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# An Eclipse at the End of the World

## by Ryan Hume

"Sebastian was late as I remember it. Johanna looked at me from across the plastic table, rain-spotted and glowing of the sun, all nervous smile. Our chairs were moist and tepid, and it didn't help. This was the first time we'd been alone since, I think, and the ocean was off in the distance making most of the conversation, evaporating.

"It's so hot today," she said.

It was almost noon and we were drinking: nothing fancy, two Mimosas; it was supposed to be breakfast, but Sebastian was absent.

"Thanks for stating the obvious." I finished my drink and looked for NASA. He wasn't on the patio. Our waiter, a gimp, walked with the grace of an askew astronaut suffering a loss of gravity; able to carry a tray over his head, slowly, defying a number of rules of physics and physiology. His one hand carted the weight, while the other — slight: the gimp, the space arm — with the three protruding, malformed digits manhandled the glasses, or possibly the food we never ordered. His left leg, ankle flaccid, drug an imaginary tortoise, and he was nowhere to be seen nor heard. He may not have taken kindly to the nickname.

So we talked. About things, mostly. A lot of nouns we used to have in common. People, places and things make the world go round. Our cats were doing fine at their place. Her plants were dead, I told her, again, I think.

I wanted to feel silent, but I couldn't stop talking, looking over my shoulder for NASA.

"So how's you're place?" she said.

“My place? Really?” I scratched my head. “It’s pretty much the same, you know? Barrel full of laughs. I’ve taken in a circus since you left with the cats. They have a bear. It rides a unicycle and plays an accordion and sings songs about it’s bear mother and what it was like to be a cub, except that she sings them in ‘bear’ and I can’t understand them mostly — I mean I get the gist of it, cause I took Russian in college — but the adjectives are lost on me. You know how it is with translation.”

“Liar,” she giggled.

“Well, yeah — no,” I looked over my shoulder for the space program. “I think it was in the 19th or 18th century in Russian — the language, and, you know, the people too, that spoke the language. They changed the word from ‘bear’ to a euphemism for, well, ‘bear.’ It’s something like — медведь, I think. I’m not sure. Doesn’t matter. The cool thing’s the reason they changed it. It was out of fear, necessity. They thought if anyone said the word ‘bear’ — you know, before it was медведь — that they would conjure a bear. It would appear right before them. The beast — you know, the burden, the whatnot...” I laughed uncomfortably, then choked on ice. Where the fuck was NASA? “I don’t know, it’s a linguistic myth.”

“You’re still a liar,” she said. “But that’s funny. I always tell people you’re the smartest person I know.”

Nothing at all to say, all Mimosa smiles, bear euphemisms, I’m not alone. Not really. I remember the peculiarities of her genitals, the eccentricities of the naked body. I’ve seen her ass, her breasts, put it everywhere. In her mouth, her cunt. The same way she put it to me. I even have that right now, so long after: there’s four feet of red checkered tablecloth separating us, but I can feel the way she used to graze my ear with only her bottom teeth.

“The smartest person you know?” I replied. “Still?”

“Sure, you are.”

Right.

Afterwards, I never want to see someone I've fucked for a very long time. She's never anyone I wanted to see again.

But I do. Almost everyday.

Everything's been said, done.

But I do almost everyday again.

"So how's Sebastian?" I say. "Still a fucker, I hope? Just a big fucker that doesn't pay rent, or do much? Right? Just like he used to be?"

"No," she smiled at my jealousy. "He's fine. Loves his job — "

"What was that again?"

" — Advertising. You know that."

"That's right, he's in advertising. Scum."

"You used to be best friends."

"I know."

"He's fine." She ignored my hostility, castrated it. "He just got a promotion."

A fine sand blew over the patio wall. It was sticky with wet salt from the ocean and smelt of sun-ripened seaweed. I licked it off of my lips and felt the uneven grains on my teeth and gums. I swallowed dry.

"So do you ever — "

"No," she said flat. The table between us grew exponentially, the

distance greater than it had been before, a sea of red checkers, and the ocean crashing behind us.

“Jesus, Sebastian!” Johanna scolded. “Where’ve you been? We’ve been here for over an hour.”

“Oh.” Sebastian’s face grew terse as he took his seat. “You guys haven’t heard.”

“Heard what?” Johanna asked.

“It’s the end of the world,” Sebastian said.

I realized we hadn’t seen NASA in a while, and I had stopped looking for him. In fact, it was a beautiful day and the patio was totally empty save the three of us.

“No,” Johanna started. “No way. Liar.”

Sebastian looked sincere enough, no tell, not a sign of bullshit amongst his features — confident eyes, steady chapped lips, sallow inert cheekbones.

“I’m serious,” he began. “It’s all over the news. You guys, of course, are at the one place in town that’s not overrun by television screens. I can’t believe you haven’t heard,” he belittled us.

Johanna’s expression drew heavy, as if she had put on extra weight.

“What’s all over the news?” she inquired carefully, not wanting to be the butt of Sebastian’s cruel joke.

“The end of the world, goddamnit.” He grew impatient, his hands clenched the plastic armrests of the chair. “I’m not fucking kidding. They announced the end of the world. That’s it, okay? Everyone’s gonna die. It’s really the end of the fucking world.

“Supposedly, astrophysicists in Newark, New Jersey were trying to

recreate the Big Bang on a subatomic level and inadvertently created a black hole one–sixteenth the size of a pinpoint. It is slowly sucking in the entire universe, starting with Earth.”

“Scientists,” I replied. “They finally killed us all.”

“You believe him?” Johanna looked at me skeptically.

“Sure,” I shrugged. “Why not? It makes perfect sense that the end of the world would start in New Jersey. Either there or Florida.”

“I’m not kidding,” Sebastian said, frustrated.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think you are.”

“Bullshit,” Johanna retorted, looking at both of us with watchful eyes, as if we were in on this together, as if we’d be in on anything together.

“It happened five days ago,” Sebastian continued. “In a lab in Newark that covers two city blocks. The machinery involved in recreating the Big Bang on a subatomic scale is huge, filled up this entire building, and — ”

“ — And doesn’t work,” I added. “Doesn’t work at all. It doesn’t recreate the Big Bang on any scale. It instead destroys the entire universe.”

“Right,” Sebastian snickered. “And it’s eating through the fabric of time and space, devouring matter, and it’s getting bigger. As it swallows, it grows, getting faster and faster by the second. Five days ago! They didn’t tell us for five days! They tried to fix it! Fix it and cover it up! They thought they could fix a black hole!”

“It’s official, then,” I said. “New Jersey sucks.”

“It’s not funny!” Sebastian screamed.

“It’s kind of funny,” I replied.

“Oh my god,” Johanna looked blankly towards the ocean, the waves crashed against the rocks, slowly beating away the earth. “The world’s ending?”

“So what’s your prognosis, Dr. Doom?” I said to Sebastian.

“What?”

“How long do we have.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “They said it will take a few weeks on the news, but I don’t think they really know. Most of the New Jersey Turnpike is already gone.”

“Good riddance,” Johanna said. We both looked at her surprised, that was my line.

“A few weeks,” Sebastian repeated.

I smiled, I really smiled. It didn’t feel forced, or wrong, or peculiar, just natural. It had come about of its own accord.

“What are you smiling about?” Johanna asked venomously. Her stare didn’t penetrate me this time, couldn’t wipe away the freedom and abandon I felt pulsing within me, the utter nihilism that eclipsed my breathing.

“I was just thinking about all of the times that I slept until three in the afternoon or all of the times I watched television for hours upon hours or did absolutely nothing,” I said to Johanna, looking right into her comfortable eyes, her formerly comfortable eyes. “And of all of the times that you told me I was wasting my life, and how I began to think that you were right — and that you really had something there, and I began to believe that I was wasting my life — and how, now, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter at all. I did exactly what I wanted to do, which sometimes was nothing, and

how I will never, not even for a second, ever regret doing nothing ever again. You were wrong, and it's wonderful."

She started to cry, and I felt horrible, sort of. That hadn't been my intention. I didn't want to hurt her, I just wanted liberation.

"Jesus," Sebastian scolded me. "Asshole."

But I didn't stop smiling. The sun was right over us now. The heat was dry. The lingering puddles had given up, the moisture dissipating. I thought about all of the babies that would never become children and all of the fetuses that would never become babies and all of the adolescents that would never realize that things weren't so bad and all of the adults who would never get to take their vacation time, or retire and get a boat, or lose ten pounds and how, right now and for the rest of the world, the only lives that are complete are those of the dead and how we will be the last people this aborted earth ever sees before it is swallowed and then I thought about myself and the black hole, and how I could empathize with it. How it was small and inconsequential, yet it pulled everything towards itself.

"The only thing I want back," I began. Sebastian looked up at me, his hand on Johanna's shoulder. "Is all of the time I thought about the war, or the deficit, or multinational corporations, or international trade agreements: that's it, that's all I want back. All I regret, because more than anything else, that was the biggest waste of time. Those are things I had no business thinking about, the things that I could and now will never change." I looked directly at Johanna, who had stopped crying. Her eyes left dew-swollen, her cheeks rouged. "I could have been fucking or eating or sleeping and now I will never get that time back."

"What should we do?" Johanna asked.

"I don't know," Sebastian said. "I don't think there's anything we can do."

“Should we go to the woods or something? — I mean...” She looked down at her hands.

“I don’t think it’s that kind of apocalypse,” I said. “It’s not gonna matter if we go to the woods. Or if we get out of the city. It’s just the end of the world.”

“He’s right,” Sebastian agreed. “It’s just the end of the world.”

“We could head west though.” Johanna played with her fingers, pulling on the tips as if to elongate them. “That would be something. Buy airline tickets with everything we’ve got and head west. It would prolong it anyway. Keep heading west until we run out of money or until...”

“Really?” I said, after she trailed off. “Do you really want to prolong it?”

Sebastian and Johanna looked at their hands, furtively, studying the creases that would soon vanish, the scars that meant nothing, their evaporating age.

After we realized NASA had abandoned his post, the mission aborted, I retrieved bottles from the empty bar inside. I made a sort of Sangria or puke punch, and brought it back to the table in a glass pitcher, all smiles. We filled our glasses.

“A toast,” I said, raising my glass. The sun disappeared behind a cloud, and the bruised sky fell over us. Johanna and Sebastian joined my salute. “To the end of this world. And to never getting any older.”

“That’s a horrible toast,” Johanna said.

I closed my eyes. The sun burnt my vision orange, all purple halos and ghost-blue auras out somewhere beyond my eyelids.

“How did you think it would happen?” Sebastian finally asked.

