



“Life lives, life dies. Life laughs, life cries. Life gives up and life tries. But life looks different through everyone's eyes.”

The Freedom Fiction Journal completes its first year - a man stands, he walks, he runs and is now carried by friends - our Freedom Friends !

FREEDOM FICTION

Grinds You To A Pulp - Join The Cult

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Editor's Note

Aloha Freedom Friends, and you are witnessing the first successful year of Freedom Fiction Journal. This is the fourth issue of the first year - and as planned we have represented the superb, creative and original fiction and art in this quarterly eZine which is also a Community Resource for anyone who wants to enjoy and enable Genre Fiction. The milestone is further exalted by the support and subscription by the best of freelance and fulltime authors. Again we have a big issue here to keep you busy for quite some time.

On some good news for the future - I will indeed make an attempt and as planned we may see a "Best Of..." issue based on already published fiction of this first glorious year. It would be unfair if these go unsung and therefore there will be a print edition. So, some of the authors of the first year may look forward to getting paid a standard flat fee, nothing too significant, but a token fee to issue them a new Standard Agreement so as to publish their fiction in print form. The minimum decent fee that fledgling web-magazines such as ours could pay is USD 12 per story - irrespective of word count. So, even though it won't make any of you (or us) super-rich, we will at least have a material existence outside the cyberspace.

Some great short stories here, including another Western Genre story. One great New York adventure by Dr. Howard Karlitz. A gritty hardboiled story by Joshua Allen. Our very first Superhero adventure by Chris Castle. Kristine, who has been a Pushcart Prize nominee thrice. These are just some of the many people who clearly show an emerging force in short story form - something we may soon someday look back and admire, when their talent is more visible to the reading audience.

We are also trying to raise funds to keep this snowball rolling and be able to reward our authors, sustaining the eZine as well as being able to post at least one Print Edition every year.

So check out "The Gift Shop" section of our website - if there is anything you like - buy 2 of it, LOLz. My sincere gratitude to all those of you who have been so kind and patient with this endeavour and hope it brings joy to many more.

Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

Ujjwal Dey

Editor for Issue 04, Vol01.

Freedom Fiction Journal | <http://freedomfriends.in/>

Last Haul

By Joshua Allen

Synopsis: Do you wonder what could be if someone was still with us? Wonder what happened to someone who disappeared? Do you get tempted by femme fatale and fate alike?

About the Author: Joshua Allen is a writer living in central Illinois. He dabbles in suspense, horror, and science fiction. His short stories have appeared in numerous online journals. He's working on his first novel, a science fiction story about a man suffering strange side effects from a most unusual medical procedure. He's found his former job as a cab driver to be rife with story ideas, and his current job as a copy editor much less so. You can find out more about his writing on his web page (<http://joshuallen.blogspot.com>).

In this gritty drama, a man will find more than he can see in the dark night, tonight.

Last Haul

By Joshua Allen



It's almost midnight, and the highway between Dubuque and Platteville is dark and empty. I catch a glimpse of myself in the rear view mirror, but I see only bruise-colored bags hanging beneath a stranger's eyes. My fare is in the back seat, sleeping. I return my attention to the highway. My cab wears a dim white light on top and is heading down the road way too fast because it knows it'll be empty on the backhaul. But if things go right, I think I coned myself a good tip.

Somehow, that gets me thinking about my dad.

I pretend he's sitting in the passenger seat, quiet. That's how you know it's not him. In life, he never stopped talking. He looks at me and winks.

He nods in the direction of my fare. "Wouldn't mind seeing what's under her shirt," he tells me. His voice sounds normal.

&&&

What's funny is that I saw him without his shirt just before he went missing. Not pretty. Someone puked on him, and he needed to change. I happened to be close and had an extra shirt stuffed in my bag. Of course, we're almost exactly the same size. He pulled on my shirt and buttoned up and pushed the sleeves to his elbows, stretching the cuffs, but my mind wasn't on the messed-up cuffs. My mind was on Dad's naked chest. How had he gotten like that, like a deflated balloon? Was that how I would look one day? I didn't say anything to him. But he looked at me like he knew what I was thinking.

"Hell getting old. Better than the alternative, though."

No one really talks about Dad anymore, not to me anyway. We all have our pet theories about what happened to him. What we know is that he took some hooker down to the quad cities and was never heard from again. At first I tried to be romantic about it, but it's been too long.

She probably called her pimp-daddy about ten minutes out of Davenport, told him where to be. Dad parked his cab and checked his rear view to make sure she still had both tits and missed

the dark form to his left. The guy probably popped a shot through the glass into Dad's lung.

Dad would have probably seized up. He had lung problems to start from all those years of smoking. Letting the air out of one couldn't have been easy for him. With luck, he died quick. Over the tang of burnt gunpowder, the car filled with the reek of piss and shit, the same smell any animal makes just before it dies.

I don't know what happened next. Maybe they put him in the trunk, put his cab in the river. It's possible he was still alive when they did it, and that he was too weak to fight back. I sometimes imagine myself, gasping for breath and feeling the ice water rising up my chest. Those nightmares end with me wishing to God that my son would show up at the last minute and save me.

"If I hadn't called Jimmy a prick that one time," he would have thought, "or slapped him around so much when he was a kid."

Did you know you have to be a relative to file a missing person's report? That's what the boss told me two days after Dad went missing. She was mad she couldn't do it herself.

"You can't make this stuff up," she said. "Bill was my best employee, and now I'll never know what happened to him unless his dipshit son gets his head out of his ass."

"They never found the car," I said. "Bill ain't dead if they never found a car. He's too stubborn for that."

She leaned in close. "But they won't even let us ask about the John Does at the hospital without a missing person's report."

I laughed. I told her she was going to feel like a silly old lady when Dad showed up in a week with a neck full of Mardi Gras beads. He'd done it before. Dad kept money hidden from himself and partied when he found it.

&&&

"Think her pussy's tight?" Dad asks.

"Stop it," I say to the mirage in my passenger seat.

"Pull over up here," Dad says. "Anywhere's good. Then," he leans in close, getting serious, "you tell her you aren't sure you want to go any further, *but* you know if you had a little incentive you'd keep driving." He checks the fare to make sure she isn't awake and listening. "What you do is, you look her

right in the eye, and ask her if you can put it up her ass, just for a minute. If she does, you tell her, you'll finish the drive." Bill nudges me as he talks. I slap him away. "Do it nice and slow, if she says yes. Nothing better."

"You have problems," I respond.

He used to say things like that to me all the time. Why do you think he divorced my mom and kept driving cab into his sixties?

"Who you talking to?" the girl says from the back seat.

"Singing along to the radio," I say.

She snarls and closes her eyes again.

She puts her hand up between her breasts. I can see a blotch of dried blood in the webbing between her thumb and forefinger. I imagine her wiping away a red snot bubble after snorting a sinus full of coke. She is just the kind of girl Dad would have liked.

&&&

For the first three Saturdays, the boss called me in and pleaded with me to file a missing person's report. By the third Saturday, I told her it was a moot point, now that they burned John Does after a week or two. I acted like I knew that for a fact.

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"Can I smoke?" my fare asks from the back window. She's awake again, full on. I roll her window down from my console, then light up my own cigarette.

I pass a sign: Platteville 6. I check the clock. I'll be back in town by 1:00, in plenty of time to get a few fares from the bar rush. First they all go over the river to the Illinois side for one more hour of drinking, then there's another rush when they all come back. Idiots!

In five minutes the fare and I are cruising downtown Platteville, past the movie theatre and the KFC. One minute after that, we're nearing the edge of town, and she still hasn't given me a clue where to turn.

We pass another sign: Thanks for Visiting Platteville.

"Where do I turn?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. It's actually a little further. Like five more miles," she says, then lights up another cigarette. Now my palms start itching. Something ain't right. I notice her hands are shaking.

&&&

"That father of yours ever show up?" my mom asked about a month after the boss got the hint and left me alone.

"No," I tell her.

"He usually doesn't stay gone this long," she said.

"What do you even care?"

That was the wrong thing to say to her, let me tell you. We argued for about an hour and a half.

&&&

The girl's cell phone rings, filling the cab with some rap song that is severely overloading the tiny speaker on her phone. She whips it open.

"Yeah?" she yells the word. Then suddenly she hunches over and casts a glance up at me. I look away as she does.

I hear her murmuring, but I can't make out anything specific. She calls the person on the other end a *jackass*. She repeats that many times and heaps a few other choice words on him, loud enough that I can hear. She claps her phone shut. I can hear a male voice still talking when she does it.

"I'm sorry," she says to me. "Can you just pull over right up here by this gas station?"





I'm about to point out that there is nothing off the road but an endless cornfield when a gas station emerges just over the crest of the hill. The itch in my palms subsides a little. She knows this area. She's from here. Wisconsin girls are the nicest, so I think I can relax.

The parking lot of the gas station is blacked out. The pumps look like they haven't passed fuel since Carter was in office. Big plywood slats cover the windows. Someone has scrawled red graffiti on one. *Dorks are Fist Fuel*, it says.

"Stupid," I mumble.

I put the car in park. There's a weird silence because the engine is no longer wound all the way up. I feel like a man emerging from a rock concert into a cold, quiet night. I flip the dome light on. It does nothing to chase away that rock concert fuzz in my head.

She's holding a gun on me.

No, not a gun. A lighter.

"I found this in the back."

A Zippo lighter. Never seen it before. It has the initials *BQR* in fancy script. Who has a middle name starting with Q? No one I know. I open it, and it lights. Lucky me.

"Hey thanks," I say.

"You said fifty, right?"

"Well, we went a little past Platteville," I say.

"They usually only charge me thirty. The other guys all tell me thirty."

Shit. I'm caught.

"Usually we have a backhaul," I say. "It's a long way back empty."

"It's fine, really," she says. "I understand. It's not like it's my money. Hey, did you know Bill?" she asks as she digs through her purse.

"No," I say.

"You kind of look like him, in the eyes."

She hands up the money, but it never reaches my fingers.

"Shit! Sorry," she says.

The fifty descends, falling down to the floor boards. I react without thinking, going down to grab it. For a second, it's like I'm outside of my body. I can see into the passenger window. I can see the nice wide target my back is providing. I can see the gun aiming at all that fleshy real estate. I jerk my head around and look out the window.

No one there.

"You sure you're not related to Bill," she asks. "Because now that I look at you, you look more than just a little like him."

"He's my dad," I say.

"So you did know him?"

I reach down again. My fingertips touch the fifty, but I can't quite get a grip on it.

"Because you said you didn't know him."

"We weren't that close," I say.

"You both drove cabs and you weren't that close?"

I sit up. I'll get the damn money later. I pull out my clipboard and mark our destination. I write in "Platteville." I leave the fare total blank. Later, when the girl isn't there to see, I'll write in \$30 and bam, there's my \$20 tip.

"They ever find him?"

"No."

"That's messed up, right? He took that nigger whore down to the quad cities and never comes back."

"Don't say that," I say.

"What? You don't think he's dead?"

"Don't say the N word."

She looks at me hard. "Why? Is your mom black or something?"

"No," I lie. "I just don't like it."

She stares a little harder at me as though she doesn't believe me. After a moment, she decides I'm okay. My mom's fair-skinned herself, I pass easily enough and always have. The locals know who my mom is, and if not for the fact that I also happen to be Bill's son, I probably would catch a lot more grief from them, but out-of-towners don't know one way or another.

"Your dad, he was a hoot."

In the distance, I see twin headlights across a hill. They exit on the overpass off the four-lane highway and onto the frontage road that passes the gas station.

"You want to know what me and the other girls called him?"

"No," I say.

"Brown-eye Bill."

"I get it," I say.

She laughs. "Look at you turning red. You never fingered a girl's asshole, or what?"

"No," I say.

She leans up. "Want to?"

I can practically hear Bill let out a whoop of joy from the passenger seat. The truck pulls into the parking lot. It approaches slowly.

"Your boyfriend's here," I say.

She opens her phone. "I'll call him. He'll wait. He's cool."

"How much?" I ask.

