

# MARQUETTE LITERARY REVIEW

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**POETRY**

RING ..... 4  
CHARLES MOHL

BENEATH THE SOUTHERN SUN ..... 5  
KAYLA WHITE

A CHORUS OF AMBITION ..... 9  
ALEXANDRA BOYD

OF PERCUSSION ..... 10  
CHARLES MOHL

HIVES ..... 11  
CHARLES MOHL

BBQ ..... 12  
ROSE GREGORY

FOREMAN ..... 13  
ANNA OLSON

DELIVERY ..... 14  
ROSE GREGORY

LIONS IN THE RAIN ..... 15  
ALISON HANLEY

SIC TRANSIT ..... 16  
BRAD THARPE

“TODAY I WON’T REPLY TO YOUR MESSAGES...” ..... 17  
JAHNAVI ACHARYA

“WELL, IT’S TOMORROW...” ..... 17  
JAHNAVI ACHARYA

HE CALLED HER PEACH ..... 18  
KIRA BOSWELL

TRAVELER ..... 19  
ALEXANDRA BOYD

**PROSE**

FOR MY _____ :	20
ALISON HANLEY	
DELILAH .....	22
ALLISON ELLSWORTH	
INERTIA .....	31
KAYLA WHITE	
UNTITLED FICTION .....	46
CAROLINE CAMPBELL	
UNTITLED FICTION .....	48
ERIN KELLY	
I MET HER ON THE STAIRS .....	64
ANTHONY HOLLMAIER	
THE BARTENDER.....	71
ALISON HANLEY	
ON THE COURT .....	74
MATTHEW SWEENEY	
NUMBER 30.....	89
MATTHEW BIN HAN ONG	
ON THROWING STONES .....	92
ANONYMOUS	
ZEPP’S DINER .....	98
TIMOTHY GORICHANAZ	

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## **POETRY**

### **Ring**

Charles Mohl

Come. Saunter late with me into our wedding.  
We can laugh at the slack-jawed priest.  
Lift the veil; tell me what you've been dreading.

Come. Help me burn our white linens and bedding,  
make a fortress of sweat without sheets.  
Come. Saunter late with me into our wedding.

Mate, we sail straightest without any heading,  
though we've met hungry nautical beasts.  
Lift the veil; tell me what you've been dreading.

There is no finer cure than bloodletting.  
It doesn't hurt me in the least.  
Come. Saunter late with me into our wedding.

And if we waver we won't bother steadying.  
We'll deflate like soufflé without yeast.  
Lift the veil; tell me what you've been dreading.

They have come here to watch our beheading,  
drooling savages anxious to feast.  
Come. Saunter late with me into our wedding.  
Lift the veil; tell me what you've been dreading.

[RETURN](#)



## **Beneath the Southern Sun**

Kayla White

Just over the old cotton hill--  
the Grave of Sighs,  
legend has it  
if you walk over it  
at night,  
you can hear the sighs of  
the slaves who poured  
their souls into the ground,  
or so they say.

Past the Baptist church  
filled with ladies and their  
sweat soaked necks  
large flowered hats and  
even bigger mouths.  
Spilling out songs  
of the Holy Ghost.  
Inviting the Serpent  
in for gossip and  
cheap liquor  
when they get home.

Beyond the oil fields with  
large hammers at work  
pumping liquid gold  
from the ground  
all hours of the day.  
Loading the bank  
of the person who found it  
but emptying ours.

There is a clearing in the  
plains of wild indigo  
of waist-high grass  
soft dirt and  
copper winged cicadas  
who sing their song  
in the afternoon sun.  
Where the golden rods  
from the sky meet  
the hundred year old trees  
to cast a crisscross  
of shadows on the ground.

This is our place  
for our break in the 6 day  
work week.

To drown our troubles with  
the buzzing of the electric  
wires, 40 feet in the air  
and satisfy our longing  
for the human touch.

You free yourself  
from your faded gray t shirt  
you won behind Al's diner  
in a fight with 'No front teeth  
Tommy'.  
Protecting your honor and  
protecting your girl,

and your blue jeans with the  
worn knees and  
sterling silver belt buckle,  
holding the same leather belt  
your dad used to teach you lessons.  
I hold the square in my hand  
and trace the markings  
on its face.

My secondhand  
cotton dress from my  
older sister,  
    who has longer legs  
    and larger breasts,  
slips to the ground.  
I will never fill it the  
way she did.

My feet escape  
my cowgirl boots.  
A whole week's pay  
and I'd rather  
wiggle my toes in  
Earth's red clay.

The peeking Toms  
of the trees blush  
from our love's  
expression.  
It's just you,  
    the perfect bait

for my soul's  
thirst and hunger  
and I.

The sky changes hue  
as I lie fitted  
in your arms.  
We stay  
until mosquitoes  
start to bite  
and tell us to go home.

And when our bellies  
growl for a different  
hunger,  
hand in hand,  
we walk home.  
Sticky and sweaty  
with bits of dirt  
speckled against our skin,  
the only signs  
of what we've done,  
that summer Sunday  
beneath the Southern sun.

[RETURN](#)



Anna Olson

How beautiful it is to feel  
small  
when looking across the wild, weathered sea,  
or up at the full moon and our faraway companions,  
the stars.  
How unspeakable is the beautiful awe  
and fear  
conjured while huddled inside as forked lightning strikes the blue-gray clouds,  
and forceful thunder rattles the windows.  
To face a mountain and look up at the unreachable point,  
To face a waterfall and desire, with the most fervent of desires,  
to bathe in the shower of those forceful drops,  
To feel the first twinge of the womb,  
and know, someday,  
that a heartbeat apart from your own within your own body  
will delight and terrify you  
inspires a great and quiet joy.  
Others may yell with dark screams to the sky,  
“I am a knight, I am a king among men!”  
I watch and feel and whisper,  
I am small.  
I am small and I am nobody and nothing.  
I am small and I love my insignificance.

[RETURN](#)





## A Chorus of Ambition

Alexandra Boyd

I.

We're all horizons yearning toward  
the promise of a new day.  
with a voice like dawns blush, a persistent hush  
growing louder every hour.

II.

He said,  
"I hope you hear my name when  
you look at those stars because  
someday  
I'm gonna be up there soaking in celestial rays."  
He said  
"I hope you blow a kiss to every spotlight."

My best friend swore she would save an entire continent from the pain of their revealed ribcages,  
as she  
penned a first draft of her  
grad school essay.  
She's in love with everyone, insane  
sensational  
and brave.

Meanwhile I want nothing more  
than a flock of words, a host of  
stories borrowed from  
imagination's lips as she mumbles in her sleep.  
I will illuminate her darkest nights and coincidental mistakes.

III.

Believe us when we tell you  
that we yearn to be remembered  
as more than photographs.

Believe us when we say  
we want to sit astride our future  
and guide the reins.

## Of Percussion

Charles Mohl

Heart—*Beat*. Bash.

Thunder—*Clap*. Crash.

*Why beginnings are jarring and rude:*

Nobody said it was a pretty business, being

the cornerstone.           We me must keep time, watching our wait,

*Dumb.*

as we fade quickly

*Dumb.*

from the foreground,

*Dumb.*

for granted.           In wake of these daintier details,

you must be much smarter than you think

if you're going to try

to beat things

with sticks.

[RETURN](#)



## Hives

Charles Mohl

Being but a child I kicked a nest  
of bees; a big mistake. I jumped, I fled.  
They buzzed so angry, chased me far. My chest  
heaved when I reached the sea, submerged my head.  
I held my breath, weathered the angry swarm.  
I'm not allergic like some people can  
be, stings that don't kill still hurt all the same.  
This lake, this place of respite where I ran  
was briefly safe. These bees were out for blood;  
just mine & all of it. Aloft above,  
me watching as I lay (lying) in mud.  
Their wings beat hard wet frenzy when they dove.  
They'll soon learn how to swim, my puddle's dry.  
I want to stay damp without knowing why.

[RETURN](#)



## BBQ

Gregory Rose

The  
neighbors all  
stared when my  
dad carved the carcass

of  
that deer  
that was hit

by  
an SUV.  
He just stared  
back as he dug  
deep to pull the heart  
from beneath the sticks of its

chest.  
When he  
finally hit the  
core he urged my  
sister and I not to

look.  
Slicing away  
to sever the  
center from the strings

sounded  
like velcrow—  
then silence as  
he swung the bloody  
heart higher than the fences  
that hid their heads. He wanted  
the blood to land in their eyes.

[RETURN](#)



## Foreman

Anna Olson

Terrified young eyes,  
her mother's eyes,  
stare at me.  
Forbidden now, but not for long.  
I smile, play the friendly boss,  
for now.  
But, oh, the night,  
when blue-eyed factory girl  
will squirm for a promised raise  
just like her mother did,  
just like her daughters wil  
and my wandering hands will have their fill,  
until the next night comes around.

[RETURN](#)



## Delivery

Gregory Rose

The comfort of the scent  
Of wool disappears when  
The sweater is removed.

A beautiful mistake,

our bodies breaking  
bounds of control.

Resealing this envelope  
We shouldn't have

Opened presents  
A sticky situation—

Do we gather the contents,  
Tuck them back inside  
And lick the flap?

Across a diner table  
Your silence  
Sends my brain  
On a frantic search for words.

I hate the taste of glue.

[RETURN](#)



## Lions in the Rain

Alison Hanley

I had a dream where there was  
a lion whose claws were screaming and slicing  
and slipping through my skin. I told him  
to stop, but he wouldn't listen; he just kept  
tearing. I realized it never stopped raining,  
even though three days past. I started to  
get mad at yell at God and scream and curse  
and *goddammit why aren't you listening*. When  
the lion was ripping through me, I didn't say  
stop. I could have, but I felt guilty. So I  
just let him. It probably hurt, but I don't remember  
I watched chunks and ripe, pink ligaments fall from my arm,  
my cheek, my thigh. I laughed when I heard the alabaster sizzle  
and belch as it tore. It wasn't funny. Why did I take  
the car out in the rain. The birds weren't flying and the  
wild rabbits and the raccoons hid under our deck  
like they thought Noah was coming to save  
them. I laughed and I pushed my dog's nose  
away so I wouldn't shut it in the door. Why is there a  
lion here? I kept thinking that but I  
never came up with an answer. I wonder why  
we dream, I thought, and why in dreams we tear our skin.  
But then the car started to slip  
through the puddles. Would it help  
if I said, *God, please?* And suddenly  
I didn't wonder anymore.

[RETURN](#)



## Sic Transit

Bradley Tharpe

I wasn't dressed for the occasion,  
my black suit and matching tie  
would have been less disrespectful.  
An exasperated sigh – my farewell for the dead  
iPod in my hand.  
It was a small ceremony,  
in the hollow of my peacoat:  
just me, my missing keys,  
and the cracked screen  
on a cracked phone  
reflecting a smooth young face.  
My car couldn't make it;  
its battery died.  
Among the bustle of the busy sidewalk  
my fingers: gloved – except for the tips,  
scooped out a shallow grave  
in the fabric of my pocket.  
My lips thought I should say more  
but the words refused to come;  
my mouth was gagged by  
*Henry V* and other works.  
I thought the man next to me  
waiting for the bus in a  
drab dun colored canvas coat  
would be a much better eulogizer.  
But he had had a tracheotomy,  
so I had to suffice.

[RETURN](#)





**“Today I won’t reply to your messages...”**

Jahnavi Acharya

Today, I won't reply to your messages. I won't pick up the phone when you call. Today, I'll forget to say I love you, and I won't remember that I should, in case I don't get a chance to tell you tomorrow.

Today, I'll pretend I don't have a future. I'll pretend that forever is just a word. That there is no tomorrow, no next Saturday, no next month. Today, I'll eat all the chocolate I've been saving for a bad day, even though I know things could be worse.

Today I'll be selfish and take a bubble bath, even though you are alone and want company.

Today, I'll eat the last piece of pizza even though I know I should save it for you.

But that's just who I am today.

Tomorrow?

If you're still here tomorrow, I'll try to be different. For you.

**“Well, it’s tomorrow...”**

Jahnavi Acharya

Well, it's tomorrow. And I'm no different from who I was yesterday. I'm still the same old me, the me I've been since I can remember.

No, I don't change.

Do you?

Will you be someone else tomorrow? On my way home, maybe I'll drop in and check.

But I wouldn't count on it. Because I'll still be me. And sometimes, I forget.

[RETURN](#)



## He Called Her Peach

Kira Boswell

1. He called her Peach. And she hated it. The way it popped out of his mouth at the end of his sentences. The way he accented the ending. Peach—with the hardest “CH” sound, exploded into her ears, into her head, and into her body.
2. Her skin slides back and forth between day and dusk—allowing the blonde hair to settle his eyes. The feeling of distance forces him to close his eyes and push his lips against her and slide them back and forth—slower, faster, and then slower again. No words exchanged. No terms of endearment. Only the silent appreciation of how she felt to him.
3. She cuts into the thin, fuzzy skin with ease, and glides through the inside until she hits a wall. She tries sliding the knife around the seed unsuccessfully. The orbit was far from perfect. She squeezes just slightly on both sides, careful not to bruise the fruit. The peach falls apart, revealing the red flower that had grown tightly around the seed. She was surprised by how easily the fruit separated. With only one, whole seed, there was no need to dig at the pieces that lay in front of her. The dark red quickly faded into a comforting peach color. She stares at a wedge and releases it into her mouth with a heavy breath.

[RETURN](#)



## Traveler

Alexandra Boyd

*For Nick*

You cupped your madness like a flower and held both palms to your chest. An embrace that lasted an infinite fifteen seconds.

You hit the road with a toothy smile over one shoulder, bound for the Dakotas or Montana or (in your daydreams) New Mexico searching for something illegal and delicious

leaving me in the oiled chains of my students loans, with the alternate madness of sleepless night hysterics and love affairs with callous jokers and raucous wanderers who remind me too much of you.

I told you that I wanted all the dust and junk. Give me all the old cracked apartment walls in apathetic grey cities that this world has to offer, all the coffee shops and second rate poetry and philosophical speculation against the backdrop of a summer sky.

Meanwhile, you, indefinite as midnight, said years ago that you hoped you'd earn some words on the blank slate of your future and then launched into a retelling of your favorite northern Minneapolis escapade.

You said I'd better listen to the words no one was saying, as you quoted Hunter S. and hummed along to that generic radio metal and you're humming probably, still, as you fill up whatever rusted out car you're in with gas and prepare to drive off into someone else's sunset.

[RETURN](#)



## **PROSE**

**For my \_\_\_\_\_ :**

Alison Hanley

For my [REDACTED] :

I remember sitting in my room. It was dark and I could see the moon. I liked it when you went [REDACTED] and also when you [REDACTED] when I was [REDACTED]. I held out my thumb and closed my left eye and the silver sliver was eclipsed by the small, smooth pad of my thumb. I was wearing red nail polish. I remember.

But all of a sudden we just stopped being and I can never seem to convince myself that it wasn't because [REDACTED]. I try, but I don't know when it happened exactly, I just remember the time [REDACTED]. I didn't know at first but I just became less. Until all I breathed was you. All I felt was you in [REDACTED]. But I don't really like to think about that anymore.

I would watch you bring your hand across your eyes and squeeze your temples, but I learned to train my eyes to see the dust accumulating on the blades of the fan, the way the door moved back and forth in a drunk waltz, or the war the tiny insects fought with the spider web and the way they always fought so hard to avoid their impending doom. I always knew I was watching those things, though, because I wanted to see anything other than [REDACTED].

I try not to think about it now, the way we moved, bodies rising, falling, our breaths so [REDACTED]ful. And all you said was [REDACTED] as you looked at some imaginary speck on the ceiling.

I wonder if things would be different if we wouldn't have [REDACTED]. I think sometimes, why did we [REDACTED].

But now I know I [REDACTED] another girl who moans.

Goodbye, [REDACTED].

[RETURN](#)



## Delilah

Allison Ellsworth

When he first saw the girl whom he'd later know as Delilah, she was looking anxiously down the street from a lonely bus stop on Route 37, which ran north to Greenwich and looped back to Klein St. She wore thin, white leggings patterned with pink hearts, a baggy long-sleeved shirt, and a faded Admirals baseball cap pulled down on her head. Then and always, the people that came though the sliding door were pushed quietly out of his mind into a foggy purgatory where they melded into others just like them: young mothers with long, bright fingernails who smacked their gum and talked loudly to their girlfriends; old men with walkers and bulging sacks of rubbish who hobbled up the ramp, staring vacantly out the windows; obese men and women who took up the disabled seats, fastening their portly hands over their protruding stomachs like seatbelts. All fell through, sorted into rubbish, but this little girl with the dirty fingernails and chipped tooth, who could sit so still you could forget she was real – she was the exception. Kids just like her had been Of No Importance and joined the other restless children of Moscow in a spiritless parade in and out and away from him, yet years later he would remember little things, like how she was wearing mismatched socks, how she hugged herself after handing him the fare and how a bit of pink skin shone through a hole in her leggings above her knee.

He thought he remembered her because that that night had marked the twelfth year he had worked for Moscow County's transportation system; it was because things had been going surprisingly well that night. The normal gang of raucous teens that he usually picked up on 3<sup>rd</sup> St. at 5:03 pm had been late – he saw them running awkwardly up the street, holding up their baggy jeans and stepping out to the side in a low-slung swagger as they yelled at him, throwing up their hands and then flipping him off as he pulled out and continued on his way. He hummed

a little to himself during the next fifteen minutes, enjoying the rumble of the engine and appreciating the docility of his passengers, the absence of profanity and the pleasant conversation two attractive women were having three rows back. As the sky darkened and the street lamps flickered on, muting the city bricks and pavement into sepia-toned hues, he had been so pleased that he even began saying “Watch your step ma’am” and “You have a good day” to his passengers, pleased because he was thinking of the extra week of vacation he had earned from his twelve years, and of the steak dinner his wife had promised him the next evening. He had only three more hours left to his shift when he turned onto that taciturn side-street and saw the slight figure of a girl standing uncertainly under the light, both feet planted squarely in the center of the luminous circle, unwilling to budge until the bus crept right up to her and opened its doors, offering lighted entryway into the interior. She was clutching the straps of her Disney princess backpack and walked up to the plastic barrier behind which he sat. He closed the doors and told her that the fare was \$1.10 and did she know that it was late and city curfew was in fifteen minutes? She pulled out two crumpled dollar bills and when she looked up, he was startled to see tears in her eyes.

“Do you know where Frommel Street is?” she asked in a small voice.

