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SPRING 2019

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The Photograph

Robert Sachs

The restaurant faces Central Park and we choose to sit outside in the warm fall evening. Potted banana trees are placed to afford each table an illusion of privacy. Joan is laughing at something I said when the shooting starts. It is a sincere laugh, one that makes me smile. One of the bullets, the fourth or tenth—I can't remember—enters her head and she is dead before her wine glass shatters on the concrete floor. There are many deaths at the three locations the terrorists hit that night.

I have a deep scratch on my face from flying glass, but I am otherwise unscathed. I fall to the sidewalk and reach for Joan, pulling her close to me and resting her shattered head on my arm. Blood is everywhere. There is screaming.

My ex calls the next day after seeing my name in a front page *Times* article about the attacks. Was I all right? Would there be a scar? It must have been horrible. I'm so glad you're okay. Who was she?

"A friend," is all I say.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she says as I hang up the phone.

I had met Joan only that morning. I was sitting in Morgan Dunnaway's waiting room. He had been my lawyer since my first divorce. Joan opened the door and said, "Mr. Westerfeld? Mr. Dunnaway will see you now."

I stood up, smiled and said, "And you? When will you see me?"

She looked surprised, but she returned my smile.

Two attractive people: Why shouldn't we have dinner together? When we meet at the restaurant that evening, Joan is the one who suggests we eat outside.

There is a cellphone photo accompanying the *Times* article showing me sitting on the ground, holding a cloth napkin to the bloody hole above her cheekbone. It is a dramatic photo and gets quite a bit of notice. I am interviewed the following day on CNN. “Totally senseless,” I say. “She was a sweet person.” When pressed, I say: “Yes, we were very close.”

Only we weren’t. I didn’t even know her last name. We had just begun talking when the shooting started. She seemed sweet. Her large, hazel eyes and soft mouth made her look young and naïve. I am convinced we would have gotten along; she looked like the kind of woman I liked. We would have become close.

I need to find out her last name. Asking Dunnaway after what I said on television, is out of the question. I’d look stupid, or worse. Three days after the shooting, the paper publishes a list of the dead and wounded. There are two Joan’s among the dead: Flaherty and Rabinowitz. Which one is my Joan?

I go to Flaherty’s funeral service at St. Peter’s. I arrive early. There is a large black and white photo of this Joan on a poster board to the right of the pulpit. I sit in the back of the church for a while, but as large as the photo is, I can’t be sure if it is the right Joan. I move closer. It might be her and then again it might not. The woman in the photo had long, dark hair and so did my Joan. There are other similarities. The eyes. The lips.

I’m too late for the Rabinowitz funeral. She was buried the day after the shooting. Checking the obituary on-line, I see a photo. Yes, Joan Rabinowitz is my Joan.

“I didn’t know you two were a thing, Jack,” Dunnaway says a week later. “Sorry for your loss. I understand you’re in demand. News organizations, talk shows.”

I nod my head.

“You might consider having us run interference for you. Looking down the road at a book deal, maybe a movie contract. Who knows?”

“They want me on Colbert,” I say.

“What about Fallon?”

“Haven’t heard.”

He tells me his firm can arrange that. “One of my partners does this sort of thing. She’s good at it. Represents a company that handles mass murderer memorabilia. Got a reality TV show for the guy who bit off his own foot. It’s a specialty.”

Dunnaway introduces me to Gloria Papademos. She looks anything but Greek to me. Short and stocky with stringy blonde hair. Russian maybe. “Sorry for your loss,” she says. “Joan was fairly new at the firm. Never did get to know her that well. How long were you guys dating?”

“On and off for quite a while,” I say.

Gloria looks at me with a maternalistic smile. “Can we get rid of the ‘off’ part?”

I go with it. Why not? Under Gloria’s tutelage, I begin getting favorable press. “What courage,” a talk show host says holding up the photo of me holding Joan. I find I enjoy the attention. There is a party in my honor at work. My boss makes a nice speech and a young woman named Melanie in the office next to mine rubs up against me.

“Courage” The word flits through my mind during this interregnum of fame. At times I convince myself I am a symbol of America’s resolve to stand strong against ter-

rorism. But occasionally, a small voice says, *you are a lying sleaze.*

“Politics,” Gloria says at lunch one afternoon. “You up for public office?” She is like a wizard and in her presence conscience cowers in the clothes closet.

“Dog catcher?”

“Senator. Senator Jack Westerfeld. I like the sound of it. We’ll need to run you as a Democrat. Gun control. Better training of our police force. You all right with that?”

“Wait. Hold on. You’re serious?”

Gloria assures me she is serious. “You’re a natural. Clean cut. Ever been arrested?”

“No.”

“Serve in the army?”

“No, but I wasn’t a draft dodger. The draft was over by the time I hit eighteen.”

“Clean cut and tough on terrorism.”

Before I know it, I am helping her flesh out my persona. Mom and dad both born in the Midwest. Good Protestant stock.

“The average Joe whose girl was killed by terrorists,” Gloria says. “I’m telling you, a natural.”

The difference between being a nobody and being a success is how ready you are to take advantage

I leave Gloria feeling important, a future senator. But I didn’t really know Joan. That’s the chink in my armor. I wasn’t her lover or even her friend. We had only just met. Won’t that come out sooner or later? I don’t know how much to tell Gloria. She seems to want to be the one telling me. “You could have been the one lying there, Jack,” she said. “There but for the grace of God. That story, and especially that photo, could make you famous, could make you millions.” Life is a series of accidents, Gloria tells me. The difference between being a nobody and being a success is how ready you are to take advantage of those accidents. “Grab this opportunity,” she says. “You’ll never have another one like it.”

I have a sleepless night. While I understand what Gloria is saying, I feel uncomfortable with her pulling my strings, animating me. I need time to think. If she builds me up as the man who lost his loved one to terrorism and then it comes out that I really didn’t know Joan, the results would be disastrous. I have a decent job with a finance company and I really don’t want to jeopardize it. I call Dunnaway the next morning. “Things are moving too fast, Morgan. I appreciate what you and Gloria are doing for me, but I want her to back off. If it turns out I’m just yesterday’s news, that’s fine with me.”

“You’re worried because you didn’t really know Joan?”

He knows! “Well listen, I...”

“Look Jack, I’m not a complete idiot. I knew you two had just met in my office. But the public thinks you guys were a couple and there you are in the photo holding her in your arms as her life slips away. That photo is the stuff of legend. It’s what the country needs right now to rally us against terrorism. And it wasn’t staged. What happened happened. So why not do yourself a favor and go with it?”

His argument is logical, but I'm still not sure it will fly. "Tell you what, Morgan, I'll think on it. Tell Gloria not to do anything more until she hears from me. Give me a couple of days."

"You're the client. Think it through and let me know when you're ready."

Things calm down. And then a woman calls: Joan's sister, Dana. She saw me on television and wants to talk. "I was looking for you at the funeral," she says.

"I was there," I lie. "In the back. Thought it better to keep a low profile."

We agree to meet for lunch.

"How long have you known Joan?" she asks.

"Not very. We were just getting to know one another."

She asks me about that night. What were we talking about? What was she wearing? Had she mentioned her family? She asks me to take her to the restaurant, the site of the attack.

Dana looks older than Joan, shorter, thinner, with sharper features. Her hair is short and curly. I haven't seen her smile yet, though she seems cordial enough. When we're standing outside the restaurant, she pulls a copy of the photo from her purse and holds it for me to see.

"Is this a selfie? It's hard for me to tell. Your right arm isn't in the picture."

