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Naked Man in the Circle

by Catherine M. Brown

"There's a naked man in the Circle," someone said.

Sure enough, if you stood on the corner of Sixteenth Street and looked toward the entrance of Prospect Park, you could see him. He was standing in the middle of the cobblestone sphere, the one with the black marble war monument in the center. The man's dark skin appeared to be glowing in the dying light of day. He was unmoving, even in the cool breeziness of the approaching night. Undaunted, his muscular buttocks faced the street. Cars swirled around the Circle, some drivers not even noticing him. The naked man stood at attention, facing the monument itself.

"Maybe he's a veteran," someone else offered.

"I sure hope so."

"It's Memorial Day weekend, you know. Maybe he's just remembering..."

They gathered on the sidewalk outside Farrell's Bar and Grill. Most of them had just gotten off work. The steel workers rebuilding the Manhattan Bridge. The nurse's aides from Methodist Hospital a few blocks away. The firefighters just coming off their twenty-four hour tours. The pretty, young attorney with the gnarled Thalidomide hand. The drug dealer. The writer. They were all there.

And then there was the naked man, oblivious to everyone else.

"What the fuck's his problem?"

"Poor, crazy bastard."

"Not a bad butt on him, though," said the writer. And the attorney

laughed, agreeing.

One of the firefighters was busy marveling at the perfect line the buildings made down one side of Sixteenth Street, between Eighth Avenue and Prospect Park West, which the locals referred to as Ninth Avenue. These buildings weren't brownstones, but four-story tenements originally made for the common people who worked for the people who lived in the brownstones. Although they were built a long time ago, things hadn't changed very much around the Circle.

The firefighter came from people who came from buildings like these.

No one else seemed to appreciate the clean, neat line of the rooftops, even though he tried to point it out to a few people. He had taken a class in architecture many years ago, before he became a firefighter, when he'd been a track worker. He had liked that physical job, swinging a twelve pound spike maul and sweating in the sun. But for some reason, he also wanted to learn how to draw building renderings, so he took a night class at New York City Technical College. Yes, that was a very long time ago. He had been in love with a waitress then. She had gone off to Arizona to study the wilderness and was murdered in the wild. After that, nothing else made much sense.

Until now.

"Look at that line," he said. "How straight. How perfect. Like it's one single structure. But it's not. It's a whole blockful of buildings the same height, the same design. And if you notice, the lines meet at the very same place on the horizon. I forget what that's called."

His girlfriend, the writer, looked. She saw exactly what he was talking about even though she hadn't swallowed two Styrofoam containers of lukewarm Budweiser. (She had guzzled two wine coolers instead.) One of Farrell's containers held a quart of beer. You could get a nice buzz for less than three dollars a pop. Only now, no one in the neighborhood knew what would happen to the

old pub. Its doors had been open since 1933, but since the owner Eddie Farrell died a few months earlier, its fate was uncertain.

The naked man was still in the Circle. He was unaware of the small crowds which had clustered on the surrounding avenue. A plainclothes policeman stood to his left, weakly shaking the naked man's pants at him. It was the delicate gesture one might use to entice a bull. The chain which held the plainclothesman's badge glinted in the dull sunlight. He said something to the naked man which no one else could hear. Not even the naked man himself. His head did not turn. He did not even look up or acknowledge the police officers' presence. He simply stared and stared at the monument.

"Turn around," one of the women outside Farrell's said.

"Yeah, turn around so we can see if its true what they say about..."

"I just ordered some Chinese. I'm starving. Haven't eaten since noon."

"Anybody seen Vinnie?"

"The drug dealer?"

"Shush. Said he'd give me a twenty-dollar piece of coke for fifteen. But then my girlfriend showed up and split."

"He's gone, man. Four to eight. Drug dealer's hours."

"Least his shit's better than Georgio's. Horseradish gives a better buzz."

"You do some of Georgio's shit and you eat afterwards. Know what I mean? You can eat a whole god-damn meal."

The writer stared at the sky above the straight, perfect line of the buildings. Pink and gold with a brightness behind it. A Cecil B. De

Mille sky. Straight from The Ten Commandments. "Where's your Messiah now, Moses?"

In the distance came the whine of a lone siren. Then a blue and white squad car screeched to a stop. The officers who jumped out seemed young. They tried not to laugh when they saw the naked man facing the monument in the Circle. They looked at each other, not knowing what to do.

"Did you get the invitation to June's party? It's the eleventh at five."

"I'll make sure I get the day off."

"It's a surprise, right? How are you getting her there?"

"I don't know yet."

"Is that guy still in the Circle?"

The sound of two more sirens coming from two different directions harmonized. Now there were three squad cars in the Circle. Three squad cars, six uniformed officers and one plainclothesman. Plus one naked black man who didn't even realize they were there. The officers discussed the situation with each other. No one wanted to touch the man. No one wanted to handcuff a naked homeless man. And who could blame them?

"Well, at least they know he isn't armed," someone said.

It was true.

The rosy yellow of the sky was deepening into a purplish blue, a hazy violet. The line of the buildings below it was unmoving, like the naked man who silently paid homage to the marble monument in the Circle.

The past few summers, at least three movies had been shot in this neighborhood. The reason wasn't because it was so picturesque,

but because it was so real. Like the man in the Circle. You just couldn't make this stuff up. And if you tried, no one would believe you anyway. Especially the people from around here, the working class section of Park Slope. Park Slop, some called it.

The locals were born here, bred her, died here only to be waked M.J. Smith and Sons two blocks down and prayed for at Holy Name of Jesus right across the street. These people weren't Yuppies who moved here simply because it was so quaint or the rent was cheaper than Manhattan. They grew up here, skinning their knees on the hard concrete streets. They sweated here, worked here in the sewers and in the schools, then were buried here, in narrow plots at Greenwood Cemetery high up on the hill, overlooking it all.

Mae West was buried in Green-Wood. So were Abner Doubleday, DeWitt Clinton, Ray Sharkey and hosts of others who'd died of AIDS. Most of the people who stood outside Farrell's and drank Bud in the trickling afternoon sun knew and loved someone who was buried in Greenwood. Most of them would end up there too. Perhaps even the naked man in the Circle. Only not yet.

The police officers were still standing there talking. Then a screaming ambulance from Methodist arrived to seal his fate. They had blankets and a stretcher. They had sirens and lights. But first, the Emergency Service Workers discussed the matter with the police officers.

"Poor fuck," someone said.

"Poor, sick fuck."

"Your tax dollars at work. How many police officers does it take..."

"He's going to spend his Memorial Day Weekend in jail."

"Or in Bellevue."

"I'm going Upstate tomorrow. My brother Richie has a house there."

"How is Richie?"

"Tested positive but he's okay. Working on his house. He's still strong and healthy...for now."

The sky was dark and the painfully straight line of the rooftops was not so evident anymore. It was difficult to distinguish where it ended and the sky began. "All the kids I grew up with are either dead, dying or in jail," the fireman remarked sadly to no one in particular.

His girlfriend, the writer, heard. She heard everything. Even the things he didn't say. "But you've escaped," she told him hopefully.

"No, I haven't," he said. "I'm still here."

"But not because you have to be. Because you want to be."

One block away, in the Circle, the naked man went quietly with the EMS workers. They wrapped a blanket around him like Gunga Din. He lay obediently on the stretcher and allowed himself to be strapped in. The doors closed. The sirens moaned. The lights reflected off the nearby buildings quite dramatically. Then the ambulance drove off. Just like that.

