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#7



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CONTENTS

Sean Thor Conroe ...	MICHAEL ...	3
Andrew Higgins ...	DULUTH ...	10
Marisa Crane ...	I HOPE THERE'S NUZZLING ...	15
Sean Kilpatrick ...	WARMAR ...	21
Jocelyn Hungerford ...	FAITHFUL ...	30
Gregg Williard ...	EYE UPON THE DONUT ...	34
Tyler Dillow ...	EXCERPTS FROM COOPERSTOWN, ND ...	37
Sebastian Mazza ...	DESERVED IT ...	40
Harris Lahti ...	DARK WOODS ...	44
Scott Garson ...	FUTURE COOKIE ...	47
Aaron Buchanan ...	LAYING ON HANDS ...	51
Sheldon Lee Compton ...	VICTORY PARTY ...	55
Kevin Hatch ...	RENTAL ...	61
Joseph Edwin Haeger ...	UNCLE POOH'S SECRET RECIPE ...	63



MICHAEL

**SEAN
THOR
CONROE**

Michael, who stayed posted out front of Walgreens, requesting eats from entering and exiting Walgreens customers, was presently posted out front of Walgreens, requesting eats from entering and exiting Walgreens customers.

"Yo what's good," I said as I approached, timing this utterance and my gaze, should he choose to reciprocate either, with the moment we crossed paths, so as to avoid a prolonged interaction.

Michael averted eyes and seemingly deliberately pretended to not see or hear me. Kneeling, he adjusted the Velcro on his foot brace, through which his enlarged, pale, callused toe was visible.

Once past the San Pablo X Ashby bus stop and around the corner, shortcutting through the gravel that hypotenuse-d the sidewalk's edges while scanning its surface, in the fluorescent Walgreen sign-light, for dog or human shit, I said: "Damn, that was cold."

Rosie remained silent, head bowed, hair shadowing the right side of her face. Ten-or-so paces later, she said: "He's probably just embarrassed is all."

I considered this. Then said: "Huh. That never occurred to me. You're probably right."

#

While we, Michael and I, were by no means besties, our repartee did go back a ways:

Michael slept outdoors; I was frequently nocturnal and spent much of my nighttime hours outdoors also, either to smoke strolling up and back Ashby, or on a bench on Ashby, or on the back bumper of my van once I secured a parking spot out front the apartment; or else to or from my van which, until the spot opened up about three months into Rosie and my year-long lease, I'd park on some shadowy one-way or dead-end in a five-to-ten block radius of our apartment.

He'd ask for cigarettes; I'd always have cigarettes, and would always give him one, even if I had to roll it for him.

We knew each other by face and, in his case, by the stimulants I could be counted on to be holding.

#

One night he knocked on my door—the back door, on the side abutting a 'bando, that tenants less frequently walked down—to ask for a cigarette. He was clearly lit—I could smell it, plus he had an open forty in a paper bag right there in his hand. I was decidedly not about him encroaching on my allotted space like this, but happened to be going out for a cig anyways when he knocked, not to mention had just toked the one-hitter so was feeling receptive and open I guess. We ended up smoking two cigs consecutively out back of my apartment, the furthest off-street of the four comprising the first-story of the eight-unit complex that, on first glance, most resembled a seedy motel.

Adjacent to the complex's collective dumpster, our unit's back wall was bisected diagonally by a stairway leading to our upstairs neighbor Olaf's; beneath the stairway was a large, maybe ten-by-six-foot—just about wall-encompassing—window, which at its lowest point was low, say two feet above-ground, and had, on either end, matching, two-foot-wide slot windows that opened sideways, like doors do, operated by a rotating handle. At least one window was generally left ajar at minimum a cat's width when one of us, Rosie or I, were home, so Winnie could come and go at will; and the blinds were generally pulled up a foot or two since if they weren't, Winnie would be sure to paw at them repeatedly until one of us (meaning me) lost their shit.

#

But we were back there smoking, and Michael was just going in, rambling about this and that. I learned that he was good homies with the previous tenant of the apartment we lived in. I learned that the previous tenant had lived in the apartment for ten, twenty years, and had died, presumably in the apartment, just months ago. Months be-

fore we moved in.

"For real?" I said, feeling like someone, our landlord or neighbors, should have told us about this by now.

"Oh yeah. George lived here forever. I used to, uh, I used to come over and he'd give me food, help me out."

"Word," I said, understanding a little better now why he thought it kosher to knock on my door, if still, ultimately, not about it.

The blind ruffled. I looked over and saw Winnie's head poke through, before retreating back inside when she saw me. Or likely when she saw, or smelled, Michael.

"Yo, how's your foot though? Getting better?" I asked.

It wasn't, nor would it. It was initially injured by a cop, who ran over it, either accidentally or not unclear. When it didn't get treated, it turned into trench foot, and had been in this enlarged, damn near ossified state since.

Michael asked what I was about. I told him I made coffee and wrote some.

"Man, I need someone like you!" he said. "I need someone to write my story. I have the craziest story, just crazy, but I don't have the time to write it down."

"You don't have the time?" I asked, laughing.

"Naw man! You see me out here, just trying to get by."

"OK, I feel you," I conceded, nodding.

When I finished my second cig I dapped him up—his hands were so leathery they felt fake, like prosthetic, or like tight-fitting leather gloves—and watched him shwhip it away, tottering, on the much too small Huffy he showed up on.

This must have been in January.

#

Weeks ago we'd gotten hit with a bout of nonstop rain, like the East Bay can produce periodically, just to keep its meteorologically spoiled inhabitants in check. It was one of my days off, I'd slept all day, woken up shortly after Rosie got home from work. She was fixing herself a salad in the kitchen area, listening to a podcast on her phone. It was dark out.

"Really coming down, huh," I said.

Rosie, who still had her button-up on, made a gesture to the window like Go look. Confused, I went to the window, started to open it. I only rotated the handle maybe twice before I saw something was off: there was a pile of what appeared to be clothes, wait shoes—

Michael.

Homie was straight up passed out basically beneath our window, his head wedged into the lowest couple steps of the stairs leading to Olaf's. The left side of the faux-leather couch we had in our living area was pressed up flush against the window, and I generally sat right there nestled against it, so as to be able to exhale THC smoke directly outside without having to get up, or activating the smoke alarms.

At first I did nothing. Rosie left to go on a grocery run, came back, took a shower, went to sleep. I took a shower, made food, got dressed, and went out to work in my van for the night, figuring he'd be gone by morning. When I got back around 3 a.m., however, he wasn't. I smoked my hourly cigs until sunup on my designated cinder block pretty much right next to him.

But it kept raining.

And Michael came back the next night.

On the third night it was only somewhat raining, was on and off, so Rosie let Winnie out, at maybe 7 p.m.

Winnie had an ongoing beef with this dog in an adjacent lot and would often disappear through this crack in the fence, sometimes for hours. She was by no means an outdoor cat though: her fighting technique consisted of lying on her back and swiping lamely at her attacker, and she'd sometimes come back with scratches on her belly.

I went out for a smoke at maybe 8:30 p.m., with my headphones in, and damn near sat on Michael. I was like Bruh—I said, "Bruh," out loud—but he didn't budge. I knew he heard me though, because he burrowed deeper into his jacket and grumbled like a kid who didn't want to get up for school. Like I was the mom.

I finished my smoke, headed back inside.

The rain started coming down harder. An hour, two hours passed: still no sign of Winnie. I posted up in the living room, worked on whatever it was I was working on, glancing outside to see if Winnie was out there—opening the front door for stretches in case she wanted to come in that way. I made all the sounds I could think to make that generally made Winnie come a-running. Nothing. All I could do was hope she'd found some awning or Totoro leaf-umbrella beneath which to take cover (although she did have fur, I reasoned).

Come 3 a.m. I'd had it.

It was time to re-up on coffee anyhow, so I put two cups' worth of water on the stove, scooped generous spoonfuls of Maxwell House into two mugs, added sugar, then near-boiling water, to each, stirred, and went outside.

The rain had subsided somewhat, it was heavily misting at this point; and the air, even at this ungodly hour, was warm and dank.

"Yo," I said, whispering.

Then: "Michael," louder this time.

Nothing.

"Ayo, Michael," in a conversational tone.

Before finally: "BRUH!" damn near yelling.

He jolted awake.

"Listen, you gotta make moves, bro. Hate to do this but you can't sleep here, you're fucking up my shit. My cat's been gone like ten hours now, and you're blocking her path home."

"Huh?" he said, trying to do the thing where he burrowed deeper.

"Nope, don't do that bro," I said. "Here, hit this, it'll make you feel better." I handed him the coffee. He sat up. Took the mug, downed it in four gulps, spilling some on his chest. He *ahhh*-ed. Belched.

"There's gotta be a shelter," I said, pacing. "How the fuck is there not a shelter?"

Michael looked at me surprised, and handed me the empty mug, before saying, "There is. It's just far."

"What about those trees by the Aquatic Park? By the tracks? If you get a tarp—. Like, I just can't have you—"

"I know, I know, I got it," he said quickly, like he'd been through this before.

Gathered himself, put on his hood, and stumbled off into the darkness.

Five minutes later, Winnie jetted out of the gap in the fence and booked it back through the window. She was sopping, meowed loudly at me in a way that sounded eerily human-like, and sprinted under the bed.

Frontal, Orthogonal, Built-in Mag = 0%

DULUTH

**ANDREW
HIGGINS**

The plane fulfills its purpose: we are no longer ascendant. The engine winds down smoothly, a game show loss sort of draining. The tarmac is ice-sheathed but our skid in was mild. Men outside in reflective gear gesture meaningfully towards the hull, and we look at them through the ovular windows with a small, first-world pity. My body is still hallucinating movement at six-hundred miles per hour.

We are all seated uncomfortably, waiting for permission, exchanging mild sentiments until we can get off. The thin fury of air-conditioning is louder than before. The seatbelt chime rings, finally, and we all jolt to our feet. It's a group-rise, liturgical. We're hunched under the rounded ceilings, staring into our respective middle distances. The plane seems to close in on us as we stand in needless silence. The reek of a changed diaper leaking into the cabin. Benign mechanical screeches issuing from under our feet. Nearby someone's belly croaks long with hunger. We're a fuselage of bodies, wanting to get off.

The woman seated beside me, stringy-haired and jumpy, was telling me about comparative taxes rates in Ireland, where she lives now with her husband because of his job. "They take *half!*" She exclaimed quietly. "*Half!*" Her voice was nasally but reassuring, an accent I haven't heard for a while. I can't guess her age. She has that life-long waitress sheen, tight-skinned, wide-eyed, always chewing gum.

A man leans over his seat, giving us both a world-weary look. Balding, wide-set predatory eyes, his collar yellowing a little after our red-eye from New York. Our eyes meet and we raise our eyebrows at one another, a way of greeting. We are open.

"Ya know," he says to neither of us in particular, "it's not much better here in the States. Between state and federal, my 401k, and health insurance—my one kid's special needs—it comes out to over 50% of my take-home, too."

