

A Seamy Fit

(Part One: 18 Stories)

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James Beach

“Jock Semantics”

THE eldest 12-year-old leapt off the stoop and onto the bristly lawn. He pitched his tattered Athletics baseball cap forward to block the afternoon light. “Girl Spartans?” he shouted, shirtless, proud of new muscles. “The Spartans did *every* damned thing *without* girls. We’re so gonna lose this season.”

On the right side of the stoop, Richie, Jr. crossed blonde-fuzzed arms over his big abdomen and spit on the hedge. “Not *everything*, dumbass, or none of us would be here,” said Richie, Jr., as if he knew the history of the world.

Douglas, seated on the left, smirked freckled cheeks into milky eyes, as if he knew what drove Richie, Jr. Meanwhile Ian scratched his jock beneath the poly-blend fabric of authentic Heat basketball shorts, checking that Douglas was watching. “Go out for a long one.”

“The real Spartans used females for something,” Douglas maintained, trudging out over the wide suburban lawn, obedient, to catch. “And our girls will look hot,” smirking less but blinking more, “in uniforms. We’ll know the best ass right off.”

Ian hurled the football in a near-perfect spiral. The trajectory put it way over head; with a fake-sounding bonk, it went bouncing in the street. “Plastic ball!” he said with a scowl.

“Snug-tight,” agreed Richie, Jr. as the ball wobbled to the gutter and out of sight. “But hey, I’m not into *butt*.”

Ian located his muscle shirt, abandoned near where Richie, Jr. kept spitting, and thrust smooth hands through its bottom.

“Follow those thighs up on into,” continued Douglas with a whistle. “I’m telling you, they will look hot in football pants.”

“They will look dumb,” insisted Ian, frustrated. He set his wrists so the shirt could be un-bunched and fitted over his head. He readjusted his cap, Athletics insignia straight, then flipped it backward. “Or, no; we’re the ones who’ll look dumb: The Spartans, with *girls*, what a *joke*—!, females in shoulder-pads and mouth-guards and nut-cups!—or, *slot-cups*!—; and no end to the dishonor of the jock.”

“Slot-*plates*,” corrected Richie, Jr., a hint in his thick voice of maybe coming round to Ian’s view.

“Girl... jocks!” fumed Ian. He wiped at sweat escaping his shaggy hair. “Do you hear what you’re saying?”

As a pair, Richie, Jr., and Douglas gave the impression of being loaded up with too many ideas.

“They’ll decorate our jockstraps—made for *males*!—with puny pink hearts and yellow daisy chains,” Ian mock-minced. “Then we’ll need new rules, ’cause the girls keep getting hurt. Our red and gold jerseys will become totally gay, like *lavender*, and *beige*. Our trusty helmets? throw ’em away; we’ll be pulling at flags!, not tackling. It’s unofficially over, the game we signed up for to play.”

“Got a pop’ to suck on, hey?” suggested Richie, Jr., lippy.

With a provoking nudge, Ian got Douglas out of the doorway and pulled open the screen door. “They join up, you know, because they see us standing tall together, free of them for *once*, and they want to wreck it. Trust me. I have a sister. She does it all the time.”

Ian flipped the lights on in the mud room. It was hot enough outside to share the popsicles his mom hid below those frost-cakey vegetables; she hoarded them, then showed them off like she was a magician, pulling them out of thin air every weekend if it was sunny. As he bent into the freezer, Ian felt a thing tickling his ankle. He stood up fast, cracked his crown on the lip.

“Mom says no ’sicles,” said the girl.

Ian let out an exasperated wheeze. His little sister was in an old shirt of his, “CampArrow” in faded kid-lettering, the one from a boys’ day camp he bussed to several summers ago; like folds of a robe, it hung in clumps on her. It was the hem that was tickling. “Did Mom say you could wear that shirt?” he demanded, gripping tight the paper-coated popsicles in his fist.

“Yes.”

“Well, sister, she gave me *these*,” the boy lied, slamming shut the freezer door. “Would you get outside? I can’t watch you in here.”

Timidly, the girl followed her older brother out the door. With disgust, Ian saw her put on a pair of his azure swim goggles. She tottered off the stoop and into the grass. In a daze of wonder, she sniffed at and trailed after pollen, dandelion seeds, butterflies, monarchs and invisible stuff in her head or on the goggles.

“That’s some weird sister you got,” said Douglas, peeling the paper from his treat.

“You can keep watching her, too,” Ian said. “I’m no babysitter.” He passed a popsicle to Richie, Jr., who shoved the thing in his mouth, to the wood.

As if to divert the vibe of a fight, Douglas asked Ian, “How much you been lifting?”

“A little,” the eldest boy admitted, “Got a set of ’bells for me birthday. Throw ’em every little while.”

“Sand, synth, or what?”

“No, no, iron!”

“The real body-builder,” said Douglas.

A moving truck moving in Ian’s periphery caught his eye and he turned to see head-on the swerve of the vehicle as its driver avoided running over his sister. With his palms he gripped at his cap, watching the oblivious four-year-old lift the plastic football out of the gutter. “We’re the *Spartans!*” cried Ian. “Get your *own* team, call it the Placenta Slots, or somesuch, aw, can’t you see it?”

Douglas snortled, cheeks again obscuring cloudy eyes, and barely licked at the vanilla popsicle dribbling down and onto his knuckles. “We’re not really Spartans. You think Chicago Cubs are really cubs?”

“Yeah, the Florida Marlins, they’re actual fish?” chimed in Richie, Jr.

Ian said, coolly, “Tell you what. You can get your pops’ some other place.” He yanked the screen door hard enough to gouge Douglas in the back. “And, since words mean nothing to you girls, why are we still yapping?”

To shrug off the scrape, Douglas fussed with the long, wayward laces in his cleats; having finished his treat, Richie, Jr. eyed the other’s hungrily. Neither made a move from the stoop. For various reasons, the little footballer gave them a pointed, toothy smile.

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James Beach

“The Chassis Concept”

CLEARING diamond dust from his front teeth with his tongue, the boy lifted a pudgy cheek from the plate. He wheezed in the light dust.

“You trip like a ’tard,” a teammate scolded.

“My *grandpa* plays better’n you,” scoffed another.

The boy remained on the plate, elbows akimbo, a peasant in their kingdom. If he were a prince he would be a stellar ballplayer—movies all showed poised, agile princes playing ball. Peasants watched sports on satellite. His dad, acting as co-coach, was busy with other boys. Advice to simply ignore the taunts and jeers of teammates—

“Just ignore ’em?” the boy had had to ask his dad, incredulous.

“That’ll really get their goads,” his dad had assured.

“Their goats? What are we, peasants?”

“They want to be all-stars just as much as you, Son. All of us, playing the great game, our souls sparkling underneath. God leant us each a chip off the heaven block. It’s up to us alone to polish the diamond inside ourselves, to shine like we mean business.”

—the advice was maybe wrong.

Tasting dirt, the boy wobbled to his feet, swept the puckered knees of his orange-white striped uniform with his blood-crusty palms. He tucked his cap in his hip pocket.

He watched his dad swing his jaw suddenly toward left field, as if following a pop fly. The scrimmage continued. Somebody hit a grounder—the clank of leather on aluminum made the air teem with breeze-distortions of shouts and whistles.

By now the boy had left the diamond. As he trudged up the grass hillock he thought about how he and his dad played catch; about the sour endings, with Dad

displaying a rare scowl, and Son working up his sulk. A disconnect, a misfiring, their games.

“Snack time, lard-o?” a teammate yelled.

“This game ain’t over,” sang another.

“Wuss.”

Their words rang elliptically until the boy cleared the mowed tip of the park basin with a triumphant wheeze. When he glanced back, he could see his dad at first base, coaching stellar player Ty Sneeth. Ty Sneeth was a sworn enemy since Grade 2.

Fontana was littered with SUVs from the scrimmage. Across it the boy could go off-road into a huge summer-dry, reedy lot where he and Henry Mosley built a lean-to last year that nobody else found. They did a lot of stuff together until Henry’s mom had had to move again.

The lean-to was still there—in parts. A hand-painted chipboard campaign sign from the town crazy’s property (what sense was a *Green Party*?) gave shelter to a frenzied mess of solar-blind silvery bugs; they re-tucked themselves below the damp, pale grass. When he climbed on a sun-bleached vinyl floater, a musty stink discharged as he sank his girth.

Under a clump of leaves was stashed their palm-size electronic gamer in a styrofoam cooler buried up to its rim. Henry had sworn it would last the winter in the plastic bag—a something had got in and chewed a hole in the bag and let in snow or rain, or whatever.

“This supposed to be a fort?”

The boy quit messing with the dead game-player and looked up to see a wiry kid, about his height, holding a bright green dune buggy and its box remote. He wore a faded “Star Wars” shirt with stiff baggy jeans and sloppy shoes. His grown-out crew-cut sat a shade lighter than his uni-brow.

“What if it is?”

“Not much of a fort,” the new kid said. Big lips muffled his crackly voice. A sketchy moustache and a smattering of tiny pimples told the boy the kid was probably already in junior high.

“It was a lean-to, last summer,” the boy told the teen, stepping in the damp gray silhouette of the sign/roof. The 2 x 6 that had supported an edge of the campaign ad was weathered, unbowed, rough. He kicked at it, knew it was half buried in the ground, at Henry’s insistence—it vibrated.

“You tryin’ to demo’ it?”

“Dunno,” the boy said.

The new kid parked his green dune buggy on a dirt mound to join in the battery on the 2 x 6. Before long the board splintered, came apart. It left a raggedy stump jutting out of the ground.

“Only idiots love baseball,” the teen said, studying the boy beneath the uniform.

“Yeah?” the boy challenged, pulling the baseball cap from his hip pocket in a show of contempt. “I just quit.” He picked up some of the 2 x 6, jammed it through the adjustable back of the cap, and chucked the thing into the reeds. He never wanted to play ball again; he wanted to strip off his uniform.

They stared awhile at where the orange cap disappeared in the reeds.

“Bet my buggy can jump it,” the teen asked next, indicating the stump.

“Bet it can’t,” the boy answered.

“Bet it can,” the teen said. He retrieved his toy and paced about a yard from the stump before positioning it at the obstacle.

“Let *me* drive,” said the boy.

“C’m on.”

“Hold on.”

“Can I *ever* play with it?”

“Sure, later. Only if I jump it, you owe me something.”

“kay.”

The teen surveyed the ground, adjusted some levers on his remote, punched a button that pitched the dune buggy forward.

Surprised at the poise and agility of the vehicle—at the accuracy of the remote signals—the boy watched the buggy go up and over the toothy stump with little more than a wobble.

“How’d you do that?” he asked, admiring the operator.

“You owe me. That was the deal.”

“So how? That buggy doesn’t look like much.”

“Looks matter for squat! This chassis, see here? now that’s where the money’s at.”

The boy sighed. The chassis looked like a squared-off little skateboard—a dented, plain metal rectangle surrounded by big rubber wheels. He touched it, felt its cool with his fingers.

The teen grinned, showing off clear plastic dental-work. “It’s all in the chassis,” he explained, tongue working expertly despite the braces.

“The body’s got nothing to do with it? I get it.”

The teen retrieved the buggy and flipped it over, showing the boy its scratched, slab-like undercarriage. “This top here, this hot little dune buggy design frame? is nothing. It’s junk. You could put almost any thing on this and it’d run the exact same.

“See,” the teen continued, “this is a universal idea, to copy the exact same chassis and put different bodies on top. That way, any race is fair. It’s all in how you drive. Everybody’s got the same chances of winning.”

The boy did catch the thrust of the teen’s concept. “We’re going to see all these cars—dune buggy, pick-up, moving van, a ’vette—and they’ll all look different, but they’re all the same underneath.”

“Exactly,” the teen said, grinning as before. “And it’s bigger than this toy, much bigger. It’s hitting the auto *industry*.”

The boy nodded, grabbed for the box remote. It had a steering wheel and buttons for forward, reverse, thrust, off. He turned the chassis in his mind awhile. The idea reminded him of what his dad had said, about everybody being an all-star.

“Nah,” the boy declared, “Life is never fair like that.”

“Come again?”

“Think of how each of *us* are so different,” the boy said. “We all buy cars and trucks that factories put together different. It’s American busyness. Henry Mosley and me already had this conversation, like, last year.”

The teen stooped to swipe at several silver bugs crawling up the cuff of his jeans. “Who’s Henry Mosley?”

“Maybe I’m wrong,” the boy eventually said. He missed his friend. Maybe his dad was right. Maybe Henry Mosley’s old mom had just had to move. And maybe he was too fat. Maybe he did play like Ty’s grandpa.

“This is a universal idea,” the teen reiterated.

“kay.”

“Nobody’s looking at things from the same angle in ‘America’. People don’t or won’t or can’t see the whole picture. They’re *lazy* thinkers, they *follow* the crowd.”

“Peasants, on the baseball diamond of life.”

“Watching baseball on satellite, kings of their stupid lot of remote controls. But by the time I hit college, cars—kid, they’re gonna be...”

“Out of this world?”

“Out of this *world*. Hydrogen, hydrogen’s fuel for the future; its emission is pure H₂O.”

The dipping sun silhouetted Ty Sneeth as he sprang from the reeds, swinging the jettisoned splinter of 2 x 6. After a malicious chuckle he spat, “Hydrogen’s for suckers,” and plucked the baseball cap off the end. He swung the board like a switch-hitter then tossed up the cap and slugged it into the fat boy’s stomach.

Then he set his elbow atop the 2 x 6 and leaned his lithe, princely body into it, as if the wood were supporting his weight.

“Did my dad tell you to fetch me?” said the boy, sounding tinny as he clenched his chubby fists. He glanced down at the cap at his feet.

“I volunteered.”

“Hah!”

“Did.”

The teen stood tall and gangly in his faded “Star Wars” shirt. “Hydrogen energy,” he said, lips flapping round his plastic braces, “will save the people of this planet.”

“My daddy says we’ve got enough oil in the Caspian Sea to feed every necessary motorized vehicle for a 100 years.”

“Your daddy’s missing the whole idea,” asserted the teen.

“Hydrogen emissions? Squirting out water?”

“You get it yet?”

“We’ll turn the planet into a new Venus in no time flat.”

“You’re a brain’s washed stupid, jock-o.”

“Jock zero,” added the boy.

Sneeth gave a sudden aggressive growl, wielding the 2 x 6. He dug in with his cleats and played a violent riff with the board on the dune buggy’s body, which fractured and split away from the chassis like a reptilian eggshell.

“Now you’ve done it,” the fat boy huffed, sounding less tinny, more robust. He felt what he thought might be that bit of heaven sparkling inside.

“Done *what*,” Ty Sneeth shouted. He tossed the board before fleeing into the reeds. Stumbling, his cap falling away, he replaced it, back forward, as he tore the right sleeve of his uniform on a prickly bush.

The boy laughed out loud, nudging his new pal.

“Look at that,” the teen marveled. His fingers quivered on the remote as he deftly spun the motorized vehicle out of its body. “What did I tell you, huh? What did you say? Out of this *world*! This universal design will change everything.”

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James Beach

“On Bluffs and Bluffing”

LAUREL lit some nag champa incense. “All right?” she asked her study-buddy Chuck dozing on a dilapidated recliner left by a previous tenant. “The air smells funky still.”

Chuck sat forward, rubbed his cheeks with his fists, blinking here and there vacantly, searching his mind. That brilliant O, faded from their conversation about the gentrification of the Olympics, went dim.

“Filtered tap-water?” Laurel asked her freakish guest, wondering about it. Then she looked at her feet, sheathed in thin chrome green socks.

Hunched on his elbows, Chuck wrinkled his slack mouth into a semblance of disgust and popped his protruding spine, his arms up like caught doing the wave at a varsity game.

The brash hues of the block pattern quilt scrunched beneath him took her attention off his webbed thumbs.

“Got anything to drink?”

Sleek veil of hair draped over a pointing finger, she watched herself step over a text on the humanities, stray pens and a notebook, before collapsing on a shining purple beanbag chair. “No I don’t. I don’t like the hand I was dealt—my feet are enormous,” she confided.

Outside, gray clouds fanned like a hand of poker—the darker wisps spades and clubs, the lighter clouds diamonds and hearts. Then she saw she was looking at the sky, not a card game or veiled art.

Chuck said, “You’re fine,” before shuffling closer for a close crouched look.

“My toes are freakish,” she lamented. “Whenever shoe department salespeople try to assist me I bluff a snob routine. The bones in my feet grew and grew.”

Chuck removed her chrome green socks to study her long flat feet with his fingers, to burnish and chip seductively at a clump of clear polish on her big big toe.

She said, “What are you doing?”

He reached for her loose shirtsleeves and rolled them up to the elbows.

She said, “What are you doing?”

Chuck said, “Your feet are the same, exactly, as your forearms. Give a try.”

Laurel could feel the stretch in her trim hamstrings as she placed her left heel on the crook of her right elbow and the toes up to the crease of her wrist.

“The other side’s going to fit, too,” Chuck assured. He flicked on a halogen desk light. “See, your feet are exactly as they’re supposed to be.”

Except now her arms were too long. Her breath tightened, the chair sifted into a fat cookie of beans against the epoxied floor. In the grotesque she saw herself as some insect-thing, a teeny torso, limbs angled awkwardly about the beanbag.

“I’m imperfect,” Chuck said. “I’m sure the Spartans would’ve tossed me over that cliff, with the other deformities.”

“What cliff?”

“You know the Spartans,” he told her, a smug look overtaking his slack open mouth. “The thing with them was male beauty—the elders of the Sparta inspected each newborn; if it failed physical criteria, they tossed it.”

“Tossed it. The ugly baby.”

“Over the cliff, like garbage.”

“I don’t think I do know the Spartans.”

“The Spartans: Jar-head athletes, brothers-in-arms, a race of soldier-kings. You know, the drawings on that pottery? a perfect circle. Dudes all looked like porn stars!”

The girl, still spacey, giggled. “The Spartans?”

“They chucked their deformities,” Chuck said.

“I thought the Spartans, like, dressed up in tin skirts and combed each other’s hair and let it all hang out, wrestling in the buff with buckets of olive oil, *in the buff?*”

Chuck nodded a pink flush into his waxen cheeks. If she only knew his theories about the early Olympics, why little virgin girls and old old men were the only citizens in the stands.

“Are these guys on the quiz?”

On his feet, he sought out the staircase of music discs beside the dusty player, counted the rungs. “Yeah, maybe,” said study-buddy Chuck. He opened the text and read: “In ancient Sparta no deformed child was allowed to live; boys began military drill at the age of 7 and entered the ranks at 20. Spartans looked upon themselves as a military garrison, and all males lived in barracks until the age of 30. From age 20 to 60 all Spartans were obliged to serve as foot soldiers and to eat at the *phiditia*, or public mess, even if married. These resolute, ascetic

warriors are best known for their 300 heroes at Thermopylae. Yet they failed to create a workable political or economic program. Excavations of the ancient city have uncovered ruins of temples and public buildings and also a theater of the Roman period, but the remains are scanty and insignificant for a city of such renown in antiquity.”

“Oh.”

Chuck quit reading. “Spartan society was based on separation of the sexes; their females nursed babies, ran village commerce; all males drilled each other, in the outback.”

“I get it.” Suddenly flouncing on the shining purple beanbag, Laurel bounced round her boobs. “Thanks for making me feel exquisite about my *perfect* feet.”

“They’re alive and well, those Alpha Males doing the Spartan thing. Tune in, every Monday Night Football.”

“Excuse me?”

“These pansy-assed over-glorified strappin’-young Alpha-men.”

“Pansy-assed?”

“Pampered-ass. I said pampered-ass over-glorified wannabe-Alpha-men. Boys, really. Pamper-ass over-done...”

“Listen Chuck,”

Chuck fell into his blinking habit out of comic resolve after his forget-getting-laid-by-her-after-that-comment. He forgot. Her uncle—

“nobody recruited my uncle because he was a, whaddaya call it, pampered-ass wannabe,” Laurel shot back.

—humanities text slipping from hand to hand—

“My uncle just signed with the Vipe’s.”

—Her uncle was NFL. “Your uncle *plays for* the Hawaii Vipers?” Chuck’s heart raced with his attempt to cover the gaffe. Pro players trained, brotherly, but not ultra-macho gay to the analogy.

Laurel leapt coltishly from the beanbag. “We’re extremely proud of him for making it to the top.” The nag champa stick sizzled as she pinched it out with licked thumb and forefinger, discretely.

“Making it to the top.”

“My uncle built himself into NFL material. Even in grade school he mowed lawns, shoveled snow, to pay for football camp, his equipment and everything.”

“Football camp.”

“*Yeah.*”

“Do you know what happens to little boys at football camp? I do. I can say I do. Only now—Hazing, you’ve heard the stories. The older guys and coaches and maybe even a star player from the League, they’re all hazers. They use...”

“What?”

“You’ve heard the stories.”

“I don’t think I have heard the stories.”

“They use the small ends of brooms, plungers. Toilet scrubbers.”

“Toilet scrubbers.”

Chuck nodded, waxy cheeks spreading into a crimson grin.

“Toilet scrubbers for what, Chuck?”

The guest let his eyes drop to Laurel’s bare feet. “Who ever heard of rejecting a *boy* over big feet?” he asked, eyes and mouth friendly, voice betraying major incredulous resentment with a crack.

“What *cliff*, Chuck?”

Heavy clouds and a thunderclap threw the apartment into dark, gave the host surreal anxiety. She verified the whereabouts of the recliner, the desk; reminded herself that glass from a broken halogen bulb was toxic dust.

“Believe me Laurel, the Clod-hopper, your uncle, he had an *in* from the get-go.”

Drops of rain snuck through to tap at the east window. When lightning streaks lit the apartment an intense white, Laurel could only hook her toes and wait for the thunder.

--references to *Sparta* paraphrased from Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2006. © 1993-2005 Microsoft Corporation.

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James Beach

“Birds, Bees Do It”

“HERE’S an essay topic everyone can relate to,” says the fat-faced professor to his ~~freshman~~ first year! composition students.

The teenagers, numbering ten and situated in folding chairs around a semicircle of tables, share the same vapid vibe. Their reason for coming to class is ticking off a prerequisite, rather than learning.

“When you first heard about ‘sex,’ how was the topic relayed? I’m not talking about cable or Internet porn; what I’m getting at is your person-to-person chat. What metaphors did your ‘teacher’ use? Did they beat around the bush?”

Few students blush, some giggle.

Somebody discreetly crunches into hard candy, quiet with the cellophane.

A collective widening of their WASPy eyes confirms that the topic excites.

Being early in the term, the prof knows only a few names, and he pauses a moment to probe his memory before gesturing at the first hand to venture up in the air.

“My mother told me with a book,” the owner of the hand, a thin girl in glasses, tells the class. “I was six or seven. The book had pastel cartoons of the human body parts—No birds and bees, I’m afraid, Professor. No animals at all, unless you count the human as animal, and most people don’t.”

The prof gives a curt nod, his tweed jacket cuffs brushing the table as he hones in on the ball player tearing at ragged cuticles with his teeth.

“Mr. Trenton,” the prof says, “what does The Birds And The Bees mean to you?”

Looking sorry he registered for first year comp, the well-hewn youth named Trenton lowers his fingers, scratches his patchy left sideburn, hesitant.

“A few words to the wise: I am scoring you on oral participation today. Refusing to add to this discussion may cause a full-letter downgrade at the end of the term.”

Trenton glances anxiously at the nearest boy, in a backward baseball cap, who yawns widely. “I guess my dad said something about birds and bees,” admits the athlete. “How girls are like birds, flitting around, you know, unpredictable as hell, and how guys are like bees, just hovering, waiting to use their stingers, all that.”

The response, so unabashedly adolescent, works beautifully; it encourages others to join in, sans prompting.

“No, *no*, dude, the bees pollinate the flowers,” volunteers a sapphic girl clad from neck to ankle in army fatigues, slowly opening and closing her thighs in subconscious desire. “You surely see the parallels between the vagina and the delicate petals of a flower. Like Georgia O’Keefe’s fantastic oil paintings.”

Screwing up his face, the boy in the ball cap shakes his head. “That analogy makes about as much sense as nothing! Guys are birds *and* bees in your world, flying around, helping a bunch of women ‘pollinate’ each other?”

“Besides,” adds a sorority-emblem girl, a sophomore transfer from across the country, Ginger? Gigi?, “O’Keefe *hated* that everyone compared her renditions of flowers to the female sex organ. She never meant it that way. She wasn’t that *gay*.”

“How about the rest of you?” the prof goes on, “did you all receive similar lessons about sex? Sandra, you look like you have something to say.”

“I heard about ‘it’ from my friends in grade school,” answers the most overtly religious, massaging the table with chubby palms. “They used the Birds and the Bees thing, only the females were the bees, because we’re smaller, and we make honey, and we’re sweet. The males were the birds, all cocky and strutting around, messy, you know, pooping on everything.”

The sorority girl chastises, “Gross, Sandra.”

A gangly teen in a beret, darkly ethnic-looking amid all the WASPs, says, “So this maybe makes sense of that bizarre-o ‘bees knees’ saying. You know, like the ‘cat’s meow,’ only it’s ‘bees(’) knees.’ Our society is obsessed with women’s legs; it’s from crawling out of the womb and sensing, first off, these giant spread legs.”

“Yes, I was hoping one of you would bring that up,” the professor says, the gleam in his eyes intense. He scans the nubile faces of his students and delights in seeing each one focused on him. “The metaphors, euphemisms and other stand-ins really take us away from the point of sex, which is simply procreation.”

“Are you saying that *guys* are Birds, and girls are the Bees?” the guy in the ball cap wants to know, beneath his scowl.

“No way,” puts in Trenton.

A perpetually sulky student responds sharply, “Don’t you listen? It’s metaphor, like the flower-as-vagina one; nobody’s any of these things, not really.”

“A bird is a symbol of infidelity,” says the one in the army fatigues. Her thighs are still. Her glare is animosity, defiance.

“I ain’t no Bird, though,” the baseball-capped guy insists, “females have eggs, not males.”

“I do believe bees lay eggs,” the prof says; “the queen, a monogyne,” needlessly.

“One female, many male drones,” adds the bespectacled girl, her head bobbing, nerves alit on a stalk. “I read recently about an all-female ant colony; Professor, is it true that scientists have found a way for female mice to reproduce without the male of the species? What do you think this says about the longevity of the male sex in mice? In *humans*?”

Shrill, staccato tweets emit from no-neck small birds, perhaps sparrows, conversing outside the classroom.

“You’re talking frat house versus sorority,” the sorority girl says, before she can stop herself.

A silence descends, split between those who know/can guess and those who suspect nothing is amiss in the land of the young.

