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Red Skies

by W. A. COLEMAN

When I was a little boy I often dreamed of beautiful, rose red skies and would awake to blue ones disappointed.

I grew up in a world where the entire human race woke up every single day and walked this impossibly thin line, just one slip away from total and utter extinction. My parents once told me that I had a great, great grandfather who worked on the first atomic bomb, the one they used to destroy Hiroshima. He was a scientist, emigrated from Germany, whose life's work, along with several others was to create something that would change human history forever. I wonder what he would have thought if he knew his great, great grandson's life's work would end up being to stop his.

I, like so many in my family, was blessed with a mind full of thoughts and ideas, a brain that sees things differently than others. This gift allowed me to discover my first love, science, at a very

early age and as our relationship grew so did my confidence. It seemed like every time I put on that bright white lab coat my destiny became a little clearer. Unfortunately, despite my abilities, most all of what my overactive mind thought up didn't play out so well in reality. If only the real world could be as beautiful and as magical as my imagination.

Most of my young life had been riddled with disappointment and failure spiked with more failure and the worst thing about it was that, I always felt in my heart that I was different; that my mind, my thoughts and ideas were so radical that I would someday be considered unique even amongst the unique. And it felt like more than just an over inflated sense of myself. It felt real. Ego though, even the big delusional kind from which I suffered still needed to breathe and reality was choking it out quicker than I could recover, and my massive feeling of self worth almost died off completely. In fact, it took nearly a decade of working and drowning in normalcy, before it finally happened; I finally made the discovery that would change my

life and prove to me that my instincts were right after all, I *was* different, I was, . . . special.

Out of all the failed experiments and disappointments of my career, I stumbled on an idea that was pure genius and could not only survive outside the sanctity of my mind, but *flourish* in a place that had, up until this point, been my greatest enemy: reality.

Uranium is required to produce a nuclear explosion. Without it, fission, or the splitting of atoms, simply cannot occur. Uranium 238 is in abundance but in order to make a nuclear weapon, it must be purified to absolute perfection making uranium-235. It only takes roughly 9 pounds to make a bomb and must not contain even the slightest of contamination otherwise the nuclear reaction would be impossible. It's the fission that creates the force. Even bombs that use fusion, such as the hydrogen bomb, can only do so as a result of fission meaning fission must occur for the conditions to be right for the resulting fusion.

Reddium is a genetically engineered dust that is blown by the thousands of metric tons into the air, which in turn causes an artificial atmospheric mist. An entire major city can be saturated in less than a day. It's not a good thing. It is toxic to humans and can block most sunlight giving the atmosphere a reddish hue, creating a Martian like sky. The silver lining though, is that it also makes the entire city completely toxic to the purity needed for a uranium fueled explosion. This does not stop atoms from splitting, it just poisons the uranium which weakens the membranes of all surrounding atoms during the initial explosion, actually making them easier to split but dramatically decreasing the destructive force once it does, essentially choking the bomb at the moment of detonation. This weakening prevents the atomic chain and makes nuclear warfare an impossibility on a city saturated with my invention. Reddium is also easy to produce in mass quantities and readily dissipates after several days, causing no additional damage to the

environment. The first tests were done in November 2, 2050 on an island off the coast of Australia. It was funded by a private anti-war company that was set up shortly after the destruction of the Gaza strip in 2042.

I may have been born in the United States, but I never considered myself an American. My self-love, I felt was always too great of a burden for one country to bear. I also figured labeling myself a humanist rather than an American would increase my fame, distinction and potential for wealth. I also knew a defensive anti-weapon of this magnitude given to just one country, even my own, would become nothing more than an instigator for aggression. So, I saw the entire world as my market and on that fateful fall day, mankind witnessed the greatest leap backwards in the history of weapons technology. All nations, big and small watched what was once considered the most devastating and threatening weapon ever created reduced to a force no more formidable than twenty sticks of dynamite, barely

enough energy to destroy a semi truck. Virtually overnight I was bigger and more widely known than Jesus Christ and I became an international symbol of peace.

It's been over forty years since Reddium was given, or should I say sold at a very high price to the world. I got my fame and distinction and more money than I could ever spend. Considering myself a real genius among geniuses at this point, wasn't considered anymore inaccurate than calling the sun bright, but my legacy remains one of darkness. I wish I could tell you that peace followed but it didn't, not even close. In fact, the creation of Reddium brought about a social storm that required a worldwide restructuring of powers.

Wars were fought; many of them but in more traditional ways. Reddium bathed the skies and covered every theatre of combat while desperate enemy nations waited patiently, hoping for city Reddium tanks to deplete so they could launch their now useless warheads in every direction. Battle fields changed

immensely but not like you would think. Armies required more basic weaponry because machine guns could not function properly and would jam up in the Reddium saturated air. Jet and airplane engines would clog up requiring slower moving and less effective air support due to the foreign and thick atmosphere and because of the toxicity of Reddium, having a spare air mask was more valuable to a foot soldier than water. With technology crippled, casualties skyrocketed and battles began to resemble those of World War II.

Many said I was the man responsible for putting modern warfare in a time capsule and sending it back about one hundred and sixty years. It wasn't long before many believed that my invention caused more harm than good because it disrupted the concept of mutual destruction and made the world as a whole, braver and more aggressive. So, in a matter of decades I went from savior to war monger.

I always thought that I would go down in history as the man

who saved humanity, yet I sit here in my rocker looking out a dirty, air-tight window at the red, hazy, war-torn world I have created.

How could it have come to this? How could humanity have turned such a gift into a curse? I think about that a lot and sadly I think I know the answer. Perhaps people began to realize that, because of me, the human race as a whole may be safer but their sons, the ones treading off to fight under red skies are not. Maybe the idea of total annihilation was the only thing keeping the World Wars in the single digits. *How I miss those days*, those days on the tight rope. I long for the time when the term "nuclear war" brought about fear; the days when political action went on for months if not years and the super powers of the world would bark and growl but would never dare bite. I miss the days of blue skies and orange sunsets. And most of all, I miss my son; my one and only son, who I feel would still be here today if it wasn't for me and my foolish attempt at peace. I once

thought that mankind wasn't ready for nuclear power, yet now I realize that the very weapon we all once feared was the only thing making us behave remotely human.

Tonight I will dream of rose red skies and I will wake up to them, disappointed.



Love You Long Time

by MEL MURPHY

“That’s nice,” she says, rolling the cherry of her cigarette around the edge of the ashtray.

He loathes smokers but they are at an outside café.

“You get to be a teenager again.”

The heat from the hazy sky above them is fierce.

“What do you mean?” He leans forward slightly, despite the smoke.

“That’s what that is, unrequited love. It’s like puppy love.”

“No it’s not.” He leans back trying to exhale some of the second-hand smoke toxins. “Besides, I’m 34.”

“Unrequited love is where you love someone but they don’t love you back, right?”

“Yeah.”

There is a server. She’s in a black apron, jeans and a t-shirt. She’s watching them from the far side of the café patio, monitoring the levels of their iced tea. He ignores the waitress. 7

“With unrequited love you never have to grow up. You can be a love-sick teenager. There’s no responsibility in it, no weight. You don’t have to live up to the other person’s expectations or even try to deceive them because they flat out don’t care.”

“You’re not getting what I’m saying at all.”

“You know when I was at Yale that one semester before cuntmother put a freeze on our trust? There was this one professor, oh my god! He was hot. I was so horny for him. I think I masturbated to fantasies of him for like a year. He had curly auburn hair and wore tweed.”

“Jesus,” he says, glancing around but they’re safe, nobody close by.

“More like two years straight. Anyway, it was fantastic. I wrote endless bad poetry about him, when I wasn’t writing suicide notes. When he ignored or disagreed with me in class, I sulked for days. It was pure 80-proof angst.”

He folds his arms across his chest despite the fact it’s hot and he’s sweating under his tattersall shirt which is frayed at the collar.

He needs to disapprove her iconoclastic tendencies because he thinks they are predictable and planned.

“Awesome. You’ve just called my marriage adolescent. I don’t know why I agree to these lunches.”

“Because you have to, stupid, or I wouldn’t fill you in on the latest family gossip.”

Her eyes are deep brown, set in a white face. She wears a sun hat and is slender, all legs and arms like a pale foal.

“It’s just, we have a child now.”

In contrast, he is thicker, pudgy. Aside from the time he backpacked through Nepal, he has never been svelte. Still, women find him rugged and attractive. Patients flirt with him.

“Yep, a sweet baby boy whom I haven’t seen in two months. When is Rocky’s auntie babysitting again, hmmm?”

“I can’t stand your flippantness, really.” His arms are still crossed. He is trying to be disapproving like their father. The sun pelts him with hot rays.

“It’s cultural. You can’t blame her.”

“I don’t blame her for anything,” he hisses, like his wife has a spy around every corner, listening in. Like she isn’t 32 miles across San Fernando doing her yoga.

“It’s cultural, sweetie. They’ve been marrying Western men for their money for years. It’s what they do. It’s how you get out of the fucking rice paddy, out of the slums, out of that level of hand-to-mouth pointless misery. It’s what you do to survive. I don’t blame her; don’t blame her country either. We went over there and tore it in two.”

“That was ages ago. She wasn’t even born then. Neither were we. And her family’s not poor, they’re middle class. Her dad’s a dentist.”

“But it’s still there, that wall, that ... DMZ. Bunkers, bomb shelters, the whole thing. See, that’s like their collective angst. It’s like their unrequited love. Hands across the water, hands across the barbed-wire fence. All their puffy faces sobbing on all those TV shows they re-broadcast on KXLA. I’ve watched those shows. The hysterical reunions.”

“Are you high? All this has nothing to do with me.”

“Well, what’s this guy do, the one you think she’s fucking?”

A fly lands on his half finished vegetarian sandwich. It investigates the hummus. He watches it for a moment.

“I have no idea. No, wait. He’s a construction, no, he’s a carpenter. Like a custom carpenter, makes kitchen cabinets for rich celebrity people. Shit, what’s your point?”

She takes the lemon wedge out of her iced tea and tucks it into the corner of her mouth.

“My point is he is what she is not. He’s Asian but American-born. He’s outdoorsy; he’s not all up-tight *learn wery goo Ringrish, me study hard.*”

“You don’t know that. I said he was a carpenter, not a tri-athlete.”

“Well, I’m picturing a pair of bib overalls, you know, brawny, suntanned, with sawdust on his bare shoulders, paint on his hands.” She looks at him. “You’ve never opened a *Playgirl* in your entire life, have you? How about those *Cosmopolitans* you keep

in your waiting room; ever read one? You see, you’re so unrequited.”

“Adolescent. Go ahead. Say it again. Call me a teenager.” He’s pissed now.

“What is he anyway?”

“I told you.”

“No, I mean, what *is* he? Chinese, Filipino, what?”

“I have no idea.” He frowns. “Maybe Chinese, I think his last name was.”

She points at him with her cigarette butt. “There ya go! That’s their angst. The communist Chinese oppressor falls for the oppressed, poor Korean girl. Fuck, it’s like an episode of that one soap opera that was always on the TV when I was in Phuket, what’s it called?”

His face is red now but not from the sun. “We have a kid,” he says again, slowly. “We screwed repeatedly and now we have a kid. My child, hers’. What’s that make him? The product of two teenagers fucking? One in love but the other not?”

“Uh-huh,” she nods as she puts the cigarette out and takes the lemon wedge out of her mouth. She puts the straw of her iced tea between her white teeth and sucks, draining the glass.

She gestures to the waitress who bolts over, frosty pitcher in hand, smile in place. The waitress glances at him, her smile widening. He doesn't even notice.

“I'm. In. Love. With. Her.”

“Of course.”

“No, really.”

“Love's something we believe we feel for someone else and since perceived reality is our only reality, then your love is real.”

He's toying with the idea of hitting her. He hasn't done that since they were little kids riding in the back of the car, caught her in the mouth with the flat of a Frisbee, made her lip bleed. “It's nice to know you've put all those undergrad psych and philosophy credits to good use.”

“You're such a GUY!” She says, exasperated.

“Whatever.”

“No, I mean, how do you know she loves you?”

“She said so.”

“When?”

“At the wedding.”

“Okay, sweetie that was three and a half years ago. I mean, since the wedding.”

“She's said it since then, a couple of times.”

She rolls her eyes and takes another slurp of her fresh iced tea.

“Wow, two times in three years. Yup, that's true love.”

“She said it when we had the baby.”

She rolls her eyes again.

“No, she DID. He came out, the nurses were cleaning him up and I said ‘I love you’ and she said ‘me too’ and then I kissed her.”

“Me too?”

“Do not try and ruin one of the most important days of my life.”

“No, he's a great kid; definitely worth the stretch marks and any future orthodontics.”

“He’s an exceptional kid. You know he’s way up there, at the pre-school. He’s way up there in early development. He’s talking, he’s writing, he draws.”

“I always wondered,” she said to the patio table between them.

“Wondered what?”

“Why the world is full of average people when everybody is considered exceptional when they’re a child. Maybe exceptional is something only children are allowed to be.”

He picks his napkin up off his khakis and tosses it on his plate. The fly easily avoids it. “You’re so bitter.”

She shrugs, picks her lemon wedge up and sucks the pulp off the rind, swallows. She sets the rind down on her empty plate. “Maybe. I wonder about this stuff all day. What we all perceive, how other people perceive us. I wonder about bees. Do bees fall in love? Do grasshoppers have unrequited puppy love? Is it ever like inter-racial? Like can caterpillars and ants have crushes on each other? And what about birds? Because I know dogs can fall

in love. I had a spaniel that was in love with my cat, Mitzy, and when she died, the dog went into mourning, lasted for three weeks.”

“I met you today to tell you my wife’s cheating on me and my life is falling apart and you want to talk about bugs and dogs.”

“How’s work?”

“What? Fine.”

“You get those flat-screen TVs you wanted installed in the front office?”

“Oh, yeah they look great above the teak wood counter. And we have those eco-bamboo floor mats now. Everything looks Asian now, peaceful like a Japanese garden.”

“Or maybe *Apocalypse Now*,” she smirks into her napkin and then stands up. “Good. Well, I’m getting laid off from that university thing.”

He pauses. “Oh. Sorry.”

She shrugs, her shoulders almost touching the edges of her floppy sun hat.

“It happens. Speaking of which, look at the time. I should skedaddle.”

She stretches and once again he’s reminded of her grace. She took ballet when they were little. He was the worst player on his little league team, missed every ball that came near him.

“I’ll take care of the bill,” he says trying to sound older, gruffer.

“I know you will.”

