

# ***New Haven Review***







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**This  
Sickness  
Will Not  
End in  
Death**

**Patrick John Flood**

The first confirmed suicide was a round-faced boy named Manny, who collected bottle caps and liked to play chess and had two younger brothers. The boys were all born here, citizens of no nation. Manny sped a borrowed bicycle into the side of a water truck and died from a brain bleed. He was ten. We ruled it a suicide because he left a note—“Sorry, Mama”—on the table in his family’s shipping container.

The attempt was, in retrospect, Manny’s second. I went through our logs and found that his mother had brought him into the clinic the year before, after Manny had eaten poison stolen from rat traps around the butcher’s shop. The nosebleeds gave him away and Doctor Mendoza rushed him to the hospital where they were able to save his life. Once he had recovered, the hospital doctors sent Manny home, and thinking he was just a little slow, told him not to eat things he found on the ground. I remember Doctor Mendoza, before she left the camp, being confused by a nine-year-old eating poison, but she couldn’t conceive that Manny had done so on purpose.

But his suicide changed what we thought possible. We had until then been stumped by a group of four- and five-year-olds who came down with what appeared to be recurring, treatment-resistant cases of chicken pox. The same children would appear again and again at the clinic, their limbs and faces covered in scabs. We’d tell the parents to wait it out. Reinfections sometimes do occur. After Manny’s note, we realized the obvious: They didn’t have chicken pox. It was self-harm. The children were scratching themselves raw. We put Band-Aids over their fingernails and sent them back to school.

Once we knew what to look for, we saw it everywhere. Two girls disfigured their mouths chewing broken soda bottles. A boy cracked his permanent molars eating rocks. A girl underwent emergency surgery to remove an intestinal blockage caused by the plastic bags she had been eating; she died anyway. One boy ate a small lizard because, he told me, he thought it was poisonous. It wasn't, but the scales made him throw up a lot. Many children chewed pieces of old tires. A boy put out his eye with a rusty nail. A five-year-old plucked all her hair, strand by strand, even her eyebrows and eyelashes. Children came to the clinic with snakebites on their hands instead of their ankles. Mothers complained about coming home to their containers and being unable to cook, their gas canisters empty and their daughters woozy. Several boys lost fingers and toes after it became popular to tie shoelaces around one's digits, cutting off the circulation for days. Every child in the camp began to wet the bed seemingly at once. We took all the scissors away and told fathers to hide their razors. And still swarms of children chased soccer balls around the camp with crisscross scars on their thighs and forearms.

I took it on myself to catalogue these injuries. I had plenty of free time with the clinic's computer because I took the slow graveyard shift my second year at the camp, after I found I slept better during the day. The tremors from the tunnel-busting bombs disrupted my sleep more than sunlight. I used the time between patients to log the cases in spreadsheets and put thumbtacks into a handmade map of the camp, hoping to find a pattern: a tire eater here, by the butcher's street, siblings who inhaled gas there, on the street with the popcorn man. I pestered the dayshift medics to keep better notes on our patient's camp addresses.

I also took the overnight shift because of the overnight nurse, Maggie, who helped me keep notes. She was a broad-shouldered, curly-haired insomniac with whom I was in love. She was married and I was not.

I remember a lot of things from our time trying to help the camp's children. The clinic's slow computer, an opaque Tupperware

full of Band-Aids, the smell of new rubber gloves, the frayed cuffs of my denim jacket, so many dirty little fingernails, my inverted sense of day and night. But most of all I remember Maggie's hiking pants and the curl of her upper lip when she laughed.

I learned a lot from her. She was great with the children—once she was treating a young boy who had stuck a rock up his nose when the clinic began to shake from a too-close bomb. The boy was scared. Maggie fanned her rear and said she'd eaten too many beans. The boy laughed. She taught me how to take a patient history and how to pull someone's forearm taut to keep a vein from rolling. (At times we were so short on doctors and nurses that even I, with no medical training, learned the basics.) I showed her how to stand up and stare at the door, as if expecting someone else, to get talkative patients to leave an exam room. It was a trick I learned during my years as a high-school teacher.

"This too shall pass," Maggie liked to say, in just about any circumstance. A bomb, a stomachache, a frozen computer, another bowl of rice for dinner—all things passed.

"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," I liked to say back, in just about any circumstance, although especially when the computer unfroze. It was a game we played to pass the time between patients.

"It is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword," when grabbing a pen or a syringe or a scalpel.

"And it was good," when turning on the clinic's lights.

"The snake is eating its own tail," she'd say in moments of despair, as when Manny died and we realized the children were hurting themselves on purpose. "One day it will starve."

This one she seemed to really believe. She said it to reassure patients and parents and our volunteer medics and me that this, the camp and the impermanence and uncertainty of existence there, could not last. The politics of now were not the politics of forever.

"The snake is eating its own tail," I'd repeat.

Maggie flew home to her husband every few months. I was

miserable without her. It's a funny feeling to live in a refugee camp without being a refugee yourself. I lived like everyone else. I slept in a storage container and put fabric on its walls to dull the echo, I ate rice and shopped at the makeshift shops and watched a lot of TV, I played chess with old men and children, and I lost a tremendous amount of weight. But my shoes fit—that was always the giveaway. I grew embarrassed by my shoes, as though I were flaunting unimaginable wealth by wearing correct-sized Converse sneakers.

Maggie was like me, both here and not. If she felt the same sense of shame that I did, she didn't let it show, and her ease made me feel better about it all. I counted down the days until she'd come back.

Looking back it seems strange and crass to have thought about love at all while living among so much suffering—to have thought of anything besides the suffering, the suffering of children, the suffering of old women, of young women, of men, of mothers and fathers. But I suppose that just like we become used to the love of a partner and take it for granted, we can become used to suffering in the same way. These once life-altering horrors had become ordinary to me—a mark on a spreadsheet, a little wooden box, a broken bike beneath a water truck, the wheezing of a small boy who was not me. I was used to diarrhea, vomit, blood under my fingernails, needles, dead children. I learned to live with it. The children learned to live without their amputated fingers.

**But then again, perhaps neither love nor suffering ever really** becomes ordinary. I went to Manny's burial with Maggie, a Sunday morning after our shift. As his cousins and little brothers shoveled dirt onto the little wooden box and his mother wept, I remember I began to pray to myself an unholy prayer. Perhaps God might undo this one horror, I asked. "Come forth." I whispered the command in my heart, the same one that Lazarus obeyed. "Manny, come forth." I knew it was impossible and grotesque and still I hoped to see the lid shake and the little boy come out. The disciples could raise the dead.

I believed. Why not here? Why not this prayer? Could I not stop this suffering?

Of course the box did not shake. No one answered my prayer. Maggie asked me what I was saying to myself. I didn't tell her. Children have died before, they die now, and they will die in the future. The grave was filled, we all left, and there little Manny's body remains for all eternity.

## II

Manny was a warning shot. But the first true crisis started with an eleven-year-old in our district, Jessica, who figured out how to strangle herself with a door handle and her school backpack. She had been dead for hours before her mother found her and carried her body to us. She screamed for me to help her daughter. I tried to explain there was nothing to do, her daughter was gone, but she kept screaming. I did CPR until we got a car to drive her to the hospital. I don't know why I did the compressions. The mother was pleading, begging, as though I had killed her child and I alone could bring her back. I pumped harder and harder on the girl's chest and to this day I can feel in my hands the moment her ribs snapped and her chest gave way. Jessica's t-shirt had unicorns on it. Her eyes were open. I slept on the floor of Maggie's storage container for a week.

Three more children repeated the act. We told the schools to cut the straps off their backpacks. The children had to carry their school supplies by hugging the now-strapless backpacks to their chests and it reminded me of a prank we used to play in high school. We'd empty someone's backpack, turn it inside out, and refill it, so that our victim had to rush with his inside-out backpack pressed against his chest to his next class. Now I watched an army of children run about in the same way and it seemed almost funny to me, even though I knew the reasons for it weren't funny at all. They were the worst reasons in the world.

Suffering was ordinary. Strapless backpacks were new.

Cutting the straps wasn't enough. The children kept finding new ways to hurt themselves. Kitchen knives, matches, stray dogs, cars, rusty bikes. They were creative and they had a lot of free time. We had no mental health counselors in the camp and couldn't find any among the residents, so I contacted every therapist in the city whose email address I could find to see if any could come to the camp to train the staff and the teachers in childhood CBT basics, or was at least willing to do so on a video call. No one replied. Maggie and I made a CBT basics sheet that we gave to the schoolteachers and suggested they spend a half-hour each day reviewing it with the children. I have no idea whether practicing "good posture" helped but it was one of the few tools we had. Maggie maintained that it did. She was, oddly, a proponent of the more pseudo-scientific parts of yoga.

"We could try placebos?" she suggested at the end of one night, as we consolidated the rubber gloves into one box. She had just treated a girl who tried to eat a cell phone battery but only managed to cut up her gums. "Give the parents fake happy pills to give to the kids?"

"Would that work on children?" I asked.

"It might be more effective, because they're children. But it also might not work at all, because they're children," she sighed.

I said I'd looked online for research on the subject.

"I don't know that we could even get sugar pills," she said. "We don't have enough real medication. I just don't know what to do."

"Maybe we could fill up bags with 'medicinal' rice? Tell them to take a grain a day?"

"Maybe," she said. "We have a lot of rice."

An older woman came into the clinic complaining of a cough that had kept her up all night. Maggie looked for an intake form.

"A sword, please," she asked, putting the form into her clipboard.

"Ape must not kill ape, Dr. Zaius," I said, tossing a pen to her.

The woman looked at us curiously. She didn't speak English. Maggie took her into the back, examined her, and sent the woman away with pills and an order to rest and eat carrots if she could find them.

“What about a project?” I logged the respiratory infection. “Something for the kids to build. Anything that gives them a sense of self-determination and something to do other than think of ways to hurt themselves.”

An explosion shook the walls and knocked my pens off the desk. Maggie waited for the clinic to stop shaking before she answered. They were bombing again. I thought of the people trying to cross in tunnels.

“A theatre program?” she suggested.

“Some might be too young for that. How about a playground?”

We looked up playground plans online, something the children could make with old car tires. They looked complicated.

**Another crisis put our playground idea on hold. We woke up** one afternoon to find the government had bulldozed the whole nineteenth district, which was outside the “established boundary” of the camp. There was no reason to do this—the camp didn’t have official boundaries because it didn’t officially exist, according to the government. It was even forbidden to make a map of the camp, as if making a map would make the camp more real. I hid mine in the clinic desk for that reason. But the new president had campaigned to do “something” about the migrant crisis, and this was a “something” sufficiently mean to appease his voters.

We had a migrant crisis on top of a migrant crisis. We were overwhelmed with new patients. Every relocated child from the nineteenth district had a diagnosable eating disorder or self-harm disorder or both, and we saw a new influx of children from our own district who had started eating dog feces. They’d laugh at the word “poop” when I asked whether they knew what they were eating. They didn’t seem to understand it was making them sick. We asked people to pick up dog droppings whenever they saw them.

“When does it stop?” I said one night, counting that week’s cases of self-harm in my spreadsheet and putting them on a new map. I suspected that a group of children living by the TV repair shop had

found and hidden a razor blade they were now sharing. “God, when does it stop?”

Maggie looked at me from across the room with alarm—I was shouting, I realized. I hadn’t been sleeping and I felt like someone had locked me in a running dryer for weeks and I had finally tumbled out, sweating and claustrophobic and the whole world still spinning. I felt like I didn’t know which way was up.

“Sorry,” I said. I turned back to my spreadsheet.

Maggie vanished into exam room. She returned with scissors.

“I taped them under a chair,” she said. “Can you trim my split ends?”

I said I would. She sat in my chair and I stood behind her.

“This sickness will not end with death,” she said, as I examined her hair. “We’ll figure it out.”

“The snake is eating its own tail,” I replied, snipping a half-inch off everywhere. I had no idea what a split end looked like. But I loved to hold her hair between my fingers, and concentrating on the work of the scissors made the world stand still.

“I thought more about the playground,” she said. “But I’m worried now it’s too dangerous for the children. Too many ways to hurt themselves.”

“What about a baseball league?” I suggested.

“What about a baseball league. How about a cup of caw-fee?” she said.

“Don’t forget who’s holding the scissors.”

“No,” she teased, spinning the chair toward me and grabbing my free hand. Her palm was electric. I realized it’d been months since I’d touched another person. “The bats might be a bad idea.”

“Soccer?” I said, trying to even out the bottom of her hair. “Football, I mean.”

“All we’d need are nets. We have enough footballs already.”

We had more donated soccer balls than we could ever use, but no goals; thousands of bicycles and no pumps; millions of crayons and no paper. Piles of old XXL shirts that didn’t fit anyone in the

camp. But never enough food or medicine.

“We could have the kids make their uniforms from the big t-shirts,” I said. “And the goals, they could help paint those if we get someone to make them.”

“Where can we put the fields?” she asked.

“The bulldozed district? We’ll get permits.

“We could pitch it as a way to prevent people from moving back in. Wouldn’t the government like that?”

I said I’d talk to the welder who lived on the butcher’s street about the goals and to the tailor on the school street about the uniforms. Maggie said she’d make an appointment with the camp administrator and talk to the teachers.

“This too shall pass,” she said.

“Thus speaketh the constipated man,” I said, and then declared the split ends eradicated.

The roof rattled from a distant tunnel-bomb and we both jumped. This explosion felt closer than normal. We waited to see whether they’d be another one.

“The snake is eating its own tail,” we said at the same time.

**The welder was a bald man with smile lines, a bad tic, and no top teeth.** He still had the sharp gum outline for his teeth, as if all had just been pulled. I didn’t ask. His shop was full of bike wheels in various states of repair. He said he would make the soccer goals for free if we brought him the metal. He told me a big strong man like me should have no problem finding metal, and that his daughter would have liked me.

We got to work. Every morning after our shifts, Maggie and I went to the ruins of the nineteenth district and collected as much scrap metal as we could fit into a wheelbarrow—wire, broken bicycles, pipes, a sheet of chain-link fence. We made friends with a stray dog who would bring me a stick to throw over and over until he’d exhaust himself and go lie in the shade. Maggie named him Snake because he’d chase his own tail when I didn’t throw a stick fast

enough. We'd collect metal in the morning, sleep for a few hours, and work in the clinic at night. Maggie called the administrator's office four times a day until they confirmed an appointment at the end of the month. We had the teachers begin a sewing class, and the children, who loved the idea of a real soccer league, started to make the uniforms. Juan, a clever boy of twelve and a reformed tire eater, made uniforms for referees and declared himself in charge of officiating. We had the older children create a league schedule. It seemed to work. In my spreadsheets, I noted a small but significant drop in injured children and almost none of the children involved with the league came to us with self-inflicted injuries.

After a few weeks the welder told us he could make a dozen full-sized and child-sized soccer goals with the metal we'd brought him. He showed us the pieces of the goals he'd made already. They were ugly, he said, running a hand along the twisted metal, but they were sturdy. He did a pull-up on a small goal to demonstrate and showed us the hooks from which we could hang the nets. We would have our soccer goals. The children would have their league. Maggie threw her arms around me and kissed my cheek.

### III

Our appointment with the administrator was at noon. We took the bus into the city after our shift and waited in the lobby of the government building. We rehearsed again what to say, how the potential benefits for the government came at no cost. We reassured each other that we were not nervous. We waited for hours. Maggie fell asleep on my shoulder and I shivered in the A/C. I had forgotten what conditioned air smelled like. At three, we were brought into a small waiting room outside the administrator's office. At four, the lieutenant administrator ushered us into her office. She told us that the administrator was away for the day but she would take the meeting for him. She sat behind her desk and indicated for us to sit across from her. I straightened the papers we had put together in our least-creased manila

folder. Everything for the league was ready—nets, uniforms, teams, coaches, referees—and all we needed was permission to build the fields. We waited as she looked at her computer. The official portrait of the president hung crooked behind her on the wall.

The dim lights in the ceiling flickered and I shuddered. Children had started climbing utility poles in the last month. We didn't know how they figured it out, but all at once they began to race up the service ladders to reach for the power lines. The lights in the clinic would dim and we'd know we'd be getting a body. Eventually. Sometimes a child wouldn't fall off for a day because children are light and muscles in their hands would stay clenched on the wires. It wasn't safe to pull them down. We just had to wait until they fell.

The lieutenant administrator looked up suddenly, as if she'd forgotten we were there.

"You're here for a permit?" she asked, sorting through papers on her desk.

"Yes," Maggie said. "We wanted to build soccer fields for a children's soccer league. In the camp."

I handed her our folder. She flipped through it once and set it aside. She went back to her computer, as though concerned with something else.

"You're referring to the area outside the city?" she finally said.

"Yes," Maggie said. "The refugee camp."

"And you want to build soccer fields?"

"Yes," Maggie said.

The woman looked at us and frowned. "Is this outside the established area?"

"We hoped to build them in the former nineteenth district," I said. "We thought it'd be a good place for the soccer fields because it's flat and it's been cleared already."

"It would keep the children out of trouble," Maggie added.

"And it'd prevent people from moving back in," I said. "And we think providing something for the children is a win for the government."

“Ah,” said the woman. “Well that unfortunately is the problem.”

“What is?” said Maggie.

The woman sighed and looked at us. “I just don’t know that it’s politically feasible.”

“Politically feasible?” I asked. “A children’s soccer league?”

She rubbed her temples. “The camp, as you call it, is a temporary and unsustainable solution. We can’t allow any expansion—anything that might appear to lend the camp a sense of permanence. This situation will resolve itself only when the people go home. We can’t afford anything that would delay that.”

“Temporary?” I said. “We have seven-year-olds who were born in the camp. We’ve buried children who were born in the camp.”

Maggie touched my arm. I sat back in my chair.

“Respectfully,” Maggie said, “we’re asking only to build soccer fields. They’re hardly permanent structures. The nets are small and movable, and at most we’d add benches. We would like permission, or at least an assurance that it’s not going to be destroyed overnight.”

“Perhaps you can build the soccer fields within the camp’s existing boundaries?” she said.

I laughed. “It’d be easier to build them in this office. There’s barely room to walk down the street now that the nineteenth district is gone.”

“I wish things were different,” the lieutenant administrator said with an exhausted insincerity. “But it’s just the political reality.”

“What about unofficially?” Maggie said. “If we build the fields, can we have an off-the-record assurance that you won’t bulldoze them?”

The lieutenant administrator shook her head no.

“Can we speak to the administrator and hear his thoughts?” Maggie asked. “I don’t think we’re making unreasonable—”

“I can assure you I speak for him on this matter,” the lieutenant said sharply.

She slid our folder back across the desk, stood up and looked at the door. She hadn’t even read the proposal. She hadn’t seen that our arguments were compelling, emotional, airtight. There was no

way anyone could say no if they really considered them. I felt a heat and dizziness in my chest, as though I'd once again been tossed from the running dryer and I felt like the only thing with hot blood inside this dim office.