“I don’t believe in God,” Johanna started, “but I’ve always been afraid of the Four Horsemen.”

“I always thought it would be nuclear war,” Sebastian said. “And that humans would live underground, surviving off vermin — but survive, you know? Someway. Something would survive. Maybe cockroaches.”

“I always truly believed scientists would create a black hole the size of a pinpoint somewhere in New Jersey,” I stated flatly.

“Liar,” Johanna smirked.

We emptied our glasses, the patio seemed so still, a faux calm. The apex of our solitude so far away from that apex of approaching doom, of nothingness. We refilled our glasses and thought about ourselves.

We watched the clouds in the murky blue sky as they were pulled east.

# Party Cat

## by Chris Miller

My cat can talk. I'm not referring to a parrot that repeats the same three or four phrases either. Abby can read newspaper articles. Sometimes we have sharp-witted discourses about politics, anthropology, and religion. Last week she taught me how to play chess. She'd been talking and playing board games for a few months now. I don't know if I'd call her a genius, but she was more intelligent than any cat that I'd ever known, that's for sure.

On the day before the office Christmas party, I called my cat into the kitchen, and vented my frustrations. "It's a goddamned annoyance," I told her, petting her silky orange coat. "I have to go to this goddamned party tomorrow."

While I sat at the kitchen table sipping black coffee, Abby responded by licking her back foot. My cat was a good listener.

Perhaps sensing my frustration, Abby inquired, "How come you hate Christmas so much?"

"A few reasons," I said.

"Such as?"

"Too commercial, for one thing," I said. "After Halloween all the candy's off the store shelves and in goes the Christmas crud." Actually, it wasn't so much Christmas I hated. Just the parties really irked me. I didn't like the people I worked with. Their voices didn't sound right and their arms and legs didn't move properly. There was a falsity about their gestures, their hands awkward. I'd been around imbeciles like these guys my whole life. At work, the only thing separating my workspace from theirs was a short partition, which did nothing to keep me from hearing their idle prattle. The men most admired by the women were the very same men who had

faces that reminded me of a glass of milk.

I continued my anti-Yule diatribe. “Let me tell you, December’s a hectic month already. Rush-rush-rush. Buy-buy-buy. Sit in traffic for-fuckin’-ever. Scuffles at the Wal-Mart checkout counter. Demolition derbies in the mall parking lot. Who can enjoy the holidays?”

“That’s quite a speech,” said Abby.

“Well, Christmas is quite a holiday. It’s become just another chore, a contest to outdo the next guy,” I said.

“If you hate Christmas, why do you insist on putting up a tree every year?” she asked.

In our living room was a green Christmas tree that I’d picked up last year at Sears. The tree was decorated with tinsel, silvery garland, ornate glass ornaments, a white-winged angel on top, and various other crappy, dollar-store trinkets.

“It’s what people do,” I said.

“Yeah, if nothing else, trees are good for scratching,” said Abby.

“It’s easy to turn anti-Christian at Christmastime, isn’t it?” I said, crooking my head around the corner to see the tree in the next room. “Look at that tree. It’s supposed to represent Christmas, which is what, a celebration of the birth of Christ, the Son of God? Yet all of us defy God daily in our addictions to TV, fast food, caffeine, alcohol, pornography, anti-psychotic drugs, video lottery terminals, and avarice. Every one of us is a fraud.”

“Fake tree, fake life,” said Abby.

“Last year’s party, Abby, you should’ve seen them. The men looked ludicrous in their bright Christmas sweaters. Women wearing slutty gowns and choice jewelry.”

They were makeshift Babes in Toyland. My fellow workers were a cluster of rich, boring, obvious folks, guys with cardboard faces with a couple of sugarplums poked in for eyes, the overfed, Oprah-loving women boasting how wonderfully well-behaved their children were, even though they were little brats like everybody else's kids.

"I can see it now, Abby, when I get there. All around the room everybody will chat nonsense about work, their favourite TV shows, vacationing in the Dominican, and how much they detest President Bush."

"I don't like Bush either," said Abby.

"Well, sure, nobody does. But you don't waste a whole goddamned evening talking about him," I said.

"True enough," said Abby.

"They never say anything original."

My apologies if I sound a tad bitter. If I attended the party, I knew full well that every man and woman in the room would repulse me, and every conversation would weary me. No wonder the suicide rate was highest at this time of year.

Last year, we ate hors d'oeuvres, antipasto and canapé. We drank mulled wine. Women laughed about anything. Meanwhile, I readily adhered to the "eat as much as you can philosophy" of gluttony and obesity. My boss gave me a dirty look when I pulled a prank involving celery sticks. Later, when it came time to exchange gifts, my boss asked that the Boney M music be turned off. I received a box of golf balls, despite the fact I never played golf. And we all got drunk together.

"Don't get me wrong, I like getting drunk," I told Abby. "But I could do that at home just as easily, thank you very much, without all that aimless twaddle."

“Yeah, you’ve always enjoyed drinking alone,” she said.

Damn right, I did. The whole concept of getting drunk at a Christmas party with others, particularly the dimwits I worked with all year ‘round, was sickening because instead of drowning my own sorrows, I was forced to listen to theirs, too. When drinking with others, all problems were compounded.

Things turned worse at last year’s party once the alcohol kicked in. My boss’s wife, a moderately large woman with droopy breasts, danced topless on the tabletop. Not a pretty sight. Then she upchucked eggnog all over the carpet. Hotel security came and warned us about the noise level. Alas, my Nightmare Before Christmas.

Honestly, I didn’t want to go through all that again. I’d rather stay at home and watch “Miracle on 34th Street.” Or, better yet, diddle with myself.

“Hell, I don’t want to go to that party,” I said.

“You’re quite fortunate,” said Abby. “I’d be most pleased to go. I’d love to sing Jingle Bells with those folks.”

“The meal will be good, if that’s any consolation,” I said. “The boss is ordering steak and lobster for everybody.”

“You shouldn’t complain then,” said Abby, in disgust. She loved seafood, lobster in particular. “All I ever eat around here is Whiskas. Sometimes I feast on crumbs off the carpet.”

Was man really born to endure office politics, Christmas shopping, female chitchat, company parties, and then die? Sometimes I’d like to show my co-workers a glimpse of what made me hate their ways, what made me wish I didn’t have to get up at the crack of dawn and greet them each morning. Let them know that at times I had truly been affected by dark and hideous things, at times couldn’t

summon a smile so quickly, at times wanted nothing more than to quit my job and curl up in a corner someplace and die. They would find me there, bury me, and hire somebody else to sit at my desk in the tiny cubicle. Maybe then, at last, I could get some relief about always being out of step with the majority, always the non-conformist.

While laughing, I suggested, "So how about it, Abby? Do you want to take my place at the party?"

Her bewhiskered face brightened for a moment, but then turned a tad dispirited as she replied, "We look too different, otherwise I'd gladly go."

"Look, the banquet room is dimly lit so it's not too easy to see in there," I said, "and especially if you're dressed up in nice clothes, no one will ever notice. Plus, most of my co-workers are drunks. A firm handshake and a well-timed laugh, you'll fool everybody."

Giving some thought to the situation, finally Abby answered, "All right, I'll do it. I love a good party!"

The following evening Abby got dressed up in a white button-up shirt, power tie, dark blazer, dark pants. She borrowed my shiny black shoes, looking every bit the classy cat ready for a night out on the town. Given that she had four legs instead of two we had to make a few alterations on the pants, but nothing excessive.

I reminded Abby to introduce herself as me. Night had come, and I bade her farewell as she headed out to the hotel across town where the party was held.

Tired out by the preparations, I took out a book, and rested on my bed reading. I read a few pages, and drifted off to sleep. It's a Wonderful Life.

I woke some time later, unsure what time it was. All I knew was that Abby had not yet returned from the Christmas party. I called out to her, but no answer. I checked the clock. It was after midnight. I

hoped everything was going OK. Next, feeling hungry, I went out into the backyard. A warm night, a snowman melted there, and I took a whiz across his belly.

Minutes later, I heard Abby pull up in my car, and I was eager to ask her about the party, and learn whether her deception won them over.

I went outside in the cold to greet her. "So, how was it? Have a good time?"

"Got a little drunk. Probably shouldn't have drove home," she said, with a sort of fatuous smile, typical of drunks. She loosened her tie that was coated with hair.

"Don't sweat it," I said. "A drunken night behind the wheel has always been an integral part of the holiday tradition. Just because you wish good will towards men doesn't mean you can't play Russian roulette with their lives on the road home."

"By the way, don't be surprised if you get a raise," said Abby. I imagined my sophisticated feline putting in a good word for me with the boss while sidling up against his leg. I imagined her rubbing elbows with the guys, getting all flirty, dancing up a storm, and telling in-jokes.

It was one thing to know that my cat was au courant in current events, science and philosophy, that she could beat me in chess in under 20 moves. It was quite another to know that she fit in with my co-workers better than I did. Somehow, I felt inferior.

"Having a snack, then going to bed. Good night," I said, swallowing down the last yummy morsel of a field mouse, its grubby gray/brown tail sliding down my throat like a strand of sticky spaghetti.

# Basement Jack

## by Clark Merrefield

In the 80s Ed and I were high-powered stockbrokers, you know, living the high life. We had so many women it was insane and the cocaine was just flowing like a beautiful white river of happiness. But, those good times didn't last (they never do). I was soon on the brink of self-destruction, literally, on the brink. My wife left me. My kids hated me. My best friends deserted me.

Except Ed. Ed was a real savior. He brought me cocaine and Taiwanese hookers when no one else would. He got me into heavier drugs, like crack and heroin, and found me a nice youth hostel to stay in when I couldn't pay my mortgage and all my expensive things were repossessed. When I viciously attacked the chambermaid in a belligerent rage and got kicked out of the hostel, Ed was there to let me crash on his front lawn. He brought me jars of peanut butter and packages of saltines as I nearly suffocated on my own vomit. His wife hated me, but Ed reprimanded her on my almost unconscious behalf.

ED: "Hey, this guy is my best customer, leave him alone."

Eventually Ed moved me into his basement, where I live now. It's wet down here and fungus grows on the walls and invades my lungs. My sanity grows more and more tenuous each passing day and I pound on the door for what seems like hours, but Ed always brings me back to reality:

ED: "Listen, you need to stay in there, you need to get better! Now, here's another quarter bag."

And he slides the delicious whiteness underneath the door. I'm quiet again. I can hear everything in the house. I can hear Ed's wife as she opens the cabinet underneath the sink. I imagine she's looking for orange cleaner, the kind on that late night infomercial.

