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Bartleby Snopes



A Literary Magazine of Fiction

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For more information about our contributors, please visit the Archive section of our website. If you would like to contact one of our authors, please let us know.

Editor’s Note

Welcome to the second issue of *Bartleby Snopes*. The release of this issue marks one year for us. Somehow, in spite of a huge increase in the number of submissions, we’ve managed to be one of the swiftest markets to respond to your submissions, and we’ve managed to keep our responses personal. Although this has sometimes caused a bit of backlash from a writer or two, we’re proud of what we do, and the general response has been overwhelmingly positive. The quality of the submissions we have received during the past six months has been mind-blowing. Putting this issue together was quite a difficult experience. In keeping with the tradition established in the first issue, I decided to include just our twenty favorite stories. I had to leave out many great pieces, but the end result is something I think that readers and writers alike will be pleased to see.

As the cover photo suggests, we are going somewhere with all of this, but we’re not quite sure where it is just yet. As we’re waiting to figure it out, let’s enjoy the beautiful journey.

After the first night of bombing destroyed his work at the University and the second night destroyed his life, he made his first specimen case from the heap that was his home. Its glass front taken from a large picture frame from which he had removed the photograph showing his smiling family: a proud husband, sitting stiff and straight, a wasp-waisted woman and an open-mouthed baby upon her lap. Since then, his collection maintained a line that crossed the gulf between the time before the war and now, a constancy that transmitted and each specimen its receiver.

As long as he could keep the connection alive, they remained as in the photograph and were never the broken forms dug from the rubble and covered with polite blankets.

Hidden and safe from the world above, he sat at a flimsy table, blew on his tea and tried to ignore the constant complaints of his stomach. Withdrawing a handful of nails from a battered tin, he bent his head forward to examine each one in the gas lamp's light. A low hum from above stopped the man's work. He pointed an ear toward the sound, contemplating its distance.

Thump-da.

Thump-da.

Thump-da.

The falling bombs sounded like the stomps of an angry giant. Its destructive footfalls marched toward the man below. He put his head down and covered his tea with his palm. Dust and stucco fell at each bomb's landing. The giant passed over him and its steps grew more distant. He finished his tea with a gulp and brought his handful of matching nails back to his workshop.

Before going to bed, he made the nightly inspection of his collection. On each case, like a tombstone inscription, the words "Lesser Common Black Beetle" were written above two dates. He opened a case, looked inside, then moved to another, then another.

When everything was right, he stepped back and let the collection vibrate as one. He felt the humming tones modulating in his chest.

"Is that you son?"

...

"That's a good boy."

...

"Did you now?"

...

"Where's your mum? Put her on." Standing before his collection, the bombers above and their endless war disappeared. He forgot about horrors seen and loneliness endured. The grumbling of his stomach passed unnoticed.

"Alright. Good-bye, darling, 'till tomorrow."

The grey light that emanated from the collection grew dull as he shuffled to another corner of the room. He sat on the bare mattress and removed his coat, slapping at it to shake away the dust. He winced as he pulled off the tattered black jumper. Forming it into a pillow, he quickly fell asleep.

The next day brought a low, lead-coloured sky. Hanging above the man, it looked unfinished, as if God had spent his days of creation fixated on arranging all the trees, placing the earth worms and song birds just so and balancing every piece of broken home and smouldering heap but forgot to finish the sky. Above the wreck of a dead city and one little grey-haired man, God's great drop cloth hung.

The man held a lidded jar above his head and carefully stepped amongst the wet, broken corpses of buildings. Their masonry and office furniture viscera spilled into the once wide avenue.

He entered a destroyed library and squinted in the weak light that came through the glassless windows. He eased himself to his knees with a groan. He licked his finger tips and carefully picked up a book by its corner. Studying the exposed area and setting the book aside, he repeated this again and again.



He moved a large book with both hands gripping a corner. Beneath black flowers of mildew, its cover showed snowy mountains. He hummed with pleasure when he saw the beetle, its black lacquered back shimmering in the gloom. His fingers moved with a spider's diligence. He scooped up the creature and held it to his ear. It protested with a sharp clicking, its only, and useless, defence against the world. He pronounced its Latin name like a priest giving absolution. The insect slid to the bottom of the jar, and he inspected it with a grin.

Back in his room below, he sat at his table with a cup of tea and a display case. Inside it, a dozen beetles floated on pins centimetres above its label. He dropped a piece of ether-soaked paper into the jar containing the three beetles he had found that day.

He took one and introduced a pin through its carapace, repeating this with the other two.

He tore a scrap of card until he had three more labels. Resting his right hand on the wrist of his left, he wrote carefully with a sliver of pencil lead the exact same words he had written a thousand times before. Order name. Family name. Locality. The only variation on these cards, Date.

Once, he returned the case with its three new specimens to its place, the collection vibrated. The air charged with static and her voice called to him.

"What's that dear? What's the matter?" he asked.

Thump-da. His room shook angrily in response. He stared at the ceiling, his mouth open.

Thump-da. The tea cup danced off the table and shattered.

"Darling, I can't hear you!"

Thump-da. The wall behind his cases leapt out and—

He awoke to quiet stillness. He dragged himself from the pile of bricks and his shattered collection. He pulled a display pin from the meat of his palm and a pearl of dark red blood welled up.

He tugged at his ear and spoke a soundless, "Hello. Hello? Hello?" His specimens scattered like black rice made their white labels meaningless. He curled up beneath his coat and wept until he fell asleep.

Days later, the bright red scratches and cuts had darkened into a patchwork of scabs. His hearing came back and with it a constant high-pitched whistle. From the collapsed wall, he retrieved and repaired as many specimen cases as he could. Now when it rained, trickling waterfalls made chalky mud upon the floor. But still, he made his morning pilgrimage to look beneath decaying books for tiny black beetles, add them to his collection and keep the connection alive.

Editor's Note

This Collection Transmits was originally published on the website in May 2009.

Photograph © Katie Reing

Visit Katie and view more of her photos at <http://www.flickr.com/eightk>

Chapter I

The town had been built over 150 years ago about a half mile from the river and had remained pretty much the same ever since.

Children grew up and moved out of the town and sometimes they moved back into the town but the town pretty much remained the same.

Therefore the people of the town were horrified when they woke up one morning and found a gigantic pit, deep and wide and long enough to fit a large building in, in their backyards.

There was no sign of any construction equipment and no heavy duty caterpillar treads and no explosion overnight to indicate how the gigantic pit might have been dug, and the town did not have the resources to fill in the hazardous eyesore.

Federal or State emergency money would be required to fill in the pit and to restore the natural, riverside vegetation.

Chapter II

The husband stood at the edge of The Pit, thinking how easy it would be to "end it all."

The Pit seemed to the husband to be an obligation to destroy himself, placed there by some superior being or life form; if not God, per se, then something akin to God.

The husband looked to the right and to the left. It was a rare moment when *he* was the only one visible at the pit.

Of course, the Pit was a month old now so some of the novelty had worn off. The National Press Corps with their photographers had come and gone.

But the husband might not really be invisible. There were plenty of views from the houses all around him out their back windows.

But even if the husband *had* enjoyed perfect solitude and privacy, he wouldn't have jumped into the Pit at this moment.

"No," the husband announced to himself. "I must take Anna and Rebecca with me."

Chapter III

The man considered the possibility of leaping into the Pit while holding hands with Rebecca and Anna and decided that it wouldn't work.

Rebecca was only a five year old child of course and very impressionable; so *she* would accept anything her father told her. The man would only have to tell Rebecca to close her eyes as they leaped and Rebecca would be perfectly comfortable.

But Anna would not accept her husband's view that the Pit was a supernatural evil. Anna would insist that man could repair the Pit with equipment and manufactured materials and she would resist the man's death order.

Therefore the only solution for the man was to lure Anna and Rebecca to the edge of the Pit and to shove them into the Pit, trusting entirely to his own judgment.

Chapter IV

While Rebecca was outside playing, kicking a ball around with the neighborhood kids, the husband spoke earnestly with Anna, seeking to persuade Anna to join him and have them both leap into the pit together along with Rebecca.

But Anna stubbornly argued that life was still worth living, that the Pit was manmade and could be eradicated through manmade effort and machinery.

"At the very least, Jack," Anna implored. "We can reconcile living with the Pit, since it didn't swallow the whole town."

But the husband merely shook his head morbidly, in response to all Anna's entreaties and enthusiasms.

"No, Anna," the husband negated, shaking his head discontentedly. "The Pit is being measured by the scientists and the engineers on a daily basis and it is growing by 20 feet in diameter on a daily basis, so that even the safety fences erected around the Pit are constantly being threatened and constantly having to be moved.

In a week or two, or a month at most, all the houses and public buildings will be at the bottom of the Pit. Why delay the inevitable, Anna?

Trying in vain to delay the inevitable only makes the suffering worse, especially for children like Rebecca."



"Then we will leave this town, Jack," Anna argued desperately. "We'll go to some other town where there is no Pit.

"It's hopeless, Anna," Jack cried stridently. "There is no escaping a judgment like this, if not from *God*, then from some supernatural being, for you and I and Rebecca except at the bottom of The Pit.

Think of it, Anna. Whatever made that Pit, all 8,000,000 cubic feet of it, did so soundlessly and almost certainly invisibly, leaving no trace of itself. The soil in the bottom of the Pit and along the sides of the Pit is pure. There are no traces of manmade chemicals or manmade metals in that soil.

And this gigantic pit was created overnight, probably in a split-second, all at once.

There is no retreating from such a supernatural force to another town or anywhere else.

The three of us must be masters of our fate and leap into the Pit.

We three shall be the first to leap into the Pit and the rest of the town, thus inspired and given courage by our example, shall join us at the bottom of the Pit.

And thus Anna, immense and unnecessary suffering shall be avoided because everyone in the town shall be lying at the bottom of the Pit, dead and feeling nothing."

Chapter V

The next day, Anna suggested a compromise.

"Jack. Why don't we construct our own personal fence around the house?

I have a feeling that the Pit is going to just keep growing and then *stop*, when it reaches the house."

This remark from Anna made Jack very angry.

"Anna, how can you *possibly know* that the Pit will stop growing when it reaches our house?

What *evidence* do you have that the Pit will stop growing?"

The scientists and the engineers have studied the Pit and they have found *no evidence* that the Pit will stop growing.

Anna, you and I and Rebecca need to jump in the Pit *immediately*, while our courage is still high.

Each day that we wait, Anna, it will be harder to jump into the Pit."

Chapter VI

We have a large property, Jack," Anna replied calmly. "Let's just build the fence 30 feet from the edge of the house.

That way if the Pit should grow under the fence overnight, you said that the pit only grows 20 feet every 24 hours, it still will not have reached the house.

And then I promise you when we see the Pit extending under the fence, you and I and Rebecca will jump into the Pit.

Jack very reluctantly agreed to the plan.

"I think that that is a very bad idea, Anna, but I suppose that I *must* agree to your plan.

After all, I can't throw you into the Pit against your will.

But I warn you, Anna, that delaying will just make it that much *harder* to jump into the Pit when the time comes."

And so very reluctantly, Jack constructed a chain link fence around his house, watching the Pit devour more ground each day and grumbling over the superfluousness of putting up a second fence to separate his house from the Pit.

Chapter VII

But Anna was right.

On the morning that the Pit grew within a few feet of the new fence around the house, it came to a halt and never grew another inch, in all the years that followed that morning.

But that wasn't the end to Anna's worries.

Anna could see that Jack had wanted the three of them to jump into the Pit, just for the oblivion of jumping into the Pit, regardless of the danger that the Pit presented to the three of them and to the community.

Yes, Anna could see that Jack had just wanted to jump into a Pit, *this* Pit or *any* Pit, and that when the Pit had stopped growing and threatening, Jack had been acutely disappointed.

And so even after the Pit stopped growing, during all those years, Anna never slept well at night.

From the day that the Pit stopped growing onward, Anna always slept with one eye open as it were, in case Jack should grab her and Rebecca while they were sleeping, drag them down to the edge of the Pit, and hurl them into the Pit.

Editor's Note

The Pit was originally published on the website in June 2009.

Photograph © Katie Reing

More than five hundred feet above sea level, the spectacular view of sky and water that Beachy Head offered took Rhys Kenworthy's breath away. The tall, sensible university professor positioned himself on this magical site in Sussex, sharing the fresh, salty air with the creatures that called it home. The chirping and cawing of the gulls sounded like distant, orchestral music.



Rhys had stood atop these chalk white cliffs before, but on this particular evening the sun was setting in broad pink strokes rippling across the sky. Normally a touch of crimson or purple, or a splash of magenta appeared to create a dramatic effect. But now it was pink that reigned supreme, though the expanding darkness was rapidly creeping up. Like a recessive gene, the pink stood no chance; its beauty would soon disappear, succumbing to the more powerful shroud of night.

The day was almost gone and the tourists had returned to their hotel rooms, allowing Rhys to bask in the solitude and the magnificent quiet. After performing in front of classrooms for two decades, quiet was his favorite sound. It was difficult to grasp the fact that someplace not terribly far away car horns were honking and stubborn people were arguing heatedly about inane differences of opinion. As far as Rhys was concerned, he was observing every single thing worth observing in the universe.

Anticipating a blast of cold weather, he dressed in a black wool jacket and cashmere scarf. Relaxed and resigned, he put one hand in his pocket and caressed the candle he brought along for this special night. He would take it out and light it when the sun had sailed off to its resting place.

Rhys knew it was impossible, when feasting one's eyes on this panorama, not to feel philosophical, at least to a certain degree. The setting always struck him as a kind of limbo, a place between life and death. Sacred ground.

A clear image of Simon in his naval uniform came into view. A handsome man with steel blue eyes, a cleft in his chin, and wavy, chestnut-brown hair, Simon loved to make Rhys laugh. It was his greatest pleasure to see that stern, serious expression disintegrate into a silly boyish grin.

"Come here!" a man shouted a short distance away, breaking the sublime silence. "Get over here while there's still some light!"

Rhys cast a quick glance at the body to which the voice belonged: dark-haired and lean, dressed casually in a grey sweatshirt and jeans, looking very much like the students he used to teach. A camera hung from a strap around this one's neck, dangling in front of his torso. He seemed frustrated by whoever didn't want to join him, whoever was standing so far away that Rhys couldn't tell if the figure was male or female, adult or child.

Rhys brought his focus back to the horizon, hoping the tourist would find another spot on which to gaze, someplace far away from him. Instead, the tourist planted himself as close to Rhys's right without inappropriately invading his personal space. "Man, it's really something, isn't it?"

Rhys peered at the stranger's face, younger than it looked from afar. His youthful reddish glow on each cheek almost seemed fluorescent. "Yes," Rhys responded in his gentle, baritone voice. "It is."

"How big is the drop, do you know? Must be a few hundred feet."

"Five hundred thirty," Rhys stated, realizing he sounded like an expert, opening himself up to a barrage of questions he was in no mood to answer.

"Five hundred and thirty," the tourist said with astonishment, taking a few steps toward the rim. "Wow."

"I came here for the quiet," Rhys said, "if you don't mind."

"No problem," the tourist said with sarcasm. "Pretend I'm not here." The men stood in silence for about five seconds. "My girlfriend Kim is afraid to come within a hundred feet," he blurted out. "She's afraid of her own shadow."

Rhys begrudgingly acknowledged the remark with a nod. The tourist continued to step toward the sunset. "You might not want to get so close to the edge," Rhys suggested. "A strong gust of wind once blew a coast guard officer off the top."

Instantly the tourist scurried a good ten feet back. "Thanks," he said. "I'm not a fan of flying unless my seatbelt's on."

"Smart man."

“She’s desperate to get married,” he shared. “Marriage is the one thing *I’m* afraid of.”

“Then avoid it like a virus,” Rhys advised.

“I’m really not sure she’s the right one,” he said.

“Then she’s not the right one,” Rhys stated.

“They say opposites attract but I think a couple should have a few similarities, don’t you?” he asked. “Are you married?”

“I was,” Rhys solemnly said.

“Did you have a lot in common?” he asked, looking at Rhys instead of the horizon even though Rhys continued to look at the horizon instead of *him*.

“Everything,” Rhys said.

“Were you a hundred per cent sure she was the right one?”

“A thousand,” Rhys quietly stated.

“Cool. I’m about forty per cent. That’s why I’m not searching for engagement rings,” he explained, taking his eyes off Rhys and focusing on the view: the smooth, endless ocean, the colorful, darkening sky.

“Do you want to experience all this from a different perspective?” Rhys asked.

“Definitely!” the young man exclaimed, eager for an experience that he could share with his friends back home.

“Lay down on the ground, slowly crawl to the edge. When you get there, put your head over the cliff, and look at the bird’s-eye view.”

“I take it you’ve *been* here before.”

Rhys’s lips formed a crooked grin. “Once or twice,” he said.

The tourist carefully followed Rhys’s instructions. When he made it to the edge, he stared down for a few seconds. Then he seemed to feel some kind of jolt and quickly crawled back several feet before standing up and rushing to safe ground. “Man, that was weird.”

“Tell me why.”

“It was almost like...I don’t know...like I was being lured over the edge.”

“By whom? Or what?”

“I’m not sure, it just felt strange...this bizarre feeling of being pulled even though I wasn’t moving. Like I was under hypnosis.”

“Maybe the dead want company,” Rhys nonchalantly said.

The young man froze for a few eerie seconds. “Is it true?” he asked. “I heard rumors that people come here to jump off, but I didn’t know how much to believe.”

“This happens to be one of the most popular suicide spots in the world,” Rhys explained, “along with the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and the Aokigahara Woods at the base of Mount Fuji. The allure of these cliffs, in addition to the obvious physical beauty, is that the human body will fall at a speed faster than the speed it takes the brain to register pain. So at the moment of impact, you die without feeling the least bit of discomfort.”

“You sure know a lot about this,” the tourist said, suddenly uncomfortable.

“More than five hundred people have taken the plunge. Young, old, rich, poor, sober, soused. Mothers with small children have driven their cars over the edge. Fathers too, deluded parents who convinced themselves they were acting out of love.”

“By killing their kids?” he asked.

“They probably thought they’d be shielding them from the harshness of life,” Rhys explained.

“Demented.”

“Well, life *can* be harsh,” Rhys said, “more for some than others.”

“Life’s tough for everyone, but we don’t jump off cliffs.”

“Of course not,” Rhys said. “Cliff jumping is highly overrated, especially when there’s soccer.”

“Why don’t they put up a fence?”

“Do you think a little barbed wire would stop someone from doing what he wants to do?” Rhys asked.

“Probably not,” he said, nodding his head.

“Most people get a running start,” Rhys explained, “then leap off and plummet to the beach below, although women tend to sit by the very edge and push themselves over, or lay down and roll.” To this day he didn’t know the manner Simon chose. Rhys had been told there was no way to determine this.

“Suicide is against the law, you know,” the young man announced.

“Yes, I believe it is,” Rhys said. “But I never heard of a corpse being arrested, have you?”

The tourist managed an awkward chuckle. “Well, I need to get going. Thanks for the chat.”

“You’re welcome,” Rhys told him. The young man continued up the bluff, almost in slow motion, as if his legs were made of steel. “Young man?”

“Yeah?” he asked, instantly stopping in his tracks.

“Don’t say ‘I do’ until you’re one thousand per cent sure.”

Neither man budged. A rueful smile appeared on the younger one’s face. “Got it,” he said, nodding. “Thanks.”

“But break it to her gently. Rejection could cause her to leap off.”

“Right.”

The tourist stood his ground, gazing at Rhys, oddly drawn to him. “Do you need anything?” he quizzically asked.

Rhys, taken aback, decided to answer this unexpected question with a question. “What could I possibly need?” Then the young man saluted him, as a soldier would salute a sergeant, and he raced away into the rapidly descending darkness.

Tranquility took over once again. Rhys found the last glimmer of pink struggling to survive in the same sky Simon saw at his worst, when he’d lost control, when flying off the edge seemed his only solution. Ten years to the day, and it felt like ten months.

Rhys wondered about the sunset Simon had witnessed. Pink? Orange? Violet? What did he focus on? The pier? The harbor? Newhaven or Brighton? Maybe the lighthouse popping up from the water like a monument. Was it clear enough to see the outline of the Isle of Wight? Rhys always felt close to Simon when he stood here, close and helpless. The hours, the days, the weeks had taken Simon farther and farther from him, but here at Beachy Head, time seemed to freeze.

The magic of the sky, with its ever-changing rainbow of colors, dazzled and baffled him. Why the sunset might be a rich crimson one night and a striking amethyst the next was as mystifying as Simon leaping into eternity. Still, these mighty cliffs, this sublime creation of rock and grass and chalk, with the calm sea so far below and the heavens so close above, brought Rhys a sense of serenity, as if he were a piece of some giant unfinished puzzle.

Unbeknownst to Rhys, Constables Maggie Scudamore and Alan Kerr were making their nightly rounds, inspecting the area, looking for suspicious characters. "It's going to be a cold one," Alan said.

"A finger-numbing one," Maggie agreed. "Just like every night this week." When Alan spotted Rhys Kenworthy standing on the cliff, facing the sea, he kept his eyes on him. "That one over there, he's a bit close to the edge, don't you think?" Alan asked.

"Ah, the university professor," Maggie said, as if Rhys were an old pal.

"You've seen him before?" Alan asked.

"Oh yes," Maggie said. "Spoke to him once. He lingers for about an hour. Not every night, but I'd guess three or four a week."

"I see," Alan said. "We shouldn't worry?"

"I don't think so," she said. Alan nodded as he and Maggie moved on.

When the line separating the sky from the sea became undetectable, when Rhys felt as if he were breathing black fog instead of air, it was time to begin the journey home. But he remained, planted on the ground like a pillar. The cold didn't deter him. After a while, his body adjusted to it. No, it would take a lot more than plunging temperature to deter him tonight.

Rhys couldn't leave the cliffs of Beachy Head just yet. He had one more thing to do.

Editor's Note

Edge of the World was first published on the website in May 2009.

Photograph © Mark File (www.markfile.com)

I was happy to be holding her hand, calloused, wet from the tears that she had wiped off from her bloodshot eyes. Happy to be out of the dinginess that our house held in its bosom, blackened by constant bickering, brawls and beating, much of which came from the man in the house who wasn't even my father, his alcohol breath, the jarring voice that made my mother crumple up in an evasive corner. The smell of unshackled morning air gladdened me every day; it freed my little mind from the sewer of rotting unrest that reeked every night inside the four walls.

