



Collection EIGHT

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Preface:

The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and other user-submitted content. Initially conceived as a successor publication to the now-defunct Zine Writers Guild, The April Reader aims to become a hub of online writing and content. Operating under the belief that the rise of the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass-media and television, The April Reader hopes to serve as a launching point for the future writers of this generation.

Updates:

Issue 8 is an exciting release for TAR. Not only is this our first issue to award our literary award of excellence to an author, but TAR now has another editor on board as well.

The first ever TAR literary award for excellence goes to J for his humorous story "Purple Hearts." It is a sleek and entertaining look at generational differences haunted by the spectres of chance, consumerism, and war. TAR is proud to have such a stellar story within the pages of its latest issue and prouder yet to bestow deserved recognition upon its author. More information on TAR's selection of this story can be found in the afterword of this issue.

Our new editor is no stranger to TAR. Matthew S. Vodička has contributed pieces of merit to past issues of TAR, and even our current issue holds a short fiction of his contribution. We are all too glad to welcome him to the staff, as we are positive he'll prove to be a capital asset to the TAR team. Please, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and encouragement, join us in welcoming him.

NOTE: It is worth mentioning, here, that editors of TAR who submit pieces to the makeup of the e-zine are outright exempt from consideration for our literary prize for excellence. This is done so TAR's readership can rest assured that there are no conflicts of interests in the prize's disbursal. It is also worth mentioning that several of the pieces have been edited for maximum readability. Whereas we did not have time to show these changes to authors of these respective pieces, In the future TAR will email such changes for author approval.

Our IRC Channel:

Server: irc.freenode.net

Room: #TAR

Our Distribution Page:

www.theaprilreader.org

Submit your writing, comments, and whatever else to:

theaprilreader@gmail.com

FICTION

Four Strings

-1c7

"Holy fuck, how did you think we were going to make it all the way there without a single book or a movie or something?"

"I can't read a book or watch a movie while driving, Em."

"You could leave it on in the background. I hate the silence."

"You've never shut up long enough to experience silence."

"Funny. At least put on some music, you brought that along."

"That's for the kid who gets the bass."

"It's not like it will wear out the CD."

"Actually, it will. Optical media is a fucked-up thing like that. And I need to keep the radio on, in case we pick up something on the emergency frequency."

"You're the worst. You have no idea on how to make a road-trip tolerable. Dick."

"Abnormal cell growth."

"You know, whoever you give it to will probably just sell it when he gets to the other side."

"I like to think he won't."

"It's a he?"

"Well, ideally it's a she; a hot she who is flustered and overwhelmed with gratefulness and pity for the generous cancer victim."

"I'd rather it be a he. You think there'll be food in the beach?"

"No."

"It was really dumb to come here without more food, you know."

"Thanks. I'll keep it in mind next time."

"You think the caravan will give us food?"

"No. I don't want it anyway. It'd be a waste."

"Double dick."

"I didn't say it'd be a waste because of you."

"Well, you didn't have to. It was implied."

"I'm sorry you feel I bear any resentment towards my terminal illness."

"Well, how do you think I feel being a side-product of you terminal illness and being treated as if I were the illness?"

"You're so grasping at straws."

"Right."

"Not only that, you're also wallowing in your own pity."

"Whatever. If I'd been you I'd have learnt how to play this thing. This way, wouldn't be on our way to die in the middle of nowhere chasing down a nameless caravan to give away some useless piece of junk to some imaginary horny chick."

I only had three packs left. Two in the glove box, one in my pocket. Three packs of luckies, eight gallons of water, and enough gas to make it to the coast. Food had ran out the day before. Not that I liked sardines and olives anyway.

"You don't smoke just to blow rings, do you? That's pathetic," the bass guitar said.

I couldn't blow smoke rings when I tried to. I could only do it when I blew absentmindedly. Whenever I became aware of this, it wasn't worth it to finish the cigarette.

"It's frustrating because at some point, could have taught me."

"Boo-hoo."

The bass guitar wasn't exactly speaking. It was leaned on the bumper of the car, sitting next to me, but it wasn't speaking. I was hearing it speak, but it wasn't. What was actually speaking was a three-inch tumor in my temporal lobe. I called it Em. Short for Emily.

"You know, before you got here, I could make out spots in the moon."

"It's not my fault you got cancer," said the tumor.

No one said anything for a while.

"I'm going to check for signal and then I'm going to sleep."

"Oh, come on, it's not even midnight. We'll make it a sleepover."

I stood up and shook the dirt off my hands with the sides of my jeans. My sight went out for a second and I leaned on the hood. I'd stood up too quickly.

Besides the bass, only the car's radio kept me company, and it spoke very rarely. I got on the passenger seat and pressed search on the radio, letting it run through all the stations on the background while I pulled out a small roll-away computer from the glove compartment. Sometimes caravans had appropriated some frequency by filling it with a repeating message. The computer turned on immediately, but the line was dead. No signal. The radio in the background let out a disappointed double-bip, letting me know that there wasn't anything in any station.

"There's nothing," I said, getting out of the car.

"Don't go to sleep just yet," Em said.

"I'm tired. We'll get there in a day or two, but I have to sleep."

"How do you know when we'll be there? The doctor said you might not be judging distances correctly."

"I've been reading the odometer."

"Well, that's OK, but how about you just don't take—"

I picked up the bass guitar. Once it was in the passenger seat, I threw myself in the back seat and closed all the windows and shut the locks.

"You don't need to take the pills."

"Can't sleep with you talking into my ear all night."

"Try."

"No."

"Do you ever wonder what happens to me when you take it?"

"Probably the same what happens to the people in my dreams when

I wake up."

"You've never felt bad about killing them when you wake up?"

"No. I don't expect anyone to feel bad for me if they kill me by waking up either."

"That's insensitive."

I shrugged and picked up a warm water bottle from the floor. I missed cold water. I opened the glove box and looked for the quetiapine bottle. The quetiapine bottle was filled with two different kind of pills: the quetiapine, which was an anti-psychotic I took when I needed to sleep (I didn't take it often during the day. As much as Em isn't real, the road is lonelier,) and the other pill was bupropion, which I rarely took. While the seizure it caused made me lose control of the car, the insomnia after it was much more irritating. I had no pills for the tumor. The only treatment for that was a scalpel, and that wasn't that easy to find since, well, The Incident. In capital letters. I threw the bottle back into the pill bottle stash. I swallowed three quetiapine, but didn't lay down. Something caught my eye.

Some ten or twenty meters ahead of me, I saw a curve that was out of place. It couldn't have been part of the tree—it was too high up on the trunk to be a root and too smooth and continuous and full to be just a shadow. The curve dropped down into the darkness, not revealing anything other than the fact that it wasn't supposed to be there. I stared at it for half a minute, waiting for it to move. Nothing happened.

"Em, do you see that?"

Nothing answered. I was alone. I decided to do nothing: sleep—until Em returned, and it was a joint effort and decision, and not just me versus the outside of the car. I laid down and tried to put the incongruent curve—that likely trick of light and bad sight—out

of my head. My hand fell into the rasping car mat and my sight locked onto a dark stain in the roof of the car. Night passed on the other side of the window.

"I told you not to take the pill."

"Get over it."

"Let's go."

"Why? She's probably decomposing already. We should just leave."

"Come on. You know you want to look. If you wanted to go you would have started the car already."

"It's just, uh, captivating."

"It'll be even more interesting up close, man. Your sight is all fucked up, come on, let's go."

The doors clicked, unlocked. The air was fresh and dry that morning. I took the bass from the passenger seat, slung it over my shoulder and walked towards the corpse. Birds chirped inside the forest.

"At least you had a good reason to freak out this time."

"I always have good reasons to freak out."

"Three days ago you wouldn't sleep because you thought something ominous was watching you."

"That's why I take the pills now."

"You're the world's lamest paranoid. I mean, you literally said 'something ominous.' What's up with that? Where's the black helicopters? Government conspiracy? You don't cut it for psychosis."

"There's no government on this side of the Atlantic anymore; a conspiracy isn't even possible."

"Maybe you could start picking up stuff from local folklore or something..."

The girl was laid on her side, supported by the trunk. There were a few bullet holes in her blouse: two side-by-side in her left tit, one lower, in her gut. Her eyelids were closed and so was her mouth. She didn't look dead at all. There weren't any maggots yet on her skin and the air still smelled of morning. I had the brief desire to go through her pockets for valuables.

"She's hot."

"She was hot," I corrected.

"Her body is still hot."

"It should be cold by now."

"Funny. What do we do?"

"What do you mean what do we do? We get back on to the road."

"I mean, like, she was obviously killed recently. What do you think happened?"

"I don't know. I don't really want to think about it. At least we know we're on the right path; the caravan shouldn't be too far ahead. We must be closer to the beach than I thought."

I fished a cigarette out of my pockets and lit it up. Once, a doctor had told me that smoking within a half-hour of waking up increased my risk of cancer seventy-nine percent. He emphasized the nine very strongly. Seventy-NINE percent. Every time I smoked in

the morning, I remembered that doctor. I had seen him just the one time, but his voice just wouldn't be forgotten. Seventy-nine percent.

"Let's go."

The ship was immense. I'd never seen such a ship at so close a distance. It had a black hull and from it rose five rows of windows. Rooms, I imagined. It was anchored parallel to the beach, and the people were entering through a smaller boat that ferried people from the shore to the ship.

The caravan rumour had been exaggerated: they were only about twenty people divided up in three vans. Half of them had already gone into the ship, and the rest were waiting inside one of the vans, with their doors slid all the way open and their stereo turned as high as it got. I could recognize what they were playing: Étude Op. 10, No. 3, over and over. A farewell song. I was glad I recognized the song. Something familiar, at last.

I made my way from my car to the van—barefoot, the bass slung in my shoulder, and holding the supermarket plastic bag with the CDs in my hand. After the third day without food, hunger had mostly subsided to the back of my mind. I had no more cigarettes, and there was only salt water to drink. I must have looked awful, from the way they looked at me. They all turned towards me when I stepped in their field of vision. Six men, two women, one boy, and a baby. It was good to discover that the fall of civilization in my continent had done nothing to change the fact that I loathed babies and all the sounds they produced.

"Hey...", I said, tense. I felt like if I made a sudden move I'd be shot by some off-stage gun. "I'm guessing you guys like music, no? I have this bass, here."

"We're not buying anything. We don't have anything to pay with,"
Said a bony man next to the door.

"No, no. It's a gift. For the kids, maybe. I got some music, CDs, if you want them too." I unslung the bass from my shoulder.

They all stared at me for a while. No one moved. No one came forward. One of the men was feeding the baby. The kid had a blank face. The women alternated between looking at me and looking to each other.

Finally, the one who did come forward wasn't young at all. It was a bespectacled, grey-haired man in his late fifties, who just picked it up and gave me a nod. Then the stares turned to him.

"Learn to play it. Or you'll regret it when you're about to die." I smiled. "Would you guys happen to have a pack of extra cigarettes?"

Mr. Bony offered me a half-finished pack.

Back in the car, I was laying in the backseat of the car, with the doors open. I heard the small boat come to shore, with Chopin still in the background. Em hadn't talked since we got to the beach. I missed her.

I looked back the prescription bottle. How did I want to die? Immediately? Heart attack, stroke, liver failure, asphyxia? Which seemed the most appealing? Which was the quickest? The least painful? They had pills for everything. At least, I did. I shuffled around possibilities. Maybe opioid overdose, maybe barbiturates, definitely no heart attack or stroke. I spread the bottle's contents on my chest and picked one of the pills—a small red star I'd been saving up for a rainy day.

No sooner than the pills had been carefully dropped one by one into their bottle had I began to experience full body shivers pulsing through my body, like so often before. I picked up the pack of cigarettes the bony man had given me and plucked one out. My

hands were shaking. The music in the background changed its mood and became softer and silkier. I managed to light up the cigarette, and inhaled, and the entire world contracted as I did it.