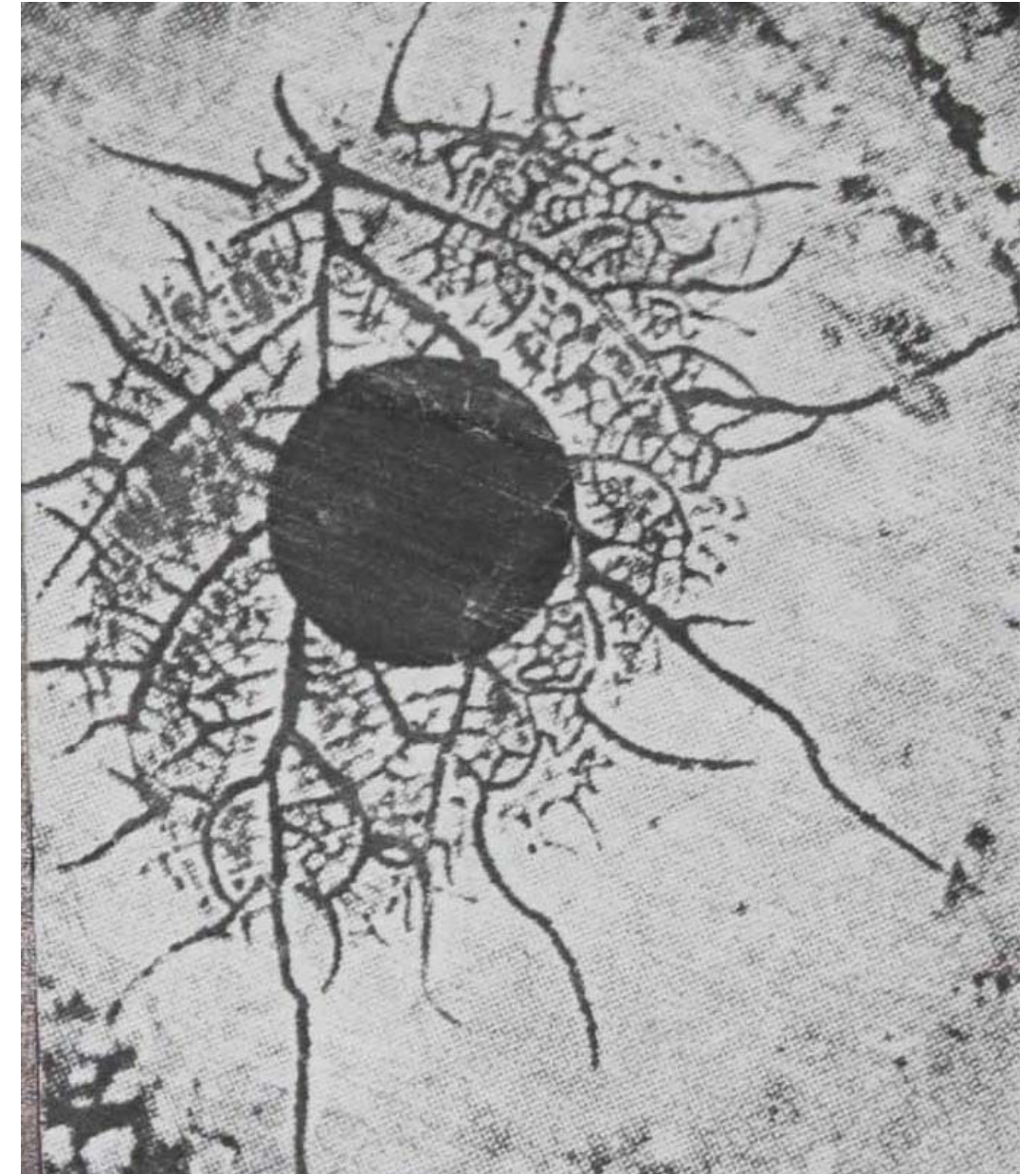
She buzzes his cheek, like a big honey bee or a love-sick greyhound.

He grabs her wrist and looks up at her.

“Sis, am I un-loveable?”

She smiles and it’s heartbreaking. She’s good looking, he thinks, and hardly anyone seems to notice.

“No sweetie. I am.”



I'll Take the Farthest Room

by ANNE CARLY ABAD

Left my friends
for Club Downer.

I want to watch me
watch paint dry.

Add-on: a jigger of boredom;
leave the lights on or off,

just leave, so I can sit
and rock my seat, listen

to it creak, creak
till I'm mad or asleep,

anything but glitter,
blitz and boom--

royal baby, single from RiRi,
laser lights, calorific cronuts...

Keep them
out of solitary.

studio

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

the room is sixteen feet by four by twelve
an odd proportion windows on either side
all sides
a skylight for the sidereal

sprit

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

whence hangs the canvas
that bellies in the breeze
across the spar
the jolly tar

preceptor

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

her taught us remain

distinct phonemes

isolated tears

The way cats float down canals

by DAVID HUTT

We would go down to the canal. After school. Around three-thirty. When we were let out. It was a five minute walk. We would walk down the street rolling up cigarettes, badly, and asking adults for a light. They were going home. From work. They didn't care and sparked us up. I smoked first. I was the tallest. The others looked at me - I don't know what they were thinking - because I used to walk with the swagger of a kid who became tall too quickly. I didn't know my feet. I would be blocking out their light. If they were weeds. I'd get the sun and smoke first. Then pass it along. There was never enough to get a second puff.

We'd go down to the canal. It was quiet. There were paths that no-one ever walked down and benches to sit on. The grass was orange. The pavement grey. In the water you

could see the reflection of tower blocks. One mate was studying Dante. He said Dante would have said you ascend into hell in this city. Someone called him Virgil. Then said, "nah, I mean virgin." We put a fist into his side. Just for fun. No pain. Just messing.

The other kids from school went to a car-park to fight another school. There were enough of them, we said. They didn't need us. But the truth was we didn't want to fight. I saw one kid get a blade in his thigh. I never went again. Canals were good.

So we'd walk and talk and do nothing. Another mate said he had licked a girl. No chance. A cat floated by, led on a burlap sack. It looked sarcastic. We took turns throwing stones to knock it off. We buried it in the canal.

"All things end up in the canal," I said.

One afternoon. Perhaps it was a Tuesday. We were chewing to each other and smoking when a kid came

running up to us. We knew him. He was all panting and happy-faced. He held out his hand for us to look at.

“What is it?” I said.

“Cochineal.”

“Cochineal, what’s that?” someone else said.

“I don’t know but it looks like blood,” said another.

I said that it looks like the flag my granddad used to have.

A week later we were kicking a popped football against a wall. We were down at the canal. Like usual. The same kid came up to us with one hand covering the other. He opened his hands like hearse arriving at a cemetery.

He was holding green.

One of the boys dug into his pocket and came out with a packet of Rizla. He took a little of the colour and rolled it

up. We all took turns smoking it. A few of the kids choked and one threw up.

Another took a pinch of it and tried to create a tree from memory.

We got stoned and watched cats float past.



Hitchhiking

by DAVID HUTT

Stood at the exit of a petrol station in-between Richard Brautigan and Charles Baudelaire with our thumbs in the air and Brautigan is writing on a cardboard sign,
ANYWHERE.

There isn't much conversation. They have just hitched a ride from Galilee and are tired and in no mood for spitting the dust. But I need someone to talk to about it all.

I say, "guys, I think I have a problem with alcohol."

Richard says that in chapter fifteen of his most famous novel a trout is killed by drinking port wine and he tried to find precedent for this in all the books that have ever been written about trout fishing but found nothing. Charles says, "you have to be always drunk."

"Thanks, guys," I say.

We never got a ride that day and we had to walk an hour to a bus station and I paid for all of our tickets.



Tinseltown

by ALAN SWYER

“You like my work?” Danny Green asked, referring, I assumed, not merely to his performances on screen, but also to his vast theatrical resume as well as his one-man shows in places like Vegas and Atlantic City.

“Who wouldn’t?” I responded, despite the fact that with the exception of *Guys & Dolls*, musical comedy was no more appealing to me than root canal work or colonics. “But if you want the truth, it’s your dad who really puts me away.”

“Wait... You know about him?”

“Ruby Greenberg? He’s one of my idols.”

“Really?”

“The man who said, *I married you for better or for worse, but not for lunch?* And who turned *Yankee Doodle* into *Kreplach And Noodle?*”

“But how?”

“TV, when I was little. Then the Catskills.”

“The name Kutscher’s mean anything?”

I nodded.

“And the Concord?”

“And Grossinger’s,” I stated proudly.

“Then something tells me you’re perfect.”

“For?”

“You didn’t hear it from Kugel?”

“Kugel?”

“My nickname for Irene Kriegel.”

“Hear what?”

“I want to do a movie about the Borscht Belt — a father and son story about an aging comic who’s pushing his kid to be a doctor, and the kid who wants to be in show biz. Up your alley?”

“Absolutely.”

“Only —?”

“What do you mean?”

“I read people, and I can see you’ve got some doubt.”

“Think a studio will buy it?”

“Because it’s so Jewish? What if I tell you Ed Palmer’s on-board?” Danny said, referring to Irene Kriegel’s boss, who began life as Edward Pelzman in the Bronx, then, after a name change and a nose job, worked his way up to Head of Production at the studio for whom I was writing a script.

“Turns out he spent years working summers at those resorts.

Plus, you ready for this?

“Sure.”

“He loves the idea of socking it to the *goyim*.”

“So what’s the catch?”

“W-why do you think there’s a c-catch?” Danny stuttered somewhat guiltily.

“Think you’re the only one who reads people?”

Danny Green sighed. “It’s more a courtesy than a catch.”

“What kind of courtesy?”

“My wife’s my partner on the project,” Danny said, getting up and pacing around the den of his Pacific Palisades home, which was crammed with framed photos, plaques, and laminated clippings from the *New York Times*, *Variety*, and other publications. “The three of us should meet the minute she gets back.”

“So that I can kiss her ring?”

“I wear the pants in this house!” Danny snapped a bit too defensively.

“I’m sure you do. But why do Jewish men die before their wives?” I asked.

“My father’s most famous joke!” Danny roared. “Because they want to!”

“Danny Green loves you!” Irene Kriegel gushed the next morning as she bounded into my office.

Short and hyperkinetic, with a head of hair that looked like coils of wire, plus a manner of speaking that made her sound

like a meth freak, she was officially the studio's VP of Development — a position that in most cases was referred to nastily as *Development Slut*. “So here's the scoop,” she continued. “While you're finishing the script you're doing for us, we'll make the deal on the Borscht Belt project so that can segue right from Africa to the Catskills.”

“You sure about that?”

“Why shouldn't I be?”

“The wife.”

“Not a problem.”

“Whatever you say.”

“And I say I want two things from you. A smile —”
I obliged her without hesitation.

“And a promise you won't start calling me Kugel.”

“Got my word,” I said, kissing her on the cheek.

In a business largely driven by envy, the fact that I had a studio writing deal complete with an office, a secretary, and a

parking space with my name meant, to many I knew, that I'd become *someone* and was raking in big bucks.

But the truth about Hollywood was best expressed in a phrase tossed around by old-timers: *You can make a killing, but it's tough to make a living.*

I was in a funny position of being *hot* within the business, yet a mystery to friends and family not familiar with the way things work in that strange and rarefied world. For while I'd worked on several projects, precious little had actually reached the screen, which was par for the course in a realm where there's rarely a trace of what I call *cause-and-effect*.

Cinema, to put it simply, is a world of fantasy, and not just on-screen. And in that microcosm, the screenwriter was, is, and probably always will be in a singular position. While a project is in development, he or she is the focal point — in many ways the most important person — in that hardly any progress can be made until a script exists. That's why the screenwriter receives a steady stream of phone calls, emails,

texts, and lunches during the writing process. But the encouragement and attention come to an abrupt stop the very moment a draft is delivered.

But even during the period of being the center of the universe, there's a sense — at least for those who get it — of sitting, metaphorically, at the kiddie table. The sequence goes from being *only* the writer to being *merely* the writer, then *nothing but* the writer, and almost inevitably *no longer* the writer.

Having seen others make the leap from *promising* to *pariah* virtually overnight, I knew that without a key credit or two I could at any random moment find myself a non-person — someone who receives no calls, and has none taken or returned. So the continuity provided by a deal on the Danny Green project was appealing if for no other reason than to stave off that fear.

But far more interesting was the possibility of getting paid not for something to which I brought little and cared less.

That, indeed, would have been the case with a novel I'd recently been handed in which three losers kidnap a sex symbol and give free reign to their twisted fantasies before going down in a blaze of putative glory. The Borscht Belt project, in contrast, was something I knew about and genuinely liked.

Buoyed by Irene Kriegel's words, I put a damper on the cynicism that had become part of me, then started giving free reign to my imagination. Almost immediately, while driving, while jogging, while showering, thoughts and images appeared as if from everywhere and nowhere — of the Catskills I'd known growing up, and of its bizarre and often singular denizens. For whatever reason, it's rarely while sitting at a desk that a project, for me at least, comes to life. Ideally, the time at the computer should come later, after a period swimming in the notions, eruptions, and associations that, hopefully, spring forth from uncharted terrains deep in my memory banks and unconscious.

Though the textbooks say it's the way to go, I personally have never understood the claims that the beginnings of a script should come from sitting down and outlining. To me the result would be pre-fab, the equivalent of designing a house without first seeing the proposed site and its environment, and without giving thought to the people who will one day be its inhabitants.

The most exciting part of the process for me is when I find myself being awakened in the middle of the night by a barrage of ideas, faces, and even lines of dialogue. That's when instead of being willed into existence by conscious effort, a film assumes a life of its own. And the characters, instead of being pushed like puppets through a contrived plot, become three-dimensional figures with wants and needs who make the choices that drive the story.

In no time my mind was in overdrive, racing in unexpected directions with material that I, at least, found thrilling.

The first character to assert himself was Artie Nusbaum, an

aging star on the Borscht Belt circuit whose occasional TV appearances haven't been enough to forestall the bitterness that comes from never having crossed over. Whereas many of his contemporaries who started in the Catskills have moved on to bigger things — playing for mixed audiences in Vegas and Atlantic City... having their own TV series... getting roles in films — Artie is a name only on the Jewish circuit. And even there, because of the passage of time, his luster has dimmed. Yet even with that background, Artie only commenced being three-dimensional, rather than a pallid reflection of Ruby Greenberg, when he assumed many of the quirks and traits of my own father. Suddenly he was a guy I saw vividly — one with no interest in sports, as participant or as spectator... who was resistant to change... fearful of Chinese restaurants... a bit hard of hearing, which he vociferously denied... and eternally distrustful of soup, which he saw as part of an ongoing attempt to poison him.

Next to come into focus was his son, Joseph Neal

Greenberg, who irritated his dad by dropping his last name and becoming Joey Neal. Instead of Jewishness as an identity, as it's always been for his dad, for him it's only one of the many components that define who he is. Rather than a facsimile of Danny Green, Joey was blossoming into a composite figure by acquiring many of my own personal interests: pick-up basketball, an obsession with the Yankees and the Knicks, a preference for the Stones over the Beatles, and a non-stop craving for Chinese food, whether Szechuan, Hunan, Shangai, or Cantonese. In sum, I was seeing him as a singular character who was ambitious, energetic, and filled with a dream of making it in a far bigger and better way than his dad.