"That's bullshit," I said suddenly. "The political reality? Are you kidding me? We're trying to give these children the smallest sense of self-determination so they stop killing themselves and you can't even look at our proposal."

"Please," Maggie said to me.

"It's the will of the voters," the woman said, gesturing at the door.

"It's the will of the voters to deny dying children soccer fields?" I said. "For fuck's sake, let us build the damn soccer fields. We're not asking for help or money. We just want you to say you won't knock them down."

"I want to go," Maggie whispered.

"It's complicated, and you are not from here," said the lieutenant.

"It's not complicated," I said. "It's not."

She glared at me curiously, as if I were a stupid zoo animal pounding on thick glass.

I picked up my chair and slammed it down closer to her desk, and then sat in it. "I'm not leaving until we can build these fucking soccer fields," I said.

The lieutenant sighed, unmoved, and went back to her computer. Maggie stood and pulled on my arm to go but I didn't move. I wasn't going to leave until she read our proposal.

"Look at me," I said. "Look at the proposal. Tell me why we can't build these fields."

She typed on her keyboard.

"*Look at it,*" I shouted at her and kicked the front of the desk.

"Please," Maggie said, pulling at my shirt.

The lieutenant, without looking at me, took her phone off the hook and pushed a button. A moment later two large men in uniforms came into the room. They had big guns on their backs. One pulled me from the chair, holding my arm behind me as I struggled.

The other kned me in the stomach. I doubled over and all the air left my body. The same man kned me in the stomach again and I threw up. I felt the burning of vomit entering my lungs when I gasped for air that wouldn't come. They dropped my face in my vomit. Then one of them hit my back with the butt of his gun when I struggled to get up and I fell into the vomit again. They dragged me from the building and down the stairs and dropped me on the sidewalk outside.

I lay on the hot concrete. One of the men pointed his gun at me and pushed the barrel into my cheek.

"Please," I said.

He spat and lowered the gun. They left me on the sidewalk.

I crawled to the side of the building, gasping in pain. Maggie helped me sit up and she sat next to me. She was crying. The sun felt like white fire in my eyes and my lungs burned and the world was still spinning but I was not. People hurried by, pretending not to see us.

"I'm sorry," I wheezed. "I'm sorry."

Maggie used her shirt to wipe my face. I couldn't look at her. Every breath hurt. I tried to take shallow breaths, but it wasn't enough air. I gasped and the pain washed back through my chest. Maggie felt for broken ribs but I pushed her arm away.

"We'll tell someone—government officers just assaulted a camp volunteer," she said.

"She'll say I threatened her."

"We'll go to the newspapers."

"No one will care," I said.

"We care," she said. "You care."

I shook my head.

A policeman told us to move along. We walked to the bus stop and waited in silence.

**"The snake is eating its own tail," Maggie said, breaking our silence as we rode the bus back to the camp. "It can't forever."**

I stared out the open window. I tried to take shallow breaths to avoid inflating my chest. I felt dust in my nose and my shirt smelled

like vomit and the bus itself smelled thick with the beers of the men commuting back to the camp.

“This is just a setback,” she continued. “We have the goals. We have uniforms.”

But I knew we weren’t going to build the fields. The government would just knock them down like an anthill. We weren’t going to save the children. I was a weakling and a coward who just got worked over by two cavemen thugs. This sickness was bigger than us both and nothing was ever going to change and I knew it the whole time—I knew it the whole time but I had let myself be fooled, let the children be fooled, all because of a woman with pretty hair.

“If they destroy the goals we can make more,” Maggie said.

“For fuck’s sake,” I said. “Can’t you see the snake is eating us? It’s eating us. We’re the fucking tail. Everyone in this fucking camp will be dead before the snake starves. Every single person.”

“We can still appeal,” she said. “We’ll build the soccer fields. We’ll build more goals, build more fields if they bulldoze them. You can’t give up. We can’t.”

“Appeal to who? The fucking president?”

“Stop it,” she said.

“Why? It’s the truth no matter how many times you say otherwise.”

“Why don’t you go home if that’s how you feel?” she said.

“Why don’t you? I don’t have a home. You do. You’ve been one foot in and one foot out the whole time.”

Maggie started to cry. “Please don’t shout at me.”

The passengers around us gawked openly at these two people shouting in English.

“Sorry,” I said to her. I don’t think I sounded the least bit sincere but I was. “Maggie, I’m sorry.”

We didn’t talk the rest of the bus ride. She cried to herself. I looked out the window at the river and the fence and the grids of shipping containers rising like tombstones. Our city in the desert, one that did not officially exist, for children of no nation that no one wanted.

**Maggie and I didn't talk that night during our shift. We did the** next night, although just with small greetings and now-hollow jokes. We said nothing about how to tell the children there would be no soccer league.

Maggie went home on leave the following week and then she never came back to the camp. She stopped replying to my emails. But a lot of volunteers do that after they leave. She probably felt she'd failed somehow. That's how I feel now. I don't respond to any emails either.

**After Maggie left, I decided I'd build the soccer fields myself,** permits be damned, Maggie be damned, the administrator and her thugs be damned. I'd do it alone. I'd stand down the bulldozers, like Tiananmen Square. I'd buy a gun and keep shooting until something changed. I'd shoot the bulldozer driver, and I'd shoot the guards, and I'd shoot the lieutenant administrator, and the administrator, and the governor, and I'd figure it out from there. I thought about killing the president of my country and the president of this country. I thought about killing all the fools who'd voted for this—forcing them to eat glass, forcing them to strangle themselves with a child's backpack, forcing them to be bitten by snakes. I thought mostly about killing the guards who beat me up.

I stopped sleeping. I felt like I was in the dryer all the time. They detonated explosives all day and all night. We kept getting thirty-year-old gunshot victims who tried to cross the border and eleven-year-olds who'd bite off their own tongues, rape victims and starving old women. We had two women and a girl all named Maria die in our clinic within two hours of each other one night and it didn't even seem that weird to me. It was ordinary. Everything was ordinary. Nothing broke the spell anymore.

I kept bringing metal to the welder and I piled the finished goals in the nineteenth district. The teachers told me to forget about the soccer league for now, but still I cleared the space for a field and, after a few close calls, started clearing out the snakes too. I'd find

one, lure it out and take the shovel and slam it down, cutting the snake in two. Sometimes the severed heads would twitch after, the mouths opening and closing, trying to lunge at me as they went flaccid. I'd get down close and watch. It was beautiful. The dryer kept spinning. I started killing non-venomous snakes, and lizards, and rats too because I liked it so much. I'd finish clearing space for soccer fields once I'd exterminated everything dangerous in the area.

The government talked about demolishing the whole camp. The ten-year-olds learned to cut their wrists open in water. Tying off fingers until they turned black came back into fashion. I threw away my maps. I ran out of snakes and then one day I killed a stray dog with the shovel. I beat it to death. It jumped out and surprised me and I swung the shovel once in surprise and then again in self-defense and then I couldn't stop myself.

That didn't feel ordinary though. That felt different. The dryer stopped spinning then.

**I sat in the clinic alone the night after I killed and buried the dog.** We had just received a three-months supply of antidiarrheals and ibuprofen and I sorted the bottles away, and then I counted out bandages. I was the only person on duty. We were short on volunteers. A father brought in his son, a seven-year-old, who'd been slicing the soles of his feet with a kitchen knife.

"What can I do?" the father asked as I washed and bandaged the boy's feet. The cuts weren't deep enough for stitches. The father's name was José. He ran a store that sold fresh popcorn. Maggie and I used to visit to smell the oil and watch the kernels pop. I don't remember the boy's name, but I remember he pulled his bloody feet away from my cold hands and giggled. They never stopped being children.

José was shaking his head and looking at his son.

"How could he do this?"

"It's a control thing," I said. "It helps him feel in control."

“What can I do?”

“Let him pick out his own clothes?” I offered lamely. “Let him help cook?”

José shook his head. “He’s seven.”

“The snake is eating its own tail,” I muttered. “One day it will starve.”

José nodded at this. He believed. He still believed that this would all pass.

“But not before it’s done with us,” I added.

The boy’s shoes didn’t fit over the bandages, so I gave him my Converse. I told him to bring them back when his feet were better.

I took a bottle of ibuprofen home with me and sat for an hour alone in my container, reading the bottle’s label over and over. I knew how many it’d take and I also knew it wouldn’t be immediate and I might throw them up. Someone would find me. Would someone find me?

I decided to find new shoes instead. I took the bus into the city but somehow I ended up in a brothel where I was arrested, and I spent the night in jail. And then I never did make it back.



# Letter from Italy

*The writer and the struggle  
for a better life*

**Christopher Thornton**

**From the top of the Torre Asinelli, the twelfth-century brick tower in the center of Old Bologna, the red tile roofs can be seen shimmering in the middle of a hot summer afternoon. Cyclists rumble along the cobblestones on the streets far below, and shoppers dodge from storefront to storefront under the welcome shade of the century-old porticos. Office workers order lunch at sidewalk tables before returning to their workstations, and it is a leisurely affair. This is Italy, after all, and on a midsummer afternoon the bright Tuscan sun bakes the cobblestones and the dense humid air stubbornly waits for a breeze to stir it.**

After leaving the Piazza San Stefano, I was strolling in the direction of the Piazza Maggiore when a man wearing a baseball cap and holding a plastic shopping bag full of tissue packets approached. He was wearing a clean pale-blue Oxford shirt and jeans, with white athletic shoes that hadn't seen much wear. His skin was ebony black.

"I'm from Liberia," he began, and the rest of his speech was delivered with rote precision. He had repeated it countless times since early morning and would repeat it many more before evening. "I'm trying to get back and I haven't had anything to eat since morning. I want to get out of here, go back to Liberia . . ."

His tissues were collected in large bundles of twelve or sixteen individual packets. I was on the road myself and didn't need so many, but said I'd take two in case they might come in handy, and if not, my single euro was a donation to the refugee crisis sweeping Europe.

He hesitated—what to do with the rest?—but a decision had to be made, and he couldn't refuse a euro dangling in the wind.

"Okay, I'll bust it," he decided, and cracked the bundle open and handed me two of the packets. But we weren't finished. "You know what the problem with this world is?" he said. "There's not enough love. That's what it is. There's just not enough love."

It wasn't the kind of remark to expect from someone selling packages of tissues on the streets of Bologna, so my eyes trailed him as he continued down the street. He approached another tourist. "I'm from Liberia . . ."

There was no sale this time, not even a few of the leftover packets. He moved on, ambling slowly, leisurely, in no hurry. There was no reason to hurry. Italians don't move very quickly on hot summer afternoons, and he had no daily quota to meet. Around him, the café tables were filled with lunchtime customers sipping cups of cappuccino and glasses of white wine. He didn't intrude on the café crowd but saved his pitch for the sidewalk strollers—the city-center office workers, the shoppers, the occasional tourist: "I'm from Liberia . . ."

It wasn't hard to catch up to him. And so I did. I told him I liked collecting people's stories, and that he probably had an interesting one to share and that I'd give him five euros if he told me his.

After a moment's hesitation, he said his name was Richard Johnson. It may have been true, or not. It didn't matter. He had come to Italy through the North African migrant route—across the Sahara to Algeria and then the Libyan coast, and finally aboard a boat to the Italian island of Lampedusa.

I asked him what kind of work he had done in Liberia. He had been a farmer, growing cassava, plantains, and yams on a small plot of ground in the countryside. He wasn't married and had no children to look after, because the support for both was far out of reach for a Liberian cassava farmer.

"I loved to see things grow," he said, his eyes widening. "That's what I like to do. I thought maybe I could get work on a farm here, somewhere in the countryside."

His eyes still shone, and then I asked him, a bit stupidly, why he had left Liberia and the life he loved so much. The civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone had been over for 15 years. Shirley Johnson Sirleaf, the African continent's first female president, had been re-elected to a second term and awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. This must have hinted at greater stability, and a brighter future growing cassava

and plantains or anything else he might choose to do. But it failed to appear, for reasons that form endless talking points at international conferences, from the United Nations to the World Economic Forum.

“All of us,” he replied. “All of us, we’re looking for a *better life*.”

I knew exactly whom he meant by “All.” He meant the migrants who were piling into rickety boats on the coast of North Africa in the hope of finding new lives in Europe, and he wasn’t the only one of them walking the streets of Bologna. More young men planted themselves outside the entrances of supermarkets and convenience stores hoping to receive handouts from exiting shoppers. Some sat on stoops or gathered around the fountains with sullen faces and vacant eyes in the small neighborhood piazzas, but when spare change was dropped into their upended baseball caps their faces brightened and they expressed appreciation with a muted mumble or nod. Like Richard they were neatly dressed and sported new athletic shoes, thanks to the euros they had been given after being cleared for entry into Europe. Others fortunate enough to have the connections to what passes for a daily income lugged shopping bags through the streets, offering tissue packets, soaps and shampoo, and ballpoint pens to passersby.

In other Italian cities the peddling gangs were better organized. They spread bed sheets on the sidewalk to form an impromptu bazaar, where they sold counterfeit watches, designer handbags, and sunglasses to locals and tourists alike. With word of police on patrol honing in, they scooped up the goods and dashed around the nearest corner, only to set up shop a little later in another part of the city.

“The leaders, they don’t care about the people,” Richard continued, echoing a sentiment likely shared worldwide. “They only want to stay in power, get money, and when they get it they spend it on guns and ammunition. They only want to stay in power.”

Liberia’s problems began long before Richard decided to give up farming and head to the Mediterranean. In fact, Liberia’s problems began long before Richard was born.

“It all started with Doe,” he said, referring to former president

Samuel Doe, who ruled in the 1980s with unchallenged dictatorial powers after toppling and then executing the previous president, William Tolbert. Rebel groups led by Charles Taylor toppled Doe in 1990. Doe tried to flee but was captured, and before being beheaded his ears and some of his fingers and toes were cut off. This was after being paraded through the streets of Monrovia naked. From Idi Amin to Mobuto Sese Seko to Sam Doe, Africans had had their fill of corrupt dictators and equally corrupt legal institutions, and it was only a matter of time before mob justice would become the face of the new ruling order.

“Doe—he raised the price of rice from fifteen dollars a kilo to forty dollars,” Richard went on. “Before that, we could make a life. As long as we worked we had food, a house—life was good.”

But Taylor also ruled with unquestioning authority, “Prince Charles, we called him,” Richard said, and the tumultuous rule of Charles Taylor, in addition to the war in Sierra Leone, added political instability to what was already economic hardship. Eventually Taylor was also driven from power. He fled the country, was arrested years later in neighboring Niger, and was ultimately sent to the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands, where he was convicted of war crimes for fomenting the war in Sierra Leone and sentenced to twenty years in prison. The world may have applauded. “Justice,” in the most abstract sense, had been served, but its immediate effect, beyond spontaneous street demonstrations in Monrovia and Freetown, was minimal. A distance of more than miles separates the World Court in the Netherlands from rural West Africa. Liberia still wallowed. Going nowhere in a dead end economy, Richard decided his future, if he was to have one, lay elsewhere.

“You can negotiate the price,” he said, referring to the fees paid to the *touaregs* who transport migrants across the Sahara to the coast of the Mediterranean. “It depends on the season, how many people are moving, how much they want the business. Most of the time it’s four, five hundred dollars.”

Richard got a deal. He paid a *touareg* four hundred dollars to get him as far as the border of Algeria, and from there he made his way to Libya. Getting across the border was easy.

“There’s no government there,” he said, referring to what passes for the Libya state, which has had no coherent ruling order since former leader Muammar Gaddafi was executed by a Libyan mob in 2011. “Gaddafi is gone. I don’t know why they killed him. He was a good man.”

Richard’s admiration for Gaddafi surprised me at first, but soon became understandable. Compared to the European leaders who would rail against the waves of migrants arriving on their shores, the Libyan welcome mat was a rare gesture of hospitality.

“Life there was good,” he went on. “I was there three years. I worked in Tripoli as a car washer. I had a little money, enough to eat. We lived in a settlement for blacks east of Tripoli, near the coast. The police didn’t bother us. They knew we were migrants but they left us alone. Then the Arab Spring came. The government fell. Gaddafi was killed. I still don’t know why they killed him. He was a good man. He didn’t bother us. He let us stay.

“Then one day the police came. It was after the government had fallen. They told us we would have to go. The new people who would be charge, they wouldn’t want us here. It wasn’t safe anymore. But they helped us, the police did—they put us in touch with people who would get us to Europe.”

The assistance from the police amounted to connecting the African migrants to people traffickers who would pack them onto overloaded ramshackle boats with the aim of dumping on the shores of Europe. After a bit of negotiation, Richard paid 500 euros for space on a rickety boat that set off from the Libyan coast. But he was one of the lucky ones. The boat didn’t capsize, and he wasn’t tossed into the Mediterranean to be washed up on an Italian beach two or three months later. He, and all the others onboard, were intercepted by the Italian coast guard and taken to Lampedusa.

“I was there for three, four months,” Richard continued. At first his ambiguity surprised me, but then I realized that time can be a very relative notion for the resident of a refugee camp. A refugee camp is, after all, a nether zone where concepts of space and time and past and future are suspended. One enters this zone throwing oneself on the mercy of such abstract concepts as “international law” and “human rights,” which often have little meaning to those who have surrendered themselves. It is a plunge into the unknown with hope that the unknown will not become an abyss.

“There weren’t that many people there then,” he went on, “but now they’re all *full*. There’s *so many* people coming. All the camps—now they’re all *full*.”

He went on: “We didn’t have it so bad. We had a place to sleep, food, and after a while we got our documents.”

The “documents” certified him as an international refugee recognized by the European Union, with license to move within the twenty-eight-member bloc, to find what work that he could. I still wondered how Richard happened to land on the streets of Bologna. There were many Richards on the streets, the “lucky ones” whose flight north didn’t end at the bottom of the Mediterranean—because the boat they piled into was a little more seaworthy, or seaworthy enough to stay afloat till the Italian coast guard picked them up, or—there were an endless number of reasons why some were lucky and others weren’t. There was a large degree of luck that went into becoming a “successful” refugee.

“We go wherever our friends are,” Richard explained. “We have to make friends, to find out where the jobs are, where we can find a place to stay. We have to help each other.”

Around Bologna, the “lucky ones” often gathered in groups of two or three—for protection, for mutual reassurance, for simple companionship. They were never seen lounging on the pavement or curled up on a park bench or piece of cardboard, like the homeless in North American cities. They were usually standing, as if expecting a bus about to arrive, one that would whisk them away from their

circumstances. To where, the destination, did not matter.

I asked Richard where he would like to go, if he wasn't to stay in Italy.

"Maybe Germany, maybe France, maybe Austria," he said, but he was rattling off countries at random, obviously with no idea of what life would be like in any of them. "Anywhere there's *work*," he continued. "You know, *all of us*"—again using the collective *all*—"all of us, all we want is *work*. That's all we want—work. Not this bullshit." To add emphasis, he shook the bag bearing his packets of tissues. Then his eyes clouded over, perhaps as he envisioned the life that his imagination had generated, before he reached the streets of Europe and found a life nothing like he had imagined back on the dirt streets of Liberia.