"No one would believe this whole thing."

"Sure they would."

"Bet it won't even make the news."

"No, probably not."

The police officers finally finished discussing the situation and left the Circle themselves. There would be paperwork to file and someone had to go down to Methodist. The Circle seemed lonely without them, their striped vehicles and the naked man whose

ebony flesh was nearly as dark as the skin of the monument of itself.

"Want to come down with me to Fifth? I have to do laundry. Five loads, maybe six. Got nothing to wear to work tomorrow. Then we can hang out at that Polish bar on the corner. It's a really cool place. You'll love it."

So the fireman and his girlfriend, the writer, tagged along. He drank Budweiser from a sweaty can while she sipped flat ginger ale because they didn't have Coke or wine coolers. Their friend ran back and forth between the bar and the Laundromat.

The fireman had grown up a block away from there. He had lived in an apartment building whose hallways always smelled of cat piss and ammonia. His parents worked hard to send both him and his sister to private school. He was smart ("But if only he'd apply himself...") and they were the poorest kids at Berkeley, but at least they had a chance. Then his family moved to the safety of a wood frame house on Eighth Avenue when he was fifteen. Perhaps this was his real salvation, moving away from the poverty of Fifth Avenue.

The fireman remembered when Luigi's Pizzeria had first opened. It was 1971 or something. He remembered the social club for ancient Italian men and a lot of other places that weren't there anymore. People who weren't there anymore either. The Polish bar was okay. Run-down, ugly, but friendly. Pool table, grimy booths, waxy wood paneling, a rotary dial phone in the corner. A stuffed toy mouse flying in a crepe-paper balloon which the barmaid reprimanded him for touching when he stretched his hand toward the ceiling.

He felt the need to go outside. The sky was black, but not as black as the monument in the Circle. Luigi's was still open, but he wasn't hungry. On the street, he met someone he used to know. They used to be children together in a place full of imperfect lines and sad buildings. They talked. The man was HIV-positive and his brother, dead. These were boys the fireman had played stick ball with, the

boys he had been with on that night the junkie snapped off the head of a pigeon right near the Grand Prospect Hall across from the Expressway, right in front of them, to shock them.

And the Nineteenth Street girls who once were pretty now were hags. If they were still alive, that is. It just didn't make sense anymore.

When his childhood friend left, the fireman stood on Fifth Avenue, just down the street from the place where he once lived. "Everyone I grew up with is either dead, dying or in jail," he repeated out loud. But no one heard.

His other friend's laundry was in the spin cycle across the street. Whiskered drunks did shots of vodka with water chasers inside the Polish bar. And the fireman's girlfriend, the writer, rushed out onto the pavement, looking for him. She found him standing there all alone, crying.

Ed, Jesus, and the Post-modern Allegory in “Basement Jack” by Mikolaj Franaszczuk

Since the dawn of time, Man has struggled to understand God and the nature of life and existence, with various philosophies waxing and waning like the lives of men themselves. Individuals from ancient times to modern, from Plato to John Paul II, have contributed much to the eternal debate. And while in today's world, science, skepticism, and a general apathy for the supernatural render classic methods of analyzing these issues obsolete, the modern philosopher is somehow able to put things in the right perspective. In his seemingly innocuous short story “Basement Jack,” (TFF, March 2006) Clark Merrefield brilliantly disguises a sophisticated allegory on the nature and existence of God as a story of an unstable drug addict trapped in another man's basement. The text explores the Christian Trinity, and delves deeper – into the psyche of not just Man, but even God Himself. The first-person narrative is a post-modern gospel, with the protagonist representing Jesus, the unfathomable Ed as God the Father, and Ed's unnamed wife assuming the role of the Holy Spirit. Merrefield's philosophical treatise offers a glimpse into the post-Nietzsche, post-Kierkegaard state of modern theology.

The allegorical nature of “Basement Jack” is apparent from the very first sentence. In it, the narrator sets the stage for his reminiscing to be “in the 80s.” While on the surface level this clearly implies the 1980s, the allegorical meaning is, ironically, the 80s A.D. That first century decade was a boon for the nascent Christianity; the gospels were being written in this period, and Paul's epistles have already been established as authoritative documents for the new religion. Despite persecutions two decades earlier, the 80s enjoyed a brief respite, and churches were flourishing all through the Roman Empire. “We had so many women” in the text refers both to the large number of new Christians in the 80s, as well as literally to the

women during the period; unlike in pagan religions, the female gender had a large role to play.

After the brief positive introduction, the story quickly shifts to a a dismal mood. The time frame is propelled to the modern world, and Jack is “on the brink of self-destruction.” Indeed, with two thousand years of history, divisiveness, and schisms, the modern concept of Christianity is even hard to clearly define. “My wife left me” refers to the Church itself. As is clear in various biblical passages, Christ refers to the Church as His bride. In today's world, particularly in a society like the American, the true Church is gone and has been usurped by politicians and “pastors” with little actual theological knowledge. “My kids hated me”, refers literally to children – today's youth. With each passing generation, religion plays a smaller and smaller role – to the point where people begin to not just ignore God and religion – but to actually disdain them.

In the second paragraph, the mood switches dramatically once again. The reader is finally introduced to Ed, whose first description is that he was a “real savior.” The allusion to Jesus is obvious. But the twist here is that Ed doesn't represent Jesus – he represents God the Father. Indeed, it is God the Father that is the “real” savior – it is He who initially sent Jesus down to Earth. Furthermore, the implication is that God saved not just Man, but even Jesus himself – much like Ed saves Jack in the story. The deep mystery of God is revealed by the methods through which Ed “saved” Jack. Ordinarily, one wouldn't regard “cocaine” and “Taiwanese hookers” as a form of salvation. Merrefield uses these clearly negative images in a positive sense to show how incomprehensible God is; the paragraph is like the Biblical book of Job, but greatly condensed.

The relationship between Ed and Jack in the story is a strange and complicated one, much like the imagined relationship between God the Father and Jesus in the modern world. Jack, for his own safety, must be kept in the basement until, he “gets better.” It's as if God put Jesus aside for a while, to keep him out of the harsh world, until modern religious problems can be solved. Ed himself is still out there – much like God is. For God the Father can transcend

Christianity and reach out to religions like Judaism and Islam. Those religions, of course, would not accept Jesus, and even modern Christians' concept of Jesus has been so corrupted, that they would hardly recognize the real Jesus, the "high-powered stockbroker . . . living the high life." But God keeps Jesus abreast of the real world – he filters it out for him. In the story, the basement has a window through which Ed gives Jack "bread and peanut butter." This is clearly the bread and wine of communion. Jesus can't be out there to receive it directly from the people – but God the Father brings it to him. Furthermore, God's first priority is his only son – Jesus. This is evident from the conversation with the wife, in which Ed lists a number of things he has to do, but clarifies that "first I'm gonna go get some things for our friend." The key thing to notice is that Ed's actions are completely selfless and altruistic. He expects nothing in return from Jack, and it is clear that Jack can do nothing for Ed at this stage in his life. The allegorical implication is that much like Jesus selflessly sacrificed himself for Man, Ed has a selfless attitude towards Jesus. The only obstacle getting in the way of Ed's relationship with Jack is Ed's wife, whose presence adds a complex extra layer to the story.