The woman glances up to me for confirmation.

I say, "That's about right."

Her face goes gloomy. She seems to be burdened by some previously unknown woe. "Ya

know," she says in a vaguely didactic tone, "a lot of kids are turning up autistic these days. I tell ya, I saw on the news that it has something to do with all these WIFI signals in the air!" Her eyes fall to her lap and she shakes her head, a look of pale distress on her face. "You just never heard of that autism before this whole online thing." I realize as she says this that she's much older than I've guessed.

"Oh, my son doesn't have autism," the man begins apologetically. "Tommy's mentally retarded."

Good afternoon passengers. This is your captain speaking. Looks like it's a cloudy sixty-four degrees outside...

There is a silence that the woman beside me obviously wants to fill. "Well," the woman starts in a vaguely conspiratorial tone, "if it weren't for Comrade O-BA-ma's health care plan...Plus! these government people with their federal salaries and pensions and benefits!" She shakes her head again, this time, at a world bent on specific fiscal waste.

The man dips his chin towards me, looking for the third side to our burgeoning revolt. "What do you do for work?"

I look at my feet.

"I'm a consultant, with the GSA."

They both find a variation of frown-smile at this, and a feeling arises that we've all sort of had enough of each other.

The door opens and the plane is depressurized, an entirely controlled danger. We all descend into the small barbarism of hasty disembarkation. Bins are pried open. Bags are ripped out. I am pushed, I push back, and no one acknowledges it. Wordless negotiations take place between opposite sides of the aisle. Each of us has our own reveries and despairs and we wear them on our faces. The passengers all enter the terminal as a dissipating community, and we fuse as individuals into a larger

faceless crowd. We will abandon all knowledge of each other: we are, above all, strangers.

Duluth is convinced it's coming up in the world. This is my hometown, but I'm disoriented in the new terminal. welcome to the james l. oberstar terminal runs across an exterior skyway. It was built recently in memoriam of a late-senator, a Democrat, and I recalled this only dimly because my Republican parents say his name with offhand venom. I walk past a pseudo-luxury coffee house, local displayed prominently on the signage (although the coffee is neither grown nor roasted here in Minnesota). There's a full British pub next door, its ruddy baroque wooden panels bleached out by the sunlight coming in through the wall-sized windows. Next, a languid young man, dark and vaguely foreign, coughs and offers me pink salt from The Dead Sea.

Travel noises. Intercoms, electric doors, the hushed tension of people moving toward destinations. I turn towards the baggage carousel, following a sign. The slow tide of traffic outside. A few passengers' families have paid the one-hour parking fee to greet them indoors. I see the man hug the son he described and a few others who share his general traits. I am enjoying the sight of this, hardened by the city I now live in—one of the elite coastal bastions. Then the woman from the flight waddles up to my side. She peers at me, wide-eyed. I can see that she's waiting to tell me a secret. I raise my eyebrows, a gesture of openness, and she begins speaking from the side of her mouth. "I can't believe they say that about their own kids!"

"Say what?" I ask, confused.

"Re-tard," she whispers, casting a look to each side. "That's like saying the *N-word*!"

The word hangs in the air. I realize she's come to misunderstand *autism* as some sort of PC term for mental retardation. Given her feelings about taxes and health care, I find this consideration mildly ironic. Bags begin thudding down onto the conveyor belt, and the silence her statement has engendered, I realize, belongs to neither of us. *Goshes* and *darnits* and *hons* fill the air. I part ways with my seatmate now and

wish her a Merry Christmas. This is my tribe, what I came for.

I am home.



I HOPE THERE'S NUZZLING

MARISA CRANE

The universe is held inside a crunch bar. Everyone knows it. We are all just waiting for the sloppy giant to unwrap that beautiful blue wrapper and take a big bite out of it.

And then what?

Well, fuck if we residents of the universe know. We're just here.

Will time stop? Cease to exist? Learn how to dougie all on its own?

Will Saturn and Jupiter finally rekindle their romance or will Venus slip on her lace thong and distract Saturn yet again?

Will the protons and electrons set aside their differences and make a pot roast together? Or perhaps a quiche? A quiche would be nice. A quiche is an adult thing to make.

Will the sun have an identity crisis? Join a cult? Begin dressing in drag? Become a levitating street performer?

Will the various alien species quit fighting over who deserves to possess the Earthlings as slaves and shake hands, then nuzzle each other's soft fuzzy cheeks instead?

I hope that there is nuzzling involved. I really do.

These are the things I think about as I stand in the corner of the party. Drinking from a red solo cup. Because that's what you do. You hold a red cup full of toxic fluid, then pour the poison into your mouth-hole, and let it weasel its way down your elastic tube until it hits your stomach where your stomach lining inevitably screams in agony. That's what happens when you burp. It's your stomach crying out for help.

X walks over to me, kinda smiling, kinda snarling, and Y, who's sticking a vial up her nose, laughs like, oh, you two know each other? And I'm like shh, I'm trying to

listen for the crunch of the crunch bar, and she thinks I'm kidding. Says something that is either a backhanded compliment or a fronthanded insult.

I decide that I'm okay with either.

X asks what I'm doing. I think it's fairly obvious what I'm doing, but I hold up my red chalice of poison as a response anyway. She slams her cup into mine, thinking that I was signaling for a cheers situation. My golden poison spills all over my pineapple shirt. It happens.

X holds her hands up like, how did that happen? She says that the walls are shaking but no one ever notices.

I excuse myself to go retrieve more beer, holding onto the walls as I walk. Kind of like a secret agent in those movies. You know.

At the keg, Z makes a noise that sounds something like an alien having an orgasm. I think this is nice. I hope that an alien is getting off right this very moment. Before the giant tears the blue wrapper open.

Z gives me a head nod. I return it to him, unused. He says the beer is cold or mold or bold. I drink it. It tastes bold.

Back in the corner, X is gone and Y is giving me the silent treatment, I think for acknowledging X's existence. Or at least she's trying to. Every time she says something, she follows it up with—okay that's it, I'm done—then eyes me like a pit bull wondering why it doesn't get to sleep on the bed or eat crème brulee with the rest of the sad humans.

Y breaks her vow of silence. Says, you know X has one of those male sex dolls, right?

No, why would I know something like that? I ask, drinking my bold beer. Fucking intrepid. It travels to my stomach, slaughters every cell inside.

Haha, I don't know. I don't know, okay? Says Y. She's grinding her teeth. I wonder if I am a male sex doll. That would explain a lot.

Z's fluffy cat approaches and rubs up against my legs then Y's.

Hi hi, little guy or girl or non-binary feline, I coo, bending down to pet it. It hisses. Fine, control freak.

You ever think about how Seaside has tons of cats outside but you never see any at the beach? It's one massive litter box, says Y, holding her arms out to show me what the word massive means. I pour more beer down my mouth-hole.

Shit, you're right, I say. None of the cats shit there. It's like this beautiful, pristine toilet they're missing out on. It's like if someone turned down taking a dump in Buckingham Palace.

Yeah, she smiles. She sticks the vial up her nose and winks at me. I listen for the crunch. Nothing yet. I bet Y is one of the Rice Krispies.

I know Y really means it when she says yeah. She says it with gumption like I just asked her to join Beyoncé's presidential campaign.

Yeah!

We leave the party without saying goodbye to anyone because saying goodbye is kind of like holding your breath underwater in the shallow end of the pool. Just stand up, fool.

On the walk home, Y laces her arm in mine and I can feel her protons wiggling around in their skin suit. We see three dogs, all of which bark at me. I bark back at them.

You've gotta practice your bark, says Y.

We talking 'bout praaaaaactice, I say, making an outdated Allen Iverson reference and

thinking I am funny in the way that time thinks doing the dougie is.

X texts me that it was good to see me tonight. I write back that she needs to find the giant and then we'll talk.

Do you like her? Y asks, her skin translucent. I look through her and read the For Sale sign tilted in the grass. She is not for sale.

No. Do you?

I heard that she has zero credit, like literally. It's like she doesn't even exist, she says. I take that as a yes.

When we get home, Y puts a homemade mask on my face. To de-bloat it, she says. It has egg whites, coffee grounds, and I don't know what else. I'm supposed to lie down while I wear it so that gravity pulls my cheeks *back* instead of *down*, but instead I decide to make a quiche.

Like the protons and electrons. I want to settle the differences within myself.

The important thing to remember when you're making a quiche is that you're not Martha Stewart. No one is paying for your recipe. Most likely you're going to ruin the quiche and everything else around you. Your cat doesn't care if you smile like a clown while whisking the eggs. You're not Martha Stewart. You didn't go to prison and increase your street cred. You don't hang out in kitchens with Snoop Dogg. You don't get to forbid Snoop Dogg from dropping the pan like it's hot and watch the joy dissipate from his face.

You don't get to crack the shell of yourself and cascade into a mixing bowl and come out 30 minutes later looking like a million bucks. Sorry, not even your therapist can help with that.

I am making a quiche. More accurately, I am making 12 muffin-sized quiches. Each its own tragi-comedy. Each its own little world.

I put them in the oven, wave goodbye.

My jowls are dangling past my nipples by the time I wash off the mask. I don't bother sliding my skin back into place.

I wonder what Saturn and Jupiter are doing this very moment. If they are kissing, I would like to kiss Y. I go into the bedroom where she is reading a book about snails and underlining her favorite ones. It's such a Y thing to do.

I give her a kiss on the cheek. Her skin is so warm and alive. I almost can't believe it. I crawl into bed with her and nuzzle my face into her neck.

I forget all about the quiche and I wake to us burning beautifully, the giant standing over us, like hey, man, I've heard so much about you.



WARMAR

SEAN KILPATRICK

One day I could speak the language hidden beneath my scabs. There were alphabets above the vacuum overhead that revealed themselves to me, but it was like diving after a flea with safety scissors. Almost enough grown to fill a coffin, still using gunshots to count sheep at night, I discovered, quite by fluke, much to the chagrin of the anorexic model whose head I crayoned off, how repugnantly negotiable human beings found love. I needed a denomination of stray to be cast adrift with, someone also awake, bowed out of society, willing to mate, common sense of history notwithstanding, and she arrived, everting her eyelids until sunshine intruded on both of us in stymied, peristaltic waves.

She slithered beneath the rat-damaged wood of my family's garage, chanting like an oracle shampooed with WD-40. I thought she flicked roadkill into her eyes, thought this was perfume in the future. Snorting Wite-Out, blowing a bubble from her mouth to mine, she said we'd enter blacker holes than birth. Which category of goddess heaved Lamaze while jump roping? We crept back through the stasis that first afflicted us as unsolidified matter inside a pair of jeans and stamped that certificate into speech. Adam and Eve joined forces to seduce the serpent. My name always sounded mutilated by other mouths.