“Test-tube babies,” says the dark gangly teen in the beret, “before we know it we’ll be birthed out of synthetic pods, no legs in sight. An invasion of intellectuals. Gender will evaporate; we’ll be self-pollinating, self-fertilizing things.”

A crow, or raven, maybe a grackle, swoops in outside and usurps the twittering with its triphthong clicks.

“Does all this talk make you *horny*, Professor?” goofs the ball-capped youth.

“Not really, no, it doesn’t.”

“It does me,” admits the religious girl, Sandra. Sweat is dappling her forehead, greasing her fat cheeks. “It’s true. This class makes me horny.”

Giggles, a gasp.

The face of the prof is cherubic, plaster of Paris. “That’s what the second part of this essay assignment is about: the misuse of terms, euphemisms, to describe sex. For example, the term ‘horny.’”

Several students scribble notes on their underused paper notebooks.

“I’ll bite,” says the sapphic girl. “What’s wrong with *horny*?”

“You tell me.”

“Hm, not a clue, Profess...or.”

“What would you guess is the origin of that term.”

“I couldn’t... say.”

“Humor me. Pretend your grade depends on this.”

A fat bumblebee drives happily into the room through one open window and out another, as if happy. The leaves out there are blazing red and yellow.

“An erect penis?”

“*Write.*”

The sapphic girl—Tonya Steinhouse!—all but slaps her forehead. “Duh; Sandra used the word *horny* to describe her libido—er, her getting hot. Heated up.” The girl turns to the chubby Bible-reader. “Do you have a penis, Sandra?”

“Leave her *alone*, dude,” admonishes Gina the sorority girl.

“Like, when a girl says ‘this or that really pumps my ’nads,’” puts in the sulker.

“’cause only guys have gonads,” nods the guy in the ball cap.

“That really pumps my ’nads, when chicks use that ‘term’.”

“It squeezes my ’varies when you dudes call womyn ‘chicks!’” says the Tonya from Sappho.

The thin girl adjusts her specs on her long nose. “A gonad,” she says, “is a term for the testes *or* ovaries, meathead.”

“Quiet, quiet,” says the prof. He frowns, his ex-smoker’s lips jagged as his tweed. “We all make these mistakes, ’til we become aware of what we’re saying. It’s part of the fun of learning linguistics. The term ‘horny,’ for example, yes, is derived from the ah, erect member, of the male. It resembles a horn. (Hence: giving a

blow job.) Further, this is reflected in physical characteristics all through the animal kingdom, with males of certain species growing antlers—can any of you think of any female beasts with horns?

“Are males and females synonymous, or equal? Yet, what Sandra said, that she’s ‘horny,’ is a common misnomer, for a female, to use.”

“You’re saying women can never ever be ‘horny?’” asks the one in the beret—D... something. First name being an initial, a letter.

The one in the ball cap says, “But they sure can get ‘horned’.”

“LOL,” retorts D.

“A man can get ‘horned,’ too,” says Sandra, defensively. “But the scriptures say it’s wrong, for men to lie with men as they would lie with a woman.”

A typically mute effeminate guy, from The South, says, “That is such a weird interpretation of the Bible verse.”

“Everybody lies,” puts in the sapphic girl.

The prof suddenly feels plenty of sexual confusion and perversion roils beneath his own smug old surface. “The essay assignment is on heterosexual sex, and the ways we go about describing it. Homosexual sex is—well, why not. Discourse on the term ‘gay’ if you like. If you want. If you choose. If you’re happy or sad, prone to worship your own sex, or if you’re programmed, pressured, to procreate... My point is this:”—and here he wonders if he *is* horny?, rather than intellectually stimulated?—“All of us were warped, twisted, damaged, no matter who taught us about sex.”

“How so?” asks the thin girl, eyes hidden behind a reflection on her specs.

“We’ve taken a natural, functional, physical act, ladies and gentlemen, and turned it into an abstraction, a morality play. We’ve eliminated mating season in our species. A spawning—unless you’re an ancient Roman or Greek—is out of the question. No offense, Gina.”

“Ginger,” replies Ginger. She arches her back so the Greek emblem becomes prominent across her breasts.

“Ah, Prof, where does this leave us on the bizarre-o bees and birds metaphor?” D. asks. “Which sex is which?”

“Once a bee stings anything, it dies,” points out a cautious but rather astute blond. “Their stingers fall off, and they die.”

This causes the boy in the cap to chew on the inside of his cheek. He grumbles, “What, like I’m supposed to spend my life buzzing around, finally get it on with some female, then my dick falls off and I’m dead? What the hell kind of life is that?”

The thin, bespectacled girl, disturbed, voices: “God, I don’t want to think of myself as a bird or a bee. They’re Lower Life Forms.”

Nodding in agreement, D. leans forward to say, “So are men.”

Trenton, stroking his patchy sideburns: “This century, men are the oppressed—just flip on the tube and you’ll see women whining about yeast infections and ‘dribbling’; about how their husbands won’t boink them anymore; and then there’s women’s libbers kicking guys in the crotch, as comedy, on sit-coms; and then we have the women-only gyms and women-only diets and women-only-books, women-only just-about-anything. Meanwhile, guys can’t watch a shaving-cream commercial without some skank in it giving him a wink. Getting *interviews* in men’s lockerrooms. Life is a joke.”

“You’re certifiable!”

“Plus, these days any female can cry rape, and sick the law on some guy, if he so much as looks at her wrong.”

“Women don’t do that.”

“They do so!”

“We’re exactly equal to you.”

“Except: you get all the advantages.”

“Really.”

“Yup: Work, or not work. Get educated, or not get educated. Play sports, not play sports. Dress up, or not dress up. Grow your hair, don’t grow your hair. Paint your face, don’t paint your face. Be flirty, don’t be flirty. Be independent, live with your parents. Register for the Service, don’t register for the Service—”

—“I’m not going to *war*.”

“Precisely,” spits the guy in the ball cap. “We have no choice—if the military calls, we need to answer. You can sit here at home, and take over more of our jobs, move into more fields. You don’t have to risk your lives, unless giving birth to a breach baby.”

The astute blond offers: “Men are valiant, designed to protect. Larger physically. More muscle, less fat.”

“That’s because men mature more slowly than women.”

“Bull! You all recently waltzed in on the society men created, and claimed it, and now you’re kicking us guys out of it.”

“*Bull.* I suppose that refers to the crap men throw out of their butts,” sneers D. “Otherwise the word in the American lexicon would be ‘bovine-,’ or ‘cow’s. But it’s Bulls.”

Paling, the professor tries to push down the noise level with his hands. He says, “We’re getting off track. Gender doesn’t divide the human race into two distinct species, does it? We’re all one and the same, with males and females contributing equally to the Big Picture.”

A pencil rolls noisily across the laminate and onto the carpeted floor.

“I merely wanted to put the idea out there that mincing around fundamental issues with vague metaphors and animal analogies can be inaccurate and confusing, especially for young children. In the case of sex, it stirs up feelings, as you can see for yourselves.”

The vibrations in the classroom begin to diffuse, and the prof is surprised to learn ~~he feels~~ relief when the vapid sheen of daydreaming returns to some of his students’ eyes. He permits the dark gangly D.-in-the-beret to be excused.

The boy in the backward ball cap rotates the visor to shield his face as he glances at the wall-clock.

Trenton draws back into himself, absorbed in thoughts of misogynistic sex, or ball plays.

With chubby palms pressed together as if in prayer, Sandra bows her head to discreetly wipe off the perspiration.

Somebody resumes eating corn-nuts or hard candies.

“I’m thankful I got the book with the pastel cartoons,” says the thin girl in the glasses eventually. “I bypassed a *lot*, that way.”

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James Beach

“A Trick of Woody Allen’s”

THE trucker believes it a trick of the light. He’s seen weird prism-like glints and other geometric shapes flicker across his windshield during night hauls, later explained away: modified high-beam, or hyper-luminous graffittied highway sign, or a firebug in the wiper-blade; once, he became so frightened while ladyfingers played across the road that he sped his rig to 92, before realizing the scrabbling digits were a blur of sparks from a late-night welding crew on a steel bridge superimposed over inferior tears...

At first, he tries to get his head round the light-trick.

“What the?” he asks the trick.

The trick doesn’t answer. The trucker reanalyzes it with his down-turned, sleep-deprived eyes. The Thing mocks a moon in the sky, skirting the top of his windshield. It doesn’t *feel* like a moon; wrong somehow, there it is, it did exist. He’s seen his share of celestial phenomena—the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis, wow what a show—and his erudition requires that the object change shape several times in his mind as he exhausts probable explanations for its existence.

Getting a dimension or proportion is difficult, it’s hovering. Much larger than a planet as seen by any eyes of the earthbound, the trick mimics the moon, excepting the color—too orange, or—and here the trucker’s sleepiness evaporates—too pink, too fleshy.

“What the?” he again asks the trick.

In response, the trick moves. It blots out more of the starry sky, its moonlike size morphing sunlike, except in an inorganic way; it was as if the trick were being pushed from behind, tearing through the cosmos. Like hearsay, a fist forcing its way through opaque window screening.

The trucker, now quite metaphysically detached from his limbs, from his face, manages to keep steady his rig on the road. He stares at the trick. It is a nose. A nose in the sky, hanging there, or standing there, or breathing there, pushing. On its way in. Or out. Backward/ forward? The trucker doesn’t know what to think, how to react—he can stare, mouth wide enough that any passing driver in his side mirror could see the glint of his spittle and fillings.

“What the?” he says in a paradoxical dance with his ability to register, deny, the superunknown.

The nose grows. Dense, intricacy porous and oily. It turns up its nostrils. The trucker knows the trick is smelling him, has invaded his world to get a good whiff; three days travel across the Midwest in the same clothes has given him a gamey odor, his armpits and his crotch, the grey-brown crud under his rag-tag nails doling a peculiar stench of its own. He’s had little more than a rinse-off in a rest area shower, due to the happenstance of the other trucker’s speedy paranoia about a double-bust—at least they’d cleaned their pipes first—and he knows he’s overdue for another.

“You saying I stink? I know it already. Just unstick that nose you stuck in here, why don’t you then.”

The nose obeys, leaving the night sky unmarred. A magical departure. Quickly, the trucker seeks a bright identifiable familiarity: the moon, which was a thin crescent hanging in the lower eastern portion of the sky. A little light. Where had it been? As a freight hauler the trucker prefers to drive nights; the experience makes a strong argument for daylight travel.

At the next exit, truck right-signals and pulls into the first Lodge.

Feeling like a partly-lit moon himself, the hauler finds the lobby, orders a single with king-size bed, pockets the key and wanders into the adjacent lounge. Under the sizzle of neon beer signs, the rig driver sits at the bar, which is very short, about six stools, and asks the bartender with the wax-laden moustache for a Black Russian. He expels the first breath he can remember, since seeing the trick.

“I have a theory about Woody Allen,” announces a fat-faced man in a tweed jacket, from the other end of the bar.

“Oh?” says the man’s younger companion, smooth-shaven college coed, bored.

“About his *films*.”

“I gathered that.”

The waxed-mustached bartender chuckles as he puts liquor and ice into a shaker then strains it into a large shot-glass on the faux-granite bar-top.

“Did I say something *laughable*?” the cherubic guy in the tweed wants to know.

“Woody Allen cracks me up,” the bartender replies. “Never made a bad film, (excepting that musical with the dubbed-over Drew Barrymore—that one, I could never watch it again and be happy with Allen’s oeuvre;) his movies are funny as

anything, every one.”

The trucker watches a generic white cocktail napkin and then his Black Russian get placed before him. Mind still spun from the superunknown, wondering what it all means, if anything, or if It actually occurred at all... He cups the rim of the cold cocktail with his left thumb and index finger. No ring yet to clink. He's young yet, astute yet, old.

“Really, I have a theory,” the fat-faced one goes on. “Ever notice that the artistic style of his, it changes, awesomely, with each girlfriend?”

“Never analyzed Woody, actually.”

“You should. Take his recent stuff, the cornball Hollywood stuff. You can blame that all on Soon-Yi. His intellectualism's gone soft. Those films are his attempts to please everybody (after that taboo thing he did). His murderers, the murders, they're deep-seated guilt personified. Absolutely! He's psychically... devastated... Yet, Hollywood moves along. Embraces a pedophile. Esteems Rhys Meyers. Forgives Scarlett. His choice of actors, his scripts: dark. Portrayals of inevitable corruption, these days alit with sorrow, dank with evil doings.

“His serious romantic-dramatic endeavors? The warped, semi-literate, whimsical s.? Mia—all Mia's doing. Lame brilliance, that one. A blond; do-gooder, passive-aggressive.

“Woody was *really* at his best while f.ing Diane Keaton. That's when his stuff was funniest, the most intelligent. The most innovative.”

“*Sleeper*,” the bartender bursts. “With the sex cabinet, that silver ball that made everybody high just by catching it, and then with him decked out like a robot, serving *everybody*? A slave, in love-me jest. Yeah, Professor, that's primo Woody Allen, all right.”

“That film, it was residual brilliance; from his days with Louise Lasser, and Diane Keaton merely starring,” preaches the prof as he sets his suede-patched elbows on the bar.

The trucker dips his finger into the Black Russian. Yes, it's wet. Chilled and wet, as a drink should be. With this new ground in reality, he can shove a new memory of the light-trick out of his mind. That is, until he lets one eye droop shut. Hovering over the rim of the lowball, the blurred and triangular tip of his own nose, nostrils flared, poised for fight.

“There was something funny about a proboscis,” the bartender adds.

The rig driver can only writhe on the inside as his flesh goes numb. Somebody might just as well've blown a paralyzing dart at his throat. Was this the beginning

of the answer he'd been searching for in his own mind?

At the other end of the bar:

“I think it was the nose of God, like, that’s all the characters ever saw of God, or all that was left of God, or something,” the friend of the guy in the tweed professes. “The God-sniffer was sacred, and Woody had it, once; he lost it, and everybody else wanted it, the dropped knowledge, I don’t know. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen it. I was high, when I saw it, to tell the truth.”

The bartender chuckles again.

“Woody’s bedmates *do* alter his whole philosophical outlook,” the fat-faced prof continues. “After Diane, he fell off his game. Smacked face-first into a metaphorical wall, he did.”

The next Black Russian works, the trucker relaxes. He gives a perfunctory farewell to the barkeep and the guy in the tweed coat but not the guy’s flunky, and discovers his room. Nose in the *sky*. While scrubbing his skin under a hot shower the trucker writes off his hallucination as a trick, of the light. A warning that his job is as perilous as his mind allows it to be.

The threadbare linens on and lumps in the king-size bed soothe him toward sleep but the idea of finding a good wife keeps him awake another two hours.

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James Beach

“Driven”

WILMA digs eelskin wallet from her art portfolio and disseminates its items down her trim thighs and on the bus seat armrests: three tarot cards, a driver’s license, two student IDs (one fake), two dorm keys, a butane lighter, a prophylactic, lint fluffs, various coins, seventy-five dollars, five pins (two safety, three traditional), three gel pens, four Carry A. Nation postage stamps, a stack of complimentary tickets to *Danceteria*, folded tissues, and two Greyhound ticket carbons. Her piles sway with the jouncing of the Greyhound.

“It must be on my dresser,” she finally says. Blood drains from her face. “What if my mom finds it?”

“Would she know what it was?” asks the large-featured Greta. Her oval eyes blink like elegies.

“My mom? I don’t know.”

“Mine wouldn’t. She’s oblivious. But yours might at that.”

“I left it sitting out in plain sight.”

“Look again,” prods Greta.

“I need some smoke,” Wilma sniffs, as petite as her bones. She holds the limp pocketbook and stares at its worn-out form, touches where the satin lining has torn, snagged and stained, where constant pressure from various items has puckered and distorted its shape. “Why didn’t you tell me this wallet’s dead?”

The Greyhound ambles onto an offramp. Because of the steep angle of the road, each grouping begins to topple, and Wilma panics while restocking her wallet. Greta covers with her manicured hands lighters, IDs and dollar bills.

“Who’s this lady?” the larger asks, singling out the strip of postage stamps while scooping the piles into the yawn of Wilma’s portfolio.

“Carrie Hatchet? She’s from another century. She went around busting up taverns with an ax, to protest against how men always get jerky when they get drunk. I’m going to send them on hate-mail postcards, to every jerk, on frat house row.”

“Was Carry A. Nation her real name?”

“I don’t know. I think so. She was a Jesus freak, but I love her anyway.”

Greta’s cheeks bloom and swallow her eyes as she chides, “Everything’s always got layers with you art majors.”

The Greyhound reaches a gas station that’s located, thinks Wilma, about a stone’s throw from Stickville. She zips closed her portfolio. The bus driver brakes, expels mechanical hisses. Her sleek, carefully parted dirty blond hair swings, reactionary.

Greta’s swept-back curls swing too as she rises, sets her purse on the seat, tugs on her pea coat.

Passengers in front ape them, with variation; their exodus is ordered, nearly silent as they step out under a feckless gray sky.

Meanwhile Wilma lugs her portfolio down the bus aisle. She wonders if she maybe she stashed the cellophane-wrapped acid doses in it instead. Nervous with the driver she misjudges the drop of the steep linoleum staircase, stops to twist her ankle back into its Birkenstock bed.

Wind sends a draft into the bus, somehow reminding Wilma to look up; she does so and notices her friend throw a conspiratorial look before darting behind the far side of the station. But the zipper has caused a pucker and she fears the imperfection will damage a semester's worth of fabric swatches and prototype garment sketches. Dawdling, fooling with her portfolio, the design major wonders what Greta is up to. Her heel comes loose again and she thinks smoking some pot might be nice.

Behind the gas station, she does admire the aluminum foil pipe quickly fashioned by Greta's calculator-sized fingers. A dust-speckled breeze prompts her to shield the flame as it chars the crude bowl; she wishes she had fastened her hair beneath her coat like Greta's is. Unsecured, it floats and attracts micro-stones, brazenly seeks the spark of the lighter. Perhaps because of the wind and the clouds, Wilma hardly feels the THC.

"This'll make the ride more bearable," Greta shouts six hits later, crumpling foil as they scurry round the station's brick wall. "Only four more hours of dull from the bus window s."

Stopping together, with identical slouches of different scale, the girls observe the Greyhound, gaining speed as it reaches the freeway onramp. Wilma lets go her portfolio, and it also slouches. They stand this way for several minutes. Mesmerized by enormity of predicament, paralyzed with shock over getting abandoned, they watch the steel bus disappear onto the bleak horizon.

*

"TOLD you to rent a car," Greta eventually says. Specifically, one of the new gas-electric hybrids, the girl thinks. The percentage of dollars saved on fuel, plus the help it does for the environment, outweighs the risk of receiving snotty glances from jock boys in Normal Vehicles.

"I won't believe this," Wilma shrugs, sloppy in her sandals as they crunch toward the station door. "This isn't happening."

"Believe it, Wil," replies Greta. "At least you have your portfolio."

Once inside, the girls stifle nervous giggles at the arthritic store-keep who ogles them with slick-looking eyeballs. Though Greta believes most octogenarians to be

blights, corrupt at their cores because, honestly, how can they not be, she also tries hard to remain empathetic. With smile expansive, she greets, “Hello, old friend.”

“Ha-ha!” the man sputters. “Sweet-tarts is all on sale, two f’r eighty-six.”

Cognizant of her diet—always, always, always—Greta also possesses a keen head for numbers. Figuring in modest musculature, average skeleton, boob and hip fat, and road-trip energy expenditure, she could use a snack. The station stocks nothing much recommended by the RDA; Greta comes to believe Sweet-tarts to be as healthy as anything else at hand. While rereading its chemically-laden label she hears Wilma buying sweet cigars.

“Your sign says three-forty-eight,” her friend argues. “Why are you charging me three-ninety-seven?”

“Ta-ta-tax.”

“That sounds a little crooked to me.”

“Ha!”

Greta intervenes with, “Actually, with six-percent sales tax, your total should come to three-sixty-nine. And would you add on this candy roll? I seem to have lost my purse.”

*

STANDING as tall as she can in her sandals outside the station, Wilma puffs her sweet little skinny cigar, thinking about Greta’s fat purse sitting on the faded bus seat. She thanks God that their Greyhound stubs are in her portfolio, and thanks God again that Greta has the weed stashed on her person.

Just inside the doorway, door propped with the portfolio, Greta keeps warm via a duct in the ceiling. She yammers, “I was just remembering how, over Thanksgiving break, we went cruising with those scummy guys, and you hid the last of our stash in your bra—”

“—that’s where,” the aspiring designer shouts. Then, at Greta’s vacuous stare, she clarifies, “I stashed the acid in my bra, this morning.”

“Yippie. Let’s eat!”

Wilma stubs out the cigar on colorless brick. “Don’t you have to call your mom again, about the missing Greyhound and all that?”

Greta says, admiring Wilma’s ash mark, “Do you think I explained it well enough?”

Was it too much, telling her the bus driver kept laughing at us in the rearview mirror?”

“He was, I saw!” Wilma fibs, fastening loose hair strands beneath her collar, like Greta’s is.

“Still, I don’t want to dose, you know, without some idea of how we’re getting back on campus.”

Nodding, Greta dials her mother again from the payphone. She presses her left palm against her exposed ear when a lemon-orange van with noisy muffler pulls up almost at her feet, listens to the receiver with a pained, wind-whipped expression.

Wilma looks on as a scruffy, twenty-something guy dressed in blah coveralls climbs out of the lemon-(limon-?)orange van’s cab, throws some surreptitious glances then, hobbling stiffly by with barely a glance, disappears behind the wall.

Stifling a grin—she’s a bit stoned, after all—the college freshman imagines their station to be dripping with drugs, and decides it’s the hippest spot in Stickville.

“We’re sitting pretty,” Greta announces, suddenly at Wilma’s side.

“Sitting pretty?”

“We’re perfect. Let’s dose.”

“Do you mean we’ve got a ride?”

“In six-hours-fifty-five-minutes we catch another bus, and we’re back in Capitol City by midnight,” she boasts with glee. “But if we miss this next one, we’re screwed.”

Wilma crumples the pack of cigs in her pocket, drops it off in the trash. “Your mom’s the best.”

Using Greta as a privacy shield she fishes for the blotter paper doses stamped with a cute blue unicorn. When her fingers find the crinkly fold of cellophane against her tit, a rush originating below her stomach rises into her throat and she’s feeling like a vandal.

*

AFTER swapping watches, necklaces, earrings and lipstick Greta can only stare at the green laminate table in suspicion. To her, she and Wilma keep sitting in the bar-restaurant, discussing the same point forever.

“Huxley likes to give A’s, because it helps your GPA,” the tiny Wilma fizzes, pausing for a sip of melting ice water. “Anyway what’s the difference? if you got an A-minus?”

She wonders what’s happening to Wilma’s voice, turning effervescent and green like the table, but tries anyway to treat Wilma regular.

“The minus is an insult,” says Greta coolly. “It’s a mark of negativity—er, a symbol of it.”

“In salt.”

“Huxley once told our class that trying to teach to us was like pissing into a vagina.”

“What?”

A carnation-pink light blushing down on her, shining up in her, Greta thinks Prof Huxley is a kind of disgusting in this light. Except there is no blush light! She knows this; she sees Huxley naked, trying to piss; the idea of sex with him excites her; she wants to experience any other thing besides him. “He has a big one I think.”

“I don’t think I want to think, about it. Your brain thinks up the weirdest s.,” says Wilma in her green way.

Greta sees the wide grin smears itself onto Wilma’s petite face, and her sleek hair begins to fan, or no , , , *wait*.

Nacho amigos!

The words descend upon the math-whiz like ethereal detritus.

Nacho amigos, nacho amigos, nacho amigos! Trying absurdly to count the number of A’s, Greta gets goofed up. A moment later, she sees the phrase coming out Wilma’s mouth.

“Nacho amigos,” her friend again intones. “God, that’s hilarious. Notch your amigos. Not your amigos. Na’cho a’m(e) goes. Nacho amigos.”

“Wil, why do you keep saying it?”

A beat. Then, “It’s where we are.”

“Cheese, chips and friends.”

Greta finds herself chuckling in hiccuppy bursts. Right, she thinks; we’re tripping,

inside of a bar-restaurant named after itself.

Her friend's snaky tint intensifies, drawing upon the laminate. Everything turns green.

A peek at the bar confirms an elderly audience who like to drink but refuse to have fun. This audience looks blue. Study of her palms tells Greta a lot about arteries, veins and bones.

Bent over in nearly uncontrollable fits of hysterics, the girl marvels at how her skin can contain her insides.

"We're very far away!" boasts Greta. She suddenly wants to see Wilma vomit, spew multicolored bile, and this stifles any giddiness. Eighteen years of partially digested meals rush to feed her head.

Across the table Wilma keeps erupting in bark-like giggles.

"Shhh, listen, Wil," she says. "Just think if we had geodes for organs? Like crystal, those geode things people are always busting open? Do you think we'd all be nicer to each other one if we knew how sloppy our organs are; how fragile?"

Wilma gets lost in their untouched water glasses, turning her head slightly as if objects in there rotate in suspended animation.

"You're right, girly; we're all disgusting tubes and pumps and sacks," the smaller spurts. "I would like to be a tall glass of nothing, like Ms. H-two-oh here. She's so pristine, so unspoiled. You and I are rotting piles of stinky garbage."

"Piles of s.," Greta agrees, nodding. She imagines her fat tits as translucent and stares at the bones beneath. Then she opens the pepper shaker and, with maniacal glee, dumps the dark cubist grains into her tall glass prism.

Fascinated, the girls watch the silt swirl and settle. The room rotates like light in a prism for awhile as the glitter disperses. Wilma says, "Now we're even."

*

PERIPHERALLY aware of the other patrons in the restaurant glancing, coughing, clearing their throats, Wilma and Greta sprinkle liberally their laughs on the establishment. Elders at the bar stare, order more drinks.

The girls eventually draw a ghostly pair of coveralls toting a bottle of ale toward them.

"The limon-orange van!" Wilma hears herself screaming, mind reeling from the recollection of bright fruits/wheels/noisy-on-gravel; the cold-looking phone, the

cupping over of Greta's ear.

The coveralls grow a face, replete with eyes, a mouth, and ears, and hovers closer to their booth, a wholly helium specter, clothed 'neath the head in blah.

Except the blah now teems with pointillist pastel coils, tightening then unfurling, disappearing behind massive shoulders, reappearing on both necks—the thick pale corded one and this extra brown one of ale.

“When did you guys order?” face above the coveralls bellows, resonating with an energy that Wilma can't right away place.

She recalls, slowly—while enthralled by the rainbow trail its elbow brushes—that yes, this creature that crawled out of a van is a Man—the Something Familiar about him.