As a husband, Jed was warm, receptive, unflinchingly generous and loyal to the woman he met senior year of high school “between the yams and the onions” at the local O’ Yes Country Mart grocery. In one of his more brazen moments at the grocer, he had thrown out a suggestive, adolescent line that was unfortunately interpreted correctly by the girl, who was so stirred by his audacity that she did not think to lay down the knobby yam she was holding before smacking him forcefully across the face. Jed liked to joke that that day may have been his last if they had been one aisle over by the pineapples and coconuts, but that by some divine intervention, all he got a loose tooth and a sore ego, which was quickly replaced by a reckless love for this woman

who continued down the aisle, never looking back or apologizing for what she deemed a very just response to an incredibly stupid proposition.

Jed said that Svet single-handedly brought him from boyhood to manhood with her stubbornness and equanimity; yet many of his friends who saw Jed at work would marvel that such a happy man could act so discontented. They would discuss his curious polarity philosophically over beer at their favorite bar, asking whether he feigned happiness at home or gloom on the job, arguing amongst themselves if it was natural for love to be confined to one sector of one's life, and towards the end of the night they toasted pimps, whores, weed, pompous teenagers, screaming babes and indifferent mothers and anything that they felt was deserving of Jed's obscure sullenness.

Jed felt uneasy when he dropped the little girl off at Frommel and Ohio at exactly 10:04 pm. He had checked his watch as she stepped out. Did she know where she was going? She had seemed uncertain, peering out of the door at the empty street at the crumbling garages and empty looking houses. He asked her if this was her stop – had she been here before? She would not answer, and he told her that if she didn't know, she should stay on the bus and wait until they circled around. At that, she had quickly looked up and stepped out, walking directly into the quiet blackness. There was the sound of crickets hiding in the overgrown weeds bordering the sidewalk – a sound like croaking frogs or a barking dog that made him think of the night the car broke down in Ohio and he had slept outside under a parabolic sky; the emptiness had scared him but he could not leave. The girl had pulled out a raggedy old stuffed animal during the ride there, and he remembered looking at the monkey's dull eyes and lopsided grin as she flung it over her shoulder and walked away through the weeds.

It bothered him how the girl stayed on his mind through the weekend, through the next week. Nothing aggravated him more than knowing he was thinking too much about something



which did not concern him. He was a Christian man; he was taught to sympathize, empathize, for these were all signs of love, and he knew there was a special place in hell for men who never cared to love or who loved the wrong way. In his late twenties though, Svet left him, and he spent more nights than he would care to remember discounting the virtues of Christian love. It wasn't hard for him to adapt a more cynical perspective that scoffed at altruism and selflessness and blissful, limitless love. He saw that he could now see the real boundaries and dimensions of love, and so he set priorities so that whatever good feelings he carried would not be stretched so far that they would become insignificant. He had felt the bitterness of being discarded, left quickly and easily by the woman he loved, had found a name for that sinking ache in the back of his gut and had grown familiar with it as a smart man would his enemy.

Though he felt he had changed, and not a trivial way, the year did nothing to lessen the way he felt about her. He never supported her though she pleaded that he respect her decision and he would tell his friends later, it just goes to show that having sensibility doesn't mean you are allotted some every time you make a choice, like twisting the crank on a damn gumball machine – it's like love that way, he thought, never showing up when you want it to. Despite her carelessness, he had waited for her, and he felt no shame in taking her back, quickly, with the hurriedness of one suddenly recalling a long forgotten memory and panicking at the thought of losing it again.

If Svet had taught him anything during the time she was gone, it was how to wait. In the days that followed that Friday night, Jed checked the crime section of the newspaper more often than he normally would, and he gave more than a cursory glance to his incoming passengers. Sometimes a scraggly kid would catch his eye and he would clear his throat and say something like "And where are you headed today?" or "Are you going to need a transfer?" There was a woman, a regular, who noticed his change in demeanor and walked up to the yellow line the next

day and began talking about her 11 year old son, a terrific athlete who wanted to be a gymnast one day and wasn't it terrible that that there were no gymnast programs in schools here? She had heard that they had such things in Germany, along with football (that was soccer, of course) and track. He was distracted by her noise, and hit the brakes hard as a traffic light switched suddenly to red. She tottered forward on her heels and swung her arms out around the yellow poles, giving a little shriek before pulling herself up and back behind the line again, red with embarrassment. "They should do something about those lights, don't you think?" she said affectedly. He grunted noncommittally. The shift dragged on; the woman left, smiling at him as she stepped down, he lowered the ramp for old men, obese men, and wheelchairs. He yelled through the door "Put out your smoke!" to an obstinate woman who ground the butt underfoot and exhaled the smoke, then muttered "Fuck cancer" as she moved down the aisle, glaring at anyone who could not look away in time. He hollered at people to move back as the crowd doubled before 6, then said nothing for hours as the sun sank and people retreated into their homes. Suddenly it was eleven, and the girl was staring at him, holding out one dollar and ten cents.

.....  
She showed up sporadically, mostly on Fridays, but then more frequently on weeknights, always after curfew, always wearing the same baseball cap and leggings. She was never without her backpack, and would pull out the monkey and some worn looking dolls to play with when she thought no one was looking. She became nervous when more people entered and would sit stoically, back straight, hands folded in her lap, until Frommel and Ohio appeared. She would press her hands over her ears when Jack honked loudly at rude drivers, and once he saw this, he tried to honk less, instead muttering "*idiot*" at drivers hesitant and rude, oblivious and shameless.

One Monday night, he tried to get her to talk before she walked out the doors. Try as he might to remain neutral, a feeling of responsibility had built up inside him; it carried tones of

guilt and self-loathing so that it became harder and harder to open the door for her onto the dark, empty street. He told himself that she had family there; that she was split between homes, but he could never delude himself into forgetting the darkness, the night, the curfew. When he would open the door the next night and find her standing in that pool of light once more, he would feel both relieved and tired, for as much as he hoped she would stay on the bus and circle back around with him, she never did. Her constancy made him restless – he felt compelled to intervene though it was not his place, and no reasonable action seemed enough. Fitful with indecision, he stalled in opening the doors that night and asked her what her name was.

“Delilah” she said softly. He said what a pretty name that was, was she named after anyone? She looked at him carefully. “My grandma” she said. Oh, and did her grandma live here? Is that where she was going now? To see her grandma and keep her company? The questions flowed into each other and he realized he was losing her, but he couldn’t stop. This is not a good place for kids to come at night – did she know that? He told her if he had kids, he wouldn’t want them coming here, and he was sure her parents would not want it either. He continued looking at her even after she shifted her eyes down, rubbing the sole of her shoe into the rubber mats on the floor. She was uncomfortable – he had asked too many questions. He felt her receding into herself, withdrawing any trust he had gained that first night and locking it away. She made a move like she wanted to leave, and when she looked back up her face was guarded, tense. “Grandma’s dead” she muttered before pushing open the doors and stepping outside.

\*\*\*

When he got off work, Svet was already asleep. He tried to be quiet but his feet fell heavily on the tile floor as he made his way to the kitchen, pulled out a plate of chicken and mashed potatoes and a beer and slumped into the easy-chair. He pulled off the note on the plate that read *Gravy on top shelf, hope work went well – Love you*. He trod back to the refrigerator,

pulled out the gravy, hesitated, and then grabbed another beer. After he settled back down into the chair, he heard slippers padding down the hallway. Svet emerged from the hallway, dark hair neatly pulled back into a braid, eyes sleepy behind glasses. She came over and gave him a kiss. “How was work?” she asked, eyeing the beer.

He was silent for a moment. “What was your neighborhood like, Svet?”

The corners of her mouth inched up and she almost laughed, but then she looked at him and saw that he was serious. Catching herself, her smile quickly faded and her brow creased as she considered the question again, wondering at the gravity with which he watched her, waiting. “You know what it was like” she waved one hand vaguely at Jed. “I was still living there when we met. You remember – it wasn’t bad. Probably better than it is now, even. We locked our doors at night and didn’t walk alone, but we didn’t live . . . scared.” She shrugged and trailed off, unsure of what he wanted. “I heard the story of the bus driver down there. It’s all over the news. Poor girl – the gangs now are worse; everyone knows it. Is that why you’re asking?”

He pulled a long drink and set down his beer by the lamp. “I’ve been taking a little girl to Frommel and Ohio every night for the last week. Couldn’t be older than eleven. Looked real scared the first time, like she didn’t know where to go, but she wouldn’t come back.” Softer, he added “Now what would a girl that little be doing in a place like that?”

“Did you ask her where she was going that late?” she asked. He shook his head. She looked thoughtful. “Did I ever tell you about the time my shoelaces got caught on the pedals of my bike and I crashed?” she asked. He twitched. *That Svet’s got a story for everything*, his friend Bailee had said. *Got a story for everything that do happen and everything that don’t*. She waited, then, taking his silence as an invitation, continued “My mom and brother were behind me – we were all taking a walk together, but I had ridden ahead. It was a hot day in May and I had gotten out early from school. I was riding so fast, but after a couple blocks I felt a tug on my

foot. I tried to lift it but it was stuck to the pedal; see, I had gotten these new shoes and the laces had come undone as I was riding. They were all tangled in the bike now, and I panicked.” She paused, absent-mindedly rubbing one leg with the palm of her hand. He waited patiently.

“Well, I crashed about two seconds later on that hot, black pavement, and I couldn’t do anything but lie there and wait for my mom to come help me, but I had ridden so far ahead that I didn’t even know where she was. I tried to reach my feet to untie my shoes but they were too far away and too tight to slip off. After that, I started to cry – I felt so embarrassed . . . and then a bus came around the corner. A school bus. I just wanted it to pass by and thought *please God don’t let it stop, let the kids be fooling around and not be looking out the window*. But the bus slowed down as it got closer, then before I knew it, an older man was helping me up – picked me right off the ground and set me straight again.”

Jed listened now with more interest. He thought she had stopped and pressed her further “So what happened then?”

She smiled ironically. “Thing was, he either didn’t see my shoelaces all tied in the pedals, or he didn’t have time to fix it. I think he didn’t want to leave the bus for too long – all the kids were watching. He didn’t even say anything, just set me up again and left. My mom had come around the corner then and asked me what that strange man was doing touching me.” Shaking her head, she said “I still don’t know if I had rather been left there, if it meant I could have remained unseen.” She lapsed into silence, and they stayed that way until the clock struck three and they stood up slowly and went to bed.

As he lay in bed, Jed thought of the girl and how he wouldn’t see her again. He was surer of it than anything else, and strangely, the thought comforted him. If he could not know where she was going or what she was doing and what would happen to her, knowing that he would never know was perhaps better. He no longer felt responsible, and as his shame simmered down

and left him, so did his curiosity. He fell asleep and dreamt of shiny new bicycles racing themselves – streets full of blue and red and pink bikes, pedals magically revolving and wheels whirling in the wind, tassels on the handlebars streaming out and sparkling in the sun as the bikes sped faster and faster. He watched them all as they raced straight into the night, until all he could see was the gleam from the moon as it shone off their polished frames, and until all he could hear was the whirring of the tires through the soft summer air.

[RETURN](#)



## Inertia

Kayla White

**Inertia:** Inertia is the name for the tendency of an object in motion to remain in motion, or an object at rest to remain at rest, unless acted upon by a force.

**Genesis 3:19** By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

I. Light  
-Saturday-

Jade sat at the kitchen table rubbing her forefinger, middle, and thumb against one another, turning the marker residue into tiny blimps of nothingness. The red was now imprinted on her fingers. She felt powerful that she could make the date that once shown ominously on the white board disappear. The board now hung empty, tacked to the fridge. What once read Friday, 11:15 am, glowed white.

She sniffed her fingers slowly, as though the marker held a scent of its desires to destroy the world, somewhere, hidden in its depth. It filled her nostrils. She stayed that way quite some time. The kitchen seemed to illuminate a little more every time she blinked. The goldfish, Julio, swam in his bowl on the counter next to the fridge, mindless of the world beyond the glass. Jade thought to herself. *You do not know what you're missing buddy.*

She rose from her chair and opened the back door into the yard. The one hovering tree stood large and fierce. She squinted and watched the leaves sway rhythmically in the wind. Closing her eyes, Jade let her senses guide her where to sit on the grass. She knew she was one small being in a midst of billions, but in this moment, she felt united. The insects, birds, and small animals buzzed and chimed throughout her ears while she imagined herself right along with them.

*Some of these trees can live full beautiful lives, others, destined to be a door, a cabinet, a floor to be walked on.*

The wind hugged her, and she let herself be free against it. She breathed slowly and imagined tracing the air that passed through her nostrils and into her lungs.

“Jade.” Her eyes twitched at the sound of her name. She turned her head to find the only other person who created the same calm feeling that she experienced now. The only person who could shed light on a dark situation, Nora, stood on the steps.

“Yes.”

“Erasing the appointment on the marker board is not going to erase the problem.”

“Aren’t we all just marks on a board waiting to be erased some day? I mean what if it’s that simple. The supreme deity has our names written on a marker board and when it gets a little full, he erases one. What a cheap war, we never win.”

Nora dropped a glass of water she was holding, and it shattered against the cement stoop. She brought her hands to her face and shook with tears. Jade rose from the ground and walked to her, carefully avoiding the shining pieces that lay on the ground.

“We’re hopeless,” Nora said, looking at Jade who now stood a few feet away from her. Jade closed the distance and pulled Nora into her arms. The glass now reflected tiny rainbows, and Jade wondered if Nora could see how beautiful they looked.

“Did you know that glass can be made from lightning?” They pulled apart from their hug. Nora sighed, “No, I didn’t.”

“If sand is heated to a hot enough temperature, namely, from lightning, it can turn into glass called fulgurite.” Jade looked around her and the sounds seemed to fizzle away. The wind no longer seemed to be her friend, and the animals probably couldn’t care less about her. She glanced back down at the glass. It no longer reflected the rainbows it once held before.

“All gone?” Nora asked.

“Yea.” The two of them walked into the house. The kitchen was now reverted back to its 1960s’ self. The floor creaked under the weight of their footsteps. Jade smiled to herself when she remembered the hopscotch ordeal she and Nora had participated in to decipher which tiles were the culprits of the squeaky sound. They were marked with black X’s and avoided when someone was asleep. The floor tiles were probably at one point off white, but now they were a light shade of brown. A few were beginning curl at the edges, and Jade and Nora spent a day super gluing them back to the floor, only to find it didn’t work as well as tile glue. The kitchen cabinets were painted with trees, flowers, and birds, by Jade because she said the dead kitchen needed ‘life’. Everything was splashed with yellow, orange, and brown, but the colors seemed stale. The only brightness it held came when Nora was in the room. They took a seat in the folding chairs that accented their card table.



“I’m...” Jade started to speak. She couldn’t handle it when Nora was upset, and especially not at herself.

The marker board was still clear and Jade decided that the first way to show her remorse was to write the date again. She rose from her seat and wrote ‘Friday 11:15’ as neatly as she could with the red marker. It glowered back at her as she started to leave the room.

“I’m hungry,” was what Jade said. What she meant, was ‘sorry’.

## II. Water

-Sunday-

Jade awoke after turning over in bed. She stretched and glanced at the glowing clock that stood on the makeshift nightstand that was made out of red and blue milk crates. She knew that a milk crate could hold a hundred pounds when right side up. If a hundred pounds rested on its back, it would buckle under the weight. Jade learned the hard way when she stood on a stack to catch a spider on the ceiling. The crates protested and almost sent her flying.

It was 3:40 am. The bed felt lighter, and she realized Nora wasn’t there. She then heard the sound of the toilet flushing and wondered if everything was alright. She waited a few minutes to listen for Nora’s return. She then heard her vomit.

She rose from the bed and shook loose the sheet that was attached to her. It was one of the few housewarming gifts that they still had. Everything that was worth a decent amount of money was sold.

Jade made her way to the bathroom and tapped on the door.

“You alright-,” She started to say but finished her sentence with, “need some company?”

“I’m pretty ugly right now. You don’t have to do anything.”

Jade let herself in the bathroom to find Nora crouched on the floor with her legs wedged between the blue-green tub and the matching toilet. The tub used to have a glass shower door, but Nora was scared someone would push her through it, like in a horror movie. So Jade and Nora broke the glass together. A single piece of the glass remained framed on the wall opposite of the bathroom mirror.

Nora’s arms were her pillow, and the bathroom rug was her bed. Jade sat down with her back against the wall and legs outstretched to the blue-green sink. She could identify with the feeling of being sick; it was a common human experience. The bathroom floor and its coolness gave the only comfort to be found when the stomach wreaked havoc on the body. It was the

mixture of hotness and coldness that rendered a small pleasure. That, she understood. What Nora was going through, she did not.

She smoothed Nora's sweaty brown hair away from her face. Jade assumed Nora had been in here for a lengthy amount of time; she looked like she hadn't slept at all. She noticed she wasn't even in her pajamas: the oversize t-shirt that she preferred to sleep in.

"How long have you been in here?"

"I couldn't sleep. So I just watched TV, and I think I came in here at twelve. Why? What time is it now?"

"3:45ish."

"Oh."

There was a silence between them. As time went on, Nora's condition worsened. She seemed to be spending more and more time being sick than being healthy. Jade rested her head against the wall and waited. Waited for a miracle? Maybe. Waited for a chance for Nora to fight what was inside of her and become healthy again? Definitely.

"Jade, do you remember when we first met?"

"Yes, of course. But don't do that."

"Do what?" Nora turned her head a little so that Jade could look her in the eyes when they spoke.

"You're reminiscing. That's the first sign of giving up. Quit it. You're going to be alright."

"I'm not giving up. I just want to talk about things that make me happy. That makes me happy. Now tell me the story."

"Wait, hold on."

Jade left the bathroom and returned with two pillows, two blankets, and a glass of water. She handed the glass of water, a pillow and a blanket to Nora. When Nora was comfortable and ready to listen, she said thank you.

"This is why I love you," Nora said.

Jade smiled and got comfortable in her story-telling position as she began to speak.

"I love you too. We met in college. You were a spoiled rich brat who asked me to cheat off of my science homework," Jade started.

"Wait, wait, wait. Tell it the right way." Nora was laughing, and she winced. Jade wanted to cry. *Fucking diseases take away life and the ability to laugh? Why can't you just enjoy one*

*simple pleasure?* Jade turned her face so that Nora couldn't see the emotions that she was sure it held. She breathed slowly and started the story again.

"I was in biochemistry and you walked in, late. Of course the only open seat was next to me, and you were forced to take it. You were wearing a black skirt and a collar shirt that would make a nun proud. I asked you why were dressed like that..."

Jade imagined she was in that chemistry class again.

