear kept her there a moment, and then concern for her mother made her creep out of the closet in stockinged feet.

She remembered the smell of cinnamon toast, the feel of the wall on her hand, cool and rough, as she made her way down the hall

toward the living room.

She remembered the angle of the doorway to the kitchen; she remembered standing next to the sofa her mother had been asleep on less than an hour ago. Susan could only see their heads as they lay on the faded, dirty linoleum, his face obliterating hers, teeth clenched, eyes closed, one of his hands holding both of hers above her head.

He moved on top of her, making small noises, but her mother was silent beneath him. Susan, afraid to stay, afraid of being caught there seeing something strange, something she instinctively knew she shouldn't be seeing, was more afraid to go, and she stood there with the longing to see her mother's face.

He cried out, a low, grunting noise, and stopped. She strained to see past him, to glimpse her mother's face. Susan held her breath until he lifted his head. For the rest of her life she would wish she hadn't seen the blankness in her mother's eyes as they stared at the ceiling, past him, past anything in this world.

He was gone from her line of vision then, and it was just her mother, lying motionless on the floor, a trail of blood running from the corner of her swollen mouth. Susan wanted to go to her, and would have, threat of the belt or no, if he hadn't laughed then.

"You fucking whore." Something landed next to her mother's face with a sickening thud. A small paper bag. "Here's a little

something extra. See you next week."

Susan heard his boots on the linoleum and scrambled under covers on the couch, settling into the indentation made by her mother's body in the night. She peeked out to look; her mother was on the floor, curled on her side, staring at the bag. She heard the kitchen door slam, and then her mother sobbed, picking up the bag and throwing it through the doorway into the living room.

Susan ducked under the covers until only her eyes were showing, waiting, watching. She would always remember the way her mother sobbed as she sat up, not bothering to pull her robe together as she staggered to her feet. Tall and pale in the early morning light, her face was smudged with mascara and blood. She stood, head down, trembling and quiet, fists clenched.

Then her mother turned and headed toward Susan's hiding spot beneath the covers on the couch. Afraid her mother would yell and bring the promise of the belt, she held her breath, paralyzed. She would remember forever her mother swearing, bending down to retrieve what she had thrown, and peering inside like a kid into a bag of candy. Her mother squealed and laughed then, heading toward the bathroom.

Susan was never discovered by her mother that Monday. She crept back to the closet and fell asleep, awakening to her mother's

voice calling her, asking her what she'd seen.

Nothing, nothing, I swear it, Mommy; *can I go to school, now?*

No, it was too late for school, but they could go to the park. And they had. Susan would also remember forever the feel of her mother's hands on her back as she pushed her, higher, higher, on the swings.

*Give me under, Mommy; give me under!* And her mother would run under the swing, laughing through a mouth still swollen and beginning to bruise.

## **Night Becomes the City**

By M.P. Berry <http://mpberry.wordpress.com/>

*"Dig, dig, dig that crazy, bombastic, fantastic sound that streams out of the city like an electrical current, like an un-spooling cosmic thread, like a long reaching arm of errant smoke that hooks you by the nose and leads you blindly to some claustrophobic, fog filled bebop club where you fast find yourself in the hypnotic hold of Charlie Parker, suddenly healed of all your lifelong hobgoblins and hang ups; jazz is the tonic to a sickness we don't even know we have."*

From his cave on the outskirts of town, the Monster could hear the mad, savage rush of city life. He found a seductive overture in the distant hoops and hollers of well-toasted partiers, the wheezing hiss of nonstop traffic and even the salvos of random gunfire that exploded frequently throughout the lower east neighborhoods.

Most inviting of all, though, was the sound of the revved up and raucous jazz that wafted frequently into the Monster's woods where it always managed to stir his dark, hardened soul. He composed long, rapturous poems in his diary, rave reviews of the latest music emanating from the nearby metropolis.

*"The drums, the drums, it's the primal, pounding drums that*

*really make your heart go zoom-a-zoom-zoom! Hearing the thud and thump of bass and tom-tom falling out of the expected rhythm and into some barely syncopated offbeat (that teeters on the edge of falling apart) lies tantamount to seeing the face of God materializing in your Saturday morning Corn Flakes!”*

\*\*\*

The Monster stood watch over the city that cast him out. Though he longed to live among its bustling crowds and looming skyscrapers and yearned to tell its citizens how he secretly protected them as they slept, he kept his respectful distance. He remained grievously silent.

He understood that more time was needed before the residents of Radio City could accept something that was so abhorrent to what they had always known. The memories of his vicious attacks, criminal acts and wantonly destructive rampages were still too fresh in their minds to allow for a cozy coexistence anytime in the foreseeable future. He knew that, for now at least, he would have to atone for the misdeeds of his past in lonely anonymity.

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The Monster had been fighting crime and corruption in Radio City for over a year when he began to investigate a series of smash-n-grab robberies at local museums. A curious collection of small, inexpensive items had been taken from low-security, low interest exhibits. The

pattern made absolutely no sense, and the Monster was trying to connect the dots.

One night while staking out a Natural History hub that had yet to be hit, the creature caught a sudden flash of light in the corner of his hideous, yellow eye; he glanced up from his surveillance in time to see another quick strobe popping to life in the shrubbery that bordered a nearby park. A third flash briefly illuminated the silhouette of a long nosed man, crouching in the bushes, snapping photos of something happening by the swing-sets.

The beast fixed his stare, focusing on the crouching photographer's subjects: two men loitering just under the tree line. A low-level drug deal was in progress—two dime bags for two bits. Nothing to get worked up about, certainly nothing worth a Kodak moment. Intrigued as hell, the Monster decided to tail the peeping creep for the rest of the night to see what other mundane meetings the man chose to commemorate on film.

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In public, the creature often obscured his fearsome features beneath a rumpled Johnny Staccato suit, classic black Ray-Bans and a William Burroughs Fedora. Looking like an eight-foot tall, five hundred pound, preposterously hairy Beatnik, he still managed to blend in better than much of Radio City's prodigiously bizarre nightlife. Donning this

ridiculous yet effective disguise, the Monster followed the Photog all over town as the clandestine cameraman cranked out covert Polaroids of a multitude of men engaged in sleazy, reckless behaviors: not only drug deals, but kinky indiscretions, petty larcenies and other decidedly desperate acts of deviousness and depravity.

Two nights later, the creature watched from the shadows as the Photog revisited these men, flashed his candid pics and collected a fast payment. Standard blackmail op. Or so it seemed in the beginning.

Over the course of a week, the Monster, a natural born detective, did some leg work on the long nosed extortionist and his various vices. As he dug into their dirty, degenerate lives, the creature came to realize that these men were not involved in a standard blackmail op at all. This was something far more sordid and sinister. And as he often did upon making these discoveries, the Monster immediately sought to involve himself in thwarting the bad guys' plans.

For just as he heard alluring invitation in the most unseemly of sounds and the most discordant of tunes emitting from the boulevards of Radio City, the Monster also heard a persistent siren song in the ever present rumble of the city's iniquitous underbelly. He had come to believe that saving the city (from its own darker appetites) was his life's purpose and as part of his ongoing campaign to atone for the sins

of his past, he determined to destroy the devilish plot being formulated by the Photog and his criminal cohorts.

Before the latest round of city saving could commence, however, the Monster had to pay a visit to a friend: someone he knew would have a particular interest in this newly uncovered mystery.

## **In the Nuthouse**

By Dannan O'Brien

The interior is pastel pink, blue, and egg-salad-with-way-too-much-mayonnaise-yellow. Sensitive to colors, my stomach spins. The overstarched nurse grips my elbow. My feet touch floor here and there traveling the hall.

Smells: cafeteria spaghetti, oranges, disinfectant, piss.

In the crafts room: clay, paste, powdered tempera, piss.

In the lounge: cigarettes, floor-wax, vinyl, piss.

*After the mind, the next thing to go is the bladder.*

Crazies are big on repetition; rocking, head nodding, pacing, phrases.

A woman sings, "When cupid shot his dart, he shot it at my heart" from morning meds until bedtime meds, if someone doesn't smack her and make her cry.

Mine is inside my head, a voice with a New York accent repeats,  
*Who knew?*

This alone is enough to land me here, but they insist there's more.

Days feel dangerous looking through barred windows.

*May-day! May-day!*

Heart pounds heart sounds in the purple light, sensing uh-oh data.

To my New Yorker I say, *We know the pencil pointed  
excruciation of being.*

*Breathe.*

Compulsion to thump forehead against bed frame—red-red-red  
later purple and yellow. The evidence noted by elbow-gripper nurse in  
my chart. Not sleeping, I spend the night rubbing off the insanity  
tattoo creating a bloodstain on pillow, which I then must hide.

*Where?*

Nurse squeak-slaps down the hall.

*Coming, she's coming! She's coming!*

*Hide under the bed.*

*No!*

*She is a trained professional. She will look there.*

The New Yorker sighs.

I flatten myself in pink hospital pj's against the pink wall, bloody  
pillow behind my back.

Hold breath. *Be the wall.*

She sees me.

I'm bummed. I am not the wall.

"What is the meaning of this?" the nurse barks.

*What a question. What a goddamned question to ask a crazy person.*

She tells me I'll never get well if this keeps up.

*The New Yorker hollers, Who knew?*

On a new day I try again. I'm casual, doing my impression of sane. Method acting.

*Remember good manners are a sign of a good attitude.*

"Thank you." I bow a greeting to elbow-gripper nurse.

Arrange a smile over uncooperative dry teeth, form lips into pleasing crescent shape. After morning meds, Bald Peter ruler of the crafts room announces through a papier-mâché megaphone of his own design, that he drained my brain during the night with his fully loaded K-80 brain zapper.

"I copped a feel too." He grins.

I say, "Thank you."

Elbow-gripper nurse says, "Now, now, now, none of that nonsense, Peter."

I look out the window beyond the bars and practice smile facsimile while one eared old lady screams, "cuntcuntcuntcunt!"

"Thank you." Curtsey.

On the way to lunch, we find piss in the hall.

"Thank you." Nod to the yellow puddle.

Lunch is egg salad with way too much mayonnaise in it. Stomach lurches.

I manage a "Thank you." Place the napkin on my lap.

I do my smile thing and take meds that make me puke egg salad.

"Thank you," I say embracing toilet.

During therapy doc says, "I hear you've had a good day."

The New Yorker thinks it's a trick but I risk it.

"Thank you."

The doctor strokes his tie, the one with bug-eyed frogs on it.

"Wellnow huminnah lalaattitude younglady."

"Thank you." I avoid making eye contact with the frogs.

"Itappearsblahblah copeyadaillness numnumwill doowahdoo returndiddyhome."

*Home!*

The mere possibility of it with its light left on and its gate that swings in moonlit breezes sends me skipping back through piss puddle halls.

And the New Yorker whispers ...

## Parklife

By Alan Baxter <http://www.alanbaxteronline.com>

Jed looked at the bourbon in his shaking hand. He didn't feel drunk and only had enough money for a couple more. 'Another,' he said hoarsely, holding out the glass.

The barman looked at him steadily. 'Everything all right?' he asked as he poured.

Jed laughed, a short, humourless bark. 'I don't know.'

'Wanna talk about it?'

Jed tipped back the bourbon. His stomach trembled, almost vibrating. Nodding at the bottle again, sliding the last of his coins across the bar, he said, 'Sounds crazy.'

The barman poured, leaning on one elbow. 'I get all kinds of crazy here, buddy.'

