

Thirst For Fire

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Ready to Leave

by Hareendran Kallinkeel

“You sure you’re prepared to go?”

The question made Rishi smirk. Maybe even gods were confounded by what went inside a human mind. “Yes, I am.”

“You must realize there’s no coming back. It’s not like on a whim you beckon death, and when you begin to confront the truth you want your way back.”

Rishi looked at the imposing figure of Yama, the God of Death. The deity’s large, muscular arms didn’t carry the legendary mace and the looped rope with which he was supposed to pull the soul from the corpses of those he came to execute. Contrary to mythological beliefs that he arrived astride a Water Buffalo, his Divine Carrier, he stood on bare feet.

“I decided to invoke you after reasonable thought,” Rishi said. “And while meditating for your presence, my mind was fully focused on my need to die.”

“What makes you think you’re ready yet?”

“I have everything in life. Enjoyed all that a man has to. I’ve no more wishes to fulfill, no goals to chase.” Rishi ran a hand along his broad forehead, smoothing back errant strands of curly locks that had fallen on his thick eyebrows. “A life without wants is no life at all.”

Yama’s blackish-green skin glowed from the brightness of raging flames in a sacrificial pit between them where sandalwood, herbs and ghee burned. The God took in a deep breath as if pleased by the aroma that hung in the air. “That doesn’t sound like a good enough reason. A man might still want to explore fresher meadows.

That's human nature."

"But I haven't left out anything – anything at all." Rishi brought his palms together in ardent supplication, and his bulging biceps swelled against the soft material of his half-sleeved Polo Shirt.

Yama's large, blood-shot eyes drilled into Rishi's. "There are an infinite number of things out there to know and enjoy. An ephemeral human life is just not enough to do that."

"I've had my fill of all sorts of food. Tasted each brand of wine." Rishi's eyes darted away from the God and his chin almost touched his chest as he stooped. "Slept with every type of women."

"Any food cooked by a different hand has a distinct taste. Every other day someone brews a new wine." Yama walked around the sacrificial pit, came nearer to Rishi, and raised his chin with a finger.

Rishi stared at Yama's face.

"Every new girl has something unique to offer," Yama said. "Don't tell me you aren't interested in exploring."

"I am fed up." Rishi knelt and touched the God's feet with both palms. "I've had enough of all the things out there. I beg you take me with you."

Inside, the air filled with a mixture of scents as sandalwood and the herbs burned more vigorously in the sacrificial pit. Outside, the rain drummed against the glass panes of the closed windows. Muted sounds of croaking frogs played a synchronous melody with the beats.

"You see? You could always go out into the rain, try something different," Yama said. "Nature offers a variety of sights, sounds, fragrances and tastes. Find new things... savour them."

“Nothing is different when you already had your fill.” Rishi raised his head and gazed at the God. “Is there anything worse than a life one doesn’t want to live?”

“Of course not.” Yama smiled. “But one must have adequate reasons for feeling so. And one must be truthful about his conviction.”

“I’m convinced. That’s why I invoked your presence.”

“I’ll know when you lie.” Yama held Rishi by his shoulders, lifting him up to a standing position, and looked into his eyes. “And I’ll know when you speak the truth.”

Rishi saw kindness in Yama’s eyes. The God’s appearance and actions contradicted his notions about Him. “Lord, I should’ve known you’d see through.”

“That’s fine. Don’t worry.” Yama patted Rishi’s cheeks. “Simple human follies are matters of routine.”

“The truth is,” Rishi’s voice cracked as he spoke. “Death haunts me. Whatever I do, it stares right into my eyes. I see it in my soup bowl, in the crystal glass I pour whiskey.”

“Death is inevitable. Unique to each, universal to all.”

“Its cruel eyes bore into mine, even while I’m atop a girl. Tell me how can I enjoy life when each living moment death stalks me? So, in order to escape death, I found no other way than embracing it.”

“One shouldn’t dwell too much on the simpler facts of life. Death is just that. A simple fact; simpler than love or hate. It doesn’t carry the burden of prejudice. Learn to know it, and you’ll perhaps start loving it.”

“I do love it, don’t I? Otherwise why did I seek you?”

“Your quest comes from dread, not affection. You failed to

understand that death, like love, needs time to blossom to full maturity.”

“Is that why I get to see you in an contra-traditional manner?”

“Do you get to know Death, now?” Yama asked, combing through long strands of his curly hair cascading down his shoulders.

“That’s why you came unprepared, sans the loop?”

“I come prepared only when one’s time is up.” Yama reverted to His position on the other side of the sacrificial pit.

“What about those who commit suicide?”

“One’s fate rather than my decision makes me take a life. You were about to do something akin to that, weren’t you?” Yama asked.

Rishi nodded.

“Do you still want to come with me?”

Rishi shook his head. “I’d like to explore greener pastures.”

Clap

by C. H. Savage

Everyone was getting ready for the weekend. We had three days off with no duty – just what a sailor needed. Ten states within three hours and three days off – beautiful.

I was going to New York for the weekend, although, it was a tough choice. I had my buddy and a couple Jersey sluts on one hand, the Jersey shore and a cabin on the other, Philly and about 3,000 bars tugging at my leg or my girl in New York. I chose my girl in New York.

It had been a hot summer in Philly and the ship was even worse. The paint dust had started to seep into my blood and mixed with all the alcohol . . . well, I hadn't been right for about 3 months. I needed a break.

Mathis caught me in the dorms. He was already half drunk but a little less pissed at me. He didn't have anyone to double with now and ended up losing both of his Jersey girls.

“Who the fuck do you know in New York anyway, Savage?” he asked from the doorway. He was finishing off a forty of the Best.

“Someone that won't blow me for a fuckin' sixer and a Big Mac.”

“What ever, asshole.” he said walking on down the hall. I heard his bottle shatter against the back hall wall as his door slammed shut – a trick I had taught him. I liked Mathis, but I couldn't wait to get to New York and away from the yard. Everything was building up and I needed out. I needed something warm . . . familiar.

Josie was as pure a girl that one could find and was just what I was needing. The day we met she was mowing the lawn of her church. She was beautiful. Cut-offs. Tank top. Tits and ass. Clean . . .

Tan . . . Fresh . . . Iowa. I had known her for about two years before I set off for Philly and the Navy and hadn't seen her for about six months. We were good friends but both of us had always wanted more – two virgins too shy to move on, I thought.

. . .

I pictured our first kiss during the train ride to the city. Maybe it would be on top of the Empire State Building – wind gusts and tourists; or under a subway outside some noisy tavern – music and dance spilling over us and our newfound bliss. Maybe I'd just grab her at the door and give her one – let her know right off how I really felt.

. . .

Josie met me at the station. She looked great; a little more makeup and a little thinner than before but still great. She was wearing a spaghetti strapped dress. Her tan legs and tits led the way and I followed, happily. Every guy there was looking at her as we hopped into our cab, which was headed for her sponsors' apartment. The city was busy and loud – horns, stereos and people all over the street, but I couldn't take my eyes off of her for the whole ride in. I was mesmerized and back to normal. This was going to be a great weekend.

. . .

Josie had taken a job as a full-time nanny. Her sponsors were living in an apartment in queens. It was the smallest place I'd ever seen. The front door entered into a 5 by 7 foot kitchen. Against the back wall were two doors – one for a bedroom and the other for a bathroom – both about the size of a small sofa. To the right was another bedroom, which was even smaller than the kitchen.

“Philly and the Navy, eh?” said Danny, the Dad. As I took a seat at a wobbly dining room table I could feel him and his wife eyeing me up.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve about a year and a half left and then it’s off to college. I joined on the sea-college fund for a two year stint.”

“Yeah? Well, I ain’t never been to the military or college, but good for you anyways,” he said taking a pull from his Rolling Rock.

“What do you kids have planned for the weekend?” asked his wife.

Josie described a day trip around New York that ended at the Empire State Building. I hoped it would begin soon. The room was cramped and his wife kept looking at me with worried eyes. Danny had that effect on people.

“I bet he’d rather go fag bashing than to the fucking Empire State Building,” he said nudging me in the ribs.

“What?!” Danny said incredulously. He couldn’t comprehend the confused look I had on my face – I didn’t know what he was talking about. Josie sat with her mouth agape.

“You know!? Fag bashing,” he said. “We used to do it all the time. You know. You and your boys jump in a car and drive down to the strip. When you pull up on a bunch of fags one of ya just leans out the window and smashes one in the head with a bat.”

“Danny!” said Margaret as she slapped the back of his head.

“Hey! What?!” he laughed. “What do you care? They’re just fags. Who cares, right?” he said matter-of-factly.

“Anyways, I bet you’ve better plans for Josie than that, eh, Savage?” he said as he pulled open another Rock. “Too bad you got that infucktion, huh, Josie. I told you to stay away from that DeAngelo.

Fuckin' filthy wop."

Josie blushed and said that it had all cleared up as she pulled me into the back bedroom where she was staying.

I could hear the wife berating Danny in the background. "That one hasn't been around lately, Danny." I heard her go on as Josie shut the door. "You know better than to say that in front of . . ."

"What's he talking about?" I asked as I sat on the bed, which was the only piece of furniture in the room.

"Nothing," she said, "he's just kidding around with you is all. He's like that." She was rubbing my leg as we talked. We kept on talking and catching up from the past year until, eventually, she asked if I'd like a back rub. I turned onto my belly as she started to rub my shoulders. This was unfamiliar territory for us but I was ready. Straddling me, her sundress draping my legs, Josie began to rub deep into my neck. I could feel the warmth coming from her crotch as she was grinding her ass into my lower back. I was getting aroused.

The room was dimly lit and my eyes were slowly adjusting as my head was crunched between the bed and the wall. I could only see the floor and I began to feel sick. Beneath the bed against the wall was an empty box of tampons. The box was littered with spent condoms.

. . .

I left that evening after we cut our day trip short. I never mentioned to Josie what I saw and didn't question her again about Danny's comments.

Lollipop

by Paul Kavanagh

A quick left was followed by a right only to be followed by two more lefts. The left was quicker than the right but the right had more weight. The left was flicked like a wet towel and the right was like a spade. Left left right. There was inevitability about the combinations but there was nothing to mitigate the machinations. Left left right. The lefts were exasperating more like a buzzing fly obfuscating the eyes but the right caused an ephemeral shroud of impenetrable darkness. The right brought with it fear and disequilibrium. The fear dictated the body's movement. The fear was debilitating. The fear drained. The fear.

The stripper was a boot and the music was too loud. The stripper had no rhythm. Her tempo was off and she jounced back and fro as though it had been her that had received the right in the first round. Anatomically she was an incongruity. Her breast ostensibly was containing foreign objects that balanced precariously upon her protruding ribcage.

Don't worry kid, it happens to us all.

He was just too good for you.

You'll do better next time.

Next time maybe the other guy would only knock out three of his teeth. His eyes hurt, his nose throbbed, his mouth objected to being opened. He felt as though his orbs were flooded with blood. He just wanted to go home to bed and sleep.

Rab! Rab! Rab! Rab! Rab! Rab! Rab! The other boys were chanting. The other boys had a right to cheer. When you win you can be loud and happy.

Ostensibly the stripper wanted some sucker on the stage. Rab was forced to his feet. His complaining could not be heard. Another ramification of hitting the canvas. Rab was helped onto the stage. Rab could hardly see and hear. Rab was still in a cold nebula of fear. The stripper sat Rab on an old creaking wooden chair facing the audience. The stripper faced Rab and kissed him coldly on the cheeks. Coquettishly the stripper tickled Rab. Rab was cold. The stripper pulled a lollipop and made Rab suck. The audience bellowed. Rab hadn't seen the lollipop jutting from her anus.

Honor Among Thieves

by Elle Pepper

As I sat silently in the passenger seat of the car I usually drove, I knew what Tessio must have felt on his last, long ride. In a situation like this, even a five-minute ride was long. The man beside me, trusted compatriot, friend--and executioner didn't speak. His mind was probably full of many of the same thoughts mine was. How the fuck did it come to this?

I mulled that over for a moment. To be truthful, I had been greedy. I had tried to take what was not mine to have. I tried to out-business The Business. And when that didn't work, I tried to kill my boss.

I thought about everything as the scenery went by unnoticed, I didn't count the turns we made, I didn't glance in the mirrors, as was my habit from being a driver for so long, I simply stared out the window and stroked the small prayer card that lay in my hand.

Saint Christopher was my family saint, he had always helped us out, but this time I knew my prayers were falling on deaf ears. I had made a promise on another saint, one I had failed to keep.

When I had first gotten out, I felt like it was my right to have a place, I had done my time, but I had a romantic, over-dramatized picture of 'Our Thing' in my head from too many long nights reading The Godfather, one of the few books in Ains that didn't suck and wasn't censored.

Pulling my mind back to the matter at hand, I focused on the driver. There were things about him I still couldn't puzzle out, men respected him as much as they feared him, and yet, unless I did something stupid, he had never so much as raised his voice to me, and not just because I was his Godson.

His green glasses still hid his eyes, and for a moment I wondered

what I would see when he took them off. Would it be that cold, smoking rage he was so well known for? Or was it that sad, almost melancholy rage that left him sobbing? Was I still a friend? I sighed and looked out the window again.

Geo-- no, I didn't deserve to call him that anymore, Don DiMarco, always taught us to take our punishments, this was mine. I couldn't let myself run from it. I wouldn't let my surname become a curse again, even if it meant my blood, my life. I looked down at my hands. When had they become the hands of a killer?

I knew the score. Twenty-five of my own men, friends, associates, earners, were dead, a few by my own hand. I didn't consider the cost when I made the decision. Now I had to. I had single-handedly upset the fragile balance of power in the city, and only this could prevent an all out war.

I was so preoccupied that though I saw the buildings, and the sunrise, it took me almost fifteen minutes to notice that we were driving in aimless circles, wasting time, neither one of us wanting to get out of the car. When I did notice that a five-minute ride had turned into twenty. I wondered at DiAmbrosi's hesitation. The man I had once earned the right to call Matt was not known for hesitation. With him, an order was given, it was done, friend, foe, it didn't matter, he did it.

It is strange how you notice things when you are sure you are going to die. The crispness of the air, the bright orange-red of the sun rising on a beautiful new day, the sound of the wind playing hide and seek around the skyscrapers. All these things seemed new to me. I even indulged in my one bad habit. I lit up and took a drag. The window obediently slid down a fraction of an inch to let the smoke out.

The normally-jovial man who sat beside me hadn't said a word. DiAmbrosi was often talkative, and generally very convivial with the staff. I still remembered the day I had walked into his office clutching a business card, and asked him for a job. It had been what? Seven years?

“Vincezo,” The younger man turned to face his Godfather who sat behind the big oak desk. “My word only goes so far. I couldn’t save your father. And if you screw up, I may not be able to save you. As far as I am concerned, I’m still ‘uncle DiAmbrosi’ I’ve helped you as much as I can.”

The younger man had nodded. “I understand.” Vince smiled. “I won’t betray you.”

