



# The Corner Club

## Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge

Best of Poetry

Ruth Gooley

Best of Fiction

Walter Giersbach



The Corner

Club

Press



# The Corner Club Press

*November 2011*

Volume I • Issue V

*Managing Editor*      *Greg Tredore*  
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*Poetry Editor*        *Daphne Maysonet*

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# Letter From the Editors

Dear shadows, who are our readers and writers,

It is with pleasure as always that we bring to you the highest quality creative pieces we have received. We apologize for the delay in our publication this issue. Although we usually publish promptly, delays in this issue are caused by many factors, some of which we had no control over. Despite the delay, we feel that the magazine has all the quality of our previous issues. We look forward to your submissions to our magazine for our next edition in January 2012.

Amber Forbes, Daphne Maysonet  
*Founders and Editors*



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*November 2011*

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Change at the Bus Stop

---

Ruth Gooley

A grouch, that middle-aged man  
in the black suit and slipshod wig  
who stoops in the off-gray light  
that never seems to glow red.

*See the rainbow?*

A hazard, but my words tumble  
into the blizzard of raindrops  
that are bound to smear the morning com-  
mute.

*It's beautiful.*

An acknowledgement,  
a bow and a brief curvature  
of the lips, a momentary light

from the pastel arc  
that soars like dawn, rising  
from the ridge of the bank building  
to the rootstock of the convenience store.

The bus smokes up.  
I get on and rustle open the Times.  
He sits away, in shadows.  
We're past the rainbow now.

*Ruth Gooley has poems published in Day Tonight Night Today, The Loyolan, Red Poppy Review, Pure Francis, Poecology, vox poetica, nibble, and Mali Mirage and have more soon to be published in Snowy Egret, Literary Fever, Hobble Creek Review, Common Sense 2, Ibbetson Street Press, and Up the Staircase Quarterly.*

On the Fly  
*To a conflicted butterfly in the Botanical Garden*

---

Ruth Gooley

As loud as a Seahawk  
in her black  
and orange jumpsuit,  
she maneuvers  
past a Japanese cherry  
loaded with buds,  
parachutes, off-kilter,  
and deadfalls  
into a Butterfly Weed.

Stunned,  
she  
stalls,  
spins,  
recovers,  
gives chase  
to a Chocolate Flower  
skimming the ground.

She  
lands,  
lies  
&  
waits.

The enemy  
spies her,  
bombs her,  
both sets of wings  
afire as they engage,  
now upside down,  
now fluttering through the flak  
—he won't let go—  
They spiral up,  
shoot into the stalks  
of a Heavenly Bamboo.

Solo survivor,  
she reappears,  
loops once again  
through that battlefield,  
does a touch-and-go,  
throws a half-looped  
barrel roll,  
nothing  
to deflect her.

Park Beat

---

Ruth Gooley

Still in this grove of live oaks  
heavy with knobbed trunks  
and thin prickly leaves,  
wreathed with blooms of poison oak  
and the creek's confusion,  
the green hum of warblers  
and bees and blue dragonflies;

still full of warm honey  
and blue air, the crock  
of an overgrown stump  
and the damp of a pebbly trail,  
insect itches annealed,  
flies and pests stolen away,  
sun's ache laid aside,

I breathe,  
out for downstream,  
in for you, my love,  
for this sage smell,  
this woodpecker's knocking,  
this wind flow,  
this bouquet of lupine  
and creaking treefrogs,  
this hand,

held to your beat.

Send Us Your Best Work (6 lines)

---

Robert Laughlin

I hunger for the day

When journal guidelines say:

Please send us all your sub-abysmal crap and  
more.

We'll publish, with the dawn,

The work of yours that's on

A first-name basis with the dust balls in your  
drawer.

*Robert Laughlin lives in Chico, California. His poems have appeared in Bryant Literary Review, Camroc Press Review, elimae, The Orange Room Review and Pearl. Two of his short stories are MWA Notables, and his novel, Vow of Silence, was favorably reviewed by Publishers Weekly. His website is at [www.pw.org/content/robert\\_laughlin](http://www.pw.org/content/robert_laughlin).*

WATCHING NOT ALLOWED



Jeffrey Park

Watching not allowed  
read the sign.  
So is touching ok then, or prodding  
or poking?

Or maybe it's acceptable  
to cast a casual glance,  
just by chance as it were, so long as  
you don't cross the invisible line  
between seeing and observing.

And at what point does the orientation  
of my eyeballs  
transition from passive reception to  
active interrogation?

And then they were right there  
in front of us  
big as life and steam and darkness  
pouring off them  
and then they were gone again.

I wasn't watching – no, me neither,  
no way.  
A few slow paces, studied casualness  
and then we run like hell.

## THE TEACUP ELF

---

Jeffrey Park

Before I turn in for the night I have  
a little chat  
with our teacup elf – we bought it  
from the shop a week or so ago. Are you  
going to come out? I ask.  
Would you like a saucer of warm milk?  
Shy little devil never says a word, just  
huddles down in its cup –  
irritating really.

Perhaps I'll take it back  
to the place where I bought it.  
Perhaps we'll set it out on the balcony  
one night  
teacup and all  
or perhaps I'll just make myself  
a nice hot cup of herbal elf tea –  
see if that gets a rise out of the  
folkloric little bastard.

*Jeffrey Park is a native of Baltimore, Maryland and a graduate of the Johns Hopkins University (BA) and Towson University (MAT). He currently lives in Munich, Germany, where he works as an educator in a private secondary school and teaches business English to adults. In his free time he writes poetry and walks his dogs, sometimes simultaneously.*

Red Hot Chili Nor' easter

---

Mike Ambrose

They're standin in line waiting ...  
Swaying, barren, exposed –  
Without a summer's blanket to protect.  
Left alone – to be broken,  
What are they saying?

Banging, clanging, rhythmic crescendo  
Only to reach a calm...before the....  
Before the harm.

Blowing hard to break a girl  
As life is stripped to its core;  
Snow won't resist  
Like a girl that bends and sways.

No light to shine through...  
Through the blinding snow...  
But what a show.

*My wife and I live in Connecticut, USA. I have been blessed with a life that includes a wonderful wife and family, a couple of patents, a pretty cool job as an aerospace engineering executive and in my younger days was a national class runner. Writing and reading poetry has provided balance in a life that is high pressure and very exact. It is probably because of my day job that I enjoy writing so much! I started submitting my poetry for publication last year and have been fortunate enough to have been accepted for publication in Grey Sparrow Journal, The Trumbull Times, Lucid Rhythms, and Westward Quarterly.*



## I Know from My Bed

---

Michael Lee Johnson

Sometimes I feel  
like a sad sack  
a worn out old man  
with clown facial wrinkles  
I know when I reflect  
stare out my window  
at the snow falling  
from my bed  
my back to yours  
reflecting on my pain  
ignoring yours  
I isolate your love  
lose your touch  
to another  
forgetting  
it is our bed  
not mine  
that I lie in

*Michael Lee Johnson is a poet, freelance writer and small business owner of custom imprinted promotional products and apparel: [www.promoman.us](http://www.promoman.us), from Itasca, Illinois. He is heavily influenced by: Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, and Allen Ginsberg. His new poetry chapbook with pictures, titled *From Which Place the Morning Rises*, and his new photo version of *The Lost American: from Exile to Freedom* are available at: <http://stores.lulu.com/promomanusa>. The original version of *The Lost American: from Exile to Freedom*, can be found at: [http://www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/book\\_detail.asp?isbn=0-595-46091-7](http://www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/book_detail.asp?isbn=0-595-46091-7). New Chapbook: **Challenge of Night and Day, and Chicago Poems.***

Leaves in December

---

Michael Lee Johnson

Leaves, a few stragglers in  
December, just before Christmas,  
some nailed down crabby  
to ground frost,  
some crackled by the bite  
of nasty wind tones.

Some saved from the matchstick  
that failed to light.  
Some saved from the rake  
by a forgetful gardener.

For these few freedom dancers  
left to struggle with the bitterness:  
wind dancers  
wind dancers  
move your frigid  
bodies shaking like icicles  
hovering but a jiffy in sky,  
kind of sympathetic to the seasons,  
reluctant to permanently go,



# I Wish...

The Witches of Desire: Book 1

Wren Emerson

could cost her everything. Her legacy as one of the most powerful witches the town has ever seen has made her enemies that have been waiting patiently for a chance to destroy her. Thistle needs to learn to use her powers to protect herself before they succeed.

**Be careful what you wish for.**

Thistle has a power unique even among the magic wielding witches of Desire. She can wish things into existence. At first she enjoys the freedom of having everything her heart desires, but she soon realizes that her power comes at a terrible price. She's losing her grip on her sanity at a time when she can't afford any weakness. Her enemies are closing in quickly, but she might not have the strength to save herself.

It's available at Amazon ([http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/Boo5oX8UJA/ref=s9\\_simh\\_gw\\_p351\\_do\\_i1?pf\\_rd\\_m=ATVPDKIKXoDER&pf\\_rd\\_s=center-2&pf\\_rd\\_r=114RN810E1XXVZ52TAG3&pf\\_rd\\_t=101&pf\\_rd\\_p=470938631&pf\\_rd\\_i=507846](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/Boo5oX8UJA/ref=s9_simh_gw_p351_do_i1?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKXoDER&pf_rd_s=center-2&pf_rd_r=114RN810E1XXVZ52TAG3&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_p=470938631&pf_rd_i=507846)) and Barnes & Noble (<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/i-wish-wren-emerson/1103662107?ean=2940013598713&itm=1&usri=wren%2bemerson>)

**All she ever wanted was a chance to settle down in one place.**

Thistle Nettlebottom knows her life isn't exactly normal. She travels the country with her secretive mother and bestselling author grandmother in a pink RV going from book signings to crazy research trips. She's never been to public school or had a boyfriend, but she can pick a lock and hotwire a car. One day the phone rings and they set a course to a tiny town that's not on any maps. Suddenly, Thistle finds her whole life changing.

**She's finally found the home she's been searching for.**

Thistle soon realizes that Desire isn't like other towns and she's not like other girls. The family she trusted has lied to her about everything her entire life and the things she doesn't know about herself

# A Whisper to a Scream

Sometimes love *can* be . . . deadly.



Ellory Graham detested high school. She relished the fact that she was a rebel. A wild, carefree, type of girl. She basked in the glory of being the type of girl who stood up to authority. Unfortunately for her, her upfront, honest and bitchy nature always managed to land her in some kind of trouble.

Adam Jacobs was everything Ellory was not. Not only was he beautiful, but he was smart, artistic, and sweet. To almost every girl he seemed like the total package- that all around perfect guy. But in a town where nothing particularly interesting happens, and gossip seems like the only fun thing to do, sometimes those perfections become flaws. And it doesn't take long for Ellory to find out, even Adam has secrets.

But Adam's secrets, are the kind of secrets people die for...

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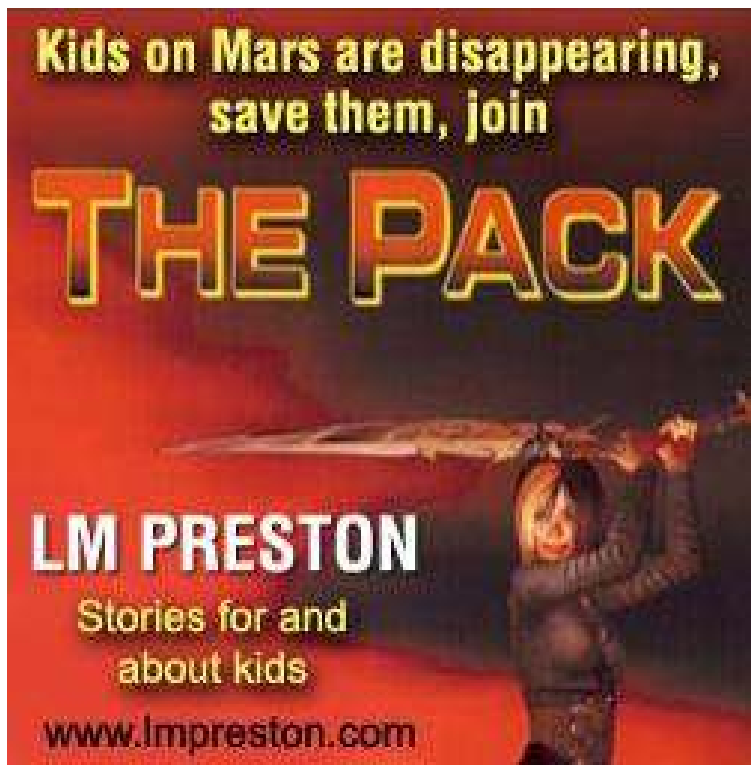
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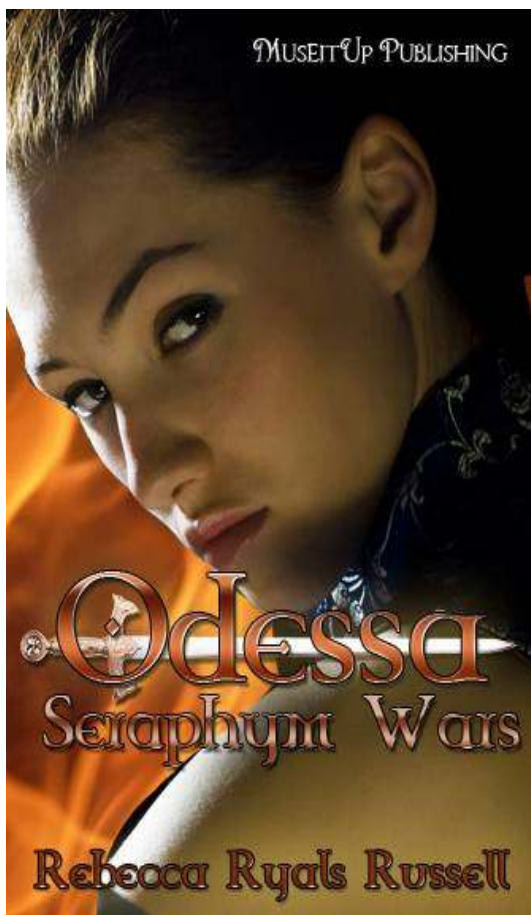
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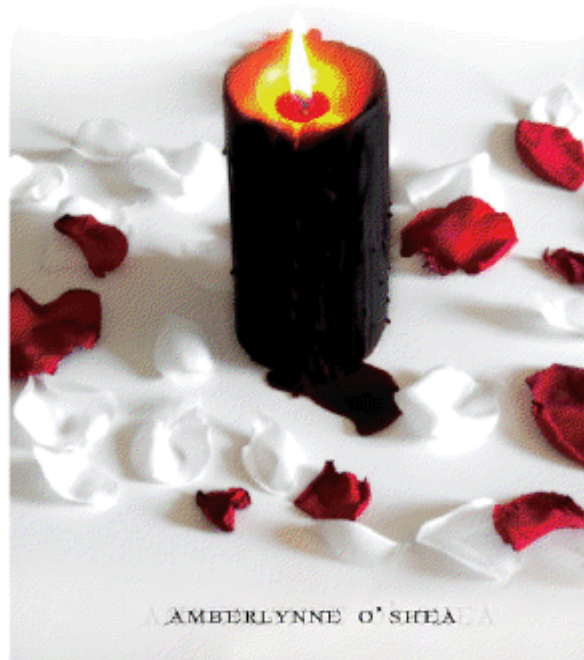
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"Ernie, how can I compete with someone who's seventy years old? A woman who's probably in some nursing home!"

Hildy was near tears, and Ernie didn't know what words would make her begin to understand how she was confusing scholarly research with mundane personal affection. Further, it was distracting the way Hildy kept batting at his furniture, as if she were swatting flies.

"Hildy, it's not like she's my girlfriend. You're my girl. Mona's simply a...." He searched for the word. "A research project. She's one of the great forgotten icons of the silver screen. I submitted a critical analysis to *Cinema Revue*, and a movie website published my critique last month. I know there's a book in this."

"And you got paid what for that Internet story? *Nothing*, after weeks of writing it!" Now the engine of her frustration made the tears flow. His fiancée wouldn't sit down. Her fists punctuated each sentence as she paced his studio, hitting the sofa, hitting the bureau. .

Ernie bit his lip. Better to let her rant, allow her clockwork motor to run down. It would be better when they talked tomorrow. His eyes left Hildy and settled on Mona's black-and-white photo on his desk. Mona had always been calm, reflective, and a tiny bit amused.

"And Ralph's getting antsy about you at work. He asked me whose picture you put up as a screen saver on your PC, that picture of her. Honestly, I was so embarrassed."

Hildy simply wasn't going to understand. Of the six films Mona made for Universal Studios, only three had survived to be shown infre-

quently on late-night television. None had been made into DVDs or tapes. Mona Magbörd was an artist, and any posterity or immortality now lay in the memory — and the writings — of her admirers.

“Just forget it!” she cried. “Our engagement is off. I can’t fight some phantom movie star!” He looked up to see Hildy pointing a small silver pistol at him.

“Put that down, you idiot,” he said, smacking the gun to the floor. “What’re you going to do? Shoot me because you’re jealous of my work?”

He was vaguely aware of the door slamming and Hildy’s shoes clicking down the hallway of his apartment in New York’s East Village. She made him so angry—no, distracted —because she had no understanding of art. He kicked the gun through the doorway where it lay innocently next to his shoes. Mona continued to smile enigmatically from her picture, indifferent to Hildy’s dramatic threat. Marvelous how the photographer’s back light created a halo around Mona’s tousled hair. The hair was brown, he knew, but since she had never made any color films he had to rely on a theater poster to remember the light brunette tones, and even those highlights might have been tinted by the illustrator. He put his feet up on the sofa and considered, if *An Affair in Algiers* had been made in Technicolor, would it have added to her impact, or was the chiaroscuro of Bim Bevilaqua’s camera work enhanced by black and white?

It would all be so much easier if he could show Hildy the queries he’d written to make her understand Mona Magbörd’s life in Europe and Hollywood was a serious writing project. His letters were never answered, by Mona or her daughter, by her former publicist or her family in Sweden, but neither did they come back *Addressee Unknown* or *Deceased*. Mona, where are you, he wondered.

On Friday, after he lunched, alone, on East 48<sup>th</sup> Street, his editor called him into his office at the newspaper.

"I tried to make this work, Ernie, I asked you to meet me halfway. To show up on time and go out on assignments and don't come back without the story. We discussed this. I sent you a copy of our understanding, just like Personnel told me."

"I know, Ralph. I just had something on my mind."

"Ernie, you're banging away on your PC with a story about that actress, for Chrissake! I'm sorry, but I have to let you go. I won't give you a bad rap if someone else wants to hire you, but I can't recommend you."

Ernie would have told Hildy what Ralph said, but she was covering a police story in Bensonhurst, so he left the office without saying anything to anybody. He had made up his mind. No girl, no job. His bank account held twelve hundred dollars, and he could add another eight hundred by postponing the rent. He could make it. Mona's smile gave him the wings to fly up to the Port Authority terminal and buy a bus ticket to Los Angeles. He would call Hildy from the road and explain.