I followed my mother around as she moved from place to place, scavenging dirt and refuse. Even in a magnanimous city like Mumbai, we were *bhangis*, a term derogatory but used all the same, for a lower Hindu caste, disparaged, whose identity stemmed from, was besmirched by, its profession: purging the stench of society. For several unforgiving decades we have been doing it with impassive willingness, an inherent surrender. As a jaunty child, I didn't see anything wrong with it, in fact enjoyed it; I got to lounge on soft carpets in people's houses, play with my craggy doll, bask in the comfort of air-conditioning, admire myself in the bathroom mirror as mother scraped the marble and bathed the tiles. The *kachra kona* days were even better; she would sit inside three-walled concrete enclosures, sifting through trash, separating paper from waste and the worthless. The paper was saved while the defecations, its stubborn splotches, were scrubbed off and washed down the drain. I enjoyed the sifting, discovering broken, decrepit but colorful toys, discarded by scions of the affluent that saw no more use for them; curious knick-knacks, unpolished hairpins, brooches, hangers, abandoned cell phones that I loved talking into, making me feel important as I chatted for hours with someone I thought was paying attention; slipping into dispossessed dresses that fit me, soiled, torn yet attractive, while my mother watched, a quiet smile playing on her lips, the spring in my delighted steps, my face gloating over new assets.

My mother seemed calm during the day, unaffected by the constant cleansing of community dregs, unruffled by occasional rudeness; she didn't cringe when people addressed her as *bhangi*, or waved their arrogant fingers of authority at her, or barked profanities in her face; I wondered whether she was injured, had stoically relinquished control over her fate, or was just thankful that there was a job to be done that kept her from extending the anguish from revolting nights. On more tiring days, I would give her a hand, go on my knees and brush away the soaked stains till the browns turned into white again, amuse myself with running water as I hosed, meandering sprays caressing my face. There was something emancipating about the sight of uncontrolled droplets flying through the air, the sound of streams gurgling into dark exits, the wetness under my feet. I loved sitting proudly behind the steering wheel, pretending to take my mother away into a less demanding world while she mopped the insides of cars, sooty from long



trips, discolored with vomit or shoe stains. There was joy in finding rupee bills stuck under the seats or forgotten in the door, and watching expressions of stifled wonder, disbelieving eyes, when my mother handed them back to the owners. One of our employers, impressed by my mother's unflappable integrity and diligence, in a rare gesture of largesse, announced her financial support for my education. That was the first time I saw my mother cry outside the confines of our house.

As a decently placed lawyer, when I look back at those days of scouring grease and excrement, I wonder if my steely determination is genetic. If there is something I did not inherit, it was my mother's honesty, which I had compromised for my profession. She remained a *bhangi* all her life, true to her squalid job, imperturbable in her submission to fate. I might be earning a great deal more than she ever did, but while she rummaged through and flushed out the filth, I am working with it.

Editor's Note

Scavenger was first published on the website in May 2009 and won the May Story of the Month Contest.

Photograph © Katie Reing

There is occasionally a man and woman whose chemistry is so powerful that they have no business ever being in the same room together, unless of course seismic shifts, uncontrolled wildfires, and fierce inexorable magnetism is their final intention. When these sorts get together they could wind up in the ladies room of whatever school, hospital, church or library they happen to be in, and making love on the little sink in the big stall at the end. The librarian thinks that the situation in the library bathroom could get quite out of hand if given the opportunity. They could end up accidentally pulling the sink right off the wall.

She's in love.

Who knows why or how these rare and beautiful cataclysms of the heart happen? They are never predictable, they're just storms that roll in out of nowhere and douse the landscape in a whirl of warm, wild spring rain that exalts the senses and awes the mind. When she thinks of the janitor the librarian feels vitally alive. She wonders if there are people in the world who've never fallen in love, who go their entire lifetimes without experiencing that glorious feeling. If there are, she feels sorry for them.

She'd been having love affairs with books every day for years, but this is different. This is a rapture of the soul.

She wants to look into the janitor's eyes and ask him if he has a hammer, ask him if he could help her wind her soul like a silk scarf around it, and mention (as she perches atop the sink in that last bathroom stall) that this afternoon her soul happens to be tucked out of sight somewhere very close by, but that she thinks he could find it if he tried. *Go straight, you can't miss it*, she'd say, caressing his razor stubble.

But she doesn't really do or say any of these things because the library is empty today, the janitor is downstairs at the police station and doesn't know that she is in love with him, and she is in the middle of nostalgically ruffling through some of the cards in the old paper card catalog. The old card catalog is beautiful and efficient but it became outdated. Even country-bumpkin libraries had to get networked into the county's cyber system sooner or later so her little library eventually acquired a single emblematic computer. She kept the outdated paper card catalog in case the computer crashed. The old catalog's case and drawers are made of oak and gleam as it sits across from a row of windows in the dust mote-strewn light of early afternoon.

Maybe she should dust. If she chooses to read, she'll feel compelled to pick *Wuthering Heights* and she's not sure she has the fortitude for it. She goes looking for a rag and some polish.

The librarian is unmarried. She is thirty-eight years old and lives down the street in her familial home with her aging hemiplegic mother and a cat named Whiskers, "Whisky" for short. She doesn't drink whisky or any other alcohol herself, but her mother does, every day at four o'clock, precisely half a tumbler. The librarian loves her

mother and is a devoted daughter. She has made a vow that her mother will live out her days at home, rather than in a nursing home, as this is her mother's most keen wish. The librarian and her mother are eccentric in that they do not have a telephone. In an age of faxes, cell phones, blackberries, and voice mail, they choose to keep their hands clean of any extra noise. She is a librarian as her mother was before her. They like quiet.

There was an opportunity for romance once, when she was in college. She met a boy on campus who wanted to take her picture. He was an art major and very idealistic about his future. He said he wanted someone "plain" to shoot, and then he was going to go from the proofs to a larger work, a stained glass project. He would brighten her up, complicate her in the name of art. She would be rendered in glass. She knew she was plain and was grateful that he seemed so enamored of this. Her hair was long and straight, her eyes pale, and she had an apologetic, slightly-oversized nose. The boy took several pictures of her over the course of two afternoons. He took her picture on a park bench and in the door of the campus chapel. He was quiet but appreciative and at the end of this episode he asked her for her phone number. She lived with her mother then too, an hour's drive from campus and without a phone. They had never had a phone.

"Oh," he said, "Well, here's mine then."

They had a couple dates and one sweet kiss in the back of a movie theater. The kiss was nice. It was tranquil, with a very slight tinge of flame at tongue's edge. The lights came on in the theatre and cut it short but neither of them minded too much.

He transferred to another college around the time that she lost his phone number. She'd walked downtown to the phone booth in front of Blini's Deli, feeling obligated to at least search the two-by-two diamond plate floor for it, but it wasn't there. She had never bothered to transfer it to her address book. And now the boy was claimed by the universe. It was okay. She was not in love with him.

Sometimes she would walk past the wire racks of paperback romance novels in the library and wonder what it was all about, the intricacies of intimacy, physical intimacy. She didn't know if she'd ever know. There was one cover that had a brawny man with his shirt buttons half undone; he had long wind-blown black hair and one of those masculine romance-novel faces that is supposed to mean business. No one is ever giggling on the cover of a romance novel. The man is rugged and smoldering and the woman wilting in his arms is wearing colonial-era clothing that is—of course—falling away to reveal the swell of her bosom, and her head is thrown back in rapturous anticipation of things to come. It reminds the librarian of the janitor.

Maybe she should go into the bathroom and see if she can break something so that she'll have a reason to call him. But she'll have to be careful. If she tinkers with the sink and causes a water pipe problem it might be necessary to call a plumber and she is not in love with the plumber. Her uncle is this town's only plumber.

The janitor's eyes make her feel like she is all stretched out in outer space, with one arm trailing through Orion, another dipping into the Little Dipper, and her legs

spreading through Cassiopeia. It's the big bang, but a library-quiet one. She feels like he answers her internal questions with more questions and then makes the last answer magical. It's a dream sublime and it makes her want to tear the cloth of reality away to get at him.

Right now he would just be sitting downstairs in the gritty police station talking about sports with the cops. They all like to watch football games and then analyze them afterwards. They'd be eating chocolate covered mini-donuts and ribbing each other about this or that with some soap opera or CNN on in the background. The janitor wears blue coveralls that are never very dirty. The library doesn't have a lot of janitorial exigencies. She wants to be his only exigency.

She wonders if it would be okay to bother him to change a light bulb. But that's too easy. There are five stepstools in the library and she can reach any light bulb she wants with any of them.

She goes back to the card catalog to look up books on heating and electricity. She spends most of the afternoon in assiduous research on the most efficient and gentle means of bathroom-plumbing sabotage, looking for a problem that will be too minor for her uncle but too involved for her. At last, exhausted, and cast into a state of wishfulness that is akin to hunger, she puts the books away, and arrives at her own simple solution.

The bathroom mirror is trimmed in wood painted white. She watches herself go by, a virgin with a burning fuchsia hope, her cheeks pink with plotting. She knows too much time has gone by and that she is really going to follow through with this. Even if she fails, she knows he won't ever tell anyone. That's what she likes about him. He is laconic. The other men holler and eat donuts while he, alternately, eats pretzels and speaks quietly, in even tones, tones any librarian would love.

The bathroom is small with just two stalls, the small one, and the larger one for handicapped use, the one with the grab bar on the wall and with its own special sink. She enters the last stall, stands in front of the sink, removes the silver post earring from her left ear and drops it deliberately down the drain. Then she stands for a minute smiling and blushing at herself, covering her mouth, mirthful and amazed.

Editor's Note

The Librarian and the Janitor was first published on the website in April 2009.

On the first day of our vacation, I heard about the Koala Tide.

The first time I heard the words, I knew I shouldn't be listening. But I was. The sun was very big and very hot that day. I was sitting a few feet away from the beach blanket, on the beach in Florida, shoving heaps of sand into a pile to make a castle. I was wearing my orange bathing suit. It was not my favorite bathing suit.

"The Koala Tide," said my father's friend Fred, "can lay waste to a man's vacation."

I looked over at the beach chairs they were sitting on. It was so sunny that it hurt my eyes to look. The sky was very blue.

Fred wore blue swim trunks and had a very hairy chest. He was holding a beer. I hated Fred.

My father wore red swim trunks and was very tan. He was also holding a beer. I loved my father.

"Shut up, Fred," my father said. "The kid can hear you."

"Calm down," Fred said. "She doesn't know what we're talking about. I'm just telling you, in two days, it'll be here. You should keep her off of the beach on the third day. It's for her own good."

I stopped looking at them and continued building my sand castle, digging moats. But the words were already stuck in my head: *The Koala Tide*. I thought about the words. I wanted to say them out loud but did not.

With my hands still in the sand, I began imagining it: Rows and rows of koalas swimming to the shore, climbing out of the ocean with wet fur as they made their way onto the sand. I pictured the koalas lying on the beach and eating lunches. Koalas on vacation.

I walked over and sat down on the beach blanket. My father was reading a book.

"Dad," I said.

"Yes?"

"How many koalas will come?"

He looked up from his book.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "It's nothing real."

"Then why did Fred..."

"Fred's batshit crazy, sweetie," he said. He was already reading again.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the koalas. I could not wait for them to come. There were already pelicans and seagulls all over the beach, pecking at the grains of sand. They were nice. But the koalas seemed much better.

On the second day of our vacation, I swam in the ocean with my older brother. He was in charge. He wore yellow swim trunks. He was 19 years old. I was only 7. My brother was pretty tan, but not as tan as my father. I loved my brother.

The sun was hotter that day. The sky was just as blue as before. I wore my purple bathing suit. And all over the beach and in the ocean, there were the pelicans again, even more than before. Their mouths were big and their chins hung down. My father said they saved the fish in those chins.

“The Koala Tide is coming,” I told my brother. The sun was glinting off of the waves. It was almost too bright and wet to make out his face.

“The what?”

“The Koala Tide.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, I do! Fred said it was coming.”

“Fred’s a drunk. No such thing as a Koala Tide.”

“Dad drinks beer like Fred does.”

“Dad can hold his booze.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, so I said nothing. Instead, I turned away from my brother and dove under the water, kicking my legs hard, looking for fish until my lungs went tight and my head pulsed black and white. Then I came back up for air.

“You’re going to feel pretty stupid when the Koala Tide gets here,” I told my brother when I caught my breath.

“Yeah, you let me know as soon as the Koala Tide shows up, kiddo.”

“You’re going to feel pretty stupid when it comes,” I told him again. “And I’m going to keep a koala. Once they get here.”

“You’re getting more retarded by the minute.”

I looked over and watched as a pelican landed in the water a few feet away. He sat on top of the waves and moved with the ocean. His feathers looked very wet and his eyes looked very large.

“Look,” I said to my brother. “Look at that pelican!”

We both looked at the pelican.

“All the pelicans,” my brother said, “look very guilty.”

I did not know what to say. But I felt that he was right and so I nodded.

On the third day of our vacation, I woke up buzzing. The excitement was in my veins. I hummed the words quietly, while we ate breakfast, through the eggs in my mouth, *The Koala Tide, The Koala Tide, The Koala Tide.*

“What are you mumbling about?” my mother demanded.

My mother wore a black swimsuit. She was tan like my brother. No one was as tan as my father. I didn’t like my mother. She yelled the most out of everyone.

“The Koala Tide is coming today,” I said.

“Who told you about that?” my mother demanded.

“I’m not telling!”

“That’s just a legend,” my mother said, sighing. “Don’t get all excited for nothing. It’s not real.”

“Mom, when the koalas come, I’m gonna keep one.”

My mother shook her head.

“There are no koalas coming,” my mother said.

“We can keep one in the laundry room,” I told her. “Nobody will ever have to know.”

But I did want people to know. I especially wanted to show the koala to my friend Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke. Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke always bragged about her new green bicycle. I hated Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke.

I wanted to take Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke into the laundry room and show her the koala and then ask if she had a koala bear. I knew she did not.

“There won’t be any koalas to put into the laundry room,” my mother said. “None.”

“Not even one?”



“I don’t want to hear the word koala again!” my mother said.

She put her eyes back onto the newspaper. I chewed my eggs and hummed some more, quietly this time.

That afternoon, we were back on the beach. I was wearing my pink bathing suit. The sun was huge and hot again, the hottest of all the days. I tried to tell my brother about the Koala Tide again.

“The Koala Tide is coming. I need to know what Koalas eat,” I said to my brother. “I want to feed mine when it gets here. What do Koalas eat?”

“Little girls.”

“That’s a lie!”

“Fine, they eat other koala bears.”

“No, they don’t!”

“Listen, the koalas aren’t coming, kiddo. Give it up.”

“Just tell me what they eat!”

“Fine! They eat plants!”

“Plants,” I repeated. “Those are easy to get.”

“Right, kiddo.”

I had not built a sand castle since I heard about the Koala Tide. Instead, I watched the beach for the koalas. I watched the waves. I pushed my feet deep into the sand and thought of what I might name my koala. I liked the name Benjamin.

Then a shadow blocked the sun. I looked up.

“No sand castles today?” my father asked.

“No, not today,” I said.

I wanted to ask him about the koalas but I was afraid I would get in trouble. I held the question in my throat.

“Well, maybe tomorrow then.”

“Yes, tomorrow. More sand castles.”

“Want to get some ice cream tonight, kiddo?” he asked. “For the sunset?”

This is my father’s favorite thing to do. Every night on vacation, he likes me to sit on the beach with him, our mouths full of Rum Raisin and Rocky Road, while the sky went from pink to purple to blue.

“Ok,” I said.

My father turned and walked back towards the blanket.

I shook my head. I was lying about the sunset and the ice cream. I knew once the koalas came, everything would be different. I would not want to leave my koala home alone so soon. He would have to come with us, or else I would have to stay home and tend to him. My father didn’t understand how difficult koala care was.

Another thought crossed my mind. Maybe I could have more than one koala. Maybe I could keep two or three. They could all live in the laundry room. I wondered how many koalas I could hold at once.

When the Koala Tide finally came, I was not the first one to see it. I had been looking down at the sand, thinking about ways to fit seven live koala bears into my suitcase when I heard the shrieks of children and birds.

“Son of a bitch!” my father yelled from the blanket.

I looked out at the waves and saw they had turned black. I squinted my eyes hard and saw that dark shapes were tumbling up onto the sand, rolling in with the tide.

“THE KOALAS,” I screamed.

Then I ran.

“FOR CHRIST’S SAKE, CASSIE, DON’T!” my father bellowed.

But it was too late. I was faster than my father.

I ran, legs pounding towards the surf. I rushed towards those koalas full speed. I heard my father behind me, screaming “DON’T!” again and I ignored him. My legs pulsed harder, into the sand; my fingers were balled up, my blood pumping.

The pelicans were flying overhead, with the seagulls. Everyone was squawking above me and swooping down into the tide to greet the koalas and some people were running away from the shore while other people ran towards it. There were colorful bathing suits everywhere, the colors blurred.

As I got closer, my eyes locked onto the piles of koala fur and claws and noses and mouths. I saw the koalas rolling up onto the beach with the waves, their bodies washing into one another, their fur covered in water.

Yes, yes, yes. The koalas were here. There were so many koalas. You could never count them all, I thought.

I kept running, full speed. The closer I got, the harder I clenched my fists.

There were too many people. If everyone took one koala, I might be left with nothing. I suddenly hated the crowds of strangers in their bright bathing suits. If I did not grab as many koalas as possible, I would only have one and one wasn't enough. I pushed through all of the legs and kept running.

I stopped at the edge of the sea. Water was rushing in between the koalas and I let it run over my toes.

I looked around. There weren't as many people nearby as I thought. There was just one old man a few feet away. Lots of people were still running, probably to get their suitcases. But there were plenty of koalas here, within reach. I could have them all. The old man next to me wasn't even taking one. Our car would be filled with koalas, there would be koalas in our house, koalas everywhere.

I bent over the first koala, one lying on his side, sleeping, the waves pushing over him. I wanted him. I reached down and grabbed him with both hands, excitedly, the joy thumping in my chest against my ribs, and he was heavy, so heavy, and so wet.

I strained to lift him up to me, to pull him up from the sand but I was not strong enough. Finally I settled on sitting him up in the water so that I could see his face. I put my knees down into the wet sand to look at him, to hug him against my chest.

The screams came out of my throat before I knew what was happening.

As I screamed, I realized that here was the koala bear's face, eyes plucked out and blood clinging to the fur, veins hanging out of the holes and resting against his cheeks.

I looked down and all around me were piles of eyeless koalas, their dead bodies rolling. All of their faces had the two deep holes, the veins bouncing against the sand as their heads hit the beach. The old man was shaking his head. I began to sob loudly. And then there was my father with his hand wrapped around my arm, yanking me away from them, away from the shore.

"Close your eyes, Cassie," my father said.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the bedroom I shared with my brother. I lay on my stomach on my small bed and cried in the dark. I fell asleep like that until my mother came in and woke me up for dinner.

And then, there was Fred, sitting at the dinner table. We were all at the dinner table. It was my mother and my father and my brother and me and Fred. My cheeks were wet and my mouth felt numb.

Fred was drinking beer again. My father was, too. I could not eat my hamburger. I could only think about those eyeless holes and weep quietly.

"Cassie," my mother said. "Control yourself at the dinner table."

“The...” I sobbed quietly back, “koala was...”

“I told you I didn’t want to hear the word koala again, goddammit!” my mother snapped.

I looked down at my plate. Fred was not bothered.

Through a thick mouthful of hamburger, he said, “Warned you about those damned koalas, didn’t I?” to my father. He said this over my head, as if I were not there, at the table. He said it as if I were not still sobbing, much louder now, my whole body shaking from the wailing sound that rose up out of me.

Editor’s Note

Koala Tide was first published on the website in February 2009 and won the May Story of the Month Contest.

Photograph—“Ghosts” © Jeanpaul Ferro

Cigarettes Don't Fit in My Hand Like They Did in His

by Kyle Kuehner

I put the car in park and turned off the engine. My coffee—half empty and pitch black—was cold now. I lit a cigarette, rolled the window down and stared at the old house to my right. The house I spent weekends at as a kid, my grandparents' house.

I hadn't been back for eleven months, not since the funeral. My grandmother called and said she had something for me, said it belonged to my grandfather and that I might want it.

I took a sip of coffee and reached in my notebook for an old, faded photograph with creases at the corners. The photo showed the house when my grandfather was around. The hydrangeas—once full of bright pinks and purples—were now withered away to a few white petals. The palm tree towards the side of the house hadn't grown much. It was probably dead now. I remember digging the soil out with my grandfather. The palm was just a baby then, but it had potential, it'll be a strong one, my grandfather said when we got it. We dug the hole and set the palm in then packed the soil tightly around.

Now all we can do is water it, he said, the sun and time will take care of the rest.

He pat me on the head and stood up to claim what he had laid. As he lit his cigarette—the sun reflecting off the silver zippo lighter he carried—I noticed, for the first time, his hands. Cracked and sun-dried with dirt and blood under the ivory-like nails, they looked mean and tired, exhausted from a lifetime of work, but absolutely perfect. The kind of hands you wished could talk, could tell you about where they'd been and everything they'd done. The cigarette he held only added to their stoicism, the way it fit snug between the middle and pointer fingers made them comforting.

Don't you ever start this, he said holding up his cigarette as flakes of ash fell to his boots.

I hate that smell grandpa, I replied. And I did, still do, but the image of him with a cigarette between his lips was too powerful, and so when I had my first smoke, I did it the way I remembered he did. Firmly held in the right hand and slowly raised to the lips, inhaling with conviction.

I set the photo down and took a sip of coffee. Another vice I instinctively inherited from him.

Black, no sugar and no cream, he said, that's how coffee's meant to be.

I was ten when I had my first sip. As he handed over the forest green ceramic mug, I noticed a small grin form in the corner of his mouth. I took the mug and stared down into the blackness, looking for whatever it was my grandfather got out of it. I raised the mug and poured the coffee into my mouth. My throat shut tight, allowing none of the grainy, burning liquid down. I spit the coffee back into the mug as my grandfather laughed to himself.

Good cup of mud, eh, he said.

How do you drink that stuff, I asked.

You don't, he said, you sip it. He reached over and took the mug from me and sipped as he leaned back in his chair.