"I beg your pardon." All of a sudden, the nature of our conversation changes. An accusation hangs in the air. "What are you getting at?"

"Simple question. Did you take the photo?"

I end the lunch before it gets started. "I don't know what your game is," I say. I don't want to have anything more to do with her. Is she actually accusing me of staging the photo?

She doesn't waste time. Dunnaway calls me the next morning. A reporter from the *Times* called Gloria. "They've got a source saying that the photo was taken by you. Of course, if it was, everything changes. Jack, did you send the photo to the *Times*?"

"I'm not going to answer that. What difference does it make?"

"Did you take the picture?"

"She was dead. Shot in the head. I was sitting right there next to her. All of that is real, Morgan."

"If you took the picture, Jack, people will say it was staged. Not the death of course. But it'll look callous. Bizarre. Can I look at your cellphone? Is the photo on it?"

"Yes, the photo is on my phone. So what? And sure, I sent it to the *Times*. But it wasn't staged."

"We're going to have to prove you didn't take the picture. It's as simple as that. If you didn't take it, how did it get on your phone? Who sent it to you?"

I point out to Morgan that he is my lawyer, representing me. "Why does this sound like a cross-examination?"

He tells me he is bound not to disclose whatever I tell him, but the best way for him to represent my interests is to know exactly what happened. He wants my phone to check the EXIF data on the photo.

"You're not digging around in my phone, Morgan. Let's assume I did take the damn picture. What's the difference?"

"Look, we're spinning you as a brave guy who lost his true love in a terrorist attack. But if you took the photo yourself, you look like a dick."

"Well I didn't take the picture. A waiter took it and emailed it to me."

"Great. Let's see the email."

I refuse on principle and tell Morgan I'm not interested in being a hero or anything. "I'd rather be left alone."

There is a second article in the *Times*. It appears, they say, there is more to the famous photograph than meets the eye. After extensive interviews, the paper is unable to find anyone who took the picture. A relative of the deceased claims I admitted to her that I had myself taken the photo, that it is a selfie.

Morgan calls. "I think you're in for it, Jack. Do yourself a favor: Don't talk to the press. You're going to be asked about the article. Say, 'On the advice of counsel, I'm not going to answer questions about the photograph. It speaks for itself.' Can you do that?"

"Yes," I say. "I can do that. But this is silliness."

A long-time friend reads the article and asks me what I was thinking. "You got this dead woman in your arms and you fish out your cellphone to take a picture? Smell test, buddy."

"It's not like I wasn't having dinner with her when she was shot. She was on the ground," I say. "I was on the ground. I'm waiting for help. I'm screaming for help. I'm bleeding for Christ sake. I thought it might be important to record the scene, to show what happened. What the fuck's wrong with that?"

Melanie gives me the cold shoulder after the second article. My boss suggests I take a few days off. "Maybe things will blow over by then," he says. Was I going to lose my fucking job over this? One damn photograph?

Harvey Cochran, a coworker in IT takes me aside. "Saw the article. I know a guy," he says. Apparently, he knows someone, a guy named Marzian, who can make a photograph shot with one cellphone look like it was shot with another. Cochran and I meet Marzian at a bar down the block.

"Easy as pie," the man says. "Five hundred bucks. You'll lose your SIM card and I recommend tossing your phone after the transfer."

"I'll get back to you on that."

While the restaurant hasn't reopened, I see activity inside and knock on the door. "I'm looking for one of your waiters. I was one of the people injured in the attack and I wanted to thank him. We were sitting over there." I point to where I remember the table being.

"That'd be Freddie. Won't be in until Thursday."

"Thanks. Here's my card. Ask Freddie to call me."

On Thursday, Freddie and I make a deal. The photograph and all of the EXIF information will be transferred to his phone. He'll go with me to meet with the *Times* reporter and convince him he took the photograph. Any money to be made off the photograph will be his and I'll give him a thousand dollars if the reporter buys our story. "Prepare to become famous, Freddie." I mention none of this to Dunnaway or Gloria.

I arrange the transfer with Marzian.

“Is your phone backed up?” he asks. I tell him yes. “Hand it over. I’ll get rid of it and the SIM card. Buy yourself a new phone.”

Freddie is a wonderful liar. A third story in the *Times* sets the record straight. The next night at dinner, Gloria winks at me. “Nicely played, my friend.” She is again pushing me to run for public office. The book, ghosted by a writer she has chosen, is being worked on. I receive a letter from Joan’s sister apologizing for doubting me.

The election is three years off. The incumbent, seventy-four years old, has made no secret of his intent to retire. Gloria escorts me to the capitol for a meet and greet. On the train up, she suggests I find occasions to insert Joan into the conversation. “Something like, ‘She’d love the idea of me being a senator.’ Think you can do that?”

I nod. “Are you going to be with me on this for the next three years?”

“I’d like that,” she says. “In the morning, we’re meeting with the governor and the assembly speaker. You need them to like you. Be humble, but remember, this isn’t Mr. Smith Goes to Washington and you’re not Jimmy Stewart. None of the aw-shucks bull shit. Got it?”

“Got it,” I say.

“Good. When we get to the capitol, you can take me to dinner.”

Something had been worrying me. “Gloria, am I going to be able to afford your legal fees?”

“Glad you asked. The firm looks at this as more of an investment. If you win, we win. Are you cool with that?”

The next three months feel like being in the middle of a Kansas twister.

The meeting with the governor goes well. He likes the idea of a fresh face as the junior senator. I stay relatively non-committal, but express support for most of his ideas. The lunch meeting with the assembly speaker is more ticklish. His views and the governor’s are not quite the same and I don’t want to be saying one thing to the governor and another to the assembly speaker. Gloria says later that I handled it well. “They may have been testing you.”

She suggests we spend another night in the capitol and, after an elegant dinner at a French restaurant, we spend the night in her room. In the morning, on the train back to the city, she takes my hand. “I think we’ve got better than a fifty-fifty chance of becoming the Democratic nominee for the Senate, Jack. I’m putting together a calendar of events for you over the next three years. Show ups, speaking engagements, et cetera. And I’ve got a handle on a guy who will educate you on all of the issues. Fundraising will start in earnest by November. We’ll have the entire team put together before the end of the year. Excited?”

She is something. “I’m in your hands,” I say. The next three months feel like being in the middle of a Kansas twister. Gloria has me going everywhere. I make a speech at the Moose lodge in front of thirty-five old men. I take elocution lessons. I am tested on the issues. I’m on television three times a week. Reporters can add two and two; they ask me if I’m going to run for office. “I’m not a politician,” I say.

Gloria stays in my apartment almost every night. “We’re a team,” she says.

She’s intoxicated by the power—the potential power—and so am I. If it’s an aphrodisiac for her, all the more so for me.

The call from Freddie turns out to be a shocker. He’s lost his job at the restaurant and needs cash. “Say five-thousand?” he says. I shouldn’t have been surprised. The photograph shackles us like galley slaves to the same oar.

There is a long pause while I decide what to do. “Okay,” I say finally, “But it will take me a couple of days to get it.

Sure, he says. “I’ll call you on Wednesday.”

I decide to tell Gloria about Freddie and his blackmail demand. She is my coach, my confidant, my lover. She listens quietly. And then I notice a slight smirk.

“Hire him,” she says. “Make him your assistant. A guy like that can be useful. If things go according to plan, we’ll ride his photograph to the United States Senate.”

I half thought she was going to find a hit man to get rid of Freddie. But that’s not how the pros think. Gloria is right, bring him into the fold. Make him part of the team.

