The Broken Teacup - Volume 6

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Solape Adetutu Adeyemi is a dedicated professional with a Bachelor's degree in Microbiology and a Master's in Environmental Management. She is a researcher, a consultant,a passionate environmental sustainability enthusiast and a talented award winning creative writer, with her works published in esteemed journals and magazines, including *Writenow Literary Journal*, *TV Metro, Poetry Marathon Anthology, the Guardian newspaper, the Kalahari review* and the *Indiana review* among others.

With close to two decades of experience, Solape has excelled in various roles within the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry with varying certifications: ISO certifications (International Standards Organisation), a Basic level certificate in Spanish, behavioural management, mental health, office etiquette, advanced Excel, health, safety and environment, script writing and movie production plus modern HR management. Her commitment to environmental causes aligns with her belief that everyone can contribute to saving our planet.

Beyond her professional life, Solape enjoys watching action movies and immersing herself in whale documentaries. She is a host, presenter, teacher, counsellor, voice-over artiste, script writer, poet, and movie subtitler. Her diverse interests reflect her curiosity about the world and her commitment to learning.

Solape is a member of the following bodies: the American Society of Microbiologists (ASM), the Association of Nigerian Authors, Lagos chapter (ANA) and Poets in Nigeria (PIN)
Currently, Solape serves as the Vice Chairman of the Association of Nigerian Authors in Lagos, Nigeria, where she continues to contribute to the literary and cultural landscape of her community. Her dedication to both her professional career and advocacy for environmental sustainability demonstrates her multifaceted talents and unwavering commitment to making a positive impact in the world.

The ghost of what might have been by Solape Adetutu Adeyemi

And when your mind decides to dwell on the ghost of a life you never lived, leaning close enough to feel real. You find yourself rehearsing conversations with people who never stayed, walking roads your feet never touched, living inside houses that exist only in the imagination's architecture. It feels truer than the air you breathe, this world that could have been. The past tilts its head and smiles at you like a lover, and you almost believe its story.

But here, this room, this moment, this pulse in your wrist, this is where life asks for your devotion. The unmade choices will never cradle you, never warm your hands. The imagined kisses will never taste of salt or summer or forgiveness. What exists is this: the small mercy of a morning, the roughness of your own breath, the fragile honesty of being alive despite it all.

The danger is forgetting that the fantasy cannot hold you, no matter how sweetly it sings. The danger is mistaking its shimmering mirage for water, while the cup in your hand goes untouched.

Life is not lived in the shadow of what might have been. It waits for you here, unadorned, imperfect, but real. And when you finally open your eyes, it will not ask you to choose again, it will only ask you to stay.

Christine Emmert is a writer, actress, director and educator. Her work has been read/performed throughout the USA, as well as in the UK and Canada. You can view her prose on Amazon. In addition you can access her thoughts on writing at christine@christine-emmert.com. She lives in the woodlands of eastern Pennsylvania with her son, a rescued English bulldog and a wily black cat.

Savory by Christine Emmert

I tried to suck the sweetness from the kiss,

but came up with salty brine splashing

in remembrance.

We had toes in the water

and waves of love against our vision.

Where was the sugar of that day?

Wrapped in the storm clouds of future

We bundled it up before the thunder could warn us.

John Doriot is an award-winning author and poet. He has written sixteen books and has received seven *Georgia Independent* Author of the Year Awards from 2022 to 2025. These include awards for best horror/thriller novel (*Litter)*, best science fiction novel (*The Cures)*, best collection of short stories twice (*Grimmer Folk Stories, Idioms*), and best poetry collection (*From Sorrow To Tomorrow, Slowly, I Grow*). He was also a finalist for his poetry collection, *Spiritual Roots*, in 2025. He has contributed short stories and poems to MetaStellar, Down in the Dirt, Dark Horses, *Fright, The Dread Literary Journal, Flash Fiction, WestWard Quarterly, The Broken Teacup, Poems for Tomorrow, Harrow House Journal, Feed The Holy,* and *Four Tulips* magazines. He lives in Evans, Georgia, with his very patient wife of 46 years and his dog, Oreo. When he's not writing, he enjoys reading, hiking, gardening, and traveling.

My dog can fly by John Doriot

My dog has learned to fly in her old age.
She stands in front of the sofa, looking at me,
Waiting.
I stand up and walk toward her and she turns
her head toward the sofa, unmoving, like a
hunting dog on point.
I pick her up and lift her onto the sofa.
She settles in next to me, either making
a nest in a blanket, or resting her head
on a pillow.
I did not train her to do this.
She just knew.
She knew she couldn’t jump on the sofa
anymore.
She knew I would pick her up so she could
rest next to me.
She knew she could fly.

Bibhushan Khadka writes poems that don’t try to impress at first glance. They arrive slowly, built on small truths, quiet moments, and whatever tension sits beneath the surface of ordinary days. His writing leans toward honesty more than decoration, often circling time, memory, and the quiet weight of responsibility. He believes a poem should leave a small echo behind—not shout, just stay.

Simple Math by Bibhushan Shakha

I don’t want an unknown equation
messing with the rhythm of my life.
X, Y, or Z—it doesn’t matter.
Tall or small, quiet or bold—
it’s still a variable I didn’t choose.

You want A.
I offer B.
Then comes C,
asking us to multiply it all by ten.

Feelings raised to powers,
arguments squared,
love divided by time—
no thanks.

I like my math simple.
I like my peace whole.

Cassandra Caverhill is a Canadian-American poet, editor, and creative writing instructor. She's the author of *Mayflies* (Finishing Line Press, 2020), and is a prose reader for *The Chestnut Review.* Her prose and poetry have appeared internationally in journals across the US, Canada, and UK. A karaoke and cycling enthusiast, Cassandra lives in the borderlands of Windsor, Ontario. More at cassandracaverhill.com.

I THOUGHT THE STRAY CATS & I HAD AN UNDERSTANDING by Cassandra Caverhill

If you're going to shit in my yard
        at least have the decency to do it
by the back fence, beneath the wild rhubarb leaves,

out of sight & scent. Before I left
for work today, I really stepped in it:
        totally oblivious to the soft bronze monument
out front & under heel, a sculpture I'll call

God, You Really Need to Take the Goddamn Wheel.
        Driving with my windows down,
unable to pinpoint the source of stench
while it emits from me—a smear
                on the sole of my white shoe.

        A baby is always a joy, Mom insists
after learning of my younger sister's oops-not-oops pregnancy.
        The *Miracle* that will suddenly give her Purpose,
when what my sister needs is a bread & fish
multiplication situation to feed her own mouth.

        I'm in no mood to co-sign poor life choices.

Standing at the office sink, a Bounty square I soak
rubs against the offence & floods my nose
with the putrid smell of something

that will never be a rose. Not when
I'm still scrubbing. Not when
        this stink shadows me all damn day.

Not when I've always been the one
to clean a mess I didn't make.

Harry Clough is a poet working and living in Edinburgh. His poetry focuses on the exploration of locality and its unique history, voice, and flora and fauna, especially that of Scotland, where he is based. He has completed a master's in creative writing from the University of Edinburgh and spends as much time as possible out in nature, particularly the Lake District, the county of Sutherland, and closer to home, the Pentlands. His work has appeared in *bind collective, Hopper Magazine, The Rialto,* and *Scottish Mountaineering Press*.

Percussion by Harry Clough

blue and black—a thunder bruise—
our lives play out
on a piano trying to drown out
the lightening above our tinder house

some short and stabbing melody
is repeating, embellishing,
never striking the same chord
twice

we're safe
as long as you keep playing
playing and I keep watching,
as long as we can pretend that

it doesn't take eighty-eight hammers
to play the piano, as long as
we can pretend there's just a lost
percussionist in our garden,
clashing cymbals together under a
shako and plume, wilting like the
lavender bushes he's stamping on

David Jeffery is a poet living in Geelong, Victoria, Australia. He has had work appear in *The Age, Cordite Poetry review* and *Quadrant.* He currently works in Administration.

PIANO by David Jeffery

We'll gut an eel for dinner
We'll gut an eel and take each
Other out

Jacob pulled up in front of the stop sign
He left the car by the pylon that
Records two deaths

Who's had a Merry Xmas?
Who's had a Merry Xmas?

We'll have the wine for dinner
We'll have the wine and make
Another joke

Jacob pulled out a card from his mother
He read the words as though
He'd not known them
By heart

He looked away
He looked a way worth choking
He looked away
He looked a way not joking

It took the sides of his mouth
To break with understanding

He took away
He took a way unmeasured
He took away
He took a way for pleasure

And then the sides of his mouth
Became no more demanding

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah is a Pushcart-nominated poet from the United Kingdom. His poems have been featured in *Propel Magazine*, *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets, Atticus Review, Tab: The Magazine of Poetry and Poetics, The Silk Literary Magazine Sublimation* and elsewhere. He won the Poet of the Month Award for December-January 2025 of the *Literary Shark Magazine* 2025, and was the third winner of the Poetry Contest of *The Hemlock Magazine* in 2025, the Editor's Choice of *Panoply Zine* in 2024, the Second Poetry Prize Winner of *Streetlight Literary Magazine* in 2024. He was shortlisted for the *Minds Shine Bright Poetry Prize* in 2024.

She Loves It by Johnathan Chibuike Ukah

She says she loves it;
she loves the way it flows like a river
tearing through rocks and rods,
or like a mountain ridges over valleys of crackling bones,
steps on fallen bodies like an arrogant elephant;
she loves the way it surges from dirt to cleanliness,
clearing the path of Spring like Spring,
opening doors and windows with the wind,
throwing warmth into freezing hearts;
she loves the way it rips through barricades of pain,
from lumps of flesh standing against smoothness,
to where the sun fills balconies with peonies.
she loves the way it swallows the air around us,
that she feels like taking a rake into the road
to clear the thistles and cobwebs of winter,
or scoop out pools of water from damp rooms
where the flood has caged millions in their homes,
millions who would have walked with light hears,
sipping coffee in gardens strewn with fresh roses,
linking hands and smiling at passing birds,
galvanises the lubricators of a destiny
carved out of the wind of fortune, fortuitous galore;
she loves the way it sways in the spring season,
littering leaves and flowers like a bird dropping stones,
It seems simple yet amorphous in depth.
She loves the hallucinations it invokes in her,
the dreams it inspires, the memories it creates
and the evocation of wonder in its infectious beauty.
She says she loves its undulations, fluctuations,
the labyrinth of its energy permeating the fibre
of a home that she dreams about but cannot have.
It's not a salamander that hibernates in the hollow of a tree,
where beauty must struggle to find its voice.
She loves it and she is alive to love it.

H.E. Ross is a Black San Franciscan who only as of late used the term poet as a reference to himself being of that ilk who never likes to classify themselves until he started sending in poems for a public to read and feel. He has published two lifestyle magazines in the Caribbean and written a maritime heritage book, countless articles with cultural maritime themes, taught Black maritime history and heritage, and has gained his knowledge by working and living on both sides of the Atlantic and one side of the Pacific, the latter from Canada to Panama. He has sailed, under sail, those oceans as well as the Mediterranean, Baltic, Aegean and the canals of France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Tijuana at Five by H.E. Ross

A scream jerk my eyes open
raised white horse
black reins
high horned saddle
moustache scream
shadow wide sombrero
tight silver coined pants
long silver gun flaring up

Three smoking loud pops
echo ears ringing
steepled white church
circle of spotlight
black sky night
soft guitars sing
two smoking pops
charcoal aromas of corn tortillas
horse-dung tobacco floating

Glare of white coloured bulbs
drooping sad gayness from thick cords
people smile laughs
crowd moves in mud
bottle lift screams cry
fierce intentions play music
fall down murmurs
breast blouses push windows
eyes have not blinked

Car cushion of cigar smoke
family all around
pull push out to street
step over dog in gutter
one leg gone

blood pool tongue out
food with red chili sauce
vomiting tears at five

Charmaine Arjoonlal is writer and social worker and mother of Ben. She lives with her husband and two dogs in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada. Her work has appeared in *The Rumpus, Anmly, MUTHA, Dark Horses/Mobius Blvd* and other places. She's working on a collection of CNF and poetry. Her website is charmainearjoonlal.wordpress.com.

Health Care Worker Burn Out by Charmaine Arjoonlal

mice roam the
hospital
sight unseen, armed with
tiny scalpels that
        gleam gleam and gleam

they gather together,
"A silent army",
Tom cats screech

my scream-whisper
        burns burns and burns—
miniature bullets
penetrate
white-lime walls   pelt my brain,

raining toxic…
until my body undulates in shame,
        I feel it, I feel it—
my skin
it rolls to pool,
discarded in a heap
laden with drool

I collapse
within myself
        to weep weep and weep,
where is
the peacefulness of a night's sleep?

Veronica Tucker is an emergency medicine and addiction medicine physician, mother of three, and lifelong New Englander. Her poetry explores the intersections of medicine, motherhood, memory, and being human. Recent work appears in *One Art*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Berlin Literary Review*. She shares more at veronicatuckerwrites.com and on Instagram @veronicatuckerwrites.

The Quietest Room by Veronica Tucker

The chair in the corner
still holds the shape of whoever sat last,
a shadow stitched into its fabric.
Even the dust has settled with purpose,
gathering where the light refuses to reach.

The clock ticks like shallow breath,
each second a hesitation.
I wonder what it means
to live inside this stillness,
to let silence make its nest
in the hollow of the air.

Once, I thought silence
was a punishment,
but here it feels more like witness.
The walls lean close,
listening for what I cannot say,
for what will never arrive.

Kenneth Pobo (he/him) is the author of thirty-three chapbooks and fifteen full-length collections. Recent books include *Bend of Quiet* (Blue Light Press), *At The Window, Silence* (Fernwood Press) and *It Gets Dark So Soon Now* (Broken Tribe Press). His work has appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Amsterdam Quarterly, Nimrod, Mudfish, Hawaii Review,* and elsewhere.

LIGHTNING DREAM by Kenneth Pobo

Lightning,
a long row of electric ants.
I get up after dreaming
that you're a heaven
made of wind
chimes. I became
the wind and gave you

a push. Rain
on the window,
tap, tap, tap,
an intimate connection
with glass.

Dr Tara Zafft is the most recent winner of the Moonlit Getaway Poetry Prize. She has published in the anthology, *Rumors Secrets and Lies, Poems about Abortion, Pregnancy and Choice*, *Write-Haus*, *Aether Avenue Press, The San Diego Poetry Annual, Vita and the Woolf Literary Journal*, and *Dumbo Press.* She received a BA in Russian Literature from UC San Diego and Ph.D. in Modern Languages from the University of Bath, UK. In addition, she regularly teaches poetry workshops.

Terra Cotta Couch by Dr. Tara Zafft

I start with something small—
the terra cotta couch long enough
for an afternoon nap, beneath
a window with a view of the
sky. Black, sliver of a moon
this morning. In this womb hour
that feels all mine. That I fought
to find for years before waking
children with kisses and making kasha
and school lunches and singing
blessings over food about sunshine
and flowers. But now I don't need
to fight to find time. I have the whole
day if I wish. I close my eyes, the
sadness sits. Like a burning. Like a
bird that wants to escape, I come
back to the couch. Feel its softness
under my skin, the couch with
matching pillows like the candles on
the coffee table next to the Patti
Smith book my daughter gave me
last year. With photos of days and I
think of Patti and her camera
and her words and my words
and my kids and the terra cotta
couch catching me.

John Dorroh likes to travel. He often ends up in other peoples' kitchens sharing culinary tidbits and tall tales. "Learning about cultures begins with the food," he asserts. Six of his poems were nominated for Best of the Net. Hundreds of others appeared in journals such as *Feral, River Heron, Burningword, Kissing Dynamite, North Dakota Quarterly, Penstricken,* and *North of Oxford.* He's had a book of micro-fiction and two chapbooks of poetry published in recent years. Once he was awarded Editor's Choice Award for a regional journal and received enough money for a sushi dinner for two.

How to Eat a Poem by John Dorroh

When I send you a poem, I don't expect you
to chew it up and swallow the parts like a jaw breaker.
Think about sucking on it like a throat lozenge
until the medicine coats your tongue and throat.
That way if the words cause you pain or discomfort,
you will have been pro-active and better equipped
to deal with the aftermath.

All of this ado about words, which are merely letters
strung together, which are merely benign components
of alphabet systems—the armies & militia, the cooling
waters & balms for humanity. The apes don't need to vocalize,
nor the dogs or cats or carp in Buddha's meditation ponds.
All of the wars over words that were sent in proper vessels
of delivery.

When I send you a poem, I don't expect a performance,
nor a single word of agreement, or phrases to express
your disgust. That poem, the one that fluffed your feathers,
the one that made you get up off of your ass and clean
your house, the one that you burned in the fireplace, the one
that you shared with a friend because she needed to hear
those words because maybe, just maybe, they moved
her enough to make her feel less lonely.

Ed Ruzicka has published four full-length books of poetry, most recently *In the Wind*, by Sligo Creek Publishing. Ed's poems have appeared in *the Atlanta Review, the Chicago Literary Review, Rattle, Canary* and many others. His poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Ed is also president of the Poetry Society of Louisiana. Ed lives quietly under the green of live oak trees in Baton Rouge with his wife, Renee.

Oh, Father, I Am Lost by Ed Ruzicka

After my father's funeral
it was all I could do to hold
the wheels of the car on the road.

I looked into forests along the roadside
as if some spirit or future might be there.
In the evening, windows cast
long light over snow in the yards.

The stinging cold felt right. I wouldn't
bundle up. I wanted to feel something
other than what I was feeling.
My heart was as dry as the dust
scorched on the tops of light bulbs.

Emma Johnson-Rivard is a doctoral student in creative writing at the University of Cincinnati. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Coffin Bell*, *Red Flag Poetry*, and others. She can be found at Bluesky at @blackcattales and at emmajohnson-rivard.com.

The Cat Speaks on Beginnings by Emma Johnson-Rivard

In the quiet hours, the poet dreams
of machines, the coolant song and the nest of
pipes, the AC too weak to hold past
the tide of days as the morning heat settles
like fog over the soul and the cat, ever vigilant,
taps a paw to her cheek and demands breakfast.

Sambhu Ramachandran is a bilingual poet, translator, short story writer, and academic from Kerala, India. He is currently working as Assistant Professor of English at N.S.S. College, Pandalam. His poems have appeared in *Neon and Smoke, The Alexander Review, The Bombay Literary Magazine, Wild Court, Madras Courier, The Alipore Post, Muse India, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Setu, The Chakkar, Ethos Literary Journal, Every Body Magazine,* and *Sextet,* among others. You can reach out to him on Instagram: @sambhuramachandran

Coffee Mugs by Sambhu Ramachandran

Sometimes on a cold morning,
when I set my coffee mug down
beside yours on the wooden table,
having longingly shaken
the last cold trembling drop
into my mouth, and notice
the faint overlapping circles
of moisture left by the mugs
on the veneer, I wish
if it were how you and I
could be when the end came around—
emptied of all encumbering desire,
yet unobtrusively interlinked.

Calla Conway writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and essays. Her work was a first-place winner of the London Writers Salon Contest and has appeared in *Novellum Magazine*, *Roi Fainéant*, *Chewers by Masticadores*, and elsewhere. She publishes on Substack at **@**itscalla, where her work lives in two spaces: one for creative writing, and *Emily Post Is Dead*, a culturally irreverent essay series.

The Rub by Calla Conway

Peter had been coming home in a foul mood. He paced, filleting his words, grunting. I never got to know *what* was wrong, but I figured he'd come around. We'd been at this thing for fifteen years (a miracle for someone like me). Most of us barely make it to one.

I spent most of my time thinking, *Peter, this and that. Peter got a new shirt. Peter is the most handsome man*. Although I had little to compare him to, I was sure of it—and the smartest, my Peter. There was a time I existed as grandly in his mind, too. But I can admit that by the end when I opened my mouth, all he saw were bubbles.

I thought foul, moody Peter was lonely. There was a woman, after all, who left Depressed Peter depressed.

But she came back.

I didn't like Marjorie. Incidentally, she thought something was wrong with me. They argued about me. She said she wouldn't move in with Peter if I came, and that I had Mona Lisa eyes that followed her. He said I'd be gone soon. They could wait.

Sometimes we have to lie to get by, I figured. Like I said—*fifteen years*.

Down the drain.

That last day, Peter finally fed me breakfast.

"Sorry!" he said. He'd been forgetting to feed me more and more. My last meal was three days ago, but I forgave him. I studied his portrait from the corner of my eye, holding still to marvel at puzzling Peter—gifted, staggering, man of my heart.

"Sup, bitch," he answered the phone. "Hang on, I'm putting you on speaker." He slouched into the couch and put the phone atop his chest.

"What's up, dear?" The man on the other end said, "What're you doing tonight?" I recognized the voice as his cousin, Jeremy.

"Chillin'. Marjorie is making me dinner. Mellow."

"Oh, dude? Be careful," Jeremy laughed. Everything Jeremy said was with a hint of a

laugh. “She’s got an edge to her, and like...it’s an actual fucking knife.”

Peter frowned. “Nah, man. She said it wasn’t her. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Who else would key your car?” Jeremy laughed.

Peter pinched his nose. “I don’t know, man.”

Peter was in a foul mood.

“I’m just saying. Respectfully, she’s loony. She’s gonna chop your dick off or something.”

“Alright, I can’t talk right now. I have to get ready for work.”

He didn’t say goodbye.

I wondered what he was eating for lunch or what a “dick” was. It was clearly important enough to Peter for Jeremy to mention it. I stared meditatively through the smudged glass window. The hum of my thoughts: *Peter. Peter. Dick. Peter.*

Peter works in a mall.

Peter put up a wall.

Peter doesn’t seem to love me anymore, at all.

- A small poem for Peter. I named it *Retep*. I've been experimenting with form.

I was counting ways to appreciate small spaces and dim lighting when I heard a key turn in the lock. The door swung open. It was Marjorie with bags of groceries in each arm. She kicked the door closed with a hard, reverberating thud.

“I’m back,” she said. “And I’m making you dinner.”

I’d never seen a smile on her face while looking at me; it was uncanny.

“Big buggy-eyed freak.” She began unbagging her groceries.

That’s Mona Lisa to *you*, I thought. But I let it slide—I was hungry. I hadn’t had lunch, after all.

If we're going to break bread, I said, *you should know, Peter and I are a package deal.* She kept her back to me. *I don't like how sad he's been.*

“I’m not a good cook,” she told me. “But we’ll make it work.”

Her communication skills were similar to Peter's.

Her phone rang.

"Hullo," Marjorie said, then she rolled her eyes. "I'm doing something nice, don't be a dick—*yes*."

There's that word again.

"We're having an old friend for dinner." She paused. Peter must've been speaking. Then she said, "Umm...chianti. Okay. Bye," and turned towards me. Marjorie sucked air through her teeth in rapid succession as she approached.

"Are you ready, Finky?" Her eyes were wet and dark.

Bubbles came out of my mouth.

I wanted to believe I could leave some parting divine sustenance for Peter—something nourishing, like love. But my fishbowl hadn't been changed in a month. At that point, what was I made of?

"Love me, tender," I cried as Marjorie brought the frying pan against me for the last time. I wondered if Peter would think she oversalted me. She sure as shit was liberal with the rub.

Jack Powers is the author of two poetry collections: *Everybody's Vaguely Familiar* (2018) and *Still Love* (2023). His poems have appeared in *The Southern Review, Rattle* and *Salamander*. His fiction has appeared in *Abyss & Apex, Flash Fiction Magazine* and *Fiction on the Web*.

Love Songs for the End of Time by Jack Powers

The first songs that come to mind now are punk or heavy metal. Songs to go out pissed at the Extinctionist assholes who've filled the sky with the rockets now hurtling toward us, the massive detonations, the plutonium clouds—their determination to end all human life. I want the last sound I hear to be pounding drums, chest-rattling bass, guitars screeching and angry long-hairs screaming.

But Audrey says, "*Really? That*'s the last thing you want to feel?" She's dead, of course, but I hear her clearly. "If you had *one last* chance to feel something, wouldn't you wanna feel *good*?" The sound of her voice is the last thing I want to hear.

"No," she says. "Gotta be a song. What's the last *song* you want to hear before *ev*erything ends?"