The photo was old and faded but it was clear who was in it. My grandfather lying on the front lawn, legs crossed at the ankles, arms raised and folded behind his head as the sun poured down around him. I was there too, at his side, copying his posture. I must have been seven or eight in the picture, oblivious to all around me, but even then wanting to be just like him. My hands don't quite reach far enough for my head to rest on, nor do my legs seem to cross as perfectly as his, but you could see the imitation.

On the grass, at my grandfather's side, was a pack of black licorice. The wrapper is torn halfway off and a half-eaten piece lies on top of the box. He always had a couple pieces with him wherever he went, usually folded in half and tucked in the breast pocket of his Levi's flannel. He would tear a small piece off for me. Try some, he said and tossed a piece in my lap.

Don't you have any reds, I said. I don't know why I asked; he never did have any reds.



Reds aren't good for you, he said, only the blacks are.

How's that?

The dye they use, you know, to make 'em red, well, don't tell anyone, but, it's actually blood.

Yeah right.

He couldn't hold it in, the smile out of the corner of his mouth gave him away, and on he went chewing that black rope.

I set the photo back in my notebook and lit another cigarette. I looked at the way the cigarette sat in my hand. It didn't look right. My hands—clean, unmarked and wrinkle free—didn't have much to say. There was no dirt under the nails, no dried blood or rough calluses on the fingers. The cigarette didn't fit snug in between my fingers either. It just looked out of place, unnatural. It didn't look the way his did, at home safely nestled in between those leathered mitts—an exclamation point on a story worth reading.

No, mine didn't fit that way at all so I threw it out.

I lay my head on the steering wheel and stared out over the lawn. It was a mess, complete disarray. Patches of yellow and brown were evidence to lack of attention.

Chunks of crab grass marked across like a bad rash. I couldn't look at it. I couldn't look at it and think of my grandfather. This wasn't his lawn. His lawn was immaculate, always trimmed and consistently green. He found something in that lawn. I'm not sure what, comfort I suspect, since he spent so much time on it. Two days a week mowing and fertilizing, one day edging, and at least four days watering the damn thing. You couldn't pull him away.

The water needs to soak all the way down, he said. So he took his time and made sure it was done right. Just like everything else he did.

I got out of the car and walked to the edge of the grass. A burning deep in my chest rose up and I could feel my heart pounding harder and faster. I ran around to the side of the house and kicked open the gate. It was right where my grandfather had always kept it, now covered in dust, cobwebs and neglect. I grabbed the handle and wheeled it back down and across the driveway to the lawn. I'd watched him do it many times before, but never once did it myself. I turned the switch from off to on, opened up the throttle to give it gas, and pulled the cord to spark the engine. A cloud of exhaust shot out the back as the engine rumbled on. The vibration from the handle bar shook my arms and went down throughout my body. I looked down at my hands—gripped tight on the rubber handle—lowered the throttle, and set out across my grandfather's lawn.

Editor's Note

Cigarettes Don't Fit was first published on the website in March 2009 and won the May Story of the Month Contest.

Photograph © Matthias Krug (www.krugwriting.com)

The Wink by Lou Gallo

Why did she have to wink just as the spiffy young priest passed the sacred chalice to my friend Claude? Should not sexy winks be prohibited in the House of God since they're in league with venality? Not that I have anything against venality, mind you, but picture Father Massini draped in his starched vestments, the chasuble so shiny and official, pivoting the cup of our Savior's blood onto Claude's lower lip, Claude stooping a bit to meet it, while I, wretch I, turned for a glimpse at the young woman a few souls down on the pew. I must admit that I glanced with intent, so I assume whatever guilt has accrued.

We live in a small outpost of the Blue Ridge where a venomous mutation of the Reformation thrives, the sole Catholic church is small, the noon masses on Wednesday attended by a mere handful of the faithful . . . almost always ancient, decrepit souls of now indistinct gender. So to speak makes me sound anti-geriatric, yet since I too am fast approaching the domain of the venerable (what with the AARP sending me daily reminders), I allow myself license. I assume honorary membership in the Chapel Moribundus. The living dead can call each other the living dead without incident. It works that way with all ethnic groups.

The point is, there was I, an older guy with silverish fringe surrounding his ears (tempered a bit through months of Grecian Formula), dallying with those who might pass as my parents, suddenly face to face with what throughout my entire life I have regarded as God's greatest gift: a young, beautiful woman. (And don't forget that beauty still resides in the eyes of the beholder.) I find the women who mesmerize Claude collectively unappealing, and vice-versa. There are no laws of aesthetics; aesthetics is wishful thinking. And spare me any feeble charge of sexism. Do not women find particular men attractive or repulsive? What's good for the goose And she was not ridiculously young after all.

Not even especially beautiful if we gauge that commodity by, say, Helen of Troy or Angelina Jolie. On some other day I might have glanced and thought no further about it. I'd say early thirties or so, and I'd pinpoint thirty-four, only because I like that age. By then women, and men too if men weren't so stupid, have just about figured it out, the games cease, and affairs of the heart had better assure comfortable survival -- or else no go. Better yet, we fiftyish males need no longer fret about not looking like Brad Pitt (oh, we do, but get over each daily sulk faster) or having muscles like the present Governor of Ca-lee-for-nia. We can sort of slump, relax, be ourselves and hope for the right pheromones. So thirty-four.

Alas, alas, fidgeting between her and a man I estimated around forty-five (her husband, natch, I would later learn from Claude). . . two children, sweet pre-Raphaelite cherubs, girls with cloud-like aureoles of golden, honey baked hair . . . why, why did she wink at me, when, despite the wafers and wine, I had languished for months on end, sick

with desire for just about anyone much less a hazel-eyed woman of lithe proportions and tantalizing smile? Women should never wink at men, ever, unless they mean business, and, unfortunately, this one did.

So my heart catapulted, I was suddenly thrust back into the fray, I was shaken by primal, uroboric stirring. Hormones do not age. More to the point: *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife*. But what if thy neighbor's wife covets you in return? And for reasons obscure, this happily married mother of two, this now breath-taking phantom of delight had, for a long moment, peered daringly into my eyes – and then the wink. Claude, who knows every member of the congregation, including the entire Sunday populous, informed me later that her name was Astral Gilbert. Gilbert. “Not,” I said, “the hot-shot lawyer?”

“Indeed,” he laughed, “Max Gilbert. That’s him. He married her when she was still in college. Took their time to have kids. She’s straight as an arrow.”

I did not mention the wink, though men have this way of intuiting each other’s amorous inclinations.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said. “He could ruin you in so many ways. He’d haul you to court and you’d wind up an enemy of the state.”

“I *am* an enemy of the state,” I said. “And who says I was thinking of anything. Just sort of nice to see younger people for a change.”

Claude lowered his eyebrows, gave me the Gallic frown, patted my back. “Be careful, my friend,” he said, his basso reminding me of distant fog horns on a distant river.

That was Wednesday. On Friday I drove over to the Rec Center, as is my late afternoon routine, and, lo . . . Astral Gilbert trotting on the upper track, in spandex. We all have our fetishes, but spandex destroys me, reduces whatever moral resolve I might summon to quivering protoplasm. Two strikes. The wink, now spandex. I had never seen her on the track before and could only (hopefully) conclude that she had cased out my itinerary. Women are good at that and do it deftly and with poise, unlike us men who tend to careen, paw at the air and grunt like beasts. Astral looked splendidly healthy, robust and, of course, liquidly sensuous. She so outshone the really young high school and college girls racing along the same track, I concluded that either (a) I was deceiving myself and smitten by insane Cupid, or (b) she was in fact a rare, incomparable beauty whose age had no relevance. I chose both (a) and (b) at once. I flung open the door to the stairwell into a drafty, airy channel leading to the track and a powerful gust nearly sent me reeling. This happens when both lower and upper doors open at the same time - some kind of unwritten law of suction. Astral descended the stairs while I ascended and we met awkwardly on the mid-landing. Dewy beads of sweat glistened on her forehead and that dainty strip between her nose and upper lip. Surely there is a name for that woefully underrated zone of the body. She looked flushed, rosy, wide-eyed, rich in oxygen. She wore no make-up except faint, subtle dots of blush beneath the cheek bones. Her hair was pulled back with a simple blue ribbon. I felt, however happy and glandular, overwhelmed, troubled, apprehensive.

“Hello,” I said, my throat parched. I had not been so stunned by a woman for years, dare I say decades? Not at this pitch, anyway. I, like Claude, was gloomily divorced, paying child support, each of us to our second wives. But while Claude had found a new girl-friend and had become entrenched for the last year or so, I still made the rounds, checked out the laundromats and boutiques, peeked at the personals in local newspapers, feeling the whole while like an idiotic schoolboy. *Seek and ye shall not find*. Let’s say I was ripe for a plunge, desperate for passion, charged with spare, unruly libido.

“Hi,” Astral said, smiling as usual, and I fully expected her to glide down the stairs, stalk out the door and return to hearth and home, Max Gilbert, the two angels. But no . . . curse fate, curse love, curse the human condition . . . she stopped, leaned on the handrail and looked at me.

“I saw you at Wednesday mass,” she said. Like a starry-eyed teenager groping for words, *I saw you at Burger King*, meaning, I saw you there because I planned to see you there and I’m interested and want to know if you’re interested and who knows what might happen if we both feel the same way.

“I saw you too,” I said stupidly. How old is wise? “But you know, I’m not really Catholic. I just attend mass every now and then when I feel the need.”

“But you took communion.”

A slight impediment in the flow. “Uh, well, I figure that’s between me and God. If God wants to damn me eternally for reckless imposture, then I want nothing to do with that God. I won’t believe in him. When I’m there, in the church, I’m as Catholic as anyone else, maybe more so. We infidels go to extremes.”

She seemed slightly taken aback but intrigued. I was the bad boy cruising into town on a Harley, tattoos of Hitler throbbing on my forearms, rolled up cuffs, a Camel pinned between ear and skull. The same idiotic scenario played out endlessly in the junior high schools of America - which, now, given our ages and the stakes, seemed absurd.

“Could you help me with this zipper?” she asked. “It’s stuck and I’m sweating and need to change in the locker room.”

I would have helped Astral Gilbert with her zipper even if bereft of fingers. I’d nip at it with my teeth. She was wearing not spandex on top - the spandex was all legs - but a tight-fitting sports t-shirt, an expensive one with a three-inch zipper at the nape. She turned, and I, my nostrils practically inhaling her fragrant hair, began to fiddle with the zipper. I took the opportunity to lay one hand gently on her shoulder. Is it possible to describe the fragile, splendid shoulders of a woman who has fired your kindling? She did not seem to mind.

And the zipper was not stuck, by the way. I slid it down with ease as if oiled with WD-40. There she stood, backside toward me, zipper down, my hand on her shoulder . . . and we lingered slightly longer than necessary on the mid-landing of a drafty stairwell, in pulsing silence, our breaths quickening. I did not understand what was happening and knew it meant trouble, but my every worry shriveled once I stopped pretending that

I could resist even a crumb doled out by Astral Gilbert. I would go for it, dive in, accelerate with no brakes. Her shoulder was warm, a sizzling sculpture of flesh and bone. If we had so persisted for a second longer, I might have wrapped my arms around her and cupped her breasts. Not might, *would have*. This is the way it goes. No man could have resisted save Father Massini and I have my doubts even there. But Astral pulled away abruptly, turned, smiled again and thanked me. She took my hand and shook it as would a man.



“Thanks?” I said.

“For the zipper. Well, nice seeing you. What’s your name by the way, in case we meet again. Seems we wind up in the same places.”

“I’m Ted Lawrence,” I said.

“I’m Astral,” she said. I failed to inform her that I already knew.

“Are you the Ted Lawrence who teaches at the university with Claude?”

“That I am. We work in different departments though. He’s in languages, I’m in

literature.”

“I just loved literature in college,” she beamed. “Poetry especially. Whitman, that was my favorite.”

“One Hour to Madness and Joy.”

“I *loved* that poem. Thanks for reminding me to read it again. Well, I’ve got to pick up my little girls. Nice seeing you.”

And then she was gone. I moped for a while, defeated, thankful, regretful, anchored in confusion. I wanted to rush after her, spin her around, demand to know why she winked at me during the Sacrament of the Eucharist. I hoped I would never see her again. I would make evil, throaty, erotic phone calls to her deep in the night. I would cut my jugular on her doorstep. I would call Max Gilbert and demand that he turn over his wife to me so that we could flee to some remote island in the Pacific. I would make trouble. I wanted no trouble. Finally, I walked up to the track and began my brisk mile or two. All the usual girls in the usual shorts did not distract me. I jogged like a man possessed by a single, mad compulsion. I felt none of my usual tolerance for the geezers who limped along in the slow lane. I did not want them there to remind me of everything time would soon enough strip away. I felt the urge to kick them aside.

And of course, after the encounter, I showed up at the gym every day at the same time. But no Astral. Had I been dumped already? I detested my demotion to an

adolescent deranged by unrequited love; maybe the pimples would flare again as well. I was too far down the road for this sort of cataclysm. Luckily, as we age, we learn to accept disappointment as routine; we don't have the energy to pine and thrash wildly on our mattresses; in other words, we quiver and bleat like sheep.

By the fourth day, when I had just about given up, Astral showed up on the track. I was half way around but saw her come through the door and set down her sack beside the wall only inches from my bundled jacket. My heart quaked, but I had commanded myself to stay calm, friendly but aloof, to flow with rather than try to channel the tide. I knew the rules of this treacherous game. Or maybe I had read it all wrong: maybe she had no interest in me beyond quaint curiosity. Then why the wink? I had to know the reason. How to approach her on the subject without degrading myself? I picked up speed and caught up. She didn't seem to notice. She seemed remote and looked rather disheveled. Spat with Max? Unruly children? Broken hot tub?

"Hello," I said with mild enthusiasm.

This would be the final test, I had decided. If she responded warmly, with affection, I would stick beside her and run the course; if only a mild "Oh, hi" I would jog ahead and leave it all behind.

"Oh hi," she said dully as if not quite remembering who I was.

So I added momentum to my stride and passed her by. Was I pissed? Of course. But I didn't want to be pissed off. I hate being pissed off. I glanced at the serene duct work on the ceiling of the gym, a certain tranquilizer. Ducts have always had this effect on me, a secret I keep to myself. No need for psychotherapy when you've got duct work. And I figure if one ever needs to hide or get away fast, a solid duct with entry hatch is made to order.

Within seconds she had huffed up beside me.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm a little cloudy today. My husband's mother had a stroke down in Texas, and he flew out early this morning. One of those days. The kids were late to school. I'm a wreck."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've been through it too. I know it's hard." Visions of my father flat on his back in intensive care fractured my mind like trumpet blasts. Another thing I didn't want to think about.

Astral looked a little ashen, a little older, though still, to my mind, ravishing. How I would have loved, as we jogged, to lean over and kiss her meaty lips. More trumpet blasts - a husband and two children. What kind of monster had I become? How could I even think of ever taking communion again much less stepping foot inside a church?

"She and I didn't get along," Astral said. "I wasn't good enough for her spectacular son. My people are West Virginian coal miners."

"You don't look like a coal miner," I laughed, attuned to her every word. Dissension in the ranks, strife in the compound? I had heard about Max Gilbert over the years. A true scumbag who relieved old ladies of their life savings. A loudmouthed, arrogant, bow-tied, Gucci-suited prick. I had never seen him before except during the recent

mass. But since I loathe lawyers on principle, my denouncement of the man has no bearing. Most lawyers, I've learned from my dealings with the species, are either stupid or evil or both, and yet they prance about like Titans imagining that they, not beautiful women, are God's greatest gift to humanity. I avoid lawyers as I would exposure to pernicious viruses.

And then, opportunity of opportunities, Astral came to a dead stop and started to sob. "Don't look at me," she said. "I've got to get out of here." The usual runners whizzed by; the usual pipes clanked; the usual boys shouted and cheered down below on the basketball court.

We were about fifty yards from the exit, and I slowed to a standstill, took her hand, and inched her along.

"It's ok," I said, "I'll help you back to your car. Hey, I feel like crying myself. We could all use a good cry. It's ok."

She brightened up some and managed a feeble smile. "I'm so embarrassed. And I look like shit."

No spandex today, just a pair of wrinkled running sweats.

"You look stunning," I said. "You could wear a haircloth and rub ashes into your face and still look gorgeous. Come on, let's go. Maybe you should go home and take a nap. Naps are like miracles. A little foray into unconsciousness, you come back energized and refreshed. In some ways we're all Lazarus."

Again she smiled, but sadly.

I snatched up her bag and my jacket and cracked the door. *Whoosh*. One of the teenagers opening up below, a tall, skinny young man with baggy pants down to his ass crack. He loped up the stairs, veered around us and disappeared. Pimples, I noticed. *Whoosh*.

"I like stairwells," I said as we reached the mid-landing.

Astral removed a Kleenex from her bag and blew her nose.

"I feel like such a fool," she said.

I figured, well . . . fate is knocking. Now or never.

I lifted her chin with my fingers and gazed at her admittedly splotchy face.

"Why did you wink at me in church?" I blurted before I had time to stop myself.

"What?" she sulked.

"Church, why did you wink at me?"

She seemed puzzled. "Did I? I'm sorry."

Instant deflation. "No, don't be sorry. I guess I misread. I'm stupid. I thought—"

And smoothly she leaned forward to kiss me. Our arms wasted no time coiling round each other, we pressed into each other, we could hardly breathe as we groped for and explored our bodies in a maniacal rush of lust. We panted, groaned, cried out to God, tried to resist, reared back only to smash into each other again, tear at our clothing. I slid my hands under her sweat shirt and caressed her breasts, she stroked my thighs and groin. *Whoosh*. Both doors opened again. The lanky teenager swept down the steps,

ignoring us . . . perhaps the sole, underrated virtue of teenagers: oblivion. But the one coming up, obviously older, more ponderous, slower, the one coming up . . . I watched Astral's face drain of blood. I didn't know the woman, but Astral did, a portly, sour-looking specimen with quadruple chins. In a leotard at her age! The shock on both their faces meant only one thing: we had been caught in the act, in flagrante delicto, hands up in the air, drop your weapons. Astral's bra had slipped to her waist. My pants were undone at the top. Astral's hair flared out wildly, and I, out of practice, had some trouble catching my breath.

"Oh," the woman said curtly, "hello, Astral." She nodded sternly at me.

Astral tried to pull herself together but lacked time. There she stood, exposed, mortified, overwhelmed. One of her looped ear rings floated to the floor. The clink seemed to resound and echo throughout all spacetime.

"Hi, Laura," she finally sighed.

Whoever Laura was had no use for me. When our eyes met – and her ratty beads ping-ponged with insatiable curiosity between Astral's and mine – they shot out tiny poisoned barbs. And, sadist of sadists, she didn't simply move on and allow us to crawl away in shame, no, she wanted to watch us wallow.

"How are the children, dear?" she asked. "Is Amber over the ear infection?"

Bitch of bitches! Vagina Dentata! Torquemada! I fancied pushing her back down the stairs, gloat as she sprawled. *Get thee behind me, Satan!*

"Connie is fine," Astral said as she hastily gathered herself, pulled down the sweat shirt, dabbed at her hair. "The girls are both fine. How are you getting along with the surgery?"

Laura waved her hand. "Cataracts. Nothing these days. I've never had better vision. I see everything now. It's amazing. I really recommend that Dr. Johnson highly."

It was the most grueling, painful, agonizing conversation I have ever endured, and I had not yet said a word. I felt the need to speak coming on fast though, the need to rid us of this inquisitive menace. And I probably would have blurted something unforgivable had not Astral, now more composed, seized the reigns. "Well, nice seeing you, Laura. Tell Richard hello. And the boys. We must be moving on."

"Oh" was all Laura had a chance to say, her mouth forming a puckered, chalky vacuole. Astral took my hand, practically dragged me down the stairs, and out we went. We literally dashed from the gym and careened into her Mercedes. She started to laugh uncontrollably, the doubled-over belly laughs, the laughs with no sound that make you feel you're about to die, the wondrous thunder of both defeat and triumph. And of course I laughed too. Everything seemed ridiculous. Finally we both came up for air, spasmed a few more times, felt drained enough to fall limply into each other's arms. Astral shuddered as I held her, I, interloper, home-wrecker, coveter . . . yet her body spoke a language I heard but did not understand. A foreign language.

"Who was she?" I finally asked.

Astral took a deep breath, held it in, as if she wanted the name to flow away with useless, exhaled air.

“Laura Donbaurant.”

Live in a small town, hear every name, but I failed to place it.

“Joe Donbaurant, my husband’s law partner - his wife.”

“Ah, Donbaurant & Gilbert. I’ve seen the building. I stay away from lawyers myself. Will she talk?”

“She will relish every syllable.”

What could I say other than “I’m sorry”? And “but we didn’t really do anything.”

Astral looked at me with the kind of resigned, serene smile I have seen on the exhausted faces of the dying.

“It’s a done deal, Ted. She won’t blabber all over town, but she’ll tell Joe, and Joe will tell Max. He’ll claim moral turpitude or some lofty crap. Of course, I’ve never mentioned how many times Joe has tried to put his hands all over my ass or when he showed up on my front porch drooling, begging.”

“What will your husband do?” I asked. I refused to refer to him by name. I despised the man, though I knew little about him beyond the sordid rumors. He might have been benign as Santa Claus, I would still despise him. I am far too entrenched in time to believe that I had fallen in love with Astral at first sight, but it’s what I wanted and needed to believe. And it might be true in the sense that miracles happen. You believe in miracles on a higher level of intellect, not the sorry, mundane fog of insight required to tackle a broken pipe or figure tax receipts or tie up garbage bags.

“He won’t do anything,” she said.

“No black eyes, torture chambers, chain saws?” I laughed weakly.

“He won’t even let on that he knows, though I’ll know he knows. Everything will seem the same but the key signature will shift ever so slightly toward the minor. Too subtle to notice most of the time. Just slow drainage, no tidal waves.”

“And me?”

“I’ve never done this before. I want you to know that. Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” I said. “Will he come after me?”

“He’ll inquire. He’ll find out more about you than you know yourself. Maybe some telephone calls. Is there a weak link, Ted?”

I hugged her tighter and laughed. “The whole chain! Nah, I’m lapsing into self-pity. Weak link? None that I know of . . . except you. Funny how the weak link becomes the greatest source of strength. Downright preposterous when you think about it.”