The one with the guy who gets as excited about orange smelling cleaner as I do about getting high and punching a brick wall.

I shuffle across the basement and try to keep my balance and my feet slip and I twist myself around a support pole for some support of my own. I'm under the bathroom. Ed is in there. I know his step, it's heavy and it beats inside my skull. His feet stop and I hear a sound but I can't make it out. The sound gets louder and then recedes, like a bell curve. There's water dripping into a puddle on the unfinished mud floor and it dawns on me that Ed was taking a leak. Even Ed takes leaks, I think. I just sigh and hug that pole for a while until I hear Ed again, he's moving. He's stopped in the bedroom.

Ed takes out a bag of pow(d)er candy and sprinkles some dust onto his marble dresser-top. I can feel my eyes bugging out of their sockets and I'm sweating hard. Ed cuts it with a lovely sharp razor and makes it into lines that he deposits into his nose using a pink hard plastic straw. Ed feels good again. He leaves the bedroom and meets his wife in the kitchen. He kisses her and squeezes her breast and her ass.

ED: "I'm going out for a bit."

ED's wife: "Where are you going, little man?"

ED: "I'm gonna go and I'm gonna buy a Ferrari and pick up a college freshman and bring her home. But first I'm gonna get some things for our friend."

ED's wife: "Her?"

ED: "We'll see."

The door shuts and the latch clicks and Ed is gone. I await his return. I throw some mud against the wall and I pour some WD-40 on the floor and run my hands through it. It's dark and rich and I want to eat it, but I'm not hungry. There's a hammer over in that corner and a handsaw over in that corner. Up on the ceiling I see dusty old spider webs and cockroaches in between the slats of the floor above. There's a space in between two of the slats but all I can see through it is yellow and white. Up the stairs is the door that

never opens and to the right is the window that allows Ed to give me bread and peanut butter.

I look up and then I look down and I must have lost some time because I'm squatting in the corner taking a shit. I stand up when I'm done and wipe with my hand my ass and wipe with my wall my hand. I mean, "I wipe my hand on the wall." I go over to the little gray shelf Ed built me before I came here and I configure my old trusty needle. I heat up my stuff with a black lighter that says "3" on it and put it all in the reservoir. I push it in and when it mixes with my blood I get sleepy.

Then I'm someplace else. Not quite asleep. But definitely not awake. I'm definitely not alive, but definitely not dead. I'm in a womb and I'm waiting to be pushed out because I know it's coming, but I want to stay in here a few more minutes. I thumb around with my fingers on the walls, which are full of mucous and darkness. I put my fingers in my mouth and they taste salty, the good kind of salty. I curl up into a ball and feel my smooth face with my feet until I feel hands on my head pulling me into blinding whiteness and then back onto the basement floor. My arms won't move and my hips and legs won't move. I'm in an incubator and I'm paralyzed, so I sit there until the numbness in my limbs stops.

Then my eyes are awake and my brain is turned on. There are people running upstairs. I look up through the slats and the yellow and white is flickering like a thousand eclipses. People are yelling in an official language, I mean, they're very official sounding and they're going through the kitchen and into the bathroom and through the door into the bedroom. A woman screams, it sounds like Ed's wife. I always liked her and I was sad to see her go.

The people run back through the house, through the bedroom, into the bathroom, into the kitchen, they all file out, yelling, "Go! Go! Go! Go!" and then the doors slams and the latch clicks and I'm alone. I sit down on the steps, which are made of splintered wood that goes into my feet, and I stare ahead into the twilight darkness of the basement. There's water dripping and a bird outside is chirping. I'm

looking around, and I'm still alone. There is literally no one there and I'm partially terrified and partially ecstatic. I grab the railing and splinters break into my palms. My hands are scraping the wood and the wood is scraping my skin as I climb the stairs, one at a time, just one at a time. A big splinter lodges itself into my left foot and another into my right foot, but nothing is going to stop me. I reach the top step and I turn the door handle, it's cold and damp. The handle goes all the way and I push on the door, but it's stuck. I push again, and then I ram it with my shoulder, but it's stuck. I kick it with my feet, driving the splinters deeper into my skin, but it's stuck. The door is stuck. The door is locked.

# Four

by Paul Kavanagh

dolly hit molly upon the pate. blood shot out and painted jim so kim swabbed his mug and slapped dolly. molly looked at kim and kicked jim in the sack. jim knew that he was defeated sat and drank. but the glass was the glass that held the whiskey of kim. dolly said that she couldn't live with molly anymore. jim was silent. kim said that dolly could move in with kim and jim. molly said that if dolly moved in with jim and kim that she would cut her wrist. dolly bellowed that a joke of that kind was not welcome at kim and jim's. kim turned white and jim laughed at the joke. once dolly had tied a knot around her neck. dolly stood upon a chair and prayed. the pray consisted of a want list. dolly wanted to be happy, she wanted molly to get cancer, she wanted kim to be runover and finally she wanted jim to drown in his own piss and shit. yes it had to be piss and shit for jim was always complaining about the mess of dolly and molly. dirtiness was an anathema to jim but not to kim. kim was a dirty bitch that wallowed in the dirt of fagan and reagan her two cats. So with the rope tightly squeezing the life out of her dolly kicked, pissed and shat and she hadn't' even kicked the chair away. outside a bus rode past and all looked into the window at the magic trick. all the people on the bus could see was dolly's feet levitating. dolly cried for a better life, more sunshine less rain more wine less beer more money less poverty more sex less men. and so dolly kicked away the chair. the pain was sharp and quickly focused its attention around her neck. dolly fought for air and kicked pissed and shat herself. she thought of the complaining of jim and the work kim would have to do to clean up the mess. o the shame upon the floor and to have a whore clean up her mess. dolly endeavored to untie the knot. she fought the rope but the rope was tenacious. death was pulling at her feet. dolly turned upon the rope and saw her reflection in the mirror. she was red then white then blue then white then red again. slowly the colours became a kaleidoscopic mess as dolly twirled round and round. upon the rope she rotated until the puke built up around the dam. soon she would choke and

pass me. but before this the rope unwound and dolly hit the floor and bloodied her pate. lying in piss and shit jim found dolly. at first he was about to call the doctor until molly said that dolly was drunk. jim asked where was the bottle and kim said in the kitchen. jim ordered kim to get the bottle while molly helped dolly to her feet. sitting dolly said she had had an epiphany. jim turned on the television while dolly told molly about her epiphany. molly saw the rope and knew that dolly had been at it again. jim turned and saw molly start to kiss dolly. jim turned off the television. kim brought jim his bottle. jim poured himself a drink. kim said he should not just pour for him, that molly dolly and kim would like a drink. seeing dolly and molly kiss jim poured the whiskey. kim gravitated to jim but jim watched molly and dolly. after much kissing molly turned dolly's head and pointed to the rope. dolly was speechless. so were jim and kim. dolly stood up and bellowed that nobody loved her. jim turned on the television and kim comforted dolly. molly picked up the rope and showed it to jim. jim laughed when he saw the television. heartless proclaimed molly. jim drank and watched kim kiss dolly but it was not the same as watching molly kiss dolly. but molly also saw kim kiss dolly. molly punched kim. left jab below the eye molly hit kim. jim turned off the television and finished his glass. kim kicked molly and molly pulled kim's hair. dolly looked at jim but jim could not help kim. molly head butted kim and dislodged three teeth. kim poked molly in the left eye. the eye flooded blood and left molly with only one clear eye. dolly knowing jim would not help kim stopped molly from stabbing kim with a bottle that jim should have held onto. molly turned on dolly and dolly hit molly upon the pate.

# Canary

## by Garry Crystal

“There’s blood on your shirt.”

“What?”

“On your shirt, you’re bleeding.”

I look down at my left arm knowing instinctively that that’s where the blood will be. A small dark stain, the size of a ten pence piece has appeared through the white cotton. It doesn’t surprise me.

“I see it, I cut it earlier on some boxes I was moving, it’s nothing, no bigger than a scratch. I’ll get a plaster.”

“Wasn’t that where you burnt your arm on the iron before?”

She was beginning to irritate me now. I had shown her my burn a few months previously, telling her I had knocked over an iron, a stupid accident. I knew that Karen, in a previous life, had been a nurse before she had taken this admin job, and I had wanted her opinion on the burn. It had looked bad; my arm had turned dark red around the small burn area. That had never happened before. I was worried it might have been infected, maybe blood poisoning, some film I’d seen where the guy had lost an arm. Lately she’s been looking at me with suspicion, as if I’ve done something wrong, as if she knows something about me just from looking at the burn. She had told me to go to my doctors and have it looked at, I didn’t and I didn’t lose my arm either.

That’s probably why she wasn’t a nurse anymore.

One day, on a break, out of the blue, Karen had told me that in her previous life her husband had beaten her, no warning. He just grabbed her by the neck one night while she was cooking dinner

and smashed her face repeatedly with his fist. At 17, it was her first marriage, she's on her third marriage now and it seems that at the age of 55, and having been beaten by her husband and then beaten breast cancer, she was finally happy. It had taken her a long time, but she's finally found happiness. I find out later that two other women I work with have also been beaten by their ex husbands. I know this because Karen has told me, on a break, out of the blue.

"I was caught in between them at a Christmas party and all they talked about was their husbands beating them, you don't talk about things like that, who wants to hear about that?"

"But you talked to me about it happening to you."

"But I didn't go into the depth they did, every detail, they told me everything."

And now she's looking at me suspiciously because my shirt has blood on it. She's putting two and two together and coming up with the 17-year-old she had been. What did she think? My girlfriend is beating me viscously on the arm? Some people are never happy unless they are speculating on the problems of others? That's why soaps are so popular. I might have a shit life but Jesus, look at theirs.

I see it out of the corner of my eye as I walk down the corridor towards my office. I'm looking straight ahead of me but I can't avoid it. I see it in my mind before I'm even near it. That fucking painting. It had just appeared one day out of nowhere. Huge, green, hideous, on a grey, concrete wall. The first time I saw it, I was transfixed. I soaked up every detail of the painting I would grow to hate. A woman was sitting naked on a bed, combing her short lank hair, looking into a small hand held mirror. She was admiring herself as if she was beautiful, and although not ugly, she was, ironically, no oil painting. And she was old. Well, oldish, middle aged, past the first flush of youth. Her breasts sagging above folds of fat on her belly, her scrawny legs stretched out over the edge of the bed, and yet you could tell from her face that she thought she

was beautiful. Then I noticed the man in the painting. He was also naked, standing at the door ready to leave the room, his head turned to take one last look at the woman. He looked sad, dejected, tired out. Face drawn, his shoulders sagging, as if they were being invisibly pushed down by something heavy. The man and woman were obviously lovers, in the woman's mind at least. She was the focal point of the whole picture. You would only see the man after having looked at the woman, as if he were almost an afterthought. The whole thing was painted in varying shades of dark green. The only dash of colour was a small, yellow bird in a cage, hanging from the ceiling above the woman's bed, wings flapping, its head tilted upward in silent song. This was another person's world that I tried to avoid entering and yet at other times I gave in and stared, as it drew me deeper into a room that I was becoming more and more familiar with.

