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THE GUY WHO WANTS ME TO FUCK HIS DOG

by DAVID RUTTER

“How’d you like to fuck my dog?”

I can’t remember his name. Maybe I never knew it to begin with. Maybe he was just “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog.” That’s how I identified people in those days. You see, I worked all night behind the counter of a convenience store at the corner of Avenida de Los Arboles and Lynn Rd., in sleepy, little Thousand Oaks, California.

Now, being fully versed in the American style of customer service, I am well aware of the adage that “the customer is always right.” Well, “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” provided a serious challenge to that tried and tested rule. Pushed it to the breaking point, in fact. If you are one of those who believes that, without exception, the customer IS always right, I

dare you to put in a couple of shifts between 11pm and 7am at your local convenience store and see how that belief holds up for you. You might find yourself with a whole new perspective on the subject. The obscene things people would do with ice cream, nacho cheese and unbelievably, their own feces, could only be considered right in the works of the Marquis de Sade.

It was a typical night in the life of your mild-mannered narrator/convenience store clerk: refusing alcohol and cigarettes to minors, cleaning up disgusting messes, stocking, restocking, then stocking again, telling the endless stream of riff raff that the bathroom was off limits. The usual. “The Man With No Friends” had been in for a couple of excruciating hours to regale me with the most intimate details of his dietary habits. After that, I was having a rare quiet moment ruminating over the most painless method of

committing suicide when the evil manchild who would be forever known as “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” walked in through the door.

My first impression, as I watched him lash his mangy mutt to the bike rack out front was that he looked like a homeless hockey player, what with the greasy overalls, missing teeth and long, unkempt blond mullet. What’s with the mullet, anyway? What vital step of fashion awareness did guys like this miss that they would choose to deface themselves in such a manner? Did they think, “Sure, mullets look ridiculous on every other human being on the planet but hey, on me, it looks hot”? He certainly seemed proud of himself as he sauntered through the front door with a macho, Dirty Harry-like swagger.

He walked straight up to the counter where I stood, digging deep in the pockets of his dirty, blue overalls. “Hey dude. What’s up?”,

he asked, as he slammed a small bag of marijuana and a pot pipe on the counter in front of me. “You wanna get high?”

“I don’t think my boss would approve of that,” I said with a smile.

“Well, how’s he gonna know?”

I glanced up at the surveillance camera mounted on the ceiling, then back at him and said, “Oh, I think he’ll know.”

“C’mon, let’s get high,” he responded with a toothless grin that made me a little sick to my stomach.

“I don’t want to get high,” I said, “I’m working.”

He looked at me as if I’d just told him the earth was flat and said, “C’mon, don’t be square. What’s the matter? You don’t get high?”

“That’s not the point,” I answered, “I don’t want to get high with you. I wouldn’t get high with you if you were the last person on Earth. You could tour elementary schools as a living, breathing anti-drug commercial.”

He just stood there, grinning that insipid grin, running his tongue over the space where his teeth should have been. He stared at me for what seemed like an eternity. “Has he gone to his happy place?”, I thought. There was nothing going on in his eyes. The lights were on but nobody was home. He’ll, maybe the lights weren’t even on.

Finally, he let out a loud guffaw, clucked several times like a chicken and said, “I like to get high.”

“I can see that,” I answered stoically.

“I like to fuck my dog,” he said.

“Sure you do. Who wouldn’t?”, I answered, trying to keep the conversation light and on the theoretical level, “He’s very handsome.”

Had he really said what I thought he’d said or had I just taken a grand leap into some kind of pornographic Twilight Zone? I was trying to keep my bearings. “Don’t look away,” I thought. Show any sign of weakness and he’ll move in for the kill. The thought occurred to me that at least he couldn’t bite me.

And then it came. The question that would be forever seared into my brain. The last thing that any mild-mannered convenience store clerk would want to hear at 4am in the morning.

“How’d you like to fuck my dog?”

I stuttered slightly as I responded, “N..n..no. No. I don’t think so.”

“C’mon, why not? He’s really good.”

I made a really big mistake then. Our eyes met. Contact. His eyes seemed lost. Wild. Crazy. “I might have a big problem here,” I thought, “this guy’s capable of anything.” But the damage had been done. I couldn’t look away. I couldn’t break free. I was having a moment with this fucker. His smile widened grotesquely and a look of triumph came over his face. He knew he had the upper hand. He’d dragged me, kicking and screaming, into his dark world of insanity and I was trapped there, helpless to escape.

It occurred to me that the next few moments were critical. What I would say and do next would make all the difference in the world. I could either regain control of this situation or surrender myself to whatever black design he had in his bubbling, throbbing mind. I pulled my gaze violently from his and began puttering about the counter. I picked up a rag and began wiping at

nonexistent dirt. I was hoping he wouldn’t notice the frantic awkwardness of my actions.

“Pull yourself together, boy,” I told myself, “You’re engaged in a power struggle with someone not only capable of fucking his own dog but also passing his sickly animal off to any stranger he’s met.” Did he like to watch? Was that his trip? Would he stand there with his slimy, shriveled penis in his hand as he watched other men pump away at his poor animal? And if he thinks his dog is hot, how attractive does he find me?

I grabbed a mop that was leaning against the counter and held it to my chest, thinking it was very possible that I might need a weapon.

“I think you’d better go,” I mumbled then, putting all my cards on the table. I knew I was taking a risk. A statement this bold just might set him off but I had nothing else.

“Don’t say that,” he answered, as he began dancing maniacally around the counter that, at this moment, was affording me very scant protection. “I want to be your friend.”

I don’t need any friends,” I answered, “I’ve got plenty of friends.”

He then started into some kind of shamanistic war dance. Skipping and jumping and whooping around the counter with a look on his face that could only be described as profound ecstatic confusion. He began thrusting himself over the counter, bringing his twisted visage in such close proximity to my face that I could feel the wayward strands of his greasy mullet brushing against my skin. This was more than I could stand. I imagined that his mullet hairs were reaching out to me like tiny feelers, or more accurately, stingers . . . to directly inject under my skin whatever sick disease was so obviously infesting him. I had no choice. I began poking him with the blunt end of the mop I was holding.

This, unfortunately, only managed to incite and enrage him further, so that he began grimacing madly and letting forth with a series of guttural, yet high pitched screams that sounded like a squirrel being stuffed into a blender.

“Shit, I’ve done it now,” I thought.

He spun wildly in a circle and made a mad leap for one of the many full coffee pots I had brewed just prior to his unfortunate arrival. He grabbed the nearest pot, holding it high in the air like some kind of trophy. He glared at me, his big toothless grin widening obscenely, his face refulgent with insanity.

“How about a nice cup of joe?”, He declared as as he proceeded to turn the pot upside down, emptying it’s contents onto the nice, clean floor that I had mopped not even an hour before.

“Don’t do that,” I said, hesitantly.

“Why not?”, he responded, “It’s fun. Isn’t it fun?” He grabbed a second pot and with a look of supreme triumph, emptied it onto the floor as well.

“That’s it. I’m calling the cops,” I said as I grabbed the phone. This was getting out of control fast and I was running out of options.

I quickly dialed 911. Luckily his attention was off me for the moment. He had fully embraced his task of flooding the entire store with coffee and was throwing himself into it with all of the gusto of an artist creating his masterpiece. “It’s going to take me a long time to clean that up,” I thought, “No time to worry about that now. My life is on the line.”

On the other end of the phone, I heard them pick up. “This is 911. How can we help you?”

“I’m being attacked by a lunatic,” I said, “I’m at the convenience store on the corner of Los Arboles and Lynn. Please send someone right away. I don’t know how long I can hold him off.”

“Stay calm,” the voice responded, “we’ll send a car right away.”

Stay calm? Why do they always tell you to stay calm? If there was ever a time to get excited, that time was now.

Stay calm and wait. Keep him occupied till the cops arrive.

Looking up at him, I noticed, with a small feeling of relief, that keeping him occupied might not be a problem. At least for the moment he certainly seemed occupied. He had a full pot of coffee in each hand and was spinning in a circle, letting the coffee from both pots fly into the air, creating a spectacular coffee fountain that was spraying almost to the ceiling. He was far enough away that none was reaching me, thank God; but the hot, black liquid was literally raining down on him.

“Isn’t he getting burnt?”, I thought, “That coffee is hot.” I could still see the steam off it even as it landed on his glistening, oily skin. Was he just so hopelessly, incontrovertibly bonkers that he’d become insensitive to pain?

I glanced nervously outside, looking for a car, flashing lights, anything. Any sign at all that the cops were showing up. Why does it take them so fucking long? No car, no lights, not even a siren in the distance. Nothing! Just the lonely dark night, an empty parking lot and a mangy mutt lashed to the bike rack in front of the store.

The dog! In all the excitement of wild vandalism and potential violence, I’d forgotten about the dog. That was how this whole thing had started. This quivering creep had wanted me to fuck his dog. The twisted, ugly thought suddenly occurred to me that

maybe I should just do it. If it was a choice between my life and the dog, then I’d fucking well fuck the fucking dog. Oh, who was I kidding? Even with a gun to my head I couldn’t fuck Lassie, let alone this pathetic, flea infested mutt.

Just then a wailing, high pitched squeal pulled me out of my twisted reverie and focused my attention back where it belonged. On the dangerous crazy man singlehandedly demolishing my store. He was sitting in the middle of a large puddle of coffee on the floor, splashing it and spraying it into the air like a two year old in one of those back yard wading pools.

“Having fun?”, I said sarcastically. The sound of my own voice surprised me. Is this what happens when you know you’re about to die and you have nothing left to lose? You suddenly find previously unplumbed depths of courage and fortitude that you had no idea you possessed.

“Oh, yes indeedy, honeypie. I’m having the time of my friggen’ life,” he sort of half bellowed, half guffawed, if you can imagine that. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“I think I do,” I said soberly.

As he started to get up I gripped the mop handle so tightly in my shaking, sweaty hands I thought that my fingers were going to snap from the strain. “One good swing,” I thought. “One perfect shot to the head. That’s all it would take to end this thing once and for all.”

Now where in God’s name were those fucking cops?

Just then a flash of movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention and I turned to see the black and white pulling into the parking lot. “Finally,” I thought, “it’s about fucking time.” I glanced over at “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” to see that

his attention, too, was captured by the cop car slowly pulling up to the front of the store.

“Well, that is that for you, you whacked out motherfucker,” I mumbled under my breath. “They’re going to drive your ugly mullet head far, far away from me.”

The feeling of relief was unbelievable. It had been touch and go for awhile but now I felt the tension just melt out of my body, followed by the deep, full body ache which inevitably comes after situations of extreme stress. I must have been holding every single muscle in my body as taut as I possibly could.

This feeling, however, would prove to be short lived.

“Hey, I know you guys,” he exclaimed as he threw his mullet head back in a great, big belly laugh and pushed through the front

door to greet my saviors, looking for all the world like he was reuniting with old friends.

“This can’t be good,” I thought. “He knows them?” I guess it made sense that this twitching weirdo was well acquainted with all the local cops but on such a seemingly friendly basis? Looking out there now, all three of them, the two cops and him, were all laughing and smiling, yucking it up like a bunch of drunken frat boys.

“Just take him away,” I thought. “Arrest him. Deport him. Take him for a ride. I don’t care. Just take him the fuck away from me.”

This was just taking way too much time. “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” was still leaning in the passenger side window of the squad car. The three of them were still talking and laughing. What was taking them so long? What could they possibly be talking about all this time? Couldn’t these cops see

that this guy was hopelessly, dangerously insane? Why weren’t they chaining him up, stuffing him in the back seat and driving him off to the loony bin?

What happened next had me thinking that the world had been turned inside out and I was suddenly stuck in another dimension. Bizarro world. Where everything was the opposite of the way it was supposed to be. “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” slipped his hands in his overall pockets and took a step back from the window. Then the police car began slowly but definitively to drive off into the coal black night. I watched in horror as the black and white pulled out of the parking lot and out of my life for good.

“No! No! No! No! No! No!”, I heard myself screaming. I had never been a big fan of cops. As far back as age eight they had been harassing me and causing me one problem after another but just this one motherfucking time they were supposed to be on my side. Weren’t they supposed to help me? Wasn’t that their

job? To defend the innocent and helpless from the tender mercies

of the criminally insane? They were supposed to take him away.

Why the fuck weren't they taking him away?

He turned back towards the door with the wildest, most obscene smile I've ever seen in my life. I imagined I could see his tonsils bobbing back and forth through the massive gaps where his teeth should have been. He had one hand in his overall pockets, doing God only knows what, while the other hand was raised over his head in a symbol of triumph, dangling a shiny, metallic object that I couldn't quite make out.

