

# The Book

# Smuggler's Den

January  
2020

NEW YEAR  
NEW YOU!



Who is the most  
prolific author of  
all time?

&

WHO LIKES TO  
PARTY?!?!

**20**

writing contests you  
won't want to miss  
out on

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# Letter from the Editor

*"I'll keep going till my face falls off." - Barbara Cartland*

It's a new year and a new you! Not sure about others, but I'm not exactly one for resolutions. I suppose I have ongoing goals that I am continually trying to achieve. I have too many goals! I want to publish an essay, publish a book, knit an afghan, knit a sweater, learn to cook a new cuisine, etc.

As much as I think I have excellent time-management skills, I don't! All these goals are fun, exciting, and distracting. That's what goals should be, right? The point is that constantly learning something new is healthy and a goal that we all should work to achieve, especially for all of us writers!

I noticed this month that we had a variety of entries from writers all over the globe. I LOVE to see that! For a community so large to come together and support one another in achieving our writing goals is truly heart-warming. Everyone is a storyteller at heart whether they put it down on paper, or pass them down from seed to seed. Oral traditions are just as important as written ones.

Getting published is one of the best feelings ever! It is something that drives a writer to continue to perfect their work. I recently wrote an article about the most prolific authors. Barbara Cartland wrote 723 published pieces, which is roughly 23 novels a year. I found that so fascinating and encouraging. While I sit here wishing I had better time-management skills, learning about Cartland's success gives me the motivation to continue to keep working, perfecting my work, and be "aggressive" at getting the attention of a major publisher.

As always, thank you to all the contributors this month!

Happy writing,  
Dani & The Book Smuggler's Den community

*Dani Watkins*

Dani Watkins  
Editor-In-Chief, Book Smuggler's Den Literary Magazine

# Undecided

by Hayley-Jenifer Brennan

## *Undecided*

*Undecided.* That's what was written on the skin of my wrist in bold, black lettering. I didn't remember getting a tattoo. I tried to pull my sleeve down over it, but it kept riding up. Frustrated, I tugged at the sleeve a bit too hard. The man on the couch next to me coughed and shifted awkwardly at the sound of the fabric ripping and it was then I realized I wasn't alone. When I examined the tattoo again, I realized it was a branding. I quickly stole glances at the other patients' wrists, trying my best to go unnoticed by them as I struggled to read what theirs said. Everyone waiting had one.

People who were at ease tended to be much quicker than those who seemed antsy. People who were jittery were constantly being asked to move to another part of the practice if they were in one place for more than a few moments. I was the only person who seemed to be neither one nor the other. *Undecided*, the branding said. I wished I could hide it.

"Grand aul day for it all the same," an elderly man told a very uncomfortable-looking teenage girl as he sat down next to her on the couch across from me. "Delighted now I made it through the wedding."

She got up and left without saying a word.

"If you'll just take a seat here," a child-like voice attached to a man with piercing eyes told a newcomer as his slender greyish hand pointed to the free space next to me. "Someone will be with you shortly."

I scoffed. Someone similar had told me exactly that well over an hour ago and yet, here I was, still waiting as I'd been told to, but nobody came. What shit service. The waiting room wasn't particularly inviting. It was hazy and grey but the lights were like those glaringfundes clouds that force you to squint and give you a headache right at the front of your skull. It was almost like the room couldn't decide whether it was light or dark. I let out a little puff of air from my nostrils. The irony of being an *Undecided* person in a room that couldn't make up its mind was not lost on me, even if everything else I should have known was. I continued to pick at my brown-tinged nails. I couldn't remember whether it was my wife or my mother who hated that habit.

If I was being honest, I couldn't even remember how I'd gotten here in the first place, or where

I'd been last. I should probably have been more worried or embarrassed, but this wasn't the first time I'd woken up somewhere I didn't recognise and had no recollection of how I'd gotten there. This was the first time, though, that I also couldn't remember where I'd been last. I was so sure I'd been at home, but then I couldn't picture home. I was sure for a while too that I'd been waiting for my wife, but then I couldn't picture her either. Then I started questioning whether or

not I even *had* a wife. I had a wife, didn't I? I had a house, didn't I? I had a name, didn't I? I was sure I did. It was on the tip of my tongue, much like a cigarette should have been but wasn't. Cigarettes were definitely a problem for me, I knew that much. Someone was always mad at me for smoking. I could clearly hear their voice in my head yelling at me to give them up, but I couldn't picture their face. They must not be that important.

I looked down at my wrist again, eyeing the tattoo in the hopes that, if I kept staring at it, it would turn into a watch. I had no phone and there was no clock in the waiting room, so I had no idea how long I'd been there. It must have been ages if I'd forgotten my own damn name. Any time I tried to ask one of the attendees for the time they just ignored me and tended to someone else instead. What shit service.

It took another good hour of thumb-twiddling and knee-bouncing before it occurred to me what everyone else in the room seemed to already know. I'd been considering it – secretly, of course – in the back of my mind for a while but now the realisation nudged its way into the same part of my brain that was suffering from the lighting-related headache and my stomach dropped to my toes in terror. Maybe the headache was what took me so long to come to the understanding that I was dead. I stood up when I realised, panicked, and several people turned to stare at me as I went to shout but no sound came out. The room swayed and the sounds became muffled and as soon as the thought solidified, a door opened and one of the grey attendees appeared and beckoned to me. I hesitated, looking around for an escape, but the greyish man took hold of my shoulders and steered me roughly through the door.

I felt like I was going to pass out. A glass of water was thrust into my hand and the attendee left me in a new room, the door slamming shut behind him. Panic rose in my chest as I looked around the room and I tried to gulp in air, but it tasted like copper on my tongue.

“Please have a seat, Mr. Hastings.”

There hadn't been anyone in the room a moment ago and, for a second, I refused to turn around to see who had magically appeared. That was until I realised that this new person knew my name - or my surname, at the very least. Mr. Hastings, I breathed a small sigh of relief. That was me. When I turned I jolted in recognition at the young boy who was standing behind a large, mahogany desk. He was thin and pale, with freckles and thick-rimmed glasses, and sported a suit that was definitely more expensive than mine. I sat down across from him but more out of shock than obedience.

Feeling the seat under me, I wondered whether I'd been sitting outside for years or hours or possibly only minutes and whether this was like a normal doctor's office where time meant absolutely nothing to anyone except the parking warden.

“What's your status, Mr. Hastings?”

“Undecided.”

That much was clear to me, even if the why or the what was not.

This was a big room in a boxy space, as though someone had taken a laptop and put it in a phone cover. It did not make me feel in any way at ease, and it certainly did not make me any less upset that I'd been dead for who knows how long and nobody had bothered to inform me. The young boy fixed his tie and my eyes fell on his name-tag which read "Life". Ah. Of course.

"Odd."

"What's odd, Mr. Hastings?"

"You look like me."

"Nonsense. I don't look a bit like you."

My Life wasn't looking back at me, though, and was instead scribbling some notes on the paper in front of him, not bothering to give me any words of encouragement or even a smile to let me know that things *might* turn out okay. The tattoo was irritating me now too. It was itchy and warm and it felt like it was cutting off the circulation in my wrist. It was making the tips of my fingers tingle and not in the way they had done when I held my wife's hand for the first time.

What was her name again? What was my first name?

"We rarely get second chances, Mr. Hastings."

"I know."

"What would you do if you did?"

I contemplated my answer as I drank some of the coffee-less water the attendee had given me while my Life explained how my case was to be reviewed. It was very unusual that someone would be Undecided, but when that happened – when they'd done an equal amount of Good and Bad during their lives – they would meet with their Life to discuss a possible Second Chance. If the Good was "good enough" and the Bad was "not-too-bad", a Second Chance would be granted.

It was a lot to take in, but Life didn't seem to care about me processing it. I took another gulp of my water.

"We generally don't start from when you're born."

"What?"

"We usually start from your first Bad."

“My first bad what?”

“Your birth is not your fault.”

My first so-called “Bad” had never seemed significant until now. The tattoo began to heat up, searing my skin when Life opened his ledger and began telling me about the Bad. As he told me, I started to remember. It was revealed that I’d stolen penny sweets from the Pick’n’Mix when my mum wasn’t looking at seven-years-old. My Life kept the face I’d had before my first Bad. He tutted, arching an eyebrow at me and I looked sheepishly at down at my fingers, embarrassed at what other Bads I might have forgotten.

The pain seared through my wrist again when I stole a toy soldier from my friend because I didn’t have one and my friend had five. I never gave it back either and the pain zinged through my arm once more.

I did a number of Goods between that Bad and the next. Things like tidying without being asked and helping my sickly grandfather and putting out milk for the stray cats on my street. I breathed a sigh of relief when I looked down at the tattoo and realised it had faded significantly and wasn’t hurting as much.

I popped the pimples on my face as though they were bubble wrap when I was a teenager. I was fourteen and those wretched pimples made me so angry that I’d done exactly what the dermatologist told me not to do. Surely – I looked up at my Life for reassurance – there was no penalty for being ugly? That wasn’t something I could control. I choked up a little when I saw myself like that again. I’d been so hateful towards myself at that age; and so angry with everyone else all the time. I looked down at the tattoo, ready to watch it judge me as harshly as I’d done to myself, but it didn’t change.

“I’m sure you recall the Moustache Incident.”

I found myself readjusting my position in the chair when Life spoke, as a young girl entered the bubble wrap memory, and suddenly I started to see the events of the Moustache Incident. The tattoo blistered and sizzled when I made fun of the girl for having a moustache and I told her she looked like Hitler. The seven-year-old face of my Life sitting in front of me now was disgusted with this development, shaking his head as the memory played out. I silently prayed that that would be the worst of my crimes but I knew that couldn’t be the case if I was sitting here Undecided. I was almost afraid of what was coming next, despite not being able to remember it just yet.

I went to defend myself. I went to say that I never actually thought she was ugly. I thought that I was ugly and that made me want to make her feel how I felt because I thought she was *beautiful*. I stopped, though, when I watched my fourteen-year-old self spit on her as she walked past me on the street. I shut my eyes when fourteen-year-old me called her a virgin in front of everyone at the school dance. Even though it was true, the tattoo boiled again. It really hurts now. Life didn’t say anything but he fixed me with a look that told me that I deserved it.

The tattoo wasn't sure what to make of my teenage years. Any volunteering or Good deeds I did were quickly overshadowed any time I stole alcohol from my dad's stash and drank it in the bushes with a few other friends. Dad was an angry drunk and I gladly took beatings meant for my mother on several occasions. According to the tattoo, protecting my mother was Good but almost everything else I was doing was not. It changed from dark to light and back again so quickly that it almost looked like it was flashing.

"Do you think we should take responsibility for our own actions, or is it alright to blame them on circumstance?"

"Something tells me that I should mention that we have free will," I laughed in response to Life's question, but his expression remained stony.

"Keep that in mind," was his reply.

When I was eighteen, I cheated on my college entrance exams. Nobody ever found out, but that didn't matter now. My Life knew everything and, ever since the Moustache Incident, I was refusing to meet his eyes. The cheating came as no surprise to either of us, but my Life sucked in a sharp intake of air through his teeth regardless. I didn't ever remember feeling more scrutinized but, of course, I only had eighteen years to base that assumption on so far.

College was when the drinking and smoking habits really manifested themselves. They stopped being things that I did to fit in and be "cool", and they started to become the only reasons I'd get up in the mornings. It would be easy for me to tell Life that it was a side-effect of losing my mother so young, or because I was following in my father's footsteps, but we would both know that I'd be lying. I wondered then if lying in here would make any difference to the end result, or if it didn't count after you were already branded with a tattoo. I didn't test it to find out.

I found myself wishing that I could remember more than just the little fragments and snippets that I was given each time. I wanted to know the bigger picture. I wanted to know if I had *any* worthy or redeeming qualities left by however old I was now. I wanted to know if I had a wife, or children, or a home. I wanted to know my first damn name.

"The memory loss is a way to keep the incoming memories pure and unedited," my Life said monotonously.

"Excuse me?"

I stared at the seven-year-old. I supposed that I shouldn't be surprised that my Life could read my mind, but it was still jarring. It meant that the little shit had left all my previous questions unanswered, despite knowing how panicked I was. My Life sat forward at his desk and clasped his hands as though he were about to share a grand secret. I wondered for a second how I looked now and what face was staring back at the face of my childhood. Had I died young? Was I mutilated? Was I attractive? I had no idea.

“People tend to misremember things or choose to believe things happened differently to the way they actually did. The memory loss ensures that the Goods and Bads are filtered correctly and without circumstance.”

“But what if you do something bad because you had no choice in that situation?”

“The wrong thing done for the right reasons is still the wrong thing.”

A long pause.

“I don’t even get to know my first name?” I asked quietly.

“Names are incredibly important around here, Mr. Hastings. They are given or taken away depending on whether you go *Up* or *Down*. It keeps the *Downers* from ever gaining any fame or respect from fellow *Downers* and it reminds the *Uppers* to stay humble.”

“And what if I stay here, in Limbo?”

“You remain *Mr. Hastings*.”

My Life didn’t say anything more on the subject and the next memory was quickly called to the stand. I wondered if I had been as adverse to chit-chat when I was alive as my Life was now, or if that was just part of the job description. My next memory was twenty-three and I braced myself when I realized what was coming next.

I had had an affair with one of my college professors for a passing grade. That was trouble with getting into college on an exam that wasn’t really yours. The tattoo didn’t look as black and scaly as I’d imagined it would when I stole a glance at it, but it was enough that I was worried my review would end with me becoming a *Downer*.

“Not really looking good so far,” I said.

“At least you’re not a lawyer, Mr. Hastings.”

“They try to defend themselves out of the Bads?”

“They chew very loudly.”

The tattoo gave me little more than a tingle when I saw the memory of twenty-seven. That was the year I met her – my now-wife. I couldn’t stop the smile when I recognized her and I felt a calm wash over me for the first time since I’d woken up in Limbo. I remembered the time we spent getting to know each other as I helped her prepare for her driving test and the feeling of elation the first time we’d kissed under the mistletoe at my Toy Soldier Friend’s Christmas party.

Suddenly I felt the urge to pick at my nails again, nervous that not all the memories with her would be like that. My Life eyed me knowingly.

“Amelia,” I said her name softly, the feeling of it familiar on my tongue. “I love her.”

“Do you?”

I couldn't tell if the question was genuine or pointed, but it stung either way. Of course, we loved each other – we'd been married until death did us part. I wouldn't have gotten down on one knee and she wouldn't have taken my last name if we didn't love each other...

But it would appear that I was wrong. Amelia had had the potential to be so many things. But she'd married me when I was good at keeping secrets and stayed with me when I wasn't anymore. Now that I found myself face-to-face with my Life and the consequences of the actions I took during it, there was no way of hiding anything. My Life slowly replayed all the times after the “I dos” that I would get too drunk to drive home but I did so anyway. He said nothing as he showed me my memories of all the times I verbally abused Amelia when I got back from another night with the lads: another Christmas party, another bachelor party, another party for absolutely no reason. Life didn't let me forget the time that I spent the last of our money for the month buying a round of drinks after a match for people whose names I didn't even know. Life played these memories back for me quickly and yet still too slowly and, as I started to remember them little by little, I felt the tattoo get hotter and deeper and darker around my wrist until I was too afraid to steal a glance at it and see what it looked like now.

She'd wanted to be a doctor when we first met, but she ended up taking a job that she didn't really want in order to pay for her half of our home. The house looked inviting when we bought it, but she never escaped the big red door that once looked so welcoming. I'd never even considered encouraging her to go back to college and strive towards achieving her dream. It wasn't in our best financial interests. Probably. I'd always been envious of her intelligence. Maybe we could have found the money for her to go back if I hadn't been so concerned with drinking it. Maybe I secretly always knew that, but it wasn't in *my* best financial interest. Probably.

“Why did she stay with me?” I asked.

“She must have seen the goodness in you.”

“I don't know if there is any.”

“You wouldn't be here if you were all Bad.”

If it had been the other way around, I knew that I would never have been able to see any goodness in the person I had become. Amelia deserved better and both versions of the man who sat at the desk now were painfully aware of that fact.

There weren't enough Goods in between those last few Bads for Life to even really consider and the things I was rewarded for as a child were too basic now for them to count. There was a difference, I realized suddenly, between being a decent human being and being a *good* human being. I didn't volunteer, but I didn't hurt anyone. I didn't spare change for the less fortunate, but I didn't use it to fund evil. I didn't drive an electric car, but I also didn't litter. I didn't do enough Bad to be bad, but I didn't do enough Good to be good either. I didn't do enough with my life full stop.

I recognized myself in the final memory as the me with the *Undecided* tattoo. I was almost thirty-one and alone in the house with a cigarette, wasted after day-drinking with the boys for Toy Soldier Friend's birthday. I had stupidly fallen asleep with the lit cigarette and it didn't take long for it to fall out of my fingers and onto the carpet. Amelia had warned me that someday I'd set the house on fire and, in the end, it would seem she had been absolutely right. I probably should have listened to her more. I *definitely* should have listened to her more.

"Amelia must be out doing the Christmas shopping," I informed my Life, though my Life hadn't asked. "Suppose she'll be home any minute."

I was avoiding the memory of today. Skimming through it as fast as I could and not looking at it directly. I'd been so concerned with the fact that nobody had bothered to inform me that I was dead that I didn't even stop to realize that I'd been the one to do it to myself.

"You're squarely at the halfway point, Mr. Hastings," my Life told me, motioning with a cocked eyebrow to the worn-looking tattoo. It was not dark enough to be a *Down* but there was still enough of it there as not to warrant an *Up* either.

"That's why you've been placed in the *Undecided* status."

"I see," I said. Though I did not.

The memory of tonight played on through the sirens and the smell of smoke, but my thoughts stayed with Amelia. Everything I'd seen of myself should have been enough that anyone else would have left me long ago. Everything else I'd seen of myself should have sent me straight *Down*. But she had stayed with me and I soon came to realise that I'd been placed in *Undecided* because of her. I was here because her final words to me before I came to this place were at my side in the ambulance when she'd stood away from me, crying. She was unable to look at me, but she had muttered the three words that gave my Life the opportunity to plea for my *Undecided* status. Three words that meant that I was granted the opportunity to have my case reviewed. Of course it was Amelia who had done that – it always was.

"I forgive you," she said.

I turned away from the memory, my eyes stinging and my mouth dry. I'd never been so thankful for coffee-less water in all the time that I could now remember. I liked myself a lot better when I couldn't remember. I liked myself a lot better before I'd entered this room. I'd liked myself a lot

better when I was seven-years-old, before I'd stolen a toy soldier and before I'd grown up and become competent enough to hate myself. I'd liked myself best when I fell in love with Amelia.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Life asked after a moment of silence.

"I should've done better."

"Everyone says that. What have you *really* got to say for yourself?"

I could feel the words in my mouth, but I didn't really know what they were. I guessed that they might have been some sort of apology or plea, but there was hardly any time for that and too much of it if the words weren't long enough.

"I'd like to go home," were the words that I settled on. My Life mulled over this for a few moments before sighing.

"Before we can proceed, I need to inform you of the stipulations of the possible Second Chance." I blinked. I'd almost forgotten about the possible Second Chance – my mind was so focused now on Amelia and how her Life would have been better without mine. I thought about her as my Life informed me of the rules. I would be asked to change an otherwise fixed-point in my timeline. If I happened to choose the right event, the knock-on effect would be enough to change the events leading up to my death – enough that I would be granted a Second Chance. If I chose the event incorrectly, my life would end up exactly the way it already had and I would stay in Limbo as one of the grey attendees for eternity. I was listening to my Life, but not really. When it came to it, I surprised both myself and my Life with the event I chose to change.

"I never want to have met Amelia," I said it so confidently and, despite us both being a little shocked at the choice, once it was said it couldn't be unsaid.

"She deserves to have had a different life to the one I gave her,"

We sat in silence for a moment, my seven-year-old face staring curiously at me before nodding slowly in acceptance.

"Then it is done," he said.

My Life didn't seem too different after the event was changed. I was still a selfish man with a drinking problem, only now I had never fallen in love and proposed to a woman who had been the only reason I'd had the possibility of a Second Chance in the first place. I prepared myself for the pain of the tattoo to become unbearable, for its ink to become permanent on my skin. I prepared myself to have my name stripped of me forever and to make my descent from the waiting room with the other *Downers*, but it didn't happen.

“Have I chosen the right event?” I asked, my mouth agape with shock and my Life looked back at me with a blank expression as a new paper appeared on his desk. This one had a heading that I could finally read. *Approved*, it said.

“H-have I been granted the Second Chance?” Hope welled up inside my chest.

“I think that depends, Mr. Hastings,” my Life smiled for the first time since we’d met, absentmindedly thumbing through the papers.

“On what?”

“How loudly do you chew?”

\*

“Good morning, Mr. Hastings,” a friendly voice said as Mr. Hastings’ eyelids fluttered open. “We were a bit touch-and-go there last night, but you’re doing very well this morning.”