“I can’t promise anything. I’ll never leave him. We’re like the ancient Persians and Greeks. One defines the other. And my two little girls come first. But I’ll tell you this, for whatever reason, you swept me away. I don’t know why. You’re not especially handsome—“

“Good to hear,” I mumbled. “And I always fancied myself another Gregory Peck. He’s dead, by the way.”

“Oh, come on, you’re a big boy. And I don’t know if you have some rare, bright mind that would dazzle me. I don’t know anything at all about you. Sometimes it’s just magic, which I don’t believe in. But how else explain?”

“Will I see you again? That’s all I care about. I’ll wait until the moment of extreme uncton.”

“I don’t think I can resist. I’ll try, but who knows when I’ll come up the stairs as you go down? I’ll *feel* you out there. Maybe we’ll wind up making out on the altar.”

“The mystic delirium,” I sighed, aware that I was now worse off than before, when at least I had grown accustomed to involuntary celibacy and no prospects, at least none that ignited my every molecule. I would think of Astral Gilbert every moment, and she would be thinking about me. How could I bear it? Would our relationship consist solely of random humps on the Rec Center stairwell? Dare I suggest the dumpster lot behind Arby’s? The Ramada Inn, perish the thought. Did I want to be responsible for two children losing their mother?

“I want you to know something else,” she said, clutching my fingers tightly.

“Please, no,” I said, “what I already know tortures me.”

“This you must know,” she insisted.

“Ok, shoot. What the hell.”

“I did wink at you. It’s all my fault. I knew what I was doing.”

How my heart raced at hearing those words. I knew I had not imagined it. I’m capable of having imagined it, of serious delusion, but not in this case.

“Jezebel,” I laughed. “Why?”

“One second to madness and joy? Who knows why? I would do it again, too.”

“Have mercy,” I moaned.

She released my fingers, winked again, opened the door of her expensive, immaculate car and slid in. She did not roll down the window. She did not say goodbye. She started the ignition, backed out of the slot and drove away. And I was left with nothing and everything in my hands. Severe ironies never fail to surprise me. Light is both matter and radiation. The Eucharist is both red wine and blood, wafer and flesh. The cat is both alive and dead. Life is dreadful. Life is stupendous. She should never have winked at me. I thank God, whose wrath will justly consume me, that she winked at me. *To be lost if it must be so!*

Editor’s Note

The Wink was first published on the website in April 2009.

Photograph—“Hong Kong Graffiti” © xTx

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From the low cliff by the tracks we threw rocks at passing trains. We timed it so the rocks would land inside the freight cars with open doors. Occasionally a startled and frazzled head would appear. We'd duck behind the bushes before the caboose came, because usually there was an engineer guy hiding behind a window or standing right out at the rail, smoking.

Arnie stole a pack of Lucky Strikes from his old man, and we tried smoking there one day, dangling our legs over the outcropping where the fossils were. It had taken a million years to make this moment, or a billion, and the smoke burned our lungs as if we were breathing the gases of the forming earth. After we did it, it was like we had to get used to living in a whole new atmosphere, gasping to search out the oxygen. My brain swooned. The edges of the summer sky grew dark.

We slid down the bank of black dirt to put our ears to the rail. This was how you could tell a train was coming, feeling the vibration long before the sound. Arnie took a penny and placed it on the rail. Someone had told us this was 'defacing government property,' something we could go to jail for. I wondered if one of these days our coin might send the train careening off the track. Sometimes the pennies would still be right where we'd placed them, flattened and surprisingly hot, but most times we never found them.

This one day after we smoked three cigarettes and felt dizzy with power, Arnie decided to put a rock on the rail, one of the creosote-crusting, indestructible ones the tracks were set on. "That's going to make them stop," I said. "They'll see it and put the brakes on."

"They're not going to see that." Arnie put his hand with the blackened fingertips out towards me. That meant it was a bet. "A buck," he challenged, and we shook.

"Okay." But what if we killed someone?

The stone looked like a pyramid replica my mother had on the TV. The pyramids had lasted forever and I knew this stone would outlast the train and the two of us and all the following generations. We climbed and waited.

Something was different with this train. The longer pauses between click and clack meant the wheels were slowing even before it reached the bend. Arnie gave me a puzzled look as the brakes whined and groaned. It seemed to me that the whole rotation of the earth depended on this train, and as it slowed so did everything else: the turn of Arnie's head and the blink of his eye, my breathing and the pulse in my neck; every detail of motion halted to try to focus and comprehend what came next.

Men were hanging all over the train, spilling from open doors and railings and steps, every one of them holding a baseball bat. Their faces did not move, but we could tell their eyes were scanning our hill. They dismounted even before the train had

stopped, whacking the bats against their open palms and moving rapidly like a trained unit towards where we crouched.

Arnie whispered, "Run!" but I only had time to throw myself down and roll into the long yellow grass, hoping to be invisible.

The heavy footsteps of the men shook the ground. I kept my face down but could hear Arnie grunt and fall. There were no words of warning before the bats started on him. The repetitive blows were strange and hollow-sounding and familiar. They had Wiffle bats! I heard him crying, so I was already sobbing when they got to me. Their hundred blows stung, but in fact I'd survived heavier ones from Arnie's Wiffle bat. They hit only my legs and back, and made no attempt to turn me over. At one point through my tears I felt a strange urge to laugh. When they stopped, only one man spoke. His voice was as hollow and eerie as a distant whistle. "Learn your lesson," was all he said, as the boots walked away.

We stayed motionless until the train was gone. Then Arnie crept over to me on his hands and knees. Tear-tracks were drying in the black dirt on his face. He held up the stone we'd put on the rail. "They put this in my mouth," he said, gagging. His arms and legs and the back of his neck were bright red. I took the rock and threw it weakly at the empty tracks.

We walked stiffly and silently to Arnie's house. We went right up to his parents in the kitchen, not even caring about the dirt and marks and smoke covering us. We were still shaking. Arnie surrendered the Lucky Strikes. "I'm sorry," he said.

"What the hell happened to you two?" his old man asked.

"We had a fight," Arnie said. "But it's okay now."

His mother told him to hit the shower and call her when he was done, so she could put something on his poor skin. He looked so small standing there. Suddenly I longed for my mother to tell me something similar. I said goodbye and ran home on my burning legs, avoiding the shortcut across the tracks.

Editor's Note

Wifflers was first published on the website in March 2009.

Dulling Time by Matt Rickard

He dabbed his finger in holy water and signed the cross in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It really didn't remind him of his baptism. He didn't really remember his baptism at all.

Rain violently kissed his cheeks as he left the church. It was freezing rain. His pale skin turned a shade of pink that was fit for the end of Lent. But everything else was gray on the Saturday before Advent. Streetlights hung from nothing. Cars drove on the sky. Birds flew south in the sidewalk. Without looking up, he pushed the cold metal button in hopes of getting a light. It was already green. He walked home purposelessly.

The icy boulevard proved exceedingly challenging; he slipped and stumbled to his apartment building. Habitually up the steps, routinely through the revolving door, familiarly up the elevator. Then left, then left again, and finally through his door. He unbuttoned his trench coat and tossed it on the couch. He also removed his cap and loosened his tie. He returned his brother's phone call—something he'd been meaning to do for days. He laid down on the sofa and searched fruitlessly for the remote control. Tired from morning mass, he quickly gave up and supinely gazed out his fourth story window. On the sill was a picture of a young man and woman, dressed formally, with pearly white smiles draping their faces. Dark gray skies and turned-off lights made the room as dark as pitch. He dozed off quietly.

He awoke slowly, late in the afternoon, to find the room exactly as he last remembered it. He removed his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. He hadn't even bothered to take off his shoes since arriving home. They were wet. And so was the floor.

He walked over to the window to see if it had rained, and the rod-iron chairs on the balcony were coated with icicles. The transparent daggers hung from the rusty metal like stalactite in a cave. They suddenly appeared irrationally threatening, and so he quickly dodged their image, looking down at his wedding picture on the sill.

The phone rang. It was his wife.

"I'm going to come home before dinner instead of meeting you at the restaurant," she informed him.

"Okay," he responded automatically.

"I'll see you in about an hour and a half. Okay? Will you confirm our reservations? I don't want to have another forty-five minute wait only to sit at the bar."

"Sure. See you later."

"Love you too."

He clicked the dial-tone button on the phone but could not remember the restaurant's number. On the refrigerator he saw a post-it note with dates and times and

places and numbers. None of them meant anything to him. He opened it and made himself something to eat.

His wife looked disheveled walking in the door. Her hair was a mess. She had bags strewn over both shoulders. She tossed her keys on the table and her eyes fell upon her husband, parked on the balcony. Through the sliding glass door, she saw him sitting in the dark, his breath fogging up the air and disappearing in the city sky. He had a candle lit. He was eating a sandwich. She picked up her keys and left as soon as she had arrived. Not again, she thought to herself. She went to a bar down the block. She called her friend, Gail, to tell the next chapter in her tragic novel. She cried and drank and cried some more. The bartender cut her off long before last call. She had had enough, he decided. And she walked back to the apartment, stumbling on the sidewalk from the ice earlier that day.

He awoke in a familiar position—on the couch—early in the morning. Sunlight crept through the half-closed blinds and peeled his eyelids apart. Consciousness flooded his mind. He cracked the door to his bedroom, and he saw his wife sleeping in her business clothes, curled in a ball on his side of the bed. Her arm rested where his shoulder should've been. Her hair would've tickled his ear. If only he had been in bed with her.



He grabbed his keys and left quickly, hoping to return before she awoke. First he visited the florist. Then he bought breakfast and coffee. He estimated his entire trip took twenty minutes, thirty minutes at the most, as he walked back towards his apartment. He went through the revolving door, then up the elevator, then made two left turns, and fumbled for his keys in his pocket. He couldn't find them. Thankfully, he forgot to lock the door.

As expected, his wife was still asleep. The flowers pinned a note he quickly jotted to the nightstand. He wanted to stay with her, but he couldn't think of a single word to say when she lifted her head off the pillow. He couldn't remember why he woke up on the couch. He couldn't remember what he had or hadn't done.

He left the room quietly and closed the door, hoping she wouldn't wake while he was in the apartment. Staring at him from across the room were his wife's blue eyes,

concealed by wisps of auburn bangs. His hand clutched her shoulder, and she reveled in his embrace. She was happy to be in his arms. And his wife—from the sill—looked with condemnation upon the shadow of her husband that covetously stared back at the happy couple. From the picture, the younger, tanner version of himself begged him to go wake his wife. He begged him to give her a kiss. He begged him to talk to her. But the man stood motionlessly until he heard sheets rustle behind the door.

He genuflected before entering his pew. After sitting through the first two readings, he stood and sang “alleluia” for the presentation of the Gospel. He prayed for God to be in his thoughts, in his words, and in his heart. He recited the creed. He asked the Lord to hear his prayers. He prayed that his sacrifice be acceptable God. He acknowledged that he wasn’t worthy to receive the Lord. But, at the Lord’s command, he would do so. And he did. He came back to his pew and kneeled. He thought about the body and blood of Jesus, inside of his own body, washing him clean. He was renewed with a simple act of faith. His soul was pure once more. He was whole.

He didn’t return to his apartment the rest of the day. He rode the subway from end to end. He had a few drinks at a bar in the north part of town. While there, he watched whatever football game happened to be on the big screen. After sitting at the bar for a while, he ordered a cheeseburger. He figured he had been at the bar for two or three hours. So he left. He went back to his parish. He went into the empty chapel. He sat in the dark so that he couldn’t discern the Advent purple from the church’s normal scheme. In the quiet loneliness, he rested his head on his hands and his hands on the pew in front of him. He searched for words to plea to God. He found nothing. So he took the rosary from his pocket and said fifty-three Hail Mary’s. It was the best he could do.

He walked in his apartment door late. Out of habit, he undressed and slowly opened the door to his room. The light from the living room leaked into the bedroom and illuminated the quiet face of a woman in his bed. He blankly stared. He went back into the living room and looked at the picture on the sill. The same woman was with him in the photograph. He returned to his bedroom and stared at the woman again. She wasn’t as happy as she was in the picture. She had bags under her eyes. She wore more makeup to cover the wrinkles on her forehead, and she hadn’t taken the time to wash it off. She had fake fingernails. Probably to cover the bitten ones beneath them. A half-glass of brandy obscured his view of the alarm clock. He thought it said it was 3-something, but salty tears made it even harder to see. He promised himself he would talk to her in the morning, but he knew he wouldn’t. Even if he remembered to speak to her, he knew he wouldn’t remember her name.

Editor’s Note

Dulling Time was first published on the website in January 2009. Photo © Katie Reing

Preoccupied, Cliff Hayley turned onto the main drag of Cleves. After one block, he realized he was headed in the wrong direction and turned around and walked to Buck's Barbershop at the far end of the small town.

Buck's was a one-room building with white aluminum siding, a vacant lot on each side. In the middle of the single front window, the name of the business was stenciled above an image of a barber pole.

Cliff went in to the empty place and stood by the door, wondering whether he should wait in the solitary barber chair. On the back wall, there was a price list, a sentimental print of a fretful boy's first haircut, and a hand-lettered sign in Magic Marker:

Not like any haircut you've EVER had!

"Hello?" Cliff called out.

A man in black pants and powder-blue barber jacket strode from the back room to the barber chair, tennis shoes squeaking on the linoleum. He raised his fist to his neatly trimmed moustache and coughed dryly, then slapped the red leather chair back resoundingly and said, "I've been waiting for you."

"Sorry I'm late," Cliff said wryly. He hung his jacket on a standalone coat rack, and stepped up into the chair. The barber snapped a thin white cloth and spread it over him, fastening it too tightly at the neck. Cliff stuck his finger between the cloth and his neck to loosen it.

"Things are tight all over, aren't they," the barber said. "Like a vice."

Cliff chuckled.

"I'm Preston," the barber said and put out his hand.

Cliff told him his name, shaking a smooth, cool hand. "I thought your name would be Buck," he said.

"The previous owner," Preston said. "I haven't bothered changing the name. Doesn't matter, anyway, right?"

Cliff thought Preston was being rhetorical and didn't respond.

"Right?" Preston demanded. "That it doesn't matter that I haven't changed the name."

"Oh, no," Cliff wavered. "I mean, right. What's in a name? It's your shop, you can call it what you want."

Preston combed roughly through Cliff's thick hair. "How do you want it?"

"A regular haircut," Cliff winced. "I'll leave it up to you to make me look good."

Preston paused, then said "Don't you know yourself by now?"

“Uhh,” Cliff said. “I’m just saying that you can probably see what looks good on me better than I can.”

Preston turned the chair to the mirror so that he could look into Cliff’s eyes. “There’s this modern invention called the mirror,” he said. “You can see yourself in it.”

Cliff forced himself to keep eye contact, trying to make his eyes friendly. Preston’s pale blue eyes were clear but glassy, the eyebrows arched. “So that’s a mirror,” Cliff joked.

“I look in it a lot,” Preston said.

“Don’t we all,” Cliff agreed, trying to keep it light and easy.

“Most, just skin deep.”

The cloth seemed to have tightened around Cliff’s neck. “Yeah,” he agreed, and



swallowed against the pulse in his throat.

Preston looked at him, then abruptly went to the back room.

Cliff turned his head and gazed at a sanguine maple outside the window and thought of slipping out, but that would be rude, and it

looked like Preston could use the business. It might be a long haircut, but Cliff thought he would enjoy the visit as he wasn’t socializing much, and it was a laid-back fall morning. He had nowhere to go on his day off, anyway.

Preston returned and asked with a medicinal whiff of breath, “Where have I seen you?”

“I work at BuildTown Building Supply,” Cliff suggested. “At the interstate junction.” He felt impelled to explain that it was a temporary post-college job, something to pay the rent and bills until he figured out what to do with his life.

“No, not there,” Preston said, remembering. “I’ve seen you drive by, glancing in like you were looking for something. I knew you’d stop in one day.”

Cliff wondered how Preston could know that. “The boss likes us assistant-manager trainees to be neat,” he said.

“I’ll give you a cut,” Preston said. He turned the chair away from the mirror and began buzzing the electric clipper through Cliff’s hair.

Cliff relaxed as auburn locks fell onto the cape, and was amused when he realized the smell on Preston’s breath was liquor. A circular clock on the opposite wall said 10:17, and Cliff wondered how long Preston would last through the day. “How long have you owned this place?” he asked.

Preston stopped cutting but left the clipper on.

Cliff thought he was calculating the length of time, but when Preston didn’t answer, Cliff craned his neck to see his distressed face.

“Seven years,” Preston intoned.

“Huh,” Cliff said looking forward, embarrassed as if he had walked in on someone crying. “I can’t imagine living seven years in one place.”

Preston held the buzzing clipper and comb idly. “How long you been here?”

“Three months.”

“How long you expect to stay?”

Cliff had been asking that of himself. He wanted to move on, though he didn’t know to what, and hadn’t set a date. He enjoyed the hilly terrain in the area, but vaguely desired a change of scenery. “Don’t know,” he said. “I’m kind of riding things out.”

“You’re here for the long haul,” Preston said and snapped off the clipper.

Cliff faced Preston and countered, “Well, something might turn up in the near future.”

Preston closed his heavy eyelids and shook his head slowly.

“And I look for job leads,” Cliff said. He named several job-hunting venues.

“That’s not where you should be searching.”

“Okay,” Cliff said, irritated that Preston kept his eyes closed. “Where *should* I be searching?” He looked forward to ease his kinked neck and loosen the constricting cloth, and Preston left for the back room again. Cliff was annoyed at this barber who acted like he had some insight into Cliff’s life and personality. And who was he to give out advice? Boozing it up on a weekday morning in this one-horse town. Cliff would have left, leaving money on the chair, but only half his head was cropped. When Preston returned, Cliff would keep the conversation to chit-chat, the weather, the NFL. He almost turned on the portable TV on the counter for a distraction, but thought better of it.

Preston came back, clearing his throat. He picked up the clipper and comb and leaned against Cliff to steady himself, exuding wafts of metabolizing alcohol. Cliff felt Preston’s heartbeat on his bicep.

“Everything okay back there?” Cliff quipped. If Preston was going to drink on the job, Cliff had a right to tease him.

“What wouldn’t be okay?” Preston asked defensively.

“Uhh . . .”

Preston compressed his lips and moustache into two parallel lines and turned on the clipper to continue cutting Cliff's hair, very slowly as if he was wary of making a mistake, breathing through his nose.

It was somehow more annoying for Preston to not talk. "How about this weather," Cliff said.

Preston turned off the clipper. "How about it?"

"Yeah. You liking this crisp fall weather?"

Preston looked out the window. "Fall, spring, summer, winter," he said. "It's all the same."

"I like something in each season, too," Cliff said.

"What I meant was," Preston clarified, "is that it all adds up to the same thing. And you know it."

Cliff felt that they were talking about two different things, but didn't know what Preston was referring to. "At this point," he sighed, "I don't know what I know, other than I just came in for a haircut."

"You didn't come in just for that," Preston said. He turned the clipper on and continued cutting.

The hell I didn't, Cliff thought. He understood why there weren't any other customers and why he'd never seen any in the shop -- Preston drove them all away. A car went by, and Cliff imagined the driver looking in and chuckling at the sucker sitting in the chair getting a philosophy lesson. Still, what had Preston meant that Cliff hadn't come in just for a haircut?

Preston finished with the clipper, and continued with scissors and comb, neither one talking. Though it was awkward, and though Cliff was interested in Preston's cryptic statements, he decided not to engage him, and closed his eyes to wait out the haircut with his own thoughts.

Cliff was abruptly wrenched around to face the mirror. It took a second for his dizzy vision to clear, and for the shorn stranger in the mirror to become himself.

"How're you looking?" Preston asked curtly.

Cliff obligingly appraised the haircut. "Looks good, Preston," he said. He was glad it was over, and reached under the cloth to his pants pocket for money.

"Not done yet," Preston said. He pressed the red button on a hot-lather dispenser that sat among green and blue bottles and jars on the counter. Then he picked up a black-handled straight razor and honed it on the strop hanging from the side of the chair.

"I don't shave on my day off," Cliff deferred, looking at the Jeris brand embossed on both sides of the wide blade.

Preston squeezed a paper strip between Cliff's neck and the cloth. "Got to trim along the hairline," he said.

"It's okay like it is."

"Some barbers don't bother anymore," Preston said, "but it's all in the details."

Cliff felt warm lather being spread along his hairline, over his ears and down his nape, and cursed himself for coming to this barbershop. The lather felt like warm Elmer's glue. He shifted in his seat, telling himself that he didn't have to stay.

"The razor making you nervous?" Preston asked.

"No," Cliff said in a tight voice, his hands and forearms tensed on the chair arms, ready to bolt.

"Then what is?"

"This is getting kind of . . ." Cliff held his breath as Preston began scratching at his hairline with the razor.

"Kind of weird?" Preston coaxed, scraping behind Cliff's ear.

Cliff tried to breathe in silently, and thought it shouldn't be too much longer, if Preston didn't go to the back room again.

"Right?" Preston asked.

"Right," Cliff conceded through clenched teeth. "I just didn't want to talk while you were trimming."

Preston wiped a glob of used lather on a square tissue. "Afraid I'll take too much off?"

Cliff tried to be casual but chuckled uneasily. "Yeah, I can't afford the deluxe cut."

Preston said, "Oh, you know you can afford it," as if Cliff had been serious.

"I was just . . . ah never mind," Cliff said, surprised that his irritation exceeded his apprehension. "You act like you know all about me, Preston."

"Call it a sixth sense."

"Sure," Cliff scoffed. "Like those con-artist psychic hotlines, TV evangelists. They say something general, and there are a lot of people that it could apply to."

"I'm not one of those," Preston said. "But sometimes I feel like a sculptor, cutting and shaping. To get to the real thing underneath."

Cliff was impressed at Preston's metaphor, but his voice rose shakily as he said, "And you're just guessing about me. You don't know squat about me."

"So how come you're getting upset?"

Cliff had to agree with Preston. Why was this tipsy barber getting to him? Why was Cliff putting any stock in what he said?

"I do know squat about you," Preston said, "based on what you told me. Unless you made it up. Even if you did make it up."

At this point, Cliff didn't know whether he had made it up. Preston, this barbershop, this haircut, this life seemed unreal.

"I also know squat about myself, when I see it," Preston continued. "And you and I are one and the same. I knew that before we talked."