In a whorl she sees how solid, somehow, his craft is; his orange one, his flesh one; she wonders why her own craft feels so soft, so expansive and unstable. To sharpen her mind she tells it to refashion the ornately covered coveralls into black tie with tails. A beetle, then; a black roach.

“We're not guys,” Greta admonishes. She blusters her way toward a menu, appears momentarily baffled by its tricky plastic folds. “And, we haven't ordered a thing.”

“Good,” the man says, “then we can all three of us take a walk.”

Wilma wants to stay, and says as much. She likes it at Nacho Amigos. She's enjoying the ambiance, the geodes especially, and the foreign necklace against her breast, and the nothing wash of her water in the mouth, the one without the crud in it.

The man says, “You're putting on a show for the yokels.”

The girls explode with laughs, echo the word *yokels*. But they allow themselves to be shuffled, still twittering, toward the door—walking the long way round the restaurant so as to avoid the bar. A windy vacuum helps expel them through the doorway into the screamingly barren universe of the town's main street, which extinguishes their fun.

“Where are we?” Greta asks, spooky in her exaggerated, chunky step.

The sidewalk roils ahead, promises more horrid pith than anything Wilma's ever experienced. Her panic barometer rises and she feels she's about to go apes. Vainly, while experiencing apes. as the most frightening word she—or anyone, for that matter—could ever aspire to think of, Wilma clutches the air for her portfolio.

“My art!” she cries, breaking the threesome, “My art!”

*

GRETA shifts her bulk, once deciding to abandon the strange man in coveralls who keeps telling her to stay put. Then she is charging beneath the enormous blinking Nacho Amigos sign dangling ominously above the door, an electric moment.

Inside, an organic warmth stuns her, encapsulates her in cloying peuse tones, a bizarrely uncomfortable comfort; she thinks for a moment that she’s entered her own vagina, strolled into her own geode.

Their booth, dotted with pepper, looks different now, the crunchy psychedelic now a sterile, matte finish awash with x-bar formulas and binary repetition. She remembers some of this from her high school calculus course, the one she took to prepare her brain for the rigors of college, though of courses her youth and yes, her campus, seems distant now—an unreachable and abstract entity—as distant as any amigos.

Greta thinks the people at the bar might know the whereabouts of Wilma.

Amoeba-like she floats toward them, slowing to focus on an object sitting in the middle of the peuse carpet, among the sticks of table and chair legs. A familiar-looking shoe, a Birkenstock shoe, toe-jam-yucky and about used up. She doesn’t want it, and ambles on.

“I’m looking for my friend,” Greta says, at last placing bare elbows on the ring-stained bar to speak at a waxy-looking woman behind the counter. “She’s short. And stringy—sounds like I’m describing an alien—oh, why , , , ? Her name’s Wilma. Like the cartoon. Only no, she:s real. I’m not , , , on, ’nything.” Greta thinks her organs seem more solid against the cracked leather rail and she begins to feel more substantial, less amoeba-like. “Have you seen her?”

“That who’s in the jane, Doe?” the woman says, eyeing her suspiciously. “Goll, you kids come in here, all strung-out like this, I’m itching to call the cops, I swears to Christ.”

“Thank you,” is all Greta can think to respond. She takes a few steps back while turning the waxwork’s phraseology. Jane/itching/doe/time/strung-out/cops/swears/christ/two , , , ?

One sweep of the bar with what could only be dilated pupils confirms to Greta that it’s littered with alienated corpses. Hunched-over men and a few red-wigged women. The evil dead, clutching empty pitchers and steins and highball glasses; they wear dark rags, have flappy skin and hollow eyes that beam telepathic messages at her, tell her she’s disrupting their macabre happy hour, confirm she’s

slipped into their true dimension. One of them orders a greyhound, to which the waxwork bartender responds, "Leave the driving to us."

Greta remembers her Sweet-tarts and regrets eating all of them already. She pushes into the jane in search of Wilma.

In There, lit by dingy antique sconces, her stringy sleek-haired friend stands agape at a mirror. A row of Carrie Hatchet stamps connects her tweezed eyebrows and she pumps Kleenex fragments in both fused-fists. Scattered about her feet lay the portfolio's contents: three tarot cards, a driver's license, two student IDs (one fake), one dorm key, various coins, seventy-one dollars, two leaky gel pens, a smattering of comp tickets to *Danceteria*, two Greyhound ticket carbons, an empty salt and pepper shaker, sixteen swatches of fabric and fourteen pieces of design-heavy posterboard, arbitrarily poked with pins (two safety, three traditional) and smudgy with ink.

"You remember Roni?" Wilma says, scarcely moving her bluish lips. Greta worries that the lips look discolored because of chewing on a pen, or if their blotter was cut with too much strychnine. She thinks on Black Spine. Spinal tapping, hair follicles. "She's the type to have glue. The glasses, the fluffy hair, she's gotta have some Tacky Glue at least."

Feeling her self slide recklessly into glazed floor and wall tiles, her insides now liquefying into the grout, her smarts sinking into the imperfect grid she always congratulated herself for being atop of, Greta steps toward the mirror. With both their faces reflected in the glass, she sees her own mouth colored maroon, not blue.

"Have we peaked? Has it been six-hours-and-fifty-five-minutes? Wil, has it yet?" the math-whiz pleads, feeling somehow uninhabitable.

"Black spine," mumbles Wilma.

Frightened, Greta reaches out to shake her friend's arm in the mirror and catches no real thing but air.

James Beach

“Collapsible Empire”

SEEKING insight into the human condition via Blockbusters struck Horace Munson as a sound way to discover something of merit. After all, millions of people went to see them in theaters, and rent them or buy them, every year. Paradoxically, he also liked to walk out on theaters of entranced strangers or flip off his DVD during the obligatory Dark Moment — always at the end of the second act — wherein hero and company receive the most devastating blow, and all seems lost. Until the next scene, that is, wherein the hero conjures enough movie-magic to defeat the villain.

The script, direction, action, all of it seemed predictably contrived from there on, what with the “surprise” or “forgotten” attribute for the hero, a tidying up of strategically-placed loose ends, the sudden soul shining within the about-to-be-slain villain. The other gunk annoyed him too: hokey special-effects subbing for depth of character, dead bodies flying every which way, mass destruction of autos/streets/buildings/nature, the booming sound-effects, decibels of over-the-top musical scoring...

According to Munson, exceptions to those sorts of mind-numbing final acts are few. Foreign films (excepting recent American-style efforts from Spain and Japan) work because they often fit no preconceived design; avoid gratuitous plot twisting, “quirky” character development or illogical romantic liaison; and are often shot with a small budget, with humanistic themes, sometimes covertly. Older independent films built in the States (before superstars and other rich scene-crashers changed the dynamic of the “indie” genre) often score big years or decades after release. And of course he enjoyed his “blue movies,” since they provides a basic f.ing purpose without pretension or decorative fluff, and can be played in a loop.

Yet the big-budget “Poltergeist,” directed by Tobe Hooper and written and produced by Steven Spielberg, quickly engulfed Horace Munson. (Rumors of a remake piqued his interest in watching the original.) He stayed rapt through all but the “lull” where everybody was whispering about ghosts and religion, at which point he checked his ’fridge for leftovers. A moment later he was glad for empty hands! Munson deduced right then that the “Poltergeist” remake was in preproduction mostly because of the man who ripped off his own face. That was “the scene,” the talk of the industry, of movie-goers, at the time of its theatrical release in 1982. Casting* Craig T. Nelson and JoBeth Williams as the scared-witless Steven and Diane Freeling helped too, since they were fairly respectable and attractive actors, and could convincingly shriek.

Also of note was the way young Carol Ann got sucked feet-first into her diabolical closet — soprano scream, long hair hovering, she clung to that bit torn from the wicker headboard. This led fantastically to a later scene with an old psychic dwarf pitching tennis balls at that netherworld portal, which had a return-portal in the livingroom below, the gooey balls dropping there. Another gnarly element: storm-slick branches nabbing the sinewy, buck-toothed Robbie, a spontaneous “Oz”-like tornado spiriting off with the hungry oak only moments after he’s yanked from the tree’s slimy hollow.

The film’s hyper-ordinary suburban setting, facile use of marijuana, and consequences-laden subtext gradually excited the sedentary Munson. He liked how the oily adolescent daughter Dana was a now-you-see-me,-now-you-don’t type of foil for the playful poltergeist strikes and jabs. (She vanishes to a friend’s place during the crises.) But when maggots wriggled out of raw meat, spiking that wonky parapsychologist with enough of the heebie-jeebies to excoriate his own cheeks with his fingernails, the movie made history. This, to Munson, was intensity on film.

What kept Munson from shutting off the DVD player at the Dark Moment of this Blockbuster was the crafty rescuing of Carol Ann from the spooks — he had no idea what to expect. A rope lassoing Diane as she strode into the closet portal assured that she wouldn’t get lost in time-space while seeking her daughter in the netherworld. The scene, replete with strobes, flickering silhouettes, darting shadows, wind-machine gusts, and a giant roaring (papier-maché?) head made in wry parody of Steven’s horror-face, assured that the audience would remain with the Freelings for the duration of the quest.

That the director(s) believed this world Earth might exist merely as a womb for us thrilled Horace Munson. He mused over the “NDE Light” seen by people with near-death experiences — was The Light an entry, a portal back into this same planet? — the brilliance of hospital fluorescents as seen through a widening, tearing birth canal? — and if so: a pathway to this, or a discrete, existence?... The symbolism and metaphor of “Poltergeist” seemed attuned to this idea, especially Hooper’s oozy red-slime special effects. The gobs of placenta-goo, gotten returning from “there” to “here”; plus the strength of a family’s love, the power of faith, trust and honesty; and looking evil right in the eye; all these underpinnings congealed to make it a stand-out rental, in Munson’s mind.

Then: The gore-ific resurrection, the surprise climax of plots! As the squeaky-clean Freelings packed up and prepared to move out of their ghost-free house, their demons regrouped. Diane has her jersey mostly down over her panties while gathering her brood to escape the house of suburbanite dreams gone renegade: Corpses float up out of the shallow-grave muck of the swimming pool-in-progress, caskets smash through the kitchen tiling, pop open, spill bones, rip up the lawn. An enormous mouth eats its way into the kids’ bedroom closet portal. Electrical surges, zaps and freaky warps of dimension keep the audience poised on the edge

of its seat.

The Revelation: A shady land developer built their home over a cemetery, moved the headstones, but not the bodies! Horace enjoyed this “skeleton out of the closet” theme almost as much as the metaphor about the birth canal. But although he agreed with the film’s heavy-handed messages (soulless capitalism and the invasive evils of television), he felt confused over why “the other side” opted for retribution by compressing only the Freeling house into a searing bright star. Was Mr. Freeling the only ignorant real estate agent in the development? Why was their home, out of an entire sector built on sacred ground, the sole empire collapsed? Surely the neighbors — who lived above their own assortment of skeletons — would encounter similar “disturbances”.

Yet fulfillment was there, attained. As the end credits and la-la-la lullaby played, a mostly content Horace Munson set down his notepad and wandered from his recliner to stare at the starry night sky. He supposed the vacuum of space paralleled the womb, its various solar systems providing nutrients, its seeming vastness merely uterine walls of time, but digging much deeper was moot. He preferred instead to keep a steady, albeit stone-cold, grip on the microcosmic reality at hand.

*The “Freelings”: Craig Nelson syndicated in “Coach,” starred in a few lesser films, was it “The Skulls” that came on cable recently? And JoBeth Williams in womyn’s network dramas, that nuclear holocaust mini-series, the big “The Big Chill,” etc. The son, Oliver Robins, soon gave up movie acting; during one scene he was nearly strangled by the machine that wrapped a toy clown’s candy-striped arms round his neck...

THE “POLTERGEIST” CURSE
Legend in Hollywood. One death per film.

Toward the end of filming Part III (1988), Heather O’Rourke’s intestines shut down and she died, age 12. Oddly, she’s the only actor to return from the original film for the final installment. Some of her unfinished scenes employ body-doubles with fright-masks and life-size dolls. The talents of Tom Skerritt, Nancy Allen, Lara Flynn Boyle can’t save this rip-off, set in a haunted highrise.

Part II, “The Other Side” (1985), employs a Native American desert sage, and some spiritual missives (undoubtedly massacred during rewrites). The Tall Man, in the brimmed hat, played with macabre control by Julian Beck, gave lots of women the creeps. He was the second victim of the Curse, dead of stomach cancer, pre-release.

Dominique Dunne, who played the lovely Dana in Part I, was the first victim of

the Curse: Choked to death, by a boyfriend, on her front lawn. What a shocker, for the cast and crew... Did she watch the final cut? Verify with IMDb for DoD.

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James Beach

“Here’s to the Day the Muses Rule”

IN lieu of daycare, a dozen or so students gathered in the elementary school library after classes. Librarian Shagrynne shut down the bank of computers every day at that time. She felt anxious about what the 'net held within its mesh: unguessable beings and objects, objectifications.

The library at least was a concrete environment, a stable dwelling, a haven from the decadence of cybernetics. Everything in there, including most of the books, came from the previous century.

In her anxiety over user-friendly e-technology — the ring-tones and sex-texts, the digiphotos in the lavatories, the teenage kiddie predators online; those ubiquitous kids’ books and movies glorifying paganism — Miss Shagrynne did her best to uphold the upbringing of her youth. Reading and studying, writing by hand, meditation even, were acceptable ways to spend an afternoon, in her world. Video-gaming and R- or X- rated movies were the unacceptable ways.

As though the librarian were an amusing public access channel show, or a comedian, the kids in the library put up with her. (They had to.) Their assorted parents were of one mind: *Latchkey Kids get into trouble; no way we're paying strangers or slacker relatives for daycare.*

“Storybook time,” Miss Shagryne called. Today was a special day, more special than any of the previous; she was going to tell a story she wrote herself.

Most of the kids settled onto the spread of latch-hook yarn squares on their own; the librarian clapped twice at the stragglers, who spooked. Another set of claps and they found their squares too.

A dousing of the fluorescent lights, and the clicking on of an antique bulb lamp in Storybook Corner announced that Miss Shagryne was ready to begin the day's tale. She waddled her bulk to her plastic, ergonomically-designed chair, settled into it, gave a nice broad smile.

Her pupils mirrored the smile — to her, their variegated beams were pleased or questioning or timid, or imbued with sarcasm, or happy as a void, a vacuity indicative of those who would grow attractive enough to never stretch their intellects to full capacity. Instead of fixating on each child's inner glow, though, the librarian preferred to compliment them, silently, on their physical flaws.

“This is a story about a painter and her muses,” said Miss Shagryne.

One of her students — probably the one with the delightful buck teeth; he was always goofing off — made a fart noise with his tongue vibrating between his lips. A few subdued giggles and then all was quiet again.

“Do any of you know what a muse is?” she asked the class, nonplussed.

Predictably, nobody ventured a guess. Everybody was interested to learn, though, and the class pitched forward its various faces. A couple of the littler kids looked downright terrified to find out.

“A muse is someone who's not very bright. A muse is stupid in a lot of ways. But, a muse is very, very pretty,” Miss Shagryne told them. “A muse is what artists look at when they want to create something of lasting value. A muse has the gift of everlasting beauty.”

A girl with thin lips and lovely fat gums like caps on her teeth stated, “Our president's a muse.”

Miss Shagryne could barely conceal her surprise as she asked, “Do you think our president is beautiful?”

The girl shrugged.

“I think he’s stupid,” offered a boy with a gorgeously nasal voice. “My dad told me he got C’s and D’s in school.”

“Did he now,” said the librarian. “And how many Ivy League schools did your father attend?”

“The president got his ivy degree because his family had lots of money to buy new buildings for the school,” added a perfectly jittery boy, with eczema. “He got out of getting drafted to a war in the same way.”

Their teacher taught, “There’s a lot more to running the country than brains, isn’t there?”

“Like what?” asked a stunningly freckled boy, before inserting a pinky into the left ear of the finely spacey-looking boy seated next to him.

“Like poise and parroting,” Miss Shagryne scolded. The loose folds of skin on her neck, wiggling ferociously, accentuated her glare. “Could you stand up all day long and act like a president, mister?”

“No,” he said softly.

“I could do it,” boasted the jittery one with eczema; he was probably shaky from too much stimulant medication. “I’ve memorized all the books of the Bible, and my Sunday school teacher says I’m the smartest boy in class.”

A girl with bewitchingly tiny squint-eyes said, “I know them all too.”

“I heard the president sneaks whisky shooters,” offered a charming plain-faced girl with obesity. “My daddy says those f.-funny cuts and bruises that sometimes show up on his f.-ugly face are from bumping into things when he’s all like good and loaded.”

“Mercy!” said Miss Shagryne.

“I heard he drinks, and puts powder in his nose,” said another, running his hands through wonderfully wispy, fly-away hair.

Shifting in her seat for emphasis, and because her rump had numbed, the librarian said, “Rumors only hurt those who tell them. And such language! Four-letter words are forbidden in this classroom.”

Several students began counting letters in words — the librarian could see the wheels turning inside their skulls.

“So, ‘f.-funny’ is okay?” said the obese girl.

“But ‘okay’ is forbidden?” asked a small bony girl with a captivatingly large brow, in all seriousness.

“No s.! What the f. ain’t a four-letter word — ‘word’ is a four-letter word. ‘Four’ is a four-letter word. F.,” the buck-toothed boy sighed.

“Half the time I don’t know what the f. she’s talking about up there,” confided the spaced-out boy to his freckled friend.

“Children!”

“Does she mean we’re not supposed to swear?” said the squint-eyed girl.

“No, she means it like, *any* four-letter word,” the obese girl said.

The jittering boy added, “That’s what I’m getting out of it. And that’s impossible.”

Irked and somewhat embarrassed, Miss Shagryne folded plump hands over her girthy, spread thighs. Again she took inventory of the blinking eyes of her pupils. She reasoned out their ages, between five and ten or eleven; she might be able to correct their defects of character before it was too late, if only she taught them the right things. “We are drifting away from story time,” she said at last. “You do want to hear this story.”

“Oh, yes,” said a high-pitched meek voice, as if thrown.

“Please,” pleaded the petite girl with the big forehead.

The buck-toothed boy said, “I could hear it.”

So the teacher began, “A long time ago, there was a not-so-pretty painter named Pearl Pearbody. Pearl Pearbody liked to draw pictures of her beautiful neighbors. In her way, Pearl Pearbody was making up for her own physical shortcomings by creating beauty on canvas.”

“Wait, she’s ugly? not a hottie?” asked a kid with a very large backside, nicely disproportionate.

Miss Shagryne grew patiently stern. “She wasn’t born with a model’s body, is all. Her *behind* was too big, and her *eyes* were too squinty, and her *gums* showed red when she smiled, and her *hair* was too flaky and dry, and she had too many *freckles*, and a deformity in her *spine* gave her a limp. But nobody seemed to mind! Everybody liked her paintings of the beautiful neighbors. This was a long time ago, when beautiful people didn’t have jobs in the movies or on television, and they had to pay their debts just like anybody else, by farming or building log cabins, or sewing clothes or babysitting.”

“How cool, to be a muse and just sit there,” said a girl already blossoming with an alluring case of acne.

“And get paid for it!” shouted a girl who had an engaging little narrow nose, and a loose posture, like a high class whore.

“These neighbors — or muses, to use your new word of the day — these muses didn’t know to ask for money,” continued Miss Shagrynne. “They felt happy to be captured by such a skillful artist as Pearl Pearbody. They spent days posing for her, all for free.”

The one with the big backside said, “I’d ask for money for that for sure.”

“So would I,” persisted the whorish-nosed kid.

“You’re mixing up the plot!” Miss Shagrynne told them. “This all happened many, many years ago, before people thought the way you do. Can you try and imagine thinking differently?”

The students nodded that they could.

“Pearl Pearbody was real real smart,” Miss Shagrynne went on. “She was so smart she thought up how to time-travel, all by herself, with nobody to help her, not even a scientist.” Here she paused, expecting some oohs and ahhs.

When there were none, Miss Shagrynne dropped her ample stomach onto her lap for emphasis. “One day, she decided to test her time-travel experiment, and it worked! She traveled ahead through time, alone but unafraid, leaving her pretty and not-so-pretty neighbors, and her paintings and brushes and canvases behind.”

A few of the students yawned. Others were glancing about the room, picking at their fingers, or rolling their legs back and forth so their toes knocked together. The speedy kid had torn the yarn-knots from a corner of his latch-hook square and was now brushing them under the rug.

Miss Shagrynne straightened her spine and, with elbows akimbo, slammed her knuckles against the back of her chair.

“What happened next?” asked the boy with fly-away hair.

“Well,” Miss Shagrynne said, enchantingly, “Pearl Pearbody landed a full millennium ahead of today’s world. Do you all know what a millennium is?”

“Y2K,” said the jittery one.

“Nope,” said the obese one.

“The dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” the jittery one said.

“Nope,” the obese one corrected; “it’s a thousand years.”

“That’s right,” said the librarian. “A millennium is a thousand years.”

More glancing about, a few more yawns, the vibration of a mobile phone that nobody dared answer.

“Right away, Pearl Pearbody could see that many wonderful things had happened. World peace had been achieved, and nobody gossiped or told lies, or snorted drugs or drank whisky — especially not the president — in fact, everybody was so peaceful that they didn’t need to elect anyone to lead them. And everybody had plenty to eat and drink.”

The boy with the flaky, fly-away hair said, “How do you know?”

“How do I know? I don’t *really* know. This is a story; it’s fiction. What I’m doing is predicting what life might be like. Do you know what a prophecy is?” asked the librarian. (She could see that they didn’t.) “A prophecy is a smart guess about the future.”

“That’s way cool,” the pimply girl said. “I’d like living in a future like that.”

“All of us would like living in a future like that,” Miss Shagryenne agreed. “Except for one thing: Everybody in the future is a hundred times as beautiful as any of us. A supermodel from our time would look *ugly* there, next to all those beauties. We can’t begin to imagine how beautiful they are in the future. We’ve never seen anything like them.”

“Models are ugly,” sneered the boy with the big backside. “All starving-looking, with those monster lips and they’ve got flat chests! and too much makeup on, always those weird clothes on.”

The girl who had a whore-nose said, “Yeah; they’re skanky.”

“Skanks,” put in the nasally boy, giggling.

Big-butt boy said, “Their pooh tang is too tangy too.”

Two claps from the librarian. With teeth clenched she forced her face into a wide smile, which the gummy kid returned. Again, the buck-toothed boy’s fake flatulence! And somebody’s stomach grumbled, as if throwing its voice.

“So what happens, Miss Shagryenne?” said the pimply one, this time with sarcasm creeping into her question.

“Once Pearl Pearbody got over the shock of everything, and had a bite to eat — time-travel makes a body hungry! — she asked for a paintbrush and a canvas, so she could start in on their portraits. She was so excited. Do you know what they told her, though? Can anyone guess?”

The freckly boy guessed, “They told her that nobody had a paintbrush or a canvas.”

“No,” said Miss Shagryne.

“Yeah, they told her they didn’t know what a paintbrush even *was*,” added the spacey boy, with a laugh.

“No, they have *electronic* paintbrushes and canvases,” said the boy with the shakes.

“That's right,” said Miss Shagryne.

“They told Pearbody to paint them in the nudie,” said the one with the enormous bottom.

“They don't ever get naked,” said Miss Shagryne.

“Why not?” came that high-pitched voice, as if thrown.

Placing her palms on the armrests of her chair, the librarian demanded, as if she were about to search on foot for its origin, “Who said that?”

The spacey-looking kid was innocent, by his expression, although the freckly kid next to him was hiding his face behind the spaced-kid’s back, convulsing with laughter — or, he was hyperventilating...

Miss Shagryne could not think of the freckly kid’s name, so often was she intent upon categorizing him by a physicality. “You, there, are you all right?”

The class began looking round, as if to assist with their eyes.

The librarian, meanwhile, had to struggle up out of the plastic chair and tap the freckled boy on his shoulder. Eventually, he stifled his mirth by biting the inside of his cheeks and turned to face his afternoon sitter.

“Are you all right?” she asked him again. The last thing she wanted was a lawsuit from the school or his parents.

He let out a laugh with spittle flying, again hid his face.

The obese girl, who totally covered her patch of latch-hook with her body even if she sat up straight, said, “He’s fine. He’s laughing at Brain’s farting.”

“Well, Brian, you should really see a doctor about that,” the librarian said, as though she knew who Brian was.

“Miss Shagrynnne,” said the morbidly obese girl, “his name’s ‘Brain’ not ‘Brian’.”

“Hm? Who ever heard of such a thing? Brain. Really.”

“Yep.”

Miss Shagrynnne waddled back to her seat. “Remember, children: every time you laugh at someone else, you’re really laughing at yourself.”

“That’s *dumb*,” said the boy with fly-away hair.

“What’s so ‘dumb’ about it?”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s down to the principal’s we go if I hear one more word out of you, troublemaker.”

“Especially if it’s a four-letter one,” said the girl with beady eyes, gravely.

The librarian took a minute to adjust her flower-print tunic. “Now where was I.”

“What are they wearing?” the whore-nosed girl wanted to know.

“What are who wearing?”

“The pretty muses.”

“Nothing at all,” said the one with the big backside. “They’re nudie. Why wear any clothes if you’re a hottie?”

“They wear skin-tight body-suits,” the librarian clarified. “Like ballet dancers.”

The girl with acne said, “Without the tutus, right? I mean, tutus are like so old. (No offense.) Nobody wears them anymore.”

Miss Shagrynnne nodded, said: “These perfect-looking people of the future shocked Pearl Pearbody again! They told her that *she* was the extraordinary one, and that they’d like to paint *her*. They said nobody on Earth looked as beautiful as she did. They told her that in their world, since everybody all pretty much looked the same, nobody painted. Nobody did much of anything. All their problems had

been solved centuries ago, by the last of the ugly smart people — people who these beauties had already forgotten ever existed, by the way.”

The girl with the tall red gums raised a hand to ask, “If the ugly smart people are all dead, what do the muses do when they get a new problem?”

“Their computers solve all their new problems for them,” Miss Shagryne stated matter-of-factly. “Their computers take care of everything: cooking and cleaning, heating and cooling, flushing their toilets. Wouldn’t all of you love to live in a world such as theirs!

“Anyway, these future people painted terribly. Any of you could draw as well as they could. It took a very long time for any of them to do Pearl Pearbody a little bit of artistic justice, let me tell you. But when they did, everybody rejoiced, and all the men there wanted to marry Pearl Pearbody because she was so unique, and because she had time-traveled, all by herself, to the Land of Muses.