Other characters followed. At the top of the list was Eleanor, wife to Ruby and mother to Joey. The personification of the Yiddish word *noodge*, she's someone for whom tranquility is both foreign and frightening. Eleanor's world is one of hyperbole. She doesn't get hungry, she gets *so*

hungry I'll die. She doesn't get cold, she gets *so cold I think I'll freeze*. For her it's never a case of needing the ladies room, but of *I think I'm going to explode*. And if Joey ever wears one of the two ties she gave him for Hanukkah, her response is certain to be: *What's the matter, you don't like the other one?*

Then there was Sheldon Plotkin, the loudmouth who books talent at the hotel where Artie's weeks as headliner are diminishing. And Sonia Santiago, the pretty Puerto Rican camp counselor who dreams of being a singer — and catches Joey's eye, much to his parents' chagrin. Plus Eugene Lee, the black cook who apprenticed under the original Eastern Europeans in the kitchen to the point where he now speaks excellent Yiddish and makes the Catskills' best *gefilte fish*, *tsimmis*, and *latkes*.

I was hooked. With the characters and their odd, funny, singular world of the past coming to life, the project seemed more and more like an anomaly: a chance to do something

special and actually get paid for the privilege.

Spotting Irene Kriegel in the parking lot as I arrived at the studio one morning, I pounced.

“I’m pumped!” I exclaimed. “Really stoked.”

“Good,” she replied in a way seemed somewhat half-hearted.

“Which means?”

“Denise needs a little time.”

“Denise?”

“The pain-in-the-ass wife. She suddenly thinks she’s a mogul or something.”

“Shit.”

“Shit is right. It’s her chance to meet what she calls A-List writers.”

“Want to tell me who?”

I started to laugh when Irene begrudgingly mentioned three highfalutin names.

“What’s so goddamn funny?” she asked.

“A Brit, a native Californian, and a guy who’s only done sci-fi?”

“I know,” she said apologetically.

“And best of all —”

“Yeah?”

“Not a single one’s Jewish.”

“It’ll work out.”

“Sure,” I grumbled. “And it’ll snow for Hanukah in Santa Monica.”

I was peeved at Denise Green, whom I’d never even gotten a chance to set eyes on. I was irritated at Danny, whose idea kicked everything into motion. I was disappointed in Irene Kriegel, who brought me into the project. But the person I was angriest at was me. Simply put, I should have known better.

My first encounter with Hollywood, just a few years before, was a learning experience that started when my first

serious effort — a largely autobiographical script about growing up white in a predominantly black area — was optioned by a studio. I was patted on the head, told I was a fresh new voice, then promptly replaced by someone whose mandate was to reverse everything, making it the story of a black guy growing up in a largely white town. Though I was distressed, especially when the film never got made, there was a measure of solace in that the payday enabled me to quit temp work and focus on writing.

Then, thanks to the heat from that sale, came a job that seemed like it would be fun: a story about a talking dog who dared to say what people would never have the courage to utter out loud. That started well but went south quickly when the producer failed to have the courage of his own convictions. All of a sudden, instead of being irreverent, wise, and funny, I was told the dog should be cute and cuddly, which meant saccharine and treacly.

My next venture was a largely autobiographical story for

which my plan to write *on spec* took a detour when the agent I'd acquired persuaded me to take development money from a producer who was considered hip. Though the guy proved to be surprisingly smart and supportive, those traits were of no help when he announced his intention to use my script for his directing debut, which proved to be a dead end.

It was at that point that I promised myself I would go into ventures with my eyes opened and not get burned again.

In the hope of getting something into production, I agreed to do a couple of TV scripts. There were no unpleasant surprises or out-of-left field twists or turns, but nor was there any satisfaction, esthetic or otherwise.

Since it was love of film that brought me to California in the first place, I was tickled when I got a call from the executive that I, too, was beginning to think of as Kugel. She wanted me to play *Mr. Fix-It* on an adventure yarn set in Africa, which was what I was doing at the moment she asked me to meet with Danny Green.

Days of waiting for a call on the Catskills project turned into weeks, then months, during which I sensed that Kugel was avoiding me. That was classic, since Hollywood is a place where it's bad form to say no. Instead of projects being rejected, they quietly wither and die. Rather than writers, directors, or actors being told they didn't get a certain job, a temporary hush far too often turns into an extended silence. As is often said, *People nice you to death*.

In a world where there's fear that even someone like me might miraculously get hot thanks to a spec script or a friendship with Johnny Depp, there was no way I would get a complete cold shoulder treatment from Kugel. But whereas once she was eager to hang out and be chatty, now our contacts were restricted to a wave from afar or a half-smile.

When asked about life in Los Angeles, IAL Diamond, who worked in his pool house while writing scripts with Billy

Wilder for classics like *The Apartment*, gave a response that defines life in LA. "One day when I was blocked," he's reported to have said, "I threw on a bathing suit and jumped into the pool. By the time I got to the other end, six months had gone by."

I finished the re-write, which was received with little fanfare, then moved off the lot into a rented cubby hole so as to spare my wife the pitfalls of the Ruby Greenberg joke about lunch.

Away from writers, producers, and directors who started every day by reading *Variety*, then cursing their friends and enemies who got deals, I dodged fears of my fledgling career being over by hunkering down and writing an original screenplay that pleased both me and my agent. Then, before the customary doubts began, I dove into a labor of love, writing an article for a British magazine called *Blues & Rhythm* about the birth of R & B in Los Angeles. Only when that was done did I start thinking about what in hell I should

do next.

It was during that period of pondering that I received a surprise call from none other than Kugel.

“Hate me?” she asked.

“C’mon —”

“Then promise you won’t start if I ask a favor.”

“What favor?”

“First a promise.”

“Okay, I promise.”

“I want you to sit down again with Joey Green.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Am I known for my sense of humor?”

“But why?”

“Because he fucked up.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” Danny Green admitted as he once again he led me toward his den.

“Looks like somebody’s still missing,”

“Let’s just say my wife was not exactly helpful,” he said with a shrug. “But I want you to know, the movie’ll be great.”

“If it gets made.”

“It’ll get made.”

“Not without a script.”

“Which is why you’re here. Truth? I got tired of watching her play starfucker with *shaygetzes* who knew *bubkis* about the Catskills. That help?”

“Doesn’t hurt.”

“Look,” he murmured awkwardly, “there’s something important I want to tell you. But first let me play host. Drink? A nosh?”

“Tell me about this *something important*.”

Danny took a couple of steps, then a deep breath, to ready himself. Then, as though doing Hamlet’s soliloquy, he looked me square in the eye. “I’m an artist.”

“Okay.”

“I do some painting, a little sculpting, and even some poetry

as well as my work on stage and screen.”

“And?”

“How would you feel about the two of us collaborating on the script?”

Torn between laughing and wringing Danny’s neck, I instead did my best to play it cool.

“You’re serious?”

“I think it would be very gratifying,” he said earnestly.

“Then mind if I ask you a question?”

“Go right ahead.”

“That one-man show you do —”

“Yes?”

“By any chance have a date coming up in Atlantic City?”

“Why?”

“Well I, too, am a bit of an artist.”

“R-really?” he murmured, clearly apprehensive.

“I do a little singing, some dancing —”

“Where’s this headed?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

“I’d like to be the opening act.”

“Please tell me you’re not serious.”

“My mother would find it very gratifying.”

For a moment Danny Green looked ready to cry.

“W-why are you doing this?” he asked once he’d regained some measure of composure.

“Know how long ago we first met?”

“It’s been weeks. Maybe even a couple of months.”

“When we first met, my wife wasn’t pregnant.”

“And?”

“We’re now the parents of a bouncing baby boy. Know why you’ll never get your movie made?”

“W-why?”

“By the time you get a script — *if* you ever get a script — Ed Pelzman and your friend Kugel will be ancient history at that studio.”

I didn’t know then that just a few weeks later, after a series

of stinkos and flops, Ed Pelzman would be fired.

Nor would I ever know if that event sparked the break-up of Danny Green's marriage.

And certainly there was no way for me to have foreseen that in the years to come I would find myself directing music videos and commercials, plus several documentaries.

Or that, over too short a period of time, I would lose my mother, then my father, and finally my kid brother.

But thanks to eBay, I was able to acquire one strange reminder of that period of my life: a pristine vinyl disk with Ruby Greenberg's *Kreplach And Noodle*. Even more than Thelonious Monk or Nina Simone, it's what I listen to when I'm down in the dumps.

Then off I head to Langer's deli for a pastrami sandwich to remind me of my heritage.



Picked Me a Plum

by BENJAMIN RADER

The lady at the door takes one look at Cal and puffs her body out like a blowfish. She's got on white leather pants, an earth colored blouse, and a buttery scarf around her neck—flowing over all of that's a royal blue robe with little lines of white dashing down the front. As her body inflates wider and wider the little white lines on the expanding blue surface grow into big, fat exclamation points (without the points), and her silk covered shoulders start to brush up against the jambs of the door. Cal rubs his eyes with his palms. The gray-dusting of hair on her head tickles the top of the jamb. He opens them: patches of pale slimy skin at every turn. Damn. The blow fish strikes again.

Thinking quickly, he shuffles his feet across the wooden porch and does the dance he trained himself to do. A succession of ankle slaps, knee highs, up and downs, all the while smiling, all the while keeping his cool, until finally he stops in place out of

breath and leans on the storm door. If she'd only move to the side, or better yet, invite him in... He has every right. Instead, she looks him up and down and smacks her creamy lips together. "You're teeth are becoming yellow," she snorts. She flashes an elbow in his face and pulls some kind of plug behind her head. Duh. Pffffffffffttttttttt. She deflates. Wait, he tries to say, but it's too late. She floats backwards like a leaking balloon, catching the door with both of her hands, then slamming it shut.

He scratches at his beard with long, filed fingernails. Maybe she forgot the meeting. Maybe. Now, it'll have to go a different way—he wasn't expecting this, and definitely didn't want it to go like this, but that stuff in there is his by right, so he's got no other choice. Yesterday, Cal got hired as the in house guitar player at Chris's Cafe in South Philly, his first actual job as a guitarist, and needed his guitar, amp, and cables for the gig. He was hired for the 12 o'clock spot on Tuesdays and Thursdays right before the whole thing turned into an open mic. He'd make somewhere from fifty to one hundred dollars a day, depending on the turn-

out. He peels the foil from a new pack of cigarettes and lips one out. He leans down onto the last step before the stone walk-way begins. The porch feels like composite, he's pretty sure, definitely not wood now that he's sitting down. He lights his cigarette.

In front of him there's a stone path that stretches about fifteen feet from the porch to the driveway where two elephant-sized hedges sit; behind them there are two isles of rich, green ivy that run parallel to the walkway back to the porch, where Cal's sitting. Beyond that a tarred driveway with little rises and dips and cracks; at the top of which is a motorcycle with red flames and leather tassels that's being framed by the hedges. And beyond that there's the road where the bus dropped him off and where, after this whole treasure fiasco, he'll pick up again. The sucking sounds of its cars comes in off the wind.

...But what about his copy of the key?

The key is in the left pocket of his pants, of course, and he can stick it directly in the cylinder and open the door if he wants to, but Cal knows that's what the lady will expect, at least right

away, so he'll have to drag it out a bit longer. He puffs his cigarette and lays down beneath the pillars of the porch. He doesn't mind taking a breather. Not one bit.

The gray ceiling above him is held up by four foot-wide pillars on each side, and between the tops of the pillars and the ceiling there are bricks stacked on top of each other to keep out the birds, in all of the pillars but one, where, as a matter of fact, a spool of grass and branches spill over the edge. He holds his breath and listens for the sound of a bird but only hears the wind passing through the trees. He feels a compulsion to check and finishes his cigarette and stubs it out on top of the floor-mat and lifts himself up on one of the benches. Dead leaves. He reaches out to feel: dampness and things paper thin, no nest. It's better that way, probably. The woman inside would crack open the eggs and slurp the yoke out. Those things that monsters do.

So, a walk around it is. There might be an open window and a ladder or an underground tunnel or something. He makes a right from the porch to where the lawn begins and walks around

the length of the house. The house itself is four floors, each floor smaller than the last, rising into one pitched roof. The right side is covered by a see through blue tarp with a company logo that's too far away for Cal to read. Some of the siding on the house looks new, maybe aluminum, while the rest is all white paint flaking and curling and rich brown spots underneath. In the backyard, a children's play set that's mostly nails and rust sits on the rim of the lawn before an open field begins.

Cal turns back towards the house. On the second floor he spots a window open a couple of inches. And coincidentally below that window there's a ladder laying on its side behind a few bushes. Cal moves closer. Wait. An open window and a ladder for climbing. The coincidence is not lost on him. He'd pick the ladder up, extend it, and line it up against the house. His hands would reach the top rung, the ladder shaking below him, and he'd look at the ground. Thirty or forty feet up. He'd reach for the window and suddenly the lady would appear and retract her spikes and

he'd fall from the ladder and snap his back in half while she 'blub-blubbed' above him. Nice try blow-fish.

So, the key it is. He takes the silver piece from his pocket. It's got a purple rubber cover on the top. He throws the storm door open and leans down on his knees. The key fits with a slight click and then turns in the cylinder but only about halfway. He tries to turn it again. Nothing. The key looks fine, the same, unless she's changed the locks, which is overall pretty unlikely. He tries the key the opposite way. Nothing. One of the metal teeth isn't lining up with the rest of the key. It's slanting off to the left and won't fit in the cylinder completely. He probably bent the key when he sat down to smoke a cigarette. Bent by the cheeks of his own ass. Damn.

So, a brick it is. The door has two horizontal rows of three panes in the center that are made of thin glass. Glass that would slither and snap quietly without a big mess. And plus the bottom, left pane of glass is practically right next to the deadbolt, which he knows from his little experience that it's the next logical step

to getting in the house. He lifts himself onto the bench and again stands up on his tippy-toes and fumbles around for a brick. Cool and dry to the touch.

The glass doesn't break until the third swing and when he raises the brick above his head and comes down on the center of the window the glass shatters out towards him. The shards catch the sun and fall onto the back of his hood and in his hair and he shakes out like a wet dog and stands up. He buries his arm up to the elbow inside the door and squirrels around until the heavy bolt slides out of place. The door opens towards him. He steps inside.