My office, if you could call it that. A small room that used to be a stationery store and still was a stationery store. Stationery supply ordering was now a new, unexpected, exciting addition to my duties. The blank white wall I face taunts me every time I sit down at my computer.

"You don't need to see out of the window, it will distract you from your work." said my boss.

"But I'm going to be sitting staring at a blank wall all day. I have to turn round every time someone enters the office."

"It's fine where it is, the cables to your computer won't stretch to where you want it. Always moaning about something aren't you, never happy."

I know the real reason of course. My new office is set out so that she can look across from her office and see exactly what I am doing on my computer. Bang goes time wasted on the internet or emailing friends. If you're having any fun at work, sooner or later they will find out and take it away. "They" have people employed specifically

to work out how to make your seven hours and fifteen minutes less bearable for you and more productive for them. I take a biro and start scribbling on the wall behind my computer.

“Mersault”, which I score a line through and draw an arrow pointing up towards the word “Crusoe”.

Another small box. Nobody comes up here to the top floor toilet. But I still check to make sure that noone is around before I enter. Sitting down on the toilet seat I light a cigarette and roll up my sleeve. Lunchtime. Time to feel something real.

“Why do you continue to smoke then?”

“Oh it’s a habit isn’t it, I’ve done it for so long now. But I’ve been cutting down.”

Talk about fooling yourself. I persist with Karen maybe to get her to stop from asking me more questions about the blood on my shirt.

“Ok it’s a habit I understand that, but you’ve just had a stroke and you know that smoking is not going to help your recovery, but you continue. You used to be a nurse for Christ sake.”

“You’ve got to have some pleasures in life or else what’s the point.”

“The point is this pleasure will kill you. If you knew a heroin addict was killing himself by shooting up every day wouldn’t you try and stop him, there’s no difference. You’d rather have a hit of nicotine than prolong your life. You’ve told me that a heart attack is one of the most painful things that can happen to a person and yet you’re almost saying, bring it on, bring on the pain. You’re valuing nicotine over everything else in your life.”

“I’m very philosophical about the whole thing,” she says, glancing at the blood stain on my shirt, “we all have different ways of coping with reality.”

“Avoiding it, is not coping with it.”

“I’m not avoiding it, I’m facing it the only way I know how.”

“Push the knife in harder.”

“You’re not supposed to talk, you said it ruins it if you talk.”

“I’m just giving you some guidelines, to make it better.”

“I’ve done it enough times now to know what you want.” I say, getting up off the bed and lighting a cigarette.

“What are you doing? Are you having a cigarette?”

I kneel over her bare chest, adjust the blindfold, tighten the straps binding her hands to the headboard and then slap her hard across the cheek.

“Shut the fuck up you little slut, I’m taking a break, I’ll be with you in a minute.”

It’s not even a surprise to me anymore that the act of slapping a woman, my girlfriend, across the face, gives me absolutely no pleasure or feelings of guilt. All I could feel, somewhere, was a gnawing sense of déjà vu. I had met her at work eighteen months ago, not even my usual type. She was older than the others yet still younger than me. A librarian, stereotypical. As she was swiping your books you wouldn’t have noticed what was hidden unless you looked closely enough, sensed something that maybe wasn’t even there before she met you. Until that unexplainable chemistry came together and led, to this. I didn’t think we would last this long but it just never seemed to end, and now here we are, at two in the afternoon acting out this little scenario, her favourite.

Rape.

“Hurry up, do the phone thing.”

I pretend to call up my friends on my mobile.

“Yeah, she’s totally up for it pretending that she’s not though, dirty little slut but fucking fantastic body, I’ve got her tied up now. Been here for hours. Yeah come round and bring some of the guys. Did you hear that?”

I grab her cheek and bring the knife against her neck, spreading her legs roughly with my other hand, checking that she’s wet, although I know from previous experience that she will be.

“My mates will be round soon,” I thrust into her and suck on her nipples, “they’ll be here and they’re all going to fuck you and you’re going to enjoy it aren’t you? That’s what you want isn’t it? I knew it the moment I saw you on the street. That’s why I chose you. That’s why I followed you here.”

“No, no please don’t.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I slap her again and force my tongue past her closed lips, against her teeth, pushing myself deeper inside her, “Open your mouth you dirty little bitch.”

“No, no, please don’t, stop, please.”

I see the flush creeping up her neck, over her cheeks, her lips swelling, covered in my saliva. I pound harder into her, staring at the black strip of cotton covering her eyes. She was about to come.

“Say my name, say my name.”

“Next time we do it I want you to wear my black knickers.”

She’s sitting up on the bed smoking a cigarette, pushing back her short, dirty blonde hair.

“And I want to be facing the mirror so I can see us fucking.”

“No.” I say, looking in the mirror we will use, talking to her reflection.

“Why not?”

“I don’t mind doing it in front of the mirror but I’m not prancing about with your underwear on.”

“Yes you will,” she laughed, “I’m not asking you to prance about, just to wear them while we’re doing it.”

I rake around for my clothes but for some reason they’re not here. I remember, they’re in the shower room, from before.

I get up to leave, walk towards the door and turn to speak to her. She looks at me, smiling contentedly, as if this room and what we just did are all that she needs in her world.

“I can tell you right now, I won’t wear them.”

I stand silently on the other side of the door, waiting on her response, keeping the game going, the door still not completely shut.

“Yes you will.”

Shit. I had pressed too hard. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I’m trying to pull the knife off of my skin but it’s stuck. A few seconds ago I was in the moment. It was real, everything in my mind was clear, focused and yet focused on nothing. It had all gone. The office, the boss, the painting, my girlfriend, gone, all I could feel was the pain and it was real. Relief and exhilaration in a single moment and that feeling would last until I took the hot knife off of my skin, but I had pushed too fucking hard. It’s stuck. I’m going to have to rip it off in one quick move. I pull it up and see the skin peel off with it, stuck to the knife like melting cheese. It hurts for a few seconds but not too

painful. I look at the layer of red skin underneath, crumbled, a tiny burn victim. A reminder more permanent than any photograph and I am glad to have it. I'm back.

She was combing her hair before, I'm sure of it. This is confusing, how can she not be combing her hair? I've stood here and stared time and time again and yet now, she's only looking in the mirror, not combing her hair. I stand back, as if the position I'm standing in and the angle that I look at the painting from will show me something different. Why had I seen her combing her hair?

"I really trust you, you know? To let you tie me up, blindfold me like that. Do you understand?"

I pull the door shut and look for my clothes.

I sit down next to Karen and light a cigarette.

"There's blood on your shirt."

# Swing For The Fences

## by John Fowora

We worship artificial idols.

Here, people are famous for being famous.

I'm going to make my mark.

You will know my name when this is all over.

I'm sitting in front of the courthouse waiting for John Doe #6. He isn't John Doe #6 yet; this is what he will be. This is very random. I'm rarely specific about what I do, and when I am, there is always a good reason. They are numbered for my quota. He went in about five hours ago.

When he walks back out of the courthouse, I get out of my car and follow him. I stand behind him. See my heart flutter, pitter, and patter. See the sweat on my brow accumulate and wait. Wait. Here I go.

I pistol-whip him and drag him back to my car, which is a short distance away. I put him in the passenger side seat and put on his seatbelt. We're going home.

When John Doe #6 wakes up he is visibly disoriented. I'm sitting on a stool in the starkly lit corner of my basement watching him until he stands up and when he does I say, "This isn't personal, it's more of a statement."

"What are you talking about? Where am I?" He says.

"Someday, they'll read about you."

When he looks like he's going to make a run for it, I run toward

him, out of the light. And then I swing.

Anytime you decide to swing, swing for the fences.

That's what my mother always told me.

The first time you see brains splattered on a wall in a Pollack like pattern, your initial reaction is shock. This is natural. What follows is the rush, a blue tooth connection with the person you just introduced to mortality in the form of a 5-iron. John Doe #6 slumps backward to the ground, his head landing with a jarring thud and more gray matter spills from his nappy head onto the slab concrete in my basement.

This is me with my jackhammer, DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH stop and adjust my safety goggles DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH. It's eleven in the evening and I'm hoping my neighbors hear me DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH. After six men and two women, coated in lye and wrapped in cellophane (which by the way, barely dents the smell), I have to bury them somewhere. DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH DUH what better place than home?

When I'm halfway done, I go upstairs and turn on the television in my living room. I turn on Black Entertainment Television, or BET, as it's known in some circles. A myopic, pedantic, representation of what is black.

Watch these modern day Minstrel shows.

Call them blacks in blackface.

Being black, here, is not what you project, rather it's what's projected on you.

I have to go to work in three hours.

I fall asleep watching Tip Drill.

I learned serial killing online. A correspondence course with an online accredited university. There was TV/VCR repair, refrigeration repair, or my GED. The very last line was for serial killing. The course packet they sent in the mail consisted of,

So you want to be a serial killer.

Ideas for creative killing.

How to kill for years without being caught.

Serial killing refresher course (If you've already been killing and need remain current with industry standards).

How to get yourself caught, while leaving one last victim alive for the detectives to find.

What to do if you want be a serial killer, but can't find the time because of work/family commitments.

Serial killing and diversity.

I had six weeks to complete all of the sections, the tests at the end of each section, and a final exam when the rest of the course material has been received by your course Professor. I finished my coursework and final within three weeks. My Professor thought I was brilliant; he wanted to know specifically about my essay from the last section of coursework Serial killing and diversity. I wrote an essay about why I wanted to be a serial killer. I feel that there aren't enough black serial killers out there and that there is a definite void that has to be filled. His response was, you're better off doing armed robbery or something like that. Or some black on black crime. Join a gang. Kill some cops. Maybe even mass murder if I had to. He said that it would be impossible for me to gain any satisfaction from my killings because I would never ever get caught. Black people aren't profiled as serial killers and there is no affirmative action for being a murderous psychopath. Apparently Serial killing and diversity is mere window dressing. Serial killing

and diversity only applies to the people you kill, not the killer.