Literary critics have varied opinions on the symbolism of Ed's wife in "Basement Jack." Arguments have been made for her as the Holy Spirit, as a symbol of Wisdom (both in a Biblical and a platonic sense), and even as the gnostic companion of the Divine presence. Analysis pointing to her serving simultaneously as the Holy Spirit and as Athena – the mythic goddess of wisdom, are most plausible. This allows for the narrative to both maintain its Christian core, yet expand into a global understanding of God (much like Ed's symbolism as God can also apply to Islamic and Judaic philosophies). This blend of concepts is indeed novel and indicative of the author's true genius; once this idea is expounded to its full potential, it will surely be referred to as the "Merrefieldian ontology."

The story first introduces us to the wife in a very negative way. Jack states bluntly that she "hated [him]." This, ironically, fits perfectly with the platonic concept of Wisdom. Jack, with his frail disposition,

exemplifies the exact opposite of wisdom: emotion. But Jack, like Jesus, realizes that this “hate” is just a force of nature and not anything personal. He later admits, once he realizes that the wife will be gone, that he “always liked her and [was] sad to see her go.” This is a direct parallel to Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees in the gospel; they confronted him with wisdom (albeit Judaic, but, in these circumstances, it can be equated with its platonic version). Although Jesus constantly got into arguments with the Pharisees, it was also his chance to present his own viewpoint; if there were no Pharisees, there would be nobody to argue against. In this manner, Jack admires Ed's wife; he thinks of her often, as is evident in the “orange smelling cleaner” passage. The “Holy Spirit” symbolism of Ed's wife is evident in her relationship with Ed himself. They are ultimately a happy couple, with Ed informing her of what he does. The “college freshman” he plans on bringing home is symbolic of the souls of people – God wants everyone's souls in his kingdom. Ed's desire for the freshman is clearly not a form of adultery, as otherwise he would not inform his wife of it. The physical aspect of the relationship (“He kisses her and squeezes her breast and her ass”) is indicative of the unity of the Holy Trinity; God the Father and the Holy Spirit are just different aspects of a single divinity.

Before delving into the powerful and thought–inspiring conclusion of the short story, it is worth to analyze the etymology chosen by Merrefield for his divine names. The only person named within the story itself, is, of course: Ed. After all, he represents God the Father and as such is the most important entity, The short name is reminiscent of the Lord's tetragrammeron used throughout the Hebrew Bible: YHWH. Cleverly, “ED” is exactly half as long. Perhaps it's because in this post–modern world, God is only half as significant as he used to be. Nevertheless, he is not forgotten: “Ed” appears numerous times in the short narrative. Notably, in the dialog segments, his name is fully capitalized as “ED” – another allusion to YHWH. Now, while the narrator's name appears nowhere in the story itself, it is present in the title: “Basement Jack.” The starting letter, “J”, is a subtle hint for the allusion to Jesus. What is perhaps less subtle is that “basement” directly modifies the name; the title is not “Jack in the Basement” for instance. This equates

“basement” with “Christ”; for Jesus really is “Christ Jesus.” Finally, one cannot ignore the significance of the number “3” – so prominently highlighted in one passage. The sentence in which it appears could have, on a literal level, read simply “I heat up my stuff with a black lighter and put it all in the reservoir.” The very deliberate insertion of “3” serves as a powerful link to the Holy Trinity. Jack is not alone when he lights up his “stuff;” Ed and his wife are there with him in spirit, much like God the Father and the Holy Ghost are together with Jesus.

The dramatic ending of “Basement Jack” is nothing short of a powerful retelling of the crucifixion story, but set in today's world. Merrefield's mastery of literary devices creates the parallel on more than just an allegorical level. The “yellow and white flickering like a thousand eclipses” immediately brings to mind the flogging of Jesus after his trial. One can almost visualize the Roman soldiers “yelling in an official language” (which, to Jesus, would be Latin – as opposed to the local Aramaic that he spoke). “The door slams”, “the latch clicks” – these images, with their associated sounds, force the reader to almost feel the whips on Jesus' flesh. Then, the story reaches its climax, with its re-imagining of the final stages of Christ's life. The “splintered wood” is clearly the cross, and much like Jesus had to carry it up to the mount, Jack has to climb the stairs to reach the door. He is “partially terrified” and “partially ecstatic” – the same juxtaposed emotions Jesus experienced – with his human part fearing death, and the divine part joyous that he was about to fulfill his destiny. The narrative gets even more graphic here. Jack gets splinters into his “palms”, into his “left foot, and another into [his] right foot.” These, of course, are the nails with which Jesus was attached to the cross. The final agony parallels the human nature of the passion. “it's stuck . . . but it's stuck . . . The door is stuck.” Along with Jack's earlier statement that he is “alone. There is literally no one there,” this is reminiscent of Jesus' futile cry of, “My God, my God – why have you forsaken me?” Jack, in his heart, was crying for Ed.

But with that, the story abruptly ends. “The door is locked.” There is no escape for Jack, and thus no resurrection for Jesus. The narrative

is left open-ended. What could happen next? Will Ed, as he had in the past, once again somehow act as savior for the protagonist? Or will Jack rot away in that basement, abandoned? The meaning takes on metaphysical aspects, as the reader is forced to examine both his own beliefs and the state of religion and theology in the world as a whole. Will the Christianity and Jesus of ancient times return to the world, or will the continual decline of organized religion continue? The reader himself will play a role in answering this question. But whatever the answer ends up being, the debate will certainly benefit from Merrefield's groundbreaking short story. The visceral, powerful allegory he created is undeniably the first of its kind and will surely influence theology for years to come.

Kiss

by C. H. Savage

It was 6:30 in the morning. Muster was in half an hour and I was off base lying in the back seat of a '70 Monte Carlo. She was sleeping between my legs, her head in my crotch. Her hand was curled in a pile of puke on the baseboard – a real trooper, this one.

We had been out on the town with a couple girls from Hoboken. Good times, really – nothing much – just the mutual desire for an easy lay.

After a night of power drinking at the Horn – a grade A shit-hole located on the outskirts of Jersey – the girls thought we should go parking under the Conway Park bridge. The park was a mile from base and a popular hangout spot for sailors. It was also a popular spot for the locals to cruise. The trick to drinking under the bridge was simple – drink all you want while keeping your head from getting smashed in by some random looking to mix it up with a Navy fuck. Most often bats were the weapon of choice so you usually knew when to move – unless you were like my buddy, Domes. He stopped a bat with his head and spent his last six months on light duty with his cracked skull hidden under a wrap.

It was about 3 o'clock in the morning and most of the cruisers would be gone by now. We'd be able to do whatever we wanted as long as the cops didn't show. On the way back to Philly, though, I lost it all. Mathis was swerving wildly while his girl was giving him a hand job. He was laughing like an idiot while swilling from a bottle of Beam. He laughed even harder when I told him to stop – that I was about to puke.

“Enjoy the ride, Savage,” he yelled over the music. Cherry Pie was blaring from the speakers. He threw in a few sudden brake jolts

with his swerving when he saw I was turning green – a maneuver that sent my first batch on the floor behind the driver’s seat. He thought we were on some sort of pornographic amusement ride. His eyes were red and wide and everything he said was exaggerated with a wide sweeping motion of his arm – his bottle splashing over the dash.

“Stick your head out the window ya fuckin’ hic,” he yelled.