The endless bus ride was a blessing, in fact, offering the luxury of time to think, and he bathed in the freedom of knowing every bit of research he'd done was in a sports bag overhead. People didn't understand that you had to separate the things you *want* to do from the things you *have* to do. Mona Magbörd would have understood, when she left Sweden after her first film. Her dream was to become a serious actress when she was accepted by the Royal Dramatic Theater in 1932, until a screenwriter saw her in Stockholm and arranged for a screen test.

*Snap*, as simple as that! It was like Betty Grable being discovered waiting tables at Chasen's. Mona was offered a contract with Universal. There also had been a daughter, conceived in passion and born into

financial need, which finalized her decision.

Four years in Hollywood resulted in six movies. Then Mona got offers from Rome. She scurried back and forth between the Universal lot and Cinecittá. Hustled for parts. The studios forgot her. She got married, reportedly to a Romanian. Then she disappeared.

The studio archivist had told him Mona died when she was 31, and shrugged off his inquiries as to where she was buried, where her daughter now lived. He hit pay dirt when a writer at an NYU film school reception gave him an address where Mona supposedly was retired and reclusive.

As his bus passed through Chicago, he ruminated on whether Mona owned any films or tapes of her movie oeuvre. As the bus entered St. Louis, he wondered if she had exchanged any letters with Charles Boyer or Hedy Lamarr, Yvonne De Carlo or any other co-stars. By the time the bus got to Santa Fe, he considered the possibility of having Universal loan him copies of every photo they'd taken of Mona to accompany the research in his book. The book would establish him as a film biographer, could change Hildy's mind about his scholarly intent, and Ralph might even give him a berth on the paper as a film critic.

Always, Mona's face floated just behind his eyes. He endlessly replayed the way she used her left hand to sweep her hair back from her face. Her left profile, with the mole on her cheek, was her exclusive camera shot. It made her so compatible with Boyer's right profile. He could almost feel her sitting beside him on the Greyhound.

The Rent-a-Wreck at the lot in Los Angeles cost him less than hundred for a week, and the woman at the counter told him how to get to Sierra Madre, up in the foothills.

The house was a Spanish-style ranch set on what seemed to be almost a quarter acre. The lawn was manicured, the shrubs and plant-

ings pruned severely. A warm feeling flowed over him as he walked up the driveway and pushed the doorbell. The waiting would at last be over. Several minutes went by. He rang again, and then the door opened.

A youngish woman, probably in her late twenties like him, opened the door a crack.

"I'm Ernest Hart. From New York. I wrote to Miss Magbörd several times. About her career? I'm writing a book."

"Go away. We're not seeing anyone." The door closed firmly.

He stood in the pale sunshine and looked past the house at the sere foothills. Had he come three thousand miles to have a door slammed in his face? He rang the bell again.

"Listen, this is very important," he told the face in the darkness. "I'm not a crank fan. I need to talk with Miss Magbörd! May I please...."

"Go away." The voice was insistent, and the door closed.

The foothills berated him as an imbecile. He had been fired. His fiancée had walked out on him. He had traveled across the entire country. This was not going to be a fool's errand! He walked around the house to a stucco wall that came up to his chin. With only a small scrape to his shin and a tear in his khaki pants, he clambered over and dropped into the patio. He listened, but the only sound was a leaf blower or some kind of machine down the street. Beyond the azure swimming pool, he could see the glass patio door was ajar. Straightening his shoulders, he walked through the slider and into the house.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dusky light, and then he made out a figure sitting in a wheelchair. The first particularity he noticed was her white hair, and then the afghan lap robe covering her knees. She was dozing.

“Miss Magbörd, excuse me for barging in....”

The white head rose and she leaned back in her chair. The eyes focused blearily.

“My name is Ernest Hart. I’m a writer—and a fan of yours. I’m writing a book about you.”

The eyes drifted across his face like an airport beacon, circling and then finally registering. “Mr. Hart?”

“Yes, Ernest Hart. I’m a biographer.”

“You’ve come to see me? I have so few visitors.” The woman smiled and the wrinkles reformed into a potpourri of beauty. She slowly raised her hand from under the robe. “Do you want my autograph?” The veined hand wavered, indecisive about searching for a pen or shaking his hand. Then it dropped to her lap and the light went out of her eyes. Alzheimer’s or dementia, he thought.

“*What the hell are you doing in my house!*” The woman who had answered the door swept into the living room. “Get out immediately.”

“I’m only trying to give Miss Magbörd the recognition she’s due. She’s a great actress and a star.”

“She is best forgotten. And, if you don’t get out I will, I will....” The woman looked wildly around the room and grabbed a magazine. Realizing this wasn’t a threatening instrument, she threw it to the floor. Her hand swept back over her hair. Her left hand.

Ernie’s eyes were captured by the beauty mark on her cheek and the gesture that had enchanted audiences.

“Miss Magbörd,” he said, exhaling in shock. “Mona, it’s you.” The pencil-thin eyebrows had grown out. The long brunette hair was now a rich walnut coif. But, the eyes had the same soulful gaze that stared from the studio portrait in his luggage. “Then, who is this lady?”

He barely heard her words as she sank into an overstuffed chair. "It has been so long. I knew some day...." The words trailed off.

"I thought your mother was in Sweden."

"She is my *daughter!*" Mona's eyes flashed with the lightening she had displayed in *Betrayal*.

"That's not possible. There must be some mistake." Ernie felt faint in the warm living room as blood rushed from his head.

"It is entirely true, in fact. At age thirty, forty, fifty I still looked as I did in my twenties. My public life ended when someone thought my daughter was my sister." The memory brought a curl to the corner of her lip. "Then, I began to fear the people who would take me apart to learn why I did not age, the friends who would kill to add a few years to their lives."

Ernie saw his dream of a publishing success growing. He was getting the interview that would immortalize him and seat her in the pantheon of screen goddesses. The signature smile of sadness he had seen in *Liaison in Montmartre* crept over her face.

"Now, can you see why I had to leave the theater? Why we have to move every time someone recognizes me? I could not be the actress who never aged. Ironically, it isn't allowed in real life—only in the movies. Now, please leave. Please."

"I can't go home. I've left everything. My fiancée, my job."

"I know that feeling." A pained smile flirted with her lips. "Now forget me and your stupid obsession."

"I have a story to write. I *will* write it." Belligerence grew at this woman who withheld his success, who would thwart his passion.

"Your choice. I will deny it, move again if necessary." Her eyes held wistfulness tinged with bitterness. "People work so hard to be re-



membered, to find some kind of immortality, and they lose sight of other things, people who count. But, immortality can be damning when—*i* — it actually comes. Be thankful for whatever you have, Mr. Hart.”

He watched her stare over the pool at the setting sun, trying to find proportion to what he had invested and what he had left behind. “I *will* write the book, you know!”

“Don’t you see the irony, you damned fool?” she whispered. “I am ageless and have nothing left to live for. You are mortal and have everything waiting for you. Go home, idiot. Make your days count so there will be no regrets.”

His hand, holding Hildy’s automatic pistol, jumped from his khaki pocket. “You were my last chance, damn you!” The pistol cracked once on the word *damn*. Surprised at his own impulse, he saw the hole appear in Mona’s forehead, her look of surprise, the way she fell exposing the profile that was her exclusive camera shot.

Her words reverberated in the chambers of his mind as he stepped backward in slow motion: Immortality isn’t allowed in real life.

*Walt Giersbach's fiction has appeared in Bewildering Stories, Big Pulp, Corner Club Press, Every Day Fiction, Everyday Weirdness, Gumshoe Review, Lunch Hour Stories, Mouth Full of Bullets, Mystery Authors, OG Short Fiction, Northwoods Journal, Paradigm Journal, Pif Magazine, r.kv.r.y, Short Fiction World, Southern Fried Weirdness, The Short Humour Site, The World of Myth and Written Word. He was 6th place winner of the 79th annual Writer's Digest writing competition in October 2011. Two volumes of short stories, Cruising the Green of Second Avenue, have been published by Wild Child (www.wildchildpublishing.com).*

A Sense of Wonderment

For Eric Johnson

---

Robyn Ritchie

She liked him hairless, like a seal, she said. He was twenty and twenty was young, she said, but sometimes she liked to think he was younger, like a schoolboy or a first mate or a delinquent fresh out of juvenile. And when he looked at her lopsided, when he tried to hide the fear or disgust in his gaze, she said she liked him best *this way*.

But the seal thing, it kept coming up again and again, in the dark, in the bed, in the little seconds when he wasn't so frightened and she wasn't so terrifying. She had never called his name out before-- it had been months before she even learned that his real name in fact wasn't Wondermint-- but suddenly, the words stumbled out over a moan, "Little, little seal..."

And he continued work, like he didn't suspect, but all that time, he was thinking.

*Things sure are going to hell around here.*

\* \* \*

Yes, this ship was sinking, that was certainly true, but like an old and faithful captain, Eric could not abandon it. For no reason other than there were no dinghies left to escape on and really no life to go back to on shore. He might as well go down.

And Bonnie would go all the way down. She would rest at the bottom of the sea for Ages, as long as the world would hold itself together, Bonnie would stay there, chthonic and silent.

In the seven months that Eric had been servicing Bonnie, he had come to not understand, but exist with her. In her dust-layered house, the

dying garden that surrounded it, and the circle of houses that surrounded that, they spent time together. He couldn't spend the night, they both refused such an idea, but he did rest. Maybe a five-minute lapse after his job was over, maybe ten. Then into his little bug and across the city.

Almost time to go.

He exhaled a breath that had been inhaled a while ago and flopped on to his back in the puddle of sweat-soaked sheets. In the lamp light, he was thin and hairless, covered in stubble from the used Gillette razor.

He looked over at her--hair mussed and glued to her lips by fluids. On the floor, his clothes, and he figured he should get ready. As he reached for his shirt, she sighed and said, "Do you know what kind of seal I think of, Wondermint?"

"What?" he mumbled, fishing the ground for his boxers.

"Sea lions."

"Oh."

"Do you know what kind I used to think of?" She looked up at him as he stood, pulling his jeans up. "With my husband?"

"What?"

"Elephant seals."

"Oh." Eric shrugged. He rubbed the side of his neck where it still stung. "Well...good night, then."

"Good night, Wondermint."

He bounded out of the room, imbued with the excitement of having the rest of the night to himself. The outside was cool for summer and the cicadas sang as he waded through high grass. Then into his little bug and across the city.

\* \* \*

During the day, he was Wondermint, the amateur whore who had stumbled his way into the lap of someone just enough degrees left of sane to

actually pay for his limp thrusts.

But at night.

Yes, at night, he was Eric Moore--King of the land of Dirty Socks and National Geographic subscriptions, Duke of Dishes Piled High and the Emperor of Late Night Gaming.

His apartment--sandwiched between Mr. and Mrs. Rodner's powerful lovemaking above and Mrs. Fielding's hedonistic children below--was a safe haven in which he could be Eric Moore. The only place. There was nowhere for a boy like Eric Moore out in the real world, in the heat of the city, in the heat of Bonnie's bed. No, only here. Only here.

He discarded his clothes, thick with Bonnie's dime-store perfume, and threw on a t-shirt and fresh boxers.

The entire two-room flat was littered with the trash of the week--Sundays were for cleaning and Sunday was far away. Everything was far away when he sat amongst his kingdom and played games late into the night. His eyes were on fire and his ass ached by 3 AM but it was nothing compared to the aching of his hips, arms, shoulders bitten and bruised.

Laying down at 6 or 7, encircled by the familiar and rank smells of his own bed, he was half asleep. And it was in that small space of time, that moment between consciousness and dreaming, that he was able to not be so sorry for what he was.

A whore?

Sure.

A broke whore?

Okay.

A broke whore whose only client thought him so poor a lover that she thought of sea lions while with him?

Yes. Yes, he could deal with that. At times like these, he could deal with that.

\* \* \*

And then there were times like these, when Eric was scared to

death and blushing because Bonnie had thrown the bedroom window open and wouldn't let him shut it and the neighbors, over just a few bushes, had their window open too, blasting some DMX into the summer noon, and he was sure they would look over, what with the long brays Bonnie was giving, that certainly weren't a DMX lyric, certainly not.

But customer satisfaction, that's what Wondermint strived for. It said so in his ad, which he had the misfortune of putting in the personals column of the West End Daily on the same morning Bonnie happened to be reading.

She writhed beneath him the way earthworms wriggle out of the dirt on rainy days. And it was nothing new. But the window. The god-damn window. He kept looking over his shoulder and the music was starting to grate on him-- he was a Dave Matthews Band kind of guy and didn't mind some Maroon 5 when the mood came over him but this was too much. It was throwing him off. And for a second, he thought, he saw a flash of hair-- gold in the shadows-- at the corner of the window. The possibility came like a bullet and knocked him off of Bonnie, to the floor. He hit his head on the nightstand and an old glass of water fell and broke.

The room was silent, save for DMX's voice from afar.

Bonnie's eyes, fervent black, were visible at the side of the mattress. She looked down on him and said, "What's wrong?"

"T-The window," Eric mumbled as he sat up, pressing his bare back against the nightstand. "It's, uh, distracting. And I think... I think someone looked over here. They might have seen."

"Hmm."

"Maybe you should shut it? It's kinda warm in here anyway." He rubbed sweat from the back of his neck.

She rolled away and was somewhere on the expanse of her bed. It was a king size equipped with a deep dip in the middle[--No Man's Land, where her parents once made love. He suspected she had rolled into that dip, and bathed in their old sweat like a nymph in the river.

"I'm airing the house out, Wondermint," she said. "It's musty in here. You probably... can't smell it because you're here so often. But it is."

He could smell it. But telling a customer their house smelled like thousand-year-old socks and rotting food wasn't prudent. And with the state of his own hovel, he had no room to complain.

"Oh," he said.

"My brother's coming."

"Oh."

"You should meet him."

Eric moved on to his knees and peered over the mattress-- found the nymph in the river. "I'm busy that day," he said and tried to sound sorry. "I, uh, was going to tell you."

"What about for double rates?" And there was a lilt in her voice, foreign and triumphant, like, *I got you now*.

And yes, she had him now.

\* \* \*

Wondermint asked for eight dollars an hour, like any respectable young man trying to make his way in the world. For this small fee, he would do whatever a customer asked. He supposed that was his downfall--a promise of anything. Because, he had soon found out, anything meant everything.

This included but was not limited to: having sex, giving kisses, painting toenails, watching Sci-fi movies, eating homemade peanut brittle, helping out in a dead garden, going out to get some falafels, wearing the color pink, pretending to see stars, helping pick out new bed sheets for the guest room, loading the dishwasher, finding out the dishwasher doesn't work and then doing the dishes by hand and staying over so late into the night that he cries because he missed a raid with his guild.

For double rates, he would meet the older brother. But for no

amount would he smile while doing it.

He stood on the porch along with Bonnie, looking out over the lawn of dead grass under the setting sun, in the shadow of the house. In this light, it almost looked beautiful, like fields of wheat in a wide open pasture. But he knew where he was again when Bonnie took a step on to the creaking stairs and her arm brushed his. She wore a black dress and smelled slightly better than normal. And on the street, a yellow taxi circled on the cul-de-sac, pulling to a stop before the driveway.

She went down the steps on bare feet and greeted the man who emerged; he was in his twenties, maybe, and his black hair mimicked Bonnie's. Eric wondered if he had been rolling around in bed all day with a whore, too.

"Wondermint, this is Andrew. Andrew, Wondermint," Bonnie said, walking through the screen door and leaving the two men to consider each other.

Eric flushed red. He said, "My real name... I mean, that's just my... my-"

"Whore name," said Andrew, and he looked down at Eric through blue-blue eyes. "I figured. It's okay, don't worry about it." And he disappeared through the screen door, as if through a portal.

\* \* \*

There was grilled asparagus, braised short ribs and cheddar dill cornbread, and sitting on the counter in the kitchen was a coconut cake. From the dining room, it caught Eric's eye and he looked down the small table as Bonnie spooned out the ribs from the pot. He stared up at her, her lax face and painted lips, as if he had never seen her before.

She looked at him. "What's wrong?"

"I... nothing, I... didn't know you cooked was all," he mumbled. "It looks great."

"I do it when I have to," she said, seated.

"And she has to," Andrew said and he smirked over at Eric. "I haven't had home-cooking since Mommy croaked. When was that

again, Bonnie? Seven years ago?"

"Eight."

His eyes hadn't left Eric, which Eric noticed from beneath his bangs and he was trying to concentrate on his fork. "Eight, that's right. So, tell me about yourself. A whore, yes, but what else do you do? Do you like music?"

Bonnie--*Bonnie*, Eric thought, dazed--rolled her eyes. "Don't pick on the little thing."

Since when did he become a little thing?

"I'm *not*. Hey, don't think I'm trying to tease you. If it makes you feel any better knowing, I used to be a whore, too."

Eric's neck cramped from looking up so quickly and he yipped, rubbed the spot there, blushed and looked back at his fork.

"That's right," said Andrew and not without some pride. "Tell him, Bonnie. I used to whore around these streets like a cat in heat. I was quite good at it too. Tell him, Bonnie, about that time in Daddy's car, when I was in there with a client and he came out with his .22 because he thought someone was trying to steal the thing. Then, come to find out, it wasn't a big bad boogie-man robber at all, but little Andy. Ah, good times."

Bonnie nodded, ate her cornbread in silence.

Eric supposed it was up to him to respond to that. "... I see. Sounds like a good time."

"Oh, yes." He laughed. "Oh yes, oh yes."

\* \* \*

Eric offered to help do the dishes limply and was glad when Bonnie refused him. He sat in the living room, on the dusty couch accompanied by a cockroach or two, and listened as the dishes clanked together, as Bonnie and her brother did them in silence.

At the door, Bonnie stood in the house, he and Andrew on the porch. Eric had a plate of leftovers he didn't ask for under his arm,



wrapped in foil.

"Here you go," Bonnie said, handing Eric a few hundreds. "Don't spend it all in one place."

Eric's eyes rounded and he wanted to be honest, forthright and such, but damn if he'd ever see such a fee again. Maybe Bonnie's eyesight was going. He glanced up at Andrew, who saw the money but said nothing, and he stuffed the bills in his back pocket.

"Be good to each other," she said and shut the door and Andrew laughed.

"What does that mean?" Eric asked and turned for the driveway where his bug was parked. He went for it and noticed the crunch of footsteps besides his own. He looked back over his shoulder, saw Andrew's sharp grin and shuddered. "W-What's up? Do you need a taxi or something?"

"Oh no, I don't. I'll just get in the back, if that's okay with you."

No. No, it wasn't okay with him.

"Oh God, what's wrong? Didn't Bonnibelle tell you?" He rolled his eyes and looked much like Bonnie in that moment. "Scatterbrained girl! Listen, don't be frightened, I'm here to help. But I'll be crashing at your place for a few nights, I hope that's all right. That's what that extra money was for. Bonnibelle thought you'd throw a bit of a hissy fit about it. She said money would satiate you, and I bet she's right, huh? So, clear out those old McDonald's cups, Wonderboy, and get this old turd going, I want to see my new accommodations!"