“Amelia,” he muttered, taking in the tall woman with the dark hair and bright smile.

“Yes, very good,” Amelia grinned. “You recognize me.”

“You’re my...” he stopped, confused.

“Your doctor, Mr. Hastings.”

“Right, of course,” he said quietly. “My doctor.”

He took her in, her white lab coat and the stethoscope hanging around her neck. It didn’t seem out-of-place on her at all.

“You were lucky the fire brigade got to you when they did,” Amelia said as though she were speaking to a child, fixing the flowers beside his bed instead of looking at him. “If it weren’t for your friend Alex – who sent you these lovely flowers, by the way – I wouldn’t be looking after you right now.”

Mr. Hastings smiled, giggling a little. Now Amelia turned to face him, curiosity in her eyes.

“You know,” he grinned. “I stole a toy soldier from him once. Think I might buy him a new pack of them after this.”

“I think he probably deserves them,” Amelia said. She paused to check his monitors and then shone a very small but very bright light into his eyes. “Your progress today is really, very good.”

She seemed surprised. “Last night, when we brought you in, you were very confused. I’m delighted to see you doing so well today.” She turned a nozzle on one of the machines beside him and smiled encouragingly before stepping away.

He didn’t say anything but he suddenly felt embarrassed. He did vaguely remember thinking she was his wife.

“I’m sorry…” he said as Amelia made her way to the door. “If I made you feel uncomfortable.”

She laughed kindly at his apology and how seriously he appeared to be taking it.

“Don’t worry,” she remarked, sounding remotely like a schoolteacher. “*I forgive you.*”

He lay in contemplation for a few moments before he began to feel drowsy from whatever medication Doctor Amelia had administered. She was a nice woman. Probably too good for him, he figured. But maybe he’d ask her to dinner when he was feeling better if she seemed interested. As his eyes began to close and the smell of the flowers at his bedside filled his nostrils, he felt the sudden urge to look down at his left wrist. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but what he saw was nothing more than a pale blue hospital bracelet that stated his full name, Kevin Stephen Hastings, and nothing more.

# A Journey Home

By Sean D. Gardner

He walked back into his room and took a silent look around. It was familiar, yet strange to him. Posters of his favorite sports teams lined the walls, his trophies of past accomplishment gathered dust on the dresser and his bed sat freshly made, ready for him to ruin. It hardly changed since he left two years ago. His bag slipped off his shoulder and landed with a muffled punch on the floor. The bed hissed an awful screech as he sat down and his eyes were immediately drawn to the gold lettering inscribed on his pack. It read "Lieutenant Michael Taylor."

He sat stiff in his own room. Although he knew the place he called home for 18 years, he moved around like he was in a museum. He kept his hands close to his sides as he looked at his own belongings. Each step he took was gingerly and very thought out, as if a creaking floorboard was a crime. When he caught his eye in the mirror he stopped and shuttered.

Michael came to attention and clicked his boots. He was a well-built man, yet slender having missed a few meals over the last two years. His brown hair was messily combed over to the side and dull. His skin was a creamy white, like an old cup of coffee, but for the drooping black bags under his eyes of a man desperate for sleep. His large hands were dirty. Each fingernail mangled and broken, painted with a mix of blood and mud that settled underneath each nail.

The closet door was gently pulled open and inside he found a pair of blue jeans and a flannel shirt. He neatly folded his uniform and laid it on the bed. The aches and pains shot up and down his body as he pulled the pants up and over the stitches on his knee and he winced as he pulled his shirt down on his badly bruised body.

"Oh, Michael," Mrs. Taylor said walking into his room. "Those old clothes are just hanging off of you."

He half smiled and shrugged back at his mom. "It's ok, I guess."

She looked him up and down and nearly shrieked at all the dirt on his fingers.

"Let's get you washed up and I'll make you a big hearty meal," she said before kissing her son on the forehead.

"We will get those pants fitting properly in no time."

She grabbed at his arm as Michael started down the stairs. She noticed a new found limp on her son and dug her nails into his arm as she held back tears.

"Ma, it's ok," he said. "These aren't the first stairs I've battled since being discharged." She gave out a nervous laugh and hesitantly loosened her grip as mothers often do.

Michael gripped the banister and looked around the house. He noticed old pictures of his younger smiling self and the traditional family portraits from Christmas time.

“Your father should be home soon,” he heard behind his thoughts like a voice in the distance. He wasn’t particularly hungry, he learned to fight the call for hunger on the front but he’d do anything for his mom and if he was being honest with himself, he did miss her homemade pasta.

Even her worst meal was better than the rations he forced down.

At first he twirled his fork aimlessly in the bowl and pushed around the noodles like he was a kid hiding his vegetables to earn his dessert. He caught his mom’s pale stricken gaze that made her red lipstick stick out like a sore thumb and scarfed down the plate. Almost immediately she scooped another generous helping on his plate.

“Mom, really I’m not that hungry I ate before I got home -- honest.”

“I know, Michael, but I just worry. I haven’t seen you for years and I’m worried you didn’t eat too well. Who knows what they have all the way over there.”

Michael rolled his eyes and tried to think of a snarky remark, but before he could his dad came storming in the door.

“Son, welcome home,” he said behind waterfalls of tears. He grabbed his boy up from the chair, counted his limbs, eyes, ears, fingers and toes and gave him a hug that cracked his son’s back.

“At least you came back in one piece,” Mr. Taylor chuckled.

“You bet dad.”

“I’ll make you a plate dear, let Michael get back to eating,” Mrs. Taylor said. “He lost too much weight over there.”

Michael’s mood started to lift and for a moment he felt like he was truly back home. He laughed, made jokes, and caught up with his parents. His face started to hurt from smiling so much at once, a rarity in the last two years.

A silence overcame the dinner table and his mom put the final dishes into the sink. He felt a tight grip deep inside him. He found it hard to breathe and started to feel a cold sweat on his brow. He gripped the table and avoided all eye contact as his mind began to race. Explosions rang in his head, the screams of his friends and the pitter patter of bullets flying into the ground drowned out his parents. He took a few deep breaths and listened to his heartbeat through his chest.

“Calm down, Mike,” he told himself. “You’re home. You’re home. You’re home.”

Tires screeched outside and an engine roared down the street. Mike sprang up out of his chair, knocking it over and screamed.

“It’s ok son, it’s just the dumbass neighbor and their race car,” Mr. Taylor said. “If I’ve told him once, I’ve told him a hundred times to knock that shit out.”

He reached for his kid and placed his hand comfortably on his shoulder. “Look here, boy. You’re home now. It’s going to be ok.”

He looked over to his wife, who could no longer hold the tears back.

“You just gotta get re-accustomed, Mike.”

Michael felt his dad’s hand on his shoulder and the nightmares disappeared and his heart started to beat normally.

“I think I ought to head to bed. It’s been an eventful day,” Michael said. “It will probably be good for me.”

A week went by and every day was the same. He tossed and turned in bed and woke up in a puddle of sweat stained into his sheets. Screams filled his head and then came out of his mouth. His parents rushed in and saw their boy in tears. Along with the bad was the good. He laughed, watched sports with his dad and sipped on whiskey, but when the memories came all was lost. Even the smallest noises set him off. Racoons rummaged on trash day and his eyes shot open and he nervously checked the window gripping a knife from his pack. When he was sure it was safe he’d crawl back into bed holding the knife under his pillow, never parting with it until the sun rose.

One morning he ventured into town. It was the first time his mother let him leave the house since coming home. He breathed in the fresh air and a sudden calmness came over him. A calmness he hadn’t felt since before he came home.

Once in town the nerves got the best of him..

“It’s just people, Mike. People you’ve known your whole life,” he told himself.

As he walked men tipped their caps, stopped and shook his hand and told him thank you. Little boys awed at him and they told their parents they just met a real hero. His body shook as he looked down at them with an awkward smile. His vision started to get blurry and he spun around, running into the nearest storefront to get away and was hit with the smell of fresh bread.

“Well, it could have been worse.”

He grabbed a fresh loaf of bread, turned around and immediately dropped the loaf.

“Eek, I didn’t mean to startle you,” Katie said. “I saw you walking and I just wanted to say it is really good to see you again....I was worried I may not.”

Mike stared at Katie and felt an anxiety that was worse than any memory of war. He looked her up and down and noticed how much growing she did since he'd been gone. He became awestruck by her flowing blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. Her smile dug into his heart and he almost forgot how to speak.

“Well, it was up in the air there for awhile,” he said, gaining his confidence back.

“Oh my, are you serious...What happened,” she said with instant regret. “I mean, you don't have to answer that. I don't want you to if it doesn't make you comfortable.”

“Honestly, I haven't thought about it much,” He said with a sore smile. “Can I get you a cup of coffee and we can catch up?”

He held onto his coffee tightly and walked down the cobblestone street with Katie. The brick and mortar stores made him feel trapped and the passing cars made him jump.

“You seem a bit antsy, Mike,” she said. “Do you want to sit down?”

“You know, it's odd. I never expected to be like this,” he said as they made their way to a bench.

“Everyone stops and says ‘thank you’ and even my parents treat me differently. I can't sleep and I can't get it out of my head. Funny enough, the only time I've felt fine is when I'm alone again.”

“Well maybe you should go away for a bit and find yourself.”

He stared into Katie's eyes and thought for a minute. He considered an old camping spot he used to frequent and how the sun beat down on the river and the birds sung their innocent songs.

“You may be onto something there.”

“I always knew what was best for you.”

“If only I had you by my side over there. I probably wouldn't have gotten into any mess.” Mike told Katie about how he got hurt and ultimately sent home. He told her about being reckless and wanting to be a hero and volunteering for a mission.

“You'll be in and out. As routine as it could be,” He remembered the general saying. It was anything but. After an ambush, he took a bullet to the leg and his squad was left without ammo until they were miraculously saved.

Hours passed by in an instant and Mike took Katie to her door and they said their goodbyes.

“Don’t forget what I said, Mike,” she said as they held each other. “Get out of here for awhile, it will be good for you.” She gave him a passionate kiss on the lips and looked up at him. “Hurry back though, I’ll be anxious for our next date.”

Mike took her advice seriously and thought about the old spot and how he’d break the news to his parents.

The miles of walking began to catch up to him and his knee started throbbing in pain as he approached the door to his home. He grabbed the doorknob and leaned into it and almost toppled to the ground as his mom, who was staring out the window waiting, swung it open.

“I was worried sick about you, Michael. We both were.”

“I’m sorry but can I talk to you guys for a second...it’s important.”

They sat down on the couch and Mike broke the news that he has to leave.

“But you just got...” his mom began before being cut off by Mr. Taylor.

“I thought as much. It’s like you’re not really home yet. Just tell us what you need.”

Ominous clouds began to fill the sky the next morning yet Michael pushed on and threw a backpack into the trunk, grabbed the cooler his mom packed with enough food to feed a family for the week -- let alone one person camping, and tugged on the straps holding a canoe snuggling on the roof.

Michael drove alone on an old road out of town and watched the traffic backup going into town. The yellow lines were faded on the tattered road littered with potholes. The uneven roadway proved a challenge for any driver who appreciated their vehicle and tires. For miles the car moved slowly, zigging and zagging to avoid danger until he hit the freshly paved turnpike in front of the assembly plant. The building stood like a mighty castle in the concrete jungle of the city. Michael slammed on the brakes and felt a cold shock run down his back as he gazed at the smokestacks spitting out smoke, a line of airplanes ready for use, and billboards asking for war bonds. He stared up at the poster painted in dazzling colors and an eager face running into battle. He lost himself in the eyes of the soldier and began to hear the screams and explosions of the past. The truck’s tires squealed and smoke oozed from the pavement as Michael sped off. He spit out the window and continued his way north, all the while keeping a nervous eye on his rearview mirror and fixated on the plant until it was safely out of sight.

The gray skies followed north and grew darker at the campsite as Michael pulled into an empty stretch of land hugging a river. A few trees were scattered around and provided enough cover from the winds and rains surely on their way. Michael hung a tarp between a handful of trees and placed his tent under it and threw his pack inside and laid down.

After a quick rest he pushed his way up a trailhead and marched through a narrow passage that opened up onto a rocky plateau. The wilderness opened up and he saw the deep valley sprawled

out across the land, cut in half by a winding river and enclosed by towering mountains lightly powdered with snow. From the plateau he grew uneasy. The clumps of grey clouds quickly push their way across the sky, like huddled bodies at a concert. In the distance wisps of clouds made their way to the ground. The explosions filled his head but he soon realized it was the storm moving quickly towards him. He turned and ran from the sounds and the rain and moved his way back through the wooded trail. He jumped over roots, weaved between tall pines and crossed over the river via a beaver dam and back into his campsite. He strapped his tent to the tree and huddled himself inside the tent, nearly in tears as the thunder clapped above him and the rain echoed off the tarp above him.

Michael now sat shamelessly in his own tears, screaming at the top of his lungs as the lightning struck. He cursed the war, he cursed God, and he cursed himself. In a fit of rage he brought himself out of the tent and stood in the rainfall and watched the clouds.

“If you won’t go, I will,” he screamed to the heavens.

Michael ripped the canoe off the truck and threw it on top of his back and grabbed a paddle. The rain rang off of the aluminum hull and reminded him of bullets glancing off a tank. He plopped it into the water and climbed in. He scanned the sky for any sign of blue or sun shining and caught a beam of light shining down in the distance like a spotlight. Michael dug the paddle through the water and heaved it backwards. The current pushed back and the canoe seemed to stand still in the current. With every clap of thunder and every lightning strike the chains wrapped around Michael’s heart and a smog began to fill his head. His shoulders burned, stomach ached, and he couldn’t discern between his screams or the ones in his head, but he paddled on.

He remembered being in a freshly washed uniform, thinking how glorious the war would be and how he’d come home with medals and be a hero. He remembered his first mission and being struck with the reality of war, the lies of glory and the men around him, some of them his closest friends, lying in pools of their own blood.

His hands tightly wound around the paddle and blood dripped down it. The rain masked his tears and the thunder masked his screams as he continued to struggle against the mighty river.

He remembered the humming of planes overhead and out of sight and the whistles of bombs falling through the sky. He remembered bombs landing and bodies torn to bits and cascading with the rubble in the aftermath.

He remembered storming buildings and smashing faces with the stock of his gun. Dragging soldiers, just like him, to prisons and to an uncertain future.

Michael pleaded for forgiveness as he broke his gaze with the beam of light. He cried out and let the emotions take him over.

“I can’t fight anymore,” he told himself.

The paddle fell with a clunk inside the boat and he brought his bloody hands to his face and let out a painful cry. The current carried him away, back into the eye of the storm. He stared into the

river occasionally catching his ghastly reflection. A shell of himself remained in the canoe, an empty house that once belonged to a young boy.

The campsite passed by and Michael guided his canoe to shore. He made his first strides on land and the rain began to fall easier as he brought the canoe back to solid ground. Michael sat on the edge of the river and felt a sudden sense of calm as he looked downstream. He washed the blood from his hands and watched a cardinal swoop past him and find itself on a bare branch of a pine tree near the ground.

The bright red bird looked at Michael and cocked its head, giving him an odd feeling. The bird reminded him of lost friends, but he found a certain comfort by the winged creature. He moved towards it, expecting it to dart away, but the bird was not easily startled. It quickly turned its head with a sudden curiosity as Michael got up and walked over to his pack and got his cooler from the tent. He pulled off chunks from the loaf of bread he bought at the market and tossed it in the birds direction.

The bird hopped down from the branch and started to peck at the bread.

“I’m sorry,” Michael said wiping away the tears running down his face.

He ate a sandwich and filled his canteen with the river water and filled his empty stomach until he had to undo the top button of his pants. Michael constantly watched the bird pecking at bread and couldn’t help but give out a smile. He had his back up against a tree and occasionally looked up at the grey sky with his eyes closed and felt the light sprinkle of rain on his skin. When the sunlight broke out from above him, the cool air slowly became a warm breeze and blew the rainwater from the trees.

The sunlight warmed his skin and he stood up leaning against a tree until the sun ultimately set. As day turned into he started a fire, changed into dry clothes, brought his pack to the fire and peered into the beauty of the fire. The flames danced around and the wood crackled. He saw the faces of his parents and Katie as he lost himself in the flames. He breathed in the camp air and felt at peace -- an emotion he thought he lost.

The gold lettering of “Lieutenant Taylor” caught his eye as it flickered off the light. Michael reached into the pack and pulled out a beaten up leather bound notebook. He cracked it open and began to flip through his journal entries. In between the covers were stories from the front. Some were happy stories, most were nightmares. As he got to the end of the notebook he turned to a page titled *Goodbye: My final words*. Michael read it over and over again before tearing it from the notebook and throwing it into the fire. In a flash it was ablaze and he gave out one last sigh of relief before falling asleep to the gentle sounds of the crackling fire.

# Insignificant Man

By Niranjana Hariharanandan

It was the summer of 1998 - the hottest one in the last few years of northern Kerala, and I remembered it vividly by the dozens of extra mangoes that heaped on the porch of Valliama's ancestral house.

We called her Valliama or great aunt. She was a pudgy woman who always dressed immaculately in neatly pleated saris, with distinctive fine facial fuzz that rustled with anger when our muddy paws trailed across her red peroxide flooring or one of us snuck our fish meat under a mound of rice. A stern woman and the matriarch of the family, but her heart was always open for us kids all-round the year. But memories of Valliama were reserved for our summer vacations because come the first hint of the mango ripening by the eastern verandah, all of us maternal cousins flocked from different parts of the country into her ancestral house – our tharavadu. This is where the story begins.

The leaves on the jackfruit tree by the compound wall burnt a deep amber, and we could smell the intoxicating scent of jackfruits and ripening mangoes when we traipsed outside for long afternoon games of hide and seek. By the end of summer, Valliama would gather the ladies in the house for the family famed pickling of jackfruit preserves or chakkavaratti.

A summer where Valliama kept the family cool with glasses and glasses of spiced buttermilk; where the rumble of the old wooden fan offered constant background score for murmured afternoon gossip. Of scorching afternoons, where the older men of the family spent many long afternoons, mouths agape snoozing on the tiled porch. But one of them didn't and that was Valliathan or my great uncle. This scrawny unassuming man with his deep chuckles and antisocial demeanor did not sleep during afternoons. Instead, He sat on the porch, his knobby legs hardly grazing the ground, a blue faux leather diary in hand and a supply of bespoke ink pens lined up beside him. He spent the better part of the afternoon writing away solemnly, his puffy grey brows furrowed in concentration – an inconspicuous sight to most in the family, but one that caught my childlike notice.

Valliathan was the actual head of the family, considering my great grandfather passed away when we were toddlers. Traditional Malayalee houses in the '90s looked up to their kudumbhanathan or head of the family to make decisions in the house- even the smallest ones like what vegetables to source from the local markets or advising them on the right 'time' by checking the almanac to schedule monthly temple visits. But my great uncle wasn't like that- He didn't fancy himself standing grand and tall between my aunts and uncles, roaring down to the workers to do their job. Neither did he tell the women what to cook. He sat blandly and awkwardly in the slot allotted to him at the head of the table, head held low chewing his way through his insipid rice without ghee or dal and a side of coconut sautéed cabbage- his favorite vegetable. He loved cabbage and asked for it quietly almost every other day, and my aunt grudgingly obliged- sometimes frying it with shallots, coconut and spices, sometimes just boiling them in salty water when she didn't have the time. Valliathan never complained- he was happy

just as the sight of the bright shards of the yellow vegetable that mounted high on his plate. Then he retired to his place by the porch, murmuring poetry under his breath, blue diary resting beneath his left armpit.

Valliachan spent a considerable amount of time, tongue between his teeth, writing meticulously long diary entries. No one knew what he wrote- considering nothing significant happened across his long days, except the occasional walk to the milkman's house or when relatives dropped in to invite the family for housewarmings or weddings. He had no friends to go on long evening strolls with, who sat about the verandah swapping paan and stories around the block. So, it was a matter of curiosity to me- what this 70- year -old man wrote, page after page in his blue diary. When quipped, he smiled secretively at my self- indulgent inquisitiveness and proudly murmured that he'd been keeping a diary since 1970!

“That's a lot of diaries isn't it, where can I find them?”

“Oh, I make it a point to burn them diligently by the back wall every evening on the 31st of December every year- no, I wouldn't want anyone reading it.” A vehement nod of the head.

The curiosity of what this insignificant man wrote in his diary drove me into a frenzy. This combined with the fact that my other cousins were significantly older than me and recently spent more summery afternoons whispering to each other than play rough and tumble made me long for a new ally. And Valliachan seemed a potential candidate, and the added opportunity of peeking into the blue diary and uncovering ‘secrets’ made me wait no further. I resolved to spend my days tailing him around, to win over his friendship – who knew! One day he would bend his head over, hook pinkies with me to imply clandestineness and show me his secret diary, just like Anjali my best friend back in school had!