A couple psychos going steady, gorgonized devotees too antsy for school, we snuck to our meeting place and her feet were defied. She issued subliminal suggestions I played out in hopes of deleting my ineligible company from her munificence. Caressing papillae with dead cat magic, poking a degraded thorn of lumber through its tongue, we emulated the feline rictus. Neighbors here didn't bother burying pets. Even I stopped pinning every cockroach in my bed to the wall for the white noise of their wriggling. She blew my scraps a kiss and, immured in that exhalation, nerve endings became inconsequential. We appeared lost beneath the rifle sight of smokestacks.

A security guard at the hospital down the street sensed my pull toward the morgue. He knew I dreamt of rigging the burn ward with outdoor speakers. The second he and his ordinary ilk stopped biblically stoning me, I anticipated that they would swap victims and snuff out the object of my affection for turning everything further vulnerable with her beauty. Paranoia of cosmic rebuke convinced me to rush home early and peek out the garage's rat hole into the alley where, indeed, three males stood

dwarfing her. I was set to self-sacrifice, but she rehearsed a laugh, mimicking our private cryptophasia. She crawled in and gesticulated under newfound critical assessment. Dubbed the pilgarlic of her expo, rococo jackass honoring duplicitous onlookers, I didn't buy the panting. How might I have handed her all the turmoil she caused my bowels? It felt ridiculous, anyway, to be understood as having meant one feeling.

My parents stopped loving each other after years of piss-streaked legs across the same bedsheet proved marriage had a plot hole. They both drank and visibly shuddered in my presence, but dad helped construct what devolved into a playhouse. It was far from a lair for sacrificial black masses. The girl would survive, regardless, not because I was incapable of harming her, but because there wasn't time, before the sun exploded, to enact my revenge. "Cool playhouse" she'd remark, giggling to her clan. It consisted of cheap plywood and rotted in the rain. A perfect, if accidental, representation of our potential. The neighborhood graduated from working class bog to fledgling ghetto, holding up bunny ears on my own decline. State-abandoned mental patients populated the alley. I picked through their leavings when they took refuge in my imitation property. The stench that lingered provided a sizeable foundation. I was getting to know my kind through diet.

As if to replace the fourberie of the previous ritual, a man materialized, stained front of his orange peacoat upsetting the streetlamp's reach. Minor subcutaneous filler was outlined only by an ostensible and never ending nod that made him seem attached, by some untraceable means, to the wall behind. Having learned to take anything appearing to defy nature as a trick at the expense of my emotional wellbeing, I approached him with bravado. He seemed to be in the process of detaching himself from the mold inside his shadow, his countenance transmogrifying against the fetid clutch of plywood, giving voice to the bruises in each corner. A wiry beard, like staples colored by a marker, dotted the chin stuck out beneath newspaper stripping. There was a croon, without accompanying projection from the lips: "This is what you parents put down for a pet to use and my face happened instead." Relaying to the squatter my boring love troubles, I noticed rattails protruding from his pocket. Perhaps they were his food, alive or not. He interrupted, a startling octave deeper:

"Bring her to Warmar."

I wasn't sure if my lodger spoke of a location or of himself in the third person, but I decided to deliver the girl. The boldness of my disruption when next we met caught her off guard. I took her hand without warning, the venous coating of her upturned eyelids waxing free in shock. Warmar throbbed from the square foot window of the playhouse. The girl instinctually broke hold, maintaining a distance. I felt her trembling change the air. Such a shame to see her eyes revealed, so jaundiced by their mere humanity in meeting a literal aberration, someone like myself: practitioner of blank appetites. If only she'd scream across this moment forever. Warmar disentangled from the barrier and edged between us. A black cylinder wreathed with slime forced its way from his mouth, plashing onto the playhouse welcome mat. Her hair now appeared spray paint white.

When she dove against her pillow, that face stayed smudged on every vision to follow. The sheltered tool down the block who worshipped spirits had spent his absurd adoration on a threat she no longer found curious. Jolted by the still-captured visage leaking all over the floor of her room, she forced open her eyes and had to spin in her sheets several times, rotating her strained perception, before the effect wore off. Weeping with alarmed frustration, only understanding hours later that this was not permanent, she finally stopped hyperventilating, but the furnace clicked on and the creature shuffled up the vent next to her bed, whispering in tune like an omniscient bellows fouling the house's oxygen and her own, its breath growing in her lungs. She would have to pass it from her, torn as a prepubescent birth, flattened along in spasms through what felt like sharp cilia attached to her nervous system. Anyone else became another violation. She divorced her thought from her actions, made a rind of the present moment, dissociating her from her.

Her brothers raised her while their mother worked. Cornered by this parody of affection, anything sentimental always took on quotation marks in the cruel lampoon she understood as human relations. If the neighbor's corny, doe-eyed, Shakespearean fixation with their sister could be exploited to either jump him in as a one of them, or to expel him from the violation of an intent they subconsciously shared, she, by no prevailing opportunity a brother herself, would make use of how her looks worked

on people. Her body didn't matter to her, as long as she could picture it having the strength to challenge any boy. Someone got duped into loving her for biological reasons. Had he the ability to see through it and to love the boulder she thought she was, despite the prank of her existence - but no male would ever be capable of loving himself in her. That love was kept quiet in the family when her brothers developed first. She ignored her size as best she could, but the damage that face accrued in her shattered who she was, fashioned her into her worst nightmare: a frail girl. She hid and resented her lame fixation with animals, but studied them in glimpses while her brothers channel-surfed. A hippopotamus father killed its offspring so it could mate more often. The mother absently nudged her infant's corpse across the bottom of the pond, unable to process the futility of her repeated attempts at resuscitation. A puma and an elk sat in the high grass, the elk stranded alive all day in its predator's grimace, bleating unceasingly like something death couldn't mute. She was fasting through her transformation into a poor symbol of this version of her life and would seek reparations for the inconvenience.

Warmar spat me her whole biography. He had spared her for reasons I found specious. Blinking was a pastime of no concern to me. I could log into the sun by staring up. There I saw taxidermy with gangrene, the depths of a medical journal brought to life, the big fungus who raised me.

"Come closer and I will tell you a secret about the rain," Warmar shushed. Digested through the texture of the wall, floor humming as I matched its frequency, eliminated piecemeal into the alley behind, reciting my master's DNA, the girl's brothers said hello, mentioning how lucky I was to live close to a hospital.

I began showing up in their garage, leaving notes with symbols outside their sister's window. They realized I'm someone you can't scare away and brought her out as a peace offering. She hadn't slept in weeks, was paler and thinner than I thought technically possible, and, most importantly, trembled for me on sight. I explained in plain English that she and I needed to perform a rain dance together. This way Warmar could detach himself from the playhouse and drift free. Their sister's condition would then be cured and I'd leave her to her mediocrity.

We met in the backyard of an abandoned house a few doors down. The earless and half-starved strays, hatched there and kept as pit fighters, were enraged by our scent. Her brothers flanked her, keeping watch, goading us to hurry. The grass came past our knees. A tiny snake twisted through the girl's sandal. She thought she was the featured food in a nature documentary. I beckoned her to roll those eyelids up. She stepped forth, quavering, arms proffered skyward, shorts patching because she lacked the willpower to demand privacy. We could all comprehend the additional terror of the first event of womanhood. A capacity for torment should have readied her for a dance that stole everything from me.

Febrile below exploding grass, she was battered between consciousness and a ringing in her ears. Her brothers punched every muscular inch of the escaped pit bull's body, causing it to lock down harder. They pried the fastening grip upward and out of their sister's skull until the entire mandible dislodged from the thing's throat with a soggy clap noise. After they'd carried her home, one of them returned, grabbed a beer bottle from the driveway, and smashed it over my head. I stared back through the bloodstream.

The dog trotted in reverse against a corner of fence, its body wrenching spasmodically, jaw hanging from a vomited thread. Both of us came alive once digested, married in twin defecation. A small storm cloud settled over the playhouse. Warmar was leaning almost horizontally by the remaining strings of mildew connected to his spine, climbing up the rain. He raised his arms and the dog limped down the alley, crawling from the garage, barking through its concave fissure. Warmar popped his fist down the gaping hole in the animal's head and searched inside. He handed me my beloved's blood-clotted ear, slick with stomach acid, and levitated above the storm cloud, disappearing hat-first within. I waited hours, until the freak weather dispersed, standing far enough toward the alley to see her at her window, swathed in bandages, and offered up Warmar's memento, whispering sweet nothings.

The playhouse didn't buckle until the right angle of wall and floor were disjointed with a sledgehammer, sliding the roof down on top of me, scalp-white revealed. No one came around to be impressed by my wounds anymore. Dragging floorboards to the alley dumpster, a charcoal tsunami, an infinite mischief swirling separate concentric rat

king knots stampeding additional carcasses in their flight, obstructed all comprehension. They were graining each other's hides, dehaired in red thickets, panicking to navigate. Tabulating through the abject fog, I could affix a final image of Warmar, sticking up his middle finger, and saluted in return.

I lost interest in any further interaction with the world. A high school ghost, I only paused next to girls to overhear how well my future bride was taking socially. She should be allowed to live life well, I thought, because time was something I could roll up my sleeves with now. Bullies never looked me in the eye. I did the bare minimum schoolwork to graduate, spending time online, cataloguing survivalist videos and becoming a gradually popular fixture in extremist chatrooms. I typed: we must be programmed against the false logic of our comfort and select what to block out in order to accomplish the atrocities demanded of us.