"I knew that nigger bitch--pardon my French--that jacked your dad. The night before she did it, she was bragging to me that she was going to roll some old fool with a guy she knew in Davenport who claimed to be a Crip." The girl bites her lip. She is inches from my face. She has my taken my hand while she was talking and has moved it down to her bare thigh. "I didn't know it was Bill. I swear."

She slides my hand up to the tender meat inside her leg. My fingertip presses the lace of her panties. I pull my hand back.

"You should go."

She waves the phone in my face. "You can start exploring while I make the call."

I glance at the truck. It is close. The lights are off. The driver door is open. I can't see anyone inside.

She grabs my jaw, trying to divert my eyes. I let her turn my head. The big shape of a man is lumbering around the back of my cab. I grab the gear shift and pull it down one notch, into reverse.

She screams. I can feel her fingernails fillet my face as I wrench free of her grip. The car kicks gravel out and surges backward. I heard a ba-dump-dump like I hit something. I slam on the brakes. The girl flies forward, into the passenger seat hard. Her phone rattles out of her hand.

I put the car in park and get out. The guy is on the ground, wailing. I open the door. I pull her out by her hair and throw her down on the gravel. She doesn't fight back.

"I'm sorry!" she screams from the ground.

I drive away, trying my damndest to spray some gravel in her face as I go. I don't know if she was lying about Dad. Most likely, she was. For all I know, it was her and the big lumberjack who I hit with my car that popped Dad. I don't believe it was a lie, though. I think she was telling the truth. I think she got the idea from what happened to my dad, and maybe the rest of it was just chance.

Dad is in the passenger seat. "I'd have at least put a couple of fingers in, Jimmy. What are you, a fag?"

I point to the red ribbons on my face. "She got me pretty good, Dad."

He shakes his head. "No girlfriend. No kids. You're no man, Jimmy."

About five miles on the other side of Platteville from the gas station, my cab lights up with a confusing spin of red and blue. I look over my shoulder. I stop. No big deal. So they called the cops. I'll have my side of the story, they'll have theirs. I'll have the marks on my face. My story will sound plausible because it's the truth.

I roll my window down as the cop makes his way toward my car. He aims his flashlight into the cab from the rear fender. I try to look, but I'm blinded.

"Step out of the car, sir. Hands where I can see them."

I get out, hands up. The routine is familiar.

"Face the front of the car, sir, put your hands behind your head, interlace your fingers."

I do it. He manhandles my wrists together and cuffs them, then kicks my feet apart and pushes me face-first onto the scalding hood of my car. He pats me quickly, pulling something out of my pocket.

"This it, Quinton?"

I hear a voice from the police car say, "Does it have the initials *BQR* on it?"

"Sure does," the cop calls back.

"Check the floorboards," I hear another voice say. It is the girl's. "He threw a fifty dollar bill at me just before he tried to rape me. I'm pretty sure it fell down there."

"Officer, I--" I try to say.

He aims a finger at my eye. "Not a word, sir. You'll have your chance to tell it to the judge."

Motherfuckers.

The cop looks in the front seat and pulls out the money. "There it is, just like the young lady said."

"Officer, she's a whore," I blurt out.

He twists my wrist a little, just enough to hurt, and says, real close to my ear, "That don't mean you get to rape her, sir. My very good friend back, Officer Ravinas, has a broken foot and a girlfriend trying to clean herself up. You people make me sick," he says, spitting the words into my face. I don't know if he means black people, or cab drivers, or men, or the whole useless lot of humanity, all filling his nose with their stink, or what.

I look up at the passenger side through the windshield. Bill's still there, his face strobing from blue to red. He has a black bubble where his cheek used to be and his eye is bright, blood

red where it should be white. Brain matter runs in a thin red slush down his head. He tries to smile.

And I'm glad. I'm glad Dad is trapped in the car. I hope he stays in there. I hope they buried him in a deep, dark hole, and that he never gets out.

I have.

**** THE END ****

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Confessions of a New York City street peddler

By Dr. Howard Karlitz

Synopsis: A beautiful story of a man's progress in living his dream, finding his truth and understanding his city. A discovery of not just individual greed, or manipulation by organised businesses, or the forgetful busyness of society - but also a sketch of how human spirit strives against all adversities.

About the Author: Howard Karlitz is an educator and writer, having received his Masters Degree and Doctorate from New York's Columbia University. His works of fiction, non-fiction, research, and political and economic commentary have appeared in numerous literary and professional journals, magazines and newspapers. "Confessions of a New York City street peddler" is based upon a yet-to-be published novel of the same name that he recently completed. Dr. Karlitz can be reached at wordcredible@gmail.com.

In this story, we delve into the simpler and more innocent era of New York of the 1980s.

Confessions of a New York City street peddler

By Dr. Howard Karlitz

It's February 1980, and David Gordon is standing in front of a class of delinquent kids in a South Brooklyn juvenile detention center trying to teach reading. While patiently guiding them through a short story called "Young Pablo Picasso," his eye is caught by a reproduction of the artist's flamboyant signature emblazoned across the top of the page. He puts the book down and stares at the lettering, then happens to notice a small blurb in a newspaper lying next to it on his desk announcing an exhibition of Picasso's work, a major retrospective, scheduled to soon take place at the Museum of Modern Art. It was strange, the signature and show coming together like that. His mind wanders. An idea is taking form. Suddenly it comes to him. Just in time too, because the kids are going bananas and a piece of chalk whizzes past his ear, powder shattering against the green board behind him.



That evening, in the safety of his modest suburban home, he announced his plan to his wife. "Jill," he boasts, "this is it, the big one! I'm going to sell Picasso T-shirts at the Museum of Modern Art this summer."

Quite naturally she's leery. In fact she thinks he's mad. And he really can't blame her. In the first place she's wondering why in the world anyone would want to buy a T-shirt with Picasso's signature on it. And secondly, they had just been through a nervous breakdown-inducing business bankruptcy after he invested their life savings in three waterbed stores, all of which sunk after only five months, leaving them in a blizzard of attorneys' letters, injunctions, collections notices, court fees, judgments, tax liens, law suits (both of the civil and criminal variety), and every other form of lawyer-related horror one could dream of.

But he had to give this a shot and Jill understood why. She understood that he was tired of trying to make it on a teacher's salary, tired of wheeling around suburbia in one clunker after another, tired of never even considering a vacation, tired of not being able to take his family to a decent restaurant, depressingly tired of watching the bills pile up on the kitchen table month after lousy month. They had held on to their 60's ideals as long as possible, but like the man desperately clinging to a ledge fifty stories up, it was getting hard because the villain, Mr. 80's, a/k/a "Greed and Excess," was stomping on their fingertips.

He hooked up with a character named Benny who owned a T-shirt printing shop near his job. David showed him the Picasso signature from the school book. "Nice shot," Benny says. Everything in this business is a "shot." Said he can copy it, enlarge it, and press it onto a shirt. A "heat shot" he calls it.

"What do you think of my idea?" David asks. "Picasso, that is."

"Great" Benny lied. Thought he was nuts. "How many ya' wanna start with? A hundred dozen? Two?"

"No, forty-eight."

"Dozen?"

"No, shirts. Black ones, with white lettering."

His first day out was in April. David rushed into the city after work figuring to catch the early ticket buyers. The shirts were in a knapsack on his back. As he walked down the block, however, his confidence melted away. Suddenly he was terrified. He had no license, if there was such a thing, no permit, nothing. Here he was, a schoolteacher, with a masters degree no less, slinking around the museum entrance on 53rd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues like a criminal. He felt like a derelict or, worse yet, a pervert. He wanted to run back to

the burbs, but something grabbed hold of him at this moment of truth and he slipped out a shirt and held it up in front of him at arms length. And like magic, a well dressed woman walked over and began to touch it. "Pretty," she says. Pretty my ass, David thought, she's a cop. She pulls out her wallet. Here comes the badge. "How much?" she asks, and when he tells her five dollars she hands him a ten and walks away with two. He's rocked. Other people who have been watching now come over to buy shirts too. And this is the first critical lesson he learns about peddling, to draw a crowd and let people see money changing hands. It adds credibility to you and your action. On the streets it's called *disalienation*.

Under half an hour he's sold out, but decides right then and there to quit because it's just too damn scary, too risky, for a schoolteacher with a masters degree that is. But that night back home, he's throwing the cash around the kitchen, and then he's on the phone with Benny ordering more shirts which he picks up the next day on his lunch hour which he's selling that afternoon at the museum after work because already he's totally addicted to the money and the action.

The Picasso Retrospective Exhibit opened to rave reviews and the crowds were enormous, with lines snaking all the way down the block and curling onto 5th Avenue. Business took off, so he hired his recently unemployed father-in-law, Sid, to help him out. One of the greatest, cast aside (not-even-a-gold-watch) garment center salesmen of all times, Sid covered the 54th Street entrance while David worked on 53rd. When the end of June rolled around and the tourists poured into town, business exploded and suddenly they were moving a couple of hundred pieces a day. Then summer vacation kicked in, thank God, and they were working nine to nine, seven days a week.

It was about this time that David's first competition showed up; two punk types from Hoboken. They copied his idea. What could he do? Sue? Call a cop? They hurt David's numbers because they were showing colors while he was only selling black T-shirts. So David got colors too, a whole rainbow, and now he and Sid are moving even more shirts. Then they got children's T's (for the grandma and grandpa set) and French cuts (for those long, tanned arms.) That was Jill's idea.

More competition hit the street: a couple of Israelis, a one-armed Cuban with a Ph.D. in physics, two accountants, at least one lawyer, an insurance salesman from North Carolina, a keyboard player and drummer from a defunct rock band, and a host of college students on summer vacation. The place began to look like a flea market, but it was OK because there was enough for everybody.

Meanwhile the idea was feeding on itself. Soon everyone was walking around with a Picasso signature T-shirt, whether they'd been to the show or not. It's big in the Hamptons. Fire Island also. Store owners buy them by the dozen, and David's starting to see them in some very chic Madison Avenue shop windows marked up four to five hundred percent. He was doing serious numbers, so serious that Benny put all his other business on hold to print only Picasso shirts. David was hot, and there was nothing he couldn't handle now...**except...the...truck!!**

One day a scruffy looking moose of a guy in worn jeans and sandals was looking down at David's T-shirts and asked for a pale pink extra large. Rather strange David thought. He bends down and rummages through his suitcases and comes up with the guy's order and suddenly he's eyeballing a police badge. "Don't cry," the plain clothes cop says, "just show me some I.D." But David's ready, and pulls out his wallet with a fifty dollar bill taped to the inside leather flap. "Don't even think about it," the cop says. "Put it away. I.D." So David hands him a valid driver's license. "You'll have to do something about this, **Mr. David Gordon.**" David has no idea what he's talking about. The cop writes out a summons, hands David the pink portion of it, gets on his walkie-talkie, and in seconds a paddy wagon roars up. This is it, David figures, he's screwed. The cop opens the back door and David starts to climb in when the cop growls, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Get out!" and he grabs David's suitcases full of shirts and throws them into the truck. "Pick'em up at two o'clock. Got any back-up?" the cop asks. Again David doesn't know what's going on. "Shit to sell, until you come in." Our hero's drawing blanks. "You're not a virgin, David, are you?" he asks, somewhat surprised. David's too petrified to speak. "You'll learn. See you at two. Midtown North Precinct," and he was gone.

At the appointed hour, David finds himself in the bowels of a west side station house located in the heart of the city's sleaze district, the denizens of which would probably associate the name Pablo Picasso with some new, well-hung porno sensation. He's huddling against the wall of a dingy basement room crowded with an assortment of motley characters, many of whom he later learns are more plainclothes cops. An air conditioner belches and death-rattles ineffectively. Everyone's milling about until one guy, a hippie type cop, sits down behind a typewriter and yells, "OK, who's up first?" and all hell breaks loose with peddlers rushing him, waving their pink summonses in his face in order to pay a twenty dollar "ransom" for their confiscated merchandise and get back on the street where capitalism in its purest form awaits.

David hangs around to the end, nervous, scared, like any law-abiding, middle class suburbanite when Gus Reuter, the officer

who took his shirts, asks for the summons and the twenty (the "administrative fee" the city figures it costs to grab his stuff and haul it to the station house). He types up a voucher, asks David to sign it, then hands back the summons and a receipt. As for the summons, David's informed that end of it is handled like a parking ticket, and has to be cleared through a different city agency, Consumer Affairs. And the fines, Reuter warns, usually \$100 a pop, can add up quickly. David was then told he could take back his suitcases, which were stacked up against a far wall.