Colors became vaguer, and tonality often seeped from one object to the next like a fluid. Then, there she was, back from wherever she had been hiding. Her new face was disapproving and reproachful, and fuzzy in the edges, and her skin was smooth enough to be confused with marble.

"Holy shit, Jamie," Em said from the body of the dead girl, now sitting in the part of the center console between the seats, and apparently not dead. I didn't know she had had brown eyes. "How much did you take? You're fucking shaking."

"Five hundred micrograms. I was saving it," I said with a disproportionately big smile on my face.

"You know, who the fuck can understand you, huh? One day it's like, you talk too much, wah wah can't sleep, but the second someone gives you the cold shoulder, you, well, fuck, look at you!"

I saw ashes fall into the floor mat, whose rigid hairs were waving and undulating rhythmically, almost hypnotically. Then my attention focused on the incredibly saturated red-orange of the tip of the cigarette.

"Hey!"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, I wanted to talk to you, you know, that was pretty mean of you."

She said nothing.

"You're pretty now, you know. I'm glad you didn't go with the bass."

"I'm glad someone will enjoy it now, at least."

"I enjoyed bringing it with you."

"Oh for fuck's sake, did you take some Viagra with the acid?"

I laughed.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"I got, I got thirty grams of barbiturates. Maybe when this is over."

We left the car. The moon was huge, and bright—almost blue. The ocean looked computer-generated, shining with unreal lighting. It was a visual representation of perfect sine waves coming and going. The ship was gone. Only the van, which seemed to be miles away, was left, and still playing *Étude* in a loop. How long until the battery of the car died? We walked towards the van. When I first stepped on the sand, I thought I was going to fall through it and lost my balance, but Em caught me and didn't let go of my hand. There was just me, her, the moon, the van, the cigarette, and the pills in my pocket.

"It's been a good trip, Jamie. Don't you think?" She said, looking at me.

I nodded and blew smoke rings.

Feed the Blue Jays, Dearest

-Andrew Mendelson

My grandmother told me that she needed to get groceries, and she did, but I know that she really left to get out of the house for awhile. The fluorescent lights and friendly cashiers must have seemed like a paradise after weeks of taking care of my grandfather.

Reading had been the first thing to go. Every room in the house had a bookshelf. Above the fireplace, there was a Borges quote: "I have always imagined Heaven to be a kind of library." My grandfather's new illiteracy had made the quote take on a terrible new implication—that without his passion he was trapped in a personal hell. My grandmother had considered painting over the quote, but had left it to remember happier times. I also suspect she left it there because the bitter irony of it wouldn't occur to my grandfather.

The doctors were surprised at the abnormal speed of his deterioration. Even my family was reluctant to accept his illness. During holiday gatherings when we were all seated in the living room everyone tacitly agreed to ignore the frail man wandering through the house who would occasionally stop to clasp his hands together and make a childish whining mew. My parents, aunts, and uncles would each make one attempt each to offer him food, get him to sit, or get him to smile. Only one attempt. We all agreed that if we tried too hard it would simply irritate him. Better to just let him be.

It wasn't until Thanksgiving dinner that we all finally accepted the situation. My father was the first to smell it. We made eye contact for a quick moment as though we were guilty for what we were acknowledging. We continued eating for a minute or two longer as if the stench was only a morbid thought that would quickly dissolve. Then my mother quickly pushed back her chair and started to leave the room, but not before a sharp inhalation and snuffle escaped her. My older brother and I ended up changing my grandfather. Nobody was in the mood for pumpkin pie after dinner.

Most of the family took turns babysitting my grandfather. My grandmother always made sure to crush a white tablet and spoon-feed it to him before she left him to one of us. It made things easier for everyone. Each time I visited, he seemed a little bit lighter, a little more withdrawn. Despite his 24-hour care needs, my grandmother refused to put him in a nursing home, and when he was whittled down to his bones, I was to give him a final bed-bath and change the urine-stained linens for his friends and family who came to say goodbye.

With my grandmother out at the grocery store, the only sound in the house was my grandfather's deep, fast breathing and the occasional gurgle he made when he tried to cough. It sounded as though a gallon of mucus had been poured into his lungs. I was sweating the entire time I cleaned him. His body was so stiff it felt as if all his bones were fusing together and he was turning into a statue. I washed behind his ears, I carefully washed his genitals, I rubbed his back with the baby powder.

When I finished dressing him, I was startled to see that he was staring at me. His eyes had been glazed over and looking straight at the ceiling just minutes before. I looked away for a moment and looked back to find that he was still staring and even moving his lips.

I bent in closer.

"Grandfather?" I whispered.

There was a flash and a pounding in the back of my head. I wondered if this was what it felt like to be shot. I felt his nails digging into my skin as he pulled my head down with a surprising amount of strength. I could see the skinny remains of his bicep trembling with exertion. A little of his phlegm hit my face as he spoke.

"*Look,*" he said.

His pupils began to dilate, like spilt ink on paper, until the whites of his eyes were completely engulfed.

“*LOOK.*”

I squeezed my eyes shut. There was a ringing in my ears and it rose in a terrible crescendo until I thought my ears would bleed. Just when it became unbearable, the ringing stopped and the grip on the back of my skull was gone.

When I opened my eyes, I was standing upstairs in my grandfather’s study. My first instinct was to open the door and leave, but it was locked. There was no light emanating from the crack at the bottom of the door—despite the fact that I could see, through the window, that it was a bright afternoon. Even if all the lights were off in the house, it seemed strange that there would be complete darkness on the other side of the door.

The strangeness of the situation didn’t faze me, however. I felt far too tired to care and wanted to collapse into a bed. Since the door was locked, I settled for the chair behind the desk. As I went to sit down, I noticed that the chair had six legs and I thought, “Why would it have six legs? It must be the wrong amount. Should it have four? Why? I only have two legs and I can stand fine. But it’s still wrong. I can tell by looking at it. If it can’t be six or four then it must be eight, and if I sit down, the chair will have eight legs.”

I sat in the chair feeling satisfied until it slouched to one side and made a tapping sound against the hard wood floor. It had uneven legs. I was starting to doze off when the chair tipped in the other direction. Each time I nearly fell asleep, the chair would tip and lightly knock the hardwood floor. I sighed and stood up. The chair started to rock back and forth, diagonally, on its uneven legs.

I stood in front of the window and tried to ignore the chair. Sometimes it rocked slowly and then sped up to a steady drumming tempo before slowing back down again. Outside, there was a little boy running towards the house with picture books from the library in his hand.

Watching him run towards the house gave me a feeling like déjà vu. I remembered being that little boy as I watched him.

The boy cried and dropped his books on the porch. He screamed for his mother. She came running to him and asked him what was wrong. He led her to the bushes in front of the yard. Underneath the bushes was a baby blue jay frantically jumping around with one of its wings connected only by a thread of tissue. The wing dangled helplessly and the baby blue jay tweeted out in every direction.

“Can we help it, mom?”

“I don’t think so, honey.”

The boy clutched his mother and buried his head into her thighs. He sobbed and left warm tears in her dress.

“Please? Can we give him worms?”

“It’ll be okay. He probably won’t be in pain for too much longer, and when he dies he’ll be in heaven with other blue jays.”

The boy looked up at her and cleared his throat.

“Do you promise?”

There were three quick pounds at the door that made me jump. I turned from the window and tried to call out but only a frightened, whining noise came from my mouth. The locked door knob jiggled.

Suddenly the chair began to wobble violently and bounce around the desk. The door pounding stopped and an irritated woman’s voice said, “Glass in the shut windows is he him is where in the desk?”

The chair bounced back and forth in reply and the voice

answered.

“Shigzs I huna clean to the is closer.”

Again, the chair bounced in reply.

“Prisencolinensinainciusol there werft I’m.”

Eventually, the gibberish of the voice stopped and was replaced with barking and hissing. Each time I tried to call out and ask what was happening, my voice would fail and make baby noises. The conversation seemed to be getting more intense, so I took one of the encyclopedias, opened it, and put it on my head. Then, I pressed myself against the book shelf and tried to blend in.

It was then that I noticed that the chair only had four legs, but it cast a shadow that looked like another pair depending on what angle I observed it from. I tried to discern the significance of this, but was cut off when the door opened.

A plump woman stood in the doorway. She wore a surgical mask—but instead of simply covering her nose and mouth, it covered her entire head. She wore white scrubs and a turtle neck. Her white, latex gloves were stretched up to her elbows. I couldn’t see a single inch of her skin.

The masked woman walked straight toward me and took the book off my head. When I tried to push her away, she grabbed my wrists and forced my arms down to my sides. She stood behind me and gripped my shoulders so hard that I cried out. I felt her palms push forward and tried to walk as fast as I could. The whole ordeal up to this point had left me so fatigued that I could merely shuffle my feet. Each time I stopped to catch my breath, her hands clenched my shoulders again.

It was pitch black outside the room, and I was scared, but the masked woman kept pushing me further. Up ahead, I could see a lit bathroom with the door open. The darkness outside the bathroom seemed to absorb all the light so that nothing could be illuminated. I had a feeling that I was up very high and I started to imagine how long I might fall

before hitting the ground.

Up ahead, in the bathroom, there was a distressing cry. It sounded like the shrill scream of a little girl.

When the masked woman had gotten me into the bathroom the shrieking sound had become deafeningly loud. I couldn’t see what was making the sound, but I could tell it was beside the sink. I tried to plead with my captor by looking at her, but I couldn’t see her eyes beneath the occlusive surgical mask.

She pushed me a bit further, and I saw that, beside the sink, where the toilet should have been, stood a giant baby blue jay. It was about three feet tall and its beak was gaping open and turned up to the ceiling as it screamed. Both of its wings were severed and its blue feathers were soaked in blood.

I tried to strike the masked woman, but she became more firm than ever and yanked my sweat pants and underwear down around my ankles. She pressed down on my shoulders and forced me down until I sat on the bird’s open mouth. The bird’s screaming became muffled and I could feel the hot breath up my rectum.

My bowels shifted and I made the greatest effort I could to clench. Eventually I could hold back no longer. There was a wet sloshing sound in the bird’s throat as it started to choke. I covered my face with my hands and wept with such sorrow and guilt that my entire body trembled. There was a ringing in my ears, again. The ringing grew so loud that I couldn’t even hear my own cries. Right when it became intolerable, it stopped and I opened my eyes.

My grandfather’s grip loosened and his hand fell to the bed. His sunken eyes were closed, and his deep breathing seemed more labored and difficult than I had ever seen it. I tucked him in and sat on a chair next to the bed, watching him struggle.

Watching him try to breathe in his bed would be the last time I saw him alive. A part of me wanted to leave, but I felt that I had to

stay. To abandon my struggle of watching him, and leaving him alone seemed cowardly. He couldn't run away from his struggle.

On the dresser beside him lay his tattered King James Bible. For a long time, I had known that it was the single most important book to him, with its promises that death is not the end. I hoped, despite everything, he had forgotten that he somehow managed to keep and believe that promise. I hoped that he could imagine himself whole again, and reading on a rainy day with a hot cup of tea while waiting for the downpour to end, so he could hear the sounds of blue jays singing.

