

X-R-A-Y

issue #1

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A GOOD BARGAIN

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I am 4'9, 323 pounds. I cannot leave my house. I cannot lift myself from the couch. I cannot find the remote control. I cannot rub my feet. My butler robot can only make so many fried egg sandwiches. My maids have been instructed to black out all mirrors. I cannot remember what my face looks like. The sheet I wear is beige. How will I clean myself without you?

If you went to KFC and bought a bucket of chicken and drove to my house, when you used the intercom at the main gate and I heard your voice calling me *Pretty Girl* I would probably start to cry.

If you parked your car in the north garage, and came in through the staff's quarters and surprised me by sneaking up behind the shark tank, with the bucket of KFC, I would probably scream and then start to cry.

If you walked in through the front doors, through the marble entryway, down the hall up the stairs, down the hall, past the library and game room and came into my sun lounge and surprised me with your bucket of KFC, I would probably cry.

I would cry because I am lonely and you brought me KFC.

You will feed me and we will eat

and then, when I have licked all of our fingers,

you will clean me.

You will not makes faces or squinch your nose; you will bathe me like you love me.

Even when you find things in my folds.

You will dry me with 27 freshly laundered towels.

I will dare to think 'this is love'

but I know

you just want all my shit when I die.

Which
if you keep
bringing me buckets of chicken,
might be
very soon.

But in the meantime

I make you fuck me

because everything

has a price

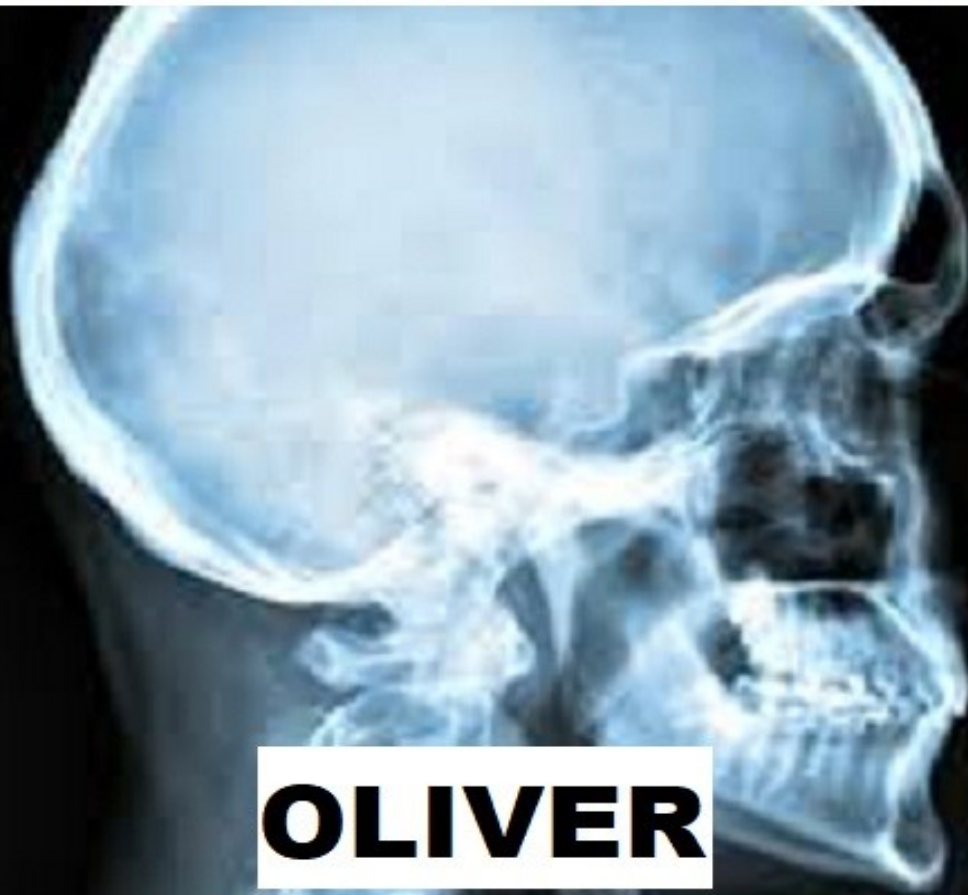
and \$10.99

for a bucket of chicken

(\$12.99 with sides)

is just too huge of a bargain.

KEVIN MALONEY



OLIVER

I was sitting in a McDonald's in Elkhart, Indiana, eating a Big Mac, crying and swallowing. The beef, or whatever gray rubber they wedge between the white bread and Thousand Island, was foul and made my stomach churn, but under my disgust was the pleasure of my unshackling. In Burlington, Vermont, the communist outpost where until 13 hours ago I'd lived in unhappy matrimony, everybody was vegetarian or vegan. Somehow, I'd gotten sucked into that nonsense; for eleven years, I'd subsisted primarily on kale, a leafy green that tastes the way doilies look. It was my wife's doing. She wanted to save the world. Meat was bad for the earth, she claimed. It killed animals. Cows! Think about them. So pretty. Now imagine a bolt jamming deep into their brains.

I hadn't set foot in a fast food joint since. I was overdue. When I noticed the angelic yellow M floating above the interstate, I put on my blinker.

I kept chewing and chewing, but the meat didn't go anywhere. I don't know what it was, but it wasn't food. It didn't matter. The joy wasn't in masticating, but in picturing Karen's face. How mad she would be if she knew. The sensuous way her lips pouted when she was angry. I imagined her hitting me, then feeling bad for hitting me. Kissing the places she hit. All the places I wanted to kiss her back. Face. Breasts. The space between her legs, like a red crayon melted on a fur coat. Now some other man was doing God knows what to her. Boning. 69. Back door. All of it. It made me sick. Chewing, I tried to swallow, but I couldn't. I spit out the meat, wrapped my burger in paper, and took sips from my chocolate milkshake.

I was about to clear my plate when I gazed out the window into the glass enclosed playstructure and noticed a lone child playing in a sea of primary-colored plastic balls. "Playing" is the wrong word. The boy just sat there, completely motionless. He looked dead. I liked him immediately. In appearance, he bore a strong resemblance to Cousin Oliver from *The Brady Bunch*. It was the haircut. I'd seen dogs pull off that look, but never a human. What kind of mother does that to her son? With a haircut like that, you're basically saying, "Athletic boys will punch you for fun at recess, and you won't kiss a girl until you're 23, but every month I save \$13 using a salad bowl and a pair of scissors."

I looked around the McDonald's for the sadistic barber. She wasn't hard to find. She was eating a hamburger and drinking vodka out of a Nalgene bottle. I decided to tell her what I thought of the cruel experiment she was performing on her child's skull.

"Hey, Lady," I said, lightly touching her arm.

She didn't flinch. A look of recognition came over her face, and she started crying. "It's about time," she said.

She reached into her purse and pulled out two \$20 bills, crisp and new from the ATM machine. She handed them to me.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"The stuff," she said.

"What stuff?"

"Jesus," she whispered. "Tell me you brought the stuff."

What at first I had mistaken for a normal mother I now recognized as a sick one. Hypothalamus, basal ganglia, cerebellum, hippocampus—all had been rendered inept in this woman by a single crushing need. I wanted to give it to her, whatever it was. Grind pills into powder, arrange it on a mirror, sit before her as she got her fix and watch Lazarus rise from death. But I didn't have any drugs. Just a chocolate shake and a half-chewed burger.

"I'm sorry," I said, returning her money. "I'm not who you think I am."

"Liar!" she screamed. "Give me my fucking shit!" She reached for a salt shaker and brandished it like a weapon.

I apologized and backed away. Eventually, I found myself at the entrance to the glass enclosed play structure. I opened the door and climbed into the pit of plastic balls with the lifeless child. He opened only one eye.

"Hey kid," I said. "Is your name Oliver?"

He shook his head, but just barely.

"It doesn't matter."

I offered him half a chocolate shake. He accepted it and slurped without speaking.

"Do kids beat you up in school?" I inquired.

He nodded.

"I thought so."

The boy had a bloody Band-Aid on his chin. He smelled strongly of shit. I would have beat him up if I was his age. He was the weakest link. On the playground, if you don't gang up on a kid like that—punch him in the kidneys, make him eat sand and small rocks—then it was somebody above you, punching your head, making you eat the earth. It was the law of the wild, the sinister truth Jack London wrote about, telling stories of sled dogs fighting to death under the northern lights.

But I wasn't in grade school. I was an adult with the power to change this child's life. In many ways, I resembled a saint with my broken heart and my schizophrenic visions brought on by my unfaithful wife. So I did what Mother Theresa or St. Francis of Assisi would have done in a situation like this. I borrowed a pair of scissors from the McDonald's manager and went to town on the boy's hair.

The way I figured it, he wasn't going to make it as a "normal," so I decided to give him a mullet. I trimmed the mop from his ears, cut it close on the sides, and took an inch off the top.

The back I left loose and wild.

When I was finished, I took a picture on my cellphone and showed it to him. He smiled. His teeth were brown. I realized I should have skipped the haircut and taught him the importance of brushing his teeth every night before bed.

Just then the boy's mother appeared in the play structure. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Your son had a horrible haircut," I said. "He has low self-esteem. His friends beat him up in school. I fixed it. I gave him a mullet. It rules."

"He's not in school," said the mother.

"What? Why not?"

"He's just a little boy. He's two years old!"

I looked at him. Christ, she was right. He was just a baby. He was probably still in diapers.

"How dare you!" she screamed, hitting me with her purse.

"I didn't know!" I said. "I thought you hated him."

The child burst into tears.

The mother kept hitting me.

The manager came for his scissors and wanted to know why there was a bunch of hair in the play structure.

I started feeling uncomfortable. The world has always been harsh on its geniuses, and I was one of them. It was time for my punishment. I was going to burn like Joan of Arc or be crucified like Jesus, or more likely die alone from complications of alcoholism like all of my heroes.

I was about to tell these sadists that the world wasn't what they thought it was, that this was just one level of consciousness, and that if you meditated long enough you became aware of other, more sublime realities. But when I opened my mouth to speak, I vomited. Then I vomited again. I couldn't stop vomiting. It was a scene. Nervous about the flavor of meat (being so long unacquainted with that gray matter), I'd lathered my burger in a heroic quantity of ketchup. What came pouring out of me, therefore, was red ooze, which may have given the impression that I was throwing up blood.

Whether it was that or something else, those ungrateful freaks backed away from me.

The manager told me to keep the scissors.

The mother said that, on second thought, I'd done a pretty good job. Her boy looked handsome.

"You wouldn't recognize Mozart if he dined among your rotten souls!" I cried, rushing out of the restaurant.

I stomped on the gas and headed west on Interstate 90. The sun rose and fell and rose again. America, seen from an automobile, is a vast, stupid country with little more between oceans than corn and cows standing around, waiting to die. With every bovine I passed, I felt that beef wiggling around in my intestines. Burping, I saw a heifer with big black eyes flirting with me. Karen, that witch, had cast a spell on me. I was a city slicker with weak bones. My spirit animal was a dead child in a sea of plastic balls. I drove over the Rocky Mountains into the land of cowboys, yearning for root vegetables and the hairy-legged wonders of the woman I loved.