*"Because, it's the decent thing to do. I never know who I might meet. They could be my future boss someday,"* Nora replied, eyeing Jade's obviously eccentric attire.

*Jade probably looked like a homeless and confused fool to her. She was wearing black jeans that were cut into knee length shorts and a t-shirt that said "F\*ck War" on it. Her dreadlocks were just beginning. It was near the end of freshman year. She was finally free to be the person she wanted to be, and she chose to embrace her hippie style. It wasn't a phase. It wasn't her rebelling. It was her true identity that was locked deep away by private uniformed schools and unappreciative parents.*

*Before she could reply, the teacher called her name to come get her test. Jade watched her get it, and Nora's facial expression held her grade. Nora was like that, you could never play poker with her as a partner, she'd lose all the damn money.*

*"Do you need a tutor?"* Jade asked when she sat back down.

*"I don't have time for a tutor."*

*"Then you have no need to be dressing all "professionale" do you? No one wants a lawyer who can't pass basic chemistry."*

*Nora looked back at her and said, "I need something quicker. Let me use your notes and stuff when you're done."*

*"You're asking for a serious offense here. I'm going to need a little leverage."*

*"I'll buy you lunch or dinner or something."*

*"Come camping with me and a few of my friends this weekend."*

*"I barely even know you. And how do you know that I don't have plans? I can't just give up my entire week--."*

*"The quicker you live, the quicker you'll die,"* Jade intervened.

*"What?"* Nora asked.

*"Stop planning your events right down to the minute. You gotta leave room to have some fun. I'll pick you up at 4 on Friday."*

Jade opened her eyes to find Nora asleep. It seemed as though one of the few times Nora wasn't in pain was when she was sleeping, and Jade decided to let her rest. She snuggled into her pillow and watched Nora's chest rise and fall until she drifted away also.

### III. Vegetation -Monday-

Jade had tried to grow roses, but she failed. Where the remains from an old rose bush existed, a clear tent stood in its place. While most people cultivated flowers in the dirt on the side of the house, Jade planted and succeeded with a cucumber plant. Jade zipped open the plant protector and watered the herb. She zipped the tent closed and marveled over the life she had created. As she bent to pick up the watering canister she placed on the ground, she seen something black flash through the dirt. Her heart started to pound quicker and heavier. She jumped when she seen it was a snake.

She was never frightened by a snake before, but her emotions were in overdrive as of late. She grabbed the canister and went back into the house.

She set the canister on the kitchen table and went in the living room. Nora was watching an old program on their TV. Jade knew it was older even though the black and white television could trick anyone into thinking a recent show was from a previous era. It was something about the way the characters spoke to each other. The show held a level of respect.

“Did you know that when we see a single color on a television, it's actually a blended mix of red, green, and blue, displayed in a rapid succession?”

Nora smiled and turned to Jade who was leaning on the door frame. The door frame that once held western style saloon doors, but were taken down at Jade's request.

“I didn't know that. But it could have something to do with the fact that we have a black and white television.”

“Well yea,” Jade laughed. She took a seat on the couch and put an arm around Nora. “But I know you've seen a TV in color before. And you cannot honestly tell me that you had any idea that the girl who was wearing a pink sweater is actually a sweater with a combination of red, green, and blue.”

Nora put her head on Jade's shoulder and laughed. She yawned.

“How was work?”

“I baked a cake that looked like the cardiac muscle, and I dedicated it to you before giving it to the customer.”

Nora closed her eyes and asked slowly, “What’s that?”

“The heart.”

#### IV. Celestials

-Tuesday-

Jade sat peering out into the mass audience that sat in rows beyond the stage. It was a crowd so large that faces blended together. She couldn’t tell one person’s eyes from another’s ears. Colors all seemed to be black and various shades of it. She knew the day would come when she would have to speak in front of thousands of people. She dreamt of it. And because of this, she spent hours in front of the mirror perfecting her acceptance speech. Her knees glistened from the light and she smiled that she had actually dressed nice for such an occasion. A pair of cut off jeans and a tie dye shirt just wouldn’t do. She wore a skirt and a nice shirt; a feat that may have been just as difficult as her accomplishment.

“We would like to congratulate Ms. Jade Roberts on her creation of the Cure-All pill. We are pleased to award her with the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. Please applaud her on her break-through scientific achievements,” a man in a blue suit declared while standing at the podium. The audience roared in approval, and Jade stood to give her acceptance speech.

She made her way to the podium, shaking the blue suit man’s hand before she stood on the tiny platform they gave her so she could reach the microphone. Wearing a skirt held a slight possibility, but high heels were definitely out of the question.

“I would like to first and foremost thank Nora, my inspiration for a medicine that can cure any life threatening disease.” The man who gave her the award cleared his throat behind her. She turned around for a second and glanced through the row of ten seats that lined the stage. She expected to see a familiar face but she couldn’t find Nora. She turned ahead and scanned the first few rows of the audience as quickly as she could to see if she could find her friendly face to calm her. When Nora couldn’t be found, she turned around again and whispered to the man in blue suit, “Where’s Nora?”

He stood and came to her side. “I’m sorry, she couldn’t be here. Why don’t you go on and continue your speech.”

“What do you mean she couldn’t be here? This is the most important day in my life, and I need her.”

“She couldn’t come because of some difficulties. Jade, just say thank you and accept the award please. We can talk about this later.”

“What the fuck is going on? Where is Nora?”

She stepped down from the podium and went to the blue suit man. “Where is Nora?”

“I’m--.” was all he could get out.

“Tell me where she is or--.”

“She’s dead. Your pill was created too late to help her.”

“NO NO NO no no no no.” Jade shook her head. Her voice cracked with anger. “She’s not dead. I just held her in my arms yesterday. I just told her that I loved her. She’s not dead.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“No no no,” she whispered. She began to cry. She shook her head and swallowed hard. The blue suit man tried to comfort her but she started to run away. She couldn’t do this alone. She fell to her knees and stared at the people around her.

The stage around her began to fade into darkness. She opened her eyes to see the ceiling and the dim red glow of the alarm clock. She inhaled swiftly and rolled over to see Nora lying in bed next to her. She realized it was just a dream. She leaned over, laid a gentle kiss on Nora’s cheek, and got out of bed.

She went into the kitchen and picked up her drawing pad that was resting against one of the walls. She searched as quietly as she could through the drawers for her paints. A yellow bandanna was looped through one of the cabinet handles. Wrapping it around her head, her elbow length dreadlocks were clear out of her face. She sat down at the table and began to paint.

“This is definitely not the worst place I’ve found you sleeping in,” Nora said with a hint of laughter.

Jade awoke at the kitchen table, confused. Paint was smeared over her fingers and the table. Her face felt sticky when she licked her lips.

“Fuck, do I have paint on my face?”

Nora laughed. “On your face, in your hair, on your neck.”

“Damn it. That’s oil based paint, and it’s a bitch to get out. I’m sure we have some mayonnaise around here or something.”

Nora laughed even harder, and Jade couldn’t resist laughing with her.

“Wait what time is it?”

“Don’t worry, it’s only 6:30ish. I heard your alarm go off a few seconds ago but you weren’t in there.”

“Oh, good, I’m not late for work.”

“What did you paint?” Nora asked.

“It’s for you.” Jade looked up at Nora, hoping she approved of her masterpiece.

“Um, it looks like a bunch of stars. It’s pretty cool though.”

Jade sighed and leaned back in her seat. As her back protested with pain, she realized she would definitely never sleep in another plastic folding chair again, at least not on purpose.

“Nora, did you ever take a science class seriously? Or did you really only start to get good grades once I intervened?”

Nora folded her arms over her chest and leaned on one foot. Jade thought, *totally woman-who-entered-bitch-mode gesture, but Nora’s not a bitch. Maybe it’s innate in all females.*

Nora asked, “What does this have to do with the painting? It’s beautiful; it is. But I don’t get it.”

“It’s a constellation.”

“Which one?”

“It’s the Eagle of Prometheus. This is the eagle that was sent by Zeus to eat the liver of the imprisoned Titan Prometheus. When Heracles freed him from his chains, he killed the eagle with an arrow.”

“Hmm.”

“Come here.” Nora came and sat on Jade’s lap and put her arms around her neck.

“Your liver needs to be rescued. I’m Heracles, and you’re Prometheus.”

Nora giggled and kissed Jade. “You are so silly. But I love it, and I love you so much.”

“Glad you like it, I love you too.”

“You know what all the constellations look like by heart?”

“Nah, I don’t know what the hell this is a picture of, but I know the story I want it to represent. I thought Greek mythology was a good way to give it meaning.”

V. Fish  
-Wednesday-

Jade stepped into the kitchen, avoiding the X marked tiles of course, after work and set her keychain, which only held the house key and a bike lock key, on the counter. She opened the refrigerator, and in the edge of her vision, she glanced at Julio. Closing the fridge, she started to feel warm with nervousness as she got a better look. She went in front of Julio's bowl. He no longer moved. He floated in the bowl, sideways.

Jade stared at the bowl for a second, and out of instinct, she tapped it. Julio didn't move. She stood, curious what to do. He deserved a proper farewell. He was a good fish.

She walked in the living room and seen Nora asleep on the couch. She went to the bedroom to search for something.

It didn't take long to find what she wanted. She went back into the kitchen as she held an old jewelry case in her hands. It was a medium size black velvet box; one that used to store a necklace inside.

She scooped Julio out of the bowl, placed him gently in the box, and closed it shut. He fit perfectly. She took a tablespoon from the utensil drawer and went outside.

She found a spot near the tree where she wanted Julio to spend the rest of his afterlife. As she began to dig, she spoke to him.

"Julio, you were a wonderful fish."

Dirt filled the crevices in her fingernails and spotted her fingers and hands, but she continued digging his grave. A fish didn't need a six foot deep hole, only a few inches. When the perfect sized hole was achieved, Jade placed him gently in place and began to cover him with the dirt. After finishing, she sat back on her knees and eulogized the fish.

"Julio, Nora wanted to get a beta fish when we first bought you. I told her no. Beta fish are mean and they kill other fish if you put another one in there. Who kills their friends? Well that's rhetorical. You don't have to answer that."

Jade rearranged herself in a more comfortable position. Sitting now with her legs crossed, she continued.

"Remember when Nora accidentally spilled sugar in your bowl? I thought you were for sure going to die. We had to hurry and get you out to replace your water. Nora was so scared."

Jade thought for a few moments, letting the memories float through her head like unseen balloons.

"Remember when we celebrated my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday? Nora decorated the living room and kitchen with signs and balloons while I was at work. I have no idea how she found time when



she was working at the law firm. Guess she didn't need chemistry after all huh, Julio?" Jade smiled.

"She filled all the balloons herself. She picked out the pink ones from a packet of variety colors, 'cause she knew I didn't like the color pink. And she even baked a cake. I'm the baker in the house, but she created the best red velvet cake I had ever tasted in my life because, you know, I don't like chocolate or vanilla. She bought me the shiny Schwinn bicycle you see outside, Julio. That was when we had money. Health insurance doesn't cover everything, no matter how great it is."

"Nora knows me the best out of anyone. Sorry lil' guy."

Jade's facial expression started to change. Her face became wet with tears without her even realizing they had escaped her eyes.

"Why'd you have to die? I often ask myself is it better to know when someone is going to die and cherish every moment with them, or just live life as though every moment is the last? You died without warning, and I'd like to think I loved you the same. Now that you're gone my life is going to be a little quieter. Fuck, a lot quieter. How am I going to remember the simple tricks that you know? You taught me that cold water gets blood out of stuff better, and that if you drop your phone in water, sticking it in a bowl of rice can help it work. I have a whole lot of scientific knowledge but that stuff is shit, worth nothing. You're the practical one."

Jade continued to cry for several minutes.

"Please don't die, oh God, please don't die. We had no idea. No idea...."

After lying on the grass not wanting to move for an hour or so, she finally went back into the house. Nora was pulling something out of the freezer. Jade wiped her face with her dirty hands and made a muddy mixture along her nose and eyes. She knew she looked like hell and felt even worse.

"What happened?"

"Julio died."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Nora replied. Jade noticed she was taking a box of fish sticks out of the fridge, but she seen her return them. Jade thought, *just like Nora, thoughtful enough to not eat fish at a time like this.*

"It's alright. Goldfish, on average, live between 6 and 8 years. We've had him for 6. It was near his time to die."

“Okay.” Nora turned and grabbed a towel in the sink and began wetting it. Jade noticed her favorite sweater that used to fit her perfectly now swayed with Nora’s arm movements. It was never this loose. Jade and Nora were about the same size, a six. Jade only knew this because she could fit Nora’s clothes. It had been at least a decade since Jade had purchased clothing from the right department of a store. Now, Nora looked much thinner than her.

Nora asked, “What did you do with him?”

She turned and wiped Jade’s face with it as she spoke.

“When you flush the toilet it goes to a septic waste management system.”

Nora started to move close and brushed lightly over Jade’s lips. Jade started to cry again.

“I had to bury him.” And she let the tears fall.

Jade rested her head on Nora’s shoulder. It was unspoken, but Jade knew Nora was smart enough to realize the tears weren’t for a dead goldfish.

VI. Man  
-Thursday-

“Yes. Yes. Dad, I know. Yes. Okay.” There was a long pause. Nora sighed heavily and crossed her legs. Jade didn’t need to hear the other side of the conversation to know that her dad was being an ass as usual. She wished she could reach into the phone and grab Nora’s father by the neck and shake him into some sense to realize how wonderful Nora was. Sure, she’s made a few mistakes but who hasn’t?

“Okay, I gotta go. Yea, love you too, Bye,” Nora said. She put her face in her hands.

Jade rubbed her back gently and waited for her to speak. Nora was wearing Jade’s favorite outfit. They had plans to go out for dinner, but a simple phone call destroyed all hope for a peaceful night out. She wore an off the shoulder purple t-shirt with black jeans. Her hair was left natural, curly, the way Jade preferred. She liked it when people were natural. Nora was natural, naturally beautiful, and didn’t wear a lot of makeup, which attracted Jade in the first place.

“I don’t think he realizes how much he hurts me,” Nora said looking at Jade. She sat back in the couch and stared at the ceiling. Jade could tell she had to keep moving her eyes to hold back tears. She loosened her posture as if letting her body become peaceful would help her emotions as well.

“Nora, I think you need to tell him.”

“Why?” She looked over at Jade. “I don’t think he would even care. I’m sure he won’t. I’ve been nothing but a burden, and he has definitely not failed to let me know this.”

“He’s pissed, obviously but if you....” Jade couldn’t even bring herself to say die.

“You’re all I have.”

“I.... I can’t take this anymore.”

Jade grabbed the phone.

“What are you doing?” Nora asked.

“Your dad loves you deep down. You’re lucky to have a parent. I have none, now shut the hell up and let me call your dad,” Jade smiled and Nora frowned in response. When Nora didn’t try to reach for the phone, Jade took it as the okay signal and dialed the number.

“Hey Jim, mind if I call you that? Hey listen. Listen. Listen please, sir, whatever. I get the whole ‘I don’t like that my daughter is dating a hippie’, especially a girl, thing. But Nora needs you right now and you need to listen to her. So pay attention to her. Please.” She handed the phone to Nora.

“Dad.” There was a short pause while Nora inhaled and exhaled heavily. “I have liver cancer, and I need a new liver.”

## VII. Rest

### -Friday-

Jade and Nora were lying outside on the grass staring at the clouds. It was 9:30 am, and they had to leave in an hour. “I don’t think I can make it through this. What if I blow up and turn into the Hulk?” Nora laughed and Jade did too.

“The Hulk?”

“Yea. You won’t like me when I’m angry!” Jade grabbed Nora and squeezed her. Nora laughed even harder. This is what Jade would miss: person who would lie out in the grass and wonder what it would be like to fly. Her equal: a person who never condemned her bakery job when she went to college for four years and decided not to take a career in science because it was all ‘what they wanted you to know’. Nora was a person who knew absolutely nothing about science, so Jade felt smart at least once in her life. When conspiracies were the topic over breakfast and philosophy the topic over dinner, these were things Jade would miss. A person who would pick off the all the black olives on a pizza because the delivery man just didn’t get it right, and life’s too short to cause a fuss. Jade needed a person who wrapped a bicycle in wrapping paper because it was too good not to do. She loved the woman who decided that other

people's opinions aren't worth missing out on true love. A woman who was strong enough to free household spiders into the wild because killing them wasn't worth it. A woman who would still say please and thank you to a waiter who just spilled water on her lap at a restaurant. And all these things were Nora, the one and only Nora.

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Jade sat in the doctor's office, tapping her fingers in an erratic tune. She could see her reflection in the back of a mirrored photo frame. Her dreads sprung out in wild directions. She saw them as snakes, Medusa's hair, ready to turn the next person into stone who stood between Nora and her chance at life.

Jade's mind wandered. *So like a doctor to be late to a meeting as important as this. Of course, it's not his life. Not his loved one. I should've been a doctor. I would've been a hell of a doctor. Wait, I don't like blood. Maybe I would've been a foot doctor. There are no diseases that can kill a person through their feet are there? Nah, can't be. You can chop a dude's foot off and he'll live. Franken-foot. That's what I'd call the one footed man.*

"Jade?"

She blinked into reality. "Yea?"

Nora held out her hand and Jade placed hers inside. Nora's was slightly larger, and Jade's fit perfectly.

Jade imagined a silver shiny line running through her liver, through her arm, hand, through Nora's body, and into her liver. The shiny line held all the healthiness Jade's liver could produce, and she imagined it transporting all of that goodness into Nora's liver. She wished she could make Nora healthy just by touching her. *Nah, only Jesus could do that. I wish he was here. Jesus?*

The doctor rushed into the room which shifted the ugly pink pastel curtains that were hanging on the right side of the window. He pushed his glasses farther up his nose and took a seat.

"My friend's wife is in labor. I'm so sorry. She's at this hospital though, so I know she's in good hands."

Jade thought, *'Funny. There are people dying in this hospital, and life is just beginning. What an in-between place this is.'*

"That's alright," Nora said. Jade didn't trust herself to speak.

“Nora, Jade,” The doctor said acknowledging the two, as if saying it late was better than not saying at all. He took out a manila folder and opened it.

“I’m sorry Nora,” he said. Nora swallowed back tears. “Your condition is too prolonged for any chances for a healthy liver transplant. There are other treatments we can give you that will sustain your--.”

Jade stood up, and both the doctor and Nora looked at her.

“Fuck you Newton!” Jade yelled. She started to leave the room.

“What?” The doctor asked. Nora rose and came by her side.