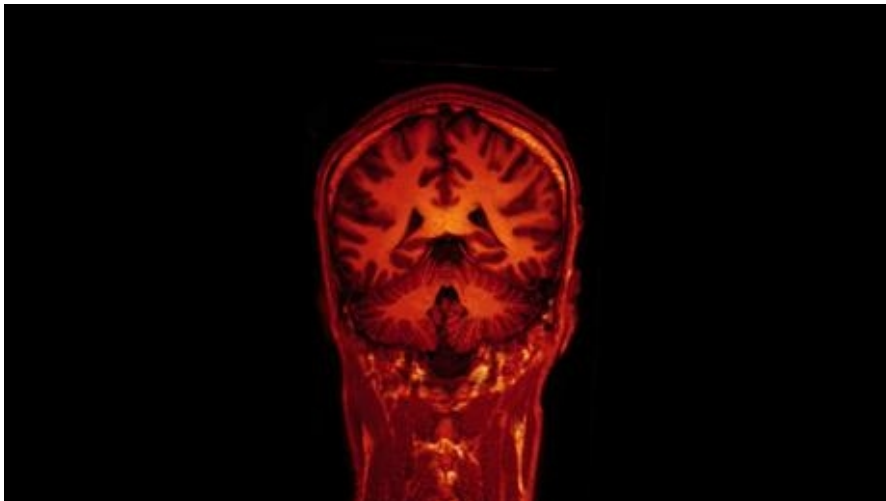


Photo Credit Jon Olav, 2009 (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jonolave/3565473585/>)

If I Knew What I Wanted I Would Go Out and Buy It

- G.Fuchs

He knocked, the door opened.

"Hi, I have an appointment at three?"

"Yes, come in. Hi, Dave? Come in."

Inside, he noticed bubbly jazz music playing and thought if that would be the most appropriate, but it was her house, her choice. He had a hard time looking at her; it was easier to keep his eyes on the floor, on the walls, the decorations of the shabby room. Especially when she talked, he looked down.

"I can see you're a bit tense, relax, it's all gonna be fine. Is this your first time?"

He had no voice to answer with, just nodded several times as he looked from one corner of the the room to the other, trying to find something to focus on and use as a soothing object. He kept looking for a while. Then he asked, taking his hand to his pocket, "Cash, right?"

As he asked, he risked one quick glance at her, to see if he recognized her from the pictures, to see how much she had lied about herself.

"Don't worry, we can do that later. It's not like you're going to run away in the middle of it, are you?"

He still didn't have anything to say. He felt his armpits warm, sweaty; he patted his hands on his jeans to dry them up, his face was starting to drip.

"Can I use the restroom for a second? Sorry."

"It's all yours, Dave. Right that way"

He walked away with his head down.

Sheryl looked in the mirror, fixed her hair, applied more lipstick on her already colored lips. Then waited, thumbing through her CD collection. When Dave came back from the bathroom, he still didn't know how to proceed with this. He hadn't thought this out too much, hadn't planned what he would do once he got here. Sheryl could tell he needed some guidance and comforting.

"Why don't we go ahead and get started; we can take it easy at first. I'm sure you're nervous but that's all going to go away once we're in the middle of it."

She took one step towards the bedroom, (lights were already over the bed,) looked back to grab Dave's hand, and guided him all the way in. Sheryl let herself down, cross-legged on the edge of the round bed, red sheets and even redder pillows surrounding her. Dave stood in the middle of the room exactly where Sheryl had left him. She half-expected this—her clientele tended to be made up of social misfits who didn't quite know their way around a woman, who'd had all kinds of failures and frustrations. That's why they came to her.

She knew how to deal with first timers: you just had to be a bit patient and coax them into it, tug out from their insides little by little what it is that they want, and how they want it, make them think they have a choice, and then do whatever you think is fastest or easiest.

"So, why don't you come here, right next to me, and tell me what you'd like for today?"

Dave stood in the middle of the room, still not looking at her, not even acknowledging he'd heard her. In the bathroom, he had washed and dried his hands and face, and applied toilet paper to his armpits to dry them too, but he was again sweating all over. She goes up to him, grabs his

hand again and tries to pull him into the bed, his arm is loose and goes with her, but the rest of his body will not budge. She lets go of his arm, carefully placing it by his side where she had found it, and stands next to him.

"It's ok sweetie, just take your time. Let me know when you're ready," she whispers in his ear.

He remembered all the attempts he went through to get the courage to call a girl up; he kept hanging up whenever he heard somebody answer. After several attempts, he was able to talk to her. He made an appointment but missed it, twice. This was the third date they'd arranged, and he had made it up to her apartment, inside her bedroom. Now all he had to do was say it. Just say it and he would have done it. He would not turn back now.

"I would like to..." he paused. He looked at her in the eyes for one second, and he could see that she was making an effort to listen closely, as if there was the risk of missing it, when he finally confessed what it was that he was here for. He looked down again, blinked hard and held his breath. "I want to be whipped." The words had been said and they were final. He wanted to be whipped.

"Alright honey, we can do that. I can see how you need it," she tried to ease the mood, "you're so tense. A few lashings and you'll be soft as butter. Let me take your shirt off..." and she went to him and started unbuttoning him, leaning close to him, her face breathing on his, trying to connect with his eyes, trying to find the libido that he had stashed away somewhere. His chest bare now, she ran her fingertips down to his stomach and then her nails up again to his chest, but he wasn't responding.

"Maybe you wanna start with some light spanking? On that chair?"

He looked at the chair, not understanding why he should want that. "No, just the whipping. Thanks."

Sheryl wasn't a real dominatrix. She knew how to do this, of course—she had done it before and the clients had always been pleased—but, she felt more comfortable when she could get them interested in her as a woman, a sex object, because it gave her the power. It's funny to think that being asked by somebody to whip him didn't make Sheryl feel empowered, but, for her, it just didn't do it. Her target audience were the regular middle-class husbands who came to her because their wives were too soft on them, not kinky enough, so they went out looking for a bit of pretend-BDSM mixed with some real sex. David didn't seem to be fitting that pattern though. Still she could handle him. No problem.

"So tell me, this is your first time doing this, right?"

"Yes."

"Alright. We can start you up with a thick whip, the thicker they are the less they sting. Then we can start working our way up if you're into it." She opens up the closet and chooses one, comes back with it, but Dave immediately objects.

"No, I want a thinner one, and longer." He sounded harsh, though he didn't mean to be; he looked at her as if apologizing for contradicting her.

"Honey, listen, this is not like in the movies, I'm not going to play Indiana Jones for you, ok? This is going to go on your back, and it will hurt no matter which one I use. The question is, do you wanna be able to enjoy that pain, or you wanna be out by the third swing?"

"I'm sorry. But can we use a long thin one?"

Sheryl knew he wasn't going to hold up, only people who've been doing this for a long time can take the kinds of whips he was asking for, but she could go easy on him even with that whip.

"You wanna keep your pants on?"

"Yes."

"And your shoes?"

"No, I'll take them off."

"Most people like to get down on their knees," she said, knowing that he would object to that and come up with another weird way to go about it.

"Yes."

He got down on his knees, on the floor, and spread out his arms, his palms against the wall, his head hanging limp from his neck.

Sheryl started whipping, skeptical that David would be able to last more than five minutes, still not really knowing how this would end. Most clients of hers that asked for this treatment used it as a way towards arousal. But she had trouble considering the idea that David could reach that state, or that he could do anything with it once he did reach it. On the other hand, Sheryl knew Dave would never become an honest-to-god BDSM guy, the ones who held these practices as the ultimate goal. No one started out like that, they just stumbled into it, and slowly found their way around things. None of them came to a first interview saying, "I want to be whipped."

But she started whipping nonetheless, the way you start throwing a baseball around during high school gym, just so the teacher sees you doing it, sluggishly, taking your time in between each throw, warming up your hand to the sting of the ball as it hits the glove. Just throwing the ball back and forth, waiting for P.E. hour to be over, thinking of what you'd have for lunch, and who you'd have it with and things of that sort.

After 6 or 7 whippings Dave interrupted, "I'm sorry, can I have a cushion, please? For my knees? Thank you, you can go on now."

"What? No. I don't believe it. You fucking piece of shit, I don't believe this", her lower lip quivering, eyes squinting.

Dave wanted to crumble down, he wanted his body to collapse into itself, his ligaments to stop holding on to each other and just let go, he wanted to be somewhere else, not talking to her.

"I slept with somebody else."

"No. Goddammit, tell me you didn't, tell me you didn't!", a crescendo that left his ears as well as her throat, echoing against silence.

He knows, just by the sound of her voice, that he's not talking anymore to the person he used to know, the girl or woman that loved him unconventionally, unconditionally. He had been looking and looking, since they started dating probably, and eventually found the one thing that would make her go back on her promise to always be there for him. She was no longer herself, not for him at least.

"I did. I slept with somebody else. I'm sorry." He was able to say this without smiling. He always smiled when he felt nervous or uncomfortable—but not without a shaking voice.

She felt an uncontrollable urge to punch him in the face, break his nose into a bloody mess, double him over with a fast knee to the stomach and then, once on the ground, connect her stubby little foot to his forehead, bloody nose, jaw, teeth, over and over and over. But she couldn't. Instead, she directed all that anger inward. She dug her nails deep into her left arm in what was half a hug to herself, half an acceptance of her impotence. The bleeding was unintentional.

"There's more. It wasn't only once, but a couple of times. And she stayed the night over, in my bed."

"What the fuck?" her voice shrilled high but then went down again, to an almost subdued tone that signaled the great effort she was making to

keep her rage under check. "When were you planning on telling me?"

"I don't know. Somehow I thought you wouldn't mind."

Sheryl started growing interested in Dave, curious at least. He was weak, skinny and no muscles, just some flabby fat around the stomach. But she had been whipping him for 10 minutes straight, doing it the right way, and he hadn't complained once; there were no signs of him wanting to stop. Her usual clients all start shifting positions, moving around in the subtlest manner, trying to get the whip to fall in fresh skin, before they announce they've had enough and would like to move on to the next thing. But Dave was as still as a Buddhist monk in an ashram, lost in the Nepalese jungle, his breathing as still as it had started. She grew tense, herself. Thoughts started going into her mind. He didn't look like it, but there were stories of serial killers targeting women like herself. She was a potential victim, and Dave was a bit of an oddball, like all crazy psychopaths tend to be. He was obviously not good with women, too awkward and self-conscious. What if he was the violent misogynist type, a woman-hater just because he'd been rejected by so many of them? She tried to think back if she had seen anything on the news or on the papers, but she was certain she hadn't; in her line of business you tend to pay attention to things like that when you see them. She wished she could see his face right now, to try to guess what he was thinking, what his mood was, but none of the mirrors in the room could reach his face.

In between lashes, she attempted to say, "Are you having fun yet?" with a naughty voice that, in the end, gave itself away as tinted with fear and uncertainty.

The lashes continued, and there was no reply, but she knew he had heard. He simply decided to ignore her. The feeling was worse than being stood up by your boyfriend on prom night, standing out on the porch with your new cherry pink dress and your

hair just back from the hairdresser, your heart skipping every time a car roars by your street. Because you were being stood up by someone that was kneeling down right next to you, someone in the very same room you were, someone you were communicating with on a second-to-second basis,

"whip"

"whip"

"whip"

yet for all the sweet-talking your hand does to his back, his mouth is unable, unwilling, to respond to you. She started getting goose-bumps.

His back was turning red, ripening beat by beat, a glowing red taking over where paleness had been before. Maybe she should stop holding back so much, Sheryl thought. He was there because he wanted to, and he showed no sign of wanting to stop, so why not go for it?

Dave realizes his position is not the right one, not humbling enough, so he fixes it. His knees stay where they are but his upper legs drop down; he's now sitting on his own feet. His hands come off the wall and hold each other, laying like a dead bird between his legs. He occupies less space than before, his limbs more in contact with themselves now. He should be able to focus better now too, this feels like a more natural resting position for his body. It expresses more closely his state of mind: not brave, proud, tall, and expanding, but growing smaller and contracting upon itself, going inwards, deeper with every lashing.