**JIMMY
CHEN**

LITELIFE

The receptionist hid the instant message regarding the logistics of an imminent gathering behind her work email, though the only thing visible to others in the waiting area was the back of her computer, which featured a ubiquitous apple with a sole bite mark in its side. Those who waited did so with the fragile purposefulness of people completely consumed by their phone, and so weren't actually "waiting"—an anti-event generally marked by ennui and restlessness—but rather, simply tending to labyrinthine text threads and neglected emails which, therefore, imparted a sense of accomplishment they ultimately found pleasurable. Behind her, on a very expansive and somewhat alienating wall, an array of air-plants were somehow affixed to it, such that it seemed these air plants were simply existing in midair, like being suspended in the reception area of a startup was the most logical place for them, and not the result of a complicated interior plant design contract which took several months of planning and cost tens of thousands of dollars.

One of the men who had meekly approached this attractive receptionist was interviewing for a job as a Quality Assurance Technician. He had just moved to the city and didn't have many friends, but wanted to appear the opposite to the receptionist, and so scrolled through a social networking app to which nearly a sixth of the world's population were subscribed, occasionally commenting on it in the manner of someone engaged in an actual text conversation. The table between this man and the receptionist was made of refurbished wood gathered from a farmhouse before being aggressively sanded and profusely lacquered.

The elevator doors opened and through it stepped a delivery man dressed in a brown shirt and shorts who had firm calves, as witnessed by the receptionist, who reciprocated his alluring smile, an encounter witnessed by the man waiting for his interview, now stricken by the notion that this delivery man probably had a penis much larger than his, one which, when erect, could not only satisfactorily penetrate the receptionist's vagina and push its girth against its walls, but was long enough to transgress her cervix, feeding his seed directly into it, versus relying on the evolutionary trait of sperm coming out of regular-sized penises which then had to swim inward towards a nebulous egg in a fight for life. The man recalled a pornographic yet oddly clinical clip he once saw set in the point of view from *inside* the vagina which ended with ejaculate spewing out of the meatus, that is, the opening of the male urethra. He often wondered how they were able to get such extreme footage and settled on an endoscopy camera. By the time the receptionist called his name, the Quality Assurance Technician candidate was inadvertently aroused

with these mental projections and had to stand with his back faintly arched in the fashion of men who have likewise had to hide their erections.

The app for which they were interviewing was a personal metrics system that monitored the number of steps one took in a day, or steps climbed, or miles ran; one's heartrate, or simply the quality and duration of one's sleep. It was also a lifestyle app that could keep track of calories consumed, or burned, tracking the arc of someone's weight over a period of time. There was also a community page on which one could post their successes or failures, and on which friends could post their respective congratulations or sympathies. Quality Assurance Techs basically ran automated scripts looking for bugs before the product went out, then responded to actual bugs reported by customers after said product went out. Customers were usually aggressive type-A personalities who really wanted to get their steps in—not so thrilled about filling in online customer complain forms, or worse, being stuck on the phone.

The interview didn't go so well. Instead of shaking hands, he had let his hand be shook; instead of looking the interviewer in the eye, he looked past him, at who was probably the interviewer's girlfriend, in a framed photo on a boat, wearing a bikini and eating an oyster. The interviewer held the shell and had likely just shucked the oyster. He had nice abs, as brandished without a shirt, for displaying one's abs was the primary perk of having them. Distracted by the gooey lob sliding down her throat, half-heartedly feigning an answer regarding his five-year plan, the candidate soon became the former candidate in the eyes of the interviewer as the interview was cut short.

As he left, the former candidate in the eyes of the interviewer saw the back of the receptionist's slender shoulder, which he imagined digging his face into as he spasmed inside her anus. He loved anal creampie, the way the camera zoomed-in over the surreal landscape of an aggravated anus.

He went to a fast food establishment and ordered the most calorically rich meal on the menu, augmenting its size using a particular phrase from the franchise's vernacular, and ate it in the corner. A group of urban teenage girls walked in and spoke loudly and full of expletives, at which other patrons shook their head. When any of them made eye contact with any of the patrons, they called them bitch. He dipped his fries in mayonnaise. In the bathroom, he tried viciously masturbating to the receptionist, but the acute smell of urine, feces, disinfectant, and bleach hindered the mental abandonment necessary to

masturbate without the aid of visual stimuli. He'd gotten more and more into interracial cuckold porn in which black men with unsettling penises displayed grand acts of coitus in front of the perturbed cuckolds. The women sometimes, humorously, compared the size of the black men's penis to their forearms. That the men sometimes wore sneakers to better brace themselves for pumping he found uncanny. He tucked his flaccid penis back into its fly and took some Lexapro.

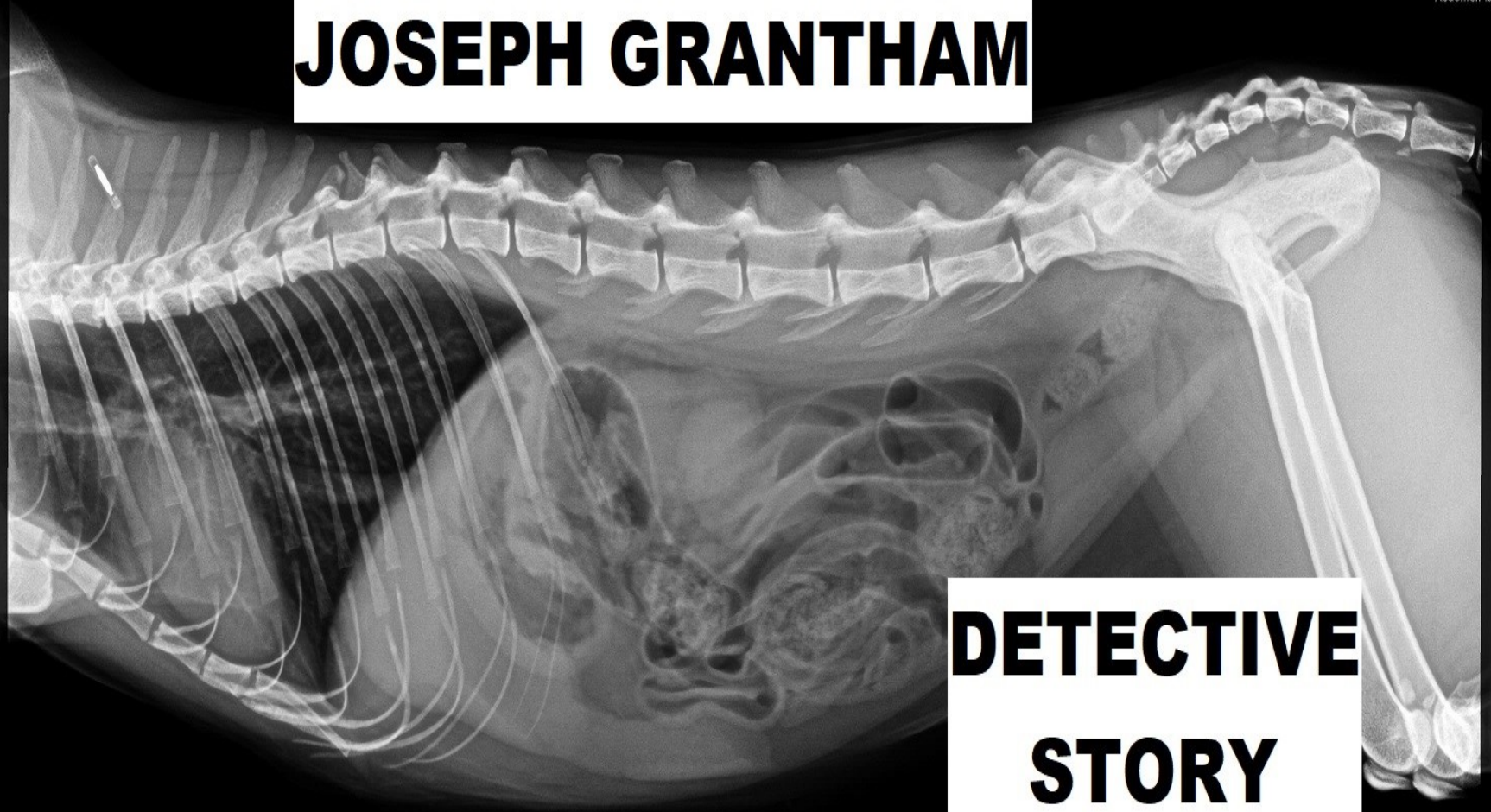
As he exited the restroom, he accidentally caught the eye of one of the loud girls, who called him bitch. Andre was tattooed on her neck, in ornate cursive that betrayed unskilled hands, and he wished that for one night he could be Andre. He would dick whip her face, which seems misogynist but is essentially playful. The levity of his catharsis. Walking away, he walked faster and faster. Now everyone was calling him bitch. Not running, just walking really fast, though the app mistook the latter for the former. It was a shame, him being so misinterpreted. Someone would have to fix that.

106519
addley,michelle, diddo

Sep 6, 2010

Abdomen lat.

JOSEPH GRANTHAM



DETECTIVE STORY

S: 280
Mag: 100%

DX
WC: 32073/ WL60398
1358x2963

There was this woman's voice.

It came on the radio at about 11 p.m. every night.

The jazz station.

KCSM 91.1.

Think her name was Dee Alexander.

She told her listeners to breathe in fresh air and exhale negativity.

She told us to love our children and to take care of ourselves.

She told us the world needed us.

I'd always hear her in the car on my way home from the gym.

She made things better for a little while.

I didn't have any children to love but I needed help taking care of myself.

I was going to the gym a lot those days.

I thought my legs were fat, and my ass too, and I was trying to tighten everything up.

For a short period of time I developed a routine.

I ran on the treadmill for twenty minutes, then I pedaled on the stationary bike for ten minutes, and then I drove home caked in my own salt.

But I'd always hear this woman's voice before I made it home.

She was part of the routine.

And she was soothing.

One night she played a song by Mal Waldron.

I remember the song because it was the first time I'd heard it and because I liked the song.

It was called "The Inch Work" and it was from an album called *Update*.

Mal Waldron overdosed on heroin in 1963 and when he woke up alive he'd completely forgotten how to read and play music.

He couldn't even remember his own name.

He needed shock treatments and a spinal tap.

He had to reteach himself how to live his life the way he enjoyed living it.

I am 24 years old and I live with my parents.

One night I got home from the gym and my parents were in the living room.

They were never up this late.

Once they entered their fifties they were in bed by eight.

But here they were waiting up for me.

The television was on, but it was muted, and they were sitting on the couch in silence.

Watching the images flicker, political pundits.

I set down my keys and they looked up at me.

"Did you see the lights?" my mom asked me.

She turned off the television.

"The police," my dad said.

I hadn't seen anything.

"No," I said. "What're you talking about? Is everything okay?"

"Larry Conlon died," my dad said.

"They think he was murdered," my mom said.

"I don't know who that is. I don't know who Larry Conlon is."

My dad ate a toasted nut.

He had a plate of them on the coffee table in front of him.

"Who is Larry Conlon?" I said.

"He lives a few doors down, at the end of the cul-de-sac," my dad said.

He was still chewing.

And then he was flossing out the nut remnants from in between his molars.

"He was murdered?" I asked. "Tonight?"

"That's what they're saying," my mom said.

She shook her head.

She seemed in a daze.

Like she'd had a long day at work.

She sells propane.

But it was a Sunday.

Sure, she'd been training the new hire that week—think her name was Aimee—and that is draining work.

But it was a Sunday.

"Who's saying that? Who's saying he was murdered?" I asked. "Where did you hear that?"