“But Pearl Pearbody, far more curious and intelligent than any of them, decided to do more time-traveling, instead of dating any of the muse-men. To her, all the future people seemed uneducated, and boring, and she had nothing to talk about with them. All they ever did was sit around in groups at their fancy swimming pools, admiring each other’s bodies, making love with anybody who catches their eye—”

“They all have *sex*? with *any* body?” the buck-toothed boy asked, mouth hanging open.

The squinty girl said, “Sex is supposed to be between a man and his wife. That’s what my Sunday school teacher told us.”

Under her breath, Miss Shagryne said, “Oh, f.”

“I don’t see how sex could happen in a group,” persisted the buck-toothed kid.

“Or with all their clothes on all the time,” said the boy with the big behind.

The tiny girl with the high forehead wanted to know, “If a man puts his penis into her, won’t he pee in there?”

“My mother told me sex was a myth,” the pimply girl admitted.

The kid with the freckles put on a skeptical expression and asked, “Do babies really come out of a woman’s butt? I saw this show on cable, and it looked like—”

“Does the president have to wear a condom?” inquired the flyaway-haired one.

“Sex is the same as kissing,” declared a girl with an exquisitely twist to her spine. “I’ve had sex lots of times, but I won’t kiss my brother. Grody.”

“I think boys should marry men,” said a typically mute boy with a gorgeous birthmark on his temple, like a bruise.

The whore-nosed one suggested, “Tell *that* to those skanky muses.”

“Or to the president,” said the kid with the fire-red gums.

Fat cheeks flushing, Miss Shagryne pulled a fingerprint-smudged storybook off the parti-colored shelf. She cleared her throat, gave a nice and broad fake-smile at the little impressionables on their yarn squares. “Once upon a time,” she said, using the book merely as a prop, because she knew the tale by heart, “there was a young heiress named Sleeping Beauty...”

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James Beach

“Number Nine”

FOR his ninth birthday Jesus vowed to do whatever anyone asked of him. This was his year to grow up. Even if someone called him Jesus (Geez-Us) instead of Jesus (Hey-Zeus), he promised himself he’d pretend they were right.

Since it was a Sunday, and no one told him to rise and shine, he slept in late. He ate cold cereal and a muffin, drank juice-from-concentrate, then went back to his room to brush his teeth. He took off his pajamas. He wetted and combed his hair, parting it the way his mom liked. He studied his image.

He put on a white collar shirt and khaki pants, dress-socks, and the silver clip-on tie he got for Easter (instead of a candy basket; his parents’ casual way of

peripherally dealing with his pudge and general listlessness). He gave up his usual church fuss — his parents wanted him to attend peaceably — to uphold his birthday promise.

Again he looked in the mirror, combing, seeking physical signs of age nine in his face. His forehead was taller, he decided. His chin and eyes and nose and mouth all looked the same as when his baby teeth fell out and his adult teeth grew in crookedly.

He kept practicing smiles. Then: those taps on the horn signaling his family was in the drive waiting for him. One quiver of hair on his crown stuck out and he rewetted it, added a gooey curl of toothpaste to smooth it in line.

He carried still-stiff tie-up loafers down to the car, where his coiffed-looking parents reverberated petulance between themselves. How long had he been up there? He gave the apologetic smile.

His sister Belle, staining the hem of her dress green in the weeds of the boulevard, dropped the fistful of dandelions when she saw him. She offered to shut the door for him, “like a chauffeur”. Okay, sure, he agreed.

The boy kneeled on the back seat. Yet the shoes in his hands ate up his ordinary spatial or senses thoughts as he considered where to put them on, how to sit his body so as to be able to tie them. Meanwhile, Belle shut the door on the right pinky toe.

Shock kept the boy from yelping in pain. When his sister figured out what happened she started to bawl. His mom demanded to know what happened, his dad already knew.

Jesus fused the hurt with his birthday resolution and managed an “I’m still alive, right?”

With an icepack retrieved from the garage freezer, his mom got into the backseat to remove the dress-sock and examine the boy’s foot. Belle rode up front, blubbing for a minute; when the sedan reached the main road she quit that noise, started singing “Jesus Loves Me” softly.

The pack burned like frost and the toe throbbed and swelled during the drive, throbbing but causing the boy very few actual tears. It was bruised, not broken.

None of them would worship together in the sanctuary until later that morning: the boy’s parents each attended a discussion group first, divided by sex, while he and his sister were signed up for Sunday school classes separated by age. Dad’s plan to drop off the kids and the wife at the door, and find a parking spot, suited Jesus; it was easy to accept “helps” on his birthday.

“See you soon,” said his mom, leading Belle by the hand to her Bible class.

Jesus limped in the stark corridor, right shoe in hand, the ice-pack inside the shoe. He buoyed his mood by meditating on doing whatever others asked of him. For months his Sunday school teacher had instilled that very thought into his whole class: be selfless.

The classroom door was open; he was late. Jesus showed off as many teeth as he could crowd into his smile.

Ms. Steffa looked from Jesus’ stretched open mouth to his shoeless foot to the loafer in hand, then to his eyes. “Are you all right, Jesus?”

“I’m okay,” he managed to say with a smile on. “I’m still alive, right?”

“Oh, sure he’s alive,” said Jason, the spiky red-head who could expand and contract his abdomen like a frog could bubble up its throat.

“Thank Jesus for that,” said Ms. Steffa.

Ms. Steffa kept a datebook and always celebrated when someone had their “nine-day”. (Once, a boy turned ten, but no one made a big deal about him being older since he’d come from a state with “different learning”.) Jesus got to cut the angelfood cake-with-sprinkles, and choose a helper to dish it out onto paper plates with cartoons of Jesus Risen on them, while his teacher poured apple juice into dixie cups with jokes on them.

The boy did feel popular, with everyone smiling and telling the dixie-cup jokes; he was the cause of this party. And Ms. Steffa winked when she put the ice-pack in his sock and set it over the top of his bare foot — no one ever got to go barefoot in church.

Except for Belle, who’d looked so apologetic that he just knew it wasn’t on purpose, his big day was progressing all right, even well. Besides, she was barely six, had slammed the door pretty timidly.

“Hey Jesus,” asked the ten-year-old, “What did the acolyte say to the candle flame?”

Jesus grinned and shrugged.

“That’s s’nuff.”

Nonsensical, that dixie-cup. Jesus forced a laugh. He picked up sprinkles by squashing them among the sticky tines of the plastic fork.

The three most popular kids in class — Jason, and two girls with shiny bobbed hair, both named Monica — descended on Jesus when Ms. Steffa took her morning “potty break”. Others in the class massed round the cake to sugar-binge.

“Jesus, hey,” said Jason. “Oh — I mean, hey, Jesus. You've got cake on your tie.”

Jesus unclipped his tie to study while the trio laughed.

“Joke’s on me,” he said amicably, then set his tie on his plate.

The trio stepped back, motioned for Jesus to follow. They lured him out of his seat and through a folding canvas room divider to an adjacent classroom, which was dark, the blinds drawn on the window, the door locked from inside. A Monica closed the room divider.

“I want you to put this in that, Jesus,” the spikey red-head said, holding a paperclip in front of his penlight before swinging the beam to showcase an electrical outlet.

The birthday boy sensed something was off, about the request. Keeping his vow suddenly took on a bit of weight. If he did what they wanted he might get in trouble; if he didn’t do it he’d ruin his integrity.

Running his penlight on the floor, Jason found a bitten-up (no. 2) pencil; he bent open the metal clip and stuck one end in the eraser. “*Now* it’s ready.”

“We dare you,” the girls chimed as one.

“Jesus, the graphite will protect you,” Jason insisted; “it’s an insulator.”

“Will it, really?”

The girls nodded as if they believed so.

Next door, someone put on a disc of Bible songs.

With his toe smarting again, Jesus limped over to the adorned pencil dare. He examined it, thinking of it and spinning the hexagon, the crooked clip glinting in the light of Jason’s beam. “Promise you won’t tell anyone? I don’t want to get in trouble.”

The three of them promised.

“Okay,” said Jesus. He and the others huddled round the outlet solemnly.

“Do it do it do it,” the girls chanted, their bodies moving like conjoined twins, in the shadows.

The boy remembered how he tore up a chapter of science homework (on electricity and conduits) last winter, and then lied to that teacher about having completed the assignments. He'd done it to catch the snobby class ace, who always managed to stay a chapter or two ahead —

“Do it!”

And then Jesus did. A hot yellow-white arc sizzled into the air, trailing like a sparkler at night — some stray jaggedy sparks jumped clear across the room. In real-time the show lasted a split-second, but the birthday boy saw it in slow-motion, the blips of light flying so fantastic —.

The paperclip twirled up out of the eraser and fused itself to the metal outlet plate. His body electric, Jesus let go the pencil.

Next door, the disc stopped.

Muffled scolding and questions from Ms. Steffa until she yanked open the room divider. Her wrinkly hands shook on the canvas and her face drew together in the middle like it had a drawstring.

“What are you all doing?” she said.

Jason flicked the penlight.

Ms. Steffa strode into the room, a silhouette, found the light switch. She sniffed the air, scrutinized the spittle-like burns on the tile beneath her feet. “What’s going on in here?” she demanded. “What’s that burnt metal smell from? Who did these *marks* on our nice floor?”

By now the remainder of the Sunday school class had filed in behind the teacher, curious, accusatory.

A Monica said immediately, “The birthday boy did it.”

To which the other Monica dropped her jaw and turned her head to check out Jason, who shrugged; she cupped a palm over her mouth.

“Oh, did he?”

“Yes.”

Jesus closed his eyes.

“How did he,” probed Ms. Steffa.

His stomach frozen at half-frog, the Jason said, “There was a pencil on the floor, and the paperclip was pushed into it, and the graphite worked as a ground. He stuck the clip in the socket.”

Catching a breath, the teacher rushed to Jesus and grabbed his small hands, checked them for burns, ran her fingers over the boy’s toothpaste-crusty crown. For a moment she breathed sharply, studying the clip fused to the outlet plate.

“Do you know what this is?” she asked, not of the boy, or the other children, but of the dimpled pencil. “The graphite in here is a conductor!, of electricity.”

At last she faced her class. “Do you all know what a conductor is? It’s the wood that insulated you, Jesus, the wood and the rubber eraser. The wood saved you from getting electrocuted. Now thank Jesus this pencil wasn’t mechanical.”

The boy did thank Jesus, and looked with fear-of-the-almost at Jason and the Monicas, who averted their eyes. Subdued, afraid, they trailed the others into the other room.

The teacher remained in the room with Jesus. “Why would you do this?”

Jesus replied, “They wanted me to.”

“What kind of answer is that? Would you throw yourself off a cliff if everyone wanted you to?”

The boy remembered a story about *a solitary house that was scheduled to be demolished... the owner invited everyone in the neighborhood for an art day. What fun! They painted the clapboards with doodles and spatters, signatures and caricatures... Then the owner of the house received a phone call. Oh, no! He had to keep his house! His friends from the neighborhood left, then... Alone, the owner rented ladder and scaffolding, bought the brushes and plain boring paint to whitewash the graffiti.*

“I think we need to find your parents. I think we should tell them what you did,” said the Sunday school teacher.

She collected his loafer and dress-sock with the ice-pack, closed the divider to the dark classroom, took Jesus by the hand.

With a passive nod, Jesus allowed himself to be led down the corridor to the narthex. He forgot to smile, cringing when he limped, numb while considering his lesson, in science. No one went barefoot in church. Besides, the tiles were clean and cool and he wanted to please his teacher by keeping stride.

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James Beach

“DeadCity”

UPRIGHT on her knees, new mobile phone headset freeing her hands, Sheila yanks out a patch of prickly weeds growing beneath her rhubarb stalks. She asks her son, “Why would you want to move there?”

“It’s ultra-liberal,” answers Erin, from an apartment in a neighboring exurb. He packs cups and flatware into boxes; a stretch of phone-cord trails behind; he’s careful to keep it clear of the filter-full ashtray perched on a box near the open front door. “It’s got a very large gay population.”

“Gay population?” she asks, and stands, brushing her gloved palms against her jeans to unpucker the earth-damp knee marks.

“They accept me.”

“Why would you be seeking a life with the gays? I can’t imagine,” says Sheila. She removes a gardening glove to scratch where a mosquito bit her neck. She lets go the other glove, frowns at the dirty spade. “Does this mean you’re Aaron again?”

“I’ve always been Erin,” Erin says smugly.

“I have trouble thinking of you as anything but Aaron.”

“I’m still Erin. Legally becoming E-R-I-N.”

“You know I’m not set on you having grandkids; your brother’s giving me more than I can handle already,” Sheila clarifies, stepping into the shade of the porch to sit on the chaise lounge. While crossing her legs she spies a cigarette filter

among the woodchip mulch, and she reaches out a toe to grind it out of sight. “I found a ciggy butt, near the porch. I wish you’d stop smoking those, Aaron. It nearly proves you hate yourself.”

“I don’t want kids,” Erin continues, lighting one.

The bark of hydraulic brakes outside the apartment causes him alarm; he picks up a compact to apply more powder to his upper lip. “One birth defect per family is more than enough.”

In the mid-morning heat, Sheila adjusts her floppy gardening hat and leans toward her iced tea, which sits in a pool of condensation on a pebbled-glass-top table. “How many times have I told you that you and your brother are as normal as anybody? You were both beautiful babies.”

“Mother, just stop.”

“Why? Why, Aaron? Is this because of that time he tied you to the bedposts—”

“I’m talking about *me*,” says Erin, disseminating a plume of smoke as the first of the stocky moving men arrives. Stooping to conceal his height, he points at the stack of boxes by the front door. When the mover slides the stack of boxes onto the dolly, the ashtray bounces onto the vinyl floor; Erin turns red beneath his heavy cosmetics. “My body’s all wrong for my brain, I’m afraid.”

“You’re afraid. We’re all afraid, aren’t we?”

“No, I meant... you’re quick to twist my words! The movers are here, Mother. I need to cut you loose.”

“You’re absolutely normal,” says Sheila wearily. “I gave birth to you. After all the trouble your brother gave me, his shoulders getting struck like that... you were the easy one. Twenty years later, you turn out to be the problem child, and your brother’s a dream. How ironic. Oh, Aaron, I’ve got a *pimple* over this.”

After a short cough, Erin asserts, “Sheila, I’m not a child. I’m a twenty-year-*new* woman.”

“Aaron, sweetie. You don’t know the first thing about being a woman. It’s not about high heels and matching your jewelry to your outfits, choosing the right perfume. Some of the things I’ve done, let’s just say I’ve fought tooth and nail for my position in this community — now, suddenly, you’re moving away and claiming the title for yourself?”

“Should I be flattered or mortified, I ask your brother. He says mortified. I don’t know what to think. So you’re not the most brutish man on the planet — so? The

world needs gentlemen... I'm driving my mind silly here, Aaron. Why in the world would you want to cut off your nose to spite your face?"

"I'm not doing a thing to my nose."

A hummingbird hovers near the near-empty feeder, darts away.

"I could've put a stop to your costuming," Sheila tells her son. "Your father and I decided it was a phase, your getting into my cocktail dresses... we didn't know what to do. I told your father to be strict with you. He didn't have it in him."

Erin scoffs, "Dad never taught me a thing. He was there, then he died, I barely remember him."

"That's maybe the trouble. I was your role model."

"You encouraged me!"

"All children play dress-up. The smart ones anyway! It's fantasyland. Then they grow up and lead normal lives — you don't see too many adults trying to look like a Lion King or a Jedi Knight, or a Cinderella, do you. It's perverse. Playing Princess, at your age!" Sheila finds a jug of sugar water in the porch, fills the hummingbird feeder. "My goodness these birds drink."

"I am seeing a therapist, you know. She's helping me to get in touch, with my inner female."

"Intelligent men might call that inner female an 'anima,' sweetie. It's quite a common thing."

"Jung again. Trash! Outdated pop-psych puke. I hate him."

"He studied under Freud. I think he knew a little something about people."

"That was like, a hundred years ago."

"Barely older than your mother, hm?"

"Stop. We're so far advanced beyond that in our culture now. Everything is different."

"Says who, the talk show hosts?"

"My *therapist*."

"Oh, *her*. Aaron, I have to say, your therapist sounds like a man-hater."

“A man-hater.”

Sheila lowers her voice, states, “A ball-crusher, a bull dyke,” then speaks with the same high-pitched warble as before, “She’s got psychological problems, dear. She’s Lorena Bobbitt but with a high I.Q. She’s not the type of girl you should be getting close with.”

“Mother, you’re sick.”

“Oh, another ciggy butt! We’ll have to find you an urn.”

Two movers enter the apartment. Erin points at the kitchen table, watches as the guys assess then, after exchanging a nod, each lift a side so as to keep the top level. At the door they flip the piece sideways and maneuver quickly and soundlessly outdoors.

Erin adds, “She’s helping me see that I’ve been largely unhappy because of my penis—”

“—that’s preposterous. Because of your... sex.”

“And that I don’t fit in with other males of my age.”

“You certainly won’t now, no. Not with those falsies,” Sheila says, starting to weed a patch of marigolds. “People are starting to talk, sweetheart. You were out shopping, at the mall, the grocery store? Last week I told one of my girlfriends that you were a rock’n’roller, like that man with the breasts, Marilyn Manson.”

“That’s a publicity stunt.”

“I don’t know, dear. They certainly look real on the ’net.”

“*You* have Internet?”

“When you were a little boy you acted like a male. Being tough, getting into scuffles, showing off.” A laugh. “That thing you always did, in the pool, pulling your scrotum up over your—”

“God! Mother!”

“I remember specifically one evening, when I drove into the drive, and five of you were fighting in the front yard, your brother was there too, and you and he beat up the Kennelly boys, little Marvin especially, because of some remark he made about whose mother was most ‘doable.’”

“I remember that. You made us take ballet lessons for a whole year as punishment.”

“Then the costuming began.”

Erin sighs and bends over to retrieve the ashtray from the kitchen floor. He wraps it in newsprint and packs it into the nearest open box. “This is embarrassing.”

“And you never asked for girly things at Christmastime. Always with the trucks, the beebie guns, the rocketships—”

“That's all stereotype! Girls can and *do* play with boy toys. And back then I didn't know what I wanted.”

“I doubt you know what you want *now*,” says Sheila. “Why not hold off, for awhile? Go back and get your degree, in cosmetology? Paint *other* people, for an income. Get into movies, something glam.”

“*Glam?* No.”

“Plastic surgery then. I know a woman who's a plastic surgeon. I know it's not the same — she does *reconstructive* surgery, not *deconstructive* — but I'm sure she'd give you an informational interview, if that's really what you're interested in, career-wise.”

“Reconstructive? No.”

“Are you sure, Aaron? Are you sure you don't want to help *other* people feel more confident?”

“What I really want is a new...” he lets his voice trail off, swallows what he wanted to say, as the moving men enter again, for the chairs. “I want a new city.”

Sheila sets the outside faucet on low, drops the hose on the nearest stunted ginko tree. “I hear where you're moving is a *dead city*.”

Finding stray hard-back romance novels in the drawer of an end-table, the son gapes. He shakes loose the stretched phone cord from behind the piece of furniture. Startled then repulsed at the image of two male gymnasts making out on one of the covers, Erin tosses that book in the trash. “What's that supposed to mean, a 'dead city'? What are you saying?”

“That there aren't enough jobs available, and that more people are leaving it than are moving in, is all. That it's flat.”

“It's *flat*. Another insult?” Erin notices the first mover stepping up on the threshold, looking amused beneath his steely stance, as if he's been eavesdropping, and rushes to the front door to slam it in his face. “Throw more stink on my plans, why don't you, *Sheila-dear*.”

As the movers peer through the kitchen windows, mouthing “hello?” and knocking, Erin trembles and pulls the cord as far as it will go, hides barely out of their sight. “Go ahead and do it, make me see that I’m up to my neck, that making waves will drown me faster than anything.”

Despite the intense sun Sheila shivers, rubs goose-pimples from her bare arms. The woman from two doors down is walking her newly-clipped Lab on the boulevard; it gingerly lifts a leg at the fire hydrant, baring the bald pink scar, exposing its sudden lack.

Dismayed, apologetic, she says, “Waiting is awful, I know! Before long life catches up, though, and lots of things turn out fine. Really. You should see my rhubarb, Aaron. The plants are just natural and gorgeous.”

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James Beach

“Kindness Kills”

SCOWLING, Mona drank her Harvey Wallbanger. Compassionate teasing suited geniuses; she thought they all enjoyed a bit of acrimony. She tugged her thin lips into a grimace. “Darling ’kraut,” she said, to Thomas her ex.

“Why do you *insist* on that term?” Thomas said.

“Insist,” said Mona.

“That term is insulting, Desdemona.”

The barstool wobbled and squeaked as Mona swiveled to face him. Suspicion that the world thrived less on groveling than gray matter kept Mona in pursuit of her own better, now that she had a baccalaureate — she knew Thom would ante up and emerge from his master's thesis-crazy rutting to play, especially today, on his birthday.

She cooed: “You're self-conscious about your German. I apologize, for poking fun.”

“Declined.”

“You're declining my apology?”

“If you were male,” said Thom, “this scene would be heading in a combative direction.”

“I'll bet,” said Mona. The inference was a specious one. She put her knees together, set a pout, and shimmied, braless under her vee-neck, pointy teats in synch.

Thom clapped. “Buy me another, baby?”

She quit her burlesque. “Lush.”

“Look who's talking?”

The graduate assessed her drink, then assessed his. “One, Thomas. I've had *one*. What is that, your third? Plus those Jagey shots. A few is too many, even on your birthday. I'm telling you this because I want you to live a long happy life and be my ex always, until we die.”

Thom chugged his brown ale, belched. “You want this” — he pointed back and forth between them, palms up— “for your whole life?”

“Just mind your mind? please?”

“My 100 billion neurons can stand to lose a few.” An academic stoney glaze, meant for future professorship and eventual tenure, worked into his face. “There's a school of thought, that each living human being constitutes one cell of every body's brain. Ever hear that one?”

“No. And your math—”

“Never mind the math. Okay, have it your way... Insects! An entomological correlation.”

“A correlation between the number of insects and the number of cells in each human brain.”

“Beetles, say. Say, a million beetles to each brain cell.”

“Each brain would be like a gajillion beetles.”

“What is that,” said Thom; scribbling circles on a napkin, he arrived at, “eighteen zeros (give or take a zero). A quadrillion.”

“A quadrillion beetles.”

“A quadrillion beetles. Maybe not that many. The total estimated number of insects on Earth, as of this decade, is around one quadrillion. About half of them are beetles. (Did you know that?) So: yes, that makes a million *bugs* per every one of your brain cells (give or take a bug). That seems like too many. If I factor the number of cells for the entire human body...”

“Thomas... Your far-out theories are too far out. ”

“Too far out. I like that.”

“How are you going to get approval on any thesis topic that you've mentioned tonight. Or are you not serious! Having fun at my expense?”

“You buy the Beatles,” said Thom in a cockney accent.

“The band, The Beatles? What’s that count.”

Thom, off-key, softly sang, “*Your inside is out and your outside is in, your outside is in and your inside is out, so come on, come on... everybody’s got something to hide’...*”

Joining in, on-key, “Except for you... and your (alcoholic) monkey.”

“You see, Des.”

“I know. Life is much more complex than you or I or anyone can see, with the five senses. We only know what we think we know, not what we need to know.”

“Right. Life *extends...*” and here Thom extended his arms, consciously blind to nearly thwacking the old sot on the stool beside him in the face.

The sot expelled half of the boozy air from his lungs, turned his greasy dandruffy head to stare at the out-of-place book-educated retro-fashioned chatter-brained bohemian-yuppie couple. He grumbled, excreted, “Damn Gownies.”

Thom leaned in close to Mona. “Did he just say something to us?” he asked, using a thumb to point over his shoulder, eyes peripherally roving.

Mona gave one of her oblivious squints.

Thom spun to face his neighbor, who bristled on his stool. He said, still in his Cockney, “People can often hear when they’re getting eyeballed for death.”

The old sot was more than startled. “Yo’ nearly thwacked me, Gownie!”

“Thwacked you.”

“Thwacked me!”

“What, a minute ago? With my arm?”

“No, with yo’ damn toes movin’ all over. Of course yo’ arm!”

“So sorry. *Townie*.”

“’s long as yo’s sorry,” said the sot.

Thom spun back to face Mona. “Where was I.”

“What did you just call him? A Townie?”

“A Townie. We’re the Gownies, they’re the Townies. It’s a war. A passive cohabitation in this small town, but it’s a war. To groove on my new math: We’re the beetles; they’re all the other bugs.”

Mona shrugged, squinted, made a cooing-type face. A publically-celebrated birthday usually brought trouble, in her view. Sometimes that sense of entitlement bubbled up in people on their birthdays, wrecked a sardonic havock on everyone trying to celebrate, innocent bystanders. Even with people trying to be kind, saying nice things, listening really well, giving gifts; all of that usually backfired, from her experience the gifts were wrong and the nice was insincere, someone would get into a fight or start to cry or whine, often the birthday baby. A day for mothers, should be, rather than for the baby. Because of this, and more, she spent her birthdays alone, indoors, with an armful of library books, a clutch of black-’n’-white movies, a basket of teas, a joint.

Thom was saying, “Alcohol kills neurons. We all know this, right? Imagine the alcoholic who goes through withdrawal and hallucinates umm, sees his skin *teeming* with insects. How about if all the insects that he sees are the ghosts of a correlating number of cells he lost in the brain. Huh? See it yet? We criminalize alcohol again. Make the beetles happy.”

“Prohibition has a fairly small fanbase.”

“Would you prefer if we all smoked dope? Dope kills zero brain cells. A lot of people support dope.”

“Dope, in what sense,” said Mona.

“Dope in the sticky sense.”

“No more bugs. I don’t see it. Who could jump on that bandwagon? (Maybe if the cute butterflies...)”

Onscreen, in triplicate from heavily-pixelated televisions suspended over the varnished split-log bar, a young woman was preening naked behind opaque digital smudges; the **Nudist Art/Design TroupeExtroVersion**, as the sluglines proclaimed, was **A Prestigious Prep School's Political Nightmare**, claiming national celebrity.

“Look!” exclaimed Mona, pointing at the nearest screen. “Wilma! — on the left? — Wilma!”

“Bacchanal,” joked Thom at first sight of the avant-garde troupe. “La petite enfants.”

“Would you turn the sound up please?” said Mona to the bartender.

Behind the bar the wonky-eyed ’tender with a monstrous remote cranked up the volume of the televisions. Yet by then Wilma and her nudie art troupe were obliterated by a veneered model-journalist mawing over movie stars who meet on-set and became engaged.

“Wow,” said Mona.

Admitted Thom, “What.”

“Are you deaf? blind? We missed it. Wilma’s gone. Grown up. A *nudist* now apparently. I babysat her, for years! I want to know! I need to know! what she had to say!”