When he got home that night he burst through the door screaming "I quit! I quit!" waving the pink summons around like a madman. But the following day, he and Sid dug up some extra suitcases, "back-up," which they stashed on the side in order to continue working between the time they got hit and the time they had to pick up their "shit." ("Shit," by the way, is the *official* term for the merchandise in your "joint." Your joint consists of your "shit" and your "rig," in his case, three or four suitcases lying open on the sidewalk. *Shit + Rig = Joint.*)

Their identity situation was deftly handled by the slick proprietor of a Broadway arcade, who decked them out with social security cards and some neat looking plastic employment badges from a bogus Brooklyn construction company. David proudly became Roger Mantle. What the hell, he figured, if you're gonna do it...

The system worked perfectly. They got hit, waited a bit, re-opened with back-up, continued peddling for a couple of hours, then went to the precinct to ransom their shit, and were back in front of the museum in no time. Their tickets, like of those of every other peddler in the city, became toilet paper. Everyone's figures were healthy. The peddler detail was vouching record numbers, while the T-shirt vendors' bottom lines were blacker than ever.

But it would be impossible to close this chapter of the story without some pain. There were two periods that summer when David thought they had him. The first was during the Democratic National Convention, which happened to take place in New York that year. Word came thundering down from the mayor's office to sweep the midtown streets clean of vermin, especially around the museum where each conventioneer's agenda would include a trip to the Picasso exhibit. He especially didn't want them in contact with vendors. Little did he realize, however, that out-of-towners love peddlers, and consider them to be just one more vibrant element in the city's personality. The peddler detail sought to temporarily suspend peddling operations and warned every street vendor in the strongest terms not to work midtown that week. The other T-shirt people stopped immediately, but

David had grown greedy, and the next day opened up, business as usual. He was hit four, five, six times a day. Gus told him he was making "enemies on the force," the ultimate threat. Sergeant Laverty, head of the detail, cornered him in the peddler room one day and said if he kept it up, he'd never work the streets again. David was scared and considered stopping, but then went back out anyway. And since the competition had dried up, he made out huge, even with the extra hassle. Towards the end of the week the detail even let him slide once or twice. In the end they earned each other's respect.

The second time when David was almost put out of business happened when Picasso's greedy heirs decided that the shirt represented a copyright violation, that they *owned* their father's signature. An army of treasury agents, suit and tie guys in unmarked cars, hit the museum one day, confiscating shirts and handing out injunctions ordering peddlers to cease and desist until a federal judge handed down a ruling in two weeks. The press had been tipped off the previous night and the street teemed with reporters, photographers and cameramen.

As David sadly walked back to his car, he passed a bear of a guy, a grizzled street vendor pulling a monstrous rack of designer tops down the middle of 54th Street toward Fifth Avenue. He leaned into a thick rope slung over his shoulder, the other end of which was tied to his joint. Traffic backed up behind him all the way to Sixth Avenue, and each time an irate motorist was able to squeeze by, he was blasted with a car horn. His response was a calm, detached, "I-don't-give-a-shit" raised middle finger. David recognized him from the peddler room. His name was Spiro, a Greek, one of the few other vendors who had worked convention week.

"I saw what happened," he said to David, dropping the rope in the middle of the street in order to stretch out his shoulder. Horns chorused.

"Yeah, they gave me this," David answered holding up the injunction.

"The hell with it, man. Go back to work."

"And get arrested! You're crazy. I'm quitting. For good."

"Hey, they did you a favor. Cleaned up the competition. They ain't coming back. It was just a big show. For the press. The Feds got better things to do than bust T-shirt peddlers. You'll never have this chance again." The Greek picked up the rope and began lugging his rig toward Fifth. The line of cars started inching along behind him. "Now is the time," he called back to David. "NOW!"

Within minutes David was on the phone with Benny screaming to print everything he had. And Spiro was right. For the next two weeks he was the only one out there selling the "banned" shirts. Everyone had seen them on TV and were desperate for them. Benny made two, three, sometimes four vanload deliveries a day. David and Sid dumped them on the sidewalk and watched their clientele pounce on them, grabbing ten, fifteen at a time. Spiro was right about the Feds too. They never came back. In fact, the case was lost with the court ruling that Picasso's signature was clearly in the public domain. It belonged to the people.

By the time the competition came back, it was too late. They had missed the best two weeks of the season. Summer was winding down. Gus told David there would never be another two weeks like it again. And he was right.

The show was scheduled to end after Labor Day, but the museum was doing so much business that they extended it through October. Every day for the next eight weeks David rushed into the city after work, once again leading the double life of pedagogue/peddler; two seemingly incongruous pursuits, yet manageable, even to the point of benefiting his classroom technique. As a result of an injection of street wisdom, which his streetwise kids instinctively picked up upon, class control ceased to be a problem. He and his kids seemed to understand and respect each other more than ever before.

When the show finally did close, David decided to quit peddling for good and devote himself fully to teaching. But he was addicted to the street freedom and ended up quitting teaching for good and devoting himself to peddling. The next day he was in front of Saks Fifth Avenue pumping scarves and gloves in the crisp, exciting, autumn air.

This was the mainstream of New York City street vending, Fifth Avenue, the "Diamond Mile," that stretch of intense commercial activity running from 59th to 47th Street. It was the time of giant rigs rolling up and down the block, each manned by four or five peddlers selling everything from lingerie to jackets, sweaters, pocketbooks, dresses, hats, records, jewelry, make-up, wigs, belts, toys, pants, shoes, socks, radios, TV's, telephones, over-the-counter medicines, tools, tires, car batteries, flashlights, condoms, birth control pills, even eyeglasses. Crazy, but true. David once saw two entrepreneurial characters with a large box filled with prescription glasses. As one partner deftly placed a pair on a customer's nose, the other held up an eye chart twenty feet away. "Can you see the 'E' lady? No? OK, here, try these." They went for six bucks a throw, two for ten.

And as Christmas drew nearer, more peddlers appeared, store owners from the suburbs and the outer boroughs opening weekend Manhattan "annexes." The streets were wall-to-wall with peddlers until ten, eleven at night. Of course the Fifth Avenue Merchants Association screamed bloody murder, so more beat cops were assigned to the detail. They'd hit the avenue every hour on the hour, setting off a wild stampede of flying vendors and careening dollies which bowled over everything and everybody in their paths, because nobody wanted to get vouched and lose precious time in this most precious of seasons.

David always worked small, out of a suitcase or on top of a garbage pail, usually with scarves and gloves in the fall and winter, and anything from wallets to T-shirts to ties in the spring and summer. But he moved with the times and never allowed himself to get locked into any one particular item. One season he did incredibly well with dollar chain, "Bro' Gold" as it was called in the ghettos, "Phonay Monet," or "sluummmm...," the definition of which can be found in the Unabridged Riker's Island Dictionary of the English Language. We're talking cheap costume jewelry, which he always sold as *cheap costume jewelry*, a buck a throw, six for five, as opposed to wise guys who'd stamp it fourteen karat and sidle up to tourists looking to make a quick hundred. David became known as the "Slum Lord" during a chain snatching epidemic by advising his well-heeled clientele to "keep the real stuff in the vault and let the snatcher have this," holding up a nifty, one dollar, eighteen-inch herringbone necklace. "Laugh as the mugger hi-ho silvers it down the block."

What a great mix of people out there too, all working together in relative peace and madness: Greeks, Turks, Israelis, Palestinians, English, Irish, Poles, Italians, Indians, Pakistanis, Swiss, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, Salvadorians, Costa Ricans, Russians, Prussians, Hessians, Saxons, Celts, Incans, Thais, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Taiwanese, Afghans, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Albanians, Iraqis, Iranians, Transylvanians, Koreans... each representing a distinct immigrant wave that came to New York, the greatest city in the world, to seek refuge and a degree of economic security on its golden streets, in the same way the founders of some of the city's greatest retail establishments had done generations before.

But even though Christmas, the time for giving, was around the corner, not everyone was in the giving mode. Members of the boards of directors of the big-time organizations like Saks, Bergdorf, Bonwits, Bloomies, to name but a few, cried the loudest. "Rid the streets of this peddler trash," they

chorused, "they're killing us. How dare they sell an umbrella for three dollars when we can get fifteen!"

Were they forgetting their roots? Forgetting where the seed money came from? Forgetting how their great grandparents came to this country penniless and toughed it out with nothing but a dream and a pushcart on the cold cobblestones of Hester Street or Avenue C? And as for the greatest store of them all, the "Big M" on 34th, are they forgetting about R.H.Macy, the original "Yankee Peddler"? Evidently.

So, at the urging of these the yuppie captains of commerce, the rules of the game began to change. Under pressure from the Association, the city raised the ransom on any joint that rolled to sixty-five dollars. David didn't care. His garbage pail didn't have wheels. The rollers didn't care either, particularly the bootleg Izod and Polo boys. A couple of sixty-fives a day would hardly put a dent in their pre-Christmas action.

So the next move on the city's part was to raise *everybody's* confiscation fee to sixty-five. When that plan flopped, they decided to "impound" wheeled rigs under the guise that these "rolling platforms posed a hazard to pedestrian traffic." No big deal. The big operators switched to blankets. "Forty in the store. Ten on the floor!" Meanwhile David is still working his garbage pail with a piece of cardboard on it. He's selling leather gloves, showing only three or four pairs at a time. The rest are stashed in a bag behind him and are not subject to confiscation because they aren't on display. If Roger Mantle gets popped, he only loses ten or fifteen dollars worth of merchandise, and does not go directly to jail, but passes Go and avoids the ransom by letting the city keep the goods. It's fiscally sound.

The politicians finally get to the big joints with Article B23-507.0 of the Administrative Code. They call it "forfeiture of seized property." David calls it highway robbery. No more ransoms, they're keeping it all now. The heavy hitting Izod and Polo peddlers scream bloody murder, threaten to form an organization to hire a lawyer to fight this latest outrage. They circulate petitions (which everyone signs with a phony name) and ask for contributions (cash...what else?), but soon the whole thing collapses because they're really a pack of unorganizable nomads and suddenly everyone's working small and garbage pails are at a premium.

So it's a whole new board game, the rules of which peddlers are learning to live with when a fresh group of players suddenly sits down at the table. A wave of Africans came ashore one day, Senegalese for the most part, but with Liberians and Ethiopians

sprinkled in for good measure. They hit the streets just like every previous immigrant wave has done since Peter, the 'bead vendor,' Minuet worked his joint on Manhattan's south forty three hundred and fifty years ago. And just like their predecessors, they were tired, poor, scared, humble, but determined. There was only one difference. Quite evident too. It was right there in black and white.

There was a story going around that a big mucky-muck walked out of Bergdorf Goodman one day and was "shocked" by the bazaar that had seemingly sprung up overnight in front of the store, making it look like "Istanbul on Sunday." His hallowed sidewalk was speckled with dashiki clad vendors hawking African flavored bracelets, necklaces, earrings and statuary, not to mention sunglasses and umbrellas (pronounced "sugahs" and "umbahs" by the new arrivals.) The Bergdorf guy cranked up the Merchants Association, which revved up City Hall, which shook up the Police Commissioner's Office, which gave birth to the "Alpha Squad," a new, heavily manned detail of plainclothes peddler-busters, so named because in the beginning they rode around in vans and light trucks rented from an outfit called Alpha Rent-A-Car. Between these new kids on the block and the regular detail, the pressure was enormous as they incessantly swept the midtown commercial districts, confiscating displayed merchandise as well as back-up if they could find it. A lot of the old time peddlers packed it in. But the Africans stayed.

The next move was to crack down on identification. Pakistani plastic became unacceptable. They wanted valid paper: drivers licenses, rent receipts, telephone bills, green cards. And if you couldn't produce it, you were hauled into the precinct and hassled for a couple of hours. For a while David kept working, taking tickets under his real name, but finally quit for good when he started getting harassing phone calls and threatening letters from a collection agency the city hired. But the Africans hung in there. And why not? Like Bob Dylan sang, "When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose."