And so, began an implausible friendship. Valliachan, a perpetually wary person who didn't initially fancy the inquisitive eagerness of a 9-year-old confidante eventually relented- soft-soaped on the insides, that he was finally the object of someone's awe and interest. So began our morning rituals together. I sat by his side, slurping on Bournvita, eyeing him as he sat on the farthest corner of our living room – a glass of milky coffee in hand. Once seated, he opened up the leaves of the newspaper to the obituary section. It was always this page that caught his fancy. Whether India won a game of cricket against Pakistan or a space shuttle scaled the moon, Valliachan's eyes were peeled to the grainy black and white pictures of morose looking people. He scoured them meticulously once, twice, and then a third time as he sipped the last dregs of his coffee, a smile playing on his lips as he finishes.

“But why, do you know these people? They all look so solemn. Didn't anyone click them smiling?”

“No,” the mildly irritated mutter, “they are gone, and it is the custom that the picture be of this kind.”

“Who made the ‘custom’? Do you know any of them?”

“Who knows I might, I’ve seen many of my classmates’ pictures on this over the past 10 years! There was Seetha and Manu and Ramankutty and even my dear friend Mohanan last month.” (A little awestruck that Valliachan went to school too!)

“Does that make you sad?”

“Well, no... no.”

“Then why do you look at it?”

No answer, just the rustle of the newspaper as Valliachan folds them neatly over and looks at me with a smile.

"Now who wants to listen to some riddles?"

Whether I liked listening to those riddles or not, Valliachan would start on them, sometimes messing them up, re- reciting ones he'd already told me, or making up puerile ones on the go! he was a repository of jokes and riddles and had a few tricks up his sleeve which he revealed over time as our camaraderie ripened like the mangoes heaped in our kitchen. We'd spend late mornings by the porch overlooking the pond, me sporting my coloring book in case things got too dreary – and Valliachan with a pack of matches, some sticks and a notepad where he tried his riddles and tricks on me. The coloring book was never opened as I sat squealing with laughter while he walked me through jokes or dared me to answer tests, he set for me.

“Who told you these riddles?” I’d probe.

“Well, it was a professor who used to teach him mathematics in secondary school. Was it secondary, or high school? He doesn't quite remember. But he remembers other things- He was a witty man, just a few years older than them. He knew all these tricks and he'd spend lunchtime showing the boys how to mimic them. He even knew how to mimic the voices of popular Malayalam and Tamil actors. See, this was how he did it”- a poor rendition followed, and I laughed glibly, not really finding it funny since I had no context to who these people were, the actor or the Professor for that matter.

Context or not, ‘Mashu’ became a fixed character in most of our chatter. Mashu allegedly was a jack of all trades, he was a poet who could conjure versus off the top of his head, some that Valliachan recited were from those sonnets- he could sing ghazals better than the most popular singers on radio, or these reality shows and Valliachan would sneer at the contestants on television and look significantly at me- as though both of us knew who the better singer was.

Mashu was seemingly a good cook too- Valliachan raved on and on about the tamarind chutneys, coconut curries and cabbage pickles he used to make. He remembered their texture to the minutest detail- memories seared into his palette of long afternoons after school watching Mashu cook spiced fish curry over tapioca. But he’d stopped eating spices, hadn’t he? I knew

Valliachan all of 9 years, and his staples now consisted of dosa over a drizzle of weak chutneys, rice, curds and more than occasional cabbage.

"Oh, it was a harsh case of ulcers. It had to stop anyway, someday" a downward glance, a furrow of the brow, the grinding of the dentures. Let's look at some more riddles?"

My 9-year-old mind equated Valliachan's increasing bland taste in food with his relationships with the other family members- mainly Valliama. In hindsight, it was hard to tell that they were married – that these two contrasting people had once found joy in each other - or maybe not. Relationships back in my Valliachan's time probably did not believe in compatibility more so than they did in convenience. As long as he received his 11 O clock coffee by the porch and the side of cabbage for his afternoon meal, and she got her way in the kitchen, their relationship was pretty much a tuneless rhyme of monosyllabic mumbles, suppressed sighs of frustration or perhaps regret. All I knew was that fuzzy memories of his childhood professor from fifty years back brought back light in Valliachan's eyes more than the sight of his wife bearing a bowl of brightly sautéed cabbage.

The riddles continued as did the long summery afternoons under the jackfruit tree as Valliachan wrote away in his diary or pored over newspapers, but my innocuous mind did fathom that there was more to Valliachan than what meets the eye. All I knew was that under the glib 70-year old who stuck to his diary entries and byhearting poetry was a solitary man who struggled with social disquiets.

He wore firm blinkers that he set for himself and the house- for instance, he didn't appreciate a woman or child – an 'inferior being' to the holy Malayalee man interrupt his conversations. His amicable face crumbled in distaste at the sound of my sister's anklets when she walked the corridors. He despised it when Valliama made an occasional omelet on a Saturday- the 'day of purity' translating to serving only vegetarian fare in Malayalee houses back then. His lips would crumble into a thin line, and he'd disappear behind the foliage with his treasured pack of cigarettes in a cloud of smoke. Smoking- his only vice, sometimes two or three packs a day. A stealthy affair that caught only Valliama's and now my keen eyes.

Maybe had I been older and nosier, I could've probed him more on his childhood. Did he have friends? It seemed odd that all of his friends had died or skipped town. If he cared so much for them to go to the lengths of checking the obituary why didn't he meet them considering he lived in the same village all of his 70 years? Did he have a long -lost girlfriend, who turned on him- was that what had stemmed this deep-rooted disdain towards womenkind, or was it him upholding the tradition of our family's well-famed male Malayalee privilege? I don't know. I was nine that summer and all I cared about back then was that there were enough mangoes to last till my visit ended and that Valliachan eventually gave me the blue diary and some secrets to go.

Summer was coming to end, and we kids were reluctantly planning to pack our suitcases to head back to the city. Valliama went easy on us and let us snack on her fragrant jackfruit sweets she'd prepared over the last month, while we spent afternoons watching rented superhero movies.

The first splatter of the summer showers hit during our last week in the village. Valliama scurried around rubbing our shorn locks dry and passing around brass cups of spiced tomato and lentils to ward off the sniffles. The coconut groves smelt of wet earth and promise, and Valliachan instructed the gardener to cut off banana stems we could use as umbrellas as we scurried in and out from the house.

The sweltering month of summer also spelled the mandatory power cuts or 'load shedding' in Kerala those days. Valliama ensured the kids were grouped into a tight-knit during this dreaded 30 -minute patch by the porch, keeping us busy with games of monopoly or carrom.

One such night, I watched through a mouthful of sticky sweet pudding as Valliachan sat at his usual corner with a lantern by his side, pouring over his diary, a smile playing on his lips. I crept up behind him, and he snapped it shut laughing at my sneakiness.

"What do you write in this, nothing happens in your day does it? You don't even watch movies with us, which you can write about... Or do you have a secret friend you converse with when we've gone to bed?"

A chuckle "yes you are my secret friend, right Ammu?"

A beaming round face, and a tiny chest puffed up with pride.

"But won't you be lonely once I go back to the city?"

"Why should I? I have 70 years of memories to live with. Mashu used to say that we don't need the actual person in your life to feel their presence, there are other ways to stay connected. "Like a phone? You don't even own a phone!"

"No..." a pause. "Sometimes, you cannot be with some people the conventional way because our forefathers wouldn't allow it. So, we respect our elders, do the right thing and come up with other ways to stay connected."

The 9 -year- old in me is puzzled

"But you can always call me in the city. I'm sure Valliama would allow it" Valliachan chuckles and tousles my hair.

"I wasn't talking about you... well, I will not call. But we will stay in touch. Here, take this ink pen. It was the one Mashu gifted me when I passed my 10th. I want you to start practicing writing with ink pens now. Enough of those pencils." My pudgy awestruck pair of hands examine the pen and fiddle with the nib.

"Now don't break it, keep it safe and do your sums using this. And maybe occasionally, you can write me a letter."

“I’ll write to you everyday Valliachan”

In the shifting light of the lantern, the beady eyes furrowed by bushy brows have melted into pools of black and Valliachan kept dabbing at them.

“That’s what we all say Ammu, but we forget. Only those remember who have everything to lose”.

I have suddenly realized that my hands are making interesting puppet-like shapes in the spool of light on the wall.

“Look Valliachan, I’ve made a deer head! Can you do this”

The last day of summer dawned stormy and grey, and we were forbidden to go outdoors. I woke up early with the sound of the raindrops falling on the tiled roofs and sat sleepily beside Valliachan toying with my new prized possession as he waited for his morning paper and his caffeine fix. He seemed in good spirits and promised to buy me a bottle of purple ink to go with my new pen-- if the rains ceased by afternoon.

The papers came in and Valliachan opened it, sifting straight to the obituary section. I perched on his armchair, eager to see the faces of his dead acquaintances- a surprisingly large number who'd come up over the summer. A few pages rustled as Valliama brought over the coffee cup. They were out of milk and would need a few packets more. Would he request the gardener to head over to the milkman?

There was silence as Valliachan’s face stayed glued to the paper, at a picture of a grainy looking man on the bottom right corner of the picture tile.

Valliama clicks her tongue in tetchiness and bustles away.

A few moments have passed and creamy froth form on Valliachan’s now gone cold cup. I flick at it with my pinkie and lift it under Valliachan’s nose to get his attention. He smiles at me vacantly, as I follow his gaze to the photo.

Is this your friend Valliachan?

No, and a long pause. He’s staring at the photo so intently. The man in it isn’t smiling as per Valliachan’s ‘custom’, he’s got puffy hair on either side of his forehead and a pouty mouth. Nothing significant about him. Just another old man who’s become momentarily famous for dying.

Valliachan seems to have lost trail of thought, and the vision of Valliama bottling pickled amlas for us to take back to the city has got my interest.

I don't see Valliachan for most of that day, he stuck to his chair, sitting pensively watching the raindrops fall. At lunch when Valliama brought out a bowl of grated sautéed cabbage to go with his rice and lentils, Valliachan pushed it aside almost vehemently. Eyes downcast focusing on his rice, a fervent shake of his head.

Valliama inwardly muttered a sigh of relief. She hated cooking that vegetable for almost half of her life.

That afternoon, while I played hopscotch on the porch of the house, I saw Valliachan retire indoors for a nap for the first time in my 9 years. His blue diary and a rack of pens lay neatly by the side of the porch, forgotten. I rushed up to it, finally excited that I could pry into his cherished secret. I open a page at whim and discover in neatly scrawled Malayalam, words of longing and belonging - for summery afternoons behind the school wall, of the taste of cabbage that still lingered, and the lyrics of the poetry that seemed unforgettable and the sound of his melodies that ring in the ears deep into the nights . My 9 year -old self couldn't fathom the meaning behind those words. But I was sure of one thing- I knew Valliachan would never write a diary entry after today.

I don't remember much of that day from that summer, except that the rains came down heavily, and Valliachan took to his bed and his promise of buying me the ink remained what it was – just a promise. I left the village, and our summer was forgotten just like the last set of mangoes had disappeared from Valliama's kitchen.

Fin

# TRIPTYCH

By Janie Kronk

I.

Paper hands skim stone. Dust clings to his fingertips, stowaway particles aching to be part of living flesh. "I'll have to tell Rach--" Bert shakes his head. Four years and he still forgets.

He circles the archway—once, twice, three times. Admires rough quoins and mottled colors. He struggles to place these classical lines within the context of the plain brick building half-demolished on the site. He steps beneath the keystone holding it all together.

Blinks. Three flutters of lid and lash to clear dust from his eyes. He presses a hand to his face. He has never said he can't believe his eyes; the eyes are never the liars. The tender membranes drink in light, but it is the brain which decides what that light means. He wonders if he's having a stroke.

He stands in front of an old-fashioned apothecary, soda jerk in a pert cap behind the glass counter inside. Shops cluster like barnacles around a cobbled square. "SOCK DEPOSITORY" marches in gilded Helvetica across the plate glass of the establishment to his right.

Curious, he approaches the sock depository, meaning to ask for a phone to call his doctor. White tube socks pack the storefront from sill to ceiling. Flashes of color snake through the maul: ruffled baby socks, gaudily dyed knee highs, argyle aplenty. Bert pushes inside. The tinkle of the doorbell draws the attention of a frizzy-haired receptionist. She straightens, dabs her red nose, and snuffles into a fluffy white gym sock like a handkerchief. "Can I help you?"

"I was just wondering if I could--" His eyes flit around the outmoded lobby, from the piles of laundry in reception chairs to the wet eyes of the woman behind the desk. He forgets the phone. He forgets he may be having a stroke. "Are you crying?"

She waves her Kleenex. "No, just allergic to lint. Occupational hazard." She extends her hand. "Stacey O'Kearn, Executive Manager, Brickland Sock Depository. Have you come to make a retrieval?" She wilts when Bert shakes his head. "Day after day socks pour in, but no one ever comes to make a retrieval. I managed to make three pairs today, though." She presents the ballad pairs to Bert. "Since you offered, there is something you can do for me. I need an antihistamine and a muffin. I'd go myself, but I have to watch the back. We're short staffed today."

He agrees, moved by the moisture in her eyes even knowing they aren't emotional tears, and finds himself two doors down at a shop called Nathaniel's Notions. Inside, books overflow shelves, rise in pillars that clot aisles, and teeter on cafe tables. "Good day," the shop keep approaching. "I'm Nathaniel, purveyor of fine volumes and curiosities, proprietor of this shop. What is it you seek today?"

"I came for a muffin." Bert's eyes scan a line of dusty globes above the shop counter, none of which conform to a modern day understanding of geography. "For--" he points next door.

"Stacey. Our Lady-of-the-Mismatched Socks. Only the most patient woman I've ever met." He surveys pastry offerings in a glass case. "She'll enjoy this one. Forgotten recipe of a family matriarch in Nebraska who's begun suffering from dementia." He wraps the muffin, a lemony-sweet smell wafting from the crinkling paper. "And what about you? Can I interest you in the Batman No. 1 we just received in our comics room? It was destroyed in a fire in Albuquerque. Huge blow to the collector."

Bert frowns. "Why would I want a burned up book?"

The shop keep's laugh is a small, embarrassed sound approximating a cough. "It burned in Albuquerque," he says as though Bert is hard of hearing. "It's mint condition here."

"Just the muffin, thanks."

"You're sure?" Nathaniel gestures to stacks of paper and shelves of leather bound volumes. "We deal in a little of everything. Do you like music?" He rifles a stack of flotsam and pulls out a Bounty paper towel scrawled with musical notation. "Silver Sonata. Would have been a lovely piece if the composer had ever finished it. I have a—feeling," Nathaniel winked, "That it's just the thing for you."

Bert's memory bubbles with words he'd spoken to Rachel two months before she died. You threw out my work? It's taken me months to get that movement nailed down. Her reply, I was only clearing the table. It looked like trash to me. "I'll take it," Bert says.

Nathaniel's fingers dance across the register keys. "Two dollars for the sonata. No charge for Stacey's muffin--the woman is a saint." He pulls a 1927 Vogue from beneath the counter. "Please take this to her as well. A token of appreciation for all she does."

Bert pays with a five dollar bill and holds his hand up for change. The register jettisons the money tray. Nathaniel fits the five into its slot then scoops his fingers beneath the tray. He opens his fist over Bert's waiting palm. Sand piles in the crevices – love line, life line, scar from building model airplanes with his son Geoffrey in what now seems a lifetime ago – and overflows onto the counter. "What's this?" Bert asks.

"Sands of Time, Brother. Only way we can make change."

Bert wants to argue, but Nathaniel is gone. Bert throws the sand into the shrubs on his way out and crosses to the apothecary. He still needs an antihistamine for the frizzy-haired saint-of-socks. His hand tingles when he touches the door centered in its grand, rusticated archway. The door resists his pull, it's weight out of proportion with its size. He slips through as soon as the opening is large enough to permit it. He pushes all his weight against it in an effort to pull it back shut. Facing out to the square with his hands pressed to the glass, he sees her. She is outside, book under her arm and sun on her dark hair. Each feature is rendered with dreamlike clarity - dark

eyes, heavy brows, and the lines around her mouth which were never as bad as she thought they were. Bert pushes toward her, but the door has latched. "Hey," he calls to the soda jerk, "the door's stuck." When he turns, the soda jerk is not there. Only a lot with a half-demolished building.

"Watch it, pal. You just came out of nowhere." A burly man ducks past Bert, through the arch and is gone. Bert follows, but this time his reality goes with him. The arch is just an arch.

He returns home to find the house empty, Geoff's worn army jacket—a memento of Rachel's time in the service—gone from the hook by the door. Bert curses the crusts of bread languishing on a plate in the sink and the pile of laundry laying untouched by the washing machine. Rachel had never struggled with the generational chasm that separated them from Geoff, but Bert has felt it growing wider every year. Now here he stands, relying on literal breadcrumbs to trace his son's comings and goings.

With a sigh, Bert sits at the baby grand in the living room. "Hello, old friend. This may not sound very good, but let's give it a shot." He reaches into his pocket for the sonata and draws out a handful of ash.

## II.

People draw around the arch like filings around a magnet. A murmur slides through the crowd each time someone walks through and does not reemerge on the other side. Bert passes under in turn, and this time does not question his health as he looks out at the airy town square. Oak trees droop over cobblestones, transformed by the noon sun into lanterns of chlorophyll and netted veins. At the end of the square, past a typewriter repair shop and a Blockbuster Video, a grand marquis twinkles, advertising a festival of films lost in the Warehouse Fire of 1937.

He pokes his head into the sock depository. "Sorry about the antihistamine," he says.

She waves him off. "It happens. Outsiders leave and can't come back again until the passing of midnight. It's all very Cinderella and the pumpkin carriage." She smiles. "You can make it up to me by helping with something in the back if you have a minute."

Piles of socks mound like snow drifts in the warehouse. Dust motes clutter the light filtering through the clerestory. Every thirty feet, round portals interrupt the windows and periodically spit socks from their yawning orifices. Bert is lightheaded with the smell of dryer sheets.

"You know all those socks you can never find after the wash? As if they were eaten by the dryer?" Stacey gestures around the room. "I need help unclogging Vent 32." They carry a tall ladder to the portal indicated, sending up a flurry of lint when they right it. Stacey sneezes. "I'd do it myself, but I don't do ladders. I get terrible vertigo, and I can't risk the fall. I hate to even wonder what happens when we leave this place."

"This place?"

“Brickland, home of the Lost. And don't be fooled by a pretty picture. Not everything that's lost should be found. You'll be tempted to go wandering when you visit—people always get struck with a bit of nostalgia for one thing or another – but I'd stick to the main squares if I were you.” He works himself higher onto the ladder. “What's wrong with a little nostalgia?”

“Comes with a price. What makes you think the good ole' days were so good? Jim Crow. Polio. Those damn duck-and-cover videos. And those are just examples from my lifetime.”

“How long have you worked here in the sock depository?”

“Since I died in '98. It's tedious work most of the time, but there are perks. Sometimes people lose other things in the dryer. Pocket change. Expensive hosiery. I found these darling pearl earrings just last week.” She pulls her hair back to give Bert a peek. “And the location is good. I see everyone coming and going in the square. People come in to chat. I've gotten to know most of the town that way.”

Bert perks up, his arm in the vent up to his elbow. “Do you know a woman named Rachel? I saw her yesterday, reading a book by the fountain.”

“Rachel? Sure. She's there almost every day. Sometimes reading, sometimes drawing. When she's not there she's at the Baths.”

“The Baths?” He attacks the vent with new vigor. The knot of clothing breaks free and lands in a pile in front of Stacey.

“The Baths of Caracalla. Down the street just south of the haberdashery.” She picks up the garment which had presumably been the cause of the obstruction and holds it up to her for size.

“Do you want this Metallica T-shirt?”

Bert jumps from the ladder and rushes out without saying goodbye. He follows Stacey's directions to the Baths and finds an expansive building of creamy marble and basalt, grand arches inviting him to enter. He wanders from room to room. Bathers lounge in the perfumed steam, paying him little attention as he rushes past. He exits into a garden on the opposite end, and at last finds her reclining on the edge of the fountain wearing a modest polka-dotted bathing suit and floppy sun hat.

She props herself on one elbow as he approaches. The water reflects dancing patterns of light across her face. He can't see her eyes behind the dark glasses. Is she surprised to see him? Has she been waiting, expecting him?

“I was wondering--” His voice catches. If you've missed me as much as I've missed you? If you'd accept my apology for not understanding how sick you really were? “Would you like to go to a movie matinee with me? The Man From Blankley's is playing in the theater in the square.”

She laughs. "I'm sorry. Mr.--"

"It's me. Bert."

"Mr. Bert, that sounds very nice, but I'm spoken for. Newly engaged, in fact." She sits up and folds her towel.