“Fuck you Newton and your laws of fucking motion!”

[RETURN](#)



## Untitled Fiction

Caroline Campbell

The temperature drops several degrees as the thunderheads roll in, blocking out the sun. Moments ago, the day had felt hot and unbearably sticky. But now, as the wind picks up and rustles the leaves, I shiver.

We are used to sudden weather changes. The Ozark sky can change from bright blue to an ominous gray-green almost instantly, as though God turns his kaleidoscope slightly to the right.

Rosie and I rush down to the dock to grab our clothes and towels, which have been scattered there since last night. Dad is already there, securing and triple-checking the ties on the boat with his infallible Boy Scout knots. Mom is unhooking the hammock from in between the tall, skinny oak trees, rolling it up to store in the basement.

Giant raindrops begin to fall from the sky. Not gently, either. They sound like rocks on the tin roof of the dock and sting my bare shoulders as I make my way back toward the house, burdened with my towels.

Just as I slip through the screen door, the torrent begins. Sheets, not drops of water crash to the ground, quickly turning it to mud. I can barely see the lake as I stand at the window, staring out at the storm.

After the initial downpour, the rain subsides somewhat and I am able to see that Dad never left the shelter of the dock – preferring to stay dry than fight his way up to the house. He is sitting in the captain’s seat of the boat, a Boulevard Beer bottle in his hand, watching the rain churn the surface of the water. I know what he must be thinking: *If you can’t catch a fish in the rain, you can’t catch a fish.* There sits a man who has fished the Colorado River at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, the river in Scotland that bears his family name, and even the famed

boundary waters between Minnesota and Canada. But I don't think any of those mean as much to him as being able to stand on the peeling red paint of that dock and cast his lure out to where he knows the bass will bite.

Not more than thirty minutes pass when, with another turn of that divine kaleidoscope, the sky begins to clear once more. Thunder rumbles its goodbye to the east. The baking July sun quickly begins to erase any evidence that today hasn't been anything but perfect.

[RETURN](#)



## Untitled Fiction

Erin Kelly

I am a lot of things. I am an 8 year old who no one seems to understand. I am the only girl in my family, besides my mom, but she doesn't count because she's a mom. I am my mom's best friend, or so she tells me and I am my grandpa's favorite, or so I tell him. I'm a fourth grader and an active user of Google. I am a great fake sleeper which allows me to listen to all the things my mom and dad say when they think I'm asleep and I plan on saving the world someday, I just don't know how or when yet.

See, I'm a lot of different things, but people just don't seem to understand me. My parents never talk to me about important things, just at me and my brothers never talk to me, just punch me. People just don't seem to understand that I know a lot more than I should and that I'm really mature for my age. Like last week in school my teacher asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said a cleaning lady, or a doctor, or a mom, or maybe a detective, but probably a veterinarian and she just laughed at me and shook her head. I didn't understand why she laughed because I wasn't trying to be funny. When I got home I told my mom and dad the story and my dad laughed while my mom told me that stupid, mean, old Mrs. Kenny didn't mean to hurt my feelings and if I wanted to be a "dog saving, crime fighting, disease curing, cleaning lady with kids" that I could. That's why she's my best friend and that's also why I haven't talked to my dad for exactly 2 hours and 14 minutes, because he laughed at me, which made my brothers laugh at me because they're stupid and have small peanut size brains and like to do whatever my dad does.

I am so much smarter than my brothers that I kind of feel sorry for them. Ben is 15 and he's in high school and plays the guitar and thinks he's just so cool. Little does he know that I



can hear him when he sings in front of the mirror in his room and dedicates all of his songs to Maggie Fischer down the street. And Colin, Colin's just an ignoramus. He's 13 and is supposed to be in 7th grade but the school put him in 8th grade because he's actually not an ignoramus at all when it comes to math and science. They just think they are so funny all the time and they like to pick on me whenever they get a chance. Like the time they cut my Barbie's hair because they thought "Ken might like her with short hair." Or the time they hid all my baby pictures and told me that I was adopted because I was left on the doorstep as a baby with a check for one million dollars and a note that said, "You can only have this money if you take care of this baby. Oh, and her name is Anna."

And don't even get me started on the stupid sign on their door that says "No Girls Allowed." I lost my Google privileges for two days when I asked Ben if it says "no girls allowed" because he's too ugly to get a girlfriend. My mom did NOT find it funny but I know I heard my dad laugh and say "Oh, burn!" to my mom when I was following my mother's instructions to haul my little butt to my room. They are just so stupid sometimes and I know they are older, but I am much, much wiser. I know a lot more than they do about, well just about everything. But sometimes I wish I didn't.

It's been a whole three hours now that I haven't talked to my dad but he doesn't seem to notice. Finally, at dinner he asked me to pass the peas and I pretended not to hear him. Then when he asked again I tried striking up a conversation about the clouds outside and how they looked rather cumulus today. My dad asked me for the peas again and my mom asked me what I learned today in school.

"Clouds" I said, ignoring my dad again.

"Anna can you please pass me the peas. Don't make me ask again," he said.

“Mom, could you please inform my father that I would pass him the peas, but I’m mad at him for laughing at me earlier so I can’t right now,” I said.

“Will, Anna would pass you the peas but she’s mad at you for laughing at her earlier so she can’t right now,” said my mom.

“Trish, will you please tell our daughter that I’m sorry for laughing earlier but it’s just that I don’t think she should be any of those things. Not because I don’t believe she would make a wonderful Pet Detective with 3 kids, but because I think she could be the next President of the United States,” he said.

“Are you just saying that to make me not mad again?”

“That, and because I believe it... and because I really want the peas,” he said.

“Mom,” I said.

“Yes sweetie?”

“Tell dad I’m not mad at him anymore.”

“Will, our daughter’s not mad at you anymore,” she said.

“Ours? More like your daughter... she is like a miniature Trish.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” said my mom and I together.

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I know I’m my mom’s favorite child. She has two boys and only one girl so how can she not like me the best; my brothers are slobs and stupid and mean. But because I’m the only girl, my mom lets me pick one Saturday a month and that is our day to do whatever we want. She always lets me plan the entire day and she never says no, except for the time I said I wanted to go skydiving off the Sears Tower or the time I wanted to jump in Lake Michigan in the middle of December. Our special day this time around had two minor glitches. One was that my mom said no to my idea to release all the animals from Lincoln Park Zoo and the second was that we had to

stop at the doctor's office. Last week when she said we had to go my eyes got all wide and my smile disappeared from my face. My mom laughed at me and said not to worry because it was her turn this time and all she had to do was run in and sign some paperwork.

"It won't take very long my love. You can even wait in the car," she said.

"Uh, fine. How long is the voyage to the Doctor's office?" I asked.

"Voyage?" she asked.

"Yes, voyage. Old English: an act or instance of traveling: journey."

"I see you are making good use of the word-of-the-day-calendar I bought you. And it's about a 30 minute voyage to the doctor's office."

"Well we better start moving. I have a big day planned for us."

"Okay, let me just go tell your dad we are leaving."

She started making her way to the kitchen but I really wanted to go so I took matters into my own hands.

"DAD!!!! WE'RE LEAVING" I screamed as he appeared in the hallway.

"Anna, I could have done that," my mom said.

"Bon voyage," he said and winked at me.

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On the way to the doctor's office, I was telling my mom about all the different things I discovered on Google the night before. I told her that Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals and he was an avid chess player and had something called a mistress.

"That's the same thing dad's boss has right?" I asked

"What?" my mom said, "Where did you hear that?"

“Last night when I was laying on the couch, I had my eyes closed but I wasn’t sleeping. Dad said something about how his boss was screwing over the whole company and then you made the joke and said ‘that’s not the only thing he’s screwin..’”

“Ah! Anna! You can’t do that anymore. Some things are meant to be between a husband and wife.”

“Tell that to dad’s boss,” I said

“Anna! Oh god, what else have you heard?”

“Nothing,” I said but she tilted her head gave me the “mom look”; the ones where she opens her eyes really wide and tilts her head and doesn’t even have to say “I know you’re lying” because her face says it for her.

“Mom I’m serious, I really didn’t hear anything. Except I’m a small, not a medium so those pajamas you got me for Christmas won’t fit and Ben will not like that black, blue, yellow and purple sweater you got him mostly because he’s a boy but mostly because it just sounds like the ugliest thing in the world. Oh, and I don’t believe in Santa anymore.”

“Oh Anna, you’re a piece of work. What have you been learning in school lately?” she asked changing the subject.

I told her all about the paper we have to write in our social studies class about Christopher Columbus. I told her that my teacher said he came to America and greeted the Native Americans but I looked it up and he did not greet them very nicely. Then I told her about my science teacher Mrs. Neary and how she blinks way more than other people and sometimes when I’m bored with what she’s saying I try to see how many times she blinks in a minute. My mom asked me what the record was but to be honest, she blinks too quickly for me to actually keep count. I told her that in our theology class we were talking about Adam and Eve and someone said that Eve was made from the rib of Adam but I just don’t think that can happen.

How does a person come from a rib? My mom said that sounded like a medical question and I said that it was a good thing we were going to a doctor's office then and I would be sure to ask Dr. Sweiss about it.

When we pulled into the parking lot my mom asked me if I wanted to stay in the car. She assured me that it would only take a couple of minutes; she just had to sign a couple of things. I knew what she was doing. She clearly didn't want me to go in with her but I had to show her I could do it.

"No, I want to come in with you," I said.

"Really?" She asked. I could hear the nervousness in her voice. "It will only take two minutes. I will be in and out and I'll leave the car on so you can listen to the radio."

"No," I said, "I will come in."

"Are you sure Anna? You remember what happened the last time you were in a doctor's office, don't you?"

Of course I remembered what happened last time. The guy with the head injury waiting his turn probably remembers what happened, and he had a head injury for goodness sake. I had to go to the doctor's because I had a sore throat for a whole week. So we go to the doctor and he does that stupid Popsicle stick test and I start crying and I want to throw up but I didn't. So I thought it was over and I was really proud of myself that I didn't throw up but then the nurse comes back and she has the worst thing she could possibly have in her hand: a needle.

Let's just say the three episodes of ER I watched that one time I was home sick from school did not prepare me for what was about to happen. All I remember is the nurse saying I would feel a little prick, my stomach flipped and I hit the ground. The next thing I knew I was being helped off the ground by the nurse, who was unfortunately wearing green scrubs and I was so out of it that I screamed thinking Gumby was attacking me. I apologized later telling her that

she had no features whatsoever other than her clothing that made her look like a green, clay, monster, stick thing but she did not seem to like me very much.

“Do you think she’s working today?” I asked my mom as she was about to turn off the car.

“Who? Gumby?” she asked.

“Oh goodness, I think I’ll stay in the car.”

She leaned over and kissed the top of my head and promised to be back soon. When she left, I immediately locked the doors and turned off the radio. I looked at the ugly building in front of me and hated it. What a terrible building. On the outside it had the ugliest brown bricks and on the inside it was filled with sick people. I’ve never hated a place more. Not even because of how ugly it was but because of what it reminds me of. Sitting in the car, in complete silence, looking at the building I thought back to the week that changed everything.

I noticed something was wrong around Thanksgiving but I didn’t know what it was and I wanted a little more time to research all the possibilities. It wasn’t until the first week in December that I talked to my brothers and I know it was the first week of December because my mom was busy taking out all the Christmas decorations. I tip toed toward their room, looked over my shoulder, and opened the door slowly. I shut the door, turned and they were both there looking at me.

“Ladies,” I said, “I gathered you both...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, we ain’t no ladies,” said Ben.

“And you are not very good at English,” I said.

I could see them trying to figure out if I insulted them or not so I continued.

“Something’s wrong with mom,” I said.

I knew my brothers saw it too but they would never say anything. All they seem to care about is football, then baseball, then ESPN, and then Call of Duty. They saw the way my mom opened her mouth to say something but then never did. They saw how she stared off at nothing. They saw how she burnt the toast 3 days in a row and she never burns toast.

“She gets like this sometimes,” Ben said.

“Yeah, this happens like every month Anna,” said Colin.

But what they weren’t seeing was more important. They didn’t see the way my mom looked at the phone like she was expecting someone to call all the time. They didn’t see the list of doctor’s numbers near the phone. They didn’t see my dad crying in the front yard when he was putting up our Christmas lights. They didn’t see my mom flinch when Ben said he couldn’t stand his teacher and he hoped she caught Mad Cow Disease and died. They didn’t see the recent history on our computer’s search engine that said “alternative treatments.”

“Anna, relax. She’s probably just distracted at work,” said Colin.

“I thought you would say something stupid like that so I’m going to ignore you and WebMD her systems myself.”

I opened Ben’s laptop and began thinking out loud.

“Okay, she’s sad, tired all the time...”

“Bitchy and crabby,” Ben interjected.

“She was complaining about her headaches too, oh and she threw up twice yesterday morning,” Colin added.

I typed as quickly as I could and hit enter. We all learned a little closer to the computer and I read out loud.

“Anxiety?”

“Maybe,” Colin said, “I told you she’s probably just stressed at work.”

“Migraines?”

“She has always had headache but they never get this bad,” Ben said, “what else does it say?”

“Menstruation?”

“That would explain the bitchy-ness,” Ben said.

“Menopause?”

“She’s too young for that right?” Ben asked turning to Colin.

“What? Dude, why are you looking at me, I don’t know that stuff.”

“And last but not least, morning sickness,” I said.

We all went quiet. Oh my god, was mom pregnant? Morning sickness would certainly explain why she threw up in the morning. And it probably would explain why my dad was crying in the backyard. He always complains that the money tree in the backyard isn’t growing fast enough and that we are eating him out of house and home. But I’ve looked in the backyard and there is no such thing as a money tree so I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“No. No, that’s not right,” Ben said, “it’s gotta be anxiety. She’s probably just anxious.”

“Yeah about having a baby,” I said.

“What, no. Stop we aren’t searching anymore,” Ben said shutting the computer. “She’s probably just got one of her migraines.”

That was a month ago. A month ago she said she had to go to the doctors and get a checkup. A month ago my brothers convinced me that mom was either a) fine or b) pregnant which is exactly the opposite of option A. A month ago I saw my dad cry three different times in one week. I didn’t even think dads could cry; I thought it was impossible. But then, this one time, when I was six, I went with my dad to see my grandma at the retirement home. I was so excited to tell her all about the dog my parents bought us. When we got there my dad went in first to say



hi and she just kept asking him who he was. She said he looked familiar and wanted to know if they had met before. I thought she was joking but then my dad came out and said that we had to go home because visiting hours were over. It was really quiet in the car ride home so I just sat there looking out the window and finally I couldn't take it anymore. I looked over at him and said I won't ever forget who you are dad. He looked over at me, which was so dangerous at the time because he was driving a car, and smiled and then I saw tears, actual tears, start sliding down his face. That was the first and only time I had ever seen him cry, until last month. Last month he cried *three* times when he thought no one was watching. A month ago I was invited to my first sleepover, and I got an "A" on my social studies project and Kelly Kevin told me we would be friends forever. I was supposed to be happy a month ago, but I couldn't be because a month ago I found out the worst news in the world that still makes me cry myself to sleep. A month ago I found out my mom was dying from cancer.

I saw my mom run out from the building with a newspaper on her head. I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't even realize it started raining. I unlocked the doors and she jumped in and threw the paper in the backseat.

"Sorry honey, there was a longer line than I anticipated," she said. "But now, I'm all yours. Where to on our date?" she asked.

"I will direct you but it's a surprise, so I'm not telling you what we're doing yet."

"Okay," she said, "just tell me where too."

I consulted the papers in my hand that I printed off of Google maps. After about two minor detours due to my lack of map reading, she asked if she could just see the directions herself because she could probably get us there much faster. I told her I did not like her attitude and that she should remember what she always tells us which is "patience is a virtue." I got us lost only two more times, well technically three but I was just pretending I knew where we were

going so she wouldn't get mad at me. I was about to give her the paper when we accidentally came across the store. We turned left into "Fasel & Sons Garden Center" and I told her to park the car.

"Anna, are you sure this is where you wanted to go?"

"Yes, yes, now come on! We have three little purchases to make."

45 minutes later we both climbed back into the car, our clothes damp from the consistent drizzling. It took us only 20 minutes to find the products but it took 25 more minutes to load the car.

"Little purchases, Anna? Could you please tell me why we just bought 4 different types of trees?"

"I can in 10 minutes. Now could you please pull out of the parking lot and go west on Pulaski Avenue."

I knew exactly where we were going from the gardening store so we didn't get lost. We pulled into Mt. Olivet cemetery just as the rain let up. I knew my mom was so confused; I could see it in her eyes. Well that and because she said "Anna, I'm so confused. Why are we at the cemetery?" I told her to stop asking so many questions and to drive where Grandma Murnane was buried. When we pulled up, I turned to her and said, "You may not get out of the car mother." We stood in front of my grandma's grave and I took out a sheet of paper from my pocket, cleared my throat, and began to read.

"Here lies Grandma Murnane. I only knew here for 6 years but she was always really nice to me. Here," I said pointing to the spot next to her grave, "is where Grandpa Murnane will be buried when he dies at the age of 103."

"Anna," my mom said but I cut her off.

"No talking until I'm done!"

“After talking with Grandpa I learned that this is for dad and this one’s for you. I don’t know, something about family plots which is weird if you ask me...” I said.

“Anna,”

“Sorry! I will get to my point! And no interrupting!” I said.

I had my entire speech planned. I had everything I wanted to say written down on my sheet of paper but then I looked up at my mom. There she was, just looking at me. My mom, in the flesh; the woman who always bought me Reese’s when I was sick and wrote “I love you” on my lunch bag. I could run up to her and hug her if I wanted to and the thought of being able to do that now but not in a couple of months made me cry. To make matters worse I just started telling her everything. I begged her not to be mad at me and told her that last month I was hiding in the cabinet under the sink in the kitchen because Colin and Ben were picking on me.

“Anna, I’m not mad that you were hiding in the cabinet,” she said confused, “I now get why all the cleaning supplies were all over the place in the cabinet, but I’m not mad,” she said.

“I’m sorry!” I cried.

“Anna, you don’t have to apologize for that,” she said smiling at me.

“No, not-sniff- that. I’m sor-sniff-ry! I’m sorry you’re dying!” I screamed.

The smile disappeared and she gasped the tiniest gasp.