The crusher came with the strict enforcement of penalties under Section B32-510, which states that unlicensed general vending is "a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of not more than \$1000, or by imprisonment for not more than three months or both." This all but eliminated the few non-African vendors from the city's midtown commercial areas. A lot of guys David knew became "moles," working the subways where the rules were different, or "book" peddlers (protected by the First Amendment). Some worked the side streets, off the avenues, or all the way downtown in lower Manhattan where there was less of a chance of getting arrested. Some, however, still chanced Fifth Avenue, usually at odd hours looking for a quick morning or night rush. And every now and then you might even catch one

doing a lunch hour, particularly toward the end of the month when the rent came due.

As for the Africans, they hung tough in midtown because "three hots and a cot" in the "Tombs" (AKA, the Manhattan House of Detention) or on the "Rock" (Rykens Island Prison) was not that far removed from ten in a room at a dilapidated flophouse.

Epilogue: A Play in Three Acts

Act I:

It's a week after David quit for good. He's on the corner Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street talking to a hot dog guy about then Mayor Koch backing down on his attempt to eliminate food vendors.

"Too much Greek clout," the vendor says, "especially with Dukakis on the way up." Suddenly a police van pulls up and three cops jump out and arrest a peddler for selling her photographs of New York in front of the library. She's cuffed, Miranderized, and led into the back of the truck. Meanwhile, across the street, a three card monte game goes on undisturbed, with a large group of French tourists being bilked out of hundreds of dollars as pickpockets work the periphery of the crowd. Next to them some dope dealer is selling crack, another Quaaludes, another loose joints. It's not the cops' fault. Evidently they're being told what to concentrate on. It's the city's doing, the result of the "crackdown of the month club." It's all part of what they consider to be the "effective utilization of law enforcement personnel."

Act II:

David didn't quit. You knew it all along. He's on Fifth Avenue selling wallets, feeling safe, surrounded by African Rolex guys, when suddenly someone breaks down and runs shouting "Alpha, Alpha!" He runs too, and from around the corner nervously watches a van cruise down the block on a "click-click" patrol. ("Click-click," by the way, means arrest in African lingo, the sound of handcuffs snapping shut.) He hangs out, and a little while later Officer Gus Reuter comes up to him. "Be careful," he says, "the Africans got a lawyer. ACLU. He claims they're being discriminated against. That 99% of the collars are black."

"He's right," David answers. "That's because there are no other peddlers left. Alpha chased them away. It's like Catch-22."

Gus continues, "They'll be looking for the few old timers still out here.. To kind of even things up."

"Forget it, Gus," David laughs. "They'll never catch me. I'm too quick. Besides, I'm protected, an endangered species. The great white fucking hope."

Act III:

The next day, David got click-clicked for the first time on the corner of 40th Street and Fifth Avenue selling scarves off a garbage pail. They grabbed him and an African to his right. The cops came up on foot behind them. David and the African never had a chance.

An hour later the two of them sit alone behind bars in a downtown holding tank and get to talking. Surprisingly the African speaks pretty good English. He's from Ethiopia and the conversation soon turns to home, and the stories David's hearing regarding violently repressive conditions are unbelievable.

David quickly realizes that to him, this is all child's play.

Twelve hours later a guard comes over to the cell and tells David that his I.D. checked out and since he has no priors, he's being released under his own recognizance. He does, however, have a court date next month. When the guard opens the door and David gets up to leave, the African instinctively rises too. "Where are You going?" the guard growls. "Sit your black ass back down."

"Sorry boss," the peddler responds step-n-fetchitly.

The metal door clangs shut behind David, leaving the Ethiopian alone in the cell. David starts walking away when suddenly he stops and turns back to the jailed peddler. "Why do you stay here, man?" He asks him.. "Really?"

"Because I'm free."

**** THE END ****

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Once around the block

By Chris Castle

Synopsis: More than a Superhero story, this is a story about human life and human frailties; about being able to persist in being the instrument for change in a small yet significant human ways. Let Ed take you on a very human adventure when on vacation from his Superhero duties.

About the Author: Chris Castle lives and works outside London. His primary influences include Ray Carver, Bill Murray, the films of PT Anderson and the Y: The Last Man graphic novels. He can be reached at chriscastle76@hotmail.com.

In this beautiful adventure, we see how it is the man in the mirror who needs to make the first efforts for his society.

Once around the block

By Chris Castle

He hung up the costume and stepped back from the pod. No more Captain Fearstrike. Just plain old Ed Masters. He swiped out of the secure unit and signed his papers. He heard footsteps behind him, let Bill-aka-Pummel, catch up with him.

"Hey man, got any plans for your week off?" Bill was new to the team, a week in. He didn't know Ed had the same week off every year, for the same reason.

"Just going to spend some time in the neighbourhood. Haven't been back there for nearly a month." They walked to the exit, past the framed photos, the presidents.

"You're not going anywhere? No offence, but your neighbourhood has more crime going on in it than the places we get sent to." He smiled. The kid had a good smile; just finished his first press conference that day.

"It's home, Bill. When you go every other place in the world, it's what you want to go back to in the end. Keep safe okay?" Ed signed out of security, shook hands.

"If I can't keep safe I'll keep winning, right?" He mock saluted and the door swung round and sealed them off from each other. He climbed into the carrier to take him back up to the city surface and waved goodbye into the glass.

It was true on both counts; it was his home and it was a dump. While all the other members of the squad lived in their Caribbean bolt holes and luxury mansions, Ed had never once thought of taking up one of the offers, accepting one of the perks. It was where he and Etta had lived. It was where she had died. It was where he was meant to be, had to be, for both of them.

He reached his block at the time of night when the shops were locked and bolted and the bars were waking up. He listened to the music and the breaking glass and fished in his pocket for his keys. By the time he was inside and making coffee, he was done. He held the photo by his bed long enough to say goodnight out loud and then he was asleep, the city sounds carrying him away and out.

He woke early, as he always did. He checked his bruises in the mirror and took a shower, shaved. By the time he was dressed and had eaten breakfast, he was ready. He sat down by the desk and took out the paper and the pen. Seven pieces of paper.

Seven days. He wrote the date in the top corner and wrote Etta's name for the first time in two years in the left hand corner.

He walked the block three times. He noticed the big stuff first, the graffiti, the broken windows. The second time he took hold of the smaller stuff, the broken needles and equipment in certain alleys. Then lastly he walked past each of the shops, looking for a good place to eat. Then he made his way back to the broken houses.

By the time he had started to clear out the glass and started to fit the windows, the street kids had started to pay him attention. He waited, but it didn't come to anything. Instead he worked with his hammer, the nails. It took most of the day repairing each one. After that he swept the glass away, the junk. By the time he walked into the café it was already dark. He ordered even though he wasn't hungry, enjoying the coffee most of all. He sat at his desk later and wrote down what he'd done and then climbed into bed, his hands humming from the work.

& & &

The next morning he found most of the glass work was smashed again. The panels were beaten and out of shape. He looked around and saw two kids lingering by the mouth of the alleyway, hanging around. He swept away what he could and boarded up what was not in pieces. He walked over to the kids.

"You know who did this?" He asked them. Immediately one kid peeled away, taking off down the road. "You not following you're friend?"

"I used to deliver the paper to your house. Your old lady used to leave me a glass of milk by the door. She was good to me." The boy must have been eleven, twelve. Looked older around the eyes. All the kids did round here.

"You know whose smashing everything up, leaving needles in the alleyways?" He saw the kid had bruises running up his arms. Could have been from falling off his bike.

"No. But I won't do anything to the stuff you put up." The kid nodded. It didn't sound a lot, could have even been taken as disrespecting him, but it wasn't. He was trying to be good.

"I appreciate that. I'm Ed. What's your name?"

"3-D." The boy said spinning around. 3D. Of course it was.

He walked to the walls where the graffiti was thickest and at its most obscene. He set down the large white pot of paint and set the ladder to the side, took the brush. He worked away at it for the morning, took a lunch on the kerb. He worked away for the rest of the day until it was dark, walked to the same café as the night before. He ordered from the same waitress, chose the next thing on the menu.

"You working your way through the whole page?" The waitress said. She looked tired, but her smile was bright.

"That's my plan. I got a week. Might have to start coming in for lunch to finish things off." He smiled, accepted more coffee.

"I saw you working the windows on the bus in. The council finally bought you guys in, huh?" She talked clear, tried to lower it from when she called in the orders.

"No, I don't work for anybody. Just trying to do my bit, is all..." He said. The waitress looked at him, figuring if he was kidding or not. When she realised he was on the up and up, she nodded, trying not to look at him like he was crazy.

"Well, good luck with that." She said and he couldn't help it; he laughed. As soon as he did she rolled in, like she'd been holding it in the whole time. It was the first time he'd laughed in... he didn't know how long.

He wrote another page that night, even told her about the waitress. He didn't want to hold back any secrets. He signed off as he always did and ran a steaming hot bath. That night he climbed into bed, smelling the paint, feeling it clogged under his nails even after the soak. He closed his eyes, hearing the city scream outside his window. But he didn't close the sill. Instead he listened until he could listen no more. Then he whispered the words he'd signed off the letter with, over and over, until he felt drowsy. And even as he fell asleep he could hear the words carry over all the noise and confusion...

-In my mind you are always love-

& & &

The walls were sprayed fresh, black cans over the white walls. He'd seen graffiti done right. Pitched so perfectly and beautiful they could have been framed and left in a gallery. He didn't think three foot dicks was really raising the bar. He worked them over a second time and then went about resetting the windows. He ate his lunch on the kerb and watched the kids on the bikes circle, some calling out trash to him. He kept

working, nodding to them, waiting for them to come closer. But instead they waited and weaved on the edges of the alleys and then set off. Only 3D came over.

"Think you and your's could come up with something a bit more creative, next time?" He said looking over his shoulder to the kid.

"You an art critic now?" He said. But even as he did, he was stepping off his bike, stepping over, steadying the ladder.

"Thank you. I'm just saying, if people saw something, they might not want to see it go so quick, you know?" He reached for the corner, filled it on.

"What happens round here? People saw something worth remembering, they'd mark it up in twenty different colours. Have your own commemoration right here." The boy stepped to one side as he climbed off the ladder.

"What, so they see three foot dicks roaming the streets every day or so?" He scaled down the ladder, secured the lids on the paint pots.

"So where were you? When I saw your old lady, how come I never saw you?" The boy took the paint brush, held it while Ed finished things.

"I was on the road a lot. And her name was Etta. And she wasn't old. Didn't get the chance to be." He took the brush back off the kid too quickly, snatched at it.

"Etta." The boy said as a way of apology. "She always wore a yellow coat."

"With a big thick belt. I bought it for her with my first paycheck. She always wore it when I was away." He gathered the stuff up into his rucksack. He looked down, making sure the kid didn't see his eyes flare up. Men like Pummel, the young guns, they have to teach to cry at the academy. Jesus.

"Where you gonna be tomorrow?" The kid said getting on his bike.

"I thought I'd clean up whatever your friends trash first thing and then work on the alleyways, sweeping up all the needles. Wouldn't happen to know the dealers, where they live or anything?" He hoisted the bag onto his back, saw the kid's eyes go wide.

"That ain't funny. We start talking about that, it's me and you sprayed up against the wall tomorrow night. Human graffiti." The kid pushed away, raising his hand.

"I'll see you tomorrow kid." He raised his hand.

"3-D." The kid called back.

"3D!" Ed shouted back, smiling despite himself.



& & &

"So how was your boy scouting today?" The waitress said, refilling his coffee. She leaned against his booth.

"I cleaned up all the stuff I did yesterday. I got talking to one of the kids. He's not so bad. Not so bad at all." He put his knife and fork together, smiled up to her.

"So it's you and a kid against the neighbourhood, huh?" She said, collecting his plate.

"Just trying to do some good." He said.

"My pa always said it was hard to be good. You going for dessert? The cobbler's getting good reviews, and by that I mean no one's returned it."

"Sounds good. My name's Ed, by the way." He felt himself blush. A forty-one year old man, blushing at introductions.

"Ed. That's a normal name for a superhero, don't you think?" She said, smiling as she walked away. Maybe it was a good thing he was blushing, so she didn't see his jaw drop.