"What is that?", I thought. It was catching and reflecting the fluorescent light as he pushed through the glass door and stepped once again into my nightmare. He brought the object down to rest and waved it tauntingly in front of my eyes so that I had absolutely no confusion now identifying exactly what it was.

Handcuffs!

He'd stolen their handcuffs. Unbelievable, not only had those miserable, incompetent cops failed in their obvious duty of removing this monster from my life, once and for all but they had somehow managed to make my situation immeasurably worse. Through some supreme act of negligence they had allowed "The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog" to steal their handcuffs.

He was standing just a few feet in front of the counter now, holding the handcuffs in front of him. He started moving menacingly closer till the handcuffs were right in front of my face. Tantalizingly close but just out of reach. I wanted to dive over the counter and snatch them away from him but I didn't dare. I'd have only one chance and if I missed it I'd be in a terrible position. He could club me in the face with them or worse yet, pin my arms and clamp the damn things on me.

He started swinging them slowly back and forth. It looked like he was trying to hypnotize me. Hell, it's more than likely that was exactly what he was doing. I kept glancing in horror from the handcuffs to his disgusting face. The fear I was feeling was so intense, I had no doubt whatsoever this lunatic could feel it.

"Christ, look at him," I thought, as his tongue darted through the whole in his teeth, licking feverishly at his lips like a psychotic lizard, "he can probably taste it."

"Let's play a game," he said, as his grimacing smile widened further than I thought a smile could go.

"What game?", I answered hesitantly, knowing full well exactly what game he wanted to play.

"You put the handcuffs on..."

"That's stupid," I stammered, "You don't have the keys. I won't be able to get out."

Oh, I have the keys," he answered. He pulled his other hand out of his overall pocket to show me that, he did, in fact, have the keys. How in hell had he been able to steal both the handcuffs and the keys from those worthless cops? I began to imagine some massive, crazy conspiracy. Had the cops been in league with him somehow? Were they all just players in some nightmarish scenario that led to my inevitable destruction?

"Come on," he said. "Let's play. Don't you want to play with me? Just put the handcuffs on. It will be fun."

Just then a crazy thought occurred to me. I gathered up all the confidence I could muster and tried to smile in a way that suggested poise and power rather than a quivering, terrified child in real danger of wetting himself.

“I’ll play your game,” I managed to croak from the back of my throat.

He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at me with wild, watery eyes. This was not what he had expected. With growing confidence, I decided to push it a little further.

“I’ll play your game,” I said, “On one condition. You go first.”

“The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog”’s mouth opened obscenely and he let out a long, low guttural howl. Was he ejaculating? Jesus H. Christ, I hoped he wasn’t ejaculating.

Whatever he was doing, I had obviously made him so happy that he had temporarily lost the power of coherent speech.

What happened next will forever be etched upon my brain as the moment when everything changed. The moment I stepped out of

my nightmare and back into the world of light. “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” slammed both the handcuffs and the keys onto the counter in front of me and stepped back with a look of both ecstasy and passive submission. Before I could even voice my next thought, he turned his back on me and presented his hands behind himself.

“I’m ready to play,” he said in a childlike voice.

“I’ll bet you are, fucker,” I answered, as I grabbed the handcuffs with a speed and dexterity I didn’t know I possessed. As quickly as I possibly could, I clamped one bracelet on each of his filthy wrists and pushed him with all my strength into the middle of the candy and condom isle.

“Is this how you like to play, you stupid fucker?”, I said, “this is how I like to play.”

I grabbed the keys and ran from behind the counter, smiling with hysterical glee. I pushed open the front door, glancing briefly at his poor, tormented animal. He was still tied there out front, though for the moment, at least, he was safe. I held open the front door, dangling the keys in front of him. I must admit, I was taking perverse pleasure at the look of fear in his eyes. I proceeded to gather all the strength I had and hurled those keys as far as I could. I watched them arc beautifully till they disappeared into the bushes that surrounded the parking lot in front of the store.

“The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” stood motionless for a brief moment. Then he seemed to buckle and falter as the realization of his situation hit him like a shotgun blast to the chest. He bolted towards the open door and I had to dive back into the store to get out of his way. The door swung towards him and the glass smashed into his head with a sickening thud. He

seemed not to notice, however, and just pushed his way out into the parking lot.

Outside, the sun was just starting to rise.

“I get off soon,” I thought, as “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” headed out through the parking lot and towards the street in front of my store. He didn’t even try to find the keys but just shambled off, his arms handcuffed behind him.

I watched him fade out of sight. For what seemed like an eternity, I could still make out the outline of his greasy overalls in the first light of the new day.

Just then, the guy who relieved me pulled into the parking lot and jumped out of his car. “Jesus, it must be 7am already,” I thought.

“How’s it going?”, he said. “Anything juicy last night.”

“No,” I answered. “Nothing at all. Just another night in paradise.”

I started moving towards my car in the parking lot. The only thing I needed in this world now was about 48 straight hours of sleep. I was just putting the key into the car door when I suddenly remembered the dog. I turned back to the store and there he was, still lashed to the bike rack.

“I can’t just leave him like that,” I thought.

I walked back to the front door, noticing the bloody spot where my nemesis had smashed his head. I pushed it open with what seemed like a Herculean effort and stuck my head back inside. My coworker was standing in the middle of the store, staring blankly at the puddles of coffee all over the floor.

“Oh, you might want to call the Humane Society,” I said to him.

“That dog’s been out there all night.”

With that I closed the door behind me and headed for that long, numb sleep that I truly hoped awaited me.

At 11pm the next night, I was back in my place behind the counter, listening to “The Man With No Friends” explain to me that I was his greatest buddy in the entire world. The dog was gone; a long night loomed, as usual and I never saw “The Guy Who Wants Me to Fuck His Dog” again.

THE MINOTAUR OF MACARTHUR PARK

by JOHN W. BUCKLEY

You leave nocturnal Los Angeles behind for the skittish light and dank air of MacArthur Park station. You pass rows and rows of bums, corpse-like and rotting, before trudging down those grimy steps. Maybe you're going home, maybe not; it doesn't really matter. Your footsteps echo off dingy tiles and soot-stained columns, down the stairs and towards the platform. When you get there, it's empty. You step out to the edge, looking across the tracks at the tunnel wall. It's caked with the bird shit that has slipped through the cracks of the city. You wait for the next train to Union Station.

You're still waiting a couple minutes later when you hear it.

C-clomp. C-clomp.

The sound ping-pongs out of the tunnel and hurtles towards you, stilted, lurching, thunderous.

C-clomp. C-clomp.

Something moves slowly in the dirty, stale light. And then you hear something else.

"I'm a fool for the city..." A grizzled, hoarse voice. *"Fool for the city..."*

You crane your neck, trying to see into the gray-black gloom. You can just make out a vast, misshapen heap, somehow filthier and darker than everything around it. Then it shambles into the light.

It is a monstrous thing, maybe seven or eight feet tall, a heaping bramble of fur and filth. Two grimy, curved horns protrude from its head, one broken off at the end, a red bandana tied around it. It shambles and it stinks and it is, unmistakably, a minotaur.

As it approaches, you can see a pair of secondhand headphones stretching tenuously across its massive bovine head, tethered to an ancient walkman it holds at its hip. Its other hand holds a bottle of something – malt liquor, gin, it doesn't really matter – encased in a greasy paper bag. It drinks between heavy, uneven steps. You hear a grating, muffled sound from the headphones.

"*I'm a fool for the city...*" it repeats, now only mere feet from you on the tunnel floor. "*Fool for the city...*"

You take a couple of steps back, maybe from the stench, maybe from the fear; it doesn't really matter.

When's the next train, you ask, not sure what else to say.

It seems to notice you for the first time then, beady eyes peering out at you from under bushy, tangled eyebrows. It says something like, "Train ain't comin' no more," in a coarse, raspy voice. Then it coughs – a great, wracking spasm – before spitting out a web of thick, brown-red liquid. It takes another drink from the bag.

You speak up. The train runs all night, you say. Always has.

"Not no more," it says. "Not for you anyways." It steps forward again, now chest level with the platform edge, looking up at you, its colossal head peering over the edge. Matted, dreadlocked hair spills up and over its horns and down its back.

You jam your hands nervously into your pockets. Loose change and bus transfers. You dare to speak again. How are you going to stop the train, you ask.

Still looking up at you, the minotaur puts its gnarled hands onto the edge of the platform, and then rears itself up, more nimbly than you thought possible, onto the platform itself. It clomps up to you, mere inches away, putting you eye level with the forked end of its unkempt, snarling beard. It looks down on you and floods your senses with the filth of everything a city could forget.

It says something like, "Mutha fucka, I *am* the train. And the tracks, and the tunnels. I am the dirt and the dark and the rumble of a thousand speeding trains. You's in my domain now."

It breathes heavily now, scabbed nostrils flaring menacingly at it, stares down at you.

"You's lost, ain't ya? Lost in my lab'rinth."

You dare to look up at it, into its wide, bleary eyes, darker than the deepest tunnel man has ever dug. Maybe you *are* lost. Lost somewhere between light and shadow, dream and reality. Maybe you think about why you came here, to this city. Maybe you were drawn like some fluttering, despicable insect to that great flame in

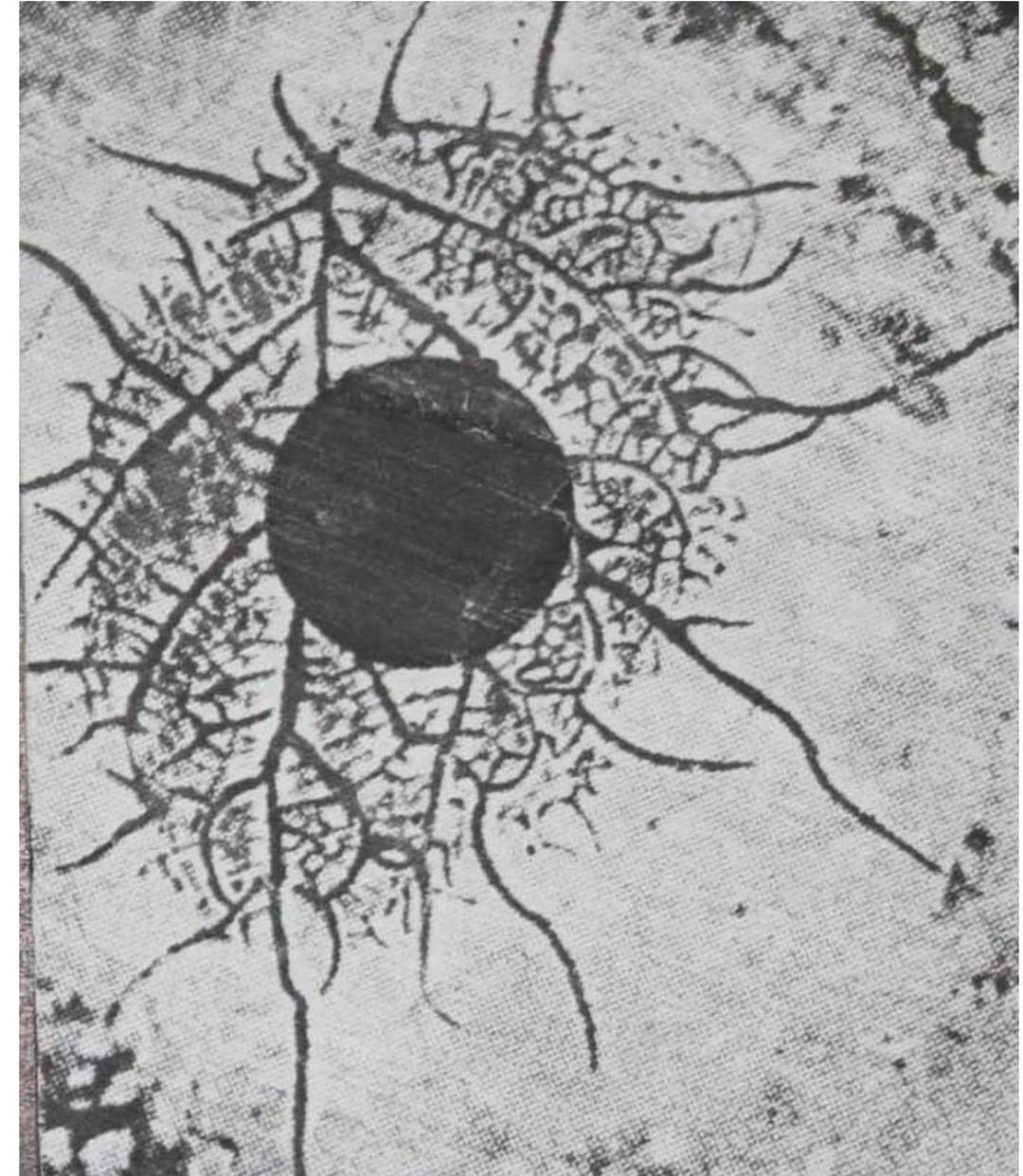
the west. Maybe you, too, have slipped through the cracks to be swallowed up by the city and forgotten. Maybe, maybe not; it doesn't really matter. This is what you think as you gaze into the minotaur's eyes.