And then I lost it. I told her that when I was hiding I heard her tell my dad the news in the kitchen. I told her I knew she only had 6 months to a year to live. I told her I knew it was a glioblastoma brain tumor and it was the size of a golf ball. I told her that I didn’t even know how to pronounce “glioblastoma” and kept calling it a “jellyblasto.” And how can something the size of a golf ball even get in a brain. I told her that I Googled it and I know what’s going to happen but I don’t want it too. I know she’s going to start forgetting things and she won’t have hair anymore. I know she might forget my name but to remember that it’s because she’s sick and it’s

not because she doesn't love me anymore. I stopped to take a deep breath but before I could talk again she spoke.

“Oh, Anna,” she said breathless, kneeling down in front of me and enveloping me in a hug. “Oh God Anna, this is just so much to take... wait, why are we here Anna? Why did you want to come here?”

I wanted to stop crying, I really did, but I couldn't so I just keep blabbering through my tears. I told her that I found the list she had on her computer. I told her I wasn't snooping but I needed it to look stuff up for school and I saw the list she made, the one that said “Things I want to do before I die.” The first one on her list said, “I want to see my kids grow up.” She didn't cry the entire time we were there until I said that.

“Anna, I'm going to try everything I can to fight this, I promise you that. But you have to know that this is a really bad thing growing in my brain and it's really strong. There are no guarantees for anything but I will do everything imaginable if it means more time with you guys.”

I didn't know what to say so I kept hugging her and talking; I had a month's worth of knowledge that I needed to say. I told her that I didn't tell anyone what I knew except for grandpa Murnane and I only told him after I found the list on the computer. When I called him I made him cross his heart, hope to die, and promise to stick a needle in his eye, if he ever told anyone what I was about to tell him. He came over for dinner that night, well, he kind of just showed up but then after dinner he and I said we had some important business to attend to. Everyone thought we were working on my math homework but really we weren't doing math. We both hate math. He told me he knew about the prognosis and I made him first define what prognosis meant and then made him explain what was going on.

“I was just so sad when I read that on your computer that I wanted to do something,” I said, “which bring me to the trees.”

For one whole month I worked with my grandpa on my plan. I researched all different types of trees for an entire week. I dedicated all my attention to tress which is probably the reason I got a minus on my math homework that week. I was more concerned with leaf structure rather than what a lowest common denominator was but I don't care because who needs math anyways? After I picked out what trees I wanted, my grandpa talked to the cemetery owner people and they guys at Fasel's and everyone said they were ok with our plan and it wouldn't be a problem.

“So I bought you four trees, Mom. And we can plant them right here,” I said running across the road to the empty stretch of green grass across from our family plot.

She started crying harder by the minute and I didn't want her too so I continued talking.

“Four trees, one for me, one for Colin, and one for Ben. Oh, and one for dad! And if we plant them right here, and you're there, then you will always be able to see us grow. And we will grow and grow and grow and keep growing for as long as you are here.”

She wiped her tears away from her face and walked over to where I was standing.

“Here is where we will plant the Sugar Maple, and that will remind us of how you always told us to be nice, sweet people. And when we look at it we will think, ‘It's nice to be important but more important to be nice,’ just like you always told us. And here is where the Weeping Willow will go,” I said, running to the next spot.

“And that one will remind us that it's ok to be sad and that we can cry because this isn't fair at all. But then right when we are getting super sad we will see,” I ran over to the next spot, “the October Maple Glory! Mom, that tree is so pretty and because it has October in the name we

will think of you because your birthday is in October and we will always remember how pretty you are.”

I ran to the very last spot and had to turn to face where she was standing. I had to shout a little bit for her to hear me.

“And last but not least, this is where the Saucer Magnolia will go. That one’s for dad because I asked grandpa what your wedding flowers were and he said Magnolias. I got a tree for dad so when he sees this he will remember how happy you guys were and how pretty you looked on your wedding day.”

I saw her hand move to her face to wipe away more tears so I ran back over to her. She wrapped me in a hug and squeezed me so tight but I didn’t mind. I knew she needed it and more importantly, I needed it.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you so much Anna,” she said.

“Forever?” I asked.

“Forever.” She said.

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“So you see, I am a lot of things. I am an 8 year old who doesn’t really understand why bad things happen to good people. I am my mom’s best friend, or so she tells me and I am my grandpa’s favorite, or so I tell him. I am my daddy’s little girl and I am the first person my brother’s love to pick on; it’s okay though because I know they love me and no matter how mean they are to me I love them too. I am currently a fourth grader and I plan on saving the world someday, I just don’t know how or when yet. I am not afraid though, of saving the world, or of 5th grade, or of spiders anymore. I don’t have to be. Because of all the things I am, no matter

how sad I get, I have to remember that I am the luckiest girl in the world because I have my mom as my guardian angel who loves me and will be with me forever.”

I stepped down from the stool they had me stand on, walked in front of the alter, bowed my head like my dad told me to, turned and walked to the middle of the aisle. I started crying when I put my hand on the casket.

“I will love you and remember you forever. Please don’t forget me mom,” I whispered

[RETURN](#)



## **I Met Her on the Stairs**

Anthony Hollmaier

I met her on the stairs. My calves were burning, and I could feel the saturated white cotton of my undershirt sticking to my armpits. I sighed, frustrated with my aching legs and the fact that from now until I finally got home, I would have to consciously keep my arms low enough that no one could see their underlying stains. More likely than not, I would soon have to buy another pack of white shirts. I pinched the front of my flannel, making sure to get the tee underneath. Pulling it in and out from my chest, I desperately tried to get some air circulating in order to limit the flooding. As soon as the first cold front of fall rolls in, everyone immediately turns up their heat. I prefer to put on a few more layers, which works well at my apartment or when I go outside, but is always too warm everywhere else. Cursing the broken elevator and the overzealous landlord, I turned the corner. Nine flights down. Five to go.

She was on the next landing. She had her headphones in and was dancing around, eyes tight shut with fists clenched, high above her head, alternating like some aerobics routine from an “I Love the 80’s” special. It made her green sweatshirt lift above her waistline. That, and the torn v-neck of her collar showed just enough skin to catch my eye, but hid enough to let my imagination run wild. I became jealous of her jeans. They got to dance with her. They got to hold her hips while she led them through the rhythm. I wanted to join her. She looked so happy and carefree as she bounced up and down, spinning around with her long brown hair flowing about her face. I wanted to dance with her on the landing, listening to my favorite song. Listening to her song.

I caught myself staring. Luckily she hadn’t noticed. I looked around. No one else had noticed either. *Why would there be anyone else in a stairwell?* It wasn’t usually a place that people hung around. But usually there weren’t pretty girls dancing on landings either. Just to be



sure, I doubled checked, looking around again. Nobody. Nothing but the white cinderblock walls. Or at least they used to be white. Now they were kind of an off-white grayish color with spots from spilled drinks, hocked loogies, and fingertip smudges. The fluorescent bulbs gave off a faint buzz overhead, hitting everything with a glow that made you wish that there were windows, even if it was 9:32 on a Friday night in October. Streetlights. Starlight. Any light besides the harsh glare coming from the tubes overhead.

But this wasn't the movies. There were no lights, no camera, and no action. This wasn't a setting, and I wasn't a star. I wasn't meeting this girl for the first time accompanied by my quirky best friend, and there was no apropos indie-pop melody in the background. People don't just meet each other on the stairs, share headphones, and start dancing on landings. Who was I kidding? Besides, I *really* had to get to the party. It was my friend Janice's golden birthday. She was 24 on the 24<sup>th</sup>, something she considered a big deal. I started up the steps.

As I got closer, the sweat on my shirt got colder. My skin turned clammy. She just kept dancing. My footsteps echoed, one after the other on the concrete stairs. I was four steps away, and she was dancing. A drop slowly exited my armpit, making its way down my side, leaving a gleaming, sticky trail to show its route. It sped up, like a runner putting on the kick, and crossed the finish line, soaking into the waistband of my boxer-briefs (which, despite the fitting 32-34 inch measurement on the tag, had become noticeably uncomfortable). I wished I could soak into my surroundings. Or run past her.

One step. Still dancing.

I lifted my left foot, and I was about to set it down, when her song must have picked up. She began swinging her arms up and down, and in and out to a silent song, her head shaking from side to side, eyes still shut as she lip-synced the words. I didn't know what to do. I stood there,

my left hand on the railing, my right held up, and my left foot suspended as if I were preparing to knock her out with some sort of crane kick from “The Karate Kid”.

“Excuse me,” I said. My voice cracked, as I hadn’t talked to anyone the whole ride uptown. I sounded timid, like a high school freshman trying to get his first homecoming date. I put my foot down. I slid to the left, and hugged the wall, hoping to just sneak around her; but her twirling blocked my path. Dodging her flailing arms, I jumped to the right, grabbing the railing to keep my balance. Putting my back to the rail I held my hands out like a man at gunpoint, just trying to slide past.

“Excuse me,” I said, this time a little more assertive, “I’ve just gotta sneak through here real quick.” I sidestepped.

She swung around again, this time inches from my nose.

“Jesus!” I shouted, ducking. Her brown eyes jolted open. They really do look like a deer in the headlights. Big and brown, like two glasses of root beer. Or even better, Guinness. Real beer was preferable, as a majority of my successes with women have come with the help of more than a couple of glasses on either side. I thank alcohol for being the leading cause of the most of my co-ed encounters, but I just as quickly blame it for my sloppy performances (although, it is probably – and by probably I mean undoubtedly - my inexperience that’s to blame).

Her big doe eyes were mere inches away, and seeing me invading her personal space (albeit unintentionally), they opened even wider. She pulled her headphones out.

“I’m so sorry!” she said. “I just got caught up in my music.” She innocently held up the headphones, looking me in the eye.

“No, no it’s fine,” I said. “It was just my face. Not like it’s important or anything.”

She averted her eyes, looking down, her own face apologetic. I realized that my dry sense of humor really wasn’t appropriate at the moment.

“Seriously. It’s fine. You didn’t even hit me,” I said, a smile cracking at the corner of my mouth.

She wasn’t buying it.

“What are you listening to?” I asked. I was amazed at my own confidence, but I needed to get her mind off of her almost assault.

“‘Mr. Jones’,” she said, finally looking up. “By the Counting Crows.”

“I love the Counting Crows!” I realized that it sounded like small talk, but it was true.

“I like them because I feel like they’re singing to me,” she said.

Oh boy. She was one of those girls. The kind that took a good band and put them on a pedestal, worshipping one of the members (usually the lead singer, or, for some reason, the bassist) and feeling like every single one of their sappy lyrics was written just for them. I’ve met those girls. They’re the kind of girls that made you hate British alt-rock bands, because you weren’t the first one to tell her that all of the stars shine just for her, and yes, these stars are, in fact, all yellow. You just can’t compete with that. But you can try. And you do. And you buy a bass guitar, and you practice nearly every day for a month, only to sell it at your parents’ next garage sale for a net loss of over 50%. I’ve met those girls.

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “Why’s that?”

“Because my name is Maria,” she answered, “And they sing about her a lot.”

*Nice call, jackass. There you go judging people again before you even meet them. Recover. Get out of your head and into the conversation!*

“There’s a piece of Maria in every song that they sing” I blurted, quoting more Crows’ lyrics.

*Not like that!*

*God you sound corny. She listens to them. I thought. You don't seem any cooler for proving your lyrical prowess.*

*It just happened!* I thought, trying to defend myself. *It's not like it was a pre-meditated showing off.*

*She's going to think you're an idiot.*

“Exactly!” she said. “I was just cutting it up. You know, showing off some of my Spanish dancing.” She laughed, and her eyes smiled.

Now I was the one that was surprised. Not only was I talking to this girl, but she was enjoying it. She thought I was funny. And she was talking back. Maybe this was the movies. I watched the previews.

“Looked good to me.” I was suave as hell, giving her a sly grin.

“Oh yeah?” she'd say. “What about you? You got anything?”

“I've been known to dabble.”

And with that I would take her right hand in my left, place my own right on the small of her back, just like my friend Kelly had taught me. Kelly and I were good friends in college, and when she finally got engaged to her high school sweetheart, she dragged me to dance lessons with her and her fiancé. She said it was because she wanted me to “find somebody” at her wedding. Maybe she did - she was always trying to set people up, like she would get godmother privileges or something – but I'm pretty sure that she did it just so that I didn't crush any of her bridesmaids' toes.

I didn't really "find anyone" at that wedding, although I did almost get a date with a girl from the groom's side thanks to Kelly's dance lessons (and by that I mean thanks to the open bar). But this time, the dance lessons would do the work.

I pulled Maria close, her slender thighs fitting perfectly between mine. Blinking back surprise, she would reach down and grab the headphones, first putting one in her ear, then the other in mine. Her hand was soft against my cheek as it pulled it back down, returning it to my own.

The guitar struck up. "Sha-la-la-la-la-la-la"

The previews ended.

"Lookedgoodtome," I said.

"Sorry?"

"Sorry. I said you dance well. It... It looked good to me," I articulated.

And as fast as it had begun, it was over. I had gotten ahead of myself. She wasn't concerned that I had quoted lyrics to her, and I took that as a sign that she liked me for the real me and not for the me in the previews. All of a sudden I'm thinking that she's perfect, and I'm falling head-over-heels in love. I'm invested, even though I've just met her, and for some reason I think I have something to lose – ignoring the fact that I had already thrown my dignity out the window in this conversation. Let's be honest. When again in my life am I going to find a girl this good looking with actual taste in music that likes to (and actually can) dance? And she thinks that I'm funny. *And* she has a smile that I'm pretty sure five out of five dentists would recommend Trident to use in their commercials, because it would significantly increase their sales. Seriously. What are the chances? Not likely.

“Thanks,” she said, charming me back to reality. “You get a lot of practice out here when your roommate is constantly studying for her bar exam.”

She was doing well at remaining cordial, despite the obvious rift that I had imagined into existence between us. It wasn’t going to work. I knew it. She didn’t have to keep up the charade.

“Well I really should - I gotta - I’m gonna go. But it was nice to meet you...”

“Maria,” she chimed in. “So do you live around here? I’ve been here over nine months, and I’ve never seen you. Although I suppose I almost didn’t see you just now, either.” She smiled.

My face started to get hot. It began in my forehead, and then, as if not wanting to be left out, my neck joined in and they began a tortuous race to meet in the middle.

“No, I’m actually visiting a friend. It’s her birthday.”

“Oh! Is it Janice? I love Janice! I was actually going to go home and get ready for her party,” she pointed her thumb over her shoulder, down the hall, “but this song came on, and, well, you know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Janice. It’s her birthday and I’m on my way and – do you want me to wait for you?”

I was raised a gentleman. And apparently a glutton for punishment. My armpits began to sweat again.

She raised an eyebrow. Then, as if thinking better of it, she said, “No, I’ll be fine. I’ll just run in and get changed. Freshen up a bit, and then I’ll see you there...” She paused, waiting for me to chime in as she had.

“Okay. Sounds good. See ya.”

I turned to the next flight and took it two stairs at a time.

[RETURN](#)



## **The Bartender**

Alison Hanley

Jackie is a bartender.<sup>i</sup> She is 47 years old.<sup>ii</sup>

Jackie looks like one would expect a bartender to look. The whites of her eyes are red. Her breath smells like rubbing alcohol and cigarettes. Her boots are old and scuffed.<sup>iii</sup>

She works closely with a lot of college students.<sup>iv v</sup>

Jackie has waited on memorable clients.<sup>vi vii</sup>

Jackie never went to college.<sup>viii</sup>

Jackie has never been married and never had children.<sup>ix</sup>

Jackie has always been close to her parents.<sup>x</sup>

- i. Jackie's name has been changed.
- ii. Jackie has lived in Milwaukee her whole life. She was born and grew up on the Southwest side, moved to the East side after she graduated high school, and finally settled on central Milwaukee, a bit north of Marquette's campus, near where she currently works. She walks to work every day, four blocks south, six blocks west. She leaves a little before five p.m. and usually doesn't get home until after three a.m.
- iii. Her irises, an electric green, are always alight and playful and they never stop roving. She shows her slightly-yellowed teeth only when she laughs her deepest of laughs, when she forgets to be self conscious and has to place her long, worn hand on her stomach to calm her breathing – the kind of laugh we shared when she came into the bathroom after a few hours behind the bar and had to sneak a cigarette, lest she keep “getting the jitters.”
- iv. The first time I saw her, she was consoling a drunk girl. The girl was slurring her speech, her body was hunched, and her long, brown hair displayed a waterfall on top of the once-polished bar. Her name was Jordan. She was crying after Jackie had pulled her away from a group of men who were making bets amongst each other who would get to sleep with her first (“I have bartender ears,” Jackie explained to me with a laugh that sounded more like a cough. “I hear everything.”). Jordan was crying because she didn't want to be an environmental engineer, she explained between sobs, and she just wanted to get married and have children. She hiccupped as she tried to wipe away the remnants of the long trail of dark makeup that stained her porcelain cheeks. Jackie plopped an oversized, greasy bowl of chips on the counter, poured herself a beer. She lit herself a cigarette and blew the smoke over her left shoulder, away from Jordan, who was on her right side, and Jackie put her hand over Jordan's. I watched as she told Jordan about how, years ago, she thought all she wanted was to get married, have kids, and occupy herself completely with something other than herself. So she let herself fall in love, or “what she thought was love.” Jackie got pregnant. She coughed and But she was still a teenager, not unlike Jordan. She didn't see any other way but to abort the baby, despite what she thought she wanted. Jackie cried a little as she told Jordan that she still thinks about it every day. She wiped the back of her and across her face, wrapped her long, spidery hands around her glass and sipped her beer. I watched her tell Jordan she was beautiful and only needs to worry about herself and what's best for her. She held her hand the whole time. I never heard Jackie talk about it again.
- v. The first real conversation I had with Jackie was a few weeks after what I witnessed when she talked to Jordan. We got coffee. Jackie sat right across from me and hugged me when she walked in the door, even though she didn't really know me. I wasn't uncomfortable, though, as she wrapped her thin arms around me and drew my chest to hers. When we sat down, the table was small and our knees nearly touched. I noticed her green eyes. They were heavily lined with black kohl, and crinkled on the sides when she laughed. When I asked her who she wishes she still got to see in her bar, she crossed her legs and wrung her hands, cracking her knuckles and twisting her fingers. “Well, there was Andrew,” she said as she ran her fingers, covered in veins, through her long, thin hair. She fumbled as her hands got stuck in a tangle of red hair. He was about 36 and was a dental student, she explained, her eyes suddenly looked heavier and her voice quiet. He used to come into the bar with his classmates at least twice a week until he killed himself. “The guys he went to school with always looked up to him,” she told me, as she tried to vanquish one of the scuffs that plagued her well-worn, leather boots. “I still keep in contact with the guys [his friends]. Andy was such a nice man. It devastated all the guys. They became closer, but they almost fell apart.” She looked at me, her green eyes on fire with something. Sadness? Memory, maybe. “He was the last person I would ever expect...I thought I knew people. I remember crying in the bathroom with his wife.” Jackie, his wife, and his classmates had a reunion at the diner this past summer. They all made a toast to Andy.