\* \* \*

Eric was sure by now that their ship had split in half by the iceberg and was sitting comfortably at the bottom of the sea. There could be no other explanation for why this ex-whore was sitting in his backseat, his grin fully visible in the rearview mirror as they headed home. But the hundreds were in Eric's pocket. Hundreds. He quietly drove.

Through the front door of Eric's apartment, they were welcomed

with the mess that Eric usually resided in alone and he felt a warmth come to his cheeks. He turned to apologize for the mess and when Andrew opened his mouth to speak, they were bombarded with the high-pitched sounds of Mr. and Mrs. Rodner upstairs. Eric turned away, ashamed.

Andrew pointed upward and said in a tone of wonder, "Does my sister sound like that?"

"No. No, she doesn't." Eric went around the floor, picking up socks and underwear. He winced when Andrew made himself at home on the bed and watched as Eric tidied up.

It was silence for a few minutes before Andrew asked, "Port?"

"Starboard."

"No, no, you goose. Wine, do you have any wine?"

Eric paused. "Sprite or Mellow Yellow, take your pick."

"Sprite, then."

He fetched a can from the fridge and threw it to the man on the bed. The floor was still swirled with junk but Eric lost his ability to care somewhere in the kitchen. He looked at Andrew plainly as the man slurped his soda. "Listen, Andrew. I know I'm being paid for all this but... I'm kind of off the clock at night. I can't be at Bonnie's beck and call all the time. I have a life too."

"You do?"

Eric frowned.

Andrew leaned forward. "What kind of life could you have, Wonderboy?"

"It's Wondermint, thank you very-"

"What kind of life could you have?" he asked again. "Really. You're a whore, and I know it sounds harsh and maybe it's not what you want to hear but take pride in your work, for God's sake. It should be easy for someone who only has one client." He sipped the Sprite.

Eric stumbled over his words, wasn't sure what to say. Bonnie must

have told him everything. In this little apartment, the only light from the floor lamp and the moon peering in through the window, there was nowhere to hide from this man and like a stab to the heart, it dawned upon Eric that his safe house, the only place he could hide from Wondermint, had been infiltrated.

\* \* \*

The night was Hell. The morning was somewhere below that. There was no extra bed and when Eric suggested that Andrew sleep on the floor, Andrew gave him such an utter look of scandal that Eric quietly made the bed for both of them. He spent the night awake, staring at his barren computer.

Mornings were usually silent and beautiful. Eric always made one egg, over-easy, and drank a small glass of orange juice before watching morning cartoons. Andrew demanded his eggs-- *three* eggs-- poached and wanted grapefruit juice. He settled for Sprite again.

On the bed, over a tangle of covers, Andrew laughed and said, "Okay, okay, maybe we should get started."

Eric was trying to ignore him, to hear the current situation on the TV. He grumbled something and took another bite of egg.

"We can't put it off forever--I have to go home in two days." He placed his plate and Sprite can beside the one from last night, on the floor. He leaned over the mattress, grabbed Eric from where he sat at the foot of the bed and slammed him into the sheets. The last bits of egg went everywhere along with the cup of orange juice. "And by the time I go, I want you to be able to please my sister. She needs that, you know? For someone so perky, she's quite miserable."

"P-Perky? What? Please-- *get off me*-- what are you saying?" Eric sputtered, wriggled, but felt a strength in Andrew's hold that he would not have anticipated. He flailed a bit longer and tired himself out quickly.

"Jesus Christ, is that all you've got?" Andrew frowned. "It's been half a minute. Can't you fight harder than that? What are you like in

bed?"

"I don't know! It's none of your business!"

"It is my business, Wonderboy. Even though I don't rodeo anymore, I can still give lasso lessons to young wannabes like you."

"*Huh?*"

Andrew sat back on his heels and Eric scrambled away. "A metaphor, dude," he said and shrugged. "It wouldn't kill you to beat around the bush a little. They like that."

"So...wait. Bonnie asked you to do this?" Eric held his head and looked down at his spilled orange juice. "Teach me how to... do my job?"

"Indeed!"

And it was less than a bullet, less than a stab, but it still hurt. He couldn't understand why. He knew he was bad, Hell, it was no secret and he knew that Bonnie knew--how could she miss that bulletin?-- but now it was something factual, a Truth. He sucked.

"Now, now, no need to cry. I can help you, buddy, count on me," Andrew said in a soothing voice.

"I'm not crying!"

Andrew grinned.

\* \* \*

Eric might have refused if he had had any pride or dignity left. But those things were long gone; they waved and said their goodbyes back when he put his ad in the personals. So in the afternoon, he was finally coerced to the bed and stared up past Andrew's eyes and watched dust motes floating overhead in the sunlight coming through the window.

"You're a bit of a wimp, Wonderboy. For a name like that, you ought to earn it."

"It's Wondern--"

"Whatever. So, lesson number one. Pin me."

"Do what?"

Andrew gripped Eric's arms and forced them into the sheets. He felt the older man's fingernails in his skin and hissed, flinched. Andrew said, "Pin me, get me off you. If you practice doing that, you'll probably last at lot longer with little Bonnibelle."

Eric groaned, kicked his feet, moved his head, while Andrew sat on him and yawned. For some encouragement, Andrew began to insult Eric's mother and various aspects of his life-- Your house smells! Your ears are huge!-- but these things would not prod the little whore enough to incite any real force. He was like a goby beneath a two-ton tuna.

After a good forty-five minutes, as Eric was still trapped and not going anywhere any time soon, Andrew slapped him. Across the face, as one would a hysterical woman.

Eric gaped, a hand raised to his red cheek. "W-What the hell was that about?"

Grinning, Andrew tried it again.

"Stop it!"

Again.

"Andrew!" And he bucked his hips, tossing Andrew from his stately perch. They rolled together, off of the bed, across the crumb-and-clothes-seasoned carpet and hit the wall. Eric's cheeks were flaming red and he straddled the cackling Andrew as a victory-drunken warrior would mount his victim. He raised his hand high and brought it down with force across Andrew's pale cheek.

"There! How's that? You asshole, don't you slap me like... like I'm your... your--"

"Bitch?"

"Yeah!"

Andrew smiled and it was something quite different than that rictus grin he usually wore. He touched Eric's chest and felt moisture. "You're sweaty," he said.

\* \* \*

The bathroom was thick with steam from the shower and Eric stood under the running water. Hot showers in the apartment lasted for five minutes at the most and so he had learned to wash quickly and in the time he had been in the service of Bonnie, he had also learned to intersperse some shaving.

On the other side of the curtain, Andrew leaned up against the sink, enjoying what he called a sauna.

"So," Eric called over the blast of the water, "is stamina all you need to be good?"

"Pff. Of course not, Wonderboy. In fact, there's so much to it all that I couldn't possibly teach you in three days." He heard Eric's sigh and continued, "But, honestly, a lot of it comes with experience. Oh, boy, I remember this one time, I remember, when I was just starting out, I had this client who was really into role-playing. And young and innocent me, I thought this meant the normal stuff, you know, like Well-Hung Stable Boy and the Virgin Milkmaid kind of shit.

"But man, was I wrong. She dressed up as an African princess, face-paint and all, and gave me a big ugly burlap sack and a traffic cone that she'd painted gray. I put them on. Back then, we whores weren't paid as well as you, lucky boy, we really had to work for our rates. She told me I was a rhinoceros, King of the African Plains. I wanted to tell her that lions were kings but I figured it was best that I shut up. She said no English, only rhinoceros grunts and she made me stand at the back of the kitchen while she washed her clothes in the sink.

"I had to grunt and snort and charge at her, impale her with my horn, all that stuff that rhino's do, and then I had to take her roughly on the kitchen floor. You know, to this day I still don't understand that fetish. She wasn't African, not even African-American. I believe she was from Canada, actually."

Eric stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his

waist. His left eye twitching, he asked, "What was the *point* of that story?"

Andrew shook his head. "That experience is useful. You won't learn everything from *me*; most of your teachings will come from various clients, Wonderboy. Because of that client, I was forever prepared to role-play as a rhino."

"Ugh. It's no use, Andrew; I don't have any clients other than your sister." He sighed and opened the bathroom door, leaving wet tracks on the carpet.

"No worries, we can fix that... hey, do you shave? Like, your happy-trail?"

Eric blushed. "Yeah. For your sister."

Andrew giggled, coming to put a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Willing to please --you're a lot further than I thought you were."

\* \* \*

The next day came and Andrew made some phone calls. Eric listened intently, amazed and reluctantly impressed at Andrew's sweet-talking of past clients and how they were so eager to help. There were many willing practice dummies but Andrew picked a woman named Ginger Hawley, 42, who lived down by the museum.

"Forty two," Eric whistled as they entered his little bug. "Isn't that kinda... old?"

Andrew tucked himself into the backseat. "Age is only a number, love knows no age, experience comes with age, a bottle of wine is best when its aged-"

"Okay, okay, I get it."

They traversed the city, made it to Owl Avenue where a museum sat across the street from a broken-down building that made Eric's home look like a cottage in an enchanted forest. The fourth floor, apartment 412. Andrew knocked once and the door flew open and Eric wanted to

cry because he was suddenly struck by a vision he'd had at nineteen, as he was typing up his ad.

He'd imagined himself surrounded by beautiful women. Mind-numbing beauty. And it was in Ginger Hawley's apartment, sitting on her loveseat, that he realized what a fool he'd been. He'd imagined getting paid for his services and living a life of high society-- he laughed bitterly now, and Andrew and Ginger looked at him--and Champaign and rare fruits.

Why hadn't he gone to college, majored in business and managed a local Burger King?

The lights were off as were Ginger's clothes. Red hair, everywhere, spread before him. He looked over at Andrew who, in the course of the pre-coital discussion, had been given a glass of Port. He must have been memorable, Eric thought.

Andrew waved at him, motioning for him to get on with it.

That morning, they had wrestled again, built up some of Eric's stamina. There was a tickling feeling in the back of his mind, some sort of bare shame at having Andrew watch him, forever Constant Critic, but he then thought that Andrew had seen much in his life and this could not be the weirdest. He thought then that he would see much in his life, too, if he ever grew to be a respectable whore.

While he worked in the near dark, he heard Andrew's insistent whispering.

"How're you doing?"

Eric panted, his reply slightly muffled by Ginger's moans, "All right, I guess."

"Getting tired?"

"Not really, but I have a cramp in my calf."

"Work through it."

Like the trooper he wanted to be, Eric worked through it. But he stared over the back of the loveseat, entranced in a painting on the



wall, hanging crookedly. Venus on a Half Shell. He felt something inside of him split, felt Ginger's hands gripping him and there was a longing to please her, as that portrait must have pleased her, sitting on a shelf in a store somewhere.

He looked down into her face.

\* \* \*

"Have you... have you ever had sex with a beautiful girl?" Eric asked in bed that night, as the two of them lay side by side, staring at the plastered ceiling. Something faraway creaked, the bed above them.

"Of course," Andrew said. "Sure. But the thing you gotta realize is that beautiful women, the ones you thought of when you got into this business, aren't our cornered market. We exist for loneliness and desperation. That's our world."

Eric swallowed, turned his head to see Andrew in the moonlight.

He grinned. "I know what it's like. I thought the way you think, once."

"I don't think that way anymore," Eric sighed. He looked around the one-room apartment and felt choked. "To continue thinking like that... it would..."

"Kill you."

"Right. Kill me."

\* \* \*

They woke up late, at noon, when the phone was ringing. Eric scrambled out of the covers, leaned over the side of the bed to answer. Bonnie was the only one who called these days, her and people trying to sell him newspaper subscriptions.

"What's up?" he mumbled.

She said, "Come over. Bring my brother with you."

Eric hung up, roused the man next to him whose hair was wild as it was at any hour of the day and laughed. They ate eggs and Eric was slow making them, waltzing around the tiny kitchenette, asking about

Andrew's clients, who, when, where, why why why and Andrew was quick to giggle. He said, "Same reason you do my sister!"

Eric stuck his tongue out. "Because she was the only one willing to pay?"

They snorted and it was like being drunk; not on Port, no, never on Port.

Suddenly they were in the bug and it was time to sober up. Coming to the cul-de-sac they had left days ago, seeing that ramshackle of a home, dead grass and missing shingles was like cold water to the face.

"Tell me the greatest lesson you learned," Eric said, turning the engine off. He stared at the house looming over them. "Tell me what turned you into a great whore."

Andrew scratched his head. "Well, there is no one thi--"

"Then make one up."

He paused, bit his lip. "I learned... that once you're in, it's hard to get out. Like a revolving door glued shut. You'll be here for a while."

"How did you get out then, Andrew? How did the great Andrew leave a world of loneliness and desperation?" Eric looked up and his eyes, a watery green, were pleading pleading.

Andrew shook his head and opened the door. Eric sighed and followed him and he found that there was no more stalling. On the porch, they waited together until Bonnie appeared, in a black t-shirt and panties and for some reason sea lions sprang to Eric's mind. Thousands of them, sitting on a beach, covering the beach until sand didn't make it up, only sea lions, sea lions.

She welcomed them in.

Eric followed her up the stairs after she had offered her brother something to drink--Port? --and he asked for Sprite. Eric looked back at Andrew on the couch, wanted comfort, received only a nod.

\* \* \*

The room was as he'd left it. There was nothing different, not

about the room and not about Bonnie. The only changed thing was him, or at least that's what he hoped, that's what Bonnie had paid for. He had hundreds, would continue to get money, he was sure, whether or not he had failed his crash course in training. So what did it matter?

*It matters, said a voice in his head, one that was very much like Andrew's in the dark, for the people you stand in front of. The clients. The lonely and desperate things you service.*

Bonnie removed her shirt, sat on the bed. As she reached for her underwear, Eric stayed her hand and put her on the mattress. He slid the black lace down her thighs.

*You know, an illusion of purpose. Or something like that.*

No, Eric didn't know. And he was sure he never wanted to. Even as he was with Bonnie, as he *had* been with her for however many months--through the sighs and bites and talks of seals and stubble bumps--he never understood her and never wanted to. He was content to do this with her, to take the money and go home. That's what he thought being a whore meant.

*But whether you want to or not, one day you'll understand. And you'll hate yourself for it. Because with that realization comes the knowledge that loneliness and desperation was never something that existed for the client alone. It exists for you too.*

Her mouth moved, and he knew she said something that had to do with fucking seals, but he could not hear her. Blood pumped in his ears and it was as the sea coming from the inside of a shell.

A revolving door.

A revolving door glued shut.

Yes, he felt it as Bonnie came with the ghost of a moan and a shudder, and Eric felt a sharp tingle run the length of his spine. He was still inside her when she told him that her brother had finally done something useful.

\* \* \*

A yellow taxi came to take Andrew away at sunset, and Eric saw him then as he saw him three days ago, inflamed by the dying day.

They shook hands, felt each other's skin in a way that was not a slap and laughed at the sensation.

"Come back and visit sometime, Andrew," Eric said.

"Cloud Nine."

Eric blinked. "Huh?"

"Cloud Nine. My name was Cloud Nine," Andrew said and looked at Eric expectantly.

It took him a moment to react and he did so with only a guffaw. Bent over, laughter choking him in attempt to escape, he could not stop himself. He held his stomach and was aware that Andrew had been watching, silent, and when he looked up again, there was that silly grin.

"I-I'm sorry...but...Cloud Nine," Eric exhaled and fanned his neck. "Really?"

"Really. Wondermint, it's been nice knowing ya."

"Eh. I'm thinking about changing my name to Wonderboy," Eric muttered and looked at his nails. They shook hands once again, lingered a bit in silence, and then Andrew turned and got into the taxi. The car was gone like a flash, screeching tires, a burst of speed, over the hill, leaving then as he had so long ago, with a blast and a roar.

## Hand in Marriage

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Brooke Law

Congress is on break for the fourth of July, and it's a slow week.

It's Tuesday, and I picked up an extra bartending shift because I'm afraid to go home. Maria's been mad at me since the fight we had on Friday night, and I've been avoiding her as hard as she's been avoiding me. We haven't come face-to-face since then—an art form, really, considering we live in a small one-bedroom apartment.

The Willard Hotel usually makes me a buck or two, but it's only 4:30 and still empty. I walk the square bar again and again, lining up shot glasses, straightening liquor bottles blue-amber-white, wiping stray drips with the rough white cloth hanging from my belt. I finally resign myself to flicking through channels on the TV faster than I can register what's playing.

In walks a kid, real gangly, barely looks 20, but his Virginia ID puts him at 22, which I suppose is plausible. If I had to guess I'd say he's a Georgetown grad who stuck around after graduation. He looks kinda jumpy, like maybe he has an interview or something. This place doesn't usually attract the 22-year-old crowd: too expensive, which is fine with me. I used to work at the Tombs, the Georgetown bar, and man do they run you ragged over there. I'm not saying you don't have to work hard where I'm at now, just that the good pay has less to do with raucous 21<sup>st</sup> birthday parties and more with Congressmen buying their mistresses bottles of Bollinger Champagne.

An older guy walks in then, late fifties, Italian. Nice looking guy. You live in the city long enough, you're not afraid to say it.

The kid bounces off his stool. "Mr. Calenda," he says formally, shaking the guy's hand.

Now I'm curious. Maybe the guy is a friend of his dad's, and the kid's trying to get a job? Maybe he's a wealthy uncle. Maybe...

Mr. Calenda motions to me. Right. Working, I'm working.

"McAllen, neat."

The kid looks like he's trying to steel himself to order some scotch too, then chickens out. "Could I have the Cap City Seasonal, please?"

I nod. People in this town want their bartenders to interact with them as little as possible, though I wish for the kid's sake I could crack a joke right now. I know some good ones. Anyway, I lay down coasters and walk two steps to the center island, pour the scotch with my left hand, pull the beer draft with my right. I'm being wasted in this place, seriously. I've got mad skills.

When I serve their drinks they're talking about the Phillies, if you can believe that. Older guy must be from Philly, because no one else talks about them. Bet he's down here for a conference. Bet he took Amtrak.

I'm sure it doesn't seem important that I find these things out, but bartenders are curious by nature. Our job is to know things about people—if they're lying about their age, what they drink, how to gauge when they're too intoxicated to drink any more. It just gets to be a habit, and when we don't know something, we guess. Feverishly. This is a game that Ellen and I play on weekend nights before we get slammed: who's on their first date, who's cheating on their spouse, who just lost their job. Keeps things interesting. Incidentally, Maria hates Ellen.

Anyway, it's clear that they're not really talking about the Phillies, they're just talking about the Phillies as a prelude to whatever business

they're really here for, and the tension is palpable in the air. It seems to be coming mostly from the kid, and I want to give him a shot of Jack or something to loosen him up; one beer's not gonna do it. I turn up the music a little, try not to listen, but not too hard.

Talk turns to the guy's daughter, who from the sound of it is interning with State somewhere in Latin America. I think I see where this is going, and I'm impressed. Kid is ballsy.

"Mr. Calenda," he begins. "I really love your daughter."

I sneak a look at them. Old guy is smiling encouragingly, which is nice of him. Kid is sweating bullets, but that's to be expected.