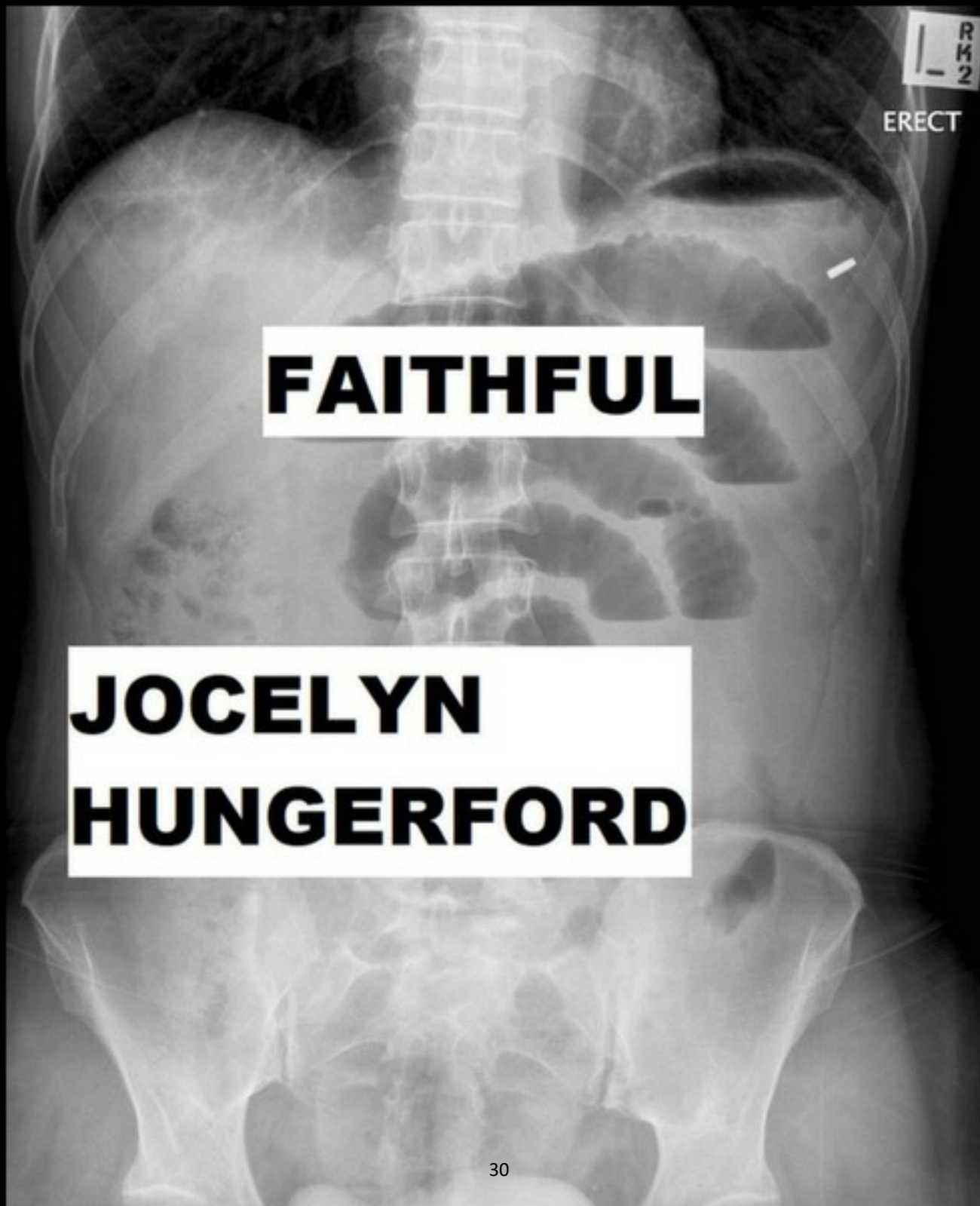
My notifications tripled in an evening. I gave up gaming, let my guy run into a wall. People sent videos concerning eradication of parasites from the body. One featured an online avatar snatching a writhing, centipede-shaped organism from a person's ear and referring to it as the icicle he used to help him function, the zygote kicked through his truer being. We contributed memes, studied explosives. Each ritual matured us early. Every supposed cure brought our bodies closer in shared agony. The girl, having decided against tutelage from an early age, embraced a popular and highly functional group of friends. Luckily, her hair entirely disguised the scar. The few who found out were perversely intrigued. Nothing diminished what drew others to her. By always choosing the opposite of what her instincts told her, she consistently came off like the most attractive and docile girl at school. She stayed out as much as possible with friends and boyfriends whose silliness acquitted her oppressive moment to moment thought process. Requiring deeper fulfillment would be ostentatious. Besides, she knew where that led. Her brothers had begun jail sentences. When she saw me in class, it was as if we had never met. She misremembered me as someone vaguely uncomfortable. I saw only her, of course, only heard students or teachers when they mentioned her. They noticed my handiwork in the locker room, but kept their mouths shut. Upwards of sixty lettings a day. My nerve endings acted as a valve I adjusted to extinguish the racket from adjacent heads. I pictured her showy clothes covered in

Sanskrit. We'd need a shroud for the honeymoon. She wanted out of the city the moment she graduated. Her friends hooked her up with a job and roommate situation in Marquette. She purchased a train ticket a week into that summer. I and my online associates signed off, divvied by one name.

I preferred surveillance footage posted online by anonymous users over getting to know anyone. Perhaps my bitch envisioned opulence, a neatly medicinal antiquation, and packed light, not caring to taint the new locale with objects involving her past. Stepping onto the platform, searching for the right train, she didn't see me approach, didn't notice the crowd turning as I turned. Nourished by the long-stoked expectation that escape was forthcoming, once age permitted, she recognized my face, the staples all across, the snot-damp newspaper, as I went down on one knee, opening the jewelry case, black prune of her ear placed in its center. She replied yes only because she knew that the fun she had had as a teenager was a façade built to domino her into a life of formalities. Noticing the intense weaponry protruding from my peacoat, finally seeing every face as the face that wrecked her childhood, she backed away, and it took such strength of mind, a decade's hiatus inside the mask, sustaining all the enfeeblement of human relatability, for her to lift both middle fingers and grin.

The pain was only surmounted by how much she depended upon it to guide her body. Almost from birth, she had been gnashing against the common qualities of her gender, practicing excruciatingly to feign the emotive roleplay necessary in fulfilling every expectant potential mate. More so than the vague confirmation of want from others, she wanted her life back, even though she had no clue what life could hold meaning. Gunshots receded from the station as the train shifted into motion, occurring to her as if a pair of dentures had lodged suddenly beneath the skin of her thigh. She talked back to the jokey chatter in her panties, hunched over like a basketball coach enraged by having genitals, trying not to be lulled to sleep, until the man one seat over shoved a dollop of toothpaste into his shorts, perhaps to spoof the nonsense she increasingly believed, and told her she was now his wife too. His general malevolence persuaded her. She had been betrothed and widowed moments before and was coming to appreciate skipping the courting process. People were always struggling to appear so

unavailable to one another that they missed out on the number of strangers who might milk them efficiently. Besides, she understood, on a telepathic level, that he would bomb the train if she refused to help him ejaculate. Everything in her life and in the culture validated the image of herself as victim, regardless of relevant paranoid, convincing her to hurry and diminish the impact of this man's predation by complying before he could institute it. She would submit even if it was in him to let her be. More important than if men were abusive was their potential for fucking every memory of hers into remission. Cocks were too big when they wanted her and too small the few times she wanted one. Living as a piece of carrion without the typical power to exclude even herself felt promising on occasion, especially if she was spared actual dick meat being soldiered through her by allowing some minor frottage while she pretended to be asleep. As long as any sexual completion left her the better person overall, which she considered fair enough, having sacrificed her hymen to a pack of dogs, so that even the piss dots on her toilet paper still resembled an exclamation point. She noticed for the first time that not all of the blood covering her belonged to her. She could have sprung a lifelong leak. Her makeshift husband viewed hours old Wi-Fi footage of the station prior to their disembarking. Due to the ignorance or fleeing terror of the conductor, they proceeded toward Michigan while factions of Warmars, enlivened by some greater onslaught, contagiously activated or were activated by a compendium of like stories across the globe. The title was as unimportant as the revolving story behind it. She glanced up from the costumed image of the boy her consciousness had always willed itself to block as he executed random women against the tracks, doling out knives and shooting those who refused to induct their bodies with lacerations and join me in the killing, halving children on the platform before their withering parents. The city dispersed pockets of smoke. She felt, per usual, like begging everyone's forgiveness might be in order, but knew that the future picked out for her in homely compliance between fate and self-hatred would keep her a passenger forever, the consensual statuary of the psychopath seated next to her, an airtight shriek within the plaster, wearing his control like a bonnet throughout the new and somehow uglier country and that his use for her would wield a tenacity that might, over time, with luck, abstract her from every municipal standing, or at least leave her his numbest remnant. The man snatched the blood-caked jewelry box from her hand and bit the blackened ear inside like he was testing gold. She got under him worse than any pillow and cleared her throat so he could speak.



FAITHFUL

**JOCELYN
HUNGERFORD**

A cool Sydney night at the beginning of spring. We were smoking a joint on the verandah. The lights on the harbour twinkled and the possums were rasping out their mating calls.

He'd been 'scraping it together' for a year, he said, to be able to come here. A few weeks' respite. Fights, a kid, a mortgage, a business.

'Why don't you leave?' I asked. He looked shocked. 'Because she's my child. I won't do to her what was done to me.'

I hummed and murmured a soothing noise. I could feel his mood sinking. It seemed to be my fault; something in the curl of his lip, his nostrils wrinkling as if he smelled something wrong about me. I wanted him to be nice again so I butted my head into him and growled. He kept still, staring straight ahead. I leapt off the couch and crawled over to a stick the eucalyptus tree had shed. I picked it up in my mouth and brought it to him, making my best puppy-dog eyes and growling low in my throat. He started to laugh. He tried to take the stick and I wouldn't let him. I bared my fangs and growled louder; he laughed harder.

He told me he wanted to kill himself. My emails were keeping him alive. I moved to his country and into his house. He gave me a box under the stairs where I could keep my private things. He said it was all mine. I could bury my bones there.

On the first night he made us dinner. It wasn't spicy enough; I asked if I could put chili in mine. His eyes flushed dark, angry. 'What, and destroy my carefully balanced flavours? You might as well be eating dog food.'

It was hard to sleep. I turned around and around in the bed, trying to get comfortable. It made him laugh, the way I scratched about. When I fell asleep he watched me grinding my teeth. He teased me about gnawing on bones in my sleep. I didn't like the laughing or the teasing but it was my job to keep him happy. And the rages scared me.

He liked to fuck me from behind. He came more quickly when he couldn't see my face.

He could get further into me. My arse looked better than my face, anyway. I didn't have the same face any more: it was longer, leaner, whiskery. It put him off when I got excited and growled.

I stopped shaving and waxing. I let the hair under my arms and between my legs and on my legs grow. 'You look like a fucking lesbian,' he said. It didn't stop him touching me, though, as long as I was facing the other way. Even my arse was starting to grow hair but he could still pull it aside to get into my soft wet insides. I didn't like him so much now but animal, I still got excited. He liked to bite the back of my neck while I bucked against him.

One day I was out walking when a stranger started patting me. I was still allowed out by myself. His hand felt good on my head so I let him stroke my back. His hand felt good on my back so I rolled over and let him scratch my stomach. His hand felt good on my stomach so I let him put it between my legs.

It was getting harder to type because my fingers were shrinking and getting wider and blunter, and my nails thicker and sharper. Still, I was a clever dog and if I used my tongue and my nose I could still write an email. I wrote to the stranger: 'I wantr to ber yoiur dog, panting afdter youy. Iu want youi to opwn me.' We knew it was a game. He liked it when I stood on his chest with my paws on his shoulders, running my tongue through his fur. We were the same size. He didn't mind that.

But because I didn't wipe all the drool off the keyboard, my owner knew I had been doing something I shouldn't. I cowered at his feet while he shouted, 'I bought this computer for business purposes! It is not a toy!' When he found the letters he said: 'You're sick. If you saw a doctor he'd have you locked up.' He called me a bitch in heat, running around offering her arse to everything that moves. He called me bestial and chained me up.

He looked through my cardboard box and found a leash the stranger had given me. He brought out his whip: it was long and cruel and when he lashed me hard with it, my back arched and I whimpered in pain. 'I'm only doing this because I love you,' he said. 'It's for your own good.' He whipped me again, harder. He was getting excited;

I could see his cock bulging in his trousers. 'I'm only doing this because I love you so fucking much. But I need you to understand what you've done.'