After we parked I spent the first half-hour puking and dry-heaving to the sounds of Mathis and his girl romping in the front seat. Fucking, Philly, I thought. Each time I came up for air I could hear another comment about his great sailor cock. I punched the back of his head as I leaned out the door. This time it was violent – I felt the muscles tear under my ribcage as I heaved. My nose and throat clogged with vomit – I was suffocating only to inhale chunks of puke.

When I finally finished I sat back, sweating and clammy. My stomach muscles were twitching – they had taken a beating. The Philly boiler-pot and the summer heat sat still. Mathis and his girl were still going at it in the front with her feet planted on the driver’s side window. Beyond them I could see a car burning in the distance. It’s gas line had been cut – the final show after a stolen joy ride. Spittle was dripping from my chin when my girl wrapped her arms around my neck and sat herself on my lap. This one was all hair and legs. Long legs and clean – all the way to her ass. Her hair spilled over as she took her top off, wiped my forehead with it and stuck her tongue down my throat.

A real horny trooper – my Jersey girl.

Haunted

by Corey Mesler

“Even when I watch TV
There’s a hole where you used to be.”

--John Lennon

Start the story with its protagonist’s name: Bob Plumb. Start with the crux of his problem, the grit asking its oyster to pearl: Bob Plumb is haunted.

He thinks he is haunted.

Say this: he lives by himself. Because his wife left him.

Her name was Honey, really Honey. Given name. Honey Plumb was, by all accounts, a beautiful woman, a leading light in life’s drama. She was accustomed to being center stage, when she was younger, for most of her days, when she was Honey Moser.

Why she married Bob is a mystery, one of life’s mysteries. He came along at a time when she was floundering a bit. She had been dumped by a man who had just passed his bar exam. Honey had thought, she had been led to think, that her life was achieving shape through the fast-track success plan that graduating from law school represents. Honey Moser thought she was about to marry a successful, wealthy man. This man, this new lawyer, married someone else. Just like that. Honey cursed herself for planning, for attempting to plan the future. She knew better.

And suddenly, there in her path was this innocuous, fairly attractive man named Bob Plumb, a teacher of English at a private girl’s school. Bob Plumb had nice shoulders, a way of walking that was both hesitant and confident. A bounce.

Bob Plumb was also coming out of a relationship, a sorry relationship with a fellow teacher, a young woman named Linn Bass. Linn, with an i. Bob was looking moony, standing in Honey Moser's path, looking like a man who had just been kicked in the stomach.

It was in the grocery store, this path, the one that contained both Honey Moser and Bob Plumb. Bob was caressing casabas. He had no idea why he was feeling them, rapping on their firm fruitiness like a spirit knocks on a table. But Bob was not thinking about casabas, their fruitiness, their secrets beneath the skin. Bob was thinking about Linn and her impossibly soft crotch and how, once he was welcome there and now would be welcome there no more. And Bob was thinking that this would haunt him for the rest of his days and, looking ahead because we can, we say, yes it will. Let's not foreshadow; let's return to the concrete moment in the produce aisle of Schnuck's grocery store.

"What are you doing?" Honey Moser asked, smiling her sucky-calf smile.

Bob looked up as if the Lord had tapped him on the shoulder.

Honey Moser stood there in the light, a glimmering eidolon.

"I have no idea," Bob answered honestly.

"Put it down and walk away," Honey said, tinkling.

Bob thought perhaps that it was time to smile, to chance a smile.

He moved his mouth in a shuttering rictus.

Honey Moser squinted, shifting her lovely weight.

"Sorry, yes," Bob said, putting the casaba down and stepping away from both it and Honey Moser.

“Ok,” Honey said, beginning to roll away from this awkward man, this mooncalf.

“You’re lovely,” Bob said. He just said it.

Honey Moser turned now, her full-on radiance blinding. A simple key, a lucky stab: she had never been called lovely before. Many synonyms but not that particular modifier. It pricked her like a fairy-tale spindle.

“Funny man, odd-duck,” Honey said.

But she was smiling.

“Yes, sorry,” Bob said again. “I’m, I’m beggared, jetsam. This is what’s left of a man once loved.”

“She broke your heart.”

“Yes, she did.”

“Join the club,” Honey said.

“No,” Bob said without thinking. “Not you—“

“Oh, yes. Left behind like a sinner at the rapture.”

That night Bob and Honey had their first date. They went to a Cuban restaurant near Bob’s home. Afterwards she did what babes-in-the-woods do. They assuaged their simple, human loneliness with contact, sweet, fleshly contact.

A month later they were man and wife.

Rick Pozgar was Bob Plumb’s best friend. A writer who worked in a bookstore, Rick was the kind of sounding board, empath that makes for long-term friendships. Bob loved Rick and Rick loved Bob. Sometimes they even said it.

Rick could not believe that Bob had married before Rick had even met the woman. When they finally got together, Rick and his girlfriend, Sandra, and Bob and Honey, the conversation was warm and lively. Rick liked Honey immediately and Sandra and Honey went off during the evening, into the kitchen to build a bond that males could never understand. Honey and Sandra had coffee the next day. They talked lovingly about their men, their funny habits, their goony love affair with each other, even about them sexually.

It was all chirpy and blithe.

It lasted a few months, a few months of sex and shopping and renting videos. And, let's be fair: the sex was good. Bob, for all his distractedness, for all his inertness, for all his exhausted outsidersness, Bob was pretty good in the sack. Not great, but adequate, unselfish. It wasn't that, assassin of so many consanguinities, bad sex. No, one day Honey took a hard look at Bob Plumb and thought, oh, Holy Ghost, I could have made a better match. I'd even prefer one of the dull bankers from the Club, thought Honey Plumb.

So, she began disappearing. Afternoons at first and then, as her boldness grew, evenings. Once she even stayed out all night, the night she hooked up with a Real Estate Mogul named Henry DeHart. You can write the scene the next morning at the Plumbs.

"I can't say I didn't see this coming," Rick told Bob a few days later over Mexican food and Tecates.

"Right. Why was she with me? One of the glittering stars."

"That's not what I meant." It was.

"I know." He didn't.

"So, the only question now is, what do you do next?" Rick said, masticating a tough piece of tortilla. Was it tortilla?

“That’s not, of course, the only question. I can think of a good dozen questions, some true–false, some multiple–choice. Some no–choice, no–win, no–contest. So many questions, so little mind.”

Rick stared at his plate which was as colorful as a Jackson Pollock drop cloth. He had no advice to offer. Let’s be truthful here: when one’s friend has had his (or her) heart eviscerated there is only one thing to say. That one thing is: I’m here for you. Beyond that, as friends, we are as useful as monkey fat.

“I’m here for you,” Rick said.

Bob grinned a poorly constructed and insincere grin.

So we send Bob home, where he has to take himself in. Home is where the hard is. The house now, for Bob, represented failure, an over–the–precipice sized failure. The TV only showed movies that Honey loved. The refrigerator still held arcane comestibles that Honey loved: wheat germ, sparrow grass, propolis. The bed was the bed where Honey loved. It was all so defeating, so beyond him. Bob sat in his living room, sunk deep in a chair the color of the bottom of the sea. He sunk badly. In his living room there was no living.

There was no life left for Bob, Bob thought.

Nor had there been much sleep, Morpheus leaving Bob on the same train Honey commandeered.