"We've been dating four years, and it's been the best four years of my life." He takes a deep breath. "I will take care of her. And, uh, I'd like to ask your permission to ask her ... for her hand in marriage." Kid squeezes his eyes shut as if he's about to jump out of a plane. I have to bury a snort.

Old guy grins suddenly, but he has tears in his eyes. "Of course," he says. "You have every blessing."

Kid offers his hand to shake, and Mr. Calenda shakes his head, stands up, and gives the kid a hug. "Welcome to the family," he says.

It occurs to me then that in three years of dating Maria and six months of living with her, I've never seriously considered asking for her hand in marriage.

Older dude gets up to use the bathroom; those bathrooms on Amtrak are nasty. Kid stands up. "Can I get the bill real quick, please?"

"Twelve," I say.

"No way. McAllen's is twelve by itself."

I nod. "Beer's on me. Congrats."

Kid grins. "Thanks, man. I was about to piss myself."

I laugh; something about his hysterical happiness is contagious.

I think about the kid the rest of the night. Ballsy. Sure of what he wants. Opposite of me.

We close early, I walk to McPherson Square and get on the Circulator. I watch the city go by, but I keep seeing the kid's face in my mind, so anxious, so hopeful.

I go home and pack an overnight bag. I leave Maria a note that I'm moving out.

*Brooke Adams Law is a freelance writer and editor and writes the book review blog Books Distilled. Her short story "Flight 393" was recently featured on Fiction365.*



Mr. Jackson

By Michael Sions

We can keep all these on file but I'm going to need that from you before you can make an appointment. The wait time's going to be about three weeks. No, there's nothing earlier, I'm sorry. If it's urgent you're going to be better off just going to the ER. No, Mr. Jackson, no, there's really nothing I can do. I'm sorry Mr. Jackson, but you won't be able to see a doctor today.

I'm sorry. Mr. Jackson I'm sorry, but we're very backed up and we just have too many patients and not enough resources. Yes, yes Mr. Jackson I know how close you are to running out of money. You told me. I understand that your bank account is down to one-hundred seventy-three dollars and twenty-five cents. I understand, Mr. Jackson, I understand that you need us. We exist for people like you, Mr. Jackson, I understand that you can't afford to go to a doctor.

No, Mr. Jackson, I can't enter you into the system without a notarized statement. It's one of our requirements and—what's that? No, I know you need to see a doctor soon, but you are not the only one, Mr. Jackson, there are hundreds of people in this tiny city alone that need to see a doctor right now and—

Please, Mr. Jackson, I'm going to have to ask you not to do that again. Please, sir, I'm sorry, I need you to be civil. Please do not knock all of my papers off the desk again, Mr. Jackson. I'm sorry that you can't see a doctor today. I just need a statement from you and then I can register you in the system, but we're completely booked...more than completely booked, we're overbooked for the next few weeks so I need your patience.

Sir, I just asked you not to do that.

Fine, yes, okay, I'll show you out, Mr. Jackson. I'm sorry we couldn't help you today. Sir, I am showing you out, please do not punch the cross

again. Yes, yes Mr. Jackson, I understand that that cross is supposed to mean something. It does, Mr. Jackson, it means that 2,000 years ago they killed him, and now they say we don't have to go to hell anymore.

No, Mr. Jackson, you can't stop in the middle of the hall and smile at me and ask me if I know what you wish. You can't tell me you wish Christ were here to judge me. You can't do that, Mr. Jackson. I am showing you out, sir. Please, right this way.

I'm sorry we couldn't help you, Mr. Jackson.

I understand that one-hundred seventy-three dollars and twenty-five cents is not enough for you to live on. I'm sorry, Mr. Jackson. We have a woman who came in the other day who's living in the back of a drycleaners where she works 10 hours a day for no pay. These people are poor, Mr. Jackson, and there are just too many of them, so yes, Mr. Jackson, we will continue to call ourselves a Christian organization. I believe you, Mr. Jackson. I have no doubt that you are a good Christian man, but now I am showing you out. Right this way, sir.

There's something I want to tell you, Mr. Jackson.

I want to tell you what happened later. I was shaking, sir, after you left I was shaking, Mr. Jackson, and I screamed. I screamed right in the front office where all of the patients could see me, and I tore up your application and threw it in the trash, while they were watching me. They were watching me, Mr. Jackson.

I want to tell you what it was I said to them, Mr. Jackson. After they had seen me contort my limbs and let my voice burst out stronger than it ever should as nothing, saying nothing, I said to them 'you can come on back.'

Because they were waiting, Mr. Jackson. They were waiting for me to screen them so they could become patients and make appointments to see doctors who would give them prescriptions. They were waiting, just like you were, Mr. Jackson. Some of them were just like you. Some of them hadn't brought their financial papers, and we had to tell

them to go home. We had to turn them away, Mr. Jackson, just like we had to turn you away. Do you know how many people walk out of our clinic or hang up the phone disappointed in a week? Do you want to know how many people we disappoint in a week? In one week, Mr. Jackson, the answer is hundreds. There are hundreds of them.

There's something I want to tell you, Mr. Jackson.

I want to tell you that we didn't have to turn them all away. I want to tell you that there were some of them that had brought everything they needed, and I want to tell you what they asked me. They asked me if they could see a doctor earlier, Mr. Jackson. They were just like you. They were just like you, Mr. Jackson, and I had to say no, just like I had to say no to you. Do you know how it feels, Mr. Jackson, to have to say no like that? You can't do this to me, Mr. Jackson. You can't do this to me.

I want to tell you what else they brought me. They brought me bottles. They brought bottle after bottle after bottle and they brought them to me. They couldn't afford their medication, Mr. Jackson. They had run out and they needed new prescriptions. They had lost money and they needed reduced rate prescriptions. They couldn't get to pharmacies and they needed ours, Mr. Jackson. And I'm sure you can guess, Mr. Jackson, I'm sure you can guess what we didn't have for them that day. We didn't have their medicine, Mr. Jackson. It wasn't there for us to give them. I couldn't help them.

I couldn't help anyone that day, Mr. Jackson. I'm not a pharmacist, Mr. Jackson, and I'm not a doctor. I'm 19, Mr. Jackson. I'm 19 years old.

I gave them schedules, sir, I gave them lists of other options for them to have until we could help them, because we couldn't help them yet. I couldn't help them yet. And I want to tell you what they said to me Mr. Jackson.

They said 'thank you.'

And I wish that I had given you something, Mr. Jackson, I wish I had told you where else you could go but I just couldn't think, Mr. Jackson. I was scared, and I held my voice inside of me, saying nothing.

Saying nothing.

I was supposed to leave at four that day, sir, but another patient came in and I screened her. I screened her, Mr. Jackson and I was entering her into the system. She was the last of the day and I was entering her into the system and a man came to the window. And it was a man just like you, Mr. Jackson. He wanted to see his wife, Mr. Jackson. He asked me if he could see his wife, Mr. Jackson, because his wife had been with the doctor for a very long time.

We told him that he couldn't see his wife, Mr. Jackson, we told him that he couldn't see his wife, not while she was with a doctor, and he told me she was his wife. I asked him why it was he needed to see her, Mr. Jackson, and he almost fell over. Because he was so offended. He told me he thought that was his business, Mr. Jackson. Another nurse told him it would be a minute, and he waited. Later, longer than a minute later, someone talked to him again, and I saw him point at me. He pointed at me, Mr. Jackson, and I didn't hear his words. All I heard was his disgust. I was entering a patient in the computer who I'd screened as the last of the day. It was four-thirty.

All I heard was his disgust.

And I saw him watching me, Mr. Jackson. I wanted him to look somewhere else, Mr. Jackson, I wanted him to look somewhere else just so I could finish this last patient, Mr. Jackson, but he wouldn't, sir, he wouldn't do it. So I picked up a pen, and I wrote on her forms 'not yet in the system,' and I left, Mr. Jackson, because he wouldn't stop looking at me.

I just couldn't help anyone that day, Mr. Jackson.

So no, Mr. Jackson, I don't accept your smiling sarcastic 'thank you' that you placed on me as you peeped your head back in the door

before I screamed in front of everyone I couldn't help that day. People like you disgust me, sir. Every inch of your being offends me, Mr. Jackson, and forces me to think in ways I don't want to think. I don't want to think that poor people deserve to be poor, Mr. Jackson, and I don't want to think that hypocrisy is all that's left of Christianity. That's not how I was raised, Mr. Jackson.

I'm fairly sure I hate you, Mr. Jackson. That's not how I was raised, Mr. Jackson. There's something that I need to tell you.

I understand, Mr. Jackson. I understand that one-hundred seventy-three dollars and twenty-five cents isn't enough to get you much of anything.

I wish Christ were here too.

*Michael Sions is a second-year architecture student at the University of Virginia. He has had fiction previously published by Jersey Devil Press.*

Andie

---

Fred Miller

Dark eyes below a weathered brow and faded babushka peer up at me while a hand moves cards about on a small table between us. "Take a seat, honey, Mattie'll tell your fortune, tried and true."

"No'm, but thanks."

"You're gonna miss out on a peek at your future, believe me... Mattie can make you a deal today 'cause of your youth...not a lot from your purse for a look at hidden treasures in your future. Come sit a spell, sweetie, Mattie'll tell you all, the cards never lie."

"No'm," I nod and move on toward the park, never looking back. I hear her pleas fade into the street noises as I pick up the pace. Momma says fortune telling is a bunch of bunk, just like throwing money off the river bridge back home.

Whew, finally here, where I want to be, on the square. I sit on a shaded park bench and drop my backpack down beside me. Took all day to get here from Batesville on the bus, but that's okay. Got good directions from the bus station, everyone's been so nice.

When I left this morning, Momma thought I was off to school, but I wasn't. And she's gonna hit the ceiling when she finds money missing from the jar she hides in the fridge from Buster and Earl, but I don't care, I'm not going back. Anyway, I just took enough for the bus ticket and a few snacks.

M'name's Andie, and I'm gonna be a writer. Like William Faulkner and Richard Ford. They wrote down here, our English teacher said so, and I will, too, everyone will see. When I was ten, I won a prize at the county fair for my essay, "Why I Like Eggs." I've got talent, I heard 'em

say so. Now all I need is a place to write and I'll be famous. Brought my special notebook and lots of pens, too.

The General's statue looks bigger than in our school book. And different, too, pigeon poo all over him. I'm Andie, too, General, we just spell it different. We've got lots in common, you and me. You're from Tennessee, me too till Momma took up with Buster and moved us down to his trailer in Batesville. Buster looks at me and licks his lips when Momma's not around, he's weird.

Better check in my purse to see how much I've got left. It's a fine purse, a Hello Kitty special, lots of girls have 'em. Tommy, my boyfriend, gave me mine for my birthday and said it was expensive. I don't doubt it, but I think he stole it from a store in Memphis. Tommy doesn't have much money. After his folks told him they don't like me because we live in a trailer park, he stopped coming around, but I don't care, I don't miss him much, glad I got the purse anyway.

The hot dog man down by the cathedral left before I'd decided that's what I'd have for dinner. Those hot dogs smelled good, but that's okay, I'll get something else later. The artists and fortune tellers are packing up now, some thunder rumblin' in the distance, it's getting late.

A cop came by a few minutes ago so I had to think fast. He wanted to know what I was doing here by myself. I told him I was waiting for my dad, while he got us doughnuts down at the café by the river. I guess he bought my story because he just nodded. Said it wasn't safe for me here by myself after dark. Sure hope he doesn't come back.

Uh oh, here comes that fortune teller lady.

"Honey, you got a place to stay tonight?"

"Yes'm, my dad's coming by in a minute and we're staying at a hotel."

"Are you sure, honey? I've seen lots of young girls end up at the park with no place to go. It gets cold down here at night, you know. T'ain't safe either."

"Yes'm, I'm fine. Dad'll be here any minute."

She tears off a little piece of paper from the newspaper she's holding and writes something on it. "Take this, my phone number. You call ole Mattie if you change your mind and need a place to stay."

I take the note and nod while she shakes her head and saunters off. That woman's plenty smart, knows I'm lying, but I can't think of anything else to say.

Andy's statue is a dark shadow now. I remember reading he owned lots of slaves, and when slaves sassed their owners, they got whipped. Learned that in history. And I know what it's like to get slapped around. Buster whipped me but good one night when I sassed him. Momma just sat there sipping her beer.

And Earl threatened to beat hell out of me if I ever told on him. Momma'd left me with Earl one afternoon when she went off to the grocery. Told me he was just gonna break me in, but I didn't know what he meant. Should of guessed what was going to happen when he flipped the lock. I fought him off as best as I could, but he's stronger than he looks. I felt guilty, afraid to say anything at first. I was sure it'd been my fault, wearing tight short shorts and no bra under my tee. But one night when Momma and Buster were up at the Purple Passion Lounge, he did it again. This time I waited up and told Momma when she came in. But she was so drunk, she laughed and said I'd made it up just to get attention. That's when I made up my mind to come down here and be a writer.

Wow, I jumped straight up when that lightning bolt hit nearby. Big raindrops coming down now. Before a minute passes, I'm standing in the vestibule of the cathedral peering out through the doors at the pouring rain. Say, maybe I could sleep in this church tonight, pretend I'm praying like the others. They cross themselves and close their eyes, I know, I saw it once in a movie.

Wonder what Darlene's doing tonight? Bet she missed me at



lunch today. And she probably went behind Pic-and-Pay to sneak a cigarette after school the way we usually do. I'd call her if I had a cell phone. Started to take Momma's, but she keeps it zipped in her purse. Besides, if I'd lifted it, she'd have caught me before I got on the bus. I miss Darlene, wish we could talk now. I'd tell her exactly where I was, I can trust her, she's good at keeping secrets.

The rain's letting up, just dripping down the sides of the buildings. Streetlights coming on all around the square and the people in the church are standing. I better get out of here before someone asks me a lot of silly questions.

I see a small office on the side of the foyer with a desk and a phone and slip in, close the door, and start fumbling for that old fortune teller's number.

"Ma'am, this is Andie...I mean the girl in the park you gave the phone number to...remember?"

"Um...no, Ma'am, I'm just fine, but I thought I'd call you to tell you...so you...you wouldn't worry... Where?...um, I'm in the church by the park...um, my dad and I decided to stop by here and, um, pray before we go to dinner.... Well, thank you, I thought you were nice--" I slam the phone down and duck under the desk, and wipe the tears off my cheeks. A man in a black shirt is walking toward the office, but he didn't see me 'cause he's looking down at some papers in his hands. I can see his shoes now. Sounds like he's dropping the papers on his desk. He turns and the door closes. Coast is clear. I better get outta here. I push the doors open and scoot back to the park.

Brought a folded newspaper from the church office so I'd have something dry to sit on. No need to get all wet on this bench. Wow, I can see fog when I breathe, colder than I thought. Wish I hadn't left my jacket on that bus.

A shadowy figure is wandering up the sidewalk from the main street. Strange, he's moving from one side of the walk to the other, stop-

ping along the way, too. Maybe he's looking for something he dropped. Getting closer. Maybe if I just pull out my notebook and pretend to write by the light of the streetlamp, he'll just pass by.

"Hey, what chu doin' out here, girlie?" If I ignore him, maybe he'll leave.

"You hear me? I'm talking to you, girlie, you, sittin' there on the bench."

"I'm writing." I don't look up.

"What chu writin', girlie?"

"I'm a writer. I write novels."

"You do? Well, you be a professional entertainer like me then."

"An entertainer?" I look up at the old man weaving back and forth in front of me.

"Yeah, writers is entertainers. Me? I'm a songster...wanna hear?"

"Not really. I'm busy right now."

"Won't take long...and I think you'll like it, too."

His feet aren't moving, and I can smell liquor on his breath.

Maybe if I listen, he'll go away.

"Sing if you want to, doesn't matter to me." He nods and clears his voice.

Like a shy little weasel,  
slinkin' through the shadows,  
lookin' for trouble here and there.  
But when the sun comes a' callin',  
I raise my head a'smilin',  
and sing out loud and clear.

Lord, won't chu help me,  
help me just a little,  
Gimme a clue or two-o-o.  
And when the moon starts a risin'  
like a sly little weasel,

slinkin' through the shadows

I'm a lookin' for trouble here and there-e-e.

He starts to hum and shuffle his feet, his arms out like a scarecrow, his mouth a toothless grin. He whistles the tune, turns in a circle, stops and stares wide-eyed at me.

"Ain't that somethin', girlie?"

"Very nice, I suppose."

"You suppose?" His voice rises in a screech. "Why, Moses is a genuine artist, gold plated. What chu think of that?"

"Very nice, Mr. Moses." I keep my eyes on my notebook.

"What? Ain't you got no tip for me for my fine performance?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"Why ain't chu? Didn't you like it?"

"I said it was nice, but I don't happen to have any spare change now."

"Spare change!" The old man stares down at me, grim-faced.

"Bet chu got money in that little purse o' yours." His hands are curling into fists, his eyes crazed. "Yeah, I bet chu do."

"And I bet I see a cop coming up the walkway from the street."

I'm lying, but when he turns to see who's there, I grab my purse, notebook and backpack and am halfway to the cathedral before he can turn back around.

And it's a good thing...a cold rain is starting again. The doors look like ghosts in the shadows, kinda eerie. Locked! How can they be locked? Lights are on inside. I bang on the doors 'til I'm exhausted, but no one comes. It's warm and dry in there. Why would they lock anyone out? I slide down into a corner by the door and try to get out of the wind. Gusts getting my arms and face all wet, hard to stay warm here.

Strange how the streetlights glow in the mist and shadows creep around car lights out on the wet streets. Quiet now, just the sound of rain dripping from the roof. I turn toward the doors, weathered and dark. Still

locked.

A weird dude in a white hat and cape and orange shirt is strutting up the lane by the park. He looks this way, but maybe he can't see me in the shadows. He stops at the church steps and stares up at me.

"Hey, pretty lady, what you doin' out here?"

My reply can't get past the lump in my throat.

"Ain't no place for a doll like you after dark, cold out here, sweetie."

"Why don't you come on down off them steps and come along with John Elle, I'll look after you, babe, treat you real fine, buy you nice clothes, ride you 'round town in my new Caddy, you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I pull out my notebook and pencil and keep my eyes down.

"What you writin', babe? How 'bout lettin' ole John Elle have a look?" He starts up the steps. I rise quickly, my back against the doors. He grabs my notebook, holds it out in the light from the spotlights above and rubs his chin.

"I'm a writer."

"A what?"

"A writer, a professional writer, I write novels."

"Hmm, you do? Well, John Elle knows lots o' pro-fessional writers, big time writers, too. Why, gave some of 'em they start."

"You did?"

"Sho I did, got 'em to be famous, guaranteed."

"Who are they? I mean, what are their names?"

"Um, well that'd be givin' away confidences, you know. I'm... uh...sworn to secrecy...they don't like no strangers knowin' where they hang out or what they be doin'...you understand, I'm sure, Miss...Miss?"

"Andie."

"Andie, hmm, why that's a fine name fo' a pretty lady like you, a wonderful name for John' Elle's newest, best writin' girl. So, why don't

you come along with me and let's get some dinner, and then we'll just cruise about town in John Elle's new Caddy. What you say, baby Andie?"

