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zuwō

/LIT/ERATURE DIGEST

Featuring:

BLOOD ON THE TRACKS PT.2
BY JEREMY LEVETT

BEFORE
BY JOSEF K.

DOGS OF THE SKY
BY W.R. HAYDEN

THE DREAMER
BY YEGOR

WARM
BY TOM FALL

WITNESS TO THE DAWN
BY ADAM WYKES

CAIN
BY LUPUS LAMIA



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Introduction/Note from the Eds

Welcome to the fourth edition of the Zine. We've introduced a number of major changes in this edition that resulted in a great deal more last-minute work than we expected, but we think our readers will enjoy the appearance and content a bit better now.

We've switched from relying primarily on word-processing programs and PDF creating programs to page layout programs like Adobe InDesign, which has resulted in a great deal more graphical styles that previously were plain text. We'd love to hear your feedback (constructive or otherwise) on the new style, so that we can best determine how to evolve this project.

This edition features some serial writers who are producing multi-part stories, so we're all excited about seeing how these possibilities develop. Our email inbox is full of creative authors sending us their work, so we've already got our jobs cut out for us for the next edition. The Zine always wants to encourage anyone and everyone with a creative spark to submit their work - we'd love to read it! Please don't hesitate to provide your own material, whether you want your name attached to it or not. Most importantly, we encourage our readers to provide real feedback - the authors are looking for people to guide them in improving their writing skills and abilities.

The Zine would also like to welcome a number of contributing editors who have devoted a great deal of time and effort to the Zine, including (but not limited to) rick_d and Mr. Monkeyman, so they deserve your praise (and, knowing Anon, endless amounts of spite and reaction images). Please keep up the good writing, and we'll try to keep up the publishing!

Updates

We have an IRC channel.

Server: irc.freenode.net

Room: #ZWG

Most of the writers now have a page on the wiki. On the left hand side, under contributors you can find their pages. Most of these contain contact info, so if you would like to provide direct feedback, that is the way to do it. There are also vague descriptions for some of them which you may find interesting.

We are *still* searching for artists who would be interested in providing illustrations to be co-released with submissions each issue.

To keep this edition condensed, several submissions originally planned to be added this issue have been pushed back to our fifth issue. This does not mean we have turned down your submission; we have emailed the authors of those submissions which we have turned down.

A Tale from Old America



“ I was younger than I am now when this story—which I am about to relate to you—happened. It wasn’t too long ago now, though not long by older people’s standards, but by mine it was —so maybe you can understand ?

K. Opatyk

“ **It was on a road trip** – you know the kind – the kind where we’re just kids, sitting in the car, occupying ourselves to pass the time, stuck in that minivan, hurling across the country—through state lines, or through the night, or the day.

“ So I sit here, switching between Blue and Silver, my sister playing Red, and both of us without a link cable – she being 3 years younger than me, and I not too willing to share my catches – something that duelling inevitably leads to.

“ I remember we had set out later – later than usual, eating lunch at some Hard Rock Café – and after spending time in some city, somewhere in America. We drove then, through the night, past another city, somewhere in America.

“ There are other people on the road, not just truckers, and they’re all up to something, but what do I care? I twinkle the little worm light, to keep it from glaring so badly on my screen.

“ You need to keep in mind that this part of my story isn’t important – none of this matters – this is all beside the point – I’m just setting up the where and also when of this story taking place. We drive for a while in the dead of night, and pull into some big depot out in the middle of nowhere – in the middle of some huge industrial oblivion. I get out in my pyjamas and my flip-flops, ready to go to the bathroom. I do, and then go stare into the vending machines. The little red light gets dimmer – I needed some fresh AA batteries, or the night, I knew, would get dull quick. I was younger then, so what do I know now?

“ In this harshly lit wing of this wayside – the one with the coffee dispenser – there were a bunch of people. They all languidly shuffled about, not even doing anything. I should’ve rambled on, but like I said, I was younger then, and had a habit of staying in one place longer than I should. Just try it next time, and stay where you didn’t plan on staying any longer. I’m doomed to gaze upon that cursed and old, decrepit hag. Cursed because she has to look on the outside exactly how she feels on the inside. I went up to her, and she motioned that I follow her, which I did.

“ You need to keep in mind that this wasn’t the first time I had seen her, and it wouldn’t be the last, but I am who I am, and so the story must be told. . .

“ **Just like where I am now**; just like there I was then – passing the concrete threshold. There was another building outside, not too far away. I kept following her, saying out loud, ‘What are you, some sort of colander for weird things?’ – but she wouldn’t reply, as usual.

“ Inside it was a place with deep colors. Posters of a lady sitting on the moon, and neon lights shaped like different things – strange things. That’s when I came in and saw what I was supposedly supposed to see. The Big Guy knocked out, blood coming from his head, and a half woman, half ichthyoid, draped over a full tub, inside the first room, and a little further down. I asked her what she was doing here, and she said she and her sisters were prisoners. ‘Okay, so what can I do about this?’ – that’s what I thought. The Old Hag had already taken her leave, and so it was just me and the other one. She told me her name was of no importance, but that, if I wanted, I could call her Flossie Lou. I asked her why, but she never told me why. I asked her what I could do to help her and her sisters bust out. She told me that The Big Guy had seen an infomercial once, for these pads that you put underneath furniture, and that they might be upstairs somewhere. I asked her to be more specific, and she told me that if you stick these pads underneath big things, like cabinets and stuff, you can slide them easily across any surface. I said ‘oh yeah,’ and that I had remembered seeing a commercial like that too, for moving around heavy stuff without having to lift it.

“ My mom had a bad knee all her life after she jumped off of a tractor – so whenever the commercial came on – we’d always mention what a good idea it would be to get those.

“**The Big Guy was stirring so I kicked him in the head.**”

“ Okay, so then I ran up the stairs. The Big Guy was stirring so I kicked him in the head. You need to keep in mind that I wasn’t as much of a pacifist then as I am now. I ran through each room, knocking over or pushing off all the chemistry sets and furniture, making a real mess of the place. I ripped down posters and set out all the provisions to spoil.

“ I couldn’t find those pads, but it was just as well. I started to wonder what good they would do. They wouldn’t work outside. But what did she know about this place? I can understand that – what do I know about anywhere else besides where I’ve already lived? I don’t know anything about living underwater, and so I thought it might be up to me. I wasn’t thinking straight for some reason, and so I took a deep breath to find calm.

“ I found all these papers. I lackadaisically gazed at them. For the price of a single gold doubloon, any wayward sailor, so to speak, could take the hour to have his way with any of the young fetching maids of mer

– or the men of mer in some accounts, as seen by me, scrounging through these documents. That’s okay, it’s like a prison movie really – nobody’s going to say anything when you get overly friendly with the cabin boy – its desperate times out at sea, and you take what you can get. Once back on land it’s another story, but when some things become – well – familiar, and those other more ‘curvilinear’ things start to fade in your mind, I guess, who is it up to to determine up from down? Out at sea, or back on land? I’m not saying it’s wrong, and I’m not saying it’s right. Anybody can do whatever he or she wants to—it doesn’t concern me, unless it’s in these documents, and even then, as the pseudo-historian, it’s not my place to judge. All I know is that whoever said it was bad luck to keep a woman aboard had something in mind. . .

“The hissing of the big trucks down the highway, snaking all around me.”

“ I ran downstairs and I pushed open the door to the outside, and peered out into the dim and orange world around me. I knew we were near a river. I can’t even think of which river it was today, but I knew it wasn’t some small pushover river. It was as big as it would get, and had already ran through some big cities—had seen plenty of action, just like the experienced maidens inside. My eyes adjusted, and I could see the river, maybe three hundred feet off. I probably could have heard it too if not for the hissing of the big trucks down the highway, snaking all around me.

“ I started running in every direction, looking for something. I ended up finding it, thankfully. It was a dug up piece of earth, with one or two big yellow machines, bags of mulch, young trees, and the object of my desire—a wheel barrow. It was a big green plastic one, damp with dew, like everything else outside at that time. I pushed it back to that strange house along the road, and informed the sisters of my plan. It was a relatively straightforward one, and I’m sure you’ve guessed it by now.

“ I rinsed the wheel barrow a little, filled it up with water, and helped the first sister into it. I carted ‘her’ out and followed a relatively straight path to the river; downhill a way, though it was unclear and overgrown with hard and sharp plants, and no soft or leafy things. I don’t know how many hours I carted back and forth, but it must have been the most time spent doing anything in this story.

“ Several times, you need to realize, I lost control, let go, and allowed the wheel barrow to spill out onto the brush. When that happened, they wiggled and writhed wildly until reaching the shoreline, cursing me the whole time, and then plopped in.

“ When I didn’t lose control, they got wheeled real nice right up to the shore. Each time that happened, I was rewarded with a smack on the cheek, or the on the lips, or in some other ways. When that would happen, my body or my mouth buzzed. Inside again, crowding my eyes with neon lights, and then outside to the luminous world, full of sounds and night, and while the time passed, I was sweating; my heart was beating and I was not fully aware of everything around me. Each time I got back from the river I would quickly scan around, and try to listen for anybody stirring. I only heard light splashes in each room. Soon all were out and only Flossie Lou was left, her feeling the most responsible for all her sisters, for reasons I don’t know, and so at last I loaded her up and took her down to the river, at a leisurely pace this time.

“ As we got closer, she told me to slow down, and as we approached the river, Flossie Lou shrieked, and I’m sure it would’ve been blood curdling, but it caught me off guard in such a way that I almost instantly knew...

“ ‘What have you done,’ she said, and I peered into the river and saw the dead, floating bodies of all I had liberated, lapping up against the edge of the water. It was a bit too much to handle, especially for me, back then—how much younger I was. Flossie Lou was the only one left, slunk up in the murky water of the wheel barrow. I fell to my knees and started weeping like a little girl.

“ ‘Okay, it’s okay,’ she said. ‘We didn’t know. Come here,’ she reached out for me, and pulled me close to her. ‘We didn’t know. It was all you could do.’

“ So okay, where does this leave us? Here alongside this disgusting river, both me and ‘her’ curled up together, soaked or cold maybe. The whole night spent—the grey hint of the sun off somewhere—everybody either wakes up, or goes to sleep—the whole world full of all those stupid sounds—except maybe a freight train moaning in the distance. That was all of me; there was nothing left. And so then, that night, underneath those fading stars—Flossie Lou, she made me a man. It was weirder than you think.”

Before

Josef K

The sun is high above me by the time I see the farm on the horizon, with its tattered yellow flag whipping in the hot breeze. The barn's central roof beam is bowed, sagging gently in a way that feels warm and inviting, like the childhood ideal of a barn.

There have been a half dozen farms along the last stretch of road, but none prominently displaying the signal flag, or showing any signs of habitation.

It seems providence that I should come to this place, and I step off of the highway onto a nearly overgrown gravel path.

I've been following Highway 37 all morning, a blacktop scar dividing the glass-still wetlands to the South and the fields and hills of wild golden grass to the North. I savor the quiet emptiness of Creation. Alone except for the elegant cranes above the water and the herds of deer grazing in the dry brush, I find long, silent hours to reflect and meditate on the days passed, and the glorious days ahead. Beneath my feet the pavement is already growing warm, and the air begins to shimmer in the distance. There is a wet, earthy riot of smells, wet and earthy like fresh tilled soil and stagnant water. The whine and drone of insects is a warbling monotone symphony, unbroken save for the short cries of waterfowl.

The Vallejo Crater is far behind me now, hidden by a ridge of meek hills and the opalescent summer haze. Ahead, a little farmhouse comes into view from behind the barn, a leaning two room structure with pale yellow paint peeling in the sun. Again, I feel a comforting warmth and my grin widens at the charming innocence of the little home, and I try to imagine it without the thick wooden boards over the windows and doors.

On the porch, an elderly man in a stained white shirt stands up, slowly and stiffly as he wipes his hands on his jeans. He hoists and shoulders his rifle, bringing the sights into alignment with our eyes. I smile and wave.



"Ho there," he barks in a voice like tumbling rocks.

"Would you mind speaking, please? What's your name?"

"Caleb," I reply. No point in lying. I hold the grin firm and come to a stop as I swing the pack off my shoulders.

"I just... I just saw your flag."

"That's why we have it up." The rifle comes down to his side as he steps slowly off the porch. "What can I do for you, Caleb?"

I exhale and raise my eyebrows with what I hope is a convincing look of honest confusion.

"To tell you the truth, sir, I'm not sure if I do need anything. I just got excited to see the flag. It's been a little while."

"I imagine it has," he says softly, "it's been a while since anyone's seen it. Where you coming from, son?"

"The Crater, and before that, I come out of Winters, up near Sacramento." He regards me silently for a moment with his head tilted, smiling slightly.

"That's a long way on foot," he says finally. "Where you headed?"

"The ocean, I think, sir." He smiles wide at this, and when his skin creases into a weathered map of a joy, I see, so clearly, what a good and righteous man he is. It's clear at once that God has led me directly here, and I thank Him for his guidance. The man steps down from the porch, leaving the rifle behind.

"You in any hurry to get to the ocean, Caleb?" he asks with a few dry chuckles that could be mistaken for coughs.

"No, sir." His smile is infectious and I no longer have to strain to affect the expression.

"I'd just like to do it sometime before the end of September. The heat makes them sluggish, and it's been easy traveling so far." He barks once with laughter at this.

"No need for 'sir,'" he says quickly, as if it embarrasses him. "I'm Daniel. Pleasure meeting you Caleb."



“Likewise, Daniel.” I nod slightly, lowering my eyes, another small calculated gesture.

“Listen, Caleb, I wonder if you’d be interested in a day’s work. I’ve got a beam on the barn that’s rotted through, and I could sure use a hand setting up a brace. We could give you as much food as you can carry, fresh off the farm. You interested?” I open my mouth to speak, and he cuts me off.

“You don’t need to know the first thing about carpentry. I just need you to be able to hold some planks still and follow directions.”

“Daniel, I think that would make me very happy,” I say with sincerity now. The thought of good honest work with my hands to better Daniel’s last days fills me with the same warmth as before. I offer my hand and we shake once; his hand is calloused and cool.

“Good, good...” he nods thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing a little; I get a little nervous twinge of paranoia that makes me have to work slightly harder at smiling, and I drop his hand.

“Well, shall we get started?”

I lean my backpack against the side of the house and turn to follow him towards the barn. He turns to stare out towards the highway and shouts over his shoulder at me.

“You didn’t see any of the sickos on the road or nearby, did you?”

“No sir.” I respond, suppressing a little laugh at his vernacular.

“Haven’t seen them all morning. It’s been nice and quiet.” He gives one last scan of the horizon and turns away with a little nod of satisfaction, we enter the barn, and I have my first lesson in carpentry.

I devour every word he says as we brace and buttress several of the barn’s rotting timbers. I can hardly absorb all the information he can offer, surrounded by a cacophony of shuffling, clucking and baying farm animals. He shares his personal advice on hammering and woodworking with an almost guilty pride, lowering his voice conspiratorially. He is aghast at the fact that I don’t carry a gun, and he even tells me a little about what he remembers from Before. I am a blank page, now rapidly filling.

Before long I fall into the easy rhythm of the simple repetitive actions, and we are finished far earlier than I expect. The air is starting to grow cool and the whine of mosquitoes rising off the wetlands is audible. It feels almost perfunctory when he invites me in for dinner with him and his wife, and I, powerless against the inevitable, accept heartily.

Caroline is a slow and doughy woman with thinning hair and rotting teeth, and I take a liking to her instantly. She unlocks the thick barricaded door to let us in, and I am met by a bouquet of smells from the small kitchen: the peppery grease of fried meats, the bright sharp tang of something bitter and green. I am already salivating as I bow politely before her when Daniel introduces me. Caroline remarks over dinner that she’s never met anyone as polite and well-mannered as me, that even Before, I would have been called “old fashioned.” I am silent for a moment as I flare with panic and am suddenly conscious of all my little affectations, but it’s obvious by her wide grin that she finds it charming.

“I was raised well,” I offer with a smile, feeling my heart rate slow. “My parents were good God-loving people, and we had a very secure community in Winters.” She nods heartily at the mention of God and closes her eyes; Daniel looks momentarily embarrassed and shuffles in his chair. The tiny flashes of body language fill my heart with sadness.

I offer up the tin of coffee I recently scavenged and we talk late into the evening trading news and stories we’ve heard, much of it baffling and contradictory. It was Caroline who brought up the End Times, and I tried to defer to Daniel’s visible discomfort by suppressing my own excitement.

“I just can’t see how Dan can deny it anymore after all these years,” she tells me as he shifts in his chair. “It’s just like it says in the Bible. These days are proof that He is coming.” Daniel smiles, one that on a lesser man would look patronizing.

“I could argue the opposite...” He locks eyes with her, and I can see the weathered and worn smooth love between them. I gently steer the conversation away.

When they retire, I unroll my bedroll out under the stars and soak in the chaotic summer night. The stars are a shimmering riot, and I trace the shapes I know again and again as the stirring breeze from off the water cools the air. I close my eyes and concentrate on the near silent passage of a coyote, as he walks a slow half circle around me before bounding off into the dark.

The night is woven with life, and it cradles me like a nest. I sleep long and well.



I awake before dawn, and prepare myself. Daniel is up before me. He has packed a box full of fresh cabbage and squash, a dozen grapefruit as well as a half dozen jars of homemade jams. He looks sheepish when I discover him filling the box, and I know, more than ever, that God has not led me astray. There is a contentedness that fills me as I approach.

“Thank you Daniel. And... she’s right you know,” I say, smiling sadly at him. He opens his mouth to speak, but looks confused momentarily.

“About the End,” I offer, and I see now that he understands.

“Look, Caleb...” I can see how much this pains him. I wonder if he lost his faith, or if he ever had it.

“I don’t really want to have this argument with you. The dead aren’t rising. This is a disease.”

“Who says viruses can’t be divine or diabolical? The Revenants are just one of the signs...” I am already starting to strain with exhilaration as I somehow manage keep my words even and slow.

“Kid. I’m really not interested.” His brow is furrowing in frustration; he looks 10 years older now, and tired. I take another step towards him.

“Daniel, I’m sorry for what you’ve had to go through, you didn’t deserve it.” I lock eyes and continue moving.

“I want to make it right for you.”

I put one arm around him and pull him toward me. I can feel him start to panic in my arms. He starts to say my name, the first hard syllable exits his lip and then stops as I slide the thin blade gently between his ribs and into his heart. I hold him tight and whisper gently to him as he slides away, his eyes growing dim. Later, I lay him on the floor and admire the peaceful expression on his pale face.

Caroline is still in bed but awake. I could smell the sickness on her the night before, the demonic taint of the disease hanging in the air like a chemical flag, but it was even stronger now, surging forward as she grows weaker. I sit next to her on the bed, smiling warmly. She is fixated on the blood on my shirt.

“Caroline. I know you must have felt sometimes like God has abandoned you, like you’ve been left behind. But you’re not. No one will be left behind. God is loving.”

She is shaking in fear, and I want so bad to be able to comfort her. But I know she will understand as soon as I have set her free.

I am crying slightly, so happy for the opportunity to do these good works, and to save good people like this.

“I know you’re sick. And I know you’re scared. But I won’t let that stop you from going home. Daniel will be waiting for you.” I tell her with a smile, as I press the pillow tight against her face. She only struggles for a few moments, and I stroke her hand gently as she goes still. Afterward, I use the thin bladed knife to cut and shred between the vertebrae just above her shoulders. I’ve seen the disease take hosts that were already two days dead, but without the spinal column, the Beast can never take Caroline’s body in thrall. I do the same for Daniel, even though he seems free of infection, because I take what I do very seriously.

I am an instrument of God, and there are so many good souls that need to be called home.

I bury Daniel and Caroline side by side beneath the noon sun, and say a few happy words over their earthly remains. There is so much joy in me now, and a little pride as well. But mostly, I know how lucky I am to have been chosen. I fill my pack with the fresh food from the kitchen before I leave, thanking them both silently for their gifts. I am on the road, the sun again on my back and the ocean ahead.

This is the end of history, and the winter of all God’s Creation,
but still, there is work to be done



BLOOD ON THE TRACKS

by Jeremy Levett

Marshal von Kobold, the Hobgoblin to all but his face, was short and rapier-thin. He didn't look much like a soldier, which had always irked him. He always wore a sword and broom-handled machine pistol on his hip, beneath huge red greatcoats swimming in gold braid, and he had grown a big bushy beard and moustache to hide his pale, clever face.

But while he talked more about peace and prosperity now, and his fortune had for a long time been from cans and fuel, rather than cartridges and blood, the Marshal was a soldier. As a youth in the Bayreuth ghetto, under the savage rule of the Six-Fingered Men, he and a few dozen other young men had plotted together, drilling in secret with swords and stolen guns. One quiet night in autumn they had stormed the burgher's traction keep, put the misshapen man's head on the tip of its mainmast with his misshapen hands nailed beneath, and rolled through the sun-dered gates of Bayreuth while the town seethed and burned behind them. He had made himself Marshal of the wandering castle Kobold, and taken its name as his own.

It had been many years since then, and now the Marshal and fat, decayed von Donnerkind were the only ones left from that red October. But when the days grew short and blustery the Marshal's eyes glinted with remembered fire, and he longed for the sound of cannon.

The Marshal's quarters, buried in the armoured hull of the Kobold and lit only by gas lamps and black-curtained periwindows, were festooned with the trophies of victories without number; frost-goggles and tusks from ice-beasts fought for attention with punctured bronze armour and implausible-looking many-barrelled automuskets from the south, mummified pairs of six-fingered hands and speckled Scriven skins, holy scrolls and glittering rainbow plastics plundered from the foothill monastery-fortresses. The Marshal's own harness, of aluminium mesh and ancient kevlar, hung on a skeleton stand next to his prized automatic soldier, a barrel-chested brass beast in turban and silks and big droopy horse-hair moustache. Opposite from them stood a huge painting of a young man who looked a little like the Marshal, standing on the deck of a rolling fortress with his long sword drawn, bringing on the storm of steel.

"In these days," he said, "which some believe to be the last days, a new sickness has appeared among ordinary people." He gestured to his map table, where twenty-seven miniatures stood in the same loose diamond formation as outside in the snow, tiny red and black pennants stuck to their matchstick masts.

"The sickness is doubt. It is the most insidious of ailments, one that spreads from man to man on their breath, weakening everything it touches. Doubt taints the mind, weakens the will. Doubt saps the people's faith in fire and iron, their faith in one another... their faith in their leaders."

He stopped, feeling he had made his point, and turned to face von Merkava and von Salem, standing silently at what passed for attention. His necklace, a weighty chain of iron crosses he'd styled after some mosstown mayor, shifted and jangled as he puffed out his little chest.

"The sickness is doubt. It is the most insidious of ailments, one that spreads from man to man on their breath, weakening everything it touches."

"Riders of the land ironclads. My loyal," and here only the slightest bitterness strayed into his voice, "knights in armour. Von Donnerkind is the only one who is happy with my orders, I suppose?"

"The Donnerkind has been having signalling problems today, I believe," said von Salem, perfectly straight-faced. "Issues with black smoke. It's possible Sebastian's complaints didn't get through." Solomon von Salem had never been afraid of anything.

The Marshal stared up at him, eyes wide. Then he chuckled. "My friends. Speak to me."

His friends. The Marshal insisted on his chains of command, and that all answer to him, but he needed the support of his captains. The masters of the little land barges and traction houses that flocked to his banner after victory were completely dependent on the Marshal for supplies and protection, unable to defend themselves in the wilder parts of the world. But his prized land ironclads were fearsome war machines, able to make their own way, and if they ever lost faith there was nothing stopping them simply rolling away.

“The cold-“ began Paul, at the same time as Solomon started to speak. They both stopped. Paul looked to Solomon, who nodded thanks and continued smoothly.

“I take it our change of course means we have given up the search.”

The Marshal sighed. “South.” He indicated his map, smudged with additions and changes, still chasing the news the crows brought him.

A chase he had lost long ago; Europa was too broad and far too mercurial to be held on a simple piece of parchment. Hundreds of tiny walled towns and principalities kept their own enclaves, and with each year some grew, some disappeared entirely with war or plague. At the edges of the map, to the north and east, uncertain borders marked the runs of the wandering courts and nomad empires. Running north-south across it all, looking defiant against the greater mass of borders, a thin red line marked the determinedly neutral Great Free Road, much too far east of the black-tipped pin the Marshal’s finger jabbed at.

