

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 Troupe ExtroVersion, 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.