You look away. The platform is utterly empty. What happens now, you ask.

It sneers then, revealing a row of cracked yellow teeth. Slowly, the sneer turns into a laugh, a dry, ripping sound like a burst paper bag. The laughter reverberates through the tunnel, a deranged, maniacal dirge.

You run then, away from the stale, buzzing light. The minotaur is still laughing as you leap down onto the tracks. You flee into the tunnel, into the darkness, deeper and deeper into the labyrinth. Maybe the minotaur gives chase, maybe not; it doesn't really matter. But then, as the light and the laughter fade away, you hear it. In front of you, behind you, all around you:

"I'm a fool for the city... fool for the city..."



STREET MAMA

by SHANNON BARBER

I stole this pen from the food bank. I stole the pad of paper from the clinic and I stole a perch from a respectable business.

I'm sitting in a doorway, lit from behind by security lights inside the- whatever it is I don't know. I'm sitting and thinking about a poem.

Or a word.

A confession.

Something.

I don't know what I'm doing.

I just want the words to get out of me.

I have a cigarette but no light. The entire story of my life framed in a moment of me frantically slapping my pockets and rummaging in my purse.

Get one thing right, the rest is just fucked up.

A hooker in house shoes stops and smiles down at me.

“Hey sugar, you need a light baby?”

Her tone doesn't say, hey baby you want a fuck It says, Mama knows.

I want to cry.

“Yes ma'am. Please. This is the first whole cigarette I've had in forever.”

She squats and lights me. She holds my gaze while I pull the untainted by other mouths smoke deep and let it out slow, lips shooting the smoke to the side.

“Junkie?”

I shake my head. I wish it was all as simple as being a junkie. I can imagine the warm wet darkness, the cliché wet crotch and vomit.

“No. Fucked everything else. Crazy. Low on meds.”

Inside the stare between us there are secrets. Deep and broad as the sky above us.

Her eyes turn sweet and soft. Her hands cup my face, smooth my frown away like magic.

“Can I give you a hug sweet girl?”

I’m afraid but nod.

Her arms are strong. I feel her lift me to my knees.

I hold my breath, praying I don’t shit or cry.

“Shhh sweet girl. Shhh.”

She rubs my back, she rocks and coos.

When she lets go of me I float back to my spot. She tucks the remains of her pack of cigarettes into my palm.

“If you get cold or scared I live in that building. Number three on the left.”

I shiver.

“Number three on the left. Yes ma’am.”

I watch her go, admiring the flex of her calves as she walks.

I pour my words in stolen ink onto stolen paper.

To myself and the night I confess I could have been hers.

And secretly, it would have all been okay.



CONSTRUCTING GUANTANAMO

by DAVID MILSTEIN

“So, we’re in the middle of doing it, I start playing with her butt-hole, and she just goes crazy! From then on, all she wanted was to be fucked in the ass,” Roger shouted, with his mask pulled off his big mouth against regulations so we could all hear his bragging over the thumping of the compressor and the roar of the fans.

“Roger, you are so full of shit,” I said, pulling off my own uncomfortable mask for a minute. The dust from the cut drywall clung to our sweat-drenched clothing like a coat of feathers.

Roger lifted his shirt. “Am I, Sam?” His muscular abdomen was covered in small round bruises. “Hickeys, man! Annette’s a damn Hoover vacuum. You should see my dick!”

Maybe he wasn’t making it up, in which case he was stupider than I thought. He was talking about Lieutenant Cord’s wife.

At six the whistle blew. “Miller time!” hollered Dave, my roommate in the converted shipping container with holes for utility access and air conditioners where we slept. Though the idiot loved his neon Miller Lite sign so much I had to threaten him to get him to turn off so I could.

“One week till Jamaica, and weed,” Dave said as we walked away from the tool lockers just outside the construction site where we were installing the drop-ceiling. Our employers must have figured we’d explode from boredom if they didn’t give us civilian contractors off-base privileges on occasion, so they arranged one flight from Cuba every six weeks.

I laughed. “I’ll be on the plane. Just don’t try bringing any back. Don’t. The month before we got here some guy smuggled some joints back in his shampoo bottle, and after he got caught, the MPs conducted a rectal exam. Then he got fired, sent home to jail, and never even got his last paycheck. Thank you, President Reagan!”

Roger butted in. “Forget about weed; Jamaica’s got what you really need. Pussy, Shepherd! Or are you a faggot?” he said.

“Thinking it’s stupid to risk jail for tail doesn’t make me anything but smart, Roger,” I said, and turned away.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I heard him, but I didn’t look back. Didn’t he realize this wasn’t a free country? We weren’t in America, we were in Guantanamo. Not that sleeping with other people’s wives is OK back home. But here; who knows what they could do to you?

I stripped off my filthy shirt and walked bare-chested downhill through rows of palm trees with wavering fronds the half mile to the beach. Guantanamo Bay has some pretty nice beach. It’d be a lot nicer if it wasn’t in the middle of an armed camp with no women you were allowed to touch closer than Key West across 90 miles of the Gulf of Mexico.

Reaching the sand, I further stripped down to my boxers and just fell forward into the gentle surf. Seabirds wheeled overhead,

riding the evening breeze. This was indeed paradise... for a man without balls.

“Hey, Sammy,” said a voice of gravel and stone. “Get out for a minute; I need to talk to you.”

I looked up, and saw Uncle Vin.

#

Uncle Vin got me this job last Christmas, when I was camped out on my Mom’s couch having run out of money for college after one semester. Dad was supposed to hook me up for the spring term, but he didn’t. Dad never really came all the way back from Vietnam. Last I heard, he’d lost his job at the steel mill in Baltimore and was back on the sauce.

My mom bitched at me every day.

“You’re not a little kid anymore, Sam. I got to look out for myself, now. I leave for work and you’re here sitting on your ass, I come home and you’re still there, and all the milk and Steakums are gone. Get a job, or join the Hari Krishnas, but Jesus do something, because you are not staying forever on my couch!”

One day, I woke up to find her looming over me at six in the morning.

“Go away Mom, I’m still asleep.”

“Get up, Sam,” she said.

“Mom, it’s still night-time. I’ll go down to the job center later today.”

“You’ll get up now, you lazy brat,” she said, and the crazy bitch poured a whole pitcher of orange juice on my head.

That night, Uncle Vin came over.

“Let’s go have a beer, Sammy, what do you say?”

Was this my eviction notice? I glanced at Mom, who’d stopped acting crazy but who also hadn’t apologized. She nodded. “Go on, Sam, it’s alright, don’t worry about waking me up when you get home, I’m going to be at Frank’s tonight. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, OK?”

Her purple-lined eyes looked sad, and old. I felt too disgusted to stay furious at her.

“Ok, Mom, Ok, Uncle Vin. Let me get my coat. Where are we going?”

“What do you care? I’m buying.”

That was Uncle Vin in a nutshell. We went to Joseph’s, his favorite bar and virtual office. Dank and smoky, they sold quarter drafts four till seven weekdays. We sat facing each other in the booth, and after drinking fifty cents worth each in silence, the pressure got to me.

“So, what’s up, Uncle Vin? Did Mom call you and tell you to get rid of me?”

My voice quavered and broke. Vincent Giambi was an enormous man, thick and tall, taking more after the Croatian blood in the family than the Italian. He was ten years older than Mom, her half-brother. He was in construction, had grown up in Italy in the forties and fifties, apprenticed to stonemasons since early childhood, rebuilding the ruins. The family rumor was he’d had to leave the old country after killing communist agitators as a

strike-breaker, but made connections here in Philly and brought Grandma and Mom over within two years.

He stared at me for another agonizing moment, bushy black eyebrows drawn together over his massive nose, and shook his head.

“No. Your Mom, she’s a good lady. She loves you, dumb-ass. When she called me today, she said, ‘Vincent, please get Sammy a job, he’s a smart boy, he can help your business.’ So, I’ve been sitting here looking at you, trying to see your smarts. Nothing so far.”

I felt a sting, but I ignored it.

“What kind of job, Uncle Vin, construction?”

He snorted. “Yeah, construction. What do you think I do? What other business do I have?”

I wasn’t touching that one. “None I ever heard of, Uncle Vin. What I meant was, yes, I would love to work for your construction business. When can I start?”

He flashed a sign to the bartender, who brought us a couple shots. Uncle Vin smiled, for the first time I could remember. “Now, there’s the Sam Shepherd smarts I heard so much about. You get your stuff together tonight, and meet me at my office tomorrow morning at six o’clock. Don’t be late. Here’s ten bucks for the cab. You pack all you’ll need for nine months, but make sure it all fits in one bag, and bring that bag with you. No more than twenty pounds.”

“How do I know what twenty pounds is, Uncle Vin; and, why?”

He raised his glass to me, and said “Your mom’s got a scale in her bathroom, kid.”

Oh, yeah. I clinked and gulped with him. As I blinked and shook my head, he answered my other question.

“Because, Sam, you’re going to Cuba.”

#

As he explained to me at his office the next morning, Vincent Giambi Construction Inc. was a subcontractor to the Bechtel

corporation for the project of expanding the infrastructure on the US military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

This was the deal: general construction work six till six, six days a week, with twenty minutes off the clock for lunch. It was seventy hours a week, fifteen dollars an hour, tax free, plus room and board. A fucking fortune; with this I could make enough money for the rest of college and then some, in less than a year. I actually cried when Uncle Vin told me. He hugged me, but gave me a warning, with a hand on my shoulder, and a salami-sized finger wagging in my face.

“Do not screw this up, Sammy. This is business, now. Not just family. Be smart enough not to get in trouble down there, or I will kick your ass,” he said. I nodded.

“Sam, I get these contracts because of reputation. My workers don’t make trouble, see? That’s how the Navy likes it. I hire young guys like you because you can work hard twelve hours a day and not break down. But the problem is, the Navy doesn’t pay as good as this.”

“No shit,” I said, having researched that option early on in my stint on mom’s couch.

“I mean, not even the officers. Not by half. The only reason we pay this much is, my company gets paid at twice our costs. Do you understand? The more I pay my workers, the higher figure I can multiply when I present them with my bill.”

“So, you get three times the money for hanging drywall twelve hours a day that these guys make for risking their lives 24/7. It leads to bad feelings. Understand that. This is a small town you are moving to for nine months, surrounded by barbed wire and Cubans with guns. There is nowhere to hide, no room to avoid people.”

“So?”

“Listen, dumbass. The officers bring their wives and families to live here. So the only women there are some officer’s wife; the only girls there are some officer’s daughter. If you touch any pussy there, it will cause trouble. If the Navy heard that Giambi Construction workers cause trouble, they would tell Bechtel to

stop hiring me. That would make me upset. Do not do such a thing, Sam. Do you understand? Watch the other ones, too.”

#

I waded back out of the surf towards my uncle’s long silhouette against the purple and gold sunset. “Uncle Vin! What are you doing here?”

He handed me a towel. “I’m here for some meetings. Pick up your stuff and let’s take a walk. Tell me about the worksite. Is the work good? Are people staying out of trouble?”

“Oh, yeah, everything’s fine,” I said. I don’t know why I would cover for Roger, it just happened.

He looked me up and down. “OK. Make sure you call me if things go off the rails. I am counting on you to be my eyes and ears, remember that. You look good, Sam. You’ve filled out from the work. You been saving your money?”

“What could I possibly spend it on?”

He nodded. “That’s a good boy. So, how about the tools? I got them from a new supplier this time, and...”

Our conversation progressed through various boring topics, and I submerged my unease at lying. I was as clean as the driven snow. Roger, he was his own problem.

#

The next morning, Annette Cord came to the work site, trailed by her daughters Hannah and Heather, ages six and four.