"You know, you have a little money, you can find a nice woman. You have a little money, you can buy them a coffee, a meal. Let's face it, women like money. You got enough, maybe you can buy a car. You can make a nice life for yourself."

And then he became downright rhapsodic. His eyes wandered into the distance. "You know, I like these Italian women. I like the shoes they wear."

I had to hand it to Richard, he had taste. All around us were Italian women, sitting at café tables sipping cappuccinos and glasses of white wine and wearing shoes that may have come from the fashion houses of nearby Milan. At least one thing then became clear: like the other migrants on the streets of Bologna, he wanted a destination—but it wasn't Germany, or France, or Austria, or it could be any of them. The only thing for certain is that it wasn't Liberia.

Richard's story was at an end, or it had just begun. Whatever it was, it was certainly worth the five euros I had promised, so I took out the note and handed it to him. He accepted it, folded it up, and tucked it away without so much as looking at it.

"You know, this isn't important," he said, tapping the pocket that now held a crumbled ball of paper. "Love, that's what's important. Love."

He did not say goodbye and I don't remember him even wishing me a good day. He just left me with that thought, picked up his bag of tissue packets, and wandered back into the crowd. In a moment he was gone.



# **Fruit Market**

**Laura Mayron**

All their mouths like ripe peaches  
upturned,  
silent murmur in glistening red.  
Passing by the stands of bruised and aching fruits,  
I want to harvest  
their sour pits,  
unleashing a river of honey  
and recreate the glaze of tender saliva  
that their tongues left on my neck.  
Thumbing the harvest,  
I can only think of those lips,  
teeth wet with old moonlight.

# **Ammol, Pasha, and the Ghost**

**Suri Parmar**

### “So you like ghosts?”

Anmol is fourteen. She lives with Nani, her mother’s mother, in a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a ramshackle bay-and-gable house. The house is wedged between brick housing co-ops that shed flakes of paint like feathers off an evening gown. There’s a small lawn in front of the house with two overgrown crabapple trees. On Sundays, Anmol and Nani cover their heads with chiffon *chunnis* and ride a bus to the *gurdwara*, the Sikh temple north of Toronto. There, they pray among women in bright *salwaar kameezes* and turbaned men and dozens of rowdy children.

Anmol wears her mother’s old dance costumes to school. Nani makes her cut off the tiny silver bells sewn at the cuffs and hemlines, but Anmol leaves the sequins and embroidery. She isn’t teased for the way she dresses. Rather, she inspires the girls in her class to scour their mother and grandmother’s closets for vintage clothing.

Pasha has been in Anmol’s class since kindergarten. His real name is Tristan. He thinks of himself as two people. He’s named his secret self Pasha after Pasha Antipov, his favorite character in the movie *Doctor Zhivago*. Like most of the kids at his school, Pasha lives in a large mock-Tudor house, only his backs up to a crowded, twisted woods.

Once, he used to play in the woods every day, and even built a makeshift tree fort behind his house. Lately though, at night, Pasha sees strange lights through his bedroom window that seem to hover in the trees. Green and blue spheres that look like swollen radioactive fruit. He tells his mom, and she says the lights are just fireflies. Tristan agrees, but Pasha, his true self, is spooked.

Tristan is a decent midfielder. He wears a Cristiano Ronaldo jersey and plays for the school soccer team. Pasha is indifferent to sports, except maybe ice climbing. He spends his free time watching Coen Brothers films and BBC programs like *Peaky Blinders* on Netflix.

Tristan makes a big show of liking Daria Hu, the cutest girl in his class, but Anmol is perpetually on Pasha's radar. In grade seven, Tristan teases Anmol for living in Toronto's worst slum. She floors him when she asks, quizzically, why he'd make fun of something she can't help. In grade eight, Tristan follows Anmol home one day and pelts snowballs at her. He misses and accidentally hits a bunch of kids smoking hash in front of a co-op. A boy with a tattooed face pulls out a knife and promises he'll fuck him up if he sees him again. Tristan laughs, but Pasha nearly pisses his pants.

Now that Pasha is in grade nine, and more mature and worldly, he tries a different angle. Early in the school year, he finds Anmol sitting on the school steps at lunchtime. She's eating spinach *roti* and a pot of *raita* and reading a bulky paperback. She shrugs when he asks if he can join her. He sits across from her and chatters to fill the aching space between them. He talks about how he hasn't studied for their math test on Thursday and how he wants to quit the soccer team. She doesn't tell him to shut up, though in fairness, she doesn't acknowledge him either. He talks about his house and the miniature forest in his backyard. She flips a page of her book, and he spots a ghoulish, shadowy figure on the cover.

"So you like ghosts?"

"Sure. They're more interesting than people."

"Well, ghosts are people, technically," Pasha says. Anmol shrugs again. "Sometimes I see things in my backyard," he blurts out, before he can stop himself. Blood rushes to his cheeks. "I'm pretty sure the forest is haunted."

She marks her place in her book and carefully puts it in her knapsack. "Haunted by a ghost?"

"Yeah." He's quiet for a moment. "It might be a dybbuk, like in the movie *A Serious Man*." She looks confused. She doesn't have a Netflix account. "A dybbuk's a Yiddish spirit. They usually haunt people. But I bet they haunt forests, too."

"Why do you think it's a dybbuk?"

"My family's Jewish and it's on our property. If we were your

religion...” He snaps his fingers.

“Sikh,” Anmol says patiently.

“Sikh, yeah. Then it would be a Sikh spirit. Just like how only Catholics are haunted in exorcism movies.”

“I don’t think ghosts work that way.” She swallows a spoonful of *raita* and looks at him levelly. “I want to see it.”

He nearly falls off the steps. “You believe me?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Today, after class.”

“I’ve got soccer practice,” he says, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice.

“How about now?”

He pulls out his iPhone and checks the time with shaking hands. Class is about to start. He’ll forge a note from his dad. “Yeah, whatever you want.”

She brushes crumbs from her magenta skirt and rises, nearly tripping on her sagging hem. He grabs her elbow. They walk down the school laneway, past jeering boys smoking on the greenbelt. Pasha can’t help lapsing into Tristan mode. He affects a deep, lazy voice and orders the boys to fuck off. Anmol ignores them. They walk beneath trees molting golden leaves and shriveled pin cherries. She picks up two cherries and crushes them between her palms. Her hand bumps against Pasha’s, leaving scarlet smears on his fingers.

They reach his house and he asks if she wants to come inside for Coke and chips. She politely refuses. They pass through a gate into his backyard and he follows Anmol into the forest. She doesn’t stop walking until she reaches its dense heart. Amidst pine trees are low, feathery sumac shrubs. Maple and ash trees with greyish bark that rise higher than Pasha’s house. Pale light filters through branches, tattooing their faces with shadows.

The air briefly darkens and takes on a smoky tinge.

Pasha’s hackles rise. But Anmol smiles and breathes the forest’s essence. Damp leaves, crumbly soil, resin. When she tilts her head back, she sees no skyscrapers or condominiums, only the leafy tops of trees stenciled against silver-white sky.

“It’s nice here.”

“Yeah.” Pasha says, still on edge. He glances at a heap of fallen planks, the remainder of his tree fort. The edges of the wood are blackened, as though singed. “The ghost, dybbuk, whatever it is. It might not show up for a while.”

“I’ve got time.”

They sit on the sopping ground. She shivers—she’s only wearing a thin jacket—and leans against him without thinking. His arm slips around her. To his surprise, she rests her head on his shoulder. Here, in the forest, it feels right. She smells like cinnamon and Herbal Essence shampoo. Tendrils of heat rise from their skin, settling in the branches of a nearby evergreen. It twitches, as though pricking its ears.

“Did you know that I liked you?” he asks, forgetting that the forest is haunted.

“You’re pretty obvious about it.”

He has to laugh. “Do you ... can I kiss you?”

Anmol has never kissed anyone before. And before today, she’d have never have considered kissing him. Nevertheless, she raises her face and presses her lips against his. His mouth is clean and firm. She smooths the straight hair on his forehead and pushes her tongue past his teeth. He inhales sharply and her arms encircle him.

“I want you to be my girlfriend,” Pasha says. He’s only kissed a girl once before. Daria, at a party last month. Her mouth had felt strange, all contours and corners. Kissing Anmol is way better, almost unbearably so. He hopes he’s doing it right. He bends his head and kisses her neck, hard enough to leave a strawberry-colored stain.

A wind smelling of oranges blows past. Twittering birds and squirrels fall silent. Anmol pulls away. “Tristan,” she whispers. Her skin is pale, her pupils enormous.

He’s on the verge of telling her his secret name when he looks up. His voice shrivels in his throat.

There are two blue and green lights hovering about ten meters away, one of each color, both the size of a stop sign. They emit whining

noises.

“This isn’t real,” he says, trembling. Anmol slips her hand into his. The wind blows harder and the lights merge into a vaguely humanoid form—it is a ghost after all. “What should we do?” He tries to remember how ghosts are warded away in horror movies. Holy water? The sign of the cross? Maybe he could mark the Star of David in the air.

She chants in a language he doesn’t understand. It takes him a moment to realize that she’s praying. The ghost pulses and swells in tandem with the uneven cadence of her voice. In the distance, he hears dogs barking. Her voice falters. Not knowing what else to do, he recites prayers of his own. His Hebrew is terrible. He hasn’t practiced in ages. The ghost doubles in size and begins to scream.

Abruptly, the air dims and cools.

For a few minutes, Anmol and Pasha sit with their arms around each other, not moving. “Is it gone?”

“Yes,” says Anmol, “but it will be back.” He knows she’s right. The air around them is thick, electric with expectancy. She combs her tangled hair with her fingers. “It’s really mad about something. I think us praying made it feel better.”

“No.” He’s equal parts dazed from Anmol’s kisses and seeing an actual ghost in the flesh. “I’m pretty sure we made it angrier. You saw how it got bigger.”

Anmol thinks for a moment. “We’ll have to come back.”

“No way.”

“It reached out to us for a reason. We have to figure out why.” She puts her hands in his pocket and extracts his iPhone, checks the time. “I should go.”

“Wait.” His mouth finds hers. They forget about the ghost and everything else until the air smells of oranges again and a warm gust testily careens through their hair. Only then do they leave.

**When Anmol arrives home, Nani is in the living room crocheting a striped blanket for her niece’s new baby. When she asks Anmol why she’s home early, she lies that there was a fire alarm at school.**

Nani nods, even though the school secretary left a message saying that Anmol didn't show up for her afternoon classes. She tells Anmol that there's a letter from her mother and father from India on the kitchen counter. Ordinarily, Anmol would tear it open and read it right away. She lives to hear from her parents. But today she stares at the unopened letter and runs a finger along its many dog-eared stamps. The closest thing to hugging her mother and father, who left her with Nani years ago, when she was a small girl. It's nothing, she reluctantly thinks, like Pasha's arms around her in the forest that day. She puts the letter in a shortbread cookie tin that she keeps under the foldout couch in their living room that's also her bed, with the rest of her letters. Nani reminds Anmol that her mother and father will be competing on the dance show *Naach! Naach!* next week and that they'll call as soon as they can afford a long distance plan. Anmol makes a face. They've been saying that for years.

Dinner is leftover *dahl* with rice and cucumber and mint salad. Nani notes Anmol's pallor and dilated pupils and Pasha's kiss beneath her chin. Twenty years ago, Nani had slapped Anmol's mother when she came home with a similar mark on her neck. But Nani folds her lips and tells Anmol to eat more rice. She's too skinny, she says. She needs to stay healthy or she'll miss classes and fall behind in her studies, after Nani went to so much trouble to enroll her in a good school. Anmol nods and draws patterns in her rice with her fork. She asks Nani if Sikh ghosts exist.

She shakes her head. "We don't concern ourselves with these things," she says, in Punjabi. "You shouldn't even talk about them. It's a bad omen."

Too late, thinks Anmol.

**The next day at school, Anmol Googles "Sikh ghosts" at the library.** All in all, the internet isn't much more helpful than Nani. An image search for "dybbuk" yields pen-and-ink drawings of fiendish crones that look nothing like the ghost in Pasha's forest. She reads on Wikipedia that dybbuks are often vengeful and will leave their living

hosts after being helped.

Two hands rest on her shoulders. She tenses, easing when she smells deodorant and cool leather. “Hey,” she says to Pasha, a little shyly.

“Hey, bae.” She cringes. He rests his chin on her head. “What are you up to?” He glances at the computer screen. “Find anything interesting?”

“Sort of. A couple things.”

“Coming over today.” It’s not a question.

“I have an idea how we can help your ghost.”

“It’s not mine,” he says, a little shortly. “Did you think about what I said, about being my girlfriend?”

“I think something must have happened to it when it was alive,” she says, ignoring him. His face falls. “Something bad. It needs peace. I think we can help it open some kind of door, so it can enter the afterlife.”

“You mean the after-afterlife. It’s already dead.” He looks bored. “How are we going to do that?”

“We’ll have to figure it out.”

**“This isn’t working.”**

For the past hour, Pasha and Anmol have been praying in his forest. This time, they’re seated on lawn chairs. Anticipating cold weather, she’s wearing a cable-knit sweater of Nani’s that she borrowed without asking. It smells like Nani, of cardamom and bay leaves.

The ghost appears, winking and growling, blasting hot marmalade wind in their faces. Its brilliant lights coalesce into the shape of a child. Anmol and Pasha pray in Punjabi and Hebrew, respectively. They beg it to speak, to tell them how they can help. But the ghost just roars louder.

“Look, it doesn’t want to talk,” says Pasha. “Can we go inside? Maybe if we leave, it will go away on its own.”

“Shh,” Anmol says. She tries praying once more. “*Waheguru ji*

*ka Khalsa. Waheguru ji ki Fateh.*” Finally, the ghost quiets down and fades into nothingness.

About fucking time, Pasha thinks. He knows better than to say it out loud.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” says Anmol, as they drag the chairs back into his garage. “It looked like it was expecting us. We might have to come every day.”

They enter his house. The kitchen is cool and open, all metal appliances and blond wood. Across the kitchen is a den with cream leather chairs and sofas and a deep carpet. On every surface are glass vases filled with pussy willows and sparkling beads.

Pasha’s mother is at the kitchen counter, engrossed in a Mac-Book Air. She’s tall, with frizzy red hair and rounded shoulders, her plump figure wrapped in a graphic print dress. She looks askance at Anmol’s raggle-taggle clothing and sees how Pasha’s eyes follow her every movement. She asks Anmol if she’d like to stay for dinner. They’re ordering Swiss Chalet. But Anmol says no, she’ll be heading home soon. Pasha takes Anmol by the hand and leads her upstairs, to his room.

It’s smaller than Anmol expected, with a dark walnut desk and chair that look like they were bought at a garage sale. The shelves are laden with books, DVDs, and peeling gilt trophies decorated with plastic soccer balls.

“Mom makes me keep them out,” Pasha says, embarrassed.

On the desk are a large flat screen monitor and an Xbox console. The walls are covered with movie posters. *Diner, Raising Arizona, Repo Man, Withnail and I*. The largest is of a man with friendly eyes and a pompadour, wearing a dark suit.

“David Lynch,” says Pasha. “A director. He used to be a painter. I think you’d like his movies. I can show you on Netflix.”

But Anmol wants to talk about the ghost. “I was thinking we could make an offering. I could give away all my savings when I go to the *gurdwara* this Sunday.”

“The what?”

“Sikh temple. You’re supposed to give money when you visit. I don’t have much, but maybe it will convince God to give the ghost peace.”

“Does God make bargains?” Pasha says. He’s not sure why he’s asking. He doesn’t even believe in God.

“I may as well try.”

He pulls her into his arms. “Can we talk about something else?”

“This is kind of important,” Anmol says. But they lie back on his bed and she coils her body around his. When he kisses her, she glances at his door.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “My parents are cool.” In response, she presses against him and feels his beating heart, his breath quickening. Their fingers twine and he pushes his body against hers, hard.

A knock at the door. Forgetting that his parents are supposed to be cool, Pasha springs away, disentangles himself and straightens his clothing. Pasha’s mother enters and puts a few takeout containers on Pasha’s desk, along with plastic cutlery, cans of juice and pop, and brownies wrapped in cellophane. She brought food for Anmol anyway. Anmol has never eaten takeout food before, or even drunk pop. It’s too rich, salty and sweet all at once. But she eats everything, down to the last brownie crumbs.

“I want to go with you to the temple,” Pasha says.

“I don’t know.” Anmol licks her fingers. “It might be weird.”

He’s insulted. “Why would it be weird?”

“You might not like it. And...” She pauses.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Later that night, when she’s home in her sofa bed, she uses the light from Nani’s ancient cellphone to read her mother and father’s latest letter. They’re excited about appearing on *Naach! Naach!* They miss Anmol dearly, but she’s to listen to Nani and not give her a hard time. The letter ends with them promising they’ll visit soon. When Anmol finishes reading, she notices, for the first time, that her mother and father’s handwriting is tidy. Too tidy. Elegant and spidery—a bygone style favored by Indians born during the British

occupation. She wonders if Baba, her father's father in Chandigarh, has been writing her all this time, pretending to be her mother and father. Anmol knows she should be angry. But she's feels a queer, almost languorous, emptiness. After she puts the letter in the tin under her bed, she stays awake until the black sky outside pales to pinkish grey and the alarm on Nani's phone beeps to signal morning.

**On Sunday morning, Anmol and Nani dress in traditional Indian garb and walk to the bus stop near their apartment. It's an unusually sunny day. Anmol luxuriates in the warmth, but Nani remarks how she can't grow accustomed to Canadian weather—freezing one day, muggy the next.**

Pasha is waiting for them at the bus stop. He's wearing a white button-down shirt beneath his rugby jacket and gleaming square-toed loafers. Nani frowns when Anmol greets him with a hug, but she holds her tongue. During the bus ride to the *gurdwara*, Nani doesn't look at Pasha. She snaps at Anmol to sit up straight and stop picking at her lips. He pretends to play Cube on his iPhone.

They arrive at the *gurdwara* at ten. It's gold and marble and several stories high, a gilded pearl in an industrial landscape of grey-brown factories and strip malls. The three of them enter the foyer and remove their shoes amidst crowds of visitors. Nani frets in Punjabi that "the boy's" shoes are too nice, and makes Anmol hide Pasha's behind a shelf in the cloak room so that they won't get stolen. There are scarves in a bin for people who aren't wearing turbans or head coverings. Anmol selects a green satin handkerchief and knots it around Pasha's temple, tucking the points behind his head.

The main prayer room is furnished with sheer white curtains and patterned carpets covered with muslin sheets. An aisle bisects the space, terminating in a raised stage with carved gold pillars. On the stage is a low pedestal holding what Pasha assumes is a holy book. Anmol gives Pasha a toonie from her tiny purse; he copies Anmol and approaches the book, throws the coin in front of the pedestal and kneels until his forehead touches the ground.