"Oh, I get it, I get it," Cliff said, forcing a laugh. "I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together."

"See, I like the Beatles, too," Preston said.

“Well, ‘goo goo g’joob,’” Cliff said as he stood. He wiped off the remaining lather with the hem of the cape and tried to unfasten it from around his neck. “Get this off,” he pleaded.

“Sit down,” Preston said gently. “Let me finish the other side.”

“I need to go,” Cliff said.

Preston swirled the chair towards Cliff, the razor slicing the air. “We both know you don’t need to.”

Cliff hesitated, then reluctantly agreed and stepped into the chair thinking it would be easier to leave if he complied. He cringed at the thought of Preston standing behind him with a razor, but figured if Preston were going to go off his rocker and harm him, that he would have done it already.

Preston slowly turned the chair back toward the mirror, taking care to not make Cliff dizzy, and smoothed out the cape. “I’ll be right back,” he said. “Take a good look at yourself.”

“Hey, come on,” Cliff said.

Preston disappeared into the back room, leaving Cliff grudgingly with himself in the mirror. He shook his head, and then smiled at the aggravation. What a kook. Probably lonely . . . like me. Cliff watched his smile droop as if it were wet lather running down his chin.

“See something interesting?” Preston asked when he returned several minutes later.

“No,” Cliff said absently.

“I’ll show you something interesting,” Preston said, his breath ether-like. He applied fresh warm lather. This time it had a balmy, lulling effect, and Cliff relaxed and settled into the comfy old leather seat, and even yawned.

“What are you going to show me?” Cliff asked drowsily.

“Yourself.”

“But I see myself,” Cliff said to the mirror.

“You just think you do,” Preston said. “But what you really need is . . .” He stopped to consider what Cliff needed.

“What do I need?” Cliff asked.

Preston didn’t answer, and Cliff let it go.

After Preston finished trimming, he rinsed the razor and dropped it in the side pocket of his jacket, then sprinkled witch hazel onto a clean white washcloth and soothed Cliff’s hairline with it. He tossed the washcloth into an empty basket under the sink and clamped eyes with Cliff in the mirror.

“You’ll have your backroom and front room, too,” Preston said. “This is mine.” He rotated the chair slowly. Three aluminum-framed chairs sat at the opposite wall. A flimsy coffee table in front of the chairs held a couple neat stacks of magazines. “This is it,” he said regretfully.

Cliff's skin tingled from the witch hazel, or what Preston was saying. "You could try something else," he said optimistically. He felt silly with what he had said, as if he had had a drink of Preston's liquor.

"There is nothing else," Preston said resonantly. He leaned on his forearms on the chair headrest and began narrating about himself over Cliff's head, and more to himself than to Cliff as his eyes wandered off into the mirror, his boozy breath mingling with the other cosmetic smells. At various points in the narrative, Cliff would say, "Yeah," or "Uh-huh," to show he was listening, but he didn't have to do that, as Preston never asked him if he followed what he was saying or if he understood.

Cliff groggily became aware of a silence in the room and realized that Preston had stopped talking, and was in the back room. His ears rang slightly and his brain was overloaded and suspended with the details of Preston's life. The details -- enlistment in the Navy, two marriages, children, various jobs -- had blended into a general impression: a life of drift, an aimless search for something. And there was a familiar feel to Preston's life, as if Cliff had heard it before somewhere. Is that why he had chosen this barbershop? A felt kinship with this lonely man whom he would glimpse sitting in his barber chair in an empty shop, staring into the mirror, as Cliff was doing now. He was having odd thoughts and shook his head to get blood to it. He was startled to see that the clock in the mirror said noon.

"Preston?" Cliff called out like a lost child for its parent.

Preston wobbled from the back, his eyes puffy and red.

"Hey, man," Cliff said, "maybe you should take it easy on that stuff."

"It's not the stuff," Preston sniffled, rubbing his eyes. "The stuff doesn't work." He went to the sink and patted cold water on his face.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Preston dried his face, then inspected Cliff's hair, nodding satisfactorily at his handiwork. He unfastened the cape from Cliff's neck, easing the flow of blood in a head-clearing rush, and draped it on the back of the chair.

In the mirror, Cliff saw that Preston's eyes had cleared. Ah, he'd just had a momentary case of the blues.

"Yes, there's something you can do," Preston said. "Watch." He looked at himself in the mirror, turning his head from side to side, and carefully put the razor to his neck.

Cliff thought that Preston was going to shave a few random whiskers, but flinched spastically as Preston yanked the razor across his throat, blood welling out in a crooked line. Preston hiccupped and dropped the razor as he locked eyes with Cliff in the mirror, then he grabbed Cliff's shoulders as though holding him back from, or pushing him towards, some impending danger.

Cliff lurched off the seat as Preston stumbled backwards into the coffee table, gagging as he landed in one of the chairs, his arms limp. Cliff grabbed the thin cape and bunched it up and pressed it against the pulsing red gash, trying not to look at it.

Preston moaned and feebly tried to push Cliff away.

Cliff saw a cordless phone to the side of the sink and rushed and grabbed it and a couple white towels, knocking over the bottles. He pressed one of the towels on Preston's neck and got him in a gentle headlock. As he flicked 9-1-1 with a jittery thumb, he nearly vomited, and retched while he faltered the emergency to the detached dispatcher.

"Can you stay with him?" she calmly asked.

"Yes!" Cliff shouted. "Yes!" He dropped the phone and quietly added, "I'm not going anywhere."

He looked past the letters on the window at the vivid maple and held his breath for the EMS, shuddering at Preston's weight and their damp shirts. Someone driving by and looking in might have seen two long-lost friends tearfully reuniting.

Editor's Note

Buck's Barbershop was first published on the website in June 2009.

Photograph © Katie Reing

The Burial by Ry Downey

Gray clouds hovered over the tops of the trees in the morning as if the bottom of heaven had dropped out, hanging low enough to touch the most optimistic of heads and mire them in the mundane. The top floor of the farmhouse was sunk so deep in the fog that it seemed to anyone who looked out of the window that they were at highest point of the ceiling in a room caught on fire. From fifty yards away the door of the house could be seen opening and two blurry figures stepped out of the house, the first holding the door open for the second, who held a third figure in his arms. The first figure—a head and a half taller than the second—picked a couple things up from the porch and slung them over his shoulder. The door swung shut, muted by the oppressive fog that hung in the air. The two figures began to walk along the path that wound from the farmhouse to the main road that eventually bled into town. A closer look revealed the two figures to be boys and the third figure in the arms of the second to be a dog, hanging limply as if tranquilized or something more permanent. Coming closer, conversation could be heard between the two figures.

“Why’d you want to build a casket for the damned thing, anyway?” came the question from the taller boy.

“Because, it has to get buried, doesn’t it?” the shorter asked in a higher pitch.

“Yeah. Otherwise it’ll rot. Just like any other meat.”

“Well, then why don’t it need a casket?”

“Because, it’s just like any other piece of meat.”

The two figures continued on in silence, the second trailing slightly behind the first, as if weighed down by hundreds of pounds of memory. The second boy looked down at the dog in his arms, as if trying to grasp some unfathomable notion. He chewed on his lip and said, “Travis, why do people get buried in caskets?”

“What?”

“People. Why do they get buried in caskets and dogs don’t?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, aren’t people animals?”

“Yeah. Kind of.”

“How are they kind of animals?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you said that dogs don’t get buried in caskets because they’re just like any other meat. And meat is animal. But you said that humans get buried in caskets, but they’re animals, too. So why do people get buried in caskets and dogs don’t?”

“No other animals get buried in caskets, Davey.”

“Why not?”

“How the hell should I know?” Travis whipped around, letting the shovels slide off his shoulder.

“I don’t know...” Davey looked down once again at the dog cradled in his arms.

“Well, shit,” Travis turned and walked once more in the direction of the tree line where they planned to bury the dog. “I don’t know either.”

Davey followed in his older brother’s wake, but slower, wishing to hold on to the time he had left. Davey remembered finding the dog—Stranger—under the porch of the house the day before.

When he found Stranger, he ducked under the porch and crawled to him to wake him up with a quick blast of air to the ear like he normally did. But when he got there, he blew into the ear of the dog and nothing seemed to move, not even the hair touched by Davey’s breath inside the dog’s ear. Davey knew Stranger was dead, but he refused to move, as if by staying that way he could circumvent the true acceptance of the dog’s demise and perhaps even trick the universe into believing that the dog was only sleeping, not dead—anything but dead. Davey sat looking at the dog until he heard Travis calling for him from inside—and then eventually outside—the house. Davey heard Travis’s voice behind him, “Hey, bud. What the hell are you doing out here? Dinner’s on and the folks are missing you.”

Davey moved his shoulders a quarter turn to show Travis what had kept him so long outside. He heard Travis mutter, “Aw, shit,” and then come closer to sit next to Davey and the dog. Davey felt Travis’ eyes on him, but he continued looking at Stranger. “Well,” Davey heard his brother say, “it was a good dog. Lived a long life, bud. There’s nothing we can do for it now.”

“Yeah,” Davey croaked.

Travis cuffed his arm feather-like and said, “Hey bud, how’s about you and me go out tomorrow and bury old Stranger along that tree line out there where you and the beast used to play all the damn day long until I’d have to come out and bring you in?”

Davey didn’t trust his voice at the moment, but liked his brother’s idea. He nodded his approval.

That night, Davey hoped that the morning would never come so that Stranger could always be above the ground and could always maybe be sleeping. The morning came and greeted the two boys. Travis shook Davey awake and told him to come on with that dog. And to dress warm.

Davey put on some long johns and jeans; tee shirt and long-sleeved shirt; sweatshirt and winter coat; then socks and his boots. When dressed, he followed Travis downstairs to the foyer of the house, next to the front door where they put on their stocking caps and made last-minute adjustments to their wardrobe. Davey looked up to the arching beam that separated the foyer from the living room where a gold crucifix hung profoundly. Davey stood looking at it until he felt a knock on the arm from Travis as a signal to get moving.

Outside, Davey picked Stranger up in his arms and found him still flexible, not yet stricken with rigor mortis. Davey waited while Travis grabbed the two shovels from the porch. Before they started walking, Davey glowered honestly over his shoulder

through the wall at the very spot on which the crucifix hung. Then he set off behind his brother.

They reached the tree line, Davey trailing behind his brother, not concentrating on where they were heading. The first sound of metal hitting unmoving earth brought Davey back to earth—the present one, at least. “What are we doing here?” Davey asked, surprised.

Travis turned around, “What the hell are you talking about? We’re here to bury that dog.”

“No,” Davey said as if speaking through a haze, “why are we burying Stranger here?”

“Because you two used to play here all the time, remember?”

“I mean, I thought we were going to bury him over there,” Davey pointed to a plot of earth two hundred yards away, surrounded by a wrought-iron gate. Travis’s eyes followed Davey’s pointed finger, then narrowed.

“The family plot?”

“Well, yeah,” Davey’s gaze panned down to the dog. “I mean, he was family wasn’t he?”

“He was a *part* of the family. Like in a play, get it? It played a *part*. And that part was the *dog*. The family *pet*. Okay, bud?” At this, Travis attacked the tundra once again with the shovel and made some headway.

Davey said nothing, but kept looking from the dog to the plot to the developing grave and then back to the plot. Davey performed this litany of looks until the second shovel, tossed by Travis, struck his booted foot and brought him back to the present earth.

“Come on, bud. It takes two to dig a grave, you know,” Travis said and winked at his brother.

Bending slowly to his knees as if to avoid disrupting the dog’s sleep, Davey placed the dog on the ground like a precious piece of china. Then he grabbed the shovel and got to his feet to help Travis dig the grave. The work was tough with the frozen earth and Davey soon followed his brother’s lead in stripping away his winter coat to let his body breathe. After a couple hours, the two brothers found themselves only a foot and a half deep into the ground. Travis dropped his shovel to rest, but Davey kept going. The past couple hours had made Davey proud—the way in which he was digging his best friend’s resting place; the way salty droplets of himself as results of his exertion were going into the ground and would be with the dog forever—so much so that Davey began to feel the need to show Travis how much harder he was working than his older brother. Every now and then Davey would look up to see if Travis was watching him, frequently seeing Travis taking sips from the canteen he had brought. Looking down again, Davey found that he had gained another half of a foot while Travis rested. This look reminded Davey of the dog and caused him to look once more at the departed dog. While Davey looked at the sight of Stranger lying there, he felt as if he could actually see the dog shaking in

need of a blanket or a warm master. Davey felt a searing anger burning inside his body as he looked at Stranger. He speared the ground anew with a fresh vigor he had drawn from the love he had given Stranger and Stranger had given him and was now lost forever, for love as well as life, is motion. And from where Davey stood digging, the love that Stranger had shown him looked as gone as the love of God.

“Hey, bud. You’d better slow down or you’ll be out by foot three.” Travis’s voice came from below Davey somewhere next to the grave.

Davey halted his digging and looked up from his work into Travis’s face. “Do dogs go to heaven?”

Travis picked his teeth for a minute and looked over the spread, as if making a crucial decision. “No. They don’t go to heaven, bud.”

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t have souls. You can’t get into heaven without a soul.”

Davey looked down at Stranger, “Can murderers go to heaven?”

“Sure, if they repent well enough.”

“So, murdering people can go to heaven if they want it bad enough, but animals that never did nothing wrong go to hell?”

“I didn’t say they went to hell, bud. I just said they didn’t go to heaven.”

Davey felt confused and angered by his brother’s patient tone, “Well where else would they go?”

“Purgatory. I don’t know. Maybe they don’t go anywhere since they ain’t got a soul.”

Davey tried to imagine a world after death where no one went anywhere, but all he saw was darkness all around—darkness and loneliness. The thought of nothing after death shook his body with tremors. “That’s not fair.”



“No one said life was fair, bud.” Travis’s reply came from beneath Davey again. Davey could tell that he was smiling, but refused to look at his brother.

“Well, it should be,” the cogs whirred in Davey’s mind as he tried to think of something else to punctuate what he had just said, “God damn it.”

“Listen to Davey here, cussing with the rest of us.” Travis applauded from the ground.

“I’m serious, Travis.” Davey persisted. “It’s not God damned fair and it should be.”

Travis scraped the ground getting to his feet and came over to Davey. “Hey, bud. Just go ahead and sit on down over there next to Stranger while I dig for a little bit, okay?”

“But I...”

“I know you want to do good on this grave, bud. It’s okay. I’ll do good on it too.”

Davey looked up at Travis. He was smiling at Davey and gave him a nudge in the direction of the dog. “Go on. I’ll be done in a little bit.”

Davey sat down next to Stranger and started stroking his black and white spotted coat, attempting to project himself into the past where Stranger’s love for him still existed, but all he could see was the moment he had found Stranger’s death up until now. His thoughts now revolved endlessly around what Travis had said about being a person. Bit by bit, Davey began to remember a saying his father had said once about how you could always tell a person by their eyes. Propelled by this memory, Davey drew himself closer to the dog and reached over and pried the eyelids of the dog open. Stranger’s eyes were simply black pools that swallowed rather than reflected light. Davey could not even see himself in Stranger’s eyes, as if his self were removed completely by the loss of Stranger’s life. “What are you doin’?” came Travis’s voice from behind him.

“Looking at Stranger’s eyes.”

“What the hell are you doin’ that for?”

“To see if I could see his soul.”

“Dogs don’t have souls, dumbass. Didn’t I just tell you that?”

“Stranger’s eyes are black,” Davey breathed, “just black. Nothing else.”

“So?”

“So the soul leaves the body right after death, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, even if Stranger had a soul, the only time we would ever see it would have been when he was alive!” Davey felt his excitement rising in spite of himself.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Travis demanded, coming closer.

“Remember when dad said that stuff about telling a person by their eyes? Well, it’s just like that! When Stranger was alive, his eyes were full of lights and shapes and life! How can you tell me that wasn’t his soul?”

“The Bible says that animals don’t have souls.”

“What if the bible was wrong?” Davey asked Travis.

“You better watch what you say, bud.” Travis’s voice hushed with significance.

Davey turned and looked at Travis, whose face had gone flush. “Well, what if it is wrong?” Davey persisted, rising to his feet. His heart struck in his chest like a drum roll. “Then Stranger would have a soul and he would be able to get to heaven.”

“The Bible is God’s word,” Travis took a step toward Davey. “And God’s word is God’s law. And you had better get that into your head, bud. Or this world is going to be a hell of a lot more difficult for you.” Travis’s words hung in the air between them. Neither of them spoke, but merely looked into each other’s eyes. The moment, whatever it was, passed and Travis turned and went back to digging.

Davey watched the cruel muscles of his brother’s back work as he worked the shovel into the earth. Davey knew what he wanted to say to Travis the moment he had stopped talking. The words assembled themselves on the very verge of his tongue, while every muscle in his body, every person he had ever heard, every fiber of his conditioned mind told him not to say what was on his mind. Davey drew himself upward and spoke the words he had come to learn, “Then God is wrong.”

Travis stiffened his back and for a brief instant, Davey readied himself to be set upon by his brother. However, Davey saw his brother simply shake his head censoriously and continue digging Stranger’s grave.

“And if God is wrong,” Davey continued, his tongue feeling freer with each word, each syllable, each consonant, “then God might not be real.”

At this, Travis turned and looked Davey in the eye. “That damned dog ain’t got a soul. He’s laying there right now in the dark and alone. Get used to that.”

“If a murderer can get into heaven,” Davey chose his words with precision, “and a dog who gave me all the love in the world can’t, then I don’t want to go to heaven and I don’t love God.” Davey watched Travis turn back to the grave once again, as if afraid of what he would hear next. “At least if I don’t go to heaven, Stranger won’t be alone in the darkness. I would rather be in a place where everything is equal rather than a place that ain’t fair.”

Davey got up from his seat next to the dog and helped dig the grave the rest of the way. At top speed with both of the brothers helping, the grave was deep enough by an hour before sunset. Travis was the first one out of the grave but left Davey to raise himself out of the grave. Davey rushed past Travis and picked Stranger up. Davey carried Stranger to the opening in the ground as if to give himself time enough to commit to memory all the features of the dog. Davey reached the grave and once again laid the dog to rest with the care of a tightrope walker. Grabbing a handful of dirt, Davey pitched a spray of earth down onto Stranger’s coat and gave Travis a nod saying to dump the dirt and complete the burial.

The two brothers stood side by side next to the mound of earth, looking down at Stranger’s resting place. After a few moment’s silence, Travis, as if he had been waiting

for the exact time where Davey would be most vulnerable, said “God don’t give a shit about dogs” and turned, grabbing his coat, and leaving Davey next to Stranger’s grave.

Davey continued looking down at Stranger’s grave and smiled, “Then god doesn’t care about Life.” And he turned to follow his brother back to the house.

Davey took his time getting back to the house. The sun was at its lowest point before casting all into night when Davey got back. Davey opened the front door of the house and turned immediately to the left, walking up to the golden crucifix. He studied it for a moment, thinking of all the things it represented and all the things it somehow neglected. Davey turned his crooked head slightly as if regarding something he had seen a million times before in a brand new light, amazed he hadn’t seen past its façade after all these years. Davey reached up to the golden crucifix, lifted it from its hook, and dropped it into the trash can right next to the door. The clank it made upon impact made Davey curious. He stooped over and reached into the can, pulling it back into the light cast by the light bulb illuminating the porch and streaking through the window. Much of the gold of the crucifix had been scraped away, revealing a metal that looked like a mixture of brown and purple, a deep bruise. The metal had been molded and soldered, cast in pits of fire and steam, created in a place of inferno to uplift the soul. Davey dropped the crucifix back into the trash and mounted the stairs to his room. He lolled on his bed and the image of the mutilated crucifix came to him once more and revealed itself to him. Davey marveled at the simplicity in this irony and began to laugh. His laughter echoed through the second part of the house and careened off the walls, down the stairs into the ground level of the house, and finally out into the night and the darkness, forever spanning beyond and transcending the limits of heaven and hell, God and Satan, right and wrong, human and not, light and darkness, for it was laughter born in freedom and in love.

Editor’s Note

The Burial was first published on the website in April 2009.

Photograph © Gaby Natal <http://www.myspace.com/gabriellanatal>

A Family Outing by Ethel Rohan

Shane's father drives fast, the car moving like a luminous fish, his big frame folded behind the steering wheel. His shirt-sleeves are rolled up to his bulging biceps, revealing thick arms inked with faded tattoos: a tangle of snakes with open jaws, fangs. Shane would like to roll-up his sleeves and hang his elbow out his window, but he has stick arms. When he's older, with more meat, he'll put a fire-breathing dragon tattoo on each of his forearms.

At the outskirts of the city, the grass sways in the fields, looking athletic and happy. *These Boots Are Made For Walkin'* blares from the radio. Shane and his father shout along. The crows scatter from the trees, the sky so blue and cloudless it appears painted. Shane doesn't think his father has ever looked more relaxed or handsome. "Her own Errol Flynn," Shane's mother has said.

They race around corners and past random houses and pubs, hearing the planes from the airport long before they see them. They sounded too close for comfort. Shane's not worried, though, doesn't think anything bad can happen. Not when his father's like this. His father accelerates, the car spinning out onto the open road. Shane whoops into the wind, slapping his hair out of his eyes. His father raises a similar cry.

They park at the rear of the airport, in full view of the runways, metal hulks, and sprawling buildings beyond the endless chain fence. On the roof of the car, they stretch out on the hot metal, their hands folded behind their heads and eyes narrowed against the sun's glare. An Aer Lingus jet strains into the sky, screeching so close Shane's heart catches. Minutes later, a United Airlines 747 follows, its grey body and white underbelly making Shane think of a dolphin.

Shane and his father wonder aloud about the passengers, who they are and where they're going. Shane hopes the passengers can see his father and him, basking. He imagines a woman passenger with sallow skin, button nose, and large red lips sitting near the front of the plane, her long black wavy hair fanning across the back of her seat. The passenger behind her fights reaching out and petting her.

She's Maria, a renowned Spanish ballerina, but calls no place home now that she travels so much. Maria's afraid of flying and likes to sit close to the cockpit, ever alert to the first signs of trouble. She can't stay still in her seat, her upper body swaying, feet kicking, and hands fluttering. To belt her in is to stake her soul. Sometimes, when Shane's mother doesn't know he's watching, she prances and pirouettes around their kitchen.