“Hi Roger,” she said in the dead silence that followed her arrival. She was unbelievable. Like Christy Brinkley. She was Swedish, almost six feet tall, and sexy: blond, slim, with huge boobs and an unforgettable ass on public display in the shortest of all possible denim shorts - which, thanks to Roger, I couldn’t help thinking of what it would be like to fuck.

While she traded innuendo with Roger, I couldn’t take my eyes off the little kids. They looked like angels, with golden curls and the most innocent faces imaginable. They were dressed in matching little pretend tennis outfits. They stood right there watching their beautiful mom flirt with a stupid, greasy roughneck who was not their dad.

I walked forward, and took a yo-yo out of one of my many pockets. Yes, I know it's juvenile, but I sometimes I just like doing something with my hands.

"Hi, girls," I said. "Would you like to see a trick?"

They looked at one another solemnly, and then both nodded.

"Yes, please," said the older one.

So I showed them walk the dog, and round the world, and then I stopped, because their mom had come over to watch me play with her kids.

"Hi, my name's Sam," I said. "Nice kids."

She looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "Don't mess with my kids, yo-yo man, or my husband will blow your brains out."

"You got it all wrong, lady. I was just..." What had I been doing, anyway?

"Playing, I see that. I was just testing you." She smiled, and I flushed. "See you later, Sam," she said, and walked off with her two girls trailing behind like ducklings. She came by one other

time during the week, and I again felt compelled to distract her kids, with yo-yo tricks.

That Friday, Dave and I were standing on the tarmac waiting for our flight to Kingston.

"Where's Roger?" I said. "What the hell is keeping him?"

"He ain't coming," said Dave. "He said he wasn't feeling good, wanted to rest up for next week."

Maybe he just couldn't think of anything in Jamaica that was better than what he was getting right here in Guantanamo. But he was taking a hell of a risk. Lt. John Cord, USMC, was not someone I would want to tangle with.

I saw a figure approaching the airstrip out of the dusk. It was Uncle Vin. He motioned me over, out of the other guys' earshot.

"I wanted to see you before I went back tomorrow. Things are good, Sam. I got a contract extension for another eighteen months."

"All right, that's great."

“You done good here, kid. When you get back, come see me before you go off to school.”

“Sure thing. I’ll see you in September.”

He nodded, and walked away. Then the plane readied for takeoff, and we went to Jamaica.

#

Jamaica was fun, but nothing you need to hear about; besides, a lot of it is pretty fuzzy anyway- all clouded by smoke, as it were. Anyways, we came back, and worked our shifts, and Annette kept coming by, sometimes the worksite during the day with her kids to flirt, sometimes to our trailer park at night to screw Roger (converted shipping containers don’t have a whole lot of sound-proofing). Time went by.

Roger didn’t go to Jamaica the next month, either. Nor the next. As August rolled around, I began to think that Annette’s husband must be blind, deaf, or dead. How could he not know?

One early morning, I got shaken awake in the dark.

“Nephew, put on a shirt and shoes and come with me, now.” His whisper was calm and quiet, but I was terrified. I threw on a Baja and loafers by the light of the Miller sign and followed Uncle Vin out into the tropical night, leaving Dave still snoring in the upper bunk. A few paces away from the trailer, he whirled and confronted me.

“I thought you were going to keep an eye out for me. Didn’t we agree on that, when I hired you?”

“What do you mean — aargh!” His slap left my face numb.

“I mean I want you to take these keys, go to your about-to-be-fired friend’s trailer, collect the lieutenant’s wife, and drive her home. Then, you pack your stuff. Didn’t I tell you that reputation matters? Didn’t you think that when I said ‘no pussy’ I meant everybody, not just you?” He shook his head in disgust.

“What’s happened here is, money breaks people down. People with weak characters, they forget what’s important, they put all their dreams into money, like if they had more, they’d be happy. Like you, you cried because I gave you this job. Weak.”

“Will you tell me what happened, Uncle Vin? Why are you so upset?”

He grabbed my shirt-front and shook me till my teeth clacked. “Because that woman has two little girls, and her husband made her a whore, and it makes me sick. So, go take her home. Right now.” He dropped my shirt and I ran for Roger’s trailer.

When I got to there, Roger was nowhere to be seen, but Annette stood by the lamppost out front, in shorts and a windbreaker.

“I guess you’re my ride,” she said.

“Where’s Roger?”

“The MP’s just took him away.”

“What for?”

She looked at me sidelong.

“I mean, that isn’t a crime, really, is it?”

She let out a sigh. “I don’t know, you Americans are all crazy about sex. I think I got Roger in bad trouble. I guess I’m a bitch.”

I thought I saw tears, but I couldn’t be sure in the dim lamp-light.

I pointed to the jeep Uncle Vin had parked there. “Shall we go?”

“OK, yo-yo man.”

After we started moving through the pre-dawn streets of a little pretend town, words just burst out of me.

“What about your kids, lady?”

She nodded. “Sam, right? That is your name? I will tell you what. Heather and Hannah, I love them. They will be part of me forever. I want nothing but good for them. But what about me? How can I live, here? When I met John it was very exciting. He is handsome, foreign; I show him around Europe, there are clubs and cafes, and culture. We make love a lot, and life is an adventure.

“But now, John never touches me. We live in a prison, and there is no adventure. And the girls, they are prison, too, yes? There is no culture, there is just – nothing. I did not want this life. I don’t love Roger, he is stupid. I just want to feel something, anything. I am dead, here; I need to leave. Leave Roger, leave John, leave Cuba. Goodbye, I am done.”

We pulled up at her house, and I was drowning in memories. My Mom, young and glamorous, and me, trailing snottily behind, left at home when she went out late and came home early. The dozens of boyfriends, the shitty apartments... and my Dad.

Lt. Cord sat in the moonlight on the front stoop of his neat bungalow, inside the square white picket fence around his yard, smoking a cigar with a half-empty bottle of whisky in his hand.

“You’re home late, honey,” he said to Annette.

She turned to me, eyes wide. “Leave, please, Sam.”

I don’t know why, but I shut off the car, got out of the driver seat, and approached the gate.

“Sir, I just want you to know that –”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Sam Shepherd.” I waited a couple of beats, then added “A construction worker. My uncle -”

He cut me off again. “Another fix-it man, Annette? What is it about those handy men, huh?” He was off the steps and brushing past me before I realized it.

“John, let go of me. I will get out, just let me go.”

I bounced up, adrenaline pumping. Nine months of construction had made me strong. I reached for his back. “Lieutenant Cord - aeughh.” He gave me a perfect donkey kick to the gut. I sat back on the sidewalk and concentrated on trying to breathe.

She was out of the car now, white-faced in the glare of the street-lamps. He had her by both shoulders as he marched her backwards through the gate and towards the house.

“Before I go, you are going to tell them. Tell the girls why mommy and daddy won’t be living together any more.”

I was a helpless witness, sucking wind.

“Ok, John, I’ll say it: because Daddy took money from a man to let him keep sleeping with Mommy-”

He struck her then, and she fell whimpering onto the sidewalk. I finally caught my breath and staggered towards him, hands raised palms outwards.

“Hey, hey, don’t do it, man. Think of those kids!” I said, knowing from experience that little faces were peeking out of the window, helpless to keep from seeing the end of their family, to them the end of the world.

He stared at me. “She was fucking a mechanic, man,” he said.

“A dumb redneck who makes four times what I do, for hanging drywall. So, I told him: ‘Fine, you can have her, and keep your job... as long as I get half your paycheck.’ Just to even things out.”

It finally dawned on me what they’d been saying, and why Roger had been skipping the Jamaica runs: he couldn’t afford them anymore. “You mean, you pimped out your wife?”

He hit me hard, between my right cheekbone and nose. I felt something crack.

I looked up from the ground as Cord finished his drink. “My career is over. My God,” he said. With a vicious throw he shattered the empty bottle against the front steps in a geyser of glass. From inside the house, the sound of terrified children became audible.

“Forget your career, Cord,” I said. “Try thinking about your kids, you asshole.” I got to my feet, and grabbed his arms. I heard Annette run by me up the stairs and the door slam. As we wrestled, it crossed my mind that he would kill me before she summoned the MPs. I didn’t care.

He broke my grip and threw me over his shoulder. I waited for the kick, but it didn’t come. I looked up, and saw Cord enveloped by a massive shadow pinning both his arms in a full nelson.

“You want I should break both arms, or only the one?”
grated Uncle Vin. Then Cord howled as a strike-breaker re-lived

the good old days. I laughed for a second; then my mind flashed back to my father in the same pose, Uncle Vincent removing him from Thanksgiving the year I was thirteen. I heard sirens, and Annette and the girls in fear, and now John Cord in pain, and I put my face in the grass and sobbed.

#

Uncle Vin said later he was sorry he put me in that spot; that's another first, him apologizing. I told him I was sorry he lost the contract with the Navy. Bechtel did chuck Giambi Construction over the side; I heard that the military wives pay-for-play scandal almost made Sixty Minutes until somebody hushed it up. He shrugged, and said it was just business- but that he would never hire me again.

He didn't say why he made me take Annette home, or why he followed me out to the house. Maybe it was his way of getting me the ass-kicking he promised me if I fucked up. But at least he made sure I wasn't killed, which I appreciate.

I'm glad as hell that I got that job at Guantanamo. That money changed my life. It's funny how Roger got the booty and I got the beat-down; what's not funny is that I still think about Annette, all the time. I wonder what happened to her, and those two cherubs trailing behind her. At least I taught those little girls how to yo-yo, and made them smile. Sometimes, that's all you get a chance to do. I guess I can live with that.

I called Mom when I got back to Philly. Classes started in two days, and I had a crooked nose and spectacular shiner. But I was pretty happy. I told her I was going to make the Dean's list this semester, and I meant it. It just felt good talking to her, for the first time in forever. I'd have called Dad too, if I had a number for him. Maybe he'll show up for my graduation.



ILL-CAPACITATED

by DANNY CROOT

Today I am ill. When I was ill as a child my mother would look after me. Bring me chicken soup and tell me how proud she was of me. Then my dad would come home and tell her to stop pampering me, “you’ll spoil the boy” he used to say. It didn’t stop her taking care of me and it didn’t stop me getting ill.

I remember one time I had to come home from school early after throwing up on to the back of Amy Linderberg’s head, she was an American exchange student at my primary school. She was okay but the accent used to grind on peoples’ nerves whenever it rained. So anyways I threw up on the back of her head. I was first sent to the school nurse, and the school nurse being what she was, refused to send me home saying “you’ve got the worst of it out already me boy you’ll be fine” it was then I concentrated all of my energy to throw up in her face, I tried real

hard, but much to my dismay I had thrown up most of what I had to offer on the back of that poor girl’s head. So instead of spewing in her wrinkly old face and showing her I really was ill, I hiccuped and a bit of the vomit left in the back of my throat threw itself forward on to her shoes. She was so annoyed she rang my mother and she collected me right away.

I think we know who won that battle.

I got warm cocoa with mushrooms and hugs and kisses, for her ignorance she got the green bile from the innards of my stomach. *Viva la resistance.*

I did have long stretches of good clean living, where my health would be at optimum levels for a boy my age. I’d run around the playground playing all the games you’d expect a good boy to be playing. Bulldog, tig, tag, the lot of them.

I was one hell of a footballer, in fact I was offered the chance to play for the county but turned them down when I was asked to play centre back. I was an attacking player full of creativity and flair, I likened myself to Zinedine Zidane or *Zizou* as those in the

know referred to him. I would never play centre back for as long as I live.

Of all the fun, all the talks, all the games a young boy plays, school was just school I was forced to learn things I didn't care for or would never have any use for, I'd ask the teacher "what are we learning this for anyways" I always ended with anyways, it took the force out of the question and I would not get told off like Gary Hawthorne would, he was a mean kid and would go on to have several stints in the local prison before taking his own life over an estranged homosexual lover.

Back to me, even from a young age, I knew subtlety and what people wanted to hear. It was the difference between good and bad in many ways. Most of the teachers would usually reply "do you not find the algebra interesting?" or "do you not want to know the curse of Tutankhamun's Tomb?"

The short answer was of course no, and the long answer was something else entirely.

The real honest ones would say "I've got to, it's what's on the curriculum." I always respected the ones who said that and I'd try real hard not to disappoint them, always getting the top marks in the class. It helped to know we were both stuck doing things we did not want to do.

The truth was my happiest memories of school were when I was ill on a rainy day. At home resting with both my feet up on the settee playing my favourite video games over and over and over again. Sometimes if the weather wasn't too bad and my mom had to fetch some shopping for the night's dinner she would take me along.