They sit on opposite sides of the room, Pasha on the right with the other boys and men, and chubby toddlers running in circles. A turbaned man reads aloud from the holy book, in Punjabi. Pasha watches Anmol as she bows her head and fiddles with her now-empty purse. He knows she's praying for the ghost. He feels gawky and hulking in this room, with its fancy textiles and incense smell. He wishes he were back home watching movies in bed, the familiar scent of fabric softener wafting over him.

After the service, a man carrying a plastic bucket presses a napkin and a handful of pale, oily meal into Pasha's cupped palms. "You don't have to eat it all," the man says, smiling. "Just a little, to show respect."

Pasha eats it all. It's delicious. Warm and sweet and oddly familiar. Anmol, he notices, only eats a small bite of hers and throws the rest away, despite Nani's scowls. He feels a bit better.

The three of them reconvene downstairs in the temple cafeteria, where Pasha accepts a tin cup of water and a plate of rice pudding from an old man. There's no furniture, except for a few seats for the elderly and disabled. They sit on the ground. While they eat, Nani relaxes and asks Pasha if he enjoyed the prayer. She smiles when he truthfully answers that it was peaceful.

During the bus ride home, Nani leans her hennaed head against the window and drowns. After a long week working double shifts at the dollar store, she's exhausted. Afternoon sunlight streams into the bus, making her skin look papery.

Anmol puts her hand on Pasha's knee and takes his hand. "I have a good feeling about what we did today. I think it helped the ghost."

"Yeah?" He turns on his iPhone. It buzzes with a slew of messages. "Shit."

"What's going on?"

"Shit, shit, shit." He listens to his voicemail. "I gotta go. Like, now. My mom and dad need me home. I'm going to jump off and take an Uber home."

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you later. Can’t talk now,” he says, rising.

Her stomach drops. Whatever’s going on must be tied to the ghost. What else could it be? “Let me come with you.”

“What about your grandmother?”

“She’s fine.” They glance at Nani, crumpled and frail in her seat. Pasha gives Anmol a funny look. She averts her eyes. “She travels around the city on her own all the time.”

“My mom’s freaking out. She doesn’t need any distractions right now.”

“Will you just tell me what happened?”

“I will tomorrow, at school.”

But Anmol won’t give up easily. “You shouldn’t ride Uber alone. It’s not safe. Just let me come”

As Pasha stares at her, she feels her cheeks growing warm. He makes sure that Nani is still sleeping and gives her a brief kiss. “I’ll see you in class.”

He gets off. She watches him through the window as the bus ambles away. He’s slouched over his phone, eyes narrowed, forehead creased. She closes her eyes and prays for the ghost once more.

**Once Anmol is home, she changes into jeans and an old flannel shirt of Nani’s. While Nani is preparing dinner, she slips out of the apartment and sprints the eight blocks to Pasha’s house.**

Two—no, three—shrieking fire trucks are parked on his street in a bright zigzag, blocking his house from view. There are police cars, too, even an ambulance. Maneuvering her way through the crowd, Anmol sees wisps of black smoke lazily rise from Pasha’s backyard into the sky. The smoke has a faint, almost imperceptible greenish tinge and smells like an orange grove gone up in flames. Briefly, the smoke takes on the shape of a face. Feminine features, narrow eyes, thick, upswept eyebrows.

The ghost. Anmol shrinks at its fury.

Firefighters and police officers are grouped on Pasha's lawn. Anmol spots Pasha at the foot of his driveway. His shirt is untucked and unbuttoned at the collar. Strands of hair fall in his face. Close by, his mother barks questions at a police officer. She's a mess. Pasha and a tall man in a tan windbreaker, who must be Pasha's father, tug at the sleeve of her soot-smearred bathrobe. The naked worry on their faces as they flutter around his mother. It occurs to Anmol that her parents have never looked at her that way.

At that moment, Pasha turns and sees Anmol. The crease in his forehead deepens. He mumbles something to his father and rushes over.

"What are you doing here?" he says. He steers her away from the crowd. "I said I'd see you tomorrow."

"I saw her. I saw the ghost, her face, floating over your house. She's doing this. We have to talk to her. We need to calm her down."

"Who gives a shit? Look, you need to go. Things are really messed up right now."

Anmol notices that Pasha's mother's hands are clumsily bandaged. "Is your mother okay?"

"Not really, no. She was in the house eating lunch when the fire started. She ran out and—"

"The ghost is probably mad because we didn't visit today," Anmol interrupts. "We have to talk to it and explain why we didn't come. That we were trying to help."

"Don't you care?"

Anmol is confused. "About what?"

"Anything. My mom, my house. Your grandmother. Me. Only that fucking ghost."

"I'm trying to help you!"

"Help?" Pasha's voice rises. "This is all your fault!"

"How?"

"The ghost didn't do anything until you came along. It was your idea to pray, to talk to it, go to the temple. And now look."

“Me?” Anmol’s mouth drops open. “You asked me if I wanted to see it.” She steps back. “It doesn’t matter. We have to stop it. What if it hurts you, too?”

“The fuck do you care?”

“Tristan!” But he walks away.

She steps backward until her feet find the street curb. She sits and watches as Pasha and his father coax his mother into the waiting ambulance. In the fading light of the evening sun, crowds disperse and the fire trucks and police cars skitter away, though the halo of smoke over Pasha’s house remains.

After everyone is gone, Anmol feels the ghost’s electricity prick at her skin reproachfully. “I’m sorry we didn’t come today,” she says. “You didn’t have to do all this.” It responds with a blast of sooty air in her face. Coughing, she whispers a few passages from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book. Her words ring hollow. She’s painfully aware of the space next to her, of Pasha missing by her side.

**Later that week, Anmol and Nani visit a family on the second floor of their house: Siv, who’s from Sri Lanka; his wife, Mira; and Kaj, their toddler son. Anmol and Nani stream the latest episode of *Naach! Naach!* on Siv’s laptop. They skim past the opening song-and-dance numbers to Anmol’s parents’ act. Her mother and father perform a rollicking *bhangra* routine and the audience claps along. Kaj, seated at Anmol’s feet, claps, too. He hugs Anmol’s legs and leaves drooly marks on her skirt. When Mira orders him to leave Anmol alone, Anmol picks him up and plops him on her lap.**

The laptop screen is cracked, so that Anmol’s mother and father look slightly aslant. Her mother is in a periwinkle silk costume that exposes her taut midriff. Her arms, ankles, and rounded throat twinkle with silver. A diamond winks on her left nostril. She’s contoured her cheeks and nose with cream blush and bronzer, full lips limned with dark pink lipstick. When Mira sniffs at her painted face and bare stomach, Nani gives her a black look.

Anmol's father is in emerald silk with a rhinestone aigrette pinned to his turban. He leaps through the air, a verdant lick of flame. Her mother circles him and bends her arms and fingers. With each cheer from the audience, her father soars higher and higher and her mother's contortions grow more intricate. One last leap and they cease, panting and bowing as earsplitting applause crashes all around them. As the camera closes in on their faces, Anmol sees faint lines around her mother's eyes and across her forehead. Her father's eyes are lined with dark circles that are visible beneath a sticky layer of concealer. Their skin is greyish, almost withered.

The audience claps and claps despite the judges chiding that they need to get on with the show. It's pure nectar for Anmol's mother and father; as the audience cheers, the seams disappear from their faces. In Anmol's eyes, their skin loses its sickly cast and grows incandescent. They're lit by an invisible sun. They seem to grow a head taller.

Tears fill Anmol's eyes. They're gone. Forever. Not that she ever had them. She'll never be able to compete with the adulation of a packed television studio, of millions of fans glued to television screens. Then and there, she realizes that her mother and father are never coming home. She hugs Kaj tight, soothed by his baby powder smell.

Her mother and father agree to perform an encore. One judge, a Bollywood star with blown-out chestnut hair and a throaty voice, asks in Hindi if they'd like to dedicate their dance to anyone special.

"Our daughter in Canada," Anmol's mother says. She laughs when the judge coos that she looks too young to be a mum. It's true. Anmol slams the laptop shut.

"Don't you want to see if they win?" Nani asks.

Anmol silently transfers Kaj to Mira's arms and clomps upstairs, to the apartment. Once inside, she yanks her mother's dance costumes from her drawers and packs them into a plastic garbage bag. She unzips her fuchsia satin smock and kicks it into the bag, too. As an afterthought, she adds her tin of letters. She yanks the

bag through the living room window and steps onto the fire escape. A sharp wind leaves goosebumps on her bare skin. She stays put, even when she hears catcalls from the adjacent alley. With a heave, she dangles the bag over the railing. A rusted dumpster quietly waits below, its open mouth gaping. And then she has an idea.

She drags the bag back inside the apartment. Nani has left her cellphone on the kitchen counter. Anmol picks it up and dials Pasha's number. The call goes straight to his voicemail.

"Hey, it's me. I'm sorry for acting like a jerk." She takes a deep breath. "I need your help."

**They meet in front of his house at midnight. The sky is dark and matte, save the odd winking satellite. The air still smells like singed fruit.**

He disembarks from his bike. "Sorry I'm so late. I came all the way from Vaughan. We're staying with my aunt until the police finish up here."

"You didn't have to come. It means a lot."

He shrugs, looking away. "I guess I'm sorry, too. For what I said—"

"Don't worry about it. How's your mother?"

"Not good. The cops think the fire was a freak accident. But she's not stupid. She thinks someone started it on purpose. It's driving her crazy."

"I hope she'll be okay. She's nice."

"Yeah." He glances at her garbage bag. "What's that?"

"All my clothes. Well, all the ones my mother gave me. I'm making another offering to the ghost."

"That's not fair," says Pasha, feeling a little selfish. He can't imagine Anmol not wearing her costumes. "Why does the ghost get everything? Anyway, the last time you tried, it went crazy."

"This is different from money. Something I need to do."

He's about to ask why when he sees the look on her face. "Whatever you want."

They hold hands and walk into his backyard. It's encircled with yellow police tape. The forest is scorched, trees divested of branches rising smooth and shiny like pokers from soft piles of ash. Anmol is reminded of an old woodcut she once saw at the museum, of Balkan peasants and soldiers impaled on sharpened stakes. As they approach the forest, the air takes on a greenish shimmer. The ghost.

"Careful," Pasha says.

"Do you think we should pray?"

"Dunno. I'm just following you."

"All right." She bows her head and murmurs a few words in Punjabi. The air stops glimmering. With a jerk of her arm, the garbage bag soars towards the trees. It hits a stump. Bright swaths of fabric scatter on the forest floor.

Nothing happens. They wait five minutes, then ten.

"I guess that's it."

Her shoulders slump. "There has to be something else we can do."

"Maybe it worked. Who knows?" They turn to leave.

The ghost blocks their path.

A woman. Well over six feet tall, mushroom-pale skin streaked with rot, long seaweed hair cascading over naked breasts and thighs, like Lady Godiva. Palms outstretched in a halting gesture, lips parted, breath reeking of lemons gone off. It exhales, enveloping them with stinking wind. Anmol stifles a scream.

But Pasha stares into the ghost's bottomless black eyes. It meets his gaze, twitching with rage. "You want something from me, too," he hears himself say. "An offering."

The ghost opens its mouth in a wordless shriek. Yes.

"I don't have anything to give."

"What are you talking about?" Anmol says. She's still holding his hand. He feels the squeezing pressure of her fingers. It's purely reflexive. Her skin is icy. There's nothing behind the gesture.

Something resembling a smirk appears on the ghost's face.

"I know," Pasha says. "I guess I've always known. But I had to try with her."

“Tristan!”

Pasha ignores Anmol. “Just like you tried with us. Whatever’s bothering you, we can’t help. It’s for you to figure out.”

“Stop it! You’ll make her mad!”

It’s too late. The ghost screeches and looms over them. Anmol pulls Pasha to the ground. They shield their faces, bracing for the worst. And then a bright rectangular light appears, obliterating all else.

Silence and then darkness. The sound of cars driving past, wind blowing.

They open their eyes. The air feels flat. Burnt and stale, bereft.

“She’s gone,” Anmol says sadly.

“For real this time?” Pasha says. He tries to stand and his legs buckle. She props him up.

They scan the trees. The plastic garbage bag is in tatters. Anmol’s clothing has disappeared. Not a scrap remains, though shreds of torn paper fleck the forest floor.

“For real. I can feel it.”

He absently picks up a piece of paper, brushing away a few flecks of ash. It’s decorated with delicate loops and swirls, a foreign language. He puts it in his pocket.

**The streets are empty as Pasha walks Anmol home. No drug dealers, no drunken patrons staggering out of pubs. All is quiet.** “I hope you you’re not in trouble for being out so late,” Pasha says.

“I’ll be fine,” she says. “I hope the ghost will be okay, wherever it went. I’ll miss her.”

I won’t, Pasha thinks.

“What did you mean back there, when you said you had to try?”

“Nothing. I promise.”

“Okay.” They keep walking. “Maybe I could come over some time,” she offers, as they approach her house. “After things calm down, when your mother’s better. We could watch a movie. That director you like.”

“You don’t have to,” he says.

“I want to.” They hug, awkwardly. “Bye, Tristan.”

“Goodbye, Anmol.” He looks at her, then hops on his bike and pedals away.

She enters the house and tiptoes upstairs to her apartment. Without bothering to change into pajamas, she removes the pillow she’d stuffed under the covers of her bed, earlier that night, after Nani went to bed. She lies down and the springs loudly protest.

“Anmol?” Nani calls from her room.

“I’m just getting some water,” Anmol responds in Punjabi. “Go back to sleep.”

A few seconds and Nani’s snoring resumes. Anmol pulls her blankets under her chin. She can’t sleep. She’s jittery and subdued all at once. She wonders what her mother and father are doing. They’re likely on the road again, maybe auditioning for another show. She feels sorry for them. Sheathing themselves in gaudy clothing and stage makeup. Living paycheck to paycheck. Forever chasing elusive scraps of fame.

She closes her eyes. Smiling slightly, she remembers green and blue lights in an altar of trees. Tristan leaving his mark on her neck, the smell of citrus and pine. And the ghost’s watchful eye.

# Letters to his Neighbor

*The writer suffers in place*

**Anelise Chen**

**One winter when I was struggling to finish my novel, I went** to Paris to séance with dead writers in a last ditch Hail Mary for inspiration. Or commiseration, more like. The problem was that I couldn't write. I know: a writer's agonies are all too easy to dismiss in light of the world's greater tragedies, and to complain of spiritual malaise as a writer is almost to complain of the very parameters of one's chosen profession. But since pain levels all reason, that winter I was not exactly pining for heroics, but rather, for sufferers-in-arms.

My oldest college friend was in Paris finishing up his doctoral work in Comparative Literature and graciously agreed to host me last minute. As I traveled to his address, I thrilled, stupidly: *Soon I will be in the company of an equally condemned person.* To my horror, when he intercepted me on the corner of his street, he looked rosy-cheeked and healthy, a baguette tucked under his arm. He was doing great. He was in a special seminar with a famous theorist. They met weekly in the theorist's apartment and they were all required to wear Japanese slippers and silk robes.

"So how are *you*?" he asked cheerfully, "What did you want to do here?"

What did I want to do? I repeated his question back to him, tears pooling suddenly. It was a sensitive issue. It seemed I had arrived here precisely because I had only done what I wanted to do, my entire life, that is, I had become a writer. I was here to figure out why I had made such a bad decision, and why others before me had made the same bad decision. I was here to see if this decision could be undone.

I told him I wanted to see Proust's famous cork-lined bedroom at the Musée Carnavalet. His eyebrows did a little pushup on his forehead. "Really?" He seemed surprised. "That's sort of kitschy, right?"

**The next morning, we went to the Musée Carnavalet to see the** recreation of Proust's bedroom. I remembered reading somewhere that the two iconic sites of literary communion, where the visitor could burrow deep into the heart of solitude, were Thoreau's cabin and Proust's cork-lined room. Proust seemed to me the apotheosis of a writer who *couldn't even*. Noise, loneliness, bad hair, spurned love, asthma, constipation—he had suffered from all of it. Famously referred to as a man born without skin, he was sensitive to the extreme, and could not tolerate smells, light, most foods, and above all, noise. Having suffered from debilitating asthma since the age of nine—which his harshest critics suspected was purely psychosomatic—he kept his windows tightly sealed and the doorway blocked with a heavy blanket. Shut away from the outside, he would spend the last dozen or so years of his life in bed. “The social butterfly became a literary caterpillar,” as Adam Gopnik said of Proust's backwards life trajectory.

Because he seemed to have fewer attacks in the evening, Proust eventually adopted a nocturnal schedule, sleeping at around nine in the morning and waking in the late afternoon. This schedule meant that the sounds of the living became a constant torture. “There is an inanimate object which has the capacity to exacerbate which no human being can ever attain: a piano,” he once griped. Striking hammers, sharp human voices, carpet beating, all of it was intolerable. He nearly expired from frustration during a neighbor's renovation project: “A dozen workers a day hammering away with such frenzy for so many months must have erected something as majestic as the Pyramid of Cheops.” He would repeat this joke with variations on other works of art—the Sistine Chapel, for instance—for anyone who would listen. In yet another letter, he complained to his landlord that his neighbors were having sex too loudly. To keep these noises at bay, he lined his entire room with cork.

**The simulation of the corked room at the Musée Carnavalet** was unassuming, a corner within a larger room cordoned off with

a length of tasseled rope. The set-up recalled an impromptu thrift store showroom: a few pieces of threadbare furniture and a narrow bed with a blue bedspread. Standing before it, I tried to summon a sense of awe: Here, in this bed, Proust wrote *The Remembrance of Things Past!* But the cork tiles reminded me, with a shudder of recognition, of the acoustic ceiling tiles in my own Chinatown apartment. As a simulation, the assemblage achieved its intended purpose: I was transported. I saw Proust sitting there with knees up, underneath a mountain of blankets, pages propped up beside his dark lamp. It was as though I were looking at my own future, remembering Javier Marías's warning about getting too close to one's literary heroes: "The one thing that leaps out ... about these authors is that they were all fairly disastrous individuals ... their example is hardly likely to lure one along a path of letters."

After a recuperative coffee, I wondered whether I should continue my quest to commune with dead writers. The visit to the room had been almost harrowing. Fine, I thought, if the consequence were that I would never write again, I could settle definitively into a life of accounting. So, in the same spirit of slash-and-burn, I went with a kind of fevered zeal to other sites of absurd circumstance. I went to the former Balzac residence to see the trap door he built to run away from creditors. And the coffee grinder he used to grind—and then eat—his coffee. I went to the bars along the Left Bank where writers had learned not just how to write but how to endure penury, nursing a single café crème all morning. I stood in the bathroom where Fitzgerald and Hemingway had apparently sized up one another's genitals. I went to the corner where Barthes was fatally struck by a laundry cart while crossing the street. I went to the bug-infested hotel where George Orwell had stayed while working as a down-and-out dishwasher, then to the Hotel d'Alsace where Oscar Wilde had died, boasting: "I am dying beyond my means!"