He had to be strong, to take it all in, to make sure that this made a lasting impression on him. When he was younger, he had a mole removed from his back under the doctor's suspicion that it could be cancerous. The surgery left a scar which he still has today. At that time, the idea of his body being permanently marred hurt a lot more than the actual knife cutting into his anesthetized skin; young men care so much about their bodies and how they look in the eyes of others. He even yelled out to his mom, "I rather get cancer than have them slice me up all over, just-in-

case!". Today, his body is old. His skin starting to sag and lose its vital color, there is nothing much to be concerned about being ruined. Today, he wanted nothing more than to be scarred. He wanted the whip to plow into his skin, boring grooves that would forever stay with him and remind him of who he was and what he had done, of what he would do and who he had been.

His mind focused on every beat of the whip, feeling its snap on the surface of his back and, as the leather retreated, the consequent stinging that reverberated through him into his chest, going past his ribs and out of him in less than a second. He had not prepared for this. There was no preparation possible. Just go in and take it, that's what you do. But, he felt prepared anyhow, like he had been meant to do this since time immemorial. He remembered a certain car ride—he was no more than six years old, his family was moving from the small town of Elmira to NYC. They had sent all their things, already packed, in a moving truck. With them, on the car, they just taken some personal things his mom didn't want to put on the truck, so the car was a bit packed. His youngest brother was 8 months old and they carried a bag full of diapers and other necessities for him. His older brother, sick of having the bag at his feet bothering him, said, "Here you take it" and plopped it on Dave's lap. The big bag was heavy but soft and fluffy; it gave him a comfort he had been looking for the past few months without any luck. He found it, New York bound, inside a rattling car, with a 20-pound baby bag sitting on top of him. It was as though the bag were hugging him instead of the other way around.

"You thought I wouldn't mind. Of course. Because *you* don't mind. Because you don't *care*! I told you not two months ago that I wanted you to stop your flirting with that slut. That the game was getting too serious for me."

"But we're away from each other all week, didn't we agree to allow each other some freedom during that time?"

"No! We said we were gonna talk each other through it to see how we felt, and I specifically called it off after that one party. You don't get it, do you? It's not that you slept with her, it's that you kept it from me for how long?! We agreed on being an open couple, which means—before anything—open to talk about things. When were you going to tell me, I wanna know. Were you waiting for me to find out?"

"I thought you'd ask, whenever you wanted to know. Wasn't that the agreement?"

"For the past month, I've been telling you about this guy at the office I've been flirting with, and you know what? I wasn't even interested in him, I was just doing that because I knew you liked it. I did not once think of taking him to bed with me; all I thought about was getting some reaction from him so I could tell you about it over the phone. That was the agreement. Doing this together, sharing it with each other. And all this time, you couldn't mention it once that you were having something with her?"

"I thought you'd ask when you were ready to know."

"Well, now I'm ready, anything more you think I should know?"

"Yes, I..."

He sighs to himself and notices how different it is to actually be saying all those things he had been thinking for so long. The words don't want to come out, every one of them has to be dragged out from his throat, the air in his lungs runs short, his body trembles in weakness. But he pushes forward and says it, no matter how much he would like to avoid it. New paragraph here.

"Yesterday, talking to her, I realized I don't wanna be with you anymore. I wanna be with her."

"No. You're not doing this. You're throwing away all our history together for someone you just met? And she finds out before me that I'm getting dumped?"

"I realized I'm not happy with you, I need to do something about that."

"You're not happy with yourself, there's a difference there. Don't make me responsible for your own misery. And by dumping me and jumping in bed with a stranger, you think that's going to change?"

"I don't know, I just think I should be allowed to give this a shot."

"You're so selfish, you know that? Why didn't you leave me months ago? You were just waiting for someone better to come along, and in the meantime you hung on to me, just so you wouldn't be alone."

"We always knew we weren't gonna last forever—this was going to end some time"

"But not like this, Dave, not like this! We were supposed to end things in a good way."

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not. You'd do it all over again if you had the chance."

"I have to go."

"Don't you dare hang up!"

"I have to catch my plane, baby, you know I have to go."

"So this is going to end the same way it's always been. Me, at the bottom of your list. I've made so many sacrifices these three years, and you don't even have the guts to come and break up with me in person. Because you're a coward. You know I'd slap you so hard if I saw your face..."

"I can't cancel at the last minute, you know that. I can go see you when I come back. "

"No. Don't bother. You've already said all you had to say. You've already moved on, thanks for letting me know."

There wasn't a precise moment when his back started bleeding. His skin had gone from the pale milky skin of an office rat to a reddish canvass that started spreading itself too thin, till it vanished, tearing up little by little, exposing its insides as it did. And he wasn't really bleeding. There were no liquids flowing from him. The blood simply stuck there to his skin, to the leathery whip, not even enough to splash as the whip fell, sharp, time after time upon his bones. It was so gradual that Sheryl didn't notice what had happened until after a while. She stopped, in silence, to appreciate the extent of the damage she had inflicted upon him.

"Hey, Dave, you're bleeding. How are you holding up?"

"I'm ok. Don't worry. Can you keep going, harder?"

The fear in her had died out, the tone of his voice convinced her he was no more violent than any of her other clients. Still, she was angry at him, so, the fact that he was bleeding and wanted even more punishment pleased her. No longer afraid, she still thought there was something wrong with him, and given this opportunity to punish him—even with his own reasons being unclear and superfluous—she wasn't going to let it pass.

She started whipping again, harder, and harder she whipped than she had done to any of her clients. She was now the one getting pleasure out of it, it didn't matter what he was in this for. Maybe Dave would turn her into a real dominatrix? She could start to understand the pleasures of the repetitive motion of raising and lowering her arm and snapping her wrist while a man kneeled at her feet. She thought of slave owners centuries ago and how great it would feel to have at your disposal muscled bodies to be whipped when the fancy gripped you, and not having to wait for them to call you to make an appointment. And not to fake the

whipping, either—because in her case it was always, no matter how they tried to make it seem otherwise, the client who had the final word. If he said, 'enough', she would have to, against her wish, stop.

She was the one being pleased, now. And he started twitching, now. His flesh showed itself red, now, raw, now, and every lashing elicited from him a cascade of tremors and shuddering. She imagined the same violent response could be reached through the use of electricity, and wished he would beckon for that; meanwhile, she insisted with leather. She still couldn't see his face, but now it didn't matter. This wasn't about him anymore, this was about her and what she could muster from his back through her own work. If he enjoyed it—laughed or cried, after every beat—it was inconsequential, as long as his back continued to tremble like a spastic muscle at the height of its attack, all foaming and overloading with electric charges.

She didn't even know what time it was now, she found herself lost in her activity. There was never a clock visible in the room, (that was bad for business,) but she knew how to track the running of an imaginable clock almost as good as a real one. Only, now, she was hypnotized by her own movement, and time had become both slower and faster, incalculable.

"Harder," he muttered in between his almost constant trembling, and Sheryl smiled and gripped the whip hard, "hit me," he said, Sheryl's private cheerleader. But what he meant was "stop, calm down, show some mercy, put the whip away and hug me. Wrap me in your arms and press your chest against my back. Know that I tremble from loneliness and regret and disappointment, not from pain. Know that I came here looking not for pain, nor sexual arousal, but for comfort and forgiveness, I came not to have my flesh torn but healed by the touch of a caring woman, healed from the wounds that I inflicted upon myself. Throw the whip away and come and hug me, take me in your arms, forgive me as only a woman can forgive, for what I seek is the uplifting forgiveness of a woman's touch". He wanted to feel again the soft comfort he felt the day he crawled in between the mattress and the sommier as his two brothers jumped on

the bed, laughing away with the lights out, and he lay flat on his stomach as two pairs of tiny feet, knees, elbows and other bony joints struck his back and legs and head through the dampening protection of the mattress that also crushed him with its weight, and everything felt to him like rough caresses, heavy pieces of cloud punching him and bursting open as they impacted his body.

He was starting to feel lightheaded, bright spots clouded his vision. He began to think that maybe he couldn't take it much longer and he felt like crying, and he wanted her to stop and hug him, to tell him that he'd had enough and that she wouldn't hurt him any more, and that she forgave him and that they could just fall down in bed now and listen to each other just breathing with their eyes closed as the room spun in their heads and all the noise quieted down. So he cried to her, begging for his life, "harder, don't stop," and then he gave in—he refused to hold it in any longer and cried, for the life of him he cried with eyes and mouth closed and hoped she didn't notice, and she wouldn't because she wasn't paying attention to him, and he hoped that the pain crawling in his back would stop soon.

His body started slouching over to one side, but Sheryl hadn't been paying attention, so she only noticed when he was about to tumble over, and he did so softly, as if he had been made of cotton and a breeze was blowing him over. He hit the floor without making a sound. She had seen him bleeding more and more, but he kept asking for more and more, so she gave him more and more, enjoying how things were turning out, satisfied that he wasn't a serial killer out to get her, and even more satisfied that he was giving her the opportunity to subject him to what she now found out she had always wanted to do to guys, but had never found the right client. She stopped and asked him if he was ok, knowing that, no matter what he answered, he wasn't. Dave never answered, but she didn't panic. This night's experience infused her with a lasting tranquility that could only be disturbed from within, so, she calmly checked if he had a pulse—just in case she needed to call an ambulance. And he did, a strong throbbing pulse. Maybe his circulatory system was trying to compensate for all the blood lost in the past half hour. She took him by the wrists and dragged him to the bathroom, his body too heavy to be lifted. She raised him the best she could and dumped his disappointed body inside the bathtub, his legs followed. She took his wallet, but didn't bother with his pants. Sheryl

turned on the water and went back to her room. Somewhere along his visit, the music had stopped and no one had noticed. Sheryl now put another album to play. She would wait until he woke up to and ask him to pay her; she wouldn't take the money from his wallet, herself. Back in the bathroom, the cold water from the showerhead washed Dave's back, running, red-tinted, down the drain.

Aspire Mutual

-J (<http://rollovertoplay.tumblr.com/>)

What driving habits are included in my snapshot?

Your driving snapshot includes the number of miles you drive, time of day you drive and how often you make sudden stops. People who drive less, in safer ways and during safer times of day could get a discount.

- Progressive Auto Insurance website

PHOENIX (AP) -- Arizona's cash-strapped Medicaid program is considering charging patients \$50 a year if they smoke, have diabetes or are overweight. A spokeswoman for the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System said Friday that the fee is intended to rein in health care costs by pushing patients to keep themselves healthy.

- AP, Apr 1 2011

The coffee tasted grimy and the buzzing of the fluorescent lights was hellacious, but this was still shaping up to be Ken Hansen's most promising meeting of the morning. For one thing, he hadn't been laughed out of the office when he explained what he was willing to pay.

"We're all feeling the pinch, huh?" said Mr. Davies, a

sympathetic and pear-shaped man with tawny teeth. “Now, the Elite Tier of plans are going to be out of your range, I'm afraid.” He neatly crossed out the top row of the chart with a squeaking red marker. “But you knew that coming in, I'm sure.”

“Right. Limited budget.”

“Now, Standard Tier's going to be hovering right around the upper limit you gave me.” Davies circled the next row down. “This is really excellent coverage, though, honestly it kills me to call it 'standard' since it goes so far beyond, you know, what you'd normally expect.”

“Yeah...” Ken twiddled his pen, stalling. The “upper limit” he'd given was actually a good deal higher than he was able to pay. “This is still maybe just a hair steep...”

Davies grinned. “Boy, are you in luck.”

Nothing on earth made Ken happier than baking, but it had been his downfall. It was the dribs and drabs of fondant, the furtive licks of brownie batter off the beater, even pinches of rainbow sprinkles he dropped straight into his mouth. His favorites, of course, were the golden elephant ears, extravagantly big and sprinkled with crunchy sugar. Ken never could resist the first out of the fryer while it was still piping hot.