"I can't. I'm waiting for someone...my dad."

"You are? Well, John Elle'll never stop you from meetin' up with yo' old man...say, where is he?" He shuts one eye and leans in toward me.

"He's gone to get our dinner!"

"Yo dinner? Why, pray tell didn't he take you with 'im? You so pretty John Elle woulda took you along jest to show you off. Why I bet you done won one o' them beauty contests," he laughs.

"I was third runner up in the county pageant."

"Whoo, I done figured it out. You a beauty queen as well as a pro-fessional writer. You and me, we oughtta get outta this cold and go get some dinner, babe, don't you think?"

"Me...me and my dad are going to eat right here."

"Oh, I see. Well, church steps is all right for people watchin', I s'pose, but if 'n' you's dining with ole John Elle, why we'd be at a fine supper club together eatin' steak, listenin' to fine music...and, uh, talkin' to pro-fessional writers I know, yeah, that's what we be doin'."

"We would?"

"Sho we would. Then after I'd show'd you off to them as my new best girl, why we'd cruise around the big city and I could take you on home and you'd have yo very own bed with satin sheets and fluffy pillows and you could write all you want."

"Well, I can't leave. My dad'll be here in a minute."

"Hey, that a cat on yo pink purse?"

"Not just a cat, that's Hello Kitty. She's famous and her image is on lots of girl stuff."

"Yeah, I know all 'bout that. All o' my lady friends get Hello Kitty stuff. I give 'em all they want. Why some of 'em gotta house full of Hello

Kitty stuff I done give 'em. Ole John Elle'll buy you much as you want, guaranteed. What's say we go get in John Elle's warm, dry Caddy and cruise a bit. Look like it gonna rain again. We'll look for some new Hello Kitty stuff for you."

"Well, I can't. And my dad won't like it if you're here when he gets back."

"John Elle can understand that. Why, I bet lots o' guys been hittin' on you, a beauty queen and a pro-fessional writer like you. And bringin' you Hello Kitty stuff and fine clothes and takin' you out to supper clubs and givin' you diamonds—"

"Diamonds?"

"Sho, diamonds! Jest look at that two karat diamond on John Elle's pinkie ring. Ain't that somethin'?"

"Is it real?"

"Damn right! And look at this here diamond in John Elle's ear. Why, I give you all the diamonds you want. And soon as ev'rbody in Nawlens knows you my best girl, you be wearin' diamonds and Hello Kitty stuff and writin' stories...and then you be discovered as the city's best pro-fessional writer, and ole John Elle'll shower you with fine furs and emeralds and rubies, too! You gonna be famous. You'll see!"

"I will?"

"No doubt about it. One o' John Elle's by damn one hundert per-cent guaranteed deals. You can jest count on it, Andie Babe."

"Andie Babe?"

"Sho, that yo new name, Andie Babe, John Elle's finest, that's you! Now, come on, Andie Babe, we need to get outta this cold wet place and head on over to the supper club for steaks and fine music. Besides, I gotta introduce you to all my pro-fessional writer friends there."

"You'd do that?"

"Sho, I will. Let's go, Andie Babe, time's a wastin'."

"Well, I don't know...my dad will be looking for me."

“Why you can leave and come back any time you want and that’s a John Elle promise. I jest wanna introduce you to some o’ my big time, famous pro-fessional writer friends and let ‘em hear all about you. Then if ‘n’ you wanna come on back here to lean against these old cold, hard doors, John Elle’ll bring you right back, guaranteed. Now, what say, Andie Babe?”

“Well, I don’t know.... I better not.”

The dude’s phone rings and he flips it out of his pocket and looks down at it.

“‘Scuse me, Andie Babe, I gotta take this call.” He turns away.

“John Elle here. Whas ‘at? You damn right I be round...’bout eleven an’ you better be on that corner with lotsa dough, you got that, bitch!”

He wheels around and smiles, the phone still at his ear.

“Uh, put Reggie on. Uh, Reggie, John Elle here. Listen, man, I’m bringin’ my new best girl over. Gimme my special table near the band... and cook up some steaks for me and my lady friend...and uh, Reggie, tell them pro-fessional writer friends o’ mine I’m coming by to introduce them to a new writer what’s gonna be super famous right away! Got that? Good, see you shortly, Reggie.” He snaps the phone shut, slips it in his pocket and holds out a hand.

“Now, what say we make the scene, Andie Babe. Your audience o’ pro-fessional writers don’t need to be kept waitin’...”

“Well...I don’t know...I’d need to be back here pretty quick.”

“No problem, Andie Babe, no problem at all.”

“Wait a minute, there’s someone coming down the lane toward us, looks like a cop to me.”

In a flash, John Elle disappears down the alley by the cathedral. A shadow of a figure turns up the street and never looks my way. Voices again. I pound on the doors and beg for help, then slump into the corner and stare out into the night...and the rain starts again.

My eyes are heavy, but it’s too cold to sleep...and that clock in

the steeple keeps chiming the hour. Oh, God, what have I done...?  
Momma's probably frantic, but I'm not going back, I swear I'm not, not  
with Buster and Earl rulin' the roost. I'd never have a chance.

Seems colder...socks are wet, toes numb, too...maybe I'll just  
close my eyes a bit and hope to fall asleep for a while.

When the clock chimes two, I crack one eye...maybe just shad-  
ows in the mist at the base of the steps...can't tell for sure...too tired to  
care...rather get back to the dreams of what I'll find in the new day...  
noise on the steps sounds like splatters in a new downpour....

\* \* \*

Her eyes remained fixed in the direction of the morning sun, an  
empty purse clutched in her hand. A detective stood over her, yawned,  
and scribbled notes on what he'd observed. A camera clicked and  
flashed from several angles in order to capture the length and breadth  
of the small, porcelain body. At the curb, a gum-chewing sergeant  
rapped with two EMT's by a gurney and made predictions on the out-  
come of the game at the Dome later that day.

No one seemed to notice the sense of wonder on the young girl's  
face, perhaps there from the moment she'd imagined a swirl of early  
onlookers with a writer in their midst, one who might craft a fine novel  
from what she'd seen in the morning light. Perhaps.

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Kudzu: A Southern E-zine, Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal, Oxford Town,  
Puckerbrush Review, Skive Magazine [print], Static Movement, Troubadour 21,  
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Raw, Roar and Thunder (Australia), and Kalaidoscope.*



## THE MAGICIAN

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Richard Lutman

Today I saw a magician die. Maybe it was just my luck to be in the wrong place again, that's how I got this crooked scar on my face -- a jealous lover who thought I was cheating on him. If the two men with the magician had come in five minutes later I'd have been upstairs with Lucas, none of this would have happened, and I'd still be at Berenson's Social Club with the other prostitutes looking for a better life.

The magician was a small, wizened man carried between a tall clown with a long bent silver hat, and a stocky curly-headed man in shirt sleeves. I couldn't tell how old the magician was, not young and with a sharp ravaged face and piercing gray eyes that made me feel uneasy. I felt myself say hurry up drop him somewhere and leave.

I knew right away something was wrong because nobody like those two would come in here unless they had to. They looked respectable. I could tell Lucas didn't like them barging in by the way his eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. He didn't like being disturbed when he was having a good time. I'd heard there were more than a few who'd regretted bothering him. He finished his whiskey and studied the men.

The two stood for a moment, as if they weren't sure of where they were, and half a dozen of Berenson's women dressed in their thin pink, blue and yellow robes pushed close to stare as if they had nothing better to do. Berenson wouldn't like that. You could bet on it.

"We need a place to lay him down," said the man in the shirt sleeves. "And quickly!"

Berenson swore and jostled forward with that way she had, as if she was someone important to be reckoned with, which she wasn't. I

can tell you that.

She shoved the women aside with a quick hard nudge of that damn ebony cane of hers and looked at the three men. The shiny red dress she wore hung loose from her thin body. An old tattoo smudged her left arm.

"What do you want?" she said. "I own this place and you can't come in here like this! Who do you think you are? Whatever you want here make it fast!"

"I have a show to finish," said the man in the shirt sleeves. "I can't leave him out by the wagon. It would be bad for business. I need a place to lay him down and need it quickly! I'm Sieble the manager. I must get back. There's another show."

"I don't care about your show. Put him in the next room and get out quick. You're bad for business!"

Sieble reached into his pocket and flipped a coin at her. She caught it before it hit the floor, and then eyed it as if it smelled bad. Just like her.

"Is that all you have?"

Sieble glared at her, and then gave her another coin.

She put the coins into a small purse and snapped it shut.

"I warn you. I don't want any trouble. I have friends. This way."

She strode into a side room, fumbled in the dark, and then lit a lamp. I'd been in there once before with a special gentleman. The walls were covered in ornate purple brocade and a large mirror filled one wall. A small table with Berenson's best whiskey had been placed near the door. I remembered the man smelled of peppermints and liked to be tickled with yellow feathers. When the night was over he'd gone upstairs with Berenson and I'd lost out on my cut for the night.

"Make sure you take his shoes off," she said. "I don't want to get anything dirty."

I saw her slide a pillow under his head, then shake out a blanket and drape it over his body. "Just as long as he doesn't die. I run a good place, you understand."

"He'll be all right," said Sieble. "He just needs to lie down. That's all. He's not going to die. You can't let him die. He owes me money."

Berenson shrugged.

I'd gone back to Lucas because he'd paid for a dance, which meant I'd get some extra money when the night was over if Berenson didn't get it first. Even with my scar across my face he said I was the most beautiful woman he'd seen. I knew he was lying, but the words made me feel good and I liked the attention he gave me.

"I want you to look after the gentleman in the other room until his friends get back," she said where she stood behind me at Lucas's table. "I'll take care of Mr. Lucas."

He blew smoke into the air, smiled and kissed my hand.

"If you don't like it you know what you can do," Berenson said to me. I knew what I'd like to do to her, but I'd had those thoughts before.

Lucas shrugged, poured out a drink and held it toward Berenson.

"We'll come back later after the show is over," said Sieble. "It won't be long."

"It better hadn't be, or I'll charge you a hundred dollars extra."

The two cowboys, who had come in earlier from the trail, stumbled past and disappeared into the night, talking loudly. I took my time reaching the room to see if Berenson would do anything and looked at the magician.

"He just collapsed," said Sieble. "He was doing a magic trick and he collapsed. He just collapsed. It wasn't a difficult trick--he'd done it before. A magic trick. I knew he was sick. Ever since we left Marquette I knew something wasn't right. But this. . . What am I to do? He's been with us for such a long time now. And the people like him. If he dies I don't know what will happen."

"You should have seen the things he could do," said the clown. "But there was so much more, things that couldn't be understood. . ."

"Maybe he'll make himself well again," I said. "Then I can go back out front where I belong and your show will go on as if nothing happened."

They nodded and elbowed their way through the women and their partners to reach the darkened street.

A large gold watch slipped from one of the magician's pockets and I reached for it. Inside was a picture of a girl, her beautiful face highlighted by a smile above a high collar closed by a brooch. For a moment I thought about taking it, and then felt something inside tell me no.

I studied the image. It looked like the magician, only much younger and fairer. I angrily closed the cover, wishing he'd been sick somewhere else. I silently cursed him, which didn't make me feel any better. His strange cinnamon smell choked me, something else I cursed him for. Then I gently slid the watch back.

He tried to rise and then fell back on the sofa.

"It's all right, old man," I heard myself say. "It's all right. Just lie back now, take it easy."

He blinked.

"Where am I?" He said.

"Berenson's. You collapsed in the street."

He smiled.

"As good a place as any, I guess. Don't you think?"

"I don't want anything to happen," I said.

"Everything will be just fine. You'll see. I can do that much for you."

"I wish you could do a lot more than that."

"Perhaps I can," he said. "It's your time."

The words frightened me. His face was opaque and his eyes held mine until I turned away.

"What's your name?"

"Portland."

He smiled. "You were named well. I have cousins named Florida and Georgia. And I met a lady once called Montana, Lottie Montana, the most beautiful of them all. You look a little bit like her. I am the Great Octavius, Master of Magic and all that is Magic."

He reached into the air, turned his hand about, and pulled a coin from his fingers, then gave it to me.

"That's the easiest way I've ever seen to get money," I said in spite of myself. He chuckled and thumped the hat against his legs, turned it upright and drew out a bouquet of yellow roses, luminous and fragile in the dim light. He held them toward me.

"Magic is real, that was just a trick. There's still much that needs to be done where you are concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see. Everyone will. But right now, I need a drink to clear

my head."

I poured out a glass of whiskey and gave it to him. He drank slowly. The hollows of his pale cheeks were flushed.

He took another drink, and then offered me the glass. I took it and drank, wiping my lips with the tip of my tongue in the way I knew men liked. He looked at me as if he knew what I'd do and smiled. The whiskey made me feel strange and lightheaded. I looked around the room. Except for the new smells of sweat and whisky nothing had changed since I was there last.

"My hands used to get raw in the winter, so raw they would break open and bleed," he said. "I unloaded freight cars and slept in a chicken coop next to a hotel. The chickens would wake me early. No one believed in what I could do. What was magic to them? The slight of hand, a disappearing coin, and a forgotten name recalled.

"Years later I played in San Francisco and received top billing. I went back to the place I unloaded freight cars, but the railroad had closed down and no one remembered me. There isn't any real magic left anymore, not the kind that means anything. Do you understand? It's all illusion and fakery."

I shook my head, not wanting him to go on. Why was it that men seemed to want to tell me about themselves? I didn't ask for it. Was it my scar they felt sorry for? I turned away, poured another drink and downed it quickly.

He sat up holding a short chewed-up pencil. He took a piece of paper from his coat. Then using his hat as a brace he began to draw.

"I was paid one hundred dollars once to draw Lottie Montana," he said, studying me with an intensity that was uncomfortable. "Not only was she beautiful, she was also a singer of the finest rank. We were on the same program. Lottie Montana in blue with African diamonds at her

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Celia

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Miriam Rosen

This stick-figure waitress crashes through the swinging doors and lifts a round tray crammed with burgers and soft drinks onto her shoulder. She skillfully maneuvers around me, 'cause I'm blocking the aisle, her slanted rubber soles squeaking across the black and white tile floor. "Seat yourself anywhere, Hon," she says. But I'm a woman who won't budge. I'm scoping out the narrow eatery, looking for the booth or stool where Celia had parked her chunky ass.

Heads of slurping suburbanites are bobbling inside each one of the green, vinyl booths that line the walls to the left of the aisle, and crusty old men in button down shirts are sitting shoulder-to-shoulder at the busy counter to my right. Their backs are facing me and their upper torsos are postured like they're each hoarding the piled up fried stuff in front of them. I smirk, 'cause it reminds me of something I'd seen in a comic book once.

Amid the chatter and guffaws, most everyone is either scraping forks or spoons against dishes or shoving overstuffed sandwiches into their faces. I sniff and crinkle my nose, 'cause the smell of all that greasy grub is making me sick. I have this thing about food, on account of me being allergic to nearly 30% of the things that most people can scarf down without thinking about. I almost died twice when I was a kid, just from eating something that had something I was allergic to in it. That has to be why my sister insisted on us meeting during her lunch break. She's always gotten a kick out of making me watch her eat.

I spot Celia sitting alone, looking thicker than I remember. The boney waitress transfers a tall glass of iced tea from her tray to Celia's table. I come up behind the woman, slide onto the bench across from



Celia like I was sneaking up on her. "Sup," I say.

Celia sticks a bendy straw into the glass and sucks. Then she shoves one corner of a half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich into her mouth. "Mom said they let you out for good behavior," she says, crunching. Her eyes seem older--harder than I remember, but she has the same boyish face.

"Yeah, I guess..." The look Celia flashes stops me dead.

"How'd you really get out? You fuck the warden?" She zeros in on the clunky 'G' I'm wearing around my neck. "Thought you was allergic to jewelry."

"It was a gift," I blurt, scratching under the gold-plated thing. "Supposed to bring good luck." I wink. "I been due. You know?"

Celia doesn't look at me.

"So...um, I read your book," I say. Then I watch Celia's face for some reaction. I'm straightening the fork, spoon and knife that someone had neatly arranged on the paper placemat in front of me. Celia's eyes are pointing down at her food. She's still chewing, but that familiar smirk rises up. I want to slap her serious. "You could have been a little kinder," I say, figuring that would get things going.

The a/c is blowing down on us, so there are goose bumps on Celia's tan arms. The gold highlights in her short haircut match her t-shirt. She doesn't look at me, but I can feel the sour mood sinking her, and this tinge of satisfaction flutters inside me. "Well, Baby Girl, kindness wasn't my aim when I wrote the thing." She pops a sweet potato fry in her mouth. "As it turns out all that anger worked pretty well for me. Didn't it?" Her breath smells like Velveeta.

I sniff and crinkle my nose.

The muscle behind Celia's jaw tenses each time she chews. She

looks at her plate, then at her straw, but not at me. I really need her to see me, so I touch her manicured fingers, which are resting near the chipped edge of her plate. She's wearing a thumb ring and a sporty analogue watch with a cream-colored face. "So, how's Bob doing?" I say.

She yanks her hand off the table. Her fork flies up and clanks against the dish. "Bob's dead," she says, still chomping.

"No shit." I'm pretending to look at the menu and pretending not to know about Bob. "How'd that happen?"

This question mark-shaped waitress with puffy, magenta-colored hair scurries over. "Know what ya want?" A waft of flowery perfume and cigarettes makes my eyes water.

"Oh um," I say, bringing the sticky menu closer to my face. "On the grilled chicken sandwich, is the chicken marinated in anything?"

The waitress slides her lower jaw to one side and kind of cocks her head, making her age-spotted face look twisted. "I would think."

"Well, um can I have chicken that's not marinated?"

"You just want a plain grilled chicken breast?" she croaks. "I'll have to ask the cook if he can do that."

"Okay. Well, if I can have just a plain chicken breast, I'll have the grilled chicken with nothing on it and no bread." I look at the woman for emphasis.

"So you just want a chicken breast?"

I look at her square. "Like I said. And bring me a glass of ice water with a slice of lemon in it, too."

The waitress jots something in her pad then says, "Ya want fries or coleslaw?" without looking at me.

"They do fries really good here," Celia says, like I care what she thinks.

"Is the coleslaw made with Real Hellman's Mayonnaise?"

The woman's hazel eyes shift towards me. "What do YOU think?"

"Uh...is that a yes? Cause I can't eat that imitation stuff." Real Hellman's mayonnaise is one of the few foods I can eat without worrying about my face blowing up like a balloon and my throat closing in on me. "Okay. Well. If it's made with real mayo, I'll have the coleslaw."

"Fine," the waitress says and abruptly scurries back to the counter.

Celia smiles at me. "Ten bucks says she spits in your food."

So, now I'm busying myself again, straightening utensils, thinking about the best way to get what I need from Celia, without raising flags. I clear my throat. "So... um, how'd Bob die?"

"I killed him."

My heart 'bout jumps out my chest. I put my hand there, feeling the craggy plastic chips in the necklace. "Really?" I lean in.