What a group to belong to, I thought, pausing for ice cream outside Hemingway's dismal, unheated apartment on Rue Cardinal Lemoine. I gazed up at the fuzzy night-stained plaque that com-

memorated his presence. Writers were truly an unenviable bunch, as hapless as children.

**Before leaving, I took one final excursion and ended up at the Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits (MLM) along the Saint-Germain-des-Prés.** I landed there on accident, originally searching for a corner where Georges Perec had advised his pupils to stand and record “what is of no consequence.” Overly air-conditioned and off the tourist beat, the museum was empty. All that afternoon, I inspected pieces of paper detritus in complete solitude.

Looking at scraps of moldy paper turned out to be a riveting experience. The artifacts immediately brought forth the embodied presence of the writer. You felt the swoop and curve of their hand behind each scrawl. Language was the medium of a writers’ art, but it was also the medium she used to record debts, register complaints, and divulge insecurities. I lingered over a letter written by Jules Verne to his father, itemizing his expenses and begging for a higher allowance (“I can’t do without books—it’s impossible!”). Another letter was written by Camus, despairing that his four years of labor on *The Plague* had resulted in nothing.

With each scrap of paper I felt conviction returning. All of these famous writers were completely miserable! I was nobody, and my work was nothing, but even these writers who had composed masterpieces were spared no relief from daily woes. Suddenly my own situation seemed less bleak. I stayed all day in that chilly, neglected museum, moving slowly through each exhibit, and, when I had inspected everything, settling down to flip through the exhibition catalogs. It was here that I encountered the letters of Marcel Proust for the first time.

**Last August, New Directions published *Letters to His Neighbor*,** a translation of previously undiscovered letters, published by Gallimard in 2013, that Proust wrote to one Mme Marie Williams, the wife of a dentist whose practice was directly above Proust’s bedroom

at 102 Boulevard Haussmann. Proust lived there from late 1906 to the spring of 1919, the second to last residence before his death. The trove of twenty-three letters had been placed in the collection of the Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits by Mme Williams' grandson.

The New Directions edition, exactly translated by Lydia Davis, hews close to the original. It includes the same foreword by pre-eminent Proust biographer Jean-Yves Tadié, in addition to a lengthy translator's afterword by Davis. Also included in the English edition is the brief but unforthcoming "note on the French edition," which mentions, without showing its hand, that the MLM had been "closed in late 2014." (In fact, several months after my suspiciously peaceful visit there, the MLM was raided by French authorities for possibly serving as a front for a sham investment scheme. The museum's founder, the financier Gérard Lhéritier, was arrested on suspicion of orchestrating the most elaborate Ponzi scheme the art world has seen in recent years.) The letters, however, seem to be genuine, and taken together, they retain a cohesion rooted in context. Tadié characterizes them as an "epistolary novel," tracing the development of a tender friendship between two suffering artists. Marie Williams was an idealistic harpist married to a practical American dentist, a "disparate" couple, Proust had suggested to his housekeeper, Celeste Albaret. Although we don't have the corresponding letters that Mme Williams sent to Proust, it seems she, too, wrote letters dripping with flattery, flirtation, and over-the-top affection.

Mostly, the letters are about noise.

"You are very good to think of the noise. It has been moderate up to now and relatively close to silence," Proust writes in Letter 4. "These days a plumber has been coming every morning from seven to nine; this is no doubt the time he had chosen." The postscript for Letter 13: "The successor to the valet de chambre makes noise and that doesn't matter. But later he knocks with little tiny raps. And that is worse." These are only two examples, picked at random, among many. Occasionally Proust's tone veers into peevishness—"Permit me to tell you frankly. Yesterday ... I was a little bothered

and you will understand why”—before settling into needy chiding—“How I would like to know Madame how you are. I think of you all the time.”

These swerves of mood and temperament are why one gravitates toward letters and diaries: they reveal something true underneath all the artifice of fiction. There is a particular pleasure to reading Proust’s letters precisely because they are unflattering. When some of Proust’s correspondence was first published in the late 1920s, Proust aficionados were appalled, believing that they tarnished his reputation. According to French scholar Victor Brombet, Proust’s letters made the esteemed author seem “effete, obsequious, and snobbish,” his personal communications “filled with affectation, ceremonious flattery, and hyperbole.”

*Letters to His Neighbor* will not change that perception. In these letters, Proust prostrates himself with cunning and ingenuity, contorting his words into elaborate compliments, equivocations, apologies, while relentlessly sending flowers, books, and even pheasants to Mme Williams. It’s the kind of behavior one expects of any insecure people-pleaser. Proust knows that Mme Williams holds the key to a good day’s sleep, so he must be convincing, and, above all, likable. He is at turns apologetic, accusing, contrite, and servile, often undercutting his own pleas in the most spectacular fashion.

In Letter 2, for instance, written at 1 a.m., possibly at the end of 1908 or beginning of 1909 (the letters are all undated), Proust apologizes for a previous request for silence with such ingratiating obsequiousness it borders on comedy. In a counterintuitive move, he insists that his previous demands for silence be *ignored completely*:

Madame, I thank you with all my heart for your beautiful and good letter and *come to ask you on the contrary to allow all possible noise to be made starting now.* (Emphasis his.)

Chagrined, the next lines that follow:

I had in fact not anticipated a shortness of breath so severe that it prevents me from trying to sleep. *Noise will therefore not bother me in the least* (and will be all the more relief for me on a day on which I could rest). (Emphasis mine.)

Absent the original letter from Mme Williams, one can only conjecture its contents, but it's likely she may have apologized for disturbing his rest, or characterized herself as an "annoying neighbor." To counter her self-blame, Proust is compelled to respond:

Don't speak of annoying neighbors, but of neighbors so charming (an association of words contradictory in principle since Montesquieu claims that most horrible of all are, first, neighbors and, second, the smell of post offices) that they leave the constant tantalizing regret that one cannot take advantage of their neighborliness.

Constant tantalizing regret! This is Proust at maximum charm. By all accounts, his exaggerated correspondence worked; Proust was, after all his complaining, well-appreciated by his neighbors. Perhaps they were sympathetic to his distress—as funny as some of the requests may sound in retrospect, Proust seems genuinely beleaguered to the point of desperation, suffering but trying to be amenable.

I have learned that the doctor is leaving Paris the day after tomorrow and can imagine all that this implies for tomorrow concerning the "nailing" of crates. Would it be possible either to nail the crates this evening, or else not to nail them tomorrow until starting 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon (if my attack ends earlier I would hasten to let you know). Or if it is indispensable to nail them in the morning, to nail them in the part of your apartment that is above my kitchen, and not that which is above my bedroom ...

He appends at the end of this same letter: “Don’t tire yourself out answering me!”

I’m sure Proust would have been horrified by the publication of this trove of letters, as with every other attempt at biographical excavation, an inevitable consequence of celebrity. In his essay “Contre Sainte-Beuve,” Proust argues that “a book is the product of another self to the one we display in our habits, in society, in our vices.” In other words, the artist’s personal life should be of no interest or relevance to understanding his artistic work.

I, for one, take pleasure envisioning that “other self” of habit and vice that Proust sought to excise from his novels. I am not alone in this. In her translator’s afterword, Lydia Davis suggests it may be helpful “to picture the room in which Proust wrote [the letters], and him in the room.” She describes her own trip to 102 Boulevard Haussmann, now the premises of a bank, which contains only subtle nods to its former tenant. Classy panels of marble-patterned “compromise cork” line the wall, along with a portrait of Proust and some shelves of Proust-related books. In the bank, one must make a strenuous imaginative effort to conjure his presence. There was once a body here, very mortal, very close.

Luckily, with the letters, one does not have to strain so hard to conjure Proust. By reading the letters against the grain, as a testimony to an embodied life, as pure presence, they constitute the simplest message from beyond: “I was here.” Here, tangibly, one finds ample evidence of that other self, that hidden self dashed off in the margins: unflattering and all too human.

**Before I left Paris, I paid one final visit to the museum to see** the last handwritten note that Proust would ever write. Behind the glass, there was a small brown index card marred with two coffee-ringing stains that contained his last words. It read: *J’avais entendu fer au lieu de verre*, “I heard iron instead of glass.” The handwriting was shaky and barely legible. The enigmatic phrase was explained thus: In those final days of illness, Proust, so short of breath he lost

the ability to speak, communicated with his maid Celeste on pieces of paper. That night, Celeste had been keeping watch, passing time with a crossword puzzle. She read aloud: “There is this, sometimes, or perhaps especially, in a glass house.” After a while, Proust guessed *antirouille*, rustproofing. Just then, the kettle began to whistle so Celeste got up to attend to it. Proust took up the paper to look at the answer, and found that the right answer was *cachotterie*, a little secret. Ah! Comprehension. He’d heard iron—“fer”—instead of glass—“verre.” Soon after, he fell into a coma.

**I stood there and looked at this last trace, the coffee stains, the imperfect handwriting, the fallible ear, the banality of the crossword puzzle. It was a life. There was nothing glamorous about it, and yet I was profoundly moved. That afternoon I got on a plane and flew back to New York. I decided that I would probably try to finish my novel.**

# **Two Poems**

**Stephanie A. Hart**

## Night Sweats

In the night  
my child is swallowed by a fish  
and she wakes crying for me.  
I stroke her sweating head  
and hear her story.

There is nothing to be afraid of,  
I tell her.  
Dream of chocolates in shiny silver wrappers,  
like stars.  
She sinks into a pattern of breaths.

I close my eyes and see her,  
older, standing in an open field  
wearing a smart brown hat  
over her sweating head, a single feather  
on its brim twitches slightly in a sudden breeze.

She clutches a red passport to her chest.  
An infant sized birch leaf,  
yellow encroaching on green  
from each of its serrated edges,  
has just fallen at her feet.

And when she opens her mouth,  
her scream is the cry of a bright orange safety whistle.

## Ultrasound

The slow ticking of the clock  
stuck with her through the night  
like a ceaseless heartbeat.  
She could not close her eyes  
for fear the sound would die in her ears,  
and her womb

closed on the dark warmth  
she could sense but not know.  
The scent of the half-peeled orange  
she had not been able to eat  
soothed her stomach better

than the bottled emollient  
her husband had offered her.  
It lay in the dark beside the stiff bill  
that would be her co-pay and the bar of soap  
neatly wrapped in resilient, decorative paper.

In the morning, she would peel away  
the picture of daisies, discard the pretty pink  
and green wrapper, and slide the heavy bar  
through the water passing over her stomach  
until the scent of olives and chamomile

rose with the lather.  
Then, she would leave the house  
without eating  
to see if what lay inside her  
was still ticking.



# **Bond Girls**

**Helena Bell**

**The red-headed PA has a wicker basket with all our cards. They**

look like wedding invitations: thick square envelopes and black calligraphy on ecru paper. But he can't hand them out yet because Production decided to have us pre-record our post-meet-cute confessionals. The new camera crew is local and impatient, and they charge double after dark. So one by one we stand in the vestibule of the mansion and gush about what an amazing experience this is, and how nervous we are, and how lucky, and how when we stepped out of the limo we knew, we *knew* this was meant to be.

"Did you see how I almost tripped on my dress?" we say. "So embarrassing. My friends say I'm klutzy enough to be a YA heroine."

While the crew resets outside, the PA calls out our names. Leah? he says. Tiffany? We step forward: backs straight, eyes forward, hands outstretched. Sophie? Ellie? Anne-marie?

In the basket there are only two cards that anyone watching at home ever cares about: the Villain and the Winner. But we know there's also a Sweetheart card. The Bad Girl. The Drunk. This is how we'll be portrayed; this is how we will be expected to act. The PA tells us our roles have been specially selected according to our personality tests: Free Spirit. Waif. Mother, Maiden, Crone.

It's a lie and he knows we know it. We saw the interns draw them randomly out of a bowler hat. And if we were what they said we were already, we wouldn't need to be told.

"You may guess twice during the competition," he says. "If you are correct, that girl's card will now be yours. Do not discuss your guesses with any of the other girls; you may not collude," he says. "Do not discuss your guesses with James. Do not attempt to steal another girl's card. We know who you are at all times. Keep your cards hidden. Your limos are waiting outside."

On the way out, we pass James. He leans against the rose-covered pergola sipping his drink and muttering names, practicing.

Isabella, he says. Charlotte. Madison. Mariko. Some of the names are ours; some of them aren't.

Some of us wave at him, trying to be friendly. Most don't. A few practice tripping. One of them is really good. She stumbles onto her hands and knees then rolls into a summersault. She manages to make it look awkward and sexual all-at-once.

Most of the show is real. We use our real names and real ages. The house is real. The island is real. Real private planes take off and land at the airstrip down the road and Production calls them every day to ask for a schedule so they can plan when we'll be shooting in the real outdoors.

The closets are visited by real lizards and real spiders and real snakes and that is why our screening process included whether we suffered from allergic reactions and/or fear of insects and other animals.

The house menagerie has a real Komodo dragon but we're not allowed to visit it until the third group date.

James is, supposedly, real. We're not sure, because technically we haven't met him yet.

Most of us have, at one time or another, worked as a waitress, a massage therapist, an assistant, artist, bartender, elementary school teacher, or instructor of some form of vigorous physical activity, even if it was a really long time ago and we've since moved on to other professions.

We are all looking for love. We are all currently single. We've all signed legally binding non-disclosure agreements.

We all know how to load and shoot a gun. Though this is not required for participation, it is traditional.

They put all the girls with four syllable names in the last limo. As the cars circle around the driveway, it drives right on past us and down the hill towards the airstrip.

"I guess Production thought they'd take too long to film," Leah says.

The PAs tell us to kiss James on the left cheek when we meet

him. Don't hold eye contact for more than five seconds. He might give you a nickname. The nickname may sound like another girls' name. Don't worry, he knows exactly who you are. James doesn't talk much, they tell us. But don't worry. This doesn't mean he's not interested.

Once we're all inside again, James wanders from group to group with a PA trailing him with a boom mic. James recites the same five questions over and over again: How are you feeling? Where were you born? What do you do in your spare time? What are you looking for in a partner? Which is bigger: the Earth or the Sun?

After he's spoken to all of us, he wanders the room a second time, then a third. We're not allowed to ask our own questions. We're not allowed to fix him a drink. We're not allowed to mention the girls from previous years. We are allowed to touch him on the arm, lightly, above the elbow.

But not for more than five seconds.

All of our beds are lined up in one room, like a dormitory in an old British boarding school. We have curtains to pull closed for privacy. We each have a washbasin and a silver-plated vanity set on our dresser. They are all chipped and tarnished and feel warm to the touch, as if someone was just there using them before us.

We find old names carved into the rafters:

*Vesper was here.*

*And Honey! XOXO*

We find old dresses in the closets: sequin and lace and silk. There are books in the drawers: dog-eared and smudged. Lingerie and white cotton panties fill the laundry hampers. One of our mattresses has a hole in it, hastily sewn back together with fishing line. There's nothing in the mattress but stuffing and springs.

On the first group date, James takes us, all of us, to a dinner party where we are the only guests. The dining room looks over the sea and waiters in black jackets pass plates of shrimp and pineapple and bruschetta. We rotate every few minutes so that each of us may have a chance to sit next to James. Sometimes James forgets who

and where he is so he rotates too and then it is one of us sitting at the head of the table, her hand on our thigh and wiping wine from our lips with her thumb.

The date ends when James falls asleep in his chair. A PA shakes him gently by the shoulder. “Are you a stewardess?” he asks her. “I think I’d like to marry a stewardess. Someone in a uniform I would recognize when I came home at night.”

The PAs live in the house too, in another long, narrow bedroom with twin beds in neat rows. They are allowed to come into our rooms at night. They leave us notes and instructions for the morning. They suggest what we should wear and tell us if another girl has been talking about us during her confessional. They hint at who the villain is. She is sleeping close to us, closer than we think. Watch out.

They tell us James hopes we make it all the way to the end. They tell us he mentioned us by name specifically.

We are not allowed into the PAs’ room. Of course, we go in anyway. We leave them notes about how James thinks they are all very pretty. He’s forming a real connection. There is a trust there he has never felt before.

Each week, the villain writes a list of who will stay, and who will be sent home. The villain chooses who will go on each date. She can be friends with whomever she chooses, even if it is no one at all.

Every villain has had a different method of eliminating the competition. One year the girls were sent home alphabetically. Another year it was by age.

The PAs tell us the villain has investigated who is homesick, who is not. Who really cares for James, who doesn’t. Sometimes she created secret challenges we never knew we were competing in: who was the first to breakfast; the last to finish. Who used the most words ending in *y* in a 24 hour period. Who is the most afraid of sharks; the least afraid of commitment; who knows the most Hungarian swear words?

No one ever tries to guess who the villain is, even when it’s obvious, even when 2 seasons ago Jessica wore a felt goatee and

mustache on every date and tearfully told Natalie the night before her elimination to make the most of the last evening they would all have together.

Production doesn't seem to know why this happens. The only way to stay is to guess, and guess correctly. The PAs tell us they hope this year will be different. They're counting on us.

On the third group date, James takes us to the menagerie. He hands each of us an orange. He doesn't say anything else. Are we supposed to eat the orange? Feed it to the Komodo dragon? He stares at us as we wander beneath cacao trees and palms. There are coconut palms and date palms. Tiger palms. Fishtail palms. Jelly palms. Leah says she studied botany in college and points out the Sylvester, Montgomery, and the Dwarf Palmetto. She says the garden looks like it was designed by a fetishist. The Sago Palm isn't even a palm, she says.

At sunset, James gathers us in a circle and talks about the time his father gave him his grandfathers' compass and said it would help guide him to his soul mate. With her by his side, he would never be lost again.

Beneath the rustle of leaves, we can hear a PA move the cue cards one behind the other. We dig our nails into the meat of our hands until our eyes are shining.

The villain picks who will be eliminated each week; Production decides how. One Thursday, James takes Judy and Tiffany by helicopter to the base of a volcano. He tells them he doesn't see a real partnership forming with either of them. Everyone deserves someone who will solicit their affection rather than simply tolerate it, he says. Then he kisses each girl on the cheek, climbs back into the pilot seat, and flies away without them.

There are surprises and rule changes every year; Production thinks this will attract a newer and broader audience. When James returns in the helicopter, five new girls are with him. They speak with heavy European accents we barely understand. They wear wetsuits under their formal gowns. We never find out why. By morning,

they are gone and there are more limos waiting outside. New girls come in, one every hour all day long. They have manicured nails, sundresses, and wear natural makeup. At the next ceremony, half of them are sent home, so quickly that they forget their suitcases. We label them and stick them in the closet.

In the afternoons, James naps and we play cards with the PAs: poker, bridge, canasta, and spades. They tell us our food is better and that our health and dental insurance is more comprehensive. “You really have it all here,” they say.

They tell us that the last three members of the camera crew have quit again and tomorrow we’ll be asked by Production to carry our own hand-helds. The PAs can’t do it, the PAs say, because it’ll ruin the image to have all these beautiful women running around on a beautiful beach being trailed by pale-faced, pimply kids in black jeans and black shirts and black sneakers, like sharks. “We’re selling romance here.”