“This is us, near the Hard Forest,” said the Marshal, with a certainty the Merkava’s own navigators hadn’t felt in a long time. “Bentley August’s traction fort should have been around here a month ago. He promised me six months’ worth of fuel from the far-north drilling stations for the cans and cartridges we have aboard.”

“A whole tribe of Peripatetians burned outside the city walls last year, never even gave her a reason.”

“But he hasn’t come,” said Solomon, a comment Paul thought needless.

The Marshal nodded. “Maybe he got into a battle with one of the northern tribes, maybe he just broke down. Maybe our ships just passed in the night. One missed waypoint, one wrong turning, one errant message crow, and here we are, undone by a simple twist of fate.” He stopped, closed his eyes for a moment.

“I wanted to take us northeast for the winter and trade with the Muskar clans on the ice. But I do not think we can fight whatever horror is turning the snow black, and we are down to the wire on fuel. If we continue, we will likely freeze for lack of it, and if we turn back to the road for the long safe route south, we will not have enough to make the journey. No caravansary can accommodate the whole tribe, and we can’t rely on the chance of meeting a tanker on the road. There is only one route to survival. Dead south.”

And Paul realised that the decision had already been made, and the Marshal was only going through the motions of explaining to them. There was nothing left to decide, no chance of talking him round. He met Solomon’s eyes. Solomon saw it too. Paul gave him a helpless look, and spoke anyway.

“We’ll be trespassing on the principalities. South takes us through a lot of borders.” The most obvious problem, though not the one that was troubling him.

The Marshal nodded again, irritably, and indicated a few more places on his map. “Magdeburg, the Hunter-Town. I don’t want to be anywhere near that place. Here, the other side, the Wallenstein lands, not nearly as fearsome but not exactly friendly. We could pass through if we keep a low profile; there, and the next few small kingdoms. Go quickly, while the mud men take shelter from the storm.” He dragged his hand further down, much further down, through a half-dozen border lines and curving around a huge black spot on the map marked MUNCHEN in tiny gold letters. “My aim is to reach Murnau. There we can trade them some munitions for fuel and spend the worst of the winter; they’ve always been good to us. They owe us.”

“Murnau is a long, long way south,” murmured Solomon, staring at the map. “But everywhere else is either too small, too hostile or too far away.”

“Nintz will not be interested,” said the Marshal. “Their new archimandrite hates nomads. A whole tribe of Peripatetians burned outside the city walls last year, never even gave her a reason.”

“Feuerburg?” offered Paul, pointing out a mid-sized town huddled among a cluster of young mountains.

Solomon jerked as if he'd been kicked. "The Six-Fingered Men run it now," he hissed, glancing at the Marshal.

"We'll trade them some cartridge one day, all right," said the Marshal calmly. "But not with twenty-seven."

Solomon gave something that might have been a smile. "Is this the plan, then? Run across half Europa for Murnau, hoping nobody will mind an entire fleet trespassing on their lands and chewing up their fields?"

"This is the plan," said the Marshal in a voice like iron, looking hard at Solomon. He hated insolence. "You will not be serving me or anyone else by challenging it. Have you anything more to say?"

"Our machines are not chained together; our hatches only lock on the inside."

"No, Marshal," said Solomon coolly. "Not for now."

The Marshal turned to Paul, and Solomon was suddenly no longer part of the conversation. "Ritter? Was there something else?"

Paul nodded warily. "My son..." He stopped, uncertain.

Solomon took the hint. "Excuse me, Marshal, Ritter." His heels clicked on the deckplate, and the heavy hatch boomed shut behind him.

"Marshal. I can't argue with your plan." The Marshal seemed to relax a little. "But I need to guarantee the safety of my... my people. There is a sickness that threatens my son. You must let me have Doctor Bracer."

The indignant reply he was hoping for didn't come. The Marshal simply looked at him impassively. "It seems to me that we won't escape the oncoming snow, and we can't spare the fuel for warmth. Without the attentions of the physician I fear for the health of my heir. I need him, or I need you to grant me enough fuel to keep my ship heated." Still the Marshal said nothing.

"Marshal, I am not begging you. I am telling you. I must have one of these things."

He never talked this way to his lord; he had always been proud to serve faithfully, and Solomon was insolent, so he had been crushed, but Paul was respectful. The Marshal tried a different tack.

"Do you know what makes us special among men, Ritter? It is not the uniforms we wear to show our code of command. It is not even the wheels and engines that keep us free from the tyranny of the field and the sucking mire. It is our freedom. We are better people than the mud men. We are not slaves. We are citizens of our tribe, not technophobe moss-lords or their illiterate serfs, and we choose our way. Our future is in iron and engines, and our strength is in our faith... the faith in each other that binds us together. This tribe is a daily plebiscite. Our machines are not chained together; our hatches only lock on the inside."

Paul met his gaze, silent and unblinking.

"Salem questions me because he is insolent, but he is loyal. You question me because your heart gives you no choice," said the Marshal, thinking he was being poetic. "I need your loyalty, Paul, but I cannot give you what you ask. Not yet. My own child is almost born, any hour now, and I need Bracer here. I will not have some baby-catching apprentice or cracked old medicine woman deliver; he is the only man in this fleet I trust with the task. I think you understand my position very well."

"I fear so, Marshal," said Paul, his voice almost cracking.

The Marshal pretended to consider for a moment. "The good doctor will be for you the hour after my own child is born. I swear it."

"Thank you, Marshal," said Paul. It was not enough, but he was afraid to push any harder.

"Child of a winter storm," said the Marshal, apropos of nothing. "Good ring to it." He jabbed his thumb at a periwind. Through the lenses and mirrors, the sky fluttered mottled black and grey. "I think this strange weather might be a blessing for us. Poor visibility, and a strong southerly wind to speed us on our way."

“Yes,” said Paul. “It’s bringing on the snow.”

Mica sat on the running board of the Jack of Hearts, smoking a rollup. A couple of janissars on watch at their loopholes by the hangar door kept glancing at him, and though he couldn’t see their eyes he knew the looks they were giving him. He ignored them, closed his eyes and enjoyed the warmth.

He knew who was coming without needing his eyes. Sandford had left a leg in the Belleau at Hamburg, and half his footsteps clanked. The big, bearded gunner sat down on the running board next to him, the whole wherry creaking as he did.

“ello, iron man,” said Mica stickily, offering his rollup.

“Hello, cobbler,” said Sandford, taking it. “Looks as though we’re rolling for the southern lands now, praise Poskitt.”

“Oh no, you’d better praise my master there. Been asking the Hobgoblin to take us down for weeks. And getting to him, not that he seems to know it.” He heard the click of spurs on the deck, but it was only old Sol von Salem, looking quietly furious.

“Marshal takes us north to sell tins to the woolly savages, cause that’s where the fuel is,” said Sandford pensively. “Now we’re out of fuel and turning back. Does that seem right to you?”

“And the Marshal personally killed five hundred men, and the world was a happy and peaceful place.”

“You live in a metal box,” said Mica, deftly retrieving the cigarette. “I’ve been riding with you crazy nomads three winters now and you’ve never been still for more than a week at a time. You drive everywhere, trading cans you don’t know how to make to buy for food you can’t farm because you don’t own land, and when that doesn’t pay you kill people for money, and you can’t ever stop moving because the past is always close behind. Oh, and it’s raining black. What’s ‘right’ mean to you people, exactly?”

Sandford snorted. “Hah. Can tell you were born in the mud.

Your mind’s still stuck in it.” Sandford’s parents, like Mica, had been born in static towns, but he had lived most of his thirty years on the Belleau and had a nomad’s distaste for the bare earth and the stillness that came with it.

Mica took another long drag. “Gives me a bit of perspective, don’t you think?” In front of them, the doors clanked open and the mono Unforgiving Mistress whirled off into the snow. “The way I hear it, we’re turning towards townie land. What’s the plan, invade us a nice stockade and set up for the winter?”

“Marshal isn’t that stupid,” said Sandford indignantly. “He knows just fine the townies here could eat us alive. Walled towns, warrior monasteries, some of ‘em are supposed to even have Stalkers and old-tech zappers. There’s a lot of nomad wrecks rusting in these parts.”

“Tell me about this ‘Marshal not being stupid’ theory of yours.”

“A few years ago,” began Sandford obligingly, “before you were with us, we were off in the west of Frankland. The mayor of Martinique hired us to crush the mayor of Maranique. Or was it the other way round?”

“You see? What kind of life is that?”

“Don’t interrupt, cobbler.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyway, we took the job, rolled out with half our money in gold and tins, and a bunch of frog observers from Maranique or Martinique or whichever the hell it was to make sure we got the job done. About halfway twixt the two, we found that the mayor of the other town had bought their own nomads, this great big shoal of pretty powder-blue armoured barges, not a one of them as big or mean as our ironclads, but there were loads of ‘em. Dupont and Dupond’s Legion des Blindes they called themselves, most feared frogs in all the land. So we saw all these dozens of barges piled high with big muscly Frenkmen, tall and proud in their wigs and huge muskets, enough of them to take us all, and they saw these huge scary-lookin’ black spiky engines laden with repeaters and mean-looking bearded fellows glaring at ‘em through gun slits, and you can probably tell what happened next.”

“You met them in glorious battle and roundly beat them,” said Mica, “and the Marshal personally killed five hundred men, and the world was a happy and peaceful place.”

“Hah. No,” said Sandford. “Saved that for Hamburg. We talked to them. Marshal likes to fight but he doesn’t like to die.”

“It was his idea?”

“Well, was your Ritter what did it. You could tell old Kobold didn’t want a fight when he didn’t let fly with everything on sight, but he’s much too proud to get on the ground and talk peace. Merkava took his own wherry right up to their head barges and parleyed, took the Monkey’s own bravery and a bit of good luck. He wasn’t to know, but in those lands, a white flag means no quarter. Marshal didn’t think he’d do it. Didn’t think it could be done.”

“So you came to a gentleman’s agreement, knifed the observers and quit the country forever with your half in gold and cans,” said Mica, taking a last drag and stubbing the rollup out on the Kobold’s shiny metal deckplate.

“Pretty much,” said Sandford, grinning. “And ever since then we’ve been spreading rumours about the biggest nomad battle the world has seen happening out in the Frenk countryside, two nomad tribes what fell upon each other with such fury and devotion that they left nary a single survivor.”

“Hmm. Paul never told me that one.”

“He ain’t one to blow his own trumpet. Your Ritter would be leading us if the Marshal wasn’t, and everyone knows it but him. Hobgoblin fears him sometimes, and old Seb Thunder’s green with envy. Sol Salem would be too, if he cared enough about anything.” He looked mournfully at the cigarette stub. “So what’s this all about, anyway? Wedel up in Signals told me the Merkava sent the rudest message we’ve ever got from your lot, the Ritter jibber-jabbering about how the Marshal’s going to kill his son, and Hobgoblin looked more than a little fretful when he heard about it. I didn’t know Merkava even had a son.”

“Ah, well, that would be part of the problem,” said Mica. “He doesn’t.”

“Wherries with cranes and forks scooped up their kills like mechanised hounds.”

“What?”

“Steersman! Get us ready to go.”

Mica heard the sound of spurs on the deckplate again, and looked back. “Ah, speak of the angel. I’ll tell you another time.”

“Suit yourself,” said Sandford, not turning around. “How’s he looking?”

“Like he’s forgotten he’s alive.”

The two of them drove back to the Merkava, and Paul went to his quarters in silence.

Later in the day scout vehicles sighted a wandering herd of wild auroxen, and drove them towards the tribe. The Marshal and his janissars gathered on the lower decks of the Kobold with their rifles, and for a while little drifting puffs from their breath and their guns joined the engine-smoke. Wherries with cranes and forks scooped up their kills like mechanised hounds. But the janissars tired of that quickly, and retreated back into the relative warmth of their hull. The feast began in earnest.

The barges Nimrod and Londis unlatched their cow-catcher jaws and rumbled to and fro among the herd, gobbling up the terrified animals like mechanical predators until there were only a few dozen left. The abattoir-barges locked their jaws and joined the fleet again, beginning to leave trails of red on the snow behind them. The mobile chapel Mimir burned purple-smoking incense on its deck and ran up signal flags proclaiming it a good omen. The land trawlers pulled up their many-bladed ploughs, and their crews stepped back from their conveyors and took their first rest in too long. The main masts of the Donnerkind were lined with rippling battle flags.

Bridge

By Captain Carlin

“I still remember when you first cursed my father. Only seven years old and having had an exceptionally bad day, you ran through the school gates, right to the top of the bridge, pointed your middle finger at him then blamed him for everything and demanded he fought you.”

“And then the rest of my school days were absolute hell.”

“That had very little to do with my dad though. In fact, you probably made things worse by avoiding him. Not that he really minded, to be honest. He gets that all the time, although rarely from people as young and melodramatic as you were.”

“Of course. I realized this when I was 8 or 9, but I can still never trust someone like him.”

My friend smirked at this remark, and sat down on the swing next to me. It had been a long time since we last met, right here in this very park – a bridge away from my old school and a mere ten minutes walk from my old home. “I know how you feel more than anyone. I had to sacrifice so much for him. I never even found out exactly why it was all necessary, it was just, well... he made me, you know? He was the reason I was alive, the reason I could do everything in my power to help others and live without regrets. It was only right, the one time he asks for me to make a huge sacrifice, that I do so.”

“Did everything turn out the way he wanted it to? 'Cause if this is exactly what he wanted... then I hate him even more.”

“You know I love you, but you can be a selfish, whiny ass sometimes.”

Taken aback by this uncharacteristic remark, I laughed so hard I almost fell off my swing. “Of course, of course. But then, so can everyone. You of all people should know that.”

We sat in silence for a while, facing the bridge that separated this park from the school. Thinking about it now, that ugly stone bridge had been a huge part of my childhood. Obviously I had to cross it to get to school and back everyday, and as my friend said I once climbed to the top of it to shoot my mouth off at his dad, but I had also asked my first crush out whilst crossing it, and received my first rejection. My first fight took place at the foot of the other side – a group of people 3 years my elder had made me fight against my best friend. Eventually I hit him with a rock and he ran off screaming, so I guess I gained my first victory there, too. Out of all the fights I had, it would be the only one I'd win for a long time. A few weeks later, the same group of older kids thought it would be funny to threaten to throw me over the bridge.

I guess if I wanted to die for whatever reason, I'd do so by throwing myself over. Which reminded me of something I wanted to ask.

“I take it you've never seen any paintings of yourself?”

“Only a couple. I try to avoid them, for obvious reasons.”

“A wise man once said he saw one of you dying. Apparently your blood was turning from red to gold. He thought this symbolized how your death was exploited, turned into an institution – a source of jobs, a source of income. A source of power.”

“I take it he's the kind of person who likes me but hates Christians? I'm so sick of hearing that.”

“You're right, and I do think he's wrong about that. I don't judge individuals based on religion, but the institution... don't you think it's wrong?”

“The church has done some good things – some great things...”

“But still! Did you know that the Patron Saint of Politics burned people for owning English bibles? And then there's the banning of contraception, the missionaries with secret agendas, the crusades, the massacres, the discrimination, the greed, the sheer hypocrisy – you can condone this?”

“Of course not! Sometimes it sickens me. Sometimes I'd like to enter Vatican City and throw the hypocrites out myself! But even by having faith in their out-of-date, flawed system, people can still enter the gates of heaven. Those corrupt fools will not. It's worth putting up with... in the meantime, at least.”

“Not to me. I don't believe in an afterlife.”

“Then how come I'm sitting here, talking to you?”

“I don't think your particular afterlife exists outside my own head.”

“Hmm, so you've gone from nihilism to solipsism.”

“That's not quite it. I just think I'm insane.”

“Not entirely different from solipsism, in my opinion.” He gets up to leave. “Oh, and there's something I've been meaning to ask you. Why are we friends?”

“Because you're so much unlike your father.”

“If you say so. Anyway, I'm going. Until we meet again, my friend.”

I watch him cross the bridge. I wait until he's past the school gates – until he's out of site [*sic*], and then I get off my swing and head in the opposite direction.”

Cain

By Lupe Lamia

"However much your heart might burn with love, beware of all great desires."

-Baudelaire

From glass thick enough to prevent my escape but clear enough to let me see through, I watch you every day. How you flit about so freely, your wings flashing between bars of pure silver. Singing songs that make lovers smile knowingly and children dance; filling the air with hope so thick it chokes those devil enough to breathe deeply. From behind my glass I thought I would be safe from you; your wicked charms and spells, at the least. I was so terribly wrong, for even now I trace your shape; the patterns of your wings into the damning glass. I hum your perfect melodies to myself, and dream of your face. You are haunting me, but I am not afraid.

I could not approach you. No one can. That is why I live behind glass and you behind bars. Others could only stare at us. At me with disgust and at you with love and admiration. Even lust. And though I hate to admit it, I would see the same as them—those that jeer at me and praise you—for such a delicate creature I have never known before.

I am so near to you, you sometimes reflect on my glass, and I watch as five images dance across my eyes, surrounding me; transfixing me. You are near enough to touch, it seems, but always my hand hits cold and unforgiving glass. If such beauty like yours was everywhere, the destruction of all man would inevitably follow. You are cunning and sly like the fox, who is also admired for his charm.

What would they do to me if they knew such thoughts? I would be killed, and you repelled, if not instantly ill, if you saw what a monster I am. What monstrous thoughts I think! Only a beast could love what he cannot have, though youth and old men alike still harbor passion for you, and you belong to no one but the collective world. You still do not know my name, my hideous face, or my wretched thoughts. But I know yours, the sweetest name that could be given, and surely only innocence exists in that head of pure radiance.

Your skin is fair like mine, your face still youthful and the expression carefree as you sing lullabies to every age. But your eyes are an electric blue that, like lightning, stuns and captivates all that it beholds. Your lips are full, your cheeks are flushed with happiness. How I envy you; how I love you; how I could never have you. You are too perfect in this world made for mundane men. Perhaps this is why you exist freely behind your bars, and I trapped in this glass where people cannot hear my wretched voice but only point and laugh at that which they see therein; what lies beneath the surface of my glass, but never the surface of my skin.

But to be like them, I would not be happy. For I hear what they say of me, I see the hatred in their eyes, their faces, and their hearts. To be like them I would be the worst of monsters. A common one; a common man.

No, no! There I go with my horrible thoughts. It is wrong. I am wrong. To be them would be happiness, for I could gaze upon you freely and you would not turn away from me; spit on me; jeer or jab at me. You could even love me, for surely men are your desire. From the ways you tease and sing so lovingly to them, flashing your peacock's tail and drawing even forbidden eyes to you, it is clear that you love them as much as they love you.

How can I go on this way? They will only hate me more if they figure out these wretched thoughts of mine! I know better, I do, than to harbor away such feelings from the world, where I should have none, deserve none, and want none. But there is no hope, alas! No

cure for the sickness of the heart called love. I read books; many I can recall completely, of lust and dignity. Men, common men, torn to pieces by emotion. Usurped by their hearts and, inevitably, dead because of the foolish whims they followed. The common men of our age are too smart for this, of course: picking their choice of wife or husband from the shallow pool of mediocrity we all seem to spawn from, so that they will be equally disappointed and not have to fear jealousy of one another.

Except for you, who is so special, so pure, and so free of these worries.

They all look the same to me, but what do I know of normalcy? I am a monster. Hideous, ugly, unwanted. Curse the wretched roots that gave me this face and this mind! Curse my blood, for surely it is tainted as well! And damned be my mind, for betraying me further and casting me closer to the Hell from which I was spawned, for thinking such thoughts of love and passion for you. Curse me, for I am no more worthy of you than a mere man is to stand at the feet of God and be judged.

But I wonder why I am wrong. Why am I so different from the common man? I have two hands, two feet as them. I walk as them, talk as them, but they fear my mind. Would you look upon me and judge me the same within your own eyes? It is assuredly my cursed appearance, and my ghastly intelligence, that cast me from the mundane and into the wretched. Are these my fault alone? Do I so deserve the punishments I receive? I did not create myself, of that I am sure, but sometimes I allow myself to think these piteous thoughts and wonder why I must be treated different from man if I act just as he does.

And you! You are the same and yet different; as I am. This must be why you cannot walk within them; you are a seductress, or worse, sent here to guide man to his destruction. But you are so fair, and so gentle. Perhaps this is why, and you are an Angel, for that makes far more sense. Any man that saw you would want to ravish you, which would so boldly go against our fragile society. The sin of flesh is one not to be talked about, though you spill desire into the heart so fully that it overflows and pounds its way through the body like a beating drum. You are clearly a danger, but no one should hide your beauty, for that would be unfair. So your bars exist, marking you as untouchable, as my glass exists to keep me separate from the common men. To spare them from the hideousness of my being.

The crowd disperses, and we are left alone. They are less interested in me today, for I have spent so much time with my hands pressed against this glass watching you please the world from your cage. You sit within your cage, your wings fluttering and revealing your bare, perfect back. I traced those lines as I had done a thousand times before, murmuring the words of foolish men in love; foolish men who always died in those stories from hopeless infatuation. But I know better. For I would tear those wings from you, and love you more than any man or God or Devil has known.

Dogs of the Sky

BY W.R. Hayden

“All systems are running smoothly, ship is ready to dock, Captain Harford.”

“Good. Prepare to—”

The piercing screech of metal against metal tore through the control room, sending the Captain tumbling forward. He braced himself against the white walls of the control room, streaked with a simple blue line leading towards a window looking into empty space. The docking station for the 153rd Colony was still a dot in the distance.

There wasn't another colony around for light-years. Not even a moon or a planet.

This was no man's land.

Warning sirens filled the control room with a rotary scream and harsh crimson glow, nearly drowning out the cries and screams of the crew members. Captain Harford gritted his teeth and pulled himself up straight. He was taller than most, and stood well above his crew. He knew what was happening. He'd dealt with these vandals before, lurking in the darkness to ambush and loot freight ships and Kingdom patrol ships.

“Keep your god damn heads on your shoulders, men,” the Captain shouted, fingering the sword at his hip. “If some son-of-a-bitch wants to board my ship, he'll have to do it over my god damn corpse.”

Jimmy was pretending to polish the airlock controls of the cargo room, digging every now and then into the breast pocket of his deep blue uniform, high collared and trimmed with silver, to fish out his compact white information systems pad. It was Blitz season back on Kuifim, and he had a hundred notes riding on the results of tonight's game. Jimmy was just a deckhand, and had no desire or ambition to be otherwise. He was looking forward to grabbing a drink on the Colony, hopefully chase some lonely colonial tail.

With a curse he dropped the pad while trying to cram it back into his breast pocket. It skidded across the tiled floor before landing up against a cargo crate.

“Piece of sh—”

A piercing crack shot through the hull. Jimmy had just enough time to glance up before the tip of a drill broke through the hull and spun through, twisting and shredding through the hull, sending a shock through the entire ship and filling the cargo room with a blast of smoke. Jimmy fell to the ground and scrambled towards the airlock control to escape. Warning sirens began to call out through the ship, filling the cargo room with a red glow. The drill continued to spin, its point spiraling through thicker and thicker metal slabs, shredding the wall until it nearly filled the height of the room. Just as he reached the wall the drill tip split open, locking itself against the inner walls of the ship.

The smoke began to dissipate, and Jimmy, forgetting his plans to escape, stared in shock at the split drill, looking like some metallic star against the wall. Heavy footsteps clanged against metal, echoing through the cargo room. As the last streaks of smoke died, a man appeared.

He strolled into the cargo room from inside the drill. His black boots climbed up to his thighs, folding over at the upper quarter. His shirt was white and rippled at the chest; it clung to him as if it were about to rip. On his back was a short coat, red and black and cut off above

his belt line. His face was rough and unshaven, all harsh angles and framed by a mess of dark hair that fell down to his shoulders. His eyebrows were bushy and dark, and he wore a smug, confident grin on his face.

Jimmy tried to push himself back, wishing he could force himself through the wall to safety.

The man placed a gloved hand on the hilt of the broad, curved sword at his side.