Gloria and I meet him at a bar near Varick and King. I give him the money and Gloria offers him the job. Freddie is excited at the prospect. “You’ll like Washington,” Gloria says.

“I’m sure I will,” Freddie says.

If I win, he stays part of my inner circle. It’s a job beyond anything he’s ever dreamed of. If I lose, screw him. Let him squawk all he wants. The photograph—my photograph—created a Senator. Is it too much to hope my ex-wives will be impressed?



Don't Get Lost In The Garden

N.L.H. Hattam

I pulled my spine out
And planted it in the front yard for everyone to see.
My coccyx stabbed into the earth until it bled worms.

I watched it from my bedroom window,
Seeing the rain slide down between my vertebrae.
Weeks went by and
My nerves began to take root,
Squirming into the soil and branching out towards the sun.

Its first fruit was my heart,
Which I plucked off and tasted.
I reveled in its mango-cantaloupe taste,
Let it swan-swim over my aching tongue.

The second was my brain,
Which I gave to the neighbor girl
Who came watching with pointed fingers
And bright wicked white smiles.
She opened it up on a rock,
Cracking it like a coconut.

She found the contents lacking but ate it anyway.

And so it came that I sold my
Arms and legs as they sprouted
And fell from the bone,
Lightly bruised,
But filled with blueberry juice.

And so it came that I sold myself
By the street side,
Until one day people mistook me for my wares
And ate me down to the pit.

Re-Creation

Yuan Changming

Towards the autumn sky
I make a shape of heart
With my clumsy hands
This is the feel of life
 I tell the cloud

This is to illuminate the dark
Dreamland like a search light
I tell the crow stalking behind
Like the spirit of my late
 Father. This is to gather all

The positive energy in the world &
Send it to the future. I tell my
Unborn grandson. This is the cycle
Of life & the philosopher's stone

I tell the skeletal copse. This is
The circle to fill in with cries
& laughs.

 I tell my other self
Beyond cosmic wall, as if
To balance yin and yang
 In the whole universe

A Rothko Isn't a Mirror

Jennifer Brown

Black stops the eye
& red invades it. Yellow
opens, & blue, in the same plane,
is a mystery,
pulsing or rippling as if
your intent study disturbed
something beneath
its surface. What moves there? Forget
the hard oak bench, the man breathing
next to you, forget
the museum shop's acceptable
reproductions, fancy coffees,
the pretzel vendor
on the corner of the Mall.
Forget how you got here, how blue
filled your windows
these years, the packed bags waiting now
by your door, sharp scallops of dust
mapping on the floor
your furniture's emptied home. What
did Rothko see reaching toward him
from beyond the real,
the glass-&-steel, the plastic, asphalt,
oil-soaked, full-scale world?
—The neutral walls
recede and these paintings, great blank
screens, consume you, letting,
around the paint, a quivering
line of light lick through—are you hoping
the edges will peel away, aren't you
always begging
for insight as if you're ready
to bear it all at once? Hold out your
hands again to the blue
field before you go. But go.
This is what won't leave you,
this terrifying blue.



The Return

Jeff Burd

Sam is standing on his front porch looking across his ragged lawn at an empty gin bottle that's been lying beneath a maple tree since early winter. I know it's been that long because I remember seeing the red label on the neck peeking out from the first few inches of snow we had. Karen hounded me a while back to go get the bottle and throw it away, but I told her you don't go on another man's property like that. She didn't say anything else, but she probably still spread her grievance around the neighborhood like usual.

Looking at Sam right now, it was a good idea to not go over there. He's got on a pair of ratty pajama shorts and a stained t-shirt that's a little too small to cover all of his pale white paunch. He's scratching what looks like a week's growth of beard. What a sight. I don't think Karen is seeing this. That's good for Sam, even if he doesn't know it.

Sam doesn't see me right off, but he looks my way when he hears me tapping the pins out of the hinges on our front gate. He watches as I set it on my saw horses in the garage. I think about going inside for a few minutes before I start. Maybe when I come back he'll be gone. What is it about an open garage door that invites people to come over if they see you?

I get to work instead, trying to keep my back to the mess next door. Sam hasn't touched his lawn since probably September. The grass is mostly wiry and uneven. It's matted down and thick in some places, like a clogged paint brush. He's got bare patches, too. I know they're there even if they're hidden by the wild growth everywhere else. Weeds are climbing up the edges of the sidewalk and through the cracks in the paver stones that lead from his porch to the curb. I don't know what's going on over there, and

really I've got enough to worry about on my side of the fence.

I'm sanding the slats on the gate when I look up and see Sam standing at the edge of the garage. I'm surprised I didn't smell him first. There's a whiff of something foul coming from his direction.

He says, "Hey, Ronnie."

I tell him hi. I keep my eyes on my work, hoping he'll pick up the cue. I can feel him watching me as I brush away paint chips and dust.

"I was wondering..." he starts. He waits until I look up. I give him a look, and he's looking at me, but his eyes are somewhere far off. Something's going on. Whatever it is, I'm sure Karen's been moralizing about it. A leaf doesn't fall around here without her saying something. She's probably been harping about Sam and Lizzy, and I've tuned her out. All that stuff becomes background noise after a while. Besides, we have our own problems and don't need to concern ourselves with others.

"Do you... do you have an oil can?" Sam says. It's like he's scared to ask me.

"Yeah, I do," I say. I grab it off the shelves and shake it a little bit. "Should be enough in there for whatever."

He stands there with the can in his hand and a confused look on his face, like he can't remember why he needed it. For whatever reason, I end up saying, "I haven't seen you for a while."

His eyes shift to the floor. "Nah," he says. "I ain't been out much."

"Did you guys sell Lizzy's car?" I ask. "I haven't seen it on the curb for a while."

"Nah," Sam says. "She's still got it." He turns and walks back to his place.

We were good neighbors to Sam and Lizzy. We invited them over sometimes and went to their parties until they got too loud. Me putting the fence up after that wasn't personal. All it was was me finally getting around to it after I'd been planning it for a few years. Sam gave me some looks while I was working on it, but never said anything.

I'm around back after a while hosing stain off a brush when I see Sam on his patio. He's got his reel mower pulled apart. He has a few wrenches and screwdrivers scattered around, along with a bunch of bolts and washers. My oil can is sitting there, too. He's pretty deep into his work and doesn't notice me. He's still wearing that shirt and those ratty shorts. Sweat drips down his face. He's got dark stains in his armpits. I doubt he can put that mower back together. He'll probably ask to borrow something else. He's gonna need a steel brush to knock the rust off those blades.

About two hours later I come back from the hardware store and start brushing water seal on the gate. This is my third time doing something with the damn thing. Stain and water seal hopefully means not bothering with it again for a while, and Karen not bothering me about it.

"Hey," I hear from behind me. I turn around and Sam is standing there holding the oil can.

"Great," I say. He returns it to the shelf where he saw me get it earlier. I dip my brush and keep on with the water seal. He stands there watching me.

"That's a good idea," he says.

"I thought so, too," I say. "The sooner it's done, the sooner the wife is off my ass about it." I look at Sam. He's not getting my humor.

Sam says, "I got my mower working again."

“That’s good,” I say.

“I mowed,” he says.

I hadn’t noticed. I look to his lawn. It doesn’t look half bad. “How’d it go?” I ask.

“Eh,” Sam mutters. “I’m tired.”

“I’m sure everybody appreciates that it looks better,” I say. I’m not sure how else to tell him he should be taking better care of his property.

“I get you,” Sam says. I doubt he does. Christ, he looks pathetic.

He asks to borrow my rake. I hand it to him and he walks back to his place.