My mother always told me that I always have to do things twice as good as white kids to get noticed. So I will. So I'll kill a lot of them. I'll kill them until they notice, however long that takes.

So, so, so I'm going to find my Professor and kill him. Eventually I'm going to kill him. I'm going to rip his ears off and stick my black cock in his ear so he'll fucking listen. But first, more practice.

In the next month or so, I kill more people. A lot more. Like mounds of people. It's sort of strange, unsettling even, that no one suspects I'm a serial killer. I mean they'd rather think I was out to rob them. That I have something on my mind other than the contents of their wallets. They'd rather offer me their Movado and Brietlings. They'd rather placate me and the fallacy of what they think I want. Jane Doe#9 is tied to a chair in the part of my basement that isn't torn up yet. Her head is hanging backward and there is a trail of drool from her chin to her shirt. She offered me her ATM card and her American Express card when I grabbed her by the hair. And I had to stop for a minute, not because there was a commotion, but more because there was an uncontrollable urge in me to smack her in the face for being so obvious. And so I did. Then I followed it up with punch to her temple. So now she is sitting here in my basement disoriented with her head tied to the back of the chair and her mouth held open by hooks I attached to her cheeks and jaw that are also secured to the back of the chair. She wakes up and is screaming, sort of. So I'll give her something to scream about. Fiberglass insulation and a bleach chaser. I ram a fistful of insulation in her mouth until I tickle her tonsils with my knuckles. She is choking and reaching for her mortality. She has the look on her face that most have when they realize that they will die. A sort of exasperated lunging and gasping at life, because life put you there, the randomness of me finding you and doing this to you. Right now she isn't thinking about her family, her husband, her son, or her daughter. She's thinking of herself, numero uno, which is

how we all go out. When I pour the bleach into her mouth, she is no longer screaming or coughing up yellow stringy clumps of fiber covered in a mucous membrane, onto herself and my basement floor. When I pour the bleach in, she gives up, like she never had a chance in life, like she didn't aim high enough. Incidentally, I just cleaned the floor yesterday.

It is late in the evening again, I'm not sure what time and I'm watching MTV cribs. This rapper has a solid gold toilet bowl. I'm pretty tired, but there is no mistaking what he said about his toilet bowl.

Now there is a commercial on with the requisite hip-hop soundtrack, although it has nothing to do with black people.

Another commercial with a loudmouthed, Afro wearing, black doll spewing all sorts of clichéd Negrocity.

Yo.

And it hits me.

I knew it all along.

My mother never let me watch much T.V when I was younger, she always made me read books instead. She said the idiot box polluted my mind. She never knew how right she was.

We've been forsaken by technology, by the new media.

We aren't black, rather we're a reflection of reflections.

We were probably better off picking cotton and talking real low when the white folks came around. Sometimes we still do, that's why I watch the Cosby show. We don't aim high because we don't have anything to shoot for.

Hope was the new slavery, then Crack, now digital cable.

Because now I have thirteen channels of hip-hop and black grooves.  
We think we are free, and yet we still watch TV.

There are acceptable levels of somnambulism. I'm living proof.

We don't aim high because we're too busy watching the rims spin.  
Look this nigga is rolling on twenty fours.

They spinnin nigga, they spinnin.

This nigga spent twenty thousand dollars on a pair of rims he saw  
his favorite rapper with on MTV cribs.

This nigga saw this other nigga with the rims and spent his tuition  
on some Giovanni rims.

This white kid observing with a childlike fascination saw this nigga  
with the rims and now he has the rims.

This same white kid can now be black without the perks.

I'm still waiting to find out what those perks are.

I'm watching a white rapper more aware of white privilege than his  
black counterparts.

So I too, just lose it.

Sumner Redstone is the Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive  
Officer, Viacom and Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive  
Officer, National Amusements, Inc.

Sumner Redstone will eventually die. I'm going to speed up the  
process.

I'm going on a road trip. I'm going to travel across the country and  
kill Sumner Redstone. Along the way I'm going to kill my online

professor. I'm going to kill a lot of people actually; this might turn into mass murder, although that's not my intent.

The sign says you are now leaving California.

I'm driving a Jet-black Cadillac Escalade, on 24-inch Dub rims with spinners.

Like I said, there are acceptable levels of somnambulism.

In Nevada I kill John Doe #30 and Jane Doe#15, but I leave them where they die. They are at the bunny ranch in Vegas. Their bodies decapitated and palm pilots stuffed in their necks where their heads should be.

In Utah I kill John Doe #35, it's easier to kill men than it is to kill women because men always think it can't happen to them. They're always dead wrong.

In Indiana I kill John Doe #38 with a 4-iron and the element of surprise. I knocked his left eye out of the socket after a Pacer game, in the parking lot, and to think, he had home court advantage.

In West Virginia I kill a mountaineer.

In Pennsylvania I drive by my mother's house and I want to go in and say hello and give her a big hug so she'll be proud of me. She was always proud of me she used to say. I never believed her. When I'm done, when this is all over, I'm going to see her and make her proud of me for real. I'm going to be special, and she'll recognize and they'll remember.

I finally find my professor in New Jersey, his home office three mile away from Rutgers University. He is sitting inside drinking a cup of whatever, typing away irresponsible blather on a laptop. I'm staring at him from across the street, apparently he lives alone and seems to never have company. I've watched him do the same thing for a about a week now. This guy doesn't get out much.

I sneak in through his back door and quietly make my way through his house until I'm directly behind him.

And when I'm about to overhead chop his skull with an axe, he says something,

"Not yet."

I'm not sure if he's talking to me and he continues,

"Before you swing, tell me, why are you here? Are you a student?"

I put the axe down. For now.

"Yes, I was a student of yours, but you shouldn't be allowed to teach anyone, anymore."

"Have you been killing?"

"Yes, quite a bit actually, why?"

"Well, if I'm such a ineffective teacher, how are you here right now? If I'm so ineffective how come you've been killing and apparently doing well at it? Tell me why you're really here."

"To kill you, but more importantly to right a wrong and make a name for myself."

I tell him about the emails from him about my final paper and how I didn't appreciate being told I wasn't good enough to be a serial killer for something as inconsequential as the color of my skin. I tell him about my theories on media and Mr. Redstone and how he deserves to die and maybe just maybe, killing him might make it better. The professor listens to me and finally says,

"I want to go with you, I want to see where this goes. Plus, I haven't killed anyone in a while. I'm sorry I offended you, it's just that I

didn't want to see a student of mine go through the same things that I went through."

Oh, yeah, the professor...he's black too. Apparently he started to kill a little bit in the seventies and early eighties, but stopped because he wasn't getting the recognition he thought he deserved. He quit doing that and decided to get an B.A/M.A in English. He's been teaching ever since.

He doesn't pack anything when we leave, like expects us not to get caught. I tell him we'll get the recognition we deserve in due time.

When we enter New York City, He asks me what I've been using to kill, "Eh, anything I can get my hands on really. Mostly golf clubs and blunt objects, but sometimes I get creative too...how about you?"

"I just like to choke people, I don't know why, I just like to" he replies.  
"Oh."

We park the Escalade a few blocks away from where we have to go, 1515 Broadway.

I'm wearing a blue, orange, white and green striped button up collared shirt with an oversized New York Mets baseball cap. I have on a pair of baggy, two-year wash jeans and tan Timberland work boots.

I'm dressed like your favorite rapper.

The professor is my manager today and we're going on MTV. From there we're going upstairs to see my boy Sumner.

# In Between, Ode to Chinaski

## by Mike Addiego

She sat across from me on the stained futon. Theresa was foreign and I didn't give a shit where she came from. I think she was Italian. She was tired and dirty. She displayed her Old Country anguish in the way she sat, always at attention, though I didn't rule out scoliosis. Her plan was to commit suicide in spectacular fashion. Unlike the many privileged but attention-starved girls in these Los Angeles suburbs, I gathered she was serious about it. She pointed to my computer.

"I will broadcast it on the internet."

"Yeah, sounds great."

I stared at her thighs. They were too round. Too European. She wouldn't make it here anyway, not with today's standards.

"Computers will take over everything soon. Why stay around for that to happen?" she said.

"No, they won't. I suppose you think credit cards and grocery stores are the work of the devil."

"They are."

"Well then, you are a walking, talking cliché."

She looked at me in disgust as I poured another glass of wine. I figured I blew any chance I had at getting laid. The slivers of sunlight let in by the blinds illuminated the grease on her face. She finished her wine and triumphantly leaned back on the futon.

We sat in silence for a while. I didn't know what to do. I hated the conversation we were having. If either one of us said something

worthwhile, who cared? There was no audience. We were two drunks sitting in my apartment at 1:00pm on a Wednesday, discussing suicide and computers. I decided at that moment that I really did want Theresa to end it all. She was a piece of shit with an accent. I stretched across the floor to kiss her.

She tasted like salt water and cigarettes, so my tongue focused on the bumps and lesions in her mouth. She grabbed the back of my head. I ran my fingers through her slimy hair and took off her shirt. No bra. She reached for my cock but I pushed her to the floor. I took her pants off. No panties. She was hairy and I dove right in, lapping away, up and down, around and around and around. Her musk fired a hidden cylinder in my brain. Sensory overload. Suicide and computers and \$400 a month apartments and pussy eating and...

She jumped on top of me and slipped it inside of her. She started off fast and hard, never once looking at me, moaning and talking in her native tongue. Definitely Italian. I could feel her rage. After what we discussed (what we loathe, specifically), fucking was the purest and most simplistic thing to do. It truly was inevitable.

I thought she came, but I wasn't sure. I was a complete idiot when it came to women. She slowed down and finally looked at me. There was no doubt she was going to kill herself. It wasn't so much in her eyes as it was in everything else. Even her pussy felt sad. I pushed her off of me. I had too much wine and my balls were big and purple.

I watched her get dressed and light a cigarette in what seemed like one fluid motion. I didn't get dressed - I wanted her to see what she just fucked in all of its glory. I wanted to push her over the edge and erase any point of return. Get rid of any doubts or last minute jitters. She stepped over me, and for just a split second I saw the worn soles of her shoes.

"Thanks for the wine," she said.

“Thanks for the conversation.”

She stopped at the doorway. She looked at me with compassion for the first and last time. I still thought she was ugly. I still thought the sky was blue.

“When I do this, do you think people will talk about it?”

“For a little while. It depends, though. You have to convince them it’s real.”

“I will.”

“I know you will.”

She closed my door considerately. I sat, balls aching, wondering if people really would watch. Of course they would. Not me. I’d be so fucking jealous that some dirty Italian girl topped herself publicly while I sat naked and alone and crazy, head filled with everything and nothing. Nope, I wouldn’t watch.