"Wait." Is she playing a game? He holds up his hands in mock surrender. "You've got me. I'm not here for a date. You're Rachel Jones the artist, right? I want to commission a piece. A big one. One of those that spans across three panels."

Her eyebrows inch above the heavy frames of her glasses. "A triptych?"

"Right. I'll buy you a root beer float and we can talk business. My treat."

She laughs and tucks the towel under her arm. "Deal. I could never resist a root beer float." I know, he thinks. Just as you could never resist the hope you would someday be "discovered" as an artist, no matter how harsh the critics were.

She follows him into a nearby diner where they perch along a red tiled bar. Bert orders two root beer floats.

"Fifty cents." The boy behind the counter accepts Bert's cash and opens a tin box full of bills and assorted trinkets. He counts the money, stacks it neatly to the side, and places a small model of a bellows in Bert's hand.

"What's this?" asks Bert.

"Winds of Change."

Rachel plucks the bellows from his palm and studies the way the pink crepe paper crinkles over a webbing of fish bones. "It's pretty." She turns her gaze to him. "You're so familiar. Are you sure we haven't met before?"

"Well, let's see. My name is Bertram Cross. I'm a retired pharmacist and amateur musician. I have one son. . .and a wife." He clears his throat. "At least I did, for many long and wonderful years. I'm widowed now."

She presses a hand on his arm. "I am so sorry. What was she like?"

A fleck of milkshake stands on her lip. Bert restrains himself from wiping it away. "Fierce, loving, beautiful, kind--all the cliches said about a woman when she's gone, but for her they really were true. What about you? Ever married?"

"No. Soon though." She hugs herself and gives a bittersweet smile. "I still can't place who you remind me of. It'll come eventually." She takes a long drink through her straw without breaking eye contact. "Oh!"

"You remember?"

She places a hand just below her rib cage. "No. It's a pain in my side. I've had it all week. I think it's my appendix."

Rachel, Rachel, he thinks. His lovely hypochondriac, worried over gangrene when she scraped her shin, and diphtheria when she caught a cold. Imagine his surprise when she self-diagnosed herself with colon cancer and turned out to be absolutely correct. Once she had beaten it, though, Bert slid happily back to a default of never taking her complaints seriously. He should have known better.

"Do you need a doctor?" he asks.

She finishes off her float. "No. Let's walk. It might go away."

They wander the streets in no hurry to get anywhere either geographically or in conversation. Neither mentions the painting Bert supposedly wants to commission. They play checkers with old men outside the drug store, and try on extravagant hats at the milliner's.

A theatrical company has erected a stage for a performance in the square. "Let's watch," he says. Her eyes travel over his shoulder to the bookstore, and she pulls her hand from his, tucking it under her arm instead. "Nathaniel will be looking for me soon," she says. "But I suppose I can spare another hour."

They sit in the grass east of the fountain and watch the sun sink low and vanish behind the sock depository. The theatrical players position themselves by the light of gas street lamps. Bert reaches again for Rachel's hand, and again she pulls it back. He notices her staring at the bookstore again and follows her gaze until he sees a familiar figure at the edge of the square, a lanky boy with greasy hair and a worn army jacket. Rachel raises a hand. The boy waves back, then disappears into the crowd.

"Who is that?" Bert asks, though he already knows.

"He comes to talk to me sometimes. He just asks me to call him Ace. Isn't that funny?"

It isn't funny to Bert. Ace is what she had called him when he was a little boy.

"What do you talk about?"

"Oh, you know. Girls, school, troubles at home."

Bert molds his voice into a tone of casual curiosity. “Troubles at home?”

“It’s actually quite sad. His mother passed away several years ago, and he’s not very close with his father. Don’t get me wrong--he loves his father. Has some wonderful stories about him. But it sounds like the two have never really learned to talk. Do you ever feel that way with your own son, being in a similar situation?”

“I hadn’t really thought of it that way before.” Bert looks around the square, and though he can no longer see Geoff, he notices dozens of familiar faces in the crowd which has filled in for the performance. They are people from out there – visitors, like he and Geoff are. “It’s getting late,” Bert says when the last applause for the show dies down. “But I’ll come back tomorrow. Promise to meet me here.”

"Just don't get the wrong idea. I told you. I'm engaged." She presses a small blue flower into his hand.

He knows before it happens that the blossom will crumble to ash as he exits through the apothecary. He marvels at the size of the crowd gathered around the arch this time, and fights his way through the melee to his car. At home on Pickett Street, he picks up Geoff's jacket from the back of the couch and hangs it on the hook by the door. In the kitchen, a plate of spaghetti waits for him on the counter, post-it note with his son's writing stuck to the cling wrap. "Thought you might be hungry," the note says.

Bert eats the spaghetti with an unfamiliar warmth in his chest, then sits at the piano for the second night in a row. His fingers run over the keys, stumble, and begin again. It doesn't sound quite right. He closes his eyes and visualizes the sonata he had picked up in the bookstore the day before. He pushes from his mind the way it and the flower had turned to ash on this side of the arch.

III.

The lobby of the inn is sublime: soaring Art Deco ceilings, polished wooden surfaces, frothing arrangements of tropical flowers. Bert and Rachel ride the elevator to the rooftop lounge. From the top, the twinkling marquis of the Brickland Theater is a mere pinprick of light. Bert spends the last of his small bills on iced tea and receives a further assortment of trinkets as change.

"I love this hotel," Rachel says. "I stayed here my first night in town. At first I was just glad to find someplace dry."

He tenses, reminded of another past conversation. The car broke down and I had to walk through the pouring rain to find somewhere still open.

"You survived cancer, you can survive wet feet. Aunt Ed's doctors are back. I need to go." The last words he'd spoken to her. She'd beaten cancer only to die of pneumonia before she'd been in remission two months.

Bert places his glass on the table. "I want to share something with you." He approaches the pianist at the far side of the rooftop. He has no bills left, but is able to tip him with a wad of silken string, *The Ties That Bind*. The man thanks him and, after a whispered exchange, relinquishes the bench to Bert and Rachel.

Her face softens as he plays. "So familiar. This music. And you—I still can't shake the feeling I know you."

"Maybe in a past life we were husband and wife. Maybe we grew old together and had a son and a little house with a lawn."

She laughs. "And big oak trees and lovely paperwhites out front?"

"Just the lawn." He surprises her with a kiss on her fingertips. "Stay here with me?"

She blushes and shakes her head. "I just couldn't. Nathaniel."

He bows his head to acknowledge her wishes and excuses himself from the piano.

"Wait," she calls after him, the word popping like a cork from a champagne bottle. "Okay. But no one can see us together. Wait ten minutes, then take the elevator down and check into your own room. I'll find you."

Excitement swirls in Bert's chest as he hands his credit card to the woman at the front desk. She hands Bert a small card which he first mistakes for his room key, before realizing it is made of paper and has no magnetic strip. A single, red dot the size of a dime hovers in the card's center.

"What is this?" he asks.

"The Point of No Return," she says. "Are you having second thoughts? Our policy is strict. No returns."

"No refunds on the room, you mean?"

"No," she says, tapping the dot on the card. "You don't return. Once you check in, this will be your home for good."

"You're telling me if I check in here, I can't leave? What is this, the damned Hotel California?"  
I love this hotel. I stayed here my first night in town.

Point of No Return. "Excuse me. I need a minute." Outside the hotel, Bert inhales the cool night air and sits on one of the street benches, hands trembling.

This is the place. This is where she had stayed the night. The question now, as Bert sees it, is whether or not he wants to stay too.

There are worse ways he can think of to spend his golden years. And what would he be leaving behind anyway? A lawn that is getting hard to maintain? A son who seems better off without him? Here he could watch over her.

Bert watches as the glowing windows of the hotel are extinguished one by one. When the last window darkens, he watches the stars. The sky burns with different constellations here, all the stars that have expired over the millennia, the last of their light long ago drunk by the thirsty atmosphere, the last of their meanings interpreted by the citizens below. The stars which still burned over the little house on Pickett Street – Orion, Ursa Major, and all the others he and Geoff had learned together on well intentioned but poorly executed camping trips – are nowhere to be found. Not even the North Star is there to anchor these thousand suns as they revolve in the night, spinning wildly out of control, and at the same time so slowly that their workings are mistaken for stillness by Bertram Cross on the street bench.

"You're out late."

Bert looks to the silhouette before him, mistaking the face for Rachel's before the speaker steps into the light. "Geoff. What are you doing here?"

"Same thing you are. Checking on her." Geoff sits beside his father, studies the sky above. "You know it's back, don't you? The cancer? She beat it out there. And what's gone out there--" Geoff inhales deeply, does not exhale. "That guy Nathaniel? He's taken her to a medicine man, a Voodun priest and an ancient Greek physician. They've decided to bleed her. To re-balance her humours."

"Bloodletting?" Bert says. His voice grows louder. "Do they want to kill her? Give her an infection?" He squeezes his eyes shut, trying to comprehend what comes next. When he opens them, Geoff is gone, and he knows what he has to do. Although Rachel waits inside, Bert looks down the street one way then the other, and starts the walk back to the town square. Rachel needs drugs--chemotherapy pills like the ones still sitting unused in prescription bottles in their medicine cabinet. He can't take her to the outside world for treatment. Not if he doesn't want her to turn into a pillar of ash as soon as they step through to the other side. He has to bring the medicine to her.

He crests a hill and the square opens in front of him, the sound of the fountain like music. He curses when he sees the darkened apothecary storefront and the block letters saying "CLOSED" on the placard behind the glass.

"I was hoping they'd be open too," a voice says behind him.

He turns to see a halo of frizzy hair illuminated by the moon. "Hello, Stacey."

"Hello, Bert. Nathaniel has been in quite a state over you spending time with his fiance." She laughs. "It's after hours, of course, but I was hoping there would be someone here to open up and get me a soda."

"You can go inside? You don't pop out into a construction site and turn to ash?"

"It's just a drug store to me."

They stare at the locked door, shoulder to shoulder. "Can I ask you a question?" Bert turns to her.

"Do you remember your old life?"

"Over time memories come to me, as they fade from the minds of others. It's Brickland, after all. What's lost out there is found in here."

"Does that mean she'll never remember me as long as I remember her?"

Stacey makes a small noise. "So that's the way it was. You were her husband? No wonder you don't care about pissing off Nathaniel." She sighs and shakes her head. "I'm not sure what you have planned, but take my advice. Don't take any offers to stay inside tonight. You'll be safe as long as you wait it out here in the square." She gives him a reassuring squeeze on his shoulder and is gone back to the depository, the door locked behind her.

Bert stoops and pries up a loose cobble from the square. He launches it at the apothecary window. The glass spider-webs and rains to the pavement. He punches out loose fragments, his fist repeatedly striking a soft barrier six inches on the other side. He reaches deeper, groping for the door lock, and his hand closes on something soft and warm. He smells sweat and fire. A strong hand grips his arm and drags him through the shattered storefront.

He is forced face-down against the side of a modern vehicle. Police flood lights illuminate an angry mob on the site of the razed pharmacy. Heavy construction equipment crawls between a parting sea of people. A triumphant silhouette, back lit by bonfire, dances on the top of the arch. An officer leans close to Bert and stares at him with wide eyes. Bert smells the garlic the man had with dinner.

"Punching an officer?" the man in uniform asks. He must have been standing right in the opening of the arch when Bert punched out the window. For the first time in his life, Bert is notified of his rights, folded into a police cruiser, and booked.

#

The arch was torn down the night of the mob.

"About time," says the officer who escorts Bert from the station the next morning. "Public hazard. Someone eventually would have gotten hurt."

Bert limps into the house on Pickett Street, heart low. He can see no way back to Rachel without the arch. Upon entering the den, he sees the familiar army jacket slung over the back of the couch and his stomach drops. He has been so worried about getting medicine to his wife that he hasn't once stopped to consider whether or not Geoff made it out before the arch fell. Bert hobbles faster, not breathing, and shoves through the bedroom door at the end of the hall. His breath rushes out in relief. A lumpy figure slumbers there, covers rising and falling with his breath. Bert leans his head against the door jamb and watches his son sleep.

For once, the tangle of electronics and piles of laundry do not irritate him. He bends to pick up a quarter glinting on the floor beside a single white tube sock. No sense losing it in the laundry. Bert straightens, his mind alive. It's not too late.

He rummages in the medicine cabinet, surveying rows of half-full bottles marked "Rachel Jones Cross." He rattles them, counts pills and consolidates them into the smallest bottle. With a felt tipped pen he prints, "Stacey--" and continues until the label is full.

In the laundry room, he removes the lint trap from the dryer. The bottle barely fits in the opening. He nudges it, and listens to it clatter as though it were falling through eternity. He holds his breath, sure that when he looks inside he will see the amber bottle lodged there. But it's gone. From here, he can only hope. He hums the Silver Sonata to himself as he drives into town, mentally reworking the second movement. It should be happier, he thinks. He parks alongside the razed lot, and sits on a bench to watch people comb through the debris.

One of the stragglers sits beside him. He shifts to give the newcomer more room, turns to smile, and is flooded with relief once more as he looks into the face of his son. Together they watch papers blow across the ground and sand swirl around heaps of stone.

"So," Bert says at last. "What now?"

Geoff shrugs. His eyes are trained on something far away. "There's a new bookstore over on Fifth. Want to check it out?"

Bert nods. His son's voice is like music. "That sounds perfect."

# Lunch with Friends

By Raymond Lee

I'd spent the morning at the famous Shakespeare and Co. getting lost in the old stacks in the back behind the stairs. George was still kicking around, drinking soup from a bowl and haunting the aisles in a 19th century sleeping gown. I remembered how years ago he used to tell me dirty jokes and so asked if he'd heard any good ones lately. He gave me a blank stare as if he was trying to picture who I was. He must have come up empty because he wandered away muttering.

The mass of young literati were ever present. Their faces merged with those I had known back in ought four, all walking around intently, looks of superiority and glory-to-come upon their faces as they brushed by without comment. The amateur volunteers had little time to direct me towards the Roman Gary title I was searching for.

Otherwise it was a delightful morning. Lost as I was in worlds that don't properly exist, worlds discovered since childhood between moth eaten, weather beaten covers hidden away in obscure corners, physically dug up from piles of the moldering like. I was in the habit lately of spending my life that way, mired in other people's empires.

My childhood was unfortunate. I was born poor like anybody else and so had to get a job out of high school. That job became a career, and that career became my waking life. It wasn't incredibly pressing, and so lonely I took up literature to ease through the monotony of the working hours. I got to choose my other life, the dreaming one where time and space were optional to preference, the company at my discretion.

I spent thirty years this way. Working a job I didn't like, but I made the right investments, selling before busts, after booms. All told I did alright for myself. No one would've thought I, among all my bright and eager classmates, would become a millionaire. Few think of me these days, but those who do consider me lucky. Maybe luck does have something to do with it, but for all the money I've made I have pitifully little to show of it.

I always wanted a woman. Pure, easy, simple. The guys at work would always joke about how clever I was for never getting married. But the truth was the envy was all on my side. Of the many fine things placed upon my table over the course of my life the one I wanted most never materialized. I played myself off to friends and the fading remnants of family as a Casanova, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. Women came along, there may have been one or two floating around the periphery of my existence, but those relationships were only ever as brief as the first fine week of Spring.

I was still rather young when I retired. At fifty-two I had plenty of money, but was too old to piss it away on anything exciting and too young to become a hermit. So I moved to Italy in the hopes of writing the great American novel. It seemed like a good idea at the time and I was well prepared for it. Marooned by the language and distracted by the stunning peaks from my villa I

actually wrote very little. Again I found my days filled with books, the greatest books ever written. And as my library grew, literature came to consume me.

I slipped inside so many minds and explored the depths of innumerable universes so much so they began to become my own. I listened to fine records on vinyl and read with a passion that ruined my eyesight and made my waist expand to a point I barely recognized myself in the mirror. My life was a dream, and it seemed for awhile I was living in another world.

The idea for my lunch with friends came to me through Maria. It bubbled up out of murky, forgotten depths one day. I don't know, I might have been asleep. "This happen with age," my physician told me in his stilted and clipped English during a regular check up, "you are fine one moment" and then with the gesticulation Italians are famous for his balled hand turned to a starburst, "next you are in dreams." He laughed. "No big deal, as you Americans say."

Some men get to keep their Maria. Not me. I met her at Under the Attic on Superior Avenue, Chicago's North Side having a drink to myself one night. She'd come in a few times a week in those days. I'd seen her around, the usual admiration from afar type of deal. This one particular night she connects eyes with me. I nod as if to say hello, a little habit I retained from my rural upbringing. Normally it didn't go so well in the city but she surprised me by coming over to my table drink in hand.

Instead of saying hello, asking my name and all that, she sits down confidently, leans over the table as if imparting a secret and asks through the drone of music: 'If you could meet any five people living or dead, have lunch and get drunk with them, who would they be?'

I was astounded by the question, but my answer surfaced more quickly than I would have thought. I guess she liked some of the inclusions because we talked for awhile. She told me the question's design was a personality test. I assumed that meant I passed. She gave me her answers. I can't recall a single person from her list but she must have chosen some authors for how long we spoke. She was the cozy type one feels inclined to open up towards, and she was a fast drinker. By any right I took her back to my modest apartment that night. She lingered with me a few weeks before moving on. Maybe I bored her? Working steel doesn't leave much to talk about and we shared little in common outside biological necessity. I saw her around from time to time afterwards. For what it was I think I might have loved her as much as any young man can love a young woman, but after that initial conversation I don't think we ever spoke, really spoke, again.

Twenty years later in my Italian villa with a well worn copy of Allende's House of Spirits in my hand Maria and her ridiculous question come to me out of a resounding silence. Again, I might have actually been asleep but given to mania I decided to see the idea through.

I collected my thoughts, got out the nice stationary and wrote a proposal. I sent the invitations out with the evening mail. I chose Paris for the location because it seemed like it

could serve as common ground. April because of that old song, you know the one, 'April in Paris.' The bar I chose because it had been my favorite when I went backpacking as a young man.

I've never really been adept at the Italian post so I wasn't certain any of my guests would receive their invitations. So imagine my surprise when within the month I received an RSVP from all five. The intervening period I was rather more fraught than I would have suspected. The closer the date came the more I felt somehow unworthy of such an esteemed audience. By the morning of Shakespeare and Co. killing time before our big lunch a pervading sense of ennui overcame me. It would be the lunch of a lifetime, but my nerves had been shot from weeks of anticipation. Few people are ever so lucky! But then again, people are always calling me lucky.

I found myself wishing I had a date to present as I walked out of the bookshop without buying anything. Almost felt like I was stealing, which I had done in the past from Shakespeare and Co. With the rain falling over the pavement, islanding themselves in pools like the way memories can be made of the same substance but at once so very separated I found myself smiling at my reflection in a shop window. I was the happiest I'd been in the longest time, and the rain reminded me of the first time I'd spent April in Paris. It reminded me that that song was perhaps the least accurate bit of pop culture to ever come along.

April in Paris is miserable, dark, wet, always wet, with something menacing in the cobble, the smell of starvation and consumption in the air. Made me think of Greece and malaria back then, as I hopped over some of the smaller puddles, noticing my step growing stronger, my muscles tightening, my balance accurate to a fine point, hair growing in thicker, the curls of my youth returning to me in the reflection of a cafe window and betraying no trace of gray. The wrinkles on my face disappeared before my eyes and that slow, neutral smile of mine tautened, regained the wickedness it once held.

A glance at my wristwatch revealed the approaching noon hour as I ducked into the glass paneled entrance of the Bistro D'Artistes. I said hello with a wink and a nod to the proprietor, Michelle. I had come to know him well over the course of that youthful summer of ought four. He would be dead before I ever left, hit by a drunk right outside his own bar. But there he was smiling, greeting me familiarly like once did. How much of what was meant to be a college education did I spend on wine and spirits in his bar? How often back in ought four did he ask me and whatever degenerate group I kept company with to leave because he needed to close shop?

He ushered me past several waiters to the back corner I had specified when I noticed one of my guests had already arrived. He rose to greet me from the carved, burnt cherry bench. I'd recognize that mug anywhere. It might be the most famous face in history. I'd never met the man, but his likeness was unmistakable and I could tell by the withering glance of nearby patrons that his presence was creating unease.

His movements were short and perfunctory as he shook my hand. His grip was light, and

I noticed something feminine to his demeanor. He made the briefest eye contact possible and then it appeared as if he were trying to avoid me altogether. Rather than meet my gaze he looked about the room to the other patrons, out the window, or to the door. His gaze floating again and again to the door. It seemed he was fixated.

“I’m glad to see you’ve made it.” I said lacking anything better.

“Punctuality is a virtue.” It was an offhand remark as he continued staring towards the door. He pulled at his shirt to straighten it though it was immaculately pressed and he sat down again.

“Wine?” I asked though I immediately regretted it. He shook his head a single time then looked to his hands. When he noticed me noticing them they were placed below the table out of my line of sight. “That’s right, I know you don’t drink. Excuse me, but I think I will have something.”