My dad rolled the string of floss into a little ball and set it next to the plate of toasted nuts.

"We went down the street and stood around with everyone in front of the Conlons' house. His wife was out there on the lawn, she was crying. And after a while the policemen asked us all to go back inside our houses," my dad said.

"*For our own safety*, they said. As if the guy who did it is still out there, roaming around the neighborhood," my mom said.

She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders.

"It was a guy who did it?" I asked.

I sat down on the floor in front of the coffee table.

"They don't know who did it, or if anyone did it, or what. Your mother's just speculating because she's a little detective."

"You heard what Terry said. Said he'd heard screaming from the house. And banging. Not like a gun bang but like a chair being knocked over kind of bang."

I reached for a few toasted nuts, rolled them around in my fist as if they were dice.

"Who is Terry?" I asked.

"Jesus, Joey. He's our next door neighbor. You know Terry," my mom said.

"Terry," my dad said.

I ate what looked to be a walnut.

It was charred black, tasted like ash or bad coffee.

"Oh yeah. The bigger guy. He said he heard a chair being knocked over? How could he hear

a chair being knocked over? From all the way down the street?"

"He passed by the Conlons' house. I guess he was doing a loop. Said he was taking Aunt Cindy out for a walk," my dad said.

He wrapped a blanket around his shoulders.

I was cold but we only had two blankets in the living room, so I stayed cold.

"He takes his aunt out for walks?" I said.

I ate another nut.

An almond this time.

"Aunt Cindy is his dog, Joey. You know that. The little dachshund," my mom said.

"Patti, it's not a dachshund, it's a terrier. A little terrier," my dad said.

My mom's name is Patti.

My dad's name is Joseph.

We have the same name.

I don't know how it happened that way.

I should have told you earlier.

If it's any help, my mom usually calls my dad "Joe," and I am always "Joey".

"Joe, it's a dachshund. I'm telling you. I'm the one who goes and pets it every time it's out on a walk," my mom said.

"Patti, no one would name a dachshund Aunt Cindy. No one. It's a little terrier. One of those Scottish ones," my dad said. "Your mother must be thinking of Tania's dog."

He looked at the plate on the coffee table and then at me.

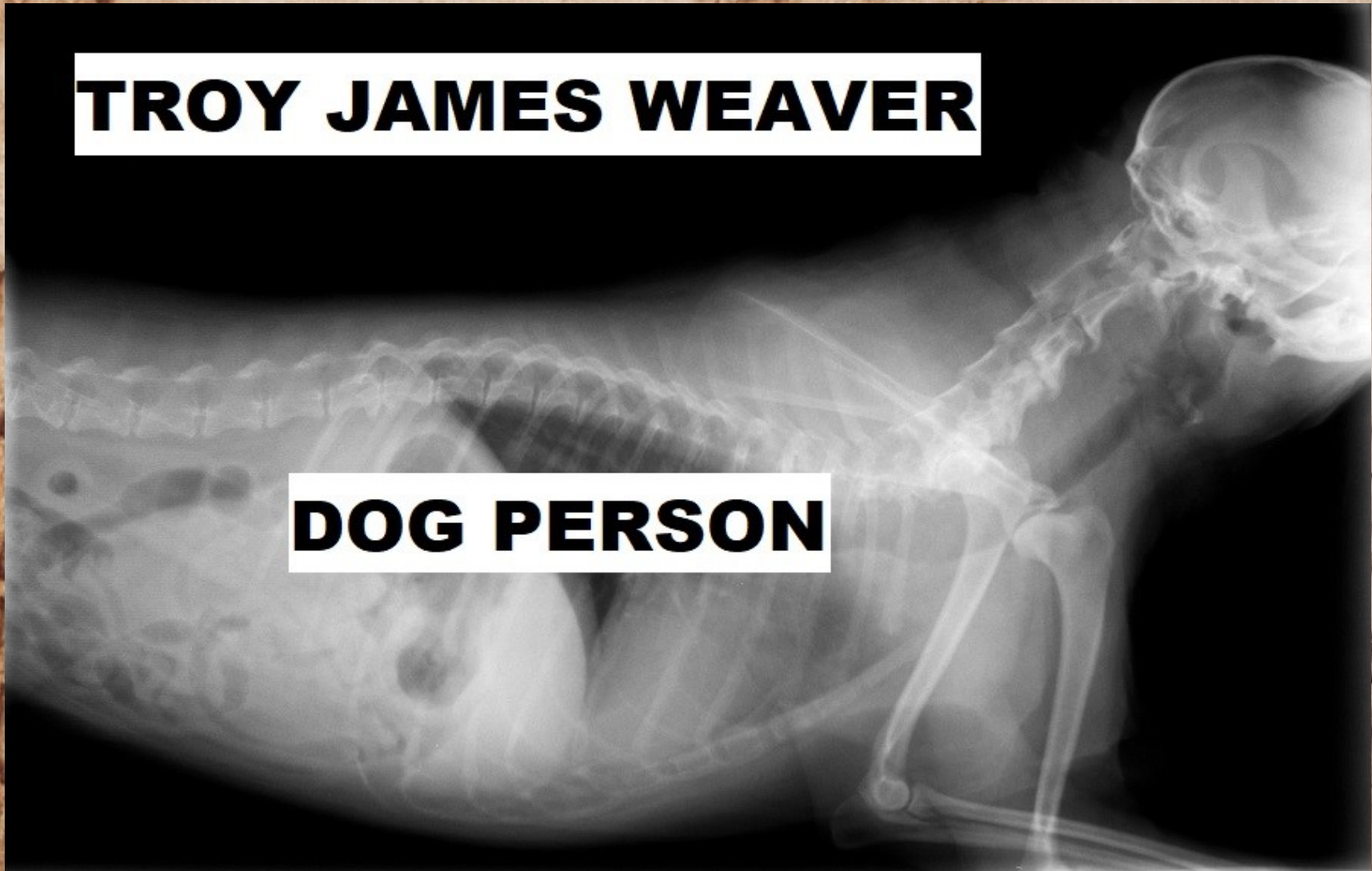
There was only one nut left and it looked like a beetle.

"Who's Tania?" I asked.

"Tania has a dachshund."

TROY JAMES WEAVER

DOG PERSON



For over an hour she'd been thinking about killing the baby. Was it a baby? A toddler? He sprawled between two exhausted, resigned parents four rows behind her. They had been in the air for six hours, somewhere over the Pacific, and she'd just had it already with the carts of stale food, the fake smiles, the snoring old men, and now, now more than anything, the crying of the kid, especially after having had the worst sex of her life that morning. It went on and on and on. She tried to plug her ears with her fingers, some meditation, headphones—nothing cancelled the sound. She could hear the blood in her head. Then the movement of her thoughts, the stars becoming nothing, dying—she could hear it all. Suddenly broken, she jolted up from her seat, and started over the man next to her. No doubt she was going to shut that stupid loud-mouthed lump of flesh up—break its neck, smother it with a pillow, maybe even flush it down the fucking toilet—*glug glug glug*. But then something happened. The last passengers, the inconsiderate few who still had their lamps on, cut the lights off almost simultaneously. It was kind of like a magic act. Maybe it was magic, period. And just like that, as the darkness moved in and consumed them, the kid finally shut up, didn't peep even a wheeze of air, as though the sound of his tears had been vacuumed clean out of him.

She sat back in the seat, slunk down, closed her eyes, and began thinking about how horrible she had been—thinking such thoughts. Then her brain started in on another thing she didn't want to think about. The lazy, half-assed, unprotected sex she'd had that morning in her hotel room in Mumbai. He was a sexy Welsh man, fifteen years her junior, named Albert. She'd been excited, after meeting him at a bar near her hotel. She was immediately charmed by him—his wit, his accent, his seeming decency. They'd spent the night together, had some fun, but he didn't know the first thing about pleasing a woman, clearly, could hardly even locate the clitoris, his tongue making motions in all the wrong directions. Something she just chocked up to inexperience.

When she finally started to doze the man sitting next to her woke up and decided he wanted to chat. Talked on and on and on about his business opportunities in China, Tech this and that, blah blah blah, on and on about how cool and young and rich he was—a monologue for the ages.

Finally, he said, The name's Jeff.

She shook his hand, didn't say anything.

Well, he said. What should I call you?

Jill, she said, unsmiling.

Jill, he said. What a pleasure. You get those eyes from Zales, because they sparkle like diamonds.

She laughed, rolled her eyes. Sure, she said. Something like that. Actually, I think it was Helzberg.

After a few seconds of awkwardness from Jeff, she said, Listen, man. That fucking baby's done crying and we have four hours left on this flight. I'd like to be asleep for all of them. Sorry. Nice to talk to you and all, but I'm going to sleep, if I can.

Jeff nodded, said, Understood. Get some rest.

She woke up upon landing at LAX. She ignored Jeff's small talk. When they got off the plane, he followed her—first to baggage claim, then to a vending machine. She hardly noticed him at first, yet there he was, tapping his foot, all smiles and waves outside the bathroom when she emerged, air-drying her hands, flapping them like weird wings.

Hey you, he said. I've been thinking. You like cats? I've got two at home. I'd love to take you out for a drink and show you my cats.

Ted, she said. I mean Ned. I mean Cody...

It's Jeff, he said.

Well, Jeff, you see...the thing is...

Come on, he said. One cat, couple drinks...

You're nice and all, she said. Thing is I'm a dog person. I wouldn't save a cat to save your life. Sorry bub, just not interested.

But, he said. But he didn't finish. She'd already turned away, had gained a few yards between them.

He watched as she faded into the crowd, her name in his head like an echo increasing in volume. By the time she hailed a cab, she couldn't recall his face—and she didn't like dogs, either. Her name wasn't even Jill. It was Amy.

The cab driver played reggae the whole ride home. It was the same and yet totally different from New York—more of a sprawl, a different smell. She'd only been in LA for six months, working as a showrunner for a popular Netflix series. She was a natural born writer, her stories occasionally appearing in the esteemed New Yorker. She told the cab driver her real name. He told her his. His name was Raheem. They small-talked over Bob Marley and the Wailers. She was truthful, except for her job. She said she was a veterinarian who specializes in cats.

I hate cats, he said.

She didn't say anything, just smiled big and wide, nodding.

How do you feel about screaming children on airplanes? she asked.

Can't stand them, he said. I'd do anything to shut the little shits up.

I wanted to murder the kid on my flight.

Maybe you should have, he said.

When he dropped her off, she threw her bags in the entryway of her apartment, kicked off her shoes and went into the kitchen. Fridge flung open, she chugged down half a Bud Light and let out a burp. She felt a little grimy so decided to shower. As the hot water fell over her body, she recalled the screams of the child on the plane. She slid her fingers up and down, up, down, all over her body, lathering.

When she got out, she saw she had a text from her girlfriend, Myra. It was a meme of the president saying something asinine, sporting an I-think-I-just-shit-my-pants face.

She texted Myra back: One day we'll drink from his fucking skull.

She entertained the idea of telling Myra about her trip, didn't feel the energy.

In her robe, she peeped through the blinds out into the courtyard and saw a young couple smoking cigarettes on a bench.

She remembered his name. His name was Raheem. He was the nice one. The screaming child in her head stopped screaming. It had nothing to do with him, though, nothing whatsoever. It was just a memory, a thought. But maybe it was something he said. She wasn't sure. Probably not. It was a little over the-morning-after, but she knew she'd be going to see her doctor soon. She didn't want anybody following her.