But I couldn't understand any more. It's hard to say what happened next; my mind isn't as clear as it was. Words are harder to think, harder to form. I remember how quickly he went down; that although his chest and shoulders were broad, his legs were slender and he toppled easily when I jumped him. I remember his yell of pain and fury; I remember the sharp metallic scent of blood. I remember that I ate his entrails first.



"She could be one of them." Matt nodded toward the end of the counter. A Japanese woman of indeterminate age with fuchsia hair and an aqua hoody sat alone with a donut and coffee. Jake had never seen anyone eat a donut the way she did, from the outside surface moving in, turning it with each nibble until there was nothing but a perfect ring around the center. She placed it on the counter to study between sips of coffee.

Matt whispered, "She's here every Saturday morning. Orders coffee and a cake donut, always real careful not to bite the hole."

Jake said, "Yeah?"

Matt leaned closer, talking low and fast. "So, let's say that everybody and everything is a projection of extra-dimensional forces that 'interpret' us in three dimensions, OK? And if we're all electromagnetic metaphors downloaded from quantum data streams compressed to infinity inside the sentient black holes that are 'dreaming' us, then some people, just a few people, like that woman there, could be a black hole's version of a 'lucid dream'."

"Yeah..."

"...which posits the donut batter as 'objective correlative' for plasma crushed in a torus of solenoid magnets, pressurized and accelerated until the nuclei fuse, which of course makes her eating the donut a representation of a representation, an avatar of a circular particle accelerator that is, in turn, a lower order, non-sentient expression of their dreaming us into being, you know?"

"Yeah. But..."

"But what?"

"But don't black holes eat matter and galaxies and stuff? Are they dreaming us up just to eat us? Like, you know, a chef imagining a new recipe for poached quail eggs?"

Matt blinked. "That's a complete distortion, Jake."

"I just don't get what they want."

"What they want? Jake! The question has no meaning. Even if it did we'd be incapable of ever knowing the answer. The consciousness we're considering is infinitely more complex than ours. I mean, do you even ever know what *your own* consciousness 'wants' , let alone anyone else's?" At that moment Jake's eyes met the woman's. Neither looked away. Her pensive expression softened. She smiled, and he blushed. And smiled back.

"You know what I mean? Jake?"

"Jake?"



TYLER DILLOW

This is an AP radiograph of a lumbar vertebra. A pedicle screw is visible, oriented vertically. A pedicle puller is positioned horizontally, intersecting the screw. The vertebral body and surrounding bony structures are clearly visible. The image is framed by a circular field of view.

**EXCERPTS FROM
COOPERSTOWN, ND**

I wash my hands, then my face.

He carries me in a bag. A brown paper sack, rough and unevenly cut around the edges. It's dark. He takes me out of the bag and hangs me, right above his headboard.

Coffee boils on the stovetop. Snow falls outside as seen through a window. Music plays as heard through ears. Bodies touch hands; hands touch bodies. Altogether naked. Altogether, a mug sits on the corner of a table as held by gravity. All held down by the feet of a person. On the floor, linoleum; on the linoleum, dust. Outside wet, outside ice. Outside, a certain amount of snowflakes reached human lungs. When inhaling, hold your breath. Colonial abstraction. There you are, German Shepard on a leash. There you are. Ready for attack; ready to oppress. More willing to oppress, than any other feeling you've ever had. You say, you didn't know you had it, but you did. Still do. Every time you don't look or more so look. A gun on your hip following the pattern of the generation before you. You are still very much them. We know, you watched Selma. You wanted it to win best picture. You even rooted for MLK. Ignoring the facts. Ignoring the fact, you were responsible for the ending.

Ten people died in an apartment fire.

My friend kissed the ground in appreciation of earth. The dirt isn't soft. The opposite of the silk robe laying over his recliner. My friend—say his name is Mark—lives alone. Mark wants to dig up the bones of fossilized animals or fossilized people. It's his first time outside in three months. Mark pays this kid to bring him his groceries, but he wants to dig through the crust of the earth. Mark found an arrowhead near the river, when he was fourteen. Ever since, he thinks, he's Indiana Jones. Mark owns a leather satchel. Mark owns a dark brown hat. Mark ordered a bull whip, a few weeks ago, and it just came in. The arrowhead stays in his front-shirt pocket.

He stirs up goosebumps on my neck. The suns rising. It shines through my curtains. Cillian sits. Half his face is, ideally, covered by shadows like a Bacon painting. He is all obtuse and sexual. Blood red stains into yellow into purple into lavender. Him into me. Windows into walls into bathrooms.

About five miles outside of town, Ronald Reagan built a missile silo. *Fuck North Dakota*, he said.

A man walks out of a shop carrying a framed Magritte painting. A bad print in a bag.

An old Pontiac is parked across the street. Today is sun. A movie plays on the television—Hiroshima—low and inaudible dialogue can be heard. This movie always plays; we always watch. Air mixes with the blemishes on your skin. Listen to this, a novel sentence, too long sticking and stuck to the roof of your mouth. Hiroshima, Hiroshima, Hiroshima—the tipping slow release of a snail shell. Water drips out of the faucets, the movie plays. We watch.

DESERVED IT

SEBASTIAN MAZZA



But I know, it's my own damn fault. - Jimmy Buffett

The lightning bolt lit up the parking lot, fizzing, spitting, then evaporating into the gloom. After my eyes adjusted, I could just make out Dad's fuzzy supine form across the lot and the man still standing over him. Before that night I'd never seen the man, who looked a bit woebegone and clumsy and irresponsible, a bit stocky with a bristly mustache, but not like a truly bad person, even now in memory. I've tried to pull up anger at him but end up mad at Dad instead, at how he left me all alone in the teeming shopping mall while he ate his ice cream cone in the food court farther underground. Now he's left us all alone forever.

Eventually I found him finishing his cone just through the sliding doors to the parking lot. They slid and slid. Then the man bounded up to us and said Dad's name, who couldn't shake hands because his were very sticky. The man's hand hung briefly in the air alone. They got to talking, speaking as if they had this long history or rivalry together, referring to strange names and other things I didn't understand. Actually, it kind of shed some light on Dad, who had always been so guarded about his life before Mom and me, to think of him in relation to this man, to think of them as basically similar.

But the crux of the encounter, from what I was able to make out after Dad ordered me back to the car, was that suddenly the guy got really dangerous and turned on Dad, a bit like if you get hopelessly lost on a hike, or if a drunken hookup with a stranger becomes violent. There's this residual half-smile of disbelief on your face, but now the trail is gone, the trees are black, these hands are in your mouth and on your throat and here's this seriously horrible thing happening to you.

Next morning Mom and I tried to speak but couldn't, felt fewer by so many more than one. Household objects stood in for Dad wherever we looked—the stupid terracotta flower pots sculpted with faces with open mouths, a folk guitar, a leather chair—and Mom cleaned all the dishes while I tried to read. It turned out that all along our lives had been that stale gray dully glowing layer we'd sometimes taste just underneath.

It kept replaying in my mind. The glowing parking lines. The insectile shapes of cars. The weight of the shopping bags. When Dad gave the man a jovial pat on the back with the heel of his non-ice cream hand, he stiffened.

"Don't touch the back," he said.

I remember him saying "the back" instead of "my back," as if it were no longer a part of him, as if every part of him were becoming progressively detached from his core of authority, and that all these fragments, the humid mouth, the oily face, the sex, the stomach and the hand, were subsequently going mad and turning back upon his inner core to take revenge.

I laughed nervously then, too loudly, and the man looked at me with his blue and beady eyes.

He described a surgery he needed but could not afford, involving the threading of inch-long steel needles through his spinal cord. Then he took a heated, whispered phone call, the blue beads rolling around the lot. But I looked at his phone, a flip phone, and he hadn't even opened it, it wasn't even on. It was squashed against his stumpy ear as he cursed and muttered into nothing. That's when Dad gave me his bags (the milk bag, the veggie bag, the grain bag, the bag of foreign coins) and sent me to the car.

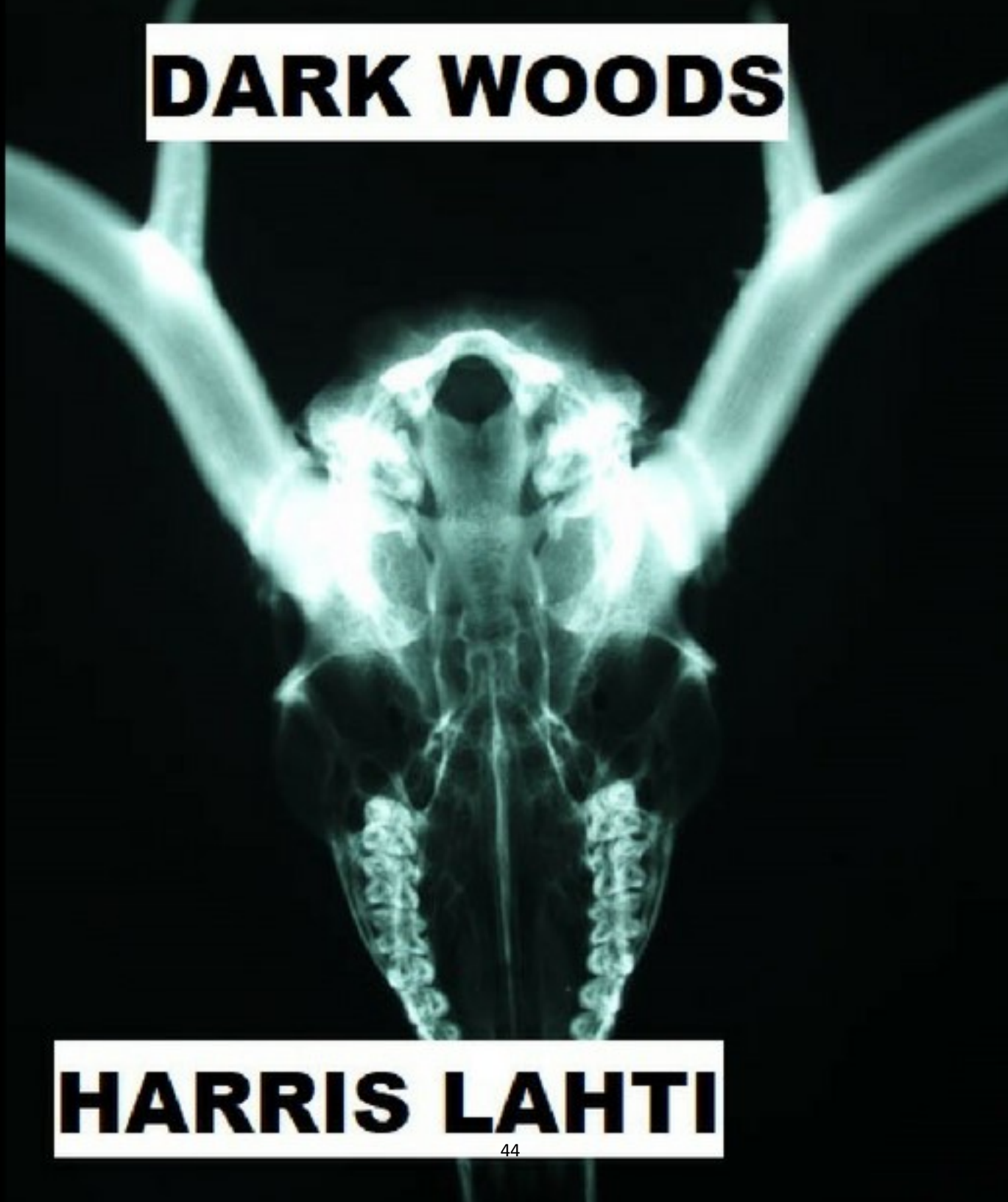
It was like in dreams, when the big things happen so fast you never quite have enough time to think or consult anyone's opinion. At home I kept walking into rooms and stepping over different glowing laptops on the hardwood floor and barely noticing. I kept waiting for the police to come, someone from the government, to file a report of death. Sometimes I checked Dad's Facebook wall. Mom would go to work or tie up her hair, which she had grown out in Dad's absence, and lie with magazines across the couch in the living room. Lights from cars and street lamps through the windows sometimes passing over her and lighting up strange novel sections of her face. I always assumed that if Dad went away, Mom and I would hang out more. Then I felt the closest thing to a sense of purpose since that night: since I'd seen it all happen, and Mom had not, I had a story for her.