# Carousel

## by Rachel Baron

“Come on numba six. Come on you fuckin’ hawse,” yelled Irwin in desperation as he stood in front of his stadium seat at Belmont. Number six, Apple Pi, fell short by two lengths to capture third.

“Aw shit.”

As usual, Irwin lost win and place, but he was always a show. He turned to the degenerate on his right to complain about the results of the race.

“You believe dis?” Irwin extended his right elbow and touched the man’s dirty sleeve covered in a colorful stain of green, red and brown.

“You just touched me,” deadpanned the filthy man.

“What’s it to ya? I’ll touch ya again you fuckin’ dick.” And he did.

“You’d better change seats or there’s gonna be a problem.” The man squared up his shoulders and widened his stance. Irwin was a big talker, but a fighter he wasn’t.

“It just so happens I have a bet to make.” Irwin cockily walked in front of the man, stared him down and continued out to the aisle.

At the betting window he looked at the colossal-sized clock in the center of the betting room: 3:10 pm. There were only two races left. Irwin couldn’t believe how fast the day was going. He opened up his tattered brown wallet, found three, one-dollar bills and a ticket for a free car wash and dashed to an open teller window.

“How long I got till the race closes?” The teller didn’t look up from her tabloid-sized newspaper.

“Yo! You hear me or wha?”

The woman looked up and revealed a face fraught with growths of different sizes. Small pimples scattered among larger welts. Her hair resembled a motorcycle helmet, perfectly coiffed and held in place by a full can of Aqua Net industrial-strength hairspray. She thought about Irwin’s question by scratching her head with a pencil. When she opened her mouth to speak, it was clear the pencil was stuck.

“Uh, you’ve got, uh, ten minutes.”

Irwin looked for a moment at the woman’s hair and said, “You got a fuckin’ pencil in your fuckin’ head.” He then frantically ran for the staircase to get down to the parking lot.

Irwin always arrived at the track early so he could get a parking spot right in front. He took pride in how close he parked, feeling victorious before ever even placing a bet. A winner indeed. When he arrived at the ground level, he saw his yellow taxicab, Cloverdale 6D59.

He lifted the handle to the back right door, and with a few tugs, it opened. He swore he’d find the time to oil up the door, as most everything else in his life, he forgot. The floor mats were sticky from passengers who spilled their drinks. They didn’t care about his cab, and he didn’t care enough to clean it. And that was the way his relationships went. Irwin reached down to the mat and pried it up. He grabbed the crushed, business-sized envelope, stood up, and slammed the door. Hard. He had five minutes left to place his bet. A race to the window was one he refused to lose.

“Numba two. Downtrotter. Hundred dollahs.” He removed five, twenty-dollar bills from the envelope, leaving five more twenties for the last race.

This teller, an elderly man in his early seventies, put down his crossword puzzle book and made Irwin’s bet. He then held out the

ticket as if dangling a biscuit in front of a salivating dog.

“I see you here a lot.”

“And...” Irwin said with his hand extended, pleading with his eyes.

“And...Good luck.” The teller handed him ticket, holding on to one end of it a moment longer than necessary. Irwin ran back to his stands to catch the call “...and they’re off!”

He ran so fast, his racing record and a black Ace comb fell out of his back right pocket. Irwin was like a 1950’s greaser, always combing his thin, oily hair back and to the left. When he reached a seat close enough to see the tiniest dust kicked up by the thoroughbreds, Irwin was sweating and disheveled. He immediately reached into his pocket and realized his comb was gone.

“Come on two.” The thoroughbred galloped down the soft, moist track, kicking mud behind him, hitting nothing but empty space. As the lead horses were approaching the finish line, Irwin pleaded, “Two, ya bastard. Come on!” Then, as if the prized equine heard his cry, he steadily gained speed. He ran faster and faster, panting as the jockey whipped his soft, brushed skin. Number two, shook his flowing mane to the roaring crowd, signaling his arrival from the back of the pack. He didn’t get very far. Downtrotter finished second to last.

“What else is new?” thought Irwin, not the least bit surprised. He settled into his seat, stretching out his long legs over the empty chair in front of him. Irwin then tipped his head up to the gambling Gods in the cerulean blue sky, closed his eyes, and prayed for an even tan and nothing else. His thoughts were always so vapid, until the ponies were released from their stalls. It was only then that Irwin felt electric.

It was fifteen minutes until the next race. Irwin hailed down a vendor in the stands selling hotdogs as he pushed his hair back and to the left with his hand. He sat down, chewed his lunch and took

out his crumbled, white, business-sized envelope. He swallowed. He swallowed hard when he saw the small words written in faded blue ink at the bottom left corner.

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In the mid-afternoon the day before, Irwin was home alone, which was quite rare. Roberta and Madeline were at the supermarket. He waited ten minutes after they left to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything. When he was certain they were gone, he looked around the living room as if he were wearing x-ray glasses. Instead of removing clothing, he used his powers to uncover money. For eleven years, he and Roberta played this game. She would hide bills and he would seek them out in the most random of spots around the apartment. Finding the money meant working on his tan at the track. Roberta cried, yelled, pleaded with him to stop gambling.

"Go to GA," shouted Roberta time and time again.

"I got no problem," he would always answer. Eleven years of the same dialogue.

Irwin began his search in the kitchen by opening the freezer door. A cloud of icy air escaped and for a brief moment Irwin couldn't see. He reached around the TV dinners and the ice trays. He reached under the sticky box of all-natural vanilla ice cream. He opened a brown paper bag filled with week-old bagels. When he was through he closed the freezer door and went on to the refrigerator. The crisper, the fruit bin, both yielding nothing.

Cereal boxes, the toaster, the coffee filter...all empty.

Under the bed...

Under the couch cushions...

In the armoire and in old, Nat King Cole record sleeves...

Irwin was out of breath and empty handed. He sat on the couch and gathered his thoughts until he had one.

After a few minutes, he ran to the radiator and opened the front flap. It was a small space to fit his large hand, but he did his best to

maneuver around. Irwin ran his long fingers along the cold, dusty pipes and felt paper stuffed into a small crack. He grabbed a hold of it as if grasping onto life by a rock at the edge of a cliff. The paper was an envelope, sealed tight and thick with money. Irwin's heart beat wildly as he licked a drop of sweat from his upper lip. How sweet it tasted.

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"I'm dead," Irwin said aloud. The envelope read, "Blue Cross" and it didn't surprise him that he hadn't noticed the words before, because he generally didn't care. The two hundred dollars in the envelope was to pay for his daughter's medical insurance. Madeline was a healthy six-year-old girl. Vibrant and strong and wonderful. She was Irwin's second love.

It was five minutes until the last race, and Irwin knew what to do with his five, twenty-dollar bills.

"Numba One. Reliable Nathan."

It was a reliable horse. It finished dead last.

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Irwin spent the rest of the day in Manhattan, picking up passengers, dropping them off. He spoke to all of them, young and old, rich and not so rich, about where they were going and where they had been. He always got a good tip. Irwin had quite the personality.

At ten at night he arrived home with \$276.50, not bad for five hours of work. He'd made a few runs out to Kennedy airport and those were the big-ticket rides.

Roberta thought he'd worked twelve hours. He would just tell her it was a slow down in the sweltering city.

Irwin opened the door to their 23rd floor apartment, walked through the foyer and found Roberta sitting with perfect posture at the end of their dingy couch. She was looking straight ahead at the television. The local news was on but it was clear she was not

watching.

“Madeline asleep?” He asked quietly.

Roberta stayed silent.

Irwin wrinkled his already crinkled forehead, and cocked his head slightly to the left, bewildered by his wife’s unusual quietness, then walked to the back of the apartment and opened Madeline’s door. The light from the foyer woke her. She was not a deep sleeper.

“Daddy?” Whined his daughter.

“Yeah sweetheart. It’s Daddy. You want some chaw-cuh-lit graham crack-iz? I just stopped to get you some.” The truth was he wanted them too.

“Yummy!” Madeline was delighted. She popped out of her bed and ran to her Daddy. They hugged and held hands as they walked to the kitchen.

Roberta was still sitting on the couch, but her posture caved in. She resembled a hunchback, staring down at her feet, fingers massaging her toes.

Madeline and her Daddy sat at the pinewood dinette table that Roberta’s mother gave to them so they would have a proper place to eat family dinners. It had been rarely used for those occasions. As he poured them both milk, he asked about her day at school.

“There is only a little bit more of school and then I go to camp with Tammie and then I go to the first grade -- big girl school -- and Miss Freeman said I read real good today and Matthew Green tried to kiss me when were playing house but I told him he looked like a monkey.” Madeline always talked a lot when she saw her Daddy. They bit into their chocolate covered graham crackers and the crumbs fell onto the table. She touched each one with her finger and brought them up to her mouth.

“Mommy, you want a cookie?”

“No thank you.” Roberta didn’t look up from her toes.

“Maddie, I think your ma wants to talk to Daddy. Finish your cookie and I’ll take ya back ta bed.” Madeline finished her third graham cracker and wiped her tiny mouth with her arm. Together, she and her Daddy walked back to her room where he tucked her back in for the night.

“Sweet dreams sweetheart. I love you.”

“I love you to Daddy.” Madeline turned on her side and threw the patchwork quilt over her head.

Irwin walked slowly back to the living room, where he awaited his fate.

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“Before you say anythin’, I want you ta know that I didn’t...” Started Irwin and his excuses.

“You didn’t?” whispered Roberta calmly. You never! You! You! You! You selfish bastard. You can steal our grocery money, you can take money for Madeline’s clothes that she needs handouts from our neighbors, but to take the health insurance money?” Roberta’s voice level increased with every word until she was screaming at the top of her lungs. Irwin cowered on the love seat, bringing his knees up to his chest.

“After I spent half of it I saw the envelope said ‘Blue Cross’. I swear Roberta, had I seen that I wouldn’t have...” Irwin was cut off.

“You spent half and then noticed? So I assume you have the other hundred on you?” Roberta held out her hand and Irwin looked the other way.

“Well?” Roberta’s eyes welled up with tears.

Irwin was silent. Roberta cried waterfalls of rage.

“I tried ta win it back, the first hundred. I picked da best hawse out there. I tried Bert. Please!”

“It’s too late Irwin! I’ll have to get a job, we’ll struggle, my mother will help us, but it is too damn late!” Roberta was sobbing uncontrollably.

“What are you tryin’ to say Bert?” he asked but he knew exactly what she was saying.