A grayscale chest X-ray showing the ribcage, lungs, and spine. The image is centered on a green background.

**MICHAEL
SEIDLINGER**

PEOPLE WATCHING

You aren't alone even though it still feels that way, long gaps of nothing between discussions that seem to have everything to do with the weekend, which leads you to the assumption that tonight won't be much. You are with someone familiar, been around, floating along with the same circle since as far back as you're willing to remember, and you are both searching the shopping mall for the others, convinced that they had told one of you to meet them at the food court.

"Why, I have no fucking clue," he says.

But that's really not ever worth considering because you both enjoy people-watching, picking out the men on the prowl, the women and which ones are possible targets, the others not so much because, as he says, "Too fat... Too ugly... One word: herpes."

You listen to him string together a situation where the men on the prowl meet the women and how it'll end up on the nightly news, or not, but it'll still be something that probably happens, and happens a lot. You tend to agree. The funniest part of his mostly nonsensical scenario has to do with the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Inevitable, you think. You ask him what it would take to fuck a girl with gonorrhoea but before he can answer, you change the subject, asking him, "Hungry?"

He's like, "I could eat."

And so you go to some fast food restaurant and both get huge burritos that neither of you have any interest in finishing. Between gorging on big bites of the burrito, you count the seconds it takes for him to swallow and then he does the same. When you watch him swallow, you think only of empty calories and stomach flab and throwing up the burrito once you've had enough. He watches you swallow and thinks of ejaculate.

Really?

It is what it is, what else do you want? Shall I continue?

You end up fingering the area between table and wall anxiously, digging out dark matter from previous meals, while waiting for him to hand you the flask so that you can add rum to your soda. And then you drink it down in bigger gulps than before, counting calories, anticipating when the buzz wears off so that when you stick your fingers down your throat.

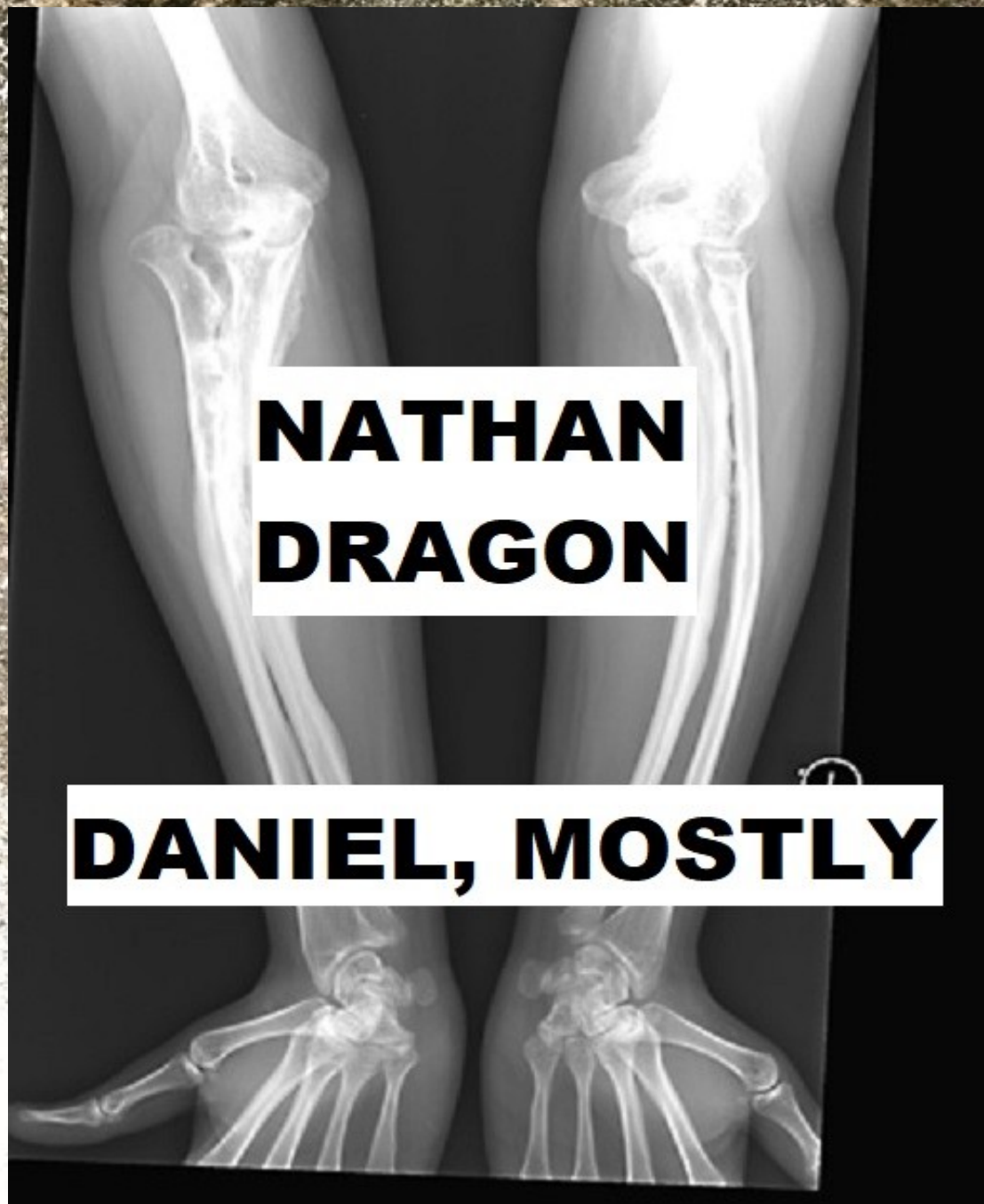
He jokes and asks, "What else have you choked on?"

You laugh along, the liquor kicking in, making the washed out light of the food court blinding to your eyes. You squint, wishing you had sunglasses but that doesn't seem like something you'd wear unless it was ironic.

He stares at the half-eaten burrito without blinking, and then leaves the table without a word. You stare at your own burrito, certain that you didn't eat all of it.

You start counting calories. You think of the sour cream, the cheese, the beef, the brown rice, you think about how many calories are in the tortilla, but when he returns, he smells vaguely of vomit and you get hungry.

Then you lose count. Start eating his leftovers, drinking more rum than soda, and then, when it's your turn, he goes with you in the stall.



**NATHAN
DRAGON**

DANIEL, MOSTLY

He always felt like he needed things to be told to him. Bed and drinking water were always good, though. Something like that, so his TV would easily be a good distraction and some rest.

People's voices, anyways, were fine. He worried a lot. Daniel needed something that could help with that. Nothing too scandalous, though. Everything as it comes, as he could handle it or it could be handled.

One at a time, please, he'd say.

Why did he walk away? Cause he couldn't handle it.

Missed the point.

Did it anyways instead of not doing anything.

To feel like he was doing something.

Mostly he wanted to have some expertise. He wanted to be an expert, didn't matter in what.

Just one thing that was no mystery to him, inherent, that he could understand fully.

Daniel knew some people, as people tend to know a few. Sometimes these people that one person knows, also know each other. Daniel's circle could only be described by the thought of it.

Daniel had a brother, too. His brother could speak more than one language and Daniel was jealous at that, of his brother. His brother always knew what to say, had something to say about everything. His brother had fantastic communication skills. Clear and concise people said.

Then, there was this guy that Daniel sort of knew but not a whole lot. The guy collected the toys and trinkets from vending machines at like the supermarket or take out restaurants.

The stickers. Figurines. All those things in the plastic bubbles. Cheap yo-yos and the

metal jewelry. Whatever there was.

Collected whole sets of the sets of the things.

Sometimes the guy would go to the bank and get out a roll of quarters or two then spend em up til he had a complete set or until he was out of quarters. If he got a complete set of the trinkets before running out he'd go to another spot that had some vending machines.

The guy always said, Not bad, to himself. At least Daniel had heard it consistently enough for always.

The sticker and temporary tattoo vending machines with the silver lower jaw protruding from a little display. The slots for quarters you jam into the jaw contraption and when a spring pushes the jaw back out, the quarters are consumed and the sticker or the temporary tattoo comes out sandwiched in between thin sheets of coated cardboard from a little opening above the quarter slot jaw.

The guy had the best luck over at the Chinese takeout place with these types of machines. Daniel saw that the guy got a whole set in five pulls.

That guy could always take home a complete set from there in less than a roll but Daniel never could.

The ones for the toys and trinkets, the machines with the clear cube of the prizes. Daniel saw this kind mostly at the supermarket and you had to put the quarters in the little quarter cut out, so as to put the quarter in the circle or half circle sort of against a wall, then it'd set in place and you'd rotate a little rectangular knob clockwise so the quarter descends in a round motion like descending on a Ferris wheel.

The best prizes from these types of machines, the guy told Daniel, were in the machines at the cinema.

The guy even had his own failing business, a collectors' and hobbyists' store that's been there forever. Had a machine in there himself.

He was an expert.

He gave Daniel some of his collection, only the duplicates and encouraged him to pick something up, like something to do.

Encouraged Daniel to use the trinket vending machine.

Daniel more interested in the fact that the guy was an expert.

Someone else Daniel knew was also a regular that he, Daniel, saw at the café restaurant that he went to regularly himself. Daniel wanted to be a regular, like the regular he always saw.

It didn't seem like he was ever considered one even though he went in every day. No one called him Daniel; not like Marty, Wendy or Trish, the other regulars.

They only called him pal.

Once Daniel got a small coffee for free. He threw the money he was going to use for the coffee into the tip jar anyways. Wasn't really sure how or why it was free at that point but he didn't mind.

Or why they were giving it to him.

He couldn't tell.

Usually he couldn't tell.

He kept the exchange going as long as he could, though. Put one coin at a time into the jar. Total of \$2.60.

Daniel always saw that one regular. 7AM or 1PM, didn't matter. The regular was always there in his regular spot, regular table. Daniel at least got the same things to eat and drink every day, but he didn't pull enough weight in his regularmanship to have his own spot.

And sometimes too, Daniel only got his drink and sometimes he got his food *and* his drink. His food was only a sandwich. Every time he got food it was that, that one sandwich. He was embarrassed to order it by its name, a pun.

And sometimes when he was there he looked through some books and he hoped people looked at him like he was really smart.

Capable.

Daniel had something living in his wall, or things. He kept hearing crawling and scratching when he was drinking water and if he was sleeping he'd wake up from it, eyes bouncing all over the room, trying to quicken the acclimation of his senses, trying to hear in the room where it was coming from.

Still or on the move.

Sometimes the sounds seemed right over him like in the ceiling or like something's on the roof or across from him in the wall or to the side of him under the floor.

They've made a mansion, a castle or condo out of his home.

Wall floor ceiling.

They had more room than him.

He was half glad to have the squirrels or chipmunks or mice in his walls. Half afraid, sort of paranoid that he was under siege. That they'd take his home from him room by room because they finally had scratched through the wall.

That he'd have to retreat to his storage room and he'd have to close the door.

And when they started to break through into that room he'd have to go down the stairs in his floor to the basement and hope that the door to the unit next door is open and he can make a through the unit, his neighbor's place, duplex style building, if it's clear.

He had a brother somewhere. His brother would've known what to do. But Daniel was sick of not knowing what to do. He wanted to prove he understood, what to do, so he called animal control to have it taken care of and they gave him instructions for the meantime.

He'd sleep better.