I hear the metal rake fingers scraping against the ground for the next half hour as I finish with the water seal and clean up. I look over at one point and Sam is sitting in the shade beneath the maple where the gin bottle had been. He’s wiping off his forehead. I’ve never seen someone sweat so much. It’s not even hot out. He’s managed to pull most of his loose grass clippings to the curb. The lawn looks a helluva lot better, minus the bare patches that are now easy to see.

Sam disappears inside for a minute and comes back with some garbage bags. He starts raking the line of grass clippings into the middle and building a decent-sized pile. The way he’s sweating, I’m afraid he’s going to collapse.

I figure there’s no harm in helping him a little bit. I’m done with the gate anyhow, and it needs to dry. I walk over there and tell him I’ll hold the bags for him.

He looks at me. His eyes look empty again, like they’re off somewhere else. His face is pale. He looks around his lawn for a few seconds and finally says okay.

He looks himself over and seems to realize how he looks.

I hold the bags open as he pushes grass into them. I try not to breathe each time he gets close. It takes us fifteen minutes to fill four bags and stack them at the curb.

Sam hands me my rake and mumbles thanks.

I’m looking at the bare spots. There must be about a dozen of them. “I’ve got some grass seed, Sam,” I say. I get it from the garage and we sprinkle it where it’s needed.

Once we finish, Sam stands there silent for a while, looking at his lawn. He finally says, “That’s what I needed to do.” I look at him. His face looks brighter. The corners of his mouth are turning up the tiniest bit. His eyes are focusing. He repeats himself. “I really needed to do that.” Then he says, “Lizzy’ll be here in a little while.”

“Where’s she been?” I ask.

Sam looks at the ground. He rubs his beard. He practically whispers. “I asked her if she’d come by.” He looks himself over and seems to realize how he looks. “I don’t want her to see me like this.”

He starts walking up the sidewalk. He’s almost to his front door when he turns around. He looks at his lawn and nods. He looks at me and his mouth moves. I think he said thanks. He wipes his cheeks with the back of his hand and goes inside.

I’m putting some oil on the gate pins and hinges a little while later when I see Lizzy’s car pull up to the curb. She gets out and steps to the sidewalk. Her red hair is

grayer. She’s thinner than I remember from last I saw her, which was probably in the fall.

We both hear the front door on their house close and look over to the porch. Sam is standing there. He’s cleaned himself up and looks about as opposite as possible from this morning. He’s carrying a rusty red sprinkler can.

I don’t know if you can feel silence, but I think I feel it between Sam and Lizzy. They stand there looking at each other. Lizzy looks to the lawn and then to Sam. She does it a few times but doesn’t say anything. He’s actually smiling. I look to where the empty gin bottle had been. Even though I know it’s not there anymore, it’s like I have to double check.

They move towards each other. He’s holding the sprinkler can between them with both hands. Sam starts making a circuit around the lawn with Lizzy, tipping the sprinkler can at each bare spot. They’re talking. About what, I can’t imagine. I’m standing there watching them for I don’t know how long. I snap out of it when I realize I’ve been holding my breath.

I’m not sure where Karen is. I haven’t seen her since breakfast, but right now I want her here with me. I want to put my arms around her. I can’t explain what is happening. I just want her to see what I’m seeing. We both need to see it.

Bad Omen

Vinnie Sarrocco

Perched on the cliff
overlooking the sound
she says she'd like to
be born again
an albatross
soaring above the seas
too rough to sail
dancing web footed and lustful
in island nests that remain
unblemished by human ambition
to absorb the wisdom
of the pilot's vantage
to mate for life
and die
a righteous martyr
strung like christmas lights
across a salty neck
condemning man for his hubris

perched on the cliff
overlooking the sound
she turns
and smiles
at me



Shoveling Snow

Cameron Morse

My 14-month-old feeds me
the sliced blackberries my wife
feeds him. He prefers bananas,

which I do not eat. Which he does
not offer. The orange lion heads
on his onesie are stained

in yellow splotches
of turmeric. Undone, his onesie
flaps above the waistline.

I try to understand the role
of methylation of the MGMT gene's
promoter in my prognosis

but was never any good at science.
Shoveling the driveway
day before my biannual MRI scan,

I remember the jolt of the handle
in my stomach. How the head
catches a crag of cracked cement

and arrests my movement
reminds me of my boyhood,
how arduous it used to be

to shovel, tossing the dirty broken
glass of day-old snow
off to the side in order to sink

the cutting edge again, again
and again, clearing the rough wet blocks
of encrusted slush, incipient ice.

Because each footstep
compacts the snow into the denser
translucency of ice

and an archipelago of ice
surfaces in the aisle between vehicles,
it feels good to shovel.

Because my son feeds me
blackberries, it feels good to suck
the gritty halves out of his grasp.

Tomorrow Mom and I will tunnel
through I-70's dark bramble
of snowy branches

and circle Arrowhead in search
of the elusive gate. Today
hard snow tumbles

in the dented tin I shove.
Behind me, a dark passage
opens wide and clear.



The Hospital Game

Ryan Gossen

My daughter held her zig zagged arm in her other hand and looked at me. She wore a tee shirt so I could see her soft, unbroken skin take a bizarre turn between the elbow and the wrist, left and then right again. It felt like a rippling visual hallucination and I couldn't understand it. After stammering uselessly for some time, I realized my understanding was not important, and we went to the hospital.

The bend in her arm enabled us to skip some of the waiting but not the forms, the insurance verification, the taking of vitals, or the need to learn precisely how much she weighed. She screamed but did not struggle when the nurse changed the shape of her arm again and placed it in a splint. Then the little room with the padded bed that was not a bed covered in butcher paper. Then the big room, a room for surgery, empty except for gas nozzles in color coded receptacles on the wall and our gurney parked beside them. Green for Oxygen, but also blue, grey, and black.

No one said the word "needle" but her eyes darted around as the nurse prepared the syringe outside her peripheral vision, and said she would feel a "pinch". She screamed and struggled, not too crazy, they got the vein the first time. She asked me, "Why did they say I would feel a pinch?" verifying, through me, the level of honesty in the room. "They didn't want to scare you, and it only hurts for a second." I realized that no one trusted anyone here.

We waited like that, with the IV in and capped, for what might have been a long time,

then a nurse came in, hung a saline bag, and injected a syringe into the drip. I sent myself a text: ".9cc morphine."

Preparations were made to bring in the big horseshoe shaped machine that would let the doctor see bones in real time. A nurse huffed in carrying 5 lead aprons. Eliza was quiet and her face looked fat and dopy for a scrawny six year old. The nurse injected another syringe. I sent myself another text: ".9cc morphine."

We waited. The doctor came in and outlined the procedure. There would be morphine for the pain, then ketamine would induce a "Twilight Sleep" to keep her still and prevent her from remembering. The phrase Twilight Sleep jarred me. It hung like a velvet unicorn poster next to the periodic table of elements. I asked what it meant but the doctor would not deconstruct it, he only distinguished it from general anesthesia, which is for operations.

But I remembered ketamine. It's a euphoric, a rave drug, but also a psychedelic, used in experimental psychotherapy. A small dose is fun. A big dose goes to the "K-Hole", where very unscientific sounding things happen like losing your sense of self, understanding nothing and everything, or watching your feelings dissolve backwards into perceptions. People emerge changed. This was not how I had hoped Eliza would have her first psychedelic experience. The intentional fracturing of reality should be done in some kind of church, where the miraculous can be accommodated and trust is extended in its most extreme form, faith. For me that meant nature: a creek or a campfire, trees and dirt. These things were eternal and did not lie. If I could design a bad trip for myself, it would look something like this room, with people like these. Not guides or stalwart friends but market vendors who would serve you green meat. A ferryman who became very brusque once you left shore. But it was what it was. All I could give my daughter was my face.