“Be a good lad and open up that there door for us,” the man said in a thick, drawling accent.

Jimmy nodded frantically and reached with one arm towards the control panel, smacking it and pushing random keys, never letting his eyes off of the man in the red coat.

“Lad?”

Jimmy nodded again, choking when he saw the sword raise slightly from its sheathe. With shaking hands he set to work opening the airlock. A green light blinked above the input pad and the airlock slid open.

“There’s a good lad. Now step aside.” Jimmy obeyed. “Let’s go then, the whole lot of you.”

The man motioned forward, and half a dozen men and women in mismatched uniforms of red and black followed him out as he marched through the airlock, ignoring the sirens and blinking lights, the yelling of enemy crew members who would surely greet them in arms, and would surely die.

“Selfie, my hat, please,” the dark haired man said, “And you there, close that airlock.” A woman with short blonde hair and a serene, emotionless look about her face handed him a plain, wide brimmed tricorne. She, as did most of the crew, wore the same thigh-high boots, hers climbing up to a red skirt. She wore a long, red frock over a low-cut, frilly white blouse.

The dark haired man placed the hat atop his head, adjusting it with his one free hand. Just as the airlock closed behind them, they came.

A crew of Kingdom soldiers arrived from around the corridor, each wearing matching blue uniforms and brandishing standard military-issue short swords and revolvers. A man with a silver star on his breast walked forward and spoke directly to the dark haired man.

“This is a Fourth Division Kingdom Military Supply ship. If you value the lives of yourself and you crew, you will surrender to the Kingdom and face a trial of your peers at the municipal court of the nation’s capitol on—”

The soldier’s eyes bulged and he gasped in pain, his eyes fell down to the steel buried into his chest.

“Sorry about that, lad, don’t have time for speeches, y’see.”

The dark haired man pulled his sword from the soldier, letting his body drop dead on the tiled corridor floor.

Suddenly the corridor erupted into battle. The dark haired man forced his way through the soldiers, swinging his sword-arm in smooth arcs that sliced through the soldiers, his men at his side clashing steel against steel, finding killing blows with little effort against the inexperienced Kingdom soldiers. Occasional gunshots fired forth from frightened soldiers, too afraid to engage in direct swordplay. Each shot found itself buried into the walls of the ship, some ripping through cables or pipes and sending steam blasting into the fray.

The dark haired man howled with laughter as his blade sliced through the enemy mob. A lone soldier dove towards him. The dark haired man could see the fear in his eyes, the sweat dripping from his brow. He had an open wound on his cheek, a gash from a blade that didn’t quite hit its target.

He swung wildly, his thin Kingdom sword skimming just short of the dark haired man's face as he dived back to avoid the maneuver. In one fluid motion he turned, exposing for a brief moment his back to the enemy before coming around again with his sword ready, the enemy soldier let out a cry, raising his own sword in defense, just in time to deflect the attack away from his face.

The dark haired man reacted instantly, changing his strategy and jabbing forward, aiming towards the soldier's heart. The soldier squirmed to the side, avoiding the jab, but the man anticipated the evasion and turned the jab into a swing towards his gut. The soldier once again reflected the attack, surviving by the sheer force of dumb luck.

He could see the confidence growing in the soldier, who hastened his attacks, seemingly gaining more and more skill with each ounce of confidence. By now the fighting had stopped, leaving the invading crew to watch with amusement as the soldier fought their captain one-on-one.

The soldier raised his sword high, both hands on the hilt and swung down, the invading captain blocking the attack with his own broad sword.

"Y'think you're quite a swordsman, eh?" He scoffed.

"Cut off the head and the snake dies!" The soldier replied.

"Selfie, I've grown bored." The captain lowered his sword and opened his arms towards the soldier, who took the opportunity to finish off his opponent. He prepared to a strike to decapitate the captain, and screamed with fury.

Suddenly a crack rang out through the corridor and the soldier's eyes bulged. Blood dribbled from the side of his mouth and he fell dead to the floor.

Behind him Selfie stood with a revolver pointed straight forward, smoke trailing away from the slender, silver barrel of her gun. Her eyes seemed to stare without emotion. The captain grinned fondly at her. She nodded in response.

The corridor was silent, all fighting had ceased. The last soldier lay dead in a pool of his own blood.

The invading crew suddenly broke into laughter, all but the girl with the silver revolver, who holstered her weapon.

Once again, none of them had fallen.

"That one was a fighter, damn shame, I'd say," the captain said, "but no more wasting time, let's wreck this piece of Kingdom shite n' get outta here."

Harford cursed as he watched from the security camera the last of his police crew fall to the hands of that dirty pirate.

He would complain to the Kingdom later about sending him untrained soldiers. For now he had scum to wipe off the deck.

"Men, hold your own, strike immediately when they enter the control room. And hold your bloody fire; we don't need any more bullets wrecking this bloody ship any more." Captain Harford thanked the Lord that the bullets fired hadn't caused any more damage than they did. The idea of firing in a ship in the ether of space was idiotic at best. Yet he held confidence in his remaining crew. He had selected them himself from the ranks of the Royal Guard, and held supreme confidence in their abilities.

He smiled. These pirate bastards wouldn't stand a chance.

The sound of heeled boots clanging through the corridor drew his attention away from the

security monitors. He folded his arms and watched as his men took position.

“All right, men. Show these bastards what it means to be in the Kingdom’s Royal Guard.”

His men drew their swords and took stance, holding their hilts steady with both hands.

The stomping of the invading crew grew closer with each second. They wouldn’t dare show it, but Harford could almost feel their pulses quickening, the fear flowing through their veins. They hadn’t yet learned to channel that fear into adrenaline. To turn their fright into a burning destruction that makes a man feel invincible.

Makes a man feel alive.

The footsteps stopped. He was ready for them to bust down the door. Ready to watch them be slaughtered by his best men. He himself would deal with their leader. Some renegade roughneck masquerading as a captain. He wore no gold star. He didn’t come from the blood of soldiers who sacrificed everything for the expansion of mankind throughout the galaxy.

He wasn’t a man. He was a dog.

Captain Harford clenched his teeth, he was growing impatient.

A knock came from the door, three times.

The soldiers looked at each other in confusion.

Knock knock knock.

“Hello?” a muffled voice called from behind the door. “I’ve got a delivery here for a dead man.”

The soldiers looked to their captain, who offered no response.

“Please, sir, s’lonely out here. I just want a friend.”

A vein bulged on Harford’s head. He was long past impatient.

“Open the bloody door!” Captain Harford shouted.

The airlock door split and slid open, revealing a mismatched crew of ruffians, all in red and black and waiting, unarmed. The Kingdom soldiers rushed forward.

“Woah woah woah,” the pirate captain raised his hands, “I’m just here to talk, y’see.” The soldiers halted, waiting for a response from their own captain. “Good lads, good lads. Now. I’ve got a bit of a proposition for you there. Now I’m sure this here’s a fine bunch of soldiers, m’I wrong?”

Captain Harford was torn. He’d never confronted a vandal so... strange.

“Well then,” the pirate captain continued, “Hows about you and me go one-on-one for this piece-a-shit ship. I win, I take the ship; you win, you take mine. Pawn it off and that’s more than enough to replace your little... security crew down there.”

“Kill them.”

The soldiers drove forward.

“Woah woah woah,” the pirate captain repeated, and the enemy soldiers halted. The pirate crew had pulled their guns and were pointing straight at the control console. Any damage to console would kill them all. And Harford wouldn’t put it past them to do it. He once saw a man blow himself up to try and take out a colony. This man didn’t seem any less crazy.

“Seems we got ourselves in a bit of a pickle, Cap’n! So, what d’ya say? Got ourselves a deal?”

Captain Harford pushed his way through his men and stared the pirate in his face. He was shorter than Harford by a hand, and had a mad look in his eyes that Harford had seen before in inmates left aboard a prison shuttle too long. This man was the type of man to seriously

underestimate the skills of a Kingdom captain. The type who imagined officers to be old and weak.

“Boy, you get the hell off of my ship.”

With a click, almost in unison, the pirate crew drew back the hammers of their revolvers, still pointed straight at the controls.

“Or,” the pirate captain began, “we can do this nice n’ clean. You n’ me. Every’un can wait down in the cargo hold where I stuck it to your ship, and you n’ me right here can duel. It’ll be fun I promise.” He grinned up at Captain Harford. “Or we can blow the bloody shit outta that there control panel thingy and send us all to hell.”

Harford glared at the pirate, but nodded.

“Everyone leaves, then.” He was sure his men could handle these ruffians if they chose to fall back on the deal.

“’Cept one. I keep one unarmed man up ‘ere to go tell the crew when the fights over. You win they pack up and leave, or end up in prison. I don’t care I’d be dead anyway.”

“Fine.”

The pirate crew lowered their weapons and began to file out. Selfie stayed behind to watch for the outcome, leaving her side arm with another crew member. Captain Harford shouted out orders to his crew, who left as well. They kept their weapons drawn.

“How do I know she wont help you?”

“S’good. She’s just an android anyway, she’ll follow orders.” He was stretching his arms and legs as he spoke.

Harford didn’t trust him, but held enough confidence in his own skill to let that pass.

The airlock door closed behind Selfie, who stood silent and still.

“All right then, ready when you are, sir!” the pirate captain said, drawing his curved blade.

Harford spit, wishing he could expel the foul air this vandal had about him. He drew his own sword, gold hilt glistening under the artificial lights.

To Harford’s surprise, the pirate captain held out his sword, as was customary among military ranks before a duel. Harford complied. They tapped the sides of their blades together three times, recoiled the swords and began.

Harford took a defensive stance, holding his blade before him with both hands, the pirate captain swung down, only to have his strike easily deflected away. The pirate captain struck again, this time swinging in an upwards arc, but Harford brought his sword down, overpowering the pirate’s blow and forcing his blade to the ground.

Harford took this opportunity and swung down again, the pirate lunged forward, forcing Harford back against the wall and throwing the path of his blade off course. The pirate kicked off of the wall, creating distance between them to recover his form. Enraged, Harford shot forward, arcing his sword in smooth, well defined paths that never seemed to pause, each attack growing closer and closer to connecting against the pirate captain.

Harford halted his rain of attacks, his blade pressed up against his foes, their faces so close together they could smell each other’s breath, could see the grime on each other’s teeth. Sweat was beading at the pirate captain’s brow.

With a grunt and the clash of steel sliding against steel the blades separated.

“Not quite the untrained ruffian I expected,” Harford said.

The pirate captain wiped the sweat off of his face with his sleeve, never taking his hands

off of the hilt of his sword. “Just warmin’ up here.”

In unison the two dove towards each other, swords clashing together with intense speed and precision. The pirate captain forced Harford backwards as they fought, driving his blade as fast and as hard as he could. Behind them an endless sea of stars shone from the control room window.

The pirate captain sliced through the air, missing his mark, and Harford swung his elbow forward, connecting with the side of his head and driving him to the ground. Harford kicked the pirate in the gut, who grunted in pain, he drove his sword down in a killing stroke, the pirate responding with a roll, narrowly escaping the death stroke. The edge of the blade dug into his face, cutting his cheek.

The pirate captain lunged forward and tackled Harford, driving them both to the ground. Forgetting his sword, he unleashed a fury of punches against his enemy’s face, Harford reached up and grabbed the pirate by the throat, then threw him off with unexpected strength, sending him flying back into the control panel.

He pulled himself up on the control panel, panting and bleeding. He looked over by the airlock door, Selfie stood watching, emotionless. But he knew it was just a show.

His sword lay on the ground between him and Captain Harford, who was already back on his feet, back straight, holding his sword at ready. The pirate captain jumped towards his sword, well aware of the danger lurking just behind it. He landed with a roll, his hand clasped around the hilt.

Harford prepared to strike down, the pirate captain stabbed upwards with a jump from the ground.

The pirate captain’s sword drove through the chest of Captain Harford, who struck too slow.

Panting, the pirate captain withdrew his sword, slowly, making sure Captain Harford could feel the sword ripping out of his flesh with each centimeter. He whipped his sword out of his foe’s body, letting him fall backwards.

Harford’s breathing was strained, and blood was beginning to pool around his body. The pirate captain stood over him, panting, sword at ready.

“W-who the hell are you?” Harford sputtered.

“I am Captain Armond. And I’m here to send you back to your God.”

The pirate captain brought his blade down into Harford’s neck.

Selfie watched as Harford’s head rolled away from his body. She smiled. Another victory. Armond really did know what he was doing. But it was only the start. There would be many, many more battles to be fought against the Kingdom. On much larger scales.

Just a start.

Armond walked towards her, dropping his sword to the ground with a clang.

“How was that, then?”

“Impressive. Smoothest one yet.”

“Is that sarcasm I detect? Didn’t know you had that in you.”

She laughed as he swooped her up in his arms. She wiped the blood off of his face with the arm of her coat. He kissed her. His rough, unshaven face scratching hers. Fighting always got him excited.

His hands began to feel her every curve, searching for the spots that made her blush. She wasn't human, but she was close. His hand found it's way up her skirt and she gasped, torn between giggling from his scruff tickling her and moaning from his hands caressing her. He lifted her up and dropped her in front of the control console, ignoring the headless corpse littering the control room floor.

He bent her over the console, and she could see the stars, the colony in the distance. Somewhere out there was her home. Her creators. Suddenly thoughts of home were forced out of her head, she gasped with pleasure, her fingers curling and hitting random switches on the console, causing the lights to flicker. Armond drove into her, over and over. She gasped and he grunted, louder and louder until his body twitched, over and over. He exhaled with relief. She smiled softly, staring at the stars.

When they entered the cargo room the corpses of the enemy crew littered the floor. Captain Armond's own crew were surely back aboard their own ship. Selfie followed him towards the open drill that led them into the Kingdom vessel.

"Wait," she stopped.

"Come off it, I'm ready to be out of here a'ready."

They continued forward, Armond climbed back through the drill of their own ship. Selfie followed.

"There's nothing here but corpses."

A shot rang out.

Selfie fell forward, blood trailing from her chest.

Armond tried to yell, but nothing came out. He rushed forward to catch her, but she fell to the ground before he could reach her.

Jimmy stood panting with his gun drawn, barrel aimed directly at Armond.

Good Friday

By Anon Steve

[Dark stage with shelves on both sides of Jesus. Jesus picks up an item off the shelf, looks both ways, and then starts putting it in his pocket when God comes up and slaps him. He then puts it back.]

God: What are you doing, Jesus? Didn't I teach you better than this?

Jesus: Hey man, the lord giveth and the lord taketh away. I'm just trying to keep up the last bit.

God: Seriously? What were you even going to use this for anyway? It's a tampon, Jesus. A tampon! To think that my son would do something like attempt stealing tampons [shudders] It's wrong. I don't need you being a failure like your faggot brother, Fred. Just remember who got you this damn job! Your mommy did, that's who! If it wasn't for me you'd still be smoking pot in my basement! I don't even get...

Jesus: Mmm, pot. That reminds me, I need like twenty bucks. For...stuff.

God: Oh I'm sure you do. Here, take it [Hands him \$20] I'll be in my office if you need me

Jesus: Don't worry, I won't.

God: Oh, go to hell!

[Jesus goes back to shoplifting but this time is stopped when Krishna approaches him.]

Krishna: Uhm...sir...may I have a moment of your time?

Jesus: What the fuck is it? And before you ask, I don't want any shitty necklaces.

Krishna: Please sir; I do not know what you are talking about. I believe you have me confused with another who has wronged you? In a past life perhaps?

Jesus: Past life? Are you kidding me? I don't believe in your black magic, bro.

Krishna: Black Magic? I can assure you that we do no black magic, the closest thing to black magic is the Ganges.

Jesus: Ganges? What is that? Some kind-a...shitty A-rab place?

Krishna: Oh sir I think you're on the right track. The Ganges is about 60% shit. It's so dense you could probably walk on it Mr... [looks at name tag] Jesus.

Jesus: It's Jesus, numb nuts! You say it like "Hey, Zeus". Kinda like if you were all like "Hey, Zeus, bro. Come over here and hit this." [Jesus giggles]

Krishna: Sir, you scare me.

Jesus: This'll take the edge off. [Digs in his pants, pulls out a joint. Lights it. Offers it to Krishna] Well bud?

Krishna: In my culture...

Jesus: "In my culture" nothing! Don't be such a pussy dude. Just smoke it and relax

Krishna: Well...

[Jesus pushes the joint to Krishna's mouth then knees him in the ribs making him gasp for air]

Jesus: See? Better isn't it?

Krishna:Dude.

Jesus: What?

Krishna: Dude.

Jesus: What!?

Krishna: Dude!

Jesus: What the fuck is it!?

Krishna: I love you man...I really do.

Jesus: I love you too man... [Both start crying and hugging]

Krishna: Let's get married!

Jesus: Yes! Let's get married! [Looks to the back of the store] Hey mom! Me and Krishna are getting married!

God:[Rushing in between her son and Krishna's hug] Like hell you are! We have a name to uphold and the Christs ain't faggots! That's why we had to kill your brother!

Jesus: But...you said he went to live on a farm upstate!

God: You really believe that? You were there when we did it!

Jesus: Dude, like I remember. I'm blazed half the time I do anything so what the hell do I remember?

God: I hate you. You're a disgrace to the family!

Jesus: Whatever, I'm outie. Before I go I need, like, fifty bucks?

God: Take it!

Jesus: Sweet, thanks mom!

God: go to hell!

Jesus: Why tell me when you think I will anyways?

[Darkness. Lights turn back on and Krishna and Jesus stand in front of an Altar with Aphrodite standing behind it.]

Aphrodite: We are gathered here today to join these two lovers in the bonds of holy matrimony. For their perils are both great and exhausting . If anyone objects to this marriage then please, say so now. If not then let me continue marrying these two, because they are gay. And I'm the only person in the state who will still marry gays. My life sucks so much. I started adopting homeless cats last week, I have 27 now. Their names are...

God: Die faggots! [Pulls a gun, shoots Aphrodite and Krishna]

Krishna: You....dirty...bitch...

Jesus: God, you didn't have to do that. I mean, I love Krishna, dude. He was a sexy man. But good job on Aphrodite mom. Now those high school poets are going to have to find something else to write about. Speaking of shitty poetry, hey mom can I have 100 bucks?

God: Sure honey, whatever you want. As long as the gay demons don't take you over again.

Jesus: But I really am...

God: Nobody has to know that. It'll be our little secret.

Jesus: Whatever, can I have your Playgirl now?

God: Hell no, steal your own!

Jesus: Fine but...can I at least have a light?

God: I've always got a light for you my child. Let's go home, get the faggot washed off of you, and get some ice cream. You'll start work again tomorrow. Isn't it wonderful, Jesus? The end really is in the beginning and yet, we don't go on.

[God shoots Jesus then herself. And then a voice.]

Narrator: Jesus was just a boy working at...wait. Why is everyone dead? Did I miss something? Shit, I knew I should have avoided that [Holds up Taco Bell bag] Fresh, new, Cheesy Gordita Crunch, now only 1.49! [Smiles] It gave me the shits like no other [Huge smile] So, I was supposed to be the narrator but apparently these dolts started without me. Whatever! [Introduces next scene if there is one, if not storms off angrily]

Haley

By Tucker

Haley had been working at a firm that called people all around the country and told them to vote for specific ballots. If the person they called had already voted, or was opposed to the company's ideas, they sent the call to Haley. "So what's the problem, honey?" she would say to the telephone receiver in her soothing, seductive voice. It didn't seem to matter if the person was male or female; Haley always managed to get them to vote the way she liked, or the way the company paid her to like.

After about a month of working there she got fired for drinking on the job and offering the customers sex in exchange for money or a vote. This meant that she was back at my place; offering me sex in exchange for money or whatever. The weekend after she got canned she showed up on my porch at six in the morning and started banging on my windows. I could hear my next door neighbor Claire screaming from her doorway, spitting and insane with rage or just genuine craziness. I tried to jump out of bed but a combination of the excitement and getting up so quickly caused me to lose my balance and my legs became tangled in the blanket on the floor, sending me headfirst into the two big closet doors. The doors were attached to rollers on the top and hung about three inches from the

ground. When I hit them they folded in at the middle and all of it, including me, went crashing to the ground, making a loud and terrible sound that almost, but not entirely, muffled the insanity outside.

When I opened the door, Haley's upturned fist was there in my face; poised and ready to begin the next succession of poundings. Instead, she saw me and smiled. "You're bleeding," she said. I moved my left arm from where it was resting on the door frame and felt my forehead where there was a gash running the length from my temple to the beginning of my eyebrow. Haley had squeezed past me, ignoring my glare, or maybe not noticing it behind the sheet of blood. I stuck my head out the door and to the right where Claire was standing. Before I could mutter an apology, she saw the red of my eyes, hungover and raving, coupled with the blood that was now dripping onto my dirty white shirt, and she shot backwards into her apartment, slamming the door behind her.

I did the same, if a little slower, and moved towards the bathroom sink. I washed my face with the cold liquid and watched through blurry eyes as the drops became pink as they mingled with the dirty water. The sink was filthy, just like the toilet and the shower. Not to mention rusted and barely working. I thought about cleaning them as I placed three large bandages on the place where I was cut, squeezing the gash together so that the strips could hold the flesh in place.

I changed my shirt and made my way into the living room where Haley was sitting cross legged on the couch, smoking a cigarette and watching television with the sound off.

"It was good, I got \$319. \$50 for my last week of work. I'm proud of that money. I have to send \$95 to my dad, but I'll still have some left," she said.

"Three hundred dollars makes you rich, when you're used to having nothing," I said after I figured out that she was talking about the job she had just lost.

"I know. I think I might put it into my savings."

"Smart idea. That isn't much to save though."

"Yeah but if I put it in, then if I ever need it, I'll have it. And whatever money I get from now on I can just put it in there and add to it. You never understood things like that. You just want to make me feel stupid and bad like you do," she told me.

"Sorry, listen, I think I'm going to go back to bed. Are you tired?" I said.

I took Haley back to bed with me and laid down on my right side, so that I wouldn't get blood on the sheets or pillows. It felt good to have her body next to mine. I was usually cold in that room and had trouble falling asleep, but Haley ran her hands through my hair, filling my whole body with warmth, and I fell asleep almost instantly with a golden feeling in my limbs. It was good to have her back.

I Have No Socks

(Alternate Title: I have no understanding of Electricity)

By Death

When I open up my dryer, I expect to find an abundance of clothing, littered with socks: freshly laundered socks. The kind of socks that you proceed to walk around in, just because it feels like an angel just vomited in a beautiful fashion, right into the tube. And you know what? That's probably the only reason I still wash my socks. Because God knows that the sacrifice needed to get these socks to me is a painful process.

Let me explain; you put in 20 different single socks in with your whites, and expect to have 10 pairs when you're done. What you end up with is about 3 pairs, two socks that don't match, and a black one (substitute black for any other color). Although you could have sworn that you left the blacks in the other pile, it won't matter, since there will ALWAYS be some kind of sock that doesn't belong. Next, you inspect inside the dryer one more time, make sure there's no white stragglers. Now, you check the clothes you folded, in case of static cling. Chances are you start inspecting the washing load, and for some reason, they aren't there, either. So what gives? Where do my socks go?

There are plenty of theories to keep a person occupied, as to what the hell happens to the socks. Static Vaporization is what I believe in, personally, but some people will also believe in an alternate theory of Short-Ranged Teleportation. Static Vaporization (SV) is the theory that when a sock reaches a strong enough static charge, it would simply disintegrate from the overbearing electricity. Miraculously, this leaves the rest of your clothes unscathed from the necessary electrical discharge you would get from instantly destroying your article of clothing. The 'tick' or 'ting' sound you hear from the dryer is actually the static getting into your sock, and completely destroying them. The reasoning behind this phenomenon is the size of the sock. A sock, in relation to the larger clothes, is a featherweight; it doesn't have enough fabric to handle a powerful charge that it can get from the dryer. Thus, when the charge is overbearing, the sock will simply go "kaput" and disappear. Since shirts are larger, they can take more static, and thus will last longer.