An X-ray image of a human hand and wrist, showing the bones in detail. The image is positioned in the center of the page. In the top left corner of the X-ray area, there is a small white circle containing three dots. The text 'GARY J SHIPLEY' is overlaid in a white box on the right side of the X-ray, and 'LISTEN, MY SISTER, LISTEN' is overlaid in a white box at the bottom of the X-ray.

GARY J SHIPLEY

LISTEN, MY SISTER, LISTEN

He watched his legs grow from the armpits of his baby sister every day for a year. Both white calves there on the door of the fridge whenever he looked, and around them the arms of his sisters that through some mistake of birth were limited to two. Their eyes and feet and ears likewise dyadic. And the things they had only one of absurdly depleted in this same way.

Your sister was never more than one, the mothers kept saying. For the mother-body also seemed to be hiding someone else inside it, without any admission as to why it was so many daughters should warrant as many mothers. But her techniques at being half of something were so practiced by then she was hard to tell apart - unless like his your eye had first been seasoned on more rudimentary versions. And so he mostly disapproved of the way he could see how the mothers' mouth would work at overlapping words, and how even her most basic movements were tiny grotesqueries of overdetermination.

Reflected in a mirror, he never saw more than one of himself; and wondered as a result why his insides had never been finished, why he'd been born so explicitly exiguous in this way, and why nobody ever mentioned it. The men the mothers knew well enough to sometimes hold onto only ever arrived at night, when they were already asleep; but some mornings the extra body was still there in the house, and like the mother-body was both internally too many and deceitfully oblivious. If he ever saw them in a mirror he saw the population of the earth swell a hundred deep into drips falling outward toward other planets.

Before his sisters got words he heard them from the same place. They were honest things, but would turn to falsehoods like the mothers and the men. And then there were the people, not part of the house, that he refused to look at. And because of this the mothers took him to see more of them. The not wanting to look prevailed and though taken specifically to see he did not. And force was he heard no good for what he had. And there was shy and there was just plain fucking weird, or so the men said, one morning in the bedroom in the mothers.

At eight years he was settled into this aloneness. He'd persisted for a series of weeks that numbered more than all the people in the house in aping the missing half. He got as far as a pancreas he couldn't recognize. Another way of being more than one spoke out the body of his sisters when they could not. The thought that they'd one day talk and would that way hide inside each other was a future he imagined never happening, and so

eventually imagined himself preventing. They were happy and would find new happinesses if they were less ensnarled in the masquerade of being the same partially put together thing as him and instead became that thing. And he would be less alone that way. And maybe then the mothers would stop pretending themselves in half, and the men too would stop arriving.

It was cold in the night and he didn't sleep. The mothers were busy merging with the men. When he tried to wake his sisters only one responded. He was falsely beside himself in the seconds it took for the second one to cry. He decided not to live through further impairments that at any time might never end.

Inside, when he looked, the second sister was not incarnated like he'd visualized. He'd imagined she would slide effortlessly from the other when she opened. But there was just blood and blood the same as his. And then parts he'd seen before cast in plastic that weren't duplicated like he'd imagined when he'd had to stop imagining her complete. And inside them no further version waiting to get out. He'd not been prepared for so many separate instances of subdivision. The scissors were to act like a wand and his sisters like doves. But the voices got quieter until they weren't anymore. And he continued to look for signs of their returning. He looked until his sisters were covering the floor. And at the point he'd stopped believing, they came back. And they all of them rolled around in their sisters listening.



STEVE ANWYLL

**YOU ALWAYS GET CAUGHT
ON THE LAST ONE**

Ain't it always the case.

I'm bored as fuck. Life's like that. So I fill my coat pockets with cans of beer. Drink as I cruise the streets. Stopping to look in windows that aren't obstructed. And ain't it always the case? You get caught on the last one.

The whole night going good. Then blammo. Out of nowhere. It's over. Some fucking do-gooder concerned citizen. Prodding into affairs that ain't their own. Acting tough. And as soon as they start yelling. You know you're sunk.

Like tonight. I'm standing there in the darkness. Behind these shrubs. Tall ones. I recognize the scent. Spruce. I convince myself I'm hidden here. From the quiet streets. Prying eyes. Even pedestrians.

And boy oh boy. You can imagine. I'm having a real good time. Beer in hand. Peering through a curtain free basement window. Watching this big fat fuck bastard standing in his bathroom. Shirt off. Shadows cast from a bare bulb above his head.

Makes his tits look extra saggy I whisper.

I lean in a little closer. Confident the light indoors hides me in it's reflection. He picks up a can of shaving cream. Fills an empty palm. Then grabs a blue plastic razor. Disposable variety. Holds it in his hand. He lathers both shoulders. He draws the cheap razor upwards. Flinging the used foam in the basin shadowed by his gut.

Then it happens. All the peace and quiet is interrupted. Some fucker yelling. I can't make out what he's saying. But I can't ignore it either. I turn around. Towards the street. No one in either direction. Fucking bizarre. Oh well. Maybe I'm going nuts? I am staring in people's windows after all.

But that can't be. I'm in control. So I hone in the noise like a dog. Look up. Ah ha. There's the source. Some god damned kook on a wrought iron terrace built for one. He's got both his fists wrapped around the railing. Shaking with anger. And the only detail I can make out in the dark. Is the small orange glow of a cigarette between the knuckles of his left hand.

When I look up at him. The son a bitch gets even hotter. Jumping up and down. Flailing

his arms. I worry about structural stability while he yells profanities. Calling me demented. A pervert. The complete line of slander. I'm hurt. I'm not doing anything lewd. I'm only stealing a moment.

And there's no way I'm going to stand here. Take this bullshit. I've got dignity. Self-respect I think it's called. So I gulp my beer. Then yell up *hey buddy, mind your own damn business. Like ain't you got a dog that needs sodomizing?*

Well shit. That does the trick. Hit a soft spot I suppose. Because he kicks the posts. Rattles the rails. Thrashes his head back and forth. And without noticing. He accidentally crushes the cigarette between his fingers. I watch it tumble through the air. And I forget about him. The yelling. How guilty I look.

Until I hear those words. The ones I've heard so many times before. The ones that hit like a knife. And break me from my trance. *I called the cops you fucking piece of shit!* Uh oh. God damn it! I have to get out of here. Find a way to get even with this lowlife another time. I know where he lives.

It seems like he must have a dog I can poison?

Remember that for later. Because if he isn't lying I'm running out of time. I chug the rest of my beer. Then run in the direction opposite of the main street. Down a smaller side one. It's dark. I feel safe. But I don't let false security stop me. I need to make some ground.

About a block away. My lungs catch fire. My head is pounding. I'm not cut out for this kind of exercise. But I hear a siren close by. So I double my effort. Nausea mounting. Huff and puff in overdrive. There's a park a block away from here. I'll be free and clear if I can make it.

You can do it you old fuck!

And I do. Slipping on the loose gravel pathway as I enter. But not falling. Rounding a bench to dive in the grass. Hidden from the street by a high thick row of hedges surrounding the park. Even if the cops start looking for me. They'll never see me from the street. Too lazy to get out of their car.

So I roll over on my back. Check my pockets. Grab a beer. It explodes a little. I gulp half of it. Drop my head down into the grass. Stare up into the night. The beam of a flashlight waves above my head. I freeze. I hear the static of their radio. And hope they mistake me for a lump in the ground.

The light passes through the park. I stay still. It feels like forever. My blood's running cold with fear. Heart rate hitting the roof. Smiling wide. Boredom no longer a concern.

R
6EB

**ELLE
NASH**

**ANATOMY
OF A
DISTANCE**



You know what doesn't happen anymore? A touch with the lips. The knock-me-on-my-ass touch, the kind that starts in the lower extremity of the leg below the ankle, as he moves closer to me, the kind where he waits for me to wrap my ammunition around him and then he pulls me in and we press with the lips pursed and slightly parted, like an immature form of animal or insect that undergoes some metamorphosis on this fucked earth, together with all of its countries, peoples and natural features which hide in our internal organs, a pear-shaped enlargement of the alimentary canal linking the esophagus to the small intestine, insects waiting in their little silky cases spun by larvae for protection, waiting for the true combination of high polymer qualities such as shape, color or form, those that please the aesthetic senses, especially sight.

Kiss so the insects with two pairs of large wings covered in tiny scales, usually brightly coloured, typically held erect when at rest, and the nocturnal insects related to butterflies could spread their number of specialized paired appendages that enable some animals to fly, in particular: outwards and upwards and out, out, out, of the opening in the lower part of the human face, the tunnel surrounded by the lips, left dust and spines of insect foot in the home through which food is taken in and from which speech and other sounds are emitted.

The kind of touch with lips that wait until 2AM, after I was gone for each of the twelve named periods into which the Gregorian year is divided, after I was gone for thirteen rotations of earth's satellite mother. The kind of touch that waited at the lowest part or point of the grief container, typically made of glass or plastic and with a narrow neck, used for storing booze, before it had the strength in the face of pain or grief to crawl up out of its trash home and hit me on the surface of the thing, especially the touch that was presented to his view, in particular, the touch on the lips slightly parted with teeth showing, that cradles the upper part of the human body, or the front or upper part of the body of the animal, typically separated from the rest of the body by a neck, that which contains the brain, mouth, and sense organs in between its palms, fingers, and thumbs and waits for me to cry, the touch on the lips slightly parted with teeth showing and a tongue that pushes through the mouth that tastes drops of its salt liquid secreted from glands in the eye when they cry or when the eye is irritated and tells me it's going to be okay.

The touch on the lips slightly parted with teeth showing and a tongue that pushes through the mouth to touch another's tongue, the touch that doesn't happen anymore is the one

that says "I'm here you're here and we're alive" after a near miss; internal combustion engine unfortunate incident, happened unexpectedly and unintentionally, resulting in damage or injury, such as the one that left black polymeric substance made from latex on the mixture of dark bituminous pitch with sand or gravel, used for surfacing roads, flooring, roofing, etc, and left a strengthening band of metal fitted around the rim of wheels screaming louder than the invisible gaseous substance surrounding the earth, a mixture mainly of oxygen and nitrogen, left in each of the pair of organs studded within my rib cage, consisting of elastic sacs with branching passages into which air is drawn, so that oxygen can pass into the blood uncollapsed and carbon dioxide can be removed.



CHRIS DANKLAND

**GHOST
SEX**

Lucille died of leukemia in Utah. Richard died in a car accident in Seoul. They were both 16 years old when they died, and now they'd be 16 years old forever, two pissed off sulking virgins condemned to populate the dreams of the living. All those faceless extras that appear in your dreams, where do you think they come from? Just whipped up out of nowhere? No you idiot, those people are ghosts.

///

In 1967, a Dominican garbage man in Queens dreamed about winning the Nobel Prize. Lucille and Richard were in the audience, sitting next to each other. Richard was wearing a tuxedo and Lucille was wearing a beautiful dress made out of a giant wet tongue. At the front of the room, the Dominican garbage man ranted about how he invented trash that doesn't smell. Every ten seconds, every audience member was supposed to stand up and cheer.

Richard looked over at Lucille, looking her up and down. Nice dress, he whispered through the side of his mouth.

Lucille stood up and cheered. She sat back down. Thanks, she said, grinning. It's the only good thing about this dream. What a jackass, she said, nodding at the stage.

Richard grinned. He stood up and cheered. He sat back down. The Dominican garbage man droned on and on and on. The two teenage ghosts managed to have quite a long conversation during that time. They introduced themselves. They complained about the afterlife. (What a fucking disappointment, sighed Lucille.) They talked about how they'd died. They talked about all the things they missed. They talked about the things they never did.