“And Vince,” DiAmbrosi smiled. “Welcome to the family.”

The black sedan finally rolled to a stop, neither one of us wanting to play out the tableau that we both knew was coming. In some ways, I felt like this cheapened the whole thing, like he should have just blown me away when he found out. But I knew how things went, he had to be sure, he had to know, after all, he wasn’t going to risk his life on the Don’s favorite for no reason. The figure beside me spoke at last, pointing to my black-and-blue hand. He half-nodded, “How is it?”

I tried to wiggle my fingers and grimaced, “Madonn’! It still hurts.” I didn’t stop to ask pardon of the Virgin for using her name like that; it hurt too much. “Do me a favor,” I allowed myself to forget, for a moment, this man was going to kill me. “Remember to break his hand too.”

Mr. DiAmbrosi smiled. For a moment, he was just my friend. The man I had called Uncle for so many years, not the man who was going to end my life. “Don’t worry, I will.”

Genuine concern crinkled his normally passive face as he looked me over again. He scanned me, from top to bottom, his eyes resting on the prayer card in my lap for a moment before he turned away, pretending to be uninterested.

Tony, one of the ‘house’ guards, had broken my hand, claiming I was resisting. I wasn’t, he was just pissed that I had betrayed the Family and wanted an excuse to hit me. Not that I blamed him at all. I probably would have done the same in his position. I was his

sponsor, he looked up to me; and I had betrayed him.

Betrayal. That word hit like a knife in the ribs. I could still remember the look on Don DiMarco's face when he had called me in for a talk. I had known I was in the shit when he called for me to close the door, and had DiAmbrosi stand guard outside.

My eyes had been immediately drawn to the pistol on his desk. And I stood there, trying not to shake myself to pieces as I calmly told my Don what I had told my Godfather. That I had betrayed them both.

He didn't say anything when I was finished, he just shook his head and hit the call button for DiAmbrosi. His eyes didn't leave me as he spoke clearly, in Italian, the language all such business was concluded in. "Take care of it." He looked over at my godfather and spoke the last word. "Quietly."

The pain as I moved my hand again brought me back to the present as I looked sheepishly up at DiAmbrosi and winced. At his insistence I had taken something for the pain, just enough to take the edge off, not enough to totally deaden it, and certainly not enough to muddy my mind.

I wanted to be clear-headed. I was being retired quietly because I was a friend—a personal friend, of the Don. My reasons for being clear-headed were multiple. One, in some sick, tortured way, I thought it appropriate to know I was going to die, and how. For two, I had already dried out from this stuff once. And, lastly, I considered the pain some of my penance for what I had done.

The don had made clear my execution was not to be public; which was unusual. But he wanted to save me some dignity after what had been done to my father and my family when I was only fifteen. Also because I had come to my friend about what had happened. I knew better than to let him find me out. That would only make my death worse. And running would have only made me die tired. No, this was how it had to be. Blood for blood.

Geo had tried to give me a pass, but we both knew he couldn't. He would lose respect, and there would always be that nagging fear in the back of his mind that I would try it again. I was too good of a Catholic to kill myself, so instead, I settled for silently cursing myself as I waited to die.

“Tell Geo that it wasn't personal.” I said around the lump in my throat. “I still respect him, but it was a business deal I couldn't pass up.” The stoic man nodded and paused as he watched me get out of the car. I got the feeling that he was memorizing me. “And, tell him I took my bullet willingly.”

He sat forward, a gesture of impatience. He was angry, I had pushed too hard, too far. He wanted me out of the car. He didn't move to help me out; he didn't even reach out to open the door for me. I had reminded him of the betrayal.

I could read it on his face, he was too angry to help me out of the car, he wanted me to flounder with my broken hand for a few minutes, but he wasn't angry enough to pull me out and shoot me here. No, he wanted me to choose to get out. He was a congenial, even to those who had done what he considered the unforgivable. He was a man who lived and died by his word, I had broken mine; that made me scum, less than scum even. It made me a traitor, and himself a poor judge of men.

In some small way, that made me fear and respect him more. Fear because I knew just how vicious this man could be. I had driven him to places where “business” and men, were taken care of; I had even helped on a few. But respect, because he trusted me at my word. Even after my betrayal, he trusted me. In his position I wouldn't have. But maybe that was the point; he was a better man than I for all of this. He kept his promise; he didn't betray it, or the oath he made with his own blood.

I could almost put myself in his place, I would've dragged the person kicking and screaming out of the car and wasted them right there. I could see that cold anger DiAmbrosi was known for, the

type that could stew for years before he found an opening to put a knife in your back for betrayal. To him, that was not a venial sin, but a mortal one.

I reached for the door handle, jumping when a passing car hit an old soda bottle lying in the road. There was not usually any traffic here, and what few cars did pass our way, were driven by people who knew better than to speak of what went on in the Heights. For a second I wanted to check to see if I had been shot, but I knew him enough to know I hadn't.

I did, however shoot him a wary glance as I scrambled out of the car, his hand tapping idly on the doorframe. I had remembered that he carried a small dagger with him at all times, the type made for 'home protection' but he used it for 'wet work' up close and personal calls from the Seacove Executioner. We all suspected DiAmbrosi's other profession, but I was one of the few who knew.

I shivered remembering the night I had met the myth. The only time DiAmbrosi dressed in black. He was a totally different man. Colder, more deadly. I had opened the door to an apartment, my friend had called me over because he said someone was after him. It took me only a moment to realize what was going on. The figure in black had just looked at me, and I knew he was giving me the choice. Live or die. I turned around and walked away. I wasn't about to face the myth himself. I let my friend face that nightmare alone, and never regretted it.

When I asked my Godfather about what had happened, he shrugged. "I guess he met the myth." Was all he would say. He acted like he didn't even know what had happened. It was almost as if he didn't remember.

I shivered, wondering if I had pissed him off enough to earn a visit from that merchant of death himself. I hoped not. Whatever would happen to me in hell would have been kind compared to what he could do to me.

For the first time in this whole thing I actually considered running.

But where would I go? My right hand, the one I use for almost everything, was broken, badly broken, and if I went to the hospital or a clinic, I knew DiAmbrosi would catch me. And then I would get a visit from Him. Even those of us who knew the Executioner didn't speak of him, we didn't want to tempt fate.

I could see myself standing in front of the Clinic, waiting to get seen. The black car would come up from the south, it always did, off of pine or Calhoun. Driving slowly, with the top down, it would stop right in front of me. That was it, you got in, and came to him, or he drove off, and came to you later. The second option was more...uncomfortable.

Clinic. This was Thursday, the day I went to visit my sister Lilly at the hospital across the street from the clinic. We had committed her shortly after Papa's grisly death, she didn't understand that time had passed; and probably still didn't. God, this would be the first week since I had been out that I wouldn't see her.

I still saw her as the little girl I had carried down the stairs of the house, out into the bright sun. Along with my brother, a catatonic, bloody mess. And that was when I had made my choice. I had found one of the cars that the men had come in, and driven to the police station to find my Godfather. I don't know if I really planned to turn myself in. But I finally figured, I had been the weaker brother, it was time for me to grow some balls and step up. So I did.

I wondered what lie my brother would tell her. I hated him, had for a long time, but I did get his word on that one thing. No matter what happened, he would take care of her. I was the one who paid for her constant care. I visited every Thursday, I had to; she was my little sister.

"Father, forgive me," I leaned on the car. The window between us made me feel only slightly safer. I knew he could and would kill me, and I wondered how I would be able to do it. Had dad known? Had DiAmbrosi? Had DiAmbrosi ordered the hit on dad?

"What happened?" The two words pled for some sort of explanation

of why such a good boy would kill his own men.

I looked down at my hands. The first two were justified, they shot at me first. But what about Sammy? I remembered the little snitch, he'd threatened to go to DiAmbrosi, I had panicked and shot him. I remembered The sargassi brothers I'd paid for them to be shot. DiLuca, I throttled him after I got the information I wanted. There were too many more to count. So I told him what I had believed. "It started as blood, Matt." was all I could say. "I had found those sons of bitches, and then...." I didn't know what else to say. How do you explain when you stop thinking about anything and just kill? I shrugged. "It got complicated." I finished lamely.

DiAmbrosi looked up at me; I guess he was thinking the same thing. I had made a power play. I had tried to take over the family when my boss showed what I believed to be weakness. I was a traitor. "Tell Geo I went willingly." I repeated.

His head bowed as he nodded again. He didn't speak and I was glad. I knew anything else he had to say would only make this harder on both of us. It was always hard to read him because of those damn glasses. They hid his eyes from the world. For as long as I had known him, Mr. DiAmbrosi had worn those glasses. Everyone knew them. They were his calling card, his mark of favor, and his mark of disfavor also. They made him look like he didn't give a damn if you lived or died.

On anyone else, dark green frames would have been an anomaly, but on him, they were natural because they had always been there. There had only been one time I had seen him without those glasses; the day I had earned my stripes. Someone had attacked Mr. DiAmbrosi to get to Geo and, without hesitation I had emptied the clip of my Eagle into the guy.

Mr. DiAmbrosi had hired me on a few years before as Geo's personal assistant and driver. I wasn't stupid; I knew what was really being asked of me. The same thing asked of any Mafia driver. Namely, keep your hands on the wheel, your eyes on the road, your ears on the radio and your mouth shut. Don't talk unless you are

addressed, and never ever reveal what you see in the rearview mirror. And if you know how to drive well, that is a bonus.

Mr. DiAmbrosi had smiled at me, another rarity. And it was that day when he gave me his other mark of favor. Something a DiMartelli hadn't earned since my father had been my age. "The name's Matt." The green eyes had told me that this one word was a secret between us: A secret that could save my life, or end it. I found out later that Mr. DiAmbrosi was a man of his word. If he gave you his name, he trusted you with everything.

Men who hadn't earned the right to call him by his name and did so anyway usually got a very cold reception. DiAmbrosi had a glare that could chill your blood even through the glasses. It was one I recognized. He was a man who knew a hundred ways to kill you before you got to the door. And, to make matters worse, he had carte blanche in the family to do whatever he felt necessary to 'keep the peace.' If that meant people died, so be it.

As I watched him open the door as if to get out, it hit me just how appropriate this was. It had started with him and I. The fact that I had used my position as his friend and the Don's bodyguard and driver to blind him to what I was doing. What was worse, at least to him, I had lied. My betrayal wasn't just against my Don, but my sponsor also. I knew how things went, if I had sat tight he might have given me permission later, when things weren't so testy. But I had to be a hotshot and make a move. I had to prove I was a man. DiAmbrosi was good at his job, I knew that, but I had bet against his ability to do his job, and I had lost. I made out my smoke and paused to look around a moment, still stalling.

We had parked behind a familiar building. It was the apartment they had taken me away from almost fifteen years ago. I smiled a bit at the irony. This was where it had started, with him and me, here, in the heights. 132, East Cedar Springs, #4. My room overlooked this courtyard, and I had seen the green convertible drive up, Mr. DiAmbrosi at the wheel. That was shortly after Papa's bloody execution. I shivered. That had been a bloody day.

He didn't look like he was ready to get out of the car, and I heard the window on the passenger side roll down as I stepped away from the car. I peeked in through the window of the apartment. It had been cleaned, painted, and then left alone. But as I looked inside, I still saw the room the way it was when I had last left it. Blood spatter across the ceiling, a crow-bar, dad's weapon of choice, leaned against his chair. He was slumped forward, his upper body resting against the coffee table, and the air still smelled of blood, sweat and cordite.

I pulled away from the window and glanced back over my shoulder at DiAmbrosi who still sat in the car, his feet on the ground, staring at me through the open passenger window. I saw one hand drop, and knew he was reaching for his gun in case I tried to flee. I turned my back to him, giving him an open shot, an out.

I had given my word. I knew that The Queen of Heaven was going to personally kick me down to hell for betraying my Family, and that alone made me sad. No, that, and the fact that either way I was breaking my word. Either I lived, and broke my word to this man, or I died and I broke my word to poor Lilly. I took a deep breath to ward off tears.

And now that man that I had always known as a protective influence rose from the car, intent on a more sinister purpose. The gun in his hand, I knew was not for my defense. I did smile weakly when I saw he had downgraded from his normal Eagle he carried to a 9 mil. He smiled, following my line of sight. "Why should I add insult to injury, Vince?" his voice grew soft. "You still know what you did."

I nodded my understanding, crossed myself, and knelt. He vanished into my blind spot, and I bit back a cry of fear and regret. "No," My voice was stronger than I had intended. "Not in the back Matt, I'm not a coward." Nothing happened for a moment, "Please Matt, not in the back. I don't want to die alone."

He moved back into my line of sight, understanding my request. I knew I was going to die, I knew who was going to kill me, I was

willing to face it head-on, that's what the move said, but also, that I was just as human as any other man. I was willing to die for my crimes, as long as I knew I wouldn't die alone. If he was behind me, he could walk away as I lay dying and I would never know if he stayed. At least this way the last thing I would see was a friend.

He blinked and I realized that I wasn't looking at his glasses, but rather the jade-colored eyes that they hid. His eyes showed far too much emotion for this line of work. And at last I understood his need of the glasses. To hide the view into his tortured soul. That even, fierce gaze drove my eyes to the ground. He was fighting to maintain this aloof air, I guess so he would be able to do what was required of him.

This was his one weakness. I could see him fighting tears I knew he would never shed. And I wondered, for a moment, if he had been forced to turn a blind eye to Papa's death. To deny him a reprieve the way I was forcing him to deny me one.

He slowly closed his eyes, I guessed to pray for strength, and when he opened them again he was different. I can't explain, but it is as if two people occupied one body. One who could kill you without a second thought, and one who would rather stand in your place.

The jade eyes that looked down on me had lost some of their hard edge. And I realized that in this, he was giving me a gift, even if it meant cursing himself. Here, in this last moment, he was baring himself to me. He was showing me who he really was without the mask I had always seen. This was Matthew DiAmbrosi.

One look into his eyes said that he didn't enjoy this, as many people said. This was a grim and deadly business he knew well, but it was not what he liked. His green eyes begged me to understand as he held me in his gaze. Something about that look calmed me, taking the tremor from my body.

Perhaps it was that this strong man, this man I had known for so many years was giving me the one thing in death that he had

denied me in life. That here, now, in this place, he considered me his equal. And it wasn't something done to mollify a man who was dying. I'd seen him do something grudgingly. No, this was a gift. He honored me with this small sacrifice.

At last, I saw the man who had protected my Don for who he really was; a man, not a ghost. Not a force to be feared, but a shattered old man, in a middle-aged body, forced into things he would rather not do. I knew from those eyes that he had made similar choices before. That he would live because others died. But I also realized what he left unsaid. That if I asked, if I used the favor I had left with him, he would die in my place. If I told him not to kill me, cried 'Stop,' he would. And he would willingly face whatever penalty came with it.