He cast a disapproving eye my way but the congeniality had melted along with my age and I couldn’t care less. I called Michelle to the table with a wave of the hand. We exchanged a few words and he walked away laughing. I think my guest may have made him a bit nervous because he usually liked to hang around and chat with the clients. Parisians don’t cater to customers so much as friends.

Michelle returned with a bottle of white that was supposed to be the house best. I’ve never been a connoisseur and couldn’t tell the difference between the fine and plastic liter variety. Still I commented on how good it was after the sample was inspected. Michelle received the gesture with a pleased smile before disappearing again.

I tried to make small talk but Hitler wasn’t much for words. I think it was due to lack of audience though, and was quite relieved when Mr. Brock showed up. I introduced the two immediately.

“Herr Hitler,” The words felt as strange to say as the look on Isaac’s face. “this is Isaac Brock of Oregon on the West Coast of the United States.” Hitler stood to shake hands but Isaac merely slumped into the bench next to him. “You’re August right?”

“I am. Listen I want to tell...”

“You’re a big fan, and I bet you liked the early stuff the best, yeah?” He asked cutting me off. His speech impediment was noticeably competing for attention against the queer glint in his eye. “You prefer August or Auggie? Your invitation didn’t leave much for me to work with. I used to have a friend named Alexander so I think I’ll call you that.”

“That’s fine.” I barely fit in as he began a tirade.

“Where the fuck were you back in the nineties, huh? All you people coming to the shows now screaming for the early stuff! We used to drive eighteen hours just to play to the sound guy at rot-gut bars in places like Des Moines. Where were all of you when we were shoplifting groceries? Where were you then?”

“Sometimes you got to pay your dues before you pay the rent.” I tell him borrowing a phrase.

“Yes,” Hitler added, “The people will respond to the strength of character. They threw me in prison, but in the end we triumphed.”

Mr. Brock laughs, looking straight through Hitler. “Maybe that’s how you see it, but the history books don’t paint it that way.”

“Books!” Hitler pounds both fists on the table.

“Take it easy Adolph, my head's killing me.” Brock looks to me. “Can you get another bottle? I’m nursing one hell of a hangover here. Spent all night on mescaline chatting into the mirror.”

“A conversation with god?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Did you just say mescaline?” Hitler asked dumbfounded.

“I did indeed.”

“Any left?” I asked.

“Back at the room.”

“Michelle!” I called out while pointing towards the bottle. He put a finger up mouthing,

“Une moment.”

“I’ll keep the drinks coming, you line me out later?” I winked to Mr. Brock.

And so it went for a period. Mr. Brock and myself becoming intimate over stories of his early years. He recited off kilter accounts of drug abuse and poor relationships, the venues from high to low and all the towns between. Hitler said little, in fact didn’t express much interest in anything other than his hunger. This complaint was pushed aside as I explained there were guests yet to arrive. Mr. Brock had asked me who, but I decided to keep him in suspense.

About mid-way through the third bottle of wine, with my pathetic attempts to translate Jaeger Bomb into French the third and my most highly anticipated guest appeared. “Herr Hitler,

Mr. Brock, I'd like to introduce Mr. Vladimir Nabokov." Neither rose for the greeting, Mr. Brock in tribute to informality and Hitler a cold clam of refusal, due perhaps to the Russian origin of the author's name. Mr. Nabokov took more flair than necessary removing his dinner jacket to sit down. It became quickly apparent that neither Hitler nor Brock had any idea who he was.

This didn't stop me from directing him to the chair next to mine. I nearly forgot anyone else was in the room for how silent Mr. Brock became left to Hitler's company. (Though I do remember a conversation becoming somewhat animated when the topic of zeppelins arose.) I had a great deal to say to Mr. Nabokov but had learned my lesson concerning idol worship with Mr. Brock. Instead we spoke about Paris.

It was a dream realized to share a glass of wine with the author, however I soon learned how much the man loved the sound of his own voice. What's worse was when I noticed him deftly remove an index card from an interior pocket while pretending to search for a cigar. I saw fine miniature handwriting scrawled across it in neat rows with delineations of topics where several words had been underlined for emphasis.

This was, as you can imagine, quite amusing if not more than just a little disappointing. The course of our conversation segued flawlessly from Paris itself to Parisian women and I soon came to discover that much like myself Mr. Nabokov lead a conflicted life in respect to the fairer sex. It wasn't the content of his speech so much as the manner in which it was delivered that enthralled me. It was several minutes after a sidelong glance towards Der Fuehrer that I recognized an unknown presence. The white of his muslin was what originally attracted my eye.

Hitler was mute, his bottom lip stiff as he stared out over the crowd. Mr. Brock began gesticulating wildly, almost screaming (I do believe he was drunk) with an arm leaning on Jesus' shoulder. I rose when the image became familiar but he motioned for me to sit before I could speak.

Jesus didn't appear at all how I anticipated. He most closely resembled an Arab, and I couldn't help but laugh at the image of a bearded Arabian Gandhi. To my mind, after the bottle I'd consumed, an Arab was what he resembled most. An emaciated, hunched Arab! There was nothing beautiful about him, in fact he looked to each speaker in earnestness, a quixotic look of constipation on his face as if he were concentrating deliberately on each word. He rarely spoke, but as opposed to Hitler it didn't seem he disapproved of what was being said, rather he looked absorbed, transfixed. I was somewhat disappointed to realize he hadn't said a word to me after the better part of an hour had elapsed. In fact, I couldn't recall hearing him speak until Hitler began to grumble about the state of his health were he not to eat that very moment.

Thus spake Jesus. "I understand there is someone yet to arrive."

I didn't realize until afterward that I had sided with Hitler, but hindsight is 20-20 and I was hungry myself. I called over Michelle to take our order. Disappointingly, Hitler ordered salade verte with no dressing. Understanding the meal was gratis and perhaps in accordance to his

struggling artist period Mr. Brock went overboard ordering steak frites, hamburger bleu and foie grass along with a bottle of champagne and another of whiskey. Jesus asked for bread and cheese while Nabokov requested pasta in a white sauce with prawns and clams. As for myself I took a pizza margherita, supposing it to be large enough to share with my final guest.

It was quarter to two and I mistook him for a bus boy when he finally arrived. He stumbled over to my bench, as visibly intoxicated as I'd ever supposed him to be and without a word of greeting. His bloodshot eyes were sunken ships of war and his countenance was quiet as the grave. He needed no introduction and I suspect Mr. Brock was more excited than anyone at the encounter. Nabokov too took a great deal of interest in the man but it seemed Mr. Poe was beyond the ability to answer questions coherently.

He rested his fine head of dense hair on a fist and proceeded to pick off the guest's plates pell-nell. The food couldn't have come at a better time and seemed to enliven the crowd. The only problem was Poe refused to speak in anything but French, so Mr. Nabokov had his undivided attention. Unfortunately my French wasn't of a state to contend.

They were going rounds debating what I could only marvel at, most likely literature because the name Pushkin issued authoritatively from Nabokov's mouth while Poe was deliberately, fatuously repeating the whole spectrum of the Greeks. It seemed the little nourishment Hitler took invigorated him to the point of soliloquy. Jesus busied himself elbowing Mr. Brock with humorous asides against Hitler's rambling diatribe that had the musician laughing while the two cheered glasses and drank without pause.

I found myself the odd man out, too far from the heated debate between Hitler and Jesus and floundering amongst the French of Nabokov and Poe. I found something of a bridge in the bottle of whiskey. It made hot laps from Poe on one extreme of the table around to Brock on the other. In-between it made several stops and after two or three rounds I ordered another bottle brought to the table.

At this time Michelle quietly pulled me aside to settle the bill. I was astounded to see it came out to just over 800E. I paid in cash while ordering a bottle of wine and another of whiskey. When I returned to the table Mr. Brock was up in arms concerning something I'd missed, lashing out wildly at Hitler who in turn was taking cover behind Jesus. He didn't look afraid so much as annoyed but it seemed there was no calming the aggressor. Brock kept screaming for a fight and so I was much astonished that Poe took him up on the offer. It would prove anti-climactic. Despite Poe's best attempt to stand and square off against Brock he tripped over his own feet and fell to the floor. This sent Nabokov into fits. Jesus picked him up to the cacophony of laughter and shouting that followed.

In a word I was embarrassed. The entire evening was a disappointment. Looking about I noticed the Bistro was nearly empty. The diners had all cleared out except for the bar where a few stragglers remained over demis watching the discordance at my table as if it were a football match. Checking my wrist watch I saw it was nearing four. I was relieved the vacancy had

nothing to do with my party but was still somewhat self-conscious about those that remained because a young woman was watching avidly.

Taking a closer look I recognized her quite distinctly. It was Maria! She was engaged in discussion with a gentleman next to her but was clearly looking at me. I motioned her over and without excuse she rose from the stool.

“How’s it working out for ya August?”

I couldn’t really explain the evening in a few sentences and so abandoned the subject altogether to ask of her plans. She took one glance back to her company then shrugged her shoulders. “Nothing doing.”

“Would you care to abuse hard drugs with me and Isaac Brock?”

“Sure,” she said without batting an eye.

“If I can find Loup there’s bound to be some speed involved.”

“Aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?”

I showed her around the table. Of the five, only Nabokov and Mr. Brock took any interest in her, and perhaps Brock too much so because he began to recount lurid stories of a sexual nature almost immediately.

It became more than apparent the party was over. Hitler excused himself without goodbye. He seemingly disappeared while the conversation focused on where to go next. It was clear Poe was in no shape to do much of anything, and so Jesus volunteered to see him off, the genius clinging desperately to the savior's frame some few stumbled steps to the door. Nabokov appeared nervous, though I couldn’t understand why, and suggested a party he knew of in the first arrondissement at the home of an old White Guard friend. Everyone agreed, none moreso than Mr. Brock, who I then inquired after the dope.

Michelle saw us out, ever the gentleman, agreeing we would settle the rest of the account at my earliest convenience. But then I knew something he didn’t and so in my drunkenness, the alcohol and the sentiment of a lost affair affecting my head, I kissed him on the cheek on the way out. Together we wandered through the dim streets, heads bent into the gusts of wind and rain of Paris in April. From one party to the next all through the night the faces became a slur, the words in every language blurred, becoming one, the want of ever more increasing, the senses dulled and then heightened at maddening intervals until finally a sweet slice of death in a stranger’s bed as Maria’s body curled over mine.

Before the dreams imprisoned me she said. “It’ll all be over when you wake.” I could do little more than nod. “So how was it? Everything you could have wanted?”

I muttered as best I could. "I'd forsake them all for another night with you."

"Why's that?" She asked.

"I spent my life in the company of these men, but you..." I trailed off as I fell into dreams trying to describe a feeling I'd been missing for the better part of half a century.

# Beginner's Luck

By Rochelle Rodak

The Free Range Insurance closed at four, and Gina was balancing the drawers when she received the text message from her babysitter, "I just put the last diaper on the baby, and you're almost out of formula. Also, Kristen wet the bed during her nap and you need more laundry soap."

"Shit," Gina muttered under her breath.

"Everything alright?" Heather asked.

"Yeah, thanks. Just kid stuff."

"Kid stuff? Is everyone ok?" Heather's voice grew concerned.

"Oh, yeah. No, they're both fine. Just, you know, diapers, food, etc. Always spending money it seems." Gina responded.

"Yeah, I get it. Good thing payday is this Friday!"

Heather didn't have kids, and she most certainly didn't 'get it'. Heather's parents put her through college. Heather had a nice car and a great apartment, but she was single. But she had been Gina's friend for the past six years. And it was Heather who got Gina the job when her soon-to-be-ex-husband pulled his disappearing act, leaving Gina to care for two young girls on her own. So Gina smiled and nodded, looking at the drawer of cash that she was putting into the vault, wondering how she would make it through the rest of the week.

The first time, it was only a twenty dollar bill slipped out of the drawer as Gina was locking it in the safe. Gina felt guilty as she bought the off brand diapers and formula. Being thrifty wasn't a new way of life for her, and she was able to squeeze out a jug of the cheapest laundry detergent, frozen chicken strips and a treat for Kristen, with twenty-three cents to spare!

Gina struggled through the door of her low income apartment, juggling her keys, purse and groceries.

"You're late." Shannon said, coat in hand.

Just then the grocery bag burst and the contents fell to Gina's feet. The door, wide open, was letting out the expensive electric heat. Gina closed her eyes and calmly pushed the door shut behind her, sighing she slumped against the door frame. Claire began to cry from her baby swing.

"I know, I'm sorry. We had issues balancing and, because of your text, I had to stop by the store. I get paid Friday though, and I'll throw in a little extra. I'm really sorry about this."

“Look Gina, I like you and I like the girls, but I can’t keep doing this for free. My kids need me too,” she said.

“It’s *not* for free. I’ve always paid you before. This month has just been extra hard,” Gina paused and looked around the corner for her girls. Kristen was trying to soothe her baby sister with a binky while singing along with the Bubble Guppies on the Disney Channel. “Their dad hasn’t paid anything in months, and it’s catching up to me.”

“I know, I get it, but like I said, I have to get paid. I’ll do it next week, but if I don’t get paid -- then I have to find something else.” Gina could hear the finality in her voice as she slipped past her into the cold November evening.

“Mommy? Can we have sketti for dinner?” Kristen came running around the corner.

“How about chicken nuggets?” Gina hoped this wouldn’t be a fight, while she mentally took inventory of her extremely bare pantry.

“YEAH! Sicken Nooguts!” Kristen jumped and clapped her hands. “Can we have cat-soup too, Mommy? Pwease?” Gina couldn’t help but smile at the way she pronounced ketchup.

“Of course, now take these diapias and put them on the changing table for Mommy, ok?” Gina bent and kissed Kristen’s soft blonde curls.

After feeding the girls and putting them to bed, Gina found the sock of money she’d been putting away for Christmas and pulled a twenty to put in her purse. Then she lay awake most of the night, worrying. She worried about the money she didn’t have, and the money she had taken. She worried about the money she already spent against next week’s paycheck and how she was going to be able to afford a sitter the rest of the month. She worried about Christmas and her car that was making an ugly sound when she started it. Between the worrying and the guilt, sleep did not come easy to Gina that night.

The only thing Gina had going for her was the fact she was the only cashier who did the daily balancing. Gina was fairly certain no one would notice that the twenty dollars was gone before she had time to get it back in the till. Despite her confidence, Gina waited anxiously at the door for Shannon to arrive.

“Morning Shannon, thanks again. The girls are still sleeping. I’ll see you at four!” Gina hurried to her car before she could hear any more ultimatums from Shannon, and spun her bald tires in the fresh layer of slick snow.

It was with a sigh of relief that Gina stuffed the stolen twenty back into the till only minutes before Heather arrived.

“You’re here early.” Heather greeted her as she came through the door. Gina was still wearing her jacket and starting to turn on the computers at her receptionist desk.

“Yeah, Shannon got there early this morning, and the girls were asleep. It’s easier on everyone if I get out of there before they wake up.” Gina gave Heather a genuine smile filled with her secret relief.

“I can only imagine. I’m so glad I don’t have kids to worry about in the morning. Gina, I just don’t know how you do it all!” Heather said. Gina thought she heard a little pity mixed with the admiration in her voice.

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Gina made it through the next couple of weeks, and was even back on Shannon’s good side before she found herself in another sticky situation. The company Christmas party was coming up, and she was worried about being the only one who wouldn’t participate in the gift exchange. But when her mom came to town she took advantage of the childcare and agreed to an afternoon of window shopping at North Town Mall with Heather.

“I don’t know if I’ll make it to the Christmas party,” Gina said as they browsed JC Penney’s clearance racks.

“What? Why?” Heather replied, “You have to go--, you’re the only reason I want to go!”

“Oh I don’t know, I just feel bad leaving mom with the girls so I can have fun. She’s only here another week. I should spend more time with her. And to be honest, I shouldn’t be wasting my money on parties.” If she didn’t have child care, she didn’t have to go to the party. If she didn’t have to go to the party, she didn’t have to buy a gift for the exchange.

“Oh, come on, it’s just a couple of hours. I’m sure she loves having time to be grandma. Besides, with Jason gone I figured you could be my date. I can spot you some cash if you need it.” Heather said nonchalantly.

“Oh, it’s not that, I just feel like I should be spending it on the girls, not company gift exchanges. Where’s Jason?” Gina changed the subject, embarrassed she had said anything about her finances.

“Oh at some conference or something.” Heather said waving her hand as if she were shooing a fly. “Hey! You deserve to have fun too, Mama! Don’t feel guilty about that!” Heather scolded her.

“Fine. I’ll go, but only to keep you company,” Gina smiled as she followed Heather towards the cuter, trendier, and more expensive section.

Gina had intended to try on a few things, to look like she was interested. Just like she intended to put it back and pretend like nothing fit. That was until she slid into the faux black leather pants

that fit like a second skin, and the red sequined strapless top that showed off her small waist and nursing mom bust. She stepped out of the dressing room to show Heather.

“Oh my God, Gina. If you don’t get that outfit I will scream. Girl, you look hot!” Heather exclaimed. “I truly hope I look as good as you do after I have kids!”

Gina blushed. She felt sexy, and these days it was hard to feel anything but tired and broke. The next day, when she realized she had predictably overdrawn her bank account, she took \$100 to get through to payday. But, this time she took it from the petty cash bag in the safe. It hadn’t been balanced in months. Everyone had a company credit card these days, and it was much easier to use those than to bother with the petty cash.

“This is the last time, Gina. You’re pushing your luck and you know it,” she whispered under her breath as she clicked the safe’s lock into place.

Most of the initial nerves were gone, and she was sleeping nearly guilt free by day six. When no one noticed the difference by payday, she was feeling pretty alright with her situation, confident it would never happen again.

“No harm, no foul,” she smiled to herself as she slipped the five twenties into the petty cash bag.

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Gina was officially introduced to Steve at the company Christmas party. He was the new office manager of the branch. Gina noticed Steve coming through the front office in the mornings, and thought he was cute. He had a snobbish quality to him, rarely giving Gina more than a nod. So she was surprised when he approached her after the gift exchange.

“These things make me so damn anxious,” Steve said quietly from behind her.

“Oh, goodness, I didn’t see you there. You startled me!” Gina said.

“Sorry about that, I really didn’t mean to startle the most beautiful woman in the room,” Steve said.

Gina blushed, “Oh. Well...uh” Gina was at a loss for words, so she took a sip of her wine instead.

“I thought I should at least introduce myself. I’ve been trying to get to know everyone, but since my first day I just haven’t made the time.”

“Oh well, yeah I guess the receptionist isn’t probably high on the “need-to-know” list.” Gina’s cheeks grew hotter. “I’m sorry, that sounded terrible, really. It’s nice to meet you, I’m Gina.”

“No, you’re absolutely right. Would a fair maiden like you please accept my humble apology?” Steve bowed before her, his hand to his heart and a twinkle in his eye.

“OK. Now you’re just being an ass!” Gina laughed.

From there they hit it off, Gina found out that Steve was newly divorced and had a three-year-old boy, just a bit older than her Kristen. For most of the evening they chatted amiably and before Gina left with Heather, she had changed her mind about his stuck up attitude, attributing it to his busy schedule both at home and in the office.

“So, tell me all about him,” Heather accosted her as soon as they got in the car.

“Who?” Gina asked, feigning ignorance.

“Gina, really? Steve! Tell me, did you guys exchange numbers or what? I hardly talked to you in there because he was holding your attention so well. Or maybe it was those pants holding his?” Heather winked at her.

“Not much to say, we just talked a bit. He’s got a boy about Kristen’s age, and he just got divorced. Oh, and I called him an ass.” Gina said with a laugh.

“You what!? Well, he must not have minded or he wouldn’t have spent the whole evening with you! Did you give him your number? Or what?” Heather was vibrating in the driver seat.

“No, but I’m sure I’ll see him again. We do work in the same building you know,” Gina said laughing. “Come on now, let’s get out of here, people are starting to come out and we’re going to look like a couple of weirdos out here gossiping in the frozen parking lot!”

“You better tell me the SECOND he asks you out, Gina, I swear you better!” Heather said dropping the car into drive.

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Monday morning Gina was extra careful as she picked out her most professional but flattering work attire. She must have looked good because even Shannon noticed when she arrived.

“Wow, you look great, some big wig coming to the office today?” Shannon said as she took off her gloves and hat.

“Um, nope,” Gina said blushing, “Sometimes a girl just wants to look as good as she feels, ya know? Things are looking up Shannon, I can feel it!” With that Gina kissed Kristen on the forehead and headed off to work.

Gina was behind her desk and looking great by the time Steve came through the front glass doors, looking extra sharp in a navy pinstripe suit.

“Good Morning Mr. McCurdy,” Gina said with a smile.

“Good Morning to you Ms. Stanton,” Steve replied as he stopped to lean an elbow on her counter. “Now that we’ve been formally introduced, I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you.”