Wagging his tongue, Thom diverted the passive-aggressive flow of her angst.

“What’s that?”

With the television speakers blaring Hollywood gossip, several patrons found their way to the bar. They nudged Thom and Mona together with their sudden sloppy heavy presence, and Thom scooted his stool nearer his ex .

“Forget it,” he slurred.

“Oh, no. Tell me.”

“A puff piece! You’re going kook over a *puff* piece starring a girl you maybe once babysat.”

“I did so babysit that girl.”

“Or her clone.”

“That was her.”

“How do you know? Those type of females — they’re a buck a dozen. Candy bunnies free at Easter. Game show hosts give them away as parting gifts! Nothing like you.”

“Why are you so derisive.”

“Oh, am I? I thought I was paying *you* a compliment.”

Thom had a goofy new plaid shirt on, for his birthday, probably sent from his Midwestern parents; otherwise Mona would leave. For all of her progressiveness, she had a sentimental streak. Yet enough was always enough. The place was a “Townie” dive. Her ex was enough like his old self today to turn her off. She sucked the bottom of her drink through the straw, fast.

Meanwhile Thomas got his face into a sultry look.

“Oh, no,” she said again.

“You know your fertile scent, the smell of *you*, drives me wild.”

“This barstool is being mean to me,” whined the graduate, (knowing that her dabs of patchouli oil, rather than the “odor of her womanly depths,” as she liked to call it, was the cause of his attraction), beetling her ass back on her stool so it squeaked, wobbled.

“That cruel stool!”

She laughed, tipsy. “I bet you can kill the cruel in this stool, with your infinite kindness.”

Thom expelled another belch, finished his dark ale, then ushered Mona off her perch and flipped the stool upside-down. After a quick assessment he dusted off his hands and leaned into the bar.

“Another round,” he said to the ’tender, adding: “and a flathead, if you’ve got one.”

After Thom got his screwdriver and began screwing Mona made (sexual, naive smiley) faces at the 'tender while he freshened her drink.

“That should about do 'er,” Thom said. He flipped the stool upright and patted the leather, enticing her to sit. “All she needed was a little TLC.”

Mona leaned her hip against the bar, swirling the cocktail with a striped straw. That the seat would be dirty and sticky from the skuzzy floor, that it would soil her light-color slacks, seemed to elude Thom. Or maybe no? On purpose, his blindspot?

“TLC,” she sing-sang. “What are you, a nurse?”

“She needed a few turns, yeah, yeah.”

“But why give an inanimate object a female gender?”

This was not a question; rather, her challenge to him would alter the course of the night.

Thom sat on his stool and told her with a glance that anything requiring perpetual- or high-maintenance had a female persona, from his perspective. Then he winked and nudged her and rubbed, come-hither, the studded sides of the repaired stool.

“Oh, no.”

Thom hardened, the familiar antagonism between them surfacing, that destructive heat. “So,” he said, in forced monotone, “we're not going to bed together tonight.”

“What gave you the idea that we would.”

“We *always* might. It's my birthday. You were flirting.”

Mona childishly and quietly ranted, sort of sang and quipped, “You say it's your birthday? If I had any guts I'd gift you with heaps, stinking *heaps*, of sauerkraut. That's my brand of TLC!”

“Once again with that term ('kraut), I'm goin' solo, Des.”

“I could leave you alone on your birthday.”

“Sure you could.”

Mona set her third world bag on the stool, dug for quarters for the parking meter, considering; her cocked elbow sent the Harvey Wallbanger scuttling over the bar

onto the saltillo-tiled floor. The shatterproof glass shattered anyway. A few patrons, amused, quit television long enough to give Mona some applause.

Thomas said, “Amateur!”

Mona said, “Lush, that’s a nillion,” and left him.

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James Beach

“Catch”

This was years ago; this story fragments.

PERCHED atop his stuffed suitcase, drizzle glossing his face, Marvin Kennelly waited. An irregular leather coat over hoodie kept all but his fingers, jeans-clad thighs and tops of his holey canvas shoes dry or at least barely damp. Worried if he had enough traveler's checks for the week, he also considered the concept Love.

He waited curbside at La Salle and Van Buren. The desolate streets, steam from manhole covers epitomized the edgy noir of his film appreciation class. It was a flippy distinction. When a ped passed he watched the way his breath hung, like smoke, visible a moment before disseminating. Perhaps displaced Marv was the hoodlum.

His host’s vehicle, arriving, looked more familiar than did the driver — an economical new hatchback, color of blue common to Gregg-ruled notebooks. When the driver turned his way he wondered if Jack Catch had sent a pal to fetch him. In any case, Marvin bared his teeth in greeting. Jack unrolled the window, his cagey energy emanating.

“I was afraid you might d-d-ditch out on me,” stuttered the coed, anxious.

Jack put on a taut grin, twisted up the volume and said on a beat between the bridge and refrain: “Welcome.”

They sped through slick shiny streets, scored by snappy electronica. Marvin took in the rusty iron grilling and girders of the city, and the driver, who kept his eyes mostly on the road. Jack wore short hair, Eddie Munster-style; his dark denim pants, stiff and creased, were belted over a shirt the color of schoolhouse brick, the long pointy edges of his collar were tucked artily under a pricey suede jacket lightly spotted by rain. His feet were in shadow, but he'd be in black leather boots, polished almost to patent.

Marv considered his own clothes, his blah physique; this vacation was in another league, somewhere new, in flux between cool and hot, casual and exclusive.

After many wet blocks Jack's facial features congealed and were again familiar: black-edged crystal blue eyes rimmed by long lashes, fair skin, upturned nose, teeth gleaming inside reflectively slack lips. Marvin relaxed some; Jack was young yet, and appeared every bit the well-put-together post-grunge beatnik-revival type. In contrast sat Marvin, the introspective shoegazing college sophomore. He guessed his grunge attire, scraggly sideburns, were a compliment maybe, to the mod, polished Jack. And yet...

Their paths had crossed by chance that night — Jack'd been passing through town on a tour across the Midwest, careening from Chicago to Minneapolis, Madison and Milwaukee, and back again to “Shy Town”; Marvin's chancing upon the party was pure luck, hearing about the soiree through a peer in film class; happenstance-turned-fate. He felt his own grin beginning to tighten the lower half of his face, echoing Jack's.

Jack switched gears and sped through a yellow stoplight. The entrancing way his wrist, thin and pale on the stick-shift... Marvin spaced out, erased reality somehow, then came to, as Jack was speaking: “...or we could-could-could still make the Erasure Huddle. All ages show. Are you hungry? I've got hippie groceries at home.”

“I could eat.”

“Food, then.”

They were in some sort of Ukrainian village, where letters crudely painted on glass and lintel encrypted whatever waited indoors. Jack pointed out places as he drove. Marvin wondered about the all-ages show; being twenty-one, many of his friends back at BellinghamUniversity were younger.

Jack drove by where “Flatliners” was filmed — LoyolaUniversity — and then past the building that had been home to “Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer” on celluloid. The drizzle kept on; the entire city was wet with it. Instead of keeping a

mental map Marvin found himself imagining what Jack's apartment would be like, how the rain might sound as it patted the roof and windows.

a life fitted together by the hero in hindsight, in therapy, in journals, via

JACK Catch lived in a squat cinderblock building on the second floor. Stuffed suitcase and backpack strained their puny party-boy muscles as they heaved them up the steep and wide inside stairwell; on the phone Jack had instructed him to "pack heavily". Where he would wear crotch-hugging corduroys, elephant-toe bell-bottoms, a thriftstore silk jacket, or steel-tipped bowling shoes, he had no clue but in the rush to meet Baybee's dad for the drive he'd crammed half his dorm wardrobe into that luggage. Also a few textbooks, some dubbed bootleg cassettes, stamped envelopes and stationery to write Baybee and, if time, if the mood struck, if he felt homesick, his parents.

"Do you like my loft?"

"Yes."

"It's very hippie."

Jack's place was earthy: fresh bamboo floors gleamed under dimmed vintage track-lights, scarce with mod 'sixties-style furniture, heavy with a veritable botanical garden of foliage. Three-foot speakers and stereo system stood near a wide fireplace nearly bricked-over with bookshelves. The tall plaster walls shone bare except for an oblong hand-stitched sign that apologized: GOD BLESS THIS MESS! Even the ashtrays looked scrubbed with bleach. Several narrow windows with dropshades drawn faced out of the east wall. Marvin lifted the nearest one partway and saw Jack's hatchback, wheels turned away from the curb, alone on the sidewalk.

"This is the parlor," he said as he carried his suitcase through the tiny foyer past wet- and cold-weather coats and hats dangling from oversized brass hooks. He placed the luggage near a closed door, continued down the hall. "And back here, our kitchen."

Marvin followed him into a time-warp of a kitchen with a blue-and-cream tile floor. The colossal free-standing sink and heavy chopping block dwarfed the vintage icebox. A rack for wet dishes stood near the sink, under which was a chipped canary-yellow bowl of brown Os and Xs. The steel dining table, sans chairs, sat beneath a rack of butchering utensils. A metal fruit basket holding ripe tomatoes hung above a backdoor.

While insisting the kitschy stenciling near the ten-foot ceiling was painted by a previous occupant, Jack showed Marvin the sunporch — apparently what the

GOD BLESS THIS MESS! embroidery was excusing. Black bags of trash, busted wicker, assorted cleaning implements and discarded clothing were strewn ankle-deep across the floor, except for a few cleared step-holes to the fire-escape.

“See, you were wrong,” Jack quipped. “I’m not perfect.”

At his guest’s unconcealed disgust, he added, “Izzy’s got to clear this out when the weather gets warmer.”

“Izzy... your cat?”

“My roommate. Izzy’s my roommate. She’s kind of not home tonight. Sasha’s my micro-cat! Here, puss-puss.”

An off-white shorthair (matching the decor?) sashayed into the kitchen and centered itself on a blue tile.

Jack stooped to tickle its chin. “He’s six-months-old today — well, close enough. He’s sure getting randy.”

“Is today your half-birthday, kitty-cat?” Marvin asked the petite pet.

“Last month Izzy and I brought him home from a K.-Party.”

“K., the letter K.?”

“As in, special K.”

“The cereal?”

“The animal tranq. Wow, we need to get you educated. Following? At this drug party there was a cover fee, and cover fee for the party was, we had to bring something that started with the letter K., and someone brought this kitty.”

“Next time, you could bring me.”

“K-k-k-k-k-k... Kennelly.”

“Huh. What did you bring to the party?”

“Ketchup.”

“Catsup!”

“We splattered the bathroom, all ‘Psycho’.”

art. Filmstrips, a former life.

NEXT, Jack showed Marv the bathroom, pointing out its claw-foot tub with a bit of reverence. He said later they could share a bath. His bedroom, directly across the corridor, contained a futon mattress, television, and blue milk-crate shelves neatly scarce with clothes. He set Marvin's suitcase against the wall, led his guest to the parlor.

"What's this door?"

"That's Izzy's room."

"Oh, right. Your roomie."

Jack smiled then, healthy smile glistening. "Hi," he said, implying that he was glad for company. After a quick kiss he said, "Be right back," and departed to the kitchen.

To pass the time, out of curiosity, Marv flipped through a pile of CDs: This Mortal Coil, Ultra Vivid Scene, Dead Can Dance, Blue Oyster Cult, My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult. He wondered what he'd heard playing in the hatchback. The music remained a marked change from his usual — Grateful Dead, The Dead, Phish, Blues Traveler, the imitators — and thus reverberated new emotions: wow!, futuristic, sought-after, unpredictable, nervous, spacey, happy yet restricted somehow from that joy.

Jack returned with two dark-rum-colas and a small china plate holding a slice of key lime pie. "I've been playing quite the housewife," he said, eschewing irony, handing him the plate and beverage. "This is hippie pie — all natural, made from scratch, honey — I used honey, not sugar."

"Wow. All right."

"And I took out all the books and dusted them when I dusted the shelves."

"This pie is good."

Jack put in an ambient disc, sat on the couch. He patted the dull-plush of the loveseat cushion. Marvin sat and ate pie bites. Meanwhile Jack parted plant fronds and found a sea-blue hand-blown glass in the shape of a whale. Already loaded in its blowhole, the bong gave him two hits from a forked tail and he packed a bud for his guest while he held smoke. While exhaling: "Purple pot! Keep it tipped so you don't suck water."

The bong gurgled as Marv inhaled. He coughed as he exhaled. When he recovered he said, "Is Purple Pot a nickname, for me? Something gay? A joke?"

Jack was shifty, amused or annoyed, alternately. “It’s got purple hairs in it,” he explained.

“Oh, I see,” Marvin said, feeling the buzz lift him quickly into that edgy state of paranoia. He quit eating the pie... jack might’ve put something noxious in. same with the dark rum. no need for another chemical right now... and he keeps taking hits: cocktail, whale’s tail, cocktail and the whale’s tail. why is this awkward? is he queer? how queer am i? cock, tail and whales’ tails. he’s not talking, i’m not talking. we’ve shut up for minutes.

“That’s about enough.”

The coed jumped, nearly coating the couch with meringue. Jack was busy nestling the glass whale back among the potted plants, while Marv set the plate on the floor next to his full beverage.

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh just fine,” Jack said, strangely, extending his vowels, morphing into an apparition, two-dimensional, multi-dimensional.

Marvin spooked. He closed his eyes for a moment, and squelched that fear by visualizing going to bed together. A holographic movie played in his head: of meeting JACK at that neighboring college party: MARVIN enters the hall to the party’s only bath, overhears Jack tell a friend: “*I want that one*” —. Now the toll for crossing the threshold to the bath is: a French kiss. This leads to an escort into the bath by Jack, a fervent piss by Marvin, more kissing, a playful stroke from Jack. Knocking, soon, at the door. They unlock the door, pull the shower curtain, strip naked and then f., quietly; nobody peeks behind the curtain that Marvin sees before he’s lost himself in the bonding, the new sweet pain.

“Sleeping? Am I that dull?”

Marvin opened his eyes to see Jack interested in him. He experienced a surge of something, lust maybe, beneath the fear. oh, i’m tense. i need to relax. no can’t. i need to get up and move, wash up after my trip. no can’t. could’ve taken the trip to south texas with the people from school, to hike and camp. bet they’re having fun. ouch my heart is beating, a drum-machine. was the dope laced, then? might be an attack.

“I’m really-really nervous,” the coed eventually said, his voice enervated, crackly, nonetheless a lilt to his slight mocking, a truth to his confession. “I’ve never, like, dated a guy, before. You were my first, guy sex, ever, for reals, at that party. You can believe that.”

Jack’s face sank, his vibe went covert. He turned away.

Another hologram, in Marvin's mind: BAYBEE breaks the silence by exhaling a blast of clove smoke and declaring, "Now that is the train." An internal splayed mess of emotions, MARVIN breathes in the icy early Spring air as the train glides to a halt. Doors slide open and a CONDUCTOR emerges to help lift up luggage and say "this step is a doozey!" Marvin climbs aboard and turns back to wave at Baybee. No tears fall yet it seems some massive emotive moment. After that he half-expects her to rush the train and thrust a fistful of flowers in his face, the effect of four-score decades of radical feminism gaining momentum. (She has a crush on him.) "You can always stay at my parents' house, if it gets crazy, bi-boy," says Baybee, statuesque with her arms at her sides, feet rooted to the slush above her crushed clove, face a mask of worry and hope. Marvin forces a smile, swallows. "Bi, Baybee," he says. She returns the grin; "What's 'bisexual' about, with you?" "Being with anyone pretty," he tells her, imitating what he recalls of Jack and his flippant philosophy. Whistle-tones signal the train's departure. Baybee regains her usual somber, slyly bemused self. Marvin finds a seat by the window opposite Baybee, so he can watch her fade. On the platform her raggedy hair fans round her head at the moving of the train. Replay. Edit. Replay.

Then a different filmstrip running: that of Baybee's nephew, IAN, slouching on one end of the couch, smooth beneath his tank-top, a lift to the crotch of his sweats. He removes his brand-new Athletics cap and sets it in his lap. A glance then, finally, toward the intrigued MARVIN, who queerly shies away. (How unlike that feeling he had while romancing Baybee, that time they'd tried screwing, and she bled, made a stain on the sheets. No apologies, not another mention, only drinks, more pot.) This nephew of hers, this boy Ian, this preteen kin, sparkles, sparks a flame of love; with a fool's grin, Marvin takes his leave, to breathe, fleeing to the bath, where he checks his face for bliss. Upon his return to the den, with Ian gone, the crazy coed brings a fist to his chest, palpitating. Replay.

At the sound of a fork falling to the bamboo, Marvin slipped out of the looped scenes in his head. He blinked at the soft light of the loft. As if space-landing on a foreign planet he noticed anew the lush plants everywhere; a hippie place, with hippie pie, with a hippie host. Did jack really live here? not his type of place. not for a munster, no, not at all! too sophisticated, him, for this, for me. and now i better check his driver's license. oh god, no! the poor sasha, poor micro-cat, eating that evil. pie!

"Sasha," said Marv. The cat stared at him a moment then resumed licking the lime rind; the man nudged it away with his foot. "No, no, kitty!"

"Would you relax?"

"Sorry — I'm stoned, nervous."

"Let's skip Erasure Huddle tonight and watch some," he said, then added, as if to tempt, "it's Mel Brooks week on cable."

The movie was “High Anxiety” and it had a calming effect, as did the flickering of the colors and patterns onscreen.

lifestyle, style of living — a mess, still

THEY watched the old tube bubble-screen with such intensity their eyes bulged — Jack’s galactic pupils pooled, large, unblinking. Marvin made the first move. The men made out, hands on old territory; Jack fumbled with Marvin’s money belt (worn because of the oversized and clunky buckle) with no interest whatever in his traveler’s checks. Flys unzipped with that voluptuous tearing sound; pants at the knees; boxers askew; shirts shed; more kissing, sucking, suckling; the big belt unbuckling at last. Clothes off, and Jack was up, out of the room.

The blood pulsed through Marv’s temples. He was hot so he didn’t cover up with the brocade spread he could feel bunched and scratchy on his bare back. “High Anxiety” still showed. The two-dimensional comedy, so intriguing less than an hour ago, now obnoxious and petty. He took a fortifying sip of cocktail to help gather his scattered wits.

Jack returned with a bottle of baby oil and shut the door behind him. His nude body, silhouetted against the movie, looked lubricated and magnificently skeletal. “Guess, guess, guess what I like to do with my prey,” he said.

playing, havoc, mayhem in the mind...

LATER Marv Kennelly awoke as if he never went to sleep, on his guest-side of the bed, away from the wall, chest pressed against Jack’s spine, fingers locked with his and clammy. Garish moonlight on his cheek, emitted from the gap between the shade and the sill. The coed stood, opened the shade and hunted for Baybee’s gifted pack of cloves, feeling groggy from Jack’s high-end pot. He needed a grounder.

Jack sat up on one elbow and watched him search. “In the mood for that Huddle, earthling? Quick-quick? I’m just about.”

“Now?”

“Why not?” Jack said while his eyes and teeth gleamed. With a flick of the spread, he revealed his enormous affection, arching his bony spine for emphasis. “After some of this, yes, yes.”

After some of his *this*, they ventured to the kitchen in a naked state. Jack put a tea kettle on the range. In the hall Marvin got the chills, went to the foyer and chose a trenchcoat missing buttons.

The cool bamboo against his toes and a draft under the front door reminded him that it was Spring Break but also late winter, the equinox, and he wrapped the coat by crossing his arms over his chest. Thoughts of Jack's chilly "mess" in the sunporch, for no obvious reason, reminded him of the K.-Party. His party story. The catsup, the ketchup, "splattered" or "spattered" or however, on the bathroom walls, all psycho.

"Do you have trash removal here in this district?"

"Yes, we have it," said Jack.

"All that garbage in your sunporch! I was thinking — stupid, I know. I'm stuck on why it's there."

"Did you say that story you wrote about me, and showed it to your friend?"

"To my friend Baybee? No, not even. Not yet. I'm just not getting the thread, of the story."

"What's the story."

"That's the question."

"Is it."

"Have you heard of a... but you know you have. It's in your music collection. It's in you..."

"What's *in* me."

"I'm... How many shy people live in ShyTown? How many shy people die... here, a year, in Shy... Town?"

The real shocker, yes, yes, came when Jack said, in a curious spate of spitting and finger-wagging, that the Eraser Huddle show would occur in his apartment.

"R-r-right here?" asked Marvin.

"It's happening just now," replied Jack.

The coed thought absurdly of Baybee, in her parents' rich-quiet suburb, her ragged hair moussed curtain-like while she read. Baybee claimed that all she knew (at eighteen!) was that each life path contorted and swayed and switch-

backed and double-hooked in what could only be dubbed “mystical orderliness”... so why not experiment, and see what develops? And what had? Friendship? A brief romance with her nephew Ian, on a visit, lonely, seeking to surrogate his absent dad...

The tea kettle announced itself ready. Ignoring incongruous shadows and vulgar shifting shapes in the high corners of the kitchen, Marv watched Jack, still nude, turn off the gas. Instead of readying mugs, the host stared at him in that sorrowful way of his. Marvin shivered and attempted one of his taut-grins, telling himself that Jack Catch cared, in his way.

Yet Izzy — and that is her, is it not, emerging from the back bedroom, all gloamy and slick and hopelessly sick with a pipe-joy simper — in fits fits her ghost in... then our antennae — jack, izzy; my antennae — a mass of assumption and wicked awareness, with a tardy blessing of tawdry killing-love, and gluttonous end-of-the-jar bliss... a grand experiment.

“Jack, I think I’m slipping into psychosis,” he said. says. yes, now in me, yet ouch and clumsy, only no; i’ve been hit, and hard! enough to erase the scene with baybee and the flowers and the train, hard! enough to erase my life; the lame lackluster years, the essays wrote, the charcoal depictions, the history learned... the black bags of rot, in the sunporch... who must we all be? i think about this: every stinking body has a given number of years left to live; maybe nearly as many as those already used up, maybe less, knowing, right, now, if i reflect, if we genuflect...

“Symbols on Labels”

SOPHOMORES Jeffrey and Jenniffer met and coupled, ostensibly over lust-love, each young and attractive, each with the aesthetic lumps of flesh in the best places on their symmetrical waif bones. Neither went much beyond the ostensible, in mind or heart, nor did either anticipate there being much else to learn about relating. In her name they rented a loft near campus, with plans to stay there until graduation and the wedding.

Aside from a similar body structure, their sole bond was the letter F: Jeffrey believed two wrongs made a right — he liked how she held his mislaid alpha character, while Jenniffer assumed two oddball statements better than one — she loved that he could commiserate. (Technically, Jeffrey’s mom and dad sculpted the spelling of his name after a song by The Pixies, Space I Believe In; Jenniffer’s letter-mess occurred on account of extended bouts of experimental birthing drugs slurring and confusing her mother’s pronunciation for the month surrounding the birth.) As can be imagined, each child was tested, tormented and teased more often than is usual, because of an odd birth-name. This pushed Jeffrey into extremist athleticism and Jenniffer into punk music and punk prose just following those few experimental years in junior high... In high school they each made their mistakes early and learned from them.

By the first year of college, each half of the couple was anxious to couple. Love at first (in-person) chat, was their story; the first part of their story. During the first semester they met twice. During the second semester Jeffrey shared with Jenniffer these lyrics, from "Space (I Believe in)":

*We needed something to move and fill up the space
we needed something this always is just the case
Jeffrey with one F, Jeffery took up his place space*

and his interpretations of the verses. During the third semester Jenniffer shared with Jeffrey poetry re why she loved having the double-F:

the first F belongs to the IF,
the second F belongs to the FER;
two Fs are better than none;
the extra F is flowery fun;
I can loan you my other F;

we had our first chat about the letter F;
I love you for needing my extra F.

That time shared, for nearly a year, engulfed them as a flood; they were drowning in love, that honeymoon phase when even foibles are endearing and the rest of the world matters less and less; that love seeped over onto most everyone else in their overlapping lives, bringing popularity and a long list of contacts for each of them, a list of footholds to help establish themselves in the Real World. Being young yet, each appreciated the contact list in a shallow and nonutilitarian way, like a candy dish of treats rather than a veritable arsenal against RW landslides... Anyway. What follows concerns that list.

“We said crescent moon and star,” Jeffrey said one night, retaining his casual personae, upon opening a packet of return address labels, ordered over the ’net. “These ones have rainbows.”

“Dumb automaton automation at factories,” retorted Jenniffer from the bedroom, head bent over psychology coursework.

Jeffrey stuck in the hall outside the bedroom, thumped the packet of labels against his palm, waited for his fiancée to look up from beneath the wispy rainbow-stripe strands of hair hiding her face. A trail of slush from his gym shoes melted down the hall to the front door. “Obviously, an error,” he said.

“So, okay; send them back.”

He stared helplessly into the bedroom, wondered at his dulled lust for the vixen, on their padded futon, clad in tight-fit sweater and denim hot pants. Today, her face — in her tone, her words, indirectly — she was shorn of her adolescence.

“Send them back? Our holiday cards go out this week,” he griped.

Jennifer quit studying to level her perturbed oval eyes on him. “No need to curse,” she said, defensively. “They’re only labels.”

“*Rainbows*,” scoffed Jeffrey. “How can I send my family something like this? My frat brothers?”

He sent the labels sailing, aiming for the sociology texts, trying to engage his mate in the fight. Jennifer kept on studying; the labels tumbled to the floor.

“This is a homo logo,” the man warned, sweating in the black warm-up sweats that she gave him yesterday, a gift to chase away the finals blues; when he thought that he loved her, like yesterday, she was the best, and on days like today, she was the worst mate he could have selected. “You telling me you’re a gay person, by ordering these labels, Jenn? We could invite in the dyke across the hall for a party, that what you want? some carpet to munch?”

A nervous sniggle escaped when Jenniffer bowed her head to avoid him seeing her grin. “Laurel? Are you talking about Laurel, across the hall? She’s fifteen! and very straight.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I met her. We all met, I met her boyfriend.”

“When?”

“Stand *down*.”

Jefrey realized his aggression and took a step back. Without conscious awareness of movement or motivation, he'd assumed a threatening stance, a handful of inches from her. Yet she deserved his aggression. The more he thought about the labels being wrong, the angrier her got.

After a breath, he said, “Your secret fantasy? to wave the rainbow flag? This why you went punk with your hair? Fess up.”

Jenniffer shut the text, jogged her notes and said, pedantic as ever, “The rainbow is a symbol of beauty among the storms of life. Iris is my goddess.”

“I could not care any less.”

“You could get to like the ‘bow’ part of it, Jef. That’s masculine! And, ‘rain’ gives us boys and girls wet in their tee-shirts. Think of: an enormous bow, for a giant, surrounded by busty coeds getting doused with rain...”