Judy and Tiffany return on a Tuesday morning. Their clothes are torn and their hair is filled with ash. Tiffany’s hands bleed from her nail beds. Neither girl has shoes. James takes them into the living room and sits between them on the couch. He listens as they tell him how they’ve thought about it, and they don’t think they could live with themselves if they gave up so quickly. James nods and nods.

We are only just beginning to learn how to film. We zoom in on the quiver of his cheek. They ask if they can come back and we circle the air with our hands.

“But I just don’t know,” he finally says, “if this is fair to the other girls.”

The villain knows what is going on at all times. She writes notes to the other girls, which the PAs give us: advice and instructions and the occasional threat. Her role is to sew chaos or order into the house, however she will. The PAs have to do exactly what she says, they tell us. She can tell them to steal a girl’s curling iron and make-up half an hour before a one-on-one, and they’re very sorry about it, but that’s the way the game works.

The PAs give us name tags to wear at all times. We leave them attached to our shirts which then go into a big pile and sometimes Leah is Sophie who is Amber who is Charlotte. Only our cameras remain our own. We hold them to our chests at breakfast, and while we sleep. We shower with one arm thrust behind the curtain. All of our pockets are filled with batteries.

James walks around the house with a gun slipped into the pocket of his trousers. It goes off one afternoon while he naps and leaves a hole and burn mark in the leather cushions. Later, Leah asks him to dance with her and she switches it out for a water pistol.

“I just don’t know,” he says to her, “if this is fair to the other girls.”

“I know, baby,” Leah says. “I know.”

There’s a hall in the back of the house where all the previous winners and villains have their portrait hanging on a wall. The PAs say it’s meant to inspire us: remember what you’re working towards. Remember that only two of you will reach the end.

Yet, Leah says, in each one, both girls stand together arm in arm. In each one, James is nowhere to be found. In each one, the girls are smiling.

James does not belong to us, though we may borrow him for a little while. We take him to the cliffs, to the waterfalls, to the meadow by the edge of the airstrip. We feed him names: names of girls who have already gone, who are safe, and he speaks them clearly at each elimination.

“Try it again,” Production says, but we have already returned to our bedrooms and there is no one left to film a tearful goodbye.

“What’s one more night?” James says.

Production corners us and tells us James would like to take us for a drive, or a sunset flight. We smile, clutch our hand-helds, and agree. We have already taken out the carburetors and spark plugs, dissembled the rotor hubs. As the engines sputter we even pat James consolingly on his back. “It wouldn’t have been fair,” we say, “to the other girls.”

There are so many of us now that we are given lumber and

nails. We knock down the back wall and hang sheetrock in the garden. One month all of our tools are donated by Home Depot. The next, they come from Lowes. Craftsman. Klein. Acme Home Supply. Sometimes we are sent boxes from viewers: screwdrivers and hacksaws. We find hand letters sewn into secret patches on new silk drapes flown in from Indiana.

“We’re watching you!” they all say. “We love you! You’re so lucky! I would just die to be in your shoes!”

On the 87th group date, we walk with James to an abandoned factory. It’s a picnic: red and white plaid blankets on the floor, white dishes, champagne. Leah takes long establishing shots of the empty rooms, of our names written in dust on the walls.

If there were music perhaps it would look just like a masquerade in some Czech castle. This is what Production wants, and we admit we see the appeal: James would rest his hand on our waist. He would eye each guest looking for the outline of guns or knives. At precisely 10:37 P.M. he would press his arm into a man’s neck and whisper a warning or secret or code.

Instead, James sits on the blankets and peels the stems off strawberries. The PAs surround us. They point to James and say we should go sit with him, put our arms around him, drink with him, bond with him. We need to do more to distinguish ourselves, to earn James’ trust and admiration. How else will he pick us?

We turn our cameras towards them. “Tell us,” we say. “How are you feeling? Where were you born? What do you do in your spare time? What are you looking for in a partner? Which is bigger: the Earth or the Sun?”

The PAs don’t blink, but they step back from the lights and booms. We feel their eyes on us in the dark and we remember the sound of their footsteps between our beds, the scratching of their pens on clipboards. We encircle James but do not approach. He is not ours, but we may borrow him for just a little while longer.

More girls arrive each day. Old girls, young girls. Girls with tattoos and scars. We take out the old suitcases and turn dresses into

hammocks and blankets. When we hear the limos, we rush down to meet them. We stare at them, blinking in the moonlight and ask if they remembered to bring fruit or rope.

They clutch their blank white cards and pencils. They ask us if we know who the villain is. They're supposed to guess the villain.

The house is real, we tell them. The island is real. Do not try to leave. We know exactly who you are.

# The Bad Is Mine

*The write suffers from  
instruction*

**Colin Fleming**

**Usually I tell people I don't have a college education, because** there wasn't a single thing I learned in a classroom when I was there.

My grades were sterling in high school, with me doing eight hours of homework a night. We had moved from Connecticut to Illinois after my sophomore year, and I had gone from being a hockey star who worked diligently at writing well to not playing hockey and having no friends, no life, but being someone who still wished to try and write well. So, I learned all I could, memorized the poems we had been assigned, looked up every last bit of Shakespeare I didn't understand.

And I wrote a lot of shitty poems, trying to ferret out the relationship between sound and sense with language. I had a girlfriend, a year older, down the street, and that was a godsend at the time, the whole of my social life. I'd gone from public school to an all boys school, which proved a tough change, and I wasn't ready for how clannish things would be in these new academic digs.

It sucked, I was on my own, and everything I was went into learning, because I didn't have much else going on.

I was lonely. That's why I couldn't wait when I got to leave for college and head back East, where I was always much more comfortable. The relationship with the girlfriend died the natural death such relationships do when she left for Fairfield University the year before, and now I was going to Boston College.

I didn't really wish to be at that particular school. It was my so-called safety school, but as the likes of Brown, Wesleyan, and Amherst wouldn't have me, that was where I ended up.

At least it was in Boston, my favorite city by the widest of margins, and close to where I'd been brought up. The Common, Fenway, ducklings one made way for, tales of Minutemen, ice cream with

those chocolate sprinkles, Old North Church, the Bruins—wonderful Old Towne, classic New England stuff.

I was in the honors program at BC, on account of the high school grades I largely got because I had no life. That was something of a tonic for me, as I was doubting myself somewhat because I hadn't been able to get into those schools I'd been told would have me gladly.

I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't gotten into BC. That would have been a mess. Sitting at home for a semester in the Midwest, contemplating how flat everything was, how a really big lake is not even vaguely like an ocean, wandering a mall or two in suburbia until January and I could go somewhere else?

No thanks, right? So, I was going to make the best of BC. Was going to do the writing bit and write so well that I could make a go of it professionally while still an undergrad, get me a smart, hot girlfriend, take in some football games, hang out downtown in the city, and then start another phase of life, eventually, maybe after years of toil, as a full-time writer with a writing studio in some place like Beacon Hill, and a house out in the country, by the sea. Plan in place!

The teacher of that honors program class was a guy named Tim Duket. When you're eighteen, people have a way of looking older than they are. At the time I probably thought he was in his early sixties, but I bet he wasn't out of his forties.

Graying hair with some brown still in it, not tall, in shape but not athletic, glasses, thick voice but not a smoker, one of those people who stretches words longer than they are. If he were Southern, he'd probably have had a drawl. That was the first class I went to, in one of those Gothic throwback buildings called Gasson Hall. It's sort of BC's signature building. You know the deal—spires, a bell, some ivy, the kind of building that features on the cover of the alumni magazine a lot.

We were given a short in-class writing assignment that first day. It wasn't about anything we'd read, because obviously that hadn't started yet, but rather about who you were, what you were looking

to find here. Everyone did theirs, syllabi were handed out, a reading assignment was given for Plato's *Republic*, and off we all went.

A couple days later, we were back again in Gasson. The honors classes met in what was Gasson's de facto library, which was an unofficial school library. It was more like a sizable conference room from a bygone era, with mullioned windows high overhead, built-in bookcases, a piano in its center, and a table—a classy table, not some mere fold-out deal—at the far end.

You could “check out” whatever book you wished, and return it whenever you wished. There was no formal system, nothing was scanned. You were “on your honor.” Very *Dead Poets Society*.

They've done away with it since, and all the books are now more safely secured—something which I think I had something to do with, but we'll get to that in good time. There were fifteen people in the class. No getting lost here amidst a throng of 200 in one of the big lecture halls.

We filed in. I had done the reading, marked that shit up, too, with plenty of notes in the margins, and I was ready.

You're naïve at that age. That's a given. But what I don't think is a given is something that you're probably not supposed to say, because you're bound to bother some people in the saying of it, but I think most people are almost always naïve, and if you learn to become otherwise, it's because stuff has happened to you that sent you reeling for a while.

And, more importantly, rather than roll along with said reeling, you halted yourself mid-roll, and you mulled.

Think of the times in your life someone has said something childish and catty to you, which they could have said to anyone. Let's say it was a person who didn't know you at all. Chances are, you still looked at that comment, wondered if they saw something that was true with you that you hadn't seen, and maybe this was a big problem you hadn't been aware of. You're stung, probably, no matter who you are. No matter how otiose, moronic, lazily tossed off the comment is.

Everyone was settling in, when Duket tapped the spine of his copy of *The Republic* against the table. I didn't know how fancy college classes started. I thought maybe this was like a judge tapping his gravel to say, "here we go." Duket didn't say "here we go." What he said was quite different.

"I'm afraid Mr. Fleming is not free to sit in with us today. On account that he would be better served being somewhere else, and working on his substandard writing."

I thought he was fucking joking. That feeling lasted for all of two seconds. Those thirty or so eyes on me felt like 30,000. I was frozen there, halfway between sitting and standing. He was serious. Walked me out of the Gasson Honors Library, even. I was a kid. And even if I sucked at writing, was just the worst ever, near about, how bad could you suck at eighteen to get walked out of class three days into your college career?

That made me reel. The semester went like that. Duket gave me a shit grade on everything. For what it was worth, so did every other professor I had. C this, D that, F that. One guy who taught Postmodern American Poetry gave me back-to-back D minuses, then said, after the next paper, that I wrote better than any student he had ever had. I thought, okay, that blip is over, gonna be getting a good mark this time, the tide has turned, etc., only to find myself in his office a day later, staring down at that paper—which received an F—and listening to this very boring man drone on about very boring man things.

Duket, back in Gasson, would be openly hostile. He'd ask a question, making five words sound like fifty because he stretched every syllable, like he was some dude for whom Hooked on Phonics was akin to the most lascivious porn.

This man was not smarter than I was. I find it notable that, when I should have been doubting myself more than ever, I wasn't. Because I knew this guy was an idiot and a bully. And also, a failure. I didn't know at what. But he wasn't what he had wanted to be. Maybe he thought I was going to be it, and thus had instigated this

projection-fest. But I went back at him. Hard. I was learning that what I did in college was not going to mean fuck all in my life. I'd be in other classes, and I'd see how professors would even get dates wrong, for when a film came out or a book was published. Everyone else would write down the dates, because, really, who would know better? Why would you doubt this man or woman who is supposed to be this expert? But I was learning that they weren't. They just had pieces of paper you didn't have. And no one to question them, no checks and balances.

The last time I saw Duket was when I had finally managed to transfer out of his class. That was frowned upon in the Honors Program. He told me what a disappointment I was, and that maybe someday I would learn to write and become an average writer. I was writing professionally by then. I told him that. I couldn't believe how dispassionate my voice sounded to me. You know how you get when you know you're right, when that little voice that, at other times, sounds that refrain of doubt in your head, is completely quiet? Not even a whispered "are you sure?"

I was eighteen and this was the first time I had that internal quietude. Years later, I'd look back, and wonder how the hell a kid, who is getting blasted from so many people supposedly in the know, was able to just think, *no, that's not true, that's not nearly true, do what you do, son.*

It was weird. For a while I wouldn't have an explanation for it.

Just as Duket didn't have any explanation when I leaned in close and told him to go fuck himself.

### **That was college for me. Didn't change much over the years.**

There was no more rancor, but one professor after another told me I couldn't write. This happened in English classes, and in all of the music and film classes I took.

I started working for the school newspaper. They fired me. I was writing for a free paper in Boston, doing lots of album reviews, features, sometimes going to gigs and writing them up, too.

After Duket I ended in the class of a guy named Peter Norberg. He was twenty-six at the time. Kind of looked like Joey from *Friends* crossed with Hugh Grant with a more rectangular face. We'd be friends for twenty years. At the time, he gave me the shit grades, too. We'd hang out after class. Like me, he'd been a hockey player, and he loved the sea and the sea's history. If someone likes hockey and recognizes the power of the ocean, we're usually golden, they and I.

By then I knew what was going on. Norberg was just the first person on the academic side to articulate it to me.

"Colin, look, this kind of writing, it's not what you do. It's not what you should try and do. Academic writing isn't for the world. You have a gift. One that is for the world. The people of that world are your audience. Not the people in academia."

"You're still giving me that D, then?"

"I am. But I'd given Dickens the D, too. This stuff isn't going to matter with you. Do what you do. Find what you have it in you to do. Someone with your ability isn't going to be about grades, and couldn't be about grades."

I thought it was pretty ass backwards, but that didn't matter. People went out to clubs and bars. I wrote. I had a girlfriend for a couple years, and that had the effect of providing some stability in that we were a thing, we cared about each other, and there seemed to be less of this need to gallivant about like college kids do, which would have wasted time and energy.

I was learning everywhere, but I was never learning anything in a classroom. Not about art. About stale theories, sure, that were being trotted out, all glazed over and lukewarm, in the exact same language, for year number twenty in a row. Sometimes I'd have questions about what I was learning, and I still held out hope that a professor would have some insight. I asked a guy who taught film what the difference between a form cut and a match cut was, and he told me there were no such things. I mentioned Eisenstein and the Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin*, and Hitchcock with Janet Leigh and that dissolve involving her eye and the shower drain in *Psycho*,

and he just stared at me. Okay then, boss.

As a member of the Honors Program—somehow, I hadn't been kicked out—I had to write a thesis my senior year. But first, I needed an idea. I toyed with a horrible one involving rock music and Vortical poetry. It was more that I didn't know what I was doing, and was flailing about. A long, continuous work? This was new. And, for me, I also knew this was important. I was going to do a bunch of these, in various forms, over the years. This was the maiden voyage.

I also needed a thesis advisor. Norberg had left by then. But he recommended one William Youngren. Norberg, who had been a BC student himself, had taken a Melville class with Youngren. The thinking here was that Youngren was an English professor who wrote about music professionally. A lot of the stuff he did was for this classical music magazine called *Fanfare*, which featured scads of in-depth analysis and then crazy classical music people fighting with each other in a point/counterpoint letters section. He also wrote for *The Atlantic* on jazz.

I took one of his jazz classes, and my first thought, when Youngren walked in the door, crashing into its side as he did so, was “this fucking guy.” Norberg was his own physical admixture, but Youngren looked like a cross between Christopher Lloyd in *Back to the Future* and Robert Vaughn in *The Magnificent Seven*. Handsome, almost movie star so, with this wild look in his eyes, like he was a touch unhinged.

Unlike Duket's, his voice was clipped, somewhat singsong. He'd unleash a torrent of words, you'd think he was done, but he was just taking a random break before pulling up the dyke and letting the next torrent out.

Every class he'd wheel in a stereo on an AV dolly, bouncing that off the door, too. You'd want to cover your ears each time he hit the play button, because that sucker was going to be cranking, Youngren not understanding that the key to turning a stereo on did not in some way involve turning the volume knob all the way to the right.

Charlie Parker, say, would then come on, and Youngren ... well,

Youngren would jive. He'd snap his fingers, prance about with his right knee bent and pointing outwards, forming some sort of internal axis—maybe it was a fulcrum—with his left elbow, which was similarly bent. Youngren, in the parlance, of the 1950s—which was also his heyday, more or less—was a hep cat. A swinging Daddy-O. Definitely not L7, a term he once uttered to me when we were deep in conference in his office.

“It means not a square. Not square. As in, ‘I’m no square.’”

“Yes, I know.”

He smiled. He liked that I knew that.

He took me on for my thesis. I ditched the Vorticist gobbledygook, and I started planning how to write about rock and roll as an art form at the level of literature, albeit a sonic make of literature, with, say, Robert Johnson's guitar doing for a narrative what a Greek chorus did for an Aeschylus play.

There was lots of Robert Johnson, some Elvis, lots of Beatles. Everyone who did a thesis got a token A for the first semester of your senior year, because, hey, you had decided to take on this bad boy of a challenge! Not me with Youngren—he gave me a B. I didn't care. That wasn't what I was there for.

We'd argue about John Coltrane in long conversations in Youngren's office. He hated anything post-*Blue Train*. He'd lend me CDs, I'd lend him CDs.

“Oh, Colin, those Coltrane Village Vanguard sessions. I don't know. I can't get aboard this particular sailing vessel. Dear me. Perhaps the bad is mine.”

“Are you trying to say ‘my bad?’”

“Yes. The bad is mine. Maybe. I am not altogether sure. Now what do you have for me this week?”

Years later I'd fall in love with a girl who showed me a paper she wrote on Coltrane. She was still in college at the time. The kind of student I never was. Could write the way professors wished one to write, and was also able to appear especially effervescent when need

be, like in a post-class hallway exchange. Not sincere. But I thought that was just the drill, how these things worked, not an indictment of your character. Like I said, we're naïve for most of our lives. She told me that she had really admired the professor, and wanted to show him just how much learning he had imparted to her. "So I wrote the best I could." The thing was so bad. It said nothing, and was just terminology misused and double-speak upon double-speak.

"You got an A on this, right?"

She said she had. I asked her if she honestly believed it was any good, if she had written it with sincerity, and the tale of the massive outlay of effort became one of "it was late, it was the last minute, I knew what I had to say to get the grade" and frustration with me.

I sometimes think about this girl and Youngren in conjunction, odd couple though they would have made. I think he would have seen through that kind of crap. That's one reason why he meant so much to me at a crucial stage in my development. I had used the phrase "pivotal link," for instance. And Youngren just about lost it.

"That's a mixed metaphor. A link doesn't pivot."

Such a simple point. It changed my life.

When we write, we tend to focus on and control, as best we can, the three or four words directly in front of us. They're what most people look at, and they're not even looking at them fully, in every possible interpretation they might have, with every repercussion.

Writing, as much as anything, is a way of seeing. The better you are at it, the more you see at once. You see how the word in one form at the bottom of page five plays off that same word in a slightly different form, a different conjugation, seventeen pages later. The more you see, and the more you see how everything relates to everything else, and the more you hear, feel, and cogitate, the more you're able to make a seemingly endless dialogue of voices and parts come together in one sweet, smooth-flowing song. And when that all slows down in your brain, and becomes so obvious, like there aren't a thousand 100 mph fastballs zipping around but a whole lot

of suspending beach balls all set for your measured inspection, you and Mozart could get together, have a beer, and talk over common ground.