“I guess that depends,” Gina replied skeptically.

“I have tickets to see Jeff Dunham at the Northern Quest casino this Saturday, a birthday present from my brother. Anyway, I’d hate to have to go all by myself.” Steve asked with a smile that reached his eyes.

“You’re right. I don’t think there could be anything more pathetic than a grown man laughing to puppets by himself,” Gina said, “I’d love to save you from that embarrassment. What time?” Moments after Steve left, Heather, who had obviously been eavesdropping, jumped from behind her computer screen.

“Gina!” Heather squealed, “Oh. My. God! I’ll watch your princesses. You need this girl! Seriously! Oh! We can go shopping before your mom leaves too. You need another killer outfit, you know, to seal the deal.” Heather was winking again.

“Ok, Ok, thank you – but please stop winking, it’s creepy!” Gina said with a laugh. “She leaves Wednesday, can you come with me tonight after work?”

“Sure! I’m leaving early to pick up Jason at the airport, but he has a meeting this evening so that will work!”

Heather left at noon, leaving Gina a lot of time to think about her upcoming date. It also left her a lot of time to think about the money she didn’t have. Christmas was only a week away and she had already blown through most of the Christmas money she had set aside. But then again, it had been nearly 4 years since she’d been on a date. Didn’t Heather tell her to stop feeling guilty for enjoying herself? Besides, they were going to a casino; she might get lucky and come out ahead.

“And what if you don’t get lucky?” Gina thought out loud, “You get fired, that’s what you get.” Gina’s cell phone buzzed in her desk drawer. Three unread messages. The first one was from Shannon letting her know that she needed to buy diapers again. The second was from Steve thanking her for accepting his invitation and confirming he would pick her up Saturday at six; the last one was from Heather.

“I’ll pick up you @ 5! We can get dinner – my treat! I’m so excited for you Gina!!! ;) ;)” “Sheesh, even her text messages are creepy!” Gina laughed. That night Gina took \$200 from petty cash.

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Saturday evening Heather was watching for Steve while Gina was finishing up her make up.

“Ok, how do I look?”

“Mommy is soooo pretty!” Kristen squealed as she wrapped herself around Gina’s legs, covered in graham cracker crumbs.

“Oh honey, come here, you don’t want to get your dinner on your mama’s outfit do you?” Heather asked as she put Kristen on her hip. “Gina - You look so good. I’ll be surprised if he doesn’t propose after tonight. Oh, and if you need me to have a sleepover with Princess Kristen and Mistress Claire, you have my number.” Heather was winking again.

“Where you going Mommy? Mommy, are you coming home?” Kristen said with her three-year-old concern.

“Mommy is going to dinner with a friend and I’ll be home before you know it!” Gina reached over and kissed her eldest on the cheek before going to check on Claire. Claire was happily rocking in her swing, chewing on a book that made crinkling sounds. She smiled and kicked when she saw her mom. “I love you too, Claire-bear,” Gina kissed her fingers and placed them on Claire’s head. “Now you two be extra good for Auntie Heather, ok?”

“We will, Mommy! I’m going to help with baby Claire. Oh! And we’re going to have a tea party!” Kristen was wriggling to get down from Heather’s grasp. She hit the floor running for her bedroom.

Just then there was a knock at the door, “Gi-na! He’s he-re!” Heather called out in a sing song voice.

“Cut it out! He’s going to hear you!” Gina grinned as she reached for her jacket, “I’ll try not to be too late, thanks again, Heather, I mean it.”

“Don’t you worry about us, we have a tea party to attend to!” Heather exclaimed as Kristen came out of her room dragging a blanket full of said tea party supplies.

“Bye Mommy!” Kristen called.

“Alright, have fun ladies, I’ll be back!” Gina blew a kiss over her shoulder as she slipped outside to greet Steve.

“Hey,” Gina said, tying the belt around her wool jacket.

“Hey. Wow, you look great. Ready?” Steve said, offering his arm.

“More than you know!” Gina wrapped her arm in his as they took off for the evening.

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The casino was decked out in full Christmas cheer and their dinner was perfect, with hardly a second of awkward silence or conversation. They both thoroughly enjoyed Jeff Dunham's show too. Gina forgot how nice it was to sit with an adult and laugh at adult things. She also realized how nice it was to be called by her name, not just 'Mommy' all the time. In fact, when Steve held out her jacket, Gina realized how badly she didn't want the evening to end. He must have been thinking the same thing, as he folded her jacket over his arm.

"Hey, how about we try out a few of the tables, since we're here," he asked. "Unless of course you don't like that kind of thing?" His nerves were starting to show.

"I haven't ever really done it..." Gina said with a shrug. "What about you?"

"Me either, but when in Rome..." Steve laughed as he placed his hand on the small of her back.

"Well, maybe we'll get lucky tonight," Gina said. It was Steve's turn to blush.

"Oh my God. I didn't mean that, honest!" Gina blushed even harder and covered her face with her hands.

"I know what you meant," Steve said with a smile, his hand now moving in a slow circle.

They started at the roulette table, where Gina's luck continued. Before long she was ahead by \$100.

"Are you sure you haven't done this before?" Steve asked, grinning with amazement.

"Beginners luck! I swear!" Gina was showing off when she placed the full \$200 on black, confident that her luck would continue. Just this one last bet, then she would pay back the petty cash and give the girls a really nice Christmas, and never take from work, or anywhere, again. The ball took a lifetime to stop bouncing from red, to black and red and black again. It stopped for good on red. Gina stared at the ball for a few seconds. The dealer looked at her with indifference as he shrugged and scraped her chips into the well.

"Oh well – you win some you lose some. Let's leave before we're out too much, huh?" Steve bent down and kissed her on the cheek. "That was a great go for a beginner!" Gina, still high from the booze and the evening with Steve, didn't feel the despair as much as she should have. "You're right. Let's get out of here," Gina agreed as she slipped into her offered jacket.

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Gina could see Heather peeking through the blinds as they pulled into the drive.

“Thanks Steve, I really had a great time,” she said as she opened the truck door to leave.

“Hey now, wait a minute,” Steve jumped out and ran around to her door. “I can’t leave a first date with the lady getting the door herself!”

Gina laughed as she slid out of the cab and nearly fell into his arms. He pulled her close and brushed her hair behind her ear. “I believe you have some explaining to do.”

Gina stiffened and her smile faltered, but before she could question him, “I believe someone is a bit eager to hear how your night went,” Steve chuckled as he nodded over her shoulder at Heather, still peeking through the blinds.

“Oh,” she sighed, “Yeah, I suppose this night is only about half over.” Gina reached up and kissed him quickly and softly on the mouth. “Thanks again, it’s been wonderful,” she started to slip from his arms when he pulled her in tighter.

“I had an amazing evening Ms. Stanton, better than I could have imagined. I hope it’s not the last,” Steve bent and kissed her with a bit more purpose.

“Oh, Mr. McCurdy,” She said, cheeks flushed from the kiss. “I don’t think you have to worry about that.” She slipped out of his embrace and hurried for the door. She stopped once to look back and give him a little wave before she went inside.

“So?” Heather was bursting with excitement, “Tell me. Everything.”

“Oh Heather, it was great, it really was,” Gina began, as she kicked off her heels and curled up on the couch. “Can I give you a recap tomorrow though? I’m just so tired.”

“Sure, of course you are!” Heather yawned, giving away her own exhaustion and a little disappointment. “But I’m bringing coffee and donuts first thing, so be ready to dish!”

After Heather left, Gina looked in on the girls, both sound asleep, both sucking on their thumbs. Gina smiled at her babies as the tears began to fall. What now? Pay day was two weeks from Monday, and she couldn’t afford to pay it back then anyway. “I have to come clean,” she whispered as she slipped into the cold and empty bed.

As promised, Heather was there by nine, with sugar coated donuts and giant peppermint bark lattes – Gina’s favorite.

“Good morning sunshine!” Heather sang through the apartment.

Kristen, barefoot and bedheaded, came squealing from the kitchen. “Donuts! Donuts! Donuts!”

“Here you go, sweetheart!” Heather handed her a white powdered donut that appeared to be exploding from an over injection of red syrupy filling, “go eat this, carefully, in the living room ok?”

Gina gave Heather a disapproving look, but was so concerned with the upcoming conversation that she let it go.

“Ok, now spill!” Heather said.

Gina told her everything. She told her how funny the comic was. She told her how great the food and conversation had been. But when she told her she lost \$200 gambling, Heather stopped her.

“Gambling? Steve’s money?”

“No,” Gina was staring into the foam of her barely touched latte.

“Your money? Oh, Gina...”

“Not exactly,” Gina interrupted.

“What are you talking about?” Heather was genuinely confused now.

Then Gina told her the rest, all of it. She told her about Shannon threatening to quit, she told her about the first \$20 and the next \$100 and how it had all worked out. She told her that she really thought it was going to be ok this time too. She told her she never planned to do it again after this one last time. Then Gina started crying.

“Look, I’m sorry. You got me this job, and you’re my best friend, and I love you. I’m just so sorry,” Gina’s shoulders were shaking with her sobs, “I’ve ruined it all.”

“Oh Gina.” Heather wrapped her arms around her as she cried. “Why didn’t you say something before? You know I would have helped you.” The hurt was palpable in her voice.

“I just couldn’t. I was ashamed, after everything else you’ve done for me. Heather, it felt like pity. It felt like, begging.”

“Well now I am stuck between helping you essentially cover up a crime, or covering my ass and doing ‘what’s right,’” Heather said, making air quotations with the last part.

“I know, I’m sorry. I understand if you have to tell the manager – Steve. What is he going to think? I’ll get fired, but it’s my own fault. He’s going to hate me, and that’s my fault too.” Gina was resigned to the worst case scenario.

“Hey now, it doesn’t have to be that bad. You have half of the money right? You’re coming clean? So let me think about it, we’ll get through this, but things will be different. I hope you know that.” Heather said. “I’ll loan you the other \$100, you still have half right?”

“Yes, but…”

“Don’t think I’m covering this up – I can’t afford to do that. Besides, it would be bad for your professional and personal relationship with Steve to hide this.”

“What relationship after this?” Gina sighed, frustrated at losing the one good thing she had found lately, and all due to her stupid pride.

\*\*\*

Monday morning Gina was at work early. Heather came in and gave Gina a great big hug,

“Look, this sucks, but you’re not a bad person. You and I both know that. So let’s figure out the best way to do this and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Oh God, Heather. I will never, ever consider this again,” Gina said. “If I still have my job after today, it will be a miracle.”

“Let’s hope for the best,” Heather gave her a smile and crossed her fingers.

“Whatever Heather, I am just so thankful that you don’t hate me.” Tears were starting to pool in Gina’s eyes again.

“Stop that,” Heather gave her another hug. “Steve’s pulling up right now, and you don’t want him to see you all raccoon eyed and sad, do you?” Heather looked at her with genuine concern.

“We’ll get through this, you’ll see.”

“Hey Steve,” Gina said, “Can we talk?”

\*\*\*

# Rack Grohl's Bachelor Party

By James Ross

Strange. 120 degrees in the Arabian Desert and Sergeant Rack Grohl shuddered like a freezing sourdough on the Chilcoot Pass.

*What?*

Rack shook his head.

*Accurate...but really weird.*

Rack twisted skyward at the passing jet scream then over at that yahoo, Grimes, gawking on his feet like a tourist. Rack's boots bit into the sand as he scrambled toward Grimes.

“Incoming!”

Rack barreled into Grimes, drove his face into the dune, and got confused, “what the hell?” scowl for his effort.

*Whump!* The concussion lifted the expanding dune and Rack and Grimes—and deposited them in a living heap—“living”. Thank God!

Sand stuck to Grimes' sweat-streaked face and Rack shuddered again. Grimes shoved his glasses up only to outline even more desert and human gunk.

*Freezing at noon in the desert with a man that couldn't figure out how to...how to...stay alive.*

Rack jabbed a finger at Grimes. “You're dead!”

“No I'm not. Not till you get your medal at Jasha.”

*What the...*

A whirlwind of sand whipped into Rack's eyes and suddenly the Company Commander, a fussy Captain, formed the company behind Rack to decorate him. Crunch, crunch.

*This ain't right!*

The scowling commander fussed and grumbled at Rack's grizzled six-inch beard, tried desperately to find an opening to his shirt.

“Aach!” The Captain pinned the Silver Star to Rack's beard, then fanned the air in disgust as he departed.

*What beard? And what the hell's that noise?*

A stomach cramp gripped Rack and he moaned before he could stop himself. His eyes flashed open.

The night, a blind man's study in pitch, issued a frigid April wind that whistled through the pines and oaks that surrounded Rack's tiny camp. The oak leaf encrusted beard Rack hadn't had in the Army blew in fits over the cardboard coverlet of his sleeping pit. He fingered it.

*It's shorter than the dream. Okay. Answers. That's something.*

Twigs snap. Crunch, crunch.

*That's the noise!*

A panicked voice yelled in the underbrush: "Get going!"

Rack shoved the cardboard off him and bolted into the manzanita—too slow.

*Too freaking slow! My stash!*

Rack skidded to a stop and rummaged in the brush. He came away with an empty yellow wrapper from a fast food sandwich. His hands dove back and rifled the bush hopefully. Nada. Rack's jaw set.

*Damn bums! He pitched the wrapper into the blackness. Scavenge in the morning.*

The thought nagged him more than usual. He was fifty miles from home, a mere fifty miles from Marcie Fram—if she would have him back. *Please, please, please...*

He trudged back to the sleeping pit, lowered and covered himself, and prayed the cramps would leave him alone.

As he passed out, the faint sounds of a familiar party reached his ears—tinkling glasses, music, laughter. The lights magically came up on his bachelor party in full swing. Definitely better than the desert nightmare; the beard was gone and well-wishers clapped him on the back.

Boomer Williams piped: "I don't know how you keep her, dude."

"It's called love."

"And now marriage."

"Yeah..."

“Life’s all choices doncha know.”

An Army recruiter nudged his way into the conversation.

“An’ *I* can help you with that.”

“Who invited him?”

“I did. You need help.”

*If I make the decision I think I’m gonna...*

Rack couldn’t remember transformers on the lights at his parent’s home, but their intensity mounted until Rack had to turn away and squint.

*How can you attend a party with your eyes closed?*

He forced his eyes open to attend it properly. Morning sun had risen full above the trees as if to grill him. The rays rooted around in his matted beard. Then he remembered the food situation and struggled from the pit.

*Choices. Another bad one.*

Rack shifted in his stained and greasy pants, finally cinched its ratty belt and stitched it through one of the intact loops. It was long past the time he could clasp it over the holes.

*What do you think? 20/30 pounds? Doesn’t matter, get home, get better.*

On that note, Rack headed for the nearby strip mall and its row of fast food restaurants. Fortunately, the dumpsters were contained in fenced-in areas, and locked. All he had to do was cross the railroad tracks, climb the back of the fence, and dine.

*Better to wait till dark...*

But he sensed his body wouldn’t cooperate.

*Again, choices.*

Inside the dumpster, Rack lowered the lid and began to probe. He found a large cup and filled it drop by drop from other cups; orange juice, cola, coffee, mochas and lattes, milk shakes, anything but water. Fountains were plentiful and always cleaner. Soon he had a brimming libation just ready for the main course—which hadn’t presented itself yet.

He spotted a likely plastic bag and yanked on it, but it refused to budge. The shadow of the open top beckoned and he thrust his hand inside.

*Mistake.*

Pain shot up his arm; he sucked in his breath and wrenched his arm up—but his hand shot another pain up the arm. His leg shot out and spilled his hard-won drink. He watched the spillage course its way through the garbage.

He stuck the empty cup between the lid and lip of the dumpster, allowing a smattering of light to show the problem. Three tines of a rusted pitchfork stared up at him. He was impaled on the middle one. Something black and furry was impaled beneath his hand over all three tines. His eyes focused on it. A cat.

“Furry” was dead, of course, eyes glazed, coat matted, it’s tongue lolled and coated with thick, dirty saliva. Rack aligned his hand and started working himself off the tine. The going was slow thanks to rusty metal scraping bone, but he was finally free.

Now, he thought, if I can catch my breath and grab a snack, I’ll get outta here.

Thoughts of how poor “Furry” met his end tried to form but Rack willed them away. His problems were only more important because he was still alive and felt the pangs of hope, but that was enough for now.

He wrapped the hand in some discarded paper towels, found some beef, chicken, and fish parts to eat, ate them, and left enough in a bag for a later snack.

*Just a quick nap...*

Much later, he was awakened by the deep rumbling of a garbage truck, and someone fumbling with the chained and locked fence. He popped the dumpster lid, vaulted the fence with his stash, and skedaddled like a ghost across the tracks—albeit a hand-throbbled ghost.

Rack dropped his bag in the sleeping pit—*fool me twice*—and glanced around the clearing. It didn’t look like the bums had dropped by, but they would. *They were bums.*

At the base of a bull pine, Rack spotted what he needed to deal with them; Two golf ball-sized chunks of rose quartz. He wrested them from the roots, rolled them in his good palm, felt their rugged contours and comforting heft, then lovingly tossed them beside the bag of food.

*Can’t have enough ammo!*

Rocks as “ammo” touched him as ludicrous but he knew the precedents—and the accuracy of his arm. Bums were born to raid and it was only that throwing arm that held them in check.

*I'm no bum. Rack snorted. I don't raid their camps, steal their stuff. I've just made some questionable choices...*

It seemed an eternity for the sun to arc through the sky and drop into the Pacific, its rightful cooling place, but it finally did, and Rack used its inspiration to find his place in oblivion too.

#

The bums came before dawn, two moving shadows against the ragged purple line etched between trees and sky.

*Snap.* the broken twig might have well have been a gunshot. Rack grabbed one of the rocks and waited.

The bums knew they were busted, and stopped. The larger one smacked the smaller shoulder, then cooed into the darkness.

“Sorry ‘bout the noise, lad. We’s a bit hungry this morning. Couldn’ wait.”

Rack angled his rock-laden hand across his mouth, and deflected his voice. “Know the feeling. Sorry, boys, nothing here.”

The bums both inched toward the sound.

Rack slid the cardboard aside with his bad hand and barely kept from crying out.

*Great. Two bums, two rocks, one hand.*

“Hold up, boys!”

The bums froze, but they caught Rack’s ruse and turned to face him.

“That weren’t friendly.”

“Tell you what. Find something tasty and I’ll cook it up for us.”

The punched bum opines, “Clever. Real clever.” He received another shove from the big man for the effort.

“Easy Mort.” To Rack, “Sure, lad. Sure.”

“Bull pucky. You just a sack’a—” Mort charged and the large man clotheslined his throat and swung a leg behind his knee. The gunny sack called Mort fell harmless in the dust, finally silent.

“Treat all your friends like that?”

“Pssh. He ain’t got no manners. He’ll learn.”

“Well. Thanks. I appreciate the help like you’ll never know. But it doesn’t change anything. I can’t cook what I don’t have.”

“Lemme over an’ we’ll work up a plan.”

The big bum’s hand inched into his pocket.

“Don’t.”

The hand stopped and the big bum shrugged. “It’s just a cigarette. Want one?”

“Just drag Mort out of my jungle and—”

The bum’s arm jerked from his pocket, a knife clear in his hand. It arced past Rack’s face and stabbed the cardboard in the pit.

Rack cocked his arm, patient and visible. “Heard a ‘stone cold’?”

“Aa-a-ah!” Evidently, the bum was through with niceties. He lunged at Rack.

The quartz cracked into his forehead and he rag-dolled in a larger puff of dust than Mort.

“Guess not.” Rack sighed. He had already acknowledged that life on the road held no appeal, but this, being skewered earlier, had catalyzed his desire to re-enter his life.

#

The admitting clerk at the hospital scanned Rack with undisguised disgust as he sat in the chair before her.

“Can I help you?”

“I sure hope so.” Rack held up his damaged hand, now wrapped in a greasy rag. “Accident.”

“Insurance?”

“Vet.”

“They’re in the valley.”

“I need help here, ma’am.”

“Of course. I.D.?”

Rack shook his head. “Sorry. Stolen.”

“Have you ever been treated here?”

“No.”

“Local address?”

“Just passing through.”

After a thoughtful moment she said, “Let me see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

The clerk left her station and disappeared into the hall. She returned momentarily with a local policeman by her side, took up her seat behind the desk as the officer loomed over Rack.

“Perhaps Officer Marquez can help you with your I.D., Mr. Grohl.”

“Perhaps. But I need my hand seen to first.”

Rack rolled his swollen, rag-wrapped hand around for effect.

“I.D. stolen?”

“Yes. The hand?”

“You’re not from around here?”

“No. The hand?”

“Sir. Can I see you over here?” Marquez pointed to an alcove nearby. “We’ll get this straightened out.”

“I’m sure of it. But I do need some help. Now.”

“Please.” Marquez continued pointing. “It’s the quickest way.”

“Right.”