Jefrey fumed, “That rainbow *was* your idea. You, you’re a dirty fighter, know that? Behind my back and all that! Rainbows. Of all the idiot selections.”

Looking startled beneath her rainbow of hair, Jenniffer started to sniffle. “I like rainbows,” said she, ripping a page from her notes. She blew her nose on it. “So I lose. I flubbed up. Let’s design a decal ourselves, instead. At the computer lab, on campus, they have the software — I have a pass.”

“Star and crescent moon, ’s’what I wanted,” he reiterated, entering the bedroom to retrieve the roll from the floor.

He read the labels again. “For Christmas we got 500 homo logos. They even got the spelling right! This, it, this ain’t the first pungee stick, that you jabbed me with, Jenn.”

“Poon-what-gee-what?”

“Poon-what?” mocked the boyfriend, incredulous.

“No, Jef. What word was that word. What was that that you said.”

“Not to sound as know-it-all retarded as you! Jenn. *Jenn. Pungee* sticks are wood spears, smeared at each tip with fecal matter, to cause infection, in the new wound.”

For awhile Jenniffer sat nervous, twitching. She folded the snotty page of sociology notes. “How am I infecting you? I’m nice. You said so yourself yesterday.”

“Figure it. Those sticks are a metaphor.”

Eventually the girlfriend created a notepaper pen, each wall triple-ply, her mucus buried inside. “You hate that you’re missing an F,” she accused in monotone, placing the tiny enclosure on her palm and looking at it. Seeing a likeness of herself trapped in there, she craved breaths of fresh air. “For some reason you think your name makes you defective — less of a person. And you like me because... of my weird name?... I’m freakish, in the same way as you. Is that right, Jeffrey?”

“Birds of a feather,” he shot back, knocking the trash off her palm with another toss of another roll from the packet containing the sticky labels. “We’re claiming our freaky-deaky. What of it?”

Before getting off the bed Jenniffer swept parti-colored hair into a binder, and scooped her coursework into a bookbag.

“We’re bad together, all these pungee jabs,” she told him, jamming her arms into a military coat with punk patches all over the sleeves, then swung the bookbag over her shoulder. “I need a guy who loves *me*. Not someone who puts up with me because we have Defective Name Syndrome.” She sought her purse and coat. “Next year, we’re officially Over.”

“Our holiday cards,” Jef stammered, turning frantic. The woman’s hush as she walked out the door fed his fears. (Handwritten notes to everyone they knew, already, from each of them, in those cards!) Sneakers skidding on the damp carpet, he followed her into the hall, to toss this:

“Double negatives do cancel each other out, that’s a math fact, Jenniff-f-fer. Look us up sometime. Together we’re logic.”

>

THE coed sat languid in the stairwell, wrists crossed over her crossed legs. She considered the warm-up suit she gave to Jef, how good he looked. She dared not cry. Why she chose to mark the order form with a rainbow logo was a mystery to her. To humiliate him, maybe! To defy their joint decision. To out herself; yes,

she had same-sex attractions; everyone had them but few acted on them, was her quick consensus. Not enough of a pull to act on usually. Her romance with Jef, dull and plebian in bed to begin with, was humming along as well as anything she'd expected or even wanted for her holiday.

So why call on the rainbow? The symbol was biblical — maybe her subconscious reasoning was religious. Her formative years were cluttered with occasional spells of her family or her and her mother attending a protestant church religiously. That excuse might work! she thought: The crescent moon with star is very dark, wiccan; satan is in its symbolism. She'd tried to save her soul, with an order for the rainbow labels. Wait— is the moon a *feminine* symbol? that lunar mystique? She began to worry that Jef was the gay.

Footsteps sounded beneath her in the stairwell. Jenniffer patted her moist eyelids and lashes, sat up, swam up out of her reverie.

A teen in a parka, hood fuzzy against dark shiny hair and slick face, rounded the corner of the stairwell. Tall and easy on the eyes, but... peculiar. On his hands were flaps of skin, a webbing stretching from thumb to index finger. Jenniffer had never seen webbed hands.

“Are you a student at Bellingham?” he said.

“Yes,” she said.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Another something?” she said.

“How's the workload here, from the courseload? How many hours a night, on average.”

“Comparable to Grinnell.”

“Oh,” said the teen, as though he now needed to find out the workload at Grinnell; it was written on his face. “Thanks I think.”

Resuming his climb, the high schooler shot past the coed, sprinkling her with misty sleet from his parka, and exited the stairwell on her floor. A moment later: a knock, on a door midway down the hall. The click of a lock and the sound of a door opening.

“Study-buddy!” squealed Laurel, muffled somewhat in her loft behind the acoustical flow to the stairwell. “You'll never guess... I have a surprise for you, Chucky-Chuck...” The sound of a door closing.

Jennifer used the handrail to pull herself to her feet, considering the teen's hands, the oddity of a man with webbed thumbs. A throwback, to the days of ocean-living, before evolution brought us out of the deep and onto dry land and into the elements... A break from her intermittent Protestant upbringing! Lest she fall into a belief in Intelligent Design, she clung to Evolution as though she thought she could scale that wall to salvation. She thought: A Darwinian marvel, that "Chuck".

Down the stairwell, then to the outdoors, she kept her oval eyes downcast. Icy rain hit her from the front as she slid across the street and to a cleared sidewalk. The gutter slush filled her low-siders and dampened her thin socks, melted on her ankles. All along the boulevard cars were crowding and sliding at intersections. The weather, the ebb and flow of bad weather! The coed quickly crossed. Once inside the campus chain coffeeshop she ordered a yogurt smoothie.

"Jennifer Foggerty?"

The coed knew the voice, from somewhere. She paid the barista and turned from the counter to see, from where and when.

"Hi! It's me, Cloud Dawber."

After a moment Jen registered a semblance of him. "Silver Cloud!" she said, then gave Cloud a hug. (After which she used a hand to shake loose rain from her hair.)

Warm and cold and wet, he warmed her with kiddie nostalgia.

"Just Cloud now," he said, removing his cap and flicking off the near-frozen rain. "I dropped the Silver, too heavy of a distinction. Wow, Jennifer. You look exactly the same — excepting for that 'fro — wow, wild. Are you a witch?"

"Oh, this?" she preened, touching her permed and dyed hair again. (She loved to downplay her hair.) Cloud was a mature version of the quiet, arty boy she once blamed a fart on: same sly face, only larger, stronger, bonier, an adult suddenly. He'd grown and thickened. She on the other hand had matured not a lot since her instant blooming during junior high, physically, as the women in her family were known for doing.

"How's your mom?"

"My mom? ...She's good... She's getting her master's. That was strange, a strange question, Silver, just Cloud."

"Gosh, how long's it been."

"Since... Fat Ol' Shagrynne, Mondays and Tuesdays after school."

“We had Advanced Math together one summer too, remember? So we would be at the top of the class by the time we finished junior high.”

“You were in that class?”

“Wow, Miss Shagryne! I had to listen to her *every* day after school; you got out easy, Jenniffer: Tuesdays and Mondays. Did you hear that she got fired, for reading to kids from obscence storybooks?”

“What? Oh. I did hear something. Wait. Something about a, a dirty story, that she told to some kids, in the library.”

“Get this, get this: I think we heard it.”

“We heard it.”

“The story!”

“Oh. Really. That’s a lot of memory card to explore.”

“Here's a hint: a time-traveler... travels to the future... Another hint: she meets a bevy of beauties who want to paint her portrait?”

“The ugly painter and the sluts at the swimming pool?”

“That’s the one. Talk about sex-ed, apparently! I thought the story wasn’t that prurient. But you know all about my hippie parents.”

“That I do.”

“Gosh, Jenniffer Foggerty! Are you a witch?”

“Am I a witch?”

“Are you in school, here at Bellingham?”

Jennifer picked up the smoothie and put a spoonful in her mouth. A witch, no, she thought. “You’re the second guy to ask me that question tonight.”

“It’s not a trick question.”

“Yes. But I'm taking a leave of absence next term. That will give you a whole semester to try and catch up with me.”

“If you deny the witch, then are you in the military? No, nevermind, with those patches on your coat... Are you joining the *Rainbow* movement?”

“The rain-bow movement... No. No, I’m not gay.”

“No. No, the Rainbow people, the gatherings: the peaceniks, beatniks, what-all-ever-niks, college drop-outs, rat-race drop-outs, life drop-outs, families on the run...? living off the grid...? Peace and free love, ganja, salvia, and organic wine and a constant noise of bongos and lutes?” — and here Cloud cupped his palms round his mouth and bellowed — “Aliens may be landing next week with pollution zappers, but clean up your campsites anyway!”

Jennifer glanced round the coffee bar, assured herself that no one else was there to spread any new gossip or slander about her. “Oh, *those* Rainbow people. No.”

Cloud smiled, the silver fillings in his molars flashing in the harsh overhead light of the sparsely peopled chain store. “Forgive me. What it was was only a stupid comment based on your hair, that art project you’ve got going on in your hair. Reminds me of those latch-hook rugs we all had to sit on with Miss Shagryne. I always wanted to go on a magic carpet ride on my latch-hook rug.”

“Okay. I never did that.”

“Is your boyfriend Japanese?”

“Japanese? No. He's white. Why would he be Japanese?”

“You know, the rainbow? It's a thing with them, the rainbow.”

“Okay. How did you know I have a boyfriend. Have you been stalking me, Silver Cloud?”

“Wow. Same old Jennifer Foggerty! Same personality, exactly! Did you know, personality is the filter for the I.Q.”

“The I.Q. Cloud, that’s clever. Can I get your e-mail? I need some alone time. To process. My brainwaves...”

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WITH a lurch in his thumping heart, Jeffrey found the apartment locked. He jiggled the knob several times anyway. He banged on the solid paneled door with his palms. Who stood on the other side? Was Jennifer home? A prowler, maybe, saw him go into the apartment across the hall, then slipped inside. He wiped frazzled sweat from his brow and cheeks, eyesockets. The door opened.

A crumpled-looking Jennifer pouted, “There you are.”

“Am I welcome? I know this loft is in your name.”

Jennifer stepped aside with an ushering motion, long loose sleeves on her floor-length robe swaying, and Jeffrey entered. To him, within his racing thoughts, the apartment looked suddenly much smaller in scope, a child's playpen. No adult lived there. Someone had shrunk it all.

"Why are you sweating? Why were you in the hall?"

Jeffrey deflected the inquisition with a "hm?" and found a fold of newspaper to skim, to occupy and calm his mind. His brain buzzing, his balls emptied, he was wired, existing in a new place altered-dimensionally. The "ringer" hit, that one huge lungfull of smoke, though it had left his eardrums after a minute, was still making noise.

"Jeffrey. Are, are you? are you high?"

"I," and he paused to clear the frog from his throat, "I was across the hall —"

"Across the hall with Laurel."

"She invited me in. I was, I was curious, about what you all did, the three of you, the other day. You and her and her boyfriend. So I knocked."

"And?"

"She had some, stuff, to smoke..."

"You got *high* with her."

Jeffrey took a big breath. "You were right."

"I was right."

"Yeah."

"*Right* about what."

"You were right. About Lauren."

"Laurel," said Jennifer, emphasizing the second L, "as in... a laurel."

"Hm?"

With a frown, she joined her thumbs and index fingers in a fingery-leaf ring, and bowed, placing the ring on her rain-damp day-glo-streaky crown. Then she stood up straight and said again: "Laurel."

Jefrey said with much petulance, as his high was being interfered with by her, “You were right. She *is* straight. I just now *f.ed* her.”

“You just now *f.ed* her?”

“*Yeah. She wanted it like a Spartan boy.* Kept saying she wanted me to make her a Spartan.”

After he’d said it, Jefrey felt much lighter, more sober. He smeared the sweat and lube and dirt from his loins into his new sweatpants, feigning a scratch. If she would relax, quit studying all the time, she’d be a whole lot sexier, he decided. That nubile body, his body pumping that body, their bodies sweaty and entwined, on the ottoman... the floor...

“Jefrey, she’s fifteen.”

“Jenn, come on. Jealousy is ugly on you.”

“She is a minor. I told you that earlier today. Jefrey! (why did I break up with you?) That’s statutory rape. This could get messed. You did, you did take precautions against her getting pregnant.”

“I did her, but in the butt.”

“Oh, sick.”

“What’s so sick about that? Jenn? And what is she doing with her own apartment, at fifteen? That’s totally *not* logical. Only college kids live in these apartments.”

Jennifer tore a strip of skin from chapped lips with her fingers, absently ate the detritus. “Her dad let it for her. For privacy from her siblings.”

Any other time, Jefrey would’ve condescended to say, “Ew, Jenn,” to stop her from eating herself. But as things stood, with his impromptu *f.ing* across the hall — that luscious fling, with the sexy stoned girl in the shiny green socks, and now allegedly underage — he withheld the reprimand. He created a change in his tone, a new direction with his approach. He said, “You need lip balm.”

“Oh?”

“Lip balm.”

“Oh.” She petted her lips rather than tear at them.

“You were at that corner coffeeshop for over an hour. I know you went in ’cause I took a walk over and saw you in the window, with some guy.”

“Over there. Oh. That was Silver Cloud.”

“Someone from your Acting Fundies class?” said Jeffrey, implying a faggotry in the man and the discipline.

“How’d you guess.”

“So you kicked it with Moon Cloud for awhile.”

“No. Silver. Just Cloud now. (gasp!) Did you really get it on with Laurel? (Did you? you dick?)... After I excused myself from Cloud, after five minutes, I sat down alone, with the alternative news. I had a smoothie. Correction: part of a smoothie. I abandoned it when I was reading about a, ah, alternative rag, from Boulder. A, ah, a woman who ate her newborn, parts of her newborn, face-first, and I almost gagged. Ugh. I retched. I did retch.”

“Ate? her baby? She ate? her baby? ...Alive?”

“Oh, it’s too stomach-churning! She started in on the toes, then bit off the nose, before scooping out the brain with her fingers... Repulsive. Ugh... Repulsive. I need a bath.”

Gazing above the foggy crackle on the pane, watching the rainfall become sleet, the vixen coed became an actress in films; she held Jeffrey’s interest. She could amaze him, the odd things she said, the places she went, the people she knew. She was as good as any of the others, at the personable stuff. Amicability could ensnare him.

When Jenniffer made for the bathroom, with wide sweeps of her sleeved arms, Jeffrey followed her to the door. To taunt her, he persisted: “She ate it *alive*? Girl or boy?”

“Jef, I don’t wanna talk about this. This horrid current event that happened over a thousand miles from here.”

While filling the tub, she fidgeted with the faucet, tested the water, reset the plug in the drain. Her sleeve ends, saturated in the pouring bath, looked like dirty dishrags dangling from her wrists, to Jeffrey.

Before the steam clouded the glass he glanced over at his gaunt, runner’s build in the cabinet-mirror, searched his temples for white hairs, his hairline for signs of thinning. His side of the family aged quick, as quick as hers, and that was a reason to not stay together, to split, in his view. He was quite a catch, in his view. And quite bright intellectually, despite his vacillation in declaring a major. Anthropology piqued his mind.

“Obviously an insane cannibal woman,” he said, the words rolling more slowly through the sieve of his mind, easier to catch. “Or an evil experiment, get this! Some covert faction dosed her tapwater with an experimental drug designed to make her go crazy, they put a slowly dissolving cakes of this stuff in her pipes, you know those concentrated pucks of chemicals, this faction maybe put those cakes in her pipes...”

“Jef.”

“Was the mother on anything? any psych drugs? That could explain her behavior. It could be her case. I should study pre-law.”

“Jef. Please stand down, step back, in the hall, and close the door. I’m sorry. I need my alone time,” she whined-shouted above the tussling of the pipes. From her seat on the tub’s rim she sat defiant and withering. “I need my alone time. To process. To...”

Jef took several steps, backward. “We’re not through talking.”

“Alone time?” She got up to shut the bathroom door.

At another locked door in his face, Jeffrey ran a palm through his hair to catch the last pools of sweat. Unexpected weirdness all day. He’d been furious. Then the girl let him in... a minor! (She was taller than fifteen, for sure mature,) sexed up with her body, her tits and her ass, her bad-girl come-ons. She spoke like she was already in college. Now he was: a felon, a rapist? No way she’d call the cops. She’d *invited* him in.

The waterflow stopped, so Jeffrey knocked on the hollow metal door.

“We do need to talk about those labels,” he said, to engage his (ex-?)mate. “If you’re going to keep living here, if we’re going to keep living together.” He could hear the sound of water rippling. “Jenn? Jenn?”

“Yes.”

“I need you to package up those logos and send them back to the maker,” he told her, “with a new order for the crescent moon and star.”

“Okay.”

“Here’s my solution: This year, the holiday cards go out with no return address! So easy. Everyone we know already has this address.”

“Okay.”

“And Jenn, one more thing. Then I’ll leave you alone. Tell me I’m a logical man. That’s something I need to hear right now. That I’m logical.”

“Ugh.”

“Please, Jenn. Tell me.”

“You’re (il)logical.”

“We’re a math equation, you and me. A math fact.”

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James Beach

“A Time Traveler Meets a Donor”

PEARL arrived 2000 years from her past into a neo-civilization, a crude quasi-society. The calendar was gone from view and its people fell back on the old paganistic 13 cycles per annum, 28 days a cycle (plus a leap month here and there to keep the seasons consistent). Solstices, equinoxes became again integral, all the planting and toiling of the fields, the harvest and hence: mere survival.

To get to this future, Pearl had sewn herself into an egg-like latch-hook pod and envisioned getting out of the insane hoopla of 1003 and to a utopian

place. She cast various spells, drowned her sense(s) in incantations. Utopian idealism ran as a submerged current. Everything she was doing, in her limited consciousness, began to groove. Soon enough the pod rose, and she rumbled and arrived ahead, feeling giddy with nerve, verve. She departed her pod with hopes of winning friends and influencing people.

Pearl was very smart, but ugly. She had a big posterior, squinty eyes, a profusion of freckles, tall irritated gums, flaky scalp and a deformity in her spine gave her a limp; for income she had spent her days oozing enough optimism to entice her premediaeval muses to pose for her canvases.

How exactly she'd witched a pod of yarn and jute to fly-up-and-away remained slightly beyond her intellectual reach; she did grasp the general concept. "Anyone could do this," she told herself as she roamed the warm hillside; "anyone with imagination."

The warm hillside soon gave way to a valley of gardens and sunset, the inevitable dark. She hid in a patch of cabbage for awhile, decided the moonlight was brilliant enough, and resumed her canvassing.

Upon discovery by several female barbarians investigating a strange odor, Pearl was bound and gagged and dragged back to their camp. There she was stripped of her habit and thoroughly examined physically. The wild women terrified and paralyzed Pearl with awe. Towering at ten feet, coated in a light dark fuzz, eyes recessed, nails like talons, these females were less like her than an ogre might've been! Perhaps they saw her as an infant, smooth, small, premature, desperate? Surely they recognized a link between them, a sameness in her physicality, a primal connection.

Pearl was verified by them as a breedable woman, and was accepted as one of the reeking, hirsute, clit-fingering clan. They dressed her in their garb of woven fronds, offered her a platter of purplish round raw meats (she declined, however hungry; the meat looked like testicles). Before long a smaller, less menacing version of the adult females, a very young "girl,"

barely hairy and about her height, took her hand and gave her a tour of the land.

First thing she noticed: the males were confined to individual cells underground, kept apart from each other even by sight. She was allowed to view empty cells, then peek down at a man asleep through a ceiling window. Each of them might believe he was the only man in the world... Pearl thought much of trying to liberate one of them but was too frightened to do anything more than obediently follow the girl leading the tour of camp.

Of note, as a consequence of womankind rising to power, the male of the species shrank, physically and spiritually. There was nothing more to a man than his ejaculate, as far as Pearl could see. She felt ill, a bit exhilarated. The world had flipped on its axis.

Where were the libraries, the judicial halls, the castles of the ruling elite? Gone. It took Pearl only an hour to realize that the entire race had shrunk mentally. Little more than predators, the ability of humankind to rationalize, to pontificate, to produce science and art, vanished. Written language reverted to pictograms.

Certainly the “people” she met in 3003 were questionable as human beings. “People” were hardly people anymore; more like, aliens, or bugs. Womankind lost its nurturing asset while mankind had already been subdued to the point of inefficacy. Tribes of brutal females? Enslavement of sperm-donor males? Yes!

Females had somehow gotten the upper hand. Womankind (or, as some men, while still able to muster a sense of humor, labeled it: “womanevil”,) had grown to absurd, gangling proportions. This increase in stature happened after they extracted and ingested the male sex from most of their human counterparts. A secret ritual, set usually during a night raid, and often during cataclysm, such as a fire or thunderstorm, this act eventually

became too easy, what with all the men ludicrously dependent on technology and blindly trusting of their wives and mothers —

Yet how did Pearl learn of this? Rather than analyzing right away, she did so during the months after this story takes place, after studying in 2003 the whole of an elementary school's library and making an hypothesis...

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A sperm donor shivered on straw that had been thrown in its cage and pulled its legs close to its torso for warmth. It spent entire nights this way, usually awake, sometimes sleeping. Though unshackled, it had only a body-length by a body-length in which to maneuver, to eat, to sleep. Its bent, distorted frame had stopped growing due to this lifelong constriction, the constriction of its forefathers.

The donor did notice a few facts. One, its body was much smaller than their bodies. Two, they stood twice as tall, their long limbs and torsos and thick hair, fatty orbs on their chests swinging rhythmically as they raked out the straw-bed. Three, corpulent creases between the pelted crux of their lower limbs emitted a dank odor unlike anything else.

The donor was animal. It based its assumptions about living in the world mainly on tactile stuff in the cell — most interesting were the bitter beetles and stinging ants, which the donor sometimes ate. Spiders out of reach spun webs beyond the donor's comprehension, to catch the flies. The straw below him had a homey, musty odor. Sometimes distant clanging sounds or carts being rolled across the uneven stone halls caught its attention. At night sometimes, as seen through the window in the roof, the moon would shift shape and size.

Usually it spent some amount of time wondering why the stones comprising the floors and the three joining walls were always cold, the straw somewhat warmer although no consolation in cold season. It did notice an accumulation of clumps of its hair and feces and other cell debris if they left it in his pen for more than a few days.

Once in a while it contemplated the shape of the ceiling and the hole up there letting in breezes. The donor occasionally mulled their language, barely comprehending the strings of sing-song syllables they spoke. Blah-blah-juice! meant that the donor could drink from the ladles that they inserted through the bars. Blah-rinse-blah-blah-clean! meant that the donor should stand upright, because they were going to blast its cage and its body with a violent stream of tepid water. Blah-blah-blah-blah-sleeve-blah! meant that the donor should make its soft dangly parts stiff by rubbing them on the moist bag until a hot white goo came out, at which point he would ejaculate in the “sleeve,” and hand the bag back to them through the bars.

One sunlit day during the summer, a few new moons before the arrival of Pearl, the donor caught a glimpse of another donor through the bars of its cage. Pressing against the steel, it watched as they led the look-alike down the corridor by its upper limbs, which were bound behind its neck.

Wanting to make contact, the caged donor grated with what was left of its vocal chords (viscerally but not consciously aware that a brutal surgical procedure had dislocated his voice), stroking with its cramped up fingers the round concave scar on its throat. The clone in the hall, perhaps sensing primitive memories of camaraderie in his chromosomes, sniffed the air, recognizing a vague sameness, yet out of forced captivity kept its eyes on the path ahead.

SPERMATAZOA were plunged deep inside Pearl a dozen times before she lost count. Almost immediately insemination occurred; she could sense this. Her first child would be an ogre or a dwarf! Both genders of the future gave her the heebie-jeebies, the male being a bit easier to envision herself holding and raising, as it was much more docile and smooth, albeit hunched up and malnourished, like it had rickets. She cringed at the thought of the female newborn chewing off her teats if she breastfed it. Such was their violent nature! Perhaps she'd have fraternal twins? Fraternal, in her nightmares, with the girl eating the boy and cooing for praise; a twist on Cain and Abel, yet the same lesson, the same killer instinct, these siblings opposite gendered yet the girl was even more brutal as Cain. It took on biblical proportions despite her wiccan thrust.

The sky above, the woodsy scent in the breeze if she shut her eyes, reminded Pearl of her homeland. She'd traveled from a serfdom where men ostensibly ruled, yet women got their way; the sexism there was balanced and seemed to work out for most everyone of age. Children were the blissfully shamed, their energies wasted on play and mirage, the lies and sins of their parents, the truth kept far from them and hence they were objects of speculation and mystique. To Pearl, this division by age only exacerbated the problems in the village — could not a child see and learn, aspire and think, assume to assist and apprentice? Unanswered, her solution to finding solutions — to “use” the young rather than to “baby” them — fell on deaf and dumb ears, which contributed to why she left her Earthly time span in search of another. Seek, being her progressive label.

In the serfdom, in 1003, a coven of nonpracticing witches had invited her to peruse their books and parchments at her leisure; Pearl got their magick. Their gemstones, powder sifts and tinctures remained off limits, as they held some sort of residual value to the ex-witches, which consequently left Pearl to either hunt for the odd newt or bat, or rely entirely on the energy flows she could discern in the chaos round the village and outskirts. (Being a pacifist, Pearl left the eyes of newt within the newts she caught, never chancing upon a dead one yet somehow extracting newt tears; the bats were more difficult to deal with, as their wings did not secrete.) Her immediate family, small and law-abiding, innocuous in the eyes of the ruling class, were best kept in the dark re her latest tricks, she decided; they were simple folk. They all loved her, for her genes, her painting ability.

Here, in the future of the present, with the she-things of 3003 pawing and clawing, cooing and gobbling, dragging at her, here sprang the stuff of nightmare. Her emotive core shook in defiance at the thought of painting a portrait of any one of them, of doing any one of them any artistic justice. A muse was a muse, a devil was a devil! She'd sooner give up her painting talent than capture their demented spirits, embody their sick omnivorous souls on canvas. (To their credit, the women of 3003 did feed and clothe her, appreciate and assuage her dementia.) After awhile Pearl deciphered their language, elapsed (perhaps) from English; it was comprised of hissing and warbling, simple cries and diphthongs, plenty of me-statements of comfort and superiority. Their banter was intriguing, invigorating for a full week, before it began to wear her down. "No better than talking turkeys," she decided at last.

At nightfall after a week of sperm douches, Pearl got her chance to wander. Her insomnia led her across the fields, which were nearing harvest, and skirting past the woodlands and a body of water that appeared large enough to be a gigantic lake or a coastline; in the humidity, green was exploding.