"If you could go anywhere in the world where would you go?" his father asks.

Right here, Shane almost answers, but stops himself.

"America," he says.

"Ho!" his father says.

"What about you?"

His father doesn't answer.

"Dad?"

"Just watch, son."

The word "son" rings in Shane's ears, the ecstatic peals of a bell.

"We'll go to Hawaii together someday," Shane says.

His father chuckles.

Shane tells himself it could happen.

Later, when they stop into the pub, parched and salty, their faces sunburned, Shane's father entertains the handful of people in the dull place with his jokes and stories. Later still, when evening falls, the orange-red fire's blazing, and the packed pub's choked with blue-black cigarette smoke, Shane's father remains the center of attention, beguiling everyone with his good looks, easy charm, and sharp wit. The musicians in the far corner bring their guitars, fiddles, whistles, banjos, and accordions to life. Shane's father waltzes a tall, thin, raven-haired woman about the stone floor, her white underwear showing through her yellow dress.

Shane sips his coca-cola through a limp paper straw, and ignores the hungry rumbles in his stomach. He taps his foot and bobs his head, his blood coursing in time to the music and his father's sure steps. Someday he'll twirl just such a beauty around a faraway dance floor. Whenever he thinks of his mother back at home, knowing full well where he and his father have gotten to, he looks through the far window, silver cobwebs in its top corners, searching for the glittering lights of the planes, listening for their triumphant roar amidst the stars. The music stops, and Shane's father dips the woman backwards, kissing her full on the mouth for an impossibly long time. Now Shane can hear the planes, their sound as muffled as his mother's crying when she thinks no one is listening.

Editor's Note

A Family Outing was first published on the website in April 2009 and won the April Story of the Month Contest.

A Time to Die by Eric Bennett

There's a righteous violence in me, a holy murder.

"Let us pray."

Everyone has a perfect death, a right ending to their life. And in each face, I see it – the way a person should expire.

"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

For some it's the blue gasping of asphyxiation, the greedy gulp of drowning, or the warm bloodletting of a cutting blade. It would be wrong to devise a murder; rather, I allow homicidal images to appear like the face of a choir boy floating up from baptismal waters.

"Turn to page 276 and let us sing 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus.'"

I survey my congregation and imagine some of them in snapshots of crime scenes; Mr. Moeller's throat pig slit, Ms. Thigpen poisoned, Dr. Schundler's face shot off. These mental Polaroids are prayers.

I prefer communion mornings, all those faces tilted, throats exposed. Wafer swallowing. Wine sipping. I envisage my sheep's slaughter best in close proximity.

"The body of Christ broken for you."

"The blood of Christ shed for you"

Today's homily is from John 19, the crucifixion. Relishing the retelling of hammering nails, piercing sword, and the agonizing death of the son of God I emphasize phrases like "lamb to the slaughter." My passion paints a picture that has the blue-haired old ladies weeping and the spit-cleaned boys cringing at being nailed naked.

"It is finished."

I shake the hands of each parishioner as they leave. Piously receiving compliments on the morning message, I imagine their murder.

"God be with you."

"And also with you."

Monday morning in my walnut-walled office, Ms. Gruber informs me that hospital visits for the week have doubled. "And attendance is down by one third," she adds. "There's simply too much work for one man to do, Father."

I turn and look into Mrs. Gruber's melon face, "There is no greater love than a man lay down his life for his friends." Gazing at her halved cantaloupe countenance I wait for a revelation of her fatality.

And it comes.

Pulling into the hospital parking lot I say a quick prayer.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

"Good to see you again, Father" chirrup the male nurse at the front counter.

"I'm here for Ms. Bender?"

"She'll appreciate the visit. Room 437."

“God bless you, son.”

Sleeping, Ms. Bender is pressed into the bed by a single sheet. Thin skin and veined, her arms rest at her sides. She is frail and fading but the light above her bed halos her face saint-like.

Gently, I lift her lolling head with my left hand and withdraw the pillow. I kiss her on the forehead.

Then, I smother her. There is a moment of clenching in her hands, but she passes peacefully. I wipe white sputum from the corner of her mouth, place the pillow beneath her dead head, and walk out of the room to the familiar alert of a life support system going haywire.



“Come unto me all ye who are weary and I will give you rest.”

I don’t turn to watch the nurses rush a crash cart into Ms. Bender’s room; I do stop to get a bag of Doritos from the vending machine in the waiting room.

“I am the bread of life.”

Driving back to the church I marvel that most people believe their days eternal, all evidence to the contrary. I suppose it’s in our nature to entertain hope that somehow a miracle will always save us. This is why God sent me – to teach his children that all things must end.

“To everything there is a season: a time to live and a time to die.”

In the moment I park my car, everything happens. Two police cars screech around the corner gravel sliding in front of me. One police car rushes up behind. Six doors fly open. Guns are ready-aiming. There is a bullhorn.

“Hands! Show us your hands. Now!”

I lift my hands.

“Get out of the car.”

“Get out of the car.”

In that moment I understand that God has rendered me powerless. And the miracle is to be that there will be no miracle. I am not spared this knowledge and yet, I welcome it. Looking in the rearview mirror I see my own perfect death, my final act of mercy.

“Thanks be to God.”

Lifting my hands, I step out of the car.

“Take six steps back and lay down.”

I step forward.

“STOP!”

I step forward again.

“One more step and I’ll shoot.”

I smile. And take one more step forward.

“Amen.”

Editor’s Note

A Time to Die was first published on the website in January 2009 and won the January Story of the Month Contest.

Photograph © *Katie Reing*

INTRODUCTIONS

Behold the great lover. What a sight he is. The brown hair thinning on top, a paunch starting to envelop his hips. Slight chin lag and perhaps a few gray hairs around the ears but he still has the step, the walk, the look. The quick wetting of the lips with the tongue, the half smile on his face, the generosity of his soul, a twinkle in his eye if that could actually happen, the enigma of the great lover.

RESUME

...and then there was Karen in San Diego and then Christine in Seattle, no, that was Portland...Rachel in St. Louis, Mary in Port Clinton, a suburb of Cleveland, how many do I have so far?....

THEORY AND MISSION STATEMENT

The great lover does not try to conquer women. They are trying to conquer him. He's trying to conquer Love.

EMPLOYMENT

He taught a class at the Extension School entitled "The Do's and Don'ts of Being The Great Lover." It was listed under the psychology department but also cross-listed under Ethnography and Business.

Being a great lover, he stated, is all in the approach. The key is attitude.

The students wrote this down. Surprisingly, there were three women in a class of twelve men.

He added, It is not how deep the well is but how one dangles the bucket, and then he sat at his desk, gazing sagely out the window.

The students pondered this for a few moments but then quickly noted it.

PROBLEM SOLVING

The great lover met a woman named Marie. He classified her as a level 6 which meant a slower approach. When asked by a friend why, the great lover said, I believe my heart has been pricked. He then quickly fled, taking the nearest empty cab uptown.

MAIL

He received love letters from all over the United States. He replied to each letter personally despite the rumor that he had hired others to do it. Nor did he use form letters or mail merge. While it's true that when simultaneously responding to one hundred letters a day that certain phrases might be repeated, the intent was to respond to each individual's need.

It's a people business, he said.

THE CONSORTIUM

A consortium of international businessmen and women approached the great lover. They wished to purchase his product and package it. What is my product, he asked? The consortium offered him a large sum of money, not disclosed. His task was to answer all queries, whether by mail or e-mail, on how to become the great lover.

PERSONAL

He was married. He had a wife and a mistress. He also had a girlfriend but only on Thursdays while his wife and mistress were together at a watercolor class. Because he was the great lover, he must cheat on them. It is irremediable.

He loved them. He said he did. He knew he did. He would be heartbroken without them. But he was the great lover and he must woo the world. Besides, he thought, they knew. The wife knew of the mistress, and the mistress was cognizant of the girlfriend, and the girlfriend believed he might be married but didn't really want to know because then she would have to end it.

Once he tried to fight the urge to be the great lover. No, he said to himself, I am now married. I have uttered my oath and taken my vow. I have pledged and been pledged.

But the urge was malarial. It made him feverish. He constantly craved water. His lower back ached and his knees were puffy on the sides, so puffy he had to either stand all the time or when he sat down he had to keep his legs stiff since he couldn't bend them at the knee. He tried desperately to deny the urge. His temperature ran to 104 and his wife wanted to call 911 but he said no. He went to the 7-11 and bought 10 bags of ice and dumped them in his bathtub, where he sought refuge. After the fever broke and he got the circulation back into his slightly blue-colored legs, he knew he had no choice. It was his Calling. He was the great lover. And he had warned his wife before they married. He had warned his mistress while she laced up her black corset and shiny leather boots. He had warned his girlfriend at the time. What else could he do? He was the great lover. It had been thrust upon him.

FAME

A television network wanted to give him a morning talk show.

The audience will love you, the Network President said. They were sitting in the Network Conference room with its black leather and silver frame chairs, marble conference table and three framed Sam Francis prints on the walls. The Network President's six assistants sat equally on each side of him. They glistened like polished silver.

Of course, he replied, I'm the great lover.

We will pay you an obscene amount of money, the Network President said, chuckling. His assistants laughed in time with him.

And I will take it, the great lover said, smiling at them.

Unless the advertisers resist, the Network President said.
How could they? the great lover asked. Soap gets out all the stains of love.
The Network President chuckled. The great lover chuckled. They chuckled together.

There was a lot of love in the room until the great lover's lawyer returned from his phone call in the hallway. He stated to the room that the Consortium's contract would not permit this since they were working on a deal with a different network. (It did not happen.)

Damn, the Network President said, disappointed. Well, then, maybe a few tips on how to quickly get to first base.

BOOK

The Consortium wanted the great lover to write a book – “How To Be a Great Lover.”

Let me contemplate this, the great lover replied, wary of revealing all his secrets to the public.

PRACTICE

While on his lunch break, he banged Ms. Brado, a secretary, in the copy room on top of several boxes of paper. When he was close, someone outside came to the locked copy room door and rattled the handle but eventually went away. The great lover guided Ms. Brado to several multiple orgasms, the last being two separate orgasms at the same time while he simultaneously manipulated three different areas of her pelvis much to her delight.

She sat exhausted across the boxes, the top of the copy machine clenched in her two hands, one foot, sans high heel, resting by its ankle on a paper shelf. Her eyes were closed. She was smiling.

It is more important to give than to receive, the great lover stated.

Amen, Ms. Brado replied.

APHORISM 27

The act of love is like exercise. If you do not practice every day, you will lose shape.

FUNK

He fell into a funk. An artistic crisis. He could not find the right woman to love. Not one of the recent women he met had seemed right. The one at the coffee shop who caught his eye. The one at the bookstore who casually grabbed the same book his hand

was on, a lascivious look on her face. The one at the deli who asked his choice of cigarettes to buy even though he didn't smoke. The one at the restaurant who sat in his booth while he ate lunch alone because, she said, there was no other spot to sit. But not one seemed right. It was not the right moment. Not the right woman. He kept hesitating and afterwards, after he had walked away, he would ask himself, What is wrong with me? He thought that perhaps he had lost his flair, that thing that had made him the great lover, and now he was just a fraud, just a masquerader, a Halloween trick and treater behind a false face begging for candy. He drank himself into a stupor. He watched sporting events he didn't like. He forced himself to oversleep. He read the TV Guide and then re-skimmed it in case he had missed something. At the Consortium, he just sat at his desk, looking desolately out his window onto the Corporate Office park below with its pine benches and small wall waterfall.

I'm just in a slump, he kept telling himself.

PASSION

The great lover had never taken artificial stimulants. No preservatives or effort-enhancing drugs. To be the great lover, he told a workshop class, it must be all you. It must come from within. The passion must be true. Or else you are a fraud, a faker. And this infidelity will betray you to your lover who will go away disappointed and you will have failed.

Slowly he reiterated, The passion must be true.

The audience gave him a standing ovation. He bowed respectfully.

DOUBT

He doubted:

What is this thing I feel? That I can't put my finger on? Is it guilt? Nonsense, I'm far beyond that. What is it then?

An ontological crisis ensued:

Why am I the great lover? How did I get to this point? Why did I choose this or did it choose me? What am I doing to my family and friends? To my wife? To my dear wife? Why have I sacrificed my marriage of ten years for the status of being the great lover? From a modest apartment on Hemlock Ave. to our current split level ranch with a terracotta-tiled pool and a guest house in the converted garage, she has always been there, trying to be patient with this career choice but how long can she last? And despite my vow to quit, to find another occupation, surely with the B.S. in Marketing, I can find another career but I don't. I keep doing this, time and time again, in alcoholic hazes to dull the guilt, I keep saying I'll quit but I do not.

The epiphany: what does the great lover have to prove?

THE GRIND

During office hours one day, his wife called him, her voice slightly strained, an octave higher, a sign, he knew, that she was unhappy.

When're you going to be home? she asked.

Soon, he replied, I have three more women before I leave.

Can you pick up a loaf of sourdough on the way home?

Sure, he said.

There's a long silence on the line. He knew it was bothering her. It hit her every now and then.

Okay, she replied and hung up.

He saw a woman waiting outside the door. Work, he sighed

VOCATION

At one time in his life he had denied the urge. It was just after he had married Patrice. He decided a change of careers would be the best thing for their relationship even though when they had met he had been the great lover. After one particularly energetic night, Patrice agreed that he was. But the transition after the marriage was tough and because he loved her so much, agreed, no, he actually initiated the idea of finding a new line of work. Despite the hundreds of blurbs he had acquired over the years from appreciative women –

“Today's Casanova.” – Samantha B., Houston

“Takes a licking and keeps on ticking.” – Leslie O., Rochester (The Consortium sold this one to a watch company)

“I give him an ‘A’.” – Amanda R., Honey Creek

“Well worth the trip.” – Graciela W., New Orleans

– and Patrice's well-meaning but frustrated attempts at understanding, he went out and looked for a job. Even though he had never made any money directly from being the great lover. He was no gigolo or some cheap hustler of sex. He made his money from the instructing of how to become the great lover. The making of love to women was his art form.

So he drove a truck for a dog food manufacturer, he painted houses for a couple months, he worked at a pet shop and cleaned the cages but he felt his talent going to waste. It even affected his life at home with Patrice where he lost interest in the bedroom, preferring to watch the gardening channel and create his own victory garden.

Go back, Patrice finally said.

POPULAR TECHNIQUES

Some of his more popular techniques as listed in his best-selling book “You Too Can Be The Great Lover”, available at Consortium Publishing for \$24.99 in its fifth printing:

The Grab and Tuck
The Airplane
Spaghetti and Meatballs
Odd Man Out
Ducking Nancy
Holy Roller



DUCK

In December the Lions Club of Columbus, Ohio, sent the great lover a wooden shoe horn shaped like a duck. They also invited him to a “Thank You” dinner which he graciously declined. But he used the shoe horn the next morning.

PRINCIPLES

But all must be used, he emphasized to his class, with maximum passion.
A student raised his hand. The great lover pointed to him.

So how can I score with women? he asked.

The great lover walked over to the student and, being of solid stature of 6'2" and 205 pounds, the great lover hoisted the questioning student into the air and tossed him out the door.

This is art, not a pickup class, he replied.

The class applauded.

Touched, the great lover bowed respectfully.

SEMINAR #4

During a business seminar at the Mutual Trust Investment Bank, the great lover had the bank employees enraptured. This was no slide show on debt-to-equity ratios. No overhead projector of the new marketing plan. The men leaned forward on the polished oak conference table, their reflections mirroring them from below, the clouds outside behind them, as the great lover ran seminar #4: "How do you do?"

The lone woman raised her hand.

Yes? the great lover smiled at her.

Isn't this just some rationalization for you to encourage men, married men, if I may add, to go engage in affairs so that they may elevate a low self-esteem and perhaps a self-hatred at their pathetic lives in thinking that if they have sex with a woman, other than their wife, fiancée, or girlfriend, that they will somehow be a better man, a conqueror? Isn't this just a rationalization for extra-marital affairs? To justify the fact that you guys don't want to have to make an ethical decision by choosing not to?

She glanced around the room, suddenly nervous.

The great lover was thinking this through. But before he could answer, she stood up and walked out of the conference room without looking at anyone.

Let's take fifteen, the great lover said.

KUDOS

When his book went into a 6th printing, the Consortium threw a party at a local Chinese restaurant. The great lover had the spicy chicken. About 30 employees of The Consortium gathered around the big banquet table. The President raised his glass in a toast to the great lover, who realized that there were only men here and, in fact, only men worked at The Consortium.

MANIFEST

Reflecting back on his life, he wondered, What have I done? But further reflection was stopped when his 3:00 shows up, a short perky woman.

Hello, she said.

Just a second, he replied, a sour feeling occurring in his stomach. He closed his door and sat at his desk.

He's sweating.

The woman outside knocked on his door.

What have I done? he asked himself.

She's waiting.

Editor's Note

The Great Lover was first published on the website in February 2009.

Photograph © Katie Reing

Of Mirrors and Elephants by Mae Siu-Wai Stroshane

At night I dream of elephants. Those gray behemoths on four legs, clothed in wrinkles like oversized uniforms. Everything about them is oversized. Their huge bony skulls, their dusty toenails and protruding tusks, their snake-like trunks, their giant swaying asses decorated with ridiculous tails like whips. They parade past me, winking and calling to me like a trumpeting army. I awake bathed in sweat, gasping for breath and clutching the pillows on my knees. My heart hammers like a shutter in the winter wind. What have *I* to do with elephants?

It's been three years that I've lived in these rooms, this velvet prison of silver picture frames, bland meals on fine china and fresh flowers brought every day by cheerful hospital staff. In all this time, Mr. Treves has forbade anyone to bring any sort of mirror into my presence, as if the sight of my own face will cause me to shatter like the glass.

He doesn't know I can see myself whenever I want. All I have to do is remove my mother's portrait from its silver frame and gaze upon every outrageous bump and twisted lump on my head, every warty fold that my fingers explore. I stare at my reflection in the picture frame, then compare it to the portrait of the dark-



eyed beauty I remember so well, the loving mother who taught me to read and sewed special garments to fit my monstrously changing form.

I know very well what I look like. My resemblance to an elephant is debatable, but it's the best the freak show managers could come up with. Those men were a godsend, freeing me from the hell of the Leicester workhouse where I had lived for four years.

I remember Messrs Torr and Ellis gazing at me as I slowly turned in front of them like a music box figurine, clad only in a loincloth. They thought a loincloth would imply something exotic and animal-like, something from an African jungle.

“Hm..he’s covered in those warty lumps. The Human Warthog, perhaps?” They laughed, and even I had to chuckle in my skittering way. They prodded me and even lifted the loincloth, much to my embarrassment.

“Nothing wrong with him *there*. Think we could pair him with the Rhinoceros Girl?”

The droll Mr. Ellis remarked, “Say, what happens if you mate an elephant with a rhino?” Pause. We looked at him expectantly.

“Elephino!” The dapper little man slapped his sides and I rolled my eyes. Bad puns didn’t help matters any.

Mr. Sam Torr rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “That gets me thinking, though. Merrick, didn’t you say your mother was knocked down by an elephant whilst carrying you?”

I nodded, feeling the old grief thumping in my chest. Mother had always told me that story in tones of deepest tragedy, though she had meant it as an explanation for my condition.

Mr. Torr toured around me again. “These lumpy gray folds and the bumpy head...you *look* like an elephant, my boy. Enough so, anyway, and your mother’s story would account for it. ‘The Elephant Boy.’ Yes, that’s it!”

I was twenty years old, hardly a boy. Apparently Mr. Ellis thought so too. He leered at me.

“Not after what we just saw. I say we call him the ‘Elephant *Man*.’”

So they came up with the pamphlet that trumpeted me as “The Great Freak of Nature, Half-a-man, half-an-elephant.” They left it up to the audiences to guess which half. I wasn’t too keen on the name but at least I wasn’t a Human Warthog or something worse. Elephants do have a peculiar dignity.

They allowed me to tell my story in “The Life and Adventures of Joseph Carey Merrick,” such as they were. Thus, audiences could read about me before they pilloried me with hoots and horrified screams.

We toured around England for two years and the managers split their earnings with me, 50-50. Soon I was independently wealthy. After several changes of managers, I ended up with Mr. Tom Norman, who treated me as kindly as any of them. But the public began to be squeamish about freak shows, and I was the ultimate freak. Soon we were shut down in town after town, moving only to stay ahead of the law.

My last manager, an Austrian, took me to the Continent where freaks were still a novelty. Same story, though, and again “The Terrible Elephant Man” was forced to move on. The manager gave up on me and stole every penny I had saved. I had to struggle back to London on my own, starved and exhausted.

By happenstance I still carried the business card of Mr. Frederick Treves, the doctor who had seen me and exhibited me to his fellow anatomists two years earlier. The police summoned him to the Liverpool Street station, whereupon he brought me to the London to get me fed and washed up.

From that day on, Mr. Treves spared no effort to ensure my safety and comfort, even breaking hospital rules and appealing to the hospital authorities to give me a permanent haven there.

I am quite comfortable in these rooms at the London Hospital, but now I live in a sideshow of a different sort. These audiences pay in silver snuff boxes and rings, trinkets I will never be able to use. Come and see the Elephant Man in his natural habitat! Dressed in my ill-fitting but elegant suit, I will use my beautiful left hand to pour your tea, and chat for three-quarters of an hour on the topic of your choice. Step right up and I will tell you once again of the life and adventures of Joseph Carey Merrick!

Then you will present me with your signed portrait and leave me hungering to touch you through the cold glass.

Only in my dreams can I lie with a woman. She plants sweet kisses on my monstrous lips and opens to me like a lush, ripe peach. But then those fearsome elephants push between us and trample her beneath their pounding feet. And I awake to the cold reality mirrored in my mother's glass.

Editor's Note

Of Mirrors and Elephants was first published on the website in January 2009.

Photograph © Cameron Cash

Hieronimus Smith is a man who hates nicknames. From his earliest childhood he would brook no one, be they casual friend, boastful parent or mocking bully, calling him “Hero.” Hieronimus would not be shortened or slotted into a two-syllable simplified version of himself. He returned this favor by not referring to anyone by any nickname or abbreviation. He knows no “Jim” no “Rick” no “Jen” no “Liz.” Despite this injunction, which Hieronimus often delivered with frustrated grunts and a blotchy blustery face, in this text, “Hero” is precisely what I intend to name him.