And I understood why people held so tightly to his name. When he gave you his name, he trusted you with this side of himself: with his humanity. Most people thought he was some unfeeling, uncaring killing machine. And yes, he was efficient, but now I knew that he didn't enjoy it. It was his duty. It was required of him. It was required of me also. We had promised, and it was worth blood.

The gun finally came up, pointed at my head. The sadness reflected in his eyes almost broke my will. Once again, he was doing what sometime, long ago, he had sworn he would never do. He was, once again, killing a friend.

Neither one of us wanted to be here, in the Heights, doing this thing, but we also both knew that it was unavoidable. I had transgressed, I had killed a friend, and I had tried to murder a man I had sworn to protect. My word was worth blood, now it was time to pay.

"Vince, I wish it didn't have to end like this."

The tone in his voice was somber, but begging me to back out. Begging for me to save him this task. Begging for me to make some sort of sign that I would live. He wanted some excuse to save my life, and I had none to give.

The silence went on for a long while.

“Why?” he broke his silence at last.

“It started as revenge Matt.”

“I told you to leave them be.” I could hear the icy anger in his voice.

“I know. I couldn’t do that. For the same reason you couldn’t let Alis’ killers go.”

“You promised me.”

“I lied.”

DiAmbrosi hung his head as if I had slapped him. “Did you ever really mean it?” his voice was that of a defeated, broken man.

That was a low blow, and yet I could hear the earnestness in his voice, he really wanted to know if I had always been a traitor.

“It didn’t start this way Matt.”

“I spoke for you.”

“And I was grateful.”

“Now you aren’t?”

“Shit Matt, I don’t know what to think. I almost had it all.”

“When Mario and Sal fingered you, I spoke for you. I argued, I told them you would never do such a thing. How could you do this?”

I shrugged. I certainly hadn’t expected this. Was the best losing his touch? Was he beginning to have second thoughts? I needled him, I knew if I could get him mad enough he’d shut up and shoot me.

“An inch higher and we wouldn’t be having the conversation.” That was how far I had missed Mr. DiAmbrosi by. A mere inch. The bullet streaked over his shoulder hitting the Don. Finally it clicked. He was blaming himself for not taking the hit.

“I knew your routine Matt, I planned it all.” At last I had given him what he was after. I had confessed to the planning. He knew I had paid for the men, but he didn’t know if I was the mastermind. Had this all been a trick to work a confession out of me? I pondered that for a moment. No, if he really had wanted an answer, he never would have let me come here. The question was his own, it wasn’t information his boss wanted, it wasn’t anything anyone else would know. If Geo had wanted that info I would have been at the docks with the “Docs”. I was getting a bit giddy, the fear was finally getting to me.

I could see the hatred in his eyes, but it wasn’t for me. He thought he was a failure, he hated himself. I had been his project, I had failed; therefore he had failed.

“You saved his life. If you hadn’t shoved him, he would be dead. So damnit Matt, do your job.” I hated to see what this was doing to him. I really hated to see it, but it was the way things had to be. “Just, when it’s over,” I bit back tears. “Take care of Lilly, my Lilly.”

I still held on to the hope that I wouldn’t die. That someone would give me a reprieve, but I couldn’t ask him to stand in my place, this was my crime, my punishment. Someone told me once, and maybe it was my dad, that he believed that Goodbyes should never be said to the living.

He paused for a moment, to let me speak if I wanted to, and then nodded. He wasn’t going to make me beg, I was too good of a friend for that. And I knew, at last, he had made his peace with this. And I watched in a fascinated horror as he chambered the round that would kill me. His motions now were that deadly, practiced calm I had always known, but his eyes were still soft, those of Matt, not of Mr. DiAmbrosi, the DiMarco enforcer.

Finally he said the words I had been dreading, "Goodbye Vince."

Pause, I guess I'd better tell you how it came to that, before I continue the story. Otherwise it won't make any sense. It started in the sixties when Mike DiMartelli knew me in the Bronx. We worked together. All he knew of me was that I was a cop with a shady past stamped "Top Secret." I don't remember if I had gotten my brass shield back then or not... Come to think of it, I guess I had. Just. That was back when I was using another alias, one not so blatant as my current one.

Those who know me, still call me Griffin, the name of the foster family that adopted me, and in fact, I think that was the name I was using. Yes. I had gone back to my 'real' name. Mikey D knew me pretty well, he was a good cop, and I was a good cop gone bad. I was under as a deep cover dirty cop. But the case was starting to mushroom out around me. I found out that the corruption went far beyond what I thought.

Mike had been assigned to me because he was the new guy, but already he had refused to take bribes, even what the cops called 'clean graft' or bookie money, he turned down, living on what he made with his own two hands.

He knew me as a dirty cop, but he didn't know I was deep cover. When he threatened to turn me in, something that would blow my cover if I didn't want to spend twenty years in jail, I had him arrested on false charges, and then I went to go talk to him in private.

"Griffin?" He stood up, still pacing. "Come to turn the knife?"

"Look, yeah, I turned you in. I had to, you were going to surface me, what did you expect me to do?"

"Surface?" He paused to think about that for a moment.

“Undercover?”

“I’m part of a taskforce to bring in bad cops, so they have me playing a bad cop.”

The Lucky Numbers

by Chris Coles

Metal-on-metal, hope there's no spark. Always the same thought, quick and barely conscious whenever he took the gas nozzle out of a car's filler neck.

It never quite slid and it didn't quite grind, but it always made him think about the spark.

Ralph bent over at the waist to avoid that stubborn, inevitable last drip of gasoline that would fall from the nozzle as he placed it back in its home on the pump, and preserve his call-on-the-client shined shoes and creased slacks. Whoever had the white company Taurus yesterday left it bone dry, the jerk. These people, Ralph thought, am I the only one who cares? He went inside the Stop-N-Go's little store for a bottle of water. Candy bars, plastic bottles of oil, key rings with car logos, refrigerator with the frosted sliding doors. He slid the glass door open, took a water bottle, and unhooked a bag of peanuts from the rack at the counter. Hmm, he thought, the Lotto's up to \$43 million. Drawing's on Saturday night. "And give me five dollars on the Lotto," he said, "Quick pick, cash value."

The cross-eyed Pakistani counter man, who didn't believe in luck, gave Ralph the ticket and his change and said, "Good luck to you."

On the way to visit his small crew of materials testing technicians at the Benicia Mega-Mart project, Ralph thought about his Lotto ticket. Five dollars, he thought, that really increases my chances, even if my chances are one in thirty billion, at least it makes them five times better than just a dollar, isn't it? Thirty billion divided by five is six billion, right? And somebody has to win, right? On his way up Highway 80 between gray soundwalls and among the other cars and trucks he thought about what he would do with the \$30 million or so he could clear after taxes. Start his own business, maybe. Retire

and buy a big house in Mexico. Or an apartment in Paris where he could wear a beret at a brasserie every day and sip espresso. He would learn French and paint. He would paint in Paris in spring and fall, and in the winter in Mexico. Where? In Cancun? Too humid. Cabo San Lucas. He would paint the hillsides and valleys of France, and those great French faces on blue and red backgrounds and French stone buildings seemed built to be painted. He would do that five or six months a year, and take lessons with real good artists, and he would spend, hmm, four months a year in Cabo, painting Mexican faces, brown men with their sombreros, serious children on red and blue backgrounds looking straight at him, women with flashing eyes and colorful blouses on finely detailed landscapes like the ones the Old Masters made, like the hilly terrain behind the Mona Lisa, misty and mysterious, but this is Mexico so they will be arid and dirt tan and rock brown with clear blue-blue skies like a Dali landscape. No melting clocks or monsters though, Ralph thought, I'm a realist.

He turned into the Mega-Mart construction site and crunched over the gravel to the project manager's brown trailer. He opened the door and stuck his head in, smelling sour coffee burning on the plate too long, ammonia from blueprints, men's sweat, the dirt on the floor.

"Hello?"

"Yeah."

"Hi, I'm Ralph Perry from Kastracorp. I'm the PM for your testing program? Just came by to see how things are going."

"Well," said the short round brown-eyed man who came out of the office at one end of the trailer, "Other than you're expensive as hell and your guys sit around most of the time and don't hardly ever do shit and your test reports never get here unless we call your office, which we shouldn't have to do, everything's fine."

Ralph saw the challenging, amused look in the man's face and said, "Whew, I was worried that we were exceeding your expectations!" Kastracorp's latest slogan was Expect Us to Meet Your Expectations.

"Here's my card in case you want to report me to my boss. He hates me so he'd really like you to call."

The little brown-eyed man put out his hand and said, "I think I'll do that. Edd Williams. Edd with two D's, don't know why so don't ask. Two L's though. Here." They exchanged business cards. "Nah, your guys are OK. We'd like a lower price but everybody does I guess."

"Edd," Ralph said the name so he would remember it without looking at the card, "The hourly rates and the lab charges are set at corporate by your guys and our National Accounts guys. I think they set them based on what you pay a guy in Arkansas, so we lose our ass on it here in the Bay Area. We probably pay a guy three times as much here."

"Whatever. Nothing either of us can do."

Ralph gave Edd a few promotional trinkets: a Kastracorp pen that glowed in the dark, a maroon sack with golf tees and two golf balls, and a maroon Kastracorp golf shirt with a squirrel embroidered on the left breast because somehow this squirrel had become the company mascot. A lot of people thought the squirrel sent the wrong message. But Ralph liked the squirrel, especially its little buck teeth and fuzzy tail, and there was something appealing about the look in its face: amused, crazed, innocent, wicked.

They talked about football and told construction stories for a while, about accidents mainly. Then Ralph said, "Mind if I walk around the site a little?"

"Sure," Edd Williams said, "Knock yourself out, but don't get hurt. I hate all that paperwork." Ralph told Edd he would look into why the reports took so long, although Ralph knew, as Edd suspected, that it was just the way it worked.

Ralph walked around the site on the rough tracked ground that was chocolate brown sticky mud a month ago and would be chalky dust next month. He meandered between gravel piles, cardboard boxes on pallets, various yellow equipment on wheels or tracks, and piles of sheet-metal studs. He snapped pictures with his little silver camera of men working and plywood concrete forms with ridgebacks, the blue plastic cone ends of snap-ties showing through to hold the forms together. He needed the pictures for the project description they would write to include in proposals for new jobs. He took pictures for himself, too, pictures of things that he thought came together

in a nice way. He took pictures of some masons leaning straight-legged over a tool box looking for a trowel. They looked like Millet's Gleaners. He took a picture of a crane crew lifting a concrete wall panel into place because he liked the way the 30-foot-high by 20-foot-wide slab looked angling, heavy, with the crane tilting behind it and the cables taut, pulling its top and the riggers waving and watching as it went up, standing back 20 feet in case anything went wrong. As the panel rose slowly in Ralph's viewfinder, in the lower right corner one big-necked, big-bellied man wearing a yellow hardhat and khaki bib overalls stood solidly with his head tilted back and fists in big brown gloves on his hips, green oak and brown grass on the soft-contoured hills far in the background. When Ralph framed the man in a zoom close-up the hardhat looked glued onto his big head and his meaty red face looked calculating, competent, judgmental, satisfied.

Later, Ralph took a picture of a dead gopher snake, muscular and limp, and with the imprint of a truck tire visible on its body.

"I'll start a development business with my Lotto money," Ralph thought as he watched. "I'll build shopping centers and malls, and commercial buildings.

I'll turn my \$30 million into a fortune and buy a football team. Then I'll travel with them during the season and sit in the luxury boxes at all the stadiums around the league. Then in time we could win the Super Bowl and I'll be the owner that turned them around. I'll be a

hands-on owner, too, not some guy who just turns it over to the GM and sits around. I'll walk the sidelines during games and slap hands with the players and encourage them. But I won't get in the way, I'll let the coaches do their jobs.

Ralph roamed the sidelines, old and gray because he had stuck with the team and rebuilt it, a loyal guy, committed, a peach of a guy, number one fan.

He strolled in the stands with an entourage that included his sons in red and blue team colors, gray at the temples now, proud of him, smiling at the way the old man cared for the fans and shook their hands like a politician, but sincere. He would be like their benevolent king, who didn't need anyone's votes and would do good as he pleased, because he had won the Lotto thirty years ago. They loved him because he was their benefactor, the man who gave them that special mania when your home team wins, wins again, and keeps on winning. The crowd roared and some of the women even cried.

Ralph found Virgil de la Cruz casting concrete cylinders from a wall pour.

As the workmen slid the wet concrete down the chute and into the forms to drop and push and shovel it into place, then screed it flat with a long board, then vibrate it to get out the bubbles and condense the sand and gravel, then work the surface with the big flat board floats on long poles to finish the surface, Virgil shoveled the mix into a bucket and carried it to the side, away from the action and noise to place it in the black plastic testing cylinders and tamp it down in the approved three layers with 25 pokes of the aluminum rod of the approved shape and length. Each cylinder would be broken in the lab to measure its strength. Ralph went across the floor slab and greeted Virgil, "Mr. de la Cruz," he said. Virgil, a relatively tall, lean, sun-baked man in his fifties from the Philippines, looked over and gave Ralph a creased smile. He said, "Ralph. You're here."

Virgil's hardhat was battered, stained with asphalt, covered with contractor stickers, and speckled with concrete spatter like his khaki shirt, faded jeans and brown abraded boots.

"Well how are you, my friend?"

"Very fine, working hard here."

"Yep, I can see that. Got everything you need?"

"Oh yes. I go into the office at five every morning and I get what I need. Sometimes I even steal what I need," he said with a wink.

"Five, whew, that's early. Steal away. Nobody cares except me and the clients, and we want you to steal. I'll pay your bail." They laughed.

"Oh, sure." They talked about the price of company stock in their retirement accounts, the lab, and why, oh why, the lab couldn't ever send out reports on time and to the right fax number (they always sent invoices to the report address and the reports to the billing address). They talked about Virgil's son, a bright young man working for Fedex at the Oakland sorting facility, but who Virgil earnestly desired would finish his bachelor's degree. Then they, too, talked about football and told construction stories for a while. Ralph told Virgil that he had bought a five-dollar Lotto ticket just for fun; Virgil said he never bought Lotto tickets but he went to Reno every two months or so and spent a hundred on the slot machines. "I go with my townmates of my hometown in the Philippines and other friends with my wife," he said, "Just to have fun.

The hotel is too inexpensive because it is a package tour and they have coupons for the meals. My wife loves it and you have free chips to gamble, even shows." Ralph said he would have to try that. Ralph took a picture of Virgil standing by his equipment, and then one with Virgil looking up smiling pretending to make a concrete cylinder. Virgil apologized because his hands were dirty when they shook hands, but Ralph said that's okay, I insist and they shook

looking eye to eye, liking each other.

Ralph was done for the day, so he headed back. Before he got on the freeway he stopped at Starbucks for a paper cup of mint tea. The girl who took his order was blonde and pretty in a young sort of way he thought, slim, with a round face and small eyes that made her seem Russian. She smiled and her green eyes met his briefly, as did their fingers when she gave him his change. Waiting as she turned around to put his teabag in the cup and put a lid on it, he watched her move and followed the curves of her back and hips.