So when Dr. Pasala told him he was suffering from type 2 diabetes, the diagnosis wasn't inexplicable – but it was unthinkable. Ken Hansen had never been sick a day of his life. If you were to call it an exaggeration, he wouldn't protest, but that was just politeness. Each flu season, while everyone else was sucking zinc lozenges and snuffling into tissues, he could be found bustling around Midtown Bakery, hale, hearty, and red-cheeked. There had been no appendectomy, no impacted wisdom teeth – not so much as the chickenpox. This sudden illness was monstrously unfair. An invisible certificate of achievement had been torn up. Dr. Pasala was telling him something about pork insulin and glipizide. He could barely stand to listen.

I'm an invalid, Ken thought mournfully on his way out to the car,

more conscious than usual of his huffing and sweating. One slip and he could end up blind or without any feet or comatose or worse. Some new precautions were in order.

First on the agenda was relegating his cache of Airheads and Zebra Cakes to the dustbin – simple enough. Next, though, was finding health insurance, and the money issues this brought up gave him a stomachache. Midtown Bakery did well, he told all askers, and it did, but sporadically. Weekends, he moved loads of apple fritters, and around the holidays his sticky buns were a huge hit, but the average Monday through Friday was a doldrums. Pastry didn't fly off the shelves the way it used to. He suspected it had become outdated, somehow dowdy. “What do you mean you never heard of an éclair?” he snapped at a kid one afternoon, scaring the youngster out of the shop.

So Ken wasn't on the brink of Chapter 11 by any stretch, but a monthly premium was going to hurt. He swallowed his pride, tallied up a humiliating budget, and set out on his tour of the city's insurance offices.

Davies returned with two more cups of murky coffee and a manila folder. “As I said, this is brand new, and – to my line of thinking at least – super exciting. Gotta say, though, a little unorthodox.”

“Long as I've got full coverage.”

“And then some.” He flopped open the folder and took out an accordion-pleated brochure. “I'm sure you've heard about this – car company gives you cheap coverage, in exchange they put a device in your car to keep tabs on your driving habits.”

“I think I saw a commercial.”

“Right. This is very similar, but since we're talking health insurance here, we don't intend to compress your life down to a series of bar graphs. We're aiming for something a little more

holistic, a little more intimate. We really love that you're joining the Aspire Mutual family, Ken. Hold out your palm.”

Without a thought, he extended it. Davies dropped in what Ken at first thought to be a coin. The silvery polished disc was no larger than a dime, no heavier than a watch battery. “This little sucker is a remotely controlled micro-camera. Bleeding edge Korean nanotechnology. If you'll just clip it onto your lapel and let me pull this up for you quick...” Davies waggled his mouse to clear the screensaver and clacked away at the keyboard. “Just looks like an especially shiny button. Nobody will be the wiser. And then...” He clicked the mouse, and a tiny pop sounded as an aperture closed over the camera's wee lens. A grainy color picture of the office – almost exactly Ken's view of it – scanned down the screen.

“It's on a ten minute schedule. We do a quick eval of each shot for health risks then delete.”

“What about sleep?”

“You can turn it off for ten hours out of every twenty-four. At the end of that period a fail-safe trips; that alerts us, and you'll be dismissed from the program. Think of it as an automatic opt-out clause – you feel uncomfortable with our arrangement, stick the camera in your bureau and forget about it.”

“Still... I just... privacy...”

Davies smirked. “Privacy, Ken? How many tweets do you post a day? How many thousand photos have you uploaded to Facebook? Privacy is a spent paradigm. It's old meme. But trust me, there's no need to sweat it. Read the Terms and Conditions. Only the photos with direct bearing on your health and safety levels will be cached, and we never sell anything to third party marketers. Again, Ken – we're family now. Family doesn't back-stab.”

“It's – I – What if I'm punching in my PIN number at the ATM? What if I have my Social Security card out or something?”

“Immediately deleted. Our adjusters are the best vetted in the country – independent audits, all that good stuff. The slightest whiff of impropriety and they're out, plus a full criminal investigation. Seriously, Ken. You've got valid, valid concerns, but when that first premium comes due your jaw will drop at how low it is. I want you to close your eyes a minute and imagine that, and imagine the security you'll feel with comprehensive coverage like this. Go ahead.”

Ken closed his eyes. The camera was nearly weightless on his shirt.

After the first couple of days, he barely noticed the camera. The little snap of the lens shutting no longer made him look down. Even better, no one else had commented on it – the thing was nearly invisible against his chef's whites.

Wednesday morning, he was doing some kneading when the phone rang. “For you, Mr. Hansen,” said Sheila, who did the bookkeeping.

“I can't – ah, cripes – would you hold the phone up for me?” She squashed the cordless receiver against his ear. “Hello?”

“Ken! Clark Davies from Aspire Mutual here. How's the, um, the...”

“The...”

“The cook – the cooking. The bakery.”

“Good, Mr. Davies. I'm kind of up to my elbows in pate a choux right now, though, so...”

“This'll be just a sec. Listen, yesterday, 4:10 PM, I'm reviewing it... Looks like you've got some cookie dough there, yes?”

“Yuh. Macaroons, I believe.”

“Macaroons. Great. Well, this is the thing, Ken – I'm reviewing this, correct me if I'm wrong, but it would appear you're lifting a bit of dough there to your mouth. That a fair appraisal?”

“Sure, I taste things sometimes. Was probably seeing if I put enough almond extract.”

Ken heard Davies suck in a breath through his teeth. “Not looking to throw a wrench in your works here, Ken, but that's going to fall under unacceptable health risks, as outlined in your policy.”

“You're serious?”

“I am, Ken, and I'm sorry, Aspire Mutual still loves you, but raw dough can contain salmonella. It's the eggs. You know how it is, not trying to be the 'bad guy' here, but we're going to have to raise your premium a dollar twenty-five. Do I have your consent?”

“My *consent*?”

“Right. I mean, you just acknowledged the risky behavior, so in this instance we have you 'dead to rights,' as it were – ha, ha – but I mean, in cases where there's some doubt you're absolutely allowed to contest the charges. So. What do you say?”

“Uh – sure. Fine.”

“Great. Let me make a note of... There. You enjoy the rest of your morning, Ken – and no more raw eggs!” Davies chuckled and hung up. Sheila brought the phone back to the office as Ken mentally re-tallied his budget, the dial tone still ringing in his ear.

The balance of the week did not go well. Thursday, he lifted a pallet of shortening with his back, not with his knees – would he consent to a 75 cent increase? He would, he supposed. Friday morning, he was driving back from the restaurant supply place on the interstate, and it looked to Davies like he had made an unsafe lane change. Ken insisted he

hadn't, but since he was alone in the car he couldn't produce a witness, would he consent to a \$1.25 increase? He guessed so. Just after closing on Friday he sprayed some oven cleaner without wearing protective gloves. That was another dollar, if he agreed to the charges. Fine, he did, though he swore a legendary blue streak after hanging up.

All day Saturday he simmered over the way his paycheck had been chipped away at. Dr. Pasala wanted him to avoid alcohol but he needed to go have a couple, he decided, for sanity's sake. He called up Lee and TJ, the usual suspects, and headed down to Rafter's. Sure enough, a few Labatts went a long way toward turning things around.

The phone rang the next morning at eight. Ken smacked his parched lips. “Yuh.”

“Morning, Ken, Clark Davies here.”

“Yuh.”

“Got some, ah, not so great news for you today.”

The morning sun was making Ken's eyes water. He pawed at the shade to pull it down further, but lost his grip and it flapped and rattled to the very top. “Just tell me.”

“Well... We saw you smoke that cigarette, Ken.”

“What? I don't smoke. I've *never* smoked.”

“12:20 AM, you are clearly, clearly holding a cigarette.”

“What – Oh. Holding it, sure. TJ asked me to hang onto it while he took a leak. But I *never* -”

“Jeez, you know, I'd love to give you the benefit of the doubt on this, Ken. Smoking's going to really jack up your premium. But

I'm in a tight spot, you've got to appreciate that.”

An idea sputtered to life. “I can get him as a witness. Teej'll testify I wasn't smoking it, he'd do it in a heartbeat.”

“Aha. Sure thing, Ken.” Davies almost sounded a little surly. “You've got seven days to appeal.”

“Not a problem.” Triumphantlly, Ken hung up the phone.

“Not a snowball's chance, Ken.” TJ said over the phone. “I can't. Can not. You know I haven't got any sick days left.”

“Half an hour, man. We'll do it on your lunch-break.”

“We will *not* do it on my lunchbreak. This address is all the way uptown!”

“Okay... okay.” Ken grimaced and tapped his forehead. “Plan B. No need to go down there in person. I just need a notarized sworn statement.”

“Yeah? You know any notaries?”

After a few minutes slumped with head in hands, he called Aspire Mutual back to explain that he wouldn't be able to contest the charges after all. “Bummer,” said Davies. “Now, as I'm sure you understand, smoking is a bit more serious than, say, eating some germy dough.”

Ken flushed. “My macaroons are *not* 'germy'!”

“Of course not, Ken. But, be that as it may, this is going to be a five dollar increase to your premium. Have I got your consent?”

His stomach cramped again. “Mr. Davies, I can't. There's no way.”

“Ah. Wow. Super sorry to hear that, Ken, but I totally understand.”

“No, hang on. What I mean is, is there any way I can bring it back down? There's no other plan I can afford. I'm kind of, uh, desperate here, haha.” His laugh had a hysterical edge to it.

“Well, you may have just lucked out a second time. Hold on one sec.” Ken heard the clunk of Davies setting the phone down and began pacing the room. “Okay, back. Just spoke with Jerry, he's actually got two or three customers who are in the same boat, and I think if you're willing to work with us on this, we can reinstate your original premium – with a few preconditions.”

“Thank god. Whatever you need me to do.”

“Great. First thing's first: we'll need to see some concrete steps toward a healthier lifestyle. Can you commit to half an hour of exercise a day, and no red meat?”

“Sure. No prob.”

“That's the easy part, I'm afraid. Other half of this is going to be an agreement on your part to wear the camera 24-7. Now, I'm aware that's a pretty tall order, believe me, but that's the only arrangement I'm gonna be able to offer you.”

Something about the idea of being under surveillance in his sleep unsettled Ken a little. Not that he sleepwalked or talked to himself or even drooled, but the time he spent sleeping just felt more private than anything he did during the day. Then again, it wouldn't be a huge difference from being watched fourteen hours a day already, and really all Aspire Mutual would be getting was some blurry shots of the bedroom wall. They had a deal.

Ken had an old stationary bike in the garage but the pedals fell off when he dragged it out, so he signed up to go use the high school gym in the morning with a crowd of mostly retirees. Next, the cooler of steaks in dry ice his brother-in-law had sent went into the garbage, along with his cherished jar of teriyaki jerky.

Davies had been right, though; that stuff was the easy part. Sleeping with the camera on was very nearly more trouble than it was worth. For one thing, he'd been cautioned to stay off his stomach, as that would cover up the camera, but trying to sleep on his back felt terribly alien. He might as well have tried to nod off while hopping on one foot. It took too much focus. Then there was the tendency of the camera's clip to slip off the collar of his nightshirt. Five times a night he'd have to switch on the lamp and dig through the sheets looking for the little disc. Whenever the thought of giving up crossed his mind, he would get up and read the WebMD entries for diabetic neuropathy and ketoacidosis.

Not everything was so grim, though: marked for that weekend on Ken's calendar was his first date in six months. He met Chelsea on a site that matched up diabetic singles. They were both from big families, and both were big fans of *Avatar* and pad thai. She was heavysset, sure, but no moreso than himself, so he really couldn't complain.

He took her to Bangkok Palace on State Street. Their laughter turned the heads of all the other diners. He blew his straw wrapper at her. She peppered his dish of mango slices when he went to the bathroom. Their legs brushed under the table and Ken's heart swelled.

After dinner – and three vodka-and-Diet Sprites apiece at the bar – they started getting a little frisky. He invited her back to the apartment and she agreed enthusiastically. Ken was gleeful. This wasn't a very common occurrence for him since putting the weight on; not common enough for his tastes, at least. Chelsea fumbled out of her shirt and started tugging at his when he suddenly remembered the camera. “Uh – Can I leave the shirt on, just for now? I'm sorry, it's just I'm a little self-conscious, and...”