Hero is a cultured man. He has an entire room devoted to books, newspapers, magazines and the other assorted ephemera of the written word. There are tall cedar bookshelves built into the walls; they hold volumes of variegated shapes, thicknesses, heights and colors. There is a chestnut-colored cloth-upholstered sofa near the brown-framed window. When he peruses rare tomes he uses a small lectern and a green-glass lamp. He has a bright red fish in a small round bowl on the corner of the desk; he likes the fish, but not to excess. There is no television, and there is no mechanism through which to play music. There is a black rotary phone on his desk that he only uses to inquire on book-related queries or purchases; no one has the number and Hero often forgets it himself.

Amongst his prized books are: a second quarto of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, multiple and assorted first editions of many late 19th Century works of English realism, an original *Précis de l’histoire de l’astronomie* by Laplace, and a *Ben-Hur* third edition from 1860.

On this fateful afternoon, Hero was savoring every well-chosen word and delicately constructed sentence of what is often termed a “classic” novel. He was on the third line down on page 236 (a left-facing page), and just raising his glass of ice-cold water to his lips when the phone rang. Hero’s shoulders tensed at the ring so metallic and angular. He instinctively felt he must answer because that is what one does with a ringing phone.

As he leaned forward in his chair and stretched his left hand towards the phone, his right hand, which still held the almost full glass of cold water, strayed over his book and a single drop that had condensed on the outside of his glass grew obese and plonked onto the open page with a moistly audible thump.

The phone continued to ring as Hero stared at the drop resting on the lower right hand corner of page 237. This sudden violation of the water was both horrifying and curious in its rarity.

The drop was thick and fat; it curved into a perfect dome on the page and seemed content and solid sitting on his book. For the brief second it had not started to soak into the page, the letters “ago” underneath the drop were magnified and he could see the fibrous grain of the paper. Hero couldn’t move until the drop’s tall dome began to lose

shape and seep into the page. There was a napkin next to his hand. He knew he needed to sop because rubbing might tear the page.

The magnified letters started to bleed along their edges and he quickly dropped the napkin on the book. Hero watched a circle appear on the napkin above the drop; the wet spot grew outward in a steady circle from its starting point and the entire napkin was quickly wet. He lifted the napkin; the drop had soaked in and was spreading across the original page, and moving steadily to the opposite page. Hero dropped the wet napkin onto his desk and stood up out of his chair. He could see the letters growing hazy; the pages began to curl as the water pulled the paper into waves.

He picked up the book, which had grown heavy as the water flowed forward and back through the narrative. Holding the book upside down released some water onto the carpet but did nothing to stop its relentless march. He handled the novel gently because he was still afraid to rip any of the delicately sodden pages.

The phone kept ringing as Hero gently placed the soaked novel in the sunlight of the windowsill. His foot came down in a puddle on the carpet that had formed when he held the book upside down. Reaching for a pile of napkins Hero saw his nervous reflection in



a thin sheen of water that had covered the desk.

His eye fell on the napkin that he had originally used to sop up the drop; it was still leeching fresh water as if fed by a hidden current. He dropped more napkins onto the desk; but they were

quickly imbued and he could see the color of the desk beneath the now loosely translucent napkins. His blood iced as he watched the heavy brown wood of his desk begin to fade to a grainy tan as the water saturated the

veins in the wood. *The napkins aren't working. Why aren't the napkins working? Napkins always work.* The desk had now become the color of milky sand and was growing still lighter.

Hero's shoes squelched into the carpet as he gently trod towards the window. All of the ink had flowed out of the book and was dissipating in the glaze of water on the windowsill. The pages had the tenuous shine of damp rice paper.

Reaching to open the window, Hero realized the frame had been overwhelmed with water. The paint had faded and the window frame, like the desk, was a whitish gray with only occasional, and rapidly disappearing, flecks of brown. He touched the frame; water percolated into the whorls his fingerprint had left in the wood. The water reached into the windowpane and hidden arteries in the seemingly flawless glass were filled. The light shifted as the water crammed into the window and for a brief second the room was filled with prisms. Hero could just barely make out the wobbly shadow of the house across the street. The ringing phone had been muffled by the sound of dripping water.

Hero moved towards the door but the water from the windowsill had flowed through the walls and into the doorframe. The doorknob had rusted and was beginning to flake apart. The door, just like the walls and the carpet, had now turned almost completely opaque as the water filled every pore of the wood. The rows of books were the only objects left with any color and the water had started to rise up the bookshelves. The water reached the wiring in the walls and the lamp and his overhead light flared bright and went out with a hissing pop.

Hero considered pushing through the pulpy wood of the door and escaping the cataclysm, but as he stepped forward he realized the door was glowing with a soft white light that seemed to come from behind the wood. Outside the door was a narrow, windowless, hallway. Before, it had always been a dark and insignificant corridor connecting this room with the rest of the house; nothing of his could have been causing that glow. The walls and the floor were becoming luminous and thin as if they were shielding him from a brilliant and powerful light that was starting to push in brighter on all sides.

Something's out there. He saw a shadow, something large, moving behind the door. He could feel the sogged plush of the carpet beneath his bare feet, but looking down the carpet had gone clear and he could see the distinct shape of something indistinct waiting under the floor for him. Waiting for the wood to crumble, waiting for Hero to panic and punch through.

Hero raised his head and the wide cedar planks of his bookshelves were dripping with water. The rain rising from the floor had quickened, but his books still looked dry.

Walking on the nails that held the planks to the crossbeams holding the floor together, Hero went to his bookshelf. The shelves were beginning to yield to the weight of the water. Hero knew he had to keep these books dry for as long as possible. Hero pressed his body against dozens of books shielding them from the deluge. The wooden shelves were now diaphanous and the refulgence behind the walls blasted all the

shadows out of the room and cast everything in a milky glow. Out of the corner of his eye Hero saw a red arrow slide across the floor as his fish surveyed his new territory.

Hero's forehead was pressed against a book that was growing damp and he stared down at a single book in front of his chest that had remained bone-dry. He focused on this book and pressed his body forward willing himself to serve as a dam to keep the water at bay. He couldn't shield the book with his hands because they were dripping wet and there was nothing left to dry them with.

His feet were completely submerged and the skin was beginning to turn prunish and pale. The water lapped against the cuff of his pants as small waves began to ripple across his library. The cuffs were soaked and clung tightly to his ankles, his light blue button-down shirt was imbued and the water climbed into his hair. A drop that had pooled on his forehead plonked on the single dry book in his collection.

Hero's eyes snapped open when he realized what had happened and he thrust his body forward to shield the book. The water splashed out of his wet shirt as the dry paper was overrun with water.

The color of his clothing faded. The books on the shelves were draining into the inky rivers that had formed on the shelves. The desk, the windowsill, the walls, the door, the sofa, the carpet, everything had gone the same bluishgrey; a translucence that was anti-color, and the glow from behind the objects was brighter. He wanted to raise his arms in front of him and wrap his hands around his face; he wanted to protect himself. But his skin had gone the same bluishgrey; his veins stood out bright red through his skin, and then the red disappeared as his veins filled with water. The light grew brighter, the membranous walls were growing thinner, the ringing of the phone had faded into a tinny whisper, the desk and couch sagged as the floor began to give way. Looking down he could see the blank shape of erased books through his chest on the bookshelf behind him, and when he looked up he couldn't see anything at all.

Editor's Note

Membrane was first published on the website in June 2009 and won the June Story of the Month Contest.

Photograph © Richard Santos

THE REV. HARRY WENDLE coasted to the four-way stop as three other cars approached from different points of the compass, but Harry, who was westbound, had no idea who got there first and found it hard to care. The Buick sputtered as he stopped and pinched his eyebrows, trying to shake the image of the dying friend he had just visited in the hospital. It didn't seem fair that a prostate gland, or any other part of the body, could do its job for years without a hitch and then suddenly sabotage its benevolent host. He glanced down, wondering just which turncoat organ would be the one to kill him off.

Through his smudged windshield, Harry saw the road and the other drivers, but he couldn't stop thinking about Bernie, shriveled to the size of a boy, scrawny legs twisted in the hospital's poly-blend sheets. All the poor guy wanted was a little spiritual back rubbing and Harry had complied, having seen prostate conversions before. What had crept up on him as he prayed quietly next to the adjustable bed was the realization that he was no closer to God than this half-dead agnostic. In his youth, the layer of doubt around his heart had been tissue thin. Lately, he could only hope he hadn't been promising "life everlasting" for forty-odd years under false pretenses.

The doctor had warned him not to expect much, so Harry had been a little surprised by the life he felt still pulsing in Bernie's hand. Tomorrow the strength in his grip might be gone but so would the fear, the naked shine of it in his watery brown eyes. That's what Harry believed, or hoped anyway, was God's grace.

A thin black sock slid down Harry's right ankle as his foot rested heavily on the brake. He was in no hurry to get home. Dolores would be waiting for him at the kitchen table and he would have to tell her about Bernie's imminent demise and about the tremulous, painted-on lips of Bernie's lady friend, or significant other, or whatever term people used these days. He could never remember her name.

After five days of rain, he noticed the sun had emerged to expose the overgrown lawns of the neighborhood near the hospital. The stretch of paint-starved duplexes had an end-of-summer look: uncoiled hoses, plastic wading pools a murky green, weeds in every crevice of the sidewalk. Wasn't that little Italian place right around here? He could dash in for their chicken parmesan sandwich with the mozzarella a little crispy around the edges. Seeing his friend's concave chest had made him suddenly fond and protective of his own ample midsection. But then Dolores would complain if he didn't eat enough dinner, and it was pot roast with those little red potatoes. He could feel his stomach aching with hunger, or maybe that was his prostate. A warning sign.

A teenager waved from a yellow Escort heading north. The Escort was a rusting two-door number with a crystal dangling from the rearview mirror casting painful shards of light around the intersection. When the light from the crystal wasn't searing Harry's retinas, he could just make out the boy's lower face and narrow shoulders

between the sun visor and the steering wheel. The face was unfamiliar, but he waved back, smiling and raising his eyebrows to convey a greeting: "Ah, yes, nice to see you." Probably the new alto in the youth choir.

The boy edged the Escort forward, but stopped short when the car directly across the intersection from Harry, a sleek black Acura, started forward at the same time. A white station wagon with a blond driver – a mother, Harry noticed, with young children in the back – idled across from the Escort, apparently, like Harry, content to wait it out.

He glanced in the back seat, strewn with loose papers and church ledgers. He was supposed to be interviewing accountants to replace the church bookkeeper, who'd been lifting cash from the collection baskets to bankroll her bus trips to the casino. The church council wanted a professional, but Harry kept putting off the chore, wishing vaguely that the ledgers would disappear or better yet, the whole car. It would have been cheaper to keep the embezzler anyway. Poor old bat played the nickel machines.

Harry decided to go for the chicken parmesan when some unpleasant thought flickered in the corner of his brain. Suppressing it, which he tried, was like pushing a beach ball under water and so it emerged: Harry Jr.'s court appearance next week on a drunken-driving charge, his second in three years. Dolores would handle it -- pay the fines, inform the court of the latest treatment program, remind the judge that no one had been injured this time. Harry just had to show up, because even a drug-addled screw-up got a few points for having a minister in his immediate family. But he hated the thought of sitting there with the judge looking down on him wondering the obvious: Where did *you* go wrong?

The young mother in the white station wagon suddenly raced across the intersection. Then the new black Acura started forward again. They could fight it out. In the end, it was your prostate that killed you. Or your druggie son, who couldn't hold a job and dragged your good name – *your* name, because they never remembered the Jr. - - through the police blotter. Dolores still believed she could jolt him out of it, but she didn't listen to what they said at the meetings. It had to be his choice.

It was three-thirty, and if he stopped for the chicken parmesan now and ate only half to three-quarters, he could make a passable go at the pot roast if Dolores would hold dinner until six-thirty. He could say he was working on his sermon.

The black Acura passed him, and Harry noticed a long, crooked scratch on the driver's side door. Shame, too. So new. Harry waved again as the Escort went by, but the young boy had his eyes on the road.

A TEENAGER WITH A BOWL CUT on his straight dark hair reclined in the low-slung driver's seat of the battered yellow Escort. His name was Milo Marsden and he was 17.

Milo had acquired his driver's license just six months before. He was an excellent driver, his coordination honed by video games, although he had a tendency to speed. Milo had the windows down to catch a breeze, and his legs were stuck to the black vinyl,

glued there with the cheap sunscreen they issued to lifeguards. The lake had been crowded – last day before school and finally some sun.

“Okay, people,” Milo said aloud. “Prehistoric Buick here pulled up first, so he goes, then the station wagon, then the Acura, then me. We move to the right.”

Milo should have been home already because his mother needed the Escort to get to her waitressing job. Her car was in the shop getting a new transmission, which Milo figured was two thousand dollars straight out of his college fund. But he wasn’t worried. His mother would sell a fucking kidney to pay her share of sending him to college. Milo wondered what his asshole father would say when he found out Milo was second in his class and had a stack of brochures on his desk: MIT, Yale, Cornell, Harvard. He couldn’t wait to give his father the tuition bill: Sorry, dad, guess your new wife will have to pay for her own braces.

“Okay, grandpa, if you’re not going, I am,” Milo said, stepping on the gas. The black Acura gave up the wait at the same time, and they both hit the brakes. Milo punished the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. Across the intersection, he caught the woman in the white station wagon stifle a little smile and he felt the urge to smash up her boxy new Volvo, the kind all the rich young mothers drove.

On a second look, though, he realized that the station wagon’s driver could have been related to Sherry Silva, maybe an older sister. She had that same blond shoulder-length hair and those smoky eyes that revealed something Milo couldn’t have named but felt to him like the knowledge of sex and lost love. Sherry Silva carried her books tight to her chest, but he had seen her put the books down once or twice and he thought of it now, the way she stretched out her T-shirts. The station wagon suddenly bolted through the intersection, and Sherry’s relative winked at him as she drove by with two kids harnessed into car seats in the back.

“Hell,” he thought, shaking his head. “I guess she likes me.”

Milo glanced at the old man, who was now looking into the back seat of the Buick. Not enough anti-geezer legislation. To his left, the Acura was revving up again and he nodded, waiting for it to cross. Inside was a young woman in a fast food uniform with her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. He watched intently as she steered past him with one hand lightly on the wheel, flipping her cell phone closed with her chin.

“My turn, Seymour,” he said, adjusting the sun visor. “You can sit there all day if you want.”

He looked at the digital clock on the peeling dashboard. His mom would be standing on the porch in her white shirt and black pants, staring at her watch. Milo put the car into first and pulled smoothly through the intersection.

NICKIE HARRIS rolled up to the stop sign in a new black Acura, her eyes like two hardboiled eggs behind her sunglasses. The air conditioning raised the fine hair on her arms, but she could still feel the sweat in the center of her back.

Nickie was eastbound, on her way to work at Dunkin' Donuts, but she had to drop off the Acura at a chop shop along the way. She was doing this as a favor to her boyfriend, who was not so much a boyfriend as a parasite with a remote control. This was completely clear when she was more than fifteen feet away from him. Up close, she lost all perspective when he called her "baby."

She asked herself, scanning the intersection, if he had ever gone out of his way for her, besides the time he bought her that fake Louis Vuitton bag on the street in New York, and it wasn't even her birthday. She'd replayed that memory until it was as hackneyed as a pop song, her Whitney Houston moment.

And yet here she was, driving to the goddamned chop shop because "you're already going that way, baby." She should have asked for a bigger cut, too, judging from the car's loaded interior: leather seats, GPS, the works. She wished it was cold out so she could try the seat warmer.

After the chop shop – and she could only imagine what kind of scum worked there – she would have to walk to Dunkin' Donuts, which was just off the interstate ramp. Tonight, she would plan her strategy for throwing her boyfriend out, which would somehow involve sending his precious Panasonic out the window. She could do it if he wasn't home.

Nickie had a theory that she attracted men who were drawn to her nose, which was delicate and upturned, almost childlike. They assumed the rest of her was just as compliant and sweet-natured, but internally, she was hawk-like and beaky. She saw every boyfriend's flaws within minutes of meeting him and she carried the knowledge around, circling silently, until each one defiled the nest and had to be removed.

The evening shift at Dunkin' Donuts was usually slow: a few old ladies with purse paranoia muttering about the price of a small coffee, truckers pushing for another hundred miles, one or two families on trips with the moms wanting decaf and a bag of doughnut holes for the kids. She'd have time to plan the final showdown. She could already see him looking up at her, collecting his shoes and underwear from the street, "But baby ..."

The boy driving the shitty yellow car was waving the old guy through the intersection, but he wasn't moving. Nickie thought she heard a siren in the distance. She started forward but stopped short when the yellow car tried to cross at the same time. If she got picked up, she'd turn that bastard in so quick he wouldn't have time to shut off the TV.

Jesus.

Nickie dug the cell phone out of her purse and hit the speed dial.

"Hey, did you call your mother back? ... Yeah, I'm still in the car ... I know, a friggin' seat warmer ... Just call, okay? ... Yeah, bye."

Nickie sat up straight and flicked her pony tail off one thin shoulder. At least it wasn't raining anymore. When it rained, a hopeless, hollow gloom descended on her – the desperation of reruns.

Just as she was about to move again, the station wagon tore through the intersection. Nice way to drive with a couple kids in the back. Nickie put her foot on the gas as she slapped the cellphone shut.

She could feel the old man watching her drive past, his eyes on her hideous orange uniform, wondering what she was doing in that expensive car.

PLASTIC BAGS OF GROCERIES shifted in the back of the white station wagon as it pulled up to the stop sign, facing south. Melissa Ramble reached back to grab the soft bare foot of her two-year-old, Michael, and give it a squeeze. Michael kicked her hand away but Susanna, her four-year-old, stretched her leg out.

“Squeeze my foot,” she yelled.

Melissa found Susanna’s foot and looked around the intersection, wondering who should go first. Probably the big blue car, an old Buick like her grandfather’s with a white-haired man inside. When she got home, she would have to remember to call a florist and send something to her grandmother in Virginia. She hadn’t even called on her grandmother’s birthday, that’s how much things were slipping.

Melissa noticed the hanging plants on the porch of a nearby house and remembered the large flowering hibiscus on her back porch. She wasn’t much of a gardener, but she’d bought it during one of those made-up errands that let her leave the house and spend money on a slow afternoon. She hadn’t watered that plant for at least two weeks.

She could feel herself losing it. Slipping right off her velvet throne.

The unraveling of her tightly wound days began on the morning she had answered the door without checking and found a smiling Jehovah’s Witness, a *Watchtower* in his outstretched hand. “Guidance,” he’d said, as though he sensed that she needed some.

Two days later, she read it during nap time while eating a cup of yogurt at the kitchen counter because there was nothing else to read within reach. Now, on top of everything, she was worrying about what Jesus would think of her endless catalogue flipping and phone calls and home-improvement projects. She had begun to examine her lack of charity and woke up shuddering after dreams of retribution involving flames. It had occurred to her, lately, that the money she spent highlighting her hair could support a family in Borneo for a year.

But she loved her hair. It was her best feature.

After calling the florist, she would make the cupcakes for Susanna’s play group and she would pay the bills that should have been sent out yesterday. She would finish cleaning the kitchen, having stopped halfway through unloading the dishwasher when she realized she didn’t have any eggs or canned frosting for the cupcakes. Then a load of laundry. When she brought in the groceries, she would remember to clean out the cookie crumbs and juice boxes from the car.

And she would cook the wild Atlantic salmon, call Tom and tell him to get a bottle of wine, because it had been three weeks since they'd made love. Not that it could have been helped, since Tom was away on business and then Susanna got the stomach thing, then she had the stomach thing, then Michael was up all night with the stomach thing. If she could just manage to stay upright after dinner, stick to one glass of wine, resist curling up on the bed after the baths and stories from the illustrated children's Bible she had purchased from a television ad. Tom had said nothing about the children's Bible, though she had seen him move it off a stack of papers on the kitchen counter.

The boy in the yellow rust bucket was waving the old man through the intersection, but the Buick wasn't moving. The yellow car and the new black car moved forward at the same time, and Melissa could see the boy in the yellow car whacking the steering wheel in frustration. She smiled. Bowl haircut ... haven't seen that since high school.

She pressed her hand against her abdomen and sucked it in as far as it would go, which wasn't far. If she got home before three-forty-five, she could do the Power Yoga tape before she had to start dinner. So call the florist, then the cupcakes, the bills, yoga, then dinner. Oh, and laundry. She looked back at Michael, who was crying because his pacifier – she swore again she would throw it out tomorrow – had fallen out. She felt around behind her seat and found it on the floor, flicked off the dirt she could see and handed it back to him as another car pulled up behind her.

Christ, she forgot the light bulbs, the one thing Tom had asked her to pick up today. Now she'd have to stop at the hardware store on the way home. She stepped on the gas and plowed through the intersection. As she drove by the yellow two-door, she closed her eyes for a moment. What was it again she was supposed to do first?

HARRY WAS THE LAST ONE to make his way through the intersection, turning right. He tried the next left and found the little Italian place. Once he had parked, he rested his head on the steering wheel for a moment, focusing on nothing in particular but allowing his troubles to condense around him like a fog. A moment later, he felt a lightening sensation, his good nature reminding him that he had no more burdens than most and quite a few less than many.

Harry thought of the young boy he saw in the car to his left, the alto in the youth choir who had waved at him. Such a boy embodied the promise, the faith, that Harry worried was gone from his life. Yet if it still existed in that boy – a boy who would have heard Harry's sermons, would have lifted his voice to a God not yet trampled by disappointments – then it still existed for everyone.

Harry thought of the blond driver, a young woman in the thick of her life's work, toting children around, rushing from one thing to the next, flush with busyness. She, too, was evidence of God's grace, of the blessed submersion that occasionally allowed us

to forget people like Bernie, to tune out the suffering that would otherwise paralyze us all.

He opened the door to the Buick, noticing that the decrepit old boat didn't have a single scratch that rivaled the shock value of the one on the new black Acura that had passed him at the intersection. He put his feet outside the passenger door and pulled up his right sock, feeling suddenly robust and hungry. He could use the scratch on the Acura in his next sermon: When our flaws appear in high relief, it's a simple matter to restore the finish. It's when they accrue after year upon year of nicks and bumps that we forget the unblemished beauty of our original ideals, and thus – such a useful word in sermons – when we most need to call upon our faith.