Somehow, on the fourth night PH (Post Honey), Bob fell into a restless sleep. He dreamt that night that he was lying on the viscous floor of a damp cave. All around him, seemingly sprouting from the floor, writhed tall, blue, transpicuous penises, swaying as if in a gentle breeze. Bob reached out for the one nearest him, a particularly substantial and gnarly example. As he held it in his hand warmth entered his body, an electric reawakening. And indeed it was then that Bob awoke. His head was still in dreamspace. The room seemed overheated, like a greenhouse. He couldn’t shake the

unsettling vision of his dream, nor the semi-sweet feeling of that botanic phallus. Suddenly, Bob was physically ill. He barely made it into the bathroom to spill.

Afterwards, Bob sat on the cool bathroom floor, a wet washcloth across the back of his neck. It was a brand of comfort Honey had taught him. Naturally, it had felt much better under her gentle ministrations.

Slowly, Bob rose and looked at himself in the mirror over the sink. He looked old and depleted. He used the damp washcloth to wipe his face. Outside, rosy-fingered dawn was turning to the title page, the day's book unwritten. Bob reached for his toothbrush to clean the taste of vomitus from his mouth. Next to his babyblue brush lay the toothpaste, its little majorette cap nearby. Bob stared at the composition on the edge of the sink for a long minute.

Here's what was odd: Bob always recapped the toothpaste. Bob was fastidious. Bob was anal. To find the cap next to the tube was tantamount to discovering Charybdis in his bathtub. Bob tried to hearken back to the night before. Had he, in his dizzy grief, been so sloppy? Of course that was the answer. Even a man as driven by routine as Bob was has, on occasion, slipped off his well-worn track, if only for a moment. A slip. That's all this represented.

Bob brushed his teeth, recapping the paste tightly.

The daylight was impending regardless of Bob's lack of enthusiasm for it. When Bob shuffled into the kitchen and hit the lightswitch the bulb blew, a soft purple pop. Good morning!

That day passed like a stone. Like jellied brainchild. Bob went to work, bumped into his fellow teachers as if he were a blind man, told his students that love was a poor kinescope, told them that they could read Harry Potter instead of Dubliners if they were so inclined. He went home that day with absolutely no memory of how the day had gone, what he had done, etc. A dangerous way to run a life, but there it is.

Bob threw some ground beef, some tomatoes, some rice and some hot sauce into a frying pan and called it dinner. He sat in front of the TV, which was showing a reality series featuring staged cuckoldry. Bob wept soft, warm tears into his dinner. As one show morphed into another Bob just sat and wept. Later, some time later, through his foggy vision he saw a woman on a desert island opening her top for the entire world to see. Her breasts were supple, blurry blobs of sexual tension. Bob felt like he may explode, as if inside an extraterrestrial was hatching ala Alien.

Bob threw the rest of his dinner down the garbage disposal, the same one that quit on him one time because of an overabundance of pasta. He heard the satisfying grinding swoosh of a successful disposal and he felt no satisfaction. He leaned on the counter for support: Bob felt as if the edge of forever was at his feet and all he wanted to do was jump.

Then his attention was drawn to the spice rack. Bob loved his spice rack and doted on it, constantly re-alphabetizing it after Honey used it. Here's what arrested Bob's attention: sage was before rosemary. How could that be? Had Honey slipped in unannounced and cooked herself a meal? No, that was foolish. No one had been in Bob's house except Bob for 5 days now.

Bob gently put the spices back in their customary place. As he did so he felt a slight shudder in his arm as if he had hit his ulnar nerve. Someone or something had rearranged his spice rack. Now, there was a foolish thought. But, that's what Bob was thinking as his tears dried up, as his house settled around him like a docked ship, ticking and rocking and trying to right itself. With the world a tilt-a-whirl Bob stumbled to his couch, diving onto it.

Somewhere basketball was being played, Bob thought. On TV. Basketball with its set rules and constant measurements. The basket was 10 feet from the floor. It had always been and it always would be. Bob surfed for a game and in no time landed in Cleveland where LeBron James was king and where, just now, as Bob reeled,

LeBron was dunking on some hapless, nameless, muscle-bound power forward from New Jersey. The ship gradually stopped rocking. Bob watched the game for a full hour without ever taking it in. His mind skipped over the surface of the game like a rock on a frozen lake. Something ineffable was eating at him, as if a small rodent was nibbling the edges of his thought. Bob cursed his own clammy metaphors. But, finally, Bob's mind came to rest. He was thoughtless.

Bob slept that night like a baby. No, not crying and peeing himself, but without disturbing dreams or flesh-hungry longings for Honey's return. He woke the next day refreshed. Showered, shat, ate, dressed, drove to school. Only to be confronted by a near-empty campus. Apparently, it was a holiday.

At loose ends, Bob drove round the city, the city where he lived. It was all painful. Every building, every stoplight, every couple locked onto each other like grim death, reminded Bob just how alone he was. Bob was abandoned on a desert island, an island called Home. He had a brief, fleeting impulse to drive his Honda off a cliff. As far as he knew, there were no cliffs nearby.

Bob drove by Rick's. There was a strange car in Rick's driveway, a Volkswagen with a flower on the antenna. A woman's car. A not-Sandra woman.

Bob drove on.

Bob went to Bob's.

It was eleven a.m. and Bob wondered if it was too early for lunch. He decided not. He made himself a salmon-salad sandwich and took it and a bag of chips to the living room. Plate in lap, he turned on the TV and found a tennis match being played. Somewhere a tennis match was being played. The two combatants were foreigners with unpronounceable names that Bob had never heard before. It was diversion enough.

Afterwards, Bob put his dish in the sink. He thought about rinsing it and putting it in the dishwasher but decided to forego that stage until later. For Bob this was sloppiness akin to leaving dirty underwear on the floor. He was trying to free himself from the merciless grip of assiduousness.

Bob went to his bedroom, in search of pornographic videos. Bob needed to pleasure himself. Depression had kept him from his duties and he was backed up. A warm insistence stirred in Bob's apparatus, a compression, a pulse in the scrotum. He found an appropriate tape—one he hadn't utilized in a while—and took it back to the living room. The light was pouring in through the windows like honey. Honey. It was a little too bright for such a private act, but Bob was beyond such consideration.

On screen, there was no preface to the action, no buildup. The scene opened on a naked couple, spread like gutted fowl on a cheesy bed, the bleach blond woman mouthing the oversized linga of an athletic stud. Bob opened his own shorts. His manhood was wee. Bob could only grip it with two fingers; there was no purchase.

Bob refocused his attention on the screen. Yes, that was erotic activity. Yes, it was quite exciting. Bob's button would not activate.

Argh, Bob thought. Distracted, is what I am, Bob cogitated until he identified his hitch. Something was bothering Bob. Then he had it: the plate was still in the sink. Bob held his pants with one hand, shambled into the kitchen, took said plate in his one free hand and shoved it into the dishwasher.

Back in front of the TV, the couple had gone on without him. Our heroine now rode the stud in what Bob believed was called the Cowboy Position. Bob's libido awakened asudden. It was a nice session.

Afterwards, Bob lay awash in his own fluid, pants at his ankles, TV back on tennis. Bob's mind drifted. He may have even drowsed. Without warning there came a knocking at the door. Bob arose as if

he'd been caught doing something shameful. He stumbled, attempting to lift his trousers and make the door in one movement. The knocking continued.

"Wait," Bob said.

With some difficulty he managed to rebuckle his pants. He opened the door. It was Honey.

"Jesus," she said in greeting. "What were you doing?"