But others believe in the Short-Ranged Teleportation. While on the same principles as the Static Vaporization (which is instant-destruction of the actual sock), the SRT believes that these socks are sent in any which way, forward, backward, upward through time, space, and the rest of that mumbo jumbo. With a standard dryer, this theory supposes you could teleport that sock into your room, which explains the reason you may find another sock still in that room. Industrial dryers can move these socks through time, and sometimes into alternate dimensions. Static Vaporizationists state that it's simply the fault of the actual loader of the dryer, and that finding those socks anywhere is simply from overlooking the sock in the first place, but the SRTists firmly believe in their theory, so no sensible argument can get to them.

So how do I keep those socks intact, and in my dryer? Many housewives suggest a static ball, but this isn't a concrete remedy to an important matter. What I have been doing recently is actually tempering my socks into being able to handle this load; think of it as sock-exercise. Basically, my procedure entails sending a steadily growing stream of electricity through the socks. Start off with .1 amps, and slowly turn it up to a sock's limit (5 amps). Make sure you are wearing protective gear, as electricity is dangerous, and you can get seriously injured! Next, turn it down right underneath the limit. Constantly do this until the socks cease to give off an unsteady magnetic field (and yes, they will give off a magnetic field). Once it is no longer unsteady, turn it up higher, to 5.1 amps. Keep going through this process until (A) your socks are perfectly toned to withstand the electricity, or (B) your socks explode in a fiery fashion, complete with smoldering elastics. If (A) happens, then congratulations! You've combated the scourge of disappearing socks! Make sure to brag to

all your friends how you have all/most of your angel-vomit socks, and make sure to prance around wildly, with your socks pulled up high. Maybe you can even teach them your methods, since we all know having no socks truly “socks”.

Like A Disease

By Ryuno

Like a disease, they have spread over the face of the Earth. The undead are now the dominant race on this dying planet and because of that, we (the few pure humans left) have become but mere prey and been forced to participate in this never-ending race for survival. We are never completely safe.

Nor free. Day after day we fear for our lives and have more trouble fighting the growing madness inside our hearts as the countless hordes of foul creatures surrounds our bases, fortresses, and homes.

While we hide inside frail walls, they freely roam the world that once belonged to us. We might be the true humans, and we might even be the ones who would usually be called “the good guys”, but if history ever taught us anything, it is that the winning side is the right side. The winning side is the one who says the rules. The winning side is absolute.

Unfortunately, I don't quite believe we are the winning side in this very moment.

There probably are, by Dr. Richard's studies, less than thirty-two thousand pure humans around the globe. Compared to the numbers we had five years ago (six billion people) it doesn't sound that big. It's actually depressing to see how fast our species decayed; our technologist's best efforts couldn't stop their advances, in the end. They could barely save their own souls from certain damnation.

Right now, some of our people might be dying. Funny thing is, every human on the planet who has not succumbed to the darkest path is “our people” these days. It's safe to say that there are no more racial, religious or ideological barriers between the living ones. We all live in small communities and try to help each other as much as we can (as long as it doesn't mean getting our necks dilacerated by the living dead). It seems that all we ever needed to become a single people, a worldwide nation, was a massive disaster to hit us all. Actually, this would be a beautiful thing if it wasn't completely tragic.

Every day we live inside a world so twisted it sounds like cheap fiction. Forced to face the low-budget horror movie scenario that we now call home, we can only put our heads down and cringe.

But not tonight.

Tonight we will defeat as many of those monsters as we can, we'll completely crush what's left of their minds and we can even feast on their bodies like bloody ravens if we want to. After all, it's Friday.

More than a mark, more than the sole omen of a future hope. Friday night is the time we do more than just run away or fight back in the worst case scenario. To us, the survivors, it's the moment when we leave our hidings spots and actually get to play the hunter's role for a change.

So come out, come out, wherever you are. Everyone is waiting for you to come out and play.

Spread the terror.

Free their tortured souls and then set yourself free.

Make the pain they made us feel worth.

Drive them to a shade of despair so deep and dark not even a creature without any trace of feelings could avoid. They must pay for what they took, and they must pay for it with the dirty blood of their own kind. Those monsters owe us every single thing they have including their lives, and the payday has come.

For now they might rule the Earth on the rest of the day and even the rest of the week, but they cannot take that beautiful moment when the flags are raised and the common rats are turned into warrior lions, the kings on the battlefield. Friday night is sacred.

Friday night is the Human Night.

My Glass of Water

By Sebastardo

Suddenly a dinosaur came out of my glass and floated around me. It was silver with a long neck and a very large, huge, immeasurable nose. While flying without touching the roof I could see that the three dimensions was not enough to him, and he didn't care the fourth. I looked at him stunned and disbelieving, giving a roundness to my eyes that distorted my face, mouth open and with the right index finger pointing to other people who were not there can see him. What now strikes me most was what, in its moment, take more naturally. In the heart of swimming in the air, looks at me without looking, talk without talk and immediately I'm on his back looking at the cold and heat, listening to the most beautiful scents that red, blue and green can provide to the touch of a mortal with 'dreams' immortality, going back in time to the beginning just to see what actually was the end of another beginning. Feeling the fear of love and security of hate and trying the most delicious delicacies that sex can offer. All that traveling in the back of a silver Sauroposeidon with the size of Russia which left my glass on a Saturday afternoon.

EVERYTHING IS ABOUT STORIES.

Not the other way around, as people usually think. Stories shape the world because their cornerstones are older than everything in it. Even older than the world itself.

Unlike what some might say, a story is never born; it existed before the someone telling it and waited until someone could actually understand the meaning.

A story never truly changes; no matter how you tell it, the story will keep close to its ancient roots and eventually, your version will be the one that sounds incomplete.

And a story never ends; even if everyone that knows about it happens to die, it will still be a living story and find a way to enter the world again. That's because stories aren't like gods, mind you.

And that's exactly the kind of story you are about to see. One that is older than the world itself and will remain until everything is gone. Many moons (and possibly suns) ago, this story was frequently told, wisdom passing from the dying mouths of the old to the fresh ears of the youth. It is probably the archetypal theme of the most beautiful legends and songs.

However, as the world was consumed by wars and high technology, it was forgotten, despite its beauty. Not that the story merely vanished into thin air; people still occasionally sing and once in a while even try to write about it, but it's safe to say that this particular story has become Fiction in the eyes of our contemporary society. In other words, humans called the story a lie.

That didn't please the story very much.

It was time to come out and say "hi", so the story flew around the world searching for characters. The world didn't look anything like the ones the story knew, but stories are known for their abilities of adapting to, say, "environmental challenges." After a while observing the humans, the story had found its protagonists and the perfect scenario. Now it was just a matter of time before the play started.

Raise the curtain.

Welcome to the art of life. You might laugh and you might cry, most likely do both at the same time; certainly this will touch you deep inside. It's a story we all know, despite believing in it or not. It's about two lovers that will have to fight everything to be together.

Lights.

Welcome to an ancient story. It's more real than reality, in many ways. I just ask you to remain silent and watch. I won't answer your questions before the story tells me to, and I won't tell you how it ends. I am just the Storyteller, not the Creator; I'm not the composer, but as the conductor I will just follow the score to the last bar.

This is a tale that will resonate forever.



JUNE 2ND, 2002.

He came back from school, but he never came out to play. It was just another boring day in a boring world, and he knew it. He knew it deep inside, and also knew that he couldn't stop thinking about it. Not just because he didn't fit anywhere, or because his first girlfriend had just broken up with him, or because, as a son of divorced parents, he never got enough attention from any of them. He couldn't stop thinking about it because it was the Truth. You can't just ignore a Truth with capital T. It surrounds you and even if you pretend it's not there, you will still be bound by its rules. Like Gravity.

Actually, it was a lot like Gravity, because it brought him down hard all the time. It crushed his soul and devoured his dreams just like the silence of the night does to the sound of your heartbeat. The Truth he couldn't deny was that every single one of us will die alone. He wasn't ready for this.

He was way too young to deal with those feelings. Every human being is, in the end. No matter how you live, or how many lovers and how much money you have, you'll still die alone. That's the nice part of the Truth.

The bad part is that you live alone as well. Lovers come and go and even your family might forget and betray you. The news and stories we hear everyday show us that there's no such thing as blood ties or everlasting love. At the age of twelve, he learned something that most of us will only realize in our fifties; that you can't trust your life to anyone else but you. The lack of faith in other human beings teaches you to rely on your skills, and that would be a jolly good thing, really motivational...

...if only he had a reason to live. He wasn't particularly good at anything and was being consumed by boredom little by little. He knew that life wasn't a bed of roses, but currently he felt like it was a road of thorns with no prize at the finish line. And he knew he was tired of it already. The nameless hero needed to decide between life and death. It was a tough one, so it would take some time.

In the meanwhile, he decided to play a little.

He knew it wouldn't work from the start. She was a healthy girl, full of joy, that was into sports and cheerleading. In the other corner, wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, he was the one that was usually so quiet that most people wouldn't remember being in the same class in a few years. So he wasn't really hurt. It was bad, but not unpredictable. Also, he didn't have any feelings for her from the start. She was just another way to escape reality.

**"IT WAS JUST BEAUTIFUL,
THE WAY IT PIERCED THE
CLOUDS THAT DAY."**

That's why it felt like giving away a toy you didn't want anymore to a poor child when she broke up with him and went to the arms of the best soccer player in the class in less than 20 minutes. He knew that he was a jerk for thinking that way, but it's hard to help it when you had a girl as easy as Evelyn. She was actually getting on his nerves, recently.

He looked away from the cathode ray tube monitor and saw the sunlight coming through his window. It was just beautiful, the way it pierced the clouds that day. However, no matter how beautiful that ray of pure light was to witness, the day was really cold, both outside and inside of him. So he cursed the fake glory of the sun in his heart. It was just as fake as the rest of the world.

The computer beeped. The hero snapped out of his inner dark moment and stared at the machine. The program he had downloaded was now installed. He was ready to enter the Fields of Van'ar. FoV was not a proper game. It was basically a chat where everyone could create their own field (a chat room) and program it as they wish. You could build a new world, if you wanted to.

His only friend told him at school that he hung out at the "portal" field. However, before entering the Fields, our hero had an epic trial in front of him.

CHOOSE YOUR SCREEN NAME.

He'd never entered a chat room by himself, so he thought about his friend for reference. His friend's nickname was **V_VEGA**, based on a 1994 movie character. It seemed that all you had to do was choose your favorite fiction character. That's why he didn't feel surprised at all when his fingers typed by themselves: **WHITE_RABBIT**.

After that, he needed to choose an avatar. An avatar is a bodily manifestation of the Divine or the graphical representation of a user, according to the internet. Both sound pretty much the same, when you think about it. He created something as close to him as he could.

He entered the Fields of Van'ar. For a moment it felt just like a game. The graphics weren't really great and the "portal" field seemed like an empty Stonehenge copy. The grass was green and the sun was shining, but unless you were easily impressed, it didn't seem real at all.

He had waited for half an hour before realizing that his friend had swimming class on Mondays. He decided to log out and find something to do. And then she appeared out of thin air.



EVELYN WALKED INTO THE CLASSROOM AND SAW SOMETHING SHE WASN'T EXPECTING.

She had tried to make it happen tons of times, but was never able to. She ended up quitting and settling for a guy that she could make happy. No matter how much she tried, there was still something lacking. And now...

...it didn't felt right. She did break up with him yesterday, right? He was supposed to be down or worse than that, pretending to be OK. But the face he was making even worse, in a way. He was smiling, he was actually smiling, and he never did it before.

Needless to say, Evelyn was stunned. She tried so hard to make him show any feelings for anything. He was always with that look that his grandfather had, and for a moment she thought that she could change it and make him happy. She felt like she needed to, and was too young to realize that their relationship had much to do with maternal instinct and just a wee bit with attraction.

Nevertheless, it was an outrage. She was his girlfriend (not anymore, actually) and he wasn't supposed to feel better when she dumped him. The relief in his face made her want to scream because she felt like she was the burden he was so tired of carrying. Evelyn wanted to break his neck with her bare hands.

However, she settled for a cold look and went to her desk.

"Evelyn does look mad."

The boy known as **V_VEGA** on the Internet sat by his classmate and only friend, the one that called himself **WHITE_RABBIT**. He always looked like he didn't care much about anything (and after knowing him for a while, it seemed to be the truth). The hero looked at him with his jet black eyes.

"Well, I couldn't care less."

There. The one that was supposed to be heartbroken was just fine. As long as he was acting cool as always, **V_VEGA** knew that he didn't have to worry about his friend. He sighed in relief and started unpacking his bag. While doing this, he realized that he had forgotten his math book at his father's place. He spent the weekend there like he usually did, twice a month since the second half of the last year.

"THE HERO LOOKED AT HIM WITH HIS JET BLACK EYES."

At this point I believe that you have realized why they were the only ones they could rely on; they were both sons of divorced parents. And they were surrounded by pre-teens, which is only another word for a devilish kid. Kids are way more honest and cruel than adults, in their own way. You do the math.

While everyone else decided to stay away from him ever since the 'hot news' was spread, the kid that looked like a younger James Dean with a bob haircut started talking to him. **V_VEGA** had never seen him talk to anyone. He tried to avoid getting any attention. His grades were nice, but he was like a piece of furniture to the rest of the class. No one seemed to care about him too much except Evelyn, the pretty girl that seemed to watch every move he made. **V_VEGA** and **WHITE_RABBIT** got along just fine.

"I forgot my math book, so I'll sit with you and..." As he turned around to finally look at his friend's face, **V_VEGA** saw something that gave him the chills. They were friends for almost a year; he should have realized that there was something wrong. He never saw the boy that seemed to wear jeans the entire time smile before, and it felt really, really wrong. The boy that seemed to be made of apathy was staring at the sky and smiling.

Oh dear.

"Ok, what's happening?"

"What?"

"You're smiling. Evelyn broke up with you yesterday and now you're grinning."

The hero chuckled.

"Is it that weird?"

"As a matter of fact, it is. Now, can you tell me what's going on?"

The one known as **WHITE_RABBIT** looked a little embarrassed.

Oh my, this is getting really awkward.

“I’ve met a girl, that’s all.”

V_VEGA was surprised. Both his friend and the ex had gotten over each other really, really quickly. He wondered for a while if all couples were like that. Little did he know, but most human relationships were really simple: “as long as we’re together our love is eternal.” Sounds stupid, but saves the involved ones from unnecessary drama.

It was already weird enough when Evelyn suddenly talked to him, being as popular as she was. She wanted to know more about the boy that always wore jeans and walked around people like they were obstacles. It got worse when his friend kissed her at the school yard. He didn’t look like someone that liked girls. Nor boys, for that matter. He didn’t even look like he could care about someone other than himself, for Heavens’ sake.

The school bell rang. As the teacher entered the classroom, the short boy with glasses sighed. He was jealous of his friend and he couldn’t help it. He hated himself for that...

...because the thing he hated the most is that he was jealous for the wrong reason.

WHITE_RABBIT sat at the bench in the school yard and opened his soda can. He took a little paper bag from inside his pocket and opened it, ripping a piece of the paper and revealing its contents. He threw the powder into his drink and mixed it by rocking the can back and forth. He took a sip of it and sighed in relief.

“Seriously, why do you do that? You always end up looking like a junkie.”

He looked to the left and saw his friend with glasses. He wore the school uniform, despite the fact that no one else did. He lived by the rules without realizing that they were more like guidelines. The boy in jeans drank a little more.

“I told you: everything tastes better with cinnamon. Anyway, there’s no one but us here right now.”

“Whatever... What happened at the ‘portal’ field?”

“I’ve met a girl that thinks like me, that’s all.”

V_VEGA choked on his tomato juice. It was worse than he thought.

“You know, about girls on the internet... she’s probably not what you think she is.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like a guy.”

The boy in glasses actually expected a weird reaction...

“So what?”

...but he couldn’t expect this. **V_VEGA**’s mind was blown.

In the end, a rather disturbed **V_VEGA** found out that **WHITE_RABBIT** wasn’t interested in Panacea in any way other than as a friend. It would be weird if he was indeed, since he just “met” her yesterday (and only technically, if you consider the circumstances). **WHITE_RABBIT** said that passion out of the blue only happens in cheap soap operas and stupid romances. Things which, unfortunately, **V_VEGA** loved but wouldn’t like anyone to find out. It hurt him a little bit inside, but not only because of that.

**"YOU KNOW, ABOUT GIRLS
ON THE INTERNET... SHE'S
PROBABLY NOT WHAT YOU
THINK SHE IS."**

V_VEGA didn’t quite believe his friend. He didn’t have much of a reason to doubt him, but he knew this couldn’t end well. Worse than that, he kind of wanted it to end badly. He was really jealous of his friend, but not jealous as a friend (and that consumed him, killing him little by little every second like poison).

He quickly snapped out of it when he saw the blackness of his friend’s eyes. The boy in jeans was now too close...

It's not like his friend was stunning and **V_VEGA** was into boys; the boy in jeans wasn't particularly beautiful (and you could thank his sick look for that), and the one with glasses was fairly interested in girls, but there was something about **WHITE_RABBIT** that attracted him a lot. It felt so wrong that it seemed right. He just realized it a few months ago. The problem is, he realized it when he saw his friend kissing Evelyn. And right now, he definitely wanted his friend to do the same to him.

Badly.

"Shall we?"

He could swear he almost died at the moment when he heard **WHITE_RABBIT** say that. Was the boy reading his mind? What should he do?

Oh dear.

"W-W-WHAT?????" He panicked.

"The bell rang a few minutes ago and I think we should go back to class." The other calmly announced. "Shall we?"

As they walked towards the classroom, **WHITE_RABBIT** noticed that his friend, after being absent-minded during the break, seemed really nervous now. He'd have to talk to him later. Right now, there was someone else in his mind.

"SINCE THERE WAS NO ONE AVAILABLE TO FILL HIS SHOES, CLASS C KNEW EXACTLY IT MEANT. IT'S GOSSIP TIME, BOYS AND GIRLS!"

History class.

Well, supposedly.

The teacher called in sick at the last minute today. He said he had some personal problems. Since there was no one available to fill his shoes, Class C knew exactly it meant. It's Gossip Time, boys and girls!

The subject today wasn't the new video of a famous band, or the sudden marriage of a Hollywood couple; they could talk about that tomorrow. Today, they had their own little celebrities.

According to reliable sources (which meant Eli, the chubby guy that sat at the back of the class, close to the windows), **WHITE_RABBIT** had been cheating on Evelyn for a long, long time before she decided to walk away. That's why he didn't care at all when she "dumped" him (can it really be called "dumping" when the dumped one has already moved on?).

Some disagreed. Molly (the one that seemed to be wearing the same one-piece jumper since the second grade) said that **WHITE_RABBIT** was probably feeling really bad, but decided to hide his weakness. It happened to her sister when her boyfriend ran away with some girl from college. Deep inside, Molly believed that **WHITE_RABBIT** was feeling sorry for himself and needed a friend (a new girl, perhaps).

It's hard to think that both sources, while not being based on the truth, managed to reach a small pinch of reality (just a little, just a little bit): yes, the boy in jeans had moved on. Yes, he had his worries and yes, he needed a friend and she was (or at least, she said so) a girl. The rest of it was pure fiction. However, when we stop for a while and think about it, isn't it all?

He heard what the people in class said about him. He didn't care at all about common people and their petty things, even if the subject was his own person. However, he wasn't acting as his usual self today for some other reason; he actually tried to look cool as always, but **WHITE_RABBIT** was having a particularly hard time doing it that day. He couldn't help but smile, and that scared him deep inside.

When classes ended, he went to **V_VEGA**'s house and spent some time with him. It seemed that his confused friend needed a little bit of fun, and playing fighting games with friends is a good medicine for pretty much any ailment. They relaxed and laughed a lot (and seeing someone else happy made the boy in jeans feel a little less weird about his own smile).

He went home at the end of the afternoon.

"HE COULD NOT TALK ABOUT IT TO ANYONE BUT HER, AND THAT WORRIED HIM."

He went straight to his bedroom and slowly opened the window, and the beautiful moon found its way into the dark room. As he sat in his bed, the moonlight was the only thing that he could see and he couldn't help but feel lonely. He smiled and laughed the whole day, but at night he was alone at his house and the Truth struck him once again. His parents were always too busy or too focused on their own lives. He wouldn't talk about it with his classmates, and he didn't have many friends. Evelyn wasn't really useful and even **V_VEGA** was acting strangely towards to him. No one seemed to understand or care enough, except for one person.

He could not talk about it to anyone but her, and that worried him. A lot.

It was a mistake. Even he knew that, but the person making the mistake is usually the last one to realize when he is doing something wrong. He was just too young, too naive to see the reason why it was a mistake

He logged on. She was waiting for him.

Yesterday, they chatted for hours and hours, and decided that if they were going to talk to each other every day, they should keep it on the net. There would be no need or room for drama nor romance, since both of them had the same views about life and love, and both of them knew the Truth, they knew they could only support each other from a distance without ruining everything.

They were the only ones that understood each other, and that's why they could not have feelings involved in this; if they lost this relationship, they would have to face the Truth all by themselves. As two of a kind, they decided to be there for each other on the Internet but promised not to meet in real life. That way, with or without friends or lovers, they would never be alone.

And it scared him, because he felt alone now.

PANACEA: HAVE YOU SEEN THE MOON TONIGHT?

Editor's note: The author has expressed some interest in continuing this as a serial, but is not sure about it. Perhaps this will depend on your response to it.

CHAPTER 1 END

PRESERVE

part II



Beside me on the bed, she sat in her plastic deathbag, fogging it up inside as she whispered to me, “You have to see them. You have to see them for what they are.”

I was clutching myself through my pants, so I wouldn't piss in fear. She had waited until I was alone again to reappear. Through the bag, the finer details of her rotting face were blurry. She was a pale white-green color, her eyes were long gone, and in some places of her body, white bone peeked out, fading into the surface of the skin like noodles partially submerged in soup. The bag kept out most of the smell, but it, like the bones, leaked out in some places.

After a time, she said to me, “My son is coming up the stairs. Listen to his words.”

There was a rustle of plastic and a knock at the door at the same time.

“Mr. Edgar? Are you awake?”

I stood up to open the door, but he did it before I could even touch the doorknob.

“Good evening, Mr. Edgar. Um, I just wanted to ask you, did you speak to my father this evening?”

I shook my head. “He didn't say anything about you.”

He cocked his head and smiled slightly, “Oh my, aren't you the little psychic? Also, I wanted to ask you, I play the piano throughout the night for my father. Do you mind it?”

I thought about his words, and the words of the dead woman, his mother.

“Why do you say I'm psychic? And if I didn't mind last night about the piano, why would I mind tonight?” I struggled to keep my voice straight. His flesh of deep wrinkles made me nauseous.

His smile dropped. “I said it as a joke, because you guessed what I was going to ask next, and I didn't even know you were here last night. I thought you just stopped by in the morning for breakfast.” He looked away, an appalled look crawling on his face, “I can't believe my father didn't tell me!”

He stared at the ground, his eyes expressing some deep inner realization. His mouth did not express it as easily.

“Maybe...” his whispers barely slipping from his soft mouth, “he's trying to show me...”

He nodded at me then. “Good night then, Mr. Edgar.”

She appeared before me at the closing of the door, clicking back into existence. All of this made my stomach twist around itself, and I bent over with nausea. I raised my head and saw her in the corner of the room, pointing to a stack of books.

“Move these. You have to see them. Move them now!”

There were a lot of questions I wanted to ask her, but the command in her voice made me shove them aside. Her will was undeniable, the will of a dictator. I hated her for it.

The stack of books fell over as my hands removed it, revealing a wide break in the wall. The dark hole was framed by jagged and dusty chunks of plaster and wood. She, or whoever made the hole, had torn it open with a hammer or some blunt instrument.

I looked up at her, and her hand was still pointing at the spot.

“Go.”

I didn't think I could fit. I told her, “I can't.”

She kept pointing. She repeated, “Go.” The imperative in her voice shoved me over. I went in the hole.

Crawling up, adjusting myself, I realized I was in the space between the walls. It was narrow and so dusty that thick wads of the stuff flew away into the deep below me with each breath. The inside of the walls scraped at my face and plaster dust flew into my nose as I breathed. Below me, the floor of the rooms did not exist between the walls, and there was a straight drop to a murky darkness that must have been the first floor wall spaces. It seemed that something moved down there, at the base of the house. Pipes, wires, and planks of wood allowed me to climb towards where the will of the dead mother pushed me.