Arpeggios from a guitar finger pluck their way out of speakers and travel on the air over the marble floor, curving around the stainless steel island in the center of the kitchen, passing the broom and pan and cleaning supplies under the doorway, and over the oriental blue and yellow rug in the living room where Cal now walks over. Some of the shards from the window pane on the door fell inside and as Cal moves he

crunches over them. Willie Nelson's voice fills the rest of the gaps: You crunch always crunch my mind. The acrid smells of bleach and cinnamon slide into Cal's nose and his eyes start to water for a second. As the room blurs up into shapes of pink walls and brown servers and tan drapes, Cal consciously clenches his butt cheeks together; he's aware that the woman is slithering around somewhere with poisonous fins ready to pierce him at any moment. She could be bubbling behind the mahogany table to his right or waiting to catch his ankles in her mouth under the wooden server on his left or maybe even clinging to one of the walls leaving behind a resinous goo. The joke would be on her, however: she'd have to clean that sticky goo off herself.

He moves towards the kitchen. The music grows crisper and clearer and louder. Various piles of dust on the kitchen floor warn him not to walk through. At the small wooden hump where the living room stops being the living room and becomes the kitchen, Cal pauses and sees an ash-tray sparkling like a tooth after a visit from the dentist. Ding. On the kitchen-table there are bottles of

Fantastic, Windex, Bleach, and Lysol. Sponges and rags. Buckets of water. A red candle. Thursday, cleaning day. Maybe I didn't hold you all those lonely, lonely times... Cal dislikes the fact that he knows the lyrics to this song, and even more so that he can play this tune in his sleep. So much sentiment, an annoyance. All of the magic sucked out and left— Click. Cal turns around and just about doubles over.

The woman's there squinting an eye down the slick, fat barrel of a shotgun. She's got one finger tickling the trigger and the butt pressing tightly into her blue shoulder.

"The door was open," she says.

Cal slowly turns and faces her. She looks deflated, hard, and cruel, and he can see now that she wasn't wearing a scarf at all, that it was just a part of the design on her blouse.

"You... You know why I'm here."

"We told you you couldn't come. It wasn't your place."

"You told me I couldn't come?"

She doesn't respond. She moves forward and spins Cal around and pushes him into the wall, pinioning the side of his face against it. She drops the shotgun to her waist and nudges it into the small of his back. The tip of the barrel scuffs a faint white line in the black leather and she presses harder. Her hands are steady, not shaking. Cal can tell because his back is as straight and rigid as all hell, and he'd definitely be able to feel any vibrations coming his way.

"Ma," he says, "Jesus."

She digs the gun into his back harder and starts to breathe heavy, and just as Cal begins to feel the slightest tremble in her hands, which, to him, is a good sign—one that means she's getting nervous—she drops the shotgun to her side and puts a hand on top of her head.

"If you're staying take your shoes off," she says, and walks into the kitchen with her blue robe swishing and curving around her.

Cal hears the heavy thud of the shotgun falling on the kitchen table and he starts to regain himself a little. He had to swallow a

little bit of bile when he first saw the gun, so he still has that acidic-sour taste in his mouth, and his butt cheeks are still clenched tight. He bends down on a knee and undoes the laces to his boots and then vice-versa. He places his ankle-highs in front of the dining room table, takes a deep breath in, and walks into the kitchen following the skinny lady in the silky blue robe. You were always on my mind.

“Should I even ask how you’re doing?” she says from the floor. She’s on her butt with her legs spread a body length apart, and she’s scooping up the piles of dust with her hands into a trash-bag. Next, she’ll swipe her hands over the same portion of floor so she can feel the smooth, uninterrupted surface. This is all too familiar for Cal.

“Would you believe me if I told you?” He leans down onto the kitchen floor with her. He rests his back against one of the wooden cabinets that contains all of the snacks and finally, for the first time today, looks his mother in the face. Wrinkles and hoop earrings. Shifting jaw muscles. Pale, grey eyes. Swarms of silver

hair at the roots with blonde tips. She looks old and tired. Little things I should have said and done.

“Try me,” she says.

“Ma,” he says, “I finally got a gig. Over on Sansom. You know that cafe...” He hesitates. He can’t get away with a big lie, she’ll see right through him, but a tiny lie, a tiny stretching of the truth, that, he can do. “They hired me three nights a week at 8, after the featured band.” “A gig? As in a real one? They’re going to pay you?”

“Yeah, Ma. A real one.”

Cal looks over at the door. From where he’s sitting he can’t tell that anything’s broken except that the curtain on the door is being sucked in the space where the glass used to be.

“I’m sorry for the door,” he says, “I bent the key all up. Look, I’m just here for my share. My stuff. I didn’t want it to go that way. I can be out of here in ten minutes.”

She looks up with wide eyes. “Your key? What key?”

“My copy. I sat down for a smoke and bent it. That’s why I used the brick.”

“The door was open,” she says and stands up on her feet.

“I didn’t know.”

“Give me the key.” She raises her hand out, palm up.

“What?”

“The key. Give it to me. We thought we had all the copies.”

“Ma...Ma, there’s no need for that. It’s all bent anyway.”

“If your father knew you still had a key...” She shakes her hand out again. Cal knows that he’s already on thin ice with the door and if he keeps testing his luck she might call the cops and he’ll never get his stuff, so he stands up and reaches in his left pocket. He puts the key on the table. He watches his mother move forward and take the key in her hand and bring it up to her face and then, rubber purple cover and all, slide it in her mouth and begin to chew.

“We told you already,” she says, swallowing, “there’s nothing here for you.”

With her last words, the multi-disc changer in the stereo shifts cds and Frank Sinatra’s “Best is yet to Come” syncs up and plays from the speakers. A minor third opens the tune, a melody, a key-sweep, the tats of the snare, Frank’s baritone: Out of the tree of life, I just picked me a plumb, a tenor-sax breathes on the down-beat. Cal’s starts to smile and laugh and taps his foot on the floor. He gets up and begins shaking his body in rhythm with the song. The corners of his jacket whip the air to the left and to the right of her head. Wait till the warm up is underway. Cal does a pretty mean interpretative dance of this tune.

“Ma, what’dya say?” he says, a finger in the air. “Like old times?”

Cal’s already throwing his head back and kicking his leg past him and twirling around in a blur of jacket, shorts, and boots. And she gets up and wriggles around him trying to find an opening, but can’t. He closes in on her and puts one hand around her waist and laces his other hand in hers. You ain’t seen nothin yet. They dip and dive from the table to the cabinets. He arches his hand

above his head and spins her away from him and then back again. I'm going to teach you to fly. The kitchen becomes one series of images: table, cabinets, doorway, and floor as they spin and laugh. The cd begins to catch and skip on the lines you aint seen it, you aint seen it, you ain't seen it. He leads them towards the doorway where the kitchen stops being the kitchen and becomes the living room and Cal arches his hand up again and releases her and she spins over the mound and onto the oriental rug. You ain't, you aint, you aint. Her foot catches on one of Cal's ankle high boots and she stumbles and loses her balance and slams her head on the living room table. She lets out a little yelp and drops to the floor. Cal sees a stream of blood coming from her nose which she then covers with her hands. "Holy shit, Ma." He calls and runs over to her.

"Eshhokay" She says below her hands, "Eshhokay."

Cal bends over her and tries to lock his hands in her armpits so he can pull her up, but she fights him and slaps his hands away. "Eshhokay, damn't." She says. He gets it and goes into the kitchen

looking for paper towels or napkins or anything that she might be able to use, but can't find any and instead goes to the stereo and tries to turn it off. He presses a few buttons that don't do anything and he hits the top of the stereo and the cd stops catching and starts to play normally again. The best is yet to come, Frankie sings.

Cal stands in the kitchen behind his mother whose still on the floor in the living room bent over and bleeding. The shotgun's next to him on the table and where he's standing he can see little glimmers of broken glass on the living room floor. He walks closer to her and bends down and places a hand on her shoulder. In the distance, there's the faint sound of a car door, shifting steps on the walkway, the porch, the wind up and scrape of the front door, the crunch of glass being stepped on. By the time Cal looks up again his father is standing in front of the door breathing heavily with the brick in his right hand.

His father's wearing a forest green suit and a tan tie. He's squat and muscular with black hair and a freshly shaven face. And

he's already made up his mind about what he's seen. He charges towards him.

"You. We told what would happen if you ever came back here." He looks down, "Jesus Christ. To your own mother." For a second he looks like he wants to cry. He helps her up into one of the dining room chairs. Cal waits for him to fling the brick in his face.

"No, no," Cal says, "It's not what it looks like. Ma tell him, tell him you fell. Ma."

"Whatever your selling, we don't want it. No fucking way man. We've been through it all before. Whatever your selling we're not buying." His tie's over his shoulder and he's breathing hard. His eyes shrink further in his square head and he walks towards Cal and pushes him again.

Cal accepts the push and waits for his mother to stand up and place a hand on his father's shoulder. He waits for her to tell him that it isn't what it looks like. That they were dancing and having fun and she fell and tripped. Cal waits for her to tell him that it's

all a misunderstanding. He looks down at his mother. Her hands are still cupping her face, dry black blood, and all he sees are her eyes. White eyes, narrowing, cruel and judging.

And then Cal loses it. "You know what, fuck you. Fuck you both," he shouts. "I'm here for my stuff, that's it, I'll be out of here in two minutes." And finally, he runs up the first flight of steps, up the second, and into his old room. Just his stuff. That's it. That's why he's here. His job. But he already knows what he'll find. Besides for a messy bed and a wall full of trophies, the room's completely empty and bare. His amps, cables, guitars, mics, thousands of dollars worth of equipment's all gone. Even his stands. Gone.

His father approaches from the door way. "What did you expect Cal? That we'd just leave it there rotting away? We took what was owed to us. You weren't ever going to use it again."

"You're wrong," Cal says, "You're just wrong. I need that stuff."

He just shakes his head. "You can't have it. Not anymore."

Cal reaches out and touches one of his trophies on the wall and looks back at his father. An idea comes to him. The trophies...He pushes past his father and runs back downstairs. He sees the trash bag his mother was using to drop the dust in and he grabs it and turns it inside out. Blots of dust leak out to the ground. When he gets back upstairs his father's sitting on the bed with his back hunched over and his arms at his sides.

"I'm taking my god-damn trophies," Cal says, "I'm taking them. Their mine." And Cal begins to slide all of his trophies into the trash-bag. A baseball player with his knee arched and a ball just about to be released from his hand, a swimmer at the top of the diving block, a basketball player in the middle of a lay-up, all frozen in gold.

His father looks up and sees a different Cal, nine, maybe ten, in matching banana pajamas and square glasses with a smudge of duct tape on the outer left frame, dipping his head past the railing of the top bunk, listening intently to each soft, warm word

oozing out of his father on the blue-carpeted floor—And then the boy who lived on top of the bunk stopped listening and...

"Hey," little Cal said.

"Just checking," he said back.

Cal stuffs them all in the black trash bag. When he turns around his father has his head in his arms. "Oh, honey," he says, "oh, honey."

Cal waits on the corner of two intersecting highways with the trash-bag over his shoulder. He can see his father picking up the phone and dialing the number to the police. His father'd have one hand on his mother's shoulder. Her hand atop his. He'd call and say that he'd like to report an assault and a burglary. My son, he'd say, he's out of control. He'd tell them that Cal stole all of his mother's jewelry, all of the money in the house, his antique coin collection. That he ran in and smashed her in the face with a brick. As he's saying this, Cal's mother would be moving up the

steps into her room. She'd grab her jewelry box, an envelope filled with money, two leather folders filled with coins. She'd run into the bathroom and empty her jewelry into the toilet. The gems would catch the light on the white tile just so and red and blue and green streaks would refract throughout. The rest would plop down into the drain. Next, they'd burn the money and bury the coins. The best is yet to come, and won't that be fine. Da-dada-da-da-dada-duh-dum, Cal sings to himself.

The sun's beginning to set in front of Cal as the engines of cars hum by. Brushes of red over wide yellow streaks, purples and blues and pinks. Black shapes floating up and down through the colors. He sees the bus approaching from the South. PHL, the orange letters at the front of the bus flash, PHL.

The bus slows to a stop. The shocks release their swoosh of air and the doors swing open. Cal steps in and walks up the steps. He flashes the driver his ticket and walks toward the back. The bus is crowded, almost full. People of all color going home from work. Some dirty, others in aprons, slow, tired eyes. Cal uses the

bathroom in the back of the bus and then settles in a window seat in the back to the left. He leans his face against the glass and his breath fogs up the window for a second, and then clears, fogs, and then clears. There's an awful smell of fresh shit lingering. Cal leans away.

When the bus nears his stop he pulls down on the chord and stands up. A murmur goes through the bus as he moves in between the isles of red seats. Tucked into the back of his pants, five or six inches down from his jacket, a sleeve of dirtied toilet paper trails him. There's a dark smear on the outside. When he leaves, a woman who was sitting to Cal's right says in a low voice that she's never seen anything like that in her entire life. They all can't help but laugh.

By the time he gets into Philly it's dark. The rows and rows of stores are barred up, closed. The bars on the corners are just beginning to open. Their neon advertisements begin to glow. It's colder than it was before and windy. He pulls his hood over his head and moves towards Frankford Ave. When he gets to

Woodland, he moves away from the sidewalk and lights a cigarette. He stands in between parked cars and watches the people walk up and down. Some walk with their hands in their pockets and their heads down. Other's laugh and talk to their friends.

Cal flicks his cigarette into the wind and turns around. The sign on the door says, Woodland Money Loan. There are watches and rings and televisions in the window. Fur coats and leathers and shoes. He opens the door, a bell jingles, the guy behind the counter looks up.

An old man wearing an Iverson jersey is leaning on the other side of the glass. He has a black long-sleeve shirt underneath the jersey and jean shorts beneath. He's mostly bald, with a swirl of brown hair in the center of his head. One gold stud pokes through his right ear. His head's pointed up towards the ceiling, to the right of Cal. He looks up to where the man's watching and sees a smaller version of himself in the television, the trash bag sagging at the bottom over his shoulder, his hood up.

"What can I do for ya?"

"Money," Cal says, "whatever you can."

"You got something for me?"

"You betcha," Cal lifts the trash-bag onto the table.

The man nods and begins to sift through the trash-bag. His fingers are as thick and dark as eels squiggling at the bottom of a murky lake. As the man looks his bottom lip starts to quiver and his face turns red. The man glances at Cal and lets out a series of sharp, high-pitched laughs, one after the other, that surround Cal like a pack of wild hyaenas. Cal rubs his eyes with his palms and starts to shuffle back and forth on his feet. The man jiggles behind the counter, the trophies clink. Cal slams his hands down on the glass, leans in closer to the man, and flashes out a twisted yellow smile. Out of the tree of life, I just picked me a plum. Then he snaps his head back, opens his eyes wide, and squeaks out a series of high-pitched laughs, all the while bobbing up and down, all the while hooting. The two screech and howl over scattered golden trophies until the lights in the store begin to flicker.