Jed wanted to tell someone, if he could bring himself to admit what had happened. He was dismayed to see his glass empty. The barman reached for the bottle and Jed shook his head. 'I'm outta money.'

The barman shrugged, poured another shot. 'What happened?'

Jed took a deep breath. 'I was jogging alongside the park ...'

\*\*\*

Looking into the inky shadows under the trees he heard a cry. It sounded like a young girl.

Jed looked around, suddenly scared. He wanted to help, but had never had to protect someone or defend himself since school. If he went in there now he might get in a fight. A real fight where someone, most likely him, could get seriously hurt. But there was no one else around. With a noise of trepidation he ducked into the darkness.

He heard the cry again, along with a man's voice grunting and gasping for breath. The sounds were close by. Then he saw a flash of something between the trees. He leaned around the trunk directly in front of him, nervously peering into the gloom.

On the grass, not ten feet from him, was a young girl, held fast by a huge man wearing a long, stained coat. The man's hair was shaggy, unkempt. His unshaven face was inches from the girl's nose as he leaned one hand on her mouth, holding her down, keeping her silent. The girl's eyes were wide and terrified, staring between stray strands of disheveled blonde hair. Her white shirt was torn and dirty. The man's free hand was fumbling under his coat, trying to tear the girl's skirt away. Her screams were muffled as she writhed under his weight, helpless to dislodge him. Jed stood dumbfounded, paralysed by fear.

The man growled as he pulled at the girl's clothing. 'Come on, bitch, give it up!'

Disgusted, Jed launched himself from behind the tree, running full tilt at the huge man. The grizzled face whipped towards him, shock and surprise etched onto his features as Jed, with arms outstretched, rammed into him, slamming him over onto his side. The two rolled on the wet grass. Jed felt a wave of panic pulse through him as he came to a stop with the mean looking assailant sitting on his chest. The man raised one hand back to his ear, clenching his fingers into a fist the size of Jed's head.

The girl scrambled to her feet and swung a sneakered foot hard at the rapist's head. The kick was powerful and true, the big man's mouth opening as the girl's foot connected with a sickening crunch.

Stunned, bleeding, the man staggered to his feet. The girl grinned, her teeth flashing bright white in the darkness. 'Thought you had me that time, Kern?' Her voice was strong, powerful. There was something strange about that voice; a soft, constant, unwavering wail that sounded as she spoke and continued unbroken when she stopped.

Kern wiped at his bleeding nose, casting a hateful glance at Jed. His face seemed to twist with effort, as if he were pulling a ten ton weight, before he dipped his head and ran at the girl. She leaped aside, spinning in the air, her leg whipping out once more. The smack

of her foot connecting was gruesome. Kern collapsed onto one knee as the girl landed beside him. Grabbing his hair she punched him hard across the jaw. As his head whipped to the side she let go, hit him again. Kern didn't even try to defend himself. Blood sprayed from his lips as he spun on his knee and slumped onto the grass.

Jed was transfixed, unable to move a muscle. The girl was still making that strange noise, her mouth slightly open as the soft wail escaped her lips. As Jed stared the sound stopped. Instantly a heaviness came over his limbs and he realised he could move again. It occurred to him that he couldn't have moved before if he had tried. The girl looked up at him and grinned, feral, wild. She stood over Kern, putting one foot against his throat. He stared up, grimacing. 'Here's what you wanted,' she said, pulling a large gem in an ornate silver mount from the waistband of her skirt. 'The good guys lose again.'

Jed stared. The girl laughed. 'You people know nothing,' she said. With that, still staring into Jed's eyes, she twisted her leg. There was a deep crack as Kern's neck snapped. His eyes rolled back, his last breath hissing out between clenched teeth.

Jed began to tremble, unable to think of anything but flight. The girl opened her mouth again, the strange wail starting once more. Jed felt his muscles harden and lock.

Through the unearthly sound the girl spoke clearly. 'I'm going to leave you here, mortal, because your fear is delicious. Besides, who would believe you?'

Still frozen by the wailing song Jed watched in horror as the girl leaped upwards and vanished with a swish through the leaves of the trees above them. The hold on Jed released and he staggered, dropping to one knee, next to the corpse of Kern, twisted and bloody in death.

## **Pirated Twinkies**

By Shannon Esposito <http://murderinparadise.com/>

George lowered himself onto the toilet and knocked twice on the wall to his right.

“I got the money,” George said. He held it under the stall. “It’s all there.”

Within a few seconds, a brown package slid into his feet. George picked it up, dizzy with excitement. He breathed it in as if he could inhale it through the paper.

“Next month, my number will be 776. Got it?”

“Yeah,” George answered, “got it.” George decided to go out the back doors just to be safe.

What happened next was a blur, because all George could think about was the brown package—containing all that mattered to him in life—being plucked from his coat by a gray haired DEA agent.

“You’ve got a real problem, son. Let’s go.”

George wasn’t a stranger to the Maintenance Facilities, but he had already failed two monthly weigh-ins. That meant an automatic year at Tripp’s Prison. His heart sank along with his will to live.

Living at Tripp’s ate him alive from the inside out and made him

a shell of the man he used to be.

"Psst ... hey, George."

George looked up to see his friend, Hubert, standing there, green eyes smiling. George was in no mood for happiness. He turned away.

"I've got something that I think you need more than I do."

George sighed. "Unless it's golden brown with crème filling I suggest you leave me alone."

"And what if it is?"

"Then I would have to kiss you," George said slowly.

"Uck," Hubert snarled. Then he did something just short of a miracle. He pulled a square of cellophane from his robe and slipped it into George's hand. "A thank you will do."

"But ... how?" George stammered, and then remembering how quickly they could be found out, he unwrapped it with shaking fingers and shoved the golden cake into his mouth. He sat there for a moment, his eyes closed, his saliva glands in over-drive.

"Better?"

George nodded, feeling dizzy. "Thank you. You didn't have to."

"Oh yes, I did. I'm worried that you're not going to make it another six months in this place. I mean, look at you. You walk around here in a daze. You've got to snap out of it ... do something

constructive with your time here.”

“I’ll tell you what I’d like to do,” George squeezed the empty cellophane into a ball between his fingers. “I’d like to strangle that guy Marcus Tripp who started this whole goddamned backwards mess.”

Hubert sighed. “I know. I think about how it all got like this sometimes. I think about how happy Marcus must have been to win the lawsuit against Quickie Burger for making him fat. And how happy the rest of the sheep who followed suit must have been when their lawsuits eventually shut down the restaurant business.”

“Yeah, if only they could have known it would lead to this.”

Hubert laughed bitterly. “Are you talking about the government banning obesity to end lawsuits against food manufacturers? Or are you talking about free will surviving in the form of pirated Twinkies?”

George had been released back into the weight-controlled population a week ago.

“Don’t forget your monthly weigh-in or you’ll end up right back here,” the guard had warned.

“Sorry, don’t think I’ll be making that date,” George said now, taking another mouthful of smuggled vodka. A nasty coughing fit gripped him and left him feeling dizzy and tired.

“What’s the point?” he asked the glowing pearl. “If your life isn’t yours, what’s the point?”

The moon was mute. "Right," George said. "Exactly, there is no point."

He pushed himself off the wet grass. He needed to stay awake long enough to poison himself. After all, he didn't want to just wake up in the morning with the world's worst headache.

George stumbled up the hill and tripped over a set of tracks.

"Son of a..." he tried to still the spinning stars and focus on the bottle in his hand. "Ah," he cried triumphantly, "safe." He guzzled the remaining drink. "Good riddance." Before the lights of the oncoming train turned the corner, he was out.

George slowly opened his eyes. Why was he in a hospital bed? And then his last memories came flooding back—the hopelessness, the vodka, tripping over the train tracks ... damn, he was alive! Then slowly, another realization. He couldn't feel his legs. George pushed himself up with one arm, flipped off the sheet ... and screamed.

"Mr. Gomas! Oh, Mr. Gomas," a nurse cried as she rushed into the room. "It won't be so bad, you'll see. Lots of people lead productive lives this way."

George stared at the two bandaged stumps a few inches below his hips.

"You're lucky to be alive. If the conductor hadn't seen you ... well, he just couldn't stop in time."

George passed out.

They kept him drugged for a few days and then he awoke again, experiencing the horror of his situation all over. A few days after that, he got another revelation.

The nurse had left his chart sitting on the table beside his bed. As he looked it over, something caught his eye.

Weight: 180 lbs.

"One hundred and eighty pounds?" That was wrong. How did he lose sixty pounds? And then suddenly, he looked at the empty space below his hips and he sat up with a start. He was no longer overweight! It was a miracle. Pressing the nurse's button over and over he began to giggle to himself, not believing his luck.

"What? What is it?" the nurse asked, startled by the urgency of his beeping.

"Can I use the phone?" George was barely able to contain his excitement.

"Well, yes," she answered. "Of course, you're not in prison."

"Thank you," George whispered with tears in his eyes. "That is all."

She shrugged and left.

George scooted himself closer to the table so he could reach the phone. "Maybe there is a point after all," he nodded happily as he

diald 776.

## Pure White

By Stephen Book <http://powderburnsandbullets.blogspot.com>

Before she could change her mind, Rebecca laid the can on the floor and opened it. A sharp acrylic smell hit her senses in an instant, and she breathed in deep like it was a bouquet of freshly picked roses instead of a gallon of paint. Within an hour, the fumes would permeate the whole house. And that was a good thing. The place needed a change.

She reached down and grabbed a paint stick. Stirring the contents probably wasn't necessary. She'd only left the hardware store an hour ago. But wasn't this what she needed to do? Her mind searched through the countless hours spent watching television shows like "This Old House" and "Trading Spaces." Even if they had just come from the store, the TV hosts always carried paint sticks. And why would they, unless the paint needed to be stirred? Rebecca nodded as she worked the paint. Yes, this was what she needed to do.

Her husband Tim told her the home improvement shows were a waste of time. They were nothing but a bunch of losers who couldn't keep jobs in the real world, he said, adding a tired analogy: Those who can do; those who can't, teach.

“Well if it weren’t for the teachers,” she said, “we would all be nowhere, wouldn’t we?” Tim walked away, muttering that she could stay in her fantasy world if that helped, but don’t expect him to sign up. After four years of marriage, expecting anything meaningful from Tim had become a fantasy.

From the store bag, she grabbed a metal tray and set it on the floor. She then picked up the can and tilted it. The paint flowed down like syrup, folding over itself and spreading out in all directions. She grabbed a roller, pushed it through the paint. Finally, she streamed the first ribbon of *Pure White* over the wall.

A year ago, if anyone had asked what colors she wanted, Rebecca would have rattled off a wide array of dressed-up names like *River Mist* and *Rain Dance* and of course her personal favorite at the time: *Cincinnati Hotel Abbey*. She wasn’t sure what it meant, or how exactly that shade of blue correlated to any hotel in Cincinnati, but the name had inspired images of happier times and better days. How could anyone go wrong with that?

Up and down, side-to-side, the roller made a sound like someone tearing apart two strips of Velcro. Rebecca never thought about it that way before. Then again, before this last year, she had never thought about how many things in life sounded. The fractured sound of words like *abruption* and *premature delivery* and *hemorrhaging*. The stark

finality of a word like *hysterectomy*. Or how about the disorienting shockwave accompanying a doctor's announcement that he's sorry to inform you, but ...

Rebecca stopped for a moment and rubbed a forearm against the base of her nose.

"No," she said. Her voice echoed against the walls. She stabbed the roller into the tray. "Not today."