“This isn’t happening,” I told her, though I could see her no longer. “Houses aren’t built like this. There should be a floor, and this space shouldn’t be...” I stopped and kept moving. There was no use arguing, only in keeping pace. Some places were so narrow they squashed my ribs until they hurt and, coupled with the plaster dust, kept me from breathing at all. I turned a corner and saw light.

Here, in the wall I had been led to, was an opening, just narrow enough to peer through. Light sliced out of it, and voices could be heard.

“Look. Look at what they do. What they always do.” She was there, ahead of me in the space between the walls, standing and peering into the opening. The light made the desiccated holes of her eye sockets look like two black dots.

“You said you loved me. I know. I’ve known, since I can remember, that you feel what I feel. I know you love me, father, and I know you want me.”

I climbed over to the light and looked into it. It was Clarence’s piano room. The hole in the wall placed us at a viewpoint near the ceiling. All over the walls, there were weapons of all kinds: broadswords, katanas, scimitars, axes of all sizes, flails, oversized hammers, and the occasional old replica gun. How I did not notice them before, I blamed on my initial shock when I met Clarence. Clarence was on the piano chair staring lovingly at George his father, who leaned against the piano. George was staring at the floor, a shamed look on his face. Clarence had a pleading look on his face, though his voice was still as calm as ever. I struggled to make out what they were saying.

“...you to tell me father. Why can’t you say it?” Clarence’s delicate voice became clearer as I strained to hear.

George seemed to physically struggle through the words, as if he was forming them out of rock in his mouth. They came after a silence.

“I love you Clarence. You know that I do.”

“I love you, son,” George said again.

He stood and held him, a contact that had been severed for too long. Clarence buried his face in his father’s neck, like a small child.

It seemed so beautiful.

George’s hands came up and shoved Clarence to the floor, his eyebrows furrowed in anger, his crooked teeth bared slightly.

“What. Are. You. Doing. Clarence.” It was his stern voice, the voice of a disciplinarian, a father. One of his hands came up to clean something off of his neck, dragging his fingers on the skin.

Clarence’s face changed from his usual angelic placidness to the open-mouthed, wide-eyed stare of a mad idiot. He picked himself off of the floor and reached his hand out to George.

“You said you loved me. I know. I’ve known, since I can remember, that you feel what I feel. I know you love me, father, and I know you want me.” He gulped.

“No!” George yelled, backing away from his son, his face twisted in disgust. “I love you Clarence, but not like this. Not at all. What the hell is wrong with you?” He grabbed a machete on the wall. It was so dirty the blade had stopped reflecting light. It was the color of scabs.

“Stay away from me. This wasn’t supposed to happen again.” A deep sadness had entered his voice. He looked like he was about to cry.

Clarence came towards him. “Father, please!”

George swung but missed, leaving himself open for Clarence to try to grab the machete from him. They tugged at it together.

Clarence pushed George away from him, trying to get the weapon, and George lost his grasp, hitting his head fiercely on the a corner of the piano that was so encrusted with residue, it looked like someone had wrapped it in grime and dried bloodied bandages.

His head hit the corner so hard the whole piano was shoved back with the impact, and he fell to the floor, a pool of thick pale fluid forming quickly.

Clarence screamed.

I didn't have to watch the rest. I didn't have to watch Clarence drag his father's body down the hallway and up the stairs. I didn't need to see him open the pull-down stairs to his attic and toss his father's body up there and slam the thing shut so he could cry beneath it, surrounded by the same smell of sawdust, sweat, and feces. I didn't have to see any of that to know how familiar it was.

I did, but only because she showed me. Pushing me and leading me within her secret network of holes between walls, she showed me as it unfolded.

Clarence got up from the floor eventually. He made his way to the backyard, repeating to himself, "I'm sorry father. I'll make sure you understand. I'll make sure you're not afraid of it, father. I love you, I'm sorry."

The dead mother, the lost wife, she told me to go back to the room. I made my way back through the narrow spaces until I found that break. I was covered in dust when I got out and nearly coughed up both my lungs, but she was already in the room, waiting at the door.

"Open the door and go into the attic."

The smell nearly drove me mad.

Everywhere, stuffed, folded, and crumpled into every corner, crack, and open space, were piles and piles of Georges. Decomposing is not the right word to use, because it became clear to me that the bodies were not made of flesh. They were rotting, but in the way a fruit rots, rather than a piece of meat. The bodies were drying out, splitting in some places, and smelled pungent, rather than rotting, falling apart, and smelling dead.

"Are they human?" I asked, unsure if I wanted to hear the answer. The faces of hundreds of George's stared at me, eyes glazed over and mouths agape. They all had the same head wound from the same piano corner. The farther to the back I walked, the more accurate the proportions of the bodies were.

"My son and husband were human," the corpse woman said, "but they murdered me, and began the cycle that tortures them today."

If I had dug into one of these piles in the back of the attic, I would have found the body of the original George.

"I made a mistake. I bred with a wretched man, and he gave his wretchedness to my son. Without me, they only sink deeper into the misery that is essential to their nature." She walked to me, but stayed at a comfortable distance. "A week will pass, and they will do this again. Your presence sped up the cycle a bit this time around, but one week is what it takes. One week it is Clarence that wins the struggle, and lives to make a copy of his father so he can try his sick wish again. The next week, George will survive, and he will make himself a new Clarence, trying to prevent the abomination he voiced and seek forgiveness. The memories stay, and the same thing happens. My son by the sword, my husband by a fall."

"You see, each survivor makes his creations stronger than himself, because he wishes to be destroyed, deep in his heart."

If I went down to the "Basmint," I would find it full of Clarences, each one less wrinkled and sick looking than the one before it.

"You see, each survivor makes his creations stronger than himself, because he wishes to be destroyed, deep in his heart."

"Clarence told me you killed yourself," I asked.

Her laughter made me shake. It rang with the mocking certainty of death.

"They killed me. Together they came at me with knives. They do not remember it, the memory of a golem is selective, so very selective. If they knew what they did, they could never handle the responsibility, and they could not continue their cycle. It must remain outside of them, so they can blame me in their minds."

I tried to see stab wounds on her through the bag she was in, but I could not.

She must have noticed me looking. "I will show you."

Her hands reached out and tore the bag. The smell hit me so hard I almost fell back. I remembered what was around me, and maintained my balance. For two weeks afterwards, I would be unable to smell anything.

The bag fell around her. She ripped the rotting dress off of her body.

There were nine wounds on her, each stained around it with old blood.

I thought that her body was still beautiful despite the wounds and look and smell of death, and the thought made me sick.

“Do you know what I want you to do?” Her voice was strong and clear now that she was out of the death bag.

I gulped in fear, disgust, disorientation. It was real, all to real, but profoundly impossible.

“No, I don’t.”

She stepped closer. There seemed to be some sort of eyes in her empty sockets now, but I could barely see them behind her hair.

“Help them. They cannot help themselves.”

She wasn’t there anymore.

He kneeled in dirt; his hands were caked and streaked with it. The hole he was in was wide, like a crater. Beside Clarence in the crater was the beginning of a new George. It was a horrible caricature of a human being. Disproportionate, anti-symmetrical, trapezoidal: it was all these things. Above the whole scene, the sky was void of stars and moon, but light from both still shone on us. I realized that she had shrouded the house and land around it somehow; even the trees lining the yard seemed like some cardboard illusion projected by an occupied mind. I called Clarence’s name.

He turned to me. Either he had wiped his face with his hands, or he had been eating the dirt, maybe kissing it.

“What do you want?” he said in the same placid tone.

“Don’t do it, Clarence,” I said. How pathetic.

“I have to do it. I need to. This time, my father will understand. My poor father. He deserves a second chance. How could I..” He stopped to cry in his muddy hands, rubbing it into his eyes.

I wondered what his mother could possibly think I could do. I tried telling him the truth, something he did not know.

“This isn’t his second chance. He’s had many before.” I waited to say the next sentence. “So have you.”

The look of realization seemed to peek through his perplexed eyes. He seemed to know what I was talking about.

“What do you mean?”

“Look in the attic where you tossed his body. Look in his basement. You’ll find many of these,” I gestured to the incomplete body of the new George, “in your form as well as his.”

I rubbed my head, trying to figure out the words in the right way.

“What happened here tonight always happens. You two always do this to each other. Why do you think this ditch is so deep and wide?”

“She was glaring at me. She had grown a pair of rotting eyes and her flesh looked only weeks dead, instead of months or years.”

He blinked, stood up in the hole made from his and George’s failures. His eyes stared at me with what first seemed like disbelief, and then with what seemed like distant remembrance. Perhaps some shade of the original Clarence was hidden there. A certainty had dawned on him, but I did not know what that certainty was until he spoke.

“You’re mad. Get out of my house. I need to bring back my father.” He kneeled down again and began forming the head of the new George.

I had little time to be disappointed: the will of his mother called to me. It felt like what I thought a hook would feel like to a fish. Clarence was raising George's head to the moon, whispering some words too low for me to hear, and the air began to smell of hot drying earth. I turned and went into the house through doors that looked black in the moonlight but were probably a deep red. She was on the couch where George and me ("I") sat when I came here, lying back.

She was glaring at me. She had grown a pair of rotting eyes and her flesh looked only weeks dead, instead of months or years. She was still nude.

"What are you doing Edgar?" How she knew my name, I didn't know. Hers was still a mystery to me. Her voice had become sharper and more lucid.

"I'm trying to reason with him, tell him the truth. It's not working. He asked me to leave." I was reporting to her, like a subject to a queen, a lackey to a villain.

"You have to do for them what they cannot do for themselves. You have to put them out of their misery, destroy them."

"I asked you to help them, not hold their hands." Her tone was impatient and bitter. She was becoming stronger.

"What do you mean?" I was afraid of what she might tell me. I thought if I just gave into her, she might eventually let me go.

"The land around this house is dying. The life force is being sucked out from the very earth every time they repeat their cycle." She cocked a moldy eyebrow. "Do you think creating one of them is cheap?"

I didn't know what to say at first. I stood there breathing the stink of her. I asked her the question on my mind after a long silence between us.

"How can you be here if you're dead? How can your husband and son keep remaking each other like that? How can any of it happen?"

She was behind me suddenly, breathing on my neck, her dead arms around me, her hands cold clasped on my chest.

"I'm strong, Edgar; strong enough to rise above death. I made the mistake of thinking I could bring up a lesser man to my level and in my image, and I was killed by him and the spawn between us. What they do now is only the beginning of what I was teaching them. I need to be back, Edgar; I need to be before I disappear forever. To do this, I need you to be my hands."

I realized I was on my knees. She tilted my head back and stared into my eyes so deeply that all I could see were hers.

"You have to do for them what they cannot do for themselves. You have to put them out of their misery, destroy them." It was the same calmness that Clarence had in his own voice.

"That is so cruel," I said.

"The high spirits of kindness," the words came out of her with such love as she breathed them into my ears, "may look like malice."

She let me go. Her weight vanished off my back.

"Do this for me Edgar, and I will let you leave this house. But you will go back to your home with me, and I will be yours. You will be to me what George failed to be, for I see in you what I see in myself. Refuse to help me, and I will spend the last bit of life I have left to seal you in here forever. Then I will drain you and wait for the next visitor. I have done it before."

She lied on the couch again, waiting.

"I don't want you," I told her. She didn't care what I wanted. The words went unnoticed.

"This is what you do with cretins, Edgar. You destroy them, or they will destroy you."

She was smiling, the dead sorceress.

Clarence was outside next to the hole, sleeping. There was no George around, which meant he had finished making him. There was a heavy plank of wood nearby, which did the job quickly. I worried if the new George heard the screaming.

I told myself it was me or them. I said it had to be this way, and that I was stopping a vicious cycle of misery. I still had to steady myself afterwards, taking in what I had done. My hands hurt.

“You’ve made a killer of me. I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Somewhere behind me, I felt her lips rise in a smile.

I told myself he wasn’t human. The pale fluid spilling from the body confirmed it for me.

**“Take them to my grave.
The freshest copies must
take my place..”**

I had to go into the house to find George, following footprints of mud. He was on the stairs, muttering incoherently. I was only able to make out the word “Clarence”. His body was so contorted he could barely walk. His shoulders were a mockery of straight lines. His arms were of different lengths as well as his legs; one arm and one leg were so long they made him look like an injured spider. His face was off center and his scalp seemed tilted, starting at his ear. His beard was solid rock.

This was when things changed for me, and I learned the first lesson she was trying to teach me. How badly would these two become if this were allowed to go on? How much misery and death and deformation could be allowed until someone stopped it? The grass and trees of the area looked gray in the daylight, I remembered. How far would that spread?

George still wasn’t any easier, either in physical or emotional effort. The intellectual acceptance of the act only deepened the atrocity. The plank cracked in half during the beating.

Her voice was in my head this time.

“Take them to my grave. The freshest copies must take my place.”

She didn’t say the rest of her command until I had dragged both of the bodies to the door. She told me to turn the stove on and leave as much flammable debris on top of it as I could. There were bottles of lighter fluid under the sink that I spilled around the house, as well as a big can of paint thinner in the woman’s room that I splashed down the hall and on Clarence’s piano. I had left the doors to the basement and attic open so the fire wouldn’t spare them. Her books had vanished.

The fire had started to consume the outside of the house by the time I reached the hill where the trees began. From there, I could see the house being turned into a bright spot of fire in the shallow valley.

She was trying to tell me something, but I could feel her weakening. Maybe that was what she was trying to say: the closer she came to life, the weaker she would grow, only regaining her full strength when I brought her back to life.

I could have dropped the false corpses then, feeling how weak she was. Her words were fading out as the cars of the road were fading in. The grasp she had upon me and the world had blurred and decayed, and I could have left the nightmare behind me. I could have dropped the father and his son and kept walking, hitching a ride with the next car, forgotten the sick things she had shown me and the sick things she made me do, and I could continue the wandering I had been up to before this little detour. I could have let my misery and spite and cowardice keep building up inside me until I died on this road homeless, angry, and safe with my morals.

My hands let go and the bodies fell. “Makes me sick,” I said.

The choice I made put me where I am today. As I watched a woman that looked holocaust-starved crawl out of the grave covered in nothing but dirty bushels of blonde hair, I didn’t regret it for a second. I still do not, because it was how I met my darling, my companion. She kneeled at the foot of her grave, coughing dirt and thick hairy gobs of mold.

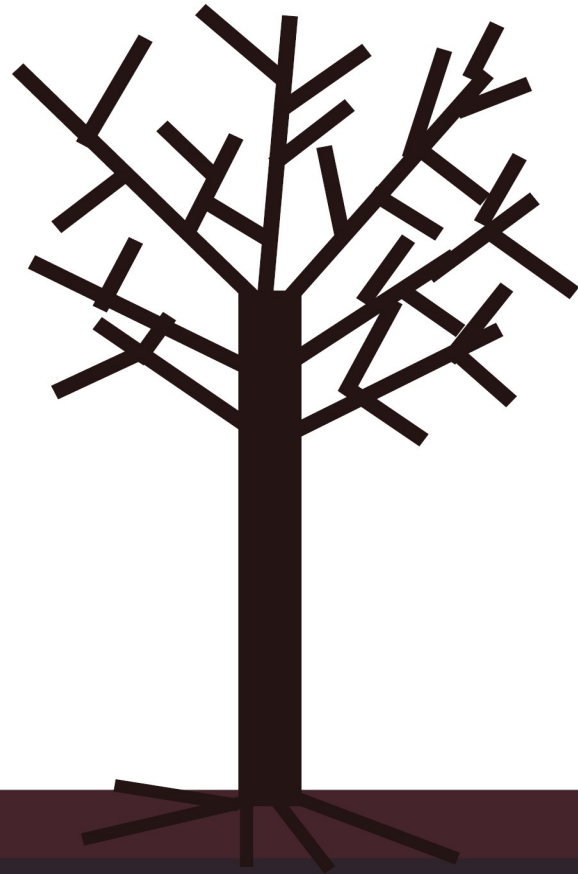
I asked if she was alright. She looked at me, smiled across bony cheeks, and told me she was, that she would be alright forever. She tried to get on her feet, but she nearly fell back into the hole. I raised her up and we walked back down the road to watch the house burn.

She sits now, in the yard of our manor, basking in the riches she has gained and I have gained and we have gained together. Our carnal life.

She plucks a strawberry from the garden and bites into it, the red drip lingering at the corner of her lips.

She swallows it and says, "Nothing tastes better than something that was just alive."

She smiles, my sorceress.



Shutterbug

By Epiphanies

Most people say they come in a pop, a fleeting moment of clairvoyance and flash-bulb bursts. Quick lightning strikes, a brilliant cathartic orgy. Mine arrived in an explosion of albumen and yolk shattering across my nose and dark tinted sunglasses. That single raw egg dumbfounded me more than the pepper of bullets invading my torso.

On the sidewalk I buckled into stunned silence, Stephen hovering, screaming for paramedics. *Fraud!*, a man bellowed from across the street. *Blind fraud!* Another echoed as I heard a commotion, what I can only assume to be he and his accomplice being brought to the ground. Unconscious to the splintered minefield of shell and viscera drooling over my face, to the chaos and perforations of the gunshot wounds -- I forgot myself. I thought in photographs and fingertips; I forgot my best-kept secret and I began to *dig*.

It was a mistake.

Nobody ever contemplated peeling the shiny skin back from a photo and operating – of course there is no skin to speak of, only a translucent gloss. No one ever imagined squishing around through the guts and verve of a small town dance, with its lemon-bauble lights, the kitschy skirts and stolen kisses. Never had someone thought they could just physically reach in and adjust that embarrassing dress, turn up the shadows, and turn down the laughter from an evening gala. Pictures aren't supposed to work like that.

I, however, did. I am photographer and surgeon; an award winning photo-surgeon albeit the latter mostly unbeknownst to those around me. And I couldn't see a damned thing.

I specialized in photographing people. Shoots were well-plotted guesses, me relying on Stephen's cues, being a little messy here and there. The real work never began until editing. The artist is the true creator of the beautiful things, the art itself is useless.

When people say cameras don't lie, they're right. Cameras are as honest as it gets. The sincerest liars are photographs, effortlessly manipulated and persuaded. Nobody ever mentions that.

For me, there is no Photoshop, no assistants, no special tools other than my redundant darkroom and these strange, wonderful hands that could slip into the photographs, rearranging everything on whim like a child's dollhouse. Sewing up a smile here, nudging shoes a step to the left there, and arching her back this way or an arm to more delectable angles; all of it my art, my work, my talent.

The images of landscapes and still life leave me awash in nothing but textures and easily crushed vegetation. But with the people, with people, I sculpt, mould, and fashion the actors of each shot howsoever I pleased. I blackened their eyes and broke their noses, I created aberrant faces that never existed; reached through the infinite flatness, the flimsy sheen and wrought havoc in homage to a world of aesthetic fantasies.

My fingers would be raw and cracked at the end of a day, too much time in chemical baths, delving into two-dimensional spaces when reality would restrict me to three. It had become second-nature, despite my inability to see. But for me - to touch was to see, to feel, to

make beautiful; to eviscerate was to live.

Now if everyone could see what I could see at this very moment: my gored fingers plunged deep through pliant, despoiled, and flaming muscle as my face blazed, churning with blood. I wrenched the foreign hand away from my side, snapping out chords of flesh in haste. They dangled wet and pathetic, protruding seamlessly from the skin as my cheek sagged and oozed into a bloodhound frown.

Somewhere nearby, I heard a camera go off

Sunday's Discovery

By Lukas M

On Sundays, I like to go watch the sunrise at my special place. That special place is the Waywise Beach, and I sit to the east of the beach near the rocks, fishing all the while. It's not like I ever catch anything, however. But it doesn't matter. To me, it's all about the solitude. It's a break from my typically boring and uneventful life. If I was a religious-type, I suppose I could compare it to church, like everybody else does. Not to say I don't believe in a god, it's just that I don't care that much. And at least while everybody else is at church, it stops me from getting caught. The "NO FISHING" sign has been there for as long as I can remember. I've also ignored it for as long as I can remember.

On one particular day when I was going on with this 'ritual' and since the water was at fairly low levels at the time, I saw a hand lying nearby the rocks. When I examined closer, I found that it was haphazardly covered with seaweed and algae, and also that it was connected to a dead body. The body was a man in his late 40s, with a heavy white moustache along with short and well-kept hair that contrasted with the facial hair. His eyes were closed, but he did not look peaceful. The skin was incredibly pale and cold to the touch. He was wearing a massive brown trench coat, along with a black top hat, black pants and a white buttoned-up shirt. Upon impulse, I checked the coat and when opening it up I saw the knife that had obviously led to this man's death; it was still stuck into his heart regions. The blade was stained red from the blood and it made an unpleasant sound as I removed it.

Then I looked up, towards the top of the cliff where the roads are. I could have sworn I had heard something; but it could have just been the sounds of the wind or of the ocean. I felt slightly paranoid and was quite afraid of being found here. However, my mind was quickly put back at reasonable ease after remembering that I probably still had an hour at the minimum to be here; everybody was still at church. So I searched further. In the man's pocket I found a driver's licence. That licence belonged to one Fredrik LaSilva. The picture looked similar, but still quite different from the body before him. The driver's licence picture had brown hair, whereas the body's hair was greying, and there was no facial hair in the image.

It made me wonder what did this man did to get stabbed. He seemed like a nice guy. The photo on the driver's licence depicted a smiling and happy person, undeserving of his fate. My mind was quickly changed, however, upon the next discovery.

As I checked the other side of his coat, I found something else. A pistol; concealed in one of the pockets and tied to the inside of the coat. I don't know much about weapons, but I knew it was an old revolver judging by what I've seen in movies. Somehow I managed to get the chamber undone and saw that the gun had five bullets in it, out of the maximum six. Then I came to the realisation that this man had probably shot somebody, and then that perhaps he

wasn't so innocent after all.

"What are you doing?" asked a slightly annoyed voice in the distance, interrupting my thoughts. I froze after my head shot up, and I looked at the figure. It was a man in his late 20s. He had a lit cigarette in his mouth. His eyes were concealed behind expensive sunglasses, and since I could not accurately judge his expression, I was intimidated. He walked closer and closer, until he was right next to me, staring at the body.

"Huh," he said, "So you found his body." He looked over the ocean, and flicked away his cigarette. "I should have known this place would be a bad spot to hide him. Until, of course, I return to dispose of him properly."

He removed his sunglasses, revealing his dark eyes as he turned his gaze towards me, "Say, aren't you that fellow who works at the bakery? I went there for my daughter's cake. Her 5th birthday. What a memory it was." I nodded, and he then looked at the body. "But he... he liked to ruin things for me. My perfect family with my newly-wed wife. I had to go on business during my daughter's birthday. Do you know how that feels? Her mother having to tell her daughter that daddy couldn't be there because of work? It's a horrible feeling."

He sighed, and leaned down. "A feeling which won't have to be there anymore. I've left that behind now. I can see her whenever I want. Did you know he killed my best friend? At that bar?" Then suddenly, I recalled a newspaper article I read two days ago, of a shooting at a tavern. It said the killer had escaped, and no one besides the victim saw the face, or at least could identify it.

"I think you remember. It was in all the papers. Everybody heard of it. Nobody knew who the killer could possibly be. Of course, I knew. But I couldn't go blabbing to the police, now could I? No..." He stood up. "No, I couldn't. So I took it into my own hands. And now you see the body."

It was at this point that I realised I was still holding the gun. It was hidden under the coat. Perhaps the other man never saw it.

"Anyway, nice story, wasn't it?" He pulled a strained and slightly frightening smile. "Life is full of pleasantries. And so is death. At least... death doesn't have troubles associated with it. No pressures, no." The man's phone began ringing a generic tune. He picked it up quickly.

"Yes?" he asked the phone, "No, no problems here. I'm on schedule. Listen, this is the last thing, alright? I'm not doing this sort of thing anymore. Yes, I've thought about it. Whatever. I'll get back to you." He hung up and put it away. "As I saying, you may feel a little odd about this whole... well, thing. I think the best option is clear, really. You should probably forget this whole thing ever happened. I want a good, clean finish to this whole thing. Maybe," he said, turning towards the body, "Maybe this is the last life to be lost to it."