"Mom," I said excitedly from across the room in Dad's old leather chair. "As Dad sprawled out on the asphalt, clothes in tatters, bloodied and beaten, and that man stood over him, panting, eyes wild, holding the thrumming lightning bolt aloft, Dad never looked away, or closed his eyes, or moaned in fear, or pleaded or cursed or screamed."

But Mom wouldn't swoon at Dad's resilience. She would not cry with me. I don't remember her saying he was coming back or anything like that, but I realized that way back when I'd walked into the house without him and she hadn't said anything or asked any questions and had slept that night in their big bed all alone while I hugged my covers to me on the far side of the house, the lightning bolt flashing repeatedly before my tight-shut eyes, and then the next morning when she and I sat at the table with our coffees just the two of us forever, Mom'd already felt something subtle about why Dad wasn't there, assumed something that had nothing to do with death, at least death as I'd conceived it up until that time.

At high pressures, sadness begins to resemble dread. Memories that used to wet my eyes dried out and sort of wrinkled in relief. Dad's scratchy falsetto singing "Margaritaville" in the basement, strumming his cheap guitar diffidently. I think Mom's feeling was the kind that has to develop over a longish period of time, so you can refer back to things. And I did begin to get some sense of those old things—not a clear sense, just an outline, a hint—and they were the terrible complicated sick hot honeyed lovely things of love I knew I could never bear to think about my parents for too long. And I was surprised to feel my own feelings finally, to realize how hard Dad's going had made me, how angry and stupid and slow, the fact that he was never coming back compressed into itself, away from anything unnecessary. And still how much it throbbed and hurt and made me scared, now maybe even more, that there was still so much out in the world of which to not be sure, of which I knew nothing at all.

DARK WOODS



HARRIS LAHTI

Another flashbulb blanches the room white. "Smile," her mother tells the purple, howling baby swaddled in its crib. Everywhere the baby—in picture, on magnets, JPEGs plastered across the internet. Roswell can't even pull a frozen pizza from the refrigerator without being confronted with its alien face.

Roswell flips the channel from the couch. A nature documentary. Onscreen, a peregrine falcon divebombs an unsuspecting pigeon, and the baby's howls mix with its cries.

"I think I'll have a beer," she tells her mother.

"I think I'll have some unprotected sex," she says. "Or maybe I'll take the truck out for a joyride."

"I said I think I'll take a joyride," she says.

Then Roswell goes over to the key rack her stepfather fashioned from the antlers of an eight-point buck and waits for her mother to chide her. She is fourteen, without a license.

However, her mother is too preoccupied to notice. And as another round of flashbulbs goes off, Roswell slides the keys from the rack. "Smile," she hears her mother say, walking out.

Deer. That summer the woods were thick with them. Roswell drives the back roads, smoking her mother's cigarettes from the glovebox, hoping to hit one. To wake up in the hospital, with her family assembled along the bedside. Not a full body cast. Just a slight brain bleed perhaps. Serious sounding but minor.

For weeks, she drives, smokes, hopes to hit one.

The way the trees clasp overhead is her favorite. The yellow spray of headlights on a grey asphalt tongue. The deer eyes that roll through the woods like marbles.

One night, a screech owl flies into the headlights, a frog elongating from its beak

like a ragged hang-glider.

Another, a neon green asteroid slices the starry night.

And another, a hitchhiker: a sight so rare she stops to pick him up. It seems the next best thing to the deer, this dark figure seeping out of the woods. The way his thumb worms its way out of his torn coat sleeve intrigues her. He is so tall his knees press up against the dash. "I'm a Eunuch," he says.

"Prove it," Roswell laughs.

Afterward, the hitchhiker instructs Roswell to let him out. He sticks his head back inside the open window and orders her to count to a thousand before driving off. "One, two, three, four," she counts as he seeps back into the woods.

Who, who. A screech owl comes to life.

Then Roswell stops counting, lights her mother's last cigarette, and drives off again.

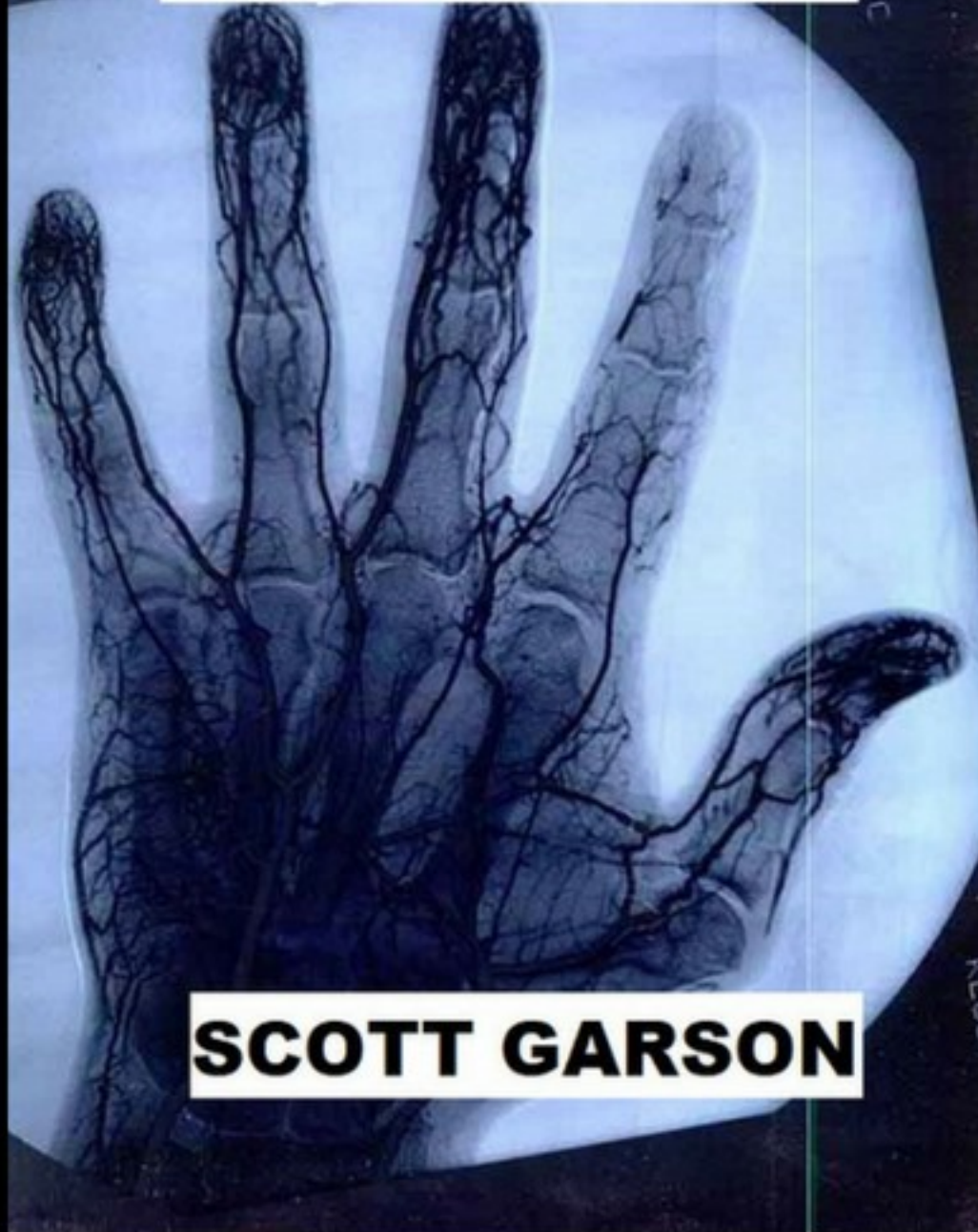
And as the trees clasp, the deer eyes roll through the woods beside her. Then, a deer emerges into the headlights, followed by another. Another, another. Until, suddenly, an entire herd has turned the asphalt tongue furry.

Roswell slows to watch them.

None of this is real, she thinks. None of this is happening.

She presses on the gas. The deer buck like crazy at first, but even crazier as the truck sends them flying. That last part is her favorite yet: the way the white underside of their tails explode like an endless stream of flashbulbs—pop, pop, popping.

FUTURE COOKIE



SCOTT GARSON

They were running a charter school out of a city building that stood in a quiet bureaucratic limbo of disrepair. Hanes had laryngitis, but Gutierrez asked him to cover L3 for the teacher whose name he always forgot, a twenty-some boy who was unable to smile without blinking convulsively, as he might with a fist in his face. The boy had a cold. Meanwhile the boy's students showed up, took seats, and moved to straighten themselves in their endless fight against sleep. Hanes knew one or two. Yevgeny, Ukrainian man, droll, somewhat pedantic. Fallou, kid from Senegal, hardcore: stocked dry goods over night and sold flowers on the street by day.

"So what was the lesson?" Lila B. wanted to know.

Hanes made use of his wounded voice as he let smoke seep from his body. "Modals."

They sat on the crumbling steps of a fire exit on the building's north side, with a view of the grounds: denuded tether-ball poles, chains hanging loose at their sides, like tools of affliction. Some malefic growth that would chime when the wind started in.

"They wrote fortunes, for cookies," Hanes went on. "Only Lydia—you know Lydia?"

"Salvadoran?"

Hanes nodded. "She was bent on calling them *future cookies*."

"Fuck did you do to your voice?"