It's just like her to stay focused. She is—was—an ER nurse and a good one. The steady voice in the chaos of children crying, men moaning, old ladies insisting they're fine. I ran to her as soon as I pulled myself out of the rubble. When I got there, the hospital was just dusty crater. The answer lay all around me in the smoke and lung-searing air, in my burning skin, the smell, the bricks. Is there a song called, "Feckin' Eejits!?"

"C'mon," she says. "A *real* song,"

I knew when I crawled out of our basement that Audrey was gone, but I collapsed when I saw how gone. I wandered into the debris where the hospital had been. Crawling over cement boulders, lifting rocks, coughing, shouting her name. I would've fallen through if I hadn't heard her voice calling me to safety.

"Don't get all dramatic," she says. "Answer the question."

"Didn't we already decide?" I ask.

"Well," she says with a sweep of her hand. "Maybe this changes things."

"Can you be singing it?" I ask. "In the car? Your feet on the dashboard? Painting your toenails red?"

"Can I have the radio on to sing along?"

That's how it started. Driving to her mother's before the droughts. Pennsylvania stretching on endlessly. Audrey in cut-off jeans and a sweatshirt that said, "Over-Meditated." Her silver black hair hanging in coils around her freckled face. Leaning forward, tongue out, concentrating on her

nails. We'd made a pact to keep driving. No stops. The top-forty station faded, then the country one. We still had three hours to Nowheresville, Ohio, where her mother lived.

“Just pick a song,” she'd said then.

“‘Dreaming of You,’” I said, though I knew she'd laugh. “Selena.”

“You love that teen girl pop!” She found the song. We sang along. “Too sad,” she said at the end. “She's all alone.”

“Your turn.”

“‘I Will Always Love You.’ Whitney.” We found it, sang it, voices cracking and quieting as Whitney held out the long notes.

“She's leaving him,” I said. Audrey nodded. “Aren't happy couples allowed in love songs?”

I can't say Audrey was a great singer, but, boy, did she commit: squinting her eyes, crooning into her fist microphone. She sold every song. When she shared her mic-fist with me as I drove, I scrunched, I squinted, I wailed. But I was an amateur and ceded the mic back to the pro.

“*Not* a great singer?” she says now, fake-pouting out her lower lip.

“A great song *sty*list,” I say.

Pennsylvania had turned into Ohio without a break in the trees and fields. Cars passed. Semis rumbled. All headed somewhere else. “How about Willie Nelson?” She keyed up “Always on My Mind.”

“Beautiful,” I said. “A beautiful plea for forgiveness.” I shook my head. “They're all loss, longing, or let me try again.”

“A story needs a conflict.” Audrey shrugged. “You know that.”

“Bruno Mars?” I asked. “‘Just the Way You Are.’” We bopped our heads and sang along. We stepped into the landscape of each song and asked if we wanted to live there. For three minutes, the world kept at bay.

Our heads kept swaying after it ended as we considered.

“Kind of an object, though, isn't she?” Audrey asked. “What happens when she gets old?”

“Too much pressure,” I said. Audrey laughed.

Her laugh hangs in the air now. Her silly *hee hee.* I wonder again why she chose me.

“Well, why'd *you* choose *me*?” she responds, smiling. Dumb question. Even dead, she's radiant.

Soot swirls around us. The horizon's dotted with fires. But it's quiet here. Or maybe the blast blew out my ear drums. There's nothing left. Radiation's poisoned my skin and lungs. I feel it crawling into my bones. Even if I wanted to stretch out the end, where could I run to? The bastards have won.

Back in the car, she'd said, “‘Unforgettable!’ Nat King Cole. My father loved that song.” He died when Audrey was ten. With a couple clicks, Nat was singing. We sang along.

“See,” she said, pointing to the speakers. “They're both unforgettable.” We played it again.

We had two hours left so we kept brainstorming—mostly oldies: Patsy Cline's “Crazy” (too sad), Ray Charles’ “I Can't Stop Loving You” (another pining ex). Elvis's “Can't Help Falling in Love” got some consideration. R.E.M.'s “The End of the World as We Know it” seemed appropriate. But who'd feel fine?

We kept coming back to “Unforgettable.” Audrey found the version with digitally-reincarnated Nat singing with daughter, Natalie. We had it on repeat for the last half hour. The Extinctionists claim life equals suffering. But what about the joy?

By the time we arrived, we were hoarse. “Don't you know any new songs?” Audrey's mother asked, unimpressed by our choice.

We stand now and sing—as if someone will be left to remember. My hand's wrapped around Audrey's imaginary mic-fist. Crooning together. Dancing in place. The sky fills with their final barrage of missiles—one headed right for us. I close my eyes and we sing “Unforgettable,” hoping to get to the last note before it lands.

Beth Sherman has had more than 200 stories published in literary journals, including *Flash Frog, Fictive Dream*, *Bending Genres* and *Smokelong Quarterly.* Her work is featured in *Best Microfiction 2024* and *Best Small Fictions 2025*. She's also a multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee. She can be reached on social media @bsherm36.

Bent by Beth Sherman

I spotted my therapist in the modern art section of the museum, in front of a photograph showing a man swallowing dozens of paper clips, each steel tongue linked. She was with a younger guy. Her lover? Her son? It was frustrating that she knew my habits and flaws, whereas her life was shrouded in mystery.

"Is he ingesting them or spitting them out?" said my therapist.

She was good at asking questions with no clearcut answers.

"Either way, it's a comment on consumerist consumption," her companion replied.

Definitely a lover, I thought.

They were standing side by side, their fingertips centimeters from touching. I felt a lustful current pass between them. After the museum, they would return to her office and fuck on the brown pleather couch where I'd told her about each of my failed love affairs. My shame. My fears. The eventual abandonment.

It wasn't fair.

How dare she get to experience normality—frequenting art museums, shopping at Target, dating someone age-inappropriate—when my own life was chronically warped?

I needed to confront her, to show her that I was more than some random patient with depression and Daddy issues. To even the playing field.

I approached from behind, mindful of the uniformed guard in the corner, when my therapist turned and I saw that she was someone I'd never met. A stranger with puffy squirrel cheeks.

After she and her companion exited the gallery, I looked at the photo of the paper clip man. He had indigo eyes, which matched his bow tie. His expression was eagerly frantic. I pictured myself in bed with him, our limbs cold as metal wires. He was swallowing them, I decided. Stuffing the chains down his lonely throat so he'd never be able to speak.

John Haymaker is a LGBTQIA+ writer whose prose appears in various online journals, including *Hawaii Pacific Review, The Bookends Review, Hooghly Review, Quibble Lit, Cosmic Double* and *New Pop Lit.* His Chinese to English translations appear online at *Bewildering Stories*. Learn more at https://johnhaymaker.com.

Unleashing the Bull in the China Shop by John Haymaker

When I broke my last Corelle serving bowl, my partner advised me to use the porcelain service I inherited, dishes my mother bought during a bank promotion nearly sixty years ago. She received one free piece for each new deposit and the opportunity to buy additional pieces to complete a set. She used the porcelain strictly on holidays—for which its blue and white English coaching scenes seemed perfectly suited. Despite the perils of two growing boys, periods of marital discord, and an alcoholic uncle, the porcelain all survived intact, passed down to me without a chip or crack—as if our dysfunctional family needed to prove on those special days that we could behave with civility.

I hesitated at my partner's suggestion to use the porcelain for everyday. He and I hadn't even used the dishes on holidays. Considering some jerk might snatch it from an estate sale after we'd passed, though, I consented—still doubting we could manage for long without busting the porcelain up as I'd done with our Corelle. My clumsiness, in fact, provoked ridicule years earlier when I lived and worked in China. When I broke not one, but two porcelain tea sets my Chinese hosts provided, they gave me a plastic set—and an admonishment to learn to handle porcelain.

For everyday dishes when I was growing up, my family used incomplete sets of ceramic ware, hand-me-downs from relatives, the glaze of some showing webs of faint brown cracks and some of the edges noticeably chipped. These were practical for a young family, but when company came, our table seemed more suited to a child's tea party.

Then in early 1970, mother and I passed by the display window of a store holding a gala opening at the mall: sparkling white dishes, affordably priced and backed by an enticing guarantee. It's Vitrelle, an associate told us, laminated layers of tempered glass—and guaranteed unbreakable; if anything did break, the associate assured us, the store would replace it no questions asked. Since it was a fraction of porcelain's cost, mother snapped up a set of this newfangled dinnerware. What could go wrong?

Unpacking at home, I fumbled a cereal bowl right out of the box. Mother and I both jumped back, panicked, and then astonished to watch this new-fangled bowl bounce across the floor and wobble to a spiraling stop—unscathed, good as new. Exactly a week later mother dropped a cup. It did not bounce, but apparently struck the floor at exactly the wrong angle, breaking Vitrelle's magic and shattering on impact.

We returned it to the outlet, smiling through embarrassment that the impossible had happened, proffering the white shards in a brown paper bag as proof. A gleeful associate replaced the piece, saying only, well, these things happen. Then the impossible happened again the following week

when I dropped a cereal bowl; still the associate smiled and wrapped up a replacement plate or a saucer we'd broken.

But when a third piece, a plate, smashed to the floor the following month, days passed before mother found a face brave enough to take it back. Seeing us return yet again, the associate frowned and then quibbled whether it was a plate or a saucer we'd broken. Only after attempting to reassemble the fragments, did she concede it was a plate and provide a replacement. On our way home, mother concluded that the problem wasn't with the dinnerware, but with us; we had been clumsy, she said, pure and simple. On our way home, mother concluded that the problem wasn't with the dinnerware, but with us; we had been clumsy, she said, pure and simple.

The outlet closed a few years later without our noticing, and the brand was re-marketed under a new name at department stores—with a severely weakened guarantee: it was now merely break and chip resistant and lacking any promise to replace broken items. Mother still bought boxed sets of Corelle as we needed replacements—the dinnerware was, after all, elegant, affordable, and lasted well enough.

Though I have used mother's porcelain as everyday tableware for a decade, ancient fragments of Corelle still turn up when I'm sweeping the kitchen—along with remnants of the two porcelain teacups I dropped. Oh yes, there was a steep learning curve the first month. Of a size more suited to shots of espresso, the cups demanded frequent trips to refill, and the dainty handles didn't facilitate a firm grip. Remarkably though, the sugar bowl and creamer survive as a table centerpiece. Plates, saucers, and bowls still make a complete set of eight, even if a few have chipped.

The longevity of the brand makes me wonder now whether Vitrelle's original marketing provoked our cavalier attitude while fostering anxiety toward porcelain. Certainly, when rushed to set a table, we doled out Vitrelle like playing cards and afterward re-stacked dishes in the cupboard like poker chips.

Should I ever need new dinnerware—I'll stake my bets on porcelain. This bull can be trusted again.

Anselm Eme is a Nigerian writer, poet, banker, and independent financial consultant. He is the author of eleven books, including *WHISKERS, OUR KIDS AND US, AWAKE AFRICA!, SAGES IN PURSUIT,* and *SHRIEKS AND GIGGLES*. Blending finance with creative storytelling, Anselm writes with heart, clarity, and purpose. His work explores identity, culture, social justice, and human resilience. Rooted in African experience but reaching global souls, Anselm's words invite readers into honest reflection and lasting inspiration.

SHRIEKS AND GIGGLES by Anselm Eme

Preface

In Creek Town, Calabar, the people say: "The laughter of a widow is never without shadows." Elders repeat it the way they repeat prayers, for they know laughter can be sweet in the mouth but bitter in the bones.

Here, where the Cross River winds like a serpent and mangrove roots clutch the banks, stories walk as freely as men. The market women will tell you: "A fat goat never returns from the river." They mean that gifts carried to water spirits do not come back. The Efik call them Ndem, the spirits who live beneath the river's skin, spirits who love beauty, wealth, and blood.

Ekaete, the widow of Creek Town, carries beauty like a weapon and wears her smile like coral beads. Men see her and forget the warnings of their mothers. They follow her laughter as if it were music. Yet no husband of hers has ever grown old, and no grave carries their names. Only her compound grows larger, richer, as if the earth itself pays her tribute.

But spirits do not give without taking.

When Dr. Effiong, a young man of science, comes to Creek Town, he believes death has reasons and laughter has no shadows. He thinks old sayings are only fear dressed in words. But the river has waited long, and the river already knows his name.

Read on, and you will see why in Creek Town, when night falls and a widow laughs, even the bravest man trembles.

Chapter One—Whispers of Creek Town

Morning comes to Creek Town with the slow hum of life. The cock's crow breaks the night, and soon pestles rise and fall in mortars as women pound yam. Smoke curls from kitchen huts, carrying the sharp scent of pepper soup and the sweet fragrance of roasted plantain. Children chase each other barefoot, their laughter running ahead of them like small rivers. Canoes slide from the muddy banks into the wide Cross River, their paddles cutting soft ripples into the water.

It is a place where beauty clings to the air, but also where shadows are never far.

Creek Town, once a seat of Efik royalty, still carries the memory of its kings and chiefs. The old palaces stand with fading grandeur, their carved doors whispering stories of times when trade canoes stretched across the river like a fleet of ants. Now, the markets swell with fish, palm oil, raffia mats, and stories, always stories. For here, people say:

“Ñwed esit ke idem owo, akpa esit ke ekpo.”
(The depth of a man’s heart is like the depth of the river, no one truly knows it.)

And among the stories that travel the market like restless flies, none buzzes louder than that of Ekaete, the smiling widow of Creek Town.

At the market square, under the great iroko tree, women balance baskets of pepper and crayfish on their heads while their tongues balance tales of the widow. Ekaete is beautiful, they agree—too beautiful for her own good. Her eyes glimmer like wet stones, her teeth shine like polished cowries, and her skin glows as if kissed by the river itself. But it is her smile that unsettles them, the smile that does not reach her eyes, the smile that lingers like smoke after fire.

They whisper of her husbands. Three, some say. Five, others claim. Each man married her in a blaze of joy, but none lived long enough to grow grey beside her. No graves hold their bones. No funeral songs were sung. Only Ekaete’s compound grew larger, her barns fuller, her goats fatter.

One market woman spits to the side and says, “A fat goat never returns from the river.” The others nod. They all know what she means.

That evening, when the sun slides behind the mangroves and the river darkens into shadow, the men gather by the palm wine tapper’s hut. Their voices are softer, their laughter strained. They speak of Ekaete, too, but with caution, as if the night itself might carry their words to her ears.

“It is the Ndem,” one man says, lowering his voice. “The water spirits love her. She trades men’s souls for wealth.”

Another shakes his head. “No spirit,” he insists. “She is just a woman with charm. Men go missing all the time in the river. Canoes capsize, crocodiles strike. Must we blame her smile?”

But even he does not speak boldly. For deep down, each man knows the Cross River is not an ordinary river. It carries secrets in its belly. And Ekaete, somehow, is tied to them.

An elder among them mutters into his calabash of wine:

“Ñwed ekim itie, eyet itie ke Ndem.”
(Every drumbeat is heard, but some belong to the water spirits.)

The younger men fall silent. No one dares argue with an elder’s proverb.

Far from the gathering, in her compound, Ekaete tends to her evening. She pours libation before a carved wooden stool and hums softly, her voice carrying like a lullaby mixed with laughter. A

clay pot sits by the corner of her yard, covered with a raffia lid. It drips water though no one fills it. Children passing by whisper that if you listen closely, the pot calls names, men's names.

Yet Ekaete herself moves with grace. She feeds her goats, sprinkles water on her flowers, and greets passersby with that disarming smile. Her neighbours bow politely, but once they turn away, their steps quicken. None lingers long.

The children of Creek Town know the tale best. They tell it to each other at night, under the moonlight, their eyes wide and voices hushed. They say if you stand by the riverbank at midnight, you will see Ekaete's reflection dancing on the water, even if she is asleep in her hut. They say if you follow her laughter too far, you may never return.

One child whispers the warning he overheard from his grandmother:

"Ñkan ke ima, enyiñ ke idem."
(Sweetness in love can also bring bitterness to the soul.)

They shiver, then burst into nervous giggles, pretending not to be afraid. But even in their play, they avoid the widow's compound when the moon is high.

And so, Creek Town lives in balance between beauty and dread. Life goes on, canoes return with fish, women trade at the market, palm wine froths in calabashes. Yet in every smile, every whisper, Ekaete's shadow lingers. She is both admired and feared, both a blessing and a curse.

The people say: "The laughter of a widow is never without shadows."

And though they laugh and work, though they celebrate births and mourn deaths, one truth coils beneath their days like the Cross River itself, silent, deep, and waiting.

For in Creek Town, memory does not die easily. And the widow's smile never fades.

Chapter Two—The Widow's Smile

The market of Creek Town hums like a hive. Women call out prices for smoked fish, palm oil glistens in clay pots, and peppers burn the air with their sharp fragrance. Raffia mats spread with groundnut and melon seeds crunch beneath busy feet. The Cross River glitters not far away, its surface broken by the slow drift of canoes heavy with fresh catch.

Amid this life, a hush always follows when Ekaete enters.

She does not rush. She glides. Her wrapper of bright indigo cloth sways around her ankles, her coral beads catch the light, and her smile, ah, her smile, stops men in their tracks. It is not the wide smile of joy, but a curved one, secretive, as though she knows something the world does not. Children peep from behind their mothers' wrappers. Traders lower their voices but never their eyes. Even the market crier falters when she passes.

“Good morning, Ekaete,” a woman selling yams calls out, though her voice wavers.

“Good morning,” Ekaete replies, her tone smooth, her teeth flashing like ivory. She pays without haggling, her fingers lingering on the cowries she drops into the woman’s palm. The trader shudders, as if touched by the cold edge of water.

Among those who watch her that morning is Obong, son of Etim, a tall young man with shoulders broad from paddling canoes, and a heart quick to leap. He sees Ekaete and feels his chest stir like a drum in a festival. His friends snicker.

“She will smile you into the river,” one teases.

Obong only laughs. “Better to drown in beauty than live unseen.”

His mother, old Ekaiso, pulls at his arm, her face creased with worry. “Listen to me, Obong. The elders say:
‘Ñwed esit ke idem owo, akpa esit ke ekpo.’
(What troubles the heart of man, troubles the spirit as well.)

Do not follow that woman. Her laughter carries shadows.”

But Obong shakes her off. “Mother, those are tales for children. She is flesh and blood, not a spirit.” His eyes stay fixed on Ekaete, who now buys palm wine with a smile that makes his knees weak.

Later that day, when the sun hangs low and the market thins, Obong walks boldly to Ekaete’s compound. Neighbours watch from behind their doors. Some shake their heads, others mutter, “Another goat for the river.”

Ekaete greets him with that unsettling warmth, her voice like silk over stone. She offers him kola nuts and palm wine. He accepts, his eyes never leaving hers. As twilight falls, Obong does not return home.

By morning, his mother searches the town. By evening, his canoe is found near the mangroves, tied but empty. His clothes lie folded neatly inside. No body surfaces, no cry is heard. Only the river flows, silent and endless.

Fear ripples through Creek Town. At the market, tongues wag with renewed vigour.

“He went willingly,” one woman says, shaking her head.

“Willingly or not, does it matter?” another replies. “The river has taken him. And still her barns are full, her goats are fat.”

They lower their voices as Ekaete approaches. She wears a new wrapper of crimson, her beads heavier than before. Yet she does not grieve. Instead, she smiles, and in the evening, her compound bursts with laughter as she hosts a feast.

Palm wine flows, drums beat, and roasted meat fills the air. Guests eat heartily, though unease coils in their stomachs. “Obong left for trade,” Ekaete explains, her smile unwavering. “He left his canoe with me.”

Some nod politely. Others refuse to meet her eyes. But when the drums rise, they cannot resist dancing. Even fear bows to the rhythm of the town.
That night, however, a boy fetching water at the riverbank stumbles upon a scrap of cloth caught on a branch. It is bloodstained, torn, and too fine to belong to a fisherman. He drops it in terror and runs home. The elders hear, but none dares investigate further.

Instead, they mutter among themselves:

“Ñwed owo anamde, ekpri owo anam ayom.”
(What a person enjoys today may bring another’s tears tomorrow.)

The boy’s story spreads, but no one confronts Ekaete. For who will accuse a widow whose smile is as sharp as a knife and as soft as the river’s lull?

Meanwhile, Dr. Effiong, new to Creek Town, listens with quiet curiosity. He is young, educated in the city, and carries the arrogance of science. Patients whisper tales of Ekaete between coughs and fevers, and he dismisses them with a smile. “Old superstitions,” he tells himself. “Grief makes people imagine shadows where none exist.”

But that evening, as he walks home by the river, he hears laughter float across the water. Not the playful laughter of children, not the merry laughter of friends, but a single, lingering giggle. It chills him, though the air is warm. He pauses, peers into the dark waters, and for the first time, feels Creek Town press against him like a hand heavy on his shoulder.

The river laps gently at his feet, as if mocking him.

In her compound, Ekaete sits before her clay pot. The raffia lid trembles though no wind stirs. She places her palm on it and hums a tune, her smile curving like the sickle moon above. The pot drips water into the sand, each drop echoing like a heartbeat.

Far away, Obong’s mother wails into the night, her voice cracking like dry wood. The neighbors comfort her, but none dares speak against the widow.

Because in Creek Town, everyone knows: “A fat goat never returns from the river.”

And Ekaete’s smile shines brighter than ever.

Dr. Effiong has now been in Creek Town for barely two months, yet the whispers of Ekaete cling to him like mist on the river. At first, he laughed them off. He told patients, “Do not trouble your heart with shadows. It is fever, not spirits, that weakens the body.” Still, the tales return, circling him like vultures that know something he does not.

Obong’s disappearance lingers in every conversation. Mothers hold their sons tighter. Young men avoid the path near Ekaete’s compound. But still, her laughter drifts over the town at dusk, mocking their fear.

Effiong, restless, begins to watch her with quiet eyes. He tells himself it is curiosity, the same instinct that once made him cut open frogs as a boy. But deep down, he feels a tightening in his chest whenever she smiles.

One hot afternoon, he is called to tend to a fevered child near Ekaete’s compound. The child sweats and mutters in delirium, his small hands clawing at the air. As Effiong wipes the boy’s forehead, the child whispers, “It is calling… it is calling the names of men.”

Startled, Effiong asks, “What calls?”

The boy’s eyes roll back, and he murmurs, “The pot.” Then he faints.

Effiong carries water from the courtyard to cool him, and that is when he notices it. A clay pot in the corner, covered with a raffia lid, dripping steadily though no one touches it. Each drop lands with an odd rhythm, as though keeping time with something unseen.

He reaches toward it, but before his fingers touch the raffia, Ekaete’s voice cuts the air:

“Doctor, the boy needs rest. Come inside.”

Effiong withdraws quickly, his hand trembling, but her smile is calm, too calm.

That night, sleep does not come easily. Effiong lies on his bamboo bed, staring at the rafters. Outside, the river hums with its endless current. He dreams, though it feels more real than dream, of water rising in his room, spilling from the floorboards, soaking his mattress. Faces press against the watery surface: men with hollow eyes, lips moving without sound. Then one face leans closer. It is Obong. His mouth forms words Effiong cannot hear, until at last, faintly: “Doctor… she waits for you.”

He jerks awake, drenched in sweat. The room is dry. The night is silent, except for a giggle that drifts faintly from the riverbank.

Days later, Creek Town is shaken again. A wealthy trader named Ekpenyong, newly returned from Oron with goods, is last seen entering Ekaete’s compound. He had been boastful, declaring, “If the widow is cursed, let the curse fall on me! I fear no woman.”

Two days pass. His canoe drifts back alone, tied loosely to the mangroves. His wares are missing, his laughter silenced.

The people gather in murmurs:

“Ñwed owo anamde, ekpri owo anam ayom.”
(What a person enjoys today may bring another’s tears tomorrow.)

Ekaete, however, walks to market that evening wearing new bangles of gold and a wrapper finer than any she had before. She buys yams, smiling as though she has not a care in the world. Some say her beauty is even sharper now, like a knife freshly whetted.

The market women lower their eyes. The men mutter excuses. None dares speak.