I considered it for a moment. Should I just listen to him? Or should I just disobey him? Could he be trusted?

"What if I refuse?" I dared asked.

"If you refuse," he repeating, leaning closer, "I'll kill you. I don't want to, but I'll have to. If you weren't here in the first place, I'd probably have this body floating in the ocean, deep down by now. But I'm merciful. You know I'm a human being. This whole thing doesn't excite me either, you realise. The less deaths, the better."

"I suppose," I replied quickly.

"Good, good. You know, why weren't you at church? You're a good guy, aren't you? You know what's right. And you're all the better for it. I'm glad this whole thing is out of the way."

I looked into his eyes. Somehow I got this feeling... I didn't know what it was at the

time. It could have confusion or mistrust. I grasped the hilt of the gun firmer.

“And I’m glad,” he said, “That nobody else will have to die.”

As I revealed the gun, his eyes widened. “What? What are you-?”

I pulled the trigger. The sound of the gunshot rang out loudly as blood came swiftly from his head and he fell to the ground. I stood up, and noticed that his eyes were still as wide as they were before I shot him.

I placed the gun within the hands of Fredrik; making it appear as though he grasped it, and replaced the knife in his heart. I also took some water from the ocean and dropped it all over them. Afterwards I placed the driver licence back in his coat.

I walked away; knowing full well that ocean will take them when it arises.

The Buzz

By Fuzzy Slippers

Near sunrise. *Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock, knock.* Can’t remember, was it six or seven knocks? It doesn’t matter; it has to be him. ‘Co- Come in.’ The door swings open. He enters. Diffidence and shame prevents me from looking up, so I stare at his feet. He’s shod in beige boots with tints of white. He wears his blue jeans tucked into his boots at the shins. A yellow and black flannel shirt tightly fits his stocky upper-body. He is wearing a veiled mask! Is it for fencing? It looks too big. What the hell is it for? He lifts his hands to remove the mask, placing it between his right arm and abdomen. A small white mane specked with twigs, leaves, and dirt serves as his beard. He opens his mouth to speak.

‘Bees! Where are the bees? Buzzzz.’ Are they in here? Where are they? I think they’re hiding in here. Their pheromones lead me here. I am part of their colony. I am, I am, I am. He- he is not in the colony; I can smell it. He is not. ‘Buzzzz!’

His beard rubs against my cheek. He is sniffing me. I step back and rebound from my initial consternation. The mask, I realize, is for beekeeping. ‘Are you-?’ Gulp. I swallow the fear. ‘Are you? When I called Mr. Bolton he told me he was sending ... Andrew? Yes, Andrew. To clean up the mess. Are you him?’ He darts his eyes right to mine and mumbles.

‘Andrew, Andrew, Andrewww, ewww ...’ What’s my name? Do bees have names? ‘Not Andrew, it’s Abibilu.’

‘Ablu? How do you spell it?’

‘ABIBILU! It’s A – buzz, BI – buzz, BI – buzz, LU – buzz. Abibilu’

‘Ok. Abibilu. What kind of name is that?’

‘It’s bee – buzz’

‘Well, Abibilu, Mr. Bolton told me that you could clean up the – the mess.’ He lifts the seats of the couch looking for *something*. The seat lands on his beard. He pulls it out and falls on his ass. He begins crawling the opposite way. He passes right over my foot and sniffs it. ‘I’m sure he told you about my ... accident.’ He crawls into my chimney, beige boots planted on the ground, and I hear an echoed reply:

‘Where are you- ou? Buzz-zz!’

‘If you are looking for the car, it’s parked in the garage. There’s a white tarp over it.’ I’m beginning to question this man’s competence. But maybe you’ve got to be a little off if you do this kind of stuff. ‘Are you looking for something in particular?’ Along with a caravan of smoke, he lunges down the chimney with more souvenirs for his beard, the spitting image of often used broom fibers. ‘Do you need something for the job?’

‘Honey! Buzz!’ Bee’s job is to make honey. I need honey to take it to Queen. ‘Give me honey!’ I must dance, I must find the colony, I must make honey, I must honey. Queen needs me. Ho- ‘Ney, buzz!’ Scent, I’ve picked up the scent!

Indulge him. It must be some kind of test. Obey my authority, trust me, I know what I’m doing –eccentric kind of bullshit. Just indulge him, so he can get rid of the evidence. Is it right that I don’t get caught? I walk to the cabinet in the kitchen while Abibilu dances. He’s dancing in zigzag circles – he’s not very good at dancing. The jar of honey is still sticky from its last use. Why can’t they make a container for this thing that guarantees it won’t drip down the side? Sticky hands, damn sticky hands! Should I wash them?

I see it! Oh, he has it, it can’t be – the honey! The queen will be so elated! So elated! Wait Wait Wait! Where did he get the honey? You don’t think – he – he captured the bees. Does he have the bees? I’m watching you. But for now just give me the honey. ‘Thank you, buzz!’

I watch, but he is not bothered by the stickiness of the jar as he opens it. I can be petty. In fact it was because I wanted to listen to my song on that damn other CD, why don’t I have a six CD changer or an MP3 audio input for my car? No longer taken aghast by the honey, Abibilu lifts the jar up. As the honey starts to pour out of the jar, he tilts his head up. Honey pouring in folds blankets his face. His look is orgasmic. I stare and this creature is all that I see. He is large but far away, like tracking a bird flying only to notice an intersecting plane further away but still large in the sky.

Hooooonnnnnnnnnnn. Ahhhhhhhh- ‘Aaaaahhhhhh.’

It will soon be day; the charade needs to end. We have to get rid of the evidence. I get it you’re a bee keeper or something, the bees are gone. But Abibilu do you not think that this has gone too far? Who cares about the bees for god’s sake? You were sent here because I’m in need!’ My words physically hurt him. He convulses on the ground like an 8-year-old child, hand on his abdomen and body on the floor rolling, left to right, to left, to right, back and forth, forth and back ... How does that ease the pain?

Not like bees, not like me! I am the bee! He hates the bee! How not like bees! This is

inhuman, this is very unbee. Haha unbeeecoming.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry - I do care about the bees. I love bees.’ He darts up and, except for the honey wildly smeared on the floor, you wouldn’t have evidence he was in such a tantrum. ‘In fact I think I heard somewhere that cell phones could be causing the bee problem.’ I pull out my cell phone and wave it in the air. ‘So all of us, especially me, could unknowingly be at fault. Isn’t that ironic?’ He stares at me and I think he is crying honey tears, viscosity accompanying sorrow.

At fault, he’s at fault. ‘I need a knife, a large knife to complete the job.’

Now we are getting somewhere. ‘One knife, coming right up.’ I hurry, compelled by the first glimpse of sanity Abibilu has offered.

To bee or not to bee, that is the question. Buzz.

I bring the knife to him and notice that the sun is rising. He looks at it and mumbles. Uh-oh. Was that Shakespeare? What is he doing? He is taking the knife and ... what did he do? He fitted the knife so that it has become a stinger. This man is no clean-up man, no beekeeper. He is a demon looking for sweet recompense. He dives at me, tackling me to the ground.

I am the bee. The bee is me. I want to mate with the Queen. Avenge the Queen! Avenge the Bees!

I cannot move; I am pinned down. He lifts his ass and plants it on my chest inserting the knife into my heart. I will be dead soon. It’s poetic. I killed, I will die, he killed, he will die. When a bee stings, it dies. I comfort myself knowing that he will die.

Knock, knock, knock, knock, knock, knock, knock. ‘This is not natural.’

THE DREAMER



Yegor

I haven't slept in four days. The cracks in the ceiling get larger and larger. I'm afraid that the room above me will come crashing down any second. That's why my eyes are open. That's why I watch the cracks. No matter how long I stare at them, they don't get larger. They grow only when I'm not looking.

It's raining outside. Every day it rains, I can't help but think back to the simpler times. The simpler times... yeah. Back when Mom and Dad weren't dead. Back when the fucker sitting behind the wheel in his SUV didn't run the red light and didn't kill my parents.

When is my body going to allow me to sleep? I hear hooting in somewhere far away. The god-damned birds hoot and screech every single night. Maybe that's why I can't sleep. Why don't they just pump some pills in them? Why don't they just give ME more pills?

Wait a second...

HA! I saw the cracks grow! Right before my eyes! I stand on my bed and peer closely at the seams which look like they are ready to burst like a pregnant spider.

Lead weights are pressing down on my eyelids. It's impossible to keep them open. It means I'm close to slumber, close to the relief. Four days...

...

The patient saw it out of the corner of his eye. He heard the slight sucking noise it made as it took the place of air.

An anomaly of the senses.

The door floated in whatever dream fantasy was playing in their heads right now, two inches off of the dream ground. It was an ordinary door, except for the fact that there was no frame... and nothing on the other side.

He stopped. The dream kept playing, an erotic encounter with an ex-girlfriend, but it was woefully incomplete, like a play without actors. The door was all that mattered to the patient. The girl, the bedroom, and the sensual lights faded away.

The patient faced the door. He walked cautiously to it. He reached out and grabbed the doorknob. It was pleasantly warm to the touch. A slight hesitation. The patient finally twisted the knob and pushed open the door.

Everything was white. There was the sound of a door slamming. The patient whirled about, looking for something, anything in this void.

He saw it: a black rectangle. Another door.

He took a step. Somewhere in the depths of his mind a symphony started to play. Vasilov's Fourth Symphony. The patient recognized the piece immediately and walked with greater confidence. With every step the strings swelled and the horns blared and then...

He reached the door-halo. There was no noticeable door-knob, so he reached out and pushed against the black. It swung out and slowly dissolved into light as the patient entered his dream dungeon.

"The walls went forever up"

It was a circular room; its walls were composed of perfectly fitting stones. The patient stepped onto the floor and found it to be strangely soft. He bent down and ran a finger through it: sand. The patient then ventured a glance upward. The walls went forever up, outlining a small bright sun, many feet, or possibly many miles above. The light that came through the impossibly high shaft gently illuminated the rest of the dungeon.

The patient saw something strange jutting out from one of the stone corners. A small, black pipe was spitting out the light colored sand. The patient ran his hand under the pipe and felt the miniscule granules strike his palm. He let the sand run over, under, and through his fingers for a moment before taking a closer look at the neighboring stones. Black pipes jutted out randomly along the corners, each releasing a small flow of sand. The patient stood in awe and finally understood. The light, the sensations, the surrealism of the "dream"... He didn't know how the thought came into his mind, but in one split second he put everything together: this place was not part of the dream realm. This place was real, it existed. Maybe not in the physical, wake-world, but possibly in another dimension.

Nevertheless, the patient was lost. He didn't realize the purpose of the dungeon yet. He sat down on the sand and begins to move it about idly, making lazy lines and curves with his fingers.

An idea came to his mind. The patient picked up a handful of sand and clamped the other hand on it firmly to prevent it from spilling. He concentrated and squeezed the sand harder.

After some time the patient relaxed his arms and opened his eyes. He held a white baseball with red stitching. He felt the leather and fingered the impeccable stitches. Tossing it from one hand to another, it sailed through the air just like a baseball should. It was perfect.

His time was up.

The patient's excitement turned to dull horror when the door opened. The patient felt invisible tendrils, like long, sharp fingers, tugging fiercely at his body towards the open door. He tried to fight but the forces were too strong. He was dragged quickly through the door and it slammed shut behind him.

...

“All I want to do now is sleep and dream, dream and sleep.”

The pillow was damp. Did I cry again? Damn that's embarrassing. I get up and sit on my bed. Something rolls off of my lap and onto the floor.

No way.

No fucking way.

It is the baseball. Fuck, now I *know* I'm crazy. I pick it up. It is exactly like the baseball I dreamt about in that weird dungeon place. If this is real... my god. The limitless possibilities: good food, video games, books, movies, computers! A laptop! Not only that, I also slept for the first time in four days. Is this a sign? Of course, what else could it be? I never believed in God before, nor tried to, but this... This is something that can't be explained otherwise.

It's rec room time, but I don't want to go. All I want to do now is sleep and dream, dream and sleep. Forever. Well... maybe not. But still, that would be nice, yes? They are knocking on my door.

My room is the only tolerable place in this hell-hole. Everywhere else is too damn bright. The white walls and the white ceiling and the fucking white floor... everything is white! They lead me into the rec room filled with people with some really fucked up problems.

I sit by myself in the corner as usual, not making any eye-contact. An asylum, or “*psychiatric hospital*” for the politically correct, is not the place where you want to stand out and cause trouble. If you look at another patient the wrong way... who knows? They could be on the verge of a breakdown and your glance can be the straw that breaks their back. The people here are too unpredictable to befriend. Eh, I was never good with people anyways.

The nurses, on the other hand, work like clock-work. I secretly believe they are robots. Every day I mentally check the time they come in with our pills and go out of the room. Every single day it has been the same time: 8:43 to 8:48.

Pills are the only redeeming part of this hell of a morning. I like the red and purple one especially well. Doesn't go down as smoothly as the white one, but it tastes better, I think.

The day passes by uneventfully.

Lights out. It's time for another reality-twisting dream. What should I make this time? A gun? Maybe a baseball bat, so I can beat the crap out of these weird fuckers.

Tom, what is wrong with you? Why so violent? Have you forgotten why you are here? Yes Tom, don't forget don't forget don't forget don't forget don't forget.

...

The patient walked around the dungeon endlessly, deep in thought. He wasn't sure of what his next creation would be. Suddenly he stopped and his face lit up.

He dropped down to the sand like a giddy child and started to feverishly pile up sand. He tried to focus on his creation, but something was off. Cursing under his breath, the patient stood up and started pacing again.

After some time, he started to make a whole arsenal of weapons. A long sharp army knife. A police baton.

Solomon jerked as if he'd been kicked. "The Six-Fingered Men run it now," he hissed, glancing at the Marshal.

"We'll trade them some cartridge one day, all right," said the Marshal calmly. "But not with twenty-seven."

Solomon gave something that might have been a smile. "Is this the plan, then? Run across half Europa for Murnau, hoping nobody will mind an entire fleet trespassing on their lands and chewing up their fields?"

"This is the plan," said the Marshal in a voice like iron, looking hard at Solomon. He hated insolence. "You will not be serving me or anyone else by challenging it. Have you anything more to say?"

"Our machines are not chained together; our hatches only lock on the inside."

"No, Marshal," said Solomon coolly. "Not for now."

The Marshal turned to Paul, and Solomon was suddenly no longer part of the conversation. "Ritter? Was there something else?"

Paul nodded warily. "My son..." He stopped, uncertain.

Solomon took the hint. "Excuse me, Marshal, Ritter." His heels clicked on the deckplate, and the heavy hatch boomed shut behind him.

"Marshal. I can't argue with your plan." The Marshal seemed to relax a little. "But I need to guarantee the safety of my... my people. There is a sickness that threatens my son. You must let me have Doctor Bracer."

The indignant reply he was hoping for didn't come. The Marshal simply looked at him impassively. "It seems to me that we won't escape the oncoming snow, and we can't spare the fuel for warmth. Without the attentions of the physician I fear for the health of my heir. I need him, or I need you to grant me enough fuel to keep my ship heated." Still the Marshal said nothing.

"Marshal, I am not begging you. I am telling you. I must have one of these things."

He never talked this way to his lord; he had always been proud to serve faithfully, and Solomon was insolent, so he had been crushed, but Paul was respectful. The Marshal tried a different tack.

"Do you know what makes us special among men, Ritter? It is not the uniforms we wear to show our code of command. It is not even the wheels and engines that keep us free from the tyranny of the field and the sucking mire. It is our freedom. We are better people than the mud men. We are not slaves. We are citizens of our tribe, not technophobe moss-lords or their illiterate serfs, and we choose our way. Our future is in iron and engines, and our strength is in our faith... the faith in each other that binds us together. This tribe is a daily plebiscite. Our machines are not chained together; our hatches only lock on the inside."

Paul met his gaze, silent and unblinking.

"Salem questions me because he is insolent, but he is loyal. You question me because your heart gives you no choice," said the Marshal, thinking he was being poetic. "I need your loyalty, Paul, but I cannot give you what you ask. Not yet. My own child is almost born, any hour now, and I need Bracer here. I will not have some baby-catching apprentice or cracked old medicine woman deliver; he is the only man in this fleet I trust with the task. I think you understand my position very well."

"I fear so, Marshal," said Paul, his voice almost cracking.

The Marshal pretended to consider for a moment. "The good doctor will be for you the hour after my own child is born. I swear it."

"Thank you, Marshal," said Paul. It was not enough, but he was afraid to push any harder.

"Child of a winter storm," said the Marshal, apropos of nothing. "Good ring to it." He jabbed his thumb at a periwind. Through the lenses and mirrors, the sky fluttered mottled black and grey. "I think this strange weather might be a blessing for us. Poor visibility, and a strong southerly wind to speed us on our way."

A girl! What will she look like, Tom? She will look like the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. Isabella...

Oh Isabella! How I miss you... I still remember the look you gave me. Your normally bright green eyes: cold and distant. Your smile: dead and rotting in a grave. Your lips quivered slightly as you wrapped your arms around me in a false hug and whispered: "I don't love you anymore."

Then you left. Your long red hair was swishing from side to side. I was standing, stunned, outside of your house. The door closed. I kept standing, hoping you would come outside again.

You didn't.

Isabella, I loved you. I needed you, and just when I needed you most: you broke me. I hate you Isabella, but kill me if you weren't the most beautiful girl in the world.

This is for you, Isabella.

Tom, stop thinking about the past! You got work to do! I wipe my eyes. There, all better now.

...

While creating the girl, the patient heard shrieks coming from the walls. The first one shook him up the most, and afterwards he learned to push it out of his mind. However, his skin crawled every time he heard something: he never got used to the inhuman sounds.

It terrified him greatly to think that others were making their own creations. It meant he was not alone and that anyone he met could be a mere creation of another. How many people had he met that weren't as real as he thought they were? He had no clue.

The patient touched the heart. It quivered and drew back from his curious finger. He resumed concentration. Bones were set in place. The girl was slowly coming to life. The heart settled safely in the rib cage. The veins and arteries coiled around the bones like a boa constrictor strangles its prey. The patient touched the skull: it felt cold and unloving. He caressed the cheekbone softly and gazed into the empty eye sockets. The bare skeleton of his girl made him nervous. He did not like looking at her like this, body stripped away except for the bones. It wasn't beautiful. It wasn't ready.

To be continued next issue

The Tea House

By R. M. Silva

Kobe, March 1867,

The tea house smelled of honey with goji leaves and the steam coming from the kettles added a warm breeze in the air. The people there were all dressed traditionally, and still maintained their customary formalities. They were progenitors of the violence outside, and still completely oblivious to its consequences. I was able to view this all through the shadows of a sliding door, and missed nothing. The material of talk was rehearsed, and it was laborious on the ears, for one had heard a dozen times before. This was all the fault of the local samurai and lords, but they were too pampered to even notice the consequences of their actions. I created a bit of a draft after I slid the door open, and caused some of the room's steam to dissipate. This did not go unnoticed, but it was not a cause of reaction for any of the men there. The women there gave off a sense of distrust, and I was able to pick up on this very easily. It was because I was dressed in Western style clothing and they were dressed in their traditional garb. I was a pariah and had no place here. This was not a very large concern of mine however, because I did not plan on staying for very long. Turning my head to the corner of the room, I smiled at one of the women who I supposed would wait on me. She nodded meekly, and I approached a vacant table. I sat down and awaited the reaction from the subtly annoyed patronage. It was not as severe as I had expected, so I relaxed a bit. The woman came back after a short time, and served me some of the house tea. I did not drink it immediately, and I let it steam for a bit. I pulled out a cigarette and my matchbox, and then proceeded to light the fag. As it sat in my mouth I then noticed that my situation was truly different. The smoke emanating from the tobacco and the tea steam fought like opposing forces. At first they mingled, and then took their respective places in a battlefield for airspace. The cigarette smoke was the newcomer, abrasive and odoriferous, while the tea steam was the old regime, the local lord over the house's dominion. I smoked more, and more smoke entered the fight. It was over very soon as the heavy soot displaced the genteel steam. It was at that time that another sliding door opened and the local samurai lord stepped into the tea room. He was complaining about the smell. and it was brought to his attention that I was the prime mover of the smoke. He began to approach me. and I rested my hand on my gun holster. The lord stood at a distance and called out to me. He asked me to stop smoking, and I refused. Upon this, he unsheathed his sword, and I pulled out my revolver. He realized the stupidity of the move. and almost backed down in sight of the six bullets that would inevitably take his life. His two minions burst forth with swords drawn and I pulled the trigger. The local lord's chest erupted with blood, and the two minions broke off to aid their fallen leader. The whole tea party began to dissipate and a certain scent and smoke drifted into the air again. Blood, gunpowder, tobacco, and pandemonium all wafted in the air and I began to soak them all in via my newly expanded nostrils. It was then I realized that I could no longer smell the tea and shed the tears of my childhood days.

Tombstone Blues, Part II: Mr. Scratch Changes Brands

By HowToKill/x/

The road back was lighting up when they drove through the ruins of Gary and the cauliflower dawn made all of them weary. Wilson started to talk to stay awake.

"What did Nitti say about Capone? Did he say anything about Capone?"

Scratch rubbed his eyes in the passenger seat and looked out the window.

"Said nothing."

"What's that mean? I mean, why didn't you meet with Capone?"

"Even before the Emergency you never met with Capone."

Dylan spoke up. "I heard he has syphilis. You know what that does to a man."

Wilson cast a glance to Scratch who revealed nothing. The noise of the wheels trundling over rubble and corpses and detritus filled the void until Scratch reluctantly nodded.

"Yeah. He does."

Wilson laughed. "So while all of us were worried about Capone's long arm, we should've been fretting about his other appendage. That's rich."

Scratch shrugged, unfolded the map in his lap and started going over it.

They knew something was up when they pulled up to the outskirts of the city and the tram cars had been run open. They could hear the gunfire from way off, but Scratch had made no indication of alarm and so the gang sat tight, puzzling over the gratuitous plinking. Then Scratch sat up suddenly and his arm went to the wheel and he said, "Stop," and Wilson did and Scratch blew out of the passenger door and was in the trunk in a hurry and lifting out guns and standing them up. The gang followed.

There were at least a hundred ghouls stumbling into the city, shuffling patiently like opera-goers through the bottlenecks the opened trams made. The man in the policeman's outfit was slumped out of one of the windows, his arms flaccid and pointed to the ground.

Scratch recharged the magazine on his .45 and pocketed it in his coat. Then he picked up the Springfield and handed it to Wilson and took two of the scatterguns and gave them to Dylan and Dorsey in turn and, stepping up on the bumper to lean in, he lifted up out the tommy gun and pulled up a sling bag from the well of the trunk with it.

He pulled back on the lever and chambered the first slug and dropped a couple extra drums into the sling bag. Then, with the tommy gun braced casually on his hip, his right leg cocked up on the bumper, he looked out at the city-made-trough.

"Are you fucking serious?" Dorsey whined, his eyes gaping.

"We need the gas," Scratch said, and bit his lip, thinking. Then he reached into the trunk, tossed out Moynihan's head and finger, muttering, "Won't need these."

He stepped off the car and started walking forward before he turned suddenly and looked at Wilson. "You've still got the keys, right?"

Wilson jiggled them in front of his face, smiling.

"Alright, alright," Scratch said, and they started forward.

They had a slow time of it. They waited for the shambling crowd to press into the city before following warily. None of them turned around or made any indication they noticed them. They came through the trams and Scratch waved his gang in and they went through, searching through but coming up empty. They cleared out and kept going in.

The decomposed and desiccated in front of them kept plodding onward, moans singing out like a devotional choir. They turned a corner and found the ghouls bottlenecked and being picked off, one by one, by a skillful but outnumbered cadre of sharpshooters. They had appropriated a fence and stacked up against a clutch of pavement slabs. They were firing from on top of the slabs, a man with a whistle, paced back and forth on the barricade, occasionally turning his pistol on a ghoul reaching up. All told they were seven or eight feet off the ground, making short work of the mess. The crack of rifle fire, tapping relentlessly, was starting to thin out the hungry dead.

"Things are looking up," Dylan said, and then screamed.