After she finished the first wall, Rebecca wondered if she had purchased enough paint to complete the work. While the white did a good job, it failed to cover over everything. Images of tigers and giraffes and elephants lingered like ghostly shadows from another time.

A sense of dread washed over at the thought of going back to the store and facing the sales clerk again. It's one thing to be a bitch when the mood hits you. It's quite another when you have to return for help. When she had requested the paint, the clerk—a young college kid by the looks of him—asked what kind of white she wanted. He then spit out the names of various shades like he had invented them. Did she want *Antique*? Or how about *Eggshell*? Oh, and then there's *French Vanilla*. You know, like the ice cream? She cut him off. If she'd wanted any of that crap, she would have asked for it. All she needed was a simple can of white, the purest they had. Something as strong

as ivory and as sterile as bleach. The clerk snapped his mouth shut and looked at her for a beat. Then he grabbed the two cans she asked for.

Rebecca shook her head. Sure, the guy was only trying to help. But she didn't need help. She didn't want anyone's words of wisdom or their suggestions on what to do. There had been too much of that already, especially from her good-ol'-expect-nothing-from-me husband. It was time to move on, he'd said. Stop dwelling on what couldn't be changed. She said that she was dealing with her loss—*their loss*—as best as she could, no thanks to him. If he didn't like it, or couldn't find it in his heart to give her some support, then he could get the hell out.

Rebecca finished the other walls and took stock of her paint. Beyond the mural, everything else had covered over nicely. She would have enough to finish the room after all. Then, maybe in a week or two, or possibly even a month, she would step out to the storage shed and figure out what to do with the crib and the bags of clothes.

She laid down the roller and walked toward the kitchen for a much needed break. Along the way, she stopped at another doorway. Once the nursery—now guest room—had been repainted, her bedroom would be next.

## Reflection

RJ Keller <http://rjkeller.wordpress.com/>

An eight-year-old boy saunters down the street, smiling proudly, armed with a powerful new weapon, a gift from his father the evening before.

He slips open the schoolyard gate and surveys the crowd with his sharp, green eyes, so like his daddy's: Girls skipping rope; boys shooting hoops; teachers chatting amongst themselves, tired and bored. And, sitting by himself, leaning against a solitary tree, reading a book, is his target.

He makes his way over, fists stuffed tightly into his pockets, twitching to keep the grin off his face until just the right moment. He comes to a stop directly in front a pair of white, spotless shoes, rolling the weapon around his tongue, savoring the jagged consonants and tangy vowels. His father's voice echoes in his ears as he lets loose his grin, pulls the trigger, and fires the word directly into his target's fragile, tender heart:

"Faggot!"

## **Rough Trade**

Stephen Nicholson <http://stephennicholson.blogspot.com/>

“Unhh,” I cursed under my breath and muffled a yelp.

I’d whacked my knee on a decorative stone that read Peggy’s Paradise in chiseled grooves as I crawled through the landscape of the house overlooking my target. I stopped, rubbed the banged spot and listened for any responses from inside.

Silence.

It was so late it was early. A three a.m. wake-up for me, followed by a traverse through grab happy woods. This final creep through the open perimeter of the lawn had to be done in the dark. Only one cluster of rose bushes in the manicured landscape offered a true vantage spot with enough cover to pull off the hit.

Clearly, this was younger man’s work.

My elbows hurt from the struggle. My mind was dusty from the lack of caffeine, and now I’d have a nice bruise to show for my efforts.

The rifle I’d brought slid from my shoulder. I nestled the butt into the crook of my arm, settled into position and poked the barrel through a couple of thorny branches, focused on my objective.

Through the sniper’s scope I picked through my target area; back

doorway, patio, unkempt little yard. I settled on a spot next to the back steps.

And waited.

Four forty-seven a.m.

The back porch-light blazed. The door squeaked open. My objective walked out, crossed the patio and made his way to the lawn. He circled the area, stopped for a moment then trotted back toward the entrance, stopping at the stairs.

My finger squeezed the feather-light trigger until the hammer dropped.

Thwwpp. The weapon's suppressor powdered the air.

"Brawwrreeghh!" the victim wailed.

One shot.

Prone, ghostly, I waited and watched.

Nothing came alive in the neighborhood.

I began the slow journey back.

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Later, in my office, I was enjoying an extra large cup of coffee and my second, well-deserved chocolate donut when the phone rang.

"Kibbles and Hits," I said.

I listened to the caller's introduction, and then jotted down his problem. "You're moving? Wife's crazy for the animal ... uh, huh ... little

dog—a real monster ... bites children, craps on the carpet ... uh, huh ... got it.”

He sighed when I told him my fee, but after a moment of silence, agreed to pay.

I smiled. Most of my clients had similar reactions, especially the ones with the purebreds. A big expense going in, even bigger to take them out.

The poor fellow had one last request.

I listened, paused.

“Of course I can make it look like an accident,” I said.

## **Running on the Iron Rooster**

By Michael J. Solender <http://notfromhereareyou.blogspot.com/>

I didn't much fancy losing either of my pinkies to Toshi, the Yakuza owner of my \$30,000.00 gambling markers.

"I need a big favor, pal-sie." Toshi told me. "My face is too familiar at Russian customs right now and I need to get some cargo to Irkutsk. You take care of this for me, and you're debt free plus you get a special bonus."

It didn't occur to me to ask what the three jump drives Toshi then handed me contained. I simply agreed. Nor did I argue when he told me I wouldn't be flying but rather taking the train, the Trans-Siberian from Khabarovsk to Irkutsk.

Sixteen hours later I was in a tourist berth on the Rossiya, jerking out of the murky, charmless Khabarovsk station with the tiny jump drives in my money belt tucked inside my baggy drawers.

Several hours in, an earsplitting scream interrupted the rhythmic chukka-chukka of the train and jarred me from the daydream hypnosis I had willingly yielded to. I looked to the end of the car at the bench below the samovar and saw our provodnita, the car attendant, was alternatively screaming and laughing hysterically. An amorous Buryat

was practically sitting in her lap and gnawing on her ear, his right hand buried deep between her legs.

I needed some cigarettes and could tell by the 30 minute interval on the schedule that Belogorsk would offer more than an isolated platform where mail and other freight would be offloaded from the rear cars of the Iron Rooster.

At the station, the morning sun half illuminated the platform, which was filled with babushka clad, gap toothed ladies in heavy woolen coats. I dipped into my money belt for a few rubles to pay for my cigarettes and began to panic when I realized one of the jump drives I had been entrusted to deliver was missing.

The panic that turned to terror when I thought I'd lost one of Toshi's Irkutsk-bound jump drives subsided when I realized the missing data receptacle had embedded itself into the lining of my money belt. Yakuza boys don't take kindly to couriers who fail to discharge their duties. My pinkies on each hand feeling momentarily secure, I let myself fade to sleep upon re-boarding.

The train pitched as it arrested coming into Magdagachy. I got off for a quick smoke and saw an uncharacteristically stylish woman of about 30 getting on to one of the First Class compartments. She was sable sleek in her tight designer jeans, oversized shades, a chestnut brown and white fur and she was carrying a large Gucci bag.

An hour later, I caught my foot on the ill designed connector bridge between rail cars and hurled forward only to have my fall broken by landing smack into the arms and billowy bosom of the cream colored woman I had seen board the train. She half laughed and mumbled something in Russian then quickly realized I was American. "You're not too fleet of foot are you?" she asked in flawless English.

"Please let me make it up to you with a drink in the lounge car?" I asked, cringing at my own lame come on but hoping none-the-less she'd agree.

"I don't like the view there." She purred, "Come up to my car, I'm very bored and want to practice my English."

Discreetly feeling at my money belt to make sure my contraband was still safely in place I said, "I'd be delighted, my name is Jason, Jason Frazier."

"I'm Lyudmila." Her eyes darted furtively up and down my disheveled form. I'm sure I was a sight, I hadn't planned on chasing skirt on this trip, but opportunity was knocking.

The beefy provodnita who had shooed me away in my repeated earlier attempts to penetrate the First Class cars was now serving me tea with milk and honey in Lyudmila's private berth. It was perfectly appointed with fresh tulips, crisp table linen, assorted tinned

shortbread and chocolates. Her laptop was open on the fold-down table, the tubular screen saver making exotic geometric designs in perfect rhythm to voice of the chugging train.

“I must excuse myself for a moment” Lyudmila informed me an hour and three cups of tea into our conversation, “I need to pee.”

The content of the jump drives in my money belt had not entered my consciousness for almost a week. My curiosity suddenly awakened, I impulsively thrust one of the drives into the USB port on Lyudmila’s laptop just as she was returning to the curtain drawn berth.

Lyudmila cocked her head at a bemused angle and pursed her lips in wonderment as I tried to wrestle the drive from the USB port from her laptop. “Please let me help you,” she said, “I know you don’t understand Russian and our keyboards are different, you’ll have quite a time navigating on my PC.”

She had the single file on the drive open in a flash, it was a multi-tabbed excel workbook with reams of data under oddly named headers like dosage, white cell count, and capacity.

“This is clinical trials data,” she said in the most matter of fact way, “Biotech firms spend big money on this stuff.”

My face froze as I got off the train in Irkutsk and saw Toshi, holder of my gambling markers and amputator of small digits, in the arrival hall with several of his Japanese tomodachi.

I never figured Toshi for the industrial espionage type, much too rough for that I thought.

"Pal-sie, you got my cargo?" he asked, picking his teeth with a pocket knife.

I handed him the jump drives and he handed over my markers.

"Here's your bonus," Toshi said thrusting a small, blue felt covered jewelry box into my reluctant grasp. I opened it and took out a gaudy, chunky gold Pinky ring.

I was only too happy to slip it onto my little finger, still firmly attached to my left hand.

## Sales Call

By Graham Storrs <http://grahamstorrs.cantalibre.com/>

"Hello, sir. My name is Pradyumna and I'm calling all GlobalNet subscribers to tell you about an exciting new two-for-one broadband offer that is available only to people in the Brisbane area."

Pradyumna looked at the screen. The script said allow the customer to react. So he waited but all he heard was a heavy, rasping breathing. "Our records show that you are a medium to heavy user of your existing Silver Plus service and this qualifies you for an automatic upgrade to Gold Plus at a rate 30% lower than our advertised prices."

He paused again. This time the customer said, "He's still here, in the house. My head is bleeding."

Pradyumna winced. He hated it when they went off the script. His English wasn't up to it, although he couldn't admit that! His uncle had got him this call centre job when the farm failed and he and his parents moved to Bangalore. Now his wages kept his whole family and he couldn't let them down.

"Yes, sir," he said, haltingly. "No person go your house. Er, have modem already installing." He hurried back to reading the script. "If you agree to this generous upgrade offer, we also offer you ..."

The customer interrupted him. Some of them could be very rude. It made the job quite unpleasant. "Who are you? I need to call the police. I'm hurt bad. Look, I think he's coming back. You're not the police are you?"

Pradyumna had no idea what the man had said but he definitely heard him say 'please' at least twice. That was probably a good sign, even though the fellow sounded confused. There was no point asking him to repeat his question though. Better by far just to press on. He skipped through the script to the section headed 'Close With Brochure'.

"I would be happy to send you more information, sir. We have your details on file and a Two-for-One Information Pack is already on its way to you." He clicked the checkbox on his screen to make it so.

"On your way?" the customer sobbed. "Oh thank God! I can't move my legs. I can see the mongrel moving in the kitchen. I don't think I've got long, mate. You gotta hurry. Please, please hurry!"