Celia smirks. "Ha! Just kidding. You know Bob was a boozer." She gives me this cutting glance. "Guess he just got old fast and fell apart."

"Oh well, I'm sorry to hear it, Cel," I say, trying to sound sincere. Really, I know too much about Bob to care. Celia's smile disappears. The waitress sets a glass of water in front of me. "Um. Excuse me. I believe I asked for lemons," I say, as the woman walks away without acknowledging me. Then I say to Celia, "Do you think she heard me?"

"Yup." Celia wipes her mouth. "She's just not gonna bring 'em. Ha!" She tosses the balled up paper napkin on to her plate and stands.

"You're not leaving?"

Celia slurps the last of her iced tea. "You said you wanted to see me. Well, here I am. Now watch me leave."

"But I haven't gotten my food yet."

She slams down her glass. "I know. I was here for that part." Smiles like she's got me. "I'll even let you take care of the check, Baby Girl," she says, walking.

I pop out of that booth like I'd been pinched, take up the center of the aisle, yelling, "But Mom wanted us to talk!"

There are about twenty-seven people in the diner who stop everything to gawk at me. Celia hesitates by the glass door. She motions to someone in the parking lot, then walks back to the table and sits. "So, what did Mom tell you to say?" Celia has her cornflower-blue eyes dead on me, like the way tough girls in the joint stare each other down.

"Well, for starters, I'm sorry for what I done." I'm talking with my hands, ready to block any hard slaps.

Celia huffs, sits back and folds her arms. "Well, Baby Girl, sorry won't do it for me this time." Baby Girl is what our folks used to call me, back when they doted on me, 'cause I was sickly and all. But the way Celia keeps saying it, it feels more like she's cussing at me.

I gently put my hand on hers. "Okay, so we don't have to be friends, or even talk on the phone, but if we could just be in the same room together for Mom's birthday next month, it would mean the world to her."

The small veins near Celia's temple bulge. She shifts her weight forward, like she's ready to slide out of the booth again. "So, all of a sudden you're looking out for Mom." She yanks her hand out from under mine. "Like what you done didn't break her heart too."

I dig my fingers into the table. "I said I was sorry."

Hands trembling, Celia grips my wrists. Yanks me to her. "You ruined my life, Gina."

"Yeah, I know." I curl my lip. "And everyone else knows too, cause you wrote all about it in your New York Times Best Seller, *Sister, Sister*. Which I didn't see a dime from, by the way."

Celia shakes her head. "Fuck you." She clenches her fist and says, "We had to go into hiding!" Dishes rattle as she slams her fist into the table. Our surly waitress shoots us a look. "Do you have any idea what that was like?" Her words spray my face.

"I spent the last 18 months in prison," I counter, wiping the spit off my cheeks and forehead. "Besides, I wasn't in it alone."

Celia stands slow, looms over me. Her words come through in a choppy, controlled whisper. "You were my sister."

"I'm still your sister." But I know that's a lie. Sisters are supposed to love each other. But Celia always had it so much better than me, even though she complained about Mom and Dad spending all that time taking me to allergists and nutritionists and such. I guess that could happen when a kid almost dies twice. But SHE wouldn't know about that.

I remember this one birthday party me and Celia went to when she was in eighth grade and I was in sixth. There was this table that reminded me of a rainbow, 'cause of all the bright colored candies and pastel cupcakes they had on it. Kids were walking around with gooey colors smeared across their faces and all I could do was lick my crusty lips. Mom was standing next to me. She always kept me close. I could feel the tension coming off her as sticky kids pushed by us--probably 'cause she knew I was full up with want. Then they brought out this buttery birthday cake and I nearly cried, knowing that all I'd be eating were the dry as chalk cupcake things Mom had made special for me. So what does Celia do, when the birthday boy's buxomly mom hands her a slice

of yellow cake, she shoves a big wad into her mouth, looks over at me and opens wide, showing off the gooey stuff like she was goading me.

I hated her for that. I hated her for all the times growing up when she tried to get to me. Like that first time she published one of her stories. It was called, *The Girl Who Always Got What She Wanted and Still Complained*. The main character was named Tina. She was a brat who everyone doted over. But she was never happy with anything anybody did for her. Then one day she fell into a well and was stuck inside pitch-black for three days. Then all these clowns came up out of nowhere and scared the crap out of her. It was supposed to be funny. The entire middle school body got a big laugh when it came out in *The Fledgling Press*. Celia even received honorable mention at the end of the year for writing it. I was totally pissed off, 'cause all the kids knew that her story was about me. Celia had to have known that I hated her after that. She just didn't know how much, until I convinced pecs-flexing Bob that it was time to have her offed.

"I thought you went away for five years," she says, gnawing on her thumbnail. "Why'd they really let you out? You rat on someone?" She slides back into the booth, like she's expecting ME to fess up. I can't look at her. She's pressing her lips together, crinkling her chin and I'm getting this heavy feeling that she knows what I'm up to. My eyes drift from the tilted straw in my glass to the chip in Celia's plate. "Why'd you do this to me, Gina? I mean, did you really want me dead--your only sister--so you and shithead Bob could...what, run off together?"

The waitress clunks a plate of food down in front of me.

Celia goes on about how I was so blazon and didn't it occur to me that hiring someone to kill another person was illegal? Truth is, I never thought much about legalities. At first, I was all about getting Brainless Bob, who Celia had been married to for three years, to fall for me. Then I made sure she knew about it. But that didn't wreck Celia nearly enough.

But it wasn't until somebody made an anonymous tip to the cops about me harboring some kind of terrorist at my place that I felt the strong urge to really get her good. Thing is, I don't know any terrorists.

It was Friday mid-afternoon, and I'd just gotten home from what felt like the longest shift of my life. I was pissed, cause Bob the Slob had come by when I wasn't home and left dishes all over my apartment. I was rolling up my sleeves, fixing to clean up the mess, when all these flack jacket-wearing cops stormed in carrying big guns. I near about shit my pants. Then two days later, Celia's article about how cops had been staking out my place for a week before breaking down the door appeared in *The Freehold Daily Journal*. I had to think that Celia was in on the whole thing.

So, I posted a help wanted ad on Craig's List with a photo of Celia and her address. I offered to pay \$5,000 to anyone who'd shoot, stab or strangle her, which was a lot of money for me. Can't say why I included MY contact information, though. For someone who was Hell bent on offing her sister and not getting caught, I sure gave those undercover cops plenty to go on.

"Aside from being a Goddamn shitty thing to do," Celia says, "it was a dumb plan." Her eyes are dead on me, like she'd spent nights thinking about what she'd say when we finally sat down together. She huffs, leans her head into her hand and rubs fingers against her temple. "You know Bob was no picnic. Sure, he was pretty and all, but did you ever try to have a conversation with him?"

I nod, laughing a little.

"But when he drank he got mean," she says, stopping to exhale. "Bet you never got to see that side of him?"

"He never drank when we was together," I shrug. "Guess he didn't have to."

"Bob got what he deserved," she hisses.

I lean in. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean he didn't exactly die in his sleep, you know?"

"No I don't," I say, waiting for her to come out with the story. But this jock, with the same boy's haircut as Celia and too many earrings poking through her face to count, glides through the glass door and Celia's attention shifts her way. Our surly waitress breaks into a yellow-toothed smile as the woman bends down to peck her bony cheek. Then she moves effortlessly through the diner, and stops at the booth where me and Celia are sitting.

She looks at Celia and smiles. "I've been out there waiting, Babe. Everything good?"

"Yeah," Celia says, sliding towards her. "Me and Baby Girl was just finishing up."

"Hi, I'm Gina," I say to the woman, extending my hand.

"I know," she says, without taking it.

Celia stands. "I'll be at Mom's birthday next month," she says to me. She smiles at the waitress, gives a little head nod. Then Celia and her friend make their exit.

I take a bite out of my chicken, sip my drink, and watch my get-out-of-jail card drive off in a white pickup truck. Then I stand and walk to the bathroom in the back, teeth clenching, 'cause I now have to think about other angles. Two men sitting in the last booth watch me pass. The one wearing a baseball cap nibbles on an onion ring, while the older man sitting across from him is ranting about something. I push in the heavy door with a little diamond shaped window on top, walk down the hall towards the lavatory and wait. The door swings open again and the guy who was ranting walks over to me.



“Well, I got what you wanted,” I say, handing him the necklace. “I mean, she said the words, right?”

Detective Ted Cash has white hair, blue eyes, and a smile that makes him seem kind. But he's not. “Yeah but she took ‘em back. D.A.'s not gonna like that. We need something unbendable.”

“Well...” I give out my cutest smile. “Can I still get that time shaved off?”

Detective Ted smirks. “We had a deal, Gina.”

I'm thinking fast and talking quick. “There's another opportunity.” I look at him with wide eyes, willing him to see things my way. “Celia's expecting me at my mother's birthday party in three weeks.”

The detective's mind is on to Plan B. I can see it in the way he's not really looking at me. He shakes his head. I'm dreading his next words.

“Sorry Gina. You gotta go back in. We'll have to get ‘em another way.”

Now I'm annoyed and wishing Detective Ted would pop a blood vessel and die. “Can I at least finish my lunch?”

The detective looks at his watch. Then he looks at me. “Yeah sure. You have five minutes.”

I walk back with muscles flexed and my head about to explode, slide into the booth and nibble on my chicken. I've never hated Celia as much as I do now. I was so close, too. All she had to do was say the words, “I poisoned Bob Cramer and dumped his body in the Hudson,” and I'd have been a free woman. I smile at the detectives, hold up a fork full of coleslaw so they can see it, and deliver it into my mouth. It's dripping with the kind of mayo I like. I crunch, swallow and take three more mouthfuls. Then I notice Detective Ted showing me his watch. My time is up.

The chalky aftertaste of the slaw is overwhelming. I take a sip of water. My ears are ringing and the skin around my neck and jaw are getting tight. "Oh shit." I grab for my purse, 'cause an EpiPen is something I always carry. I try to clear my throat--cough, hack, wheeze--no good. My hands are sweating, trembling as my fingers rifle through the tampons and gum wrappers and old crusty pennies that are on the bottom of my purse. Detective Ted hurries over. So does the surly waitress. I should have went for the fries like Celia said, but she must have known how that would go. I have to admit, she got me good. I grip the pen, already figuring on ways for getting even.

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## MORE THAN A LITTLE

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Tricia Clasen

“Do you love me even a little?” The question fell out of my mouth and landed ungracefully between us.

I waited for him to fill the silence that surrounded the question.

“Do you think you’d be here if I didn’t?”

It was two-thirty in the morning. I’d walked nearly two miles to his house, my whole body moving forward in anticipation, betraying the logic in my head, which said it was stupid to be walking by myself in the middle of the night just because he’d called.

He’d led me up to his bedroom, which I’d never seen despite “dating” for nearly two years. The floor wasn’t visible for the dirty laundry strewn about. His twin bed had been pushed up against a wall, unmade and sagging in the middle. A few posters dotted the walls—half naked models and beer ads. I inhaled, and when the scent of stale body odor and unhung towels hit me, I decided to breathe through my mouth.

This was not a woo fest. He shushed me when I tripped over the shoes next to the door and then pulled me to the bed. I sat down next to him. He leaned back against this pillow, and patted the bed, my signal to join him. I slipped my coat off and acquiesced.

“So,” I began in an attempt to have an actual conversation, “how are classes going?”

He shushed me again, but this time with his tongue. It filled my mouth as his hands began to roam all over me. My stupid body again betrayed me by arching up to meet each grope. My body seemed to be telling my head, this felt right. He loved me. He must.

I didn’t question anything. I just let go. For that brief period of time, everything felt good. I was connected to something other than

myself and all my insecurities. I was wrapped up with someone, warm and safe and not at all alone.

Then it ended, and he rolled off me, taking all the heat and security with him. In an instant, I felt empty, like when I was little and my mom left me alone in my preschool class. I wanted to scream like I did then. I'd chased after her and latched on to her leg. I knew I couldn't do the same thing to him.

I sighed instead.

So, did he.

"You think you should get going?" he asked. "I'm pretty tired."

My brow crinkled involuntarily. I pondered both the question and the statement before I asked that fateful question. I'd never said the words to him, either, so it probably wasn't fair. Love had never been a spoken expectation.

It was after three-thirty in the morning. I was drunk on kisses, high on touches. I didn't hear the statement for what it was. Not at the time. I smiled. He loved me. He'd as much as admitted it.

I slipped out of bed and scavenged for clothes. Before I left the room, I leaned in for a kiss, but he turned to the wall just before I got there.

"Be quiet when you leave," he said.

"Okay," I answered.

I hesitated at the door, thinking he might say something else, but he didn't. The only sound I heard was the start of a snore.

It was okay, I told myself. He loved me. At least a little. Enough for me, I thought.

It didn't hit me while I walked home, all alone. Not even though the chilly air bit my nose and numbed my toes. Not even when I had to sneak back in my house, and I almost thought my bedroom window was stuck. Not even when I tossed and turned in bed, trying to fall asleep but feeling too jazzed up from the walk to make it happen. Not even the

next day when I got up for school after only sleeping a few hours. Not when I climbed into the backseat of Ben's rusted Ford Escort. My best friend, Stacey sat in the front passenger seat, and she turned around and asked me, "So what'd you do last night?"

Believe it or not, I didn't even feel it when I passed him in the hall at Kyle Cooke's party the next night. I looked straight at him and smiled, but he didn't say, "Hi" or wave or anything.

Still, he loved me, right?

My confidence didn't start to shake until later. First, when I stood in line for my third (or maybe fourth) beer, I overheard a couple of sophomore girls chatting about him.

"When did he ask?"

"He called me this afternoon. I couldn't believe it. I thought we were just joking the other day at lunch."

"I thought he had a girlfriend, or something. Don't the guys always give him shit about it?"

"Nope, I thought so, too. Guess it's all just a dumb joke."

I turned my body slightly. I didn't want to be too obvious. There was nothing left in my cup, so I couldn't take a drink to distract myself. I pretended like I was looking for someone. I craned my neck a little. Then I "accidentally" caught the eye of the girl who'd just unknowingly called me a joke.

She was pretty. Prettier than I, for sure. She reminded me of my family's trip to Cancun a few years ago. Her blonde hair framed her bright blue eyes just like the sand did the Caribbean Sea. I must have stared a second too long because she arched her eyebrow. I glanced away.

"So, where are you going to get a dress?"

"I'm not sure," Mexico girl said. Then she squealed a little. "I can't believe I'm going to prom with a senior."

If my cup had been full, I would have drenched her in beer.

It wasn't her fault, but I hated her anyway. I couldn't blame him, of course. It was his friends, the whole social order of school. He and I couldn't mix because I wasn't pretty enough or thin enough. I didn't have the right nose and I couldn't dance. So, it wasn't his fault either. It's just the way it was, I decided.

But he loved me in spite of what everyone else thought. He just couldn't show me in public, and in private, he avoided the words and the actions to protect me, to keep me from getting my hopes up.

I looked back at the girls with the sandy hair and the ocean eyes. I pitied her. She could go to prom with him, wear his corsage on her wrist, and smile for pictures his parents would snap. But it wouldn't matter. My heart would be fine because of one immutable fact. He loved me. A little or a lot, what difference did it make?

Both my cup and the house were overflowing. I sipped quickly to avoid spilling on my clothes, and I followed the small crowd out onto the back patio. Generally, we avoided going outside at parties for fear of creating too much noise and inviting a visit from the police, but Kyle's closest neighbors lived at least a mile away.

I wobbled slightly when I tried to stand still so I backed up against the house, watching everything unfold around me. It was perfect buzz stage where things were fuzzy and clear at the same time. I should have been happy in that state, but I couldn't quite shake beach girl.

I stared at some freshman girls trying to flirt with a few of the basketball players. Hair flipping and giggling abounded. I didn't hear Ben approach.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"You're just by yourself."

I shrugged. "Fresh air."

He nodded and leaned back against the house, too, resting his head against the siding. I watched his Adam's Apple move when he

swallowed. Laid back, as always, his eyes were closed, and his blond hair stuck out at some strange angles. It didn't look bad on him. He was the kind of guy who didn't seem to care how he looked which just made everything look right in the end.

He and Stacey had lived next door to each other since they were four, so he'd always been around, joining us for movies and concerts. The caption under his yearbook picture read "Future Stand-Up Comic." He was a boy with no enemies, except it would seem, for me. Apparently, Ben's good nature was always used up by the time he saw me.

Everything I did was wrong.

"How can you like that movie? The plot is ridiculous."

"Don't you think that shirt is too tight?"

"Why do you wear so much eye-shadow?"

"I wouldn't try out for American Idol, if I were you."

Stacey said he was just teasing, and I shouldn't take it personally, but it was hard not to when everything he made fun of was so, well, personal.

I glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. What was he doing there? He didn't move.

Neither of us talked. I just let my last beer soak in, and I was grateful for the house that was holding me. As a rule, I avoided drinking at parties. It wasn't that I was philosophically opposed; I just didn't want to deal with getting caught. Plus, I usually ended up driving because Stacey didn't have a car, but since Ben drove us here, and Kyle's house was so remote, I decided it was okay to let loose for once. It was my senior year, after all.

I heard the sliding glass door to the patio open, and my head turned without asking permission. Caribbean Queen stepped through first. She caught my eye, but clearly, it meant nothing to her. I was just a person who happened to watch her walk outside. She turned back and

my gaze shifted. He followed right behind her. Our eyes met. Mine narrowed.

I couldn't quite place the expression on his face. It wasn't panic, which irrationally, I would have liked. I'd have seen it as a sign that he was nervous about being seen with her. It wasn't exactly bravado either. Not like he was trying to throw it in my face. It was something else. Whatever it was, I hated it. It was like a fly buzzing around. His expression and my reaction were annoying, but they were too fast a target to do more than swat at them.

The girl yanked on his arm, and that was all it took for him to follow her. I brought my cup to my lips and swallowed what was left in one gulp.

"Whoa, slow down," Ben said.

"Why?" I asked. I pushed myself off the wall. I probably staggered a little, and then made a bee line for the keg.

Only a couple of people stood in line ahead of me. The last bit of beer hit me hard. It was more than my body was used to, and I found it increasingly difficult to stand still. I wanted to sit. I had to concentrate to remain upright. Then I felt a shove, just as Stacey screamed, "Where have you been?"

"What?"

"I've been looking all over for you."

"Why are you talking so loud?" I asked.

"Um, I'm not. What's up with you?" She glanced at my cup and then stared into my eyes. "Oh my god, you're drunk!"

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe a little."

"Well listen, would you mind if I took off early?" She motioned behind her, and I saw Tim Brennan a few feet away, looking right at us.

"That depends," I said. I wasn't too drunk to be a good friend.

"Safety check first."

She took a deep breath. "Fine. He's driving, but he hasn't had anything to drink. I have no intention of having sex with him ... tonight.



Just, you know ... want to talk and stuff."

I did know, and honestly, a part of me resented the hell out of her for it. She was the kind of girl who had real boyfriends. She would go hang out with Tim and then next Friday he'd ask her on an actual date to a movie or miniature golfing or something. Meanwhile, I'll still be sneaking out in the middle of the night for a quickie.