He asked a nurse for Eliza's weight, she said it was written down 8 kilograms and they looked puzzled. My wife spoke up. "It's 18 Kilograms. I heard them weigh her. The 1 is just missing," which satisfied everybody. The doctor muttered some verbal arithmetic and said "28cc's ketamine". Eliza slipped into an open-eyed stupor, and then her eyes gradually closed. I sent myself another text and the doctor left the room without further explanation.

Two nurses were chatting in swivel chairs on the other side of the large and otherwise empty room and I talked to Eliza. After a couple minutes I asked them how long the window for the dose of Ketamine lasted. She said about an hour and I gave the nurse a serious look. A quarter of an hour went by and I asked where the doctor was. Actually, she said, the drug could last for two hours.

I stood across my daughter from him. He gently removed the splint and held her limp arm in latexed fingers. He dangled the arm vertically by the fingertips and moulded it like clay with his other hand, kneading the knotted muscles down, pressing in from the sides to move bones, and Eliza made one, quiet "Oh..." They rolled the Flouroscope over

to the bed and the cord came out of the wall, the screen went black. The nurse who had prepped the room stood up and hesitated, searching the walls for a closer outlet, but strangely, there was only the one by the door. By straightening the cord, they got another foot closer.

Stretching her arm out like the hand of god in the Sistine Chapel, it barely reached between the horizontal plates. The bones in the grainy image looked more or less aligned to me. He hung it from fingertips again and, with the help of a trembling technician, placed a sugar-tong splint and wrapped it.

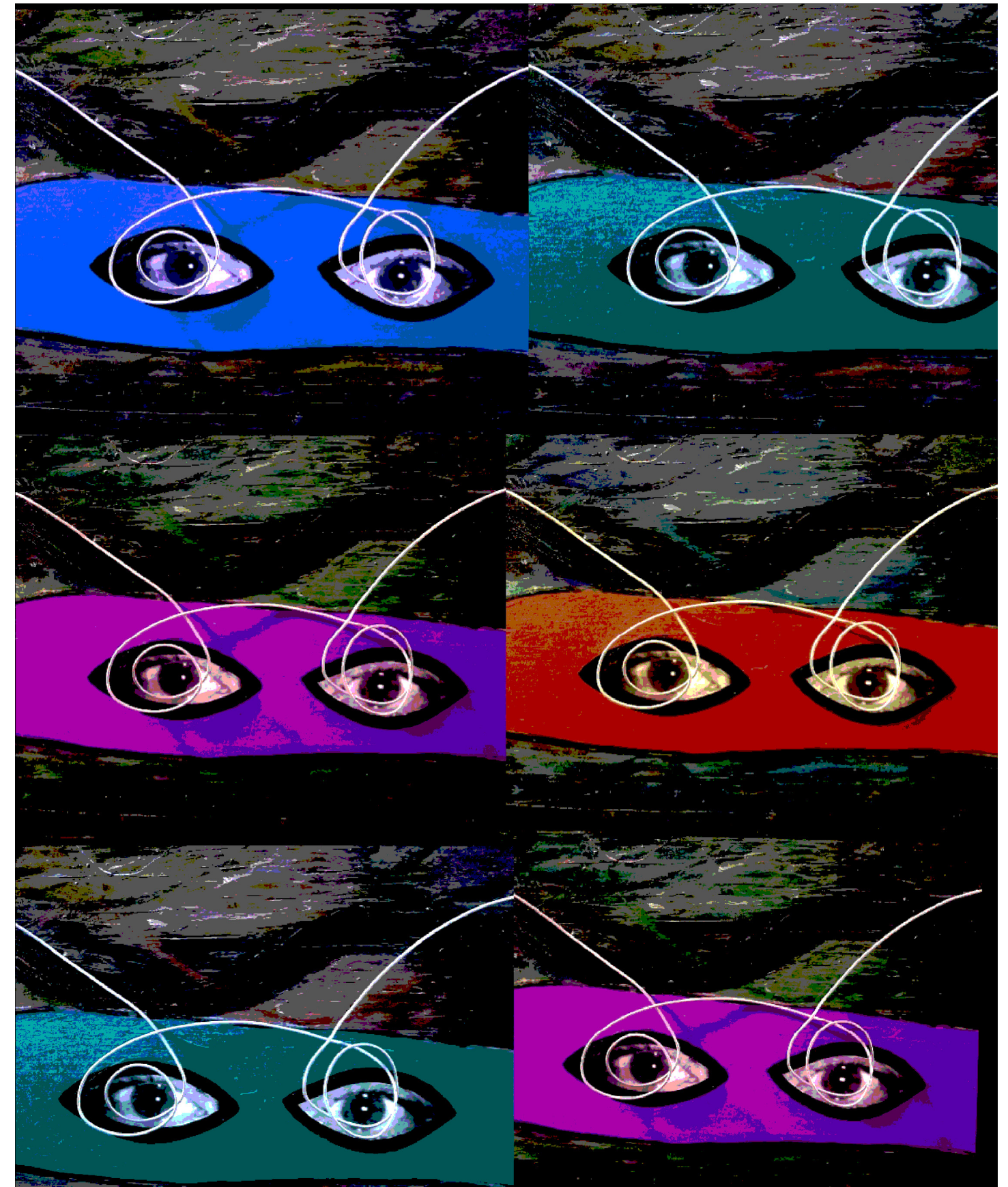
Her eyes opened as slits, saccading like she had just gotten off a merry go round. I leaned my face into her gaze and searched for her. She seemed to be searching my face for my eyes. I saw myself resolve there and she smiled her simplest, happiest smile. She looked from eye to eye, side to side of my face, saying “da, da, da, da, da...” I lingered there and asked her what was so funny. She said she liked how we changed, Laura and I, when we were leaned over the rail of the bed. I asked how many eyes we had. She said three.

A week later the three of us wandered down a bank of the Pedernales River. A dusty white coating of calcium covered the stones and boulders, making everything that wasn't wet look like bone. In the river, rocks were dark under glass past giant Cypress, through deep green holes and bright rocky shallows. Rattle seed bushes held out their pods at chest height and we grabbed them as we walked by. Eliza's red fiberglass cast was in a sling across her chest. She walked carefully, barefoot in the shallows. “If we go to the hospital, I want to play that game again.”

“What game?”

I thought of hospital games I had played. There is the admissions game, the zero-sum patient-provider-insurer game. The game with the nurses, the game with the doctor, the game with the needle.

She smiled her simple smile. “The game with the faces.”



Unforgiven

Benjamin D. Carson

“Close pent-up guilts /
Rive your concealing continents and cry /
These dreadful summoners grace.” –King Lear

In the picture my grandmother held of my grandfather, he sat astride a young gelding, a gift, she smiled, for his fortieth birthday. “The bastard stood fourteen hands,” she said, and I wasn’t sure if she was talking about the horse or the man, who, in the picture, was straight-backed, a little wild-eyed, which over the years was tamed out of him, as if he’d been ridden hard, corralled against his will, and finally tethered to a stake, and, as family lore has it, it was my grandmother who broke him, the man she hadn’t seen in twenty-five years.