Pradyumna was quite taken aback by the man's urgency. Still, enthusiasm was better than the shouting and insults he often got when he called people. He put a smile on his face. They can hear the smile, they'd told him.

"I make a note. Say is very, very urgent," he assured him. Now all that was left was the 'wrap'. "Thank you for your time, sir, and I hope you will be very happy with your new GlobalNet products or

services."

He reached out to push the button to take the next call off the queue and, as he did so, he heard the most chilling, horrible scream through his headphones. But he was too late to stop himself, his finger hit the keyboard and the call was gone. For a moment he hesitated. Should he try to call back? Should he tell his supervisor? He shook his head. He was being silly. The man was clearly drunk. He'd probably just fallen over or something. Anyway, another potential customer was on the line.

He shrugged and replaced his foolish concern with a big smile.  
"Hello, madam. My name is Pradyumna ... "

## **Savor the moment**

By Greg Stoll

*"In other news a teenage boy was..."*

Nothing can stop the rays of the sun from shining on me today despite the pouring rain. The familiar walk home from school draws more pleasant with each step knowing that I won't be making it again all summer. Absentmindedly I step into a deep puddle, and then take the time to give a very deadpan look of disappointment at my soaked shoe. It's only at the very last moment I look up and notice a car swerving to the side as the driver loses control of the traction. My body cascades painfully over various parts of the car until I finally settle on the ground a little ways away.

*"The driver was not found to be driving under the ... "*

My initial impression of getting hit by a car is mediocre at best; I do not recommend this activity. The surrounding people make haste in crowding me and shouting obscenities at each other. I try to tell them that everything is going to be okay, that I just need to start breathing

again. The words don't materialize however; I guess the shock of the impact has taken the wind out of me.

*"Nobody at the scene of the accident had medical training, by the time that..."*

Out of the corner of my eye I can see my tenth grade report card still intact a few feet away. "It brings me solace knowing that it's safe so my mother can see how drastically the extracurricular tutoring I'd gotten has paid off. Tomorrow is my father's birthday and it saddens me to envision missing it in recovery. Every year since the time I was five my father and I go fishing to celebrate; it's kind of a tradition we share. Simply reflecting on the memories brings my lips to a smile. One year he slipped, launching the bucket of worms in a spatter that left us both covered in a wriggling mess. Hopefully my girlfriend doesn't make too much of a fuss. I was smitten right from the first smile she gave me and every time disaster strikes the ensuing melancholy breaks my heart. We've only been dating for a month but I find more and more my reality bleeds into hers and hers mine. I can feel her with me, the one who smells like flowers, the one who holds my hand, the one. She may be my first girlfriend but I know that I never want us to be apart."

*"-Keep prattling kid- is what the paramedic said to the boy as they tried to..."*

"I can feel drops from the sun falling hard on me now. No longer looking at my surroundings, for once in my life it's enough just to be somewhere. Shamefully I can't find the puddle I held so dear, I miss my puddle. Lightning strikes not once, not twice, but thrice and then suddenly there's only me."

*"Despite their attempts to keep him alive with defibrillators the boy died. Even though in his final moments he was barely intelligible everyone at the scene said he had a peaceful look on his face as he passed on."*

## Sign Language

By Linda Courtland

Sandy stopped at the end of the freeway off-ramp, and a beggar staggered toward her. Black letters on torn cardboard screamed, "*Its cold. I'm hungry.*" Sandy rolled down her window. "Give me your sign," she said.

"But it's all I've got," he said.

"You can't expect people to take you seriously if you don't proofread your work." She removed a manila folder and a black felt-tipped pen from her briefcase.

Sandy rewrote the beggar's message using the appropriate spelling and punctuation. She handed him the folder, smiling proudly. He was unimpressed.

"You got a dollar?" he asked.

"Education is priceless," she said. "Study the changes I made."

"A quarter, then?"

"Try the new sign."

That night, Sandy told her boyfriend about her good deed.

"You're nuts," he said.

"You're just jealous of my altruistic nature," she said, inwardly questioning their long-term compatibility.

Two days later, Sandy cruised down the off-ramp at dusk. The beggar was stationed on the side of the road, standing tall in a designer suit. She pulled over.

"Good evening," he said.

"Hey, you look great," she said.

"Some guy gave this to me. He thought it would look good with my new sign." The beggar held up an 8x10 dry erase board with a grammatically correct, multi-colored message.

"I see," she said. "Did he give you that, too?"

"Time to get back to work," he said, when the stoplight turned red again.

The next day, Sandy spent her lunch hour at an office supply store. She was trolling the aisles, looking for signs, when she stumbled upon the store's copy center.

"Do you print banners?" she asked.

The beggar was thrilled with the bright green personalized banner that Sandy brought him. Together, they drove stakes into the ground to hold up each end.

"Now your hands will be free while you're working," she said.

The flashy neon vinyl flapped in the breeze.

"Does this thing glow in the dark?" he asked.

"To help you with the night shift," she said.

A week later, Sandy exited the off-ramp at midnight. A monstrous billboard stood where the banner used to be. The sign had a panoramic photo of the beggar's toothless grin. The caption read, "Hungry! Please help me." The beggar sauntered over in his suit, tipping his new top hat.

"I never thought you'd go all Hollywood on me," Sandy said.

"Business has been booming since that billboard went up," he said. "I got \$3 from that last car!"

"Yes, that's great," she said. "But are you realizing the full potential of your enterprise? What's your marketing plan? Have you done a demographic analysis?"

"I just like the sign," he said, counting his quarters.

"You think that's a sign? I'll show you a sign."

She researched contractors in the yellow pages. By Saturday, a sixty-foot lighted marquee stood in the bushes over the beggar, obscuring the view of the billboard. Messages scrolled across the screen, little white lights begging for change.

"I can't thank you enough," the beggar said.

She noticed he was wearing the same tie she'd given her boyfriend last Christmas.

"Business has never been better," he said. "I sold my first franchise today."

Sandy got out of her car and showed the beggar how to program the marquee so that his pleading messages would alternate with the time, temperature, and Dow Jones Industrial Average. She tested him until she was sure that he understood how to use the marquee's spell-check feature.

On the drive home, Sandy thought about the beggar's tie, and decided to confront her boyfriend. The game was over. He couldn't top the marquee. She hoped he would take her victory in stride.

As she walked toward her front door, Sandy noticed a Goodyear blimp floating toward the freeway off-ramp. A million moving lights demanded help in fighting hunger.

Sandy's boyfriend was waiting on the porch, his face awash in faux innocence. He got down on one knee and held up a piece of ripped cardboard. The misspelled marriage proposal was printed in shaky block letters, and Sandy realized with certainty that she'd finally met her match.

## **Sportsmen**

By John Towler

I took Kyle hunting with me today. Eight years old is on the young side, I know, but Kyle is big for his age and I judged it was time for him to see how food got on the table. His mother worried he'd get fidgety, maybe spoil the hunt, but during all the hours we sat perched in the tree he didn't say a word, just kept his eyes on the trail, watching. Waiting.

When the time came, he made the kill. He did me proud, as I knew he would.

"She's beautiful," he said. I had to agree. Sleek body, chestnut hair, well-muscled legs built to run—which she had, but only after it was much too late—she was in the prime of youth. Her limbs twitched as the last light of life faded from her brown eyes.

I was glad to see a trace of sadness in Kyle's face. A certain melancholy taints the thrill of the hunt for all respectable hunters. I'd tried to impart upon Kyle the nobility of all living things; how it was important we respect them and express gratitude for the life they give for our sustenance.

Kyle was suitably respectful, but after hours of waiting he was

also hungry. His mouth gaped open, fangs shot forward, buried a moment later in the dead woman's neck.

## **Ten One-hundreds of a Second**

By DeborahBundy <http://mistyhill.blogspot.com/>

A small finger wraps around mine and a lump forms in my throat. I struggle to talk.

“Chad, have I told you I know how to swim?” I say.

I believe if I can keep talking you’ll keep listening and will keep breathing.

“That’s what you have to do. Think of the incubator as a pond. Keep your nose above the water. But there’s something else you need to know and it’s important.”

I feel a sense of urgency.

“I’ll tell you my story. When I was bigger than you, but still little, my father threw me in a pond. I almost drowned. Lucky for me I was a natural at swimming. Soon there was pressure put on me to see how far I could go with this talent. When I wasn’t practicing I went to the stream in the woods behind our house and studied crawdads.”

I rock you.

“It was peaceful there. Crawdads taught me how to skitter backwards out of harm’s way. Sitting on a cold rock with my bare feet nuzzling the mud and sand bottom of the creek I’d flip over stones

until one of them long-tailed dads raised his claws and snapped at me.”

I smile at the memory and think I see an answering smile on your face.

“I’d poke a stick at him, and watch as he moved backwards lookin’ for another dark place to hide. Ugly creature, but fascinating. Learned from crawdads, you don’t need to be good lookin’ to attract attention, but you better know how to skitter backwards when you attract the wrong kind.

“The crawdad approach worked when I was in trouble with my father. It can work for you. You’re a little underweight and a bit wrinkly right now. Practice skittering so no one comes and snatches you away.”

I clear my throat. So do you.

“Now, the other thing you need to remember. Guess it’s best to explain how I learned it. We’re going back in time little fellow. Some people know the big story, but you’re the only one who will ever know how it made me feel.

“I swam in the Olympic Trials for the United States of America. I’d been working for this since I was thrown in that pond and I figured I had as good a chance as any of the dudes there. Guess I was a bit cocky.”

I laugh. You mew. I hold you close to my heart.

“This was my plan. When the gun went off, I’d imagine I heard my daddy’s voice yelling swim. And I would swim like my life depended on it. The gold would be mine. I thought there would be hot times in the old pond that night for me.

“Then things started going wrong. They had music for us to march to and I was out of step. Fourteen years of two a day practices, miles and miles of strokes, missing summer vacations, no Friday night dates because practice started at 4 a.m. on Saturday, and I was drowning before I hit the water in the big pond.

“We reached the deck. I took off my warm-up and put it in the box by my chair. Lined up behind my starting block and waited. The race I wanted to swim played through my mind. The whistle blew. I climbed on the block, felt light-headed and for a split second feared I’d fall in and be disqualified.”

You settle against me, seem to be breathing easier. I take a deep breath, just as I did at that moment at the Olympic Trials.

“It seemed forever before the gun went off. Then I hit the blue, found my rhythm. I saw the guy next to me out of the corner of my eye. Wingspan longer than he was, hands twice as big as mine, he pulled ahead. We turned for home.”

I frown. Your lips form a miniature rosebud.

"At that moment, I realized the gold at the end of the Olympic rainbow would be his, not mine. Fourteen years of f'ing time, gone in ten one-hundredths of a second. I dragged myself from the water, dried off, and congratulated the one I wished were me."

I risk a peek. You don't look disappointed. Something hard melts in my middle.

"You're named after him," I say. "After the rush and the crush, I went back to the creek, studied the crawdads, buried my feet in the mud, and learned how to make something good out of something sad. I'd focused on the wrong prize. I realized I'd missed the pleasure of the water and the everyday joy of giving one's all, missed the valuable moments, missed my life."

I shake my head.

"Or so I thought. Today, I've learned, never believe your dream is dead."

I stroke the soft down on your tiny head.

"I ended up with the gold after all. You."

Your little legs are turning purple. Time is precious.

"Listen little fellow, you were thrown in the pond of life today. Remember to keep your nose above water, but don't forget to feel the blue, test yourself against it, and treasure the swim. That's the prize, living every minute you're alive."