She did care enough about herself to make the decision to move on to the next destination in her travels and she ventured that night toward where she thought she'd left her latch-hook pod; perhaps she'd already lost her pod to the elements? In her search for the pod, sounds of whimpering, emitting from seeming air, disoriented and unnerved her. She took a moment to get naked of the frond-dress and investigate in the glow of moonlight. Pearl discovered that the whimpering originated in a hole, about the width of her shoulders, in the ground.

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MUCH of the donor's day consisted of nothing more or less than the donor could think to do in its cell. It sometimes picked its nose or its anus for fun. An opening in the ceiling, beyond reach on tiptoe, let in sunlight and heat, other times it was moonlight and a chill. The window was large enough to crawl through, if only the donor could think of a way to climb up in there

and out. It was unused to thinking. All it thought was all it knew. All it knew for certain was what they told it: blah-rinse-blah-blah-clean! felt like a cold punishment, and blah-blah-juice! tasted good, and blah-blah-blah-sleeve-blah! was heaven for a moment.

Yet the donor grew restless after seeing the other donor, the clone of itself. Everything in its brain turned upside-down. The donor saw how to reach that window and crawl through! First it began to bounce on the straw, a compactor. Then it scooped the straw into a pile, defecated in it twice to increase the density, and found that it could reach even higher. A tragic slip in its sticky feces and the donor crumpled to the stones and began to whimper, loud, in a cycle. It felt a new pain, a physical hurt, its ankle swelling and turning blue... Was that a muscle torn?

Just then, above, appeared a hand, about the same size and color and shape as its own. To whose body did it belong? What was the hand doing in its cell? "Hurry," came the hissing, the soprano voice, freakishly, from the grasping hand. Unsure, of everything, (yet following some primitive adrenaline rush,) the donor stood, reached. Its fingers touched the fingers of the strange hand. As the donor strained to touch the strange hand again, the hand vanished momentarily, only to reappear a few inches closer, deeper, the whole arm showing. Their fingertips touched, the creatures tingled; the donor snorted, became alive.

As if by magick the upper hand locked onto the donor's forearm and hoisted the male up, up and away... Breathless, the donor simply allowed itself to be raised. The coarse edges of the stone gouged at abdomen and ribcage and yet... wait! Rather than feeling an ouch, the donor was elated. The scrape across its flesh meant, it was going off somewhere! Here at last the donor found what it'd always longed for, and kept secret even from itself — escape! freedom! ventilation! The absence of walls...

As the body with the helping hand darted away into the dark (the hand belonged to one of them, and yet, somehow, was completely unique of their stench and wiles,) the donor watched. Stilted, crippled, is how the donor

would some day describe the good-soul rescuer — Face dotted with pigments of the earth, skin fair as the heavens.

Later that night the donor would realize that he too could be a helping hand, that he too could lift donors from their cells and raise them onto the prison roofs to breathe. Breathe! All of them. Only, for the next few moments, the donor was unaware; the donor woke up, blinking at a tiny lightshow happening in the sky.

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THE way time travel worked this time (and she supposed the way it worked last time, despite totally losing her memory of that trip) was divine: her latch-hook pod a gyroscope on invisible string, straddling the time-space continuum. This, Pearl could feel, as she zipped up and down, round and round, through and over and beneath or above. Her stomach rose in her throat and became her throat, while her throat became her gimp leg, her nose became her anus, her forehead her lungs... She ceased to exist while tripping from here to there or wherever she'd come from and was heading off to, became instead a filament.

Implausible and impossible to hold onto, her donor, had she carried him aboard her craft after the rescue. He would've squirmed, being unable to comprehend time-travel. Not that he was incapable (she hoped) of learning, more that his years of residing in that single cell had so squelched his brains that a decade of tutelage would've been necessary before he understood the concepts of time and teleportation, matter and energy. Beyond any of that learning he would balk at the physical sensation, probably panic, and tear through the jute of the latch-hook hull and plummet out into the mess of time-space, possibly hauling Pearl along with him to an unfathomable nexus.

As it was the vessel barely managed to hold together for its second voyage — when it landed, an exact millennium backward from last point of origin,

it split apart, the hull separating into mathematically squared sections, each piece laid out evenly on the ground. Or... what was this? Was this “ground,” as Pearl knew ground to be? More like stone, a gigantic smooth floor, covered with a peculiar nubby cloth.

The room was cavernous, dark. A red luminescence came from down the hall, as if someone had found a way to steadily maintain a torch aglow with clays or tinctures or liquid. Rows of shelving, several tables and chairs, a sturdy ceiling overhead jutting with what might be roots of an ancient tree – very metal to the touch, ordered and symmetrical – roots – perhaps, then, Pearl was underground?

Steady on her feet already, Pearl located a torch, which lit via a metallic pull-chain! How she knew to pull that chain welled from the same mystery as that of how she knew initially how to use her witching craft. “Yes,” she thought, “here I can birth my any wretched offspring. In this cave, this underground chamber, this... athenaeum? a lair of edification!” For each of many shelves was strung with books, the spines teaching and preaching all variety of subject, every fact a body would or could want to know. She selected a book of fables, seated herself on the yarn-patch nearest the strange torch, and began to read the allegories.

Before Pearl knew much of anything, Miss Shagryne rang the first class bell of the day. As was her custom, the fat lady hurried through the library bookstacks, shelving any odd materials left out by the children. Some chore, being a librarian in this digital age; the boys and girls rarely picked up after themselves, entranced as they were in their e-gadgets. She did not immediately notice Pearl, staring at her from a new pile of latch-hook mats. Instead she noticed the mess of mats.

Pearl told her of the future, an incredulous tale of how she'd traveled from premediaeval days to the present. She inquired the year and Miss Shagryne mockingly told her it was 2003, the Year of the Spoiled Child. Pearl merely grimaced. It was all too unbelievable.

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James Beach

“Squatter’s Rights”

THE resort manager showed the male dormitory to Ace. With the job he and coworkers got minimum wage (no tips), free board, free room. The condemned-looking large narrow house on the edge of the land-locked resort property used a perilous stack of splintery skids that led up to a foundation propped on stilts; the basement was somewhat dug out beneath it. The dorm lacked running water, had a bucket for its toilet. Of all the live-in jobs Ace had worked, this one won for worst living quarters. The reason he was there: his near-classic sedan had a flat and a flat spare; this gig was his shot at funding a wheel.

Ace’s second-floor room, just off the low-ceilinged, tilted staircase, spanned the width of the house and looked out over the sagging mossy-shingled roof of the front porch at a rag-tag of weeds, a few downed pines, some stumpy moguls. Beyond that sat the stony parking lot behind the main lodge, through which male employees could access the resort “lobby,” through which they could access the pool, which had showers for the guests that moonlighted as the place for the male dorm crew to wash, after hours.

The doors to the rooms all had a padlock latch, a device that Ace employed from the get-go since who did he know there besides himself. Another way into his bedroom, he figured out a few days later, was to climb onto the porch roof and jimmy either of those two front windows.

A hipster calling himself Kid Keen stayed in the largest upstairs room, at the other end of the hall from Ace. His roommate was Jason Bosky, nicknamed

“Buzzy” because he allegedly convinced several peers to try and electrocute themselves via inserting metal objects into sockets, succeeding in bringing about one death (for which he did several years as a lab-rat-type in a group facility for young delinquents being studied by graduate students for neighboring Bellingham University). Their room had dormers and the worst of the dryrot.

In the other upstairs room was Reese, the pacifist, sprigs of dreadlocks perpetually on his zitty forehead. Below lived two musclebound guys, Shredder and Beau, in the converted living room, sapping much of the house’s small supply of electricity with their gadgets. Plans for a rebuild, with a basement common area, standard amenities including satellite and Internet, plus a working kitchen, were presented to Ace upon hire; the plans had been drawn up for a decade.

Fridays required Ace to lug tubs of scrubbed round potatoes over the property’s many moguls to the weekly fish-boil where winds off the distant lake blew volumes of smoke off the fires and at the evening staff. He was scheduled and had a partner every Friday, this time Shredder, each man, in the required uniform of polo shirt with resort-logo and black shoes and slacks, muscles popping, to one end of a yoke-like plank strung with twenty-gallon pails of salted-water. They had to carry the water about the length of a football field, from the resort kitchen to the bonfire, where a cook (that night Reese) would boil the fresh fish bought from the local hatchery, at the same time boiling scrub potatoes and bulb onions, for the guests.

“Ooh, he looks mean,” chided a bundled-up octogenarian to her husband, snapping their photo with a phone camera. They wore cold-weather coats and hats, standing just free of the smoke from the bonfire.

Ace realized with consternation that the old lady was referring to him, not Shredder, as the “mean” one of the two. The expression set on his face was telling more than he knew? Was his cartooning too vicious, too without heart, to be ethical? Who knew and who cared about his art? — Those buckets were damn heavy! Meanwhile Shredder was popular among the guests, getting several “hey buddy”s and winks. After crossing the lawn they arranged the buckets to boil on the fire. On the opposite side Reese tended the “fish-’n’-filler” pots, a mournful look on his face (no doubt over the souls of the fish cooking) as he doled them out to curious or hungry guests.

On payday after fish-boil the occupants of the dorm, all in their twenties, a bit younger than Ace, who was thirty, liked to party. On this, his first Friday, Ace was not receiving a check; he scraped pot pipe resins and smoked them, alone in his decrepit room, studying the comic strips he’d done over the week. The one of lean, mean Kid Keen was a soldier doll in trendy striped pajamas. With a thin marker Ace added Keen’s mantra, “skin-on-skin is the only way to go in,” and turned the page. Red-head roommate “Buzzy”, with the deeply-etched abs, was easier to craft, a dummy’s survivalist guidebook under one arm and reading glasses underfoot, a half-shirt and bicyclist tights-under (depicted here under a

translucent peasant skirt), an electric volt shaved into his crewcut at the temples. Ace's rendition of the overbuilt Shredder turned out too — his stacked upper body, involuntary muscle pose; his typically hanging open mouth (drooling); a slogan on his tank-top: Who Said Sucking Sucks?

Smirking at the proofs of his talent, Ace smoked a hit and deliberated doing one of Reese, or that other bodybuilder downstairs, Beau. He couldn't yet see either of them well enough yet. (Many intelligent people were translucent on sight, to him, while new sorts, of any I.Q., often puzzled and eluded his artistic sense; rather than judge his subjects he was obsessed with accurate representation imbued with a rich satirical flair, which was quite often misunderstood by muses and comics-readers; he felt compelled to keep trying...) As he was mellowing and envisioning the hairy vegan Reese, umber crayon poised, the subject of his maybe-emerging cartoon knocked at his door.

"The food here is synthetic gunk and always over-salted and so this makes me wonder if you're hungry, if you want some granola."

Stuffed full from the buffet leftovers, Ace said, "No, thanks, though."

"Also, beware of... trouble, in this house."

"Trouble?"

Reese had a simper as he rerolled the baggie of oats and dates, then dug an orange from the pocket of his nubby cardigan. "Organic," he said, turning the fruit.

Ace said okay, accepted the orange, then the granola; the pacifist bowed and left. Ace closed the door. What a stranger, he thought — what a neighbor — that simpering face! The visual artist in Ace backed down while his emotive side stepped up — pangs of pity; attached to that, and whatever else lurked below the surface of his usual buffering, was guilt over the state of the nation, the world; guilt over not wanting the prep cook job but needing to take it so as to fix the tire and leave the resort region; guilt over the pacifist's guilt. He stashed the goods on the shelf in the closet and ventured downstairs, toward the heavy bass loops reverberating up through the floor.

A staff party! Same small-talk, same people, as everyday every day, yet now with drink. A few female resort staff, from the newer A-frame dorm, mingled with Ace's drunk, hyper-animated dormmates in the kitchen with no water and so no sink but a working fridge and hotplate, utensils. The bath (as described) had a thirty-pound bucket for a toilet. The vibe at the party echoed that of a roller rink "snowball" in junior high — boys lined up on one side, girls on the other. To ease fidgetiness and lubricate a festive air: a jug of vodka in the middle.

Instead of jumping into a partyer personae, Ace clung for a moment to the sidelines, a wallflower. He slicked back humidity-wavy hair with his palms; a storm brewing always curled his hair.

Between flirts with the females Shredder offered Ace a few vodka shots; giving in, Ace relaxed, became friendly; they'd lugged water to the fish boil seven times, had now a dull rapport, about that. Slick talk got him a petite French kiss from each blond maid in quick succession, which was flattering although he got stuck in the sensation that they had shallow minds and hearts, to be so easy... More comic-strip fodder! Warm mouths of the vapid, however aesthetically or sensually alluring, did a lot of nothing else for him. He let go their waists and noticed Kid Keen glaring, shock playing round his dopey brown eyes. On Kid Keen's elbow clung Shredder, a camcorder with a blinking green light held in front of his face.

"Hey bro," Kid Keen said, shaking Shredder off his arm before stepping forward. A phony joviality spread across his features. "You all right, turtle? You look a little whacked."

"Just partyin' bro," Ace said, mocking Keen.

Kid Keen slung his arm round his shoulders, leaned in close, and whispered, "You ever get the feeling that people are turning into cartoons, turtle?"

High from the resins, Ace worried Kid Keen had the sixth sense; his thoughts split, he gravitated toward the concept of ESP to explain the cartoon remark, rather than the more logical criminal theory, with Keen and or Bosky entering his padlocked room through the windows, searching his closet, finding his notebooks and finding his creative efforts, maybe getting amused and offended all at once, going so far as to pull a prank, rub his toothbrush in the armpits or take a piss on his mattress... "Yes," he answered, thinking on how to clear up the matter ESP v. THC.

At the sound of a car crunching into the lot, its headlights panning the kitchen windows, energy shifted. Keen and Shredder approached the blonds, who had been joined by their huge-chested frizzy-haired hostess friend, to interview them about the kiss with Ace; they demanded a star-rating, say, one or two stars out of four. (Threes.) To show off, or to get booed or to ball, Keen told the trio that each set of breasts was unique and sexy, that seeing them all together at once was like a Picasso painting. One blond took the remark as a compliment, the other got huffy and demanded a vodka shot, which was backed by the brunette.

Bosky and Beau entered, arms full with beer and liquor bottles. Keen obliged the maids with vodka, meanwhile Bosky juggled a king-can then opened the beer all over the trio's shirts, with Shredder catching the episode on digital tape for his "documentary" on working a three-star resort.

:)

BEFORE long Ace found himself up in his room snorting Psilert with Gyx, the lanky teenage son of the resort manager. With a sketchy goatee and a large stash of the drug intended to reduce hyperactivity but often taken to stimulate, Gyx seemed as much the rebel pariah as he himself did — Kid Keen and his cohorts allowed the boy to hang round their parties, and gave him grins and pats on the back, but no kinship. Conversely, Ace admired the boy, drew sanctuary, glommed on to his steady, youthful charisma.

The high from the powder was good anyhow, and Ace threw U2's classic "Zooropa" onto his beatbox to drown out the distortion from downstairs, their bass-heavy trip-hop. While the disc spun into play mode he could hear Gyx cracking its jewel case while making more lines of the stimulant.

"I heard from Shredder that these mattresses came from cabin suites that had bats in them! Your dad's putting us at risk for ringworm of the scalp, or worse," said Ace, to gain the teen's favor.

Gyx shoved the jewel case across the floor, handed Ace the short straw they'd been snorting through. "Dude, this place is a deathtrap," said the teen.

"I know! What the f. My plan is to... Between you and me, I might cash my next check, buy that tire and put it on and peel on out."

"Going back home?"

"I dunno."

"Where you from again?"

"Mars. No, really, Capitol City."

After each line they conferred anew, touching on music and films; futures and no-pasts and psychoanalysis; sisters, mothers, brothers; summer drugs and end-of-summer cliques; of simultaneously needing and fantasizing over and forgetting the to-be-found soul to which everyone gravitates, the one your mate needs to emulate so as to create monogamy bliss, the jelly for your peanut-butter, your pig and the Swiss...

"I'm out of here in two years."

"Enlisting?"

"I'm gonna go to BellU."

"Bell U.? Why the f. there?"

“The parties, the women! My cousie, Trenton, he goes. Showed me around one night. We all took E. Man, the females there would knock you out. Smart, beautiful... loose...”

“Oh yeah? What grade you in again?”

“Now, tenth.”

“Getting good grades?”

“Where’d you go to college?”

“Bellingham. That was a long time ago! I took a leave of absence. Maybe true love is for lazy people.”

Outside the creaking house, wind and rain increased. The foundation began to sway. Yet Ace and Gyx rode the storm out easy, like sailors. They converged spiritually and moved as one, one’s mind spewing out the other’s mouth while their fingers danced, images and ideas nearly perfect in shape, in sync, crystalline in clarity, in presentation: complete philosophies whisked through nerve, muscle and bone, on journey through those incredible brain machine(s) that occasionally translate abstract genius into everyday throwaway language...

“What’s with your name, anyways.”

Shrugging it off, “What kind of name’s Ace?”

The smooth, loose precision, the power and talent balance fresh and teasing; a collective mental labyrinth the citadel about them. Metaphysical skyscrapers of thought and notion thrust up rapidly, binding wrist to ankle, chin and torso, eyelash and eyebrow; all laced within a system of interconnecting corridors. Bay windows, bungee cords, burgundy table wine, roof golf, intercoms and tour guides. Sudden balconies, swimming pools, tether balls and lightning rods. Like an all-night toy model-building fest; like solid and intricate clock innards; like a tightly-expanded helium balloon; like matchbox cars snug in their plastic carry-case carports, their citadel was ordered and bright. The fantastic city, a play-fantasy-alive in all its psych-drug-induced manifestation, kept ascending...

“Did you ever ‘snowball,’ as a kid?”

“Like, at the roller rink? Girls on one side, boys on the other...?”

“No. Like, um, the one *without girls*.”

“Explain.”

“The guys line up, and... pass, you know, the first guy’s ____” — and here a grimace rather than a word — “to the next guy, in the mouth...?”

“Wha?”

“A snowball, with just guys.”

At a fever pitch mentally Ace told Gyx: “Going to take a leak,” wondering about the snowball, aware of the details of the game now yet somehow unable to grasp them. A glance at the mildewed shell of a bathroom, where someone had taken a crap on empty beer and vodka bottles in the bucket. Ace pushed outdoors. An anemone-like rain dampened his horizontal planes; the shifting wind blew rain all over his back. While pissing, a strong gust blasted his exposed crotch with wet, made him feel alive, sexually, itchy; pissing gave way to a monster of a masturbatory session, culminating in sporadic bursts of lightning vying for dominance over thunder smashing like cymbals.

By the time he pulled up and reziped, the rain was wet enough to make his clothes and hair cling. The next Ace knew, he was lurching up narrow steps in pitch dark; another blackout - - - - . The low ceiling, when it hit, made cartoon stars dance in his skull, and when he reached his room, where Gyx had lit a drippy candle, he could feel the new welt leaking blood.

Skinny in a tight tee-shirt and unbuttoned boxer briefs, Gyx was lying casually on a sleeping bag unrolled over the bat-crappy mattress, propped on an elbow. “What did you do to your head? You’re bleeding.”

“This dorm is a deathtrap,” Ace reiterated, dismayed that their marvelous city, quickly erected and lavish — built on credit and assumption — built without blueprints, without pain — had aged in his absence. Barely there, the figurative citadel was a fading ghost-bond, a mirage. Fractures took hold, toppled facades and turrets. Green goop attacked, spread across balconies to peely patio furniture, crept onto flattened mattresses, slid down tetherball rope. Rust and corrosion reigned. Glass splintered and fell away and the relentlessly mounting metronome of time buried the remains.

Gyx was whispering. “You know that girl with the mongo tits?”

“The blond with the round face or the other blond,” said Ace, half-blotting his forehead with a sock found on the floor of the closet. The cut sliced up into his hairline.

“No, the frizzy-haired one, kind of looks like a snowball on legs,” clarified the resort manager’s son. “She dates guys with weird bodies. Her latest looks like a pumpkin — you’ve seen him, doing maintenance, on the property.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Bosky says he wants to carve ’im up, for Hallow’een!”

Ace surveyed the red mass absorbed into his scrunched sock and wondered why the injury hurt less than it could. Being oddly-shaped himself, somewhat apish, or according to Kid Keen, turtlish, he supposed he could have a date with her too, get some action from the last resort frizzy-haired brunette freak-dater. Ace thought again of his crayoned caricatures. He wanted Gyx, now; the only one with a fighting chance, in the real world. He saw the girls as slight, vapid, bad mothers. Plus most everyone there was either average-looking or homely! So the average folks were fascinating to paint, to poke fun at... Maybe his urge to draw them originated out of a vibe permeating from the resort land, out of a hick locus-inspired desire to reduce everything to its basest, most trivial, comical, inhuman? Too many people at the resort seemed preoccupied, classifying humans as animal, vegetable or mineral.

“Who cares about that, Kid Keen’s an ass,” said Ace at last, kneeling to take a hit of resins (which Gyx declined) since the Psilert on the Zooropa jewel case was only dust.

After mulling resins and re-sins, then wondering if any sane person could consider smoking pot a sin, Ace decided he was too wired, thinking about nothing. He doused the candle, took off his jersey and jeans, and spooned with Gyx, who was lying to one side of the mattress. He felt like a young uncle, the teen’s guardian, something. They clasped hands as the thunder rumbled. Thoughts of coming again, indoors, right there with him, sweetened a new vision of skin on skin, best way to go in. Ace fell asleep.

;)

WHEN the Norway Pine struck dawn was being obscured by the furled clouds of last night’s storm, and for a moment he believed the cacophony of thunder and splintering wood and shattering glass to come from a dream. A hush descended, and achieving full consciousness proved a lengthy task. A falsetto wail for help caused Ace’s core to lunge into his throat and Gyx to tense up beside him.

“What is that?” Gyx asked in a whisper.

Shrugging off the eerie vibe— of the wail itself as much as of the way Gyx was rattled — Ace figured Shredder was scoring with one or both of the blonds. Yet the shrieking was for sure emanating not from below but from the largest upstairs room, belonging to the nocturnally quiet Kid Keen and Bosky.

Now near-fully alert Ace lost his five a.m. hard-on. Before he could make a move on the teen leapt out of bed and into his boots and opened the door, disappearing into the hall. Ace stepped into his jeans and loafers, and got struck by blackened rainwater dripping from the lintel of his room’s door.

Pale orange sunlight along the horizon filtered through his gauzy-curtained windows and made the hall just bright enough to see the door to Kid Keen and Jason Bosky's room hung ajar. Outside it, more pale light and a moist breeze blew out at Ace. A sobby Reese appeared at his side, looked fearfully into his eyes but said nothing. As Ace slid through the doorway a roosting bat flapped by in the drizzly sky overhead.

The downed pine, in its majesty, looked oddly picaresque on Bosky's plaid bedding. A rubbery-looking arm drooped from beneath branches fringed with desiccated needles, a rivulet of blood streaking Bosky's ring finger.

Beside Gyx, near the closet, Kid Keen was moaning. Compared with the crunched gape of the dormer where the Norway had fallen in, Keen in his hushed hysteria was an extraneous sound-effect. In the rubble surrounding the mattress Ace stumbled over a survivalist's guide, and steadied himself by grabbing a dangling roof beam.

"Don't you touch him," warned Kid Keen. "Don't you touch Buzzy."

Crouching, Ace could see Bosky's chest and throat pierced by long-dead pine limbs. The red-head's face, unrecognizable now, was gored too, as were his intestines, groin and left thigh.

Ace looked away, toward Gyx, who ran to him across the rubble and held his arm at the elbow, in shock. "Go get your dad," Ace told him.

That remark led Ace into and through the day, with an ambulance, squad cars and an undersized fire-engine ambling up the narrow road past the pond and into the parking lot. Paramedics chainsawed through the trunk of the Norway to remove the body. City personnel taped off the condemned house and attacked the owner of the resort, causing a panic among many of the guests, who would be put up in a nearby hotel or motel (courtesy of the county elite who would write the deed off as a "cause").

Kid Keen found solace in the bawling blonds, and soon disappeared with the two of them into their A-frame. The pacifist got onto his moped and drove off, dreads and tears flying. Beau and Shredder piled as much gear as they could into a beat-up old truck and drove off to set up camp. After asking round, Ace found out Gyx went to stay with relatives down the road while his dad, after shoving a city official and then an officer, got handcuffed and taken to county courthouse.

By sundown much of the resort property was deserted. He ventured from his lookout in the woods, with an empty duffel bag for looting.

He found the rear kitchen door to the main lodge chained, and panicked. Of course, management did that — no showers necessary now that everyone from the house had been sent away. He had no money at all now and had already quit

the job, in his mind, so as to obtain his check first thing Monday, buy a used tire; pick up Gyx; and head out. Til then he needed to improvise, fend for himself. Would he be forced to beg food from the females? He recalled the pacifist's gift of the fruit and cereal, stashed in his closet.

The house was belted with yellow POLICE LINE! DO NOT CROSS! tape. On the plank the splintery skids shimmied and shook so Ace headed round back to find another route inside. He noticed a hydraulic jack, under the foundation nearest where the Norway had struck the roof and crashed through the joists above the second-floor window, the stressed corner reinforced with concrete blocks. There was no other way inside except to risk smashing a window. The house looked ready to collapse.

Ace climbed the sturdiest overhanging tree and leapt onto the porch roof, which rocked the entire house; one of his bedroom windows had been jimmed. He went in.

...quiet and dark enough for Ace to raise cautionary palms as feelers against any obstacles, especially on the stairs, where his still-throbbing forehead caused sympathetic stars to re-shine...

He put the food gift from the pacifist in his duffel, risked a step into the hall. Adrenaline churned beneath his calm rationale. In the pacifist's room (door hanging open) moon and stars assisted as he scouted for granola and oranges, whatever he could find. The heavy curtains were open to the moonlight. Figs, dates, pears, dried kelp!

Then, a scrabbling of something in the next room...

The pacifist (duh) kept no weapons; and Ace's army knife sat stashed away, beneath that white birch where he'd peeled more bark away to carve

ACE

into, right above

4EVER

HM + TAO

(whoever they were) in a heart.

"What's the hold up?" came a whisper.

"Can't locate the video," came the reply.

Ace held his breath on the other side of the pacifist's door, recognizing the voices of Shredder and his bodybuilder roommate, Beau. They'd apparently crept in and gotten to Bosky's room without him seeing from his post outside.

"Why'd you give it to him anyways?"

“He wanted to watch that turtle whacking off... How come you *stupidly* left our slurpy, slurpy? What if the cops took it?”

“What would they want with a camcorder,” Shredder said.

“Where’s that other flashlight.”