We wouldn't walk past the school, we'd take a different route. It was our little secret. And she'd always buy me a comic book and a few freddo's to keep me occupied for the rest of the day. If I was real good I'd get to pick my own mix. Depending how rich we were that week it wasn't unusual for me to get a whole pound just to spend on a mix, which I did with due delight.

There's always one thing I never would know when it came to my time at school. Did I really hate school? I knew I hated having to sit watching out of the big double-glazed windows that overlooked the classrooms, wondering why was I here when I had far more fun at home. I didn't have to make small talk with the teachers when they would ask me questions on what they had just said. I didn't have to pretend that because Stephen Jaglop was my friend that he was as good at football as me, because he wasn't, he was crap. Two left feet at best. He was fat. Behind his back we nicknamed him The Beast, because he was the only kid that could touch the crossbar with his head and the posts with his stomach.

But now when I look back on what I would have done if I could do it over again, I wouldn't change a thing. My only regret would be, that I cannot live it all again.

My dad was not as bad as I made him out to be, there were times, when he had time off from work or was just switching to

night shifts and his body clock was all messed up when he would take us on trips to the woods.

Hopwas woods, past the tiger's den, across all of the snake pits, over giraffe mountains and out the other end into the fresh air, come wind or rain, sun or shine, if me and my brother had a chance of going to the woods you could bet your bottom dollar we were going to take it.

At the far end of Hopwas woods there'd be a lake or a reservoir I never found out which, where my dad would bring what looked like a bunsen burner and fry me and my brother the best food we had and would ever taste: burgers, eggs, bacon, you name it we ate it.

The best times were when it was just the two of us, it's not that I disliked my brother I just liked my dad all to myself every once in a while. I liked the time we spent together very much, not only would I get more food, sometimes he'd tell me about his childhood, all the pranks he played on his brothers and sister.

There was one that I particularly liked where his eldest brother, Brian, would distract their sister, Jackie, downstairs and the two youngest, my dad and his little brother Dale would sneak up to her room with as many insects and things that moved and crawled and looked disgusting into her pillowcase. Then when the job was done they'd all sit around the table knowing full well what they had done. They'd play football or aky 1 2 3. Waiting never giggling, never talking about it in case she or one of her friends were lurking around the corner or just happened to walk on by and overhear their perfectly laid plan. Then at night they'd be all tucked in. They knew their sister after a few minutes or so would nestle her hands into her pillow case like she always did, and then she'd scream, all hell would break loose, the lights would flicker on and off, his mom and dad would run in. They'd all get beatings because they all grassed each other up. But it took more than a few whips of the belt to wipe their smiles off their faces.

I don't know why I found this amusing, I just did.

On one of our later excursions I found out that he was a published poet. I asked why had he given it up. He didn't answer, we both already knew why.

Now as I look out of the yellow tinted hospital window I think of all times that have passed, of the good as well as the bad. My mom and dad drifted apart and he remarried, to a lovely woman named Ruth who had given him a third child like he had always wanted. I always believed he wanted his own army, to protect him as he got older. But it was always him protecting us and never the other way around. Things changed, circumstances differed, loyalties became divided, for better or for worse I don't think I'll ever know.

I look away from the window and down at my father the wires and tubes are sticking out him like a science experiment gone drastically wrong, he's drifting in and out of consciousness. His forehead and brow are sweaty his lips are chapped and there are bruises everywhere the size of small buildings across his body. But

when he is awake he is my father, I try to tell him what I have always wanted to, all the things I had wanted to say to him but never got the chance or foolishly waited for the right moment. I found his poems they moved me to no end, I wished I was never born so you could of been famous and happy, I never appreciated you for what you really were, you took me to every football game I ever played in, when we played in the same team it was not only one of your happiest days it was also mine, you are my father, my dad and my best friend. I will miss you forever. But nothing came out, the words are there but they are not playing instead he grabs my hand and tells me “he knows...” he calmly whispers “everything will be alright”

My mother was first to go, those two packs a day finally caught up with her. She went the riskier route. They operated but she died there and then.

My step mom was next to go, three months ago she died. My dad's been ill ever since she went so abruptly

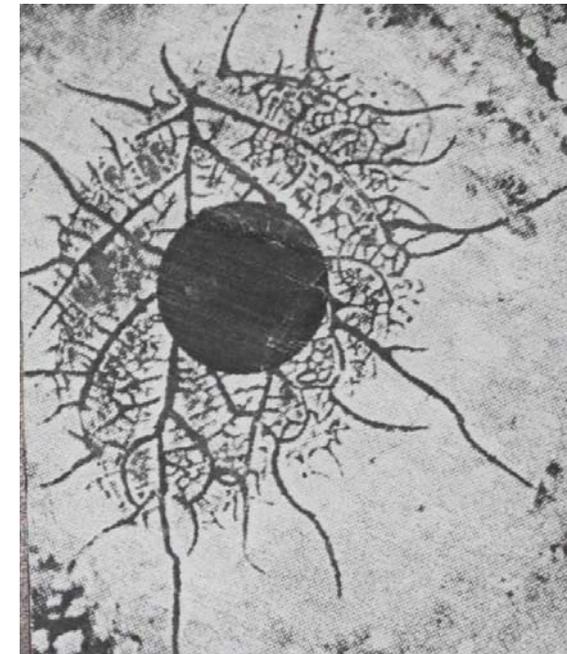
The doctors say he hasn't got long, he may live a few more weeks, his heart is failing. I think they are wrong, they don't know him like I do he has given up the hope, there's a look of silent resignation about him that makes me think tonight's the night. The eyes do not have that spark they once had. It pains him to speak, his life force slowly draining never returning.

He's dead.

Life is short.

Maybe I should start living.

“Everything will be alright”



GOOD GIRLS

by CARLY BERG

In response to the boy's advances, she pushed her tummy blubber together like a crack and said "Fuck my fat," preserving her innocence but ruining his.

WORLDBUILDER

by SAMUEL MATTINGLY

Pegasus 867 b collapsed in on itself, imploding into nothing. Where the heavenly body existed a few moments before, there was now only cold, soundless oblivion. The Worldbuilder leaned back from his console, mouth open and eyes wide. He removed his finger from the doomsday button and refreshed the heads up display. Pegasus 867 b disappeared from the list of candidate planets and appeared on the list of extinct planets. Removing the neural attachment from his temple, the Worldbuilder stood up and stretched. Finding the right planet was exhausting. A red light blinked on the console, and a message popped up on the HUD.

“Worldbuilder Clement, we have received confirmation of your removal of Pegasus 867 b in the Tau Omicron system,” the computer read in soothing monotone. “Understand EDEN supports all its Worldbuilders in their search for the perfect candidate. Unfortunately, we must follow up on all instances of

removal of any planet or planetoids within the Local Group.

“We have assigned a case worker for your convenience. We understand you made the right choice – that’s why we made you a Worldbuilder. Please assist the case worker in understanding that you made the right choice as well, and together we’ll build a better future.”

The console hummed, as if awaiting a response. Clement read the message again and frowned. Case worker? That wasn’t necessary. They had chosen him, not the other way around. Worldbuilders shouldn’t have to answer for their decisions. Clement had just sat down in his chair when a tone rang out from the console.

“Attention, Worldbuilder Clement. An EDEN representative has arrived.”

The white, metallic door blinked away in a blue flash. A woman walked through. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin. White teeth, orange fingernails, crimson jumper. The jumper, emblazoned with the EDEN logo across the middle, proclaimed

her thus: Maria.

Clement gave her a one over and furrowed his brow. So much for operational discretion. He got up and met her in the antechamber. She held out a small hand, flashing her ivory teeth. He shook it with reluctance. Maria tilted her head and focused her gaze.

“Is something wrong, Worldbuilder Clement?”

“No. Obviously not.”

“Well, let’s get started, shall we? I’m Maria,” she said, pointing to her name.

“I am aware. Reading is a prerequisite for Worldbuilding.”

Her lips pressed into a line. “Noted. It will be easier, I think, if we treat this matter professionally and with a positive attitude.”

“Are you suggesting,” Clement said, “that I’m not professional?”

“Not at all, Worldbuilder Clement. Is it OK if I just call you Clement?”

“I suppose,” he said, waving his hand. He turned back toward

the main chamber and sat down at the console, sliding his fingers along the polished, white surface. The heads up display disappeared, and the glass comprising the screen showed deep space. The glass doubled as a window and a monitor.

Maria strolled over to the console and stared out the window. “Amazing. We don’t have anything like this in my sector.”

“Of course not,” Clement said, sneering. “Worldbuilding is a little more difficult than ... what is it you do? Case work?”

Maria glanced away, taking in a deep breath. “Yes. Case work. Now, I believe you just removed a planet?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Pegasus 867 b in the Tau Omicron system, correct?”

Clement rolled his eyes.

“I’ll take that as confirmation. EDEN protocol requires I take down your rationale for this removal. Rationale must be one of the following: natural resource gain, orbital pattern realign—”

“Yes, yes. I’m well aware of the EDEN protocol,” he said. “It had an abundance of magnesium.”

Maria pressed an area on her jumper next to her collarbone, and a small red light began to glow. “Personal log starting for EDEN representative 678954. Recording is for case 133567. Case pertains to Worldbuilder Clement and the removal of Pegasus 867 b in the Tau Omicron system. Rationale for removal, quote: ‘An abundance of magnesium.’ Rationale given tentative status. Mental fitness as yet undetermined. End record.” She pressed the same area and the light winked out.

Clement blinked. “Tentative? Mental fitness? What’s going on here?”

“I cannot approve the rationale until I learn more, and part of that is determining your mental fitness,” she said. “Of course, you must have already known this.”

“O-of course I did,” he said, cheeks reddening. He ran a hand through his black mane and rubbed his nose. “Well? Get on with your quackery. Some of us have work to do.”

Maria searched about the room, squinting her eyes. “Is there a more comfortable area we can do this?”

“What’s wrong with the inner sanctum?”

“Nothing, I guess,” she said, sighing. A look of exasperation came over her face. “Is there somewhere I can sit while we talk?”

“Erm. I suppose. Let me fetch you a chair.”

Long, bony fingers slid along the console as Clement typed out various commands. Melodious chimes of confirmation echoed into the inner sanctum, almost like music. Clement conducted this electronic orchestra until a servitor appeared with a small, functional chair. It was colorless, clean, and without texture – precisely what he wanted. The servitor beeped and set the chair down next to Maria. It left the room, gliding away on the glossy, tiled floor. She sat down in the chair and crossed her legs, folding her hands on her lap.

“Thank you, Clement. Are you ready?”

He gave her a blank stare in reply.

“Fine,” she said, pressing the hidden button once more. The recording light turned on. “Personal log continuing for EDEN representative 678954. Recording is for case 133567. Case pertains

to Worldbuilder Clement and the removal of Pegasus 867 b in the Tau Omicron system. Mental fitness evaluation to follow.

“Please state your name,” she said.

“You already know it.”

She closed her eyes. “Please, just for the record, state your name.”

He gazed out the window, watching a comet streak through the cosmos.

“Clement Levine.”

“Thank you. Do you agree to this mental fitness evaluation, Clement Levine?”

“What happens if I don’t?”

Her eyes pleaded with him.

“Fine. Yes. I agree.” He turned away, shaking his head.

“Very good. I’m going to ask you a series of questions. Please answer honestly and without putting too much thought into it. I want your gut response.

“Question one: do you enjoy your work?”

“Of course I do.”

“Is that all?”

Clement snorted. “Yes.”

“Noted. Question two: do you believe what you do is right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Maria paused, a mistrustful look in her eyes. “Anything else?”

“No.” He continued to stare out the space window, avoiding her gaze.

“Noted. Question three: why are you here?”

Clement glanced up, cloudiness leaving his eyes.

“Why am I here?”

“Yes. That is the question.”

He sat up, looking unsure. He was chosen, that’s why he was here. Who did this woman think she was? EDEN surely couldn’t expect him to get work done under these conditions. He resigned himself to the bureaucratic machinations.

“I am here because I was chosen.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“Noted. Final question: do you feel you are mentally fit?”

“Yes.”

“That all?”

“Yes.”

“Noted. End of mental fitness examination.” She pressed the button. “Thank you for your ... cooperation, Worldbuilder Clement.” She stood up, dusted herself off, and offered her hand. Clement turned around. Maria frowned. “I will file all this with EDEN and you should hear back from us within forty-eight regulation hours.”

As she walked away, Clement mumbled something. She turned around, looking at the man.

“Excuse me?”

He avoided her eyes. “I said goodbye.”