Later he wrote that down on the paper and smiled. He tried to sleep but couldn't for hours. Instead he listened as the noise outside swelled and broke, swelled and broke. He peered down to the far corners, the alleyways. He waited for the police that never came. He heard the rules flutter page by page in his ear; no interference, no independent actions. He heard all the by-laws and codes of his job even as the needles shattered and then nothing but low laughter. He drifted off and woke screaming, calling out to the city, just as it had quietened for the night.

The walls were untouched. He almost walked up to them and kissed them. Plain white walls had never looked so good. He checked each one, went back to the windows and saw most were intact. He smiled all the way until he reached the alleyways. Then he felt the sound of glass breaking underfoot twice as loud as shattered windows.

The piles of glass that crunched must have added up to over a hundred needles, easy. Suddenly he realised why there wasn't any trouble last night. He started to sweep the glass into piles, set down the container, the pan and brush. He thought about 3-D and hoped he hadn't added any bruises to his arms.

He worked his way through the streets, knowing all the alleyways he had to find. Sure enough they all delivered the broken glass, the vials. He filled the second carton and wondered if he was going to have to go back for a third, when someone stood across him on the end of the alley.

"You with the city? Trash collectors don't come down here, on account of all the broken glass. Worried about cutting their fingertips." It was one man, then two and three branching out around him like oil wings.

"Wouldn't be anything to do with them being told to turn a blind eye?" Ed emptied the glass into the box. The man took a step forward.

"I don't know who you are friend, but I don't like the way you talk. I don't like your do gooding. I don't like you. I don't like you and my friends might do something about that. I got lots of friends. Sweeping glass in alleyways, you ain't got friends. You ain't got nothing except what I leave behind for you to clean up. I don't need a butler. Leave things as they are, how I like them, or someone is going to be sweeping you up in this alley And you gonna be carrying a lot of glass inside you, understand?"

Ed took the punch in the gut, once he realised he wasn't holding anything. It was a weak shot, but he tumbled anyway, fake coughed. He stayed down until they left, glad the guy hadn't kicked the glass over. It didn't hurt. But it stung. He was glad 3D had read the play and not met up with him.

& & &

He knocked on the door and waited. Finally the old lady opened the door and smiled, saying his name. She drew him in and hugged him and he hugged her back. They walked into her place, saw his window from across the street. They sat with coffee and she played old music in the background. Vinyl.

"It's been too long since you visited, Eddie. I still keep all the clippings in the scrapbook." She patted his knee and laughed and he laughed along. He couldn't help himself. The one person outside Etta he'd ever told.

"It's the anniversary this week, isn't it child?" She spoke so low she almost whispered. "I already laid flowers. I go down there each month. The boy in charge, he keeps it clean how you asked."

"Good. That's good to hear." He put down the coffee, looked around. The place was same as it ever was. Immaculate.

"You were always so proud when you visited with her, Eddie. I remember when you told me about her before you first brought her round. What was it you said to me, that first time?" She sat back, let herself slip into that easy chair.

"I said I'd met a girl who wears a yellow coat. Makes her stand out like nothing else, like a small piece of the sun just fell to earth and kept tumbling down the street. That's what I said." He knew she'd never forget and she knew he'd never tire of telling the story.

"And what was it you said about her?" She looked over, half waiting, half willing him to speak.

"I said I liked the way she talked. Spoke the way we all should because she learnt it for a second language. She spoke the way I wanted people to. Perfect words shaped by red lipstick." He lifted his cup and smiled over to her and she raised the cup back.

They talked for a long time, catching up. Eventually he asked her about the neighbourhood, the alleys and the kids. She knew what went on and she told him. They talked until it got dark and she walked him to the door. He walked to the diner feeling the love of his friend knit together the bruise in his gut, the glass in his fingertips. By the time he opened the door he was smiling after a day of frowns.

"You running late tonight? Hot date?" The waitress was holding the coffee pot like she was expecting him.

"Don't you ever take an hour off?" He said, laying his jacket on the booth.

"I need the cash, same as anyone else. Long as I got rent in the bag and flowers on the table I can get by." She said.

"My name is Amy, by the way." She said and it was her turn to blush.

& & &

He wrote the letter, still alert from the coffee. After he was done he lay in bed, waiting for the noise of the street, but none came. He walked over to his window and looked down. The alleyways were empty. Somehow that made them look uglier. He watched out the windows until the night stepped away and the sun edged through. He went to bed, not able to shake that feeling of waiting for something to happen. He slept.

He was working on the park when 3-D came cycling up. He'd had a good run at the grass and was looking at fixing the rides. The kid put his cycle by his tool bag and down.

"I figure this'll inspire you for the next Olympics." He emptied the bag into the container.

"If you're around to see it. I heard you had a helper in the street yesterday. You're lucky it was a fist that got stuck in your gut." The boy was frowning and for a second he looked like an old man.

"Worse than doing nothing, 3-D?" he walked over to the kid, his bag, pulled out a couple of water bottles.

"Thank you. So what, you think you can John Wayne into town and then stride out with everyone cheering? Not going to happen. You're just getting hurt, that's all, old man." He watched the kid take a swig, shaking his head.

"I'm just trying to do some good, 3-D. No law against that. Yet. And knock off the old man stuff, kid I can hear you wheezing when you get off that dinosaur. Christ you sound older than me." He smiled as the kid coughed up his water.

"Now how about instead of the wisdom, you step up and give an old man a hand?" He held out a bag and the kid took it. He was glad. He'd packed enough food for two and had enough work for three. They went about it.

After they finished the grass, they worked on the rides. He was glad once he started, realising how a lot of the jobs needed a second pair of hands. By the time they took lunch they were almost done with the park. A few boys rode past, not saying anything to the kid, which he wasn't sure if that meant it was better or worse, but he didn't seem to mind. They took lunch up on the bench, looking out over what they'd done.

"So...You like school?" Ed said, just after dividing up the sandwiches.

"Don't start with that, old man. Come on! Don't blow it with the big brother shit." The boy was shaking his head.

"Hey watch your mouth, okay? And what? You ask me about me and Etta, but I ask you some age appropriate question and I'm full of it?" He bit into his sandwich.

"Age appropriate?" the kid was laughing, crumbs spilling

"Bite me." He said, though he felt himself holding down the laugh. "I don't know anything about the music you like, we don't see the same films and that's that."

"Science." He said after a while. A long while. Two sandwiches long. "I like science, okay. But don't tease me and don't tell anyone, okay?" He shrugged and looked his age at last.

"I read somewhere that we, people, we got particles of stars inside us. I thought that was pretty cool, that we're made of stars, you know? Made me want to understand about the

constellations and stuff. I don't know, one day. I don't know." He went back to looking to the grass.

"One day. I won't tell." Ed said, passing over an orange, taking one for himself.

"Thank you." The kid said, though he didn't say for what.

& & &

Long after 3-D left, Ed sat in the park waiting. The man walked up to him from the hill, raising his hand once. When they were close enough to talk, Ed held out a hand. It wasn't taken.

"You said you had information for the police?" His voice was steady and non-committal.

"Officer Laughton, I have information about drug deals that are-" The hand came up again. Ed stopped for the hell of it.

"I don't remember introducing myself." He flipped his jacket off, tossed it over his arm. He patted it down.

"That's because you didn't shake my hand." Ed took a breath, trying to stay steady. "Nice jacket."

"Suede. 100%" He picked the last few imaginary dust bits off it. He looked up. The smile he had for his jacket died on his lips.

"I know who you are. The boy scout, cleaning up the block. I was going to have you arrested, taking you for a nut job. I checked you out. I figure this is just some warped way of grieving for your old lady. The nostalgia or something." He smiled suddenly. Ed figured him as a man who only smiled when he hurt someone or was looking at something rich.

"I'm trying to help you." Ed felt his blood raising, tried to settle it. Giving the man a chance.

"I get that and I appreciate the information. Like all info the police department takes on board what they think is relevant." Mechanical speech now, quoting the book.

"You don't think four inches of crushed needles is relevant?" Ed waited for the man to draw in, but instead he just shook his head. Ed watched him as he sat on the bench, carefully laying the jacket out next to him.

"When I was eighteen I worked in a kitchen. I cleaned tables, washed the dishes. Dirt poor. Every day I'd work my ass off and

never get thanks for it, no tips, nothing. Because everyone else was poor too, see? Then one day a guy came in and he was rich. Nice suit, all the trimmings. He didn't tip. He was worse than anyone else, because he thought he had the right, because he was rich. So I was wiping down his table and I found it. A silk scarf. Prettiest thing I ever saw. I rolled it up, stuffed it in my apron and kept on working. Guy never even came back for it. I would have denied everything, anyway. I mean if you can afford to have nice things, you can afford to lose them too right? Casualness is a rich man's luxury. But I never forgot how it felt, having a nice thing." He patted his jacket down, finally looked back to Ed.

"So my information..." Ed tailed off, allowing himself to be interrupted.

"Will be taken on board..." He started waving his hand in a circle, bored. "If you'd like to discuss it in further detail I can haul your ass down to the tank and we can spend a few days discussing it, in amongst your charges for trespass, defacing property, other such things...sound good to you?" He stood up, jacket back over his arm.

"You'll take it on board." Ed stood out of his way, avoiding the barge.

"Sure." He stopped by Ed's shoulder. "Cost more than you make in a month." He whispered, patting it down. Then he raised his voice back to regular-joe policeman.

"Now you have a good day. Nice work, by the way." He walked away, flipping the jacket over his arm. He didn't look back. He didn't need to. Ed watched him all the way, breathing, calming himself down. He remembered the day with the kid, tuned into the last beams of sun on his back. The man was gone over the hill. He collected his bag and made his way over to the diner.

& & &

"Last tick on the menu." Amy said as he walked in. The place was quiet. He looked at his watch, didn't realise how late it was.

"Am I okay?" He looked for a closing time. The place was empty.

"There's no rush, Ed. It's a long life. If you're lucky. Been doing your chores today?" She walked over with the coffee pot.

"Trying. You own this place, Amy? I never see anyone else in this place but you?" He thanked her for the coffee. "You'll join me?"

"Why not?" She said, walking back to the counter, taking her cup. She set the food on, walked back.

"The Pattersons, they own the place. They go holidaying six weeks at a time. Made it big in shares. So they trust me to run the place. I wanted to get away from where I was so...My pa always used to say there's no decision you can't make in the time it takes to smoke a cigarette. So I took it. I call in a guy, Mike, when he's not studying. It runs without being overrun, you know?" She clinked her cup against his.

"You like it?" Ed sat back. The street outside was quiet. This time it seemed peaceful rather than anything else.

"Gives me an idea of what it would be like. Owning something, taking care of it. It's nice. The people who cause trouble don't usually come in here. If they do they're too tired or strung out to do anything other than drink coffee and stare at the pies." She shrugged.

"They are nice looking pies." Ed said. She laughed. That was a relief.

"I make them myself. So how about you? When you're not saving the world, what is it you do?" She sat opposite him.

"I save the world. I work for the government." He cleared his throat. "I'm heading back tomorrow. Big project." He saw her eyes dip a little.

"I'm due for another break in about three weeks. I'll come back here when I do..." He didn't know what else to say. She smiled and her eyes told him he didn't need to say much else.

"I'll work on a new menu. I work better when I'm given a deadline. That would be nice...if you stopped by." There was a noise from the kitchen and it made them both laugh.

"I'll be right back." She pushed away to the counter. Ed watched her walk away. He looked out to the street. Things to finish tonight. In a little while.

Amy laid the food down, brought a plate herself. She turned the sign over in the door.

"I'm not keeping you?" He asked.

"We've got time." Was all she said.

& & &

He walked to the closet and took out the costume. A prototype. Nothing worked, no protection. A glorified Halloween costume. He pulled it on, limbered up. Man, he shouldn't have eaten that dessert. Ed shook his head, focused. He pulled on the mask.

He walked over to the window. It was Friday night. It was steady and only going to get busier. He cracked his knuckles and pulled on his overcoat.