“I want you to pack your bags and get the fuck out of my life.” It took Roberta eleven years to say one sentence. Finally it was free from her soul. Irwin sat there, dumbfounded. He never thought she would find the strength. But she was stronger now than he had ever seen her before.

“Bert. Calm down. Remember all da fun we yoosta have? Eh? The egg creams at Eisenberg’s sandwich joint? Irwin tried to conjure up other good memories, but that was the only one he could think of.

“Don’t tell me about something that happened more than ten years ago! What about now? When was the last time we even laughed together?”

Irwin couldn’t remember.

“Irwin, I was DES-PER-ATE.” Fat and fucking desperate. What? You didn’t know? That’s why you picked me. I fit in real nice with your gambling. You get to waste the day away knowing I’ll be waiting for you with steak and potatoes. Well no more cause ma’s been payin’ for therapy and now I know I don’t have to take your shit anymore.”

“I really loved ya Roberta. I swear it.” Irwin wondered who would

cook him dinner from now on.

“You don’t have the capacity to love.”

“What about Madeline?” Irwin really wondered.

“You’ll come every Sunday and spend the day with her. It’s not like you see her so much anyway.”

Irwin knew this was true, and that it was just best to give in like the quitter he was. “When do you want me to leave?”

“Be gone after I drop Maddie off at school tomorrow. Pack up as much as you can and you can pick up the rest when you come on Sunday.”

“Where will I go?”

“Irwin, I really don’t care if you go straight to Hell.”

Madeline had been hiding by the closet next to the living room, listening to every word with her mouth turned down, clutching her favorite teddy bear. She yawned loudly.

“Maddie, are you there?” Roberta panicked. She wasn’t prepared to explain this to her daughter this now.

Maddie tiptoed into the living room, bear in one hand, thumb in her mouth.

“Did you hear Mommy and Daddy? Daddy is sorry Mad. I am sorry,” Irwin said genuinely. Madeline began to cry softly.

“I’ll come and see ya every week. And we’ll go bowlin’. I know you love bowlin’. And I’ll bring ya grahams like I do now. Won’t that be fun?” Irwin thought it would be.

Madeline ran to the couch and tucked her head under her mother’s

arm. Irwin walked over to his daughter and knelt down beside her. He stared into Madeline's blue eyes, looking for the right words. Instead, he saw his very own blue eyes looking back at him. And for once, Irwin had nothing to say.

# Captive

by A. F. Cronin

Please help! Please! A deranged, blonde, Internet hag is holding me captive and I don't know what other horrors she has in store for me.... Forgive me that. Although true, that first sentence may be a bit much-- a little too hysterical. I'll take a cleansing breath and will begin again. Since I'm locked in this box of a room and I can't go anywhere anyway, I'm really in no big rush to tell my story. There is no use in embarrassing myself further by producing a "please-save-me-note" scattered with scratched out words and sentences just because I lack the patience to think before I scribble. I'm used to a word processor, you see, so it's a bit anachronistic and extremely annoying to have to use a pencil to write this note, and, since it has no eraser, I need to write slowly so I won't make mistakes and be unable to correct them properly. Perhaps this should be a life lesson for me.

Forget you read that previous paragraph. Please. It was a mistake-- a false start. I want you to understand the dire nature of my situation clearly, so I'll explain it to you. Simply. Rationally. Just the facts. I'll start at the beginning.

It was supposed to be a pleasant get-to-know-you-eat-some-food-maybe-screw-a-little type of a date. I had met her on an Internet dating site. She was an older, thicker version of the svelte, well-toned athlete smiling broadly at me in the posted photograph. And she was neither as "earthy" nor as ebullient as her picture and autobiography suggested-- "I love frolicking on freshly cut grass!" -- what a load. I must admit she had beautiful eyes; eyes of a psycho, I now understand, but beautiful none-the-less. And she's not ugly by any means. She's attractive, just not hot. And the picture she sent was of a hot young woman. Hot as in.... HOT!

I'm getting off subject a bit. I return.

I saw her profile on the dating website, e-mailed her –I sent the picture of me in my black sweat suit (I look very good)-- and waited for the reply. I admit I was a little pissed-off she didn't respond right away, and after the second day I was fuming at what I had perceived of as her rejection of me. But by the fourth day I'd forgotten the whole thing and had moved on to other cyber-chicks. I had a great date set for Friday, by the way--a great date-- a hot and horny divorcee eager for sexual payback on her ex, but this blonde, falsely-photographed bitch-hag-from-hell locks me up and blows it for me. I couldn't even call to cancel with the Divorcee! Damn it!

Anyway, on day five, I get bitch-hag's response—sort of a teasey, flirty I'm-into-just-screwing-if-you're-cool-enough-for-me response. You know the kind. So I e-mail her back, she calls me, we set a date and place for a dinner-meet and things were on their way.

It's not as if I was in search of an immediate ego-stroking approbation or some quick and brainless hook-up fueled by some bizarre (and twisted) fantasy. I was more than open to whatever spontaneous reaction erupted between us. Or didn't erupt. The primal attractive forces swarming through the warm, pulsing flesh that constitutes the physical bodies of two incarnate souls are capricious and uncontrollable, sparked by unknowable factors, mysterious in their workings.

I didn't mean to write that last sentence. Really, I didn't. The stress is getting to me and I'm not thinking clearly. I'm becoming delusional. Put the entire previous sentence out of your mind-- especially the incarnate souls part. Please. Erase it from your memory -- or better yet, erase it from the page if you have an eraser handy. Destroy all evidence of...of whatever that was. The point I was trying to make is that I would have been happy to have simply met the woman and see what happened between us -- just a date --dinner with an attractive female, intelligent conversation, tasty food, maybe an overpriced latte and some miniscule pastry portioned, ostensibly, for a dieting eight year old. But I don't want

to discuss pastries right now. I want to talk about this horrid situation.

And I don't mean to suggest that the sex wasn't good with her-- what little actual sex there was ... at first. It was adequate.... traditional, you know... climb on board... just the usual... until she brought out the ...device.

No. I don't want to go there. Not yet. The thing is I was just telling her the truth as I saw it. I was being honest. I thought that's what women wanted? They're always whining, "just be honest with me, I respect honesty, I want the truth!" Lying little bitches! Ooops.

I can tell you that having no eraser is a challenging proposition. It's like talking out loud when someone's listening. It takes a little doing to take back something that just slipped past your lips-- usually a lot of doing if I think about it. It is frustrating in the extreme, after expending the extraordinary effort required to mentally compose a sentence and then scrawl the words you've considered and arranged onto a piece of paper, to find, that for lack of the proper tool, the idea or sentiment you no longer wish to convey is unable to be erased. Without erasure one cannot begin anew, but one must retain the detritus of an ill-considered act. This is not a good thing. I will admit, however, that, due to the simple fact that it takes so damn long to scribble the letters onto the paper, when you're writing longhand it's easier to stop yourself from blurting out stupidities than when you're talking. This fact, in light of the embarrassing "incarnate souls" fiasco, is of little consolation to me at present!

I'm taking another cleansing breath now. I need one....Two.

So. The dinner went well. She was dressed conservatively in a high collared shirt and long skirt with flat-heeled shoes. She wore her hair up in a bunch clip thing. She looked neat and nice and wasn't giving any hints to what lay beneath. The food was satisfactory, the beer was cold, the restaurant was busy but not over-crowded or too noisy and, although there was not an abundance of witty dialogue

or profound conversation between the two of us, when I asked Bitch-hag if she wanted to go home with me she gave me as sultry a look as her outfit allowed and, with a sort of gravely purr-voice, invited me to go to her place -- standard boring date stuff. Blah, blah, blah.

We drove to her house-- in separate cars, of course. I don't even know the street name or the exact neighborhood she lives in. I just followed the creepy little taillights of her volkswagon beetle as we worked our way away from downtown through a maze of dark and windy streets. I was playing the music loud and singing along with the Wallflowers as I drove. I felt the conquering hero; the mighty hunter. I had bagged my prey and was soon to reap the just rewards of my efforts, and I was singing my thanks and praises to the gods of the hunt. Obviously, I'd had a few too many beers.

Bitch-hag pulled into her driveway, and I parked on the street. I stood a few feet behind her as she worked the keys into the locks on the door. I remember now, there were three separate locks. That should have clued me into her unstable emotional state, but, struggling to decipher the exact shape and firmness of her hips, butt, and thighs through the ever-changing contour of her silky knee-length skirt, I missed that one. I missed all the others too, come to think of it. She pushed the door open and stepped inside, stood and held onto the door with her left hand, welcomed me in with a softly outstretched right hand and, straight faced and silent, watched me as I entered her humble home. I, as any first time visitor would do, assessed the place.

It's a worn and peeling 1950's ranch-style bungalow with a gothic haunted-house feel. The grass is long, the plantings unkempt and overgrown and the trees are old, venerable, and leafy. It sits on a hill in a featureless suburban hell--the perfect setting for the horror story that is now my life. If you take my suffocating cinder block dungeon out of the equation, it's a nice little house on the inside, tastefully decorated in a sort of overstuffed-chairs-with-heavy-drapes-Edwardian-clutter-with-a-billion-little-pictures-and-knick-knacks sort of style.

She is into her bed, by the way. I have never seen such a complex arrangement of pillows and blankets and throws and mosquito netting and stuff on or around a bed. It took her ten minutes just to get it all cleared and packed away so we'd have a place to lie down. Then -- surprise, surprise -- she went to the bathroom to "get ready."

The damn dolls should have tipped me off immediately, but they didn't. A dozen or so porcelain abominations in frilly little 19th Century dresses with real hair and eyelashes stand watch over Bitch-hag as she sleeps from a shelf above her dresser. Their glossy glass eyeballs vacantly stare at their own freakish reflection in an enormous gilt mirror on the wall opposite their perch—Chuckie's kissin'cousins--weird in the extreme. I was not thrilled at the proposition of performing before their motionless glass eyeballs in the imminent sex session, but I figured that porcelain dolls only laugh maniacally and chop people up in the movies, so I put them out of my mind.

I refocused my attentions on more pressing matters --specifically on what she was going to be wearing when she came out of the bathroom and on my trying to find a comfortable pose on the bed that was both seductive and anticipatory while remaining nonchalant. These considerations are why my alcohol and hormone muddled brain failed to recognize the myriad and obvious signs of a dangerously out-of-balance individual. Thus I left myself open to subsequent ambush, capture, and imprisonment.

Did I tell you I was bitter yet? I am. I am not happy at being unceremoniously driven into this basement cubicle with a cattle prod by a shrieking woman in a flimsy white nightgown. Women do not look good when they do this! It is not sexy! Their faces become...really bad, like...I can't even go there. Poor Pip.