The nurse approaches. I bend toward your ear, no bigger than a droplet of water.

“Chad, it’s like you’re a crawdad, danger waiting to snatch you. The medical people don’t know it son, but I do, crawdads can skitter backwards out of harms way. I don’t want you to miss your life, not even ten one-hundredths of a second of it.”

The nurse reaches for you. I kiss you ever so gently. Hold you up. Your tadpole of a nose crinkles, your little legs pump.

“Have I told you little fellow I know how to swim?” I say. “I’ll teach you, so you won’t drown. I’ll never let you drown.”

They place you amongst all the wires and tubes. You skitter backwards a tiny bit. I cry.

## **The Distraction**

By Donald Conrad

They were lost. The cheapo GPS in their rental car crapped out; yet they knew they were close. The smell of the ocean came in with the air conditioning.

Tom was thinking in expletives but said, "I'm taking a left here."

Julie said, "Why here? What makes you think you know where you're going?" Her stiff Miss Piggy hairstyle shuddered when she talked.

Tom palmed the stubble on his head then said, "The beach is that way."

"Oh, how do you know that? We should ask someone."

"The beach is east, right?"

Julie had to think about that before she said, "Yes."

"The sun rises in the east and it's still morning. Which way is the sun right now?"

Tom had already taken the left and the sun was high in front of them. Married twenty-five years and she still made a lousy co-pilot.

Julie said, "I'm sure the GPS directions were a little more involved than just 'take a left.'"

Directly ahead was the ocean. The street came to an end at a stop sign and they had three options; they could take a right onto a street that followed the coastline for the two hundred yards they could see, they could turn around and go back (hoping luck would bring them to another beach), or they could park in what looked like a small lot across from the stop sign. Tom drove across and parked with his bumper close to the white-railed barrier. The car just fit.

“We’re here.”

Julie studied him for a moment. “This can’t be it. What was the name of the beach we were looking for? Why—there’s no sign here at all.”

“This is better. Look at it. Nobody’s here; no kids, no dogs, no Frisbees.” He looked at her then and batted his eyes before saying, “Just you and me.”

Julie stared at him for a two count, pushed his shoulder and tisked before getting out of the car. “We can try it. Don’t forget the umbrella and the chairs.”

Tom smiled away the death threat thoughts and said, “Yes dear.” She didn’t even make a good pack-mule.

He carried the beach chairs they found at Wal-mart that morning, the umbrella from poolside at the hotel, and a cooler with her cheap box wine. She carried the bag with the hotel towels, her book,

and his computer.

Huge boulders formed a storm barrier they had to navigate down to reach the beach; he led the way. Tom picked up a piece of driftwood as big as a baseball bat before heading out.

“What’s that for?” Julie asked. She stopped walking.

Tom said, “To hammer the umbrella into the sand.”

It was low tide and they walked straight out from the car. The beach dipped low and rose again to an exposed sand bar.

Julie said, “Why are we going out so far? What’s wrong with right here?”

“We’ll have a better view out there.”

“Seems like a lot of extra effort for nothing.”

He carried most of the stuff, so she followed. Tom stopped on high ground; put the cooler and the chairs down. He used the driftwood to bang the lower half of the umbrella into the sand, and then clicked it back together.

She moved in with a chair and her bag, taking up the larger portion of the umbrella’s shade. “Open the wine, Tom.”

He looked at his watch and said, “It’s not even noon.”

Julie said, “On vacation it doesn’t have to be. Besides, it’ll be that much closer to noon by the time you get it open. Get to work.”

Tom wrestled the container open and poured her a cup. She

settled in with her wine and her book—a romance novel with a shirtless hunk on the dust jacket. With Julie quietly reading and drinking, he could relax. He opened his notebook computer and started on his email.

Later, Tom woke with a start, his feet suddenly cold and wet. He was surrounded by water. He closed the computer that was still on his lap and looked over to Julie. She was also roused by the water, but was having a hard time sitting up. Her snug black and white bathing suit accentuated her amplitude.

“Jeez.” Tom yawned. “The tide came in.”

Julie managed to get up. She put the beach bag on her chair so it would not get any wetter and began packing. “We have to go.”

Tom stood, surveyed the situation. Their sand bar had been reduced to an islet by the tide. The main beach seemed distant. “We’ll have to wade in.”

Julie looked to shore. “Great idea coming out here. What did you say? We’ll have a better view?”

Tom spotted a dorsal fin off to his right, circling. “It’s a good view,” he said. There was another dorsal fin to his left. He folded his chair around his notebook computer, grabbed her chair and folded it also. Leaning the chairs against his leg, he took down the umbrella and tucked it under an arm.

Julie had the bag by the handles, held to her chest. "Is that all of it?"

"Think so ... "

"Can I get anything else?"

He knew it was an insincere offer. "All set." He had a wrist looped into the cooler's handle and clamped the umbrella under his arm as if ready to joust. He held the two chairs and the notebook computer over his head with his other hand.

Tom warily looked around again, and then said, "Lead the way, I'm right behind you."

He watched as Julie waded into the water, heading to the beach and the car. The water had gotten pretty deep. She was up to her waist when he saw one of the dorsal fins return.

She was good for something; she made a good distraction.

## **The Mercantile Exchange**

By Kim Beck

Dust from their arrival billowed over Milburn Mercantile's pine pole awning in a reddish-brown cloud. A lone sorrel drank from a trough in the corral beside the building. Angled near the storefront's hitching post sat an unattended one-horse farm cart.

Nannette's father unhitched the wagon mules and led them to the paddock while casting sidelong glances at the saloon across the street.

"Does Pa think we don't know what he's up to or something?" Nannette said. She shook the trail grit from her long skirt and followed her ma up the wood planks.

"He's watering the animals. Hush yourself." Her ma pushed the door open and walked to the low counter. She took the basket from Nannette and presented Mr. Milburn with two-dozen quail eggs.

While they exchanged pleasantries and fussed over egg quality, Nannette sauntered back to the entrance and looked out. Across the road, Pa hurried through the saloon's red swing doors. She turned away, frowning. Toward the back of the store she saw a young man in a curled brim hat, tipped low in the front.

He turned his head and regarded her for several seconds before reaching to inspect a bridle. He was a sight like none other. The way he moved held her attention and she drew toward the rear without taking her eyes off of him.

Mr. Milburn stopped her by saying, "Afternoon."

"Yes, it is," she said distracted by the goings on in the tack aisle. She hovered near a display of liniments.

Ma sighed, "Really, Nannette."

Mr. Milburn chuckled. "You fancy something I can help you with?"

"Perhaps," Nannette said. "After I look around." But she didn't stray. She rested her hand on the shelf and watched the cowboy. He moved with casual confidence as he inspected leather reins. He looked like a prime stallion in a blue shirt, strong and healthy. After a minute, her other senses kicked in. She looked down at a purplish mound, and hopeful to smell like something other than tallow, said, "This soap has dried lavender."

Ma said, "We make our own."

Nannette said, "But the egg money ..."

"No." said Ma. "We'll need wicking though."

Nannette frowned and noticed the cowboy with the flashing eyes watching her. She pressed her lips together and sashayed toward a

board with several notices nailed to it. She studied the papers a moment before pointing to one. "This competition—for best action shooting. I'd like to be there. When is it? The ink is smeared over the date."

"That's not for ladies to watch," Ma said, fingering gingham fabrics Mr. Milburn produced on the counter.

"I don't intend to watch." Nannette said. "I intend to enter."

Ma said, "That would be untoward. I won't allow it."

Nannette produced a closed-mouth smile. She brushed a long piece of hair back into the bun at the nape of her neck. "We'll see, Mother," she muttered.

Mr. Milburn clucked his tongue. "I'm not sure ladies are allowed."

Nannette studied the poster again, focusing on the hundred dollar cash and chestnut gelding prizes. If she won that award, she'd be free as a falcon. And she could buy sweet smelling soap if she wanted it. She heard footsteps then, boots on planks. Without turning around she said, "There's nothing written here that says men only. It says you have to be fifteen, which I was four years ago. I can shoot the wings off a dragonfly. I'd like to enter."

"Act like a proper lady," Ma said, whisking up the willow-braid baskets and bundle of wicking.

"I'd say she looks right and proper," the cowboy said.

Nannette spun around at the low, smooth sound of his voice. He stood, one hand smoothing his worn buckskin vest, one hand holding a new bridle. He wore guns on each hip. She studied him, guessing he was military by his stance. He lifted his hat and replaced it high on his forehead, a new mustache and beard sprinkled around his mouth. He locked eyes with her. And held it. Her heart beat a woodpecker rhythm against her breastbone. "I like this man." Nannette said, offering him a brief genuine smile.

The cowboy said, "And he likes your mettle."

She watched his eyes rake over her and felt the rush of mutual attraction.

Ma grabbed her elbow and thrust a basket in her hand. "Time to leave. Let's gather your Pa."

Nannette didn't budge and said to Mr. Milburn, though her eyes stuck to the cowboy's. "You never said when the contest was."

"It's Saturday. Noon," the cowboy said. "I'll be there."

Pa walked in the door then, face reddened, a bottle poking out of his pocket. "Howdy. Hotter than an ember out there. You get the laudanum Fern?"

Mr. Milburn said, "You ailing?"

Nanette almost laughed for her Pa's ailment was a sore head after slinging too much drink.

Pa settled up with Mr. Milburn while Nannette and the cowboy stood near the lanterns. Nannette said to him, "I wonder if I might know your name?"

Her ma hovered at the door, scowling.

"The name is Gavin Stroud."

Pa heard them and looked at Gavin with narrowed eyes. "Mister, you'd better be affording my daughter respect."

"Gavin," she whispered.

"Nothing but, sir." Gavin said.

"Time to ride home." Pa said and walked out the door as Gavin conferred with Mr. Milburn.

"Nannette?" Gavin said.

Surprised, Nannette turned in the doorway. She soaked up the image of Gavin's black hair and dark brown eyes.

"For you." Gavin held out the cake of lavender soap.

Nannette hesitated taking the intimate gift. But then she did.

"You are most kind. I'll treasure this," she said.

Gavin tipped his hat. "My treasure shall be seeing you again."

Stung by a notion that her life would soon change, Nannette vowed to be at that competition no matter what. She followed her ma to the wagon, her head swarming with things worth remembering until Saturday.

## **The Nearest Thing**

By John Wiswell <http://www.johnwiswell.blogspot.com>

Felix and Creed grew up at different ends of Eagle Street. A curious zoning law shuffled and dealt the neighborhood children to different hands of schools, and so these two boys only met for two weeks in their entire childhoods. The boiler exploded at Creed's elementary school and his class was temporarily reassigned to Felix's district building, left learning short division in what was normally the art and music supply room.

During those two weeks Creed only had one memorable meeting with Felix: pounding him for lunch money. Creed was a big, funny-looking boy, and the school counselor told his parents that being mocked for it was turning him into a bully. Ironically, being beaten up by a big, funny-looking boy was the primary reason for Felix's pathological fear of large men for a decade afterwards.

Creed was kicked out of his house at thirteen for "causing more trouble than you're worth," as his father put it. Felix's mother, who was the rare sort of school counselor that might have actually helped Creed had they met more than once, was killed in a car accident that same year. Felix's father did his best, but the boy still ran away from

home a year later.

A year apart, the two youths followed almost identical strings of towns down the Mississippi. Their nearly identical strings leant them almost identical tastes for spicy food, appreciations for jazz, and talents for finding somewhere safe to sleep. Felix never slept under the same arches that Creed had, though.