#

The HUD glowed green in the blackness of the inner sanctum. A clock on the bottom-right corner of the screen showed midnight. Midnight for the EDEN Class J Hyperstrider. Clement continued working well into the morning, fingers dancing along the console; pleasant bell tones matched up with his movements. He needed to find the perfect planet. A message flashed across the HUD, read out in computer monotone.

“Hello, Worldbuilder. We are pleased to inform you of a change in the guidelines regarding planetary removal. Please note that magnesium has been stricken from the list of needed resources. Thank you, and let’s continue building a better tomorrow.”

Magnesium. The very same resource he acquired by destroying Pegasus 867 b three regulation days earlier. Could it be coincidence? Maria, the nosy case worker, floated to the fore of his mind. No, definitely not coincidence. She had meddled too much, and now he looked like a fool. If they wanted war, they had it. After all, he was a Worldbuilder – he understood warfare.

They wanted the perfect planet for terraforming. Life aboard spacecraft necessitated increasingly long expeditions into deep space for the requisite resources. Humanity had had enough. They wanted a new home world.

And Clement was just the man for the job.

They would get their perfect planet. His fingers traced along the console, demoting promising candidates from the list. If they wanted to treat him like a child, the one entrusted with remaking civilization, let them. He could play at their games.

A holomap of the surrounding systems popped up from the console. Clement cross referenced this with a chart of terrestrial planetoids in the area on his HUD. He divided the monitor in half and used the right side to stare into space. Gripping a white stylus, he marked three stars for further research and crossed out nine. No sub-prime real estate for humanity.

Beep. The visitor's light on the console winked on and alerted Clement of someone at the door. The door blinked out of existence, and he saw her out of the corner of his eye: Maria. She

wore the same crimson jumper, had the same hair, same eyes, same smile as before. Even the same nail color. She was the quintessence of the EDEN bureaucracy: polished, useless, and ubiquitous.

"Why did you come back?" he asked. Her stride brisk, she made her way to Clement and paused, eyeing him for a moment. She put a hand on her hip, placing the other on her forehead. A sigh breezed her lips and she closed her eyes. Clement frowned. She shouldn't be here.

"How are you, Worldbuilder Clement?"

The question hung in the air.

"Why are you here? I have work, Maria. Didn't you file the case already?"

She rubbed both hands over her face. "Yes. I did. But I just ... wanted to follow up."

Clement sat back in his chair, rubbing his chin. No one needed to follow up on anything. She was genuinely ... something. He saw the circles under her eyes, the lines on her

forehead, and the weariness in her gaze. It clicked; she was worried about him. He mistrusted this new display of emotion.

“Well, everything is fine,” he said, avoiding her stare. “Just fine.”

She sat on the small, colorless chair. It hadn’t moved from its original placement.

“I know this isn’t by the book, but bear with me,” she said, crossing her legs. “You gave me satisfactory answers the other day, and I had to mark your rationale as technically correct, but that was it.”

Clement rubbed his brow. “So my answers were satisfactory and my rationale technically correct?”

“Yes, but—”

“If everything checked out, then I have work to do.

Furthermore, EDEN representatives need clearance from their supervisors to talk with a Worldbuilder.” He noticed she glanced away, biting a nail. “Is it safe to say you didn’t get this clearance?”

She looked back and set her hand down. “I may not have the

clearance, but our duty dictates—”

He held up a hand. “No more. Please leave. I have work to do.”

“But Clement—”

“No.” He stood up and pointed toward the exit. “Leave. I can have my servitor show you the way, if necessary.”

Maria sat in the chair, unmoving. For a moment, he thought she wouldn’t budge and he would actually have to call in the servitor. At the last moment, she stood up and gave him a look – a look of pleading. He pointed again. She gave a brief nod and walked away, glancing back from the doorway. He thought he saw something in her eyes as she left: fear. That was crazy. He smiled, shook his head, and sat down behind the console.

#

The room swam in his vision, darkness shrouding everything into obscurity. Where was he? The harsh, green light of the HUD

blinded him as he opened his eye, holding a hand in front of his face. The inner sanctum. He had worked through the night, trying to find the perfect candidate – the perfect planet for humanity. No rest for the Worldbuilder. He picked up a caffeine pill and swallowed it dry, the rough object sliding down his throat. He rubbed his eyes and pulled up his most recent notes on the Tau Omega system.

The regulation days blurred together. Space never changed; neither did the atmosphere in the inner sanctum. Clement's fingers danced along the console, dashing out calculations and commands. Bell tones rang out in the hollow of the inner sanctum. The maestro took center stage; his faithful performers awaited his direction. The concert began.

GB 3532, a silicate terrestrial in the habitable zone in the Tau Omega system. No strong magnetic fields detected. Orbit shaped like an oval, rather than a circle. Humanity demanded better. So did Clement. His finger hovered over the doomsday button.

He pressed the doomsday button.

The planet blurred out of focus. It spun faster and faster, like a demonic dervish. A cosmic force pulled on it from inside, obliterating the celestial body and exploding its remains into the universe. After the chunks of the forgotten world cleared, nothing remained. The empty void stared at Clement. He stared back into the deep infinity of the abyss. And smiled.

Beep. Red light. "Worldbuilder Clement, we have received confirmation of your removal of GB 3532 in the Tau Om—"

The voice stopped. He removed his finger from the mute button and hit the door lock. No one in, no one out. Time to work.

The next candidate planet came into view: HJK 665 c of the Upsilon Alpha system. It was much too far from its star. The doomsday button clicked. The planet disappeared. Next candidate.

Theseus 23 of Upsilon Beta. No water, no life, no good. Doomsday.

HG 543621 of Upsilon Gamma. No resources. Doomsday.

FTG 1221 of Upsilon Delta. Doomsday.

Perseus 443 of Upsilon Epsilon.

GH 666555 of Upsilon Zeta.

Clement Levine.

“Attention, all active members of EDEN in the lambda sector, we have a red alert. There is a code five. Initiate Zion protocol. All available EDEN representatives please respond immediately. This is not a test. Any EDEN representative in the lambda sector: please force entry to room twenty-three. We have a red alert. Code five. Zion protocol in effect. Approach with extreme caution, subject has become volatile. Repeat, force entry to room twenty-three in the lambda sector.

“Worldbuilder has gone rogue.”

Maria stared at the commspeaker on her desk, mouth agape. She dashed out several commands to her computer, bringing up

past case files. Reviewing them as quickly as she could, she finally came across the file she wanted – Clement Levine. Location: lambda sector, room twenty-three.

The alarm system buzzed harsh tones into the air, meant to stir everyone to action. She grimaced and grabbed a pair of ear buds on her desk, shoving them in. The alarm tone quieted almost to nothing. She sprinted into the hallway, unsure of her intentions. Glancing about the station, only a few other representatives appeared to share her enthusiasm. She motioned for several others to follow her. This shouldn't be done alone.

White paneled hallway peeled away into more white paneled hallway. Feet clacked along the white tiled floor. Smooth, white light shone from the ceiling. Sterile, white doors lined the walls. Maria skidded around the corner and made it to the hallway of Worldbuilders.

Rooms flew by. One, two, three, four. They seemed so much further apart than they had before. Her heart fluttered in her chest, her stomach tightening with fear. She ran down the hall,

glancing back at her co-workers. They looked just as scared.

Worldbuilder gone rogue. A first in the history of EDEN. An image of Clement appeared in her mind: the fallen creator.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. She couldn't reach the room fast enough. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Almost there. Twenty-one, twenty-two. She had arrived – room twenty-three. The door loomed ahead, a gateway to another dimension. She walked up and pressed the small, white button next to the door.

Nothing.

Frowning, she pushed again. Nothing. She pounded on the door, becoming desperate. The thought of planet after planet winking out of existence made her sick. The other representatives stood around, sharing looks of uncertainty. Maria faced them, tears in her eyes.

“Someone get this door open. Hurry!”

One of the men snapped up straight, as if coming out of a trance. He rushed forward, withdrawing a thin, white baton.

“I'm a peacekeeper. Step back.”

Maria complied. The man put the tip of the wand against the door and twisted the bottom half. There was a distinct pop, and the door disappeared in a flash of blue. The peacekeeper grinned, looking half smug and half confused.

“I've never done that before.”

Dashing into the room, Maria gave the antechamber one look and knew where he was. Strange instruments and detailed charts zipped by as she rushed to the inner sanctum. There was something coming from that direction. A beat, or a sound, or ... music? Maria entered the inner sanctum, emerging from the small hallway between rooms.

And came upon the concert.

A chandelier filled the room with light. Light so bright Maria had to shield her eyes. A symphony blasted through massive speakers. The sound engulfed the room. Something wasn't right. The HUD wasn't on. The screen gave a view of deep space. Debris floated through distant systems, remnants of the recently destroyed planets. A celestial graveyard. Maria shuddered and

walked deeper into the inner sanctum.

The room went further back than she remembered. The intense light and loud music made it hard to concentrate. Where was Clement? She strode past the console, going deeper into the chamber. Large screens displayed metrics and measurements. Arcane symbols and equations filled a whiteboard. Scribblings dotted the floor and wall, written in marker. Squatting down, she read some of them. It was gibberish, mostly, but one phrase stuck out.

Perfect planet located.

The lights wavered for a moment, but stayed on. Maria shot up, looking around for any activity. The music blared all around her, clouding her thoughts. The perfect planet – that was a Worldbuilder’s ultimate goal. Perhaps Clement had found it, and the ostentation was a display. That would fit his profile.

Further into the sanctum, Maria felt a mounting sense of dread. Something was wrong. She pushed on, going deeper into the chamber. More machines, more screens, more scribblings. It

became increasingly frantic and sloppy, the words of a madman.

The sense of dread increased. She needed to find Clement.

The end of the line. The last space in the inner sanctum. An area opened before her, free of machines and monitors. Removed from the rest of the ship, it was a pristine paradise. Maria stifled a gasp.

Clement hung from a rope.

She didn’t know how long she stood there, gawking at the dead man. Eventually, the other representatives caught up. The peacekeeper pulled her back and turned her away from the carnage. Tears rolled down her cheek; it was all so pointless. She glanced back one final time at the tableau. There was furious scribbling on his exposed stomach.

Rationale: Resource drain.

Target: Silicate terrestrial in the Sol system.

Name: Earth.

THE SPILL

by ILAN HERMAN

I knew him as Daman Yadav, an unusual Hindu name. Daman means, *controller*, or *one who tames, subdues*, and is prevalent as a surname. Yadav is one of many words that mean *Krishna*, and is primarily a first name. Therefore, it makes sense that Daman Yadav was instead named Yadav Daman—Krishna who tames and subdues—but that wasn't the case with the name Daman Yadav—he who subdues Krishna.

Forgive my linguistic curiosity but, I dare say that if Daman's mother had taken a moment and named him Yadav, maybe, just maybe the spill wouldn't have taken place.

I don't know Daman's mother or her motives. She's long gone. Perhaps mother knows best.

Your shrug tells me you don't quite get the name issue. Let me cross cultures to Anglo-Saxon. Say you met a man named O'Neil John?

I suspect you'd crane your neck and politely ask, "Is that John O'Neil?"

"No," the man would reply. "It's O'Neil John."

"So your first name is O'Neal?"

"Yes," the man would say, perhaps tersely, as you've joined the multitudes that already asked that question. "My name is O'Neal John."

Such was the case with Daman Yadav. There must be repercussions to that reversal of names. I cannot in truth insist that is the only reason that led to the spill, but I can imagine how, as a child, Daman was ridiculed by his peers. How much does childhood ridicule come to fester in the heart of the grown man? How does that man express the festering? Does he fight evil to

prove his nobility? Does he lead an army in search of self worth?

The ripples of ridicule are infinite.

Bullies enjoyed to ridicule Daman Yadav for his name, but also for his height and girth—five-feet tall and 200 pounds.

Daman confessed that, even as a child, he lacked the slimmer version of his dreams. “Short and skinny is better than short and fat,” he said, moonfaced, dark hair quickly receding to shape his head like a bowling ball.

“You’re probably right,” I said. “I was short, but also one stripe on the pajamas.”

He didn’t know what that meant, so I explained, and he laughed in a thick baritone, one I rarely heard and mostly when he conversed in rapid Hindi with the staff at Hurry Curry, the Indian restaurant where Daman Yadav worked—a cafeteria style operation with a few tables and a great majority of takeout.