Editor's Note

Crossroads was first published on the website in May 2009.

The woman stood facing the stove. She poured the lentils into the pot and stirred. Cool mountain air blew through the open kitchen window. Outside a curtain of rain fell from the edge of the overhanging roof.

The man sat at the table, contemplating the bottle of red wine set in front of him. He reached out and spun it slowly on its base. He imagined he held an axle around which the entire house and everyone in it rotated. "Tell me honestly," he said. "Do you regret coming to the island?"

"The girls are happy," the woman said. A breeze caught a loose strand of her blonde hair, lifting it off her shoulder.

"That's true," the man said. "But they're children. What about you? Are you happy?"

The woman stirred the beans and said nothing. The man wondered if she considered his question too ridiculous to answer. Then she said, "It's been a series of sacrifices, hasn't it? We knew it would be. I suppose I didn't realize . . . I didn't anticipate there would be so many, so much we'd have to live without." She set the spoon down beside the stove. "And it seems that's all we ever do now. I'm tired of sacrificing. I'm tired of poverty." She rubbed her eyes. "I'm tired of eating lentils."

The man turned the bottle around in his hand, reading the label as it scrolled between his fingers.

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The next morning at sunrise the man went to work tilling the corn fields behind his landlord Mr. Aquino's house. The rain had stopped, but at this time of the year and on this side of the mountain it never stopped for long. Ocean borne cloud formations billowed overhead and intertwined with layers of fog blown in from the south. Bursts of sunlight occasionally punched holes through the swirling canopy, and in these moments the overwhelming greenery of the landscape shimmered as though electrified.

The man kept his eye on the rotary tiller dragging behind the tractor, holding a straight line. He was not a farmer. The work he did for Mr. Aquino was in trade for the rent he owed on the one bedroom guest house he lived in with his family, plus a generous share of the food he helped grow. The man had worked as a commercial fisherman before coming to the island, but he enjoyed working Mr. Aquino's fields, despite its non-monetary rewards. He enjoyed working outdoors.

The man had tilled one field and was half way through the second when he saw Mrs. Aquino standing beneath a stand of papaya trees. She held a paper bag and a plastic jug of water. The man completed the rotation and shut off the tractor. He climbed down and walked a furrow over to where his landlord's wife stood waiting for him.

They sat on her porch eating spam sandwiches. Mrs. Aquino had not yet said a word, a natural reticence the man recognized as general among the native born members of the mountain community, if not the whole island itself—a trait he admired and tried to emulate.

“Roscoe says his cow is dying,” Mrs. Aquino said, apropos of nothing.

The man pulled a long draught from the jug and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “Uh, huh.”

That may or may not be as far as Mrs. Aquino intended to carry the conversation. Politeness dictated the man simply acknowledge he heard her and leave it at that. He ate the second half of his sandwich in two bites. A drizzly mist began to fall around them. The man stared out over the fields. The Aquinos grew sweet corn mostly, but also spinach, kale, and beans, plus smaller plots for cucumbers and tomatoes. And of course papaya. Other members of the church who lived nearby grew bananas. Some, like Roscoe, kept livestock—pigs, goats, maybe a milk cow or two.

“The cow’s got gut worms,” Mrs. Aquino said between bites of her sandwich. “Stomach all ruptured out. Roscoe says she can’t eat. Got to be put down, he says. . . . Maybe he’ll hire one of them vaqueros from the ranch.”

The man chewed the food balled up in his mouth and swallowed.

“He can’t do it himself?”

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Aquino said. “Roscoe could never kill something like that. Too big. Besides, I don’t think he got a rifle.”

The man dragged the end of his sneaker over the rich loamy soil. He tried to imagine what the aborigines experienced 500 years ago, coming ashore to this convulsing and primeval land, a land not yet fully formed and still drenched in the placental blood of its mother. They communed with newborn gods and goddesses as violent and implacable as the island itself. To honor them they built idols with fierce faces and ravaging mouths. To satisfy their hunger they offered the blood of animals and human beings.

“Tell Roscoe I’ll do it,” the man said.

Mrs. Aquino nodded her head once, barely. She folded up the rest of her sandwich and stuffed it in her mouth.

#

The next day the man stood with Roscoe in the small pasture of guinea grass and ragwort that grew behind his house. The afflicted cow stood fifty yards away beneath a mango tree. Its skeletal frame contrasted starkly with its grossly distended abdomen. The cow lowed once, a plaintive sound that was somehow muted with resignation.

“It won’t be like it may have been for you working on that boat,” Roscoe said. “She’s no fish. Even the way she is now she’s still got a half-ton on her, at least.”

“I don’t know if it matters how big they are,” the man said. “Nothing that lives is happy about dying.”

Roscoe hitched his thumbs into his jeans and sighed. “Suppose so,” he said.

Walking the man back to his car Roscoe asked him what kind of gun he planned to use.

“I don’t have a gun,” the man said.

“I could probably get a hold of a rifle. Jennings has a .22, I think”

The man shook his head. “That won’t do it.”

“What then?”

“I’ll bring my sledgehammer with me tomorrow morning.”

“A sledgehammer?”

“It’s quick, it’s clean, and it’s painless. If done right. ”

“If done right you say?”

“I’ll do it right.”

#

That evening the man ate flat bread, cheese, and lentil soup for dinner with his wife and two daughters. He drank a glass of red wine. He did not drink a second glass. He had lost the urge to drink since they had arrived on the island. This, along with the lentils, resulted in him dropping about 15 pounds. His pants now hung loose around his waist, and the angles and planes of his face stood out more clearly in the mirror. He thought his wife would notice these changes, but she said nothing about it. She had never been much of a drinker herself, but lately she had gotten in the habit of drinking wine during meals. Sometimes she drank after meals as well.

About an hour later the woman bathed the children in the tub, dressed them in their pajamas, and tucked them in the double bed they shared next to the bed she shared with her husband. The woman left to finish cleaning and to prepare meals for the next day. The man pulled up a chair and read his daughters two chapters from *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. They were happy girls. The man felt an almost clairvoyant certainty they would remain here after him, that the island would be their home for the rest of their lives, no matter where their travels took them.

The man shut off the light over the bed where his daughter’s slept. They were turned towards each other, breathing in time. The man looked through the door to the kitchen where his wife stood at the sink scrubbing a pot. Dark sweat stains had formed under each arm. She wiped her forehead with the back of her wrist, a dripping wash cloth clutched in her hand. A glass of wine sat on the shelf above the sink.

The man got up and closed the door. The bedroom was dark. He crossed the floor and looked out the window. The clouds had cleared and stars wheeled above the black slope of the mountain. The man had seen night skies this clear working in the middle of the ocean, but never on land. Filaments of the Milky Way stretched across the sky from Cygnus in the west to Orion rising in the east, spiral arms rotating around the galactic core. The man got down on his knees, bowed his head, and softly chanted lines from the Hinário de Cura, the Hymn of Curing:

*I climbed a hill of thorns
Stepping on sharp points
The Stars told me
In the world, everything can be healed.*

#

The man arrived at Roscoe's house at 7 a.m. the next day. He open the trunk of his car and took out the 10-pound sledgehammer. The lower end of its 3-foot long hickory handle was wound in black electrical tape.

Roscoe stood on his front steps, drinking a cup of coffee. He went down to meet the man as he walked up the drive and together they went around the back of the house. Beneath the mango tree the cow lay on its haunches. It turned its head and looked at them. Its dried and swollen tongue lolled out its mouth. Its distended belly looked close to bursting. Its wasted hind quarters were smeared in feces.

The man breathed in deep through his nose.

"She's too weak to stand," Roscoe said.

The man became aware of the hammer's weight in his hand and crouched down, laying the head in the grass and holding the handle with both hands upright between his knees. The long strands of guinea grass glistened with dew, turning the steel head of the hammer wet and black. The man swallowed.

"Can I have some water?" he asked.

"I'll get you some," Roscoe said. He laid his hand on the man's shoulder. "You alright?"

"I just need some water," the man said.

Roscoe headed back to his house. The man remained hunched down in the grass. He did not look at the cow under the mango tree. He did not listen to its labored breaths. His attention was turned inward. He made the Sign of the Cross and recalled a line from Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*: "*Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish, wonderful though he is.*" He remembered the time he had spoke that prayer aloud on the boat, nearly delirious after a 36-hour shift. "*What's so fucking wonderful about a fish?*" someone had said.

Behind his back the man heard Roscoe coming with the water. "She's no fish," he said quietly to himself.

Roscoe handed him a canteen. The man thanked him, unscrewed the cap, and upended it over his open mouth. He swallowed the cold water.

He gestured towards the cow. "Has she had anything to drink?" he asked.

"I tried to give her some last night, and again this morning before you came. But she wouldn't take any. I don't think her stomach can handle it."

The man handed back the canteen. He hoisted up his hammer, resting it across his shoulder.

"Pray for me, Roscoe," he said. "Pray that it's quick, that it's clean, that it's painless." He advanced a few steps and looked back. "Pray for my family."

Roscoe's face was grave. He nodded and turned back to his house. "Fetch me when it's done," he said.

#

The man walked under the shade of the mango tree and stood in front of the cow. Black flies spun around its face, drawn to the yellowish discharge that encrusted its eyes and nostrils. The man held the hammer in both hands across his waist. The animal regarded him unevenly through the halos of circling flies. Then it lifted its head and bawled, a rasping sound like tearing cardboard. The man leaned over and waved off the flies. He laid the palm of his hand on top of the cow's head, damp with sweat, and focused his intent on the suffering of the animal. He received it within himself and combined it with his own. He felt a weight like a stone around his neck pulling him down. He shut his eyes and saw a cascade of images. Some he could identify, others were entirely unknown to him: he saw mandalas, some glowing, others overlapping and unfolding in fractal-like progressions; he saw swastikas in both Hindu and Buddhist form; he saw anthropomorphic totems of unknown origin and meaning; he saw Mithras holding his knife to the throat of the bull; he saw bare-chested priestesses wearing bird masks and carrying bowls of blood. Then he saw images of his own life emerging through the layer of symbols. He saw the fishing boat pitch and yaw against the waves; he saw pots dragged up from the deep teeming with crabs; he saw his daughters sleeping face to face; he saw his wife dressed in ceremonial white, her head down and her hands folded together in supplication. Lastly he saw the whole world suffused in light rolling through space and circling a ball of fire, and from some hidden place he heard a chorus of voices chanting a hymn:

As estrelas me disseram

No mundo se cura tudo.

His heart swelled within his chest and he offered it up.

The man opened his eyes and rose to his feet. He wiped his hands on his jeans and tightened his grip on the handle of the sledgehammer. He circled around the animal. The crests and knobs of the skeleton beneath its sagging hide rose out of its body like the silt-enshrouded timbers of a shipwreck on the ocean floor. He came round the other side and looked into the glassy black surface of the cow's eyes, sunken in their orbital sockets. He saw reflected there the outline of a figure, its limbs foreshortened and stretched out, wielding some instrument of expiation and mercy.

The man stepped closer to the head of the cow and stood to one side. He brought the hammer up high over his shoulder, rotated his torso, and stood poised for the intake of a single breath. "Blessed Virgin," he began, and swung.

Editor's Note

Reflections in the Eyes of a Dying Cow was first published on the website in May 2009.

1.

Good morning, Mona.

Good morning, Henry.

You wanted to see me?

Yes. Have a seat.

Thanks. So, what's up?

I'll get right to it, Henry. We have a problem. I may not be able to keep you on.

Really? I'm surprised to hear that, Mona. What's the matter?

Where were you yesterday afternoon, Henry?

What do you mean?

I mean you weren't in your office. I mean you went to lunch at 12:15, and you never came back.

That's not true. I'm sorry Mona, but that simply is not correct - not historically accurate. I was back from lunch right on time. In fact, as it happens, I was back five minutes early - at ten after one.

No, Henry...

I went out for lunch at twelve-fifteen, and I was back at my desk at ten after one.

No, Henry, I happen to know that you weren't.

I was. I went across the street for tacos. I had three chili tacos with cheese and guacamole. Then I sat there a few minutes, drinking my tea and doing a little light reading. Voltaire. *Candide*. Chapter two, in which Candide chooses the gauntlet. My favorite part of the whole story.

Listen, Henry, I'd love to sit here chatting Enlightenment literature with you, but...

Then I came back to my office - at ten after one - and I stayed there until five.

Henry, I know full well you were absent all of yesterday afternoon. I looked into your office a half dozen times, and I didn't see you once.

Oh, right, right... I understand now. I understand the confusion. Let me explain. You'll laugh when I tell you. Really. Prepare yourself for a really good laugh. Okay?

I'm ready; go ahead.

You see, here's the thing: I was there the whole time. You saw me; you just didn't recognize me. That's because, you see, I was shape-shifting. Get it? I was there the whole time, but I was shape-shifting. You see? It's funny, yes?

Shape-shifting.

You noticed the new lamp on the corner of the desk? The tasteful, art deco number with the frosted shade? That was me. I shape-shifted into an art deco desk lamp with a frosted shade. Convincing wasn't it?

Shape-shifted.

Shape-shifted. Yes.

I don't believe you, Henry.

You don't believe me?

No, Henry, I don't.

I have to tell you, Mona, that stings a little.

I'm sorry, Henry. It's nothing personal. It's just that I don't really believe in shape-shifting. I think it's a myth.

Oh, it's no myth. I can assure you of that. It's as real as...

I'm sure it's been quite thoroughly debunked...

No, no, no...

...in all the major...

No, no, no. It's just that it's still perceived as a threat to the orthodoxy of the ruling elite. That's why they insist upon slandering it's devotees in the popular press.

True as that may be...

But shape-shifting has hardly been debunked - by any... objective...

Henry, please...

I mean some of the very top young - that's the thing: *young*... Some of the very top young minds in the field...

Alright, Henry, why don't you show me then?

Show you?

Yes, Henry. Show me. Please. Convince me. Treat me to a demonstration of your abilities.

Sure.

Right now. Right here in my office.

Okay.

Prove me wrong and you're off the hook. It's as simple as that.

Sure, no problem. Just give me a second.

Take as long as you need.

There.

There what?

I'm done.

You're done?

Yes. I've shape-shifted.

Just now?

Just now. Yes.

And...?

I've shape-shifted into an alternate version of myself with inverted molecular chirality.

I don't know what that means, Henry.

I've converted all of my cellular amino acids from L-enantiomers to D-enantiomers - that is, from left-handed to right-handed molecules.

Right-handed molecules.

And it follows that I had to invert my cellular carbohydrates, too. Of course. I mean, you can't go around with your proteins clashing with your sugars.

Of course not.

That could be fatal.

Obviously.

What's the matter, Mona?

Well, it's just that, you know, I really want to believe you, Henry. But, it isn't that easy to tell the difference. I mean, to the naked eye, you appear no different than before. I suppose we could send out a tissue sample for spectral analysis, but it would take weeks to get back the results. And, anyway, I seriously doubt Procurement would approve the expenditure.

That's a good point.

I mean - given the current economic climate - it might be seen as a little extravagant.

Yes, I understand.

Maybe you could shape-shift again, but with a little less subtlety this time?

Sure, sure.

You know, to something more easily discernable...

Of course.

...to the unaided eye, that is.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. No problem. Let's see, what could I... Ah, okay. Here goes... How's that?

Have you shape-shifted again?

Of course. Don't tell me you can't...

I can't see any difference.

Look closely, Mona. Closely.

I'm looking right at you, Henry, and I'm only three feet away.

I've shape-shifted into a version of myself, three minutes younger.

Three minutes younger.

Precisely. To the second, that is. Precisely three minutes younger. One hundred and eighty seconds younger.

Okay, first of all, wouldn't that be time-travel, not shape-shifting?

No, not at all. That's an excellent question, but no. You see, if I had time-travelled, you and I would *both* be three minutes younger. As it stands, *I'm* three minutes younger...

But I'm still my natural age.

Exactly. Also, we wouldn't be having this conversation about time-travel, because this conversation would still lie three minutes into the future. If I had time-travelled, I would just now be walking into your office and sitting down.

I understand.

You'd be saying something like, 'Hello, Henry. Please have a seat.'

I get it.

Besides, I don't know how to time-travel.

Of course not.

I mean it's not really my thing.

No, no, I understand.

I mean, I'm a shape-shifter. That's my thing. My true avocation.

Yes, yes. Of course.

I *did* go to a time-travel seminar, years ago, at the Holiday Inn. I thought it might be a fun thing to learn. You know, just as a hobby.

I suppose it would be.

But, as it turned out, the seminar was nothing but a sales pitch for a series of books on tape.

That's too bad.

I should have known, really. I mean, it *was*, after all, a *free* seminar. They wanted something like three hundred dollars for the time-travel paraphernalia. You know, the tapes and the companion handbook and so on. The time-travel journal and subscription to the quarterly newsletter. All the usual... So anyway, I decided to pass, on the time-travelling.

Can't say I blame you.

I mean it might be worth every penny, but still, it's a lot of money.

I understand completely.

I mean... on *my* salary...

Yes, yes. Of course.

Plus, I wanted to concentrate on my shape-shifting.

Sure, sure.

Better to be a master of a single esoteric art than a dilettante at a whole arcane assortment.

Specialization is the key to greatness, some would say.

Others might disagree, I suppose.

Yes, yes. The Renaissance types, for instance.

Yes, of course. So, just to polish the point, when I say that I shape-shifted into a version of myself three minutes younger, what I mean is that I backed up all of my metabolic processes to where they had been three minutes previously. I reversed the aging process by three minutes, if you like.

I *do* see the difference. Thank you for clarifying.

And of course, some have argued, quite convincingly, that time travel - at least travelling *backward* in time - would violate Special Relativity.

Special Relativity, right.

The idea is that movement backward in time is tantamount to faster-than-light travel, which Relativity would seem to preclude. Kierkegaard, for example, presented this argument quite elegantly in *Fear and Loathing*.

You mean *Fear and Trembling*, and no, he didn't.

Fear and Trembling?

Yes. *Fear and Trembling*. *Fear and Loathing* was Hunter S. Thompson.

That's what I said: Hunter S. Thompson.

No, you said Kierkegaard.

Are you sure?

Yes. And anyway, Hunter S. Thompson didn't say it either.

Who am I thinking of then?

I really don't know. Richard Feynman, maybe. But that isn't the point. It doesn't matter. I know what you're doing, Henry. This is just a diversion from the issue at hand - a kind of linguistic tai chi.

Linguistic tai chi. I like that. Can I borrow it some time?

Consider it yours, and don't bother with the attribution. But I'd like to get back to what we were discussing: namely, your little truancy problem.

Truancy problem?

People have been complaining, alright? Some of your co-workers. They say it isn't fair that you're habitually absent - an hour here and a half day there - while everyone else is expected to sit at their desks for eight hours a day. And I have to say I agree with them, Henry. It simply isn't fair.

But I swear to you, Mona, I don't have any truancy problem. I am faithfully - almost religiously, almost fanatically - at my desk from eight to five every day... minus, an hour for lunch.

What about Monday after two o'clock? I looked in on you three times between two o'clock and five.

Perhaps you noticed a new briefcase resting on the floor just next to my desk? Black leather with pewter fittings?

I honestly can't say I recall. But let's suppose, for the moment, that I did. Are you going to tell me you shape-shifted into a new briefcase?

No, I bought that on clearance at Macy's over the weekend. I shape-shifted into a new laptop, with wireless internet, which was locked inside the briefcase. You can never be too careful.

I see. And I suppose Wednesday of last week, when I couldn't find you all morning, you were shape-shifting, as well?

A ham and gruyere on pumpernickel, with sauerkraut and dijon mustard. Toasted. With a kosher pickle on the side.

Sounds delicious. But I'm afraid I still don't entirely believe you. About the whole shape-shifting thing.

Not entirely?

Not entirely, no. You still haven't convinced me. You see, the problem is: I can't identify any tangible difference between run of the mill Henry and Henry minus three minutes.

No?

I'm afraid not.

Still too subtle?

A bit, yes.

Okay, okay. Give me one more try.

Sure, but quickly please.

Okay. What about this?

What about what?

I've shape-shifted into a version of myself just as I would be if I lived in a parallel universe in which *Slaughterhouse-Five* had been written by Gore Vidal, instead of Kurt Vonnegut. Surely there's a difference - admittedly subtle, but unmistakable - somewhere around the eyes?

I'm afraid I have to let you go, Henry. I'll need you to clear out your office by the end of the day.

2.

After boxing up his things and putting them into the trunk of his car, he went back into the office one last time. Then he climbed onto the top shelf of the empty bookcase

behind the desk and shape-shifted into all three volumes of *The Rosy Crucifixion* - an old library edition, clothbound.

She couldn't help but notice him when she looked into the office, on her way out, at the end of the day. Curious, she walked over and examined the books, conspicuous on the otherwise empty shelf. She read the gilt lettering on the spines. She must have told him, at some point, that Miller had been one of her favorites, years ago as an undergrad. And he must have left the trilogy, she guessed, as some kind of apology, or farewell. She took the first volume from the shelf, slipped it into her black handbag, and left.

On the train, sitting beside the window, having loosened the belt around her brown coat to let it hang open, she reached into the bag, resting on the floor, between her legs, and took him out - the first volume of him. She flipped past the copyright page to the beginning of chapter one. She rested the end of his spine on her lap and cradled him in both hands before her, her head tilted forward to stare at him from above. Her eyes loitered over the first line of him, as she savored the sounds of the words in her head: "It must have been a Thursday night when I met her for the first time - at the dance hall." She smiled and bit her lip lightly. Then she took a deep breath and sighed, and her eyes continued over him, back and forth, softly down the page.

And he loved her still, and he forgave her, had forgiven her already before she had even finished throwing him out. And now there was only now, he thought, and only the two of them, there together in the light from the window, there in the back of the train, with the city speeding by, and her eyes pouring over him, taking in every line, growing wider, moving faster, and then her fingertips at his corner, hungrily turning the page, devouring him bit by bit and word by word. And now, at last, she loved him, too. It was clear. And he was happy in this knowledge, in the undeniable and plain, objective fact. And this was only the start, he told himself. There were five hundred pages to go.

And there were two more volumes of him after that, resting on the highest shelf, alone in the dark, as patient as death, awaiting her glance, awaiting her touch, awaiting her return.

Editor's Note

Form as Problematic was first published on the website in March 2009. In order to make the story easier on the eyes, I decided a space between paragraphs was the best bet.