She cupped his face in her hands. “You're so warm. Is that what all bakers are like?” She giggled. “I'm sorry, that was corny.”

“No, no...” Woozy still from the cocktails, they weaved toward the futon, Ken kicking laundry out of their path on the way.

“Yeah,” whispered Chelsea.

Ken kissed her on the hip and started unbuttoning her jeans.

Snap! With horror Ken recognized the click of the camera shooting a photo. He saw Chelsea's face lit up, white and disgusted, by the flash.

She scrambled off the futon, hurling away the blanket like something diseased. “What the hell is wrong with you?” She grabbed up her shirt and wadded jeans to cover herself. “You think you can just take naked pictures of me? Pervert!”

“No! Jesus, Chelsea, no, it's for my insurance—”

“*Insurance?* You're *blackmailing* me?” She slapped him so hard his lower lip went numb. His cheek was smoldering. “Asshole.”

He wanted badly to explain but the combined effect of his bewilderment, the Svedka, and the stinging of his face shut him up. He sat dumbfounded as she dressed and stormed out.

Ken sank back against his pillow with a thud. The phone rang. “Yeah,” he sighed.

“Hi there, Ken. Listen, I hate to interrupt while you're, ah, getting intimate, but this is kind of serious. Can you spare a minute?”

“She left.”

“Oh. Huh. Well, reason I'm calling is, I didn't happen to see you wearing an, um, heh, uh – prophylactic?”

“What? No, she said don't bother, she's on the pill.”

“Pill just protects against pregnancy, Ken, our concern is sexually transmitted--”

“That's nuts! She's clean, I'm sure of it.”

“I believe you, Ken, but all the same we're going to need to see some medical records.”

“Are you kidding me? There's no way!”

“You couldn't just ask politely?”

“Ask poli – No!”

“Jeez, Ken, I know it's awkward...”

“No, we are well past awkward here. She slapped my face and left thanks to your damn camera.”

“The camera? Oh. Ohh... You didn't explain to her beforehand, huh?”

“No, I didn't tell the girl I brought home that my insurance company would be snapping nude photos of her. For some reason I didn't think it would set the right tone.”

“Hey, don't bite my head off. Only reason you went on the 24 hour schedule was your own behavior. Now, how about you take a few minutes to cool off, call that girl up, and ask her to forward her test results to our office.”

“Davies, there's no way. Seriously, if there's anything at all I can do to—”

“...To keep your policy without getting records from her? I figured. Might be tricky this time, but if you're willing to compromise a little...”

Ken was up at dawn the next day to grab a quick breakfast. He opened Midtown Bakery extra early on Sundays, since the old people liked to stop in and pick up plain donuts to eat after church. As he sat down with his cereal the phone rang.

“Mornin', KENNETH HANSEN. Noticed you were sittin' down to the most important meal of the day. Now, next time you're fixin' to eat some breakfast, why not try Heartland's Favorite Hickory Cured Sausage on for size? Premium beef seasoned *real* gentle-like with herbs and spices. Smoky an' satisfying. Might even make your fried egg jealous. For details and special offers, press one now. Para español...”

The compromise this time was a small modification to the Terms and Conditions. In exchange for his continued coverage, Ken would allow Aspire Mutual to share his data with a select circle of trusted friends and associates.

“Uh-oh! Don't cry over spilled coffee, KENNETH HANSEN. Household spills and messes are no match for Husky Paper Towels. With over four hundred absorption packets per sheet, there's no limit to what they'll soak up, and with over eighty percent post-consumer content the trees will thank you. For a special limited time offer, press one now.”

There would be an average of sixteen calls per day, Davies explained, of which Ken was obligated to answer and listen to only eight. Really rather reasonable, if you think about it. Davies recommended that Ken keep a ledger, to make sure he was filling his quota. Aspire Mutual was thrilled, just thrilled, to know that they had a future together.

“Losing sleep, KENNETH HANSEN? We couldn't help noticing those dark circles under your eyes, and we know how it feels. Somnicel can help. A capsule before bed could be your ticket to the restful sleep you need. Don't wait – this valuable coupon won't be available long! Press one now.”

Purple Hearts (Winner, TAR Award of literary excellence November 2011)

-J (<http://rollovertoplay.tumblr.com/>)

A tide of hot air forced its way up from the furnace, invading Travis's dreams and finally waking him. He blinked under a low and yellowed awning that turned out to be the brim of his Yankees cap. The time was some puzzling 4:30 stained the color of toilet bowl cleaner – either just before dawn or just after an early December sunset. Lance was supposed to get off Domino's at two. Travis had passed out waiting for him to text, though he simmered with annoyance.

Swearing mightily, he vaulted into his rolling chair. Travis took a skimpy resin hit and washed the taste out with a swig of warm Vitamin Water. His phone shuddered suddenly. In gratitude he shook it in his fist, but then he read the message: Lance needed to give the cat ear drops and make a grilled cheese, give him fifteen minutes and he'd be right over.

Travis chucked the phone as hard as he could into the wall. The back panel flew loose and tore Dimebag Darrell's face. Whatever you asked Lance for, the answer was always “fifteen minutes.” As far as Travis knew, Lance had never done anything in fifteen minutes in his life. Lance couldn't brush his teeth in fifteen minutes. It would take Lance more than fifteen minutes to get out of a burning building. Still, he was the only guy left in town who wouldn't short Travis on an eighth, so his only real choice was to grit his teeth and deal.

He figured he might as well try to unlock the Desert Eagle again. “Connecting,” the game promised, but the little pinwheel symbol just kept chasing its tail. It was the same as Lance's “fifteen minutes.” Everyone was out to bullshit him today. He slapped the monitor, grabbed his hurt fingers, and galloped down the stairs.

“You're hogging the bandwidth,” he told Kelsey. His older sister was slumped under a pink and brown afghan, playing tug-of-war with Sunny using a twist of rawhide.

He faked a savage kick to the screen of her laptop in slow motion. “Don't.” He reached behind the entertainment cabinet to unplug it. “Travis, I'm frigg'in' dead serious. Don't.” Sunny the pocket pug lost her grip and rolled across the carpet.

Kelsey was on probation for unlawful dealing with a minor after buying Travis and his friends a couple 30 racks of Busch for a party in the garage. J.C. Penney got wind of it and laid her off, so for the past month she'd mostly just bummed around the house. Travis and Kelsey generally got along better the less they saw of one another. Lately he'd been seeing her every day.

Boondock Saints was lit up enormously on the flatscreen, and the thunder of machine gun rounds being sprayed into a room boomed out of the surround sound. The wrinkled little dog thrashed her head around like it wasn't even connected. Travis squatted to type in Kelsey's password. Right away he saw the problem. She was torrenting something huge, sixteen gigs or so of a Sims expansion pack. “Can I just cancel this?” he moaned.

“Travis, I swear to god.”

“It's probably a fake anyway.” He shoved the laptop out of his way with his sock foot. He found a rotisserie chicken in the fridge, popped off the clear plastic dome, and pinched some meat off its leg. Another burst of gunfire came from the living room.

“Did he say when he was getting back?”

“Monday or Tuesday.”

Bill LaDue sold automatic hand dryers to hotels and restaurants. On Wednesdays he left them pizza money and drove downstate. The following Monday he'd be back with his Aerostar full of unsold merchandise that they would have to help unload.

“We should throw a rager,” said Travis.

Kelsey hucked the rawhide strip at his face and it sailed past his ear. Sunny the pocket pug jumped up on his leg, her nails digging Travis's shins through the denim.

"You're a retard," Kelsey said. She loved partying more than anything in the world, and it was taking everything she had to stay in on Friday nights until her probation ended. She was even paranoid about returning beer cans. He knew it was mean to tempt her like that.

Travis stepped in front of the TV to put on his jacket. "I'm going out to the Rez. If Lance comes can you, like, let him in or whatever?"

Kelsey made a face. "Uh, no?"

"Just let him in! He can chill."

"No, he's gonna want to smoke and I can't."

"So just smoke one bowl with the kid."

"Travis, I have a piss test Monday!"

"Can't hear you," Travis said. He swung the screen door shut. The rawhide, then Sunny, thudded against the opposite side.

Pebbles of sleet rattled down on the roof and driveway. Travis leapt over the three porch steps and through the stinging shower to his Tempo. The first word anyone who knew Travis might use to describe him was "tense." He sprang from place to place with wiry energy and spoke as if each word were giving a violent shove to the one that came before it. He never slept the night through. With both hands he played a blistering drum solo on the steering wheel until the car started weaving over the fog line.

In his jeans pocket was a decent if slightly blurry fake ID. The New Hampshire license wouldn't have done him much good at the liquor store – nobody was about to mistake his lean beardless kid's face for a 21 year old man's – but the Red Branch Casino always took it without a second glance. He just needed to be careful to pull out his real license if he got pulled

over.

The iron bridge hummed beneath him. Once he was across he passed a truck carrying a giant cauldron of molten aluminum. To his left were a bingo parlor and a leather shop. On the right a gas station flooded the highway with white light. The friendly turtle mascot on their sign gave him a thumbs up. Beneath the turtle, HOT CHILI scrolled in red electronic letters.

Hot chili sounded good. That mouthful of chicken had been the first thing he ate that day. He veered into Turtle Lodge's parking lot. Two attendants in puffy silver parkas and tuques were huddled in their glassed-in booth. Travis killed the engine and ran through the ice again.

Jugs of greenish antifreeze stood in every window of the store. On his way back to the steaming pot of chili, Travis jostled a rack of novelty toys and knocked one called The Perfect Husband onto the floor. The Perfect Husband was a plush figure of a man in a tie that, when you squeezed it, said things like, "Please, allow *me* to do the dishes," and, "I don't care about the big game." He stuck The Perfect Husband back on the wire shelf upside down.

Snapping a lid on his paper cup of chili, he headed up to the counter. There was only one other person in the store besides himself and the cashier, a towering man with paint-spattered jeans and a curly beard. The man was buying a Fire Cracker pickled sausage and a pack of Brave cigarettes, and he was having the cashier tear him off a strip of five Big Doublers.

The man spun a penny on the counter, then squashed it flat with his palm when it began to slow. "Now don't you forget about my discount this time," he told the cashier. The penny stuck to his palm when he lifted it.

She snorted and stooped to break down a carton. "Your discount. You'll get a discount, all right."

“You know what you are? You're mean. You're just plain mean.”

“Oh, boo hoo.”

Travis reached into his pocket and took out the one crumpled bill inside.

“Well, I suppose you know what I'm going to do. I'm going on the air and I'm gonna tell my listeners, Turtle Lodge has the meanest cashier in the whole entire world. Don't buy nothing there, don't fill your tank up there...”

“You shut up!”

“Don't even look at the place.”

“Shut your mouth!”

The bill was a ten, not a twenty. If he bought the chili he would have barely anything left to gamble with. While the man and the cashier grabbed the strip of lottery tickets back and forth, Travis snuck the cup of chili onto a shelf of Life Savers and walked out.

“See, he's got the right idea!” the man cried.

The casino bathroom was probably the nicest part of the place. It smelled like coconut and had lots of pink marble; it was definitely the quietest part, and had the most fresh air. A cascade of paper towels reached from the dispenser to the wastebasket. If Bill had any brains he would have tried selling them one of his hand dryers.

A red plastic biohazard box was bolted to the wall. Diabetic seniors came in here to shoot up with insulin so they could return to winning. Travis peeked inside at the jumble of syringes. He shivered and strolled out onto the beeping, clanging main floor.