Her ponytail exposed her neck, which was smooth and soft with the fine hair that women have there. Ralph had always found this fine hair appealing and innocent, and it made him wonder what her neck would smell like. I could have a mistress, he thought. As he looked out the glass doors of the shop and sipped his tea, he thought of the women a man with 30 million might take as his mistress. He reviewed the women he had seen on the streets and malls, in coffee shops like this, in magazines, on television. He thought about the twenty-something temps who rotated through the office staff – were any of them looking for an easier life? Ralph lingered on memories of one very tall, very black girl with a tiny sinuous waist and a spectacular high firm middle-distance runner's bottom – what was her name? Tonyya? Tamyra?

She hadn't lasted long but she had been shy and sincere, and spoke in a high-pitched little girl's voice. And that rear end, wow. I could probably find her if I wanted to. I'll be her dependable easy-going older man and provide her some security, kind of a friendly, relaxed father figure to her kids – the temps all seemed to be single moms – and help her out with other things, make grilled cheese sandwiches and go to the kid's ball games. It would be an easy, relaxed relationship with a sort of severance agreement if she found someone else or things got too...you know, uneasy.

Thinking about women and wealth and the many settings where a rich man might have sex, he drove back into Oakland on 680 and then 24 through the slowdowns and the red taillights, through the

long white-tiled tunnel, accelerating to 75 MPH down the wide concrete slope toward the Bay, missing the spectacular view that was right in front of him, past the houses and their adjunct trees carpeting the hills on either side beyond the earth-toned rough masonry soundwalls. At the office he had a few messages on his voicemail. Bake the Snake demanded to know why Tom Terry and Blanche had so many overhead hours last week, the same thing as the week before.

Ralph had explained it more than once, so, out of patience, he rolled his eyes and wrote another e-mail:

Dear Bake, It doesn't seem that you are paying much attention to what I tell you from week to week! I explained this to you last week and the situation is just the same. Tom Terry (who you keep calling Terry Thomas, which bothers him) is helping in the lab while he waits for his long-term assignment we have him lined up for with the Domingo County. Actually he was offered another job with Briscoe Eng. (b-----s!) more locally and closer to his home but he chose to stay with KC out of loyalty and gratitude for how well we have been treating him. If we lose him we lose the Domingo Co. job, which will be lucrative I assure you. As for Blanche she is working on proposals for me, and of course if we don't do proposals we don't get new work, and if there is no new work I'm sure you will be the first in line to kick me in the ass, as you should be given your responsibilities to do so. I know Blanche is unpopular with certain other employees because she is overly blunt, but she does the job well. For one thing she deals well with clients who are PO'd because our invoices are screwed up every time – another problem we have to talk about. Blanche can be caustic about this, I admit, but well worth the pain in the u no what. So, hoping you can refer to this information next week as the situation is likely to be the same until EOM, I offer my apologies for the inconvenience and my frustration this is evidence of. RP

After this, Ralph went over the weekly reports and found that things were good in his branch financially. But why didn't it feel good? He

felt in his pocket and pulled out the Lotto ticket. I could tell these people to shove it up their asses, and never look back. No, I would look back. I'd start my own engineering firm and steal all of the clients I've brought in on their faith in me and the lies I've had to tell, and kept in spite of the jerks and their policies and their loot-and-pillage attitude. I'd run them out of business and laugh at them. I'd spend the whole 30 million on it if I had to.

Or I could buy a lot of company stock. They'd love that at first, then I'd just sit on it. I'd demand a seat on the board and be a pain in the ass.

The People's Director, make them tell the truth about bonuses, who's getting them and how much.

He got home a little early to their small green ranch house in their windswept 40-year-old subdivision near the cold beach on the Bay. Jenny liked green. She said it made her feel calmer. That was fine with Ralph. Jenny was happy to see him and asked him why he had come home early. "Went out and visited some projects," he said, "See the clients and some of the guys." She said that sounded nice. She knew he liked to visit the projects. "Yep," he said, "I like it. It's nice to be home a little early too." He ruffled her short blonde hair, which she liked if she wasn't going out, and gave one lock a little gentle tug. He slid his hands down her waist to grab a little at the comfortable bulk of her hips. After dinner, Ralph sat in his brown recliner petting the big orange tabby on his lap while she clanked the dishes and pans in their little kitchen. He read Sunset magazine and thought about what they could do with their little ranch house with just a small piece of the Lotto money. We can put in a hot tub and really fix up the back yard. Xanadu. We could remodel and put in some French doors. Nice. Big kitchen with an island in the middle, a big butcher block table with a sink, and granite counters, and a tile floor.

The bathrooms, too, with a Jacuzzi and a walk-in shower. We'd have to build an extension and maybe go up another story. He'd get a couple of thick white heavy towels and go through a new double-

paned thermal sliding door to the back yard, enjoy the feel of the smooth enameled handle in the blond wood frame, the smooth hydraulic feeling of the new door sliding with that new-sliding-door resistance. The back yard would have ferns, big ones that arched over you, very green. There would be rock steps, brown sandstone, going out to the tub, and little lanterns lighting the path. A Japanese garden, Ralph thought, private, just for us, but a little gem. People would talk about it as a marvel of small perfection. He would stroll as if entering a completely different world to the cedar tub and smell its clean rich steam rising as it danced and faded into the cool air, then he would take off his thick heavy robe and kick off his flip-flops, climb naked into the hot water and feel that tightening sting and then the oozing letting-go of his muscles as the heat soaked in deep. He would lay back to look at the clouds go by, nowhere he had to be and nothing he had to worry on. He thought about the air bubbles swirling and the vibration and the smooth liquid feeling that Jenny's skin has when it's hot and wet, how it could get them a little crazy again, maybe we're pushing fifty but hot and little drunk on champagne under the stars and a cold wind blowing but so hot under the waterline.

Jenny finished up the dishes and came over. She wrapped her arms around his neck from behind and smelled his hair. "That old familiar smell," she said.

"Do you still like it?"

"I've always liked it."

"You're always telling me to put on that gel goop on it. That stuff smells, aside from the fact that it would look like I'm trying to look younger."

"Do what you want, honey. But I like your smell."

"It's my natural pheromones. It drives women wild. Men too."

"And all kinds of animals, I'll bet," she said. "Just don't go to the zoo.

There could be a tragedy."

"One time I was on the beach and a whale beached itself just trying to mate with me. Hey."

"What."

"Your kitchen sucks. You need something better. Here, look."

He turned the magazine to a dog-eared page and showed her the photo spread of the Tuckers' new kitchen in Bockston. Mrs. Tucker stood with crossed arms and an amused expression in the corner that the counters made, looking at the camera as if to say that she had a new kitchen, so what do you say about that? She had a point. The gray-speckled countertops flashed white where backlight reflected, the wood cabinets bragged that they were expensive, and rounded brushed aluminum fittings – door handles, faucets, backsplash, trim – gleamed their special dull gleam of quiet brand-new-metal pride.

"Pretty nice," Jenny said. "Does it say how much it cost?"

"They never tell you that. But here's the architect's name, Patrick Miller. From Burlingame."

"That must have been expensive, then, if he went all the way to Bockston."

"Cheaper here. Closer. Hey, I bought a lottery ticket today. That's like having money in the bank. This is the winner, I can feel it."

"Get outta here. You and your Lotto tickets."

Saturday night came, and in Sacramento two beautiful women, tall and slim in clinging silky dresses and stiletto heels, one blond and

one brunette but otherwise exactly alike, stood on either side of a genial handsome man in a tuxedo and took turns plucking ping-pong balls from the chute. 12, then 18, then 45, then 2, then 5, then 35. And the Power Number, 42. Ralph's ticket had little to do with these numbers, other than the 45 (in two lines on the ticket, the number he always asked for on his basketball jerseys before he got too old to play, 'my number'), the 18 once, on the same line as a 45 for a two-dollar payout (18, his age when he first tried marijuana and had sex, although not on the same night). Ralph's ticket would have won if only he had chosen these other lucky numbers:

* 12, the age Uncle Jim had told him he had an aptitude for mechanical work when young Ralph held a crescent wrench firmly on a stuck bolt, so Uncle Jim could break it loose and change the belt on the lawnmower.

* 2, the number of Ralph's children from his first marriage, and in fact the sum total of all his children, although he had also adopted his first wife's daughter and he considered it possible that he might have a child in Vietnam somewhere, child of a woman he had lived with there briefly and missed sometimes.

* 5, the age he had learned to read from a little book about a little yellow duck who wanted to walk South instead of fly. Little Ralph was actually reading, although his mother thought he was just reciting based on the pictures, and he heard her say so to his father.

* 35, the number of tulip bulbs Jenny had planted in the bed at the west side of the house exactly 35 days ago while Ralph watched the Mavericks beat the Nuggets by 5 points.

Power Number 42 was also within Ralph's grasp. This was the number of days left before he would be summoned to Bake the

Snake's office to be told he was let go, there would be no severance, and Kastracorp needed no reason for this action. A more astute office politician than Ralph would have been able to calculate this ahead of time.

As it turned out, for a number of reasons that included the kitchen and the hot tub, Ralph and Jenny laid warm and sleepy in bed late next Sunday morning 39 days before he was fired and decided to refinance their little house and pull out the cash. 35 days after this, they deposited the big check and had a nice dinner at Applebee's. Ralph had two Margaritas and the riblets-and-chicken-fingers basket; Jenny had an oriental chicken salad and a Pina Colada.

* * * * *

On the day he was fired, Ralph went and had a drink, too, at a not-too-depressing bar he passed every day when he went home. He walked into the gloom, greeted the other patrons vaguely and ordered a shot of rye, straight up because this is what a tough guy would order in an old movie.

He had always wanted to do that. Pulling out his little wallet to pay, he remembered the Lotto ticket, which he had never checked. He looked at it and put it back in his wallet.

After he knocked back the rye in one toss like Robert Mitchum, he walked out of the bar and into the liquor store next door. He showed the ticket to the Korean man at the counter.

"Can you check this for me?" he asked.

"Sure."

The man placed the ticket into the scanner toward the rear of his glass counter crowded with snacks and gum. He clicked his tongue. "Lucky today," he said, "You win two dollars."

Ralph felt a little dizzy from the booze. He said, "Let it ride," out of the side of his mouth with half-closed dangerous eyes, like Mitchum. He put another five on the counter and said, "Seven bucks, cash value, you pick 'em."

The man said, "That's the way," and printed the ticket. "You want this?" he said, holding up the old one. No, Ralph said, I'm done with it.

The Korean man, who believed in luck with his whole heart, said, "Good luck to you, sir."

The Beekeeper's Fever Dream

by Devan Sagliani

An ominous, black, billowing cloud rose from the mouth of the oven. Flames shot out of the Cornish game hen, dancing eerily across its charred flesh, like some sort of alien code to an unseen enemy or an indiscernible and inimical lesbian feminist argument, laughing at me, taunting and emasculating me.

Wait a minute. Let me start over.

I suck at this almost as much as I suck at cooking.

It's hard to believe that I actually spent time in a creative writing class once, years ago in college. I needed an elective and there were several cute girls in the class.

Don't get me wrong.

I understand why you are making me do this.

I understand that this is an important part of marriage counseling.

I understand why you want me to write down everything, how it will help the healing process between my wife and I, but I still feel silly.

I'm not a great writer.

I never have been.

It doesn't bother me in the slightest, making this confession.

I have other talents, like shifting data around and sorting it and pulling out meaning where none seems to exist.

Patterns in the data flow reveal anomalies.

Patterns in the data flow reveal irregularities.

Patterns in the data flow reveal unforeseen connections, concentric circles of interlocking statistical relevance, transparently laid one over the next like a translucent golden stairway to Heaven, winding up into the clouds like a double helix.

I use those patterns to create meaning in a chaotic world that by design defies order and classification.

I use those patterns to make money, which is the life source of this world.

I use them to create value from an excremental culture of waste, to breath new life into this dying planet like a tiny spark, like the glimmer of hope that was left in Pandora's mythological box after all the other evil things had already escaped and contaminated the world.

I also use them to fill mass graves with nameless bodies, filthy and unlicensed, completely forgettable, in dull, crowded cities of dirt and pain my eyes will never see.

In my dreams they have neither faces nor sex.

In my dreams they pour from the earth towards the sky, wrapped in flames and redeemed; clods of silt form a gauzy veil that streams behind them like a bride on her wedding day as their newly awakened screams invoke in my temples a low, visceral throb.

I know what I am now, how complicit I am, but that doesn't deter my fascination for my job or my raw need to perform it. Capability always supercedes culpability as the arbiter of our fate.

Knowledge is neither good nor evil, neither power nor freedom. It is beyond good and evil. It is the tool we use to harness the pure energies of this existence and manipulate them to our advantage.

Ask yourself this: what good is a moral compass when the signified value of an implied true North has been obliterated? Or, to be more precise, how can one live a moral life in this society when the engine of hypercapitalism requires the obliteration of limiting terms such as 'objective standards?'

I am not the only one whose work is both destructive and necessary, positive and negative, according to who is interpreting it; although I no longer require the blessing of an obsolete God and the religious sanctioning of my daily activities to support the value and ultimate meaning of my life.

I have come to a place in my life where I am ready to be held accountable, ready to defend my choices. I'm okay with that.

This really isn't about my marriage.

I use those patterns to make other patterns, like searching through trash for something to recycle, like digging through the decaying stench of a warm, eroding mulch pile, in past your elbows with both hands, but in a much more complicated and sanitized way.

This is about control.

I swim through a technological dump full of random scraps of discarded info flow, statistics once compiled to serve other masters and means, and redefine them, endowing them with new equity by filtering them into new protocol categories.

There is no simpler way to explain it. Sometimes I wish there was.

It is like suddenly remembering a dead language from some distant future and knowing that you speak it fluently but no one else does. You will have to teach others how to conjugate in data flow before you can communicate with them.

Past.

Present.

Future-tense.

It is like having nostalgia for the present.

Maybe this is about my marriage, about what went wrong there, why I started coming to see you in the first place.

It is like awaking from a coma into a world that only you can remember, which makes it not entirely dissimilar to having your heart broken, or some of the emotional cycles that mercurially govern the mind post-infidelity.

When it comes to crunching info and making charts out of seemingly unconnected data and easy access spread sheets I have an uncanny predilection.

You might even call it a gift.

I know that this is not the reason why I started therapy, but I want to put my best foot forward.

This journal stuff shouldn't have to feel like a weekly homework assignment.

I shouldn't have to feel like I am being forced to do something by someone who I am paying to help me get better.

I have to want to share my feelings with you.

I can't let you help me any other way.

I'm only doing this because I want to believe that there is still a chance that I can fix my shattered marriage.

You told me to start with the incident, the thing that fractured my trust in our relationship, but that's hard to pinpoint. A million

things could be responsible for what happened, how we ended up here.

Work.

Sex.

Impatience.