"Yeah, have fun."

"You'll be okay? I already talked to Ben and he promised to get you home."

I nodded. At least that explained why he'd stood outside with me. Stacey gave me a quick hug.

"And Rach?"

"Yeah?"

She opened her mouth to say something, but then she scrunched her nose. "Nothing. Just have fun yourself."

The conversation had sobered me a little but I didn't want that. I wanted numb. I filled my cup again, but suddenly, I felt a little lost. Usually, I followed Stacey around at these parties. Or because I played the role of sober cab, I just kind of observed. There were groups of people I could join. I wasn't a complete social misfit. I just wasn't good enough for him, I guess. He'd never said it. I'd just figured it out from the girls he went out with ... in public.

When we were freshman, he dated a senior. That was unheard of at our school, especially for a guy. Senior girls always dated college guys. When he broke up with her, he went out with the head of cheerleaders, a girl with boobs so perfect, there was actually a blog dedicated to them. It was pretty disgusting if you asked me. People sent in any pictures of her that featured her boobs. Everyone had their phones at the ready whenever she walked into a room. I would have thought she could get the whole thing shut down if she wanted, but she wears low cut shirts a lot. The other day in History, I swore she dropped a pen

right in front of Cory Darrow's desk just so he could get the right angle on her lacy yellow bra.

Anyway, the thing is, I believed him when he said he loved me, a little, because why else would he still come to me when he'd had them. I thought maybe he really loved me but he was afraid of the emotion. Maybe it was like when I was a kid, and my mom broke out the sprinkler. The whipping water jets scared the crap out of me, so every time I ran toward it, I chickened out at the last second. But I wanted the cooling power so badly, I kept going back for more. Was it possible his fear was like mine had been? Not enough to keep me away but enough to keep me at arm's length?

The thought empowered me.

I wandered back outside. The girl from Ipanema was still there, but he wasn't with her anymore. I walked a slow loop, and I didn't see him anywhere, so I headed back in the house. Now I was on a mission. I picked up my speed and I started bumping into people and maybe the wall. I must have said "I'm sorry" five times. I was mad that Kyle's house was so damn big. I had this vision of me heading up the stairs in the back of the house at the same time he walked down the set in the front. Like some comedy of errors, I was probably just missing him wherever I went. Who the hell has two stairways anyway?

Maybe he was looking for me, too. I was sure I was smiling. I stopped a few times when someone asked me a question. Mostly, I just kept searching. I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I thought about texting him. As a rule, it pissed him off if I contacted him in public, but I had convinced myself it was different. Now, that I realized what was really going on, I wasn't worried about his reaction.

He was in the basement. Several of his buddies sat around a small table, holding cards. A pile of poker chips drew my eye. In the crowded basement, the thick smoke clouded my vision and maybe my judgment. But then, the beer helped, too. I walked up to the group

slowly, trying not to call attention to myself.

I stood just behind him. I hesitated. I contemplated tapping him on the back, but I nudged the heel of his foot with mine instead. He didn't notice the first time so I did it again. This time harder. He turned, probably assuming someone had bumped into him accidentally. The expression on his face wasn't one I was accustomed to seeing. His smile reminded me why I'd fallen for him in the first place, so expectant and open. Then his eyes locked with mine, and his expression morphed. From inviting and curious to that one same look I'd seen outside earlier. The one I couldn't place.

"Can we talk a sec?" I whisper-yelled.

"Now?"

I nodded.

He shook his head.

"Please? Just for a second?"

I must have been a louder than I thought because one of his friends turned around, too. His buddy slapped him playfully. Then he looked at me.

"Can't get enough, huh?"

I inhaled quickly and kind of whined on exhale. I assumed since he wouldn't be seen in public with me that I was a secret altogether. I felt like a deflated balloon, limp and purposeless.

I looked back to him. He smirked at his buddy and then turned to me.

"Please?" I asked again.

He shook his head and shrugged.

That was the moment I figured it out. The look. The expression. It was pity.

The realization churned the beer in my stomach. It came on so fast there was nothing I could do about it. I covered my mouth but it didn't stop me from retching. The guys jumped away laughing. I couldn't catch their comments.

I didn't move. I remained in the middle of the room hunched over. I felt myself swaying, and I wanted to let myself fall onto the black and white tile that covered the basement floor. I raised my head. He and all his buddies laughed. I begged for his help with my eyes. He rolled his in response.

"Really?" I said, not loudly at first, but he was looking at me so I knew he heard it. When he didn't respond, I got louder. "I mean it. Really?"

He didn't answer, but one of the guys near him did.

"Just go home. You're obviously not getting any tonight."

"What?" I straightened as best I could. With vision blurred by alcohol, I could still make out every detail on his face. Pity no longer greeted me. It's been pushed out by unadulterated disdain. "So, that's really how it is, huh? After what you said?"

I knew I was getting too loud. People started to move away from me. I felt the air being pulled away. I knew I'd become the center of attention, and I suppose logically, I recognized that it was not in a "hey you're the best dancer on the floor" kind of way but more like "oh my god, check out the freak." Unfortunately, my emotion beat logic over the head with the force of a bat, completely flattening it.

The whispers of a crowd gathered to watch the train wreck reached me.

*"Someone get her out of here."*

*"Who's going to clean up that mess?"*

*"Was he really screwing her?"*

I ignored them all. I babble-yelled at him. I didn't remember the exact words. Stuff like, "You're a shit, and I hate you."

I sought out the girl, the one he'd asked to prom. She was easy to spot, wide-eyed and still pretty, a stark contrast to the mess I knew I'd become. "You think you're special now, but you're not."

Her wide eyes narrowed. Her fists rested on her hips. She looked

between him and me. Kind of what everyone else was doing. I glanced at him again. Like an out of focus picture, the details blurred together, except for his face. Unfortunately, that pity-filled expression was crystal clear. He couldn't maintain eye contact with me, and he couldn't look at his friends. Instead, he just stared at his feet. I wondered what he was thinking, and then he said, "Go home. Just go home."

Maybe if there'd been a hint of concern in his voice, things would have gone differently, but I might as well have been an annoying dog he'd just kicked. His tone was that dismissive.

"That's it? That's all you've got."

"You're going to make a fool out yourself," he said.

"Too late," a voice from somewhere behind me yelled. Laughter filled the room, and my face burned in embarrassment. I should have run away, but I didn't.

"Is that what you care about? Or are you worried I'll make a fool of you?" I started to walk to him, but I swerved a little and ran into someone. That person stepped away, and I tripped. I felt a hand grab me around the waist.

"Come on," Ben said. I almost shook him off. I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay and fight. I wanted answers, and I wanted an admission, a public acknowledgement that I was more than a fling, that he loved me ... a little.

I stood for a second letting myself lean on Ben. He was stronger than I expected, taking my weight, and keeping me straight. He squeezed me tighter.

"Let's go," he said, his voice was the oddest contradiction, so soft and inviting like my favorite pillow, yet the way he said it leaves no room to decline. I wanted to. I really wanted to, but everything about his voice reminded me I wouldn't get the answers I wanted in this room, and

he was my only hope for a safe exit. I didn't know how, in my ridiculously drunken state, that I sensed this, but his eyes informed me of his intentions. He would protect me.

I felt the stares searing my skin as we made our way out of the party. I didn't stumble at all. Ben was holding me too tight. In fact, I stood a little straighter. I concentrated on every step. A few jeers and snickers reached me, and I was vaguely aware that something very bad has just happened, but I didn't have the energy to process it. I just wanted to fall into this safe pillow next to me and sleep.

The minute we were outside, Ben loosened his grip, and I suddenly felt like I was going to pass out. The world spun, and my stomach turned the opposite direction.

"You okay?" he asked, but his voice didn't sound as welcoming as it had inside.

I shook my head and bent over, clutching my stomach as I heaved again. There was nothing left to come out.

"I'm sorry," I said between gags.

He didn't answer, and I realized he must have been mortified. This was just what he needed, to babysit a drunk who just humiliated herself, particularly one he already hated. I looked up expecting to see his disgust, but that's not the expression that meets me. This time, I recognized the pity instantly. I didn't puke though.

"You ready?" I asked. He nodded, and we moved toward his car. We didn't speak during the drive to my house. He didn't even turn on the radio which was the strangest thing because Ben breathed punk. We were fish out of water, flailing and flopping, as we drowned in the silence.

When we were about a block from my house, I croaked out, "I'm sorry" again. I waited for his response to cool the burn of rejection and embarrassment that scorched my veins, but none came. He pulled up in front of my house, and put the car in park, without killing the engine. I

was grateful my house was dark. I assumed I could get in without anyone finding me in this state.

I took a breath before opening the door, steeling myself for the walk. I moved as quickly as I could, stepping out of the car and tossing "Thanks," behind me. I had no idea what to say to him or how to make things right.

"Wait," he said, and the desperation in his voice forced me to stop instantly. I spun to face him. He hesitated, and then shook his head slightly. I furrowed my brow, and I turned toward my house again.

"No, wait."

I stopped, but I didn't move. Then I heard his car door open. He must have got out, but I still didn't turn.

"You deserve better than that, than him," he said. "You are better than that."

I couldn't look at him. I couldn't face what he was saying to me. I shook my head, and I walked away as fast I as could.

\* \* \*

In the morning, the relentless sun woke me earlier than I would have liked. It didn't know that my life changed the night before. Actually, neither did I. In fact, for the first five minutes, I didn't remember anything that happened. I stretched in my bed. I rolled my ankles, listening for the crack. It's when I sat up that I get the first clue. It was like someone had taken hammer and slammed it straight into my head. I groaned when the pain hit me, and my voice came out crackled and hoarse. My mouth felt like someone had removed all the stuffing from my pillow and shoved it in my cheeks.

These were nothing compared to the moment I remembered what I'd done. I fell back into my bed and buried my face in my pillow. I stayed like that for at least a half an hour. Everything hurt.

I'd ruined my life—I'd never live down the humiliation. The things I said. Calling him out like that. Throwing up in Kyle Cooke's basement. All

those people. Everyone knew.

It was worse than anything I'd ever experienced—crashing my parents new car two weeks after I got my license, the time I thought I was pregnant even though I always took my pill on time, not making the cheerleading squad my sophomore year, getting a D in Trig last fall—none of them come close. I broke so many rules last night, made such an incredible fool of myself that I couldn't fathom a world in which getting out of bed—ever—was a good idea. I couldn't go to school again, not after what I did.

I picked up my phone. Guess who hadn't even bothered to contact me? I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. Middle of the night calls from him only came for one reason apparently.

Then it was like I ran at top speed and slammed right into a brick wall as I realized that he didn't mean it. He didn't love me. Not even a little.

And this idea of not getting out of bed grew more real, heavier, less of a flippant thought. Could I actually go on? I closed my eyes. No tears came. No typical "I lost my boyfriend" sobbing. This was complete and total despair.

I wasn't sure I wanted to die, but I sure as well didn't want to face what waited for me Monday morning. I pondered options. I knew I couldn't handle pain. My parents were so ridiculously square they dropped off all old prescription drugs at those places where they collect them to keep teens safe. Ugh. Great.

My headache screamed at me, telling me I needed water. I denied it. I told myself I don't deserve it.

That triggered a memory.

*You deserve better than that, than him.*

I tried to shake the thought out of my head but it hurt too much to move.

Back to my options. Overdose was out. No pills here. No con-



nections to actual drugs. That meant pain would be involved. Okay, razor blade. I groaned. It would really, really hurt. And my parents would find me. No way.

*You are better than that.*

I rubbed my face, trying to scratch away Ben's stupid voice that kept popping up.

Gun? Safety parents struck again. Stacey's dad kept a rifle in the garage. I could probably get to it pretty easily. How could I get it out of the garage? Did I want to?

My phone vibrated in my lap. I inhaled sharply. It had to be him. Please let it be him, I begged the universe.

*Are you okay?*

I stared at the words. Soon, I couldn't see them. Tear blurred the letters. It wasn't him. It was Ben. Why was it Ben?

Not even a little, I reminded myself. I didn't know why I responded. I shouldn't have if I really wanted to end my life. But my shaking hands betrayed me by typing, "No," into the phone and pressing send.

I tossed the phone across the room. My ring tone echoed as it flew. I didn't want to talk to him, to anyone. I threw the covers off my bed, and I went to the bathroom to escape the buzzing and the ringing. The sound followed me as if my phone had grown legs and chased after me, insisting I answer it. I locked the bathroom door to keep it out. The ringtone turned from a soft rap on the door to an incessant banging. I took one look at myself in the mirror and I nearly hurled. I splashed cold water on my face, put my hair in a ponytail and brushed my teeth. I should have showered for this, but what was the point, I thought. It's not like I'd smell good dead, right?

I saw my reflection, and I grimaced again. The thought was so morbid.

I didn't bother changing out of my blue plaid sleep pants or

sweatshirt. I rushed down the stairs. I could get to Stacey's in five minutes. I should have called first, but I refused to go anywhere near my phone. We were not on the same page, my phone and I. My phone seemed to think someone cared enough to call me, someone who taunted me with hopeful words. Someone who didn't understand that my life was over.

My mom sat in the living room, surfing through home improvement shows. "You're up," she says.

"Yeah, but I left something at Stacey's," I said rushing past her. I couldn't look at her. She might have detained me. Might have made me feel guilty. I pulled the front door open with so much force, it knocked me off balance, and I had to catch myself before stepping out into the brightness. My eyes closed involuntarily, and I opened them slowly, hoping to give them a chance to adjust. When I do, I gasped.

Ben was standing right in front of me.

"Hey," he said.

I looked down at my feet and swallowed hard. The air was thick like sludge, and I gasped to take in more.

"You didn't answer." He reached out and touched my chin. I looked up. "I was worried."

"Why?" Suddenly, it seemed so ridiculous. Why would he care? How could he have known what I was thinking?

He held out his hand and nodded his head toward his car.

"Come on."

My heart battled and banged in my chest. My choices battled each other in my brain. It wasn't a fair contest. Obviously, I didn't really want to kill myself, but I still had no idea how I would get past this.

I let him lead me to his car. He drove me to a park on the edge of town. No one ever went there. The rusted play equipment had been painted over dozens of times, and overgrown grass climbed the steps of a slide. He stopped the car and got out. I followed wordlessly.

We sat down on the grass, and he opened his arms. I bit my lip and I searched his eyes for any signs of malice. All I saw was an invitation. I accepted by falling against his chest. He closed his arms around me, and I cried. And cried. And sobbed. His hand smoothed my hair. He whispered in my ear. "It's okay. You're going to be okay."

I'd read all these stories where people said things like time lost all meaning or crap like that, and I always cringed at how stupid it sounded. Well, it was kind of true in this case. I'd abandoned my phone, and Ben never made a move to check his. At some point, the sobbing slowed, and the tears tapered off. I still sniffed a few times, and my body shook a little as I exhaled, but eventually, I stopped thinking about my drunken tirade, my public purge, and my humiliation. I felt the sun on my cheeks, and I was getting hot. I wanted to take my sweatshirt off, but I knew that if I did, I have to give up the safety of Ben's arms. I didn't know if he'd let me back in.

Why was he there anyway?

I picked at the grass, pulling individual blades out and twisting them in my hand. I didn't feel brave enough to ask the questions swirling around in my head, but then again, what did I have to lose?

"I thought you hated me." I barely recognized my scratchy voice.

"No," he whispered.

"But, you're always criticizing me, making fun of me."

I heard him exhale, and then I felt a hand on my face. He pulled gently on my chin, and I had no choice but to look at him.

"I just wanted more for you. I wanted you to want more for yourself."

The expression on his face was so raw, I almost turned away, but I was so used to guys glaring at me with pity that it felt too good to see him look at me like that. Not that I could identify the exact emotion; I just knew that I would never again settle for less than whatever it was in his eyes

that made me realize none of what happened the night before mattered.

I didn't fall in love instantly, and I didn't march up to the other asshole at school on Monday to tell him to enjoy his senior year because five years from now he was probably going to be drunk every night on Miller Hi-Life just trying to feel a little of the high he experienced in his "glory days." I didn't do that, because honestly, when the dust settled, I just didn't care anymore.

Instead, Ben dropped me off at my house hours later. I walked straight to my mom, still sitting on the couch, and kissed her cheek. I figured if I was going to live, she deserved better, too.

I had to search a while for my phone. It'd fallen behind a dresser. The first thing I did was to text Ben.

*Thanks. You have no idea.*

His response came seconds later. *Would you like to go to a movie sometime?*

I almost started crying again and then another message came instantly. *Bad timing? I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. Forget I said anything.*

Then another one. *Unless you were going to say yes.*

Instead of crying, I laughed.

My hands shook as I punched in my answer.

Yes.

I stared at those three letters hanging out on the screen. Such a small, easy word to write. But for me it was an answer to a much bigger question. Did I deserve more, more than a little?

Yes.

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## So Dark

Eric G. Müller

Matthew had the most pitiful, heart-wrenching scream. And he screamed a lot. One particular night, as he was at it again at 2:00 a.m., I'd reached my limit and decided to let him scream. Tina had fed him, changed his diapers and tucked him in, cozy and tight, just ten minutes ago. There was no reason for him to scream. I'd stay put in bed!

Edmund, his older brother, had been entirely different. Only a few weeks old and already he slept right through the night. And when he did scream it was only because he needed to be changed and fed, or when he had a legitimate ailment. Granted, sometimes he bawled for attention out on the balcony during the day, but he'd soon tire, stop and fall asleep, or happily babble away to himself.

I'd tried to let Matthew scream before, but never for long. In the end I always succumbed, got up and brought him back to our bed. Immediately he'd snuggle up to me – perfect fit – and fall asleep. I, in turn would lie awake, not daring to disturb this delicate baby's slumber. His crying had its source in some inscrutable place. You could see it rising from somewhere deep inside of him (or was it descending from the periphery?). First, the tiny little fingers twitched faintly, followed by a silken tremble on his chin that increased like infinitesimal ripples, spreading round his shiny red lips, rippling up his rounded cheeks, onwards between his dark eyebrows, splashing over to his smooth forehead and culminating in an eruption of crescendoing screams that only stopped when Tina or I rescued him from his crib.

Julian, who came eight years after Matthew, was again very different. His screams were born out of sheer frustration, because he couldn't yet control his bodily functions. Furthermore, he was consistently an-

noyed at everything that kept him from leading a self-sufficient, independent life. Whereas Edmund was easily pleased with nipple, bottle, or pacifier, Julian rejected them almost outright. He wanted to eat and drink with all the proper utensils like the rest of us, and raged against the limits of his own restrictive infancy.

Matthew's screaming was as enigmatic as Edmund's and Julian's had been clear and straightforward. You'd think he was a neglected, orphaned street kid, left to die in a dumpster, the way he broke forth. But he was nestled in the finest silks and linen, held within the firm confines of a sturdy crib that could rock quietly back and forth, while we sang mellifluous lullabies, invoking a most dreamy, sleep-inducing mood. I even brought out my little harp, gently plucking the strings. These ethereal sounds had worked wonders for both Edmund and Julian. But Matthew, although he'd listen for a while out of courtesy, would either begin his ceremonious and highly sonic unfurling of fear as soon as we'd retreated, or start playing his prelude of suffering and discontent with a nimble succession of tremulous twitches that inevitably expanded into long, drawn out wails.