The trek introduced Felix to a wide array of very tall men: all smiling at first, some of them perverted, one who hurt him badly, and the last a lanky paraplegic whose endless supply of dirty Bible jokes began to turn the boy around on his phobia. This last gentleman, Mr. Corksworth, shepherded Felix into a halfway house. The comfort of regular meals kept him long enough to discover the trampoline, and a talent for gymnastics.

Creed also visited that halfway house, though he meandered so slowly down the river that he actually arrived after Felix. He slept in the alley under the kids' windows until a cripple invited him inside for breakfast. Yet minutes into his cornflakes he overheard a girl gossip that he was too "mean and gangly" for these parts. He left moments before Felix came downstairs.

Creed spared girls because only hitting men satisfied. It'd started when others wanted his food or squatting rights. He lost enough to learn how not to lose as often. His talent matured, if such

tendencies can be said to mature, to the point where he fought in private clubs, where only underage performers were desired, and the winner always lost a little more than the loser by the end of the night. By the end of the year, the satisfaction of hurting drained right out of him.

It was only by luck that he fell out of such circles and into the circuits of the smallest of small-time pro-wrestling. Professional wrestling, "hitting people for fake," but making it look real, for pathetically small crowds. Those crowds, sometimes only ten people, cheered his work with profanity normally reserved for threats, and yet they swore with happy enthusiasm. They were intimate, and they hated him.

You see, puberty and black spandex turned Creed from a big, funny-looking boy to a big, evil-looking son of a bitch. Crowds cheered his work, but his work was making his opponents look like they had a chance. They chanted him down until he left the ring, at which point none could meet his eye. On that level in that queer art, he was the scariest guy anyone had ever seen, even before turning 18. And when he turned 18, "we could actually pay you over the table if you wanted," not that he ever did.

At the same time, a wiry young man named Felix Jester came down the circuit. Any time you threw him in the air, he'd come back

down on top of you, like he'd trained in gymnastics or something. He was so nimble that no matter how badly an opponent bent or stretched his limbs, he laughed instead of screaming. The crowds loved it, and had no idea that Felix, their favorite hero, was living out of a used car as he traveled from show to show. The fans had no idea their most reviled villain, Killer Creed, also lived out of a used car. Even the promoters of those wrestling shows had no idea that these two cars were parked next to each other outside the arena the night before their owners fought for the first time.

Felix was trying to sleep, while Creed was getting his jazz on with the new car CD player attachment he could finally afford. Who cared if CD's were outdated when used John Coltrane and Trio Beyond were going so cheap?

Felix cared. He rolled up his window, waved to get the guy to shut that crap off to no avail, and finally gave up because you couldn't be mad at Louis Armstrong. Eventually he tapped on Creed's window and asked him to turn it up.

They spent the night talking from the front seats of two of the ugliest automobiles in the state, their doors open, almost touching. It was 1:30 AM before one figured out the other was wrestling, and 2:30 before the other figured out the other was wrestling him, "but jazz does that."

They had a heck of a match, especially for two guys who had never met before. Rematches were inevitable, and the feud of the acrobat and the killer wound up lasting years. Promoters forbid them from traveling together lest they ruin the gig, and they did not complain. All they needed were those nights with car doors open, when the road no longer separated them.

## The Vial

By Tom Bentley <http://www.tombentley.com>

Lily Farquat checked the vial for the third time that day. She held it up to the light and shook it slightly. The old cut glass was heavy, and its facets still threw off quick slants of light, but Lily's eyes looked only for the liquid within.

More accurately, her left eye looked, for at eighty-four, her right eye only offered her a muddy haze, its clarity lost to milky cataracts years ago. Satisfied that its contents were intact, she put the vial back in the cupboard, pushing it behind the cans of soup.

Four days, she thought. Four days. Maybe a dance at Luthjen's. Or beignets and coffee at Du Monde—how long has it been?

All the shades in the little house were drawn; they had been drawn for nearly ten years, winter and summer, drawn the day that Lily turned 75. That day she had taken every mirror in the house and had them sent away.

"Don't care to have anybody looking in on me—they can mind their own business, and I'll mind mine. And I don't care to be looking into any more mirrors. I know what I look like."

She had rid herself of most of the reminders of her past—

everything but the vial. The vial was older than Lily, older than Lily's mother. It had been given to Desiree, Lily's grandmother, by Marie Leveau, after Desiree had saved Marie's daughter from being trampled by a horse.

Marie told Desiree that the potion would grant its drinker youth and vitality, but that its effects would last three years, and not a moment longer. However, the juju would only work if the vial's entire contents were taken at once.

Desiree accepted the gift with sober thanks, but had always laughed about it in private. She'd kept the vial in a drawer, and given it to her daughter Rose on her sixteenth birthday. It was willed by Rose to her only child Lily, accompanied by a note detailing instructions for its use.

Lily had scoffed, but later she'd been given a book about the Leveaus, and having read it, read countless others. She'd looked at the vial ten thousand times since then, shaking it, pulling out its tight glass stopper and smelling it, falling asleep with it clutched in her hand. There was validity in the vial's age, portent in its liquid gleam. Lily knew its power was real.

She bided her time, noting the slackening skin on her arms, the brown splotches on her hands. She'd always been a vigorous walker, loving to stroll the Garden District and the waterfront, but as those

neighborhoods and her body fell into disarray, her interest in walking waned.

But she had the vial. Four days to go. She was dozing in the chair, dreaming of dancing in front of the statue in Jackson Square when the knock startled her awake.

"Lily, it's Letitia. I brought you a few things. Can I come in?" It was the new social worker, whose eagerness Lily had not yet been able to put off.

"Fine, fine, an old woman's sleep isn't important. Why should I rest?" said Lily.

"Now that's no way to talk, on this fine day. I brought you that good strong rye loaf from Boudreau's, and this little angel food cake, because I know that somebody's birthday is close. A little soup too."

Letitia started to put away the soup into the vial's cupboard when Lily scuttled over from her chair.

"Letitia, no, just leave everything on the counter! I'm not feeling well, and I need my rest. Please go, now." Lily gripped Letitia's arm, clawlike, and looked up into Letitia's face, stricken.

"Lily, if you're not right, I'll call the doctor this instant!"

"No, no, no doctor. I'm fine, I just need to be alone. Please go."

Letitia looked at her closely, and then moved to the door. "I can't come by on your actual day, but I'll check in on you right after."

Lily nodded and went back to her chair. In four days, I'll come and check in on you, Letitia—you'll be surprised, she thought.

Lily felt poorly the evening before her birthday. She'd gone to bed early, but couldn't sleep, dwelling on the upcoming morning's transformation. Shortly before midnight, her breathing became labored; she started panting, taking quick, shallow breaths. She felt a strong pressure on her chest.

No, not now, she thought. She struggled up in bed, holding her hand under her rapidly beating heart. The vial. The vial will save me. She pushed heavily out of her bed and wobbled to the cupboard, barely able to seize the vial. She pulled out the stopper and brought it to her lips. The taste of the liquid was sweet, even sparkly.

She slipped to the floor, an image of whirling at Luthjen's flitting through her mind.

The technician had puzzled over the liquid, but having checked it twice, he knew it was water, nothing but. He held it up to the light and shook it, then shook his head.

"Finished with the tests, Jack?" the coroner said as he entered the lab.

"Yep. H<sub>2</sub>O, pure and simple. But my eyes were playing tricks on me—it seemed like it was glowing, in some weird way."

"Well, weird is daily on this job. Thought it might be some kind

of poison when they found the old lady with it on the floor in a death grip, the bottle up to her mouth. What's really weird is that they're telling me she was a few hours away from her eighty-fifth birthday—she barely looks fifty. And she supposedly had a clouded eye, but they're both clear as day. That's weird."

Jack nodded and poured the contents of the beaker down the drain. He turned away before he could see the little wisp of light that seemed to hover over the sink for a moment. But it might have been a reflection—it was a brilliantly sunny day in New Orleans.

## **The Vigil of Clouds**

By Eros-Alegra Clarke <http://alegra22.wordpress.com/>

Somewhere in the darkness, silent mountains surround a small body in a white box. The stars emerge. The heavens rotate. Wind whispers through the wildflowers, causing them to bow around the mound of earth that, fistful by fistful, buried my baby. In the brightly lit kitchen, my husband pages through the discounts and sales. Carlos, my other child, sits on the couch, toast crumbs and peanut butter on his shirt, as if nothing is missing.

Today at the burial Carlos tripped on a gravestone, sliding across it with his hands outstretched, smiling like he could hear applause. But there was only the murmuring of adults who didn't know where to stand, where to look, what to say. There is an angry red scrape on his knee from the fall. Even from here I can tell that it will leave a scar.

The light from the television screen washes across his face, making him look pale and tired. I still feel his brother Noah as an invisible weight riding on my hip, his fingers curling against my breast. I catch myself swaying back and forth and I stop. I lift my hands to my face, to smell the clean baby lint that I searched for daily in the lifelines of his hands. Now, there is only the scent of disinfectant on

my skin.

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Last night before the burial, the Pacific hurled its air inland against the north island of New Zealand, the land that has been my home for the last ten years. The storm came pounding, rolling, pushing over fern trees and power lines. In the dark of the marae, the meeting house of my husband's Maori tribe, relatives and friends slept on mattresses on the floor, the smell of sweat and dust, coffee and baby powder pressed against the walls, sealing in the warmth of our three-day tangi, the period of mourning before burying the dead. I sat in the darkness, my arms wrapped around my waist. I thought about the missing part of my son's heart, an artery so small it had gone undetected, but too important for him to live without.

The storm tested the walls of the marae, searching until it found its way in through me. The storm spread into my muscles, defining the parameters of my skin as it raged. I tried to contain it with my stillness. I knew it had come searching for my baby. I was not ready for Noah to be taken.

In the morning, the clouds hovered close to the earth as if the world had been wounded during the night. The Maori name for New Zealand is Aotearoa, "Land of the long white cloud." The clouds are the first thing I noticed when I moved here from California with my

husband. Sometimes the clouds are like gentle creatures grazing over the earth; sometimes they darken and gather forces like angry gods. Always they appear to be within reach, as if with a little bit of faith, I might jump up and grasp one, swing up onto its back and get carried away.

I held Noah in my arms as if my warmth might fill the absence in his body and change this day. I stepped forward my eyes fixed on the clouds, and wondered if we could jump together, if the clouds would take both of us. But behind us the elders, the grandmothers and aunties, women with deeply lined brown faces, began their wailing, and I knew that I was earthbound. I became heavier with each step. The heavier I became, the less weight Noah had in my arms.

I placed him in the coffin before he could disappear. Buried in the earth, I would know where to find him, but riding on the back of a cloud the winds could take him anywhere.

The smell of freshly dug earth rose up around me as the clouds pressed down. Shovels struck earth with the sound of resolution, handfuls of dirt echoed down on top of that small, white box as friends and family moved around me in procession. Carlos climbed into my lap clutching a dandelion bouquet in his hand. I expected questions. Why are they throwing dirt on Noah? Why is he in a box? I expected his sticky grip fingers to tangle in my hair, pulling until I answered him. I

expected him to push me away because I held him too tightly.

But he didn't do any of these things. He pressed his nose into mine. He lifted his hands to my eyes and stroked them closed, the wilting dandelions trailing along my skin.