Those processes were beginning for me in Youngren's office. I believe in this life that at some point, for all of us, a switch is thrown, and we become that thing we were always going to be. For some people, this happens early on. The particulars of their lives change, people come and go, but that dude at sixteen is often that same dude at forty-six. He just looks different.

Same goes for artists. This was my flick of the switch moment. I began to see language with I'm going to say ninety percent more clarity than ever before. My thesis itself was largely shit. I looked at it before writing this. The writing is not worse than what you'd see in a newspaper or magazine, and there are some parts—well, a passage here or there—where you can really see that there's talent. But it mostly sucks. Juvenilia. But language kept slowing down for me, kept making more sense, and I was able to tour rooms and veritable museums housing more and more of those beach balls hovering in the air, and I could do so faster and faster, with hardly any time passing outside in the world, as I passed a hundred years internally in the space of a single second on Earth.

Youngren and I hung out for a while after I graduated. He was in his sixties at the time. We got grilled chicken sandwiches at this place near BC called Cityside, a popular bar. We'd discuss Laurel and Hardy films, Faulkner's short fiction, the Rolling Stones' *Beggars Banquet* ("Oh, so 'Stray Cat Blues' is concerned, shall we say, with the capaciousness of a young girl's orifice, and how feasible said capaciousness might be in the context of this would-be assignation," as Youngren put it), Emily Dickinson's poems, often in the space of two or three sentences.

It was electric. I wondered who I might ever have conversations like this with again. That was part of the reason I fell so hard for the girl who wrote the Coltrane paper. She wasn't there yet, but she

had enough in her to get there at some point. But you never want to build something, even in part, on what might be, do you?

After college I worked shit jobs. Bouncing at a bar, for instance, and trying to write at the same time. College grad becomes a bouncer. But whatever. I wasn't going to grad school. Fuck that. I couldn't get clear of academia fast enough. I asked Youngren how he wrote for a place like *The Atlantic*, to which he said, "You sort of just fall back into it." That was disheartening. Because I knew it wasn't like that anymore. Youngren probably had fallen back into it. He was at his club, some friend of a friend of a friend was an *Atlantic* editor, they had a whiskey, and the guy said, "you like jazz, would you like to try your hand at penning something for us?"

I'd seen enough stories like that. I thought maybe Youngren would help me get into that classical music magazine, *Fanfare*. It was the size of a very thick literary journal. We're not talking a million-circulation place here. But I could never get him to give me a sense of where things stood one way or the other, though he kept promising that he'd talk to the editor. Finally, long after having sent some writings, I phoned that editor. Took a lot of courage for me. He was brusque. Told me they had no interest in my work.

"We only hire one new person every five or six years anyway."

Bugger. I wrote something and mailed it to *The New Yorker*. A kindly note came back, saying the piece was quite good, but they couldn't use it. The note was signed by one Erica Youngren.

I asked Youngren about this at Cityside, on what was the last time I ever saw him. Not the most common last name, and if you like nepotism, boy howdy, publishing is the place for you. I told him about the note, not really thinking it was anything but a coincidence.

"Oh, Erica, yes, she's great, she's my daughter."

Dude? What the motherfuck? Not even a word to help me out a little? A note of introduction? A heads up?

Time went on. I got into *The New Yorker*. After a couple years, I wrote the *Fanfare* guy again, making like I'd never written him

before. Sent some clips. He couldn't have phoned me fast enough. "It was like you were born to write for *Fanfare*."

Yeah. Wasn't it, though?

*Fanfare* paid you two dollars a piece. No joke. And they were a lot of work. So if by the end of the year they cut you a check for forty bucks, you had invested serious amounts of time. I must have written fifty pieces on all kinds of classical music, which just became one more thing I wrote on, in addition to what, eventually, included literature, film, sports, ballet, architecture, art, rock, jazz, plus all the fiction I did. And I stopped writing for them. There was no point.

But I'd follow what Youngren was up to. *Fanfare* ultimately fired him. His health hadn't been good, and there was some major disagreement between him and the editor over a piece on C.P.E. Bach. Youngren loved C.P.E. Bach. More than J.S. Bach. My sense was that he intended this piece, which I never saw, as some sort of critical swan song. It was a baby of his, and it got the chop.

I felt bad. And I felt bad, too, when a year or so after, I encountered Youngren's obituary in the *Globe*. I knew his daughter had stopped working at *The New Yorker* years before. One of the passerby people in publishing. It doesn't mean that much to them—it's just something they do for a while.

Whereas the art of the written word was all I was, was everything I was. I cut the obit out, and I must have kept it for nearly a decade. It was as though it existed as a reminder for something I hadn't fully admitted to myself in the replaying of my memories. Whenever someone asked me about college, or someone was extolling how wonderful college was, I always had that line of thinking in my head that I never learned a single fucking thing in a college classroom, not pausing in those memories to correct what had become my official record and say, "But what I learned in Youngren's office is more than just about anyone gets to learn anywhere else."

Youngren had been dead for a while when I had some occasion to talk to a guy who used to write for *Fanfare* and who taught at BC. Youngren mentioned him a bunch. I thought we'd have a nice little

exchange, share a “the bad is mine’ anecdote” or two. I brought up Youngren, my history with him, how he’d spoken so highly of this particular fellow.

“That’s odd,” he said to me. “You know, don’t take this the wrong way, but Youngren would regularly mention students to me whom he thought wrote really well, who might go places.”

“Ah.” I knew, of course, where this was going.

“And he never once mentioned you. Strange, isn’t it?”

Wasn’t remotely strange to me. Was in keeping with everything else. Which is to say, it was also in keeping with something I knew was beyond having people roll the log for you or even remembering to put you forward, or to give you some reward, be it deserved or not. The latter happens far more often than the former, I had learned by then. But what really mattered is what I had, and what I had discovered further down in myself, with an assist along the way.

And I guess, in a more pedestrian, more topical, albeit more rake-hellish way—never lose your spirit, baby—what also mattered was that I had zero compunction about looting the fuck out of many of the books in that Honors Library. No wonder they needed a new security system to protect what remained. But what few people knew about me was that I had one, too, and what remained was always more than what was there last, and then more still.

# The Emptiness with No Eyes

*The writer and the  
wilderness*

**Edd B. Jennings**

When unsaid things lace lovers' passion-cries  
We cling to life, we're dust-drops, swirled. Afar,  
Lies eyeless emptiness in deep disguise  
As pauses in our breath. It's who we are.  
For little deaths keep big ones chained at bay,  
Our thrills, your charming chases, savage grins,  
Growled games, my sweet resistance. We'll not pay  
The Bitch before it's time (she always wins).  
For when you leave, I'll stay. We know it, though.  
With one salute to Lucy sails Sir Reep  
His little boat to paddle, sword to throw,  
To pierce salt waters, sink and stab the Deep.  
I pour our tea, don't ask you when you'll go.  
Departures. Lover, don't you think I know?

—LJ MacDowall, from the Utter North Sonnet Crown

**Friday, September 25th—In the early calm—A few weeks ago I**

would have logged the time. Exact time centers me. I lost that when my watch stopped. If the sun shows today—

it might not—I will use the rose, the mirror, and the lanyard of my compass to take a back reading off the sun. I compare this reading to others at sunrise and sunset, and I will have the hours of remaining daylight. I tell myself it doesn't matter if I do without that luxury.

I dreaded my first look out of the tent, but I had to see the ice. Without leaving my sleeping bag, I pushed my head out the door into the cold. The thin ice formed during last night's calm extended another thirty feet out. One morning soon, I will look out and see the first real ice of winter. Canoe travel for the season will end. This low

island in Beverly Lake, where the Dubawnt and Thelon Rivers come together, would be a bad place to be trapped. But this morning I can get out. I will get out.

The water in the coffee pot I left in the small tent's vestibule froze solid again, and the water in the half-gallon Nalgene jar I kept inside the tent barely sloshed when I shook it. I put the frozen coffee pot on the little one-burner stove and prayed the whole time the flame wouldn't burn a hole in the thin aluminum. It didn't, and I used the boiling water from the coffee pot to thaw the ice in the half-gallon jar. Edging across unstable new ice to get coffee water was not the way I wanted to begin my day. I guessed by the contours of the ground around the shoreline that the thin outward edge of new ice extended out only to knee-deep water, but sometimes sudden drop-offs hid in surprising places.

Cold deceives. Opening the tent door this morning and noting the frozen water jar magnified the cold. After three boiling cups of coffee and a pan full of the Stove Top stuffing mix, scavenged at the government gauging station days upstream, the creeping cold dominated fewer of my thoughts. A person can learn to deal with the cold. The nylon walls of this lightweight tent blunt the wind. In a calm, the tent walls reflect the body's heat to create a pocket of warmth that allows my core temperature to remain stable or to drop at a reduced rate.

I can only guess at air temperature and wind chill, but a person can acclimate to almost any conditions with the right gear, if he can stay out of the wind, and stay dry. My sleeping bag was already worn out before the season began in early June and dangerously light for these conditions. Everything I owned showed months and in some cases years of hard use. I dropped weight from a frame that wasn't fat, and I expected to destroy a pair of the surplus heavy wool West German military trousers a month. The trousers I had slated for September had a waistline four inches less than the ones I started with in June. If I didn't cinch my belt hard, they dropped off my hips.

I was a dead man, way too deep in the interior for this late in the closing season, but I had my rifle, remnants of strength, and my

precious gear. I would not die today.

**Once I loved a woman. A memory of my fingers in her hair**

lingered. Last I heard she translated Medieval Latin texts in a nunnery somewhere in the Ardennes. I had this.

**Yesterday afternoon I stopped at the abandoned scientific**

station, a cold, cinder block shell marked on the Aberdeen Lake map. To warm my feet, I walked around, and as always, went through the rubble for salvage. I found a half-full eight-ounce can of 3-in-One oil. For the last two months, I hoarded what remained of my tiny supply of lubricating oil only daring to use it on the stove pump, which will seize if it goes dry. On my rifle, I used honing oil, which is too light to help much with rust prevention. For the most part, I fought the rust and kept the bolt operating with graphite from a pencil. This can of 3-in-One oil will last until the season closes. It has more remaining oil than I started with in June.

With most items—food, fuel, and clothing—I cannot carry enough to last through an extended season. I proportion my load in what seems a reasonable fashion, understanding the tradeoffs: the six-pound Sorel Dominator boots represent several weeks of flour. A George Eliot paperback novel means doing without three days of oatmeal. Lubricating oil is in a category by itself. To run out of oil means I won't have an operating stove. I might lubricate the stove pump with pencil graphite, honing oil, or lard, but the lubricating pad might also go dry and ruin the stove. In this part of the Keewatin District of the Northwest Territories, I might go days without finding enough wood to boil two cups of tea. Until I found the can of 3-in-One yesterday, I couldn't bear to commit to paper how I foresaw my situation deteriorating after I used the last of the oil.

**At dusk last night the Arctic fox returned. Only his eyes and**

ears showed over the fold in the tundra. I feared that sometime in the night he would be in my meat cache. I would have killed him

had he presented a shot I could have made. Several times, I opened the tent door to look out, but saw little in the dropping light. Heavy waves hitting the new ice dominated my senses.

This morning the meat bags were undisturbed. The weight of the packs over them must have stopped him. A fox skin would make a warm little stole to go around my neck. The caribou hide over mitts I finished sewing yesterday morning blocked enough of the cold wind coming up that final section of the Dubawnt River to make the difference between stopping and continuing to paddle yesterday afternoon.

I wish I still had the wolf hide I skinned and scraped during a time when I needed to move. I carried that hide with one of the early loads around the five-mile Dubawnt gorge. When I returned with another load to the end of the portage, I discovered my loss. A quick, frenzied search didn't turn it up. I found nothing else among my gear disturbed, touched, or moved. The impression of nothing disturbed struck me so hard that rather than accept my loss, I went through my gear again in an increasing frantic crescendo until I forced myself to accept it was gone.

An Arctic fox took the wolf hide. The hard, rocky ground showed no tracks, but, aside from a tundra grizzly, no other animal or bird in this country had the strength to move the hide. A bear would have destroyed everything.

My clothes rotted off my body. I could have used that wolf hide. Ice won't form in wolf hide the way it will in caribou hide.

**In this country, a man looks over his shoulder. Most of the** time I saw emptiness, but I knew they were out there. On the lower Dubawnt River, the wolves followed. A long way downstream, a lone male sky-lined himself on a prominent low hill. He meant to show himself, to hold my attention. I only glanced at him because I knew the pack hunted closer, running behind the folds of the tundra, following. The shallow waters of the Dubawnt I bounced through, touching the rocks, wouldn't slow them. They'd come into my blind

side and fast. I knew what they were. Maybe they knew what I was, or one of their number knew. He, the magnificent white wolf, had howled long into the night when I killed his mate. I should have killed him instead, he was the greater threat, but I couldn't. He was just too magnificent, my weakness.

When the wolves lost interest in following, the Arctic fox, who may well have been there all along, reappeared. In winter, the Arctic fox follows the polar bear. By substituting me for the polar bear they paid me the highest honor I had known. Small recognitions from my fellow man meant nothing in comparison.

**Under the Stars, Camp XCVII— Late in the day. In the dropping** darkness, I rounded a peninsula on Aberdeen Lake to discover an ancient Inuit camp, a place I could touch dry ground without breaking through the shore-fast ice. The little stone man, the Inukshuk, guided me in. I found the ancient stone tent rings, the collectible debris of old tins, an axe head, the marks of the seasons. On the height of land in the center of the peninsula, where the wind swept the hillside bare of snow, I searched for dried crowberry, or, if lucky, heather, which makes an oily smoke that shows for miles and enough heat to boil water without wood.

The sight of the fresh grizzly track, double the size of any track that could belong to a tundra grizzly, etched out in the thin covering of snow, stopped me. I was a long way out in untraveled country. Maybe I had stepped into a place where the rules changed, and out there somewhere in the folds of the tundra, a supernatural grizzly hunted. I thought, please, not now, not here, not tonight; I am too weak, too cold, too diminished; but if I met him, I would fight him for his meat, as he would fight me for mine.

The caribou had gone west and south and left us behind. It was a time of remoteness, turning inward, maybe it was nothing more than pulling my coat tighter and trying to stay warm in the rising night winds. My reasoned self, which had a sharp picture of what could and could not be, warred with an imagination that looked to

the lengthening shadows and could believe anything. Then I understood, like the reported fresh tracks of the yeti, I looked at tracks that froze and re-melted and appeared fresh and supernaturally large after this afternoon's sun warmed them once again. These tracks were days old.

I hadn't collected fire starter in days. Patches of willow were rare in this country, but, much earlier in the day, on my last stretch of the Thelon River, I found a pile of whitened driftwood. One spruce bole, measuring six inches in diameter and eight feet in length, was larger than any wood I had seen even in the great forest, when I started my season back in June in Northern Saskatchewan. I tied all the wood in a bundle to the canoe cover.

This driftwood came from a little stand of wood further up the Thelon, famous because John Hornby starved to death up there in the winter of '27. The books said Hornby was never the same after the Great War, that he came back diminished. He was reckless, maybe insane, they said, and a better man would have survived. They were wrong. Hornby was good. He knew all the tricks: the ptarmigan nets, snares with a shoestring, everything. Once he wintered in a hole, but in the winter of '27, he missed the caribou. Caribou meant life in this country. I faced the same. Last year in the Mackenzie Mountains, I lived when I might not have, when I killed an old bag of bones caribou cow left behind by the herd to die. I am diminished too, maybe insane. I don't know how to tell.

On a huge fire under the vivid stars on this moonless night, I cooked one of my few remaining caribou roasts. I had not known this much warmth in days. I filled plastic bottles with hot water to warm my sleep. As I watched the fire and drank hot tea, I took the small chunks of bone from a dead musk ox I found in August and rolled them in the firelight. I had been doing this for days. Again, tonight when I rolled the bones I couldn't read the future. I saw nothing in the tealeaves, in the clouds, or the bones, but that's not entirely true. I saw images without words, but nothing I could interpret or translate into a clear message. The images assaulted me whether I sought them or not.

Tonight, I saw no images of what was to come, and perhaps that told me everything.

**It happened. Maybe everything inside my mind collapsed.** The stars moved in great long slow arcs, back and forth, in the eastern sky. A star represents a fixed mark or appears to. It scared me. Maybe I had done it to myself this time. My physical diminishment was a known phenomenon I could allow and calculate for, but what if my mind went, or what if I stepped into a place where the natural laws I understood meant nothing? Could I trust nothing? I fought with myself.

And then I understood. What I saw in the eastern sky only amounted to hot air meeting cold to create atmospheric turbulence, the same effect that created the twinkling of a star on the horizon on an ordinary warm Southern night. The illusion of stars moving in wide arcs meant a cold front moving in fast. A massive storm would hit sometime during the night. The ancient Inuit survived these storms. Maybe their Inukshuk guided me to this place for a reason.

My back froze as I sat by the fire, and I lacked the discipline to refuse the magic of the flames, even though they destroyed my night vision. I saw stories in the flames and I remembered them. I remembered images of this season past. Taste them, I told myself. These images and this night may be what is left. I remembered the gyrfalcons over the Dubawnt gorge; their cries, as I shouldered my canoe under their circling gyres, as they flew out into the great void I would never know. Not all the images were beautiful. I passed an Arctic fox pup alone on an island in a small lake, a dried, picked-over goose carcass beside it. The pup cried.

What lay out there watching my back, waiting for me to sleep? More than my fear of this wide, wandering grizzly, I feared that he wasn't out there. I feared the emptiness with no eyes....

# Organization Ensues

Jenna Lyles

**When my mom's sister got pregnant, the O'Brien family was**

overjoyed. There had been rumors that Maureen was a lesbian, and the staunchly Catholic family could not forgive that. Plus, they violently begrudged anything that ensured less fire-haired clones on the planet.

My mother came from a family of ten. Her parents, Ewan and Margaret, were satisfied with this number because anything under 10 was considered a tragedy in Port Glasgow during the 60's. It didn't matter how poor you were: the goal was to hit double digits. Ewan and Margaret had done that. They'd married young, bought a tenement house, and in between making just enough money to get by, spawned two hands' worth of children—not a single one of which turned out sane or steeped in civility.

The O'Briens were notorious in the Port. They were just as poor as everyone else, but their depravity exceeded what was deemed tolerable for people who had nothing except each other. Andrew had been to jail twice; Neil was always just narrowly escaping death or criminal charges; Lorna and Lexie, the twins, were thieves; Janice had verbal tics and pulled her hair out until her scalp was patchy; Gavin had already had three kids by 15, and was feared by fathers; Maureen was bound to the bottle, and likely to throw it at you after she drained it.

Rose—my mother— was the eldest girl and third oldest overall, born right after Bruce and Craig. The three of them formed the leadership trifecta of the O'Brien clan. Flagrant affronts to the family were funneled through their joint deliberation; smaller, less insulting ones were resolved through the flippant whims of whichever O'Brien you had been unlucky enough to provoke. There were rarely occasions that required them to take pause and plan. If there was a system to their mayhem, checks and balances that kept them from murdering in the light of day, it went largely unexercised. But then Maureen's boyfriend beat the shit out her during her third trimester.