But Effiong is no longer content to ignore. He walks by the river often, listening, waiting. One evening, as the sun bleeds red into the water, he hears it: drums. Soft at first, then louder, as though played beneath the surface of the river itself. He looks around. No drummers. No dancers. Only the restless water, shimmering like scales.

An old fisherman passes by, sees the doctor’s pale face, and shakes his head. “You hear them too? Eh! Young man, you must be careful. There are drumbeats you cannot dance to.

‘**Ñwed ekim itie, eyet itie ke Ndem.’**
(Every drumbeat is heard, but some belong to the water spirits.)”

The fisherman hurries away before Effiong can ask more.

One evening, Effiong gathers courage and visits Mama Ansa, an elder whose stories stretch back further than most can remember. Her compound smells of wood smoke and bitterleaf soup. Her eyes are clouded with age, but her voice is strong.

“You have been watching her,” she says before he can speak.

Effiong stiffens. “Ekaete? I am only curious. These tales of spirits and vanishings”

Mama Ansa interrupts with a dry laugh. “Curiosity, my son, is the first thread the river pulls. You think the Cross River is only water? It is a mirror of our souls.

‘Ñwed esit ke idim, ndien eyet anam fi.’
(If your name enters the river, the water will one day call you.)”

Effiong swallows hard. “And if it already knows my name?”

The old woman looks at him long, then whispers, “Then you are already halfway gone.”

That night, Effiong cannot close his eyes. He walks by the river, the moon high above, casting silver light on the black waters. He hears laughter again, soft, lingering, echoing as though the river itself were laughing. He looks down, and for a heartbeat, sees not his reflection, but Ekaete's, smiling up at him.

His breath catches. The water ripples, and the image vanishes.

He stumbles back, whispering to himself, "This is madness. Just shadows. Just… water." But in his heart, fear has already made its home.

And far across the town, in her compound, Ekaete dips her fingers into the clay pot. She lifts something glinting from its depths, a gold chain, still wet, belonging to the missing trader Ekpenyong. She holds it to the moonlight and laughs, her voice rippling like water.

The river hums in answer.

Chapter Four—Night Drums And River Eyes

The rains come heavy that week, drumming on the thatched roofs of Creek Town, turning narrow paths into red streams of mud. Yet even the storm cannot wash away the whispers. Obong is gone. Ekpenyong the trader is gone. And Ekaete still smiles.

By day, life continues, fishermen paddle out, women hawk roasted fish wrapped in plantain leaves, children play ten-ten in the dust. But when night falls, the town grows uneasy. Doors are bolted early, lamps burn low, and ears strain for sounds that should not be there.

For some nights, faint drumbeats ripple from the direction of the river. They rise like heartbeats, thumping against the stillness. And always, somewhere between the beats, a woman's laugh drifts, thin as smoke.

Effiong lies restless on his bed, staring at the ceiling, his mind gnawed by what he has seen and what he dares not admit. The fevered boy's words haunt him, "The pot… it calls the names of men." And Mama Ansa's warning presses into his bones:

"Ñwed esit ke idim, ndien eyet anam fi."
(If your name enters the river, the water will one day call you.)

When the drums sound again, he cannot resist. He takes a lantern, though he shields its light, and walks toward the Cross River. His steps are soft, his breath shallow.

The river glitters under the moon, its wide body shifting like a serpent's back. Mangroves hunch along the banks, their roots twisting into the water like black fingers. Effiong hides behind a tree and waits.

Then he sees her.

Ekaete.

She is dressed in a wrapper of white, her coral beads glowing faintly in the moonlight. She dances barefoot on the wet earth, her movements smooth and hypnotic, as though guided by a rhythm older than time. Around her flicker shadows, figures without form, faceless yet watching.

Effiong's heart pounds. His medical training tells him he is dreaming, delirious, imagining. But his eyes will not look away.

Ekaete dips her hands into the river. The water foams, though the current is calm. She lifts her hands, and in her palm lies a gold chain, Ekpenyong's chain, unmistakable. She raises it to the moon, laughing, her voice carrying over the water like a bird's call turned cruel.

The shadows lean closer, their faceless heads bowing as if in worship. The drums grow louder, though no drummers are seen. The river itself seems to pulse with sound.

Effiong grips the tree trunk until his nails bite into the bark. His breath is ragged. He wants to flee, yet he cannot move. He feels as though the river itself has fixed its eyes on him.

And then he hears it, a whisper, not from Ekaete, not from the shadows, but from the water itself. A whisper that curls into his ear, cold as a snake's tongue.

"Effiong…"

He stumbles back, nearly dropping his lantern. The water ripples though no wind blows. The shadows lift their faceless heads. Ekaete turns suddenly, her smile stretching unnaturally wide. For a heartbeat, her eyes glow like wet stones in the moonlight.

Effiong runs.

He does not remember how he reaches his hut, only that his heart hammers like a war drum and his breath burns his throat. He bolts the door and sinks to the floor, the lantern shaking in his hands. Outside, the rain begins again, masking the sound of his racing pulse.

But still, faintly, under the storm, he hears it: laughter. A giggle rising from deep below, as if the river itself laughs at him.

The next day, Effiong seeks out Mama Ansa again. He finds her sitting under her raffia roof, chewing kola nut. She looks at him once, and without his speaking, she sighs.

"You saw."

Effiong nods, his hands trembling. "She danced by the river. Shadows… spirits… and the trader's chain. Mama, what is she?"

The old woman spits the kola nut skin into the dust. “Not what. Who. Ekaete was once just a woman. But grief can open doors no one should walk through. When her first husband drowned, she went to the water spirits. She begged for wealth, for beauty, for power. Ndem do not give freely. They asked for her womb of husbands. And she agreed.”

Effiong shudders. “So every man who marries her—”

“The river takes,” Ansa says flatly. “And each gift she receives grows heavier with blood. Her compound is fat with the souls of men.”

Effiong presses his face into his palms. “And now the river knows my name. Mama, I heard it call me. What do I do?”

The old woman leans close, her milky eyes sharp as knives. “You cannot fight the river with medicine. You cannot run from it, either. The river follows. But remember this:

‘Ñwed esit ke idem owo, emen esit ke ekpo.’
(What a man declares of himself, the spirits must hear also.)

When the water calls, you must call back. You must remind it whose son you are. Else it will swallow you whole.”

That night, Effiong does not sleep. He dreams again of drowned men pressing against glassy water, their mouths opening, their voices lost. Among them, Obong whispers, “Doctor… hurry.”

He wakes with a start. The clay pot in Ekaete’s courtyard flashes in his mind. The dripping. The boy’s fevered words. The chain lifted from the river.

He knows now, if he waits, Creek Town will bury his name in whispers just as it did Obong’s and Ekpenyong’s.

The drums rise again that night, louder, faster, the rhythm of a heartbeat nearing its end.

Effiong grips his Bible, a cross hanging from his neck, and salt in his pocket. He whispers into the dark: “If it is war, then war.”

Outside, the river giggles.

Chapter Five—The Doctor’s Dream

The night presses heavy over Creek Town, thick as oil on water. Dr. Effiong sits in his hut, lamp burning low, shadows stretching like fingers across the mud walls. Sleep evades him, yet when it comes, it takes him swiftly, as though dragged into another world.

He dreams.

He is standing at the riverbank, barefoot, the sand cold beneath his feet. The Cross River is wide and still, its surface like a mirror. Then ripples spread, and faces appear, men's faces, pale, hollow-eyed, their lips opening in silent screams. He sees Obong among them, Ekpenyong too, and others he does not recognize.

They raise their hands toward him, but the river holds them down. One by one, they whisper his name: "Effiong… Effiong… Effiong…"

Then the water parts, and from its depths rises Ekaete. Her wrapper is white, soaked and clinging to her skin, her coral beads glowing faintly. She smiles. always the smile. She stretches her hand toward him.

"Come," she whispers. "The river remembers you."

Effiong tries to run, but his legs sink into the sand. The more he struggles, the deeper he sinks. The river laughs. Ekaete laughs. And behind her, faceless shadows dance to a drumbeat that thunders like a heart about to burst.

He wakes with a scream, his body soaked in sweat. His lamp has gone out, but in the silence he hears it still, a faint giggle, rising from the direction of the river.

At dawn, Effiong walks to Mama Ansa's compound, his eyes bloodshot, his voice strained. The old woman listens in silence as he recounts his dream.

When he finishes, she nods slowly. "The river is calling stronger now. You cannot ignore it."

Effiong shakes his head. "Why me, Mama? I am not her suitor. I have not sought her smile."

Mama Ansa leans forward, her cloudy eyes sharp. "The river does not choose by love alone. It chooses by name, by presence, by weakness in the heart. And you, doctor from the city, you are bold enough to question what others fear. That alone draws its gaze.

'Ñwed esit ke idim, ndien eyet anam fi.'
(If your name enters the river, the water will one day call you.)"

Effiong swallows hard. "Then what must I do?"

The old woman sighs, as if pulling words from deep within her bones. "There is a way. But it is dangerous. You must face her when she dances by the river. You must call her by her true name, not the one we use now. You must remind the spirits that she is still flesh, not water."

Effiong frowns. "Her true name?"

Mama Ansa nods. "Before she was Ekaete, widow of Creek Town, she was Ekaete Inyang, daughter of Okon Inyang. Speak her name, and pour salt into the water. Spirits cannot drink salt. If your voice is strong, the river will recoil. If not…"

She lets the silence finish her sentence.

The day crawls slowly, every hour heavy. Effiong tends to patients, but his mind is elsewhere. Children with coughs, women with fevers, men with wounds, all blur into shadows. He hears only the laughter that rides the air at dusk.

By evening, he prepares. He places salt in a small calabash, ties his cross around his neck, and carries his Bible close. His hands tremble, but his jaw is set.

As night falls, the drums begin again, soft, then louder, echoing from the river like a heartbeat against stone.

Effiong walks toward the sound. His feet feel heavy, but he forces each step. The town is quiet, doors barred, lamps extinguished. Only the river moves.

At the bank, he sees her.

Ekaete dances again, dressed in white, beads glowing in the moonlight. The faceless shadows sway around her, bending to the rhythm of drums no human hand beats. The river foams at her feet, and her laughter curls through the night air like smoke.

Effiong hides behind a tree, clutching the calabash of salt. His breath is ragged, his pulse wild. He knows Mama Ansa was right, he must speak her name. But his throat feels locked, as though the river has already coiled around it.

Then, from the water, the faces appear again, Obong, Ekpenyong, and others. They lift their hollow eyes to him and whisper, “Doctor… call her.”

Effiong steps forward, his legs shaking. He raises his voice. “Ekaete Inyang, daughter of Okon Inyang!”

The drums falter. Ekaete freezes, her smile twisting. The shadows hiss, their faceless heads turning toward him. The river heaves, sending waves crashing at the bank.

Effiong flings the salt into the water. It sizzles, white foam rising like smoke. Ekaete screams, not in pain, but in fury. The shadows scatter, shrieking like bats. The river thrashes, its voice booming like thunder.

Effiong raises his Bible high, his voice shaking but firm. “You are not spirit. You are flesh!”

For a moment, everything stills. Ekaete’s eyes blaze, her smile widening, and she whispers: “The river remembers, doctor. Always.”

Then the waters surge upward, engulfing him.

He wakes in his hut, coughing water from his lungs. His clothes are soaked, his body weak. On the floor beside him lies the empty calabash, cracked in two.

Outside, Creek Town stirs with uneasy silence. The drums have stopped. The river flows quietly, as though nothing happened.

But in his ears, faint and lingering, Effiong hears it still, a giggle, soft and mocking.

And he knows the struggle is not yet over.

Chapter Six—The River Remembers

Creek Town wakes to a strange silence. The air is heavy, the market unusually still, as though the people sense something watching them. Women whisper as they fetch water, men glance nervously at the river, and children are warned to play close to home. No one says it aloud, but they know the widow is restless.

Ekaete walks through the market that morning, her wrapper gleaming like sunlight on water, her coral beads brighter than ever. She smiles at everyone, and though her smile is beautiful, it cuts like a blade. In her eyes there is triumph, but also hunger. She knows the town fears her, and fear is its own kind of wealth.

But Dr. Effiong watches from a distance, his jaw set. He has survived the river's call once, but the laughter still echoes in his ears. He cannot eat, cannot sleep, cannot breathe without feeling the weight of unseen eyes. The battle is not finished. He knows this, and so does she.

That evening, Mama Ansa summons him. She sits before her hut, chewing bitter kola, her face grim.

"The salt weakened them," she says, "but it did not break their bond. She still belongs to the river, and the river still remembers you."

Effiong swallows hard. "Then what must I do?"

The old woman lowers her voice. "You must return to the river, Doctor. Not as a man of medicine, but as a man of faith and courage.

'Ñwed esit ke idem owo, emen esit ke ekpo.'
(What a man declares of himself, the spirits must hear also.)

If you do not face her tonight, the river will take you in your sleep."

Effiong bows his head. He knows there is no running, no hiding. He must go back to where it began.

Night falls. The Cross River lies wide and dark, its surface glinting like the skin of a giant serpent. The drums begin again, louder than before, shaking the mangroves, rattling the hearts of those who dare listen.
Ekaete appears at the bank, dressed once more in white, her beads glowing, her smile sharper than ever. The faceless shadows crowd around her, their movements jerky, as though pulled by invisible strings. The air thickens with the smell of wet earth and blood.

Effiong steps forward, clutching a gourd filled with salt water in one hand, his Bible in the other. His cross hangs heavy on his chest. His voice shakes but does not break.

“Ekaete Inyang, daughter of Okon Inyang! You are flesh, not spirit. Release the souls you keep!”

Ekaete laughs, her voice carrying like a whip across the river. “You dare again, Doctor? You, a stranger in Creek Town, think you can speak against the river? Look behind you!”

Effiong turns, and his heart freezes. The faces of the drowned men rise from the river, Obong, Ekpenyong, and many more. Their eyes are hollow, their mouths open in soundless wails. They reach for him, water dripping from their hands.

The shadows close in, their faceless forms pressing against him. The drums pound faster, louder, until they become the beating of his own terrified heart.

Effiong raises the gourd and flings the salt water into the river. It sizzles, steam rising in ghostly tendrils. He raises his voice, shouting, “In the name of the Living God, you are not river! You are blood and bone!”

The shadows shriek and scatter. The faces sink beneath the waves. Ekaete staggers, her smile faltering for the first time. Her eyes blaze, and she screams, “No man can take what the river has claimed!”

But Effiong steps closer, his Bible raised high. “The river does not own your soul, Ekaete Inyang! The river remembers, but so do the living! Return what you have stolen!”

The ground shakes. The river swells, waves rising high, threatening to swallow the bank. Ekaete throws back her head and laughs, but her laughter cracks like broken glass. Her beads snap, scattering into the water. Her white wrapper darkens, heavy with unseen hands pulling.

The faces of the drowned men rise again, but now they surround her, not Effiong. Their hollow eyes fix on her, their hands grasp her arms, her legs. She screams, thrashing, but the river pulls harder.

For one moment, her eyes meet Effiong’s, wide and furious. “The river remembers, Doctor,” she hisses. “And it will not forget you.”

Then she is gone, dragged into the depths, her scream swallowed by the water. The drums stop. The night falls silent.

Effiong collapses to his knees, gasping, tears streaking his face. The gourd lies shattered, the Bible damp but still in his hands. The river flows quietly now, as if nothing happened. Only the moon bears witness.

From the shadows, Mama Ansa appears, walking slowly with her staff. She nods once, her expression grave.

“It is done,” she says. “Her bond is broken. The men she took will never return, but the river will rest.”

Effiong shakes his head, his voice hoarse. “No… it is not done. She warned me. The river remembers.”

The old woman sighs, her eyes sorrowful. “Yes, Doctor. The river always remembers. But so do men. And sometimes, memory is its own curse.”

In the weeks that follow, Creek Town returns to uneasy calm. The market bustles again, fishermen sing as they paddle, and children play by the river. People whisper of Ekaete, but only in hushed tones. Her compound stands empty, her laughter silenced.

Yet Effiong is not at peace. At night, he still dreams of water. Sometimes he wakes choking, as though waves press against his chest. Sometimes he hears a giggle, faint and mocking, drifting through the night air.

And once, just once, he sees her reflection in the river, smiling, her eyes unblinking. He blinks, and it is gone.

The elders of Creek Town warn again:

“Idim anamde, idim anam ñkpo.”
(The river gives, and the river takes away.)

And Dr. Effiong, though alive, knows one truth that will never leave him.

The river remembers. Always.

Epilogue—When Rivers Whisper

In Creek Town, tales never truly end. They bend like the Cross River itself, wide, restless, circling back with memories no man can silence.

The widow Ekaete is gone, swallowed by the same river that fattened her compound with wealth and silenced the laughter of men. Yet her name lingers in whispers. Children dare each other to pass her abandoned compound at night. Fishermen, when their nets tear without cause, mutter

that she still smiles beneath the current. Market women, pounding yam at dusk, shake their heads and say:

“Ñwed esit ke idem owo, anam ke ekpo ndien.”
(What troubles the heart of man, troubles the spirits too.)

Dr. Effiong remains, a man alive yet marked. He saves lives with his hands, but in the quiet of night he feels the weight of unseen eyes. Some say the river has spared him as warning, not mercy. Some believe the river has simply delayed its claim.

And still, at the edge of Creek Town, when the moon hangs low and the water glitters like a blade, there comes a sound that chills the marrow. Not the rustle of mangroves. Not the splash of fish. But a soft, lingering giggle, rising from deep below.

The elders shake their heads and remind the young:

“Idim anamde, idim anam ñkpo.”
(The river gives, and the river takes away.)

They say the river remembers every secret, every bargain, every name it has ever touched. And if you listen closely enough, you will hear it whispering back.

The river remembers. Always.

Griffith Pound has published print copy short stories in the Mobius Boulevard Anthology, The Unbridgeable Canyon Anthology, Black Sheep: Unique Tales of Terror and Wonder, Dark Horses Magazine, and Tamarind Literary Magazine, as well as in online publications Academy of the Heart and Mind and Ariel Chart. You can find more of his work on Instagram at griffithpound8. He is the father of three wonderful children and has an energetic border collie and a lazy cat.

BUSTED SPRINGS by Griffith Pound

A flash of light and a crack with the distant sound of shattering glass and twisting steel. Down, down, down…

James comes to first, his head swimming in a daze that soon sours into awareness. He lies in a clearing which opens to a nearby field, the sun a low, buttery glow over cornfields in the western sky. Next to him, Lily is a sprawled, crumpled heap of calico and cotton. James rolls onto his side to look at her. Just as he does, her eyes flutter open.

“Where in the hell are we?” Lily asks, her voice groggy as she pushes herself up on her elbows and looks around.

James sits up, rubbing his clean-shaven head. “Hard to say,” he mumbles, squinting at the world as if it were a strange picture he can't quite make out. “Looks like a forest, or a field, but I don't recall us driving through the countryside. Last I remember, we were at that Italian place with the cheap wine.”

Lily gets to her feet, brushing bits of dried grass from a dress she doesn't own, a soft blue-and-green floral pattern with a wide white collar. She touches her hair, which is twisted up and held in place by what feels like two long, straight sticks. A breeze, soft and warm, rustles the leaves of the nearby birch trees, the only sound, and then the rustling ceases. The white bark of the trees, ghostly against the vibrant green of spring, appears to contrast starkly with the deathly quiet. James has an unsettling feeling but can’t quite put his finger on what is out of place.

“And why,” Lily wonders, holding out the apron that stretches across the front of her dress, “am I dressed like some character from Little House on the Prairie?”

James stands, and Lily’s sights drift to him, her eyes widening in a mixture of confusion and a sort of mortified amusement. “What in the world is with your git-up, pardner?” she asks, a smirk playing on her lips.

He looks down at his own clothes, a faded flannel shirt tucked into rough leather pants, a dark vest, and a gun belt complete with loops full of bullets. As he leans down to pick up a straw hat off the ground, he lets out a laugh. “Hey, all I'm missing is the gun!” he exclaims.

“I thought you told me you didn’t like guns. You told me you’ve never been hunting and wasn’t sure carrying one needed to be a constitutional right. Since when do you, a native of Park Slope, Brooklyn, carry a gun?” she asks.

“Since you ended up here,” a voice startles them both. The words, dry and clear, make them both jump and spin around. Standing there, as still as a stone and as lean as a fence post, is a man in a long, black coat and dark pants. He tips a black hat with a black-leather-gloved hand, his other holding a long-barreled revolver. His eyes, though shadowed by the brim of his hat, hold a weary and ancient glint, as if he'd seen all the world's sorrows and then some.

“Welcome,” he says to Lily, his voice a low rumble. “You made it here.”

Lily, ever the one for directness, asks, “And where, pray tell, is ‘here.’”

“You're right outside Busted Springs,” he says, his gaze as steady as a rock. “First stop on this side of the great divide.”

“The great divide?” James presses, stepping a little closer to Lily. “What’s the divide?”

The man doesn't answer right away, his silence stretching like a taut rope. He admires and plays with the revolver. “My name's Pete,” he finally confesses.

James, his eyes fixed on the ample piece of dark metal in Pete’s hands, says nothing. Lily, sensing the need to fill the void, extends a hand. “I'm Lily,” she says, her voice a little shaky.

“And I'm…” James starts, before Pete cuts him off with a wave of his hand.

“I know who you both are,” Pete says, a shadow of something like a tired grin touching his lips. “We've been expecting you.”

James and Lily instinctively move closer together. Pete extends the revolver slowly, holding barrel and offering the grip. “Come and get it.”

James takes it as if the metal is hot to touch, holding it gingerly between his thumb and index finger. “Do I get one?” Lily asks.

Pete doesn't answer, simply turning to walk toward a dusty road where a rickety carriage and a black horse are waiting. “You'd better follow along,” Pete calls back over his shoulder, his voice a low command. “We need to get inside by sundown. This place gets weird at dark, and you don't want to be out in the open.”

“Wait!” James pleads, fumbling awkwardly to slide the pistol into the empty holster at his hip. “I mean, where the hell are we? We still don’t know what the big divide is or where Busted Springs is. You haven’t explained any of this!”

“I’ve told you,” Pete replies, without turning around.

Lily, her voice edged with a frantic note, adds, “Can you tell us why we are here? In this get up? And why did we just get a revolver?”

Pete ignores them, instead stroking the nose of the black horse as he pulls the bridle to better position the carriage. James, after a quick, furtive glance at Lily, gathers some courage and pulls out the revolver, the weight of it in his hand feeling both foreign and strangely heavy.

“We want answers,” James demands, his voice a little bolder now that he holds a peace maker.

Pete doesn't even turn to look at him. “I'd take the threat more seriously if you'd loaded the weapon,” he quips.

James looks down at the gun in his hand, then at the loops of bullets on his belt, and a flicker of panic crosses his face. He has no idea how to load it. He shoves the pistol back into the holster in defeat, takes a couple of steps forward, and as Pete turns to face him, he notices a silver star glinting on Pete's black coat.

“Wait, you're like... the sheriff here?” James asks, the bravado gone from his voice.

Pete grins, crow’s feet spreading out of the corner of each eye. “Let's just say I've been deputized,” he replies.

“Deputy Pete,” Lily begins, her tone pleading.

“Just Pete,” he corrects.

“Just Pete,” she starts again, “we're a little bit at a loss. We'd be more compliant if we had a better idea of what was going on.”

Pete climbs into the driver's seat of the carriage and considers his boots, a grim look on his face. “This is always the hard part,” he mumbles, his voice low and grumbling. He looks up, his eyes locking on Lily’s, and his voice takes on a commanding power that makes them both flinch. “Think!”

The word hits Lily with the force of a punch, and a scene, fractured and disjointed, flashes through her mind. “We were on a date,” she says, her voice a whisper.

“Italian food,” James adds, the memory arriving.

“We shared some wine, that really bad wine,” she continues, a nervous laugh escaping her lips.

“But I only had one glass,” James adds, the recent evening becoming clear. “Because I was driving.”

“I was giving you directions back to my place,” Lily says, then adds defensively, “to drop me off!”

“We were at the intersection, we had a green light,” James says, his voice rising in pitch.

“The other car was coming so fast! It just came out of nowhere!” Lily bursts out, her hands flying to her mouth as the full, horrifying picture clicks into place.