On the back of the picture, left on the table the night he disappeared, one word was written in my grandfather’s galloping scrawl: Unforgiven. And, for my grandmother, it was all she needed to know she’d taken it too far, that his need to run was in his blood, and was as harmless as a cockle-bur hitching it on the gelding’s cresty mane. The horse wasn’t just a gift; it was her way of telling her man it was time to come in “out of the heat,” she said, as if I knew what that meant. I was nine at the time, and she was eighty-five, gray-eyed, gray-haired, with thick calloused hands, as though she’d been holding a rope for decades. “I took it too far,” she said, setting the picture on the table, and hugging me into her chest, as she began to recount the way my grandfather made her coffee each morning, a cup three-quarters full and a tab of saccharine; how he’d take in the laundry after a hot day in the field, making sure to wash his hands before folding the sheets; how he praised her cooking, her soggy vegetables and bone dry chicken; and how he, on cold winter nights, put extra blankets on the bed, kissed her forehead, and wrapped his body around hers to keep her shivering teeth from rattling out of her head—and at the memories, her voice caught in her throat.

Then, as I slid off her thighs, she slumped in her chair. “I took it too far,” she repeated. “I never let him forget that he used to love to roam, though the hills he loved weren’t of the breedin’ kind but the contours of his very life. And then he rode off.” On the night of his sixtieth birthday, my grandfather guided the gelding out of the barn, saddled him, mounted up, and headed south. No one knows this for sure, because no one saw him go, and no one has seen him since. Even now, twenty years on, when I can’t sleep, I can still see an old man gliding across the plains on a horse, a lone rider, the ghost of a man who, once wild, sought grace in gestures, and got only silence until home wasn’t home any more.

Driving North on I75

Klara Pokrzywa

Circumstance spat mother-daughter onto a highway
red strip of sky licking the horizon
at their backs.

Mother laughing, saying
Think if the world ended now think
of our emptying fuel tank.

Think
of the peace
of pared down
apple peel
shavings
on the floor
of an abandoned
kitchen.

Mama,
if the sky lit up further and swallowed the car,
bird of prey style--
if the thunderclouds parted
and the Lord Himself came down,
condemned us all to fire
would we all just say

Hallelujah, my love
where were you yesterday.



Sandy
Visual



The Northern Waterthrush

Jonathan Andrew Pérez

The Magician of Justice walked all night in circles.
What rots inside of him - streams of blue darners dance spun
felt like the magic of baptized
in formless schools below,
laced wings in waterlogged lances
mark the sign of tight abdomens.

The magician hatched another plan
waxes and wanes on brown and black solvent
to enjoin and shed skin, mark lithe play, least distraught
in pools, lets dissipates the dregs of the river's debt.

The Northern Waterthrush in motion with the migratory rush
runs but rarely finds one still figure in rapid sprout by
a quicksand of weaponized flight,
while what spins around the center is perfect
silvery stirring calm.

Nothing will hurt us.
We are invincible. Soon another will rapidly rise
from what batch calcified and merged with saltier scrawls below.
The magician of justice read the fates of randomness as the Oracle of Delphi,
captured an imprisoned net of spawning growth
and spat out, foresaw letting some grow from puerile worms to glowing rays and shadows
into pure crossfire.

Neither Form nor Function

Ivan Marquez

My dad's car sat on cinderblocks beneath the ant infested tree
in our backyard
The summer sun cut through leaves and branches
creating coins of light that cracked and shimmered on
rusted metal
hot and cold spots
The bottom of my feet burned and I wished I had
my shoes
or
chanclas
or
something
as the Pepsi can warmed in my hand
the pop's fizz had gone Urbana flat

Insects hum with electric business, humming
adding
to the sway of tall grass that springs from
cracked concrete
prairie plants
no orchids or roses
or spring
Just visceral summer that snarls and prickles
thorned pollen mixes
with beads of sweat that run like wild horses
down the hills of my face

My dad told me and my brother
in an accent part
Ciudad Guzman
and another part
South Chicago
to stay away from the car because the
cinderblocks could crumble
beneath the weight of all that rust
and crush
us

The car never ran
And it seemed to serve only one
Unspoken purpose

He sold it to a junker
Later than he should have
He admitted

It was useless
like a warm Pepsi in July
Or plants that crack concrete
or
chanclas
that
sit
by
the
door.



Optimist

Patrick D. Hogan

I'm an optimist. You're probably one too. And we're in good company. There were millions of optimists in Poland in 1939. Millions more in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The world is full of optimists.

Don't get us confused, though. I'm not just *an* optimist, I'm a capital-O Optimist. It says so on my resume. When I applied, I had no doubt I would get the job.

I'm part of a team of people who write just about every movie you've ever seen. Most films need an optimist to give the audience hope. That's where I come in. That kid who gets cancer at the end of the second act? I write for the doctor who tells her it will all be okay. That guy who murdered a man in self defense? I speak for the priest who tells him it will all be okay. "It will all be okay," is my signature. It's always a hit.

There are dozens of other writers at the table with me, each representing an important part of the puzzle we use to trick you into thinking you just watched two hours of genuine humanity. To my left, there's Mac. He writes the one-liners your favorite action stars say when they murder a terrorist minority. James to my right, he was tossed around from foster family to foster family so he writes for the dysfunctional parents. Albert sits across from James. He's half-Black. He also happens to be gay. When we hired him, we were all so excited about the money we saved not having to hire both a Black person and a queer person, we redistributed the money into raises. For already existing employees, that is. Albert writes for every queer character or character of color we get, which isn't many. Because he doesn't work as hard as the rest of us, he gets paid the least, right after Jeanie. Jeanie sits next to Albert, right across from me. She's the only woman on staff and since we hired her our movie quality has increased exponen-

tially. Before she was hired for her motherly instinct, we struggled to name the hundreds of characters we went through a day, especially all the women Colton writes for. Colton grew up with two sisters so he's our resident expert on all things female.

Every shift the boss, Mr. Oat, he stands to my right in front of a whiteboard at the end of the long table, says one studio wants a horror movie. Another needs two romances, one a comedy, one with a dying lead. Colton's excited. Romance movies have countless scenes where women talk to each other about men. Means he gets paid over-time. Mr. Oat asked Jeanie for names. Everyone knows their parts before we even start. There will be a tragedy at the climax. I'll downplay it.

I took Jeanie to get drinks once. See, Harold had been acting weird toward Jeanie the whole day. Harold was sitting to Jeanie's left, between Mr. Oat and her. It was normal for Harold to act that way; it was his job. But when he would say his lines, he kept staring at Jeanie even though Jeanie had done her part, named the characters, and had no other creative contribution for the movie we were writing. This meant that rather than facing Mr. Oat, which is what everyone did, he was turned around in his chair. It was so apparent even Mr. Oat made a comment.

"Looks like Harold found his muse." We all chuckled. Jeanie sat as far back in her chair as she could.

See, Harold got the job through his parole officer. Anytime we needed dialogue for a sex offender or rapist or child molestor or sexual harrasser, Harold got paid. It was his area of expertise. So while many of the other men thought they were witnessing Harold going above and beyond for his craft, Jeanie was cornered next to a guy who was saying things to her he had said to other women. Only when he said those things before, it got him sent to prison.

Three groups of eight-hour shifts pump out movies around the clock. So after work, after successfully telling the tales of a house built on a Native burial ground and of a rape victim raising her rapist's son and of a vampire who moved next door to a blood bank, after the next shift came in and Leon took his place in the Optimist's chair, after I told him I believed in him one hundred percent, after the work day was officially over, Harold started following Jeanie to the elevator.

I was usually the last one out since I didn't have anywhere to go, but Jeanie was hanging back. So was Harold. With Jeanie's seat taken, she stood in the hallway, not quite close enough to be waiting for the elevator Harold was leaning on.