#

After four hours filled by a trip to the jail, critical questions asked and answered, phone calls completed and otherwise, finger prints inked and CLETS verified, Richard “Rack” Grohl, former Army sergeant and recipient of a Silver Star, had been positively identified and blessed to go where his heart desired.

“So. You can take me to the hospital?”

“Sorry. Got another call. You know the way?”

“Hmm. Can I get a sandwich?”

“Inmates only. Sorry.”

“I get it Officer Marquez, but how about a quid pro quo?”

From the look on Marquez’ face, Rack wasn’t sure he understood that one.

“Face it sarge. You look—and smell like a bum.”

“Looks are deceiving—but I am broke. A razor?”

“Inmates only. Sorry.”

“Right.”

Rack had been told that once you’ve heard the clank of steel doors behind you, a coldness creeps into your bones that stays with you forever. Maybe so, but he couldn’t buy it from this experience. He just listened to them both ways and felt the anger of injustice. He sensed that some of the heat was in fact a fever that hit him about midpoint in his stay. Regardless, it didn’t improve his disposition. He kept his own counsel however, his college education advising him not to make things worse.

Two choices greeted his release. He could head back to the hospital armed with the legal tender of proper—if stinky—citizen, or he could find a new place to jungle up for the night.

Rack chose geography and fever over medical attention, but not before glancing at the hand—which was swollen and blotchy—his fingers thick and yellow like Vienna Sausages. He’d definitely return to the hospital in the morning.

Rack had no dreams that night, only pains he mostly couldn’t find reasons for. One was obvious. A rat nibbled on the grease-soaked rag; he smashed it and tossed the carcass into the bushes. For a moment he wished he were back at his old camp, that the rat was rabid, and that the bums would devour it, saliva and all.

*How could he get back to Marcie?*

Trudging back to the hospital he had fleeting glimmers that supplied ways to do it, ways he might try. But then he saw Taliban soldiers lurking in various places.

He laughed. The thought of Taliban soldiers lurking behind lush trees in the Sierra gold country was too much, even in his fevered state. But he couldn't concentrate. One of the soldiers, a man in blue homespun clothes, leaning against a column, grinned at him as he entered the cool confines of the hospital.

The same clerk was on duty. She spotted Rack and flushed with embarrassment.

*Can't be helped. She'll learn.* Rack took up the same chair as before. "Not to worry. There's bums and then there's bums."

A wave of dizziness hit him and he laid his head on her desk. "Sorry. It'll pass."

A hand gripped Rack's shoulder.

*What the...*

It is the blue Taliban from outside. Rack leapt on him and wrestled him to the ground.

"Grimes! Where the hell are you? Move your ass. Taliban!"

"Grohl. It's Marquez."

"Taliban. Taliban."

Rack loosed a fist into Marquez' face, but Marquez saw it coming and dodged it. He flipped Rack on his stomach and cuffed him.

"Easy, sarge."

A doctor bolted through the Emergency Room door, a syringe in hand.

Marquez pinned Rack so the doctor could administer the shot.

#

Rack emerged from this hole in his life with all the bile he entered into it. But his hands were cuffed to the rails, and his feet to the uprights, so his thrashing quickly subsided. He focused on Marquez who stood by the bed.

"You get me like this?"

“The one and only.”

“Not many can say that.”

“I had an advantage.”

Rack smelled antiseptic, observed his clean bed clothes and covers, the gauzed boxing glove of a hand that hung in front of the cuffs.

“Well. I got some help. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So why am I trussed up?”

“You gotta be kidding. Thanks for the shiner.”

“Why would I do that?”

“You tell me.”

#

Rack, beardless, reflected on his answers after he pushed the call button by the cell door.

*Let’s see...that was yesterday...before I got fed...before I tried to get Marquez to drop the charges. Before the judge gave me thirty days of work release—nights to be spent in jail—for slugging Marquez.*

A hollow, scratchy female voice warped into the day room.

“Whuzzup?”

“Grohl for work release.”

The mike stayed open as papers shuffled.

Rack seized the moment and glanced at his reflection in the glass door. *The cast-off clothes weren’t half bad. The pants were a little short, but what the hey. And the face...hmm.*

*I reminded Marquez I was an inmate and entitled to shave. Marquez laughed and gave me a half dozen toy-sized cutters.*

“You’ll need ‘em.”

The door buzzed and Rack pulled it open. The sally port was a short way down the cinder block hall.

*I'd think this was all a blessing if this blasted headache would go away.*

Rack waited at the sally port while the muted vision of the booking clerk behind opaque windows found the button on her control panel to let him out into a sparkling day.

#

By noon, the Thrift Shop actually let him make a phone call.

“You’re all right,” they said, “for someone with one working paw,” and showed him a privacy phone to use.

There was only one person he wanted to talk to.

“Hey Marce...”

“Rack?”

“Course.”

“How’s the Bachelor Party coming?”

Rack laughed. The “bachelor party” had lasted over two years now.

“I’m done.”

Sucked in air. Silence.

“You sure?”

“I can be there in twenty-nine days if you’d like.”

“Get your ass home, soldier.”

Boomer’s voice from the party rippled through the two year interval. “I don’t know how you keep her, dude.”

*I know, Rack thought. I know.*

The boss stuck his head through the door.

“Sorry.”

He thumbed in the direction of a customer and disappeared.

“Marce...I love you. Gotta go.”

“I just set my timer, buddy boy. No hiccups.”

“Not of my choosing.”

#

The headache escalated that afternoon and Rack fought it back with the intense joy of Marcie’s voice. The fever returned making it a one-two blow that was hard to fight, and he misread the boss’s instructions several times as a result. He apologized but he could see the concern on the boss’s face all too clearly.

Nothing was going to keep him from making the most important date of his life—not even the Taliban soldier he saw lurking in the Thrift Shop doorway.

A muscle spasm pitched Rack into a stand of clothes; clothes and man writhed on the floor. He saw the boss grab the phone and then all became fabric shrouded. His right leg refused to let him up, refused to move at all. He stilled and waited for the Taliban to finish him off.

*Some things just can’t be fought.*

It didn’t happen, but then he didn’t know about the ambulance ride to the hospital, either.

#

Rack lay drained, completely spent, in the hospital bed. Again he found himself restrained and Marquez nearby.

*This can’t be a dream...it can’t.*

Rack tried to speak but his jaw weighed a ton and felt wet.

“I didn’t...”

“No, sarge. You’re just sick.”

“Blood poisoning? Lock-jaw?”

Marquez shook his head. “Not that.”

A cough erupted and sent spittle flying.

“Been bitten by any animals lately?”

“Rabies?”

“Guide me, sarge.”

Rack began to laugh and choke.

“Who’d a thought?” Between gasps Rack managed, “Talk about a bachelor party gone wrong!”

The nurse came and pressed the medication button. Rack watched through an enveloping haze as she and Marquez left the room. His confusion grew.

*Marcie. Grimes. Boomer. The bums. Marquez. Taliban all over the place.*

Parking lot lamps snapped on outside Rack’s window but he didn’t know it. His lungs just expelled their last air and he died.

# A Southern California Love Story

By Auriane de Rudder

I left the party just as I became significantly drunk. I didn't know the birthday girl well, although I managed to bring along a thoughtful gift—a small Mexican tile with an illustration of a bartender serving cocktails to a skeleton on it--that seemed to impress her. The bar was one I had frequented a number of times, typical for a dive in my neighborhood; red lighting, cheap booze, bad karaoke. I said my goodbyes to the other guests hastily, and stumbled onto the pavement, excited to drink the last of a remaining bottle of Rosé in my fridge. I pushed ill-fitting headphones into my ears, and played an online radio station of contemporary Pop music. I walked along to the upbeat music with intention—albeit a little crookedly-- toward home.

The streets of Long Beach were quiet. It was a Sunday night, and few pedestrians lingered in front of the bars and bodegas that I passed on my way to my apartment. The air was cold, February's Pacific breeze biting at my bits of exposed flesh. I pulled my heavy leather jacket around me, tighter, and knotted another knot into my scarf. I took a few steps forward, and I stopped to adjust my purse. That's when I saw him. Julian.

He stood under a street lamp, illuminated in the buzzing yellow light, staring at me. At first, I didn't know it was him. I prepared to avert my eyes from this stranger, ignore whatever passing comment he had for me, like I would with any other man on the street. But as he cleared his throat, my vision narrowed and I recognized him for what he was. My lover, or my ex-lover, if I could even call him that.

“Hi,” was all he said.

I'm sure I rambled on about something, I don't remember. I was drunk, after all. I do remember that I agreed to let him walk me home, something I hadn't allowed for months—months I had gone ignoring his calls, and avoiding seeing him at all—and that I took his hand in mind. Before we started to walk, I buried my face into his neck, inhaling the scent of his beard—he smelled like soap and nutmeg and pot. Then we were on our way.

As we walked, he did most of the talking. Knowing Julian, I'm sure that he was drunk, too, but I didn't care about that. I listened as he tried on two pretty half-assed apologies. First, he was defensive, upset that I had ignored him for so long. When that approach didn't win back my affection, he explained that he had made a mistake, and *deserved* to be forgiven. I had heard these selfish kinds of apologies from men before. As he spoke, I focused on placing one foot in front of the other and remained quiet.

When we arrived at my doorstep, he stopped apologizing, and stood, slumped, his pelvis slightly tilted toward me, his head hung low; a stance of defeat. He was almost like a dog, or some other sad animal the way he stood there. It was time for me to speak.

“I don't think it's a good idea for me to forgive you,” I told him.

He stirred a little, and lifted his head, “Has this ever been about a good idea?” He asked.

“You left me there, Julian. You left me alone,” I looked down, determined not to show too much emotion. I was definitely not going to cry.

He started to speak again, defending his actions that night, months ago, but I had stopped listening. I turned on one heel, ready to walk away, but instead turned back and looked him in the eye.

“I woke up in a pool of blood, Julian. You left me there. In a fucking pool of blood,” I spat,

“That’s way too dramatic,” I said.

I turned my back to him, walked up the stairs to my building and turned the key. I pushed the door open and stepped inside. I didn’t look back or say another word. I locked the door and leaned against it for several seconds. I took a deep breath, and greeted the happy dog, wagging her tail at my feet.

“Hello good girl! Yes, baby, I just love you *so*,” I exclaimed, as I bowed to scratch behind her ears. “Do you wanna’ go potty?” I asked her, peeking through the blinds to see if Julian had gone. He had.

After the half-bottle of Rosé, I went to bed and pretended that Julian was holding me in his arms until I fell asleep.

The next few weeks were peppered with more Julian. He lived close to me, right around the corner, actually. This made him hard to avoid, if that’s what he wanted. When he didn’t want to be seen, he could quite easily disappear into the recesses of bars I didn’t frequent, but when he did want my attention, he only had to make himself visible—at our local coffee shop, along the stretch of grass where I walked the dog, or even right there on my doorstep—to be seen. It was unfair, the way he could pop back into my life without permission. This made him impossible to forget, and harder to get over.

One day, while walking the dog, I noticed a car, gliding slowly next to us as we walked. I didn’t recognize the vehicle as belonging to anyone I knew, and so I slowed to see the driver. The car pulled up alongside me, and stopped. The passenger window rolled down. Of course, it was Julian. He had bought a new BMW.

His previous car was a beat-up Honda of some sort, with sun damaged, peeling black paint. He had actually lived in that car for a period of time, after finding himself without an apartment. He had gone broke getting wine drunk for weeks at a time in Napa Valley. Fortunately, his wealthy Orange County family had bailed him out, and—when he wasn’t frequenting dive bars and sleeping in that Honda in Long Beach—he could live at his parent’s house somewhere in Newport. More often than not, he chose to get drunk and sleep in the car.

His new car did not double as his residency. He had moved into a studio apartment catty-cornered from my place. I had actually noticed the rental sign months earlier when he and I were still friends and mentioned it to him. Now, I felt like an idiot for doing so.

The BMW was shiny and white. When he rolled down the window, he didn't say anything. The sun shined so brightly, I had to shield my eyes, and at first, I didn't recognize him. This made him noticeably uncomfortable, maybe even hurt.

"Hi Julian, how are you?" I said flatly. I didn't give him the satisfaction of reacting to his luxury item, although seeing him alongside something new, something changed, did ignite a foolish spark of hope in me.

He didn't speak at first, but just nodded his head.

"Eventually," he said, "'Sup?"

I wondered if he was already drunk. It was about 2 p.m.

"Just walking the dog," I said, leaning on one hip, trying to look disinterested. He nodded again, rolled up the window, and drove away. This encounter—the same cold exchange, Julian in his fancy new ride, and me walking my peppy little mutt—would happen again and again in the weeks to come.

The weather remained unusually chilly and wet, and I cursed my drafty apartment and inadequate heater. With each passing night alone, shivering in bed, my resolve weakened. One late night, half-drunk with my arms wrapped around myself for warmth, I gave in to my irrational loneliness. I couldn't call Julian—I had deleted and blocked his number in such a way that I had no access to finding it on my cell phone. Instead, I had to find him on Facebook messenger, which felt even more desperate.

"I'm cold. Come keep me warm," I messaged.

He didn't respond for some time, and I fell asleep in the same position, holding myself, waiting for my phone to signal me back awake. That signal came early the next morning.

"I was passed out. Still cold tho'."

Minutes later he was at my front door. I gently ushered him inside, taking his hand. He was warm and smelled of stale marijuana. I kissed him slowly and walked him to my bedroom. We spoke only briefly, some inane chit chat, maybe something about work, or more likely something about my pilot light not being lit—how cold I was, but not how lonely, or how much I missed him.

We laid in my bed. He spooned me and I pressed into him as he did. I pulled his arms around me, and he cupped my breast. He played with the lace bra I was wearing a little, exposing my nipple,

and stroking it slowly. Everything he did seemed so slow, so deliberate. I reasoned this was because he was high, but it pleased me, and so I leaned into him harder.

We continued this slow dance for several minutes, before Julian pulled me on top of him, pushing my bra above my breasts and leaving it there instead of removing it. He took each of my breasts into his mouth, again, slowly, and encouraged me to push down on top of him. This wasn't intercourse, but a playful kind of teenage flirtation. Something I used to call "Everything but..." I came softly, on top of him, my cheeks flushed, my hair shaken out loose, my bra still perched awkwardly on my chest.

"That was kind of fun," he said as I rolled over next to him, his cum dripping down my inner thigh, "Fucking without really fucking," he exhaled and leaned back on the bed next to me.

"Yeah it was cute, kind of like we're kids," I said.

"Yeah like don't wake up mom," he laughed.

"Well no, that makes it sound like we're brother and sister," I poked him and he laughed, wrapping his arms around me and spooning me again. Five minutes later he left to go to work.

I put a kettle of water on the stove and retreated to the bathroom alone. I stared at myself. I leaned in to the mirror, examining the fresh, pink scar above my right eye. I winced as I massaged it a little, and then opened the medicine cabinet. I applied over-the-counter scar gel to the area, something I had been doing for the past few weeks in hopes to lessen the appearance of my injury. I went back to my bedroom, refreshingly filled with sunshine and rainbows from the crystals hanging in my windows. It smelled warm and musty, like vanilla and biscuits and sweat. I picked up my phone from the nightstand, went back on Facebook messenger, and blocked Julian again.

I wouldn't hear much from Julian for several weeks after that, other than seeing him cruise by my apartment once or twice. I spent any lonely moments repeating anti-Julian mantras like, *He isn't the one for you*, or *He is a drunk and a slob*.

"*He's not romantic, he is high*," I would say aloud, looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and then spitting toothpaste into the sink, washing it down the drain.

I even wrote *He got a new car, not a new personality!* on a pink Post-It note and placed it in clear sight in my living room. I read it again and again each day as I did my morning Pilates, inhaling and exhaling with a new confidence that I had finally moved on. I called the gas company and had my pilot light re-lit.

After a few more chilly nights, the weather began to warm, and the nasty, unusual rains went elsewhere. California began to bloom like I had never seen it, a welcomed payoff for enduring the storms. Californians swooned over the fields of poppies, the hillsides now covered in green and orange and instead of the usual draught-ridden brown. My neighbors' roses bloomed a bright crimson, lining the street in front of my apartment. All along the Long Beach bike path, tall,

purple Lupine grew wild and free. The air smelled of lilac instead of inner city, and Esperanza trees dotted the city with their impressive golden, bell-shaped blooms.

I started experimenting with making fancy dinners for myself, as I had started to frequent the local farmer's market and found myself inspired. Each night I opened all of my windows and propped open my front door. A brisk ocean breeze would sweep through the apartment this way, sending the aroma of each meal swirling over the patio of my building, over the rose bushes and sometimes enticing neighbors to stop by for a bite. One night, I shared a cauliflower crust pizza with goat cheese, chicken sausage and basil with the married couple from next door. Another, I made a chicken salad with cumin, lime and cherry tomatoes over a bed of fresh arugula, topped with a sprinkle of sesame seeds. My neighbor Christina helped me eat that one. I sent her home with leftovers, and drank the half bottle of wine she left for me while I watched TV until bedtime.

After a long day, tired of entertaining guests, I closed the windows and made only a solitary turkey burger. I seasoned the meat with provincial French spices, and also added turmeric since a hippie friend had mentioned that it's helpful for cleansing the liver. I opened a bottle of wine and just as I sat down to eat, I noticed a shadow on my front porch. My door was ajar, although the screen door was locked. I leaned over to see who was at the door. It was Julian. He stood, slumped slightly at my stoop. He had seen me see him. There was no avoiding saying hello. I walked to the door cautiously. All of my mantras were suddenly lost.

"Why are you avoiding me?" He asked through the screen door, his voice too loud for the short distance between us. I didn't open the door, but stood there unmoving.

"I'm not avoiding you," I lied.

"You never respond to my texts. You blocked me on Facsebook," he slurred.

"You're drunk," I said.

"Why are you avoiding me?" he asked again.

"You know why," I told him, "I can't be around you."

"I told you I'm sorry," he said. He held a small paper cup in his hand from the neighboring coffee shop. It was empty where his espresso had been. He crumpled it and dropped it on my doorstep. I unlocked the door to retrieve it.

"Take your trash with you," I insisted. He had walked several steps away, but turned around, walking back to me. He pushed my extended hand, holding the paper cup, away, and leaned in, close. I could smell the coffee and liquor and pot on his breath. He leaned into me. The door was now ajar, and he pushed both of us inside.

“This isn’t happening,” I told him, and walked a few steps away, out of his reach. He followed me and pawed at me—not an act of aggression, but of drunken immaturity—and I recoiled. I walked to the freezer and retrieved an old pack of Marlboro Lights. I had quit smoking but kept these as a security blanket, just in case.

I pushed him outside, and stepped out with him. He provided me with a lighter, and we sat and shared a cigarette, in silence. After I extinguished the butt of the cigarette into the crushed paper cup, I walked inside alone and locked the door. He stood on my stoop for a few seconds, looking in through the adjacent window. By the time I had put the cup and cigarette butt in the trash can, he had gone.

The night things fell apart—the really, really bad night—started out innocently. Julian and I had just met a few weeks prior, and despite our mutual bad habits—we drank too much; smoked too much—we agreed that we genuinely liked one another. Friends asked what I saw in such a loser, and I tried to get them to understand that beyond his obvious flaws, there was some magic there. He made me feel the way I felt, alone in a new city, or just as I inhaled some bump of a new drug as a teenager. He had a buzz and a glow, but something constructed, something unnatural. I coined this sensation, this aura around him “Electric Blue.” He kissed me slowly, which none of the men I had kissed that year seemed to know how to do. We joked that we had known each other for 100 years. It was *that* kind of shit. *Electric Blue*. Naturally, we fucked it up.

Julian came over for dinner. He had just signed a lease on the nearby studio apartment I mentioned to him, and wanted to celebrate his foray out of “homelessness.” I made mushroom stuffed ravioli in a four-cheese sauce and a hearty salad. We ate merrily, and also drank copious amounts of vodka. Julian complimented me again and again on my culinary skills, which pleased me. I liked watching him eat a balanced meal. I liked providing him with that meal. I fantasized that he would change; that the alcohol was just a symptom of his loneliness; that my drinking was the same.

After dinner we made out on the sofa, and Julian lit a joint. I complained about him smoking inside, but after noticing that he couldn’t keep the joint lit, I hypocritically took a few drugs, trying to get the cherry to burn. This was a mistake. After the several hits of weed, the room began to spin. Chunks of my memory are missing after that—although the horror and intensity of what happened next remains clear. I am not sure how, but somehow, I got cut. At the time, I couldn’t tell how badly I was cut, but I was bleeding profusely from my head.