vi. When I asked her more about clients that have stayed with her, she laughed, the tambour light and cagey. “Ben Kingsley? I got him tipsy one day.” She uncrossed her legs and I felt her knobby knees bump against mine under the table as she bounced them up and down. “I thought, ‘I’ve got an Oscar winner in my bar!’ Then I told him I have a Vera Wang dress if he wanted to take me to the Oscars.” Her eyes glimmered in the dim glow of the room, alight with mischief and a little bit of pride.

vii. Jackie’s yellowed green eyes light up in a magnetic craze as she recalls one of her most memorable experiences. “The first lady and I are like this.” She grinned as she glued her once-restless eyes to me and intertwined her long fingers in a knot. “There were rumors that she might come in, but because of the Secret Service you don’t know until the last minute.” She gripped her hands to the sides of the table and raised her left eyebrow. “I still remember what she ordered. Absolute cheeseburger and fries. She ate all the fries,” Jackie remembered with triumph, her face full of pride and excitement with the knowledge that such an “elegant woman” had it in her to polish off a plate of fries, “even though she didn’t finish the burger.” As Jackie explained, her cheeks flushed and her mascara-caked eyelashes never stopped blinking. “I wanted to take a picture with her on my phone, but it was in my purse, and I was *not* going to reach into my purse and grab something *in front of the Secret Service.*”

viii. After graduating high school, she left home. “I’m not a college person,” she laughed, the sound pure and sincere, if not a little rueful. It was the kind of laugh that makes you pay attention. “I tried to go to Whitewater. I lasted until Christmas.” Her smile faded as she turned her eyes downward. Jackie never went back to school.

ix. “I see myself 20 years ago, and I would do the same freakin’ thing,” Jackie explains to me as she remembers asking Jordan’s friends to help her cover herself up and then telling Jordan about her abortion. “I had a meeting with [Jordan] in my office - I took her to the bathroom and talked to her. I’m protective.” Across the table, she reaches over and grabs my hand. She smiles, her teeth stained but still beautiful, because when she smiles I can feel it and I know she means it. “I’m protective. I don’t have kids, never been married, it just didn’t happen. Now it’s like you’re my kids. This is what I would do, this is what I would be telling them. Somebody’s got to look out for you guys.” She rubs her thumb, calloused but soft, across the back of my hand as she let go.

x. “[Working], it’s like you’re on stage. Everyone that comes in there...I’m there for [them] to have fun. They don’t want to hear my problems,” Jackie explained with complete practicality, as if she were simply showing me how to tie my shoes. “They don’t know that my cat had to go to the vet and my mom fell down. You just kind of shut that off for eight or nine hours.” I couldn’t comprehend how she was able to rationalize this with herself so easily. Then she blinked at me, her eyelashes clumping together a bit, and her mascara starting to run as her eyes welled with dewy tears. “But my mother has Parkinson’s and I’m 47, and I’ve got to think now. My mother’s not getting better. She’s going to have to go to assisted living. We still talk, but it’s hard.” I felt her composure sort of unraveling and she wiped the bottom of her eye with a bony knuckle. “My dad says God put them through the divorce because He knew he couldn’t watch the woman he loves go through this...I had to watch her [put her] parents in a nursing home and that was God-awful. I can’t imagine what my sister and I are going to do.” She sucked on the straw of her iced coffee, but it was already empty.

[RETURN](#)



## On the Court

Matthew Sweeney

Gus the janitor let them in to the gym with his giant steel key ring. The teeth clashed together and sounded like depressing jingle bells as he turned one to the left and opened up the steel doors painted Wild Cat royal blue. They entered the cavernous gym.

“Ok, here you go guys,” he said. “Remember. Out of here by 8, OK? OK.” He pushed the cart of cleaning supplies away and disappeared around the corner where the gym teachers’ offices were located. Brian called out after him, “Thanks Gus!” and then grabbed a ball off the rack in the equipment closet. The court was empty and the hardwood was glimmering in the artificial light overhead.

The court is located in the annex building of Jefferson Memorial High School. It is the court that Brian Sloan, honors English teacher at JMHS, reserved for ten men every morning from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. Monday through Friday. They came to play basketball, three games to fifteen points. Brian had started the game a year prior after a late night in the classroom grading students’ essays on *The Grapes of Wrath*, many of which he felt were comprised of 10% insight, 10% filler and 80% SparkNotes.

On his way out that night, he passed Gus buffering the varsity basketball court and the memories of his four seasons as a JMHS Wildcat came pouring back, inundating his brain with visions of lay ups, suicide sprints, shooting drills and the trip to the final four in the 1984-85 state tournament. He asked Gus if it would be okay for him to shoot around a bit just for old times sake before he locked up for the night. He hadn’t touched a basketball in years. While Gus traversed the science hallway sweeping gum wrappers and lumps of dust into a plastic pan, Brian ran the three step shooting drill that Coach Kopecky made him and the rest of the Wildcats do every practice. One. A straight up jumper from the top of the key. Rebound. Two. Move in,

pump fake and fade away from the charity stripe. Rebound. Three. Drive to the middle of the lane for a running floater. Rebound. Repeat.

The memories poured on: Kopecky barking at him to go faster and touch the line during sprints, running the motion offense, rebounding and passing to the Cats' star point guard Colin Flemming during a game against Rockhurst. Feelings washed over him in awesome waves: feelings of youth, energy, determination and competitive thirst. He remembered the desire to win, the devotion to the game he once held. He remembered the insatiable urge he had as a kid to keep playing. When he was eleven, Brian used to sneak out of bed in the middle of the night while his parents and siblings slept to shoot around on the driveway hoop. He used the headlights of his father's Buick to cut through the dense November dusk and illuminate the backboard, rim and net. He dribbled, squared up and shot. Every swish sounded like a violent whisper in the dead of night. He exhaled opaque white carbon dioxide. It was late, dark and freezing, but he couldn't stop. It felt too good. He kept stepping back, jumping higher, and flicking his shooting wrist harder. A twelve-footer, swish. A fifteen-footer, sunk it. A twenty-footer, cashed. He backed up onto the front lawn and launched a quixotic prayer that clanged off the crook where backboard meets rim and crashed into the hood of Mr. Sloan's Buick and set off the alarm. *What in God's name is going on out here!?* Brian Lawrence Sloan, *get your butt in the house this instant! Do you know what time it is!?* You've got school in the morn—

“Brian... Brian! What are you still doing here man, you know what time it is?” Gus shouted from the doorway. “Come on man it's late, I gotta lock up, you gotta get out of here. Hell man you got school in the morning.”

Brian had drenched his J. Crew Oxford and the waistband of his Dockers in sweat. Gus watched him gather up his messenger bag and corduroy blazer and muttered, “Guero loco. No tiene cosas mayores hacer en la medianoche en miercoles? Necesitas novia.” Brian desperately

wanted more of whatever it was he was feeling so he struck a deal with Gus to use the court for an early morning pick up game. He invited some of his old high school teammates who still lived in the vicinity of JMHS, who in turn invited a coworker and a neighbor and a friend of a friend until they finally found ten for a full game.

They came for their health, both mental and cardiovascular. They came to get away from themselves. Off the court, they were sales executives and insurance agents and doctors and accountants and real estate lawyers. They were normal and mundane nine to fivers trudging through the daily grind, wondering what it was that they were actually *doing* in this life. Wondering if it would ever add up to anything real. On the court they were superstars, league MVPs, All-Americans, hustlers, three point assassins, monsters in the paint. On the court they felt like men. Off the court they acted, dressed and spoke like men, but deep down they knew they weren't. They were just boys. Scared little boys. On the court they felt free. Free from thoughts of rising property taxes and mortgages and car payments and client lunches and credit card debt. Free from the trials and tribulations of upper-middle class modernity. On the court there was only offense and defense. Pass, shoot or dribble. Rebound and help out on defense.

They warmed up: dribbled nowhere in particular, talked about nothing in particular, took the shots they liked to take in games. Colin, once a teammate of Brian's on the 1982-1986 JHMS basketball team and now a financial planner at Fidelity Investments, left to get a drink from the water fountain. The water chilled his teeth and as he looked up, he noticed something was missing. Colin's varsity basketball portrait had been replaced. Instead of a 24x36 framed photograph of sixteen year old Colin in mid-jump shot hanging above the fountain, there was one of a stocky young man swinging a lacrosse stick. He thought, *Where the hell did it go? It was just here last week. I've been replaced by a lacrosse player?*

He re-entered the gym and casually asked Brian, “Hey Sloan, you know what happened to my portrait?”

“What?”

“My varsity basketball portrait. The big old picture of me taking that jumper against Middleton sophomore year. It’s been hanging above the water fountain since ‘86 and now it’s gone. Wondering if you knew where it went?”

“Uh... I don’t know. I’m not in charge of the decorations around here.”

Colin felt marginalized and infuriated, but he feigned composure.

“Did they move it somewhere or like get rid of completely? I mean I’m just curious, you know?”

“Uh, again I’m not really sure. They don’t tell me about that stuff, but if I had to guess I’d say they probably put it down in the basement to make room for the current athletes’ photos.” He took a shot, bricked and chased the rebound.

“Oh...OK, I.... I get that,” *How could they do that!? I’ve had that spot for twenty-five years! I deserve that spot. I’m a hall of famer at this school. I got us to the goddamn final four. This is bullshit. How could they do this to me?*

“What are you guys talking about?” Allen, an accountant who played small forward and always knew the score, asked Colin.

“Oh my uh... my senior portrait for basketball isn’t where usually is.”

“You went to school here?” He stepped into a shot.

“Yeah I went here. Class of ’86. I still hold two records: all time leader in assists and three pointers.”

Brian shook his head. *You never miss an opportunity to talk about yourself do you? Why don’t you just carry around your highlight reel on DVD so you can bust it out whenever,*

wherever? “Actually, you’re not the three-point leader anymore Colin. Some kid broke the record last year. Cortez Smith, he plays at UCLA now.”

“For real? Huh... I didn’t know that,” Colin replied. *Are you kidding me? Why didn’t anyone tell me? How could I... Fuck that, I’m still the best three-point shooter this school has ever had. Best shooter. Ever. Period. Junior year against Oakcrest. Took seven three’s and hit seven three’s. Seven for fucking seven from behind the arc. Cortez Smith never got his team to State. Still the best. All-time leader. At point guard, number 21. Colin Flemming. Still the best.*

“You ever play any college ball Colin?” Allen inquired.

Colin didn’t say a word. He just shook his head from side to side quickly and then continued taking shots.

“I played in college,” Brian said.

“Oh really? Where at?” asked Allen.

“Uh... you were a walk on at Minnesota,” Colin interjected.

“Yeah. What’s your point?” Brian asked.

“My point is, you road the bench for four years. I don’t think that really qualifies as ‘playing college ball.’ I mean, no offense man, but... it’s true,”

Allen sensed the tension rising between Brian and Colin so he tried to change the subject. He shouted out to everyone, “Hey come on boys, let’s run it. First game. Let’s go.”

They matched up. Brian brought the ball to the top of the key. Colin began to get into defensive position.

*You know what Colin? You’re right. I did ride the bench. I got dunked on every practice and played a whopping sixteen minutes in my entire college career.* Brian checked the ball and Colin checked it right back. *But there’s only a handful of guys in this world that get to say they were part of a DI college basketball team and I’m one of ‘em. So FUCK. YOU.* He lowered his

left shoulder and drove to his right. He pulled up at the elbow and launched a high-arching jumper. Perfect form. Swish. 1-0. Colin's nostrils flared. The game was on.

These men were all raised on television. TV told them that adult life would be full of action and adventure and romance and drama and hilarious situations. They were lied to. Life had turned out to be one long, monotonous, straight line. Straight to the middle. Life was sitting in traffic and staring at billboards advertising insipid products. Life was waiting in line at the post office. Life was checking their inboxes over and over and over again. Basketball was their escape. On the court they could relive the halcyon days of high school basketball where memory embellished their highlights and edited their blunders from history.

For instance, Colin was perpetually trying to recreate the big game twenty-six years prior in which he defeated JMHS's rival by sinking a fifteen-foot fade away from the baseline with a hand in his face as the final seconds of the game ticked away and the shrill buzzing sound emanating from the scoreboard was drowned out by riotous cheers of bleacher-seated peers, parents and pillars of the community. A few games later he suffered a torn Anterior Cruciate Ligament and was sidelined for the remainder of the season and the college scouts who had been regularly attending his games (as well as sending letters and brochures and some even making personal visits to his home to discuss their school's basketball program and the myriad of opportunities Colin could have at their school and even hinting at athletic scholarships that would cover 100% of his tuition) ceased all contact with him.

In addition to Brian, Colin and Allen, there was Phil who played in the post either as a power forward or center before returning to reality and his pediatric medicine practice. He came here in hopes of reducing his flabby stomach that had begun to resemble that of an NFL offensive lineman. Then there was Mark, also a post player, he used these games to take out his workplace anger and relieve stress from home. They all hated their jobs, but none more than

Mark. He was the oldest junior account executive at DDB Worldwide. Many of his bosses were ten years younger than he and his livelihood was constantly being threatened by twenty-two year-olds. He had been passed over for promotions more times than he could count.

Consequently, Mark boxed out hard, he blocked shots hard, he threw elbows hard and he fouled really, really hard.

Mark played the toughest, ugliest kind of basketball there is, fueled by terrible memories playing over and over in his head on a non-stop loop. Memories of his annual performance reviews. *We think you're doing great right where you are. We need an experienced guy like you down in the trenches. These kids need someone to show 'em the ropes. You understand don't you Mark?* All the times he wanted to tell those overpaid media whores to fuck themselves, knock over his cubicle walls and storm out of the office to start his own agency, but he didn't. He just swallowed hard and took deep breaths and told himself that sooner or later things would start to work out. Memories of his wife one night last year after she got drunk at a family Christmas party. *You know what? Yes. I do. I want to. I want to leave you. There I said it. But what would be the point in divorcing you? Huh? It'd never work. You couldn't afford the alimony or the child support... you're practically a fucking intern!* Memories of his Father. *Don't you see now, why I pushed so hard for law school?*

The second game got underway and their hairlines dampened with perspiration. Each bucket made came with three seconds of pure ecstasy for the guy who put it up. Their legs grew rubbery from so many trips up and down the court, but they loved it. They hoped the clock would never strike eight because when it did they would all have to go back. Back to their offices or a commuter train car or the dinner table where they felt like they were in the middle of an ocean drifting in place. Not drowning, just drifting in place. They often came home after a



long day and bypassed their families and caught glimpses of themselves in the mirror and wondered how it ever got to be this bad.

On the court, they were consumed by their pounding hearts and that glorious feeling that comes upon hearing the crisp snapping of nylon. After each made three-pointer they held their follow through, shooting arm extended straight up and hand reaching into an invisible cookie jar, while backpedaling to get back on defense. None of them thought about anything during this moment because who could ever think of something as trivial as a board meeting or dinner with the in-laws after knocking down a shot from beyond the arc? It took a lot of courage to put up a three and if it went in... it was indescribably good. Maybe it was the sense of personal satisfaction or the relief that they hadn't messed up or maybe it was the exercise endorphins, but it got them higher than any dosage of Wellbutrin or Lexapro ever could.

The final game began, the best of three. Colin, the perennial point guard, held the ball at the top of the key. He dribbled with supreme confidence, pounding the rock through his legs and scanning for a lane or an open look. He saw Jake, a small forward before nine a.m. and insurance claims investigator afterwards. Quick pass. Jake caught it and pump faked, then attacked towards the basket. Defensive arms rose up in the air and bodies clogged the paint but he was sailing through the lane in a way that he was just out of everyone's reach and he threw up a teardrop over the fingertips.

The ball hung in the air. Their faces went blank and their eyes locked on the Wilson Evolution brand regulation size ball and it was in this moment that nothing else mattered. Life was on hold. They watched the high arching shot descend in slow motion through the air wondering if it would land gently between the braided nylon strands or ricochet off the heel of the hoop. They readied their legs to leap up after it regardless. If Jesus Christ walked into the gym, none of them would have noticed. They waited. It snapped through. A crisp, clean point. In

Jake's mind, the crowd went wild and Marv Albert shouted, "A spectacular shot!" He pictured the recently divorced brunette whose daughter is on his son's AYSO soccer team sitting in the stands and watching him hustle back nonchalantly, but she wasn't there. The bleachers were folded into the wall. No one was watching. They were all alone.

The game wound down. They dripped with sweat. 14-13. "D up!" Allen shouted, "No two's! No two's!" Mark posted up in the paint and extended his right hand calling for the ball without the use of words. Colin brought the ball up, crossed over and came around a screen. Mark posted up, extended his arms out and shot Colin a look. *Come on, hit me. I've got a mismatch here, I can dump in an easy bucket. Tie this game up. Pass. Pass. Hit me. Hit me. Hit me.* Colin faked a pass to the wing, shook his defender and let a shot go from beyond the arc. *Still the best. Watch this Cortez whoever the fuck. Watch me sink this. Show them you're still the best. Sink this. All-time leader in three-pointer field goals made. Number 21. Colin Flemming. Show them that you're still the best.* The shot was rushed, off balance and too long. Way off the mark. It pinged off the back of the steel and into Mark's hands. He tried for the put back as defending hands and limbs came crashing down on him.

"Ah! Foul. Foul. I got one," Reset. Colin started again at the top of the key. Mark posted up and called for the ball once more with a raised right hand. He dug in to his defender. Mark gave Colin another look. *I've got this. Hit me with the ball, man. Didn't you see how I just boxed this guy out? He can't guard me. I'm gonna spin off him, lay it up and tie it up. Hit me goddamnit! HIT ME.* Same play all over again. Colin shot from way outside and missed badly. Except this time Phil got the board and sailed down the court for an easy lay up. 15-13, Game over. Mark clenched his teeth.

They started slapping each other's hands and patting each other's shoulders and saying, "Good game, good game, goodgame, guhgame, guhgame..." Mark approached Colin, but not to high five him.

"What the fuck man? I was open back there. Could've tied the game."

"I didn't see you, sorry man."

Mark raised his voice, "You didn't see me!? I was WIDE. FUCKING. OPEN."