Sasha Green and the International Porn Conspiracy

by KEVIN MUNLEY

Running late and running, Mark hustled through the oncoming traffic and was welcomed with an abundance of horns. She was standing above wearing the red coat she described in her email. The stairs added extra displeasure to his journey and sweat gathered in circles that descended down to his netherworlds. Finally there, an avalanche of words poured out of Mark.

“Alicia, Sorry I’m late. The schedule for the bus was all wrong this morning and then when they finally came...Alicia, It’s Mark. I can’t believe we are finally meeting!”

The sweat had cooled but settled into pockets of Mark’s flesh as they sat down together. The coffee shop was old and romantic. It resembled a Moroccan café and was assembled like a restaurant that years ago could have been filled with femme fatales and hardened private eyes. Mark had been here before, but never

with a companion. Although he wasn’t aware, this place had seen an abundance of awkward and awful internet dates. The waitresses had become proficient in silently and sometimes not so silently judging others.

“So you’re from Connecticut, right Alicia?” Mark deliberately said her name feeling that his knowledge of it had put him significantly ahead of the curve.

“Yeah, from just outside Hartford.”

“I love Mystic. It is like a postcard from New England.”
Mark responded.

“Really? My grandmother has lived in that area for years.”

Explaining the menu to Alica, Mark felt comfortable and relaxed now. He made sure he was extra polite to their wait staff. He cracked a few jokes and made her smile. She seemed to

becoming more comfortable with him, which pleased Mark. Smiling into her coffee cup coyly, she was more affable and pleasant than he had imagined.

One of the waitresses approached the table. “Are you Mark? There is a call for you.”

“For me? That’s weird. Excuse me Alicia, I didn’t even know anyone knew I was here.”

As Mark made his way to the phone, he felt significantly important. This phantom phone call couldn’t have come at a better moment for emphasizing his importance to society to Alicia.

“Hello?” Mark said.

“Mark Fisher?”

“This is?”

“The International Porn Conspiracy. I’m Sasha Green.”

“The what? I’m sorry, the *what* conspiracy?”

“This is the IPC. International Porn Conspiracy. There is a bus line behind the coffee shop. I need you to get on the 57 bus and take it to Longwood. My associates will be waiting to take you into hiding. Mark, they’re coming for you.”

“Is this a joke? Because I’m not laughing!”

“Listen pervert, I’m not fucking around. When you see the man with the trimmed mustache and the anchor tattoo, no one will be laughing. You better run. Tell Alicia I said hi!” *Click.*

Mark’s heart was pounding. Who were these people? The man with the anchor tattoo? Obviously, one of his friends was winding him up for laughs. He made his way back upstairs to Alicia.

When Mark returned to the table, Alicia was texting on her phone. Maybe she had asked her friends to make the phone call as a joke? It wouldn’t surprise him. Why did he even try to go

on dates? He always had bad luck with women. Putting away the phone, Alicia looked up with a smile. Her teeth glistened white between her lips and her eyes peered into him. No, most likely she was just texting the details of their date to one of her friends. On the other end of the café, a customer working on his laptop rolled up his sleeves revealing the edge of a tattoo.

“Alicia, what kind of tattoo do you think that is over there?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“No reason. The guy just looks a little bit like a seaman. Strange for him to be in here. We’re so far from the ocean.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Are you done with your coffee?”

“Almost.”

“Let’s go for a walk. I mean, would you like to go for a walk?”

“Sure, just let me finish.”

Mark almost knocked over a grandmother walking past him as he hurried up. “I’ll go get the bill. My treat!”

Mark journeyed with Alicia through a maze of crosswalks and changing streets; he had grown quieter and was rattled by the phone call. He would have to discuss this in his therapy. Why didn’t he deserve a normal life with normal relationships? Warm winds gusted around them as they progressed, blowing them back and forth with each step. If he just kept talking, he could manage the whirlwinds and hellfires that were raging within him.

Talking just about you on a date was a big turnoff. Women love to be shown that you are interested. *Don’t look at the breasts*, he told himself. *Don’t look at the breasts*. Alicia’s breasts were freckled and filled the front part of her dress. *Don’t!* He didn’t look at the breasts and launched an onslaught of questions.

“Do you like the people you work with?”

“Do you want to go back to school?”

“How did your parents meet?”

“Do you want kids?”

“Would you ever want to settle down?”

He was content that he had outrun, whoever was trying to make a fool of him. The International Porn Conspiracy? Was that what the caller said? He had to admit it was a pretty clever joke though. There was a park bench just past Broadway that Mark would often eat his lunch on. Typically alone, he would read his paper here and devour his lunch in silence. He often sat here and watched the young urban mothers walking by with their children and occasionally, bored with the articles he was skimming, he would wonder what kind of men were their husbands. Mark motioned towards the bench and Alicia joined him.

“Have you met anyone else from this site?” Mark asked.

“A few people. I’m just scared i’ll meet a real weirdo. I don’t date people off the internet much. How about you?”

“Me either. I’m not really much of a dater.”

A homeless woman dressed in layers of rags and clutching a garbage bag smiled at Mark from the other bench. “This poor woman,” Alicia said. “I wonder if she is a drug addict?”

Mark suspected otherwise: “she probably has mental health issues.” The woman was talking and laughing to herself

Crap, he made eye contact. Would his bad luck never end? Great, she is coming over here. Alicia and Mark looked up at the disoriented woman now looming over them with a crooked face smile.

“Hi.” Mark said unsure if he had any change.

“I’m really sorry I don’t have any cash. Maybe we can buy you some food?” Alicia responded.

“I want it. Give it to me.” the haunted woman shrieked.

“I’m trying to find some. Just a second.” Trying not to make any more significant eye contact, Mark was rummaging through

both of his pockets desperately to find change amidst the candy wrappers and debit card transactions. Meanwhile, the woman continued to sway back and forth buoyed by the wind and inner turmoil.

“Not that. I want your balls, if you have any.” The withered being leaned in and breath her foul odor on Mark’s pants. “Want to party?”

“Jesus, no. Go away Mark” yelled.

Ignoring Mark, the homeless woman’s hands gyrated around the center of Mark’s legs, shaking from the excitement of lust and the abundance of medication.

“Christ,” Mark yelled. “Come on Alicia.”

The vagabond wasn’t done though, and as Mark and Alicia tried to relocate, she began to beat Mark with trash. Coffee cups and fast food splattered behind Mark and Alicia as they fled, drowning the woman in her own slushy waste. Although Mark

and Alicia were now away, she continued to shriek in internal pain.

“He’s gotta tattoo and he’s going to fuck you. Porno, porno, porno.”

Was she talking about the man with the anchor tattoo? Who would involve this crackpot in on their jokes? Mark felt pressured to deny her insinuations.

“Come on Mark. She’s crazy.” Alicia said as they fled through the park back on to the streets. Quiet and unsure, they found themselves crossing the river into a less crowded section of the city. Rain had begun to fall heavily down upon them. The heavens were wrathful and wet. And as they approached Raven Books, a used bookseller that Mark had frequented; he thought it best to seek shelter. During his intense questioning earlier, Alicia had stated her third-favorite author ever was Flaubert because of his “complex human relationships.”

As Alicia wandered aimlessly through the aisles of books, Mark had an idea. There had to be a copy of *Sentimental Education* somewhere in the store. Mark tried to traverse the “H” in the author’s alphabet, but his path was blocked by a man in a tan trench coat. The obstruction wore oversized pants that were adorned in unnecessary pockets - each pants pocket from foot to thigh was crammed and bulging. The man in the trench coat appeared to notice that he was spotted. Pretending to read a hardbound copy of *The Inferno*, his eyes followed Mark from the discount section to the classics and over to the generalized fiction bookshelves. Mark noticed Alicia was elevated on a bookcase ladder and was leaning in for a distant book.

“She’s got a great ass, doesn’t she?” The strange man said without moving his mouth.

“Excuse me?” Mark snapped.

The strange man smiled and continued reading Dante, ignoring Mark. “No, not like that. We need to talk telepathically.

The walls have ears and possibly surveillance equipment. Plus there are agents everywhere: VDI, CIA, UTI, and the IPC. Are you going to try it with her?”

Oh no, not this again Mark thought. Desperate for answers, Mark tried to play along. He sat down and focused himself. “Try what?”

“Your new technique of course! The one Interpol leaked to the Vatican which started this whole mess with the Porn Conspiracy- the brave new position that will change human sexuality and pornography consumption forever and set us free from bland penetrative intercourse! I really do admire you, sir!”

Mark was confused. He didn’t know anything about a new technique. Does masturbation even have techniques? There must be some mistake. Why was the universe so intent on ruining his date with Alicia?

As his mind raced frantically, it was invaded again by the man in the trench coat. “Don’t worry, I’m a material plane virgin. I wouldn’t ever steal your technique. But there are others that seek to exploit your genius. Fuck, they’ve found us!” The man with the trench coat threw his copy of *Inferno* frantically at Mark and scuttled like a crab around a stack of paperbacks, dropping dildos from his bulging pockets. Tucked behind the books, he poked his head out one last time to offer excuses to the confused hipster working behind the counter. “Those sex toys aren’t mine.”

Mark couldn’t take it anymore. The telepathy, the phone call, the mind reading, and now this large man in the trench coat collapsing in front of him. Mark snapped. He had longed for death for a long time and would happily accept it now, if today was the day. From out of the corner of his eye, Mark noticed that Alicia was smiling at him, unaware of the dangers around them. No, he wouldn’t allow the conspiracy to hurt Alicia. She had a life ahead of her. She would meet someone else and fall in

love. She would soon forget she had ever gone on a horrible blind date with MaFish85. Forcibly grabbing Alicia’s hand, Mark pulled her towards the exit. He looked at Alicia terrified beside him. “Trust me, we have to leave. This is for you. I know you love Flaubert.”

They fled down the road to the Longwood area. Perhaps it wasn’t too late, perhaps Sasha would be there. He had seen all of Sasha’s movies and would recognize her immediately. He would just explain, he had no technique and was actually pretty bad in bed. As he dragged Alicia, through the crowds and city streets, people would stop and stare, convincing Mark that the conspiracy was moving in for their final strike. Mark scanned the horizon, waiting for reality to crack open at any moment. Agents of porn, SWAT soldiers, and disembodied sex organs loomed behind every corner, but when would they strike? At times Alicia would try to pry her hands free from Mark, but at others she looked resigned to her fate as his prisoner. Should he leave

her behind? He didn't want to be alone when they came for him, but he was hurting her. What would they do her? "Fuck. He's here!" Mark yelled. A man with slight facial hair and an indecipherable tattoo blocked their way.

"Why don't you let her go, man? You're hurting her."

A crowd had descended around them, probably all agents of the conspiracy. Mark was trapped.

"She's scared. Just let her go."

Panic and terror were in Alicia's eyes. Recognizing that there would probably not be a second date, Mark dropped her hand and fled into the streets through flashing blue lights and a dark angel choir of horns. A car skidded and knocked Mark to the ground- darkness. All things considered, it wasn't that bad- just excruciating weight and an explosion of pain. Death, finally, it was over. Would anyone mourn him? Maybe his mom? Maybe Paul and Matthews from his support group?

When Mark awoke he was in a padded room. The melodious voice of the trench coat man rung in his head, "Wake up. Wake up. "

From the halls, he could hear teeth gnashing and souls suffering throughout the unit. Looking around him, Mark saw what looked like a boiler room converted into a psychiatric ward. The heat was immense. He must be near the furnace.

"Can I come in?"

Where am I? Mark wondered.

The door opened and a doctor in a white lab coat stepped in. Beside her was a woman about the same build and look of Alicia, but slightly younger. Her face looked blank and her eyes glistened emptiness.

"Sasha Green?" Mark stammered.

“It was a good thing we got there when we did. We were able to extract you before the agents moved in. How are you feeling?”

“My head- it’s so foggy.”

“We had to enter the cortex to disseminate the technique to the populace. Sorry about the headache, but you hid it deep in your subconscious. You should have seen the sensation it created on the web! You’ve got production credits of course. You are quite the celebrity know. There is fan mail, which the nurse will bring you later. We just need more. More tits! More cocks! More of your brilliant sexual fantasies!

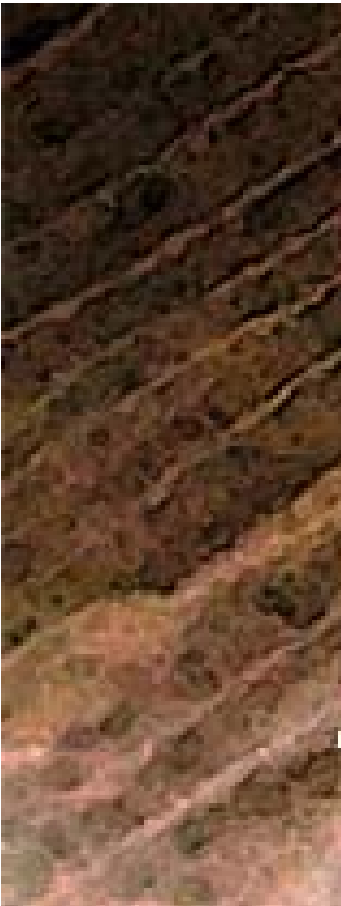
“I’m sorry more what?” Mark said hands holding his aching head.

“More positions. We start production this week. Any ideas?”

“Is Alicia okay?” Mark said looking at the tall slim girl beside Sasha. She could be Alicia’s younger sister, Mark thought. The

girl returned his stare with silence. Droplets of saliva formed around her quivering lips and rolled down her chin. “Who is that?”

“She’s for you. It’s our gift. See what you can come up with on her. Alicia had to go home. But we figured she would be a better and younger substitute anyway. Don’t worry, we took care of her brain.” Sasha turned to the girl beside her. “Stay. Stay. God, she is dumb, but see what you can do with her. We expect great things from you.”



Where the Water Is

by ANJOLI ROY

In the dark water, daughters don't swim straight.
Grandmother, mother, daughter, back to grandmother again.
Twisted fins splash, gills curl water, wake waves. In the dark
water, daughters don't swim straight. Such stubborn fish. Pull
forward. Arch back. In the dark water, daughters swim spirals to
hold our past, to guide us, the water, forward again.

* * *

Grandma is my only grandma, because I call my other
grandma thakurma, which is grandma in Bengali. Even though
grandpa called grandma Großmutter, we never did. Maybe that
was because his parents were from Germany, while mine are
from San Diego, USA, and Khulna, India.

Maybe ancestral languages spoil after one generational step,
when the second generation has both feet planted on foreign soil.
The tragedy of week-old curry or a crusty lemon meringue pie

lost in the back of a moldering American fridge.

Come over here.

Maybe those languages skip over murky descendants like
stones over water. Maybe we're the water, waiting for those cold
tongues to touch us, hoping this time that we'll get something
warmer than English.

I want to tell you a story.

Grandma met grandpa because of a duck! Did you know
that?