"What do you mean?" Bob asked.

Honey looked at Bob the way one might look at a dog which had tried to hump a hassock.

Bob switched gears. "What do you need?" he asked.

"Did I leave my camera here?" Honey asked, breezing by him.

It's my camera, thought Bob. But he said nothing. The sneaky guilt he felt, incongruously or not, made Bob meek. Even meeker than usual.

He could hear Honey rummaging around in the bedroom. Oh, God, Bob thought, I left the bag of videos out on the bed. Shit, he thought. And his hand went to his lower stomach where there was a good-sized soggy patch. Honey was going to smirk at him. He didn't need that right now.

Honey emerged from the hallway, camera in hand. Her face was—it was—superior—and smirk-ready.

Bob started to speak before she could ridicule him.

Honey was too fast.

"You left a dirty plate in the sink," Honey said, as she headed for the

door. “You’re slipping,” she said, parting.

“I don’t understand,” Rick said that night.

“Dammit, I’m haunted, spooked, visited by something from another realm.”

“Because you forgot to put a dish in the dishwasher.”

“I didn’t--and the toothpaste cap. And the sage.”

Rick barked an unintentional laugh.

“Bob, the spices?”

“Yes, they’re always alphabetized, see. Always.”

“Don’t panic, buddy. You know what I think? Honey is messing with you.”

Bob thought about this for a moment.

“The spice rack maybe. But she didn’t sneak in and uncap the toothpaste. And—wait—see, she was the one who pointed out the dirty plate. Oh, wait, you think she took it out of the dishwasher? No, no, that’s not right. She didn’t know that I had just been bothered—that I had just put it away.”

“So, what you’re saying is, something unseen is at work. Poltergeists that have nothing better to do than mess with your alphabetization.”

“No, don’t you see—what if this is actually how they get you—not rattling chains or footsteps in the attic or table knocking—but by small seemingly insignificant moves—just a little each day to make you doubt your own volition—to make you aware of them.”

“Ok, now you’re creeping me out. That’s—just, well, stupid.”

“But it creeps you out.”

“Ok, look you wanna sleep at my house for a while? It would be cool. I think you’re haunted alright, by loneliness. You’re just not used to being alone.”

“No, no—what about—who was at your house? You had a woman—“

“Yes, right. Kathy, Kathy Faulk.”

“Kathy from high school?”

“Right.”

“And Sandra--How did you—never mind. How do you ever? You’re—insatiable.”

”B—“

“Sorry, that was unkind. I’m—jealous, I guess. Anyway—I’m alright alone. Really.”

Bob went home that night feeling even more remote from sympathy, an alien to human compassion. Even his best friend who understood everything was distancing himself. Ok, it wasn’t literally true—Bob was indulging in self-pity, relishing it really. Rolling around in isolation like a rooting swine. Bob was spooked into spiraling solipsism.

The house seemed hot, as hot as love’s flaming climate. Bob was uncomfortable in his own skin—he itched. He rubbed at himself, wanting to strip away everything, everything that held him, clothed him, everything that made him Bob. He settled for pulling all his clothes off. He kicked pants, shirt, briefs into the air and let them fall where they would. He was sweating.

Bob Plumb turned around like a dog situating itself and looked

frenetically about. His body felt prickly, yet alive—alive! He rubbed his hand over his oh so solid protoplasm—his arms, ribcage, his belly, thighs, crotch. Desire stirred momentarily. But onanism was not what Bob was seeking. What was it?

Bob lay down on the crappy carpet in his living room. The ceiling above him whirled like the souped-up heavens. The water spot in the corner resembled a head, in profile, speaking, its moist mouth permanently ajar.

And, as he lay there, Bob thought about his life, how wrong it had gone, how it was his fault partly, but not entirely. Some things had just happened, like they might happen to any man. As natural as a shower of rain.

It was then that Bob noticed his two pieces of wall art, reproductions in cheap frames. One was Chagall's "Bouquet with Flying Lovers." The other Larry Rivers' "Parts of the Body: French Vocabulary Lesson." Someone had moved them. The Chagall was where the Rivers used to be, and vice versa.

Bob considered the new placement of his prints. And he smiled.

Let's do a gentle fade here. We've gone with Bob about as far as we can go. His ignis fatuus is not our ignis fatuus. Each to his or her own phantoms, his or her own hauntings, and so on. Sleep well, Bob Plumb.

You Packed Beer and Secrets

by Leigh Hughes

It was the first night we would spend alone and I was still a child. Seventeen. I made us a picnic and we sat on a blanket in the clearing near the creek behind my grandmother's house. I packed turkey sandwiches and blueberries. You packed beer and secrets.

We were lying on our backs, looking up at the cloud formations and finding animals.

"What does that one look like to you? That one right there," I asked.

"It does not look like a rabbit," I said and threw a blueberry at you.

You sat up and took off your shirt. Your skin was tan from doing yard work all summer; your hair was streaked with blonde. The muscles in your back moved like the waves on a windblown swimming pool.

You grabbed a beer from the cooler and asked if I wanted one. I said I did, even though I didn't. You popped the top and took a long pull. I saw you hold in a belch and I felt special. I popped my own top and set the can down beside me.

You leaned over. You took a hold of my face and kissed me. Your lips opened and your tongue pushed its way into my mouth. I tried to wiggle my tongue a bit, like I knew what I was doing. Your mouth was sour and cold and I hoped mine tasted like blueberries.

You got up and said you'd be right back. You threw your shirt back on and winked. I nodded. The sun was going down and it was getting cold so I wrapped myself in the blanket. I saw the first star and squeezed my eyes tight, wishing you and I would be together forever.

Just before the sun dipped behind the trees for the night, I heard a soft thud on the ground behind me. I sat up and turned, expecting to find you there with a fistful of wildflowers and a toothy grin. Instead I found a dove with a broken wing, gasping for air, and blood on its white belly.

Another one dropped from the sky. This one wasn't breathing at all. I scooped up the first bird with thoughts of saving its life. It looked straight through me and I felt God shake his head in bitter disappointment. I heard footsteps crunching on the ground and your cold laugh. I stuffed the doves under my shirt and ran. I knew if I hurried, I could make it home before Momma even realized I'd left.

The Singing Brakeman

by Charles Langley

"T for Texas, Lord it's T for Tennessee," he took a deep breath, then continued singing in that whiskey tenor that was just below the point of breaking, "T for Thelma, that gal who made a wreck outta me."

Bob James took the cigarette out of his mouth and put it beside the one burning a ridge in the top of the upturned orange crate that served as an end-table beside the chair.

Picking up the fruit-jar from the makeshift table, he took a big swig of the colorless liquor.

"Doc says nicotine and corn likker are killing me. Wants me to stop both. Crazy bastard knows TB will kill me in six months. Just wants to take the fun out of living that last six months."

He went into a fit of coughing, then lit up a fresh Camel, ignoring the ones still sending up curls of smoke.

"Those radio men in New York town are just as crazy. Took me up there and wined me and dined me. Only the stuff they give me wasn't fit to eat or drink. Give me an audition and put me on a test program on a Saturday night. No body in the whole town paid any attention, but they got letters from all over the South and the Bible Belt. And the record they made is selling."

Another swig, another round of coughing.