I've never been so uncertain about anything before in my life. I can tell you without hesitation that I don't like it. It feels like being suffocated while you watch the final seconds of your life tick by on a large clock, all that time, misspent, thrashing about, hoping to escape and take one long good breath.

I think the best place to start is the night I found out that my wife had cheated on me.

That's as good a place as any, or don't you agree?

You said to go back to the event that still carried the strongest emotions in my memories, and that event carries some pretty strong emotions.

You said to talk about my feelings.

You told me to visualize what things were like at that point in the marriage, to put myself back in that place and time, to experience it all over again. That way, you insisted, I could search for clues as to what had happened that might have contributed to the infidelity, as if my marriage up to that point was some dime-store mystery that I would eventually unravel through deductive reason.

Control is very important to me. It always has been. When I feel like I am not in control I start to lose perspective in my life; I become unbalanced, as if I am fading away into nothingness.

It's one of my greatest fears, anonymity.

I know why all those serial killers end up confessing.

I'll do it again.

I'll tell you how it started.

I hope I am not boring you with too many details, but this is the only way that I feel comfortable sharing this kind of thing with you, with anyone. I have to make it a story, like it's happening to someone else, otherwise I'll quit before I even start.

I warned you, I'm not a great writer.

Inky black plumes of soot rose from the gaping mouth of the oven as my carefully prepared Cornish game hen, stuffed with fruit and precooked brown rice then doused with butter, sprouted a bright orange mane of flames, out of the weathered bands of an Indian ink tribal tattoo, where once its tender skin had succulently sizzled a mere thirty minutes before.

That's better. I like that.

That's much more colorful and visually impressive.

That's what I get for setting the oven to 450° instead of 350°.

'The soul of the world is broken,' I thought.

'We have forgotten our true nature, that we were once like Gods or other immortals.'

I might have spoken it out loud with a sense of ironic detachment.

'Buried deep within the crevices of the original earth, hidden from our soft, dull eyes, is a lost world humans crawled out of four hundred million years ago and abandoned, opening and closing like an oyster shell, empty and forgotten.'

I lit a Newport and walked into the living room, flipping on the Reformation Symphony by Mendelssohn to calm my nerves.

Things felt wrong.

We were off the charted territory on the map and I knew it.

Things in my marriage had been sliding for quite some time.

No one was trying to deny that.

No one was trying to do anything to fix it either.

Things just kept getting more and more confusing, and I wasn't always sure how I felt about what was happening. The more I tried to sort out my feelings the less solid the ground beneath my feet seemed to be. It was as if the soil I once took for granted kept eroding away, like I was falling into a sinkhole, back into that original earth upon which we built this faulty paradise, one layer and a time.

I hadn't smoked since high school.

I hadn't smoked since my mother died of lung cancer.

I picked the habit back up when we started fighting.

It was almost like I never stopped in the first place, like twenty years hadn't passed. Once the initial nausea and queasiness subsided, the nicotine rush and buzz settled in; it was like I had never quit. It was like being locked in a room with a friendly and consoling executioner, the warm gun nestled visibly in his lap, as if he wasn't even trying to hide the unpleasantness of what it represented, as I listened to him comfort me about the eventuality of my demise.

Things were complicated, that is all that I am saying.

Things weren't always like this.

Things started slowly, gradually, and built up speed.

The first year of my marriage everything was perfect.

The first year of my marriage my wife did all of the cooking.

The first year of my marriage my mother in law grew soft in the head and had to be displaced from her world, had to be set up in a retirement community saccharinely dubbed Shadow Grove. I hope I never end up in one of those homes.

I'd rather put a gun in my mouth than go gently into that good night.

The first year of my marriage I was free to focus on more worldly pursuits, the burgeoning aspects of commerce that define a man, packaging and repackaging information for sale at DataCorp. It was a world that I had been destined for since birth.

It was a world full of order, a world that ran on schedule. We nicknamed the office 'the hive' because of the lay out of the cubicles.

There were clearly marked boundaries for everything.

There were hard and fast rules to follow, operating procedures and manuals.

There were margins to exist within, defined signs with easily decoded meanings.

I spent days assiduously pouring over spread sheets full of discarded info dump.

The days at DataCorp clicked away with the precision of a well-manufactured clock. Each one could be accounted for by the minute. The tiny details of the machine working, breathing life and

feeding analysis of the data out to us, were like a miniature symphony to the trained eye.

Mondays were spent in protracted productivity meetings with my supervisor, Bob Cleary from the Upper Management team, and three other midlevel advisors, Larry Trancas, Tom Sinclair and Fazel Lieberman.

Each of us was in charge of our own team.

Each of us controlled a wing of the hive, a fat section of DataCorp's precious honeycomb.

Each of us put on our best Pollyanna impersonation, trying to laugh more genuinely at the wry innuendos buried in Bob's weekly monologue until we practically descended into a pack of cackling hyenas, although he never seemed to notice.

Bob enjoyed the clamoring and endless fawning.

Bob rewarded those who were humble enough to truckle before him, in the same way all great leaders throughout history have enjoyed basking in appropriately tasteful compliments from the honey-tongued mouths of well-trained sycophants.

Bob would begin the Monday meeting with a cup of Starbucks for each of us.

Bob would launch the Monday meeting off with a gratuitous soliloquy regarding the previous weeks accomplishments that made us all feel included. It was pretty much the only time you could expect to receive praise from him, or recognition, or acknowledgement. The rest of the week his office door was usually closed barring emergency sessions.

At DataCorp you always knew exactly what your place in the world was.

We would always start exactly on time, without fail.

We would go as long as was necessary, until each team member present had utilized the opportunity presented to them to offer positive suggestions.

Bob's little Monday meeting speech always started with him commending us on efficiency, extolling the virtues of employee appreciation as the cornerstone of a productive and enlightened society, and urging us not to stray from the course.

Bob wore a navy blue tweed vest on Mondays instead of a suit jacket, as if he was ready to roll up his sleeves and dig into the work himself, ready to tarnish his fresh manicure by tunneling into manure with the rest of the 'plebians' in search of lost gems.

Bob liked to present himself as a man of action.

He was inspiring in a lot of ways, like a mentor more than a father figure, and I think he left an indelible impression on me about what is possible professionally.

I don't know that I would say that I looked up to him, but I used to move my lips to the key phrases of the speech.

It was a world so uniform that nothing was ever out of place.

This is about my marriage, but not in the way that you think it would be.

It was a world that you could depend on.

While outside the storms of change incited chaos and fear and disharmony, our perfect world never faltered. It never failed to achieve its maximum potential.

My marriage was disintegrating in direct proportion to my career growth. You could have plotted it on a chart.

It was the equivalent of a drone hive at peak output during honey season.

I felt so at home.

I wish I could feel that safe again, like being in a womb that would not fail or eject you.

Isn't that what you shrinks think all of us men want anyway?

Whenever we would fight I would assuage my fears with more work. Instead of talking about my feelings I would burrow into a new project until I was so far ahead of the rest of the hive I had to propose new parameters to keep busy.

I have never been as successful as I was when I was emotionally distraught.

I have never been so happy as when I was miserable.

Bob would finish his speech then ask each of us in turn to describe our teams progress and suggest some new strategies for the week to come. There were charts passed around with brightly colored bar graphs and pie shapes, spreadsheets on various categories, innumerable white sheets with highlighted sections that amounted to little or nothing.

It was better than religion for me.

Opiates failed to compare and Marx became a babbling derelict before this kind of unfaltering certainty.

It was customized in a way that neither Christ nor Buddha could ever be.

Religion was scurrilous. This was sublime.

We were nestled into our own false sense of security.

We were the gleaming hope of the new world order, an effulgent paragon of possibility.

We were pioneering a bold new fascism.

Everything was well marked and labeled.

We would end the meetings with a resolution to improve, the Western notion of progress and high quantities of caffeine humming as loud and pure in our veins as Bob's sonorous voice had just moments before.

My wife and I would fight so long I couldn't remember what had started us fighting in the first place. I guess that's pretty normal.

Bob's honeyed tones were like an aria that drained torpidly out of the air and settled over our skin, his optimism sinking into us via osmosis.

My wife, by contrast, would scream so loud when she got upset that I felt skinned alive in her rage, excoriated by the litany of irrelevant and caustic insults, until the wind inside of her would just dry up and leave her silent.

Things weren't really that bad the first year of our marriage.

I had a research team of six underneath me, headed by James Tralmer, a bright young graduate from Rutgers University with an MBA in something I could never recall. It was James I talked to the rest of the week.

I gave him the orders and he dispersed them.

He was exceedingly motivated.

He was efficient.

He was loyal.

We were the model that the others looked up to in the hive.

He would come to me later with piles of sheets he had sorted through, figures and numbers, neatly organized, and inserted into blue folders suggesting finality.

His team looked up to him and I never belittled him in front of them. Any complaints or suggestions I had about his work I gave him in private.

I wanted them to fear him.

I wanted him to command their respect.

I wanted them to admire him and work harder to attempt to displace my favoritism for him.

I gave him lavish bonuses and praise in front of our team.

He responded well to positive motivation.

He brought back the blue folders with surprising speed and consistency, fulfilling my seemingly endless and non sequitur requests with blind faith, like a cult member.

The contents of the blue folders ranged from statistics of unwed teenage mothers in American cities to manatee stranding incidents in Texas since the turn of the century. There were charts whose color coding suggested the spread of teenage abuse of angel dust in Washington D.C. had grown significantly in contrast to the number of re-released Sinatra albums sold citywide. There were thermonuclear scans of the atmosphere over the continent of Africa included in a folder where data on Ebola outbreaks in Gabon were juxtaposed against smallpox incidents from a century ago.

My wife was never interested in what I did at work. She seemed to

view matters of commerce as corrupt and dirty. She acted as if discussing my work would somehow contaminate her. She never really understood what it all meant to me, to be good at this thing that only a few others could even recognize. I had to come to terms with that eventually and it broke my heart, but I loved her. Shouldn't that have been enough?

At the end of the week Bob would reconvene with us in the main conference hall on the third floor and stand near the projector, going over the list of culled projects we had presented. We would report our progress, discuss our failures, and leave early, around three in the afternoon, to lighten the daily commute.

A brave new world indeed, and just a double click away.

I was the master of a very small, purposeful world, still and calm.

I never knew how DataCorp translated our findings into the one hundred and ten thousand dollar salary they gave me with full medical and dental and a 401K, and, most days, I didn't care. At least I used to not care, when things were going so well.

In the first year of my marriage a pack of impish devils began to needle me in the form of an unrelenting curiosity that trellised into interlacing streams of suspicion and threatened to undermine all I had worked for. This unquenchable rumination arose in me around the same time my marriage began to grow queer.

With success came contentment and eventually a slow decay.

My golf scores were down.

My sex life had grown regular and stagnant.

Even our fights had become predictable. I could weather them with as little interaction as possible, allowing her to rant like an opium addict in the throes of a discontent fever dream.

I lost interest in the running stock quotes at the bottom of my

twenty-two inch monitor.

I began to doubt.

I began to entertain preposterous notions.

These were not unfounded notions, mind you, like a hypochondriac with a sore throat in allergy season envisioning the end of his frail existence from some newly manufactured virus.

I was beyond centered.

They were based on concrete incidents.

There were notes in Arabic in the wastebasket of Bob Cleary's office for weeks.

There was an incident at the hive, a foreigner, an outsider, visited our wing of the office, as if he had wandered lost into the small catacombs we dwelled in, and began ranting in an indecipherable dialect of Chinese until he was ushered out by DataCorp security guards.

The incident was never properly explained to me.

I was insouciant. I rolled my acupressure balls clockwise, then counterclockwise for twenty minutes.

Ten. Fingers. Connecting. Heart.

There is something I am not telling you. There was always something underneath it all, shifting, like plate tectonics.

Listen.

I can tell you the gross figures of the number of starving children in Chechnya but I cannot tell of the republic's true soul. I cannot tell you how the soil feels when pressed between the fingers or of the

stony aftertaste of their metallic water.

Pennies and dimes.

Flat Alka Seltzer.

Aluminum.

No spreadsheet can do that for you.

I do not speak Russian.

I do not speak Chinese.

I told my subordinates that it was nothing to be concerned with, just a crazy man in a thousand dollar designer suit, and to return to their fact-finding missions.

There were blue folders to fill.

The world would go on.

My mind began to fabricate wild tales I dared not repeat to a soul.

I'm not that good of a writer.

There is another world beneath this one, writhing, and it began to effervesce into all the other aspects of my pristine existence. It bubbled into the soft gray matter inside my mother-in-law's head. That's when the fighting in my marriage really began.

Aluminum cans.

Stem cells.

The future.

The forgetting.

It's all connected somehow.

That's my job, to find the thing that connects all of these elements, that unlocks new meaning in them.

That is what I do best in the world.

I would envision clandestine meetings deep within the walls of DataCorp with Iranian businessmen, discussing the Uranium contents of the hills of Jalalabad in quick, hushed tones. I would dream up deep voices whispering Dari over wooden cups of dandelion wine on the other side of my office wall.

Sometimes I would imagine that our clients were wealthy, corrupt politicians from around the world.

Nygoya.

Petrozavodzk.

Nanjing.

I used to fantasize such wild things, like the numbers we fed them allowed them to commit unspeakable acts of horror on an unsuspecting, civilian population.

Bosnia.

Herzegovina.

Beirut.

Sometimes I would hear echoes of the things I had filled countless blue folders to the brim with on FOX, falling lucidly out of Greta's lacerated mouth.

Ramallah.

Baghdad.

Hawthorne.

These thoughts are normal I am told.

The important thing is that we do not repeat them in the company of others.

The important thing is that we do not allow them to inhibit our ability to perform.

The important thing is that I was building a very impressive stock portfolio at the time, diversified like hell, municipals and all.

My world was filled with purpose because it was utilitarian and clean.

My marriage didn't begin falling apart when my wife's mother began falling apart. It just accelerated.

My marriage at that time was like a suicidal driver on wet asphalt during a hail storm, briefcase open and pouring documents out into the cold void through the back windows, tie undone and hung around the rearview mirror, empty bottle stained amber rolling around in the vacant passenger seat.

Yeah. I'll admit it. I've thought about suicide before, but name one sane person who hasn't.

Potassium chloride and iodine.

These were just two of the ingredients they used to clean up her wound when she fell, a jagged cut on her thigh that sweltered into a violent bruise.

We rushed over the minute we got the phone call.

We lived so close that it took less than ten minutes.

We discussed whether or not we should move her as she laid moaning on the nicotine yellow linoleum.

I took the bottle and pensively dabbed a cotton swab until it fizzed.

I applied it gingerly to her skin and Doris cried.

My wife was transfixed as she watched. Her personal identity began to disintegrate.

Find a myth to live through; these were the words that my wife had written onto her psyche by her junior year Chaucer professor. These were the words that kept her anchored to this sultry world, a linguistic tether of irrational yarn.

My myth was always control.

My myth was always force coupled with predestination.

My myth was tainted by the desire for a return to some forgotten and distant paradise lost.