They both stop, their frantic words fading into the approaching dusk. The wind whispers once more through the leaves, the air thick with a silence that feels heavier than a shroud. Pete, his expression unreadable, looks at them for a long moment. Then, with a slow nod, assured they now finally understand, he offers the simple explanation that makes all the strange, terrifying pieces of their new reality slam together with a sickening finality. “Yep,” he says, his voice as quiet and final as a closing grave. “You're dead.”

James and Lily find themselves standing on the rough, splintered porch of the Happy Endings Saloon. The sound of a piano, slow and out of tune, drifts through the swinging doors, playing a mournful rendition of “All the Way My Savior Leads Me.” The song, which was supposed to be a hymn of hope and guidance, sounds more like a dirge, each note a tired, flat groan. The air is warm and still. A fine layer of dust coats everything, giving the saloon an exhausted, forgotten look.

Pete, lean and silent, reaches for the swinging doors, but Lily holds up a hand. “Wait,” she begs, her voice sounding small in the dusty silence. “Before we go inside, may I ask you just one thing?”

Pete pauses, his hand on the door, and with a slow, deliberate movement, he tips his hat back and rests a hand on his hip. “Shoot,” he says.

“If this is the afterlife,” Lily begins, gesturing vaguely at the muddy street, the rickety buildings, and the saloon doors behind Pete, “why is it a Western? I mean, what's with all the cowboy business and this frontier town?”

Pete purses his lips and rubs a hand over his grizzled chin, his brow furrowed in thought. He seems to genuinely consider her question. “I was wondering the same thing,” he replies, his voice as dry as the road.

“Wait, what?” Lily asks, surprised. “What in the world does that mean?”

“Well,” Pete answers, his gaze shifting from Lily to James and back again, “one of you imagined this is the Great Beyond.” He pauses, letting the words hang in the air between them. “You see, for everyone, the definition of the afterlife, of Heaven, is different. Since you both died together, here we are.”

Lily and James exchange a long, suspicious look, each wondering if the other had a secret, unfulfilled fantasy about living in the Wild West.

James shakes his head. “Nope, definitely wasn't me,” he declares, looking up at the porch's sagging roof and then back to the dust-filled road.

A tired sigh escapes Pete's lips. “Shall we proceed?” he asks, pushing the doors open wide.

The saloon is no cooler on the inside. A single bartender, his movements slow and methodical, polishes a row of glasses behind the bar. Across the room, in a dark corner, a cowboy with his hat pulled low over his eyes sits hunched over a table. James's gaze, however, falls on a slim blonde woman in a white gown standing near the bar. Her green eyes meet his, and a slow, knowing smile touches her lips. Her dress does little to hide a bosom that strains against the fabric.

"Shall I pick your jaw up off the floor for you, pardner?" Lily jabs.

James snaps out of his stare, clearing his throat. "No, I'm good," he mutters, "Let's, you know, check in."

James approaches the bartender. "Two rooms," he attempts to command.

The bartender, without looking up from the glass he's wiping, shakes his head. "Sorry," his voice flat. "We're full. You'll have to share a room."

Lily's eyes widen. "Oh no, there's a misunderstanding," she says, stepping forward. "That won't do."

"Yeah, we're not together," James chimes in, "You see?" He glances at Lily and then back to the bartender, a touch of the awkward entering his voice. "I mean, we're not at the stage where we can share a room."

"We were on our first date when…" Lily starts, the horrifying memory of the crash momentarily forgotten as she tries to explain their predicament.

The bartender shrugs and points down a long, dark hallway. "Sorry," he says, not a hint of sympathy in his tone. "All the other rooms are being used."

Just as the bartender finishes speaking, a woman, wrapped in nothing but a blanket, enters the saloon bar from the long dark hallway of rooms, her bare shoulders exposed. Her cowboy passes from behind her, strutting with a satisfied shit-eating grin right out the swinging doors onto the street without a backward glance. The bare-shouldered woman approaches the bartender, places a key on the counter, and announces, "I'm done for the night." The bartender holds up the key. "Here's your room," he relays to James and Lily.

James's face shifts from pale to a deep, embarrassed red. "Hold on," he says, with an adolescent's beaming curiosity. "Is this a brothel?"

Pete lets out a low chuckle from behind the pair. "In a way of speaking, yes. This place is famous around these parts. These girls will do whatever you want, whenever you want, however you want. Some would even call it Heaven," he explains with a wink at Lily.

Lily's mouth sets in a grim line. "Well, I'm in Hell," she mutters under her breath.

James, ever the modern gentleman, puts a protective hand on Lily's shoulder. “I just don't think it's appropriate,” he says, “you know, for Lily.”

Lily looks at James, a flicker of surprise in her eyes. “Are you protecting me?”

“Well, I guess I sort of am,” he admits, his cheeks still flushed. “I mean, we can't stay here, right?”

Pete sighs. “Look,” he says, “different times, different mores. Even Mary Magdalene gets a mention in the Bible.”

James glances uneasily around, his attention drawn once more to the mysterious slim blonde standing at the bar, whose gaze has not wavered from James. “We have to find something else,” James insists.

“Sorry, everywhere else is full,” Pete replies, holding up a hand to stop James from arguing. “You just have to stay one night. Tomorrow, we'll find a place that's more suitable.”

At that, Pete turns and pushes the swing doors open, pausing before they swing back shut. “Just try to survive one night.”

James lies on the dusty floor of the cramped room, his vest a makeshift pillow, a damp ‘V’ of sweat staining the shirt under his neck. The heat in the room is a thick, suffocating blanket. Lily stretches out on the bed, her eyes wide open as she stares at the ceiling. “I can feel the sweat dripping off my back,” she murmurs.

“And what the hell did he mean by ‘survive one night’ anyway?” James asks from the floor, his voice muffled.

“What's the worst that can happen? We're already dead,” Lily jokes.

Just then, a quiet knock, and the sound makes both of them jump. “Stay there, I'm closer,” Lily suggests as she slides off the bed.

She opens the door to find the cowboy from the corner of the bar, the one with his hat pulled low over his eyes, standing in the doorway. She can see now that one of his arms is wrapped in a dirty cloth, dark red and brown with dried blood.

“Sorry, but I don't mean to bother you,” the man starts, his voice husky and masculine. His eyes are a startling, clear blue, and as Lily looks into them, she has the uncanny sensation that he could stare straight through her face and into the back of her head. She swallows hard, forcing herself to stop staring.

“I have this wound, from driving cattle,” he explains, a grimace on his face. “I was trying to get the herd through the crossing.”

“Uh-huh,” was all Lily can manage. She touches the dirty bandage, prompting a wince. James sits up from his spot on the floor.

“Would you mind taking a look?” the cowboy asks Lily, his blue eyes fixed on hers.

“I'm not a doctor,” she says, stepping back slightly.

“I just need a woman's touch, you know?” he says, a soft, raspy, seductive note in his voice. “I can't stitch it up myself.”

James rolls his eyes. “Sure, come in,” Lily offers, surprising herself with her own words.

The cowboy walks past Lily to the washbasin in the corner, and as he approaches it, he begins to remove his leather vest, hat, and unbutton his shirt. As his tanned, lean, muscular chest is revealed, Lily mutters a silent, “Sweet Jesus,” under her breath. He reaches down to unbuckle his belt and the holster at his side, and she quickly stops him, her hand on his arm.

“That's good enough,” her voice a little breathless. “Remember, it's your arm we're inspecting.”

James stands up. “If that’s how it’s going to be, I'll go see if there's anyone at the bar,” he announces, a strange edge to his voice.

Lily gives him a sharp look that says as clear as leaded glass ‘Don’t leave me alone’ which only encourages James to complete his leveling of the situation. He shrugs and departs.

James strolls into the saloon bar. The piano stops playing. The bartender is nowhere to be seen, but the slim blonde from before is still there, waiting at the bar. Waiting for James. She swirls a tumbler of whiskey in one hand, while the other supports her forehead with a single finger. Her green eyes are fixed on him, same as before.

James approaches the bar, makes a show of looking left and right for the bartender, and jokes, “I guess we fix the drinks ourselves?”

She doesn't answer. She leans forward, her eyes never leaving his. He has a clear view down the front of her low-cut dress. He finds himself unable to look away, the silent invitation in her eyes a powerful, dark draw. She’s a steamy vision in her translucent white gown, and with a figure that’s less like a woman and more like a work of art with smooth, clean lines. The air is thick with a stillness that hums with a heady cocktail of lurid sex and a touch of menace. James senses an unfamiliar, almost primal urge to move towards her, to grab her by the waist, and run his hands along her sultry hips.

The cat has his tongue. Finally, the break the silence, he asks “Are you staying here as well?” The words feel clumsy, out of place, like a city boy trying to ride a bucking bronco. She still doesn’t answer, her silence as sexy and mysterious as the quiet in the saloon. She moves toward him, he feels a chill, and a sudden and profound conflicting sense of being wanted for pleasure and hunted as prey.

Nervously, James asks, “I mean, I don’t know how to ask, but do you come here a lot?”

She moves closer, James gulps. Her eyes a lasso holding his feet to the floor. Her hand, cool and delicate as a spider’s web, brushes the back of his cheek. As she leans in, James leans back, the worn floorboards creaking under his weight, but a bar stool blocks any attempt to step in reverse. He can feel the soft pressure of her breasts on his chest as she leans in, the thin gown leaving little to the imagination. She breathes, hot and wet, into his ear, “I'm here for you.”

“For me?” James asks, his Adam's apple bobbing as he gulps down a nervous breath, confused by the feeling of imminent danger and the powerful attraction of the creature before him.

Her hand snakes down, reaching below his belt, and her expression changes quickly. “You are not pleased by me?” she asks, her voice a low purr.

“I mean, you're very lovely,” James stammers, his mind a frantic jumble. “It's just that, everything here is a bit... I mean, what about Lily? This is all so strange.”

The woman’s face, which had been a mask of soft seduction, hardens. “I command you to be pleased with me,” she orders. A sudden and involuntary surge of desire, like a current of electricity, shoots through James's body up through his masculinity, pushing against his pants. Her lips brush against his, but he turns his face away just in time and she licks his neck and cheek.

“I can't do this. This is not right,” he protests, a jolt of resistance suddenly awakening within him.

She tries to unbuckle his belt, but James’s hands reach to stop her, the action almost a reflex. Her face shifts instantly, the seductive mask cracking to reveal something ugly and furious beneath. Her green eyes flash with a cold, unnatural light. “You deny me?” she snarls, and for a second, James is certain he sees fangs.

“You are beautiful,” he pleads, trying to placate the thing before him. “I can't deny that. I just think I'm not the right client for you.”

“Client? You think I'm a whore?” she growls, the word a feral sound.

“No, I, I just meant that… wait, are those bat wings?” he asks, his voice a terrified squeak.

She lifts off the ground, her wings, black and leathery, unfolding around James, encircling him in a living shroud. She lets loose a howl, a sound less human and more beast, and in the sudden, hellish light, James sees her teeth are indeed rows of sharp, predatory canines. Shaking, he reaches for his pistol, the one Pete had given him, but his trembling hands fumble, and the weapon clatters to the floor. He stumbles and falls backward, knocking over the bar stool behind him and several others in a wooden domino.

Lying on the floor with his eyes on her, he attempts to recover the pistol, but floating above him upon her great, flapping wings, she sweeps the pistol away with a wave of one hand, while the other reaches down for his neck, her long, sharp fingers closing around his throat. “No one denies me!” she roars, her teeth hovering over his face, a drop of her foul spittle landing on his cheek.

Just then, Lily bursts into the barroom. The shirtless cowboy, the one with the wound, right behind her. The cowboy is stunned into inaction, his eyes wide with a look of pure, unadulterated terror. Lily doesn’t hesitate. She draws the shirtless cowboy’s pistol with a practiced hand and takes aim.

The slim, blonde, demon vixen, turns to face Lily, but before Lily can squeeze the trigger, the creature transforms into a cloud of green mist and disappears into the ceiling. James, paralyzed with a mix of terror and profound relief, can only stare at the ceiling above. It takes him a few seconds to process what just happened, and all he can do is breathe heavily and squeak a shaky, “Thanks.”

Lily holsters the pistol, sliding it back into the cowboy’s belt. The wounded cowboy hadn't moved a muscle, his expression a vacant stare.

“You're pretty useless in a crisis,” Lily tells the cowboy.

The cowboy slowly emerges from his stupor. “I, uh, I've actually never seen that before,” he stammers, his bravado gone.

“While we’re being honest, have you ever actually driven a herd across a stream?”

The man looks down, his face flushed. “No, never,” he admits. “I just work out a lot at the gym.”

Lily appraises his cut chest and the well-placed vascularity in his bulging arms. “It's impressive,” she assesses, “but what good is that if you're a deer in the headlights when it's crunch time?” She pats him on the chest, a gesture of dismissal, and walks toward James, who is just getting to his feet.

“Now you,” she says, a wicked grin on her face. “What did you do to conjure a demon?”

“I think her ego was bruised,” he answers sheepishly, straightening his clothes.

“You didn’t seem to mind her too much,” she says with a widening grin.

James looks down at the unmistakable bulge in his pants. “It was tempting until the bat wings and fangs came out,” he confesses.

Lily gives him another look, her eyes glinting with amusement. “You don't understand,” James tries again. “It was like some kind of demon-Viagra. Instantaneous. She commanded it.”

“I'll bet she did,” Lily replies, her grin now a full-blown smile. “Ok, clearly, you're traumatized. At least you don't freeze like Hi-Ho Useless over there,” she says, nodding toward the cowboy, who stands in the same spot, boots still rooted to the floor.

James reaches down to recover the still-unloaded revolver from the floor. “You were quite the Calamity Jane on the draw at the critical moment,” he observes, a genuine sense of awe in his voice. “Where did you learn to handle a gun like that?”

“I grew up in Texas,” Lily answers, a small, proud smile on her face. “We went hunting all the time.”

James offers her the gun. “Then I suppose we'd be better off if you held this,” he says. She accepts the revolver and starts pulling bullets from his belt, her fingers working with a swift, practiced grace.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” James adds softly.

She stops withdrawing bullets, looks at him for a long moment, and then, with a mischievous smile, pulls him by the belt until their bodies press together. “Thank you for being man enough to be rescued by me,” she whispers, and then she kisses him.

It's a sweet kiss, a hundred times better than the clumsy first-date kiss they never had. It’s passionate. Sparks fly, not just in their imaginations, but in the air around them. It’s the kind of kiss you get after you’ve faced a demon together and won. It’s the first honest moment of joy either of them has felt since arriving on this side of the divide.

It’s the next morning, and Pete meets the couple at the front steps of the saloon. He has a wide smile on his face. He tells them, “I knew you two could do it.”

“Do what?” asks James.

“Make it through the night. It proves that you are in fact soul mates.”

“Soul mates? Now hold on, we had just one date,” answers James.

“True. But some soul mates never meet. Some soul mates spend their entire lives, happily, with someone else. But should they meet that person, the person they are supposed to spend eternity with, well, that’s different.”

James and Lily look at each other. “We are supposed to spend eternity together?” James asks.

“Yep. Now follow me and I’ll take you to some more appropriate accommodations.”

Both smiling, they follow Pete to his carriage, when Lily stops again. “Hold on. So, if we didn’t die, we would have spent our whole lives together?”

Pete turns and tips up his hat. “Yep.”

James asks, “and we would have lived happily ever after?”

“Yep.”

“Would we have had kids?” asks James.

“Kids? Heavens no. This is Heaven, not Hell.”

Dave Smiderle, well, some might describe him as interesting, which can be a good thing and not so good thing. He has a Doctorate in Psychology and is an Associate Dean at one of the largest Colleges in Canada. He is also a musician, a comic book geek and a fledging writer of short stories. He lives on a micro-farm with chickens and bees with the real farmer, his lovely and amazing wife (she was looking over his shoulder when Dave wrote this) and he likes to chop wood from his forest to heat his house in the winter. Depending on what you fancy, any of these things could be good or bad.

The Bad President by Dave Smiderle

It was a Tuesday when I left my hotdog stand and walked into a familiar gray building.

They escorted me to a level far below the surface, where a man was waiting for me in a small but pleasantly lit room. In the room was a wooden chair, an office desk, and a man sitting behind that desk I had known since I was a kid. He gestured for me to take the open seat.

“State your name and occupation for the record,” he said. “You know who I am, George,” I said, slightly annoyed.

“I know. We still have to do this by the book,” was George’s response. Sigh. “Okay—my name is Sam Everfield, and I am a hotdog vendor.” “Why are you here, Sam?”

“One week ago, my best friend was murdered. His name is Dan Howard, and he is— was—the President of the United States of Amron,” I said, with a deep sigh that belied both a sadness and a resignation of the situation.

George took a pause and then said, “Why don’t you start at the beginning?” “How far back do you want me to go?” I asked.

“Start where you think makes sense for our records,” George said kindly.

“I knew Dan’s family when I was growing up. My dad had a hotdog stand just by the office of Howard Industries, a leading tech company that focused on micro-grids and clean energy. I used to watch Dan’s dad, Bill Howard, talk to my dad when he would be making his famous Everfield Experience hotdog—jumbo dog, grilled to perfection, with a focaccia hotdog bun; relish and mustard on the one side, and then ketchup and sauerkraut on the other. Bill would order a root beer to go with it. For the owner of a large tech company, Bill seemed like a regular guy and always tipped my dad well. I think that’s part of the reason why it made it easy for Dan and I to become friends.

“Every so often Bill would bring his son Dan to the office with him. Like his dad, Dan seemed easygoing and, to be honest, I think as we were both only children surrounded by adults all the time, we were happy to connect. At the stand, while our dads were talking, we would talk about video games, girls, and our favourite hockey team.

“One time, I asked Dan why he was going with his dad, and he said, ‘Dad wants me to take over someday, so he would like me to ‘shadow him’” making air quotes in the air. We laughed, thinking how lame all that corporate speak was. ‘I’d rather be playing video games, but whatever.’ Dan would often grab his version of the Everfield Experience (hold the sauerkraut), wave, and head up with his dad.

“As the years passed, Dan and I got closer. We would be playing video games online and talk about a lot of things. One topic that always came up from Dan was my future. I always laughed at him when he asked about that. He knew I was going to get a two-year college diploma and then take over my dad’s hotdog stand business. For some reason, Dan thought I could do better, ‘realize my potential.’ I would clap back with some offhand remark like, ‘Well then, when you are the new CEO of Howard Industries, who is going to make you the Everfield Experience just the way you like it?’ Dan would laugh at that and say, ‘Fine, fine, that’s like the same thing you say every time,’ and we would then go back to killing zombies.

“By the time we both got to 30, my dad had retired, and I had become the owner of the hotdog stand business. It was also the same year that Dan became one of the youngest CEOs. I was so proud of Dan. They held this big party for him, and he invited me, of course, and I said no; he knew I was uncomfortable in formal settings. He insisted, and I offered as a compromise to buy him a drink at the local pub called the Handlebar after the party. It was a local pub where the beer was cheap, and the music was decent. The cheap part worked for me, as it was all I could usually afford when it was my turn to buy a round.

“Around 11 p.m., Dan and I entered the bar and pulled up to our favorite spot. ‘Two glasses of your best scotch, my good woman,’ I said in the most formal fake English accent I could muster. Dan began to protest, worrying that this would be too expensive for me to pay.

“‘Shush, Dan—consider it my congratulations, and uh, maybe a birthday present as well,’ I said sheepishly.

“Dan laughed and slapped me on the back. We toasted to our mutual futures, and then both Dan and I took our first sip.

“After the initial sips of this amazing scotch, I looked at Dan and said, ‘So what’s next?’

“Dan looked at me, a little perplexed. ‘What do you mean, what’s next? There are so many things I am going to be able to do for the company, our country, and maybe even the world. Think of it, Sam—with our micro-grid technology, we could stop rolling blackouts and make sure everyone in our country and the world has power. This will be a game changer. Why would I want to think about what’s next after that?’

“‘Oh, I don’t know. I mean, after a while, won’t you get bored with this?’ I commented. “‘Well, how about you and the hotdog stand? I think you are wasting your—’

I cut Dan off before he could finish his sentence. ‘Yah, yah, but this conversation is not about me, it’s about you. You don’t like doing the same thing for a long period of time. I was just

wondering—have you given any thought to what you would do after?'

"Dan sat back, clasped his hands behind his head as he often did when he was thinking. After about 30 seconds, he said, 'Well… nah.' He waved his hand and took another sip of the scotch.

"'What, Dan?' I said earnestly. 'Spill it—I mean, not the scotch, 'cause that stuff's expensive!'

"Dan laughed. 'What about if I became President of the USA?'

"Dan then stared me right in the eyes. I think he expected me to laugh or tell him he was crazy. I didn't. Instead, I said, 'I think you'd make a great president. There's just one problem.' 'Oh? Just one? This I have to hear,' he said, taking another sip which was about half a day's worth of earnings at one of my hotdog stands. 'Go on, what is it?'

"'Dan, you know I have been around people all my life with the stand. You get to learn a few things. First, people don't like change—unless they think that the change is a lot better than what they are dealing with right now,' I said. Dan nodded.

"'Second, even when people agree to change, it only lasts for a while, and then things have to be crappy again so you can put the next change in,' I said.

"Dan pondered this for a bit and then said, 'Well, by your logic, things will never get better.'

"'No, I think of it more like a line of prosperity that moves up a lot and dips a little bit once in a while—like tall hills and small valleys,' I said, making the motions with my hand. 'It nets out as being better.'

"'How is this a problem for me thinking about being the president, Sam?' Dan mused. "'Well, first, I know you, Dan—you would want to change things for the better.

Depending on where the people are, it could impact the kind of president you have to be and when real change could occur. If you are a president when people want something better, then great—you get to be the public hero. However, if you are a president when people are complacent, it's almost like you have to be a really, really bad president—like on purpose—to get people wanting a change. At that point, you go down in history as a bad president, even though because of you, things will eventually get better. Publicly, you will be the bad guy, but in reality, your actions would be the driver of change,' I said matter-of-factly.

"Dan just sat there, looking at me. He was trying to see something he hadn't seen before. I almost thought he figured it all out when he then said, 'Dude, you are nuts. That is the most messed up theory I have ever heard,' shaking his head and then taking another sip of his scotch.

"'Yah, you are probably right, Dan.' I laughed and then raised my glass to my best friend. "'Here's to the youngest CEO of Howard Industries,' I said.

"Dan replied, 'Here is to the best hot dog vendor this side of, well… everything!' We both

laughed and clinked our glasses. I asked the bartender if I could keep the glasses from that night as a memento, and for an extra tip she said sure.

“Over the next 10 years, both of our lives experienced a similar and yet different path. We both met what we thought ‘was the one,’ experienced some degree of marital bliss for about 5–7 years, and then within a year of each other separated and divorced. If there was anything that was good about this, it was the fact that Dan and I were there for each other during this time. Even during the marital hardship, Howard Industries under Dan’s leadership grew its profit significantly, much to the joy of the shareholders. I too experienced a period of prosperity, where I now owned about 10 hotdog carts. It seems the Everfield Experience was more popular than I thought, and who knew that you can actually learn something in college about scaling up a business.

“‘The gracious donation from the Sovereignty Fund really helped with my start-up costs, thanks.’ I said, gesturing to George.

“‘You are quite welcome, Sam,’ George said.

“As being a new ‘Captain of Industry,’ I didn’t really man the carts as much as I used to. I would use my free time to brush up on a few subjects I have an interest in, like the history of world leaders and psychology. When I knew Dan was going to be in his office, as he would text me, I would make sure I was at the cart in front of his building. It was one of those times, about 4 years ago, when I was finishing up making his Everfield Experience that Dan said, ‘Hey Sam, got plans tonight?’

“I said, ‘Was just going to plop myself in front of a screen and watch some junior hockey.’

“‘Why don’t you join me at the Handlebar tonight, say around 8 p.m.? My treat,’ Dan encouraged.

“I said, ‘Sure, what’s the occasion?’

“‘I want to run something by you,’ Dan said.

“‘Ooooo, Mr. CEO needs advice from me?’ I poked Dan in the ribs, laughing.