#

I first walked into Hurry Curry two years ago. I’d just moved to Los Angeles and the restaurant was a stone throw away from my apartment. Looking out my bedroom window, I’d watched a steady stream of folk walk in empty handed and walk out with paper bags. I took an hour to count 130 patrons pass through at lunchtime. I was impressed, and, by that time, quite hungry, so I rushed out and crossed the street and walked into the restaurant and came up to a sheet of glass featuring nine metal containers filled with lentils and potatoes, cauliflower and garbanzo beans, lentils in spinach, eggplant curry. The steamy aroma satisfied me deeply even though I sadly noticed two containers with chicken and one with lamb.

The short and fat man I’d later know as Daman Yadav, had round and dark-brown eyes. His gaze was friendly but also detached—the proper etiquette for someone who serves 1000 meals a day. His voice was low and soft.

“Naan,” he said, or perhaps asked, judging from the slightly raised brow.

“Naan what,” I asked.

“Plain or garlic.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Naan plain or garlic?”

His eyes flickered with slight frustration, so I quickly said, “Plain,” though I still hadn’t a clue what he was talking about.

You, of course, are an educated and savvy reader, so I hear the snicker, so be it, but I confess that until the day I faced Daman Yadav, I didn’t know what Naan meant.

“Lunch one or two?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I was besieged. A line of four hungry people had formed behind me. I clenched my fists and decided to fight my way out. In quick succession I pointed to three of the nine containers. “I want the eggplant curry, the potatoes and peas, and the spinach.”

I stepped back and grinned. Daman Yadav spooned the food into three compartments in the styrofoam plate. I watched him measure what he thought was right, the wide silver spoon

dipping and rising with sauce. He added white rice, a container of yogurt, and the Naan, which I finally understood was much like Pita bread, if thicker.

His motions were slow and deliberate, confident, a rhythm he’d known for years. I was impressed but also very hungry, almost famished, so when the bill came to \$8.76, quickly handed the server a ten-dollar bill and said, “Keep the change.”

His eyes shone with a flicker of gratitude. The line behind me snaked with six hungry people. I spun on my heels and walked out, fled, like I was encroaching on a cosmic flow.

The food was a rainbow of spices and sauces, the vegetables cooked just right—a softness with a crunch, like the skin of the eggplant and zucchini. The portions were so generous—enough for three meals at about 3 bucks each—and I knew I’d found my well of sustenance for the foreseeable future and that doing so also entailed daily contact with my server, one Daman Yadav, an association that would lead to the spill. I can’t take that back, wish I could.

Hurry Curry was open daily from 11-11. I couldn't fathom how anyone survived such a cutthroat schedule, yet Daman Yadav did so six days a week. He took Sunday off. I found it best to arrive early, like five minutes after 11. The shining metal containers, like chariots, filled to the rim with fresh and bubbling food, waited to be assaulted. I was privy many times to the first ladle-filled scoops of the day. Only a trickle of patrons arrived before 11:30 and when the pace rapidly picked up as a human herd rushed the place in search of delicious and cheaply priced food.

I took advantage of some slower moments to try to get to know Daman Yadav, but the always polite and friendly conversation never flowered into friendship. Daman never asked me anything about my life. Was I married, kids, what kind of work? Meanwhile, I inquired about his past in India, his culture, how the food was cooked—like a Samosa—the batter wrapped the potato and soaked in the starch. Our exchange was never

more than two minutes, but, when one adds 2 minutes x 250 days, one ends up with 500 minutes—over 8 hours. One could be psychoanalyzed in less time.

Good morning, Daman.

Good morning, Boss.

The food smells good.

Thank you, Boss. Naan plain or garlic?

You're funny, Daman. No eggplant curry?

Tomorrow.

Okay. How's the blood pressure?

Not so good. Doctor give new medication.

You don't need medication, Daman, you need to shrink that gut of yours. I'll take the lentils, potatoes, and garbanzo beans.

I have no time to lose weight.

I know, Daman, you work a lot. I admire that.

Thank you, Boss, he said and placed the styrofoam container in the paper bag.

You, esteemed reader, surely detect the aloofness in Daman's words, but I was not offended. How many other middle-aged white guys pestered him with fake cheer (though not in my case) but wouldn't even notice him walking down the street.

I'd known Daman three months before I saw him beneath the waist, obscured as he was behind the glass counter, but when I did—he emerged from behind the counter with a cardboard box of chutney jars to stack on the shelves—I saw Buddha as he's depicted in picture and statue—round face, big belly and squatty legs, and an authentic Hindi accent.

And finally, to surmise the portrait of Daman Yadav, I will speak of his artistic performance, the beautiful constant of the pedantic precision—the ladle gliding to collect the bounty—the trained discipline of a concert violinist executing Paganini—and gently placing the food in the plate. I'd watch him scoop up from the potato bin, when sometimes he'd return for another slice, perhaps feeling he'd dished out too much sauce, like a god

extending favor. He never quibbled with a scoop that possibly had too much potato. Indeed, Daman Yadav was a master on the ladle, smooth moves, like Fred Astaire, feeding the multitudes who come to drink from his well—his teat—the teat of Buddha—turning water into wine.

#

A year had passed in blissful mundane, when a phone call came from a friend in distress, and I was set to fly to NYC at midnight. Flying 3000 miles at 30,000 feet in the dead of night on a tiny cylinder is nothing I'd wish on my worst enemy, but my duty was to go—strong enough to face phobic tendencies.

Busy all day, eight in the evening came about, and I was delirious with hunger.

I peered out my window. A year had passed since I'd been to Hurry Curry other than my 11:05 am time. The place was busy. Territorial impulse pointed me to challenge my fellow men in my

need to live another day. I had a plane to catch. I needed the soothing touch of basmati rice and curry potatoes.

I hurried across the street, walked into Hurry Curry and stood in a line of five people tapping toes and scrolling cell phones. I read the labels off DVD's—Indian film and music stars, and admired the bronze kettles and incense vases gracing the top shelf. Daman was in the groove, but two more people now stood behind me. He picked up the pace—moves confident as ever.

I was next in line when two tall Indian men in long black coats walked in, accompanied by Nazar, the owner of Hurry Curry, whose pitter pattered with great need for approval. Daman Yadav narrowed his round eyes while he scooped the food into the plate. He packed the goods in a brown paper bag and handed the bag to the client.

I walked up to the glass window. Daman ignored me. He rushed out from behind the counter and, much like a duck, waddled up to the visiting dignitaries and quacked loud angry words in rapid Hindi.

#

I've since wondered many times what Daman Yadav was so upset about. I strongly suspect it was about an issue many people express—not being appreciated, not rewarded for diligence and honor to duty.

The two Indian men in the black coats nodded and smiled, like they were trying to shake him off. Daman Yadav turned on his heels and waddled back to his place behind the counter. He bit on his wide lower lip and looked at me, eyes remote with anger.

I shrunk into my jacket. Four people stood behind me. I pointed and quickly said, "Potatoes, spinach, and eggplant."

Daman Yadav had fished and placed the potatoes and spinach in their styrofoam compartments, and had the scoop of eggplant gliding toward its resting place, when something happened. To this day I'm not sure of the breaking point, whether the hand

gripping the ladle, or the one balancing the plate. I'd been distracted as I glanced at the two men in black coats, and I hated them.

I heard a muted, ominous thud, and turned my eyes on the glass partition. The plate, filled to the rim with saucy food, had crashed to the counter and splattered all over the place, including Daman Yadav's pants and shirt.

Silence lingered for a moment while Daman, frozen in time, head bowed, witnessed the chaos. Then he looked at me, sad eyes filled with contempt, possibly hatred. The chatty conversation between Nazar, the owner, and the two men in black trailed off.

Nazar looked at Daman and raised his voice. Daman didn't answer. He wiped the counter with a towel and tried to brush off the sauce dripping from his white shirt. His shame consumed my heart. I could take no more. I turned on a dime and scurried off without my dinner.

#

The week in NYC was chaotic and fast-paced, but not enough to help me erase the memory of Daman Yadav, head bowed, witnessing the devastation.

I kept asking myself if I had anything to do with the spill.

Of course not, said a well-tempered voice in my head: you were but an innocent bystander, a loyal customer, one of a thousand standing patiently in line when two men in black coats entered and caused Daman to lose his cool.

That is true, said another voice, this one quivering: but what if you hadn't been there, all stressed out, at a time you never frequent the place. Surely your frazzled energy contributed to the mayhem. What if the call from NYC never came?

The well-tempered voice snickered: My, my, aren't we important. If you're looking for some esoteric collective energy excuse, then go ahead. I'm not going to reason with shaky and unproven metaphysical scaffolds. The spill had nothing to do with you.

Maybe, whispered the anxious voice, but you were there, the conduit, when Daman was fragile. What if you'd asked for lentils instead of eggplant as the last dish? The lentils tray was much closer to Daman. He wouldn't have to stretch his arm, perhaps the time when his elbow shook and lead to the spill.

Whatever, said the well-tempered voice and walked away swagger intact, leaving the anxious voice to cross his trembling fingers with remorse.

#

The airport shuttle dropped me off at my apartment at 11:15 am—time for me to hurry upstairs, drop off my suitcase, and rush to Hurry Curry so I could profusely apologize to Daman Yadav.

He wasn't there.

"Where's Daman?" I asked the server—a young Indian man with acne scars and thick glasses.

"Fresno."

"Fresno? That's 250 miles north. What happened?"

"He go to live with his uncle."

"Why?" I was really distraught—the hopeful scenario of regret and atonement, maybe even absolution, slipping away, perhaps gone forever.

The server shrugged. "Family matters, Boss. Naan plain or garlic?"

#

I walked off in a sad mood. I suspect that Daman was never the same after the spill. I really wanted to know how he was doing, but that would involve going to Fresno. Daman Yadav wouldn't appreciate that, couldn't care less to ever set eyes on me again.

I returned to my apartment and indulged in the sublime cuisine. I was now convinced that hadn't I been there on that day

at that hour, the spill wouldn't have happened. I choose to feel that way. I know it's the truth. I was the proverbial straw.

A year has since passed, and I still feel the same. I just know it in my guts of guts.

Goodbye Daman Yadav. Be well. I'm sorry.



IDENTITY POLITICS 101

by ROBIN WYATT DUNN

Motivated to look up the etymology of the word “identity” last night I discovered with great interest and a degree of horror that it comes from the Latin expression “idem et idem,” meaning “sameness” --literally, “again and again.”

So our word identity and indeed the thing itself is predicated on sameness, one generation resembling the last, ad infinitum.

The modern era, with its beautiful emphasis on individual rights and individual perception and expression, glosses over this crucial tidbit: that we know who we are by how closely we resemble one another.

This essay is intended to be my reflections on identity politics in genre fiction, and so I begin by seeing how generous I can be with the nobly intended lancements, joustings, and wavering truckages of our rainbow-colored knights of the round table, scribbling away as I am, embracing our expanding public fora for debate, the printing press of the Internet and the Zarathustra samizdat we love, new fiction with the right optics, giving the voice back to the voiceless . . .

Identity politics at large in the books we read; rearing its strange head to gaze at us back in the mirror. Terrifying!

And though I hate to do it it must be done, I have to ask: what are identity politics?

No different, I think, from politics. You can't meaningfully separate the two, since identity is about human generations and politics are about cities and our randy species has done a whole

lot of fucking in a whole lot of cities since we've been building 'em, and we're well on the way towards the glorious Bullworth Solution to racism (keep fuckin' till there ain't no colors left).

... but before we achieve that Nirvana-like color blindness (or, I suppose, it's really *uniformity of color* that the Bullworth solution offers . . .), I feel obligated to try to explain my leery rage at the approach of our beloved folks of color and folks of different sexual persuasions and folks of different what-have-yours who legitimately feel that the dominant discourse and popular works of art they've grown up on did marginalize characters of their disposition and appearance, the queer and the brown.

Remember, dear brothers, the pain of love and the pain of the city, I believe, is tied to this fact about identity: sameness counts. It hurts and it counts.

Just as the most beautiful faces (I like Sherilynn Fenn) are said to be beautiful precisely because they are most average, the most likely to be acceptable to everyone, the most likely to not be a genetical outlier that will wreak havoc on the statistical average of natural patterns of these encounters with the raging natural world we call life . . . just so, the published and the sung and the televised and the lauded and the cheered and the saluted and the respected are these average faces, the everyday guy, the gal who just wouldn't quit, the spirit we see somewhere inside, yes, but more importantly, OUTSIDE, the look we wear on our face and on our skin, the smell we got comin' out of our pores, identity, identity, *idem et idem*, the more you the same, the more we like it real good.