I never kissed anyone, said Lucille, quietly. She stood up and cheered. She sat back down.

Really? said Richard. But you're so pretty!

Lucille blushed the same color as her red tongue dress. Thank you, she mumbled through a grin. Nobody wants to kiss somebody that's dying, I guess. You didn't see me the last year of my life. I was bald and pale and skeletal. I was throwing up all the time. I could barely get out of bed.

Can I kiss you? said Richard. He stood up and cheered. He sat back down.

When they sat back down, Lucille nodded enthusiastically. Richard leaned over and pressed his soft lips on hers. Everyone else in the audience stood up and cheered. But Richard and Lucille just stayed sitting there, pawing each other, breathing hard, making out.

Hey! said a nearby ghost. Pay attention!

They didn't even bother to peel their faces from each other long enough to tell the creep to fuck off.

///

In 1983, Richard and Lucille met again. This time it was in the dream of a Japanese house wife who was taking an afternoon nap. She was dreaming about a haunted house full of pillows with arms and legs. The pillows had giant mouths full of razor sharp teeth, and they were running around murdering people. Richard and Lucille were both dead bodies laying on the kitchen floor.

Hey! said Lucille, quietly. She moved her foot and nudged Richard. Richard opened his eyes in a squint, but when he spotted Lucille they shot wide open.

HEY LUCILLE! he said loudly.

Lucille grinned and said: Shh shh shhhhh. The pillow monsters were running all over the house, chasing the Japanese housewife. Those fuckers have sharp teeth, she said.

Richard nodded and quietly crawled over, closer to her face. He kissed her. I missed you so much, he said.

Me too, she sighed.

Who knows when this bitch is gonna wake up again, said Richard. Lucille nodded sadly. Do you want to know something that I never got to do before I died? he asked. Lucille nodded happily. Richard stretched out his hand and put it between Lucille's thighs. She blushed. Thirty seconds later, she was squirming. Lucille looked over at Richard's pants. Something big and long was bulging down his leg, twitching like a chrysalis eager to shed

its cocoon. She unzipped him and pulled it out. It felt good in her hands. Warm and hard and swollen. For a long time, they rubbed each other like that, watching each other grin and grimace and pant and whimper and groan.

All the sudden, a pillow monster scampered into the room, bug-eyed and wild.

Fuck! said Richard, jumping to his feet, hard as a rock. He jumped in front of Lucille and wrestled with the pillow monster, punching it in the face and throwing it around. Lucille! he said, between kicks. Meet me in the dreams of the first baby born in 2078! Find me! The pillow monster snarled and screamed.

FIND ME! LUC--

The Japanese housewife woke up.

///

In 2078, the first baby born on the planet was a girl from Nigeria. Her first dream came on the the third day of her life. Newborn baby dreams don't usually have ghosts in them. Babies know nothing of the world. They know nothing of other people, not in the way that you and I do. To babies, people are amorphous blobs with liquid vibrating voices. And that was how Richard and Lucille appeared. Two naked lava lamp bodies with voices like singing waterfalls. The baby floated in a fractal womb full of patterns and squiggles. Richard and Lucille were playing the baby's father and mother.

Your dick looks like a bowl of red jello, said Lucille, giggling.

Richard smiled and rolled his eyes, which nearly floated out of his head. He had to reach up and grab them so they didn't get away from him. Look who's talking, Miss Picasso painting, he said.

Lucille looked down and laughed. I have like fourteen breasts, she said. I guess the baby is hungry.

I think it's kinda hot, said Richard.

You do? Well, I have to admit your jello boner is kind of doing it for me, too. Let me

try something. Lucille floated down until she was six feet from Richard's waist. She started sucking in air through her mouth like a straw. Richard groaned. His jello dick start stretching out, slowly pulled toward her mouth. Soon his dick was six feet long, filling her mouth. Richard held his head back and groaned.

Come here, he gasped.

Lucille floated over like a wiggly amoeba. Richard's six foot long dick gently pushed through her skin, deep into her center. She wrapped her arms around him and gasped.

They finished fucking two hours later. In the newborn baby's dream they held each other tight, their hearts pumping in perfect synchronized rhythm.

We have to do this again, said Richard. We have to.

Yes, said Lucille. I don't want to be without you. I love you, she said.

I love you too, said Richard. Next time, let's meet in somebody's wet dream. Lucille nodded enthusiastically.

Lucille hugged Richard as tight as she could. I love newborn babies, she said. They sleep all fucking day.

JENNIFER GREIDUS



MR. ANGEL



She was no *Ingrid*. She was more of a Pat, or even a "Chuck," but she was no Ingrid. An Ingrid would never own a truck stop on 85, and an Ingrid would never tell blue jokes to men who haven't bathed in a couple weeks. When her daughter, my lover, took me there to eat, Ingrid always saved us a booth in the corner, away from Manuel, Jim, and Shaky, because those three stank more than anyone.

While she was alive and in her thirties and forties, Ingrid had two wishes. One of them was to bowl a perfect game. A perfect game is 300, all strikes, plus the two extra strikes you get at the end for bowling all strikes in the previous frames. She never bowled a perfect game.

Her second wish was to make love to Criss Angel. Mr Angel was a bit of a humdinger. A Casanova. He liked the ladies, and he liked them large. He also liked the boys--at least this is what my lover and I heard (no libel suits, please)--and the boys were the kind of boys who liked getting paid for sexual favors. Also, we heard the boys he liked--all rumor, of course--were skinny boys from Midwestern states.

As an aside, my lover and I think it's a bit pretentious to spell your name like Criss and not Chris.

Ingrid never did get to make love to Criss Angel. But that's not to say she didn't get damn close. In 2009, Mr. Angel and Ingrid enjoyed champagne and strawberries in his suite at The Luxor. He had a fancy bathroom. Ingrid liked to tell her poker partners that Mr. Angel drank too much bubbly that night and couldn't get it up. She and he parted ways, sans penetration.

Five years later, the two met in Dollywood. Ingrid was rather hush-hush about the encounter. They stayed in a cabin. She told us he wanted to go on the water rides. The log flume. When my lover quizzed Ingrid about the evening, she said the log flume made Mr. Angel queasy. We found this hard to believe because we all know the log flume makes everyone horny.

When they met for a third time in 2019, the washed-up Mindfreak was subsisting on heroin-boys, coffee, and cracker Snak-Paks. He showed up in her motel lobby. My lover and I were there, watching Les Bleus football--my lover had a thing for Basque country, the Napoleonic Wars, and baguettes, and felt some affinity for anything French.

Ingrid dropped her crossword puzzle and went to him. She held him like a baby, but her hand slipped down his torso and seized a handful of whatever she could find in his pants. I'll wrap it up here by saying that, although Criss Angel spent the night in Ingrid's motel room, after she brought him French toast and orange juice, he dropped dead right in front of the dresser.

For weeks, Ingrid liked to tell her poker partners that he stuck it to her right before he hit the ground--that he was stuffed in and subsequently slid out of her vagina with his last breath--but we know she was taking a shit when he kicked it. Two months to the day after Mr. Angel died, so did Ingrid.

#

My lover and I now run Ingrid's truck stop. We let Manny, Jim, and Shaky sit wherever they want; they were pallbearers at Ingrid's funeral, and that casket was no joke.

My lover has been depressed since her mother's death, and nothing--not my mouth, not flaxseed waffles, not bonsai--helps her move on. I try to stay upbeat. We smoke a lot of cigarettes. She can't even put the effort into inhaling. She hasn't eaten my pussy in months.

Even Manny, Jim, and Shaky notice her blues. Manny tells her she looks like she lost weight. She has not. Jim says her custard pie is better than ever. Custard isn't my favorite, but when I taste it, it's the same as before. Shaky just winks at her a lot. It's all he can do.

We go to bed high and hungry all the time. I feel bad eating when she never does. Sometimes, I'll sneak into our motel bathroom and scoff down a smuggled juice box and Swiss Rolls. I eat like a squirrel, with the chocolatey outer shell melting between my greedy squirrel claws as I munch away. I make fierce eye contact with myself in the mirror as I eat. I am a bad girlfriend.

After my fifth Swiss Roll this week, I return to the bed, light a joint, and pass it to my lover. I only smoke so she doesn't smell the artificial flavorings on my breath.

The TV is muted. The TV is always on and muted. It stays on the one channel to her liking. The channel features old sitcoms. At ₅₃2 a.m. every night, I know by heart the

reflections and shadows that will hit the ceiling. I don't even need the theme song. Red, red, pink, shadow, shadow, white, blue, red, red, pink. Black. Commercials, multi, too many possibilities to keep track of patterns. I do know the commercial for dog food with bits of real bacon, however; the ceiling takes on a lot of orange, then. The flashes go back to blue. Usually blue.

Now, she drops sideways, her head in my lap. She says, "We need to re-gravel the parking lot."

I say, "First, we get the septic fixed." Even as I say this, I swear that I can hear the pipes burbling.

"The septic is fine."

"It is not fine. There are floaty things in everyone's toilet. All the time. And sometimes even in the bathtubs."

"It's more satisfying to re-gravel. We see where the money goes."

"Septic first," I insist.

"Gravel."

"Fine. Gravel."

We have arguments all the time. I let her win. We never do anything, anyway.

We look left when the metal closet door slides open. It's where my lover keeps all the shoes she never wears. She has a lot of shoes. We mostly keep our clothing on chairs and the floor. It's a closet door that has jammed and come off the track so many times, we just decided never to open it again.

It's not even graceful, the revelation. Criss Angel is in a tuck-n-roll position on the top shelf of the closet. There is no mirror magic. He doesn't glide. He's not in one place and then suddenly in another. We don't *Ohhhh*. We don't *Ahhhh*. He just plummets from the top shelf, arms and legs scrabbling at the shoes, and lands on his back. He groans.

This ghost of Criss Angel is always nude.

This ghost of Criss Angel comes once or twice a week.

My lover and I sigh.

Mr. Angel has a penis that looks like bamboo shoots. Like six shoots tied parallel with twine. He's still wearing all that makeup. Ingrid loved the makeup. She did hers like his and went dancing or bowling. Mr. Angel's nipples are like dinner plates. Crystalline sockets for eyes. His mouth is French. His nose is Polish. I think his teeth might be Welsh.

Which one of you wants me? His mouth moves. My lover and I know what he's saying, but he's not making any noise.

"Neither one of us wants you," my lover says and sits up. He asks us this every time.

Let's have a coffee.

"No one wants a coffee," my lover says.

Mr. Angel plays with the twine around his penis. His hips gyrate. His eye sockets dim. His body flickers. *I need Ingrid's holes. I need some holes. Anyone's holes.*

"Not it," my lover says.

"Not it," I say.

"What are you going to do with that bamboo penis, anyway?" My lover smirks.

Just some milk, then. I've had no cow's milk for ages.

My lover stands, sighs, and puts on her robe. "Cow's milk, and then you fuck off?"

Cow's milk. Criss Angel moans. His crystalline tongue swipes across his French lips.

My lover sighs again and puts on her slippers. She finger-combs her hair in the mirror

over the TV stand. "My mother should be here moaning, not you. You had three million chances to make love and fill my mother's holes." My lover grimaces as she says that. She kisses my cheek and heads for the door.