Dan laughed back. ‘Yah sure, Hot Dog Man—just meet me at 8 p.m.’ Dan waved and went up to his office.

“Later that night at the appointed time, Dan and I pulled up to our regular spot in the bar and Dan ordered us a couple of beers. We clinked our bottles, Dan took a swig, put his beer down, looked at me and then said, ‘Sam, you remember the conversation we had in this bar like 10 years ago?’

“I laughed and said, ‘Dan, we’ve had many conversations here. Was there one in particular you wanted me to remember, which I probably won’t?’

“‘There is,’ Dan said. ‘The one about me being President.’ “‘I seem to recall that you thought I was nuts,’ I said. “‘Well, what if you were right?’ Dan said.

“At this point, I paused and put my bottle down. ‘What do you mean?’

“Dan looked around and moved a little closer to me. ‘I had the weirdest meeting today with someone from the United Nations,’ he said in a low voice, so that only I could hear. ‘This woman claimed that she was part of a secret group that ensures that the right people are elected within certain democratic countries and since the Second World War, there are, in fact, good presidents and bad presidents, depending on what the people need for change, and that she wanted me to run for office.’

“I mockingly checked my phone and said, ‘Dude, April Fool’s jokes happen on April 1st; we are in November.’

“‘Sam, I know this sounds like some bullshit, but I am being serious here,’ Dan said in earnest.

“‘Okay, let’s say I play along and believe you. Based on what I am seeing, people are complacent right now. The new health care bill was passed about a year ago, the economy is okay although it looks like we are seeing a greater gap between the rich and poor. So, by my reckoning, you would have to be the president—and that is if you run for office and win—that people would coalesce to hate. You would have to become the Bad President. This then sets up the next guy or girl to make the changes,’ I said.

“Dan nodded and said, ‘Yah, I know. Thing is, they also said that after my term is done, I would be able to go back to Howard Industries and that my company would be part of all the good changes.’ Dan expressed eagerly, raising his voice slightly. Good thing our chat happened at a point in the night where the band was playing; you would have to pretty much yell to be heard above other conversations which was good. Given our conversation, it was best if only I heard this.”

George nodded.

“‘This is some major conspiracy shit, Dan. Why are you telling me this?’ I said.

Dan replied, ‘Because I’ve known you most of my life, Sam. There is no one else I could tell who I could trust or who would even believe me if I did. My question to you is: should I do this?’ Dan asked.

“I sat there looking at my best friend. I really cared for Dan and wanted to make sure that he understood what he was in for, and that now would be the only time for him to back out of this. After taking another swig of my beer, I said, ‘Dan, those four years will be hard on you for sure, and it will take at least a few years out of the White House and back at Howard Industries before you will be able to do the good that you really want to do. I think you have it in you, and I will stand by you whether you decide to run or not. So, what’s the call here, Dan?’”

George interjected at this point. “We know the answer to this, Sam, and so you can skip over the part where he decides to run, wins the nomination from the Republican party, and then wins the election by a stunning majority in both the House and Senate as well as the overall popular vote. We also know that President Howard decided to unconventionally have you personally operate a Hot Dog Stand in the Rose Garden. Tell me about how he started down the path of being the Bad President,” George asked.

Sam sighed, and then paused, looking off in the distance. He was thinking about his friend and how he ended up here. A sadness creeps in. He wishes that his best friend’s life hadn’t ended the way it did. George noticed this and said, “Sam, do you want to take a break?”

Sam then seemed to refocus and say, “No, that’s okay, I just want to be done with this as quick as we can so I can go back to my hotdog stand,” Sam said and then continued.

“So right out the gate, Dan started signing a bunch of Executive Orders. He figured this was the best way to get the people to dislike him. The first one was about deportation; a sensitive topic for sure. Anyone who was not born in this country, or in any of our partner countries, was to be immediately deported. No surprise, this caused a lot of protests, at which point he called out the national guard and the army to disperse the crowds,” Sam said.

“I think what caused the fallout from this was when they used a water cannon, and as a result, a few people died due to being trampled,” Sam said sadly.

“The President then turned his attention to some wars that were happening overseas. As you know, he signed another Executive Order to deploy troops and weapons to support Olympia, a modern dictatorship, in their fight against the Democratic Republic of Arya—or DRA—a strong ally of the USA. What you or others may not know is that although Olympia was a prior enemy of the USA, Dan and their Queen were secretly lovers. Despite my protest, Dan provided excruciating detail during one of his visits to my hot dog stand of his encounters. I remember Dan saying, ‘Well if I can’t tell my best friend I banged a Queen, who can I tell?’ The President and I laughed at this as he was drinking his root beer.”

George then interrupted. “So, you think the reason that the House and Senate flipped during the midterms to Democrat was because of the deportation and the whole DRA debacle?” George asked.

“I think this was the nail in the coffin for the flip for sure,” Sam said.

“After the midterms, it just got worse,” Sam said. “He started to call legitimate news groups such as CNN, ABC, and newspapers like the New York Times, or The Washington Post as ‘troves of misinformation,’ which only caused the media outlets to double down on their criticism and ridicule of the President. They would say things like he is not fit for office, he moves too quickly without consulting, or he is afraid of freedom of the press,” Sam said.

“He even started his own social media site called Howard’s Truth, where he would post his thoughts on everything, including this crazy idea of building a giant trench between the USA

and the neighboring country of Terra Cotta and actually suggested that the Terra Cottans pay for it," Sam said shaking his head.

"In the end, it was a brilliant strategy; most people, no matter what their politics, hated the idea and this along with the other things I mentioned started to bring people together against the President," Sam said.

"How did the President feel about all of this?" George asked.

"Well, in the first year after the midterms, he took it in stride; said it was part of the role he was supposed to play," Sam said. "During that last year of his Presidency, I started to notice that it was getting to him. He looked more tired and worn than I have ever seen him and started this weird compulsion of pacing back and forth in a straight line in front of his desk in the Oval Office. It was like he was trying to burn off the frustration of being the Bad President," Sam said. "I tried to console him, encourage him, tell him about the greater good, and when that didn't work, I would just try to make him laugh over a few beers when he had the time," Sam said.

"Okay, so we are heading into President Howard's last year of office," George stated matter-of-factly. "We also know that in this fourth year of President Howard's term, campaigning had started, and the Democrats offered up John Liu to go up against President Howard. John was a second-generation Chinese lawyer trained at Princeton University and who had been practicing law for about 20 years," George said.

"I remember the papers and media were all very positive about Liu; they called him a 'person of unity,'" Sam reflected. "Tell you the truth, I was happy that Liu was running, as it meant that Dan's time as President would soon come to an end," Sam said. "He wouldn't have to pretend to be the bad guy anymore and could focus on his company and doing the things he felt that could make a difference, like providing the world with renewable and stable power. Sure, there would be some initial rough patches, but people's memories are fleeting; I think in five years they would have all but forgotten about his time in the White House," Sam said.

George then asked, "So what happened next, Sam?"

"Well, just around the time he got the news that Liu was the Democrats' choice to run against him, he came to see me at my hot dog stand in the Rose Garden," Sam said. "I was about to make him the Everfield Experience, when he said, 'Just a sec, Sam, I want to talk to you about something.' Dan said. I stopped making his hotdog and sat on the bench in the Rose Garden beside him. 'Sam, you know I originally signed up for this arrangement to be the Bad President, so that it would create a sense of common dislike for me and also allow for the next person to make some real positive changes for our nation,' Dan said, and I nodded. 'I also know I am supposed to step down just before the primaries, so that the party will not have a strong candidate to stand up against John Liu,' Dan said. Again, I nodded.

"'Sam, I am thinking of running for a second term,' Dan said.

“I just sat there. Dan was not comfortable with the silence.

“‘Well, what do you think?’

“‘What the fuck, Dan?’ I said. ‘Why in God’s name would you want to submit yourself to the ridicule, the humiliation, and the antagonism you have experienced on a WORLDWIDE STAGE for another goddamn second?’ I asked incredulously.

“‘Hear me out, Sam,” Dan pleaded. “See, I now understand how this all works. I can have what they call a ‘redemption arc’—where the bad guy becomes the good guy. Think about it. Think of the good I could do with the position I am in. With my business sense, I could solve our country and the world’s energy problem. I could show the people who I really am,’ Dan said excitedly.

“‘Yah, in like five years when you are out of office. How the hell do you think you will be able to convince people right now that you are a good guy?’ I said.

“Dan looked at me with a wild look in his eyes and said, ‘By exposing the United Nations about this whole Bad President/Good President thing.’

“Again, I just sat there in silence staring at my friend and then said, ‘Dan, if what you have been saying is true about the United Nations and that they have been doing this for a while, what makes you think they would not have planned for someone going rogue like this?’

“‘I checked, Sam, in terms of all of the past Presidents, both good and bad,’ Dan said. ‘Not a single one had been in the private sector before. I’m different from them, Sam. I don’t think the United Nations would be prepared for someone like me breaking the rules,’ Dan said emphatically.

“‘So, what now, Dan?’ I asked.

“Dan looked at me and said, ‘Well, first I need to go to the press—yes, all the press that currently hate me. I need to tell them my story, all of it and the truth of it,’ Dan said. ‘Get the conversation going, have them conduct their own investigation into the United Nations. This will put the U.N. on the defensive,’ Dan said. ‘At the same time, I need to start to show my true self and my true business sense. Start with even more Executive Orders, though this time it will be different. These will be coming from me with the goal of turning our country around. Sam, I need you now more than ever. Democrats hate me, my own party wants me to resign, the press hate me, hell even those right-wing crazy bottom of the barrel supporters, the ProudMen, have turned against me. The damn ProudMen, Sam! There is no one else I trust more than you. I need to be able to bounce stuff off you as needed. I know you have a good heart; you understand people and have a pretty good business sense,’ Dan smiled.

“‘Yah, for a hot dog vendor, Dan,’ I said back and we both laughed. “‘Pretty messed up stuff, Dan.’

“‘Yah, Sam, but I think I can turn this around with your help,’ Dan said, in a voice that sounded more resolved of his course of action. After a pause of a few seconds, Dan then stood up and said, ‘I have to go meet the Secretary of State, so let’s chat again later tonight to talk about a game plan,’ and started to walk away.

“I watched Dan, my best friend, start to walk away. Time stood still. I knew what should come next, and for a second, I hesitated. He got about three feet before I snapped out of it and yelled, ‘Hey, wait, Mr. President!’

“Dan turned to look at me and grinned. ‘Yes, what is it, the Official Hot Dog Vendor to the President?’ Dan said.

“I said, ‘I was saving this for when your term had ended and we were going to celebrate…’ and went behind the cart. I came back up with a bottle and two glasses.

“‘Is that what I think it is, Sam?’ Dan asked.

“‘It is, Mr. President,’ I said, chuckling. ‘The same expensive brand of Scotch we had AND I PAID FOR all those years ago when you became the CEO of Howard Industries. I even kept the original glasses, well, one of them anyway. I accidentally broke yours when I moved, so I got you one that at least had a similar look to it.’

“‘Sam, it’s the middle of the day. Not sure the President of the world’s biggest free nation should be drinking,’ though Dan said this in a way that was not entirely convincing, so I pushed the point.

“‘Come on, Mr. President, one glass to toast your comeback tour!’ At that point, I started a two-finger pour in each glass. I gave Dan his glass and asked him to make a toast.

Dan said, ‘To my comeback tour and the future of the USA!’ Dan said and we clinked our glasses.

“‘To President Howard 2.0!’ I replied and we both downed our drinks. When Dan had finished, he gave me his glass, looked around, and then gave me a big hug.

“‘Thanks Sam, for being someone I could always count on,’ Dan said.

“‘Go get ’em, Mr. President!’ I replied as Dan walked away.

“Later that night, President Howard passed away quietly in his sleep. The autopsy would show that he had a rare deformity in his heart that is hard to detect. In reality, the glass I gave the President had an imperceptible film of Thallium 13, as per the standard United Nations protocol given when a President goes rogue.” I stopped talking and rubbed my eyes. “What else do you want to know, George?” Sam asked.

George put down his pen and notebook. “Sam, your dad would have been proud of you.

We know you were young when you were inducted into the United Nations LTF (Leadership Task Force), and for the last 20 years you have done this country and the world a service,"

George said and smiled. "As predicted, President Howard has mobilized the country to be ready for real change. We are confident that Presidential nominee John Liu will put things into play that will be better for all," George said.

"He was my best friend, George. Are we done here?" I asked.

"We are done here, Sam." George closed his notebook and showed me the door.

I walked out to the door and returned to my hot dog stand. There I saw, in the bottom right corner, Dan's original Scotch glass, from all those years ago.

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The Bear by Huma Farid

In the sweltering heat of the hottest June on record where even the hydrangeas, that quintessential summer flower, wilted, a baby bear frolicked in the strawberry patch the size of a football field in the farm a few minutes from her house. The farm's security cameras had captured and broadcast the bear's shaggy, rotund form to the local news station, where the news anchor delighted in sharing lighthearted fare, a delight that captured her attention as well.

The bear had good taste, she admitted. Despite the farm owner's questionable political allegiances, she shopped there frequently, refusing to believe that the same people who sold strawberries so delicious that her children licked the juice from their fingers could align with the vile rhetoric that dominated political discourse currently. She silenced the faint murmurs of unease that drifted towards her consciousness and kept shopping for the fruit her children loved. After all, she thought with a touch of acerbity, it was all for her children, wasn't it?

School had ended a few days ago, and her children had celebrated their newfound freedom by reverting to their natural, indolent, unwashed state. Her earnest admonitions urging the importance of hygiene and routine were met with vociferous protests of "But it's summer!" So she let them roam in the backyard unfettered by convention, and for a brief moment when they tumbled together as one round ball, they reminded her of the baby bear that munched on strawberries in the farm at dusk and roamed the field at night.

Her husband, unfettered by the summer responsibilities of keeping the children alive and entertained, conformed to his demanding work schedule. His job title instantly made people realize how very important he was as she faded into the background as "housewife." She reminded herself that it was his job that guaranteed this house in the suburbs with more bedrooms than people, the embossed leather handbags that other women instantly recognized, their annual summer trip to the resort town favored by the Obamas. In contrast, everything she did was unseen, unheard, quietly efficient, much like Santa's elves. The magic just kept on happening, the fridge stocked with her family's favorite meals, the clothes crisply folded, the rugs freshly vacuumed. She faded into the background of their lives.

Those first few days of summer, every morning with her first cup of coffee, when the house echoed in silence and she could pretend that she was free of the inevitable cries of "Mommy!" and the incessant needs of her children, her husband, her house, her life–in that moment of rarefied peace when she could pretend that she was hers and hers alone, she watched the exploits of the bear. As the first rays of sun limned the strawberry patch with red and gold, the bear's outline stood out sharply. Some days the bear sat on its haunches as though pondering life. Sometimes it rolled in the berries, trampling the budding flowers and staining its fur with the sweet juice. Sometimes the camera caught it eating handfuls of the glistening red fruit, morning

dew and green tops and all. She couldn't help but ascribe some anthropomorphism to the bear, but it seemed to be enjoying itself, unencumbered, unafraid.

She started every morning with the bear. In the chaos of the day, as she wiped juice from children's faces, folded clothes still warm from the dryer, or loaded the dishwasher, she would sneak a peek at the bear cam and feel a sense of relief as it dozed or ambled or burrowed. She felt a strange longing for this bear, free from any expectations, able to live its life as it wanted.

And then one day, the cam had a bear sized absence. Her morning cup of coffee grew cold as she stared blankly at the strawberry patch, uninterrupted by a shaggy black form. It seemed that the bear had vanished overnight. What would that feel like, she idly wondered, to just disappear? To declare through the omission of your presence that this careful construct of an existence was not enough? She shivered at the thought of freedom and then instantly flagellated herself for even considering that to be a possibility. As the day proceeded without any bear sightings on the farm, worry replaced her wondering. Had something happened to the bear?

In a rare moment of silence nestled between cries of "But he hit me first!" and "Mommy, I need you!" and the tumbling of the laundry machine and the whispered jets of water in the dishwasher that scrubbed evidence of home cooked meals from the everyday china, she pulled up her computer and googled "Where did the bear go?"

Apparently, she wasn't the only one invested in the bear. Instantly, a multitude of search results tracked the bear. Sometime in the middle of the night, the bear had wandered over to the next town. Neighbors reported that he raided multiple backyard bird feeders on one street. He must have loped to yet another town, because someone spotted him in a suburb twenty minutes from hers, on the playset in the backyard, his furry figure fighting for balance on the swing. She felt relieved to know that he was alive and well, although his departure from the fields of plenty puzzled her. Was he, too, discontent with the dry, drab sameness of it all? For a moment, she was tempted to google "Where did *I* go?" in the hopes that perhaps the internet could find the woman of yore whose identities had been more than just mother, daughter, wife.

Satisfied that the bear continued to follow its own mysterious path, she returned to reality, the peace shattered by the sound of something very expensive breaking. She closed her eyes, prayed for patience, and then stood up to find the vacuum.

Later that evening, after a dinner where the dog ate more food than her children, and her husband called her to let her know that he would yet again be late, she searched for the bear. The internet was strangely quiet about the bear's whereabouts, and this worried her yet again. No one was untraceable anymore, especially not something as huge as a black bear, its growth fueled by organic strawberries. She pushed the worry out of her head, and turned in for the night, her husband's absence creating a gaping hole in the bed smothered by only the finest of linens.

She awoke the next morning earlier than usual as her husband kissed her goodbye; he murmured about the flight he needed to catch for a work event. She nodded sleepily, waiting until she heard the click of the door closing on his footsteps, then grabbed her phone and searched for the bear. Still no news after that last sighting a few towns over yesterday afternoon. She wondered how quickly bears moved and how he had navigated multiple lane highways to reach his destination. The internet, always readily available with answers, informed her that black bears, despite their lumbering size, can run in short bursts of speed of about 30 to 35 miles per hour. Imagining the bear's pilgrimage proceeding at the pace she drove her car in assuaged her worry and made his perambulation concrete and purposeful. He had a destination and a goal of a certain number of

miles per hour. Her jaunts to the grocery store, driven at the same speed, sometimes had less purpose.

Then one morning, as she typed in her usual query into the ether, a news headline flashed ominously: “Dead bear found on highway.” She gasped. Her coffee congealed in its mug as she read about the bear’s body parts scattered over the black asphalt. Her stomach heaved. She dashed to the bathroom, her bare knees pressing into the cool tiled floor as she gripped the edge of the toilet seat, willing herself to control the roiling contents of her body. She thought plaintively that this couldn’t be how the story ended. The bare strawberry patch, the empty bird feeders, the swing with a bear-sized indentation, the frolicking, the freedom, the indelible memory of something that was alive and vital and full of joy—all imploded by death and destruction. The bleakness of it leached the hope from her bones and left her desiccated. She curled up on the tiled floor that smelled faintly of the eco friendly, eucalyptus scented cleaning products she used and tried to calm the distress pillaging her brain. She must have lingered too long, because all too soon she heard one of her children keening, “Mommy, where are you?”

She gathered up the scattered bits of courage, thrust her grief—for herself, for the baby bear, for the cruelty of this world—into the farthest recesses of her mind, and turned to face her children with poise and grace. She would need another cup of coffee.

Ben Macnair is an award-winning poet and playwright from Staffordshire in the United Kingdom. Follow him on Twitter @ benmacnair

Static by Ben Macnair

The asphalt rippled under the oppressive heat, a black ribbon stretching into a horizon that shimmered with false promises. Arthur traced the lines on his topographical map, his thumb smudged with dried coffee. This forgotten stretch of highway, nicknamed 'The Devil's Backbone'—a ghost of a place, perfect for his current photographic obsession with forgotten Americana. Instead, it was leading him to nothing but an unbroken wall of evergreens, their shadows long and skeletal under the late afternoon sun.

He'd taken the detour a week ago, leaving the familiar hum of the Interstate for the silence of back roads, chasing whispers of spectral beauty. His latest project, an exploration of places time forgot, had drawn him further and further into the country's decaying periphery. Now, the silence wasn't inspiring; it was smothering. His old Ford Explorer, usually a reliable workhorse, coughed, sputtered, and died with a final, gasping sigh.

Arthur slumped against the steering wheel, a curse thick and bitter in his throat. He tried the ignition again. Nothing. Just a pathetic click and then a deeper, more profound silence that seemed to sink into the very bones of the forest. He stepped out, the air thick and still, buzzing with unseen insects. Even the crickets seemed to hold their breath. The engine was cold to the touch, defiant. No cell service. Not a soul for miles.

Dusk began to bleed across the sky, painting the western horizon in bruised purples and blood oranges, ominous precursors to the impending night. Panic, cold and sharp, pricked at him. This wasn't the romantic solitude he'd sought; it was stark, isolating terror.

Just as the last sliver of sun dipped behind the tree line, a figure emerged from the deepening shadows up ahead. Arthur squinted, heart lurching. The man was old, impossibly so, with a stooped posture and clothes that seemed to belong to another era—a threadbare tweed coat, heavy boots, and a wide-brimmed felt hat pulled low over his eyes. He carried a gnarled, dark wood cane, not for support, but almost like a divining rod, tapping it rhythmically on the asphalt.

"Trouble, friend?" The voice was a raspy whisper, like dry leaves skittering across pavement.

Arthur forced a smile, gratitude warring with a primal sense of unease. "Yeah, she just quit on me. Any chance there's a tow service around here?"

The old man chuckled, a sound like gravel shifting. "Tow service? Not for fifty miles in either direction, no sir. Not on this stretch of road. Folks don't much like to come out here." He took a step closer, and Arthur noticed his eyes, pale, almost milky, but with an unsettling intensity that seemed to penetrate rather than merely observe. "Name's Silas. And you're a long way from home."

"Arthur. Arthur Finch." He extended a hand, but Silas merely nodded, his gaze fixed somewhere past Arthur's shoulder, into the trees. "I was heading for Oak haven."

Silas’s lips thinned into something that might have been a smile, or a grimace. “Oak haven. Yes, many come looking for Oak haven. But Oak haven isn't a place you find, Mr. Finch. It's a place that finds you.” He gestured with his cane further down the road, into the encroaching darkness. “My place isn't far. You can rest there. We'll see about your vehicle in the morning.”

Arthur hesitated. Every instinct screamed no. The man was too old, too gaunt, too perfectly timed in his appearance. The way he spoke, the unsettling precision in his movements. But the alternatives—a night in a broken car, exposed to whatever unseen things rustled in the forest—were worse.

“Thank you, Silas. That's very kind of you.”

“Kindness,” Silas echoed, the word tasting strange on his tongue. “Necessity, more like. The Road takes care of its own.”

The house was a shadow against the darker shadows of the forest, a Victorian-era relic that seemed to have materialised from a forgotten dream. It listed slightly to one side, its paint peeling like sunburnt skin, but a faint, welcoming glow emanated from a single window. A porch light, dim and yellow, illuminated a meticulously swept path. Ivy, thick as a man's arm, snaked relentlessly up the walls, clutching at the eaves.

Inside, the house was a mausoleum of dust and old wood. The air was heavy, smelling of forgotten things like dried flowers, beeswax, and something else—something metallic and faintly saline, like old blood. Silas moved with unnerving familiarity through the gloom, lighting a kerosene lamp that cast long, dancing shadows.

“Make yourself at home, Mr. Finch.” He gestured to a worn armchair covered in a faded floral print. “I'll fetch you some water. It's been a long journey for you.”

Arthur sat, his back ramrod straight, trying to soothe his frayed nerves. The room was crammed with antique furniture, each piece draped in a fine, almost imperceptible layer of dust. The walls were adorned with framed photographs, sepia-toned snapshots mostly, of people with indistinct faces, their features blurred as if viewed through a dirty pane of glass. They stared out, their smiles fixed, eternal. He felt a shiver despite himself.

Silas returned with a glass of water, presented on a silver tray. The glass was strangely cold, condensation beading on its surface. Arthur drank it down, the water tasting flat, metallic.

“You're a photographer, I gather?” Silas asked, his milky eyes fixed on Arthur's camera bag, which he'd instinctively clutched to his chest.

“Yes. I look for the forgotten, the overlooked.”