Needing to breathe, Ace did so slowly, in ragged exhalation. That they filmed him masturbating (squatting on that fallen oak!) mattered less now than their clandestine 69ing — Shredder resembled an amateur pro wrestler. Smaller, more built, Beau could severely injure him with his mighty grip. Together the two could kill him despite self-defense lessons and an army knife, if they discovered he knew their secret passion, the both of them now immortal on film, the lot of them in a slip-slidingly stark ménage a trios...

“I say we stick here, wait for daylight. Much easier to look, see? We’ll meet up with them later when we find it.”

“Find it fast! This place is falling down, get it?”

“Sure, boss.”

“Is that it? Oh, no.”

Their clomping and rooting gave Ace an opportunity to slip through the pacifist’s door and steal into the hall. Silently something occurred: a pendulum swing? He hesitated, aware of a tremendous tension, before the hydraulic snapped loose from the dormitory.

Shredded scolded, “You’re such a—”

Mechanical hee-hawing from the other end of the house heralded a shifting and more stress, thousands of nails and screws being tested, torn free. Plaster was cracking off the ceiling and walls. Across slowly tilting (funhouse) floorboards Ace ran, in command of his sack and knife as he sprinted through his room and ducked out onto the porch roof. As he rode it down he thought of Gyx and his whereabouts, rolling free enough of the resort debris, so he could nab him before heading to the lake.

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James Beach

“The Monied Man”

ON top of his game, feeling a boost, the personal investor turned thirty. The wealth in his veins — a young widowed client’s losing track of her husband’s retirement rollover grossed him a shady eight grand — was evident. Today he would hunt for a spouse, in his better linen suit and snazziest shoes, wearing his watch-with-bling, thinning hair cut yesterday. He had a void of family, a loneliness of the type that can urge men to marry and breed out of sync with the life-pattern. His quest was primal.

Sweating gold, or so he imagined, the thickset numbers-cruncher with male pattern-baldness took a taxi to the old nightclub in “the happening warehouse district,” as the cabbie put it, mocking the local alternative rag. The marquee: POLARITY. A new name, what was the old one, he forgot. Mega-bass boomed from the propped-open doors; a column of mechanically-conditioned cool air hit him full force, devoid of pheromones or cologne. It was either a dying disco, or was he early? Ten o’clock.

Down the cavernous main hall he found a short bar and bought his ritual drink: a double Rusty Nail, with a dash of cream, over ice; when the ice melted away, like an hourglass, he would know to give a business card and leave. Staying any longer would result in either a lull (time-waster) or the timid, tipsy approach of those has-big-problems types. (This superstition originated in college, when he would ditch his frat pals to visit the local lounge bars in search of rich or pretty divorcées; it was a system he refined in grad school, for sex and for making money.)

In the discotheque, youthful singles of either sex gyrated on black platform boxes, all braided twirling hair and synthetic bodysuits, appearing digital in the flecks of

light. Some were synthetic-laden and cold, a riff against their own humanism as much as symbol of the high-technology usurping science and nature. In shadow in the corners ravers sat and stared, made out, torso- or head-danced. A patron took furtive puffs on a pipe near the smoke machine. Rather than find a date, the disco crowd showed up out to expend energy.

The investor shied away from there. Straight ahead the main hall swelled into a semi-circular bar lined with brass poles, for dancing. He imagined bodacious females spinning round and sliding up and down on them, the prettiest waiting for her shot at Pygmalion. For now, the room was sanctioned off by a velvet rope.

He ascended a voluptuous staircase, slightly winded, trying to come up with the title of the instrumental version of “Mac the Knife”; it hit him as he stepped into a piano lounge. A few eligibles were waiting to be approached, by the look of them. Dimly lit, these types of lounges often attracted his type of demure, overdressed and desperate woman. He preferred to approach them in the lounges, rather than at the bars, or on the dance floors. He knew his money talked much louder if he could converse with the ladies in a relaxed scene, booths and couches, even hit the small dance floor and cut a rug to a song or two to seal the deal.

He chose a flush-looking date: tall, angular, thin, small-breasted; with ornate sculpted tresses looped in thick shiny ringlets; with exquisite dewy skin; wearing an elaborate gown snug under a modern fishbone corset, low heels. Eccentric, maybe erotic; at first glance striking, this one looked and dressed and acted like an aging model, aged thirties, wanting now to settle down yet still trying to find footing, like a spoiled teen too old to play kid anymore. His stance on that was mixed; former drug users were okay, even preferable, while currently-using dates were of no interest, usually leading to antagonism; plenty of the vixens had flaked out on him, disrupted his plans. He wanted to, needed to, settle down, create his family.

At his urging they found a secluded booth. He doled a few compliments, then got to his interview. (Another of the inquisition traps he refined in grad school, his pick-up interview consisted of a random selection from his arsenal of multi-faceted questions, meant to buoy up any lurking trouble.) The answers from this one were okay, if a bit daft, uneducated — there was a faint yet primary unsexiness to this one to bother about... this one was not only unacademic but had uncute, rather crass, replies. In the course of this survey, he grew atypically flaccid, and stalled.

“What do you do for a living?” asked the pick-up, demurely, an alto drawl.

“I’m a personal investor.”

His date smiled complete: the teeth were small, filed; the gums very pink against the dewy-sheeny tone of tanned dark skin; lips puckered like bicycle tires. The aesthetic razzle-dazzle was corrupting, moulding, dimming. He noticed the long

nose as handsome, rather than the face as beautiful. His oafishness, astride that painted doll-face? He was having second thoughts and his brain-stalling should've been the clincher. To envision more than a romp or a pricey dinner uptown proved a challenge. Yet for some reason he pressed ahead. Any offspring of theirs would anyway have a fair shot at beauty. For a moment he imagined them, athletic with good skin, if somewhat clownish in the mouth.

“All right, you caught me, Mr. Investor,” the pick-up said, hiding teeth with lips or drink. “I’ve made this mistake before—. Some men aren’t nice, about secrets! As a favor to us both, I’m telling you, straight off, that I’ve had some... work, done.”

“Erin, was it Erin?” the money-manager asked.

Erin nodded.

“Could you be more specific, on what work you had done?”

The pick-up took a shallow breath. “Teeth-filing, new lips, bigger cheekbones; pixie chin, smoothed brow; eye-tucks, ear-tucks; there’s the pretty thin throat; you bet these titties; a tummy-tuck; ass-enhance; the bottom-most ribs removed; and, to top it off, there’s my pussy,” the pick-up replied, with snappy flips of bony wrists.

Silicon and knives, flesh distortions and swabbed bleeding scalpel cuts swam over him, through him; that response sending him reeling out of a typical interview. Genital plastic surgery kink: Was it collagen-puff lips, made snug-tight again? a replication of a hymen? or a piercing? — Ugh. Too many possibilities. The gore made him queasy. He flashed his bling on his wrist, gauged the time on his melting drink.

As an inquisitive creature he had to know, his curiosity rarely getting the better of him yet doing so suddenly. “What, exactly, have you done, down there?”

The pick-up’s next line was so vulgar, so much the antithesis of his quest, biologically, and so opposing of his life plan, that the investor went momentarily deaf. He heard it only in retrospect. (“Penis-inside-out-into-a-pussy.”) That he’d been lured in, toyed with, detained and fooled was repulsive and disconcerting to him. A debit! A larger loss at that moment was tough to formulate.

Wishing to buy back the night, the investor stood. He reached for his drink, wiped animal-sweat from his forehead with its cocktail napkin. He made a casual escape. He dumped his drink in the nearest bar trough, set the glass upside-down.

“Barkeep, did I somehow or another stumble, step, into a gay bar?”

The bartender, muscular in black vee-shirt, quipped, “We call ourselves ‘metrosexual’, which means your bent is just as all right as his bent is, or hers is, or as their consenting adult bents are...” in that gay high-pitched quaver. “Between you and me I fly it up and open.”

Rushing, skipping treads down the stairs, the investor sidestepped into the leather shop, nearly falling headlong into the stairwell to the dungeon, half-wits in slings and fantasies-on-crank, somewhere-out-there, subterranean and cruel. He steadied himself with the maroon velvet rope, now looped to allow entry, and turned away from the muscley male pole-dancers and their white washcloth modesty.

At the door the bouncer pointed the way to the nearest taxi line-up. First thing Monday, he’d revert the widow’s error, return the eight thousand. (Twin sons in college, a teenage daughter, a yearly property tax! Peggy needed the money more than he.) He would develop a more moral, ethical stance which meant for awhile the brunt of real work and the solace of his house. He could wait and would. He could join a church.

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James Beach

“The Widow-maker”

“TULL Alan is so cute! And smart! He’s in all the accelerated classes. I’m in love with him. Am I sick?” said Peggy, long legs crossed at the knees and ankles, angled toward the door of the pick-up.

“How old is this kid?” asked Cory, to alleviate the boredom of the drive. Their trek “up north” ran through miles of pine families and their relatives, the cones bouncing down into the bed every so often, the only activity besides road construction, and in his mind a sex fantasy, to keep him alert.

“He’s seven now. I’ve been babysitting him since I was thirteen.”

“Yep, Peg, you’re sick,” Cory said.

“I got naked in front of him, bathing him. You should see his little penis, and the look on his face when he gets a boner! He has a body just like yours, only, smaller, and smooth and no big muscles, but the same bones.” After a silence, during which Peggy implored her boyfriend several times with her eyes to speak, she added, “Did you ever babysit?”

Cory groaned under the tension in the new relationship. Being in his mid-twenties, he figured he had about twice the maturity level of his date, who’d just graduated high school. She was the child; he, the adult. His job would be to take care of her. He preferred that to the other way it sometimes goes, wherein the female bosses and nags the male, as though the man needed another mother. Either way, nothing was ever fifty-fifty; tossing a coin evaded the factor of the rim.

“Hello, Mr. Shipping and Receiver Guy?”

“Guys don’t babysit,” he said, matter-of-fact, as if repeating a game stat. He refused to be single, an old man alone, like his dad.

“You’ve never once babysat?”

“Maybe! Okay, sure. Once. This once I had a neighbor kid pawned off on me, you know, for the afternoon... I made a few bucks. Richie, the kid’s name. Fat Republican, already a chunk and a politician at nine. Sat there stuffing his face in front of the TV — wouldn’t talk to me about girls or school or movies or anything except wanting his right to vote. My mom set us up. I made twenty bucks.”

Peggy began picking at her nails with a nail trimmer. “I suppose teenage boys aren’t allowed to babysit little girls, or little boys, anymore, either. That immaturity... thing..., in you males.”

“Tha’s right! I’d be all rapin’ and molestin,’ tearin’ up that boy butt, doin’ him all to pieces, tha’s right.”

Startled, she gaped at her boyfriend. “Oh, you’re making fun!”

“Peggy. If I don’t make fun, how will we ever have any?”

“Are you bored?”

“Why would you say *that*?”

“Oh! This is gruesome, I know; did I tell you about my great-aunt, who was killed? I doubt if I did, it’s very personal. She was almost twice as old as Tull Alan is now, and she was *reely* blooming, you know, sexually active and all that... I’ve seen her Super 8 film debut! Politically active too, into stopping Roe v. Wade, and explaining Watergate. Cory, she had groovy hair, grown out to her knees! A psychotic *stranger* at the mall broke her charm bracelet off her wrist then pushed her down the escalator stairs and (sob) you can guess what happened.”

“That groovy hair got caught up in the machine?”

“Gruesome, I told you. A heinous mystery for my small family, since the stranger walked off, in all the bloody commotion—we all wonder who he was.”

Cory thought a moment. “I’m sorry (you told me). It is a gruesome story. Sad, too. I wonder if, do you think maybe the stranger who shoved your great-aunt was a government death agent?”

“Government death agent!” shrieked Peggy. “Why would the government want her charm bracelet?”

“Maybe the government, or the people above the government, wanted to stop her before she started making politics her life.”

“That crime was too heinous! Nope, it was one of those random pedophiles.”

“Huh? A random what? Peggy darling, ‘pedophile’ means ‘a lover of children’. Your theory is nonsense.”

“Do you want children, Cory? I can go off the pill... Let’s get married, and make babies! Make all the evil go away!”

They rode in silence awhile. Once Peggy leaned over to kiss him, once she fell asleep against the window, deep breathing fogging the glass near her gaping mouth. She was best drunk, he decided. Sober she talked too much. Alert but quiet, and sexy, and flirty and compliant, that was Peggy, drunk. And he figured he’d reached the zenith of his cash flow at the warehouse, not counting those ridiculous coin-raises each year in October; at that rate, he could afford a good life only if his partner earned more than he did, which, in the case of this one, who babysat neighbor kids for her job, was unlikely. He’d hit a glass ceiling in his career, and though he could see scads of dollars bunched on the other side of the glass, he was sure he didn’t know how to get up in there. The idea of marriage, a

family, was bearing on him, a weight to be wrestled out of the way, only to have it return again every few months. As a navigator, Peggy was at least able to read a map.

The last few miles were tricky, on dirt roads, way out, in the boonies. Despite the summer warmth Cory felt a chill there among the uncivilized country, and rolled up his window. Peggy said “brrrrrrr” and pulled her sleeves down over her fingers, buried them between her black-jeaned thighs.

When Cory turned up the drive he knew right off that his dad had overpaid for the cabin property. The lot was lush, overgrown in the ditch with weeds, saplings. Beyond that the pines and their relatives, spruce and fir, were vying for nutrients in the earth. As for the cabin: its frame was plywood and chipboard siding, weathered gray. The bowed walls were flanked by half-dead evergreens; green-grey moss was thick on the tarpaper roof. Cory vacillated between rage and disgust. He’d guessed the fuzzy image, in the link online, to be a doctored photo! The cabin looked much more decrepit in person.

“No way. No way, Peg.”

“No way I’m sleeping in the truckbed again,” Peggy whined. “I have a crick in my neck that won’t quit.”

“I hope there’s a clause,” said Cory, “to upend this real estate deal.”

He shut off the engine and got out of the truck, walked round the scratched and dented front fender to grasp the hand of his pretty, leggy, Peggy. On the pebble drive she sank and wobbled on her heeled boots, threw a sneer at the cacophony of dying and desiccated pine, fir, spruce. Some of their needles were orange.

“They’re ‘widow-makers’,” he told her, then let go of her and cupped his hands on his mouth. “Timber!”

Peggy wondered, sarcastic, “If a widow-maker fell, and squashed somebody, and nobody else was around to hear, would it make a sound?”

“That was making fun!”

“Is that a squirrels’ nest, way up in the branches?”

Cory put his arm beneath Peggy’s loose sweater, held her small waist. Together they steadied a piece of chipboard on the deck that slipped loose beneath their feet. Then Peggy giggled until gusts of smoke from the flames in the fire-pit choked her into coughing. Cory stood tall. They crossed the threshold.

Sight of his aging, crusting, balding dad, standing admiringly, in stoic appreciation, pontificating or pondering his property in the dilapidated cottage, helped Cory lose his cool in a hurry.

“Pathetic,” he scolded.

“Well, hello to you, too. Putting on some bulk, eh?” He turned his attentions to Peggy. “You must be the new girlfriend.”

Peggy blushed, said, “I see where Cory got his good looks.”

“Really?” he said, turning to his son, “I think I like this one.”

Reeling at the absurdity of the scene, Cory puffed up his chest for the fight. “Dad, you threw my inheritance into this... shanty-shack?”

“Your inheritance?” was his dad’s reply.

He flicked a switch on the lone interior wall and a florescent light buzzed on behind a translucent plastic panel, yellowed and spotted, with what was that, mildew or...

A pitter-pattering from the center of the ceiling and out to the darker corners sounded almost like rainfall.

“Rodent piss?” spat Cory, pointing accusatorily at the grid of mildewed panels in the false ceiling.

“Turds too,” the father replied, shrugging. “There’s a family up there, squirrels I like to think. Baby squirrels.”

“Dad, you bought an illusion! The, the rustic-looking photo, the... what, ah, the ‘indoor plumbing?’” fumed Cory. He let his cool eyes play over the bare studded walls, the grimy vinyl flooring, other bleak attempts at modernity. “A spigot and drain in the kitchen, a sweaty toilet in a closet? Dad! That sentimentality, your old memories, can’t be bought.”

Cory’s dad kept up a smirk. He found a chair and sat, before long insisting, “I got this cottage for a real steal. The property it sits on is appreciating like mad, and what does anyone care about a false ceiling, Cory? The place has a solid roof and joists, a sturdy foundation. We’re getting a highway paved right to the front door... Wanna move in?”

“Here? Are you retarded?”

“Your cousin Ace found his niche in this region. Opened avegan restaurant right nearby, with the young son of a resort owner.”

“*Ace()*s high! did that? College-educated faggot.”

As Peggy spritzed at the mustiness, with perfume, Cory sneezed. He would've told her to quit stinking up the stinking place, except... her belly was distending slowly over her low-riding jeans.

“You all right, Peg?”

She nodded, jiggling a belly that had been as trim as her wide, flat ass just moments ago; she was preg-O? when did that happen? (put into context, the huge platter dinner she ordered in the roadside diner on the drive up made some scary sense...;) the idea of her giving him his offspring put him in a panic. She better be joking!

Peggy dug through grocery bags, tore open the packet of wooden shish-kabob spears, found the grocery store knife and plastic cutting board, spreading the color of the raw ingredients on the board, the filthy vinyl counter. Her stomach swelled out from under her shirt, the pale flesh around her navel taut as a balloon as she prepared the kabobs. Stunned, Cory could think of no way to excuse, or escape, the morphing of his girlfriend.

“Loving the new old homestead yet?” asked his dad.

“We need to take apart that ceiling,” the son persisted, believing the pregnancy to be a hallucination, a trick. “Getting rid of my ceiling evicts your freeloaders, don't you see that much, Dad? Tear down that, we're both ahead in this game.”

“They were here first,” the father retorted, grabbing corroded tongs from the coathook rack. He stepped through the peeling gray of the cottage door to tend the fire-pit. “Besides, I haven't signed off on the counter-offer yet. This weekend is a dry run.”

That night, twisting and rolling in a mummy bag in the loft beneath the false ceiling, on a musty perfumed mattress in the condemnable cottage, next to his heavy-breathing beer-bellied date sweating in her mummy bag, he dreamed. Included in the patterns, symbols and symbolism, and acting out of interior traumas past and future, he dreamed up the next years of his life. A rather smooth ride, the span of him, in retrospect. Easy-going, and simple, is how the dream resounds...

At daybreak: a sunbeam glint shone on the wedding band on the somehow hairier and thicker ring finger on Cory's left hand. He rolled from under the flannel sheets and stepped into his jeans, then his boots before pulling on a sweater slung over the railing of the loft. Blinking in surprise, he saw the vinyl floor replaced with hardwood, laid with wool rugs. Near a broken-in couch and rocking chair was a black iron pot-bellied stove. Above all this stood a new knotty-pine ceiling, nailed right to the roofbeams. As Cory descended, the stair treads creaked

beneath his weight, and then they became solid and silent. The pine walls were scuffed and bare, set with old then new windows. While descending, he could detect a magical sanding and shellacking of the walls, see a covering over of them by antique frames with heavy oil landscape paintings and old photos of his family, and fishing rods and reels crossed above a motley school of taxidermy sunny, walleye and trout... shellacked, at work and at play. Days lapsed into weeks and months then years. In his mind he could access specific dates, incidents, rites. Yet too for the life of him Cory questioned whether he was among the living.

Was he asleep, dreaming? What was real? Was he refurbishing the cottage, with his dad? Was his dad rich anyway, having made some brilliant investments in computers and data info services? What did he do for a job anymore, was he still in shipping and receiving? Was he married, to Peg? When had he put on all this extra muscle? He racked his brain til it bled — all that thinking; he had to remember to forget, he had to try and just live... He could do the math, he could hear the music. Yet was he playing? Was he being played? Life added up for him only in small sums.

Beneath a rack of vintage copper-bottomed pans, his very pregnant wife was frying flapjacks over a cast-iron griddle on the range. She fed him, hair long and brunette and tied loosely, now short and blond, now medium-length and ashy. Her face puffed up and drew gaunt several times while he ate the stew, the fish, the eggs, the flapjacks again. He felt his beard grow thick and bushy, stroked at it, then looked in a mirror, in the bathroom that was no longer a closet, but an actual room with a shower and vanity, a linen closet, towel racks — he was as freshly shaven as on prom night, the hint of jowels now. His dad grinned, patted him on the back, a joy in his lucid old eyes not seen since Cory was little. They each had a bedroom there; the loft was now for the many guests who sped through the cabin like ghosts.

Offspring? He had them! A pair of infants squalled from a playpen beneath the loft stairs. An addition on the shack was drawn up and got built: two bedrooms, another bath, a shed with indoor and outdoor access. Quickly Peggy lost interest in the boys; she gave them over to their dad for rearing; they enervated her, she said, talking now as though she'd taken some college. She preferred her new baby, a girl. Cory's boys, dark-featured, hyperactive twins age four, or now six, with movie star smiles and moves to match, feigned cops and robbers, shooting each other with squirtguns. Could the man grasp any of this long enough to enjoy himself? As their dad, he had to tell them to get serious and start thinking about earning a living; they were, after all, turning eight, nope, ten. The third child, a blond, reminded Cory of the photo of his mom at that age, aging, older already. At age five she insisted they start the tradition of each of them planting a tree at summer equinox: fir, spruce, pine, maple, oak, birch. Sitting in her granddad's lap on the rocker, amidst the din from the boys' play, she struggled to speak phrases perfectly from a picture book about saving the planet.

In the surrounding acres Cory took the twins camping overnight to learn about their guns, how to clean and polish they already knew from their day treks out and winter nights snug by the stove but the boys were men now, they were old enough, at twelve, to learn how to shoot. They never killed anything. Cory and the boys honored and respected wildlife too much to do it much harm. Even when they fished they threw the littlest ones and the big ones back. College or trade school stood a handful of years away... The boys' friends, a few new ones each month, drifted in and out of the cabin, each one growing some since the last time he visited. Never of a mind to take these friends hunting, Cory nonetheless housed them for a night or two and he or his wife made them meals and entertained them with stories and music. One boy, obese and anti-sports, stuck on hydrogen-fueled vehicles, informed them all that he'd run away from home, where his dad coached all his enemies on the ball team; a trucker stopped on the new highway out the front door of the cabin picked up the fat boy and the two of them disappeared despite national media coverage about the missing youth. Cory felt responsible and secretly thrilled at the idea of him creating a life of his own. But mostly it was quiet round the cabin, with only him and the wife and their offspring.

Once he explained to them how snow hardly ever fell this early in the year, here, "up north". When he had to tell them their granddad died last night, they returned solemn, teen gazes. Peggy was slim and brunette again, an archetypical mom, telling their sister. The sniffling preteen feigned a smile and wandered outdoors; despite warnings to steer clear of widow-makers, she approached a scaly, black deadhead spruce to ask it if it felt anything, to knock on its trunk. Cory ran to shield his daughter with his body as the spruce shook in the earth; the caught maple limb knocked loose fell and narrowly missed him, so he roped off the dying grove and forbade anyone from entering. The groves continued to dance and die, one after another, always one patch near their home sloughed off and needing nixing. His primary reasons for declining to fell the trees: his daughter had an aversion to the snarl of the chainsaw, and whenever he would lift an ax or a handsaw his sons would notice a nest of birds, or squirrels, and get panicky over babies in the boughs.

As for work, Cory supposed he did toil, although the hours of labor passed quick as anything. He chose construction as his occupation, getting a quickie certification and then working independently, erecting and perfecting homes in the region. Plenty of structures benefited from his meticulous mechanically-inclined eye, and his savings also benefitted. The last job he took, when his boys were all set to enter college for their science degrees, would provide for early retirement. See, the nearby resident bachelor named Gage wanted an escalator put in, said he had a fascination with the electric staircases for over 40 years... When the encased charm bracelet and other antique kiddie-items displayed oddly about the cabin raised a red flag in Cory he failed to recall exactly why; and, although Gage told him the power was off at the source, when Cory tipped a screwdriver into the escalator a heinous jolt—.

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James Beach

“Assignment Eighteen”

SOMEONE I WISH TO LIKE
by Tull Alan Oak
Accelerated Language Arts
Prof. Longen, Grade 3, Period 9

To wake up Lester and his sister Lulu we can throw creamed corn at the front door. Or I can knock and when they answer we can rally and push their faces into mud pies. They deserve this. I wish I could like them.

Lester especially deserves a wake up call. They live in the biggest house at the top of the block behind a high fence and look down on everybody from their deck and windows. They even have a pool but I'm banned from there now. All because that older nerd Brain [sic] told me to pin Lester and kiss him on the mouth, and his mom got all mad when she saw.

Now Lester hates me. He spits at me if I'm at the bottom of the stairs and he's above at school. Once he got a teacher to think I was a cheater and another one to think I was pushing study drugs. I push nothing and I never cheat at school or

games. I call him Moe Lester and so do some of the other kids. This is *ironic* since he's a prude.

Last winter I liked him because of his pool and we built forts in the lot at the end of the block, near where the jocks scrimmage. That's where I met nerd Brain, my high school friend with the glass eye. The three of us all got along and played together before the seamy kiss.

At school Lester eats several lunches a day with his sister and only his sister. If anyone sits near them, they move. He gets his step dad to drive him and Lulu to school, to avoid us on the bus. My mom says people like that make pollution trouble. My other mom says it's no wonder their family is morbidly obese. I take the bus or I skateboard the whole way and I'm skinny but growing into puberty fast and tall.

Lulu's a liar! for reals. She told the principal I keep "hassling" her, and we had to have that conference with our teachers and parents. All I wanted was the G.I. Joe she had Lester steal from me (a stud, for her slutty Barbies) and she still lies about doing this. Kids who act like that turn into criminals, said my mom. My other mom stood up for me to her mom.

Now my friends and mestay away, or we spy on them. There's a hole in their fence and we can see them in their huge pool, going down the extra-wide slide and yelling like they're having fun, like they know we're there and they're actors. I want to dump red and blue food-coloring in the water so they get all purple and wreck their towels but I'm a nice person.

Someone I really do like is Huey Mensa. Hu moved in next door over the summer and is a poet who plays the stock market. A family of turtles and some parrots live free and wild in his green house. Hu has a sauna we go in naked and he likes how much I come over. He loves me. We watch movies sometimes. Most are French and Russian ones, starring a boy about my age. Cie la vie! Huey labels everything in his house with "H.M.", even his underwear.

Professor Longen, you might appreciate this last part, since you told our class you believe in ghosts, and you push eerie movies like Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris". A babysitter I had when I was little once told me how a girl who was killed by an escalator kept haunting her, and I'm haunted by her too. So I asked Hu if we could watch "Poltergeist" but he said no, it's a blockbuster. Then he threw the box out! I guess he's trying to keep me independent? Hm.

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