Lila B. was a tall lesbian of arresting glamour. She brought to mind Morticia Addams—but with a tendency to go on manic jags. Hanes might have told her the rest of the story if he had been able to speak. How the woman, Lydia, had written her fortunes in the first person. *I will visit my father next week*. How he had been willing to let that slide—because she had produced the grammar—but others were not. Yevgeny, Alberto, Jinhui. They took over. They wouldn't authorize this failure to get what a fortune was.

You will have much prosperity.

You will enjoy a quantity of wisdom in your life.

You will get nice house, good place for family.

You will be rich.

The fortunes, as they had been declaimed, kept going through Hanes' head.

He turned around.

Gutierrez stood in the doorway. She was framed in graffiti—the word 'SURVIVAL' rendered in characters that interlocked as if part of an alien alphabet.

"Join us," Hanes said.

Gutierrez ignored this. "What are you doing?"

Lila B. held up her cigarette and faced it. "Hello, I'm Lila," she said. "Hello, Lila," she said for the cigarette. "I'm Death."

"We were talking about cookies," Hanes tried.

Gutierrez produced an indignant smile. "I've got like ten situations I'm dealing with here?"

"All right." He held up his hands in surrender.

He got to his feet.

You will live on streets of gold.

You will receive a marvelous surprise in the federal mail.

You will own a big ship. You will travel the sea.

In Hanes' own future, he'll come to recall this one bit of a day. He'll remember standing, wiping the grit off his hands—and since the time will seem to float up pure, without lines of significance, he will feel wonder, and will cede to that. He'll reinhabit this wayward piece of a life—when he fought to start a school, when students fought to learn. When he was still smoking. When they tried to dress okay, in shirts with uncomfortable collars, and tended to feel that the good in the world was far-off, like a storybook dream.



LAYING ON HANDS

AARON BUCHANAN

At Garron Lake Baptist, all the hands were up in supplication to God as bodies swayed and voices sang "Just As I Am." In the front, Pastor Charlie Schmidt was laying his sweaty, psoriasis-afflicted hands on Grace Switowski.

Pastor Schmidt prayer was heard above the din of chanting, moving bodies. His voice elevated above the song, booming out over the microphone clipped to his lapel each time he said *"blood" of our savior, Jesus Christ.*

Grace Switowski was 24. Stringy brown-gray clumps of hair fell from patches on her mostly-bald head like wet papier-maché. At the front of the worship hall, the pastor, the church deacons, Grace's parents, four brothers and sister watched Grace in her wheel-chair as the preacher anointed her and laid on his hands.

It was 1985 and she was in stage four lymphatic cancer.

I was seven and in my groove. I sang the song. I didn't need the hymnal. I'd been to church since popping out of my mother's vagina, fully spawned, in leisure suit, and with a King James Bible tucked under my tiny, cherubic arms.

My older brother, Jeremiah—named for the Hebrew prophet, of course—sat on a pew next to me, doodling a crude representation of a woman with big tits and hairy muff looking cross-eyed at an oddly-muscled and veiny dick protruding from a curly patch of pubic hair lining the bottom of the page. Jeremiah and Kenny pointed, laughed.

This act of pornographic defiance was drawn on the back of this week's church bulletin.

Jeremiah was 14 and always doing things like this. It was a contest between him and his best friend, Kenny, who never took showers and never went home and whose parents never seemed to care if he did. He was on the pew next to Jeremiah, pointing, laughing.

The ceremony went on for at least 30 minutes after Kenny and Jeremiah's bulletin-drawing. While Grace's family, her mom, her dad, her brothers, and other members of

the congregation were on their knees praying for and over the young Grace, the ever-peculiar Jeannie Thompson laid supine in the aisle, arms stretched toward the ceiling. The even weirder Rebecca Kent sat on her knees next to Mrs. Thompson, bending over, sobbing, sitting upright, raising her hands to God, praising Jesus, and singing piecemeal the words of "Just As I Am" before returning her face flush to the floor.

The song-leader motioned for a repeat of the hymn and our mom pedaled the intro to the hymn on her organ.

Pastor Schmidt's prayers had grown to a whisper. I forgot about telling on Jeremiah and Kenny and I gave myself over to the words:

Just as I am—poor, wretched, blind;

Sight, riches, healing of the mind,

Yea, all I need, in Thee to find,

—O Lamb of God, I come!

The music stopped, suddenly, almost violently. And I was somewhere else. I opened my eyes and found myself unable to look at the room. My head was swimming and I blinked my eyes open-closed-open-closed rapidly in panic.

I was in a small house, stone masonry making up the walls. Ahead of me was a woman sitting at a desk, staring out the small squares of an old window whose ancient glass made circular puddles of the view outside. With the sun shining through, I could make out the woman's shape. But I also heard her humming. The woman stood up from her desk and steadied herself uneasily, warily. When her eyes met mine, her mouth opened to...

And then I was back and on the floor, listening to Jeremiah.

"You all right, Asa? C'mon, man, you, all right?"

My eyes felt glued to the tops of my skull and I tried to stare *through* the static orange of my eyelids. In that moment, I was hyper-aware of my surroundings: the antique oak pews my own uncle had refinished, Kenny sticking his hand through his shirt and up to his armpit, making fart noises that, over the continued singing, I could not hear. I also had somehow lost my sense of identity. Jeremiah and Kenny both said my name, but it was a word I felt no connection with.

No one else in the church paid us any mind. Jeremiah had me by the collar of my dress shirt, shaking me. I said something to him that I had no recollection saying.

On the way home from church that Sunday night in 1985, Jeremiah rode in the front seat of our mom's Impala, he turned the radio up—the rock station out of Kalamazoo my mom never let us listen to on Sundays, but even she must have been sick of hymns after two hours on the organ. He turned around to Kenny and put up his devil-rock horns on his fingers and stuck out his tongue, then swiveled around and rub-patted me my head.

"You said you thought you went back in time," he tousled my hair in a way he had not done since my baby-blond hair had turned its permanent coffee black.

I sat back, said nothing, lost myself in "Modern Love" on the radio.

A week and four days after the *cheirotomia*—the laying-on of hands ceremony—my mom played the organ at Grace Switowski's funeral.

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VICTORY PARTY

R

SHELDON LEE COMPTON



He talks to me through the trees. Not through them, like he's standing on one side of a treeline and I'm standing on the other, but like he is the trees.

We will stay together, become taproots, strong and lasting, he says. Or we are both oaks.

Discussing trees and strength becomes tedious, and, sometimes, he starts in about my little sister. Those conversations don't last very long.

The Olympics. 1984. Summer, because both Daddy and the man were wearing tshirts instead of coats. And because I'll always remember Katarina. It was their fight that brought the police to Fox Bottom. Our area anyways, the part in the far northwest corner where Fleet Mitchell had his ratty garage fixed up as a body shop. But he didn't fix vehicles, he sold cocaine. And this was at a time when almost everybody was only selling pot or cheap liquor.

One of the two men was my daddy. The other man, John something or other, was a nobody to me, just some guy who decided that night, the night the Olympic ice skating was on television, was the night he was going to shoot Daddy. It was Fleet who wanted him to do it.

That's what he told us right before the fight started. He looked at me and my sister and said he was going to go shoot our dad. I remember his eyes were like wet glass in his sockets and his mouth sagged when he talked. I remember he smelled like mothballs. Then he whispered as he walked away that Fleet was going to set him up nice for doing it.

Before Dad went to prison we used to get together with all the uncles and aunts and cousins on Sunday nights and watch episodes of *Chiller*. It aired late Sunday night, 2 a.m., and me and my sister didn't have to worry yet about school, being so little.

The night Fleet tried to have Dad killed I kept thinking of how the show opened with that dark swamp and the craggy old tree and then the weird hand coming up out of the fog of the swamp. The music sounded sinister and then how, from somewhere in that deep blackness came a voice saying only *hooooo* and then *chilllllller*. These days horror movies or shows remind me of how alone I am, skipping to the bathroom in the dark and back to an empty bed. These days I'm in one of those episodes all the time.

It's not that we shouldn't be talking about my sister, his daughter, our kin, it's just that we shouldn't be talking. As in hearts would be lighter if we kept words out of it. We should be keeping that line, holding that grudge. But trees have that knack of sticking around, and I'm not going anywhere soon. So here we are, swaying and dying and returning to life and not talking about my little sister as best as I can manage. I have to remind my father. I'm right on point with, Let us remain positive; let us lift our chins. Let them not touch our breastbones in defeat.

Mom and a lot of her friends knew something was coming that evening and rustled all the kids into the top floor apartment where Mitzi had her little beauty parlor set up. It was the only place with a television. She turned on the television, told us not to go outside, and left. The channel it landed on happened to be showing the moment Katarina Witt took her second gold medal in figure skating events for East Germany.

All these years I've thought it was an argument about my mom, but that wasn't even close. Daddy and the John guy were fighting over cocaine. And they were fighting, and yelling, more importantly, about cocaine loud enough so all of Fox Bottom could hear.

Estill Buchanan heard. And he called the police. He'd been waiting for a reason ever since Fleet moved into the bottom a year before and I blamed him hard at the time, but looking back on it I see he was an old man with no family. He was scared all the time.

It's not that he died recently, alone at the head of a holler four counties away while I ate ice cream in Chevy Chase and later went to a Wildcat game. It's not exactly that. It's that the last time I saw him was at a victory party for his first cousin, a close family member who had just won an election for county clerk. He sat beside me when I got there and held out his hand for me to take. I didn't take it. I still remember how the long hairs on his arm glowed in the sunlight and how he shrank into an old man when I got up to leave. It's a ruination, forgiveness. I can't have my mind changed about that. When he spoke he sounded like Shakespeare writing the Bible.

Before we talked through the wind in the leaves he gave me one, and only one, piece of advice that has lasted and never failed me. Always slap a man, and make sure you do it at the first sign there's going to be trouble. They can't charge you with any real conviction in a court of law for an open hand slap. This as opposed, of course, to a nice, tight fist. And, little missy - this is how he said it - and, little missy, it will break a man's will with him standing right there in front of you.

When the police came the whole place lit up red and blue. The mountains went from dark to disco bright and dark again with trees flashing like Christmas lights. We all went to the windows to watch three cops drop Daddy to the ground and handcuff him. They dragged him belly-first to the squad car. It hurt like heartbreak at the time. It hurts like heartbreak now, and nothing makes me angrier. Not what happened, but that I still hurt.

So, yes, Katarina Witt won two gold medals for East Germany. That's what I focused after the arrest. For weeks I followed news about Katarina Witt. I wanted to change my name to Katarina. Later on, the East German government gave her cars and jewelry, property and homes even, to keep her from defecting. I don't know if she ever

accepted any of the gifts but I always imagined she did. And I hated her for it, being famous, beautiful, successful, and getting gifts. And because it wasn't only East Germany who loved her, the whole snobby world loved her.

I sat in a swing covered by a wedding ring quilt my aunt made. She was my dad's older sister and therefore one of the few who would speak of him without reservation for the fragile and small amount of pride he had built up since prison. Part of that was this election win, his cousin's day in the sun and, of course, his day in the sun. Maybe his first.