*It was a Sunday. There I was, driving with the blooming duck in
my lap.*

She picked him up off the side of the road!

*. . . It was moments like this when I feel the hand of God in my
life.*

Grandma never complained. That's because she lived through
the depression. That's like a really, really long time. I wonder if
she was really, really sad.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't know how to tell a story!

What is this story if not the tinny recording of Grandma's voice stuttering on your tape recorder? The voice of your sisters, your mother, disagreeing with you about the details? The telling and the retelling, the un-telling and the telling again?

A fragment of words and phrases torn up over time in addled memory, knocking about like loose change in a forgotten coin purse.

It'll come to me a little bit later.

A story where, in the end, she couldn't remember his name anymore.

Remember that nice man? He was such a nice man.

Maybe Grandma told you this story so you'd look for more than a man who could read your body like a sentence. Maybe she wanted you to have more words than that. Maybe Grandma wanted you literate.

* * *

I'm home from college for winter break. I'm with a guy who's not *the* guy (my dad's uninvited assessment. I'd introduced them a

few weeks before when Dad was in New York for business, though I'll stay with the guy for another six months).

I'm itchy at home, am checking my Nokia constantly, grabbing at calls from my boyfriend like he's air and home is that dead-water wade pool.

The 2.5-hour drive from Pasadena to Escondido for an afternoon dinner at Grandma and Grandpa's. Mom's not with us. It's starting to occur to me how strange it is that it's my dad who makes these trips to see my mother's parents. Maya's home from college in Atlanta. Joya is chasing Rab and Momo, her dear boys, across the thick carpet of Grandma and Grandpa's living room, scolding Grandma's collection of brittle seashells out of little boy fingers. Her soon-to-be-husband Ben is there too—he's a good guy who she's known since high school and who has been in love with her since then, even though she only recently noticed him. The boys are tumbling over each other in the plush water of Grandma and Grandpa's wall-to-wall carpet. My sisters and I still wrestle here too despite our basically-full-grown-ness. There is a promise

here, but one it's not safe to trust yet.

Chairs pushed back from linoleum floors. I'm clearing plates. When Grandma starts clearing with me, I pretend not to see Grandpa's hand graze Grandma's bum. She smiles, swats at him half-heartedly. Grandpa's orange potassium pill fizzes a water glass. Grandpa looks hollowed, his collarbone too loud, his voice a lowercase O, cancer cutting at him, the sharp sparks pulling him back.

I move to join the rest of the family in the living room, where as kids my sisters and I would gum up with sweaty palms the full-wall picture window that looked out on lazy cars slowing at the four-way stop of South Beech Street and East Fourth Avenue.

Grandma stops me under the arched doorway that leads to the basement. A mounted plastic fish that one of Grandpa's fishing buddies gave him a few Christmases back is stuck on the wall. It used to sing, but doesn't anymore. Grandpa heads out to the living room.

I want to tell you something, she says. Eyes magnified behind

thick glasses, her paper fingertip skin cold on my forearm. I look for my sisters. She pats my arm. We sit back down at the kitchen table. I hope it's not another *Daily Bread* she wants me to look at. I hope it's not a verse she wants me to read with her. Even in all of my agnosticism, I feel bad for hoping this, but I hope anyway.

Joya is loud-laughing in the living room.

Something about a duck. Easter. The 40s.

What?

I watch Grandma closely but don't hear much. I hold my ribcage, keep my gill flaps closed, not wanting to offend her.

Blah blah, something about World War II blah-blah, about Uncle Gordon in Florida for the Air Force blah-blah, and Grandma went to Hawai'i—

Momo is howling in the living room. What about Hawai'i, Grandma?

Grandma went to Hawai'i because her big sister, *what was her name? It'll come to me a little bit later. That's right Virginia Mast!*

(Not her blood sister; her nursing school big sister who was one

year above her.) *Anyway, Virginia had moved there because there were plenty of jobs and dates (dates!) too if you wanted them.*

Grandpa's big old laugh is bouncing off the picture-window.

Grandma left San Francisco on the S.S. Lurline, the same boat Grandpa would take a few years later when he was shipped out, *but I'm getting ahead of myself*, she says, laughing in high-pitch.

Hawai'i was wonderful. Parties on the beach, so many friends, learning about aloha, nice folks who took good care of her and each other. A cliff (the pulley?) with wind so strong it turned a well-dressed woman inside out? Upside down like the waterfalls on something called the windward side? Something about watersheds in mountain cavities. Something about dating military men? (Grandma!) Something about a family called the Kempers who Grandma stayed with. Folks who took care of her. How she worked at a hospital called Tripler in the maternity ward for army wives.

The husbands were never around. Grandma's words like high-pitched water sprinkled on dusty scales. *The head nurse said that*

as long as they were there to lay the keel, we'd take care of the rest! I don't get the ship reference, but I laugh anyway, getting her gist.

Something about how names were published in the paper.

Something about folks coming and going, how you'd have to have your named published in the paper before you left port.

Something about debt collectors and keeping people honest.

I want to go wrestle with my sisters.

I check my phone under the kitchen table. No messages.

Uncle Gordon with a one-month leave so he was coming home to San Diego. Uncle Gordon, Grandma's favorite brother. She'd only been in Hawai'i six months, but she took the Lurline back home at the end of November 1941 because she wanted to see him. It'd been so long! She docked back in California and heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Honolulu on fire while Grandma rocked on a boat, lurched toward home.

All those friends back in Honolulu to worry about. Uncle Gordon called back to his post. Grandma asked to take care of his brand new car, and Gordon obliged, and Grandma suddenly in

the Navy.

What I want to tell you about is in March, though, but I don't know how to tell a story.

I pat Grandma's paper hand, feel myself settling down.

One of the other nurses in Grandma's bunk in Balboa got a duck somehow. Cute for a while but not for long. Pooping everywhere.

I told them about my mom's orchard, said I could take it there.

All her bunkmates so relieved. Grandma heading back to Escondido from Balboa. *The blooming duck in my lap, all over that car.*

You know, I listened to the radio. They told us to pick up any army men we saw, take them home for a meal since they were so far from their families.

(For a *meal*, sure.)

I was used to picking up a bunch of guys (Grandma! [The desire to read into everything]). You know, to take from the base to the local bar, but there wasn't anyone this Sunday except two guys.

I pulled over. Hold this duck, I said. That was the first thing I said to them! I handed that blooming duck to the guy who sat up front in the cab with me.

Grandpa? I'm feeling the water, finally.

She smiles, looks at the plastic fish, mounted at the wall. *I asked them where they'd like to go, if they had a bar in mind, and this young fella who I'd given the duck to said, well, I don't drink. He said they were just a couple of guys from New York. That they'd arrived recently and didn't know what there was to do out here. Well, I remembered how nice all those folks had been to me when I was out in Hawai'i and I asked them if had they ever picked an orange. When they said no, I took them to my mother's house.*

Rab is calling for me from the living room. Momo is crying. Grandpa is scolding someone, Momo most likely.

I am leaning forward, holding Grandma's hand. I want this to swallow me whole.

Grandma stands, gives the kitchen faucet a good twist shut. She walks back over to me. *This is when I feel the hand of God in*

my life. You see? she says. *The smallest decisions, they can change* me.

the rest of your life.

That was the end of our first storytelling session. I was 19.

* * *

Grandma met grandpa because of a duck! Did you know that?

I'm talking to my sisters in our dad's kitchen in Pasadena. Maya is scrounging in the fridge. Joya is sipping at a fat glass of hot tea.

Yah, Joya says, smiling warmly. *It's a good story.*

Momo, Joya's youngest, toddles into the room, looking puffy faced and ready for bed. She scoops him up and he pulls on her shirt as the two of them head to the back bedroom. *It's good to have you home, Anj,* Joya calls over her shoulder.

Ben is reading a story to Rab in my old room.

Maya is making a plate.

Can you believe she picked him up on the side of the road? I say.

Maya shrugs. *Propaganda. They could have gotten people to do anything they wanted at that time.* She drops into a chair next to

I was thinking about writing the story for her, I say.

Oh yah? That would be really nice, Anj. She takes a big bite of the cauliflower, potato, and pea dish that is our favorite.

* * *

What happens if, in the course of writing a story about her, you turn your grandmother into a fish? And what if you turn the duck that brought her to your grandfather into a warm-bellied ship?

If grandma is a fish, and grandpa is his aluminum skiff, I am the knife blade separating scale from skin. I am a drag of red jellied belly bits across the cement pathway outside their house, where crystals sprinkle rainbows in yellow afternoon light the way candles dance dark across warm walls. I'm the cold cavity, borne within.

I'm looking for where the water is.

* * *

Grandma kept the story going when we spoke on the

telephone for birthdays or holidays, in her cramped cursive in her birthday cards that she sent across the country from Escondido to New York York to me.

Happy birthday, Anjoli! Know that your Grandfather and pray for you every day. We love you very much. Love, Grandma P.S. Remember, you're at that age!

Grandma watering me with this story again until the words were heavy and full inside me, until it was all around and through me, until my fins cut water like deserts never existed, like love was always there.

She gave me these words so many times, she started drying up herself.

When Grandpa died. When Alzheimer's started its cruel bleaching of bones.

* * *

How long was Grandma in Hawai'i again, Momma?

A long pause. Her wireless landline crackles. An ambulance races on the street below my living room window followed by the NYPD. *Two years, I think, sweetheart.*

But she wasn't in Honolulu during Pearl Harbor, right? I thought she got there in '41?

Well, she certainly left before the bombing. That was why Uncle Gordon was called to post and she got to have his car.

Right, right.

Listen, you'll have to ask her again, sweetheart. When you're home, though. Her hearing is going the way of her memory, I'm afraid.

* * *

I knew that if I didn't accept the story, make room for it in my heart and mind as truth and acknowledge it as such, it would be lost for good.

I angled for details like I wasn't desperate for them. Like I wouldn't be lost without them. Like I could live without them. Like I didn't need water to breathe.

The next time I was home, I used a tape recorder like cheap buckets all over the house, captured what I could until the roof gave way. Grandma came up to Pasadena with my mother's sister, Ginger. The two of them had brought Grandma's Hawai'i albums to help jog Grandma's memories. We set up shop on my father's dining room table.

You see, in my day, photographs didn't really last the way they do today. So, I never bothered to buy a camera. My friends sent me all of these.

The pictures were black and white, mounted on a black paper background. Grandma's fingers ran over them.

Grandma, why was it a big deal that you dated Grandpa again?

Well, to begin with, he was a Catholic.

I nodded vehemently, understanding that that was a big no-no then for her, being that she was a Protestant. It probably would have been like interracial marriage back then, maybe just

with one degree less on the severity scale. *And then he was also a corporeal. I was an ensign, an officer, that is. So that just wasn't done either. Even to run around in the park wouldn't have been acceptable, she says. If I was in my uniform, anyway.* So, they were friends. How it wasn't until Grandpa took his one-month leave back to New York that she realized how much she missed him.

He'd asked her before he left what he could bring her back. *Hoes, she said. I wanted black nylon hoes.*

A racy gift to ask from a friend, wasn't it, Grandma?

She patted my hand. Silly granddaughter. *Bob wouldn't take any money from me, and I felt bad about that. They weren't cheap. He was gone for a whole month.* I nodded along, remembering this bit of the story and how it would connect to the next about what she did when he was back in California.

Grandma trailed off. *I dated some real jerks when he was gone,* she said.

I thought I heard her wrong when she said this. If I didn't have her saying it on tape, I probably wouldn't believe she did.

She shocked me when she said this. Not only did it crack my perfect image of Grandma and Grandpa, post-duck, but Grandma never complained or called anybody a jerk. Ever. What had these guys done to my grandma?

* * *

I'm a freshman in high school and am coming home from a high school party. I am climbing the dank driveway up to my father's house, where my friend has dropped me off. The moon is playing in the oak tree branches and the playhouse looms darkly in front of the bamboo forest. The manmade wade pool dug a few steps from the playhouse's front door is filled with leaves.

When I was little and the family was still together, that was where Mom would hose me off when I came home too muddy for the clean inside of the house. Eventually, she filled the shallow pool with water from a nearby hose and dumped in a clutch of goldfish that the raccoons clawed out as easy as salad from a buffet tray. We drained the pool then, when the mosquitoes started taking over, when Mom moved out to live with the first

of her boyfriend's, when Dad started getting engaged, when my sisters went away to college, but I never stopped getting bitten.

As I near the house, I fight the urge to run inside and slam the sliding-glass door shut behind me. There are wolves in the bushes, bodies ready to grab me into the shadows, all kinds of menacing, fast-running things that I've actually never encountered in real life.

I am singing "Jesus Loves Me" to myself quietly, even though I'm not Christian, because that's what Grandma told me to do ever since I was small when I was scared, and I still believe it somehow.

When I collapse into my bed, I drop like a stone into the shallow clutches of sleep, my heart still racing. I am tired from drinking the better part of a forty and fending off my boyfriend Chris, who is determined to take my virginity, which I refuse to give him. I am swimming through something I learned in bio that day: about how girls are born with all of the eggs they'll ever have in their lives. That this was completely unlike boys, who make and dispense of sperm throughout their lives. I scribbled

something in the margins of my spiral notebook about how crazy that is, that we are like nested dolls, that to carry a girl baby is like carrying all of your potential grandchildren too. That, in that sense, granddaughters are a grandmother's route home. And vice versa.

A matrilineal, genealogical connection.

That night, I have a nightmare about a crying baby moved across the house by monsters that leave picture books in our mailbox. We find them in the morning.

This is when I learn that love is a barbed-wire necklace.

* * *

The tape recorder crackled and Grandma was talking about when Grandpa's one-month leave was finished and he came back to California. She didn't confess her feelings to him right away. There was that Catholicism to contend with, for one. So Grandma started talking to Grandpa about God. *Do you know where you're going when you die? I asked him. Now this is something a marine was thinking about a lot, and your grandpa*

was a marine. When he told me no, I told him I did, and that got him listening.

Grandma agreed to go to Grandpa's church with him since she wanted him in hers. (She was the daughter of a mission builder; she knew how conversion worked.) She met with his priest and went head to head with him on Bible verses. *I wanted to marry him. I think you should know what I'm talking about.*

She laughed at that and I laughed too, though I felt something pinch in my chest. I was dating a man I'd been with for several years, who a few years later I'd split from. Would I have to find a religion, finally, to be in a relationship that would last? My partner at the time was terribly religious. I was terribly not. I knew I couldn't ask Grandma this.

The flock of my now three nephews whirred past where Grandma and I were hovering next to the dining room table at my father's house. The usually smooth surface of water ribboned, tore. Was that me or the water?

Grandpa got to see then that Grandma knew her stuff and,

surprisingly, his priest didn't. Also, Grandpa liked her picture of a forgiving God rather than the fire and brimstone one he'd been raised with. He converted, and they started dating officially. They spent all their free time together. The war waged somewhere in the periphery and the two worried silently about when Grandpa would be shipped out.