Colin started walking away, "Take it easy. I didn't see you. That's just the way it goes sometimes." Once again, Mark went unnoticed. He stood and dripped and breathed heavily. Colin tried to catch up with the rest of them on their way to the water fountain. Mark snapped. He made fists. He blindsided Colin, tackled him to the floor. Colin fell flat on his face. Mark flipped him over and started punching. Quick, repetitive shots to the jaw and cheek and nose and forehead. Colin put up a slight defense, but Mark was too motivated.

He punched and shouted. "DO YOU SEE ME NOW!?" He punched and shouted. "DO YOU SEE ME NOW MOTHERFUCKER!?"

Brian screamed. "MARK! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!? GET OFF HIM!"

Mark kept punching. They all shrieked. "JESUS CHRIST MAN, STOP!" He wouldn't stop. He couldn't stop. "MARK! PLEASE STOP! YOU'RE GONNA FUCKING KILL HIM!" They wanted to step in and pry the two apart, but they were paralyzed by fear. They all hoped someone else would step in, but no one moved. They were scared. Scared little boys.

Brian screamed louder than any of them, "MARK!"

He pummeled away and shouted. **DO**. Punch. **YOU**. Punch. **SEE ME**. Punch. **NOW!?** Brian and Allen finally jumped in and peeled them apart. Silence. Mark breathed harder than he did all three games. His heaves and gasps turned into light tears and sobs. He made his way out of the gym slowly, still gasping and nursing his punching hand. The rest of the players parted

like the red sea and Mark kept walking, staring straight ahead. Brian hunched over Colin as he slowly pushed himself up with one hand and caught the drops of blood babbling out of his nose with the other hand. He shouted, “You fucking psycho! Get back here!” The Wild Cat royal blue doors slammed shut. “You crazy fuck!”

Allen shouted. “Somebody call an ambulance! Phil aren’t you a doctor? Can you do something?”

Phil answered. “Come on guys, I’m a pediatrician, not a ringside doctor.” They insisted. Do something! “Alright, alright, alright,”

Brian retrieved the first aid kit from the equipment closet and gave it to Phil. He put on latex gloves and surveyed the damage. He dabbed the blood with gauze. They all crowded around and watched, but didn’t want to get too close.

“Well, that nose is definitely broken and he might’ve fractured your cheek. A slight concussion is a possibility, but that’s worst case scenario.”

Gus walked in wheeling his cleaning supplies in. “Hey you boys gotta get out-- oh shit! Que cono esta pasando aqui!?” No one said anything. Gus’s eyes were fixed on Colin’s blood stained face. “Goddamn it Brian! You told me this wasn’t a fight club!”

“Gus, everything’s fine. We were playing ball and... it was an accident,” Brian replied.

Gus ran his hand through his hair and looked like a Father disappointed by his reckless teenage child. “No, no, no, no. You asked me if you and your friends could use the gym before classes and I *specifically* told you, ‘You better no be starting a fight club,’ and you said you weren’t. That was a major part of the agreement.”

“It’s not a fight club Gus, I swear to you.”

“Oh so, how do you explain the guy bleeding all over the floor?”

“Look, we were playing basketball and things got a little out of hand—”

“Just get him out of here. Get him to the hospital or whatever. You deal with it. I got first period gym class comin’ in here soon. I gotta get this place cleaned up.”

They filtered out through the steel doors. Phil drove Colin to the hospital while the others slipped back to the real world. Brian was the only one who waited and searched for Mark in the locker room and bathroom, only to find him in the basement level sitting on the floor, arms wrapped around bent knees.

“Hey...” He didn’t know what to say, so he just let the words go. “What the hell happened out there?” Not in an interrogative way, but in a genuinely concerned way.

“I dunno... just got tired. Tired of being ignored. Tired of being walked on. Tired of it all. I just wanted to win one.”

“Mark... I can’t let you come to the game anymore.”

“I know. I figured.”

“Are you gonna be okay, man?”

“Probably not... but who cares? You know? Who cares? I’ve made it this far without being okay. I mean... have you ever been okay? Do you think *you’re* going to be okay?”

Brian wanted to say something sympathetic. Something Mark could carry with him, something that would comfort him during the rest of his struggle through dredges of the suburban condition. He tried to say something that would explain to Mark that even though he didn’t know him that well, he understood what he was going through and he understood why he did what he did. But Brian couldn’t say the words. He was too scared. A scared little boy. Instead he said something easy, something simple, something cowardly.

“I was talking about your hand.”

Colin healed and did not press criminal charges on the condition that his hospital visit and subsequent rhinoplasty surgery would be paid for entirely by Mark. Basketball should not

have crossed his mind. Colin had plenty of things to think about. He had clients to think about and yard work to think about and license plates to renew and college funds to grow. But still, he couldn't help but feel a stinging sense of restlessness: an urge to get back on the court. He missed gripping the ball and crouching into shooting position. He missed hanging in the air at the crest of jump shot.

Months after it happened, he returned to the scene of the fight on his way to work. Brian was there alone, taking jump shots followed by lay ups. His dribbles echoed off the rafters with grave intensity. Around the world and then straight to the cup. Fade away jumpers and stutter steps into hard drives. Head fakes against imaginary defenders. Up and under lay ups. Some shots banked in, some shots rattled around. Sometimes the rim was friendly and other times it was a real bitch.

After a few minutes, he noticed Colin. "Oh, hey. How uh..." He caught his breath. "How long you been standing there?"

"Just a minute... what happened to the game?"

"There was a slight decline in popularity after... well you know,"

"Yeah, yeah. I get that."

"Weird huh? One guy gets the living shit beat out of him one time and everybody gets scared and stops showing up... buncha wimps."

Colin chuckled. "Lot of memories on this court huh Sloan? Lot of good times."

"Yeah..." He held the ball at his side and stared up at the State championship banners hanging overhead. "Lot of shitty ones too though. Remember the time Kopecky made us do wall sits for like twelve minutes straight?"

"Oh man, that was awful. Did you ever play summer league here? That was way back. We were like eight years-old or something,"

“Yup, yup. Summer league playoffs 1976. That was the first time I ever heard an adult say the f-word. How crazy is that? Grown men swearing at little kids... over basketball.”

“That was probably my Dad,” Colin laughed. “He got banned from Summer league one year for that.”

“For real?”

“Oh yeah. I remember the game. I had four fouls with two minutes left. Game was tied. I got a steal and took off on a fast break. Whistle went off and the ref called me for reaching. I fouled out. Dad started yelling. I was pissed so I slammed the ball on the ground and stormed off. Ref called a technical on me and my old man just lost it. Started yelling louder at the ref, walked out of the bleachers and onto the court, eventually he dropped an n-bomb and that was that. Banned.”

“Whoa... I never knew that.”

“The most fucked up part of that story is during the car ride home, my dad gave me a lecture about playing aggressive defense without fouling; if I had played smarter I wouldn’t have fouled out and blown the game.”

“What a bastard,”

“You’re telling me,” Colin stared at his Johnston & Murphy shoes. “I’m not like that though. I would never do something like that my son.”

“That’s good Colin, that’s really good,”

“I mean, yeah I’m hard on him sometimes, but it’s because I know how good he can be and I want him to reach his potential and be the best player... the best person he can be. But I’d never put him through the shit my dad put me through,”

“I... I didn’t even know you had a kid.”

“Yeah, yeah. His name’s Luke, he’s twelve.”

“He play ball as well as his old man?”

“Oh yeah, he’s a good player. He’s on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade A-team over at St. Pat’s.”

“Good for him... must be fun to watch.”

“It is. I love it. Although, he had a heartbreaker game a couple weeks back that was tough to watch. He shot 8 of 9 from the field and the ninth shot would’ve won the game at the buzzer.”

“Oh man... that’s brutal. Just brutal,” Brian shook his head.

“He was devastated after that game. Never seen him so down. He was crying and crying the whole ride home and at one point he said to me, ‘I’m sorry Dad. I blew it. I’m sorry.’”

“What’d you say?”

“I said ‘Luke, I never want you to apologize to me about basketball ever again. It’s just a game. Sometimes it feels like it’s so much more than that, believe me I know, but... it’s not. It’s just a game.’”

There was a long silence.

“You wanna take a shot?” Brian asked.

“I gotta be at work soon,”

“You should take a shot”

“I’m in my work clothes man. Come on,”

Brian persisted, so Colin obliged. And this time there were no mental recreations, no flashbacks, no pressure, no sense of longing; he simply squared up and released. It meant nothing. It was beautiful and inconsequential. It was the greatest shot he’d ever taken.

[RETURN](#)





## Number 30

Matthew Bin Han Ong

I was waiting at the bus stop across Gesu Church on Wisconsin Avenue. Just got off a full day of work. Relatively warm Monday. Slanting shadows from the setting spring sun. Healthy breeze. Drove of blonde and brunette girls in short pants across the street - probably back on campus after Easter.

A tall young man in loose printed T-shirt and bright blue pants stands to my right, hands in pockets. Dark blue baseball cap, bright blue earphones. Name's Mr. Bright. On my left is Mr. Sharp. Middle-aged, donning a worker cap and a weather-worn coat. He walks to me, peering through his thick glasses. Half-points at me with his walking stick.

"Yuh got a phone?"

"Yeah. What do you wanna do with it?"

"Take it out, dial # # # - # # # #. Tell mah wife ahm comin' home."

"Sure. So it's # # #...what is it again?"

"Yuh hear me right? It's # - # - #, # - # - # - #! And tell mah wife her husband's comin' home!"

Silence as I wait for wifey to pick up my call. Mr. Sharp stares at me. Too-too in my ear. No answer.

"She's not answering."

"She not answering? Yuh sure yuh got da number right?"

"Yup."

I put my phone back in my left pocket. My black slacks. Mr. Sharp leans heavily on his stick.

"Call again."

I look at him.

“If yuh sure yuh got da number right, then fucking. Call. Again.”

I keep staring, one eyebrow half-arched. He’s my height. Maybe slightly shorter. Both my hands remain in pockets. I breathe.

“If you want me to call again, the least you could do is ask nicely and say PLEASE.”

I’m being a jerk. You gotta be a jerk to deal with assholes or they’ll happily doormat you.

His eyes bulge. Takes a few steps forward and half-swings his stick.

“Oh. Yuh wanna FUCK with me? Huh?”

I turn my back on Mr. Sharp. I start walking away. Mr. Sharp starts yelling.

“Ya FUCKING immigrants! GO BACK TO JAPAN!”

I saw it coming. Chuckled. I’m used to this. I turn my head.

“WRONG COUNTRY!”

I walk away again - he starts yelling something about Vietnam. I squint at the sun. Can’t tell. I am in ignore mode. He keeps yelling, swinging his stick as he closes in. I keep walking. I am pissed. With my back towards Mr. Sharp, I put my right hand in the air. People stop to watch. And behold, my glorious FLIP. All heads on the 12th street turn to savor the public beauty of my erect middle finger. A mast whistling in the breeze. Outlined in gold by the evening sun.

I breathe.

More yelling from Mr. Sharp. He takes a few more steps - probably beyond furious by now.

Mr. Bright suddenly moves. Puts a long black arm between Mr. Sharp and me.

“HEY!” he thunders at Mr. Sharp. “Leave him alone!”

“He COOL yo! Leave him alone!”

Mr. Sharp backs down. Mutters under his breath. Mr. Bright squares up to him, and said:

**“Yer BLACK yo! Yuh wanna pick on someone, yuh pick on yer OWN kind!”**

The air froze. Every soul silent and unmoving. My breath caught in my lungs. I turned around. What? What was that supposed to mean?

Mr. Sharp’s bus arrived. He climbed in, turned around and looked at me. Death written in his eyes. Have a good day, I said.

“Yuh aright?”

I turned and looked up at Mr. Bright. I wanted to thank him, but my tongue was tied. Funny. I had no problem wishing Mr. Sharp good health. I shook my head. Disbelief.

“Shame,” I said. I said no more. I didn’t wanna say no more, I couldn’t say no more. I am surprised at my choice of word. Or my lack of it. Shame. English, my native language. Shame was all I had to say.

Bus no. 30 stopped. I got on, glanced around at the score of black faces that swung up to meet mine, and sat down. My thoughts sat on what Mr. Bright said to Mr. Sharp like smelly, dark, over-fried lard.

[RETURN](#)



## **On Throwing Stones**

Anonymous

**Winter, 2010**

Their names were Sean and Chris. They'd been neighbors since they were six. Some days they would skip school to play basketball all day. They didn't care that the park by their houses had a net missing from the basketball hoop or that the ground was littered with empty beer cans and spent cigarettes. Whenever they would leave, their little brothers would stand at the door and wish they could go with. As a sort of consolation for leaving them behind, they always rubbed the top of their heads or nudged their shoulders. And they never left the house without kissing their mothers lightly on the cheek as they stood over the stove rubbing their temples with one hand, the other placed languidly on their left hips. Or maybe not. I don't know. All I got to see was them standing in front of me, debating which one would get to fuck me up.

\*\*\*

Before, when I walked around the city, I was bombarded with Milwaukee's vibrant colors. My mind was occupied by a constant stream of the glowing red and gold of the Wells Fargo sign, the yellow glow from the twinkling firefly lights at the Wisconsin Club, and the way the gray haze of smoke I exhaled intertwined with the deep navy of the sky. Now, though, it's hard for me to see anything but black and white.

*Milwaukee's last race riot took place in 1967. The riot lasted from July 31 through August 2, partly fueled by mounting dissatisfaction with housing in the city, which was highly segregated by race and ethnicity, and de facto segregation in Milwaukee schools. Four were killed, including 18 year-old Clifford McKissick, a black college student, who was shot by police – many argue unnecessarily – as he entered his home after throwing gasoline-filled bottles into a paint store. Hundreds of citizens and police officers were injured. 1,740 people were arrested amidst violent looting, sniping, and arson.*

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It was deep enough into winter that it was already starting to get dark at 4 p.m. I noticed the weight of the plastic bags in my hands and the miniscule twinge of warmth I felt in my left palm from the cup of coffee I was holding. I didn't really notice the broken windows of the storefronts I walked by or the way the eyes of a man who sat on the sunken front porch with a brown paper bag in his hand followed me as I walked past him. At the time, it didn't mean anything to me that the few cars that passed me slowed down as they did so. I didn't seem to notice all of these things that might signify to me that the location of the bus stop I was standing at might be "dangerous." I didn't notice any of these things until I heard two deep voices grumbling. "Which one do you want?" I heard one of them growl at the other at a more-than-audible level, "the white bitch." Suddenly all of these things made themselves apparent as I searched, desperately, for something, anything comforting.

Nothing.

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*Milwaukee has flitted in between being the first and second most racially-segregated city in America for the last decade, as decided by the US Census Bureau. The most widely-used tool in calculating residential segregation between black residents and white residents was the dissimilarity index, which determined what proportion of a minority population would have to be dispersed within a given city for each neighborhood to have a representative racial make-up. In Milwaukee, 82% of the black population would have to move for each area to reflect the city's racial diversity, based on a November 2002 study. The Guardian, a British newspaper, beseeches American citizens to realize that "every city has at least one rundown area where white people rarely venture, and another where few black people could afford to live."*

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As they approached, the fact that they were black didn't really register in my mind until one of the men (boys?) made it clear that he was only interested in pursuing me, *the white bitch*. Had to be me. I felt my body tense as one grabbed my hand with more violence and urgency than was necessary. I pulled my hand away. Everything around me s l o w e d. Every moment stretched itself out in front of me as I pled with God to make time to go by faster. He grabbed my hand again, this time squeezing until I felt my knuckles pop. His face appeared right next to mine, his breath hot on my neck, screaming at me, an endless stream *fuckareyouherewhitebitchkillyouwhitefuckIshouldbeatyou*. As I felt the rough heel of his hand make contact with my right cheekbone. I coughed a felt the sting of tears in my eyes. But I didn't want to let him see me cry as he told me all the reasons he should kill me. My eyes darted around, trying to find somewhere I could run.

Nowhere.

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**A student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee was only 19 when it happened to her in 2007. She was in her apartment on Oakland Avenue when she was awoken by a man she didn't know. He entered her home through an unlocked door. He sexually assaulted her, left "minor injuries," and then left her. Alone.**

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*While former mayors have scoffed at the idea that Milwaukee is as racially segregated as the media suggests, historians disagree, but also see a larger problem at play all across the country. John Gurda, a Milwaukee-based historian, argues that although there is no doubting Milwaukee is racially segregated, he suggests that cities like Boston and Washington D.C., though lower on the list of racially segregated cities, are equally as segregated. "It depends how you skin the cat," he says, regarding the ranking of racially-segregated cities. "But there's [no denying that there is] an American racial problem, and it's obvious here. To some degree, perception drives reality."*

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**A woman waiting at a Milwaukee County Transit System bus stop asked two men at a bus stop if the bus went east on Hampton Street in October of 2008. The two men were brothers and accompanied by their mother. The two men "responded disrespectfully," according to reporters. A video taken on the bus shows one of the men approaching and striking the woman who asked for directions. He continued to assault her and threatened to shoot anyone who intervened. He then got off of the bus with his brother and mother and walked away.**

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Now, most days I can walk down Wisconsin Avenue and preoccupy myself with my chemistry homework or the fact that I'm late for work. I reduce my brain to a machine with synapses and pathways and hormones, all of which I try to control. I force my mind to light itself on fire in an endless stream of thoughts about the papers I have to write, the days I have to work, the word choice my boyfriend used in his text last night, how long I will have to nap in between classes, and the last time I called my mother, anything to avoid thinking about that day, or the way the man I will never really understand looked as he walked away - his long, sinewy figure getting smaller, smaller, smaller, until he

disappeared.

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After a few unanswered emails and hours sitting in front of my computer, I stabbed the power button with my short, mostly-ineffectual pointer finger. For a few minutes, my eyes saw only the fluorescent white glow of the screen as I studied the tattered, burgundy fabric of the chair beneath my fidgeting legs. There were so few documented cases of women being harassed in Milwaukee and I barely found any documentation about how harassment, much like my own, is often exacerbated by racial and socioeconomic tension. As far as the cases I found that were reported and distributed to the public, the details were often incomplete and left me with a hazy idea of what might have happened. But then I thought of myself on that day and the empty, sunken feeling I had at the pit of my ribcage I'd only ever felt before when I'd been violently ill. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't say anything. It was raw and uncomfortable and strange and embarrassing and I didn't say anything. Then I realized that maybe that's how it is for everyone, whether they've been harassed at a bus stop or not. Racial tensions and dichotomies, evident as they may be, are also entirely, palpably raw and uncomfortable to talk about. They exist and we live with them every day, but we don't often acknowledge them. I live with them when I walk down the street of Milwaukee, my mind a silent stream of *please don't notice I'm white, please don't notice I'm white, please don't notice I'm white. I'll be good, I promise, please don't notice I'm white.* Or when I can't sleep after I drink too much coffee and I see the eyes of those two boys, bulging and freckled with red, and I still can't figure out why they were so angry. We live, every day, with the knowledge that we are separated. But we don't say anything.