He walked the top of the building, reaching the alleyway. He moved down the steel staircase and reached to ten feet. He let go of the railing. He landed and crouched, letting the overcoat slip off his shoulders as he hit the ground. He looked up to the dealer, the men on either side. They almost started to laugh as he drew closer. The first bodyguard fell, then the second. He grabbed the dealer by his shoulders and lifted him off his feet as he slammed him against the wall. No one laughed.

They came into the alley, seeing the dealer in the corner. They found him. He broke every needle under his foot. He looked every junkie in the eye. By the time the sun came up, there was a pile of glass gathered in the corner, by the two trussed up men. He turned to the dealer and spoke into his ear. The sweat almost fell onto his lips he was so close. When he was finished he threw him into the pile with the other two. He fell on the pile of glass and the cuts made him scream. Ed left them and climbed the steel staircase. He walked along the rooftop in the dawn light and let people see him briefly. Then he sank into a stairwell and it was over.

Ed packed his bag, shaved, patted himself down for his keys. He made the bus just in time, climbed the gates of the cemetery. He walked to the stone and laid down the flowers. It looked beautiful. He stood there for a long while, trying to talk but he failed. Just like always. Instead he pushed the envelope amongst the flowers and hoped it was enough. Sometime he fooled himself it was - the other times he knew it wasn't even close. He walked away as the sun came up.

The shops he needed were open when he got back. He left the record shop carrying a crate and marched it over to her door. He laid it down and knocked gently on the door, walking away before the door opened. He looked back once, saw the vinyl brimming out of the top of the crate. Then he kept on walking.

As he walked over to where the kid lived he flipped up his phone, turned it on for the first time in a week. He ignored the stream of messages and dialled the code.

"Jeff. Ed. I need you to call in on someone." He gave the details, the necessary. When his friend asked him if there was anything else he should know, Ed thought about it, took a breath.

"Yeah. He'll probably be wearing a suede jacket."

He found 3-D's door, knocked on it. A woman answered the door, a baby in her arms.

"Can I help you?" She said. The baby twisted in her arms, looked like she was juggling a hundred different things on top. He set down the box, knowing it wasn't right to try and get inside.

"Award from the school for 3-D. Science project came in top. Just wanted to deliver it, save him carrying it home." Ed smiled. He walked away, leaving the girl smiling, the baby giggling. It was a good noise to hear.

The car was pulling up any minute now. He walked to the diner, set down the flowers by the door. He saw her out the back, readying everything, but doing it this way felt better. He tapped on the door, heard her call out 'nine'. Ed tapped again and walked down the next corner, hearing the door open, the bell rattle just as he disappeared out of her sight.

The car pulled up right on time. Ed walked over the road, made for the back door. He looked around, taking the block in for the final time. Did it look any different? Maybe not. Did it feel any different? Maybe. He reached for the door when he saw it. The shutters of the shop were pulled down. The spray paint was everywhere. A costumed fist breaking glass. A woman in a yellow coat. A dawn sun. The streets glowing and looking unfamiliar, strange. Beautiful. He stepped inside the car and closed the door. He never realised 3-D was such a good artist. Maybe he knew. Maybe he figured it out. After all he knew about the stars. The rest of it wasn't rocket science.

****** THE END ******

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Highway to Hell

By Grady Yandell

Synopsis: In this intriguing adventure, a cop investigates an assault on his friend and succeeds in pursuit of justice through the supportive grace of a victim from beyond the grave.

About the Author: Grady is a writer/editor for Abandoned Towers magazine. His work has appeared in Abandoned Towers, Black Petals and now the Freedom Fiction Journal. He has a new book coming out soon entitled "With Guns Blazing" that features Johnny Gunn and Hillbilly. He is happily married with two children and pays the bills by working as an L.P.N. at the local Veteran's Hospital.

In this crime story, we see that justice and law are applied in more ways than one.

Highway to Hell

By Grady Yandell

The flesh was burned off his face and arms. I could still smell the stench of gasoline and wondered if he would survive. He lost his wife to cancer, now his daughter was missing, and someone had decided to pretend he was a charcoal briquette. Pausing to look at the mangled wreck of a man that had been my friend since boot camp, I also wondered if he would really want to live after all of this.

The pretty young nurse was the person who brought him into the ER. She poured a bottle of saline into a pan and prepared gauze bandages covered in silvadene for his burns. Changing the dressings will reduce the likelihood of infection and help the tortured flesh restore itself. I know because I've helped do it on the battlefield more than once.

My buddy's nickname is Rocky and he was found in a ditch on U.S. 191 by this lady. That is a long and empty stretch of road between Phoenix and Springfield Arizona. He was fortunate that she was riding to work and saw him. How she managed to lift him onto her moped and drive it to town, I'll never figure out.



I spoke with the Emergency Room nursing assistant and found out they thought he was dead until he knocked the ER doctor down and began screaming for them to "leave her alone." According to his chart, he passed out a short time later and was kept downstairs until he was stable. He managed to give someone downstairs my number before he lost consciousness and I came over with Hillbilly as fast as I could get here.

I watched the nurse soak an old bandage on his face with saline to keep it from adhering to the subcutaneous tissue underneath, but a patch clung to it stubbornly and peeled away as she removed the bandage. The pain was enough to jolt him awake. "Andrea!"

He strained at his wrist restraints to no avail. The nurse stepped back and then calmly touched his shoulder and spoke in a low voice, "You're in the Clifton, Arizona hospital."

"Cassie? How did we get here?" His eyes were wrapped in gauze and his hands were tied to keep him from pulling loose the IV lines connected to him.

"It's okay Rocky. I couldn't just leave you out there, so I brought you in on my bike."

"It's not okay. They have my daughter, Andrea!"

That's when I spoke up. "Who has her Rocky?"

"Is that you Johnny?"

"Yeah man, it's me. Who did this to you?"

"Some gang on the highway. Andrea and I rode past a joint called 'Snakes', at Three Ways. There were four hogs parked out front with some dirty looking punks nearby. Andrea said she wanted to stop. We were hot and thirsty, but she's just a kid and I don't know the place, so I didn't. A few miles later, the bikers caught up with us and ran me into the ditch. Some of the jerks poured gasoline on me and set me on fire man, while the others grabbed my girl!"

"You said they came from a bar called Snake's?"

"It's near the intersection of Route 78, Route 75 and US 191. You know, where Three Ways is Johnny?"

"Hillbilly and I came down through Three Ways from Mule Creek on Rt. 78, and I didn't see any bar there." Three Ways was the local name for the intersection he was talking about because you had three ways you could pick to go.

"I swear to God Johnny! You've gotta help her!" He pulled hard at the restraints, breaking his right hand free. I grabbed it and felt the fragile skin slide in my grip like loose plastic covering a hunk of raw meat.

"Calm down Rocky! We'll find her, but you need to let these people help you so Andrea has a dad to come home to." He still struggled. "You're all she has left man!"

That stopped him cold. He lay back down with a groan and I helped Cassie put a new bandage and restraint in place. We broke the rules and doubled the tie downs on both sides to keep him from hurting himself. I looked his guardian angel over and saw she was in her late twenties and attractive. The dress she wore was plain white with no special designs, like all the nurses used to wear years ago.

She looked at me and asked, "Are you a friend of his?"

"Yeah, we served in Operation Desert Storm together. My name is Gunn, Johnny Gunn and I'm a Federal Agent."

She nodded politely and we took turns washing his blood off our hands at the sink near his bed. I wanted her to understand he wasn't a bad guy. I don't know why, maybe because she saved his life. "Rocky lost his wife to cancer about a year ago and he was biking cross country with his daughter to get away from things for awhile."

She gave me frosty look that melted quickly when she looked at Rocky. "The gang that hurt him has hurt a lot of people over the years."

I stared hard at my old gunny. He was unconscious again. He wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for my invitation. "I'll gladly help bury the men that hurt him or his daughter."

Cassie gave me strange look and said, "Did you say that you missed seeing Snake's when you came into town?"

"Yes ma'am. I rode down Big Lue to Three Ways. There was a run down building off 191, but it looked empty to me."

Cassie looked out the window and said, "I know the place."

That surprised me. I wanted to ask how a girl like her could wind up in a biker bar called Snake's, but the look on her face made me hesitate. The ice in her eyes was back and she was staring outside the window to the distant horizon with a despondent look that let me know that question was off limits.

After a little soul searching, I agreed to let her come with us. This wasn't standard operating procedure, but I'm the government's wild card and allowed to do what I think is right. We had to move quickly or Andrea would be dead, or wish she was dead by the time we got to her. Some gangs would pass a woman around like a cheap bottle of whiskey. Too many young women lost their innocence to a different kind of terrorist than the one that killed my fiancée, the kind that won't take no for an answer.

"The clock is ticking on his daughter. We need to move fast if we're going to get her back in one piece. I have a friend, Hillbilly riding shotgun with me. I'll let you lead us there, but I want you to come back here before we get the party started."

She agreed and we went downstairs to let Hillbilly know what the plan was. She stopped to grab a cold drink out of the soda machine and said she needed to clock out. I informed Hillbilly, "We'll call for backup, once we see exactly where this bar is located."

"Hell, Johnny, we can take them on by ourselves for all I care, but I don't see how we missed spotting a biker bar in the middle of the desert."

"I don't either, but Cassie said she can show us how to get there from here."

That was when she pulled up beside us on her bike. "Did your boss put up a fuss about you leaving?"

"No. Are you ready to go?"

"Hillbilly and I mounted up." My Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycle, still produced in India since the 1950's, even though the British parent company closed shop in 1970. A solid bike with an iron engine, almost a tank on two-wheels.

Hillbilly is riding a Harley 2002 Ultra Classic with the Screamin' Eagle package. He installed an after market stereo and amplifier that will rattle your teeth from 200 feet away if he cranks it up.

As for our new sidekick, Cassie is on a bright pink moped. It wasn't a scooter like they sell these days. It looked like a take off of the older model you could pedal if the gas ran out. She was still wearing her bright white dress, but she had a pink helmet on that matched her bike.

Hillbilly looked at me with a grin. "They will be so embarrassed when she pulls into their lot on the pedal pusher, they'll surrender without a fight."

"Don't give her a hard time man." I whispered. "She threw Rocky on the back of her..... bike and brought him to the hospital when he was bleeding all over the place."

Hillbilly's bike thundered as he engaged the clutch and pulled away saying, "Then she must be something special."

My bike roared to life and I trailed the two as I thought back to the way she worked on Rocky and how tough it must have been to load a three hundred pound man over six feet tall, covered in blood and burnt flesh onto her moped and get to town. That was when something else occurred to me. "How did she do all of that without getting her dress dirty?"

She must have changed clothes while they were working on Rocky in the ER, but I didn't see any saddlebags for her to carry a spare uniform and all she had, that I knew about, was a small change purse I saw her stick in one of her pockets earlier after she bought a Coke. She drank it straight down on the spot, just before I came outside saying, "I haven't had one of these in a long time."

"When she finished her drink I told her, "I'll buy you a case of Coke's if we survive this just to show my appreciation." That would be the least price to pay for getting Rocky's daughter back.

She led us down 191 and straight to the rundown place I saw earlier from the intersection. I wasn't really paying attention before. Now I could see where it looked like someone was trying to fix it up. I called Irene and gave her the location. The signal was weak, but she was able to lock onto our GPS location and said reinforcements would be here in about thirty minutes. This was the end of the line for our nurse.

"Cassie, you head back and look after Rocky. Hillbilly and I will take it from here."

Just then a bike with a sidecar pulled up beside us. I looked them up and down as they stared at me and Hillbilly. The man in the sidecar raised his sunglasses up with a toothless grin to reveal two empty eye sockets.

Then he lowered them back in place with a loud laugh and said, "Welcome to the highway to Hell boys. My name is Bear and this is my son Judas. I just reopened Snake's old place and we have plenty of cold beer and a handful of women if you want to join us."

U.S. 191 used to be Highway 666, the 'Devil's Highway'. Back in the day, it was hotter than hell and twice as dangerous. Biker gangs and outlaws ruled the road and preyed upon anyone not strong enough to hold their own against them. The state renamed the road U.S. 191 in 1993, but they would never erase the old name from local history, or the stories of strange happenings associated with it.