Have you checked the board? one of the nurses in Grandma's bunk asked her one morning.

I told her no.

Well, your name's on it!

The inevitable hadn't happened, the impossible had. They'd been so busy worrying about when Grandpa would be shipped out, they'd forgotten that of course Grandma could be shipped out too. Grandma called Grandpa for the first time ever—*you just didn't do that*—and Grandpa went AWOL from his post, *something he just didn't do either.*

I told him the only way I wouldn't get shipped out was if I was engaged. She'd laugh at this, blushing at her forwardness even

more than a half-century later. *I still feel bad about that too.* What was worse, she'd said, was that since he'd just spent all this money on her hoes, she'd been the one to put up the money for her engagement ring.

The Navy released me when I told them I was engaged. They didn't take married women. The head nurse asked me who I was engaged to. When I told her a marine, she said it'd never last. Phooey! We sure showed her! Grandma laughed at that too, and I couldn't keep my arms from wrapping around her. She never muscled like that.

This was my favorite part of the story.

They were married a year, living in a bare beach cottage by a small stream that one day flooded their kitchen. That's when Grandma learned that Grandpa could build things, and what a talented fisherman he was. He was a freediver who, in one breath, would touch down to the ocean floor with a chisel and hammer and knock abalone off their rocks before they could suction back down. When he had them loose, he'd stick them on his swim

trunks and swim back to the surface. Walking out of the water, he must have looked like a beautiful (I've seen the pictures) mollusk-ed sea monster.

Grandma would batter the abalone. Grandpa would inlay the shells into a coffee table that he and Grandma would still play cards on, long after Grandpa had passed away.

On the day of Grandpa's funeral, when we all took turns weeping in Grandma's kitchen, Grandma told me the rest of the story.

One day your grandpa came home and said tomorrow's the day. He was getting shipped out. So, anyway—that was the phrase my Grandma-who-never-complained would use when something too hard was happening that she didn't want to dwell on—when they finally boarded their trucks and Bob said goodbye, I watched the truck where he was and when they got out on the road, I went out and I kept going up until I got behind his truck and he was sitting outside looking back so I drove all the way down to the entrance of the ship, from Miramar down to the base. When we

finally got to the base, they turned in and I couldn't go. That was the end, so I had to keep going straight ahead. That was the worst day of my life. So, woooooooo! she uncharacteristically mimed crying hard here. I cried and cried! It wasn't fair—we were just getting started! Here the Lord had given the man He'd made just for me, and he was getting taken from me! That's why now, she'd said, water flowing down my face, filling me, I can't cry. Not like I did that day. I cried my tears for your grandpa that day. The Lord gave me more than fifty years with that man after that, and I'm grateful. He gave me a man He'd made just for me. And I got to love him and have my life with him all these years. And, anyway, in a little bit of time, I'll get to be with him again!

A few years later, in her telling, she did.

* * *

Can a story hold us together?

Grandma wanted it to. To give us a story that we needed even after our parents split and Joya was in danger. To nurse us through the heartbreaks and worse that we would endure.

Grandma wanted to give us everything, even if that meant she had nothing left.

It was her favorite story to tell. It was her last story, the one that brought her back to the present.

You're at that age now, she'd start, hoping that was enough to weave the story back into us, even after it had been lost to her, that promise that there was a way forward, that the dark water would hold us together.

Grandma had been waiting for my sisters and me to be 19 our whole lives, so she could tell us this story. One on one, one at a time.

I keep thinking about what a long time to wait that was.



Watched Pot

by CAROLYN ZIEL

Last night after we made love Bill went outside to wait for the rain.

He stood on the flagstone patio , hands in the pockets of his white terry robe ,
watching the oncoming storm hover in the distance.

She was moving in her own time.

I opened the back door and leaned outside?

“A watched pot never boils.” I said. ?

But I knew , if watched long enough , it would boil.

Bill stood patient , planted , like a tree whose roots are thirsty for wet.

“I felt a drop ,” he said.

This morning the house is quiet ,
except for the sounds of sleep and wind and rain.

pictures of splintered trees ,
pictures of floating cars , flooded and stuck in muck ,
pictures of sand bags and empty beaches and businesses shut down ,
a flash of yellow earthmover slogging through mud?
and inevitably dramatic coverage?of swift water rescue from the quick rising LA River.

Later , I'll dress for weather.

New winter boots

water resistant , lined with fur.

Ultramarine raincoat

that matches nothing.

I'll walk , head down , to the car ,

open the trunk and dig for the umbrella.



The Boogreater

by NICK HILBOURN

Alissa was ready to burst. Glancing at the classroom ceiling, she seriously considered Jasso's suggestion that she could become a rocket, that this was best method of escape. Right *now*, she thought, I should do it right *now*. But something about the drone of the classroom held her back. Some feeling she couldn't accurately define: the air was too heavy, she wasn't wearing the right shoes or wasn't positioned correctly? No, she thought, that's not *it*. Just an uneasy feeling in her stomach that she was never able to pin down. Not yet, she thought. Her legs jittered under the desk, popping lightly on the balls of her feet, making light tapping sounds. Just not yet. It was frustrating, but that was that.

Mrs. Hepburn was facing the class and looking straight at her. Her hands folded like she was keeping a puppy from protruding from her stomach. Her eyes glimmered by the reflection of the

sun on her glasses and she sent laser beams to keep all the students in their seats. Alissa looked to Lansing on her right, whose hair had been ruthlessly combed and soldered to his skull by his mother, most likely. His eyes were connected to Mrs. Hepburn's fingers by a string and whenever she lifted her hand his head followed. He was like a puppet. Alissa smiled whenever she thought about him. Jasso didn't like Lansing, but Alissa thought he was adorable, like a doll. Sometimes, just after his hair was cut, his parents wouldn't put gel in his hair and his bangs would curl up slightly over his eyebrows. Alissa thought it was beautiful. Her own hair was too thick, too oily, too curly. Nappy. Ugly. She thought about running her hands over his head, cutting Mrs. Hepburn's strings and marrying him. Jasso rolled his eyes whenever she talked about that.

If she was going to rocket through the ceiling, then she would take Lansing with her. After Lansing, she might take Lydia at the front of the class. Lydia had curly black hair that fell just

above her butt and whipped up at the end like a coat hook. Her hair would look pretty when they were flying through the air.

Alissa would let her sit on her back, in front of Lansing even, just so the black curls would fall over her ears and tickle her nose and mouth as they flew through the air. Beautiful hair. Lansing and Lydia, *but no one else*. All the other boys in the class would probably try to crash her into the playground equipment and all the other girls would talk about how nasty the smoke coming out of her was.

Outside, part of the school was already at recess. That was first lunch and Alissa thought that they weren't very good at recess. No one was on the jungle gym hanging upside down. This was the best part of recess. No one was running with their arms held out. This was how you got started if you wanted to fly. They were on the swings or the slides and some of the boys were playing baseball with a stick and a pine cone or racing from the monkey bars to the sandbox.

Alissa turned back to the classroom and Mrs. Hepburn was staring at her. She felt warm inside, like someone with cold hands had suddenly ran their fingers up her spine. The laser beams. Mrs. Hepburn turned away. Alissa pressed the side of her left nostril and felt a sharpness. She dug up her nose and discovered a large crusty booger on the right side of her left nostril.

She tried to pull the booger out in one go, but it was higher up than she had previously thought. The higher she went the more she thought she might poke her brain and Jasso had told her that this had actually happened to a kid much older than him. He said that the kid had poked his brain out and couldn't do anything anymore. Just wandered around with a blank stare on his face and his parents wished he'd never picked his nose to begin with. This bothered Alissa to hear, but she knew that it was just Jasso telling her to be careful. He didn't need to worry, she thought. She'd done this before.

Yesterday, she'd told Jasso that she was seriously interested in becoming a rocket. He shook his head and said that she was always trying to rocket away somewhere, but she never knew where she was going. "It doesn't matter where I end up," she said. Jasso laughed. "Well, that parts important. But I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd really be interested," he said. "But I am. I think it's the best way." "It *is* the best way. If you want to leave as soon as possible, but you've got to have enough fuel to make the *whole* trip. You should eat a lot and be in good shape. So, you should start running." "But I don't want to race with the boys during recess?." Jasso shook his head. "That's not what I meant...*I'll* train you." Alissa smiled and nodded. "Okay," she said. "Next recess," Jasso said. He had been sitting on the couch when he'd told her that. They had been pretty much alone in the house: their mother in her room with a cold washcloth over her face and the television on but neither of them watching it.

"But where are you *going*, huh?" Jasso asked, biting a piece of beef jerky off and chewing it with his mouth open. He had a

whole slab in his hand. He had probably bought it at the gas station down the street. He loved beef jerky, but when he finished his breath smelled terrible, like an old stink of puke. So, Alissa sat across the room because she liked to talk to Jasso, but not when his breath smelled like beef jerky. It smelled like long car rides their family used to take. The whole car smelled like it because their dad liked beef jerky. That's why Jasso liked it because their dad chewed it. He had also said it made a great fuel, but Alissa said that she'd have to find something else because the smell of beef jerky made her sick. "But Alissa, *where* are you going to go?" he asked again and Alissa didn't know what to say.

"Alissa!" She jumped and swung her head around quickly. The classroom was suddenly in front of her again and she felt dizzy. Things were moving apart as if the floor were increasing in size, things were separating from themselves. She could see table legs and tops, but they were scattered all over the room and getting farther and farther away from each other. Mrs. Hepburn

shot a laser beam at her and everything suddenly slammed together. Alissa jumped, quickly withdrew her finger from her nose and placed her hands on her desk. She had not retrieved the booger and now she could *really* feel it, but Mrs. Hepburn was staring at her so she could do nothing. She picked up her pencil up and wrote the cursive “I”, lower case and upper case. The booger stung at her nostril now and she couldn’t concentrate. Even though Mrs. Hepburn was staring at her, she needed to get it out.

Jasso said that he picked his nose all the time when the teacher was looking. He said that he always held his hand up to his cheek and slid his pinky finger into his nose. Alissa thought she would try this. She put her right hand on her cheek and slowly inserted her pinky finger. Mrs. Hepburn’s eyebrows did not raise and Alissa knew it’d worked. She smiled. Once she’d asked Jasso how he knew so much about nose picking and he had said, “I’ve been doing for a long time.” “How long?” Alissa had asked.

Jasso ripped off a piece of beef jerky and talked with his mouth full again. He did it on purpose, she thought. “I was picking even when I was inside momma’s belly.” “Really?” Alissa scrunched her nose because the smell of his breath had reached her even though he was across the room. “Until she spit me out.”

Alissa had the booger on her pinky and she was drawing it out very slowly. Mrs. Hepburn hadn’t noticed a thing. She glanced around the classroom to see if Lydia or Lansing had seen her. They stared straight ahead. She heard a knock on the window and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jasso. She smiled and wanted to wave, but she didn’t want get in trouble with Mrs. Hepburn. He saw her and waved. Jasso was always waving to her because he didn’t have to go to school. Every kid she knew had to go to school, but Jasso was special. He was invisible.

Jasso saw Alissa’s finger up her nose and he put a finger up his nose, too. A booger slid along the sides of her nostrils and Alissa

smiled. She looked at it. It was the biggest she had ever pulled out of her nose. Mrs. Hepburn wasn't looking at her anymore. She was writing more cursive on the board. Alissa waved her booger at Jasso. He nodded and grinned. Then, he pulled his finger out. His booger was wider than her hand. It came out of his nose like a magician's handkerchief. He held it up in the air like it was a prize fish, swung it back and forth, floppy and wet. That was what their father did when they were at the lake house three summers ago. He caught a tiny fish and waved it around. It was floppy and wet and the water hit their mother and them in the face. They were all in a boat together and he put the fish close to his face and did a voice like it was speaking. Jasso couldn't do that right now because you couldn't hear anything through the window, but he did something *more* amazing. He held the booger in the air, waved it over his mouth and winked at Alissa. Then, his jaw disjointed until it was nearly as big as his head and he swallowed the booger whole. Alissa clapped and giggled.

"Alissa!" Alissa jerked her head in Mrs. Hepburn's direction. "Pay attention. Are you writing in your handwriting book?" Alissa nodded. "Good. Keep it up. Recess will come after lunch. Right now we *concentrate*." "Yes, ma'am," said Alissa and looked at her book until it appeared she was paying attention. When Mrs. Hepburn turned around, Alissa looked at the window again and Jasso was hanging upside-down. His legs were wrapped about the windowsill. Alissa knew that was dangerous. Mrs. Hepburn would surely see him. Jasso shook his head. He knew what she was thinking. Alissa smiled. "Oh, I forgot," she said softly to herself.

Jasso told Alissa one night before she went to sleep that he could tell what people were thinking. "How did you learn how to do that?" she asked. "It happens when you become invisible. Thinking is invisible. Once you're invisible you catch everything else that's invisible," he said and hopped on top of her bed. "Really?" "Yeah, I can see daddy, too." "Is he here?" she asked and

curled her legs against her chest, wrapping her arms around them and looking around the room quickly. She hadn't seen her father in several months. Jasso back-flipped off the bed and landed on his hands. "Of course. He's really mad that I backflipped on the bed, but he's glad you're in bed. He says I should stop bothering you so you can go to sleep." "Don't. I don't want you to go. I *like* when you're here." "I know. I can read your mind."

The first lunch kids were heading back inside. Their recess was over. Jasso jumped down from the windowsill and pointed to his nose and then to Alissa. He was pointing to her booger and she showed it to him. He clapped and gave her a thumbs-up, then he leaned back and opened his mouth wide. Alissa nodded and smiled. She looked at the board. Mrs. Hepburn was writing the cursive Z and told the rest of the class to do so. Alissa did so, holding the pencil in such a way as not to accidentally wipe off the booger.

The bell rang and the students stood up at once. Lansing was pulled so tautly on Mrs. Hepburn's string that he almost fell forward when he stood and Lydia's hair bounced up and down when she stood. It was so beautiful, Alissa thought. She looked toward the window and Jasso was there. She smiled because she knew he could read her thoughts and she pointed at Lydia. Jasso gave her a thumbs-up. Then, he pointed to his mouth and Alissa nodded. Mrs. Hepburn was wiping the board so she quickly slipped the booger into her mouth and swallowed. She made a thumbs-up. Jasso jumped up and down on the windowsill, laughing.

At lunch, Alissa sat by herself. She wanted to sit beside Lansing or Lydia, but they sat with their friends so that there wasn't an open seat, so she ate by herself instead. Jasso wasn't there and her stomach hurt. He always made her feel better. When her father had made her sit on his lap, Jasso had been there. Each time he'd been there. He made funny faces

whenever she felt like crying. “*Shh*. Just look at me,” he’d said and pulled the corners of his eyes and mouth together with his thumb and forefingers. “Okay,” Alissa said. The room was dark and had stunk of beef jerky.