“And the Road,” Silas mused, settling into a rocking chair opposite Arthur, “is very good at forgetting. And at being overlooked.” He paused, his gaze drifting to the window, where the night pressed in like a physical weight. “This Road, it collects. Not just dust, you understand. But stories. And sometimes, the storytellers themselves.”

Arthur managed a weak smile. “A poetic way of putting it.”

“Truth isn't always pretty, Mr. Finch. Sometimes it's just necessary.” Silas's voice dropped, becoming even more of a whisper. “How far did you travel today?”

“About three hundred miles since sunrise. Came off the 51, onto the old 17.”

Silas nodded slowly. “The 17. Yes. A hungry road, that one. It weaves and tangles, doesn't it? It likes to lead folks astray. To bring them here.” He leaned forward, his eyes suddenly piercing. “You felt it, didn't you, Mr. Finch? That pull. That whisper that said, ‘Go this way. There's something forgotten here.’”

Arthur felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cool night air. He had felt it—an inexplicable urge to take this specific, obscure detour, despite his better judgment. The map had seemed to sing to him.

“You're tired,” Silas said, rising. “I've a room ready. Just for tonight. We'll see to your engine in the morning.”

The bedroom was small, sparsely furnished with an old cot and a rickety chest of drawers. A single window looked out onto impenetrable darkness. The air in here was even heavier, charged with a strange, static energy. On the bedside table, a half-burnt candle sat next to a small, leather-bound journal. Arthur, his curiosity overriding his caution, picked it up.

The script was elegant but faded, the ink a pale brown. The first entry was dated October 14, 1937. “The car stalled. Old Silas offered shelter. He speaks of the Road as if it were alive. I am uneasy.”

Arthur's heart hammered. He flipped further. Entries from 1952, 1978, 1999, all mentioning Silas, the broken car, the quiet dread. The handwriting changed, becoming progressively less coherent, more desperate. One entry, dated April 3rd, 1965, read: “He watches. Always watches. The house breathes. I hear scraping. He says I am part of the plan now. Part of the Road. Cannot leave. Cannot remember my own face.”

Then, a newer entry, in a different hand, dated July 22nd, 2007: “Another one. Silas says my work here is important. I am the caretaker now. I guide them to the house. To the Road. The faces blur. My face blurs. I remember a name. Arthur?”

Arthur dropped the journal as if it were a venomous snake. His breath caught in his throat. Arthur? He scrambled for his phone, but the screen remained stubbornly blank—no service. He raced back to the living room, but Silas was gone. The rocking chair was empty, rocking gently as if he’d just risen from it. The lamp glowed, casting long, accusing shadows.

“Silas!” Arthur's voice was a desperate croak.

No answer. The house creaked, settled. The silence pressed in, heavier now, filled with a thousand unseen eyes. He ran to the front door, rattling the knob. Locked. He tried the windows. Sealed shut, or painted over, impossible to open. He was trapped.

He stumbled back, his gaze falling once more on the blurry photographs. Not just blurry, he realised now. The faces were faded, dissolving into the sepia background, their features becoming indistinct smudges. These weren't old photos; they were images of people in the

process of unbecoming. The faint metallic smell in the air suddenly seemed to pulsate, joining with the static charge that prickled his skin.

He heard a faint thud from the back of the house, followed by a low, rhythmic scrape, scrape, scrape. He moved, drawn by a morbid curiosity, his heart pounding a frantic drumbeat against his ribs. The sound led him to a door at the far end of a narrow, dark hallway. It was slightly ajar, a sliver of eerie green light escaping.

Pushing it open, Arthur peered into what appeared to be a workshop. Tools hung neatly from pegs: wrenches, pliers, strange, slender instruments made of dark, polished metal. In the centre of the room, under a single bare bulb, lay a large, intricate mechanism. It was made of interlocking gears, pistons, and polished metallic plates, all gleaming with a dark, oily sheen. And it was moving. Slowly, deliberately, the gears turned, the pistons pumped, and a thin, dark liquid pulsed through transparent tubes. It wasn't driving anything. It was simply operating.

Silas was hunched over it, meticulously wiping down a joint with an oil rag. He didn't look up, didn't acknowledge Arthur's presence.

“What is this?” Arthur whispered, his voice trembling.

Silas finally straightened, his movements slow and deliberate, as if his body were stiff, unaccustomed to quick motion. His pale eyes met Arthur's, and in them, Arthur saw not just age, but an ancient, weary patience.

“This, Mr. Finch,” Silas said, indicating the machine with a sweep of his hand, “is the heart of the Road. Or perhaps, its stomach. It processes. It consumes. It ensures the flow.” He tapped a metallic plate. “It must be maintained. And I am the Steward.”

Arthur felt a cold sweat break across his forehead. “Maintained? Consumes what?”

Silas smiled then, a wide, empty smile that stretched his gaunt face into a grotesque mask. “Travellers, Mr. Finch. Like you. Like the others. The ones who feel the pull of Oak haven, the whisper of the forgotten. They come here, to the Road.” He gestured to the wall, where more blurred photographs hung, not just sepia now, but faded colour prints, some looking eerily recent. “Their stories. Their faces. Their very essence. All collected. All fed into the Road so it might continue its journey. Its purpose.”

He walked over to a small, heavy workbench. On it lay a collection of objects: a tarnished silver locket, a pair of spectacles, a child’s wooden toy. And then Arthur saw it—a familiar, well-worn leather lens cap, emblazoned with a small, stylised 'FA.' His own. He had lost it this morning, thought it had fallen out of his bag.

“The Road knows what it needs,” Silas continued softly, running a skeletal finger over the lens cap. “It gathers the tools. It finds the next pair of hands.”

Arthur backed away, tripping over a loose floorboard. “No. No, I'm not.. I'm leaving. Now.”

He turned to flee, but Silas was suddenly in front of him, blocking the doorway. He hadn't moved quickly, Arthur realised, but as if he had always been there, always would be there. Silas’s eyes were no longer milky; they were deep, boundless pits, reflecting the green glow of the machine.

“You are already part of it, Arthur. The Road called, and you answered. You felt the static, didn't you? The hum beneath the asphalt? You are already forgetting what your own face looks like, aren't you?”

Arthur reached up, his hand fumbling for his face. He could feel it, of course, the bone and skin, the stubble of his beard. But suddenly, he couldn't quite picture it. The memory was hazy, like looking through a camera out of focus. He could remember the concept of his face, but the image, it was slipping.

The scraping sound intensified, a rhythmic grind that seemed to emanate not just from the machine, but from the very walls of the house, from the floorboards beneath his feet. The metallic smell was overpowering now, filling his lungs. He felt a profound weakness in his knees, a draining of energy, of self.

Silas reached out, his hand cold and dry as parchment, resting gently on Arthur's shoulder. “The Road is eternal, Arthur. And now, so are you. Your memories, your experiences, your very spirit—they will fuel its journey. And in time, you will learn to guide the new arrivals. Just as I learned. Just as the others learned.”

Arthur looked at Silas, truly looked. And through the ancient, gaunt features, he saw flashes of the blurring faces from the photographs. He saw a flicker of the elegant script from the journal, a memory of a lost child’s toy, a faint reflection of his own camera lens. Silas wasn't just a man. He was a confluence of them, a vessel, a living manifestation of everyone the Road had collected. A Steward, formed from countless forgotten souls, each contributing to the ancient, insatiable hunger that wound itself across the land.

The green light from the machine pulsed, casting Arthur in its sickly glow. He felt a sharp, electric jolt, then a profound emptiness, like a memory being erased. His thoughts became disjointed, his purpose fading. Oak haven. The forgotten town. He had come here for a reason, hadn't he? It was important. The Road was important. Someone had to care for it.

He looked at the tools on the workbench, the intricate gears of the machine. He felt a strange competence rising within him, a knowledge of how to operate, how to maintain. An understanding of the ebb and flow, the subtle hum that signified the Road’s satisfaction.

“There's new ones coming,” he heard himself say, his voice raspy, unfamiliar, yet perfectly natural. “I can feel them. They'll need guidance.”

Silas smiled, a slow, knowing curvature of the lips. His eyes, now a clear, untroubled pale blue, seemed to reflect the infinite stretch of the road outside. “Yes, Arthur. They always do. The Road always calls.”

Arthur nodded, the last vestiges of his former self ,the photographer, the man who chased forgotten places—dissolving into the pervasive static. He picked up an oil rag, his movements unhesitating, and walked towards the humming machine. He had work to do. The Road awaited. And somewhere, out on the dark asphalt, a lone car, its engine sputtering, was about to pull over.

Studio 7 by Ben Macnair

The air in Studio 7 was thicker than usual, heavy with the scent of cheap cologne, ozone, and desperation. Above the vast auditorium, blinding white spotlights hammered down onto the central stage, making the polished chrome surfaces gleam with synthetic holiness. This was the altar of late-stage capitalism, dedicated to the consumption of human dignity: this was The Reckoning Hour.

John Thorne sat on a cold metal bench in the holding area, his hands slick with anxiety. He wore the required uniform—a standard, ill-fitting indigo jumpsuit—that made every contestant look simultaneously insignificant and identical. He traced the lines of his contract, memorized weeks ago, but the words still felt like a venomous joke: "The contestant willingly and irrevocably forfeits all rights to physical, emotional, and psychological safety in the pursuit of the Prize."

The Prize. For John, it wasn't flashy sports cars or a tropical vacation. It was the cancellation of his life debt—a monolithic, suffocating sum incurred after his wife's experimental treatment failed, leaving him with an empty house and a ledger sheet that mocked his existence.

A digital voice boomed through the corridor, shattering John's focus. "Ten minutes to air! Our second contestant, Mr. Harrison, is entering the Gauntlet now!"

John stood and pressed his face against the narrow viewing slot in the door.

The stage was electric. The audience, tiered high in shadow, looked less like people and more like a single, monstrous organism, waiting to feed. At centre stage stood Victor Sterling, the host. Sterling was a masterpiece of cosmetic surgery and cruelty, radiating the toxic charisma of a coiled viper wearing a three-thousand-dollar suit.

"Welcome back, you beautiful, indebted souls!" Sterling's voice was a practised, velvety purr, laced with just enough contempt to remind everyone of their place. "Mr. Harrison, you look nervous. Don't be. Remember, failure only hurts for a little while. Success lasts forever! Tell the fine people what drives Mr. Harrison tonight."

Harrison, a man in his late fifties with sunken eyes, spoke in a trembling whisper. "My daughter's tuition. They threatened to pull her papers."

Sterling leaned in, his smile predatory. "A father's love. Sacred. Beautiful. And utterly worthless if you can't pay the piper. Let's play the game that burns away your burdens! Tonight, Mr. Harrison faces The Consequence Clock!"

The stage transformed. Two massive digital clocks appeared on screens, ticking down from sixty seconds. Between them, a heavy, metallic apparatus descended from the ceiling, a cage of polished steel bars, just wide enough for Harrison to stand in.

"Mr. Harrison, you have sixty seconds to answer five rapid-fire questions about your personal life. Simple, right?" Sterling paused, letting the silence ferment. "Except one clock displays the time you have left. The other displays the current interest rate on your debt, which escalates by one percent every second you are inside the cage."

The audience let out a collective, hungry roar.

Harrison was ushered into the cage. The moment the steel door clanged shut, the first clock began its merciless countdown, and the debt clock surged upward.

Sterling launched into the interrogation, the questions fast and designed to inflict maximum emotional damage rather than test knowledge. They were personal, humiliating, and utterly irrelevant to the actual contest.

“Question one: What was the primary reason for your first bankruptcy in '08?” Harrison stammered, his focus split between the ticking time and the skyrocketing debt percentage. “The housing bubble. Bad investments.” “Wrong! The primary reason was your desperate attempt to impress a mistress with a beachfront condo. Two seconds wasted!”

The game continued, a brutal ballet of psychological sabotage. Harrison was flustered, sweating, and increasingly frantic. He answered two questions correctly, but the humiliation was etched on his face.

The timer hit ten seconds. The debt clock flashed: +55%.

“Final question, Mr. Harrison! Easy one. When was the last time you told your daughter you loved her, knowing full well you were leading her toward an impossible future defined by your financial negligence?”

Harrison stopped trying to answer. He simply stared at Sterling, tears tracking clean paths through the grime on his cheeks. “You’re monsters,” he whispered.

“Time!” Sterling shouted, an almost ecstatic thrill in his voice. “Mr. Harrison, sadly, you failed to clear three of the five questions. And your debt has increased by fifty-five percent. But don’t worry, we have a contingency plan for failure.”

Sterling snapped his fingers.

The lights on the audience dimmed, plunging them into shadow, making their anticipation palpable. The steel cage around Harrison began to hum, a deep, resonant sound like a giant tuning fork. Tiny nozzles set into the bars hissed open, releasing a faint, metallic mist.

Harrison gasped, clawing at the bars. “What is this? Stop! I can’t breathe!”

Sterling barely glanced at him. “Contingency number one, dear viewer: When a person’s debt becomes too burdensome, it must be metabolised. We are simply speeding the process.” He addressed the camera directly. “Mr. Harrison’s failure means his remaining assets including his biological composition must be reintegrated into the system. Simple thermodynamics, folks.”

The mist intensified, glowing a faint, sickly green. Harrison’s screams initially human and panicked grew thin, high-pitched, and rapidly muffled. John watched, paralysed, as the edges of Harrison’s body began to shimmer, his form becoming indistinct within the fog.

In less than twenty seconds, the screaming stopped.

The mist cleared. The cage was empty, save for a thin, shimmering residue on the floor that looked suspiciously like fine, grey dust. The cage retracted silently into the ceiling.

Sterling wiped a single tear of synthetic emotion from his eye. “A heartbreaking loss. But the economy demands liquidity, doesn’t it? That was ‘The Reckoning Hour!’ We’ll be right back after a word from our sponsor, SecureVault Debt Consolidation because they know you’ll be back soon!”

The studio lights flared and the audience erupted in applause, a sound that felt less like appreciation and more like a collective swallow.

John stumbled back from the slot, his body shaking. He had known the show was cruel. He had heard the rumours that the stakes were lethal. But seeing a man reduced to dust, live, for failing a quiz about his own shame, was an entirely different genre of horror.

A handler, a tall, silent woman with eyes that promised nothing but indifference pulled him away from the door. “Your segment next, Mr. Thorne. Try not to make a mess. We hate cleaning up.”

John was thrust onto the stage during the commercial break, the warmth of the vanished Harrison still radiating faintly from the floor tiles. The energy of the audience was different now; they were sated but ravenous for the next course.

When Sterling returned, the transition from commercial cheer to deadly seriousness was instantaneous.

“Welcome, John Thorne! A man who, through entirely selfish choices, has incurred a debt so vast it could purchase three small nations!” Sterling grinned. “Tell us, John, how did you manage to squander two million credits?”

John gripped the sides of the podium. The lights were so hot they felt like physical restraints. “It was for medical care. My wife—the treatment was expensive. It didn’t work.”

“Touching,” Sterling drawled. “A noble effort resulting in spectacular failure. You sacrificed everything for love, and now all that remains is the interest payments. Tonight, John, we offer you redemption. You face The Burden Chamber.”

The stage cleared, and a massive set piece rolled into place. It was a dark, steel structure—a tunnel, perhaps twenty feet long, sealed at the far end by a thick hydraulic door. The entire mechanism looked less like a game prop and more like refinery equipment.

“This game is simple, John. We call it the Test of Worthiness.” Sterling’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, audible only to John and the nearby boom microphone. “You will enter the Burden Chamber. Along the walls, you will find ten numbered pressure plates. Under each plate is an object representing a segment of your debt: a memory, a mistake, a piece of the financial ruin you inflicted on others.”

“You must choose five plates. Lift the object, place it in the slot marked ‘Forfeit.’ Every item you forfeit reduces your total debt by twenty percent. Five correct forfeits, and you walk free, entire debt erased.”

“And if I choose wrongly?” John asked, his voice hoarse.

Sterling’s smile widened, revealing teeth too perfect to be natural. “If you choose one incorrect item, an item whose monetary or emotional value is deemed ‘irreplaceable’ by our panel, the

hydraulic door at the end of the chamber will begin to close. You must exit before the chamber seals completely. If you fail to exit, your Reckoning is immediate."

The subtle shift from psychological torture to imminent physical threat was sickening.

"Begin!" Sterling shouted.

John stumbled into the chamber. It was cold, metallic, and smelled of ozone and damp concrete. The air felt heavy, like the atmosphere before a storm. He could hear the low, rhythmic churning of unseen machinery overhead.

He reached the first pressure plate, number one. He hesitated, then wrenched it open.

Inside lay a tarnished silver locket. He recognised it instantly; it was the locket he'd given his wife on their tenth anniversary, containing their first picture together. Value: zero credits. Emotional worth: priceless.

John's hands were shaking. He had to choose five things to destroy. Five memories, five pieces of his past, that the system deemed suitable for erasure.

If I forfeit the locket, is it considered 'irreplaceable'?

He wrestled with the object for a full minute, the chilling knowledge of Harrison's fate pressing hard on his mind. He couldn't risk it.

He moved to plate two. He lifted it. Underneath lay a stack of forged insurance documents from five years prior a desperate attempt to secure a loan he knew was fraudulent. Monetary value: immense. Emotional value: negligible, save for the guilt.

This is a mistake. This is pain I inflicted.

He grabbed the thick sheaf of papers and shoved them into the 'Forfeit' slot. A green light flashed above the slot.

Debt reduced by 20%.

A wave of relief and profound guilt washed over him. He had just admitted his deepest shame on national television and destroyed the evidence of it.

He moved quickly to plate three. He lifted it. A small, wooden toy train, his son's favourite, broken during a sudden argument.

A mistake, but not financial. Is that the trick?

He forced the memory down and put the train in the slot. The green light flashed.

Debt reduced by 40%.

He was gaining momentum, navigating the moral wreckage of his life. He found four more plates that held evidence of financial negligence, callous business deals, and broken professional vows. He forfeited them all, his hands becoming coated in sweat and the fine grit of the chamber.

As he closed the fifth slot, the final green light flashed.

Debt reduced by 100%. WINNER!

John sagged against the metal wall, panting, dizzy with disbelief. He had done it. He was free.

He waited for the sound of bells, the confetti, the cheering applause.

Instead, the lights in the chamber began to flicker, turning a deep, bloody red. The rhythmic churning overhead stopped. The air pressure in the room shifted, deepening to an almost painful equilibrium.

Then, a new voice, low and resonant, spoke not through the overhead speakers, but from the walls themselves a vibrating, deeply mechanical hum.

“ANALYSIS COMPLETE. DEBT CLEARED. EMOTIONAL WORTHINESS. EVALUATED.”

Sterling’s voice cut in, suddenly loud and close, filtering through a speaker near the exit. “Oh, John. Did you really think it was that easy? Did you think ‘The Reckoning Hour’ was about money? Money is merely the currency of despair. The show demands something heavier.”

John stumbled toward the entrance. “I won! The contract”

“The contract is irrelevant now,” Sterling hissed, his voice full of venomous delight. “You forfeited five items, yes. But you left five behind. Five irreplaceable items that define your remaining humanity. We don’t just erase your debt, John. We erase you, piece by piece, until only a shell is left.”

The hydraulic door at the far end of the chamber, the one John had ignored, began to move. It didn't slam shut; it moved with a terrifying slowness, a deliberate, colossal groan of stressed metal.

John sprinted for the entry door, which now looked miles away. He slammed his shoulder into the steel.

It didn't budge.

“No entry, no exit, John,” Sterling crooned. “The show is linear. Your final phase has begun: The Reckoning.”

The far door was now only eight feet from the opposite wall, the gap shrinking by the second. John realised, with a soul-shattering clarity, that the entire chamber was a giant, slow-moving press.

He spun around, scrambling back to the pressure plates he had left untouched. He had to find the ‘irreplaceable’ item and somehow destroy it, even though the game was officially over.

Plate six. He hurled the cover aside. It was his father’s Purple Heart—a war medal John had kept hidden, deemed too sacred to pawn, even during the worst moments of his wife’s illness.

Irreplaceable.

He grabbed the heavy medal, his fingers slipping on the cold bronze. He tried to jam it into the forfeit slot, but the slot was sealed shut.

“FORFEITURE PERIOD ENDED. COMMENCING ANTIMETABOLITE.”

The sound was unbearable now the grinding of gears, the whine of strained hydraulics, and the growing pressure in his ears. The air was thin and hot.

The press moved forward, one foot closer. Five feet remaining.

John dropped the medal and moved to Plate seven. Inside, a small, dried bouquet of baby’s breath flowers from his wife's funeral.

His breath hitched. He couldn't force himself to touch them. These were the things that anchored him. The show didn't want his money; it wanted his soul, and it used his self-preservation instinct against him. By protecting these precious items, he had signed his own death warrant.

The press moved again. Three feet remaining.

He heard Sterling laugh, a high, piercing sound of pure, unadulterated joy. “Look at him, audience! The true cost of love! He clung to his sentimental trash, and now look what happens when the consequences arrive!”

John saw the jagged edges of the advancing steel. If it reached the opposite wall, he would be crushed into a layer of bio-waste, just like Harrison. But the truth was far worse than simply being flattened. The chemical residue on the floor proved that the mechanism was designed not just to kill, but to consume.

He scrambled toward the far wall, pressing himself against the cold metal, looking for any seam, any crack, anything that wasn't solid steel. He found a small indentation—a maintenance hatch, barely visible. He jammed his fingers into the gap. It was locked.

The press stopped momentarily, just two feet away. The noise was deafening, the vibrations shaking his teeth loose.

Sterling’s voice returned, calm and close. “Last chance, John. Look to the camera. Tell the world that debt is freedom’s only master. Say it, and maybe we’ll give you a quick end.”

John stared into the lens of the automated camera mounted on the ceiling. He didn't see an audience. He saw the cold, unfeeling eye of the machine.

“Go to hell, Sterling,” John choked out, spitting blood onto the floor.

The final surge began.

The pressure inside the chamber became physical, pushing against his chest. He heard the sickening groan of the steel wall as it made contact with the wall behind him. There was no room left to breathe, no room to move.

He raised his arms instinctively, trying to hold back the inevitable. He felt the cold, oily metal of the press bite into his forearms.

The pain was not instant and shattering, as one might expect from being crushed. It was slow, agonising, and deliberate. The mechanism seemed to be designed to extract the maximum amount of consciousness before the final moment.

He felt the bones in his left arm splinter, not breaking cleanly, but collapsing inward under the immense, calculated pressure. His vision swam red. He tried to scream, but the compressed air in his lungs could barely escape.

Then, there was a flash of blinding light from the side of the chamber, not from the stage, but from a small vent. A needle-fine jet of the same green, metallic mist that had consumed Harrison sprayed directly onto his exposed flesh.

As the mist hit his wounds, the agony became something else entirely—a terrifying, internal dissolution. He didn't just feel compressed; he felt disassembled. His body chemistry was warping under the influence of the gas, preparing him for the final stage of “metabolization.”

He saw the reflection of his face in the slick steel, distorted and alien, his eyes wide with a terror that transcended the physical. He wasn't just losing his life; he was losing his very composition, being converted back into base materials deemed worthy only as fuel for the network.

The very last fraction of movement, tightening the distance between the walls to less than an inch, forced a final, ragged breath out of John’s throat.

The metallic hum reached a pitch that vibrated through his core, and then, mercifully, the world dissolved into a cacophony of white light and searing, systemic pain.

High above the silent chamber, Victor Sterling smoothly adjusted his tie. The scent of ozone was fading, replaced by a subtle, sterile aroma piped in from the ventilation system.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen,” Sterling announced, his voice regaining its practised smoothness, “is the price of clinging to unproductive sentimentality. John Thorne failed to understand the most basic rule of our modern economy: what cannot be converted to capital must be converted to energy.”

The audience, now fully illuminated, rose to its feet, applauding with manic intensity. Their hunger sated, they were ready for the next commercial break, perhaps to buy the same debt consolidation services that funnelled people like John directly into the show.

“Join us next week,” Victor Sterling beamed into the camera, “when we welcome our next batch of debtors to the stage. Remember: you might be poor, you might be broken, but here at ‘The Reckoning Hour,’ you are always, always valuable.”