I looked around and saw that Cassie must have left when they pulled up. I was glad, because she would have been eaten alive by these men if she gave them half a chance. "That sounds like a plan." Hillbilly simply nodded in agreement and we followed them into the parking lot in front of the bar.

Judas helped his dad out of the sidecar and led us to the front door of the building. I tried to look through the window, but there was so much dirt and build up that not even a ray of light would get through; I couldn't see in. We ventured into the darkened interior of the fire hazard as a rat scuttled along the top of the bar.

I could barely make out a girl in the shadows that I recognized as Andrea from pictures Rocky had sent me. She was sitting at a table with two of the other bikers in Bear's gang and looked like she was crying, but she appeared okay. There was one woman behind the bar and one sitting at the table with Andrea, holding the girl in her seat. That gave us six people to deal with in all.



It was getting late. Judas hit a light switch that cut the darkness in half and I kept my head low in case she had seen a picture of me. I didn't want her to get excited before we were in a position to get her free.

Hillbilly gave me a wolfish grin as we waited for our beers and said, "Nothing like the bear inviting you into his den during hunting season." We cut our teeth on trouble and we were going to have plenty tonight.

I nodded at Hillbilly and he took his beer and he went to a table near the door. This would put most of the gang in our crossfire when the troops arrived. Under the circumstances it was a good plan, but they weren't going to give us a chance to wait for help.

Judas guided his dad over to the table with Andrea and said, "Boys you got here just in time. We were planning on breaking this girl in later, but I don't see a need to wait that long since pa is here now."

I took my beer and killed it, watching in frustration as two men held Andrea down while the biker chick started to put a tourniquet around the young girl's arm. The woman pulled out a syringe filled with only God knows what and was planning on shooting the girl up. We would have to make our move now, or she could OD on whatever they planned to give her.

A loud noise from the front of the bar got everyone's attention. It sounded like a hundred motorcycles were riding into the old parking lot at once. The woman holding the needle full of dope hesitated and Judas said "Rhonda, hide that stuff and tie her up in the bathroom until we see what's going on."

The sun was going down and headlights bounced up and down, cutting through the crust covered glass. I was expecting Irene and our back up to come in with guns cocked, locked and ready to rock, but then I realized it was too soon for them to be here. When the door swung open I could see a shapely figure outlined in the setting sun and got the shock of my life when she stepped inside. It was Cassie!

I looked at Hillbilly in disbelief as our angel in white walked over to the bar and ordered a tequila sunrise. She laid her driver's license on the counter, as if they would bother with checking that here and smiled at Judas. Her white uniform was tight fitting and she looked like a dying man's fantasy with long legs; long hair and dark eyes that could make any man she looked at feel like the center of the universe.

Judas drew a blank for a minute before saying, "Get the lady her drink Becky."

Cassie took the liquor and I grabbed her ice cold arm as she went around me. Her dark eyes were steady, and her voice calm when she looked at me and said, "Get the girl and leave. I've got this under control."

Rhonda came back to sit beside Bear, and Cassie walked over to sit with Judas at the table. Becky took a tray full of drinks to the bikers and joined them. Hillbilly and I drifted slowly towards the hall where Andrea was. Everyone appeared to have forgotten we were here.

Cassie had them all mesmerized except for Bear who stood up and was yelling, "What the hell is going on?"

"Get Andrea and take her outside while I cover Cassie." I was on the move.

The old man was raging mad but no one answered him. The men and women sat stock still at the table as she stood up and walked over to Bear, running her fingers through his hair.

"I'm surprised you don't remember me."

He froze in place and I could see a puzzled look in the old man's face as Hillbilly came back out with Andrea. "Your voice sounds familiar lady, but I don't know you."

"I know how to turn you on big man." We were quietly making our exit when Cassie said, "Maybe it would help if I said those things that used to drive you wild when we were together." She turned around and pressed her back against him and shrieked, "Oh God no, please don't hurt me! I won't tell anyone if you let me go!"

A chill crept up my spine at the sound of her voice. She sounded desperate and the pain in her cries was real. It shook Bear to his core. The man stumbled backwards and fell on the floor in front of me, his glasses landing at my feet. "It can't be you. I buried you myself!" The rest of his gang sat at the table like unmoving mutes as their blind leader crawled away.

Cassie gave me a sad smile and said, "I'll be right out," as she bent to pick his sunglasses up.

Andrea followed us outside. Cassie closed the door and locked it. The sounds of Bear's screams soon faded into the night and I waited to see what would happen next. There were more screams, the other men and women this time.

Hillbilly looked at me as he started up his bike. Andrea climbed on behind him. "We can't leave her Johnny."

"I didn't say we're going to." My gut instinct was she didn't need us, but I wasn't going to leave until I knew she was safe.

Andrea said, "Are you my dad's friend?"

I nodded and she fell apart. She wept into Hillbilly's back saying, "This is all my fault! I wanted dad to stop here, but he was afraid there would be trouble. When he pulled away, I blew the guys a kiss and they followed us. They killed my dad Johnny!"

I walked over and stroked the back of her head. Her hair was thick with the junk teenage girls spray in it to hold it in place. "Your dad is hurt bad, but he is alive."

"He is?"

"The lady you saw in there just now, Cassie, she saved him."

Andrea looked up at me with mascara streaming down her cheeks and then she looked at the bar. "I think she saved us too."

The screams ended and Cassie came out a minute later. Her white uniform looked just as neat and clean as when she went in. She waved at us as she climbed on her bike and rode away. I should

have stopped her, but I figured whatever she did to the men and women in there was justice served in kind. Irene and some State Troopers pulled in a few minutes later from the opposite direction.

&&&

That was a year ago. Rocky and Andrea were packed up and heading back to West Virginia. He was doing better and so was his kid. They would both carry scars from the encounter with Bear and his crew, but they developed a bond that was stronger than ever.

Hillbilly told me he was going to ride back with them to visit his family and simply said, "I'll see you down the highway."

The night at Snake's still lingered in the darkest recesses of my mind. After Cassie left us and Irene pulled in, I went back into Snake's for a look. Bear was dead. His throat had been ripped out and his testicles cut off. The rest of his gang was alive... minus their eyes. I saw Cassie's driver's license still lying on the bar where she left it earlier. Her name was Cassie Harris. The birth date on her license was 1954.

"There ain't no way that the woman is fifty years old!"

A little detective work revealed that Cassie Harris disappeared on Highway 666 on her way to work twenty years ago. Authorities suspected foul play, and found Bear in the hospital that night recovering from injuries to his face, but they could never find enough evidence against the monster to bring him in. According to him, his eyes had been gouged out in a bar fight and his gang backed his story up.

I remembered when Cassie had said, "Oh God no, please don't hurt me! I won't tell anyone if you let me go!" - Bear had acted like he was hearing a ghost and I think he was.

As for me, I was Oklahoma bound, but I had a stop to make first. I got off my bike and planted a small wooden cross at Three Ways that said "Cassie Harris" and left a 24 pack of Coke with a thank you note for her. I promised her a case if she helped get Andrea back and she kept her end of the bargain. I didn't want to feel like she might come collecting someday.

**** THE END ****

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The Package

By Ilan Herman

Synopsis: A science fiction and a comedy, this story ponders the eternal question of consciousness - who are we and who made us?

About the Author: Ilan is 41 year old musical producer with a passion for writing good fiction. His works are online at:
www.emily-music.com (musical webpage)
www.scribd.com/ilan-herman (literary webpage)

In this SciFi, we witness a day in the life of Jeff and his response to a close encounter of a strange kind.

The Package

By Ilan Herman

Toby John, the rotund mailman smiled through his thick and graying mustache and asked, "What ya order?" He inquired only because he knew Jeff wouldn't consider the question intrusive.

"I didn't order anything," said Jeff and eyed the mid-sized cardboard box.

"But it has your name and address on it," the mailman said. "Why would someone bother to send you something you didn't order?" He rapped his knuckles lightly on the box. "Good packaging job."

Jeff shrugged. "I'm not sure I want it. Maybe you should take it back."

John the mailman, who wished to avoid carrying the package back to his van and back to the warehouse, chuckled. "Now that doesn't make sense. It's not like they're chargin' you or somethin'. Take it. It's yours." He leaned toward Jeff and held out the box. Convinced by the mailman's hard sell but also curious about what the package held, Jeff accepted the box - about two square feet and five pounds.

The postal employee saluted. "US Mail delivers once again." He turned and rumbled down the stairs with one more glance and a smile at the middle-aged man standing at the door to apartment 106.

Jeff walked into his apartment and shut the door. He laid the box on the coffee table and heard the postal van chug away. He then fetched a knife from the kitchenette and cut through the tape sealing the box. The label didn't have a return address. He liked the fact that his last name, *Simmoneyous*, was spelled correctly. Many times when he'd requested an order, his surname was jumbled by the sender, though never to the point of a botched delivery.

The box contained a fireman's red helmet and black jacket, both of excellent quality and authentic looking. His first name was etched on the front of the helmet and above the breast pocket of the jacket that fit snugly around his shoulders yet left plenty of room to raise his arms. The helmet also hugged his scalp well, as if the designer knew the exact circumference of Jeff's head.

A warm vibration soothed his skull as soon as the helmet was resting on his head. Then a stocky sky-blue creature formed

from thin air and floated a foot off the ground. The creature had no limbs. One watery-brown eye centered its round face that had no mouth or nose. Two short tentacles rose from the top of its head.



Jeff gasped and took the helmet off. The creature dissolved. Jeff stood trembling. A moment passed and the creature was still gone. Jeff padded the helmet - inside and out - but found nothing unusual. He gingerly put the helmet on. The sky-blue life-form appeared. Jeff kept his shaking hands on the helmet, ready to snatch it off, when the creature said, "Hello." He had a deep, friendly voice, like the one heard on National Geographic documentaries, when a pleasant British

chap follows the exploits of a family of chimpanzees.

"I promise not to harm you," the creature said.

"Who are you?" Jeff asked and squinted in disbelief, though with less trepidation.

"I am Koy, from planet Zoomar."

"You're an extra terrestrial?"

"I am. Zoomar is, according to human calculations, about two million light years away from earth."

The human let out a protracted whistle. "That's amazing. How do you space travel? Do you go through black holes? Did it take you two million years to get here?"

Koy gurgled like someone rinsing his mouth after brushing his teeth. "Yes and no. Yes, I have been traveling for two million years, actually much longer, and no, it did not take me that long to get here. I appear anywhere I need to be regardless of the space-time continuum."

Jeff laughed. "Star Trek lingo? Okay, the joke's on me. You're a hologram or something. What is this, some kind of promotional thing?"

He took off the helmet. The creature vanished. He sat on his new maroon leather couch and fondled the helmet, tapping on it with his fingers, caressing the interior with his index and thumb. Then he gazed out the open porch door. Oak trees had

recently bloomed and shielded the porch with shade and greenery. Late May was quickly warming up.

Jeff put the helmet on. The sky-blue alien appeared, shiny skin shimmering with tiny ripples.

"Can I touch you?" Jeff asked.

"I do not have a physical presence," the alien said. "Your fingers will feel only air."

"So you are a hologram?"

"I am pure energy, which allows me to travel faster."

Koy's direct and matter-of-fact demeanor served to lessen Jeff's anxiety as he realized that a close encounter of the third kind was indeed taking place. Calm reigned as he sensed that Koy meant no harm. Comfortable silence ensued as the human sitting on the couch and the alien hovering a few feet away observed each other.

"Why did you choose to show yourself to me?" Jeff asked.

"Because you are wise and compassionate."

"Me?" Jeff laughed. "You got the wrong guy for sure. I'm a surly fellow, some say acerbic."

"Let he who cannot be judged cast the first rock," Koy said.

Jeff rolled his eyes. "It's 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'"

Koy's tentacles quivered. "I shall make that correction."

Jeff took the helmet off. Koy vanished. Jeff put the helmet on and took it off five times in rapid succession. The alien came and went and seemed nonplussed by the cumbersome display of human curiosity.

"Can anyone else see you?" Jeff asked.

"No."

"And what if someone else puts the helmet on?"

"They will see nothing."

Jeff sighed. "So you're basically saying I can't share what's happening with anyone else?"

A shrug sounded in Koy's voice. "You can try but it is unlikely to be a good idea. You will not be able to produce any proof of my existence."