As I passed Jeanie she walked a bit behind me. Harold stepped in front of me and spoke over the top of my head. I hadn't realized how tall he was before, only ever really seeing him seated. At that table everyone looks equal, at least in all the ways that matter.

"You've been flirting with me all day, Jeanie. Let's get drinks."

I stood still, not wanting to interrupt their conversation, but I couldn't make it to the elevator without going through Harold.

She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back toward her a bit, declaring that we already had plans together that night so she was unavailable.

Harold locked eyes with me. I smiled at him. We hadn't spoken much since he was hired so I had no reason to dislike him. "Is that true?" he asked.

"Sure." Of course it wasn't, but if Jeanie wanted drinks who was I to say no?

His eyes remained on mine. "Let me know if you change your mind, Jeanie." He

smiled at me, then at her, then called the elevator. I followed him. There was only one elevator.

On the ride down, Jeanie found comfort in the corner. Harold's breathing could be heard rasping over the dings that indicated a passing floor. When we reached the lobby Harold remained still even though he was closest to the door.

"Excuse me," I said. "Just gotta get through."

Jeanie tried to rush past but Harold stepped in a way that made her bump into him. I was sure it was an accident. She walked past me and I tried to keep pace.

"Have a good night, you two!" he shouted after us.

"Thanks for that," she said. "I don't know why Oat ever hired that guy."

"He's good at his job. Audience polling has gone way up when rating the creep factor of our villains."

"Right." She seemed unconvinced. "Well, again, thanks. I'll see you tomorrow."

It turned out she didn't intend to get drinks with me at all. She just didn't want to get drinks with Harold. I felt sort of bad for him and had the sudden urge to tell him it would all be okay. He was still standing in front of the elevator, watching us.

She must have felt bad for me the same way I felt bad for Harold because once she realized I wasn't in on her plan she offered to buy me a drink for real.

I took her to a bar by my apartment. It was the only place I knew about. I'm typically either at work or at home, but I had seen pairs of people go in and out of there before so it seemed ideal.

She remained silent during the walk. It wasn't far from the office, but she checked her watch four times. Considering how often she was late to work, this sudden attentiveness to time surprised me.

The bar, as it turned out, was a bit below her usual standards. See, we made what a lot of the country would consider a luxurious salary, so when Jeanie went out for drinks she was used to places with cushioned booths and clean floors and a dishwasher. I couldn't mistake the look of disgust on her face as soon as we walked in.

"We can go somewhere else if this doesn't work for you."

"No," she said in a way that made it seem like she'd been holding her breath up to that point. "This is fine. Let's just get a drink."

We seated ourselves on wooden barstools sticky with industrial glue where cushions used to be. We were the only customers.

When the bartender came near enough to us, Jeanie asked "What do you have on tap?"

"No idea. I just attach a new keg whenever something's empty." None of the tap handles had logos on them.

This made me smile. "I'll take whatever comes out of the middle tap, please."

"I guess I'll have the same one," Jeanie conceded.

The bartender grabbed two glasses from a bus tub, dumped out any remaining beer, and poured our drinks. One of the glasses had a lipstick mark on the rim. He gave that one to Jeanie. I thought that was considerate.

I took a big gulp of my drink. Jeanie rubbed the lipstick mark clean with her finger but didn't lift her glass.

"How do you come up with all those names, anyway? It's incredible."

She studied me, unsure if I was serious. "Have you never noticed? Has no one ever noticed?" From her bag she removed two books, one pink and one blue. "Baby naming books. I make no effort to try and hide these."

We had all seen her reading those books over the years but no one had ever read the titles. We just thought she was a slow reader.

"The real question is, how do you stay so positive? I mean, any of us could fake the dialogue you write pretty easily but every time the Optimist has a line you just sound so believable. Like you actually mean every word."

I took another drink. She eyeballed my glass to see how much was left.

"I do mean every word! There's nothing in this world so horrible you can't be positive about it."

The door opened.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I turned around to see Harold enter. Without looking at either of us he took a seat next to Jeanie. She scooted her stool closer to mine. Without moving his head, Harold's eyes turned down and to the left, watching her move away. He hooked his boot beneath the metal bar of her stool and pulled it until her seat rested against his. She stood and backed away.

"What the fuck, Harold?"

"I thought you two were having drinks," he laughed. "But it looks like you haven't touched yours."

"I don't think that's any of your business. Did you follow me here?"

"No, I come here every night. I think you followed me here."

"Is that true?" she asked the bartender. "Is he a regular?"

"I have no idea."

"Oh, it doesn't matter anyway, Harold," I interjected. "I chose this place. Even if she knew you were going to be here, she didn't say anything." I smiled at him.

"Has she taken a drink yet?"

"Nope!"

Jeanie elbowed me in the chest.

"Good looking out, buddy," he sneered. "Take a drink, Jeanie. That's why you're here."

"It's pretty good beer," I whispered to her. "I think."

She grabbed her glass and downed the whole thing. A fresh lipstick stain replaced the old one. From her mouth she pulled a long, black hair. Jeanie was blonde. Harold grabbed the glass and shook it at the bartender, signaling a refill.

"I don't want another one." She had backed so far away from him she was almost leaning on me.

"It's not for you." When the bartender returned with a full glass, Harold turned the glass so Jeanie's lipstick stain faced him and took a long drink. "Wow, that is pretty good."

Jeanie turned to me. "Can we go somewhere else?"

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

"Yeah! Let me just finish my drink." I tried to chug what remained in my glass but

ended up choking on it. I never liked beer.

I left cash on the bar and Jeanie gave Harold a wide berth as she moved for the door. On my way by he grabbed my arm. “Why are you doing this to me, buddy?”

“What have I done?” I took the accusation very seriously. Jeanie watched us from the door.

“Why are you cockblocking me? That’s not something friends do.” It felt nice being called someone’s friend.

“I’m so sorry!” I was. “What can I do to fix it?”

“We all walk out that door, only you go home and Jeanie and I go together.”

I looked up at Jeanie. He had projected his voice enough that she could hear. Her eyes were wide and she shook her head.

“I don’t think she wants to go with you, Harold. And I don’t think it’s because of me, either. But that’s all right! It will all be okay.”

“You can stop the Optimist thing, buddy. We’re not at work anymore. Look at me. I’m not acting like a creep anymore. I’m being downright fucking romantic.”

His grip tightened.

“I don’t think this is something friends do either, Harold.”

He pulled me to the ground, put his knee on my chest, and squeezed my throat. The pressure in my head was intense but I didn’t fight back. Harold always seemed stressed more than I could understand. What better release for him could there have been?

Wow! Two friends in one night. I closed my eyes to bask in the glory of it.

I heard the bartender yell to Jeanie. “Hey, you gotta get your friends out of here if they’re gonna do that.”

Wow! Two friends in one night. I closed my eyes to bask in the glory of it. My oxygen supply was nonexistent at that point. I had never felt so euphoric. I opened my eyes again and looked at Harold. His eyes bulged and his face was red, as if he were the one being choked. He seemed to be enjoying himself so much I couldn’t help but give him a big smile. He let go of me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Jeanie took the lipstick-stained glass and smashed it against his head.

“Let’s go now. *Please.*”

“Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“I hope not. I’m leaving. Come with if you want.” She hurried out the door.

“Be right there!” I called after her. “Here’s for the glass.” I handed the bartender a five dollar bill. “Sorry about that!”

Jeanie was already halfway down the street by the time I caught up to her.

“We should probably just go home,” she suggested. Then she saw my eyes. Apparently when Harold was choking me he broke blood vessels in both of them. They were a violent red. “Would you like me to take you to the doctor? Can you see okay?”