"They got it all wrong. Railroad man is what I am. Brakeman on the C and O. road is the what I was till they said I couldn't cut it no more and let me go. Singin's what I do for fun. They pay me good for it though. I stick it out long enough that three cents a record could mount up. Pay for my buryin' and leave a little something for

Thelma. Radio program will help too, it lasts more'n six weeks. You know what she'll do with the money? Buy a red dress and high-heel shoes and go looking for another man. Can't blame her much. I ain't been much good for her."

"This here shirt is one they give me," he confided. The shirt had a button-down collar that wasn't buttoned and the sleeves had been cut off at the elbow. A logo over the pocket read "Dixie Network, covering the South."

Dwayne Pritchett, over in the corner, spoke behind his hand.

"You believe that crock? They took him to the big town to make a record? They took him anywhere, it would be to sue his sorry ass for money he owed them. I can sing better'n him. Just can't git anybody to listen to me."

"I hear tell he didn't cough once while he was cutting that record." Shorty Johnson offered, "Held it in. Session was over, he hunched over and spit up blood for an hour. One lung's gone and the other one's on the way but he sure can yodel when he sets his mind to it."

James twanged the old guitar with the extra holes to allow the little notes out and finished the refrain.

"Tried to make me believe, I ain't got that old TB," He put down the instrument and sat back, exhausted from the effort of the singing.

Three weeks later an official looking envelope arrived. Shorty opened it. It contained a check for eight hundred dollars and was marked "Broadcast fee and royalties to date". Another item was a contract with an X where it should be signed. It was for thirteen weeks of programming on the new Dixie Network. A copy of the show business paper, Variety, had the headline, "Hottest country singer since Hank Williams." It went on to say, "Bob James' first record sweeping the South. NBC assembling regional system like the Dr. Pepper Network to carry his programs."

"Hot damn," Shorty exclaimed. "Wait'll Dwayne sees this. Bob was telling the truth all along. Too bad he couldn't have lived just one more week to see it. Where's Thelma?"

"She went to Penney's," Tess said, "Something about a red dress and a pair of high-heeled shoes."

Peek-a-Boo Freak

by Ann Tinkham

Fritz sat naked on the edge of his bed. The innards of the mattress were coming out. He sometimes wondered if there were colonies of bedbugs living inside. He smirked when he thought of himself as a bug lord—sleeping above thousands of bugs. That was as close as he would ever get to lording over any living thing.

As he stared blankly at his faded Bob Dylan poster, he took a long drag on his Lucky Strike to shake the sleep from his bones. Fritz could feel the nicotine circulating to all his dozing parts—like a sergeant shaking and waking his underlings.

Which café would it be today? The Bean tended to attract sexy moms who wanted to see and be seen, with kids as accessories. Jumpin' Java was a coed hang-out for manic all-nighters and overzealous study groups. Maybe he would go to the eclectic haunt, Clouds in My Coffee. The problem with Clouds was that at any time of day it could be a coming out party for boy-queens or a gathering of the NY Times crossword puzzle crowd, which consisted of a guy who looked like Einstein, a woman who looked like Broomhilda, an obese women with crazy hats, and a collection of Woody Allen wannabes who were trying to create little Manhattan. Clouds was definitely out. He wanted a sure deal. No, he needed a sure deal.

He wasn't in the mood for vodka girls on cell phones with biochem books, so Jumpin' Java was out. That left The Bean. He remembered the last time he was there; a thirty-something woman with maroon hair, violet eyes, and erect nipples was watching him. She couldn't keep her eyes off of him. He looked down at himself, and said, "Top o' the morning to ya, big guy."

Fritz dropped his cigarette butt into his Bud can beside his bed, heard it sizzle, and then considered his shorts options. Whatever was clean was usually what he chose. His favorite khaki shorts were

stained, so he chose the loose denim Bermuda shorts, and pulled them on. He had never used these ones before, so he needed to test them out. He dragged his desk chair over to the cracked full-length mirror he had recovered from dumpster diving after all the college kids left town. In fact, all his furniture was acquired that way, save his used bed, which his mother bought him when she found out that he was sleeping on a camping pad on the floor.

He positioned himself on the chair and turned slightly to the right. Then he spread his legs so that he could view himself through the opening in his shorts. He adjusted his shorts so that he revealed his crown jewel. He grew hard again just looking at himself through the opening. Man, I'm hung like a donkey. Any woman who gets a look at this is lucky as hell.

He left the chair in front of the mirror, walked over to his pile of t-shirts and kicked a Dunkin Donuts box out of the way. Fritz pulled his t-shirt over his head and then walked back to the mirror, noting that his soul patch was becoming more of a soul pasture. No need to tame it now. He gelled his bleached hair with dark roots so it had the day-old dirty, just stuck a finger in the socket look.

On his way out, he grabbed a cinnamon frosted pop tart, but quickly discarded it in the back seat of his car. His breakfast would be black coffee and a woman.

As he pulled his Camaro into a spot in front of The Bean, he crossed himself for good luck. Catholic school was good for something.

After ordering a tall black coffee with no room for sissy stuff, he chose his seat carefully—one in the back with an adjacent popular table with only one chair. That way, it would attract no groups of chatty soccer moms.

Fritz grabbed the free college newspaper and pretended to read. He didn't really give a shit about college happenings or crappy articles written by opinionated college dweebs. He held the paper up and peeked out the side of it. He willed a hot chick to come over to the

table-in-waiting. Fritz imagined a slender Barbie gone bad, a voluptuous goth girl, or a sex-crazed preppy lady. After nearly 30 minutes of emptiness, a weathered, plain Jane forty-something woman arranged herself, her romance novel, and a fancy coffee drink at the target table. Damn. Oh well, she'll have to do.

He peered out the side of his paper as the woman with droopy eyelids, heavy lip liner, and frosted hair sipped her frozen drink through a straw and dove into her novel. His eyes followed hers as they followed the words. She had no idea that she was being watched. They usually didn't at first. She finally looked up from her book when his stare became heavy. She glanced over at him and back at her book. Damn. Come to me, mama.

He wrestled his paper and scooted his chair, hoping the movement would get her attention. She looked up and then back down at her romance novel. He had read one once, and imagined that he was far better-hung than the character with the giant cock. He would give this matron a run for her money. He struck his pose and cleared his throat several times until she looked straight at him. He wiggled his thigh back and forth. She looked down at him and up, and then down and then up. Then came his favorite part.

The moment of realization.

It's for you, baby doll. It's all yours. Her eyes widened as they looked up and down, up and down. He could feel himself growing in response to her gaze. He was throbbing so hard, he felt he would burst right then and there at The Bean. But he kept his cool and his hard-on.

Her mouth dropped open as she watched the show. She then covered her O-shaped mouth with her hand, and glanced around. But she couldn't keep her eyes off of the performance in his pants. I'm fucking irresistible.

Fritz was discovering that middle-aged women were the best targets, and this one in particular was a jackpot. Confused,

shocked, intrigued, flattered, and then aroused. The young ones could be tattletales with attitudes, whereas the aging ones, who had long since given up, didn't know what hit them.

But they seemed to like what hit them. They were torn between naughty and nice.

This romance seeker was a live wire—her arousal evident; her face was turning pink, her breathing rapid, and her nipples erect, or so he thought. She sucked on her fingertip as she accepted his offering.

Just then a manager walked by, and Fritz resumed his newspaper reading position, and closed his legs. When the coast was clear, he snuck a peek at her, and she was gone. Her drink and book were still there.