Mr. Angel's dinner-plate nipples perk up. *Ingrid had two wishes.*

"We know," my lover and I say. "*Making love to you and bowling a perfect game.*"

Criss Angel's nipples perk up further. He gyrates. *Bowling a perfect game.*

"Do you want your milk or not?"

Thunderbird Lanes. Never forget.

#

After another month of Criss Angel visits, which usually come in the middle of *Punky Brewster*, my lover and I pull out the topographic map and make a plan. We stand like generals over an *if > then* flowchart on our round card table in the motel room.

We are concerned about all the cow's milk--my lover is vegan--and the special two-part *Perils of Punky* is coming up this week. We don't want to miss it.

"We can't do anything with that bamboo penis," I say.

"He talks about the fucking bowling a lot."

"We can't take him bowling."

"How about we bowl? Maybe Ingrid keeps shipping him back so that we'll bowl."

We pull ourselves together. My lover calls the emergency sewer hotline. I get the gravel crew on the books for Wednesday. We brush ourselves off. We finish a joint. We unpack Ingrid's bowling shirt.

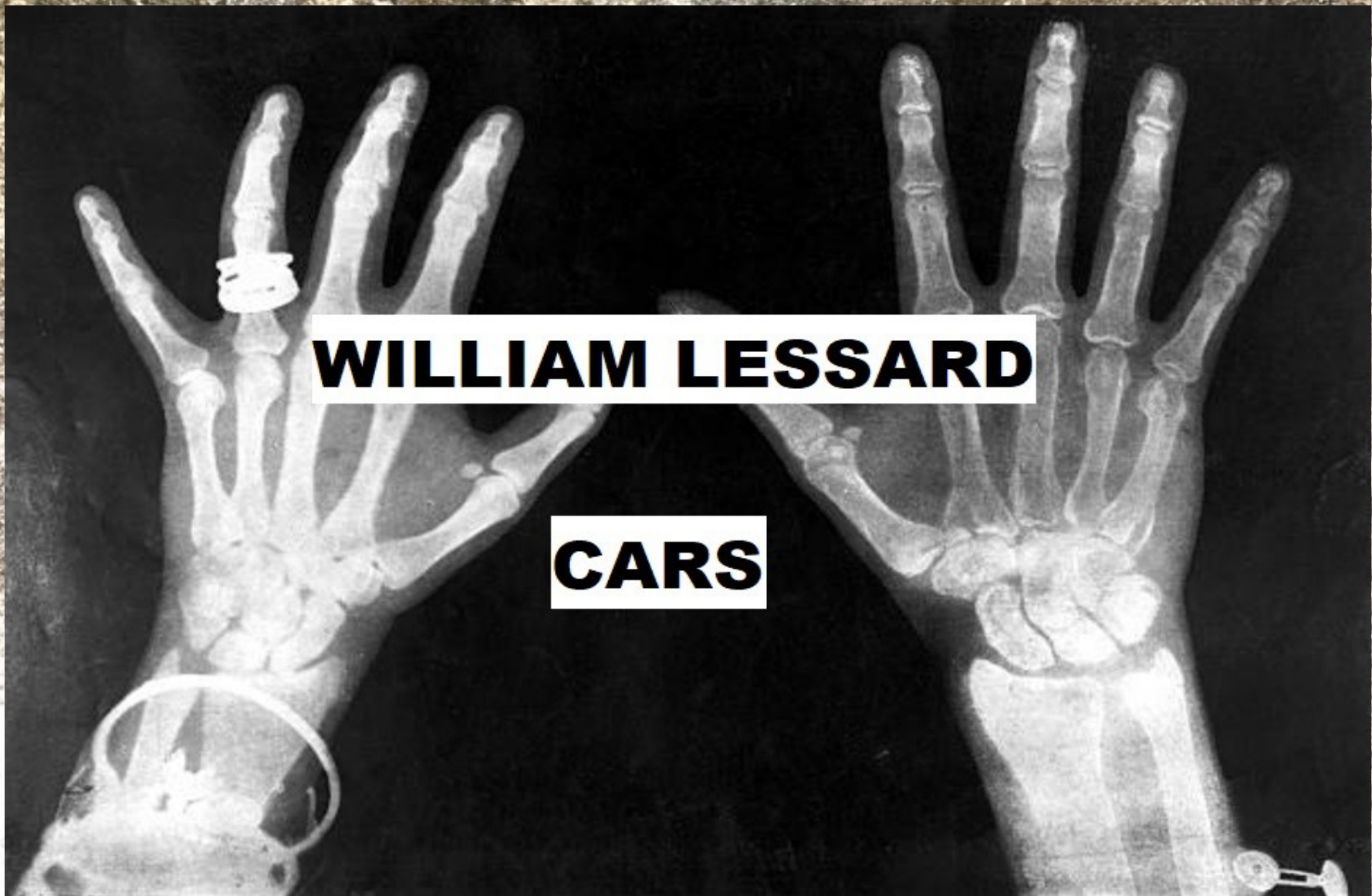
I am a size four, and my lover is a size twelve. But Ingrid was top-heavy, sort of an upside-down pear. A size eighteen. Regardless, my lover and I take turns wearing her

bowling shirt. It is light purple--maybe it's lavender if you're into being specific about tones and shades--and her name is on the right breast pocket. You can't hold anything in there, the pocket, because it's sewn shut. Her name is in cursive, purple thread--eggplant if you're into tones and shades.

We bowl like hell in her memory. We bowl so Criss Angel will stay away. We bowl the fuck out of bowling. No one bowls like we do. I never so much as won a trophy in my life, but I have the heart of a lion when it comes to bowling.

We pick off 300-games like nobody's business.

A few times during the week, the metal doors of our closet creak. The more we bowl, the less they creak. Mr. Angel never tumbles out. My lover can sleep without the TV. She eats my pussy. She kisses me a lot with a face full of pussy juice. We bowl even when we're sick. We bowl on Christmas.



1

The car stopped turning. Jay would drive to the deli, reverse the process once the six-pack or bag of 40s was chilling his inner thighs. The job of the person with him was to rotate their head to the middle of their back. Bumper distance within ten feet required a preemptory "Yo." In tighter circumstances, random curses were substituted. Increasing volume emphasized proximity of the parked car/oncoming vehicle/pedestrian.

Walking the five blocks was never a consideration.

2

My father's car was parked in the yard with hedges growing from one of the wheels.

On the screen in front of him, men in red uniforms zipped around each other. They appeared to be chasing another man, this one in a green uniform with a black dot he slid back and forth with a stick. The man with the dot had the confidence of someone who had just acquired magical powers. Powers that included disappearing into the TV's faux-wood grain.

3

There was a smell in Freddy's car on hot days. Strong, with the animate quality of freshly prepared food. Sometimes we would turn around, expecting to see someone in the back seat cooking a Big Mac and fries. Freddy thought the smell was a gift from the car's previous owner. A built-in air freshener. Freddy changed his mind when the smell became a heavy sourness, a stench that absorbed all the air in the car. A stench that lingered even after we drove 80 miles an hour on the highway with the windows down. It would return whenever the temperature rose above 90 degrees. Its lesson, delivered from deep inside the vinyl, was to remind us what the body did to a Big Mac and fries once they had passed the teeth.

4

Being a non-driver allows you to see what your friends would do if they were God.

5

"Do you have any warrants?"

"Warrants?"

"Are you guys wanted?" asked the cop whose bumper we almost flattened, thanks to Freddy's fondness for rolling stop signs.

"No, no. Nobody wants us," I said.

The cop undid the clip on his holster.

"I want *you*, out of the car," he said.

He knew to point at me, even though I was a baby sheep, tucked behind my friend's shoulders in the back seat.

6

The mechanic didn't give Jay a price. He gave him the number for a used car lot. This would have been useful information, if it wasn't the place Jay bought the car that had lost the will to steer.

7

"Look out your window," Jay said on the phone. A black Lincoln slid up the middle of the block, taking up three car lengths. Jay was dating a woman we called Cold Cuts who worked as a dispatcher at a car service. She sent him limos anytime he wanted. That first one we took to get slices of pizza. Other times we'd go to a club or just ride around. Jay took his to his window cleaning job on days he overslept.

8

Glen picked me up in the driveway in my socks.

When someone says they "need to do something for five minutes," that estimate does not include travel-time to a pile of sawdust in Delaware.

9

He walked out five minutes later, exactly. Right pocket bulging, knuckles bleeding.

10

What would you say to new clothes, free food and coke all weekend in Virginia Beach?

11

What would you say when he asks if you're interested in another side-trip? Friend of his in Florida will take good, good care of us.

12

Help.

13

Grand Prix was a popular model. With a back seat more commodious than the beds we slept in at home. Motels were for special occasions.

14

Rearview mirrors threaded with silk scarves. White. Names in red script—with date—stitched across the front. Ladies first, always.

Angela & Tony
2/14/82

Anne-Marie & Vincenzo
7/2/81

Tina & Joey
9/22/83

The scarves were from the same old woman in Morris Park. For a few dollars extra, she

added a heart pierced by an arrow, or a brief saying. At Last. Together 4-ever.

My friends had trouble matching the scarf to the person they were with. The scarves were jammed in the glove compartment like an overstuffed sock drawer. Getting busted with the wrong scarf meant coming up with a lie. The more intelligent young women would snatch the scarf from the mirror, hold it tight in their fist as they punched. The less intelligent/less emotionally mature would believe explanations worthy of a senator. "My friend Jay, who I know has the same name as me, borrowed the car."

15

Everything was about sex, except the sex.

16

Troy at my house at 8 a.m. with tequila, a gift of his parent's liquor cabinet. He was back from LA with three tattoos he didn't remember getting. The most visible: a woman's name uncoiling across his right forearm. *Cath* or *Kate*.

17

Calm person, crazy driver. The instructor said it was always opposite, yet mid-season *Columbo* episodes disproved this theory.

The drunk driver who killed Commodore Jones' wife turns out to be Mr. Sketchy McSketch, the one we thought it was from the first five minutes.

The writers were tired, perhaps low on blow.

18

He gestured with the remote. Waving it over different body parts to demonstrate bathing in a stranger's swimming pool.

19

"The things I did."

"Yes."

The line of tequila even with the eyes of the pirate on the label.

20

Put car in Park, catch a few winks, drive on at the green. Freddy's system for driving under the influence was a success. He arrived home, bladder full, tank empty. Total travel time, for the 15 blocks from Dawn's house: just under six hours.

21

Jay's limo-on-demand lifestyle ended when one of the drivers told Cold Cuts that Jay's trip to *First Blood Part II* last Thursday night wasn't a solo.

22

Troy at my house at 8:30 a.m. with crème de menthe. He had drunk his way through the rest of the cabinet. He was left with the booze his parents poured on their ice cream.

"How about we go find a wall to break that up against?"

23

Dropping the unwanted cassettes in a pile on the floormat, fingers mashing buttons. He put in a tape, drove a few feet, popped it out, tried another.

Fast Forward, to the last tape in the ashtray: "Where Have All the Good Times Gone?"—Diamond Dave vibrated in the left kickpanel. The perfect soundtrack for exiting that movie parking lot.

24

When the brake is no longer the brake.

25

Glen showed up at Jay's house every day with a different car.

T-Bird on Tuesday was good. But it was the Seville on Friday that got him. Emerald Green. Spoked rims.

Jay offered him 3 grand cash. Right there.

"Next week—and I want the wreck in the driveway."