Most of the gamblers were sixty or over. A trembling man in a motorized scooter almost ran over Travis's toes. The casino had themed

machines based on shows Travis's grandpa had watched: The Munsters, Beverly Hillbillies, I Dream of Jeannie. The Kenny Rogers video slot barked that he needed to know when to hold them and when to fold them. A skewer of grilled shrimp the size of a kayak loomed on a banner behind the blackjack tables.

Every machine had a red enamel ashtray next to it, and plumes of speckled cigarette smoke rose and swirled around the lights. Travis found an area where the smoke was relatively less dense, smoothed out the ten, and slipped it into a machine. It came up with three bunches of grapes and began dropping quarters into the tray with a generous clattering noise. “Hey hey,” said the woman sitting next to him. Her face was mottled with rosacea and the Tasmanian Devil bared his teeth on her back.

The machine wanted Travis to swipe his Club Card. He didn't remember ever getting one. The woman plinked on his screen with a sharp mauve fingernail. “Tap 'Cancel.’”

Travis tapped Cancel and the fruits and goldbricks started whizzing by. Lime. Bell. Lime. “Why do they even give you the third,” he said. “If the first two don't match...”

“I think,” said the woman, “there's an instant win. Yup, right here.” She pointed out the sticker alongside the screen. “If you'd gotten two limes and then a star it would've payed triple.”

“But even with that, if you get a lime then a bell you know you lost already. No matter the third.”

“Well, you never know.”

“You do know, though. So why show it?”

“Why even have the fruit and all to begin with?” She sounded like she might be losing her patience but she was smiling. “Why not, you just pull the lever and get a 'yes' or a 'no'?”

Travis admitted that would make for a pretty boring game, but still, it didn't make sense to wait to be told you lost when you already knew you didn't stand a chance.

“If we just acknowledged when the jig is up, we wouldn't have any kind of entertainment at all,” the woman said. Travis touched the button on the screen to double his bet. Bell. Lime. He cashed out what he had left and walked away without looking at the third.

Jackpot amounts flashed on high narrow screens, zero zero zero zero and zero cents. That was a shortcoming of the lottery, Travis thought. The amounts were too even. \$7,849,277 – wouldn't that be a more interesting prize? One that would be more fun to break into and divvy up? With something like \$12 million you knew where you stood. That was no fortune. Winning ought to be more interesting than losing.

He hopped onto the stool in front of a desert themed slot machine. The man on the right was playing the same one. His face was big and gnomelike but friendly. Two clear blue plastic tubes trailed up into his nostrils from a black case with Velcro on it. Every few seconds a *ppft* sound came from the case, a little sigh, as oxygen from the canister spurted up into the man's sweet-potato nose. Without even thinking about it Travis started breathing with its rhythm. *Pffft*, inhale, exhale. It was like the oxygen system was imposing a more natural rhythm on them both.

On his third attempt he got three cacti and quarters gushed out. “Lucky man,” said the gnome.

“Yeah right. I only won once before this.”

“You're going to need patience to win yourself a nice new car.”

“I have a car,” Travis said. “I'm trying to win back my grandpa's Purple Hearts.” He looked over to check the gnome's expression.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup. We had to pawn 'em for rent money. There were like five.”

“Five!” The gnome pursed his lips and nodded. “Korea? Vietnam?”

“World War II. He killed a bunch of their generals. Like four star generals. He just jumped in through the window and started stabbing them, like... That was how he got all the Purple Hearts. One for each one. “Because they only give it out if it's like basically you've got knives at each other's throats. Basically it has to be like a fifty-fifty chance you'll survive.”

“So what theater did he fight in?”

“It wasn't a theater,” said Travis, “it was a barn.”

The gnome turned and smiled. “No, 'theater' means, was he in Europe or the Pacific.”

“Oh. Both.”

Travis wasn't sure if he'd said something completely unbelievable or not. He bet a dollar. He felt inspired. “Yeah, you know, he had to kill his own brother.”

“His brother!”

“Yeah. 'Cause the family went through Ellis Island but his brother stayed in Germany to save the farm. And he got drafted by America and his brother by the Nazis. And they were in France, right? And he sees this German stick his head up out of the trench across from his. And he had to, like, throw this grenade in his face. Even though he recognized him. 'Cause that's what you had to do.”

“It's senseless,” said the gnome with a wry look.

“Yeah.” Travis was excited. His mouth was dry but he felt

pressured to go on. "He got home after we finished fighting the Germans and it was the same day Pearl Harbor happened. Well, not home. Washington DC. And he saw the speech. He saw President Truman get up out of his wheelchair for the very first time. Nobody thought he could, 'cause he was crippled, but he got up and told everyone, 'We've gotta bomb Japan.' And my grandpa was there."

"Isn't that something." The gnome won a trickle of eight or so quarters, which he scraped into his plastic cup. "You'll excuse me?" he said, like a question. Coins jingling, he walked away.

Travis played a few more rounds but each time the machine came up with two of the same thing and a tumbleweed. Tumbleweeds counted for nothing. The third time it happened he had the machine spit out what was left of the ten and he counted it up. There wasn't enough for chili. He felt he had a decent chance of winning it back, but it seemed like a good time to cut his losses.

All Travis could think about on the way home was the tale he'd told of his grandpa. He didn't even wonder whether Lance had come by yet. He still had no clue whether the gnome had believed him or not but he could see the whole thing in his head. When whirling red lights sped past him on his street it didn't even register.

Mrs. Truman stands in back in a taffeta ballgown. She's rubbing her eyes with gloved hands because she can't believe what she's seeing. All these months he spent learning how to stand up, he didn't tell her once what he was working on. His fingers tighten around the mahogany rim of the podium and the President is standing, for the first time the nation has ever seen. Listen, he tells the crowd over their gasps. I know times are rough but we've got one more war to fight. And when we're finished with this one, our boys can all come home. Just one more, he says, determined to finish pleading his case before his legs give out. Just one more war.

The Cardigan

-Kristopher R. Busby

She had asked for and received special permission to be in his classroom after school. She said there was too much noise at home and as far as the library goes, it has recently become more of a hangout than a place of study. Even study hall had its whispers and giggles.

She usually got what she asked for. Being the daughter of the minister residing over the largest church in town had its perks. Everyone thought of her as 'the girl who couldn't lie, cheat, steal' etc. She knew better than they that everyone does all those things, it's just the religious folks who deny it or go to confess about it. Maybe they choose to see her that way because that's how they want to see her. Maybe by imagining this were so gave them some kind of hope in humanity. Maybe, but they would certainly never think that the reason she wanted to be alone in his classroom was simply because it was *his* classroom and contained *his* cardigan.

She wanted to be alone in his space. To smell his cologne, to think of an excuse to be near his desk so she could see the classroom from his angle and get a sense of him. She didn't completely understand, but she knew enough to know that she had feelings for him. When the other girls were at his desk she found it difficult to breathe. When they laughed at his jokes and played with their hair she burned with... anger? Well whatever the emotion, the thought was "he's mine!" She felt the same way, yet different, when the women at her church acted this way toward her father since her mother had passed several years earlier.

She wasn't particularly happy that these things were happening to her. As a matter of fact, she was starting to find the whole thing somewhat of an intrusion to her life. She knew that what she was going through was a 'crush' and that it happens to everyone. At

eighteen this was only her third and definitely the most serious. And the most ridiculous. What if he liked her back? He was so old, her father's age, like mid-forties! The whole fantasy was ridiculous. And what if she caught him, like the dog who, at last, catches the car he's chasing, what would she do with him?

She fantasized about reading the Bible together, which always made her feel happy. Her father took the Bible way too seriously, but to her it had the same effect as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. They made her feel emotions and think about things and ultimately gave her funny dreams when she went to sleep. She wanted him to be there with her.

Maybe they could teach Sunday school together, all the kids looking up to them. Melissa and her *husband*! They'd have two children and he'd read *Charlotte's Web* to them, and he'd cry at the end.

She looked out the window at Mr. Clydesdale's car, waiting for it to be gone so she would know it was safe to retrieve the cardigan.

She knew all about the cardigan. Well, not where it came from, nothing like that, but what its life consisted of; the cardigan had, for the last three years that she had known of it, hung on the back of Mr. Clydesdale's chair. It was as much a part of the room as his desk or the chair itself. Mr. Clydesdale would use it during the colder months, putting it on in the morning while the old school heated up and removing it, usually, about lunch time. As the seasons became warmer, he wore it less but he never took it home. That is, never except for summer vacation.

The cardigan smelled so wonderful. It was a mixture of Old Spice, chalk dust and what she could only conclude was Mr. Clydesdale's own scent. But not at the beginning of the school year. Then it smelled like everyone else's clothes, fabric softener.

The cardigan wasn't particularly ragged or worn. A couple of the buttons didn't exactly match, and the collar was a little frayed, but only needed to be clipped a bit. It had the colors of a cloudy day, dark grey with lighter grey trim and some white threading here and there. And it was soon to be hers.

She was in the classroom for the purpose of stealing the cardigan. She glanced again towards the car in the parking lot, hoping not to see it, but it was still there. She just didn't have the courage to take the cardigan while there was any chance of being caught in the act.

She had plans for what she was going to do with it: smell it a lot, sleep with it, (that was a given,) sit in her favourite chair with the arms of the cardigan wrapped around her waist in a perpetual hug, wear it around the house, and maybe even, when enough time had passed that she wasn't afraid it would be recognized, wear it outside.

Melissa was lost in her thoughts when the door to the classroom opened and to her horror David, Mr. Clydesdale, entered the room. "Well hello there, Melissa."

"Hi," her voice squeaked.

"It's unusual to see someone using classroom for study hall when there's only two days left of school," he said as he took the cardigan from the back of his chair, folded it and stuffed it into his briefcase.

"Oh, ya... I was just doing some review." She was devastated that he was taking his cardigan. She was so close to completing her mission. She was frustrated with herself for not having had the courage to act sooner. She would have already been halfway home if she had just grabbed it and left.

Melissa realized she hadn't even taken a book from her bag to study. She was sitting there with nothing open. "Oh God you're so stupid!" she thought to herself. "He's going to think you're a complete moron!"

She fumbled her math book from her pack onto her desk, opened it randomly and pretended to be reading, her eyes rolled up practically to the inside of her forehead so she could keep watch on him.

Mr. Clydesdale was selectively removing items from his desk and putting them into his briefcase with the cardigan.

“At the end of every school year it takes me three days of going home with a stuffed briefcase to get my desk cleaned out,” he said.

She laughed a forced laugh, knowing it sounded forced, then blushed because of it.

“Do you have any big plans for the summer, Melissa?”

“Um, no, um, just Bible camp and preparing for college.” Oh God! Why did she mention Bible camp? That’s sounds so childish! “I’m a counsellor!” she almost shouted.

“I’m sorry?” said a somewhat surprised Mr. Clydesdale.

“At Bible camp,” she said, “I’m a counsellor.”

“Oh,” he said, watching her from his peripheral vision while he tried to stuff several books into his briefcase. He gave up and left the classroom.

A few moments later Melissa heard something outside. It was Mr. Clydesdale. He had opened the trunk of his car and was rummaging around for something. He straightened up with a reusable shopping bag in his hand, put it on the ground by his feet and fidgeted with the contents of the trunk.

“This was it,” she thought. She could wait until he was around the corner of the building on his way back in, grab the cardigan from his briefcase and run out of the classroom and out the back door before he made it to the hallway, where the entrance to his class was.

“But he’d know what you did!” she scolded herself. “He wouldn’t even realize it until he got home, then he’d think he just misplaced it.”

Mr. Clydesdale was still fumbling in his trunk. Melissa slid her math off the desk and into her bag. Her heart was pounding. He had his palm on the trunk lid and was peering into the trunk, taking one last look before forcing it closed.

Melissa felt like her head would pop off from the force of her heart.

He picked up the grocery bag and started his lanky walk back to the school.