Seeing him move around the party so naturally, so organically, but, at the same time, with that underlying insecurity when he thought he might not be as welcome as he hoped reminded me of a wind hoping to gain strength but always held back by some object in its path. Even a force of nature is only as strong as the nature it encounters.

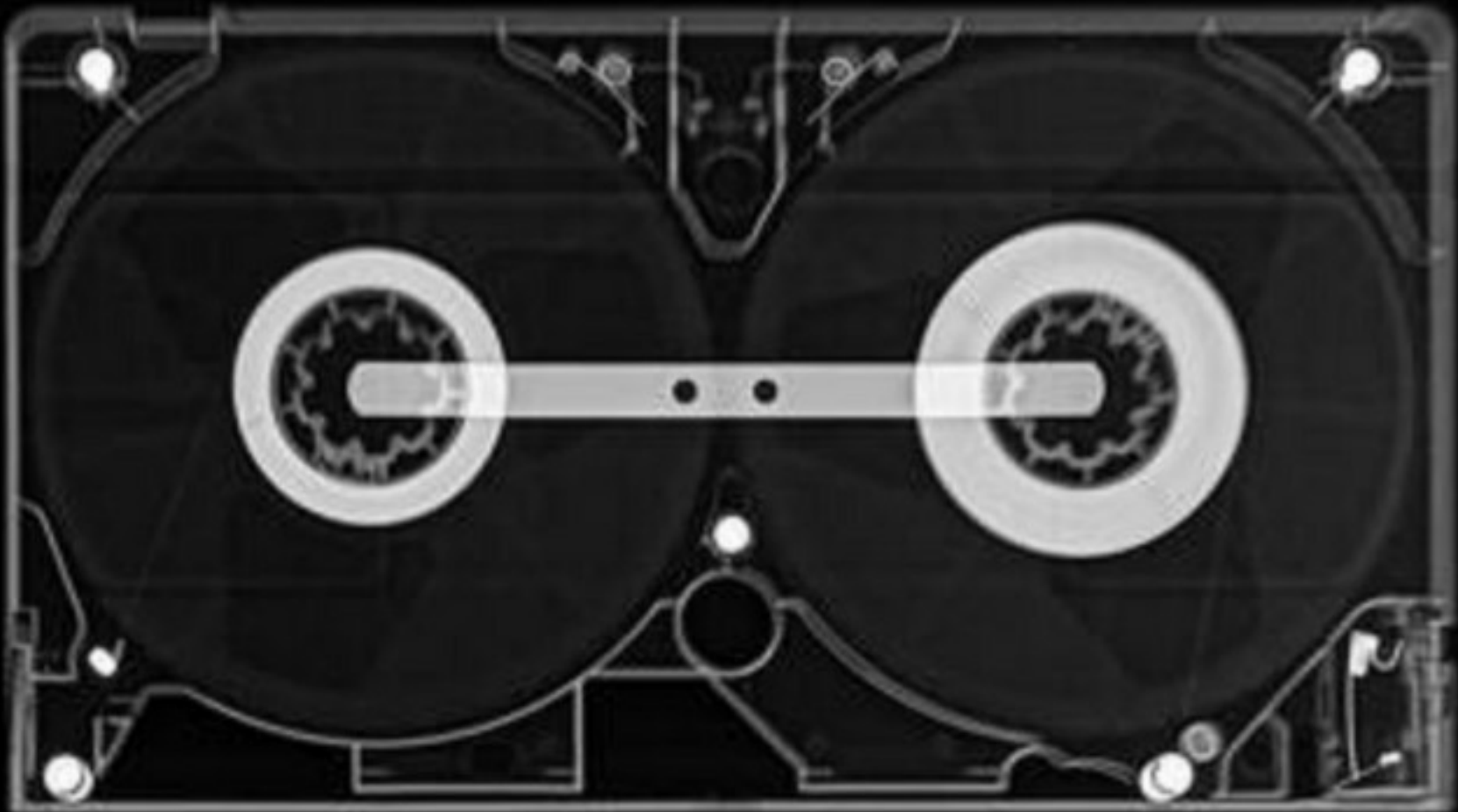
Little sister heard the same advice about taking a man's pride by stunning him with an open hand but hardly listened. Something inside our father had been broken apart and my sister could see it, could sense it like a stench all over the man, and she was offended that she came from such weakness. She knew that for all the braggadocio and mustache pulling, our father was weak. The man's desires made him so, the way he gave up on a thing the moment it took a little fight. His neediness. I was never able to feel that hurt as sharply. It never darkened my mind in the same way.

He had went from one end of Pike County to the other campaigning, knocking on doors the same way they did it in the old days. He bought votes; he drove those same voters to the polls. He attended church picnics by day and argued good old boy policies in honky tonk bars until they shut out the lights. And he loved every minute of it,

that's what it's important for me to remember. The political process, the human side of it, the side where a campaign can become a spotlight to dance in, fed his ego. Now he wanted his daughter beside him, holding his hand at the victory party. He wanted the cake and wanted to eat it too. He wanted someone to bake it, in the meantime, and pay the grocery bill, pour the milk, light the candles. I'm of the mind that he's old enough that his wants won't hurt him.

But let us remain positive; let us lift our chins. Let them not touch our breastbones in defeat. Maybe I am a white oak and you are a hickory. And maybe you say one strong thing and it's always another, weaker thing. So here we are, still talking and then not talking. The trees wave along the hillside, bending, but not for long. If taproots hold the ground here, you wouldn't know it by the way the wind bullies them.

RENTAL



KEVIN HATCH

My sister was a Blockbuster Video. She was a happening place. She kept her aisles clean, her shelves organized. Children begged for candy inside her. Families made special trips to see her.

My sister was the church of Friday night. She was too inviting. A track-star type took her out, filled her with words and other flesh. Made her too-family. Made her un-happening. Made her un-rewindable.

Her posture changed. Late-fees and rental-rates changed. People tried to be polite. She breathed dust in their face, forced expired candy in their hands until they just stopped coming.

My sister drove her Honda Accord through the divider. The car leapt over the guard-rail. Our father and I tried to find her. I climbed into the ditch filled with fridges and trash. I followed the trail of broken glass to the blue-Accord puddle. Father tried to mask my eyes but I saw my sister's aisles everywhere.



**UNCLE POOH'S
SECRET RECIPE**

JOSEPH HAEGER

The first time I made grits I used water, the same way I made my oatmeal. Granted, I'd never had grits, but was told it was a staple food in the south, so when I saw a two-pound bag for a dollar at the Grocery Outlet it seemed like a no-brainer to give it a shot. I mean, this was a food that helped mold a culture.

The red sedan in front of me slows down, or I come up on her too fast. I tap my brakes to keep a comfortable distance between us. My speedometer reads thirty-five exactly. She's going the literal speed limit, but I'm not in a hurry today. All I have going tonight is cooking our family's new favorite recipe: Uncle Pooh's Secret Shrimp & Sausage Grits.

The grits were underwhelming that first time. *This*, I thought, *was what an entire region kept in their pantry at all times?* I made it just that one time, and I was so disappointed I threw the whole bag of grits into the trash. It was like eating a sub par oatmeal. The consistency of hot mashed baby food. I sprinkled cheddar cheese into the lumpy concoction, but the grits absorbed any flavor the shredded cheese had to offer, and instead made it into a bland, glue-like mixture.

A blue SUV zips past me. It's a two-way double yellow lined road, but some people can't ever stand going the speed limit. The impatience builds in the pit of their stomachs and they let impulse take over. Most people act on impulse at one point or another, like me with the grits.

It took the one meal of failed grits to decide they weren't for me. I could let the restaurants and family kitchens keep them in rotation, but they weren't going to enter mine. Or that's what I thought.

The SUV whips in front of the sedan and slams on the brakes. Smoke rolls off the tires out of the wheel wells as it skids to a stop. The red sedan's brake lights shine as they come to an abrupt stop.

My wife sent me a recipe she wanted me to cook for her: Uncle Pooh's Secret Shrimp & Sausage Grits. It was on the internet, so it wasn't all that secret, but I appreciated the attempt at mystifying the dish. She requested it, and I acquiesced. I

wasn't about to withhold her request because I'd sworn off grits years earlier. I gathered all the ingredients, again going to the Grocery Outlet to buy another two-pound bag of grits, but this time it was a dollar fifty. While I portioned all the ingredients out I noticed water wasn't anywhere to be found. Uncle Pooh called for the grits to be cooked with whole milk and a heavy whipping cream.

A man in a dark blue suit steps out of the SUV. His clothes matched his car making it look like a surrealistic painting: him standing there blending in with his car with a double barrel sawed off shotgun hanging at his side. Before the sedan has a chance to open their door, or even attempt to drive away, the man levels the gun and fires. The driver's side window shatters—and while I know I'm imagining it, I think I see a mist of blood evaporate into the air. The man pops the barrel down and loads two more shells into the gun. He snaps it back and cocks the hammers, firing once more into the open window. This time I do see strings of blood launch out of the car. It lands on the gunman's lapel. He uses the back of his hand to wipe it away. He yells something that is too muffled for me to hear, then spits into the car.

The grits with dairy was to die for.

The gunman walks back to his car. It is still running, like he ran back inside for a forgotten cup of coffee. He pulls his door shut and drives away. The sedan's door opens, slow and methodical. The woman tries to pull herself out, but collapses under the weight of her body, crumpling onto the pavement. I squint to see if she's breathing, but can't tell. All I know is her eyes are open and she's laying on top of the double yellow road strip.

The heavy whipping cream thickened the grits so it wasn't mushy. It was able to bring the cheddar cheese flavor to the forefront of the dish without gumming the entire dish together like glue. It was rich and filling, but I couldn't help myself from getting seconds. And then thirds. It was me who had ruined grits the first time. It wasn't that I didn't like grits, it's that I made them like a jackass. I had trouble sleeping that night because I was so stuffed. Well, that and because I wanted to eat more grits.

The traffic from the other side of the road moves around the dead-or dying-woman's body. This isn't going to work for me. She is too central, and her car is on the shoulder. The line of cars begins to build behind me. Honks waft up from cars backed up in a line. I pull off to the side of the road, inching the tires over the curb and onto the sidewalk. I drift around the red sedan, keeping my eyes ahead to make sure there aren't any pedestrians walking down. Once I'm past the stalled car I drop back onto the road. My car bounces as it reenters the lane. The cars behind me follow my lead driving onto the sidewalk and continuing up the Post street hill. It takes cops forever to clean this kind of thing up these days. When I was a kid this would have been newsworthy. These new generations have no idea.

She wanted Uncle Pooh's Secret Recipe again tonight. I tried to play it coy, but I think she was aware of how much I loved the dish as well. It calls for bell peppers, but I'm going to try mushrooms and sweet potatoes instead, like a meeting of two regions in one delicious meal. Even if that's not good at least I know the grits will be worth all the effort.

X-RAY

LITERARY MAGAZINE

SUBMISSIONS