He was tempted to continue the show, but couldn't take his chances. He set down the paper, and slipped outside into his Camaro. From there, he watched her take her seat again and look for him. He imagined her intense yearning—felt the pull of her desire, and watched her through the window as he finished the job.

Confronting the Cherub

by Jamie Gegeny

There was an urgent knocking at the door, the phone was ringing, the dog, Ron, was barking at whoever was knocking and Push Up Upton knew that masturbation would have to wait.

“Son of a fuck,” he snarled. This wasn’t shaping up to be the kind of day Push Up had envisioned when his alarm went off an hour earlier. Rush’s “Tom Sawyer” was just beginning on his clock radio, which meant that he could awaken to it in its entirety. The sun was shining, Ron had coffee made, the outlook looked fantastic. Now, though, after breakfast, after the shower, after the clothes were on and the teeth were brushed, everyone wanted to get a hold of him, himself especially. Against his better judgment, he reached down to his ankles and grabbed his pants.

“I got the door, Ron,” he muttered to his Golden Retriever as he put a cigarette between his teeth and bit off the filter, “you’re on phone detail.”

He was well-built, muscular, and would have been quite an intimidating man on sight alone, had it not been for his cherubic face. He was in his mid-thirties, but to look at him, you’d think maybe twenty- seven, twenty-eight tops. Having this youthful appearance, Push Up was rarely taken seriously in fights and was often picked on by muggers and street toughs, drunks in bars. His pajamas, which he rarely left the sanctuary of, were baggy and served to camouflage the rippling ice cube tray of muscles underneath them, surprising many a confronter in the process. Push Up, you see, always removed his shirt to fight. He liked to see the look on the other guy’s face, the surprise of seeing a hidden giant emerge from the shell of a manchild, before he rearranged it. That look of surprise allowed him to get in two, sometimes three shots to the face before the other guy could react, stunned as he was initially. If the first blows didn’t knock the guy down, which they

often did, Push Up would have to resort to taking a shot or two in order to get in position to double the guy over with a punch in the gut. Then the knee to the face would usually seal the deal for Push Up. The nose would break, the blood would come spraying from it like Old Faithful, covering his slippers and sometimes his robe, if he was wearing it. Yes, he liked the knee to the face. It felt right to him. From there, to make his point even more clear to those around the area who might be watching, he would do any of the following, depending on his mood: 1) Jump straight up in the air as high as he could and land with his knees on the man's ear/temple. 2) The same as Number One, but with elbow replacing knees and falling replacing jumping. 3) Pick the by-now-side-of-beef-like victim up and throw him across a table like in the movies. 4) Punch him a bit more. 5) The same as Number Four but switch punch to kick. 6) Find something, anything, to smash against the guy's head (past selections have included a pool cue, a cue ball—same guy, same night, different fights—a burning log, a golf club, the phone, a tuna, a sled, the hood of a car, etc., etc., etc.) To see a man fight Push Up Upton was like watching a gazelle carcass being ripped to shreds by something that would come out of a Hercules-impregnated Truman Capote.

As he grabbed the door knob, he was reminded of what he was doing when his day took a turn for the worse. It made him angry. He swung the door open and spit the cigarette filter into the left eye of his neighbor, Anthony, from four doors down.

“Ow!!!” Anthony shouted. “What’s the matter with you?!?”

“I thought you were going to be the cuntin’ newspaper kid. What can I do for you? Hold on. Ron!,” he shouted into the next room, “who’s on the phone?” Ron barked a sharp, guttural bark that was loud enough to make Anthony blink. “Cockass,” Push Up whispered to himself. Then, back into the other room, he hollered, “Do you think you could call her back? I need you to go tell Gordon to bring the car around. Please?” Ron barked, followed by a muffled growl. “Sorry about that. What were you saying? Here, come in.”

“I’m, uh. . .I’m here, Mr. Upton,” said Anthony, “because my son, Derek, tells me that you owe him quite a bit of money.”

“Derek? Who’s that, the kid at Best Buy with the hash?”

“My son. Your paperboy. Derek?”

“Yeah, Derek. That’s who I thought you were going to be when I opened the door. That’s kind of weird, don’t you think?”

“He says you haven’t paid him in six weeks.”

Push Up now finally got around to lighting the cigarette that had been hanging from his lips since he opened the door. He blew a cloud of shiny, blue smoke into Anthony’s face.

“What’s your favorite word, Tone?”

“Excuse me?”

“What’s your favorite word? The word you just love saying and writing and hearing? There’s gotta be one.”

“I. . .”

“That’s terrible, Anth. Terrible. It’s only one letter long. Here, I’m reaching into my pocket. I like you. Your son needs his paper money, right.” Push Up kept his hand in his pocket, even though it contained no money. It contained a paper clip, three pens and a wadded up gum wrapper. Anthony’s eyes wandered down for a second; realizing the situation, that he would have to tell the man a word before he actually got to see the money, his eyes again met Push Up’s.

“I guess, uh. . .Mississippi. . .?”

“Uh–huh. Why do you like that particular word?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were you born there? Did you fuck around on your wife there? What?”

“I just. . .I just. . .like the. . .way it sounds. Now, Mr. Upton. . .I upheld my part of the...”

“I like a lot of words. Don’t like a lot of words, too. But, you know my favorite? The number one word in the entire English language?” Push Up removed his hand from his pocket and scratched his cheek with it.

“Mr. Upton. . .”

“There’s no better word in the English language. There’s no word more powerful, more...dare I say, cleansing. And you know there’s no better word to use in that situation because it just rings so true, truer than any other word. People’s reactions. . .when they hear that this word holds significance in your vocabulary. . .it’s priceless. No two people react the same way. And when you say it, the way it rolls off your tongue when your tongue hits the back of your front teeth where they meet the gums. It makes you feel alive, it really does. You know what that word is?” Here, Push Up leaned into Anthony, not much, but enough to make Anthony draw his head back slightly. “Here, watch my teeth. Ready? Cunt.”

“You can expect a visit from the police. . .”

“. . .I don’t that a great word? Cu. . .I’m undoing my tie here. You see this? And what I’m going to do is place it around your neck. I’m giving you this tie. It’s a nice tie, look at it. It’s very expensive. It’s yours to keep, but first I’m going to strangle you with it. Not to kill you, I’m not a murderer, but to threaten you and to strike fear into you. . .you see? You feel that? It’s pretty scary stuff, isn’t it? You feel like you’re going to die, aren’t you? You can’t breathe, you can’t think. I’ll bet. . .that you’ve watched movies where you see people get strangled and you ask yourself, ‘why don’t they just hit the

person strangling them? Why don't they just pretend to be suffocated and dead so the person loosens their grip?' It's not that easy when it's actually happening, is it?" With that, Push Up walked to his coffee table, picked up his unfinished orange juice and put it to his mouth. "You sure you don't want this?" he asked to Anthony, who was already crawling out the door, through the small pool of vomit he had deposited on Push Up's floor. "I'll clean that up, friend. You just get home and get your son's financial problems fixed. The boy needs to be paid for the work he's doing."

Push Up downed the last two swallows of his orange juice in one swallow. He then slammed the glass against the dry wall table, leaving it with its third dent in five days, checked his teeth in the monitor of his computer, walked out the door and over top of the crawling/gasping Anthony to where his driver, Gordon, was waiting with the car.

"Gorgeous as fuck today, sir," greeted Gordon.

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Gordo" replied Push Up cheerily.

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.