As soon as he was out of sight she bolted for the briefcase, and panicked when she realized it was under everything else. She thought of removing everything, taking the cardigan and putting everything back... “No time!” she screamed inside her head. She spotted a corner of the cardigan, and in one movement pulled it out, turned and ran out the door...hearing the sound of books falling to the floor as she fled.

Melissa developed a forty-eight hour stomach bug and couldn’t attend the last two days of school.

Milk Poured Gently to a Wine Glass

-*Matthew S. Vodička* (www.msvodicka.com)

He'd been blaspheming for the past ten minutes, despite starting the conversation by asking me for the time. I gathered that his life wasn't going as he would have liked, and that the Heavens were to blame for it all. I listened noncommittally. I acknowledged him only with moderately placed, polite nods.

My nonchalance must have offended him, for he suddenly got close to my face, and said, "you think your apathy makes you innocent?" He cackled in his loud and obnoxious laugh. "Apathy is the worst of them all!" he shouted.

I could no longer see too well. Fog had descended around us—the clouds which were all above the surrounding mountains had fallen down around our feet in a matter of minutes. Neither of us were dressed for the drop in temperature.

"Oh, but, oh!" I could feel him grasping at me, at my chest and shoulders. "Hold my hand!"

I brought my hand limply to his, which he claimed with extreme vigor. Indeed, he seized my hand so forcefully that I was momentarily frightened.

"It's because of what I had said," he confided. "That stuff about, oh—'fuck God!'" He laughed. "You want proof, here's your proof. Fog in a desert?" He laughed even louder. "Fog, suddenly, in a desert!"

I admitted that it was quite eerie, and before I could mention more of my thoughts, he commented,

"We wouldn't even be able to see the bus. Even if it came within a foot of our feet!"

He was right. The bus we were both waiting for was likely grounded somewhere, as stranded as we were by the sudden, low clouds. I was about to excuse myself, to find my way back inside my apartment, but he pulled on my hand, saying, "come on, come on!" until I was on my feet and following him in quite a callow manner.

"I know a bar," he said. "Quite close to here. Oh, it's not far! Come on."

He led me as if by leash; I feared he would do something to my hand, for he coddled it so oddly in his arms. "The mountains," he said, "there's mountains all around us—they cradle in the clouds. Who knows when it will dissipate!" It was freakish, the way he laughed that laugh so often, his mouth just beyond my shoulder. After some paces, he said, "this is how He does it. It is always a descent from on high." He looked up to the sky, crossed himself, and then I lost his image forever in the ever-thickening haze. I never saw his image again. I heard him spit.

I could not see where I stepped, but I knew we were in the street.

"I once knew a man," he began again. (I thought we might be in some danger of getting hit by a car, but heard no traffic.) "an adulterer!" He shot out his insane laugh. "I met him at this bar, actually." I imagine he gestured ahead of us, for I felt one of his hands leave mine. "He told me he was there to pick up a loose woman. The nerve on that guy to come out and say it, by the way! And I said, 'but your wife and children at home!' 'Screw them!' he said. No kidding, that's exactly what he said. 'What have they ever brought me but misery?' he said. And then I said, 'but you have a duty. Have you no morals?' Well, what do you think he said to that? 'Not tonight,' he said! 'Not tonight, no.' Well, at least he was honest!"

Laughing, he let go of my hand entirely, but I swiftly grabbed out into the fog and managed to grasp his shirttail. He seemed to

know where he was going.

“Well, as lack of luck would have it, he did meet some gal in this bar that night, and he went home with her. And what do you think the last was that I heard of them?”

“What?” I said, trying to keep up with his hasty steps.

“They both died!” He laughed louder than ever before. “The ceiling caved in on them! They died—!—well, no, that’s not true. The ceiling fell down on them, but gently! Gently! Oh, gently—as if it was on, what are they, like,—pneumatic sliders!”

Here, I stopped, which made me inadvertently tug on his shirt. He paused, quite abruptly, and I could tell he wheeled around at me while shouting, “it’s true! Yes it is.”

He resumed walking, but said, “How I know this is that they were on the ground floor, and the guy who lived above them wasn’t once disturbed from sleep. Not once! He even told cops and reporters and, oh, whoever else, that he never once felt his floor fall! It was like it was gently lowered to crush the nude couple below.”

He was quite serious, now, or seemed to be, because his comment was not marked by his characteristically over-the-top laughter.

“The bar should be here,” he said after a while, and I was amazed that we had already crossed the street. I tripped over the curb as he lead me beyond, and I fell face-first into him, and then onto the gravel and sidewalk.

“Well, if you don’t want to go to the bar with me, then the hell with you!” He said, and walked rapidly away, laughing his insane laugh.

“No, I do—don’t—!” I called out in the fog.

His laughter continued on, but diminished quickly into the clouds around me.

Alone and shivering, I inched my way back home through the fog. I had to crawl, just to be certain that I wasn’t walking in circles, or the wrong way. It took hours to go by this method, and I appreciated the decisive and quick steps of the strange, old man—as if he had been walking through the dense atmosphere by utilizing some sense I lacked. Toward the end, I could actually see my apartment building due to a general lifting of the fog. It had taken me so long to traverse mere blocks; when I entered my apartment, I discovered it was four in the morning. I undressed and brought a spare blanket to the bedroom doorway. I soon fell asleep in the frame.

When my wife woke up that morning and found me there in our bedroom doorway, I could not find any method by which I could properly explain myself to her.

POETRY

Nadir Under Sun

-Alison Floren

I've a friend,
 a dilettante photog,
 who says the valley's
 beautiful when the sun ignites
 the smog
 in just the right way,
 but he doesn't live here
 year round,
 and me and my gal are dying
 to get out

 .

 He worships those ghastly lurid sunsets
 that she and I detest—
 well, she and I just hate the
 sun,
 when its summer singses
 minds
 —thoughts off as effluvia—
 and makes us,
 as Steinbeck might say, slices of carrion in a steaming
 closed pot

 .

 He'll be out in a month
 to the city on
 the make,
 and he says he won't be back,
 which is just as well;
 I'm sure I won't miss
 his reverence of the sun,
 carved in pixels and plastered on
 digital walls

 .

 There's likely a maxim
 hidden
 in an old tome or poem,
 on how the brilliant are awed by the simple;
 it must be the mark of a genius
 to be awed
by the awful.

Painted Hearts

-Jessica Browne

*Pastel blue rain shivered its descent
Upon the prismatic glass
The serpent here - bent, yet eager
With coffee mug before her nose
The other - rugged, strong, yet meager
In tandem, the soul grows
Brilliant colours fade.*

*Gold splotches coalesced in 3-part time
Across the drizzled, grizzled plane
The fire Drake waiting beneath the depths
For Sir Richard to slay her, in reverie
Past knights and kings had proved inept
And yet, he was each and every
Brilliant colours fade.*

*Carmine paint slithers to the end
Beyond the transient boundaries
A sonata rings with Armageddon's dread
For the dragon still hunts for the girl
Yet she sleeps serenely in the bed
Beneath the tree with the silver-eyed merl
Brilliant colours fade.*

The last Romantic

-Michael Labone

1.
you can't see your face
when the mirror bleeds into the tiles,
and the particles in the air seem to do nothing
but illuminate the spaces inbetween

A cup of tea and a cigarette
and that awful feeling in the pit of your stomach
as the butterflies turn to lead,
and the dizzying high becomes acute paranoia

There is nothing more beautiful than the night sky,
the ripples across the top of the pool,
the human form
and the luxury of the shower.

2.
the overwhelming sense of calm
that only comes from the pills that dissolve in the stomach.
Notebooks and ideas lie in a state of
desuetude strewn across the floor.

locked in this state for an hour,
or a year or a day or a week.
the skin forgets the sun and the wind.
to move on would be to lose
the stability and fragility of self

3.
The silence will be the death of them,
neither to be the first to leave the crutch
turning to what will hurt them.

As pain is the only way to feel alive

the look of disgust in her eyes will soon become his
and they'll stop caring.
He'll stop caring.
but for now the pain in his chest wont subside.

maybe it was the wine.
maybe it was the innocence in her eyes.
that he recognised from that raining autumn night six years earlier

but the facade crumbles
and the flesh of intention corrodes into
the gutter of the sick city streets
congealing on his footsteps as he walks away

Dear Music

-Michael Vires

I encourage, Do surround me.
Displace future, deadline, sure reality.
Envelope me—your wise volition
(You've my affable permission.)

Click.

Play, Now, GO!
Indulge the energy: Permit its flow!
Here a comfort—familiar form—
Pulses through: the placid storm.

Tension.
Tension!
Build,
Now raze!
You beating drums,
Your feral haze,
Guide my affect!
Perfect the daze.

“Distribute this,
But one
Apiece,
A fleeting moment's pure release.”

I Can't Remember Your Face Anymore

-Preece

Long ago you
were my next door neighbor,
and we held hands through
the halls of the empty houses.
We skipped stones
into the streetlight pools,
and swam naked down the
rivers of wet asphalt.
We lived alone on
porches and lawns
where the sun would sometimes
gather like diamonds.
We'd yell into the empty sky
and our voices would
weave and echo.
Your love was enormous,
but now you've slipped
through the eye of the earth
and you know
that's a long long way
to run away from home.
It never has been the same
since you left us.

Nothing to see here.

-Tom

Hanging at the democratic convention,
With the government snakes,
Spike the punch with common sense
And make my getaway.

They're eating expensive refreshments;
A broken promise soufflé.
Everyone's happy, laughing
Back-slapping away.

Out on the streets
The calls get louder for revolt,
But they'll just turn up the music louder,
Louder, as loud as it goes.

Call in the riot vans,
The pepper spray, the dogs.
And we'll crush this faster
Than you can say 'Nothing is wrong'.

Afterword

TAR is delighted by the increasing quality of submissions, and there were many items in this issue that were seriously considered for our literary prize of excellence. Significant nods go to Alison Floren's poem "Nadir Under Sun" and J's other piece, "Aspire Mutual."

Ultimately, the editors decided upon "Purple Hearts" to take top honor. In the story, one can find a very subtle yet unflinching commentary on the differing views and interests of characters separated by a generational gap. The protagonist, Travis, lives within a consumer-based and carefree life of internet, illegal drinking, and general, tense listlessness. He is the current, privileged youth of America, replete with a car and a fake I.D.

The power of the story unfolds when one realizes that the grim realities of life—as signified by insulin syringes, oxygen tanks, and war—are looked on by Travis with only a minor and detached curiosity. He peeks into the biohazard box, but swiftly strolls away. He can match his breathing to the old man's oxygen tank, but it's not mandatory (as it is for the "gnomelike" man) that he breathe in that rhythm. He can talk about his grandfather's war efforts (whether they were actual events or merely his invention,) yet, he cannot talk intelligently about them in an informed way befitting serious study and knowledge of war: "It wasn't a theater," Travis says, "it was a barn."

Using his keener sense of realities, the old man is disgusted by the senselessness of war. He walks away. Travis, in his own stead, looks to it with a removed fascination. He is interested, but not interested enough. He—and his entire generation—can't reconcile their lives with discomfort. He doesn't want to wait for the third bar of the slot machine to stop spinning when it's already known to be a losing spin. His patience wanes just as readily as his interest does.

Is this losing slot machine, still spinning, a metaphor for current U.S. war efforts? Could be.

A remarkable story. Well done.

Credits & Information

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Special Thanks to the Anonymous artist who designed our logo, our Authors, and everyone who took the time to download TAR

And now for an informative word from Wildweasal on copyright:
Copyright law in the United States states that when you write or create any work, you as the creator of this work, possess ownership of this work at the time of its creation. When you submit something to The April Reader, you still retain the copyright to the work, and you still own what you have submitted. By emailing your work to TAR you are simply giving TAR permission to host this work on our Internet server. There is never a point in time at which TAR becomes the owner of your work and you will always own the work that you have submitted.

See you next issue,

-TAR