The soul of the world is the Garden of Eden.

It lives in the womb.

I was ejected from this perfect world once, forced through the gates and blocked by an angel with a fiery sword.

I have always known what my own personal myth was.

This is not true for everyone. I can admit that.

For my wife her myth was always about somehow evolving into some other version of her own mother.

We should have had children, I thought, as I was throwing away the

remnants of our failed dinner.

That is where we went wrong.

Our neighbors, the Childers, who utilized the probate of one of their deceased parents estate to fund their transfer out of Grand Rapids Michigan to the Whisper Oaks town home Community of San Pedro, told us they had bred within the first year of their marriage. Greg Childers laughed when I suggested that I still utilized prophylactics during certain parts of the month for 'security reasons'.

They had planned things out a bit further than we had.

After the second Childers offspring had coursed through the gates of paradise and ventured out into the world Greg had a vasectomy to prevent any further surprises.

"It's a simple procedure," he explained. "They go in and snip the tubes, then tie them in a bow.

They say that if I want, they can reconnect them. I told them I didn't see the need."

They were full of surprises, the Childers, while we had grown as predictable as a head of cabbage. I used to watch them barbeque seafood in their backyard from my home office window upstairs, a succinct vantage point. This was after my wife had insisted that I choose the work-from-home option three days a week so that she could go back to school and we could still have someone on call for her mother.

"In case of emergency," that's what she said.

This was after her return to remedial course studies, after her coloring books for test preparation began to litter every surface of our home.

Drone eviction occurs when a colony stops feeding its drones due

to a lack of incoming pollen supplies.

I spent untold hours in the quiet sanctity of my pseudo-office, stripped of my power, withering.

Over a number of days drones become weakened and are forcibly removed from the hive.

I stopped watching the Childers when I felt I needed to watch, when it became a necessity to feel like I existed in a social sense.

I used to look at my wife and feel like my heart was swelling until it was too much for me, until it hurt to be so in love with someone else.

The most important factor in a hive colony is the amount of fresh pollen being collected.

I used to look at her without fear or distrust.

I don't know how I am ever going to feel that way again.

I felt like I had lost my religion. I was no longer within yelling distance of my unctuous human machine, my pacifying uniformity.

If pollen supplies coming into the colony are terminated, then drones are evicted.

The soil beneath my feet was eroding and pulling me down into its musty umber folds.

There was talk when I did go in to DataCorp, whispers that dogged near my ankles as I passed, an obvious coup developing.

I might as well have worn a yellow sunflower dress to work.

James was extra nice to me and I knew it was a bad sign, like a funeral home director planning a burial.

'The old guy is losing it,' that's what their eyes said as I passed their cubicles. Nervous giggles replaced peels of laughter at my

stupid comments. I had become a stranded manatee, a figure in one of my little, blue folders, and it was all Doris's fault.

Things were beyond great at DataCorp, then my wife's mother, Doris Edelman, the world's most complacent widow, started forgetting things.

Funny how the loss of her memories began to restrict the world I lived in.

You wouldn't think that the two were connected in any way.

You wouldn't think she was the water in my ocean.

You wouldn't understand how much I once loved my wife and how the hope of feeling that way about her again someday made me willing to do anything for her, even care for her aging mother whose memory was rapidly shrinking to the size of an unshelled garbanzo bean.

Doris would forget to shut off the oven and the house would heat to unbearable temperatures.

Doris forgot our phone number and my wife went and wrote it in thick, indelible marker on the front of her fridge. Things began to pile up on her porch, flyers and milk containers made of glass full of spoiled milk. In the living room, a precarious stack of National Enquirers and similar tabloids was growing in dangerous proportions.

She was cleaning.

She fell again.

She didn't know who to call.

She couldn't remember.

She bled a lot.

Things like that were happening all the time.

Doris lived in the same house for forty years. It was the house that her and her husband Herbert bought shortly after they were married. It was the house that my wife had been raised in and her childhood bedroom had remained intact, even after she left for college. She never resumed residence there once she dropped out of school.

It was a time capsule of a young girl's life complete in every detail, like the set of a movie of the week. It was where they held the wake for her father after the accident at the construction site. One morning, Doris left the house and vanished.

We searched frantically for her. There was no sign of where she might have wandered off to, no trail of breadcrumbs to follow to find her way back home.

My wife was hysterical to the point of being nearly useless.

We found Doris downtown near the strip malls, huddled into a pile of used cardboard, shivering. She had been there for hours.

She had gone looking for a store that no longer existed and had given up trying to find her way back across a foreign landscape that she no longer recognized.

She had gone looking for an America that you could only find on late night reruns, an America full of God fearing couples raising children with strong family values.

I used to bury my face in my wife's lap when I would come home from work and smell her while she rubbed my shoulders. With my eyes closed she would softly hum to me like a soothsayer, a delicate collection of sounds that eased away all the tension, like forgetting.

She didn't remember where she lived.

We took her back to her house but it was never the same.

We started making plans for her move the minute we put her to bed.

I saw a fear in my wife's eyes that day I had never dreamed I would see. We couldn't leave Doris alone for a second. My wife was there to meet her when she awoke in the morning.

We started mentally packing up the house the minute we put her to bed.

I used to think that my marriage would last forever, that it wouldn't be like other marriages, that I was capable of saving it from becoming typical.

We took Doris home but she didn't really live there anymore and we both knew it.

We transplanted Doris to a care facility, but that's not what we called it.

I used to think that if I cared enough, if I showed my concern and said pleasant things to my wife, reminded her of my love for her, that I would never end up having to keep a therapy journal.

We told Doris that we were painting the house.

We told her that the fumes would be really strong for a few days and that she wouldn't be able to stay in the house during that time.

We told her that the move was temporary, that soon she would be back in her house all shiny and brand new like the day she first walked through the front door, a young bride with a wild and romantic heart and faith in the future.

I used to believe that I was unique. More than anything I want to feel like I felt the first time we kissed, like I felt the day we were married, like I felt on our honeymoon.

There was no fear or mistrust between us then.

I want to go back to that place.

I want to wipe the slate clean and start over.

I want to return to the Garden and forget again.

Doris was disintegrating along with my marriage. My wife spent nights up crying inconsolably for hours over it.

She stopped asking when she could go home by the end of the first month.

She stopped recognizing me when I came to check on her.

No one from work bothered laughing at my jokes anymore. It was clear that James was going to assume my position within the company, that he would be enjoying my Starbucks on Monday mornings during the great speech.

I want to not have to be in control for a while, to let it all go, to be taken by the hand and led home.

I want a soft and friendly place to forget all of this.

I really want therapy to work. That is why I am telling you this.

She stopped being connected to reality. She was unplugged from the world, from time, free to escape into any version of herself she deemed worthy to entertain.

I tried to explain what was happening to her but she showed no

interest. It was as if the words held no value, like they signified nothing, like I was speaking gibberish.

She never went home again.

She never knew the difference.

By the second month she had started calling me Frank instead of Jim.

Frank was the name of her butcher who had choked to death on a piece of sausage.

Frank was also the name of the forty-year-old divorced man, who moved into her house with his three cats.

Frank paid us a modest sum that allowed us to keep Doris in Shadow Grove comfortably.

I just want to feel loved and safe in this world, but I know now that it just isn't possible to feel that way again.

Life is less imaginative than one might think.

So much of the world is just facts and figures, pressures and fissuring.

I know that better than anyone.

So much of the future becomes clear given the right amount of information. That's what I do for a living. I prove that if we have all the information in front of us we can predict the future. We can show conclusively that it is not a gushing paroxysm, violently usurping our destiny, but an opaque river, transforming us.

There are days I would like to drown Doris and her daughter Francine both in that river.

There are days I do not know who or what I am anymore.

There are days I just don't feel like I can go on anymore.

The world is spinning so fast, spinning and spinning, and there is nothing we can do to slow it down.

I just want this to all end well but I don't think it's going to.

Less than a week after her mother's move to the community, my wife began her silent campaign to undermine my manhood.

I don't think I will ever feel totally safe again.

I don't know that it's possible to feel that way in this world.

We were in bed, post coitus, when she first unearthed her mounting discontent. The words came out like a snake slithering, a wheezy near whisper that wriggled serpentine into the fragile and contingent space between our still entwined bodies. Still the suggestion from my wife's lips was absolutely lucid.

"Maybe I should get a job again."

I tried to pretend I hadn't heard her at first.

I tried to pretend that the force of the semen exploding out of my urethra had somehow dislodged tiny bones in my ears, a tympanic calamity, temporarily making it impossible for me to translate the audible wavelengths of sound she had emitted into coherent words.

I tried to blithely smile.

This tactic, however, was not entirely successful.

"Did you hear me?"

This was harder to ignore. Avoiding positing a response on this one

meant risking being taken for either arrogant or ignorant. At some point I was going to have to deal with it. I exhaled a long, deliberate sigh.

"Why?"

"I've been spending a lot of time thinking about my mother. Her situation bothers me."

My wife has the most beautiful and mesmerizing eyes, like black shiny coal and burnt amber with flecks of liquid gold. I've always thought she was one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen in my life. No matter what we've been through I never lost sight of that.

I feigned understanding, hoping that a sudden influx of estrogen had caused this lapse of logic, and that empathetic behavior would bring her back around.

"It bothers me too, sweetie," I said, sitting up and facing her with my best facial expressions ready to call into action, like index cards. I cued up the non-diegetic soundtrack music in my mind. I tried to recall the blocking for the scene.

None of it was real to me. It was just another drama unfolding.

I believe I was wearing my face of compassion, screwed on with a hint of intrigue.

'Let's see how she takes this one,' that's what I thought.

"No listen, when I was in college I had other aspirations. I never even thought of marriage before I met you. I was considering a career in law, originally. After graduation I kind of got lost in the world, then we met, and now all I do is read books on feng shui."

In college my wife had studied comparative literature. She had taken a number of rather interesting and pointless classes on the

anthropology of unknown and now extinct cultures. She abandoned them shortly after our engagement and began focusing on her wedding plans. Prior to that evening, I had never heard of this interest in law.

I knew I was in for a long haul. I went soft on her.

"You're good at feng shui."

"But I might be good at a number of other things that I don't know about. Listen, I got to thinking about my mother being locked up in that home and it just filled me with a sense of emptiness. My mother never did anything with herself. She was never anything more than a housewife and then she was a widow. Do you know how proud she was when I finished college?"

"I thought you said she was against the idea of you going to school," I gently countered.

"She was, up until I finished. We were sitting near a patch of begonias in the backyard and she turned to me, her face was glowing. Do you know what she said to me?"

I had a feeling I was going to hear it again anyway.

I flipped up the next index card, an expression of beguiled confusion, as if to say, tell me, came up.

"She said that she had never been so proud in her entire life."

I had never been so bored in my life.

I was losing my ability to feign interest.

I began to wish I was at work, flipping through Playboy and hearing my printer hum.

I knew what was happening but I just didn't know how to deal with

it.

More than anything I still wish I could just hold my wife in my arms and feel like it is just the two of us against the world.

The seeds of disruption had sprouted within her, threatening to uproot her personal identity and our marriage with it, and I was powerless to do anything to stop it.

The numbers were starting to come back wrong.

The data was erroneous and contaminated.

The paradigm was shifting into undiscovered terra and with it a timeline and personal history were being revised, repackaged to justify another evasion, to reinvent and distract my wife for a moment, from the lack of purpose in her life.

I never told my wife what to do with her life, never attempted to control her choices or options. I left all of the choices up to her, to work or to stay home, to be in charge of her own destiny, and the strain of it unraveled her.

I just wanted her to forge her own identity, to endow her existence with some kind of self-discovered meaning, like I had.

I wanted her to be unbridled.

I wanted her to be independent.

I wanted to share my life with her in every way, to be naked and honest to the core.

The ground beneath us was undulating from the prior rhythm of our hips, from the insanity of our impulses. Suddenly, nothing was solid anymore, like plate tectonics.

I should have seen it coming, the infidelity, but I was too self-absorbed. I was too busy imagining that I was in bed with Miss

September.

She could tell I was tuning her out and her voice faded away, as if something had broken in her and the force behind the words had dried up. It was nothing new.

I did not notice when she stopped talking.

That's the truth and I know it's ugly.

I was lying on my back making patterns in the ceilings dimly lit stucco until I fell asleep.

I couldn't stop thinking about that night in the back of my mind, the night that must surely have been the beginning of this. The Reform Symphony had run out, I had smoked most of the pack, and all I was left with were the smells of the house, the smoke and spices and burnt fruit smoldering in the kitchen unattended.

Why do all the important things in life have to be so complicated?

I would give anything if I could go back to being a child again, living in a small world that all made sense, that I knew the boundaries of, where everything was patched up at the end of the day or was someone else's problem and I could sleep with a clean conscience and wake up feeling renewed and ready to rush out into the world again.

I would give anything to feel that degree of confidence and safety again, but I know that I never will.

The world is the world is a word.

By the time she came home the wall clock read eleven thirty, the microwave clock said eleven-thirty-two and the wristwatch I had left on the bathroom counter was reading only ten-fifty-eight, a

perfunctory fabrication I had taught myself to believe to get to occasions such as office meetings and scheduled dinners on time.

The clocks in my life never match.

I don't know why I won't allow them to, whether it's an admission of the unreliability of time or if I'm just trying to give myself enough time to go back and try to fix small errors I have made, to cheat the system again.

I used to drink coffee in the mornings with James Tralmer and he'd laugh on cue at all of my incredibly dumb jokes.

I used to like the words 'morning commute.'

I used to believe in my wife, to trust her implicitly, but now that's gone.

She came in without a word.

There was an unfamiliar and foreign air hanging around her, a new color in her aura.

There was something ineffable about the way she flipped her bangs out of her face, the preternatural sheen of stolen lust that shone like Lucifer's torch upon her no longer furrowed brow.

She had been released from something and I knew that something was me. She had been paroled and my arguments about her being inconsiderate were going to mean nothing to her now, less than nothing.

She was no longer bound to this earthly realm. She had been translated.

The Cornish game hen, long abandoned, had come to dissipate in spirit form. It was now nothing more than an amorous odor that slunk across the kitchen tiles like an accusation no one in particular

was willing to acknowledge.

Clean and clear and in control, I had thought, as I removed all traces of it.

This was no great loss.

‘Breath,’ I told myself.

‘Breath slowly, deliberately, in and out. In and out.’

‘Something is different here,’ I thought.

It was written on her face in words so thick I didn’t even have to try to make them out.

This is what she had intended from the start.

She wanted me to know.

She wanted to make sure there was no way I could avoid it. There was no way to ignore her now.

She had committed this crime against us, against me, and there was no way to let her slide by with a smile.

She reminded me of a puppy that shits on the carpet and then waits for you to come along and see it.

She reminded me of a petulant child basking gratuitously in her wrongdoing and taunting me to upbraid her, daring me to be indignant so she could turn it all around on me.

I wondered how long she had spent arguing with me in her head, playing this exact scene out over and over, practicing the blocking.