All I could see was the blood streaming down my face from the head wound. It was so much blood, and it filled my eyes, clouding my vision. At one point, I looked at Julian. He was just sitting back on the sofa, not moving, not trying to help. He kept telling me to stop crying, in a defiant, angry tone, but I was terrified and continued to cry. I stumbled around, my eyes coated in thick, gooey red, and felt around on my desk until I found my cell phone. I rubbed the blood from my eyes and asked Julian if I should call 911. He didn’t stand, but he did tell me not to call 911. I did anyway. When I looked down at the light blue terry-cloth shorts I was wearing, and saw that they were almost entirely burgundy with blood, I was sure I needed an ambulance.

Julian went from loudly asking me to put down the phone to yelling for me to put down the phone. Hearing his voice, the 911 operator became concerned and asked me if the man in the background had hit me.

“Did you hit me?” I asked Julian, “No, I don’t think he hit me,” I told her. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have called. I am very drunk,” I said.

I don’t remember what else was said, but she agreed to let me hang up and not to dispatch an ambulance.

I stumbled to the bathroom and identified where the blood was coming from. Above my right eye there was a deep gash. I knew then that it would need stitches. The amount of blood was overwhelming. I couldn’t stop crying. I called out for Julian, but he didn’t respond. I felt dizzy, and knew I would pass out soon. I staggered to the kitchen, where I wrapped a half a roll of paper towels around my head, securing it with tape.

“Julian?” I said as I staggered from the bathroom in my paper-towel dressing. Julian had left. I was too drunk to go to the E.R. I stopped crying and went to bed.

The next day, I woke up on a pillow stained horribly in a cloud of dried, brown blood. My stomach turned. The paper towels were saturated with fresh blood, I was still bleeding, and where the older blood had dried, the paper towels stuck to my skin. This worked to my advantage by keeping the makeshift bandage somewhat in place.

I ran warm water in the bathroom sink and slowly removed the bloody towels. The wound was still wide open, but clean and even. I pressed the two hanging ribbons of flesh together and looked as if they fused perfectly. I removed my hand, and they separated again, as blood came streaming out. I took a bottle of superglue from the junk drawer in the kitchen and—after using some leftover vodka to sterilize it—glued the wound shut. I did a pretty good job, but, as I cleaned the remaining blood away, I said aloud,

“This is going to leave a nasty scar.”

# The Colour of January

By Carol Stewart

We coupled between the tracks,  
the clacking of tongues on juniper palates,  
the crackle of new romance-  
brushed neon tides in hushed rebellion, rolling

*in,*

*out,*

we loved

our made-up reflection,  
our escape from the townscape breathing

ghosts round a disused chimney stack,  
birds over concrete squall,  
a break-line circle, back-slant  
black cutlass wings;

moths in a downpour, we stood to admire the shimmer.

*Demimonde,*

in the mirror nothing was real,  
age looked upon youth and youth upon age as fantastic  
as those songs on vinyl discs  
I recollect

their dividing silence.

# Until the Break of Dawn: An Electronic Autobiography by Hany Saed

Review by Ibrahim S. Fawzy

In this fascinating book Professor, Hany Saed takes his readers on a journey into the visual world where he searches for his own identity as well as ours. The book documents a journey through social media, especially Facebook, which lasted nearly eight years. The author's -eight- year experience loaded with events in the visual world is depicted in this book. *Until the Break of Dawn* belongs almost everywhere: it can be considered an autobiography, a diary, a collection of short stories, a novel and a collection of essays. Yet, it should be considered a new genre that is electronic autobiography. It also belongs to travel literature as it is a long journey where reality and imagination intermingle. This book obviously shows how the visual world has become real and vice versa.

In fact, everything you need to read will be found in this masterpiece. This book has been divided into five chapters: the first chapter includes essays that bring to light the Egyptian culture, especially that of the Egyptian countryside and its traditions. The essays also deal with Egyptian myths, such as *Abo-Shwal*, *Abo-Regl Maslokha* and *Al-Ghola*. Additionally, they deal with familial relationships and how the Egyptian countryside has been changed over time. The second chapter includes reflections and short stories that show the author's philosophy in life and enlighten the readers' way as he gives the author gives advice through narrating personal experiences. The third chapter includes selections that represent the author. The final chapter includes real stories experienced by people the author knows; these stories give us morals and show how the author behaved with those people to help them overcome their problems.

Eloquently written, the book shows how social media has greatly changed us into consumers and how it falsified our real world. The author uses different methods of narration to attract his readers whom he classifies into two categories: his readers who were his followers on Facebook and may have read and reacted to the content of the book and the book readers who first read the book without knowing the author and concludes that both readers, the one of the book and the one of the author, will have different interactions with the book. The language of the book is simple as Professor Hany Saed mixes Colloquial Arabic with Standard Arabic according to the situation and the background of the speaker. He uses imagery and extended metaphors to make his readers imagine and experience the event themselves. The tone in most parts of the book is sarcastic, yet sometimes it is critical, revolutionary and quiet as life is full of everything. Undoubtedly, he writes in a magnificent way.

Finally, this book clearly brings into view the life and the significant role of the University Professor and shows that the book will always have its value notwithstanding the advancement in technology.

# When Breath Becomes Air by

Reviewed by Lauren Jahn

When taking a birthing class, it is often recommended to pack plenty of comfort items. By preselecting loved objects, it is supposed to ease the tension of labor. Following instructions, I packed essential oils, coloring books, silly Putty, and a book about a dying man. *When Breath Becomes Air* accompanied me to the hospital to give life to a healthy daughter and assisted me through my own grief process of a chronically ill father. It is evident when one admires and loves a book, as they recommend and lend tirelessly; this memoir by Paul Kalanithi will forever be on the top of my must-read list for others.

Kalanithi can personalize and narrate the intimate and universal truth of death. As many readers consume his words, it is assumed that most will make connections to cancer carrying away a loved one. Without over-romanticizing, Kalanithi allows readers into his final days. Also, he prepares his audience for his eventual death in the preface—as to avoid any unwanted spoilers. Being upfront and blunt with death is refreshing to caregivers. Like parenting or getting fired, witnessing and being a passenger to death fulfills the cliché of “you just have to be there” to understand. As Kalanithi succumbs to his illness, he finds a way to connect to his audience without romanticizing or victimizing his situation—which is admirable.

As the reader accompanies Paul through his final months, they learn of his passions. He dabbles in varying professions such as an abstract philosopher or a meticulous neurosurgeon. Consistently, Kalanithi returns back to the intricacies of the human brain and all of the potential within it. Literature and science fascinate him; again, making him relatable. Most individuals side more with a right-brain or left-brain motif, but Paul is both pragmatic and imaginative as he navigates soulful science. On the other hand, while his brain is imagining and solving, his body is decaying as the cancer progresses. As his mind elevates new consciousness and thoughts, his body is shuttering to maintain vital organ processes. Despite all of the love, his quick end nears. Instead of distracting or numbing the inevitable, Kalanithi welcomes instances of uncomfortable farewells.

Like most people, his heart warms with his wife and daughter. He meticulously reassures his daughter through grace and boundless fatherly spirit, “do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man’s days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more, but rests, satisfied.” He lets his youngster know that he is not craving redemption or answers, but is instead, comforted by the early memories he has while she begins her life as he is ending his own. The father-daughter and life-death dichotomy gives readers an opportunity to associate dying with something abstract such as hope or joy. Kalanithi portrays the fatherly archetype that is both vulnerable and patriarchal. He strives to be a stereotypically strong man to fulfill cultural norms, but he also opens himself to possibilities of pain.

It is unknown where Paul Kalanithi’s soul went after he died, but I will recommend his memoir until my last breath.

# The Soft Path by Joshua Harmon

Reviewed by Katy Scrogin

The atmosphere of Joshua Harmon's *The Soft Path* is heavy, hanging over a still-living landscape holding out against mechanical incursions and cheap plastics, sagging infrastructures and colonizing data streams. This three-part study stares hard at what we have become and continue to turn into, what we allow ourselves to inflict on souls and matter, human and non-. But this is not a predictable lament for lost places, or a plea to join with the feeling heart of nature. If this is a protest song, it has refused the ham-fisted lyrics and self-congratulation typical of the genre.

Along the soft, non-technical path, it's evident that something else, something other, has absorbed what we still call living, and has done so thanks to our easy permission and submission to it, what Harmon calls our "unquestioned concession." This is a world of one-time towns progress left behind, of massive roadways bounded by "monocrop chokepoints," of clouds gutted and smeared by passing airplanes. It is a world in which a sentient being is unable to get its bearings, pummeled by forces bent on speed and fragmentation. The difficulty of the struggle to remain whole, to stand apart from so much virtual and material traffic, is evident in the line and word breaks found throughout the text, the work's narrating presence often stop-starting amidst the confusing flux of sensations surrounding it.

In Harmon's world, a particular being may insist on its singularity, but that assertion is already compromised when seeing and thinking take place in the language of conquering forces, when

the inexpressiveness of the world  
as I see it on screen prevails

when aspects of creation are described as the

404 error of sky  
-line at twilight

or as

a 2-D screenshot of a curved  
world it seems less and less  
possible to recognize: to inhabit.

When this blandly destructive something blankets and shapes and directs the world that was once familiar, it becomes difficult not to give in to its ways, to abandon mind and self to the ugly neuroses that are now the norm. We bend under the pressure, and

like everyone else,  
I seek only the least

inconvenience,  
the least disruption, a day  
defined less by what happens  
than what doesn't.

Standing upright under these conditions means striving always to remember that

I am merely a one  
-time programmable: low  
reservoir, lower sun,  
zero vim: but the heart  
still blusters its watt  
and a half, its boot-code  
logic unarguable.

In this account, nature seems still able to maintain this principled posture, stronger in its  
resolution than the lazy sapiens who are destroying it. Even broken and put-upon,

Anthemic pines this  
Morning frisk micro-  
waved skies

and

rain audits all my ambitions

And yet, this is no vision of good winning out in the end, of nature emerging victorious and  
(re-)instituting a harmonious reign of balance. Creation's

registration  
of predictability's  
predicament

takes note of the continuing disturbances being wrought—and certainly, too, of the fact that the  
lines that began “Horizontal Dropouts” on a seeming note of defiance

—and I, in between, unreachable,  
elsewhere, otherwise

return again to close the volume—this time as an acknowledgment of how difficult, how hard on  
the soul, is this world that is still loved, still wondrous, still in so much peril, where

the verbal

errancies coexist with  
a twenty-minute downpour  
that yields to isotropic  
skybreaks and the remnants  
of an internally combusted I,  
in between, unreachable,  
elsewhere, otherwise—

# Contributors

**Hayley-Jenifer Brennan** is a new writer, and is very excited to be featured in The Book Smuggler's Den.

**Ibrahim S. Fawzy** is a Lecturer-Faculty of Arts-Fayoum University-Egypt. He invites you to follow him on [Goodreads](#).

**Sean D. Gardner** is a journalist residing in Grand Blanc, Michigan. When not writing he enjoys being outdoors, good coffee, and the company of his beautiful wife and their two dogs. More of his work can be found at [Gardnersjournal.wordpress.com](#).

**Niranjana Hariharanandan** is a writer and content creator with Discovery Networks Asia Pacific. When she's not working on a piece of fiction or on a documentary, she can be found traveling back and forth to her homestay in Cochin, Kerala. Niranjana is a photographer, a writer with Indulge and Punch magazine, and an award winning documentary filmmaker. She is a 2 AM existentialist, scuba diving enthusiast, a Murakami maniac and has 67 pairs of shoes. She lives in Mumbai with her husband, and turtles- Roger and Mirka.

You can find more of her work on [www.clickninjaa.com](#) or at +91 8800524975

**Lauren Jahn** is a young adult residing in South Dakota with her husband, daughter, dog, and cat. Currently, she is dabbling with creative writing alongside her job as a program specialist for a governmental education department. You can reach her Instagram at 100wordsbylauren.

**Janie Kronk** is a writer, architect, and adult literacy tutor. Her work has previously appeared in The Petigru Review and in South Carolina Architecture. She lives in the Palmetto State with her husband and daughter, dog and cat, multiple fish, and a curiously active snail.

**Raymond Lee** lives and works in Afghanistan where the combination of political unrest and Sharia law keeps him at once in his natural element yet sober. If you, too, have the misfortune of encountering Raymond Lee, doubtlessly in a bar, in say Manila, Tallinn, or Oklahoma City, be forewarned: he is not to be trusted. His writing is expansive and largely (one could argue rightfully) unpublished.

**Rochelle Rodak** is graduating from Central Washington University with a B.A. in Professional and Creative Writing. She comes from a sleepy gold mining town in NE Washington where she shares her home with her best friend and two children.

**James Ross** loves to write and always has. Finding words to rouse heartbeats with the passion of a tale is his pride and promise—wherever it leads. His published work can be seen on [Goodreads](#).

**Auriane de Rudder** is a writer located in Los Angeles. She writes fiction, prose and memoir inspired by the great duality of life--its beauty and ugliness--peeking around every corner. You can learn more about Auriane on her website, [www.aurianederudder.com](http://www.aurianederudder.com).

**Katy Scrogin** is a Chicago-based writer, editor, and translator. In addition to her most recent work at *The Bookends Review*, *Bearings Online*, and *The Pangolin Review*, she can also be found at [katyscrogin.wordpress.com](http://katyscrogin.wordpress.com). She was especially moved and infused with determination by Harmon's declaration in *The Soft Path* that "the heart/still blusters its watt/and a half, its boot-code/logic unarguable."

**Carol Stewart** is a mother and grandmother living in the Scottish Borders. A former freelance editor, her poems have recently been published (or are forthcoming) in a number of journals including *Abstract Contemporary Expressions*, *That (Literary Review)*, *Gravitas*, *Panoply*, *Coffin Bell*, *Buddy* and *The Beautiful Cadaver Project*.

# Writing Contests & Guest Post Opportunities

There are many sites that allow guest posts, too many to list here! Rather, visit [Advanced Web Ranking](#) for a list of over 150 websites that accept guests posts. Categories ranging from health and fitness to finance and more.

Writing contests are one of the ways the Book Smuggler's Den encourages writers to gain confidence and get your work in front of as many readers as possible. Contests are also a way of building a report and can help you attract the attention of an editor. Plus, contests are a blast! Below are some upcoming contests that we encourage you to submit to.

[Writer's Digest](#) has been shining a spotlight on up and coming writers in all genres through its Annual Writing Competition for more than 80 years. Enter our 89th Annual Writing Competition for your chance to win and have your work be seen by editors and agents! Almost 500 winners will be chosen. The top winning entries of this writing contest will also be on display in the 89th Annual Writer's Digest Competition Collection. *Deadline: Early-Bird Deadline 5/4/2020 Deadline 6/5/2020 Fee: See website for details Prize: One winner can win up to \$5,000, other prizes are awarded, see website for details.*

[The Diana Woods Memorial Award in Creative Non-Fiction](#) Creative nonfiction essays of no more than 5,000 words on any subject, are eligible for consideration for this award. Works must not have been published elsewhere. Award winners are required to submit a 100-word biography, recent photo and a short note thanking the Woods family for their generosity and support. *Deadline: February and August of each year Fee: None Prize: \$250 and publication in Lunch Ticket*

[Non-Fiction Writing Contest](#) Share your non-fiction writing to enter this contest. Share your writing on any topic. Can be a funny piece, serious, true story or informational. Any type of non-fiction is welcomed. *Deadline: 02/21/2020 Fee: \$9.95 Prize: \$100*

[100 Word Flash Fiction Writing Contest](#) Can you share a complete story with only 100 words? That is the challenge of this writing contest. Enter a story but use only 100 words. Cash prize to the winner. *Deadline: 02/28/2020 Fee: \$9.95 Prize \$100*

[2019 Accenti Writing Contest](#) The contest is open to prose works. Entries can be fiction, non-fiction or creative non-fiction. Entries must be previously unpublished and not under consideration by any other publication. Entries must be original and not a translation of a previously published work. *Deadline: 02/03/2020 Fee: \$30.00 Prize: \$1000.00 (CDN) and publication in Accenti*

[2020 Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award](#) Since 2008, the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Awards have recognized the best stories from the previous year told through various media utilizing the elements of mystery, thriller, and/or suspense. Judges are professional writers, book reviewers, librarians, academics, and—in specialized cases—specific industry peers. Focus is on quality, not popularity. *Deadline: 06/01/2020 Fee: None Prize: \$250*

[Arizona Mystery Writers Mary Ann Hutchison Memorial Story Contest for Youths](#) All writers 9-16 years of age (at time of entry) can enter – and anyone can win! Send in your short story in mystery, suspense, or thriller style. Entries may be up to 2500 words (about 10 double-spaced pages). It's loads of fun and a good exercise of your writing skills. You can submit more than one story if you like. Entries are judged "blind," that is, without the judges knowing who wrote the stories. Everybody is equal before the panel of judges! Therefore DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME OR ANY IDENTIFYING INFORMATION ON THE STORY. If you're too old for this contest, give the information to your children or grandchildren. *Deadline: 02/01/2020 Fee: None Prize: 1st Place - \$50*

[Daisy Pettles Women Writers Writing Contest](#) The Daisy Pettles Women Writers Writing Contest is open to women writers, age 40+, published or unpublished. Fiction or Non-Fiction writing projects are eligible. Poetry is excluded. *Deadline: 02/15/2020 Fee: \$45 Prize: Grand Prize \$1,000*

[The Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veterans](#) This creative writing contest for U.S. military veterans and active-duty personnel is hosted by The Iowa Review and made possible by a gift from the family of Jeff Sharlet (1942–69), a Vietnam veteran and antiwar writer and activist. The contest is open to veterans and active-duty personnel writing in any genre and about any subject matter. *Deadline: 05/31/2020 Fee: None Prize: \$1,000 plus publication in an issue of The Iowa Review*

[New Voices Award](#) This award is given for a previously unpublished children's picture book manuscript (of no more than 1,500 words) written by a writer of color. *The 2019 deadline has passed, please check back for updates Fee: None Prize: \$1,000 cash and a standard publication contract*

[Writer's Digest Competitions](#) One of the longest-running writing competitions, this contest spotlights up and coming writers in a number of categories, including Memoirs/Personal Essay, Print or Online Article and Genre Short Story. *Deadline: See link for multiple deadline Fee: start at \$20 Prize: The Grand Prize winner gets \$5,000, a feature in Writer's Digest magazine, a paid trip to a writing conference and more*

[Young Lions Fiction Award](#) This award recognizes "young authors," which the rules define as any author aged 35 or younger. Submit any novel or short story published or scheduled to be published in the calendar year. Works must be written for adults; children's or YA pieces are ineligible. *Deadline: 2020 date TBA Fee: None Prize: \$10,000*

[15 Syllable Writing Contest](#) Write a poem that only has 15 syllables to enter this poetry contest. You can write about anything. You can write a poem of any type. The only requirement is that the total number of syllables in your poem is 15. What can you write when you only have 15 syllables to work with? *Deadline: 02/10/2020 Fee: \$9.95 Prize: \$100*

[James Laughlin Award](#) Offered since 1954, the James Laughlin Award is given to recognize and support a second book of poetry forthcoming in the next calendar year. *Deadline: Submissions are accepted January 1 through May 15 each year. Fee: None Prize of \$5,000*

[Love Poem Poetry Contest](#) Share a love poem to enter this poetry contest. Your poem can be about anyone (or even a special pet). Write it any way you choose. *Deadline: 03/25/2020 Fee: \$9.95 Prize: \$100*

[Tanka Poetry Contest](#) What's a Tanka? A Tanka is a poem that only has five lines. Each line has a specific syllable count. That count is 5-7-5-7-7. So the first line of your poem will have five syllables. The second line will have seven. The third line will have five again. The fourth and fifth line will have seven syllables. Cash prize to the winner of this poetry contest. *Deadline: 02/02/2020 Fee: \$9.95 Prize: \$100*

[The Tufts Poetry Awards](#) Based at Claremont Graduate University and given for poetry volumes published in the preceding year – are not only two of the most prestigious prizes a contemporary poet can receive, they also come with hefty purses: \$100,000 for the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and \$10,000 for the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. This makes the Kingsley Tufts award the world's largest monetary prize for a single collection of poetry. *Deadline: The 2019 deadline has passed, please check back for updates Fee: None Prize: \$100,000*

[PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction](#) Honoring the best work of fiction published by an American author in a single calendar year, this award has been given to the likes of John Updike, Philip Roth and Ann Patchett. *The 2019 deadline has passed, please check back for updates Fee: None Prize: \$15,000 and an invitation to read at the award ceremony in Washington, DC.*

[The Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing](#) Looking for extraordinary unpublished submissions from emerging writers of sharp, culture-straddling writing that addresses identity in a global age. Each year, a distinguished panel of judges will select a winning manuscript to be published by Restless Books. We can't wait to read and share what the new voices of the world have to say. Fiction manuscripts must be complete. Nonfiction submissions must consist of either a complete manuscript, or a sample of at least 25,000 words and a detailed proposal that includes a synopsis and an annotated table of contents. All submissions must be in English (translations welcome). *Deadline: 03/31/2020 Fee: None Prize: \$10,000 advance and publication by Restless Books in print and digital editions*