The lights faded to black. The cameras cut. Studio 7 was silent, save for the low, rhythmic churning of the ventilation units, recycling the purified air and the particulate remnants of what was once John Thorne. The show was over, the debt paid in full, and the system remained clean, functional, and deeply, terribly hungry.

Bill Tope is a retired caseworker, line cook, construction laborer and one-time nude model for university art classes. He lives in the American Midwest with his mean little cat Baby.

Scold by Bill Tope

Alicia Menendez frowned unhappily down at the rejection slip clutched in her fingers. Just home from work, she had printed it out from an email she received only minutes ago. Alicia had subbed this mag only four days ago and they lost no time in turning down her story. Most journals waited at least a month before pulling the plug, but these guys, the editors of a fetid rag titled *Miasmic Meat,* a so-called horror magazine, seemed almost too eager to break her heart.

The land line jangled and Alicia picked up.

“We on for Friday night, Allie?” inquired a familiar voice.

Alicia smiled. “Spaghetti alright?” she asked, knowing it was Larry's favorite. She prepared it almost every week for the home cooked meal they shared.

“Can I bring anything?” he asked, like he always did.

“Just yourself,” she told him and after some billing and cooing, they disconnected.

Her boyfriend, thought Alicia, was the one thing going right in her life. Alicia was 25 years old, pretty and chronically frustrated at everything. All she really sought was to have a decent love life and to excel at something, to make her mark—at anything. She had lots of ideas. Her foray into the Small Press began two years ago, at about the same time she found employment with Mercer Industries, where she worked in marketing and likewise expressed herself creatively. By writing short stories, she had been trying to spread her wings. Curling her pink lips into a pout, she crumpled up the sheet of paper and cast it in the direction of the waste can. It missed. And the night wore on. In between pounding away on her keyboard on a new story, Alicia culled additional disspiriting emails from her Inbox.

The next rejection notice was, like the first, a sheet of boilerplate, this one from a mag which called itself *Shit 'n' Stuff,* a putative literary magazine whose title, Alicia thought, was too cute by half. She paused her perusal to pull a bottle of stout from the mini-fridge under the PC table and twist off the cap. Shaking her auburn curls at the unfairness of things, she tipped the green-hued bottle back and took a swig. She checked the time on her monitor: 6pm; seemed she was hitting the sauce earlier than usual. But, like some bon vivant—George Sanders?—had once observed, it was cocktail hour somewhere in the world.

After the first three emails, Alicia ceased printing out the rejections; the expense of paper was just an insult on top of injury. She glared blearily at the monitor screen.

Hi Alicia! she read. Cheeky bastards, she thought. *Thank you so much for submitting to “Congealed Fat Magazine.” Although we read your submission with great interest* -- Bullshit! thought Alicia, furrowing her brow -- *we do not have a place for it in our next issue.* Eat me! she raged inwardly. *Please remember us by submitting for future issues. Regards!*

“Regard this,” muttered Alicia, and flipped off the editors; then she felt rather ridiculous at the impotent gesture.

The PC beeped. Alicia glanced down at the screen and saw that she had yet another response to one of her submissions incoming.

“C'mon, bring good news this time!” she implored the fates, and bit her lower lip. She bent to read the blue-tinted message from the submissions manager.

Thanks, Alicia Menendez, she read. *After careful scrutiny of your submission, we have decided that what you sent us is NOT something that we cannot live without. All the best.*

Adam Griesedick, editor-in-chief, Mouthful Magazine.

Hours later, after the denouement of another long evening online, Alicia pulled a third bottle of stout from the mini-fridge, shook out a capsule of oxy- and slipped it between her lips. Her shoulders slumped.

In the lunchroom at work on Thursday, the frustrated writer was confronted by a familiar face. “Hi Alicia,” greeted Randy, a co-worker who worked for legal and who was forever trying to get into her pants. She half-smiled crookedly up at him. “How's the writing career coming along?” he inquired with what seemed like genuine interest. She raised one shoulder enigmatically, let it fall again. “You know,” he went on, “I've seen your work in Marketing; it's damn good. You're a hell of a copywriter. Maybe you should be judging others' work, you know what I mean?” Randy smiled toothily and moved onto the dessert rack, leaving Alicia to stare thoughtfully after him.

Why the hell not? she thought to herself.

Alicia had been heavily subbing—the pejorative term was carpet-bombing—the Small Press for almost two years when she decided to make the change from contributor to editor/publisher. What should she do first? she wondered. After carefully consulting Professor Google, she settled on the most economical online platform—she immediately eschewed print as too expensive, unnecessary and too much of a hassle—and swiftly got her house in order. She contacted some web sites she had unearthed from an old copy of *Writer's Digest.* By this means, Alicia sent out a half-assed call for submissions. She briefly considered engaging a submissions manager, by which means she could monetize the project and streamline it somewhat, and maybe pay for a part-time assistant and even offer a token payment to those writers she published. But, she hated submission fees herself, so for the time being she decided against it. After the submission calls went out, she sat back contentedly in her little wooden chair before the PC. Hey, she thought smugly, this is easy.

“I want to help other aspiring writers, Larry,” she earnestly told her lover of one year at dinner on Friday night, one day before the official launch. She had been yakking for 20 minutes, explaining to her boyfriend what she hoped to accomplish with her entry into the publishing ranks of the Small Press. Larry, as usual chewing loudly with his mouth open, merely grunted around a forkful of spaghetti. Alicia winced. She hated that! “Well,” she asked finally, “what do you think?” Larry took up the white linen napkin that Alicia had thoughtfully laid out and wiped his greasy lips on it.

“Let's fuck,” he said.

Alicia had decided to accept only email submissions, as Word documents. Just keep it simple, she thought. That first night, a Saturday, she was pleasantly surprised to receive several submissions in her Inbox, along with the regular flood of spam. Alicia's original idea for a journal was a unique twist on publishing. Rather than reply by email to the stories she received, she would run her critiques on-site at the time of publication. This would afford the writers

almost immediate gratification, as well as the benefit of her superior knowledge and experience. Alicia knew that writers hated waiting for the mostly negative responses. Most of all, this scheme was responsible for and responsive to the real hook: put downs. She would publish only specimens of flash fiction which merited her scorn, which she would levy with abandon. It had been done before, she knew, but her own idea was a bit more radical.

That first month, a typical critique ran like this:

Dear Ernie:

I found your plot confusing, your dialogue stilted and your language immature. Better luck next time. Keep submitting!

Alicia

Another went this way:

Dear Marilyn:

I sincerely hope that your own sex life outstrips that of the misshapen, cardboard characters in your miserable prose. Some women do orgasm, you know. Try us again.

Alicia

And so on.

Alicia had decided to name the magazine after its principal reason for existing. She called it *Scold.*

At work on Monday, Alicia again encountered the always horny Randy. She had confided to her co-worker that she was starting her own literary magazine and she found him to be encouraging—unlike some people she knew.

“Sit for a coffee, Alicia?” asked Randy.

She grabbed a coffee and then a seat.

“How is the new magazine coming?” he asked her, all blue eyes and white teeth.

“It's only been up for two days,” she explained. “I've received a total of eight submissions.”

“Not bad,” he said. “How many do you expect, per month?”

Alicia blinked. She didn't know. She hadn't actually thought that far ahead. Apart from her own hypercritical remarks on the few stories she had published, she hadn't gotten too involved yet.

“If I can get one hundred or two hundred a month, then I'll be pretty well set,” she opined in total ignorance. How long would it even take to peruse a hundred stories? she wondered. She had arbitrarily capped the word limit at 1,000. Randy was talking again. Alicia turned to listen.

“I helped a pal put together a journal back in college. If you ever need a volunteer reader, you know, to whittle down the slush pile, give me a ring, okay?”

She nodded. He tore a page from his tablet of foolscap that all the attorneys brandished, scribbled and then handed it to Alicia. “There's my number. I'm free most evenings,” he told her.

“Thanks Randy, I'll keep you in mind. I need to see how it goes, how many subs I get, how much time I need to spend on the project. Thanks!” She smiled and folded the paper away into her purse.

Randy smiled and stared at her chest.

By the next Friday, Alicia was so swamped with work on *Scold* that time got away from her and she didn't have a chance to prepare dinner for her boyfriend. Every day, when he called to check in on her, she had been preoccupied with the magazine and had given him short shrift. He had seemed a little put out by her devotion to her new obsession. So, when Larry arrived at six, he was in a peevish mood.

“What the hell, Alicia?” he grumbled. “This is supposed to be *our night.”*

Alicia, with a red pencil clutched between her teeth, looked up from the pile of emailed stories she'd run off on her printer and frowned. “If this is *our night,* then why don't you cook for a change? I figure by this time you're running a fifty-dinner deficit. It wouldn't bankrupt you to take me out to dinner for a change, or at least get freakin' take-out, Larry, for God's sake!”

“You cook,” he acknowledged, “but I make it up to you.” And he smirked.

Alicia rolled her eyes. “With what, your body? *That* body?” she asked incredulously.

Larry's lips tightened.

“I knew there was a reason that your old girlfriend called you Mr. Five Minutes, but I had hoped you'd grow out of that behavior.” Now she smirked, but wondered where the sarcasm was coming from. It wasn't like her and she wasn't sure she cared for it.

“It's that damn magazine,” grumbled Larry, pointing at the PC, “It's changed you, Alicia. You're never available. And you're hypercritical now. You criticize everything I do!”

Alicia said nothing. She was used to being in charge now and didn't appreciate being challenged or criticized herself anymore. She relished her new position of relative power.

They glared at one another for a moment, before Larry broke eye contact and said, “Maybe we need a break.” Alicia's eyes opened wide in surprise. “I'll call you in a couple of weeks,” he said, and then fled the apartment.

Shit! thought Alicia. Larry was sometimes a bit of a pill, but he was loyal and rather undemanding and didn't cheat on her. But then her thoughts wandered and she considered a truly awful short story that a writer had submitted. She'd give that writer what for, she decided. It was her duty, she told herself. Larry called every day for a week after their kerfuffle, but Alicia, still miffed, and busy, busy, busy, never picked up. The calls soon stopped.

Over the ensuing months, *Scold* developed a cachet. To appear in an exclusive magazine—Alicia accepted less than 5% of the submissions she received—and then get your ass eaten out, in real time, by the editor-in-chief, was just too rich. No one could resist it. It became a badge of distinction; sort of like owning a Pet Rock. After three months, Alicia was receiving a dozen subs daily and often, after she had selected the three very worst stories, or just the first three stories, which she would publish that day, she would pitch the other nine stories into the trash, unread. That way, she kept up. She had been careful to include in the submission guidelines an admonition that she could not, because of the high volume of submissions, offer critiques or even formal rejections of the stories that didn't make the cut. Alicia advised writers to monitor the site and if, after one week, their story did not appear, then they should consider it a failed effort.

One disgruntled writer sent the magazine an angry email, asking where the editor got off not even taking the time to send out a simple rejection note. Alicia responded regally by promptly banishing the offender from the pages of *Scold.* A day later, the culprit emailed an abject apology and after a day or so, Alicia publicly forgave him.

Alicia, who had but a Bachelor's degree in General Psychology, as well as a minor in Creative Writing, nevertheless addressed not only the writers' literary shortcomings, but their personality quirks as well. Sometimes she was short with them; other times increasingly brutal:

Dear Bruce:

I wish you hadn't written this piece. I say that because I had dinner shortly before reading it and I vomited up an otherwise delicious meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

Alicia

And then:

Dear Bella:

Congratulations are in order: in the six months that Scold has been published, this is absolutely the worst flash fiction I've ever read. I hope you get run over by an Uber!

Alicia

There were comments on the stories from other readers, as well. And they, likewise, were harsh. A sort of horrible groupthink pervaded the readers of *Scold* and a cult of personality crystalized around Alicia. She could do no wrong. It was like being heckled by the 1970s comedian Don Rickles; everybody ate it up and wanted to be the crash test dummy on the receiving end of her sadism. At first, it was just schtick, but as the pages of time turned over, Alicia began to feel a visceral sense of command.

Alicia perhaps achieved the apex of her scorn in *Scold* no. 300. In that issue, she published a story by one Elmer Dweet, who had been published -- and pilloried -- by Alicia and her caustic clutch of literary groupies on two previous occasions. Alicia took him to task:

Dear Elmer (Or should I say, Shit for Brains?):

In the first place, you are two words over limit, you flaccid little shitheel. Can't you count? 1000 words is not an arbitrary figure, you know. There is a reason for it. The reason is none of your damn business, you literary parasite. Why don't you save me the trouble in the future and just drink Drano tonight?

Alicia

Alicia pressed "Publish" and scampered off to bed. She no longer needed the stout or the oxy- to sleep.

Police detectives interviewed Alicia two days later at Mercer Industries. Extracting her from the breakroom, they escorted her to an isolated office provided by her bosses, and introduced themselves as Detectives Rust and Isom.

“How long did you know Mr. Dweet, Ms. Menendez?” asked Rust, who was apparently in charge of the investigation.

“Who?” asked Alicia. She was poor at names, particularly in light of the hundreds of writers' names she had encountered in the previous year.

Rust showed her a black and white photo of a nondescript man with a harmless look. Alicia didn't recognize it.

“I don't know him, Detective,” she said.

“Our online records indicate that Mr. Dweet made contact with you on nine occasions in the past ten months.” He began to read off dates.

“Where?” she asked, flustered.

“At your online journal, ma'am,” Isom put in, speaking for the first time. “Our records indicate that he contacted you on nine occasions and that his writing appeared on three occasions in your journal,” he added. She stared at him. Did Isom just wink at her?

Then it all came back to her. “Elmer,” she said, remembering. “Yes, I remember now. But, I never met him personally, or ever even talked to him. What is this all about, Detectives?” she asked, thoroughly perplexed.

“Ms. Menendez,” said Rust, seizing the reins of control again, “Elmer Dweet shot up a neighborhood and wounded three people, none of them fatally, thankfully.”

Alicia's mind was all awhirl. “Oh my God,” she exclaimed. “I had no idea that one of my readers was capable of that behavior. Has he been taken into custody? Is he still on the loose? Am I in any danger?” she asked hurriedly, glancing nervously around.

“Mr. Dweet is deceased,” said the detective.

“Was there a shoot out?” asked Alicia with relish. “Did you shoot that monster?”

Rust shook his head no. “No, ma'am, Elmer Dweet died by his own hand early this morning.”

“How?” she asked softly, somehow already knowing the answer.

“He ingested the contents of a can of Drano.”

There was never any question of legal liability on Alicia's part. She had appended the necessary disclaimers and wherefores and what not to the Submission Guidelines during the sixth month of the magazine's operation, courtesy of her new boyfriend, Randy, who was of course an attorney. Randy had in fact been instrumental in further developing the caustic nature of the magazine, and he frequently wrote the sadistic remarks ascribed to Alicia. Randy was, she discovered, a bit of a passive-regressive personality bleeding unexpectedly into S&M tendencies, a personality quirk that was thankfully not shared by Larry. On the other hand, Randy didn't chew with his mouth open.

Following the tragic demise of Dweet, Alicia began to withdraw, bit by bit, into a shell, and Randy became the dominant figure at *Scold.* With a degree in Accounting as well as Law, he was well configured to take the journal to the next level. He engaged a submissions manager and began charging first $5 and then $10 and finally $15 per submission. And the number of submissions increased drastically too. Within a matter of a few months, the magazine was grossing in excess of $300,000 per year, while yet remaining a basically one-person operation.

“I think we should run a contest; perhaps a series of contests,” urged Randy one day.

“Whatever you say,” she blithely agreed.

“We'll offer a $1,500 Grand Prize and charge a $50 entry fee,” he went on, and she only nodded and said, “Yes, okay.”

Before long, Randy was engineering changes and making decisions at *Scold* without even consulting the erstwhile editor-in-chief. Alicia ceased writing entirely, and with more energy to devote to her day job, received a promotion at work. Randy now worked only part-time there. Ultimately, he severed his relationship with Mercer and devoted himself full-time to the magazine. Romantically, Alicia found Randy unambitious at best, indifferent at worst.

“Randy,” asked Alicia one day over breakfast—he had moved in months before—“what is the Bizarro Pushcart Prize?”

Randy grinned toothily, the way he did, and replied, “As you know, my...*our* magazine has spawned a legion of copycat journals, mags that leverage the big put-down to aspiring writers…”

Alicia nodded. She'd heard...something, but hadn't had much to do with it.

“Well, anyway,” went on Randy enthusiastically, “one of the other editors came up with the idea to hold a sort of negative Pushcart Prizes for the dopey losers who patronize our magazines. It'll be the worst of the worst! We'll call it the ‘Bizarro Pushcarts,’ after Bizarro World, the dystopian world of the characters in the Superman comic books; get it?” He grinned stupidly.

Alicia stared at him blankly. She'd never read comic books. “But,” she asked reasonably, “who would want to be awarded for being a terrible writer?”

“Who would want to be torn a new asshole in a national daily magazine for writing shitty stories?” Randy came back at her.

Alicia shrugged. He has a point, she thought. The world was filled with masochists.

“Hey,” said Randy, taking up a bundle of documents, “you need to sign some stuff,” and he pushed it all in front of Alicia.

“What is this?” she asked with little interest.

“Business,” he said enigmatically. “Sign here,” he told her, handing her a pen, and she appended her signature where he indicated.

“Gotta get to work,” she said, and leaned in for a kiss, but Randy was already busy and so she withdrew and left for the office.

While at the office that morning, Alicia went online and clicked on *Scold.* She had washed her hands of the magazine and had not even perused it for several months; what she saw gave her pause: it was a bizarre panoply of sado-masochism, bondage, anti-Semitic tropes, homophobic screeds and much worse. She searched urgently for the masthead, saw there was no trace of her own name. Thank God! she thought with relief. Under editor and publisher she spied Randy Berger, Esq. She shook her head sadly. Today was by chance the celebratory 1,000th issue of *Scold*. Alicia's heart nearly stopped. She felt so ashamed. In her snail mail, she discovered a card, then remembered: today was her 28th birthday; Randy hadn't said a word about it. She slid a finger under the flap on the envelope and took out a handmade birthday card. It was from Larry!

Her heart melted and she felt a tear roll down her cheek. He sent one every year at this time. Sweet, sweet man, she thought.

Years ago, Alicia had set out to accomplish two things: find a decent boyfriend and make a mark. She'd accomplished neither. She had started a magazine, an odd one, yes, but with the best intentions, and had been inveigled out of it. She was gratified that she was no longer associated with that rag. And as for Randy as a boyfriend? She drew a deep breath and let it out again. Three years ago, perhaps she had been too hasty. Sitting at her desk, she placed a call, hoping the number was still good.

“Larry?” she said.

“You know, I never knew why you broke up with me, Allie,” said Larry, sitting across the table from her at an Applebee's restaurant several days later. The waitstaff had just delivered a tiny birthday cake for Alicia and sung happy birthday. Her face was still bright from embarrassment and joy.

“You didn't seem to be interested in what interested me. Also, it was your chewing with your mouth open,” she explained. “I'm misophonic and it drives me crazy. I'm sorry, I should've told you. You don't do it now,” she noted.

“My next girlfriend gave me grief for it,” he admitted, chewing quietly. “I wish you'd told me, Allie,” he said. “I was always so into you, and then when you started the magazine, things just went all to hell.”

“I'm sorry too, Larry,” said Alicia. “I had some issues and some growing up to do and I guess now I've done it.”

He smiled at her and she smiled back.

“So what's happening with the new boyfriend?” he inquired.

“He's history,” replied Alicia. “A relic. I officially moved out two weeks ago; he signed the lease, put the apartment in his own name.”

“Good,” said Larry, and they exchanged another warm smile.

“I've been keeping track of the magazine,” admitted Larry.

She looked up at him. “And?” she prompted.

Larry shook his head. “Wow!”

“I know,” said Alicia. “I had nothing to do with the way it finally turned out.”

“I knew that,” said Larry confidently. “Do you,” he asked cagily, “wanna come back to my place tonight? I can show you my...etchings?” He grinned.

“I've already seen most of your etchings,” she told him winsomely, “but yes. I need to stop by the apartment one last time and pick up some things, is that okay?”

Larry agreed and after dinner they motored through the city to what was now Randy's apartment. Alicia was shocked to find there the same two policemen that she'd encountered two years before: Detectives Rust and Isom. Isom answered the door and allowed only Alicia to enter.

“I'll meet up with you at your apartment when I'm through here, Larry,” she told him. He departed.

“What's going on, Detective?” she asked. Randy was nowhere about.

“Another casualty of the magazine wars,” replied Isom cryptically.

“Umm?” she asked.

“Another wild child, Ms. Menendez,” said Isom. “Man got rebuffed on his prose entry in a *Scold* contest and took it out on some innocents.”

Rebuffed? thought Alicia. “What happened?” she asked.

“Your ex-boyfriend, the current editor of *Scold* magazine, called a man named Adam Bede everything but a white man and vilified and excoriated him for his prose submission.”

Vilified? she asked herself. And *excoriated?* This guy probably performed beyond expectations on the SAT Verbal test. She winced at the subtle racism of Isom's remarks.

“What did he do?” she asked.

“Took up an AR-15 and shot to death five people, three of them children,” replied the detective grimly. “What do you know about it?” he asked.

Alicia just imagined the heartbreak of the families of the victims and the perpetrator and felt sick. She shook her head sadly. “Detective,” she told him, “my hands are clean. I'm not even on the masthead.”

“I know,” he said, and smiled in relief. “The DA is really going to stick it to Mr. Berger,” he told her, “make an example of him. This lack of personal regard, of basic civility, is destroying our society; it has got to stop.”

“I know nothing of this matter, Detective,” said Alicia. “May I go now?”

“Yes ma'am,” the detective replied, opening the apartment door. “You know, if I'd known before today that you were on the loose, I would've been on your doorstep,” he said wistfully.

“Keep talking, Detective,” she told him with a smile, “and you might get an invitation to the wedding.”

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BALCONES FAULT by Jonni Dunn

Her father yelled himself hoarse calling her name until nightfall. The next morning, word spread that six-year-old Mindy Persons had disappeared, driving women to search their hen houses and plumb the dark green water in mossy cisterns with a broomstick. Nearby ranchers on horseback or in Model T Fords joined the hunt through prickly pear and black brush, but fresh coyote scat and circling vultures made them fear the worst.

By mid-day he was driving a borrowed auto with one hand, veering recklessly while sounding the frantic *oogah* of the klaxon horn to alert his wife. He turned wide and braked in their swept dirt yard, skidding to a halt. His wife ran out the screen door of the farm house, and he shouted over the motor's clatter.

"We found her! She fell down the sinkhole! Come on!"

No one could remember a time when the sinkhole wasn't there, a deep cavity yawning abruptly out of the rocky terrain, its floor littered with skeletons of wildlife that had fallen in. Centuries before any settlers' wagons struggled over the land, underground water had inexorably dissolved a thick layer of porous limestone until the surface collapsed under its own weight into the void. The result was a cavern open to the sky on a massive geological shift called the Balcones Fault. Roughly bisecting Texas north to south, the fault produces stark contrasts—wet black land with pines and magnolias edging east into Louisiana but mesquites, sagebrush, and dry high plains sweeping into the west.

By the time the child's parents got to the sinkhole, automobiles and a troop of men and horses were drawn up at its rim. He led her mother where she could lean over to see a thin arm barely moving in a sunlit crescent on the floor below. Smelling like days-old sweat and hand-rolled cigarettes, he held his wife to his chest, but when she looked up, he saw her eyes demanded their child from him. He glanced away as he answered.

"They've been putting something together for me. I'm going down there and get her."

A file of men made their way to the sinkhole, shouldering the sagging line of tow chains with links the size of a fist. There was a loop made with clevis hooks in one end, the other attached to the frame of an automobile, and after inserting both feet into the make-shift stirrup, her father slid over the ledge with the help of neighbors. They signaled the driver to lower him by backing slowly.

He knew her leg was broken the moment he lifted her skirt and saw the bone leaning against the silvery caul of skin barely holding it inside. It turned his stomach, but he scooped Mindy up with his left arm, and she grabbed him about the neck with all her might, crying in agony at the hanging weight of her limb as the rescue rig spun in its dizzying ascent. At the sinkhole's rim, men lay on their bellies, reached for the little girl, and pulled her from his grasp. Then he and his wife rushed her to the only doctor in town, the borrowed Model T running hot at forty miles an hour.