She reminded me of myself, of the simple pleasures associated with shame when it is stripped of any real guilt, detached from regret or

penance, devoid of concern or sympathy.

‘Don’t forget to exhale.’

It had happened and now she was forcing me to name it, to give words to it, to acknowledge it and breathe life into its lungs.

It had happened and now she was forcing me to drag it out into the light and expose it, bristled and new, a cancerous lung, prodded and examined, while regurgitating our past transgressions.

‘Do it now. Breathe.’

‘She has cheated,’ I thought. ‘She has committed adultery and now she wants me to call her on it so we can throw names at each other, so we can assign blame for the lost and atrophied parts of our lives.’

I was so tired by this point in my marriage.

Boxes of immaculate Chinese food, uniform, expected, calculable, stood where the more exotic cuisine once had been intended. I hadn't eaten. I had been having a different argument in my head, gaining focus, for well over an hour.

I had been working on my blocking.

You wanted me to talk about my feelings.

You told me to be specific, to tell you how I felt, to allow myself to relive the moment fully so I could heal and let it go.

I want you to know that no matter how sorry I am or how much she apologizes, it can never take away these awful feelings I get when I think of another man touching her.

I want you to understand that I am not avoiding anything here.

I am not protecting myself with sarcasm.

You wanted to know how I felt and all I can say is that it hurt, it still hurts, and I'm hoping you can help me make it stop.

I just want the love and the pain in my heart to end, like a mutual suicide pact.

Some days I just want to stop feeling all together.

I was losing composure.

I was looking at her in disbelief.

I was expecting her to laugh.

I spoke first like a bewildered child.

"Who is he?"

Her eyebrow peaked like some over arching actress in a silent film, symbolic and wry.

She was not going to waste her moment, not going to bother with denials and hyperbole.

She was beyond that.

She was totally empowered and all I could think to myself was how tragic and unfair it seemed that she needed to betray me to get to that place.

"His name is Howard. I met him at the college. He makes me feel completely alive, like a violent wind blowing through shaking trees."

I was speechless. Light and unfettered mirth caroused in her soft, unrepentant pupils like false kindness.

She had her strength back.

She had enacted her revenge on me for my need for control.

She had seen the monster that I was becoming, had become, a full-tilt misogynist, and had outright rejected it.

She was glorious in all of the ways that I hated because I never could be. Her perfidy had taken me by surprise and words were beyond my grasp.

I wish I could say that she threw herself on my mercy, then and there.

I wish I could tell you that my heart opened up and forgave her, and that we spent the night making love and working things out.

I wish I could tell you that her mistake made me a better man.

It didn't.

I am still the same selfish prick I have always been and the only difference is that now I know it.

Yes, we spoke that night, but not in complete sentences. I wouldn't allow that. I was way too calm, trying to reassess my position. A myriad of possible futures presented themselves to me, one at a time, fleshed out and then smashed like fine china on coarse, ugly stones.

'I am still in control,' that's what I thought. It was a natural reflex. I was falling back on the only thing I knew.

You called it reverting to a defensive posture once, when I first came to see you.

You seemed so understanding then.

I still believe you can help me. That's why I'm writing all of this down.

'I can handle this.'

I wish I could tell you that I didn't end up locking myself in my office and pacing back and forth in silent, angry contemplation.

The numbers were starting to come back wrong.

The data was erroneous and contaminated.

I picked up my acupuncture balls and hurled them through my office window. They broke the pane and soared like an angry interloper into the Childers' yard, missing their beloved barbecue and rolling lost into the grass.

I wanted Francine to hurt like I hurt.

I wanted to knock her to the ground and straddle her, my fingers slowly locking around her delicate nacre throat, and take the breath out of her forever.

I wanted to return her to clay, till death do us part, ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

I wanted to see her like I used to see her, with adoration and desire and hope again.

The world was filled with a violent explosion of breaking glass for a brief moment and then everything began to fade away. I had a blanket hidden in the closet and a bottle of Johnny Walker Red. Francine never even came to check on the sound. I heard the bath start and stop.

I drank.

I might have cried.

I descended into a coma.

When I awoke to the sound of the house phone ringing it was six in the morning the following day.

My head throbbed as I answered the phone.

Doris was dead.

Daytime physicians had found her.

She was stiff with rigor mortis, that's what they said.

She was blue, that's what the voice told me.

She did not suffer much, they duly reported.

It's easy to see the future when you have all of the information laid out at your disposal.

Everything becomes clear. To my great relief, my mother-in-law Doris, the metaphoric albatross which hung snugly around my neck, was finally dead, asphyxiated, from choking on her evening pudding.

Francine beat me with her fists when I told her.

Francine looked at me like I had killed her mother myself, with fear and confusion, and it hurt me more than I could ever tell you in mere words.

Francine cried in my arms for over an hour when I told her, and I held her and would not let go.

The last time we met you told me that I needed to focus on all the

reasons I first fell in love with my wife.

You told me to think of how things started, to go back in time and reconnect with the relationship we once gave birth to, to remember what made it special.

You told me to nurture the love we both once cherished.

I'm not sure if this is working.

I'm not sure that things make any more sense than when I started writing this journal.

I'm not sure that you know what you are doing.

You told me to be brutally honest.

The first few strokes back into her felt like some kind of breeching. She felt new to the touch, to my senses.

It had been six weeks since I had slept with her.

It had been six weeks since she had confessed to the crime of accepting the strange, the other, and now I felt like I was the one cheating.

Some things don't need words.

Some things are so primordial, so embedded into our animal psyche, that they will never be confined to the crude syllables of our blunt, primitive reason.

They will never know expression through such coarse means.

They don't need to.

"That's it, big boy."

She patted me gently on the back as she cooed. Speaking during sex had been her new introduction to the bedroom, to liven things up. It had been part of the agreement.

"Give me all you got."

Children had been the other. We would try extra special hard to get pregnant, together, and bring a little life into the world. We would not talk about the number of sudden infant deaths in Somalia last year.

"Deeper in. I want a boy."

I had been allowed to go back to DataCorp, where my lack of physical presence had completely shattered my previously undisputed hegemony.

I was now working for James Tralmer and he didn't seem to have the same sense of humor I had once remembered him having.

I was now looking at figures on poppy production in Afghanistan and Eastern Bloc quadriplegic rape statistics all day long.

Jokes during coffee break were told to the spot on the wall I had designated instead of actual people. No one pretended to think I was funny anymore. They didn't have to.

Productivity meetings were like closed sessions of Congress to me. The other employees all gawked at me as if they knew, as if my cuckolding had somehow caused her death, as if I had strangled my mother-in-law with some newfound psychic powers.

'Prolong this,' I thought, thrusting discordantly with sweaty hips and raspy groans. 'Think of anything.'

I wanted to crawl back into the oyster, back into the fissure, worm my way back into the world we lost, the world that Plato described beyond the cave.

I wanted to crawl back into the fracturing that is the soul of the world.

I wanted to be a better person but I am pretty sure that I am beyond therapy now and I think we both know it.

I don't think this is working out.

I don't think I am going to be coming in anymore.

I think this is the last time I am going to be writing in this journal.

Nothing you suggested to me is working. Talking about all of my feelings, talking about my wife cheating on me only made me feel worse.

'Think of baseball.'

'Think of premeditated clown murder statistics in Akron, think of their dramatic rise since April in southern states.'

'Think of the ratio of Siamese twin births contrasted against the number of rainforest acres decimated per second.'

'Think of any of the meaningless figures that you collect every day with your eyes on those closed doors, scheming.'

The soul of the world is opening again, letting me in, swallowing me up.

I am going home, one way or another, and nothing we can talk about has any affect on that.

"That's a good little boy. Keep it up."

'Think of the immaculate revenge you will one day exact upon the world, upon your coworkers, upon your very wife.'

'Think of the Childers, of their state of suspended animation, their permanent happiness you can't seem to achieve.'

'Think of the future.'

"Just a little more, puppy dog. Keep panting."

'Think of the clinic that Childers told you about, the fantastic irony of it, the simple procedure.'

'Think of the first few days after the original incident and how she never even tried to touch you down there once during the next two weeks, not even in marriage counseling, how she never knew you had done it.'

'Think about how holding hands was enough for her then.'

You told her she had to respect my privacy and she did.

She never knew the first thing about my surgery.

She never has to.

This is about control.

Outpatient surgery, that's what they called it.

I know that now.

Revolutionary, that's what they told me it was.

I am being brutally honest.

Contingencies, that's what I thought.

I am in control.

"That's it. Don't stop. I can feel you pulsing inside of me."

The force of the ejaculate released me from hearing her for real this time, even if it was virginal, even if it was only sugar and saline instead of raw life.

I had healed from my vasectomy in less than a few days, leaving plenty of time for golf.

I had given up on trying to undermine James with talks to Bob.

I was forgetting the key phrases of the Monday speech.

It was a world so uniform that nothing was ever out of place.

This is about my marriage, but not in the way that you think it would be.

I just want my relationship with my wife to be something I can depend on.

Something has mended in the world for me.

I have gained something for my loss.

I felt like I was floating in amniotic fluid.

I don't need you anymore and for that I am grateful.

I thought about how penitent she became when her mother died. How she became the woman I had once loved again, renouncing her desires to go to law school, forgoing her time with Howard.

Howard was just another myth.

Howard was never real to her.

Howard was a wake up call for me, she said, a desperate cry to get

my attention.

I used to love my wife more than I thought it was possible to love another human being and I want to feel that way again someday, even if I don't want to bring a child into this world.

They can undo the procedure, they told me. I didn't see the need.

There are several factors that determine the eviction of drones from the hive.

I thought about how I was released from the oppression of having to make dinner.

An abundance of pollen will prevent drone eviction.

I thought about how being in love, even the facsimile of it, was like being back inside the soul of the world and feeling its heartbeat.

So will the absence of the Queen Bee.

She rocked back and forth with her knees held to her breasts, like she had seen in a movie, humming. The serene and placid look on her face almost made me want to tell her the truth, almost made me want to relinquish control.

No. I am an immaculate, perfect drone again, functioning at peak output.

At last I am totally in control of my destiny.

Children Are Precious

by Larry Chiaramonte

April traces of snow remained by the pond where I was sitting. The trees stood like burnt match sticks devoid of their leafy crowns. Birds settling around the pond promised a spring time regeneration. My first day of retirement, it was the beginning of the end of my life. With nothing better to do, I was feeding the quacking ducks. I felt my life had slipped away without any meaningful accomplishments

A young mother with a four-year-old boy sat next to me. She was uncomfortable sitting so close to a stranger. The boy was not. He was too immersed in watching the birds fight for a piece of bread from my hand. I tore off a piece and handed it to him. He began feeding the ducks.

The woman sized me up, "Day off?"

I held up my hand asking her to wait as I put in my hearing aids.

"Day off?" she repeated a little louder.

"No just retired," I said

"From what?" she asked

"Pediatrics -35 years a children's doctor", I answered.

She seemed to unwind " I love my boy's doctors. They are saving his life. He is now in remission from acute leukemia. They treated him with triple therapy -three cancer drugs in rotation. An other six months cancer free and they will call him cured."

Having run out of bread the boy was chasing the ducks. He was flapping his arms and quacking.

“Triple therapy” my mind journeyed back in time to thirty years ago.

“Triple therapy.” It was first used when I was in training on a children ‘s ward in a cancer hospital. “Triple therapy.” Was being used in placebo– controlled research. I had been assigned a four– year–old boy with the same disease as the boy now feeding the ducks–acute leukemia. In those days this diagnosis was a death sentence. On average, the children died within three months from the first signs of the illness.

The teaching doctors were following a research protocol using triple therapy for the first time. There was a fifty percent chance that the patient would receive drugs that were blanks. We all were blinded. This meant that the doctors nor the patients did not know who was receiving the active drugs. The code revealing who received the active drugs was broken only after the experiment was over. I thought “how cruel! My little patient is dying. We have some drugs that might help and we might be using placebos.” My teachers stressed we could only beat this disease if we took the long view and did accurate research.

I had the task of administering these drugs intravenously. No easy job. The boy’s body was swollen from steroids used to counter the spread of the leukemia to the brain.

The pressure on his optic nerves blurred his vision. He could still feel the pain of a needle stick.

“Wrap him in a sheet with a free arm. While I try to start this intravenous.” I instructed the student nurse.

I felt a vein. The alcohol I used to clean off the area gave off flumes burning my nostrils. My heart pounded in my chest with the fear I would fail and hurt the boy more than necessary. The needle to my surprise slipped easily into the vein as I heard clapping coming from behind me.

“Good job, Doctor Ferranti” It was the boy’s mother Mary Garvey Esq. who had come to visit straight from her work as a malpractice

attorney. At five foot six in heels, dressed in a power suit with her hair up in a bun, she looked as threatening as she did in court when I last saw her.

She and her law partner were suing the hospital, my attending, and me a student doctor for some mistake a nursing aid had made. This was a high-powered legal team fast earning a good reputation. Mary Garvey sat at the plaintiffs' table planning the attack. Her husband and law partner Stanley Garvey Esq. examined and cross-examined using words like swords to fillet his victims. I found out that day the law could demand someone with a minor responsibility pay the major damages. As lawyers say "go for the money." The hospital settled the case.

"I hope you can care for my son. We found from our case you are a well-trained doctor. Please feel comfortable treating my son. We are on the same side now. We both want just the best care for my son. Right?" She said.

"Right. You understand the research protocol?" I asked.

She said. "Yes, let me change in the bath room."

Minutes later she reappeared no longer an attorney but as a concerned mother in her tennis sneakers, jeans and tee shirt. Her hair was down and soften her face.

"How is he eating?" she asked

"He is not eating" I replied.

She sat and took a baby's bottle from her purse to feed her four-year old son.

"I read that children may regress when ill. At this point a bottle will not hurt." She picked up the child and began feeding him. A tear ran down her cheek as she rocked the shadow of her child in her arms.

“Can I help you? Do you want anything?” I asked

“No we will be fine. Good night” she replied.

It was Friday night. I was done. I left the hospital for some much needed sleep. As I stepped outside I was greeted by an April snowstorm. The promise of spring like the boys life was fading away.

The next day I found her asleep with the boy in her arms in her reclining chair. She was no longer the malpractice lawyer striking fear into the medical establishment. She was just a simple concerned mother. I had been in her world in court. A world filled with human confrontation. Now she was in the hospital. This was my world. Here mankind joined forces to struggle against nature. Who has more pressure? Doctors or lawyers? I thought we doctors can afford to be nice we are confronting a common enemy.

Just then, her husband, six-year-old daughter and nanny arrived for a Saturday visit. The husband put his finger to his mouth for silence and motioned me outside. When we were alone and out of earshot he began “ he can not see. He is dead. Isn’t he?”

“No he can still hear, be careful. He is not dead. He is dying.” I replied.

“My wife is falling apart,” he said.

“She needs to make the boy more comfortable. She needs you.” I replied.

“ I can handle a court confrontation but not this– my sons death” he replied.