Nothing.

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*“When you go outside of Marquette’s little bubble, you see a whole new world. This is like a little cage to me... It’s a totally different world. In the school, it’s like you’re caged in. In the city, you see the real life stuff,” – Tarissa Young Claybourn, Marquette, ‘14.*



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[RETURN](#)



## **Zepp's Diner**

Timothy Gorichanaz

After 8 p.m., the stores along Peru Street close, and the pedestrian traffic that clogged the sidewalks all day begins to dissipate. By 9 p.m., all the shops and restaurants in Saint-Michael—the reputable ones, anyway—are closed. Except some diners. A few minutes after 9, if you look down the street, it'd be an extraordinary thing if you saw more people than you could count on one hand. Even the street vendors will have called it quits. Then, between 10 and 11, the Cleaners come out.

All day long, millions of people walking on the sidewalk conspire to trash the city. They go into the Starbucks around the corner and come out with an icy Vente Caramel Frapuccino, slurping it as they walk out. A few blocks down, all they're sucking is air, and they toss the cup on the ground. Advertising. Sometimes there's a little coffee left and it splashes out as the cup hits the pavement. Do people really do that, you ask? Yeah, more than you think. Just when "no one is watching." All day long, they toss their McDonald's french fry containers and pieces of paper and gum wrappers, without a second thought.

It's like, people, there are garbage cans on the street. They're on just about every corner. It doesn't take that much effort to walk over and drop your crap in the trash instead of on the ground. It's really not that far out of the way. Maybe they do it because everyone else does it, right? There's already trash on the ground, so what's one more thing? Well, someone has to be the first one, and he's the real shithead.

So anyway, all day every day, piles of garbage accumulate on the streets of Saint-Michael. The trash blows in the wind like tumbleweeds, and the place really looks like a ghost town after 9 p.m., when there's no one around. But the trash isn't the only problem. The sidewalk, made from engraved tiles, all with the same black-and-white pattern, gets caked up

with tar from all the traffic. Makes you wonder what these people step in. The paint on the road and curbs gets scuffed up and chips away. It's like everyone is a little bit of a vandal. Things age fast here.

In the past, things got pretty bad. Saint-Michael was damn ugly, of course, but there was more. Tourism fell. People started getting really sick. No one was happy; you could see it in their faces. The garbage men couldn't keep up, so the people had to wade through trash wherever they went. And the funny thing was, people still threw their crap on the ground, even then. For God's sake, it was like seeing a cancer patient light up a cigarette.

The city knew things were bad, obviously. They weren't that thick. And they knew they had to do something. So after who knows how many meetings and checks and stamps, lobbies and rallies and brainstorming sessions, whatever, they hired the Cleaners.

Really, it was obvious. The city's dirty, so clean it. Brilliant. But at least they came to that conclusion. Too often the government spends too much money, only to go in the entirely wrong direction. But that's just the way things are.

As the name implies, the Cleaners clean. Every night, starting between 10 and 11, you'll see them working throughout the city. They divide themselves in groups by the block and get to work. They know they've got a long night ahead of them. First they sweep all the trash into piles like hay bales, then they move the piles into carts, which they roll down the block and dump into trucks. The carts go back for more till the trucks are full, then the trucks drive off into oblivion and come back empty. The trash didn't disappear, of course. It just moved. Someone else's problem now.

Once all the trash is gone—the small stuff, too—the street looks better. But it's not bright and sparkly like a manicured amusement park quite yet; now they have to work on the real details. For hours, they scrub the tile sidewalks, uprooting and reseating them where necessary.

They repaint the markings on the curbs and change any light bulbs that might have broken or gone out. On some nights, they pressure wash the scum from the sides of buildings.

All to combat reality. To make everyone think they're living in a brand-new Disneyland. Well, I guess it's better than wading through other people's trash.

So do you see what's going on here? All day long, the streets of Saint-Michael get filthy. All night long, the streets get clean. Meanwhile, in the daytime, you have the little Mexican maid cleaning your house. And in the nighttime, you have Miss Sexy Stripper Maid making your house filthy. There's this balance, a kind of yin-yang thing. Daytime: filthy out. Nighttime: filthy in.

That's the kind of stuff you think of when you work here on Peru Street, when your joint is open late. Like Zepp's godforsaken Diner, open all night.

My dad, Frank Werdoft, founded this place in the fall of 1980. He called it Zepp's Diner after some stupid band he used to listen to, and he decorated it with photos of the classic cars he loved. It was always his dream to open a diner, for whatever reason. None of us could figure it out. Sure drove my mom wild when he retired early to "pursue his lifelong ambition," to use his words. She could put up with the pile of broken down cars in the driveway, but a diner was another thing.

My sister and I were just little then; we didn't really understand it all. But the thing about fights between your parents, is you don't have to understand all the words. You get the emotions just fine. Even a baby knows what a raised voice means. At first they fought because my mom thought my dad was nuts, that they couldn't make any money and they'd go broke and couldn't send Sis and me to school. Well, Mom was right about that.

But as history was written, the fights changed. By that time, Mom was more frustrated that he paid too much attention to the diner, that he was forgetting he had a family. Hell, he

hadn't touched his cars in so long it was like he'd forgotten he had them, too. Enough broken dates and disappointments later, and she'd had enough. So Mom took Sis and me, and we moved away. I was just starting high school around that time.

Mom took a lot of jobs, whatever she could get, to make enough money to give us a normal life. We deserved that much, she used to say. We got along fine at our new schools; we made friends and whatever. We didn't hear from my dad. I don't know if he tried to contact us or not. Mom just said he wasn't interested in us when we lived in the same house, so why would he be interested in us now? I always kind of thought he knew he messed up after we moved out and he'd do anything he could to reverse what he'd done. Mom didn't think so, or maybe she didn't want to admit it to herself. Or maybe she had her own reasons. We were close, Mom and me, but there were still things we kept from each other. Not exactly intentionally, but it's like that old saying: Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. You know?

Years passed and I graduated high school. Never went to college. That was because we didn't have the money. Didn't go into the army, either. I think that was a generational thing: It wasn't cool. I took on random jobs, trying to find my niche. It's funny: At one point, I worked at a diner in town.

It was the 90's and I did it all. Delivery, retail stock, restaurant service, painting... I was living on my own by then, and Sis was off doing her own thing, too. It's not like we didn't see each other—Sis and Mom and I got together often enough—but independence was important. Who are you if you can't stand on your own feet?

So life went on. My dad and mom and my sister and I, all living in our own little capsules. I presumed my dad was happy—or at least busy—enough, still living the dream—and fixing his cars when he got bored with it. My mom, well, I could tell by how she held herself that there was some piece of her missing, some sorrow in her. But she was okay. Never remarried, or

even dated, but she did have a lot of girlfriends that kept her company. My sis met some guy and they dated for a while. Eventually got married. They're doing great, talking about kids. I gave my brother-in-law a piece of advice before their wedding: Don't open a goddamn diner, no matter how bad you want to. And me, no ladies in my life. Never hardly were, probably never will be.

Anyway, it was early in the 21st century when a few things happened with uncanny timing. I was a full grown adult man, starting to gray and go bald and everything, and I got the news one day, from my mother, that my dad had died. In a car accident, of all things. Live by the sword, die by the sword, right? And it just so happened that I had lost my job with the school cleaning company, and I was desperate for work. So what did my dad leave me in his will, but the diner, and what was essentially an instruction manual. All the dates, account numbers, names and phone numbers I needed. And before he died, he added my name to all the diner's credentials, to make the logistics a little easier. For being so shortsighted, he was incredibly proactive. I guess that's what he learned managing the diner. I didn't want to accept it, to become the don of the thing that drove my family apart, but I couldn't throw away the opportunity for work when I needed it most.

So that's how I got this job, and why I'm up now at this godforsaken hour in Zepp's godforsaken Diner, watching bums walk by in the otherwise vacant streets. I don't usually work the night shift—actually, I don't usually work outside the office—but I'm here till morning because one of those damn good-for-nothing kids that works here didn't show up. Not that I blame him.

I'm Les, by the way. Alexander Frank Werdoff, in the flesh.

The good part about working the night shift is there's really nothing to do. That's the bad part, too, but at least it gives me some time to think. There's really nothing like it. It's just me

and the cook here, but he's kind of reserved and we don't talk much. He's in the kitchen reading a book right now. So it's just me and this cup of coffee, black and bitter as the night, and the scenes outside the window playing like a silent movie, only in color. I'm not colorblind.

I watch the Cleaners methodically heal Peru Street as they do every night. One of them comes in every once in a while and we talk, trying to keep each other company in our dreary jobs. "A lot of crap out there tonight?" I say. And he replies, "Yep. Just as much as every other night. But at least I still have a job, right?" The Cleaners all wear the same blue jumpsuit, making their faces stand out more, as if they were pudgy blue aliens wearing masks. Their faces are kind and bright.

Around midnight, a familiar limousine rolls up and stops across the street. Some of the Cleaners are still milling about, finishing up, and none of them raises an eyebrow. It's the same limo that rolls up and stops there around midnight every night. After a minute, someone steps out, and the limo drives away. The man standing there is a twerpy hotshot in a tailored suit, the owner of Museum, the night club he's standing in front of. I don't remember his name, even though he's on the news every now and then.

He comes into the diner every once in a while and gets a grilled turkey club, with swiss, to go. Even the first time he came in, he knew what he wanted. Didn't even check the menu to see if we had it. He's decisive. I guess that's how he got so high up in the underground business world.

He keeps a low profile, despite all the rumors. He tips big, but I wouldn't trust him to water my plants when I'm on vacation. I mean, he seems shady. You hear things, you know, being at the diner at night every once in a while. Or you'll hear stories from the punk kids you pay to be at the diner at night instead of you. Museum patrons come in when they get hungry or need a break from the club scene. They talk freely. Everyone who goes there knows the guy.

Predictably, sometimes they mention him. “The Boss,” they call him. I see they don’t know his name, either.

The things they say... Of course he has money, so he does pretty much whatever he wants. I guess he throws these parties, where he lives his own Islamic afterlife. However many virgins at his leisure, you know. And he doesn’t have to crash a plane to get them. Other days he prowls around his own club, looking for the hottest cougar in the place. Flashes some Benjamins, whatever, doesn’t even talk to her, and next thing you know they’re upstairs in his private suite. You can bet they need a maid in there the next day. This is all hearsay, mind you, but why not believe it?

Then there are the stories that don’t revolve around sex. You guessed it: drugs. They say you can get anything you’ve got a fix for at Museum, just talk to the Boss. Animal crackers and Cheez-Its of all variations, trafficked directly from Venezuela. Just make sure you know what the hell you’re asking for, because they’re not the names you read in the dictionary.

Anyway, the guy keeps a low profile, like I said, and he runs a clean business. Drugs or not, there are never any cops at Museum. And as quiet as he is, so is Museum. I mean when the place is closed, you wouldn’t know it’s a club. There’s no sign or anything. When it’s open, you get the picture. I mean, there’s a burly guy in a suit manning the velvet rope, letting certain people in with invisible discrimination. And I’m here the whole time, just watching. There are apartments above Museum. I wonder if the people inside do the same thing. Just watch, I mean.

Every night it’s the same thing, all night. I wonder if these people sleep, or work. Even without setting foot in the place, I can see the debauchery inside. There’s violence. People get thrown out with blood and black eyes, at least a few every week. There’s sex. Couples emerge that went in separately, their arms around each other sloppily. I see the guys copping feels, little samples of what they’re about to get. It’s disgusting. If only these people could see themselves



after the alcohol wears off. It's a wonder that these people get all dressed up just to make a mess of themselves. Like a kid playing in the mud in his church clothes.

All that goes on inside, right across the street, while the blue-suit Martians are busy cleaning up outside, saving our environment from Starbucks and McDonald's.

A group of kids comes in; I recognize them immediately as stoners. And not just because the smell of marijuana wafts in along with them. It's funny: People say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but there are a damn lot of books about pot out there that dress exactly the same. It's the thrift store look. Old plaid patterns, awkward fits, lots of black. It's as if they spent all their money on drugs so they didn't have any left for proper clothes. Or shampoo, I guess. Their hair is mangy and greasy; I wouldn't want to touch it. Their eyes are red.

They yell as they come in. Not intentionally—they don't seem to realize how loud they are. It's entertaining, I admit. How they argue about nothing, in slow motion, unable to form a cogent sentence. Yet they understand each other perfectly and seem to respond appropriately, continuing the conversation.

As I give them menus, they light up cigarettes. I don't care if they smoke in here. Cigarettes, that is. None of them looks 18, but I don't ask for ID's. I figure if you're old enough to want to kill yourself, or naïve enough to think it's cool, then be my guest. I'm not your goddamn mother. And I don't care that they come in here baked like turkeys, as long as they pay. Another plus is they eat a lot.

I mean, I won't do it myself, but I'm no narc.

After they order, more or less in English, I send their ticket to the kitchen and listen to them talk, their brains in the oven while their food's on the grill. They resume their discussion. One of them mentions that they smoke inside, at one of their houses, because they'd get caught otherwise. They do it at night, of course, because that's when they can all meet up and when

their parents are asleep or just ignorant. I wonder how their parents can be so stupid, or if they just don't care.

They complain that the food's taking too long, but they aren't really angry. It's not like they've got anywhere to be. In time, they get their food and shut up, stuffing their faces with hash browns and burgers like starving African kids at a Buckingham Palace buffet.

The stoner kids eat their fill and leave a mess. Once they're gone, I'm back to entertaining myself. I check on the cook, and we talk for a minute about nothing in particular. I can tell he's eager to get back to his book, so I let him. Out front, it's just me and my cup of coffee, dark as the spaces between the streetlights.

Suddenly I'm thinking of the news I watched before coming in tonight. It's always dreary, the news. I know a lot of people refuse to watch it for that very reason, but I can't stand not knowing what's going on outside my life. I long for the information, and I'll be damned if I have to go to a computer to get it. As a consequence for my adamance, I'm haunted by all those real life stories of negligence, molestation and murder that the news anchors find so fascinating.

Tonight, for example, there was a story straight out of a fairy tale. A man and a woman are married, no children, happily. They grow apart, like couples often do, and divorce. Only one problem: The girl still loves the guy, and she tries to get back together with him. You know the story—relentless phone calls, letters, e-mails, stories about how she's sorry and they should still be together. Things take a turn for the worst when the guy falls for a new slice. Then the messages get downright hateful, stuff you wouldn't even believe a lady would say. Next thing you know, one night the crazy bitch breaks into her ex's house, grabs a big old knife from the kitchen and slices open the traitor's throat, along with that of his new girl. "If he won't be with me, he won't be with anybody," she says. One of those. Afterward she goes straight to the police

department and tells them what she's done, and—bam!—the news stations have a story.

Everyone wins, except not really.

That's what I'm talking about, with this inside-outside, clean-dirty, day-night balance theory. Do you see what I mean, how that heinous stuff only happens inside, at night? Drugs and sex and violence, the three cardinal virtues of our backwards society. With alcohol to fuel it. All that stuff goes on inside after the sun says lights out, while the Puritan Cleaners make the other half of our problems all better. Tomorrow, it reverses: The sun comes up and the trash comes out. People throw last night's filth into the street, along with their Happy Meal boxes and gum wrappers. Someone else's problem now. After dark, it all starts over. The Cleaners won't be losing their jobs any time soon.

I return to the silent window picture with no company but my own mind. I think about the steam rising from my coffee cup and the rain that's beginning to fall from the sky, how they're really the same thing. Like the sky's just a big, upside-down cup of coffee. Well, it's just as black.

A woman walks by, in slow motion. Her hair shining synthetic blonde, her legs striding, long. She's wearing fishnets, tall boots and a black miniskirt, and she's carrying a red handbag by the strap, her elbow bent and her hand up as if she were a coatrack. Please, Honey, could you be a little more cliché? I can smell the dead fish in her makeup from inside the diner. She's a prostitute, of course. A businesswoman. It always surprises me how blatant they are. But, then again, is a cop really going to approach a woman and say, "Hey, Miss, are you for sale?" Sounds like sexual assault to me.

So there's another example. Just an innocent little fox right now, but once she gets to her destination, inside, she's a skunk. A garbage truck. Or maybe the term "dumpster" would be more appropriate.

Actually, now that I think about it, she's just as much of a prostitute outside, isn't she? Sure, she's not actually doing anything illicit, but she still wears the title. Still has the intention. So there does seem to be some sort of outdoor element to prostitution. Doesn't exactly put a hole in the framework of my theory, but it gives me something to think about besides my goddamn coffee.

A scream. Though she's out of sight, it can't be anybody but that prostitute. Instinctively, I run from behind the counter to the door, outside. She's at the corner on her hands and knees, with her head down, her locks mopping up the sidewalk. I notice immediately that her red handbag is gone. Without it, she's just black and white, like Marilyn Monroe. She was robbed, obviously, probably by a motorcycle. Jackings like that are all too common these days. She doesn't seem hurt, only startled.

I look around, searching for clues, and the only other person in sight is the Museum bouncer, watching with his arms folded, his face expressionless.

I take out my cell phone to call 911 and report the robbery. Doing what I can to help this poor girl. The prostitute springs up as she hears the beeps and screams, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Well," I answer, "I'm calling the police. You were robbed, weren't you? We can catch the bastards."

"Hang up now, you goddamn idiot!" She snatches the phone from me before the call connects, and I wonder whether the cops will be showing up soon, looking for someone incapacitated. Still holding my phone, she sees the bouncer looking at her. "Shit," she says and tosses me the phone. "Damn it," she says hurriedly as she runs across the street. "Damn it, damn it, damn it." Wobbling in high heels, soon she's out of sight.

Geez, Miss. You think you've got problems? I'm the one whose theory is all messed up now. I'm alone in the intersection, among all the smells of night—and fresh paint. To my left, glistening wet in the streetlights, are the words, “Neither God Nor Love.” Blue letters against ghastly white concrete.

So that's what really happens after the Cleaners finish up. So much for that wonderful balance. I guess that's what happens when you step outside.

I process these new developments as I walk back into my diner and grab the bucket.

Ha. And now look at me. I'm wiping a table clean, indoors, at night.

[RETURN](#)