After sedating her with ether, the doctor set the leg from hip to ankle in strips of coarse cotton cloth infused with plaster of Paris. Then he and Mindy's father sat on the physician's front porch in the summer heat and smoked cigarettes, their faces blank while they waited for her to wake up. Her father was grateful the other hadn't said what they both were thinking: she'd likely die of an infection or a blood clot he had no way to treat, and the break was so severe she might never walk again. Even if she did, she'd limp badly.

It was almost sundown when the child emerged from the fog of sedation. Washed and soothed, she was wearing one of the physician's old undershirts as a gown. Her eyelids fluttered, and she struggled to sit up in her mother's arms.

"Papa?" Mindy's croak roused her father from dozing in his chair.

"Papa? Did you save the man, too?"

Her sharp little face was drugged but earnest, and her parents glanced at each other in amused surprise. Her mother murmured indulgently as she smoothed the child's wispy white hair, "What man is that, Mindy?"

"The man who's asleep down there."

Her father shot his wife a startled look, but then his brow rippled, and he shook his head slightly before he stroked the child's arm with a gentle forefinger.

"Did you have a bad dream, baby girl?"

She responded in fierce certainty. "No, Papa! He gave me a drink out of a silver bottle!" The little girl paused only a moment, then finished softly, "But he's asleep now."

The doctor barely smothered his relieved grin. "That's just the ether talking."

Mindy stared at the unfamiliar cast, pale as death, as if trying to remember.

The day before, she and her older sister Ethel had gotten into a squabble. Soundly defeated, Mindy ran from the swept yard, pouting, then ducked through the barbed wire onto parched grazing land.

In her hand-me-down cotton print dress, she marched onward, gesturing and muttering irritably to herself until she noticed a kettle of vultures circling in the hazy sky. She was only a child, but she knew what it meant—something dead, and from the number of vultures floating above, something big.

Finally, she came across the cow's carcass, dark with flies. Bickering vultures hopped strategically for their turn, puncturing the bloated flesh or tugging entrails out of gaping orifices. Occasionally, the birds rose on thermal currents but then descended again with renewed purpose.

The smell made Mindy hold her nose and run, glancing back in fear the vultures might swoop down on her from the sky. She slammed into a boulder, skinning her bent elbow, and landed on her backside.

In the shadow of the rock, Mindy found herself face to face with a jackrabbit. His golden-brown eyes were enormous and his fuzzy body tall on his haunches. He sat frozen. His long ears flicked. Nostrils flared. Time stood still as they regarded each other.

Suddenly, she sprang to her feet and gave chase, zigzagging between boulders. The jackrabbit veered sharply on his large flat feet, and, too late, Mindy saw the sinkhole's rim. She skidded on gravel and then tumbled in, shrieking before hitting the cone of debris below near the edge of the shadows.

What came next was terrible pain—her leg was bent at an unnatural angle. Her screams echoed against the sinkhole's walls.

Then a figure limped out of the darkness.

The man was stooped slightly, his left arm held across his chest by a brocade vest fashioned into a sling. As he moved into the circle of sunlight, Mindy saw what looked like a large red flower painted on his white shirt beneath the sling.

"Hey, little girl." He had a pretty face, almost as pretty as a lady's, except for the stubble. His black hair was recently-barbered, long on top, short on the sides. Uncombed, it hung in his face, and he swept it aside with his right hand.

Making soothing sounds, he staggered closer, but Mindy shrank away and begged him not to touch her leg. With effort, he lowered himself to sit near her on the mound of sand and bones, only the toes of his shiny patent leather shoes catching the sunlight. He brushed some bleached animal bones aside, his voice raspy but gentle.

"I'm Billy. Billy Margolis. Somebody's gonna come looking for you, ain't they? Then they'll find the both of us! That's—good."

The man's eyes reminded Mindy of the elusive jackrabbit's as he went on.

"I'm hurt, too—been shot and broke my arm when I fell in here. Your folks'll be here soon, though, and it'll all be fine."

Mindy suddenly realized in shame she'd peed her pants, but Billy didn't seem to notice. He began to rock slowly, his expression dazed as he started to sing. She didn't know what the ranks of death he sang about were. Figurative language wasn't part of her world, which required practicality and struggle. Still, she always remembered that song, and in years to come, she sometimes hummed it to herself while pouring another glass of liquor.

The man broke off singing as if needing to hear another human voice.

"How'd you come to fall in here?"

If Mindy stayed still, her pain didn't get worse, and talking helped. When she spoke, she couldn't think of hurting.

"I seen a jackrabbit staring at me, and he dared me to chase him."

Billy laughed, then coughed, a sound half-choked, and Mindy thought maybe it hurt to laugh.

“What’s your name, girl? Are you Alice who fell down the rabbit hole?” The dark-eyed man dropped his lids again, once again swaying breathlessly.

In irritation, she replied, “I don’t know no Alice in a rabbit hole! My name’s Perminda Persons, but my folks calls me Mindy.”

He smiled without opening his eyes. “Perminda. That’s elegant. You hang on to that for your grown-up life. Mindy’s just right for a little girl who falls down sinkholes and has adventures. Want me to tell you about Alice and the white rabbit?”

The wounded man spent a long time telling her a disjointed story about tea parties, a mad hatter, and a queen who wanted heads to roll. His voice rasped in thirst because he’d been yelling for help, he said, since dawn.

Mindy drifted in and out until at some point she realized the light was fading. The sky above the sinkhole had turned from straw-colored to coral, then lavender, then dark blue, and finally black.

When she started to cry, Billy’s voice came to her, floating through the darkness.

“Mindy, listen to me now. The full moon’s gonna be here soon. It was here last night, and it’ll visit us tonight, too, so you look up and be watching for it.”

Her eyes grew accustomed to the gathering night as stars blinked to life, scattered across the black dome above them. When the opalescent moon finally rose and passed straight overhead, it spilled silver down the sinkhole’s walls, and the cache of bones began to shimmer like carvings of ivory and ice.

Billy sighed and leaned to one side, gasping. From his pocket he pulled a silver flask, its polished surface gleaming in the moonlight. Mindy stared at it in wonder, and Billy’s fever-bright eyes glittered, too, as he wrestled one-handedly with the stopper. He took a sip, then offered it to her with a trembling reach.

“You need to drink this magic elixir,” he whispered. “Maybe it’ll make you grow real tall like Alice, and you can climb out of this hole and get help for us.” His lips curled in a smile, as if caught in a hopeful fantasy.

Mindy gripped the flask with both hands. She was so thirsty she didn’t care about the taste—an after-sweetness that made her mouth water. She drank deeply, then passed it back.

Billy sang to her after that, songs that tangled together in one long sleepy tune. When he wasn’t singing, the night was eerily quiet. Once a coyote yipped somewhere nearby, and Mindy thought she could hear cicadas churring, but it might’ve been the rush of her own blood in the silence. Later, there came the sound of Billy’s breathing, slow but with a small wheeze. The silver bottle flashed once again in the moonlight as he tipped it to his lips for the last few drops.

“Mindy, you ever heard about Lazarus in the Bible? His saint’s day is the 17th of December—same as *my* birthday.”

He sounded like he was offering her another story, but Mindy had a headache now and her stomach was turning, so she didn't answer. His voice broke, each sentence more breathless than the last.

"Lazarus got sick. His sisters—sent for Jesus. He told his friends Lazarus was asleep, but he really meant he'd….died, you see. When Jesus got there, one sister said, 'If you'd come sooner, my brother wouldn't be dead.'"
If only help had come sooner, Mindy dizzily speculated as she watched Billy continue doggedly, his body struggling to do the only work it had left.

"Jesus saw them crying, and he cried, too. He said to open the grave, and they said, 'No! The buzzards will smell him!' But finally they did, and Jesus called, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And Lazarus—he came out. Alive!"

Another smile bloomed on Billy's face, wide and joyful in spite of the pain. He sucked in a deep breath. "I saw a painting of Lazarus coming out of his grave, Mindy. Mary Magdalene's robe was red, so—red."

Like the red flower spreading on Billy's shirt, she thought as she drifted in and out of a drowsy stupor, and later heard him whispering, humming, maybe praying.

The moonlight drifted away, and deep darkness settled again. Billy told her goodnight, and she watched him drag himself to the cavern wall where he'd already made a pillow out of his suit jacket. She heard his pain in every movement as he rolled on his side to slip the empty flask into his trousers pocket with a low groan and a sob.

The rest of the night passed as patchwork. She came in and out of consciousness, sometimes crying out his name, and Billy would murmur something soft in reply.

Just as morning's pale light began to creep into the sinkhole, Mindy sensed he'd fallen asleep. "Lazarus, come forth," she murmured and then slipped back into her own slumber.

The next she knew, someone was calling her name from the bright daylight. Mindy woke with a pounding headache and a thirst that made her mouth ache. When she moved her leg without thinking, it screamed at her, and so she cried out for Billy.

But the man in the sinkhole slept on. *He's so tired. He sang and talked all night long just to keep me from being scared. And he's hurt so bad.*

Then there were many men's voices above—hooting, calling, growling like bears—and she cried until she gagged, but after her mother called down, all she wanted was her mama.

Out of the blinding circle of light overhead, her father appeared like an angel descending and lifted her into his arms. It hurt so terribly when he moved her, she couldn't think. They were spinning, rising, rising—she was no longer a child but an animal turned wild with pain and fear.

Only after the morphine, when the worst of the agony had slipped away, could she remember. She asked whether they'd saved the man in the sinkhole, the man who was asleep down there.

He was just a dream, they told her. That's what they always said whenever she asked about him in the weeks ahead. The child's refusal to believe it made them angry and strangely ill at ease.

Mindy Persons had been waiting tables at the run-down truck stop and diner east of town for over a year. Old Man Duffy hadn't hired her at the Wide Spot Cafe even though she was fifteen years old—there were plenty of grown women who needed the job worse than she did. At twelve, she'd quit school, never a particularly happy place for a disabled girl whose feisty personality had cultivated a sharp tongue, and since the truck stop was just a mile walk from her older sister Ethel's house, she'd grabbed the only job on offer.

When Ethel married and had a baby, Mindy had gone to help her and somehow just stayed on, but she soon wanted a job so she could get out of the house—Ethel and her husband had added another crying baby. She figured that way she could have a little money and do what passed for fun in the Depression's stark times.

The teenage girl liked the look of Carl Buckholtz the first time he came into the truck stop. The little waitress studied his broad chest and large hands. He was cleaner than most men she met there.

"What can I get ya?"

In his mid-twenties and married but with a roving eye, he grinned at her much too familiarly.

"Well, what ya got, little lady?"

She paused only a moment.

"Mister, I got anything you need."

Carl told her he serviced slot machines in local gas stations and delivered soda water to businesses over a three-county area, but he also did some mechanic work on the side, helping desperate farmers unfreeze gears. He lived in Refugio, but he traveled a circuit all week, getting home late most nights except the ones when he didn't get home at all.

Some of those nights he and Mindy spent in the back seat of his car, but there were other women in other towns, and they had their own houses, he told her. Still, he said he liked her blue eyes, white-blond hair, and the sass she dished out—even if she was a cripple.

Several weeks into their relationship, Mindy woke him one night, flailing in terror. Carl groaned at once again being roused out of a sound sleep.

"What in the hell is wrong with you, Little Bit? You dreaming about being in the sinkhole with that man again? You got to get that sorted out or I'm gonna go sleep with somebody who don't have nightmares."

Wiping the tears from her face, Mindy pushed her silvery blond hair behind her ears.

"It seems real, Carl. I know it's just a bad dream. Mama said it was. But how come I—?"

Drawing his forearm over his eyes and trying to return to sleep, Carl grumbled his solution.

"Easy enough to find out the truth. Just go back in the sinkhole and take a look."

She immediately refused, but from then on it became a battle of wills, with him eventually bullying her into guarded surrender to his plan by threatening to leave her. They would go out to the sinkhole after dark so as not to be caught on Wynans' ranch. Old Man Wynans was a powerful figure in Caraway County, and Carl said he had no desire to aggravate him during these hard years of the Depression—he was lucky to have a job.

At twilight, Mindy intended to navigate from her old home place to the sinkhole, but she was heart-hurt when she saw the abandoned, graying farmhouse where she had spent her early childhood, its familiar screen door aimlessly swaying.

It was painful to remember her mama had been forced to leave the farm after her papa died, and she and Mindy's just-older sister had gone to live with a widowed aunt while her two brothers had gone on the road, looking for work. They hadn't been heard from in months.

Carl had explained his simple plan to Mindy, but she couldn't let herself think too deeply about it or she might back out. When they arrived in the darkening pasture, she felt the gaping presence of the sinkhole even before she caught sight of it, and Carl let out a low whistle when he saw what lay before them in the headlights of his car.

He wound the rope around her waist twice and tied it off in a series of knots with the rest of the rope centered in front of her chest and face, then handed her a flashlight.

"Stick this down your front. No, turn it on first, Mindy."

The beam illuminated her sharp little face from beneath, rendering it ghoulish. Positioning her hands on the rope, he instructed her.

"All right now. Always hold the rope with both hands in front of you. You'll go in straight up and down if'n you keep it there. I'm gonna help you over the edge and lower you real slow. Then I'll get in the auto and pull forward and let you down the rest of the way. When you get on the floor, I'll let out more slack so you'll have some play in the rope to walk around."

In her rush to show him she was fearless, Mindy dropped to her knees, and started to scoot toward the lip of the sinkhole.

"Hold up! Hold up, girl! Let me lower you first. You'll just be dangling there for a minute, but don't get scared. I'll drive the auto forward and let you down some more."

Suddenly, she wanted to tell him she was afraid, but pride wouldn't let her admit it. Planting his feet firmly with the rope secured in his hands, he nodded to her to slide over the edge. The sensation of hanging in the air with nothing beneath her feet made her gasp and grab the rope in terror. Maybe using a rope was foolish—she vaguely remembered her papa and the men had used an iron chain when they rescued her.

She also recalled peeing her pants all those years ago and feared she was about to do it again. Mindy hung in the darkness that gathered everywhere around her like black smoke, and sensed the nothingness beneath.

There was a sudden lurch as she began to descend again, and the flashlight in the neck of her dress shone upward, revealing the creamy, uneven cavern wall beside her. She sank more deeply

into the earth, questioning when she would ever reach the cavern floor. Then her downward motion stopped, and she swayed in the semi-darkness.

Carl called down to her.

“How much further you got to go?”

Now aware that she couldn’t give him guidance about what was below with the flashlight stuck in her clothes, Mindy yelled up to him.

“I can’t see nothing yet. I need to look down with the—.”

Holding on with one hand to the rope in front of her, she pulled on the flashlight, but it caught on the neck of her dress and fell out of her wildly snatching hands. She lurched backward without her grip on the rope to right her, and she heard the flashlight clank on the floor below. Frantically putting her hands to her belly, Mindy grasped at the rope and fiercely clung onto it, pulling herself upright.

“I dropped it! I dropped the flashlight!”

“Is it still on? Can you see it?”

Finally daring to look down, Mindy saw the still-burning flashlight lying on the ground beneath, but she was unable to judge how far it was to the floor. Carl continued to question her, growing more and more angry in his tone until she mastered her panic and tartly instructed him.

“Shut up, Carl, and go let me down about a car’s length at a time! That way, if I get there sooner than I expect, it won’t be a hard fall.”
Mindy knew what a hard fall onto the limestone floor had done to her leg nine years ago.

No reply from Carl told her he’d trotted back to the vehicle to move it forward ten feet or so. There was again a lurch and then a twirling of her body that induced nausea. She continued to look down at the flashlight, its illumination much greater in total darkness. Her feet were tingling, and Mindy realized they were going to sleep.

Finally, her feet made contact with the ground, but the loss of sensation in them made her collapse onto the scrabble of debris, two lumps of numb flesh at the end of her legs. The rope continued to run down before her in sizzling loops and then stopped.

“You there now?”

Carl’s voice sounded strange, filtering down into the sinkhole.

“Yeah, but I ain’t got no feeling in my feet. Let me get ‘em woke up so I can stand.”

He sounded aggravated when he yelled at her again.

“Well, hurry up and see if that dead man’s there or not, Mindy. We can’t be out here in this pasture all night. I don’t want Old Man Wynans walking up on me with a shotgun.”

Mindy massaged her feet to get a tingling needles and pins response in them, then pushed herself up to a standing position and dusted the sand off her legs. The smell of the sinkhole was quite familiar, the scent of her dreams—both stuffy and yet dankly pungent with the skeletal remains of animals.

She gauged her relation to the surface by the slash of light from the car's headlights across the opening of the sinkhole. *I was over here. Maybe. And he was sitting right here by me. No, more that way.*

She stooped for the flashlight, and the cavern shifted around her as its beam pierced the dark.

Billy had limped away from her and had lain down somewhere nearby, but where was the starting point? Where was she lying in the cavern nine years ago? She realized she'd have to walk the cavern's roughly circular interior to find him if he was actually there.

"Mindy?"

"Leave me alone, Carl! I'm looking."

She picked up the skull of an animal and placed it as a marker, then began a slow clockwise sweep. Carefully scanning the area lying before her with the flashlight, Mindy came across piles of bones—possums, coyotes, and deer. In the back of her mind, she wondered if the marker skull belonged to the wide-eyed jackrabbit who had dodged a fall into the hole when she chased him. Perhaps he hadn't been so lucky the next time.

Her own breathing was amplified, and in her head a voice sang and echoed hollowly in the sinkhole.

"The minstrel boy to the war is gone. In the ranks of death you will find him."

And then she did find him. So close she was almost on him before it registered, Mindy saw in the flashlight's yellow beam the gray remains of a human being. She backed away in horror, noting in her scrambling flight a solitary thick shock of dark hair drooping on the skull. Breathing shallowly and making a low growling sound in her throat, she forced herself to reapproach cautiously.

Nothing there was the Billy she remembered—except maybe the hair that had hung in his face. His disintegrating clothes were dusty. The white shirt with the bright red tropical flower on its front was in bits and tatters, discolored now with a dark chestnut stain on what was left.

Mostly he was bones with the thinnest layer of ashen human tissue draping over some of the hollows of what had been his face. The girl stared her fill, allowing the sight to register in grisly detail.

He had not been a dream, after all, but she sensed he could become a nightmare. She shined light on his eyeless skull, and inexplicably, the fear melted away as she remembered even more about him.

A moment of aching sorrow and regret welled up in her as she put together the fragments of her memories to recognize he was hurt so badly that night. She recalled his labored breathing and his groans that echoed her own, interspersed with gentle words of comfort to her. Billy had needed

help, and she'd been just a child with none to give. Then she'd let the grown people convince her he wasn't real. Life was easier for them if he wasn't real.

Carl's voice burst harshly from the reality above.

"Mindy! Is he there or not? Hurry up!"

She abruptly turned her flashlight in another direction, plunging the body into darkness once again. Suddenly, Mindy realized someone must have longed for Billy that night. Back then, her child's mind hadn't thought of his connections to anyone in the world above them. Now she sensed surely there was someone who didn't know what had happened to him and had been desperate to find him. Whoever it was would still want him back, even almost ten years later.

Mindy decided to keep him. There was so little that belonged to her, and even though she determined she would never come to this place again, he was hers, known to her alone.

No, not known to her alone! He'd said he was shot. Whoever shot him knew Billy was there—but didn't want him. Surely that meant he was hers.

She made up her mind. Gasping for the deep breath her lungs demanded of the stale air, she hollered up to the surface.

"Nothing here, Carl. Bring me up."

He didn't respond for a moment, but then his voice was cold as he jeered at her.

"You just said 'Leave me alone, Carl.' Maybe I'll leave you alone, little girl—down there. Maybe I'll let you spend another night in the sinkhole. What do you think about that?"

Mindy knew he was capable of doing exactly what he'd said. Carl enjoyed making her uncomfortable—his treatment of her had started to include occasional physical abuse and assault. Stubbornly, she made no response.

"Mindy?"

She knew Carl thought she was calling his bluff.

She calmly turned off the flashlight, plunging herself and the corpse into blackness.

For the next several minutes, she could hear Carl's voice above, periodically yelling to her in reluctant concern. In total darkness with Billy's skeleton nearby, she drew a macabre strength from the secrecy. She was the only one who knew.

Eventually, she heard the car, and then the rope near her began to slither. At least she hoped it was the rope. It rose up near her, and in supreme self-control, she refused to turn on the light to make sure a snake wasn't preparing to crawl up her body. Then there was an abrupt yank at her waist, and she grabbed onto the rope and felt herself ascend through the darkness.

Mindy turned the flashlight on and shined it where she believed the body lay. It took only a moment to orient herself as she rose, and she saw the corpse again, now that she knew what she was looking for.

She remembered Billy limping out of the darkness to comfort her, his hand to his chest in a gesture of courtly respect, his face so beautiful. Her memory was filled with jackrabbits and tea parties from *Alice in Wonderland*, a sparkling silver bottle in the opal moonlight, a heavenly taste of liquor she'd never re-experienced in all she'd consumed since, the sound of his singing haunting the unexplored recesses of her mind.

"Hey, little girl. I'm Billy."

Mindy turned the light off and rose to the surface.

She recognized Carl had stopped the car, and then she heard him tramping closer. Her disembodied hand flailed on the lip of the sinkhole. He reached down and grabbed her by the rope around her waist, and between the two of them, she reached the surface, flopping onto the overhang. She lay trembling in exertion and anxiety as Carl laughed in bitter amusement.

"So he *was* just a dream, huh, Little Bit? Your singing man with the silver bottle? Well, that's good to know. Now maybe you can stop waking me up."

I shoulda got that silver bottle. But I couldn't touch him. Just couldn't.

Once they were back in the car, Carl casually remarked, "Oh, I didn't mention this before 'cause I figured you'd never go down there if'n I did—somebody told me there's snakes in the Wynans sinkhole. I guess you didn't see none?"

Her father wasn't sure what he was doing there. After catching one of the raw-boned mules in the pasture, he'd traveled bareback across the countryside to Wynans' place and the sinkhole. He hadn't slept well after he got home from the doctor's house the previous night. Mindy's insistent, hallucinating concern for a sleeping man in the sinkhole had troubled his own dreams. Unable to name what drove him to return, he slid off the mule and made his way through the boulders surrounding the sinkhole. The scar made by the scraping of the rescue chain was visible on the limestone ledge where he had descended.

Peering into the abyss in dread and horror, he called into its depths. "Anybody down there? Hey! Anybody there?"

The sound rattled inside the sinkhole, but there was no response. He walked around the ledge to get a different sightline. The interior of the sinkhole was dim, but he could see the mound of bones and debris he'd scrambled over yesterday to get to his child

He scanned the floor of the sinkhole from above, but the edges of it were deep in gloom so his eyes began to find many shadowy shapes, all of them possibly Mindy's sleeping man—curled in a fetal position or lounging supine with his hands beneath his head or with a bent arm lying across his chest. They were only a trick of the light, perhaps, and her father no longer trusted his eyes.

A hot breeze that would become a blast furnace later in the day came out of the west, producing a pair of dust devils. Like miniature tornados, they swirled furiously across the landscape, stirring up the pasture's parched stubble and loose sand, and winding their way erratically toward the ring of boulders. Caught up in the vortex was a spherical cluster of dry broom weed that tumbled across the pasture, bounded atop a boulder and then leapt from it as the dust devils drew

up within themselves and vanished into the sky. The ball of broom weed rolled crazily toward the mouth of the sinkhole and fell in.

He imagined his daughter's body plummeting the same way into the cavern's emptiness until she landed on the cone of debris, causing such terrible injury. But she was safe now. He had saved her, and Mindy would be coming home soon.

Grabbing a handful of the mule's mane, he pulled himself onto its back and gave it a kick in the ribs to return to the farm and his other children.

The ball of broom weed on the sinkhole's floor somersaulted lazily, stopped, then rolled until it came to the gray face of Billy Margolis, staring as if taken unaware. Some hours later, a swirl of hot wind disturbed the air in the sinkhole enough to send the broom weed over his head. It rotated once and came to rest against the sinkhole's limestone wall on the eastern edge of the Balcones Fault.