Scratch turned and started in a panic. There were a dozen of them, groaning, covered in dirt and dried blood. Naked in the street, in between the devil and the deep blue sea, Scratch's left hand found the foregrip on the Chicago typewriter and he started firing.

The closest two were obviously okies of some kind, their skin yellowing and leathered. One wore a set of overalls and scant else, the other's tie and dress shirt were pockmarked with holes. Scratch shot the first one in the head and chest, and didn't stop firing as he swung the gun to face the next one. Beside him Dorsey was struggling to reclaim his shotgun from the clutches of a preteen girl whose polkadot dress was torn salaciously. Scratch felt better after plugging her with two rounds to the face. Her grip tightened and she fell back with the shotgun. Scratch backed up, still firing, then reached into his pocket and winged his .45 to Dorsey.

"Fuck me dead," Wilson muttered, dropping three but missing wide on another and only managing to stagger the thing, pomaded hair now gelatinous and gooey, it took the round into the shoulder and didn't spin nearly far enough to give Wilson time. Dylan blew its head apart with the scattergun and kept firing. Bullets littered the ground; Wilson stepped sideways to avoid a lunging ghoul when his foot landed on .45 shells, and he slipped awkwardly.

Down on the ground, scrambling for the rifle, he looked up to see it- jaw shattered by an anonymous blow and set so askew it seemed to be grinning at him, sunken eyes, the hideous stench of the thing overcoming him and his hands unable to find the rifle- when Dorsey kicked it in the side. There was a palpable crunch and the thing split in two, the torso dropping just beside Wilson, the arms still struggling to find him and eat.

He found the rifle, lifted up the butt, and beat its skull into the city street until its brains were pulpy and running out like eggs.

They were done with the ones in front of them, but their other newfound friends were beginning to self-divide in two behind them. Half the group continued to stumble into the barricade and the withering gunfire, the other wheeled around reluctantly to claim the lowhanging fruit that was Scratch's gang.

"Up, up," Scratch said, linking arms with Wilson and pulling him to his feet before going back to shooting. He stopped aiming for the head and started to spray at that height, and four, five, six heads popped open like over ripe fruit, and their owners dropped and fell away into the crowd. Dylan was walking forward, pumping shells out, firing point blank and then turning the gun on his next target. He was six feet deep into the crowd, shooting his way through it, when he ran dry.

He said nothing, just started to back up warily, reaching frantically into his coat pocket

to chamber more shells. Meanwhile, the lingering dead closed ranks around him.

Wilson started to pummel his way in when his rifle ran out. He reached into his boot and affixed a bayonet and went man to man, slipping the point expertly into the eyesocket of a luckless corpse. Scratch was forced to start picking his targets more carefully, slowing the rate at which he dropped them. Dorsey's .45 chattered and the noise barely concealed his furtive, outloud praying, when they cleared through and found Dylan on the ground swinging his shotgun like a cudgel at the knees of the standing dead. He was knocking them down and then kicking them astride, too spry to be grasped from above. He swung and struck Scratch in the shin, who dropped down, swore, and started laughing.

"You fucking mug," Dylan said. "You look just like one of them."

"I'm flattered," Scratch said.

They stood up and dusted themselves off, unscathed to a man, but there was a sudden calamity and they spun to watch the wooden barricade fall away, and the unevenly stacked paving slabs to start to waver and fall apart, throwing up dust as they slammed into the street. The sharpshooters screamed and the man with the whistle was pulled down by the ankle into a crowd of dead and Scratch watched as one took a strong bite right out of the man's cheek. The man screamed and the taut muscles in his jaw stood out in stark relief, suddenly exposed to the open air. Removed 'and' There was a renewed chorus of groans behind them, far enough off not to pose an immediate threat, but present and dangerous.

Scratch dropped into a squat, dropping the drum of his gun and fixing another in, sliding the bolt back to load the next .45 slug. Removed 'then' He turned over a bloated, stinking dead man and plucked the fedora off his head. He put it on his own- it was surprisingly crisp and still had much the backbone a good fedora should- and stood back up.

He waved them forward, and the gunfire started again.

They found twenty stacked barrels on a side street a few minutes later. Scratch unscrewed the cap on one and smelled it, came up grinning. He tightened the cap on it, and knocked two on their sides. He gestured to Dorsey and Dylan.

"You and you are on barrel detail." In what city can you find barrels of fuel lying in the street?

They exchanged bratty looks but got down to it. Dylan slung his shotgun over his shoulder and Dorsey pocketed the pistol. They started by setting the barrels on their sides after a short discussion on how best to move them, and rolled them slowly in front of them, kicking them forward every so and so, walking them on their edges around piles of rubble or mangled undead. They did their fair share of bitching.

"I feel like this is something I should get paid for," Dylan sneered.

"You're alive, aren't you?"

"Well," he grunted, rolling the thing awkwardly when they came to the destroyed barricade, "sure, boss. But what kind of life am I leading, I mean?"

Scratch shook his head, rolled his eyes.

"I wonder where everyone else is," Wilson said. "I mean, you'd have expected them to put up more of a.. of a.."

"Spirited defense," whinnied Dorsey, wheeling a barrel, hunched over.

"Right. A spirited defense, like."

"Why do we need two of these?" wondered Dylan. "We can't fit one of these in the

fucking trunk. So why do we need two?"

"Oh, he's a philosopher now," Scratch said, slapping the back of his head. "All will be revealed."

"I mean, there were a lot of guys on that tram, but when we went by just now it was like all of them were gone. What is that?"

They came to a destroyed grocer. The black marks of a recent fire scraped along the brick storefront. Scratch waved them to stop and walked in.

He walked through the shelves, stocked with yellowing paper boxes and threadbare sacks, knocking over candy bars, bottles of cola to have them shatter on the ground in front of him. Walking over the crunching glass, shifting the heavy Thompson from one arm to the other, he lingered, trying to feel out the store.

He found what he was looking for in the back, but spent some time policing up the rest of what he was looking for. He came out of the store with a sack of potatoes slung over his shoulder, wearing a wry smile. There were mingled cheers from the group, the kind of gracious hectoring that comes with very real hunger. Scratch dropped the sack down and went back in, ending the celebration abruptly. He came out hefting a scarred red wheelbarrow with the Tommy gun and some full cola bottles rolling around inside. He set it down, put the potatoes in, and set the gun on top of it all, and started wheeling it forward.

Wilson and Dorsey both expressed astonishment when they came out to the tram barricade and found not a ghoul there.

"Not a barebones in sight and neither is Nitti," Dorsey said, standing up the barrels. Scratch waved them to stop again and quickly vanished.

"Maybe they're all barricaded up somewhere deep in the city," Wilson volunteered.

"Yeah, okay. I got that but then why no ghouls here anymore? And why that barricade out in the middle of the street and nothing past it?"

"Suicides," Wilson shrugged, getting anxious. He unlatched the bolt on the Springfield and caught the spare shell, pocketing it, before loading another stripper clip in. He stood there like a country gentleman, the rifle hanging in the crook of his folded arm.

"Looks like it's gonna rain," Dylan said.

There was a loud sputtering noise, and then a roar far off somewhere to their right. They drew up their guns and said nothing as the noise grew closer and closer. A big Dodge flatbed pulled into view and Wilson drew a bead on the cab before starting to laugh.

It was Scratch, waving out the window with his off-hand, smiling like a clam, wrangling the wheel as the truck bobbed and weaved around potholes and rubble piles. He pulled up astride them.

"Put everything in the back," he said, and then dropped the thing in park. They went over to the nearby One-Twenty and unloaded everything in the trunk and cab, piling it up messily in the flatbed. Scratch got back into the cab, opened the door and motioned for Dorsey to hop up. Then Scratch scooted over, picked up the gun on his seat. He drew back the action on the gun, pulled out the drum of ammo, and slipped it under his feet in the cab.

As the other two came round he spoke up.

"I forgot to mention, there's only room for three in here."

Wilson didn't hesitate to pull himself up and in, clamoring over Scratch's legs and dropping in between him and Dorsey. Dylan swore. Petulantly he started to pump out the shells in his shotgun.

"Keep it. Might need it back there," Scratch said, closing the door with a bang in Dylan's face. Wilson snickered, watching as Dylan lifted himself into the flatbed, closing up the back and locking the pins by himself, complaining. Dylan scooted back into a corner closest to the cab and they started driving.

"Where to?"

Scratch unfolded the map and handed it over to Dorsey. At some point unseen to all of them he had marked out their route. The ink took them back the way they came through Indiana but jutted south into Kentucky and ended in Tennessee. The gang had long since learned not to question Scratch's mysterious intuitions on where to go next. Dylan waved goodbye to the old Packard.

They were pulling out when Wilson spoke up.

"So- where was everybody?"

"On the lake," Scratch said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. No one asked how he knew this. The three words sparked considerable debate with Dylan shouting up from the flatbed on how long a group of people could wait out the hungry dead ashore. Wilson noted he had never seen a ghoul drop dead from hunger, proposing that Nitti's people were fucked from the outset.

"Could be, but maybe they never ran out of food cos' most people nowadays are too dumb to live," Dorsey said.

"One thing I've always wondered is how come they never eat each other, right?" Dylan hollered from the flatbed. No one said anything.

A thunderclap announced the rain, and it came down in thick waves. Scratch and Dorsey rolled up their windows as Dylan began a fresh round of bitching. The sky had almost totally darkened, but light still broke through occasionally, painting much of the road ahead of them in hazy sunshine. The sibilant falling of the rain drummed gently into the top of the cab, beating out a tinny lullaby. Mr. Scratch tilted the fedora down over his eyes, crossed his arms, and slouched down to sleep.

WARM



I don't even feel the needles any more.

Propelled by the frosted air, they make my face into a pin cushion. Any attempt to shield myself from them has been useless. They seem to come from every direction in the chaos of the storm. The only thing safe is my back. I gave up wasting my energy on protecting my exposed skin, and now the pain of every small puncture in my face has subsided into a heavy and almost total numbness. The one thing I can still feel is the cold, and the swelling.

The blizzard continues to devastate the land as if it was angry. The snow blasts white over everything. My senses are slowly being blanked out. I don't even know what I'm doing any more, let alone where I'm going. My legs are cramping, contracting in the cold. My body is tired of fighting a battle against the elements. There's no chance of victory. My opponent doesn't even know I exist. I'm just caught in the fray between the blizzard and the earth.

But still the wind continues to aid the fragments of snow in assaulting me. They glide down from the sky harmlessly only to be launched toward me by the wind in a never ending volley. I'm getting close to wanting to attack the weather. To flail my arms wildly in defence.

If only I had the strength.

The snow is piling up. It finds its way into my boots, soaking them and weighing them down so they feel like bricks. I'm sinking further and further into the layer of deep white powder. I have to almost jump now just to advance. It's trying to capture me, lock me in to a long white coffin. It won't claim me yet.

It's getting in my clothes too. All over, in places so obscure I have to wonder how it could possibility slither its way in. The powder becoming dirty slush, filling the space between my clothes. The layers upon layers of cloth do nothing to shield me. I'm soaked. But I can find comfort. There must still be some warmth there, inside me. Enough to turn the snow to water.

I think fleetingly that it might be better to just throw away everything and embrace the cold. Stop struggling and maybe the whole experience might be easier to bear. Maybe the cold might just become so intense the sensation of freezing would melt into that of burning. And then I might not be so cold.

There's no hope of ever finding him. I'm going crazy.

Salvation finds me after my second collapse, when I think I might start howling at the moon for reasons unknown to myself.

The rocky crops around me produce a cave big enough for me to enter. Maybe in another situation I would be too weary to enter. Afraid of the unknown and what might lurk in the dark and the damp - maybe crawling things or oozing things or things with too many legs. But these thoughts are crushed by the onslaught of the cold, so all I can think of is how to get any where but out in the open. The exposure may not have taken my life yet, but time remedies everything.

“Any moment now the blood might stop, my arteries filled with blocks of red ice.”

I climb into the crevice, my thick clothes compressing to fit in the tight gap. I feel the needles sink deeper into my flesh as I squeeze against the rocky floor, my first real sensation in a long time. But still the pain doesn't return. I would be glad to feel that much. Then I might feel the blood that probably covers my face. I might feel its warmth against my skin. But maybe that too is cold now. I can't tell if there is any heat remaining in me. Maybe the cold has already sunk in to the deepest parts of me. Any moment now the blood might stop, my arteries filled with blocks of red ice.

Surprisingly, the cave is dry. I don't think the snow reached this far, at least from what I can tell from my dulled touch. I can no longer see what's around me. Even if the sun itself were in here with me, I'd be unable to cut the darkness of my damaged eyes. The only thing I can see is fluid swirls of black through the melted snow and tears. I'm sure my eyes are so red they will burst any second.

And I still wouldn't feel it.

I collapse at what I think is the end of the cave. At least to where I can still fit. I sit there for who knows how long. I drift in and out of conscious states. Or maybe they're all dreams, and I lay there in a coma for days. It's not worth speculating on.

Eventually my mind regains some form of pitiful control over my body. The sensations that were once obliterated come back in waves, demanding all of my attention. Every second feels endless. I realize I'm shaking violently. My muscles are aching as if I have been pulling a giant bolder behind me. I realize I'm no longer so wet, or so cold. It's still dark, but I think to myself the snow must have stopped. I'd feel better if I had any hope of moving my legs long enough to leave this place.

When I can move my arms well enough to not hit myself in the face or smack the wall with my spasms, I try to reach into my pocket. I had avoided thinking about it for so long. I would have lost all hope if they weren't there. I feel a box, and grab hold of it tight. I can't get my hopes up yet. A thousand thoughts fly at me to warn me not to be optimistic - that there are so many ways I could still be doomed. But then I shake it, and it rattles back at me, and I feel so glad that one thing out of everything else hasn't betrayed me today.

The wind somehow worms its way in here. My dreams of complete shelter are blown away. It whistles as it bounces off the walls, denying my ears any sense; just as it has already done to my eyes. But, matches need oxygen, right? It can only serve to help me now - I just hope that it isn't too strong to overwhelm the spark.

“The cabin is empty, the fireplace is lifeless.”

I strike the match. It lights, and I see for the first time. It might as well be the first time in my life. I can no longer remember anything from before; the memories discarded in the pile of useless information. But I can't feel the match's heat. No wood lies around me to feed its meager flame. I could have been resourceful and dragged a log in here with me. Any one of the hundreds I passed. But my brain couldn't be trusted; another useless thought. I think about lighting the rest of the box on fire, it might make the flame considerably bigger, giving some hope for heat, but I would lose all my matches. I didn't think it was worth it. So I just stare at the red head dancing on the thin wood, until it burns down to my wet fingertips and goes out. I don't even feel it. It's dark again, and I can't stop my mind from filling in the blankness of my surroundings. I drift to thoughts of what could have been. Of places I could have been at this moment.

The cabin. A comfy, deep red armchair. I feel James place the matches in my hand. He tells me to light the fire for when he gets back. I wouldn't want him freezing to death, he says. And then he opens the door and fades in to the flurry of white.

I light another match, or manage eventually when the shaking isn't so severe I can't even strike it cleanly against the box. And I strike each match in turn. All of them, whether they light or not. They run out so quickly it's frightening. The thought passes that I wish I had the longer variety.

And then I'm holding the last one, in position ready to strike the now flimsy, empty box of cardboard, to produce the last light I may ever see. I never lit the fire. The memory comes as a final defeat. I never lit the fire for James. Was I too hasty? What if he comes back to the cabin without me. I came to find him, but in the end I might just have sealed his fate. The cabin is empty, the fireplace is lifeless.

I look at the final match. It's so useless in my hands. All it can give me is temporary vision to stave off haunting hallucinations. I wish I could give it to James, wherever he is. I wish I could have left the pack by the door. Ready for when he returned.

I'm pathetic. My reasoning whispers to me. It tells me what I should do. How I can do justice to the potential of this little match. At this point, what else can I do but obey?

I hold the tiny stick tightly and try to steady my hand with more effort than ever before. I pull both hands under my clothes to shield the flame from the wind. This one can't fail. I can now almost feel the tiny piece of wood against my skin.

And then I strike the match, and pray the flame catches. I look down my collar and see my success.

And the **warmth** finally comes.

Wat

By Joe Brown

Duck was about to sit down and enjoy a nice freeze-dried liquid turkey dinner when the captain called him over his voice communicator. He regretted not turning the damn thing off.

“Looks like a nest of fleshworms have popped up down in the medical bay-”

“I’m on lunch.”

The captain continued on.

“We’ve locked the place down and need someone to get rid of it.”

“I’m on lunch.”

“Security Captain Marx will meet you at Airlock 7B with appropriate equipment.”

“Wait, airlock 7B? Why the airlock?”

“Yes, you’ll have to enter the medical bay through the service entrance on the hull since we’ve locked down all other entrances as per galactic naval protocol.”

Duck sighed and walked over to his locker where his space suit was. It was heavy, but considerably less bulky than the suits used when mankind first went to space. On the back of his helmet was written “Prisoner #43A62W77U” to let his superiors know that he was expendable.

Duck had been sentenced to hard labor on the galactic frontier after shooting two men during a bad gamble. He didn’t know where he was in the big vast universe or how far he was from Earth and his wife and kids. He had only been greeted aboard the pioneer vessel Abraham Lincoln by a man from processing who told him, “If you had any loved ones or friends on Earth, they are probably dead by now.”

The whole ship was in an uproar over the fleshworm infestation. Security guards had put on their extra armor and were now armed with flamethrowers and pulse rifles, and everyone from the medical bay was being scanned to make sure they didn’t have any eggs in them. According to the Galactic Encyclopedia Volume 324: Worms And Wyrms Of Sector ZZ322, fleshworms could burrow into the body and plant eggs which would result in delirium, manic rage, and the sprouting of additional “sentient” limbs on the human body.

At Airlock 7B Marx and two other men were waiting for Duck. Marx was still in his officer’s outfit while the two other men, like Duck, were dressed in their space suits. Duck didn’t recognize them, or their voices. The other men serving labor for crimes rarely saw one another. They were confined to their individual barracks and on the clock all the time for any minor repairs that were needed, or dangerous situations dealt with. The two men greeted Duck with muffled voices that barely penetrated their space helmets. Duck gave them a meager wave.

“Now that we’re all here,” began Capt. Marx, a dark skinned man with a face adorned with scars where the insectoid Karaag had nearly melted it off with their lava rifles, “I’ll give you the briefing. Doctors down in medical found a nest of Type N fleshworms growing on a corpse. The nest is still in its chrysalis stage so a good flaming should take care of the problem easily. Each of you will get a flamethrower and a pistol. I’ll input the location of the nest on your maps...”

Duck had no sense of time or place in space, so it felt like it was only yesterday when

he first arrived on the Abraham Lincoln. As such, he always thought about the things on Earth he enjoyed. It felt strange to look down at his feet to see the cold gray lunar steel floors of the spaceship. It felt strange that all his food was liquid and manufactured by a nutrients dispenser designed to supplement vital functions in space. He was given a small window to look out but always saw nothing. Sometimes not even stars or planets. Often times he would see bright glints on the horizons, perhaps distant suns or quasars, but he knew that by the time the ship would reach that light, it would be long gone. Missed by several billion years.

“Okay then, so we're clear on this operation?” Marx grunted at Duck, who he could tell was day dreaming. “We'll commence now. After completion, report immediately to security station 7L for medical scanning. Good luck, men.”

Marx exited the room. The overhead lights went dead, replaced with a dim red glow. There was a terrible screeching hiss that started out loud but slowly dimmed until it had completely vanished. Decompression. Duck could feel the zero gravity. Sound ceased and only his breathing could be heard inside of his helmet. The opposite door slowly opened, revealing a great dark nothing. The three men walked out with footsteps drained silent in the great vacuum.

Duck trailed behind the two men. On the helmet of the man in front of him he saw written, “Prisoner #32Z54Y06D.” He couldn't see the other men. Over the communication line came faint singing.

“I can't get no satisfaction and I try and I try and I try.”

Duck didn't ask the names of the two men, and they didn't ask for his either. It didn't really matter. In the soundless void an asteroid could smash one of them and they wouldn't even know it. Or a Tarsus, a huge bat-like creature that glided on celestial ether, could swoop down and devour one of them like a fish out of water. Any number of things could happen outside of that ship.

Mankind hadn't been met with friendliness upon leaving the comfortable threshold of the Milky Way. Space whales the size of Uranus devoured entire fleets on their eternity long journey from one side of the universe to the other. Skin melting viruses devastated expeditions. Wars were fought like the War of Glerkonian Aggression, the First Zurgon War, the Second Zurgon War, the Third Zurgon War, the Neutron War of Planet Volta-7, and the Golgamech Conflict, but humans persevered and made their way across the galaxies, reaping and raping as the heroes of old did in the Manifest Destiny.

After a while though, experts agreed that perhaps it wasn't wise to send Earth's brightest and bravest to their cosmic deaths at the hands of sentient suns and asteroid monsters. So space exploration was taken over by Earth's abundant supply of prisoners and misfits. Frontier vessels were outfitted with prisoners, unremarkable captains and officers, failed or illegal doctors. They were cheap, plentiful labor who would not turn down one last chance for glory. No one aboard vessels like the Abraham Lincoln would ever see Earth again. And if they did return, what for? Thousands of years would have passed. What little they had on Earth would have turned to dust. So they could only go blindly forward.

Yes, in the far future of advanced technology and space travel, the basic human question had yet to be answered. Humans met other races who, like them, possessed no knowledge beyond their assumptions and theories. Some believed in gods, some believed in science, the Balkonians on planet Zephyr-12 believed that the universe was simply a massive egg underneath a colossal bird.

Wherever the universe would take them, humanity would keep going forward. Unless the universe was round like Earth, in which case they'd been running around in circles.

Duck looked off into the distance and saw a planet moving closer. Slowly but surely, closer. It looked small, blue, and fragile like a tiny drop of rain. It could be blue because the atmosphere is full of toxic gases, or blue because it was completely frozen and inhabited by

man-eating ice people, or entirely made of water and home to continent sized sea monsters. The universe was inhabited by many dangerous things. But regardless, the ship would move forward, and Duck knew that he would be visiting the planet soon enough.

What Went Unsaid

By Bulknowt

(I never said I hated you.)

I'm sitting there, placid and far, far away, as you yell at me. You're really going off, really giving it to me this time. "-never do anything! What do you do?" ("I am sorry for whatever whoever did,") and the blood in your face seethes as I say this, but no one ever says what they want to. What I wanted to, or meant to say, was: "Shush darling, we're being foolish. I'm sorry. I love you," but those words only exist in my mind, and they are spoken in a voice much more human than my own. "-even listening to me? Bastard!" My voice is dull and strained from work ("What name please? Location?-tap-tap-tap-May I connect you? What name please?"), where I say so many words in one day yet never really say anything at all. ("Baby, babe, bub, c'mon.") You shaved your hair off and I didn't raise a single protest, but maybe you wanted me to. "You fucking dolt! You look like shit! My God! Get naked right now! Now! Now!" (Sounds of frenzied love-making and shrill orgasms). People rarely say what you expect (want) them to. Snapshot from my childhood: "My son, what do you want to be when you're older?" "Either a spy or a writer." "That's beyond ridiculous, next time, say doctor," the Lesson: There is always a right answer, even when it's wrong.

"You don't put any effort or energy into anything!" / ("I hate myself when you're sad. Aren't I enough to make you happy?")

"Routine baby, I'm just going through a rut, bear with me." / ("You're only realizing how insubstantial I am. Soon you'll leave me. It's my fault but I still love you.")

"Do you even want me anymore?" You're thinking about your old friends as you say this, the friends you've never told me about. They bullied you relentlessly, called you "ugly", "bitch" and "slut". If I knew this, I would say: But you like who you are now, I know you do. Those bullies are just a part of that; they're a part of you. If it weren't for them, you would not be... I see the pain quivering in your eyes. I see that you're humiliated but I have no idea why. I know that you're hurting, and I'm young enough to think that this is all about us.

"I don't know what I want anymore." And, of course, there are wrong answers too.