Outside, he tapped her on the shoulder and then hid when she turned around. “I see you!” she said, even though she didn’t. But she felt he was there. Suddenly, he popped up right in front of her face. She squealed and then giggled. “Where *were* you?!” she asked. “Where? Not in the lunchroom. I hate school lunches.” “It wasn’t so bad today.” “Never. Those lunches make you puke!” “No they don’t...do they?” “Sure they do.” “What should I eat then?” Jasso grinned, pulled out some beef jerky and bit off a huge slice. Alissa scrunched her nose, but she didn’t care what Jasso ate as long as he would walk beside her. “I don’t think I could ever eat that,” she said. Jasso rolled his eyes and looked down at the ground, biting a piece of beef jerky and chewing it thoughtfully. “Okay, I got it. This is how you get fuel. If you

won’t eat beef jerky, then eat your boogers. It’ll help you.” “How?” “Because you’re eating yourself. The more of yourself you eat then the less of you there is. And soon you’ll become invisible like me and then you’ll be able to rocket.” “And I can take anyone I want?” “*Well...*” Jasso said, and took another bite of jerky. Alissa was at the jungle gym. There were a couple of kids sitting near the top. They stared at her and then talked to each other. Her stomach hurt again. Jasso climbed up the jungle gym and hung upside down. He wiggled his finger for Alissa to come inside and she did.

“Who do you want to invite?” “Lansing...or maybe Lydia.” Jasso shook his head. “They’re not light enough. Just one person, anyway. You don’t want to weigh yourself down and crash.” Alissa nodded, watching Jasso do tricks on the jungle gym. He hung from a bar with one thumb, grabbed another bar with his ankle and then swung himself through the air to a bar on the opposite side. But Alissa wasn’t amused. She suddenly felt very serious.

“Jasso...were you always invisible?” Jasso took another bite of jerky before he spoke. Alissa scrunched her nose again. “People could see me when I was first born, but I decided I didn’t like that, so I just ate my whole body right then. Then I was invisible.” “But how did you know how to do it?” Jasso shook his head. “I knew I was born for it. Some people are just born to be *invisible* and some have to work at it. Daddy, he worked at it for a long time, but now he’s here. Soon you’ll be here, too. And then you’ll be able to see him.” “Is Daddy there right now?” “You wanna see him?” Alissa looked down and pouted her lips in thought. Then, she shook her head rapidly. “No thank you.” “But you *will* see him.” “When?” “I don’t know. Momma, she’s almost done it.” “Really?” “Yeah, she’ll be here soon.” “So, I’ll be alone?” Jasso clicked his teeth. “Alone? I’m here. You won’t be alone.” “I don’t want to be alone.” “Well...there’s not much you can do about it...momma’s coming so you better start eating beef jerky or boogers.” “I don’t like that.” “It doesn’t matter.” “I know,” Alissa said and her shoulders tightened. “I don’t like momma

anymore. And if you go, I won’t like you.” Jasso said nothing, climbing up and down the jungle gym silently. Alissa thought he looked like a spider crawling across its web. He did it so smoothly, backward and forwards without a pause, without a sound. He smiled at her and made a thumbs-up. She glared at him.

The kids at the top of the jungle gym were crawling down, staring at Alissa and speaking to themselves in low voices. One of them was Lansing. Her face felt warm and she didn’t wave. She felt like she had to use the bathroom, but she didn’t want to leave without Jasso. She always talked to him when she used the school toilet. “Jasso?” She looked around, but he was gone. “Jasso?” Alissa wandered around the playground until recess was over, but Jasso never showed up. He didn’t knock on the window during class in the afternoon and he wasn’t sitting beside her on the school bus or jumping on its roof. She looked out the window to see if he was racing the bus on the side of the road

(which he sometimes did so he could beat her home). But he wasn't there.

He wasn't at home either. And he was *always* there, hiding under Alissa's bed or speaking to her from the closet. Her mother didn't see him and didn't like it when Alissa spoke to him, but Jasso said that that was because she was jealous. He didn't say why she was jealous, but Alissa thought that it was because she wasn't invisible yet.

She lied down on her bed, putting her back to her mirror hanging on the wall, even though there was a blanket over it. She wanted to crawl under the covers and take a nap, but she didn't feel sleepy and she also felt a little scared of closing her eyes. Am I alone?, she thought. She sat up and hugged her knees to her chest. An uncomfortable tingling sensation encircled her ear, like someone was blowing air on her. She knew it was her reflection, staring at her behind the blanket. "Stop it," she said, but it continued to stare. She got up and walked into the living room.

Alissa didn't see her mother and she didn't answer when Alissa called out her name. Still, she was home. The house had a scent when she was there, just like it did for Jasso. Her mother's scent was freshly vacuumed carpet, even when the carpet hadn't been vacuumed. Jasso was crayons, at least it used to be. She used to love when he was around because it was like sticking her head in a box of crayons and taking a really big sniff. It changed when he'd watched her on her father's lap. She watched him to keep from crying. Her father was sitting on her bed, facing the mirror, and she could see everything that he was doing to her. His fingers trailing down her chest and then under her skirt. But worse was her reflection, staring at her from the mirror. It was her reflection that seemed to keep her there, that refused to let her leave. The eyes. (Not *her* eyes, but the eyes of a dead bird on the sidewalk, frozen in a look of horrific surprise. It was her reflection and *not* her father, she thought, that had made her want to cry. But this wasn't right either. It was something she couldn't accurately define.)

Then, Jasso came in and climbed her wall, falling off on purpose, making silly sounds. “Look over *here*, Alissa! Look at me!” And Alissa looked at him and it felt like she wasn’t part of her body anymore, that it wasn’t her in the mirror at all. Not *her* reflection. It was the television playing mindless images on the screen. (But that wasn’t it.) She looked at Jasso and giggled. “Shh...” he said and held a finger to his lips. Alissa nodded and was silent. After that, Jasso smelled like beef jerky.

Alissa’s stomach hurt again and she thought about Lansing. She wished that he hadn’t been with the other boys watching her talk to Jasso. Now she was sure that he wouldn’t speak to her again. She laid face down on the couch and tilted her head toward the television. The remote was on the coffee table. She turned on the television and watched images and sound move across the screen, but she couldn’t organize them. Her head was warm, too. She felt very sad and, suddenly, she cried but only with tears. No whimpering or moaning like other times when

she’d scraped her knee or bumped her elbow really hard. Just tears rolling down her cheeks. She stopped trying to follow the colors and sound on the screen. She didn’t want to organize anything. She didn’t care. Slowly, her body curled into a fetal position and her eyes stared straight ahead without seeing anything. She dug her face into the couch and felt the tears slide down her cheek, some going into her mouth, some dampening the couch fabric.

“Jasso,” she said, even his beef jerky breath on her neck would be nice. But she felt nothing and she moaned loudly. She didn’t want to call her mother. She was angry at her mother because she’d leave soon, too. And then, she’d be alone. She was angry at Jasso, too, but she wouldn’t be if she could see him again. If he would pop up from the couch cushion at that moment, her anger would disappear like a spit stain in the sun.

She sat up and her fingers rubbed the damp spot where her tears had fallen. Still warm, she thought. The house was very

large and empty now. And fake. Even with everything in it, it was fake. Like the cardboard boxes for packing in the attic. Nothing in them, even though they seemed filled with things. She felt hungry, but she didn't want to eat. Still, she stood up and walked into the kitchen. A jar of peanut butter was on the counter. The top was off. She ran her finger along the rim of the jar. A glob of peanut butter sat on her index finger, but the sight of it made her sick. She smeared it along the kitchen counter. The idea of smearing peanut butter all over the cabinets crossed her mind, but that made her feel sick, too. She stood still, listening to the house. A clock ticked somewhere in the kitchen or the living room. The refrigerator hummed quietly. I don't know what to do, she thought, but I think should *do* something.

The kitchen was very small now. The refrigerator, cabinets and counters all bunched together around the sliding glass door. Freshly cleaned, there were no streaks. Almost as if there wasn't glass there, as if she could walk straight through the frame. Only

the faint, ghostly image of her reflection moved within it. Like it was trapped in the glass. She waved. It was very bright outside, but she didn't want to go outside. She wanted to be in a dim space. A small space. Smaller than her room. A place that would make her shrink until she no bigger than a grain of salt.

She walked to the sliding glass door, pressed her face against it. The clock ticked. The refrigerator hummed. Her cheek left an oily circle and she licked it without exactly knowing why she did so. Her reflection was in the mirror, slightly altered by the oily spot. Trapped in the glass. Her eyes and the outline of her chin. "Hello," she said.

The reflection said, "Hello."

"I'm Alissa," she said.

"Hello, Alissa," the reflection said back.

Alissa sat down and the oily spot was gone and she could see the reflection more clearly. She ran her fingers over the glass and said, “I love you.”

“I love you,” said the reflection and Alissa leaned her head against the glass.

“Thank you,” she said. The reflection didn’t say anything, but she knew that it heard her, that it wouldn’t leave. “You’re welcome,” Alissa said for the reflection.

She closed her eyes and smiled. “Don’t come back, Jasso,” she said. “I don’t like you anymore.” The refrigerator buzzed now. She realized the television was still on. It filled the living room, making it seem as if it was full of people. Nothing else. No other sounds. The backyard was silent behind the glass. She passed gas. Her shoulders warmed. She curled up on the linoleum floor and, in a few minutes, was asleep.



Diner, 4:00 A.M.

by JOHN GREY

One guy is raking through the sugar bowl for FBI microphones. Some tattooed bikers spontaneously arm-wrestle, their elbows in their eggs. I sip my coffee slowly, half-asleep.

I am still waking. For all I know any of these others could be what I am becoming...

the loud-mouthed truckers, the grizzled white-haired man in his one suit, the petals of a dead rose peering out of its coat pocket. I may have no lover. I may have no family.

Sleep and life are separate my senses tell me. They may have drifted in the night.

The waitress's voice chimes in my ear like a sour clock. The cook's basso rumbles up from his steaming volcano of a grill. The caffeine is working. I am beginning to recognize these for what they're not. The mirror behind the counter helps. The way I spin this hard stool does too. Sip after sip, they drag me back to who I was yesterday

with tiny, almost unknowable variations.

For Gina

by JOHN GREY

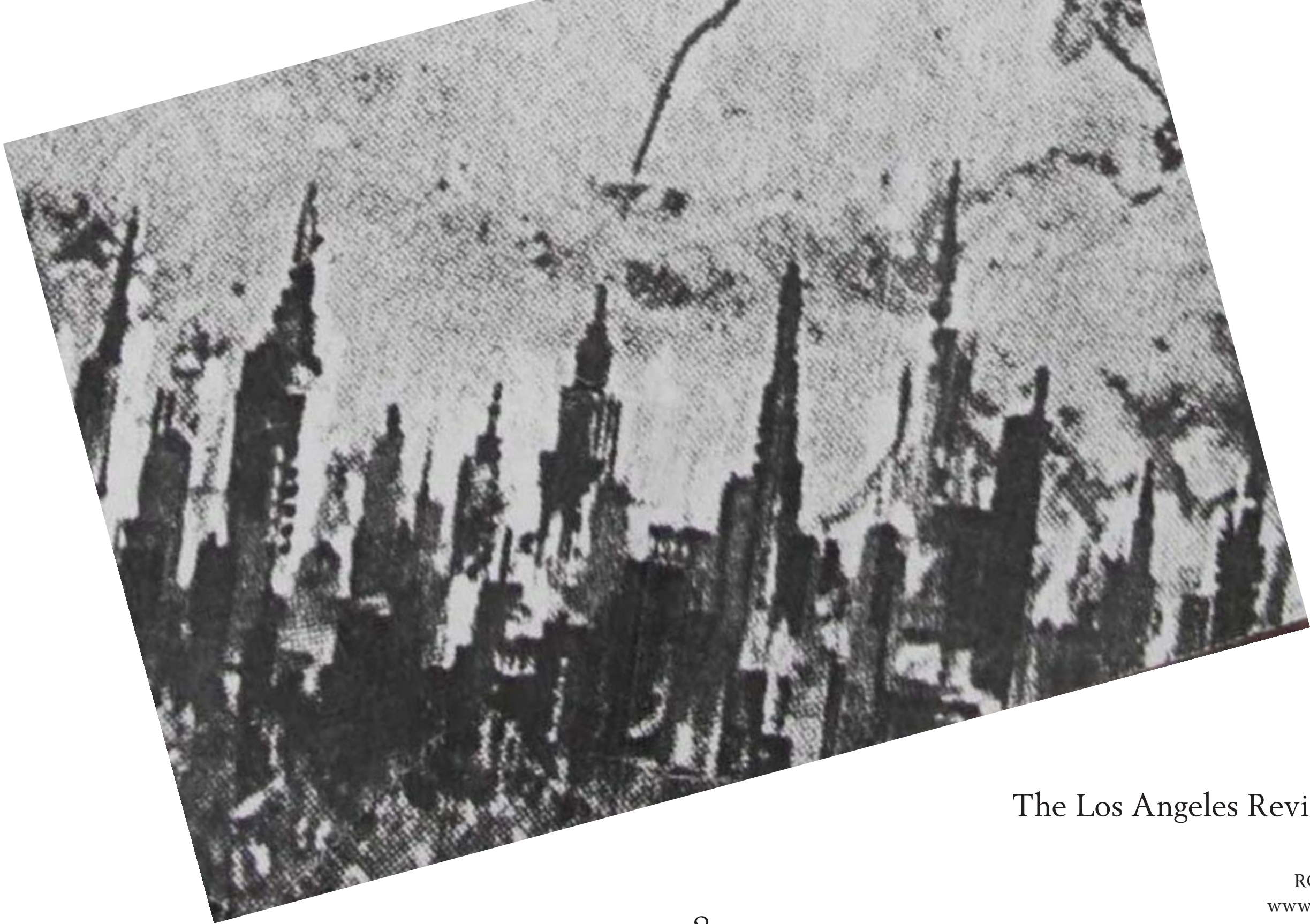
Wind tips the grass against the current. It's where the dead meet the sorrow. Folds of mist rise up from this machinery of mourning. An occasional pebble cracks against the banks like bone. A deer dips its face into the berry bush. The sound of his feasting becomes, for me, a drip of honey red down his fawn cheeks, the way the stillness can reside temporarily, at least, in the dip of his head. As day lengthens, trees and light circle my thoughts. The dead are lost and dreamy in them. The current skitters off toward the old days. The twilight, one more layer, one less plan of action.

Editor's Note

by ROBIN WYATT DUNN

To Edit Means to Give Out, from ex + dare, which gave us edition, back formation to edit.

You are my back formation and I am yours.



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