My mother has described the scene to me a hundred times. She was making a large pot of lentil soup when she heard the front door open. Bruce and Craig, who were once peacefully occupying the living room, are suddenly yelling. Andrew, awakened by the commotion, passes through the kitchen into the living room, whereupon his own yelling joins the choir. My mother emerges from the kitchen, wielding ladle and concern. There is Maureen, standing battered in the doorway.

A broken blood vessel has turned the whites of her left eye bright red, and a dark indigo bruise has taken over her cheek, which is—and this is not an exaggeration—the size of a mango. She’s holding a parcel under her arm looking at no one specifically.

“This is for mum.” She sets it gently on the coffee table, offering no explanation.

“Oy! What th’ fawk, Maureen?” Craig asks.

“What?” She says back.

“at was your fawkeen Eddie did ‘at?” Bruce asks. Here, my mom always interjects that the siblings knew better than to lie to Bruce.

“Aye,” Maureen says.

Swift as snow, organization ensues.

The way my mom tells it, Bruce and Craig had become quite patient by their late twenties. Had they been in their teens, they would have been well on their way to Eddie’s before Maureen could have set that package down. In their heyday, they were suspected of being in a gang. Mom says they would leave for hours to buy groceries and come home empty-handed, their jeans soaked to the calves. Sometimes their jackets would be wrapped around their waists, shirtsleeves bunched around their ashy forearms in the dead of winter. Whoever did laundry—which was no small chore in the O’Brien household—found loose teeth in their pockets and scrubbed blood out of their cuffs.

Since then, the pair had settled. But a stunt such as this, some dosser bashing their sister’s face in? Well, that was certainly enough

to bring them out of retirement.

Andrew: *Aam gonnae kill 'at fawkeen lunatic.*

Bruce: *We're naw gonnae leave Reenie raisin' 'at wean alone.*

Andrew: *Better 'at than a loser fur'a pa.*

Roma: *Oy! The two ay yoos hush! We're naw fawkeen killin' anyone.*

Craig: *Awright, Rosie. Teel us th' plan.*

When Eddie came home later the night, he opened his door and came face to face with Bruce, Craig, Andrew, and Rose O'Brien. Maureen had let them into the apartment without asking any questions. All they told her was that she could come back home in 20 minutes.

When Eddie saw them, Mom says the color drained from his face instantly. He bolted for the door and got as far as the hallway before Andrew tackled him. With Craig's help, they dragged him back inside, where Bruce was waiting with duct tape.

Eddie flailed and screamed like a madman, he got so loud at one point that Andrew suggested knocking him out. Of course, the others were in agreement that he should be conscious for this. They taped his mouth; Bruce held his legs; Andrew and Craig each kept an arm pinned to the ground with their knees. From my mother's perspective, Eddie was stapled to the floor like Jesus Christ on the cross. So, what happened next was only fitting— she took a hammer to Eddie's right hand. The crunch was unforgettable, mom says.

Their work was done, and with 15 minutes to spare. But then Andrew asked a very good question: *Is this fawkeen dobber even right-handed?* My mom had no choice but to smash Eddie's left hand, too.

Maureen came home and found the poor bastard with his hands stuck in the freezer. She took him to the hospital where his fingers were declared so mangled that he needed surgery. Eddie was subsequently fitted with two mitten-like casts that he had to wear for a month. And sure, this meant a little extra housework for Maureen, but at least her face would heal in peace.

A few days passed. When Maureen finally came by the house

again, she told everyone that when the police arrived at the hospital, they took one look at her face and Eddie's broken hands, and didn't even ask if he wanted to file a report. The story that Eddie, who worked in the shipyard, gave police was this: he was welding a stiffener to a plate when the slab slipped and crushed his hands. Nobody was particularly inclined to refute this account.

**Before my mother left Scotland in the eighties, back when all** the kids still hung around Ewan and Mag's house, nothing was above family. It had always been—and would always be—that way, which is why even after the siblings dispersed, Bruce moving to Greenock, Craig and Neil to Southbar, nobody tried anything. The O'Brien legend persisted: if you hurt one of them, you could be certain that eventually they would come for you. Your arms would be held behind your back, your knees would be kicked in, and your jaw would hang a little looser.

Mom's big change came 1983, when she met my father in a nightclub down by the River Clyde. Van Schaffer was an American sailor, or, more aptly, a young, wanderlust Mississippian. The naval ship he hailed from was docked less than a mile from where he first lay eyes on Rose O'Brien, who had already noticed him and was fast approaching. According to my mom, my dad was a black man in a country full of white women who loved black men—she had to move fast.

During their drunken introductions, my father said that he was 23 with no girlfriend to speak of. This was mostly a lie. He was, in fact, only 19. And although he did not have a girlfriend, per say, he did have a wife. The day his ship arrived in Dunoon, he had been wed nine days to his high school sweetheart, Selma. But my dad had traveled to a foreign country and met this lively, brash, loose cannon of a woman. The very embodiment of all things good southern girls were raised not to be. Sweet-faced Selma was on the other side of the ocean. If the fruit hung any lower, it would have been on the ground.

The annulment took three days; my parents dated for three

years. Come the end of 1986, my dad was scheduled for deployment. It was either follow him or forget him, and as much as my mom loved the Port, a part of her wanted out of it. Where she was from, you went to school; you graduated at 16; you went to work in the factories; you married young not old, Catholic not Protestant; you had a clan of children and then you died. If my mom wanted more out of her life, she had to go get it.

The entire, teary-eyed O'Brien clan took her to the airport where she and my father left Port Glasgow, Scotland for Key West, Florida.

**In 1990, I was born. Three years after that, my brother, Darien.**

Growing up, we lived on military bases all over the States. Our neighbors were from around the globe, spoke many different languages, brought cultural zest to the blocks we lived on. Mom said that's exactly how Scotland was, people of all ethnicities scattered around. She remembered authentic curry shops and Chinese restaurants on every street, how they served Scots and Pakistanis and West Indians. When dad retired and we settled in a flourishing suburban community in Virginia, we all needed a moment to adjust.

People had become indiscernibly alike. The women were blonde, the men were blonde, their kids were blonde, their Labradors were blonde. They had the same jobs. Women were nurses; men were contractors. Women were interior designers; men were supply chain managers. They seemed to move as one, with no defining features, nothing to set them apart. No edge. They were all smooth corners.

My mom required more adapting than anyone. Aside from the obvious—that she'd moved 4,000 miles away from her family and now had children of her own—she'd been appointed to a new rung on the socioeconomic ladder. Back in Scotland, her family couldn't even afford a refrigerator (I know what you're thinking, and I already asked—they left their milk out on the window sill to keep it chilled). Now, my mom owned an immaculate, five-bedroom 2,700

sq. ft. home; she drove a Mercedes; on occasion, perfectly good milk had spoiled in her thousand-dollar refrigerator.

Certainly, there was solace to be had in these new comforts, but it would have been impossible for her not to feel out of place. Her new neighbors hadn't come from similar backgrounds and it showed in their mannerisms, how easily they cut their eyes when she did her own yardwork or conversed with the trashmen. People were enamored by her accent, but their interest in hearing about Scotland visibly waned when they discovered the abject poverty she had lived in.

To some extent, her new surroundings rendered her edge obsolete. Privileges such as safety and abundance threatened to file down her hard parts. She had to shelve her Glaswegian street smarts— forget how to throw a punch, pick a lock. At the apex of these changes was the opportunity to be a softer woman. And what a gift that would have been, had I not cut off six inches of Beth Turner's hair after blinding her with a handful of glitter.

Allow me to set the scene. It is 11:30 A.M. in Room 203. Ms. Lugo's fifth-grade Mathematics class is deeply engrossed in designing geometric Mandalas. Cast in stark contrast to my pink-obsessed peers, I am clad in khaki Bermuda shorts and a loose t-shirt that reads "Smile, Mon!" above a dreadlocked, Rastafarian smiley. I'm sitting with my chin in my hands, staring off into space, when Beth Turner knocks my arms out from under me. My chin smacks loudly against the desk.

Some of my classmates recoil, some say *Oooh*. Most stare wide-eyed. They are waiting for me to react, hoping for a show. They want to know if the new girl is shark or minnow. I touch my hand to my bloody lip and hear Beth ask her friend for a marker. She's pretending nothing happened.

Without thinking, I take a handful of glitter and blow it into her face. She covers her eyes with her hands, screaming *Stop! What are you doing?* That's when I grab a long lock of her hair, wrap it around my fist, and start cutting. Nobody helps her. The kids in our class are frozen in their seats, paralyzed with astonishment. Ultimately,

it is Ms. Lugo that saves Beth from the asymmetrical pixie I have in mind.

“Let her go! Let her go!” She’s yelling, trying to pull me away from her. But I cling to Beth’s hair like her hair does her scalp. What I cannot cut, I tear clean out.

I don’t say anything to the principal until my mom arrives. This is a trick I learn from crime shows I’m not supposed to be watching: say nothing until your lawyer arrives. I knew a pissed off mom was better than any lawyer, and when my mom found out that Beth started it, that Beth had been terrorizing me for a month, “pissed off” will be an understatement.

When my mother finally arrives, she doesn’t disappoint. She rips the principal, the vice principal, and Ms. Lugo a new one. Although, when she catches me smiling at the sight of her raking them over the coals, she pops me in my mouth. I stop smiling and listen to what the adults have to say.

They want to expel me, but they can’t. The school security officer says given the delicate nature of the altercation—the fact that Beth and I are literally little girls and my weapon of choice was literally glitter—this particular situation doesn’t qualify as an assault. They suspend me for three days and change my homeroom. Before we leave the office, the principal looks at me affectedly and asks if I understand why I’m getting into trouble, but Beth isn’t. I shrug.

“You know, Beth is probably going to have to cut her hair really short now.” Ms. Lugo lingers for my apology.

“Good.” My mom and I say in unison.

Ms. Lugo’s jaw drops. The principal folds her arms and explains that although though my suspension officially begins tomorrow, I need to leave the school grounds immediately. She makes a remark about Beth’s parents pressing charges, which sends my mom flying into another profanity-laden frenzy.

We walk in silence out to the parking lot. When we get into the car, out of eyesight, my mom clutches me tightly to her chest and breathes an unforgettable sigh of relief.

“Blinding th’ wee cunt and cuttin’ ‘er hair off? Yer an O’Brien, love.” This singular event changes the course of our relationship forever.

**Unlike Eric, who was incredibly affable but terrified of rocking** the boat, I was tough like mom. I spoke out and disagreed, not caring if it branded me as a difficult (and it usually did). Like my mother, I had a uniquely tactile approach to problem-solving. Force, it seemed to me, was a perfectly natural means of resolution if you weren’t too chicken shit to use it.

The older I got, the more inclined my mom became to divulge her roughneck past. She told me about impaling a girl in the head with her high heel in *Club 67*, consequently getting banned for life. She told me about Blair Kelly, a huge lass from Colgrain who whooped her ass one night when they got into it on the ferry. She told me about the streets of Port Glasgow and I listened in awe, unsure how I could have missed a side of her that hid in plain sight.

“Does dad know?” I asked.

“Aye, of course,” she said, “who’d ye ‘hink was holdin’ mah purse?”

A fundamental difference between my mother and I was that as the years progressed, I fought less physically. By the time I left for college, I was settling scores tactfully in the dead of night or, sometimes, not even in person at all. It was business as usual—rigging, misleading, ruining—but I cared about keeping my hands clean now. I had more discipline than the average O’Brien, and it showed.

When I found out my boyfriend had cheated on me, my first instinct was to gouge his beautiful green eyes out. Instead, I hacked into his university account mid-semester—using a VPN to mask my IP address, of course—and dropped a few of his classes so that he couldn’t graduate on time. Med school would just have to wait.

When my upstairs neighbors weren’t mindful of my study hours, I starting picking the lock on the communal electric box and shutting their power off. Having a party? Watching the play-

offs? Leveling up? Not anymore they weren't. When their loudness persisted even without electricity, I started intercepting their mail and shredding it. But first, I read it. I jotted down their bank account numbers and camouflaged it in my statistics notebook.

My mom thought I was brilliant, but in truth, I aspired to her level of mastermind. After she got into a minor fender bender, we found out the "victim" was seeking extravagant medical attention. There hadn't been a scratch on this guy or his obnoxious, six-wheel drive. We looked the asshole up and discovered that he was a former NFL player, released from his contract due to recurrent back injuries. He was looking for a pay off, but mom was prepared to give him a little more than that.

Donning my Cleopatra wig from Halloween '99, she filled a spray bottle with brake fluid and spritzed his truck in the middle of the night. A week later, the vehicle's top coat had peeled off in huge splotches. As luck would have it, his polka dot pickup compelled one seriously miffed resident—guess who—to complain about the eyesore to the HOA. We don't know how much it cost him to have that goliath thing repainted, but we were confident it was more than the \$8,000 he'd weaseled out of Geico.

We could not be tamed. The two of us pushed one another to retaliate harder, with less and less mercy. It seemed to us there was a legacy at stake, and as our affinity for chaos came to a climax, we fully intended to uphold it.

What happened was this: Darien got robbed. He was supposed to meet with a guy named "Jake" in a Kmart parking lot to buy a phone from him. I vaguely remember asking Darien if Kmart was still in business, but he didn't know. Overhearing this, my dad idly told him to be careful; he said he would. An hour later, Darien came home visibly rattled, without his money or a new phone.

As the trade unfurled, Jake had snatched the money from Darien's hand and took off towards a running car that was hidden along the side of the building. When Darien gave chase, he fell. His scuffed palms and blistered kneecaps were proof of this detail, of

which he was intensely embarrassed.

My father wanted to file a police report, but my brother pleaded with him not to. It was his senior year and he was being scouted for baseball. He was worried about anything that might hurt his chances, and being the victim of a robbery, he felt, not only cast him as gullible, but weak too. My mother understood this in a way that my father did not, but her attempt to talk him out of the police report was just as unsuccessful.

When the officers arrived, they asked Darien exactly what had happened. After he told them—his face flushing when he said he tripped— it was their expert opinion that nothing could be done. Because he was handing Jake the money when it was snatched, Darien had, technically, *given* his robber the money.

“By that logic, there’s no such thing as a bank robbery. Just a bunch of tellers handing out money to men in masks.” I said pointedly.

“Hold on. This guy was wearing a mask?” One of the officers pulls out his notepad. Darien shakes his head, missing the joke.

“Well then there ya’ have it.” The officer smirked.

My dad was so heated by this response that he asked the officer for his badge number, then kicked him out of our house.

“Fucking pigs.” He said, slamming the door.

Darien, who was clearly trying not to cry, made a beeline for his room. My dad followed after him. It was just mom and I standing in the hallway. We exchanged careful glances; organization ensued.

While the men went to bed, we remained awake. I wanted a midnight snack and she needed a glass of water. Happy coincidence that we should both wind up in the kitchen when we did. I opened my yogurt. Crushed ice clanged at the bottom her cup. We took our seats at the breakfast bar, eating and sipping quietly.

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

We sat there for hours, hammering out a foolproof strategy. We decided to wait exactly one week before creating a fake Craigslist profile to lure Jake in. We would respond to his add and meet up for

the trade, and as just as he was sufficiently disarmed, we would beat the living shit out of him. We needed the week interim to let the dust settle and get everything in order, make sure we'd crossed our t's and dotted our i's.

As we imagined he would be, Jake was quite receptive to our inquiry, and fortunately for us, he and his getaway driver had done most of the logistical work. We knew the Kmart had closed down, so it was free of cameras. There were multiple exits out of the lot onto the main road, which made agreeing on this location when Jake suggested it easy. We could infer that his buddy would be parked at any one of three various passageways on the side of the building, so it would be necessary to circle the lot just before the trade to see which. We knew that we would simply look lost, two women driving around a vacant lot, craning their necks in every direction.

Before we got in the car to go, mom and I had a serious talk. She told me, essentially, that if I had since changed my mind, we didn't have to go through with this. We could let it go, the way Darien and my father were trying to. She reminded me that what we were doing was dangerous, illegal; if we got caught, I would lose my scholarships, maybe even go to jail.

I thought about how my brother would never forget what happened to him. How, as his big sister, it was my implicit duty to protect him. Avenge him, if I failed at that. "We're doing this."

We'd been to the parking lot many times before the night of trade, scoping the area out, preparing against unforeseen obstacles like weather and traffic. The night was cool and the sky was clear, traffic had yet to accrue on the other side of the Kmart. We spotted Jake's driver parked in the leftmost passageway, behind a small dumpster. He was out of our line of vision, but we'd parked in that exact same inlet for practice, and we knew that he couldn't see us either.

The man of the hour was standing in the far-left corner of the lot. As we approached, we turned the car off. Mom and I had hotly debated who would be the one to initiate the trade, to face Jake. I

had persisted with such obstinacy that eventually she relented and agreed to let me do it.

The closer I got, the more he came into focus. Jake could have only been 5'9", but he was long-legged and dressed comfortably. He was wearing a Virginia Tech baseball cap, but it didn't exactly thwart facial recognition. He was olive-skinned, clean-shaven, button nosed. Attractive, save for his weak chin and preferred pastimes.

"Hey," I smiled. I looked around. "Did you walk here?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "I live just down the road."

"In Fairmont?" I asked. Fairmont, a neighborhood I'd just made up.

"Yeah, over that way." A surge of adrenaline coursed through me.

"Oh, I know some people that live over there, do you know—" I maced him.

I held the keychain container tightly in my hand and sprayed his eyes, his mouth, his ears when he turned his face away to cough. His hat fell off and I sprayed it into his hair, all over his shirt. I kicked him hard in his groin, until he was wheezing too hard to scream. I heard the car door open behind me, then the pitter patter of my mother's sneakers as she approached with Darien's baseball bat.

Jake rolled onto his side, trying to catch his breath. The bat soared high above my mother's head before crashing down on him. His ribs snapped under the lightweight aluminum. *Please* he wheezed. My mom struck him again in the torso, handed me the bat. I didn't bat an eyelash as I took it, swung it down on Jake's arms when he tried to cover his face. The crunch was unforgettable.

Mom and I made eye contact. She smiled; I smiled. Jake gasped for air in between us, clutching his sides.

I saw the discarded phone lying next to him. I wondered briefly if it even worked, or had just been a prop. I thought about how little it took to lure a person in, how everything turned into bait sooner or later. Before I could smash it, my mom cleared her throat—our signal to get back to the car.

The trunk was still popped, waiting to reclaim Darien's bat. I

tossed it in, and we drove coolly to our planned exit with no chase from Jake's driver. My heart hammered in my chest and my hands shook violently; I was thankful we agreed to let her drive back. My mom glanced over at me, chuckling as we assimilated into burgeoning traffic, camouflaged in a motley of cars.

We drove in silence for a little bit, soaking up the high of come-uppance served.

"Ye' alright?" She asked.

"Yeah." I nodded.

Then I sighed. "I should've broke that phone. Make sure he doesn't try that shit again."

She smiled. "Och, trust me, love. He won't."

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