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Tonight, my husband's breath is in my ear as he urges me to bed. He carries Carlos in his arms into the bedroom. I follow in their shadow. We settle into bed like we are made of stone, heavy and cold. We fill the space with the rising and falling of our breath. Beneath the blankets we become the mountain ranges surrounding the meadow where Noah is buried. Our bodies make contact, feet first and then our foreheads pressing into one another. I understand for a precious moment that we have not left Noah behind. Noah is the weight of a broken bird nest falling into my heart as my husband reaches for my hand. He is a cool, blue sheet of peace passing over me until the darkness is complete.

Outside our window the long white clouds drift and glow in the moonlight. One by one, points of light appear as the stars arrive to keep their silent vigil until the sun rises once again. They will remain until the clouds catch the fire of the new day and bring it close to the earth, close enough to warm us, to remind us that heaven is not so distant after all.

## **Time for a Change**

By Carol Benedict <http://thewritingplace.wordpress.com/>

Camille's attention switched from the cinnamon pretzel in her hand to the silver-haired man heading her way. At fifty, she was mature enough to appreciate his lean, chiseled features and the air of confidence he wore like a badge of authority as he patrolled the shopping mall. Watching him make his rounds was the highlight of her day. He caught Camille's eye and smiled, but she dropped her gaze and gathered up the trash from her meal. She tossed the rest of the pretzel into the garbage and headed back to work.

In the busy card shop on the second floor, Camille smiled at customers as though there was nothing she would rather be doing than helping them find the right card for their loved one. Yet she felt a trace of bitterness that they had someone to buy cards and gifts for—and she didn't. Ray had succumbed to cancer five years ago and her joy in life had died with him.

At four o'clock, as always, Mr. Whiskers greeted Camille at the front door of her small condo, rubbing contentedly against her ankles as she sorted through the mail. No bills, thank God, just the usual assortment of credit card offers and AARP literature. It wasn't that she

worried about bills. The interest from her nest egg, along with her wages from the card shop, covered her expenses. She could even splurge on a movie or nice dinner now and then if she wanted. Not that she did. With no family and no single friends to go along, outings didn't hold much appeal for her.

"I'm in a rut," Camille muttered as she brewed a cup of green tea. Never one to hide from the truth, Camille admitted to Mr. Whiskers that her former mind-numbing grief had given way to mind-numbing boredom. Her job was the only social outlet she had, and it was not enough.

Next morning, resolving to begin a new chapter in her life, Camille packed a lunch from the leftovers in her refrigerator and tucked a magazine into her purse. No more solitary lunches in the Food Court, no more sitting and watching the people walk by. She would eat in the card shop's office and look for a new hairstyle in her magazine. After work she would stop at the trendy beauty salon on the corner and see about getting a complete makeover.

The day passed much as usual, except for lunch. Camille stuck to her plan and, while nibbling on crackers and cheese, selected a radical new look from the fashion magazine she'd brought. As she waited on an elderly woman towards the end of her shift, Camille noticed a familiar figure hovering in the doorway. He stepped aside to

let her customer leave, and then approached the counter.

"May I help you?" Camille asked, too flustered at seeing him there to think of something witty.

"I need a card. One with a nice verse about missing someone. Could you help me choose one for a special lady?"

"Certainly." Camille tried not to show her dismay. The last thing she wanted to do was choose a card for this man's special lady. She knew it was silly, but this was the only guy to attract her attention in the years since Ray died, and she couldn't help feeling a twinge of jealousy. Professional to the end, she showed him a couple of possibilities before returning to her post behind the cash register. He brought his selection to her and, after paying, asked if he could borrow a pen.

She tried to look disinterested as she waited for him to finish, but couldn't hide her surprise when he handed her the card along with the pen. Confused, Camille saw that he had written "To a Special Lady" on the envelope.

"Am I supposed to give this to someone?"

He smiled, and his clear blue eyes sparkled with amusement as he shook his head.

"It's for you," he said.

Opening the card, Camille read the short note he had penned

beneath the printed verse. It said, "Five days a week I see you sitting at your table in the Food Court, and all's right with the world. Today you weren't there, and I missed you. Sincerely, Frank."

Looking up, she saw the question in his eyes, and knew he was waiting for her reply. A knot of tension formed in her stomach, and words wouldn't come. As she hesitated, the expression on his face changed, and with a quiet "Sorry. Have a good day," he turned away.

"Wait! I just felt ready for a change. I needed to do something different. But I'll be there tomorrow. Just like always."

"I could take my lunch break at the same time," Frank said. "If you want to do something different, we could eat together."

"I'd like that."

"Great. Then, I'll see you tomorrow," Frank said as he backed out the door.

Camille waved until he was out of sight. Only then did she remember that she wasn't scheduled to work the next day. Startled by the flood of disappointment that washed over her, Camille realized that she was ready for a bigger change than a beauty makeover. And there was no rule that said she couldn't have lunch at the Food Court on her day off.

## **'Tis the Season**

By John Marfink

You're going to die today. You don't know it yet, sitting there sipping your overpriced Starbucks. You've got your life so tightly put together, you squeak when you walk.

Look at your bags: Macy's, Belk, Best Buy; you have your Christmas shopping all done and it's only the day after Thanksgiving. You feel pretty good about that, don't you?

You might want to take back that new laptop you bought for your husband though. He doesn't really deserve it. He'll probably return it after I kill you; my fee strapped his cash reserves and your insurance will take months to clear.

Damn girl, you don't have a clue, do you? That's why identity theft is so easy these days. You really should keep a closer eye on your bank statements. That money last month he said was going to the Hartford group? It wasn't for any investment like he told you. Mutual fund my ass. The only mutual benefit he gets is you dead and two million dollars cash if it's murder. And it is murder.

Don't worry, you weren't cheap. A normal spouse-removal runs around twenty Gs. I made him pay fifty. You're a real looker and it

seemed right to charge more.

Done with the caffeine? Good, that's my girl. Stand up now and gather all those packages under your arms. Incapacitate your arms and head for your car. Oh, don't worry about muggers, I've got your back. Sorry, little gallows humor there. Unfortunately your final act in this little drama won't be recorded. Someone disabled the security cameras. Kids these days ...

It was decent of you to park that new Chrysler van back out of the way. Your concern for wild shopping carts and careless drivers makes my job so much easier. That's it, hit the 'Open Sesame' switch on your key ring.

Would you look at that! Door slides right open. You know just how stupid that is? I'll show you.

Now don't struggle, this won't hurt—much. Just lie still there on the carpet where I put you. Don't worry about the confusion, you got smacked pretty hard with the sap. You're lucky, it'll all be over soon and a good thing too. There was a telltale crunch when the sap hit your skull. Real likely some serious brain damage. Here, I'll ease the pressure.

There. Quiet little .22, a couple of quick taps to the base of your skull and we're all done here. Let me pull your skirt down, no sense embarrassing you. Nice thong though. I'll shut the door too, it's pretty

cool out here and we wouldn't want some teeny-bopper suffering undue stress over finding you like this. Mind if I have the laptop? Didn't think so, thanks.

Oh, and have a Merry little Christmas ... your husband will.

## Unscrambling Love

By Angel Zapata <http://arageofangel.blogspot.com/>

Greta held the plastic letters in a tight fist. The flat rectangular magnets glued to their colorful undersides felt cool on her palm. She unfolded her fingers. Today it would only take four consonants and three vowels.

All week she had carefully positioned her words on the refrigerator door. On Monday came the letter "I." She wanted her husband to know she was acting alone. It didn't matter what her friends said. It didn't matter her mother still called her a drug addict. She needed him to know it was Greta, the woman he fell in love with eight years earlier, not the empty shell she'd become.

Tuesday, she spelled out "don't." She used masking tape for an apostrophe. Don't was a word she rarely spoke aloud, but in her mind was the catalyst of numerous mantras. "Don't have another drink, Greta. Don't share that needle, Greta. Don't cheat on your husband, Greta." She was a failure at "don't." She had cried that day, and the only way to stop the tears was to open the freezer and allow them to ice.

At the close of day Wednesday, she unscrambled "want." It was

always what she wanted; her lusts, her desires, her needs. Months ago, she ran off with a coworker, and her husband found her strung out in a motel bed, bruised and naked. He carried her to the car, pushed the child seat out of the way, laid her down, and covered her with his jacket. She cursed him out, said he didn't know what she wanted and never would.

Thursday was one simple vowel, "A." She stuck it right next to her seven year-old son's report card. He'd gotten straight A's. He came running from the school bus waving it in his hand.

"You know what word starts with 'A,' mamma?" He had asked her, breathless.

"No, baby."

"Annihilation."

He smiled so wide, and she just sat there smoking at the kitchen table completely ruined.

She wasn't sure why, but this morning she decided to drink her coffee black. She felt sober and ready to talk about checking into rehab, but wasn't able to express herself audibly. She almost dropped the letter "V" from her trembling hand. Not today, she thought.

Nothing would prevent her from accomplishing this goal.

Finally, she reached up and formed the final word.

"I don't want a divorce," she read aloud. She didn't notice her

husband spying on her from the shadows of the den. He heard her voice and his heart broke. He didn't notice his son watched him from behind the couch where he hid; writing this all down in a notebook he thought no one would ever read.

## **Wake up, Please**

By Jemma Everyhope

A frozen baby fell from the sky. The stars were sharp points of light and mice scratched through sweet dry grass. My husband and I were having a midnight picnic when we saw something fall near the spruce tree.

“What shall we do?” I asked.

“What we always do,” he said, not that this had ever happened before.

I packed up the last of the picnic, corking the unfinished merlot. We carried the picnic basket and the baby home, the screen door clicking behind us and the electric lights humming. We set the baby on the kitchen table in between the yeasty rising bread and the bleach-soaked lemon half.

“Will anyone ever believe us? We found a baby, frozen, after it fell from the sky? What if we lied? Would they believe us then?” I asked.

“We found it,” he said. “That’s all we did.”

So we buried the baby beneath the blueberry bushes in the backyard. We switched off with newly sharpened shovel, digging a hole

deep enough to deceive the coyotes. I picked up the frozen baby.

The baby had thin eyelids clasped over its eyes and a squinched-up face with no chin, just a dimple beneath its pouting juicy lips. It had soft white down covering its skull. I peeked through the darkness at its chubby thighs. It was a girl baby. I set the baby into the hole.

"Should we say something?" I asked.

"It's not our baby," he said, and began filling the hole. I pressed down chunky dirt with my fingers. Then we washed our hands and went to sleep.

"Is it crying?" I asked in the middle of the night.

Shush, shush, went my husband's breath. He was still sleeping. My breasts were cold. I cupped each hand around my aching cold breasts, my swollen nipples. Milk oozed out.

"Please, please, this has never happened before." I shook his shoulder. "We should have told someone. Someone is missing their baby."

"No one is missing their baby," he said. "Go back to sleep."

The next night I was sure I heard the baby, the girl baby, the exact sound a girl baby makes when she needs to be changed.

"Is it crying?" I asked, but my husband's face was waxen with sleep, and his breath said, Hush.

I slid out of bed. My naked shadow stretched and leapt before

me, touching the nursery door. The cradle stood a gaping womb in the center of the room, so I filled it with teddy bears.

In the morning I called my mother and she did not remember my name. So I called my daughter. She had a test tomorrow, gotta go mom, bye. I had no one else to talk to, so I walked in the orchard. The apple trees told me I would soon be carrying heavy baskets in front of me, all filled with rosy Braeburns. Crows cried, leaping among the branches and glittering mobiles.