He flashed the knot under Glen's nose, close enough for him to smell it.

"Monday. I promise. I'll even make sure it's detailed."

26

No word from Glen Monday.

27

No word from Glen Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.

28

Friday. Glen waiting for Jay first thing in the morning. The driver-side door swung open, even with the front gate at 5:30 a.m.

"You still got the money?"

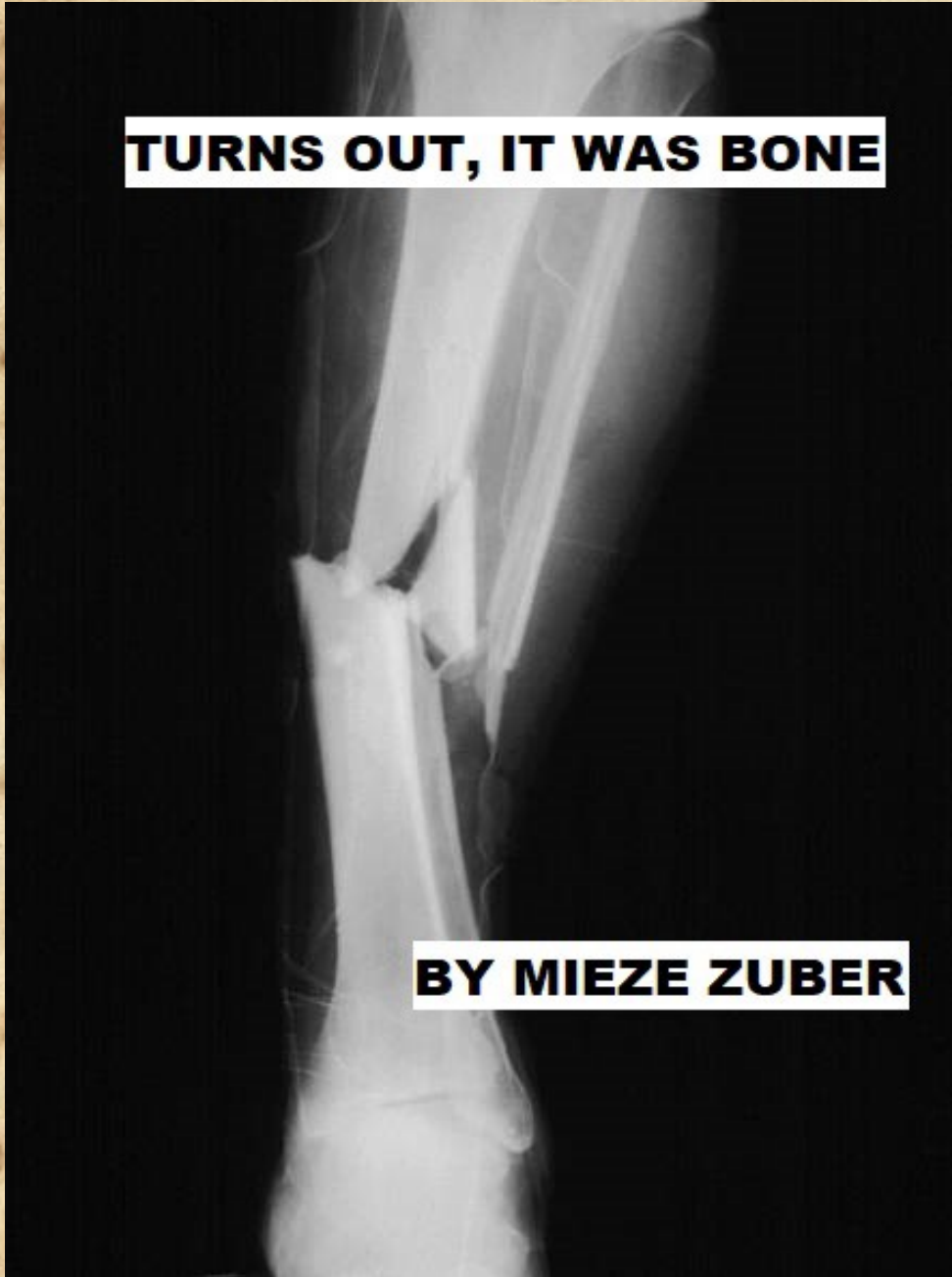
He leaned over the steering wheel in a way that Jay could see something he didn't want to see.

29

Everyone in the neighborhood thought Glen must've been high when he sold the Seville for only \$1,500. The next week, Jay had it painted. Red.

URNS OUT, IT WAS BONE

BY MIEZE ZUBER



It was early spring, nearly like now, before Columbine, and I was drinking again in that bar perpendicular to the office where they'd housed me. I was with a couple of the bankers and J., the gay man who refused to admit what he was. He knew I knew, and that I wasn't going to judge, that I liked him as he was. So he hovered close like security, almost like a pimp, and he was lovely to drink with and say much of nothing to. I slept over at his, overlooking the river. I took men back there. He did, too. It was a good arrangement. It was all right between us.

Drinking in that bar. And as usual, I'd had a lot. It was a Thursday night, and that was the one night in the week when that dead city came alive even when there was no baseball game at the stadium just across the way to flood them all in. Prospect Street. Go a few blocks down and you'd see the hotel that Led Zeppelin trashed in the '70's; you could see the hookers coming out and walking up and down until cars stopped and they got in and went for a ride. Ride, yeah. Ride. Thursdays were a good night for rides, with all the businessmen who stayed downtown to drink in anticipation of the weekend.

One of the bankers said that evening,—Your face isn't the usual. I'd like to paint you.

—Do you paint, I asked him absentmindedly.

—No, but if I could, I would, he said.

—Ah, I said, and took another swallow.

—I need the toilet, I said to J. —And then you're driving me home.

—Baby, he said. Stay a little longer. It's too early.

—Yeah, I said. And I made my way up the staircase to the unisex bathroom.

When I came out into the hall, the last one I'd fucked and ended things with was there. K. He saw me and called me. Not a banker, not one of the work colleagues. He was far out of that circle. I was swaying, I'll admit. I was well on my way. I'd been there for a while. The music was deafening and he leaned into my ear to tell me what he did.

—Come back, baby, he said. —I miss you. Come have a drink with me.

-No, come on, I said, shrugging him off.

-We're not finished, he said.

-No, we are, I said. -Leave it. It's over. Get one of your others.

-You're here now, though, he said. -There's no one else here. You come with me now.

I didn't say more. I went back down the stairs to the bar. And then he was behind me; I felt him and there were no words coming from him but his fists were out, I felt them on my head and half turned and got one to the face and then I was falling. And I reached the bottom, the ground floor by the bar, and I tried to stand and someone I didn't know, she was stopping me and saying, -NO, DON'T MOVE. And then I felt more hands on me, holding me back. I tried to stand and they stopped me. I saw white through my black stockings and thought, -What's that?

Turns out, it was bone.

They phoned an ambulance while I kept saying, -I'm fine, leave me alone, it's fine. I was transported to the inner-city charity hospital emergency room. Saint V-----'s. Laid there on a slab of an examining table, next to a homeless guy in the next bay. He was crying and I wasn't. I just ignored the pain running up my leg, into my pelvis. I wanted to smash something. He was crying; he was crying for his mother. I looked over at him in a haze of something and saw his weathered face, his black ashy skin.

-You'll be okay, man, I said. My voice didn't sound like my own. It was high and thin and cracked. I sensed some kind of feeling, some deep and sharp thing. I still couldn't identify it as pain.

-I'm going to die, he said. Wailed it.

-No, no. You're fine. You're going to be fine.

-I'm BLEEDING, he screamed. EVERYTHING'S BLEEDING.

-Shh, I said. Shh. It's all OK.

-I'm telling you, bitch, I'm FUCKIN' BLEEDIN'. I'M DYIN'.

I didn't say more. The pain had manifested; the pain was making itself known. And I was unable to even turn on my side to see if he actually was bleeding. And there I was lying there on that fucking slab of an examining table, and I just wanted to get up and walk away and I couldn't. I lay there, trying to erase K.'s face from my head. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth.

++++++

I'd chosen K. because he was precisely such a brute. I'd met him in that very same bar in late winter. Another Thursday. J. had crinkled his nose at that choice. K. was blue collar and sweaty, garage car mechanic, shaved head and Neubauten tattoos. He bought me a couple of shots and actually sniffed me.

-Don't tell me that one's coming home with you, J. said.

-Why not? I'd laughed, and hugged him.

-He's disgusting, said J. -And he's a fucking freak. I don't need a radar for that. Yours is totally broken. Pick someone else.

But I didn't. I knew J. was right. I'd seen it myself. I knew K. would fuck me up but good, and it was exactly what I wanted that evening. J. wouldn't let me stay at his that night. He told me that if this was the new romance, I could take it back to mine. And I accepted that, and I did.

I was bleeding from various places the following morning. I let K. out the door at 5 am with stinging promises of more. He came back twice, and we went out together once, and then the fourth time we got together, he kept talking about other women. And he left his pager on and kept using my phone to answer their calls, arguing with them about this and that. Funny I couldn't put up with it. It wasn't like I was in love or anything. I just found it annoying.

When he hung up from the last page saying, -Sorry, I'll turn it off, I told him that I would rather that he leave. We argued and he gave me a few slaps and punches, and I told him, -OK, enough now. Go home.

Surprisingly, he did, and he left me alone. Up until that night in the bar, early spring. April 8th, I think it was, into the early morning hours of the 9th.

++++++

After the x-rays, they told me my tibia was fractured and close to a break. They would keep my leg mobile. J. was allowed in to see me then.

-I phoned your mother, he said. -Your dad picked up.

-Fuck, I said.

-You're going to need him tomorrow, baby, he said. -How else are you going to get back to the hospital? They're about to release you right now. I can't take you.

-They won't give me anything for the pain, I said. My face was wet, and he wiped it for me.

-I'll get you something, don't worry, he said. -We'll get you home tonight and stay with you.

I didn't say anything for a few minutes, and he didn't either. J. If I could explain to you how much I miss him in this exact moment, writing this.

-And don't worry about that fucking asshole, he said, almost as an afterthought.

-K.? I asked.

-Yeah, K. No one called the police. You're not going to have to worry about him again. A couple of guys from the bar took him out around back.

++++++

Nearly two decades removed from all that. It's sordid, it's shit. I'll tell you more about that emergency room. I'll tell you how that man next to me cried for his mother and asked me to sing him a song to keep him occupied. I'll tell you how I gave in and did it, in a cracked and off-key voice. I'll tell you how much it hurt, and how much I deserved

it or didn't and got it anyway, how playing with fire guarantees you'll get burned and how it echoes, how everything from the past resonates, how your entire life of skull fractures and bruises the school nurse questions leads to it. How it echoes. I'm here, safe now, removed. But all the echoes. It goes on and on until you can finally call it past and can finally call it over. And what it means when you reach back and dredge it up because you realize it's never over until you really call time on it. Just know, this is calling time on it. The narrative from then isn't finished, but I'm calling time on it now.

The logo for X-RAY LITERARY MAGAZINE features the word "X-RAY" in large, bold, black letters. Each letter is filled with a detailed, grayscale X-ray image of a specific part of the human skeleton: 'X' shows a hand, 'R' shows a ribcage, 'A' shows a leg, and 'Y' shows a foot. Below "X-RAY", the words "LITERARY" and "MAGAZINE" are stacked in a smaller, bold, black, sans-serif font.

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SUBMISSIONS