On this particular occasion I was convinced he would exhaust himself soon enough. Surely he wouldn't be able to hold out too much longer, considering how much energy it takes to scream with such vigor. I continued to lie in the darkness, suffering through his repetitive squeals. Every drawn out shriek expressed utmost terror. It conveyed a culmination of illimitable suffering.

We'd consulted numerous people about his incessant nightmares. Some veteran mothers just told us not to be so sensitive and let the little blighter cry. Others gave us the usual advice we'd already taken care of. One elderly woman sagely proclaimed Matthew was being attacked by malevolent demons, and that we should create a protective force-field around him. She went on to say that he was a remark-

able individual, destined to achieve great things on earth, and that the evil spirits were trying to hinder his harmonious incarnation, in order to prevent him from fulfilling his lofty mission. I tried, but the spectral fiends got through without much difficulty. A self-proclaimed, bushy-eyed psyche said it was karmic, a carry-over from his last incarnation, living itself out now, and that it was our moral duty to lessen that burden for him. A matronly mother of eight suggested we strike the sign of the cross above his head each time he succumbed to the spasmodic crying fits. I did, but the screaming continued and only direct bodily contact could calm him.

However, this time I was determined not to relent until his screaming stopped. Tina agreed, albeit reluctantly. And so it went, minute after minute. With every second the screams got more intense. Not a hint of exhaustion in that tiny, fragile body. I was convinced Edmund would wake up, but he just slept through it all. And what would the neighbors think? I felt terrible. Was I cruel and heartless? A torturer? Surely he'd give up after another scream or two! Surely he'd resign to the inevitable fact that for once he would not be brought to our bed!

But in the end it was I who surrendered. I could simply not bear it any longer. My compassion and worn down nerves got the better of me. I clambered out of bed and took the suffering baby boy into my arms. At once he relaxed, ceased his crying, and after a few stuttering aftershocks, fell fast asleep.

As soon as he could walk the screaming stopped. Almost entirely! Or should I say, it metamorphosed. He still managed to make it into our bed, however. Nearly every night he'd toddle quietly to our bedside, dressed in his favorite red pajama-overalls and stand there in the darkness, repeating very softly, "So dark, so dark, so dark," until one of us would wake up, draw the blankets aside and invite him in. Satisfied, he'd jump into our warm bed and snuggle up, finding in one of us

(usually me) that perfect mold. Though we often told him to just crawl into bed without first waking us up he never did. He always had to be invited across the invisible threshold. And I knew better than to try and see how long he'd stand there saying, "So dark."

*Eric G. Müller is a musician, teacher and writer. He has written two novels, Rites of Rock (Adonis Press 2005) and Meet Me at the Met (Plain View Press, 2010), as well as a collection of poetry, Coffee on the Piano for You (Adonis Press, 2008). Articles, short stories and poetry have appeared in various journals and magazines. [www.ericgmuller.com](http://www.ericgmuller.com)*



## TRANS AM MAN

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Gary Sprague

The low rumble of the motorcycle carried up the street, deepening as it grew closer. Ray refused to look up. He applied wax to a small area on the hood and wiped it off immediately. It was a hot day, and even though the Trans Am was in the shade of a large elm tree the wax dried almost instantly. He was about to wax another small area when the rumble turned to a roar, vibrating off the surrounding houses and making his balls tingle. With a sigh, Ray looked up and watched the bike roll to a stop in front of his house.

From the corner of his eye Ray watched the young man head up the driveway. Danny? Donny? He couldn't remember. Plain black t-shirt, dark jeans, studded belt, black boots, tattoos - definitely a hoodlum. Why was Maddy always drawn to the losers? He continued rubbing the hood, a bit harder and faster than he normally would. He forced himself to slow down. His daughter dating a punk was no reason to harm the Trans Am.

"Hey Pops, Maddy home?"

Ray stopped rubbing. He closed his eyes tightly, counted to three, and motioned toward the door with his thumb. The hoodlum strutted to the front door and rapped his knuckles against the window pane. Ray closed his eyes again and tried to ward off a heart attack. There was little doubt in his mind that Maddy's love life would send him to an early grave.

"Danny!" Maddy squealed from the doorway.

Danny. Well, that mystery was solved. Ray watched them disappear inside. He finished waxing the hood, then stood back for a look. The

car gleamed like black ice. He'd washed and waxed the Trans Am nearly every weekend - except during the winter, when it was stored in a heated garage - for the past thirty years. The car had been a high school graduation gift from his father. It was black with the gold eagle on the hood, Smokey and The Bandit-style. He told people that the happiest days of his life were the days his son and daughter were born. That was a lie. The happiest day of Ray's life was the day his father handed him the keys to the Trans Am. Nothing had ever topped that feeling.

He put the wax and towels back in the garage and grabbed a Coke from the small refrigerator in the corner. He thought he might take a nap. He looked toward the house, then toward the motorcycle, and changed his mind. Maybe a walk. Since he'd turned fifty - how the hell did that happen - he walked two miles a day, almost every day. Ray liked to walk in the early evening, when the shadows began to lengthen and the smoke of backyard grilles filled the air. Well, evening wasn't that far off, and maybe a walk would help him relax. Maybe he'd even go for three miles.

By the time he'd reached the end of his street, Ray realized he wasn't going three miles - too hot. His shirt was already stuck to his back. Also, he'd forgotten to take a leak before he left. He looked around quickly, then walked down the embankment and into a small patch of trees. Standing hidden behind a large oak, he unzipped his shorts, expecting to send a strong stream against the exposed tree roots. Instead, he dribbled urine on his sneakers. Fucking prostate. Arthritis, swollen prostate, bad knees, bad hips - he snapped and creaked like a pile of kindling. He pushed and managed to shoot a small stream past his toes. Pathetic.

A car approached, stopping near his hiding place. Ray peeked around the tree and recognized Harry Deal's rusty old Ford pickup. Harry's boy Eric must be dropping off Brad after football practice. Ray

squinted - failing eyesight, another problem - and saw Brad in the passenger seat. Ray smiled. He couldn't help but smile every time he saw his boy. Football star, top ten in his class, fielding scholarships to a dozen colleges already.

Brad and Eric sat in the truck for a minute, talking. Probably deciding which cheerleaders they'd take out later, Ray thought. Then Brad looked around quickly and moved closer to Eric. Shit. Probably passing a bag of weed. Please, let him not be involved in drugs, Ray thought. Everybody smokes a joint now and then - God knows he'd smoked more than his share in high school. But Brad had a lot riding on this season, his senior year. If he blew it for some pot, or worse, a harder drug, Ray would kill him.

Then Brad took one more quick look around, leaned over, and kissed Eric on the lips. Hard and passionate, like Redford used to kiss 'em. It lasted about ten seconds. They separated, and Brad jumped from the truck. He grabbed his shoulder pads from the back, waved, and headed up the road home, his cleats clicking on the pavement.

Ray watched in stunned silence. Warm urine dribbled down on to his sneakers, splattering his bare ankles. He didn't notice, didn't move for a long time. At some point - Ray was unsure how long he stood in the woods with his dick out - he zipped up and walked back out to the road. The walk was forgotten. Everything was forgotten. His son was gay.

The motorcycle started with an earth-shaking roar, but Ray hardly noticed. A few seconds later the bike flew past, and if Ray had bothered to glance over he would have seen his daughter waving excitedly to him while pressed tightly against the hoodlum Danny. But Ray saw nothing. Up the street, through the yard, into the garage he walked. From the refrigerator he grabbed a six-pack of Bud pounders. He walked to the Trans Am, slid inside, and popped in a Led Zeppelin cassette. The tape deck was a Pioneer, mounted under the dash by Ray when the car was

still new. It rattled like hell but played as well as the day he installed it.

He felt his wife watching him from the kitchen window and didn't care. Inside the Trans Am, the rest of the world didn't exist. Ray cracked open a cold beer and took a long drink. He wondered how Harry Deal would react to finding out his son was gay. Harry was a large man, country-strong, with a short fuse. A few years previous at the county fair, he'd taken on three rednecks who'd called his nephew a fag. What occurred next was a good, old-fashioned ass whipping - all three rednecks ended up in the hospital. Recalling the beating, Ray imagined what Harry would do to the person who told him his only son was a homosexual. Ray decided to not be that person.

The beer was empty and Ray tossed it out the window, on to the grass. He'd pick it up later. He started the car and eased out of the driveway. It was difficult to drive the Trans Am slowly with four hundred horsepower under the hood, just begging to be used. Once down the road a piece, out of earshot of his wife, he matted it. The engine skipped, then - pow! - it backfired. Ray glanced around, embarrassed. The motor was getting old, tired. Couldn't push her like he used to. He patted the dash affectionately and drove the speed limit.

The faded sign outside Nick's Pub advertised ten beers on tap, but Ray didn't drink draft beer - it looked like piss in a glass. He only drank Bud, from a bottle. He slowed as he approached the pub. Long ago, it had been his regular hangout. In those days, a thick, swirling fog of cigarette smoke and honky-tonk music hung over the barroom like a protective old soul. Things had changed a lot since then - no smoke, no honky-tonk, just some whiny hybrid of pop and country that reminded Ray of his gay son. He sped up and drove past.

The Trans Am pulled into the Central Lake parking lot at dusk. Central Lake - closer in size to a puddle than a lake - was barely visible from the lot. Ray parked at the back, in a dark, secluded area strewn

with empty beer cans and condom wrappers. He cut the engine and sat silently for a moment, breathing in deeply. The summer breeze off the water smelled good this time of day. Then he turned on the radio and grabbed a beer from the back seat. The bottle was slick with condensation and the beer was lukewarm, but warm beer never bothered Ray. He'd downed plenty of them over the years. Within minutes he opened another one, and the combination of alcohol, dusk, and classic rock relaxed him. Maybe things weren't so bad, after all. Then the passenger door suddenly opened.

"Want some company, Trans Am Man?"

Before Ray could answer, a young man slid into the passenger seat and closed the door. He was pierced and tattooed, with long, shaggy hair. Ray ignored him. The young man said nothing for a few seconds, then reached over and unzipped Ray's pants.

"Not tonight, Keith."

Keith appeared disappointed, almost angry, and left the car without a word. Watching him walk away, Ray felt a mixture of pity and disgust. The poor young man had no self-control. And self-control was the key. Ray carried the same sinful urges - had since he was thirteen - but at least he'd held them at bay, enough to marry and raise a family. Ray sat in the parking lot long past nightfall, praying his son would be able to show the same restraint.

*Gary Sprague lives in Maine with his wife and two sons. His fiction has appeared in The Linnet's Wings, Spilling Ink Review, Raleigh Review, Matchbook, The Toucan, and The Mayo Review.*

# Submission Guidelines

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We will consider unsolicited material submitted by any writer. Submissions must be original and not previously published elsewhere. We appreciate well-written, creative, and thought-provoking work that has both literary merit but can cater to a wide audience. Simultaneous submissions are encouraged.

We will not accept any form of erotica, fanfiction, high fantasy, or any children's fiction, EXCLUDING young adult. We do accept creative non-fiction. Short stories should not be more than 7,000 words, and poetry must not go beyond 5 pages. We accept multiple submissions, but this must be noted. Maximum of 3 for short stories, and maximum of 5 for poetry. If you're submitting both poetry and short stories, please submit them in different documents. If accepted elsewhere, notify us immediately.

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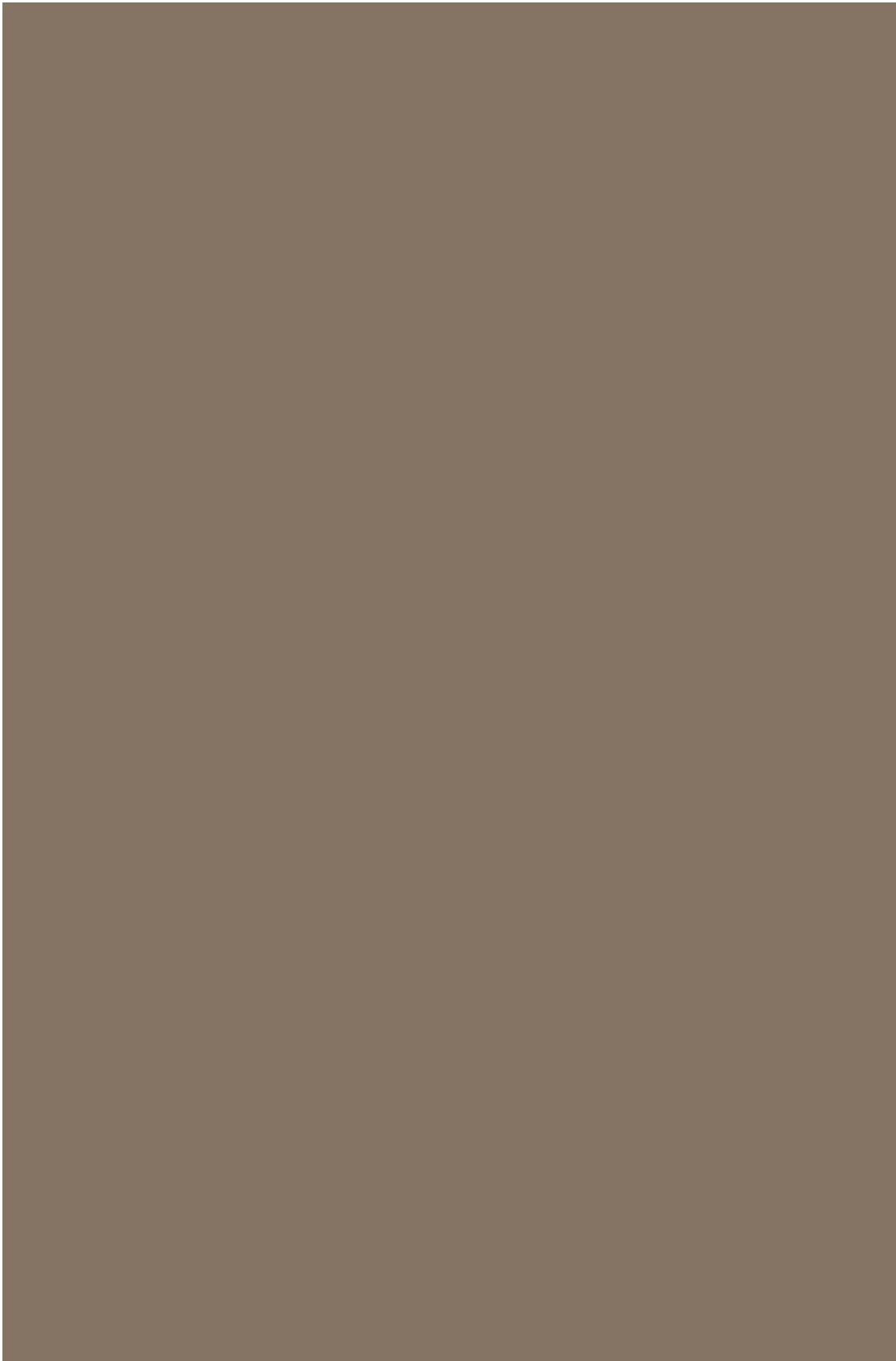
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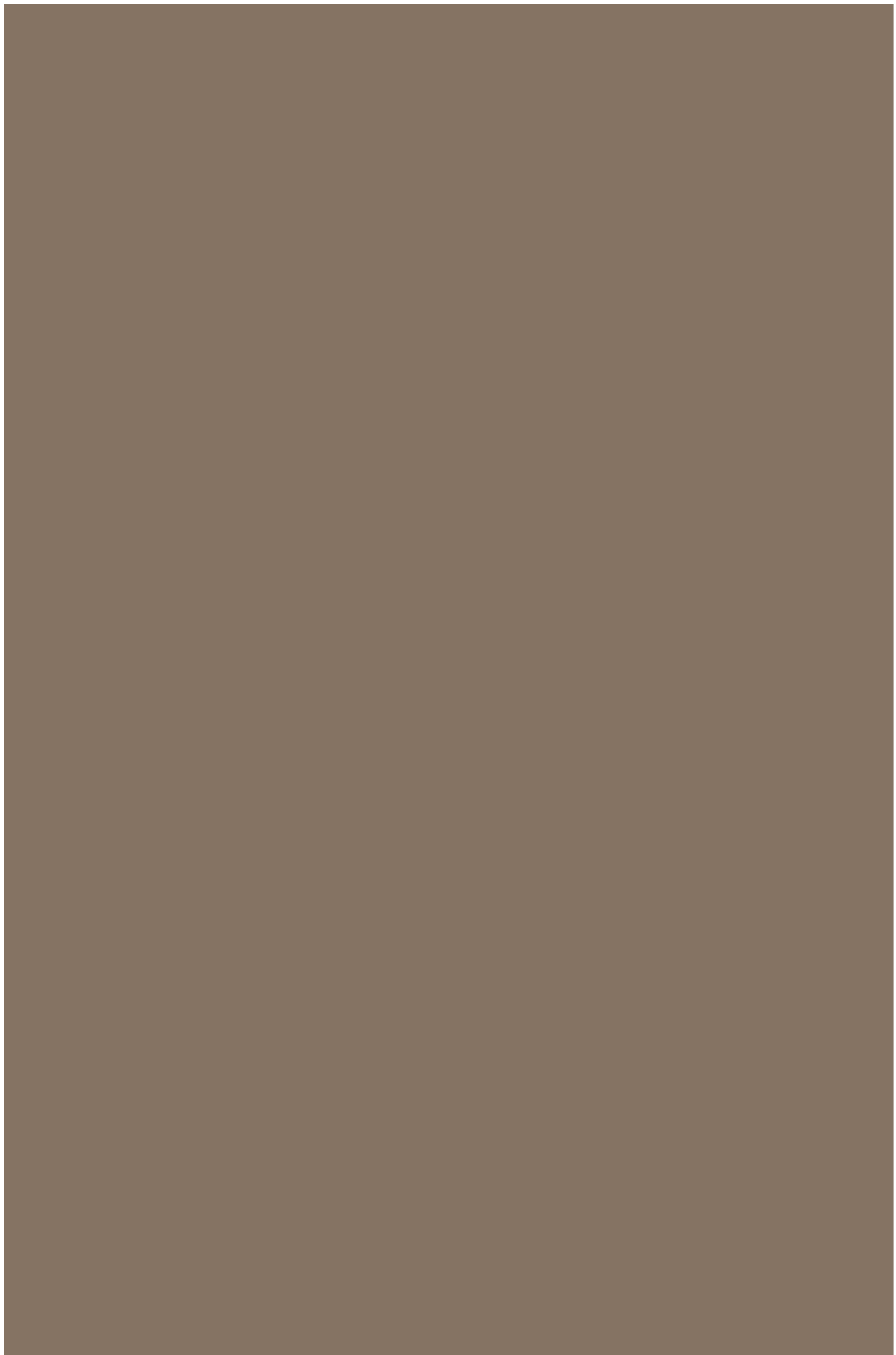
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