And so, dear brothers, this the pain of our awakening to the odd corners and loving oddities, the beautiful freakshow of human possibility, this opening and this liberalism and this Marxist agenda and this creative explosion of political and artistic

thinking, this has revealed to us that we are conservative assholes, every last fucking one of us.

Why is this? Oh, why, why. Nature is conservative because DNA is conservative. The genetical soup of 4 billion B.C. was radical, we're told, because those babies had already perfected the Bullworth solution, it was fuck each other's genome every minute and watch the new limbs grow . . . but DNA is conservative and it don't want no colored president and it don't want no third limb, so to speak, it waits and it courts disaster in its patience and in the very difficulty it insists upon: to be the same, to be as same as it can be.

Now in this strange and brave new world, I as a writer see every damn week "specialists" declaiming on how to "write that bestseller" and "find your mass audience," every editor and publisher awaiting with bated breath the next Harry Potter clone excrescence that will make the Hedge Funds happy and give

Donald Trump a hard-on (or whoever the big dick is these days).

Yes, even these evil blowhards represent this evil truth of Nature, that publishing, that novels, that works of art, these cave paintings, they derive no small part of their MEANING from their potential at mass appeal, from their clever little shenanigans inside the nucleus where they have their OWN DNA but they nevertheless resemble the genetic soup at large, they are Sherilynn Fenn and eminently fuckable and desirable by all red blooded American men at her prime, and yet are unique, forever in her plaid skirt . . .

Perhaps I digress. Or perhaps you see where I'm going with this (can you give me a hint?).

I suppose I should have just started with the beautiful advice of Kathe Koja, that beautiful freak of a writer almost as hot as Sherilynn Fenn in her prime, denizen of Murder/ Motor City, who, when asked by an eager young gay writer something to the

effect of: “how do I write a great gay novel?” her answer was, you must write a *great novel* with a character in it who happens to be gay.

This seems to be, on reflection, to be a kind of genius observation on par with the Dalai Llamas interesting observations about the nature of the mandala, which is to say, *out of this world, baby*.

For *idem et idem*, we adore the same, we adore the face that so resembles ours with that *frisson* of difference, but there is something in this heady run of the generations, perhaps in the ultimate *difference* that results over time (birds from dinosaurs and what have you!), or perhaps in the *perspective* we gain on ourselves from this ruthless self-analysis, this ever-expanding idea of MLK-inspired brotherhood, as Gene Wolfe has Horn say in *On Blue's Waters*: (and I'm paraphrasing) even the pig is us. We may eat him and train him, but he is us.

So now, we happy few, we band of brothers, with our bold Welsh longbows looking down at the fields of Agincourt, I dunno who the French are in this disturbing metaphor (Evil racists? Gay writers who suck balls?), so now we stand today on Krispin's Day to *Go to the Moon*, not because it is easy, but because it is hard, because that goal, Mr. JFK, will be the ultimate test of our ideas and skills, to get out of this Silent Planet over to Perelandra or whatever and check that shit out, and in the process check out just who the hell we really are --which is only to say, *meine freunden*, that we're getting there.

Am I only mildly chiding my queer cousins, then, the small presses and eager scriptoria of various colors and persuasions and backgrounds who eagerly press forward into the breach, waving their yard-arms and cannons and cats-o-nine-tales (kinky . . .), no, not exactly. I'm angry. I don't like what you've been on about.

For as our dear Ms. Koja said, the story's got to be good. The bi-racial disabled Lesbian protagonist ain't worth shit unless you really show us what she's got, unless you show us that *idem et idem*, who the fuck is this bitch with no legs and who won't even suck a cock? What's she got, huh? Let us see this bitch fuck some shit up!

You better fucking show us, assholes. And by us, I mean, the human race (still expanding its definition . . .). James Baldwin showed us. He burned away the dross of what hole what dude liked to stick it in, what shade of brown what shade of pink, to reveal the horrifyingly murky *idem et idem* beneath, always the same, just another lynching, just another beautiful show for the pickpockets to watch, our dross is down *inside*, as Ms. Koja knows, so sure, give us the gay biracials and the historically underrepresented but BY GOD you had better make those fuckers sing and fight like Enkidu and Gilgamesh, the FIRST

CHARACTERS EVER WRITTEN DOWN, who just happened to be gay.

So they liked fucking each other in the ass! Did the WHOLE STORY hinge on that aspect of their human experience?

So. I'm no Henry the Fifth, unfortunately, nor a JFK able to declare a new moon mission (I want to go!), and it's still unclear who the evil French racists are in this perfungled equation . . .(ourselves?), but let me just close with this:

We're not getting any younger. Evolution moves in fits and starts and so before we turn into something like birds, to make way for the new Masters of the Universe (algae?), let's at least be clear about this one: just because you're gay doesn't mean we want to read your book. And just because I want to cum in Sherilynn Fenn doesn't mean the products of my diseased mind and pen are

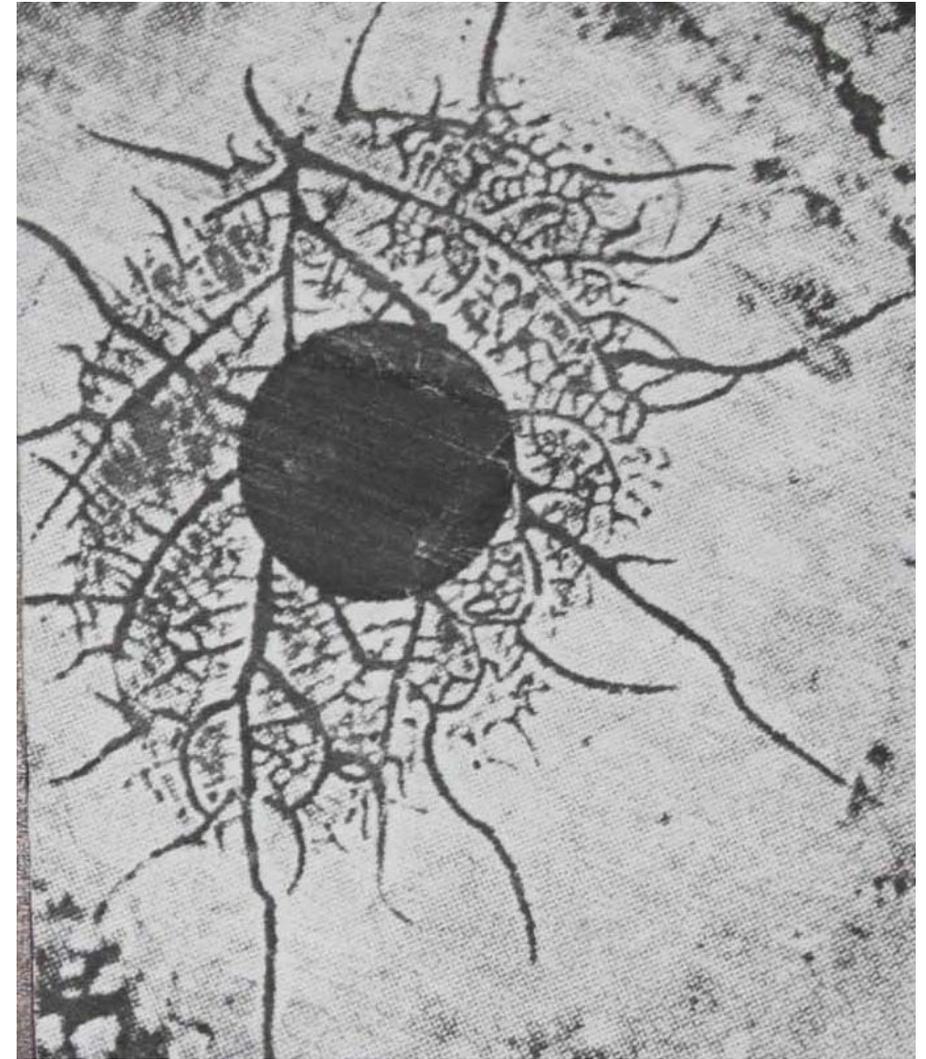
therefore of universal acclaim. (My goal is to make my words as appealing as her fabulous breasts . . .)

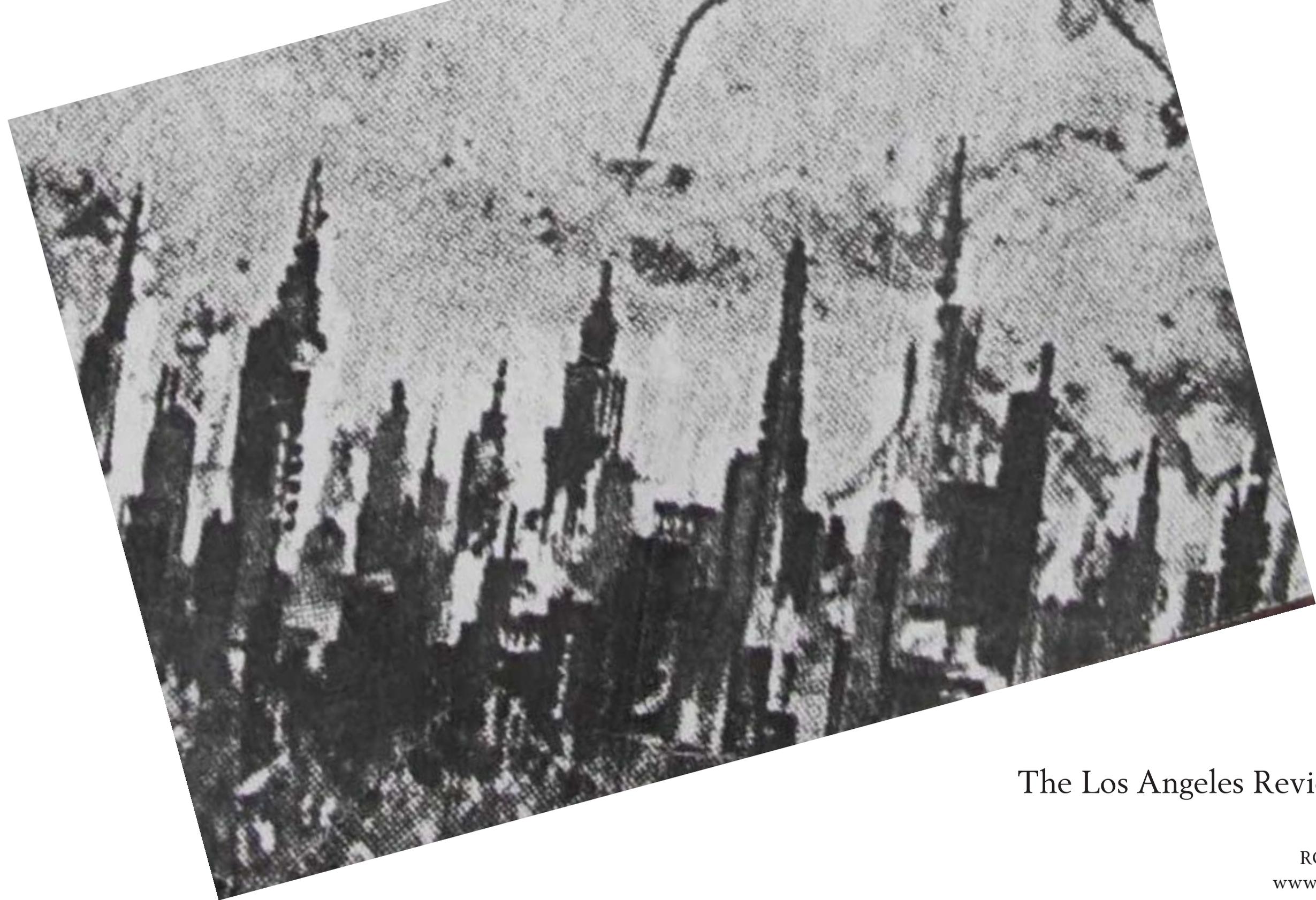
“Identity politics” is a redundancy. All politics are about identity, broadly construed. Politics are king. Have you been scratchin’ my back? I been scratching on yours real good, honeychile . . . So no, not the color of your skin, but the sharpness of your dagger. Not only the content of your character, but how much you willing to compromise it baby, you wanna make a deal in an alleyway?

No, I ain’t talkin’ about sex, I’m talkin’ bout revolution. You remember that word?

Yeah, give me a *coup d’etat*, you whiny little bitches. I don’t care who you been fuckin’ if you got a good idea in your head and you scratch my back while you’re at. There’s this one place that’s really hard to reach . . .

Yes, Gilgamesh did get a little on the down-low, but then he and his beautiful gay lover just happened to SAVE ALL OF SUMER.





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