“They seem fine. It will all be okay.”

“You live around here, don’t you? Let me at least walk you home. I’ll just get a car from there.”

Like every night, once inside my apartment I turned on the television. When a project I wrote for was released I got a free copy in the mail. I haven’t seen a movie since I was a child that I didn’t have a hand in creating. I played them on a loop as background noise. It helped the apartment feel less empty, hearing the words of the people I worked with echo off the walls.

Tonight’s movie was about a man who falls into a volcano and fuses with it. He gains the ability to control all magma throughout the world. Upon realizing this, he erupts the supervolcano at Yellowstone National Park. His ex-girlfriend works there.

At the climax of the film a firefighter has to persuade him to use his powers for good and stop global warming.

Hector, our scientific jargon master, tried to explain to Mr. Oat that volcanoes have nothing to do with global warming but he didn’t care. When the film opened it was number one in the box office, so nobody else cared either.

Anyway, the firefighter talks to this guy called Volcano Man (it was after this film the studios requested we hire Jeanie) and he says, “You have to use your powers for the good of humanity. You have been given a gift. Don’t be selfish with it.” He’s holding a firehose to Volcano Man, threatening to fire if he moves. Mac added that line later, having the firefighter put a major emphasis on, “Fire.” Test audiences loved it.

But the Volcano Man, he’s crying tears of lava, and he says, “I’ve killed thousands of innocent people. I should be locked up. I should be put away.”

“Make up for those lost lives by saving billions more,” replies the firefighter. “It will all be okay.”

I wrote the lines for the firefighter. I didn’t fully understand how a life saved justified a life lost, but Mr. Oat assured me it was normal for an antihero to counteract evil by occasionally being neutral.

“If that’s the case,” I said, “then every murderer just needs to spend a summer as a lifeguard. And every lifeguard has a few spare murders!” I hoped maybe one day this would be true. It sounded so much simpler.

Jeanie thrust several sandwich bags of ice into my hands. “Ice your throat and eyes. You’re already starting to bruise.”

I did as she said. Until that point I hadn’t noticed the dull soreness that consumed my head.

“You actually watch this shit?”

I didn’t respond. I had never thought much about whether or not our movies were good. I just knew on average they sold well. If it’s what the people wanted, how bad could it be?

“Anyway, I’m sorry that’s how tonight went. I’m going to talk to Oat tomorrow about Harold. See if I can’t at least get him moved to a different shift. What he did to us was unacceptable.” She checked her watch.

“Shit, I should get a car. It’s getting late.”

The next morning Jeanie was waiting for me in the lobby by the elevator. There were several distinct finger-shaped bruises on my throat and I could feel her staring at them as we rode up. My chest was sore. When we arrived, Harold was already talking to

Mr. Oat. His head was wrapped in bandages.

Mr. Oat called us over. Jeanie sighed. "This isn't going to go well."

I couldn't imagine what she meant.

"Harold here tells me you two hurt him last night."

"It's true," I said. "Jeanie hit him in the head with her glass."

"*But*," she added, "that was only because Harold was choking him." Mr. Oat seemed unphased. "*Choking* him."

"Is that true?" Mr. Oat asked me.

"Look at his throat!" Jeanie interjected. "It's purple!"

"Please, Jeanie. Go inside. I think we have everything we need from you."

Jeanie's eyes met mine as she went inside to replace the previous Namer.

"Harold, you too." Harold seemed eager to take his seat next to Jeanie.

"Now," Mr. Oat pleaded, "I need you to tell me if that's true."

"Yeah, these bruises are from Harold. He choked me."

"About that, Harold already told me he was sorry. Said it would never happen again. Now it's up to you, but I don't think it's fair to ruin his life over one little mistake. So with your permission, I'm going to keep this from his parole officer. He's been doing so well here, I think all of his positive contributions have made up for this one negative."

It dawned on me. Helping write movies was Harold's summer as a lifeguard. "Of course, Mr. Oat. No use ruining his life over one little mistake."

"Good, good. Now, did Jeanie break a glass over his head?"

"She did."

Mr. Oat motioned for Jeanie to come back out. She hadn't stopped watching us the whole time.

"Jeanie, I need you to apologize to Harold for assaulting him."

"Are you serious?" She gave me a slight shove. "Did you not tell him Harold choked you?"

"I did."

"Jeanie, I'm not sure more violence is going to help you in this. Just apologize to Harold and everything will be fine."

"I'm not apologizing to that trash after what he did to him. After what he did to *me*."

"What did he do to you?"

"Are you serious? How do you people not see this? He was disgusting to me all day yesterday."

"He was doing his job, Jeanie."

"He followed me to a bar last night."

"He says that's his usual bar."

"Harold assaulted him!"

"And that's awful, but he already apologized for that. All is forgiven."

"Not all."

"Jeanie, you either go in there and apologize to Harold or you go home."

Jeanie stood in disbelief. I couldn't believe it either. We would write several movies that day. How would we name anybody if Jeanie went home?

Jeanie inhaled through her nose, exhaled through her mouth, and stomped into

the meeting room. "That went better than I expected," commented Mr. Oat. "I thought she would be more hysterical."

We watched as Jeanie stood over Harold. She seemed to be yelling.

"Spoke too soon, I guess," Mr. Oat chuckled.

From beneath the table, Harold revealed Jeanie's purse. She snatched it from him and rifled through it. She said something else and held out her hand. Laughing, he reached into his pocket. Harold retrieved a tube of lipstick and placed it in her hand. He slid his fingertips across her palm. She recoiled.

She rushed out and past us into the waiting elevator. "Go fuck yourself. Both of you."

I sat down across from Harold.

"Bitch can't take a joke, huh, buddy?"

I shrugged.

We went to work.

We wrote a film about a man who went to rehab. He fell in love with his sponsor, impregnated her, relapsed, and overdosed. The rest of the plot followed her until she died in childbirth.

Next, a serial killer seemed to come back from the dead, one by one killing a house of sorority sisters. The twist was, the killer was a jealous sorority sister the whole time. She thought one of her sisters slept with her boyfriend and since she couldn't figure out which one, she decided to kill them all. At the end, the boyfriend killed her to stop her murder spree. It turned out he never slept with any of them.

Before work ended we managed to squeeze in a quick script about a nun whose biological sister died right before she took her vows. Doubting God, she reentered society. Witnessing all the debauchery the world had to offer, she doubted God even more, but one night she met a lapsed priest on his deathbed who expressed to her his regret about not going back to the Church. He persuaded her to take her vows but on her way back to the convent, she was mugged in an alley and stabbed. She bled out.

You should have seen the smile on Colton's face, all the money he made from that one.

Harold stayed back to talk to Mr. Oat. Mr. Oat stayed back to make sure Harold wasn't waiting for me. As the three of us got on the elevator, Mr. Oat held out an envelope. "Guess I have to go drop off Jeanie's last paycheck."

Harold held out his hand. "You know, Mr. Oat, I feel so bad about how that all went down. Let me drop it off to her. I'll see if maybe I can persuade her to come back to work, too." Without waiting for an answer Harold grabbed the envelope from him. "Perfect. The address is already on there."

Harold was out the elevator door before Mr. Oat had any chance to object.

We sauntered through the lobby. "Do you think that was a mistake? Letting him do that."

"No, I don't think so."

Mr. Oat sighed, reassured.

I rubbed the bruises on my throat and looked Mr. Oat in the eyes. The red in mine made him flinch away. "It will all be okay."

CONTRIBUTORS

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