“Your wife needs you” I said.

“Sorry I just can not handle this” he turned and left.

I walk back to the room the woman was awake. The boy was now asleep in his bed. She hugged her daughter. "My husband?" she asked

"He had to leave," I said.

"Can we talk?" she said as she motioned her sitter and daughter outside.

As soon as they left she took my hand and began to cry. "This is so hard. I try to be a good mother but I can never be good enough. I need someone to depend on." she looked at me long and hard. There was a hint of an invitation.

Mrs. Garvey was an attractive woman. For a second I was tempted until I realized that she was so vulnerable that she would be receptive to the advances of any doctor now. A comment from one of the staff psychiatrists flickered through my mind. "Someday you will meet a distressed woman who will be susceptible to a doctor's sexual advances. Remember you are a doctor first and a man second."

I needed to be professional. "I understand how difficult this is for you. Your husband is denying his feelings. You must feel very alone. There is help."

She looked at me slowly cried and nodded her head yes. Starred at me as if to say please save me.

"Your husband, your daughter they will need you after this is over." I said.

"My husband, he can be damned. He is not here for me now, when I need him." She almost shouted.

"Your daughter?" I asked.

"Yes, I cannot let my husband raise her without me." She said.

“Have you thought of suicide? If you have you must have some professional grief consoling. We have a staff psychiatrist. Grief is common problem here even for young doctors. He has helped me. You and your husband can both go.” I said.

“He is too macho to admit his feelings.” She replied.

“Well you can start. Remember your daughter.” I said.

A flicker of a smile crossed her lips, she squeezed my hand in thanks.”

I feel better I will be back after some sleep at home this afternoon” she then left.

As if he did not want to upset his mother the boy convulsed as soon as she left.

I tried to treat the convulsion to no avail. The boy died. I pushed off my grief by filling out the forms required at a child’s death. Looking at the encoded research protocol I found that the boy’s treatment consisted of three placebos. The children who had received the active cancer drugs were doing much better. Research required cold judgments. I felt like a victim and killer at the same time. How was I going to inform the parents of the child’s death? I could not let the grief stricken mother dive back to the hospital alone. I called the father. He was almost relieved that it was over. “Remember your wife needs you,” I said.

Thirty minutes later they arrived. The woman cried into her husband’s chest. He had his arm around her. She was stiff to his touch as if the comforting was too late. She had suffered alone too long. The husband made the arrangements for the boy in a professional manner. I took the both of them aside. I told them that grief, guilt and anger would enter their relationship in the days, weeks and months to come. Their marriage would be stressed. Grief consulting could help.

The husband became defensive.

“You are a pediatrician not a psychiatrist. That is ok for my wife. Women are into that touchy feely stuff. We men, especially trial lawyers need to suck it up and go on. I thank you for your concern.” He said.

A year later, the next April as I was shopping I heard “Doctor Ferranti, ”

I turned and saw Mary Garvey with her daughter.

“ How are you?” I asked

“Getting better,” she said.

“I wish I could have done more for your son.” I replied.

She reached for my hand “You did what you could for him. You saved my life.”

“Your husband?” I asked.

She shook her head. “He began drinking. He would not go for consulting. He got suspended from the bar. He showed up in court drunk once too often. He is in rehab. We are separated. I just need some distance. It is too much like my childhood. Therapy is helping. We need time. He might turn it around. He needs to do it on his own. Like I had to face my sons death on my own.”

“It happens. A child’s death stresses everyone to their inner being. I wish you both well.” I said as I turned to walk way.

I had forgotten about the child who died thirty years ago until now.

“Quack, Quack!” The boy in remission was standing before me flapping his arms. “Triple therapy” I thought. The pain of thirty

years ago was paying off in those wonderful words “Quack, Quack!” and the flapping of the boy’s arms. They were signs of his normal health.

I said to the mother. “I will pray for you and your son. Thanks, you made an old doctors day.” I walked away whistling.

I always smile now when I hear a duck.

“Quack. Quack.”

It is the sound of music to my hungry ears.

Disconnected

by Keely O'Rourke

It was in a chair, uncomfortable and aching at the strange shifting angels I'd find. It was in me, in that moment, in that time and space.

I thought of the floor my chair sat on. The fibers of the carpet, alternately clean and dirty, the bacteria in the dirt with their little teeth. Walls white and striped with sunlight, dotted with the light reflecting on the balls of colored glass that hang on the French doors, blowing on their Tibetan bell string.

The moment was a new one, time had not stopped. I moved with it, beyond those doors to the ocean, the sound of wind and cars rushing, the liquor stores light bulbs glowing dimly in daytime light. I went the other way, toward the city and Santa Monica, down Olympic and buildings that rose, the metal spines of those buildings, there fifty years ago, the same mass holding tightly together letting people rise, work. I thought of the paper in the offices, the hum of copiers and the buzz of lights. Filtered air running through ducts and seeping silently into rooms all day. The lungs breathing that air, from one mouth to the next, a constant kissing and breathing of life. The tissue of those lungs, the tissue before it was tissue.

I moved to the 10. That straight line of pavement and the people somehow calmer, cooler than on these other California highways. I thought of myself in my car, my music a theme that I change with emotions and thoughts, the music made in minds and studios, the tape the music is put on.

To the San Gabriel's, to the Angeles Crest and the city of dumped bodies, each having lived a particular kind of horror before passing into the time I was also passing through. I veered down, to the islands, Bali and waterfalls with wet rocks, the hiss and roar of

water falling into itself, each drop losing its individuality as it falls into the next. A frog would sit there, a hundred years from now, tongue wet from the lapping at the dew, toes moist and sticky. The frog's throat with its searching song, the plants that rise around him, giving their own air, mixing and kissing the frog, eventually to make it to me. For my kiss.

Or higher, in the Arctic with the icy floor reflecting a thousand lightning bolts, dancing against the backdrop of a red sun, fixed in its non-position for days, in this very moment, and how it might have been a thousand times before, a million different lightning strikes, gathered energy unleashed and drawn back into nothingness, quiet sky and top clouds and north stars beyond.

Out into space floating with the expansion of every atom there, and also just beyond. This sun and the other stars too numerous to count or conceive, and the space that space is expanding into, in this moment, in the moment it first came to pass, in the moment it will cease to exist.

I shift in my chair, ecstatic.

Hiroyuki Nomura

by Andrij Zip

The girl couldn't have been more than fifteen. She was clad in a sailor-style school uniform. White blouse, a red bow, a pleated navy skirt that came up to her mid-thigh, plump white socks glued to her toned calves, and black leather shoes. Her long black hair fluttered in the wind as she lay asleep on the beach. A giant orange octopus appeared out of the crashing waves, meters from where she lay. It slowly made its way through the sand towards her. A tentacle wrapped around her ankle, and began to pull the girl. The girl shook her head and gaped at the octopus.

"Are!?" she cried. "Dame!"

Another tentacle made its way up the girl's leg and under her skirt. She grabbed at it. A pair of tentacles wrapped around her wrists and pinned them to the sand.

"Dame! Onegai!"

It began to rub her crotch. The girl moaned in delight. Two more tentacles worked their way up to the girl's blouse. They reached inside and ripped it off of her chest, exposing a set of firm breasts straining against a white bra.

"Onegai!"

The tentacles grabbed at the cups of the bra and tore it from the girl's body. Her breasts fell free. The two tentacles moved under a breast each and pushed them up. Each tentacle proceeded to slither up her breasts and place a sucker on each of her erect rose coloured nipples.

"Dame." the girl moaned.

The girl was now moist. The tentacle rubbing her crotch was now joined by another. They reached up to the girl's hips and peeled off her panties. They clung to her crotch momentarily before sliding down her legs and around her ankles.

"Onegai!" the girl squealed.

The two tentacles moved up the inside of the girl's thighs and pushed them down, spreading the girl's legs. Another tentacle made it's way through the sand and began to penetrate her....

"Mamonaku, Owari Ichinomiya, Owari Ichinomiya desu." a voice boomed through the crowded train.

Hiroyuki caught himself staring at the naked thighs of the schoolgirl who was standing in front of him. She was scowling at him. He turned away and saw his reflection in the mirror. Dark suit and tie, glasses, balding, late-forties, carrying a cheap leather briefcase.

"Is this our stop?" asked an older foreign lady. She was pressed up next to Hiroyuki.

"No, Mom. This is Ichinomiya. Ours is the next stop in Gifu." a young, blonde haired man replied. They had a suitcase on the floor between them. "I used to live here, though."

"I thought it sounded familiar."

The train stopped and the doors opened. A flood of people got off the train, including the schoolgirl. Hiroyuki watched her walk away through the window of the train. A few people got on, the doors closed and the train was off again.

"Mr. Nomura?" the reporter asked.

"That's me." Hiroyuki said as he looked up from his massive mahogany desk. A striking blonde in a short skirt was standing in

the doorway of his cavernous office. A fire crackled in the fireplace off to the right.

"I'm Lindsay Smith from Fortune magazine. I'm here for the interview."

Hiroyuki frowned and then smiled. "That's right. I'm so busy I totally forgot. Please, have a seat." he said motioning to one of the plush leather chairs in front of his desk.

She smiled and strode across the Persian carpet to the chair and had a seat. She arched her back as she looked at her notes, a pair of spectacular breasts straining against her white blouse. Hiroyuki wet his lips as he pulled out a cigarette. Lindsay looked up from her notes.

"Oh! Allow me." she got up, and reached over his desk. Hiroyuki put the cigarette in his mouth and stared at the naked curves of Lindsay's breasts as she leaned over. She lit his cigarette and he blew out a cloud of smoke. Lindsay sat back in her seat. "I'd like to start off by saying, you speak excellent English."

"Yes. Before I went to Harvard Business school, I spoke very little. By the time I graduated I was fully fluent. Many people tell me I speak better English than most native speakers."

"Do you need English as President of the Nomura Group?"

"Yes, I do. I have several companies under my belt. Toyota, Sony, NTT to name just a few. I have to speak to our overseas managers, some of whom for one reason or another are not Japanese. Foreigners can't speak Japanese at all, so we must converse in English."

"Mr. Nomura, you're the wealthiest man on Earth and you control the world's largest and most successful privately owned company. How did you accomplish this?"

"Hard work. This is my typical daily schedule: I wake up at six-thirty, get dressed, and eat a traditional Japanese breakfast. The helicopter picks me up and flies me to my office here by eight. I eat my lunch at my desk and finish work at ten. The helicopter flies me home, where I eat dinner, have a bath and do a bit of work before going to bed at midnight. I do this Monday to Saturday."

"Don't you take holidays?"

"Only Sunday, which I spend golfing." Hiroyuki said before putting out his half smoked cigarette in a Cartier ashtray.

"That's it?"

"Yes. In your culture, people are lazy, but in Japan we work hard. Especially me! Once I retire, I'll finally be able to find the time to travel abroad. Maybe to Hawaii or Paris where I own homes, but I've never set foot in them because I'm much too busy."

"I love a hard-working man, Mr. Nomura." she breathed, just as the train lurched. Hiroyuki stumbled into the foreign lady beside him. Their eyes met.

"So-lee." he spit out.

"That's ok. These things happen." she said with a laugh.

Blushing, Hiroyuki looked away and grabbed the handle hanging from the ceiling above him. He looked around the train. In front of him, he saw a man reading the sports page of a newspaper. There was a large colour photo of Tiger Woods grinning. The crowd clapped and cheered amidst flashing cameras as Tiger held the green jacket for Hiroyuki to slip his arms through. Once Hiroyuki was wearing the jacket, Tiger leaned in and whispered into his ear.

"You're the greatest. I thought it was me, but it's you. I'm in awe." Tiger stepped back and bowed. Hiroyuki waved him off. Tiger bowed again and backed away until he disappeared into the ecstatic

crowd. Hiroyuki forced back a smile and raised his fist into the air.

"There is no question that Hiroyuki Nomura of Japan is the greatest golfer in the history of the game." an announcer gushed. " He dominated this final round of the Masters with fifteen eagles, 2 birdies and a hole-in-one on the final hole. All in all, a vintage performance by Nomura. "

Hiroyuki bowed to the crowd. Kate Winslet came bouncing along, wearing a ridiculous red hat.

"And here's his beautiful wife...Rose!"

The train lurched again. Hiroyuki's grip tightened on the handle he was clutching.

"What did you want to do for dinner?" the mother asked her son.

"There's a good sushi restaurant in the station. Would you like to go there?"

"I don't know if I want to eat raw fish."

"Mom, if I can eat it, you can eat it."

"I don't know about that."

Hiroyuki looked out the window and briefly glanced at two men clad in black, one tall, the other short, walking across a parking lot towards a pachinko parlour. Hiroyuki moved his rifle so that the red dot at the center of his crosshair was directly on the back of the tall man's head. Hiroyuki squeezed the trigger. The tall man's head exploded. Hiroyuki swung his rifle at the short man and fired. His shot went wide. The short man disappeared into the pachinko parlour. Hiroyuki stood up. He covered his face with a black ninja mask before leaping off of the roof. He did a summersault in the air before gently landing on the pavement of the parking lot. Hiroyuki pulled out a long samurai sword from the sheath on his back and

ran into the smoky pachinko parlour. Customers looked at him in horror as he stalked the aisles of flashing pachinko machines. He finally spotted the short man in the corner by a bank of vending machines. In his left hand, the short man was holding a cell phone which he was barking instructions into. In his right hand, he held a pistol which he had trained on Hiroyuki. He fired. Hiroyuki spun and turned, dodging the bullets as the patrons around them screamed and fled. A bullet hit his sword, shattering the end of it. Hiroyuki dropped his sword and dove into the air amidst the gunfire. He flung a throwing star at the short man. It lodged into his Adam's apple. The short man fell to his knees, clutching the bloody mess of his neck. Hiroyuki landed behind him and whipped out a second samurai sword. In one fluid slice, he chopped the short man in half at the waist. His trunk fell off as a column of blood erupted from his belt line.

"Oi!"

Hiroyuki spun around. A small army of black clad men were gathered at the entrance. They all had machine guns pointed at him. He dove into the air...

"Mamonaku, Gifu. Gifu, desu."

"This is our stop, right?" the lady asked her son.

"Yes, it is. So...what's the verdict on going for sushi?"

"Is there a Denny's or something nearby?"

"Mom, your first meal in Japan isn't going to be at Denny's."

"All right. Let's the give the sushi restaurant a try."

The train came to a halt. The doors opened and everyone aboard swamped the train platform. Hiroyuki watched as the son lugged his mother's suitcase out of the train. He walked past them, down an escalator, down a set of stairs and through the turnstile. A beautiful

woman holding a sleeping baby smiled at him. A little girl ran up to Hiroyuki with her arms spread like wings.

"Papa!" She cried as she jumped into his open arms. Hiroyuki watched as the mother and son from the train strolled by him chatting. The mother turned to Hiroyuki and met his eyes. He looked away and reached for his cigarettes inside his jacket before hurrying out of the station.