All I said was that she was all right. I think that was the exact phrase. We'd just finished the first round of sex and, my not having done it in a few weeks, it hadn't taken me an extraordinary amount

of time to finish. It was not my best performance by a long shot, but she was not Jenna Jamison either. And although I was sort of fast, I would have been ready for round 2 in a half hour or so (sometimes a little longer-- but not much). So I rolled off of her and, to fill the awkward silence and reassure her that she was still the object of my unsatisfied ardor, I said, "You were all right. Not great but we can try it again."

I think she took this the wrong way.

Have you ever been in a really sunny room and pulled a blind over the window and shut out all the light? That's the best way to describe what happened to her eyes when I uttered my post-coital appraisal. Even though the room was only lit by a couple of candles on her bureau, I could see a cold, dispassionate darkness descend over her corneas. She got up from the bed and, with her back to me, pulled her flimsy white night gown over her head. She looked really good when she did that, by the way. Something about her back with her arms up in the air and that flimsy fabric sliding down over her butt in the candlelight was very sexy. Very. I said "Nice," but she didn't respond to my compliment.

Instead she walked to the dresser and, beneath the freakish lineup of porcelain girl-women, she pulled open the top drawer.

"Are you into toys?' she asked in a frigid monotone.

I sat up in the bed. "Of course." My interest, obviously, was piqued. "What do you have in mind?"

"Just a little device that will make you beg me to stop." She said cheerily,

I can be a jerk. I admit it-- especially when it comes to women. In response to her statement I whispered, "Whoa, this is getting interesting," (I think she heard me because I noticed a momentary stiffening of her spine after I spoke). She turned around, slowly revealing a thick black object held gently, like an offering to some

pagan god, in her slightly trembling hands. For a moment I was intrigued. Fascinated. What could that thing do to me to make me beg her to stop? More importantly, what could it do to her? She flicked a tiny switch on the device and a little red light flashed on. I was confused.

I shifted my glance to her face to ask her what the black device was for and how she would use it to get me off. But the look on her face told me she wanted to give me something other than pleasure. I could feel hate flowing out of Bitch-hag's pores. I became afraid. In a nano-second the most primitive part of my brain recognized the extreme danger to my person and the run-away-really-fast instinct took over. I swung my feet onto the floor and ran for the door. Foolishly, I tried to grab my pants as I went. This need to cover my nakedness, I feel, was my downfall (I could blame this entire mess on Eve right now, but I think the essay would require a far larger pencil than I have at hand).

A point of observation; bitch-hags are quicker than the average woman when they're angry. She got herself between the door and me in the blink of an eye. That ostensibly benign black object transformed from an unrecognizable sex toy into a turned-on stun gun and she stuck it full force into my solar plexus. I jerked and jiggled and howled until I crashed to the floor. I writhed around for a minute or so in an extraordinarily keen agony as she stood victorious above me.

Those stun guns really hurt.

I was still naked and on her floor, gasping for breath, when she ordered me to get up. I didn't reply so she stuck me with the stun gun again--this time in my thigh. I howled like a banshee.

When she asked me to get up again. I acquiesced.

She led me through the house, all the while holding the stun gun close to my quivering skin, and forced me down the basement stairs and into this little room. She pointed to the handcuffs that just

happened to be bolted to the floor joists over my head and told me to slip one over my wrist and lock it. I acceded to her wish. Then holding the stun gun millimeters from my stomach she fixed the second handcuff over my other wrist. I was too stunned, literally and figuratively, to even comprehend the situation. She looked at me with an icy stare, turned and left the room, closing the iron door behind her. I heard her slide the dead bolt home.

Bitch-hag had me at her mercy.

I'm not certain if telling you this next part will increase or decrease the sympathy with which you, my potential rescuer, will view my plight. There's no doubt in my mind that it should increase your sympathy for me as it has caused me an incalculable amount of psychic harm. However, events such as these, as unique and disturbing as they are, can always be interpreted in many ways and I'm sure that some people would consider me, the victim, somehow a beneficiary of this bizarre and traumatic situation.

I'll just tell what happened and let you be the judge.

Bitch-hag left me hanging, cuffed, and naked in this little room for what seemed an hour. There was a single light bulb that lit the room, so I wasn't in darkness, and despite the cinder block wall behind me, it was, considering its incarceratory function, a rather cheery room. There was an inexpensive but nice, very thick, peachy colored oriental carpet on the floor, and the walls were painted a bright red and had a few prints of landscapes hung on them. A small wooden desk with a chair was against one wall and I was handcuffed against the other. And, beside the door, directly across from where I was fettered, was one of those old style velvet curved-back couches Victorian Prima Donnas would lounge on as they received their visitors. Not as Spartan a cell as Monte Christo's, but a cell none-the less.

Eventually Bitch-hag returned. She had changed her outfit. A black leather bustier, a garter belt, fishnet stockings, and black spike heels had replaced her long, flowing, white-cotton-high-necked

nightgown. And she had applied different make-up --very red lipstick and a lot of mascara around her eyes—and she wore a long black wig with bangs. Her skin looked really white and she, in that serious-minded dominatrix way, looked quite good. Sexy. She clutched her stun gun, now appropriately color coordinated with her outfit, in her right hand and held a black towel and a bottle of lotion in the left. She knelt in front of me, spread the towel on the floor, and set the stun gun down beside her. She gave me a long and evil stare and then proceeded to fill her hands with lotion and rub it all over me...my... you know.

You might be thinking, as I normally would have been, how kinky. Right on! But, since I had been stun gunned into my present situation, I was a bit wary of her intentions. She managed, to my great surprise and in spite of my apprehension, to bypass my anxieties and to get me aroused quite easily. But, in true Bitch-hag fashion, when I was closing in on the boiling point she simply stopped her rubbing, stood up, and, holding the stun gun against my freshly lubricated apparatus, she reached up and unlocked my left handcuff. Then she backed away from me and reclined on the couch.

I want to reiterate how really good she looked in that outfit. She was OK before, nice, clean, and, although not the hot little number in her photograph, attractive. But now, in that get up, she was hot. H.O.T. So then, after nestling into a comfortable position on the couch, she started to touch herself. Yes, that kind of “touching herself”. And, moaning softly as she worked, she locked her eyes to mine and hoarsely whispered, “Finish.”

Usually I have no problem finding a clever riposte to even the most elegant of verbal assaults, but this command stymied me. The audacity of this woman! And, since she was not wasting any time in finishing herself off, my visual cortex was overruling the linguistic functioning of my brain and I remained mute. Her breathing, meanwhile, was transforming into a hard, relentless panting, and let's just say her hands were doing their job with fervor and skill. Since she was still in control of the stun gun, I thought it best to do

as she said and not to resist her or interrupt her handiwork. That would have been rude. So I did what she asked of me, as much for her, I reasoned, as for myself. She had gotten me close to the end so it didn't take me long and as I released she let out a roar of a moan and in a shuddering spasm collapsed back onto the couch.

I had made her scream.

But, instead of a nod of recognition or a word of thanks, she looked me in the eye, slid her tongue over her upper lip, broke the smallest sneer and said, "You were all right. It'll be better next time."

Flummoxed is the only word to describe my state of mind.

She stood up, went to the door, turned and said, "I left the key in the handcuff. You can let yourself down. Clean yourself off. I'll be back." She pulled the door closed behind her and locked me in.

Bitch-hag still wields the stun gun. Since that tawdry episode she has forced me to continue this uncivil and perverse behavior. Throughout the night (two more times in the exact same format) and, after a few hours sleep and a quite acceptable French toast and bacon breakfast, into the afternoon and evening (keeping me from the aforementioned date with the horny divorcee, Gillian), she continued the humiliating torture. After lunch and our "desert session" (her words not mine), I requested a pen and paper to chronicle our little liaison and, much to my surprise, she returned with this pencil and legal pad. Then she forced me to perform her perverse mode of lovemaking once again.

She is off somewhere now; doing evil things I've no doubt. And I have sat here composing this note. When I am done I will stuff it through the crack of the small cellar window and, hopefully, when you find it, you will contact the police and have them rush to my rescue. She refuses to even discuss my release and if I try to force the issue she waves the stun gun menacingly. I am compelled into silence-- the horror of it all!

I would like to ask you, my rescuer, to provide one more service for me. Destroy this note after you read it! Nothing dramatic is necessary. Burning it in a furnace or tearing it into a hundred pieces and scattering them in different public trash bins is adequate. Shredding is good too. Once freed, I'd like all traces of this horror erased from the world.

I hear the click of her stilettos on the bathroom tile above me. She comes soon! I think she's applying her make-up now. I have to get this note through the window and out of my pajamas and back into my cuffs before she gets here! She promised to bring a new toy and she likes her entrances just so.

I await your rescue. Hurry! I don't know how long I can last!

# To California

## by John Sweet

Man has the baby in the stroller next to him, has a hunting knife in his hand, says he wants a pack of cigarettes. Nothing else, just the cigarettes, and the clerk hands them to him slowly. Waits until the man is gone, until the baby is gone, then calls the police, and there's a car nearby.

Man uses the baby as a shield, but it's small, can only cover his heart, his belly, and he takes a bullet in the head. Bleeds to death on the sidewalk and the baby is crying and the mother is curled up on the bathroom floor. Is passed out and covered in puke and the story is about none of them.

The story is nothing more than the sound you make when you cum, but it's enough. The story is you at the back door in skin-tight jeans and a pink t-shirt that says GET LUCKY. Your smile, your teeth, your voice low in your throat. I told him I had to run some errands you say as you walk inside. The baby's asleep, so he won't be going anywhere, and you grab the front of my pants, undo the button, slip your tongue into my mouth.

And it's a week past my 37th birthday and my wife has been gone for two months now, has left me with a leaking roof, with a stove that doesn't work, and she writes to tell me that the kids are doing fine. Sends a picture that my oldest drew, planes and bombs and dinosaurs, and I tape it to the refrigerator, and the first time you see it you smile, the two of us naked on the kitchen floor, my face between your legs, and then the story begins.

The girl is eleven. Is last seen playing in front of her home, and then fifteen years later she's still missing. The story is empty spaces. The story is a closed door, is a room filled with pain and dust. Is a bicycle found in a ditch, front wheel pointing to the sky and still spinning, a crushed pack of cigarettes nearby, and no one wants to

tell it. No one wants to hear it. The sun will shine a little brighter if no one says anything, but we've come too far for silence.

The girl is eleven, is laughing, is riding her bike down the street. This much we know. This much can be carved in stone. Whatever happens next is only the story.