You're crying now, curled into a ball of grotesque limbs. Your face is covered by your hair, a featureless, shrieking ball. I really don't know what I want, it changes daily. There are times when we're in bed together and I think young love is the most beautiful thing. Other times I want to find a pistol, load it, and shoot myself in the face. Sometimes I say this out loud when I humiliate myself (-sound of crashing plates-"Jesus Christ! Someone find a gun, put six bullets in it and shoot me in the fucking face please!" "Did you hear that?" "Yes, don't laugh, here he comes." "His face isn't so bad.") I mostly wish to be dead when I work.

“What name please?”

Two fat women (one an ageing junky, the other a mother of five young sluts) sit in crowded breakout room, gossiping and cramming down pastries.

“Where did you say that was?”

(“Have you seen what Patty’s wearing today?”) Junky pokes finger into nose, finds large prize, excitedly rolls into ball and flicks away, comets into Patty’s hair.

“How were you spelling that?”

(“-papaya enzyme shower gel, can you believe it!?” “She’s just a feral bush pig.”) Mother of Five reaches discreetly down back of skirt, pulls panties out of arse, lifts away the lint between her cheeks.

“Sorry, which state was this in?”

(-sound of crashing plates-“Did you hear that?” “His face isn’t so bad.” “Hey, I got a way we can teach that Patty slut, got a pen?”) The note I found on my desk read: Don’t shoot yet! Your face isn’t so bad. Love, Patty.

People will always surprise me. Patty was, as I had assumed, a young Catholic woman of good moral standing. She had long, black hair. She had deep, black eyes. She wore appropriate business-casual clothes. Thus was my assessment of Patty before that moment—

“Please wait whilst I put you on hold.”

—and apparently, she thought I was handsome.

I spied her figure and felt lust surge through my body. I wasn’t sure if I was good for her, but I knew I was already in love, for she accepted me (“...beyond ridiculous...”). I tried to focus on my work:

“What name please?”

“The Hotel Rochester, thanks.”(Her hair pressed lightly on her breasts and-)

“Eh? How were you spelling that?”

“H-O-T-E-L R-O-C-H-E-S-T-E-R.” (-she really wore that dress. The way her body moved under it as she moved, her pale thighs would be soft-)

“Hello, operator?Are you there?”

“Sorry, which state was this in?”

(-and welcoming to my mouth. Her lips were generous and purple, they would become tumescent in excitement as we shared our first, nervous kiss-)

“Oh mate, you can’t be serious. It’s the Hotel Rochester in-“

(-our breathing deep and unsteady, our hands reaching shyly around each other, our tongues pressing... I envisioned her breasts, her ass, her pubis and yes, her inevitable vagina-)

“-on planet Earth! All right? You got that?”

Patty must be on her next break because she leaves her desk and heads towards the staircase. This was her way of calling to me. She would wait for me in the stairwell, this was my chance.

“Please wait whilst I put you on hold.”

“On hold? OPERA-”

I threw my headphones to the ground and sprinted towards the staircase, bodies tumbling in my wake, others leapt awkwardly out of harm’s way, their coffee spilling through the air and landing in pot plants. I yanked the stairwell door open and caught Patty as she was midway down.

“PATTY?” I shrieked, completely out of breath, sweating, eyes rabid with need. She seemed more startled than impressed.

“Yeah?”

“I’m here about the note.”

“What note?”

“The note you left on my desk.”

“What note did I leave on your desk?”

“What note? Good grief woman! The note that said you loved me!” Spittle flew from my mouth and freckled her reddening cheeks.

“Said what?” She whispered as she unconsciously shielded her snatch.

“Don’t you want to fuck me?!” Always a wrong answer.

“Ugh?”

“What’s the matter? Didn’t you leave a note on my desk saying that you love me?”

“Oh, ugh. What?” She was noticeably paler now, and she seemed weak on her feet.

“Did you leave that note for me?”

“Oh Lord no. I did not.”

“Damn! Well, how about it then?”

“How about what?”

“Well, I’m quite lonely and you look very good in that black dress (black panties, black pubic hair, dark nipples, oh God!) don’t you want me even a little?”

“Want you how?”

“Christ Almighty! Don’t you want to fuck me? C’mon, quick, I’ve still got a caller on the line.” I notice that urine is pressing through the folds of Patty’s fingers, which are steadfastly shielding her womanhood from this apparent rapist. People will always surprise me. Rejected, I returned to my desk and put my headphones back on.

“What name please?”

“YOU SONOFABITCH!”

“Say what?”

“How can you treat your customers this way?”

“Oh, right. What was it then? Hotel Rwanda?”

“That’s all moot now. I’ve got a gun and if we ever meet I’m gonna kill you motherfucker!”

“Oh really?”

“Yes!”

“For real?”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Fine! You have my permissions then! Where do you live? What’s your address?!”

“What?”

“Tell me your address because I want to die!”

“You’re touched mate.”

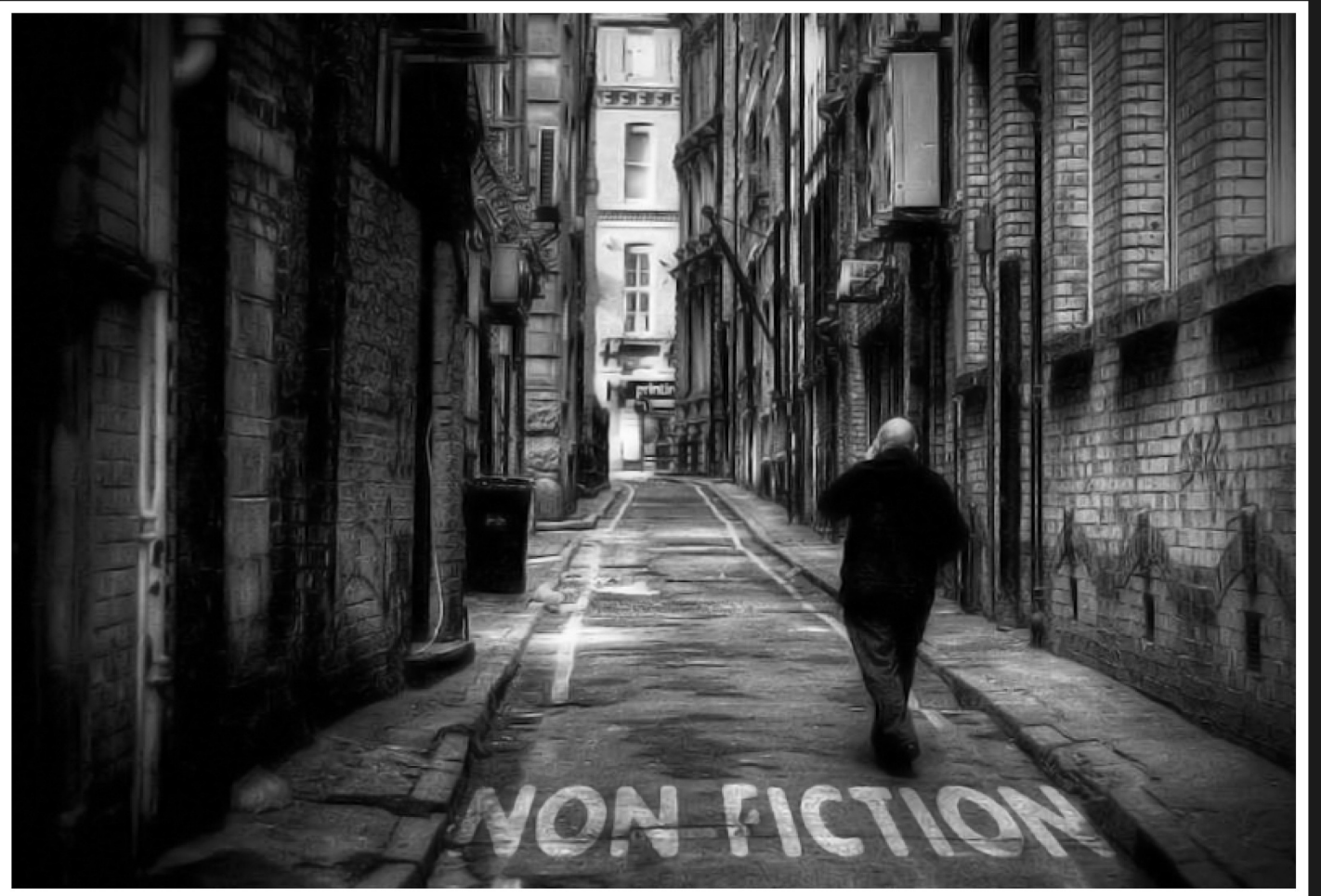
“Yeah I’m fucked mate, the Hotel Rochester then. May I connect you?”

“Yes please.”

“Thank you.”

“Cheers operator...”


When I got to my desk the next day for work there was another note from Patty, though the handwriting was completely different. This one read: I’m not sure about yesterday, but I do want you. Love, Patty. Surprise, surprise. Several months later, as we lay in bed together, you asked me what I wanted out of the entire world and I couldn’t answer because all I wanted was in that moment. You thought I was trying to spare you feelings. Neither of us knew how the other felt and we just couldn’t admit it. We start to bicker over every little thing. One day you come in screaming, and I’m sitting there, placid and far, far away as you yell at me. What went unsaid led to this. It may have saved us. But no one ever says what they want to.



REVIEW REVIEW

Shichinin no samurai

Seven Samurai



Seven Samurai is often considered the penultimate work of the master Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. If there was one film to be called upon to justify cinema as an art form, this film would be it. Kurosawa's magnum opus presents themes, and applies complex theoretical conventions that make it a masterpiece to this very day. As such, it must be reviewed to help the casual viewer of films see it, to make sure it stays relevant in an age where films have become watered down for the sake of pure monetary gain.

This film executes a seemingly grind-house, conventional plot into a masterpiece of the human condition: the film follows the path of seven 16th century ronin samurai, or samurai without masters, as they are hired into defending a village from forty bandits who terrorize the hamlet year after year. Each of these samurai are unique, interesting individuals, and the conversations that are had between the seven are truly interesting. The personalities of the war-weary leader Kambei (**Takashi Shimura**), the youngster Katsushiro (**Isao Kimura**), the elite fighter Kyuzo (**Seiji Miyaguchi**), and the wild-man, false noble Kikuchiyo (**Toshiro Mifune**) are all excellently portrayed. The feeling and character that exudes from each one of these acting performances is second to none. Toshiro Mifune is probably the best of this film's acting roles however, and it is not for nothing that he is considered the greatest film actor in Japanese cinematic history. The raw emotion that erupts from him throughout the movie is one of the most stark and vivid recreations of character in a period film that I have ever seen.

“ Kurosawa is to the camera what Mozart was to the Opera ”

It does have its share of melodrama, but in no way did I find it overly-done, nor did it take away from the plot progression. In fact, I found moments like Kikuchiyo's speech and Katsushiro's romance with the farmer's daughter Shino to be particularly well placed and interesting. The characterization that comes out of both of these moments are interesting, too, giving the viewer the impression that we are really “getting to know” the characters. As the final battle in the film looms, we feel attached to these characters, and the film plays with our emotions in that regard to the point in which even though we know at least a few of the characters die, we genuinely hope for the best possible outcome. Kurosawa's views of fate also play out quite effectively in the narrative. Characters do not receive just ends in this film, and this is proven by the noticeably un-karmic actions and consequences that occur throughout the film's progression.

The cinematography, as assumed with any Kurosawa film, was absolutely breathtaking. I am under the impression that particular care was taken in the shots involving Kikuchiyo, with his speech, his raising of the banner, and the graveyard scenes being shot in a way that amplifies emotion in a way that few directors can accomplish. In this regard, the film's shots are so palpable that one feels as if the camera could only be placed where it was, if it was anywhere else, it would feel as if the film was diminished in some way. Kurosawa is to the camera what Mozart was to the Opera, a true master of substance and style.

The way the action scenes play out, especially the final attack on the village, is also especially well done. The camera splits its time between medium/wide shots of the pandemonium to almost serene, focused shots on the samurai. Though the battle itself is actually quite contained, the panoramic shots gave the impression that the conflict was one that took place on an epic scale. In this regard, the battle was a very human one as well. At no point did the film get lost in the collective nature of war-- it treated combat as an intensely individual and personal subject, all through a series of shots in a powerful montage. It provided for an effect that was borrowed from, and utilized for even greater effect by eclectic directors like Tarantino and Leone.

Another subtle aspect of the shots are that much of the film's shots contain either three or seven points of focus (usually people) that add for an almost mythic view of the story and surroundings. Subtleties like this are packed into *Seven Samurai*, which just make it an even more beautiful objet d'art. This 3/7 focus also personalizes the story, especially during the scenes of village in combat, in which scenes of madness are then juxtaposed with the 3/7 scenes for even greater effect.



The music of the film was not exactly the best I have heard, but it didn't need to be. The focus was on the characters, not whether or not one could produce a soundtrack to be sold in record stores. The music amplified emotion where it needed to be strengthened, and played when it really needed to play. The best part about it was most likely the moderation used with it.

In closing, there are really not enough compliments and accolades I can properly give to this film. Watch it. It is definitely worth every penny you will spend on it, and/or every minute you spend downloading it. When the ending inter-title rolls, you will realize that this really is cinema.

Ryan Silva

POETRY
BOELBY

I know when I really
love a girl

when I can't jerk off
about her

Men are only honest
when their dicks are
soft

Just like you

We're both in pieces on the floor though
I surely feel worse than you do for
Nothing will feel quite the same again as
When I had you in my calloused hands all
Strong and gentle like I was holding dynamite
Or something

You've been through the hands of many but
None like mine because I really cared and
So I tamed you like you tamed me with
Your soothing secret whisper which
Takes me back to the old cool breeze and
Hot sand between my toes

And so we would sing and we would dance and
I would tickle you with blistered fingers which
Hurt a lot but it was worth every
Hour to see what I hear and hear what I
See in pieces in my mind but now we're
Done till I can find another just like
You

The Family

She told Him

“You’re ruining our lives!”

He told Her

*“You make a better door
than a window”*

I love you,
Mom & Dad

Mason

The Men Who Worship TRASH

.....
In many of my long walks
I came by the men who worship trash.
They reside in our refuse bins
our dumps; our wastelands.

They wander aimlessly through The Heap
watching as they mutter to themselves
of broken eggshells and coffee grounds.

They feed on the scraps:
the apple cores, the old pizza, the grains.
They eat feverishly and with intent;
food is no pleasure, it is a privilege

They live among the twisted metal structures
the dangerous exposed glass and caustic chemicals
they are but squires among the great land
the caretakers and land owners of this place

And when I happened upon this utopia
where Strong will survive and prevail
I lament
at the thought
of not being fit

The Twelve Bars of The Blues

By W.R.Hayden

Oh my love
I have buried you here
Six feet below
The looking glass
Among the soil and spun silk

Oh my love
Fuck you
In every hole
You ever dug
Is a flower waiting to bloom

My love
Pull meaning
Out of a word
Which has none
I wore your flower on my neck

My love
Lie in the garden
Under the twelve bars of the blues
Six strings bind
Two hands

Then into
The hole
They
Go.

The Path

By Mason

I do not wish disdain on this place
for this place I've traveled well
I've meet many I've loved
and many I've loathed
but This is my parting
This is my leaving

When I stray from this path
I know not where to go
I travel alone with
memories of those still with you
when I stray away from This path
I hope I will not be forgotten
For I remember you, Road

The woods I head to are strong and stalwart
they are uncleared and unwavered
do not be afraid reader
do not be afraid young student
old teacher, or blossoming youth
do not be afraid of becoming lost

For you cannot become Lost
when you've no place to go

Witness to the Dawn
The New Akkadian Aubade

a t god f
i rs t ,
t h e r e
w
e r e
th ing s
b e y ond
co ncep t s
: et e rnity an d

god ¹ out	,		o f		wh ich
came concepts		the		of	god
		numbers		time	
good and evil		otherness			and something-ness
		chaos	(after god)		and order
this was the most beautiful creation day					god was over the waters and divided the waters
The Higgs particle and a RESOUNDING BANG					Thus they were split the shot that was the world
Then all the expansion Then all the diffusion					and on the other side of the waters yet watched an eternal world
Venus Trackless interstellar deeps					Multifoliate Rose Limbo
And Now We must dispense With that invisible world Of which we know nothing But instead as children yet to be men As looking darkly into a glass But understanding the key					

¹ And not in that order; first was god and then eternity, unless they were one and the same, in which case neither was before the other, but both at once and always.

To the gate which we may cross
But once. (or perhaps many times,
but without knowing)

Behold, this key is	language
First given us by first folk	
First fractured by god	
And if I were to seat my self	
Amongst the tragicomic	Gilgamesh
And ignorant	
Enkidu	
By the side of lissome Shamhat	
Within sight of terrible Humbaba –	
Then I would not have to speak	
Of how the	words
are what <i>is</i>	
In the method of the	mind.
You and he ^{II}	
Have lived so long in their presence	
That we had put that study away	
And laid the dust	
Of forgetfulness upon it	
But the	words
are inescapable	

We are born	
As the universe was born	
First without	concept
Or	language
But soon we grow	
Soon we speak our first	tongue
- Our very first cells perhaps	
not yet replaced –	
And	
Things fall into order	
Leitmotifs arise	
Grammars	
Syntax	
Brought on by	

god

and/or
Evolution or
Viruses or

||

^{II} For though we were the younger generation of Babylonians, not less in power nor excellence, we had still the mark of some new race, and being newer, less inclined to hearken to what those before us had already learned, stealing off instead into our own lesser Cedar Forests, slaying the small unknowing in them.

Built out of other languages^{IV}
 So beautiful it makes those
 Who understand
 Weep

||

How,
 Could physics
 And its daughter chemistry
 Combine
 To assign life to bits of mass
 Complexity swimming
 Against the current
 Of Newton's thermodynamics

god,

But this poor man cannot
 It, let it go in silence
 Sow no
 Amongst the snow
 Of pages and our

say

words

minds

Yet just think on it
 He wants you to know
 We are made of chromosome syntax
 And grammar. The best
 Are complete sentences

Or are they?

Perhaps just

Is better.
 But only complete sentences tend
 To beget more sentences
 Although...
 What is the point of that?^V
 Now that hints
 A rather large question

Who knows but us, who seem
 (perhaps only narcissistically)

^{IV} So now, the dim hierarchy of tongues is seen erected in the misty distance of the universe, a sort of Atlas which maps the tiny human tongues, which are the infected toes of the giant, through his legs, which are the sciences, to his torso, which is mathematics (here it must be meta-noted that perhaps this middling part is somewhat unknown), to his neck, which it follows must be logic, to his head, which is the word, and the word is god, and the word is good, as that toenail apostle John said.

^V Try not to doubt doubt. Here it has taken us far.

At the center of its
 Mystery:
 All scribes attend
 Once this man's words
 Are down:

Why anything?

- Yet stop here a moment
 (The definite warm breeze of early summer
 in Illinois through the web of his mind
 gives this skein pause)

This man is, he hardly
 Need be reminded, a simpleton,
 So what has he to dredge
 From his dry well?

Yet
 Perhaps other simpletons are in need
 of an idiot's revelations.^{VI}

Now to grip
 Again the question
 To wrestle with
 That monstrous
 White Whale;

There is no science
 For what *is*
 Dawns are the first
 Light, which illuminates
 The world of science^{VII}
 And what has come
 Before was darkness
 The realm of god
 Or chaos
 Or another universe
 But anyway none
 Of those may just exist

^{VI} Note here, you who are not semi-morons – you have at last been warned. Shuffle off to more tepid if scintillating waters: this is a great Sargasso, boiling over with heavy-handed poesy and scalding to the enlightened mind. Only those of us built like a brick may sink into this cesspool of supine and shallow susurrations. Flee, before you no longer know the joys of avoiding the muck we must wallow in to come to terms with things.

^{VII} Science studies what can be observed; that is, what is seen by light or by energy – those things with a signature in this world and which are of this world.

||

Or else
 (and almost certainly
 not in mutual exclusivity)
 The universe is just mysterious
 Beyond the simple grasp
 Of stargazers
 Such as us.
 But the author
 Does not despair,
 That this may in and of itself
 Be a proper
 And good to share
 Or meditate upon
 Or to clean the perspiration
 Of useless labor from his brow.

thinking
 revelation

This is the problem
 With beginnings in general
 And whence they came:
 All the beginnings save one
 With which we are
 Acquainted
 Arise emergent
 From that swirling
 Sea of caused chaos
 That is the memory
 Or the maelstrom
 Of chemicals and elements
 Out of time immemorial^{IX}
 But in the particulars
 It becomes so hard to
 Find one solid jot of
 Evidence
 That all which has just
 Been created
 Is not all derived from
 ALL
 Which has come before
 It, and not some novel faction
 Of reality, easily cut from the herd.
 Indeed, might not
 The massive universe
 At last done
 With sensible things

^{IX} ~13.7 Billion years.

000 000 years, statistically speaking ||
 Then, once out
 Of the boiling bubbles
 Of quanta in a vacuum,
 After so many other strangenesses,
 And after time in
 Darkness indiscriminate,
 Another
 BANG
 And ||
 Delineation ||
 Would take ||
 Place ||
 Higgs particles ||
 Stars ||
 Hydrogen ||
 Bacteria ||
 Babylonians ||
 Plasma screen TVs ||

So let us build us
 Great Works
 Dams
 Pyramids
 Tombs
 Megaliths
 Mounds
 Henges
 Stock Exchanges
 Space Programs
 Human Genome Projects
 Mausoleums
 Castles
 Religions
 Great books
 Visions
 Internets
 Sculptures
 Libraries
 Time capsules
 Voyager Probes
 Palaces
 Macchu Picchus
 and
 Roads

When rather likewise
 Raindrop rejoins river.
 Fast and yet far away
 Comes this for all of us
 With completeness;
 A sense
 That by some *ars moriendi*
 The world and we
 May cap our centuries
 With a final heroic act
 Bringing the frame full
 Around the picture
 Of our achievements
 Of the universes'
 Achievement(s).

||

What will *those* have been?
 To have been a seed blown on the wind
 To sow another universe?
 No,
 Such circles seem sad
 Or insignificant
 What's to gain?
 Or then again
 To have served
 And yet there is no thing
 That we may serve him
 Which he could not
 In greater excellence
 And with more quantity
 Provide himself.
 To have
 And been
 Seems trite, and

god

loved
lovedgod
Loves

All sufficiently.
 Then to have borne witness
 To
 Perhaps
 Or to have born witness to hate
 Or
 Perhaps
 To have borne witness
 To a choice between -

love,

Will run in the waters, ||
 Terrible deformities
 Will augur the future
 In the flesh of babes
 The bounties of Earth
 Will grow scarce as happiness.
 Even though many
 Will fight
 And die
 To reverse
 These difficulties,^{XIII}
 Their good souls
 Will be overcome
 By the evil that men do
 Which will outlive them
 A short while longer.

In these days,
 All the tribes of the earth
 Will suffer as one;
 Animals^{XIV}
 Plant and Fungus
 Protists and Monerans
 Robots
 - They will find themselves
 Alive
 On a mutant planet^{XV}
 Alien to their ways
 Hostile to their presence;
 A mute terror
 Incomprehensible in its demands
 Newly placed upon its inhabitants
 The language
 Of evolution
 Will be spoken
 Curtly with us.

Then humans will speak
 Of eschatologies
 The remnant peoples
 In the last few sanctuaries

^{XIII} They will speak of sustenance, a small voice in the middle of the last bacchanal before an execution.

^{XIV} We fall here, with the rest; and no better – indeed worse, for we will have been in part the cause of our catastrophe (though only insofar as you can blame a person for the acts of a mob of which they partook:

The mob acts without a center, its uncoordinated flailing overcoming the subtle sense of single souls.

^{XV} The language of its lineage contorted via exposure to the radioactive Human element.

Untitled

By Mason

The insects that escape from my flesh
fly and buzz about
they crawl from this mesh
that is my hand and shout

We've traveled here, from another plane
to spread our wealth of knowledge;
to pollinate the minds of those who are destitute
and fill their head with problems

So I glide the across this land of mind
and the look so unsatisfied
and so when the winter came they fell
back into my hive-hands, and cried

From what they saw was enough to make
bee's weep
and to take and break
the strong and make them weak

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Credits

As always, the people who most deserve respect and thanks for this project are the authors and artists who submitted. You made this what it is.

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And all of the anons who took the time to download and read this.

Thank you!