I shut the kitchen door and wept as I scrubbed the floor. My husband came in.

"The floor seems clean," he said.

It wasn't.

"We can't tell anyone anymore than we could have kept it," he said to me. "We're too old to have more children."

"It wasn't ever going to be my baby," I told him.

"No, it wasn't," he agreed.

When we ate dinner, I could hear a baby crying in the kitchen. I ran in and searched. I opened up the bottom cupboards, and found a baby crying on a muffin tin, but it wasn't my baby. I found a baby beneath the sink on a pillow of plastic bags next to the Drain-O, but that wasn't my baby. I found a baby in the cupboards beside the bread and one on top of the refrigerator next to the coffee, and there, in the

sink, taking a bath, and I couldn't hold them, I couldn't carry them, because not one of them was my baby. But they had the sharp complaining cry of babies that want to be held, a cry that cut through me, and so I was holding myself, cradling myself, shaking my head.

My husband put his arms around me, and he was like a robin over a blue speckled egg, and he rocked me, and he whispered, "We couldn't have kept it, even if you'd been able to bring it to term. It was just as well you miscarried. You'll forget it soon enough, and we'll get through this."

That night I shook my husband and shook him.

"I know she's out there," I said. "I can hear her sleeping beneath the dirt."

"It's four a.m.," my husband said.

"She'll smother if we leave her out there!"

My husband rose into the night. Together we drifted down the stairwell, two raindrops streaking down a window, dropping into the garden.

The blueberry bushes above the raw earth of the baby's grave were pregnant with fruit, and I curled beneath the kneeling branches.

"What do we do?" my husband asked me.

"What we always do," I said.

Our hands plunged into the warm earth, and we found the baby

inside, white as a potato, frozen hard. We washed her in the kitchen sink with warm water and no-cry soap, and I wrapped her in a white terrycloth dishtowel. Then we walked out to the meadow with the sweet grasses.

I pulled myself up into a pine tree. My husband handed the baby up to me, his face moon-like in the darkness. Cradling the baby in one arm, I climbed one-handed, the pine bending beneath me.

I held up the baby until the sun rose and the crows took her away from me.

## **What's in a Name**

By Mark Souza

Boner is a tough nickname to live down, especially in a small town.

My life turned for the worse the first month of my freshman year in high school, during the warm last days of summer before autumn takes hold. It was a year of change, and nothing highlighted that more than the changes in Lisa Canter. Tall and gawky the year before, the only clues she wasn't a boy were the dress and long, blonde hair. Then something magical happened over the summer. She arrived at high school a fully formed woman, and oh what a form.

She was in my first period biology class. Mr. Larsen had us giving team reports that accounted for twenty percent of that quarter's grade. He called it getting a running start. We all hated him for it, preferring instead to ease into the academic year like timid swimmers.

Lisa had worn a green halter top that day, which was strictly verboten by school dress code, and wore it with pride. Her new figure had given her power and prestige she had never known. It was only natural that she would want to take it out for a test drive.

Mr. Larsen's eyes latched onto her the moment she walked into his room. By all rights he should have said something, sent her home,

but he didn't. A sly smile spread across his face and his eyes lingered longer than they should. It was obvious he too was a fan of the changes in Lisa Canter.

Lisa's group was up first. Their report was on photosynthesis. As she spoke and gestured from the front of the class, her halter bobbed to a frequency uniquely Lisa, the thin clingy fabric leaving very little for my fertile imagination to fill in. I daydreamed scenarios that would never happen anywhere but in my head, where that halter went from a featured player to a rag forgotten on the grass. I learned nothing about photosynthesis. Her voice faded into a melodic hum as my mind drifted in to an area code of its own.

All too soon she smiled and her group returned to their seats to a smattering of applause. I jolted back to reality and clapped too. Then my group was called forward.

I had a problem and remained frozen to my seat. "Mr. Adams, aren't you going to join your team," Mr. Larsen said. "Hurry now, we haven't got all day." When I wouldn't move he pressed harder. "You do realize this is twenty percent of your grade. You don't want that sycophant Becky Stanton to wind up freshman valedictorian uncontested, do you?" He stood over me looking stern, arms crossed over his chest, tapping his foot impatiently. "Mr. Adams, this is no time to be shy. You are ten seconds from an 'F'. Ten, nine, eight ... "

I stood. An ache in my loins pressed out stiff against my pants. I walked to the front of the room trying to be nonchalant, trying not to draw attention, and kept my back to the class as long as I could. Jimmy MacClure stood at the front with the rest of my group, the Mitosis Clan. He started laughing with that hyena laugh of his, and couldn't stop. His face turned a bright shade of pink only attainable by redheads. In mere seconds, others in class caught on and joined in. A few pointed in case anyone might have missed the spectacle. Blood rose to my cheeks in a hot flush and I prayed for an aneurism. Mr. Larsen attempted to quell the riot by explaining the mechanics of an erection and how common they were for males my age. It only added fuel. Thanks Mr. Larsen. The class laughed so hard I thought they might die of oxygen deprivation. No such luck.

My group didn't give a presentation on mitosis. The bell rang before Mr. Larsen could regain control. Lisa Canter was sent home by her second period teacher after a trip to the principal's office to discuss proper school attire. News spread though the hallways faster than a foul smell on a brisk wind. By lunch I was Boner Adams, and I've been Boner Adams ever since.

At first, no one could say it without snickering. They'd either been there or heard the story. For a while afterward, Lisa would smile when she passed me in the hall, the expression on her face a mix of

embarrassment and pride. Eventually, she pretended not to notice me at all, or I'd turn and go the other way to save her the trouble.

By the end of the year, nearly every kid in town claimed to have been in Mr. Larsen's room that day, and Boner was what everyone but my parents called me. My given name of William had turned to counterfeit currency everywhere but home. Most jokes lose power with repetition, but not my nickname.

I moved out of state to attend college. I had to. How far can a man go burdened with a moniker like Boner? Boner Adams is the perfect man to handle your sexual harassment suit. Perhaps we should let Boner look at your portfolio. Meet our new staff gynecologist, Boner Adams. *It just wasn't going to work.* There are some names you can grow into, some you can grow out of, and others as restrictive as a straightjacket. I needed a fresh start.

Photosynthesis: the word still makes me smile whenever I think of it. To this day, when the sun backlights maple trees so their leaves glow like emeralds, my mind wanders back to the magic of Lisa Canter's green halter top. With the benefit of time and distance, I can laugh about it now—now that my name is once again Bill.

### **When Don Cristobal Eduardo Stabbed his Wife and her Lover**

By Christopher Sutcliffe

When Don Cristobal Eduardo stabbed his wife and her lover in broad daylight in Dona Maria's coffee and cake shop nobody batted an eyelid. The padre almost spilt some sweet milky coffee into his saucer, but he caught it just in time. Dona Maria called one of the girls to mop up the blood and when it was done she called the Gardia. Two men, barely boys, rolled up in dirty green uniforms smoking thin stinking cigarettes and stared at the bodies like they'd fallen from the sky.

"Dona Maria," said one of the Guards. "What happened in your café?"

"I didn't see a thing," said Dona Maria. The rest of the cafe agreed.

The Guards scratched their heads and cast inexperienced eyes over busy tables.

"Dona Maria, whilst we consider the crime scene, perhaps you could bring us something to drink."

"Of course. Anything for the Guards. Black coffee? Green tea?"

"Perhaps something stronger. White rum?"

"Fine," said Dona Maria, and sent a girl to fetch two large rums.

The younger Guard looked at the elder Guard and shrugged.

"It's a mystery," he said.

The elder nodded slowly. "I agree. But perhaps it will become clearer in time."

The two sat down by the padre and the elder rested his arm heavily across the churchman's shoulders. "Padre," he said. "Perhaps you saw something?"

The café turned as one in a chorus of scraping chairs to watch the padre, who again was close to spilling his drink. The padre was a drunkard and his coffee was mostly rum. His eyes took their time to find his interrogator, and it was towards the ceiling he answered finally.

"I didn't see a thing."

The younger looked at the elder and they exchanged shrugs.

"A mystery indeed."

The Guards received their drinks and sat down to enjoy them, and the café resumed a noisy lunch.

"And the bodies?" asked Dona Maria.

The older took a hefty swallow and sighed because it tasted so good. "Perhaps Don Cristobal Eduardo would be so good as to help us remove them," he said. "Send a boy to fetch him. Until then ... hmm?" He indicated his empty glass. A boy was sent to fetch the Don and a girl to fetch the bottle of rum.

"This time," said the Guards, "You'd best make it the good stuff."

After killing the cheating couple Don Cristobal apologised to Dona Maria for disturbing her café, and left for the home of his

mistress. Don Cristobal was a stout man with a taste for the mulatto girls who danced on Calle Simone. His mistress was Luisa, a Colombiana who performed in the Nightingale Garden. She never awoke before eleven and when he walked through her front door with blood on his hands she was enjoying a long, hot morning shower.

"Luisa," he said, "I am a bachelor and a murderer. I am both free and wanted at the same time."

"Don Cristobal," she said, rubbing soap into her breasts. "Will you help get my back?"

"Luisa, you don't understand. I have slain my wife and the man she was screwing behind my back."

"That's fine, Don Cristobal, but please get my back."

Don Cristobal rubbed soap into Luisa's spine and told her everything. Luisa listened carefully whilst she washed and dried herself and when he was done she told him to never admit to anybody what he had done, not even to her, or they would tie his arms and legs to fast horses and set them off running in opposite directions.

"But Luisa," said the Don, "fifty people must have seen me."

Luisa wrapped her hair into a towel with a few sharp, deft flicks of her wrists, and threw another towel around her waist, leaving her chest exposed. She examined herself in the mirror, and enjoyed what she saw.

"Now how could they have seen you, Don Cristobal," she said, in the voice one would use to talk to a slow child, "when you were right here with me the whole time?"

The boy arrived to fetch Don Cristobal Eduardo, who kept him waiting in the kitchen with a glass of milk whilst he and Luisa screwed in the bedroom. Don Cristobal arrived at the café shortly after two, almost three hours after the murders. The bodies had begun stinking and flies were lapping the spilt blood. The midday crowd had left. The Gardia were drunk, and were trying to throw cashews down the low cut top of the dead wife. Only the padre remained, and because he was hungry he was picking up and eating the cashews that scattered the floor.

The Gardia were young. The eldest was nineteen and his partner sixteen. They compensated for youth with violence and laziness. Don Cristobal was as familiar with their sort as anybody, and stiffened when he saw them drunk. The soldiers stood when he arrived and came close. The Don was a short man and their rum-stained breath warmed his balding pate. The butt of the younger's gun poked hard into his rounded stomach and the elder lifted him by the chin until Don Cristobal's eyes met his own.

"Don Cristobal," he said, drunk with alcohol and authority. "Did you stab your wife and this man?"

The Don found it hard to breathe under the stench of rum. He was afraid. The elder soldier slowly pulled his sword from its holster and raised the pointy end between the two of them to rest on the Don's Adam's Apple.

"Don Cristobal. Did you stab your wife and this man?"

The Don stood as tall and with as much dignity as he could under the circumstances, took a deep breath that he slowly released, leaving blood on his neck from the sword.

"I did," he said.

For the longest time, everybody froze.

"HaHa!" shouted the Guard. "Good man!" He lowered his blade and clapped his hands. "A drink for the Don!"

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We hope you enjoyed this Flash Fiction 40 Anthology, brought to your by [Editor Unleashed](#) and [Smashwords](#). This is the July 2009 edition.