"And what happens if I put the helmet on when someone else is in the room with me?"

"I will not appear," the alien said.

"So what's the point?" Jeff said. "It's like discovering electricity and you can't share it. It'd be cool if everybody knew about you and planet Zoomar. Wake people up big time."

Koy gurgled, which Jeff now understood was his way of laughing, and said, "Only disaster would come from all humans knowing about me. Great confusion will set in when billions realize their God is dead. The universe is too big and diverse for mortals, company excluded, to comprehend and accept."

"Do you show yourself to people other than me?" Jeff asked.

"Four others," the alien said.

Jeff sat up. "That's it?"

"Yes. The rest are not ready."

"Who are the other four?"

"A woman in China, a woman in Russia, a man in Peru, and one other in Scotland."

"Can I meet them?"

"I am sorry, but you cannot."

Jeff slumped on the couch. He would've liked to share his fortune with Myron, his good friend. He imagined what would happen if Myron came to visit and Jeff would mention that he now speaks with an alien when he puts on the fireman's helmet, but is unable to provide proof. Myron would be offended, feel like Jeff was making fun of him. The friendship would suffer, perhaps irreversibly. The same could happen with his friend Alisa, who'd been understanding and accommodating even when Jeff spent two years experimenting with alchemy, trying to convert nickel into gold.

Jeff's excitement at meeting Koy turned to sadness: he'd appear insane if he tried to share his findings. Jeff took off the helmet. Koy vanished. Jeff packed the helmet and jacket in the

cardboard box and placed the box in his closet. Then he walked to the Starbucks across the street from his apartment, sat on the patio, and sipped a cappuccino. The coffeehouse hummed with young professionals perched over laptop computers. Jeff wanted to stand up and shout, "I met Koy, an alien from planet Zoomar. He's pure energy and doesn't have any limbs." Instead, he withdrew into his chair and sighed deeply. Thoughts of mutiny consumed him: He'd hide a video camera in his belt buckle and film the alien; he'd set up a sensor to track the vibrations of Koy's shimmering glow, the tiny ripples that radiated off its blue skin. The intent to rebel, though understood, also amounted to nothing. Jeff knew that trying to "put one over" the alien was absurd. His anger having abated, new questions came to mind.

He rushed home and put the helmet on. Koy appeared.

"How long have you been coming to earth?" Jeff asked.

"By your calendar, about two billion years."

"But you're not God even though you've lived that long?"

Koy gurgled. "I am not God. I am the result of a timeless and infinite consciousness, the same origin that you come from."

Jeff entwined his fingers and tapped his thumbs. "If the universe is infinite, then it has no center."

"I can vouch for that," the alien said.

"And when are you going to die?" the human asked.

"By your definition of death - the body decomposing - I have died millions of times. You must remember that thought triggers everything and that thought, inception, never dies..."

"Because of its timeless and infinite origin," cried Jeff.

"You understand that," said the guest from Zoomar, a smile rippling in its voice. "That is why I am here."

Jeff frowned. "But I can't share your existence with anyone. Who'd believe me?"

"I am sorry," Koy said. "There is no other choice. You cannot advise a man who is not ready to listen."

"What about reincarnation?" Jeff asked.

"That does not exist," the alien said, a tad of sadness in its voice.

"What's wrong?" asked the human.

Koy's sigh was a high-pitched whistle, like the one used to alert dogs on a duck hunt. Then it said, "There is one fact I have not shared with you."

Jeff nervously sat up on the couch. "What is it?"

The sky-blue alien then explained that life on earth wasn't spontaneous evolution, rather, it was really an experiment conducted by him and his associates, a chemical and anthropological study of how life evolved from the molecular to the bird, or fish, or tiger, or man. "We planted the seeds of life on earth. We did the same with other planets with various environments and used different seeds. On H12, we have an intelligent race of Aves. They have language and governance much better than yours, perhaps because they use their wings instead of cars, though they have those too. We have not done well with creating life on Earth."

Jeff listened to Koy's confession and then said, "No worries. We're like germs in a Petri dish. We're genetically engineered. I can dig that."

Koy's voice choked with cosmic tears. "We tried so hard to make a good world for you. Our best minds labored tirelessly to help humanity succeed. We failed and we are sorry. Man turned out to be toxic to the planet."

Jeff scratched his balding scalp. The alien sounded like a frustrated five year old whose tree house had collapsed. "Why are you so upset? If we all come from the same timeless infinite intuitive thought, then we're still all an extension of God, with you as a facilitator. It's all good."

"I am happy to hear you say that," Koy said, "for what you say is true. We are all one."

"Besides," said Jeff. "You could be someone else's experiment."

The alien's sky-blue skin dimmed slightly. "I am not sure what you mean."

Jeff held out his palms. "Duh! Like us humans are your experiment, though only four of us know that, maybe your race is also a Petri dish set up by another race."

"But I have revealed myself to you," Koy said, a cheer in his voice. "If what you say is true, why have I not met the race that created me?"

Jeff rolled his eyes. "Because you're not one of the five of your race to know. Like your secret is safe with me and the other humans who know, so is the secret safe in the hearts of a few of your people, or race, or blue blobs."

Koy's shimmering ripples turned pinkish-green. He shrunk to about half the size of when he'd first appeared. He hovered only two inches off the carpet.

"That is a silly theory," he finally said.

Jeff raised his arms in surrender. "If you say so. You're probably right. After all, you made me, so you know better."

Koy said nothing. Then he vanished, even though Jeff was still wearing the red fireman's hat.

Jeff took the helmet off and placed it on the coffee table. "Nothing new under the sun," he said and hoisted himself off the couch and walked to the fridge for a glass of milk. Pouring the milk into the glass, he chuckled and said, "And that's not a bad thing."

****** THE END ******

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The Outlaw

By Scott Wilson

Synopsis: A man on the run, not truly an outlaw, but in the Old West, you are guilty until proven innocent.

About the Author: Scott began dabbling in writing soon after discovering sci-fi and fantasy novels at high school. He is an avid role-play game fan and has played Dungeon and Dragons for over twenty years to further explore this creative, interactive story-telling outlet.

In 2008, Scott joined the Australian Horror Writers Association as a full financial member. Currently, he is an active member of the University of Texas Flash Fiction Writer, Zoetrope Virtual Studio, and FlashXER Writer Groups. Over 150 of Scott's stories have been published in various countries so far.

In this wild Western, we find the cruelty of adventure and the haunting of an innocent man's conscience.

The Outlaw

By Scott Wilson

Randall blew softly over the smouldering tinder as Emerson looked on, shaking his head with an apprehensive scepticism. Emerson knew this was a bad move but his disparity with Randall over the intricacies of fire making was a mute point.

"What are you shaking your head at?" Randall said.

"Nothing, partner," Emerson replied softly.

"I've started more camp fires than you've ever thought about. Ain' no problems with my technique."

Neither of them had eaten any solid food in almost three days and Randall was not about to eat his freshly killed fox raw. He was willing to take his chances with the fire. But then again the type of ruffian Randall was, he was always willing to take as long as it took to prove a point, even if it meant putting someone else at risk. Emerson was in no position to argue. Randall was the meaner and ruthless of the two and he was not beyond putting some lead in him if for no other reason than to shut him up or better yet, to not have to divvy up the fox with him.

"I might have a look for some branches and whatnot. Keep a supply handy to stoke the fire all night."

Randall continued to tend the fire and Emerson grudgingly went about gathering what firewood he could find in the starless sky. They had made camp far too late and now they had to fumble in the dark until a decent fire was established.

As he walked outside the campsite, he could see Randall's silhouette as he added more fuel to the slowly growing campfire. It was obvious that anyone tracking them would have no difficulty in discovering them out in the open with nowhere to shelter them. He hoped that they had a fair enough lead on the posse chasing them so they wouldn't be sitting ducks. The thought had no sooner entered his mind than something caused him to stop dead in his tracks. He was already nervous about the fire and now he was hearing things. Slightly cocking his head, he stood silent in the dark and listened intently. Emerson thought he saw some shadows move in the distance, but not that far from their location. It appeared that Randall had heard it as well. His iron was already drawn and he sat motionless, keenly listening for the exact location of the movement.

"Get down, you fool!" Emerson mumbled softly to himself.

Randall was an excellent gunfighter and did not need the daylight to get a bead on his target. A single shot pierced the silence and Randall dropped to the ground letting loose three quick shots before rolling away from the fire. Emerson dove for cover behind a small group of cactuses and squinted to make out how Randall was doing and if he caught the bullet or was lucky enough to dodge it.

"Damned it," Emerson whispered. "Where are they?"



Randall lay motionless and Emerson was not sure if he was avoiding the attention of the unseen gunman or dead. Emerson stayed low, motionless, and far enough away from the campfire to not give away his location if he was lucky.

"Glad I went to find some kindle," he murmured to himself.

Emerson began to cramp up in his calf after lying motionless for over an hour.

Each time he looked toward the fire he saw the still body of Randall, and after a few good, hard looks, he could tell that not even Randall's chest was moving anymore. It appeared that the single shot had hit its target and laid Randall out for good.

Emerson slowly stretched his leg back and forth to ease the cramp, careful to not make a sound to avoid giving away his cover. He did not know if the gunman was still out there or long gone after hitting his target.

"Don't even know how many are out there. Am I surrounded or completely alone now?" He assumed that it would be a posse and they would still be lingering around for sunup. The night dragged on.

"Time to do or die, partner," he said softly. "Anyone out here's who's going to hear me now will see me in a few hours anyway."

Emerson decided after a few hours that he had to make a move and get to some cover before the morning came uncovering him as he lay out in the open. From his calculations, the Rocky

Mountains were a few hours further to the north. Randall had steered them east, towards the gambling town of Gold rush, to spend their newly found fortune. If the posse guessed that, then Emerson felt pretty sure that his change of direction would not be realised until he had a good head start again.

Emerson slowly crawled along the hard, dusty ground backwards until he was twenty or so meters from the campsite. The fire had dwindled out to all but the soft, red glow of embers, giving off virtually no light at all now. He gradually stood up and walked quickly to the east.

By daybreak, Emerson was far enough from the campsite to feel a little safer. His legs ached from walking for almost three days straight and now his gun hand was stiff from carrying his pistol all night. He holstered his pistol and flexed his hand.

"No quick draw, no running either," he thought aloud.

If the posse hadn't tracked him from the campsite, when they were so close, then chances were that he was in the clear now.

Emerson knew he had to get to shelter soon; he was exhausted from a sleepless night and too many days on the run. His eyes ached and he almost missed the horse tracks a few yards to the left of the path he was on.

Cautiously, he walked closer to the tracks and saw splotches of dried blood in-between the hove prints.

"What have we got here?" he said.

Drawing his gun again, Emerson followed the tracks until he saw the owner of both trails. Slouched across the horse's back was the limp, lifeless body of a bounty hunter. It appeared that Randall had managed a perfect shot just before he died, hitting the stranger directly in the heart.

"Thanks for that, partner," Emerson said. "Least now I don't have to keep looking over my shoulders for either of you."

With the hope that this would buy him some time, Emerson got busy. He backtracked to the campsite and started digging graves for the bounty hunter and Randall. It was mid morning when he finished burying the two men. Not that he felt either one of them deserved it.

"More than I would do. I'd rather leave you for the buzzards. This is to save my hide" And that was the prayer Emerson said as he stood on the grave, stomping to pat the dirt in.

His main concern was in hiding any evidence that could point someone else in his direction. After taking what few useful provisions the stranger had on him, he stowed away the rest of the items and covered the tracks. He then took the money he and Randall had gotten from the bank they held up back in Railway Gorge several days ago and stuffed it into the saddlebag of the stranger's horse. Emerson mounted up and continued east, away from where he and Randall were to meet up with some acquaintances to plan their next job.

Emerson had no plans on becoming an outlaw, and was dragged into the robbery after losing a poker game to Randall. He had no doubt Randall cheated, but he had had too many whiskeys to outdraw Randall in a gunfight. Emerson was led to the bank to withdraw his entire account as payment of his gambling debt. Before Emerson knew what was going on, he was already an accomplice in the robbery.

While Emerson only worked as a station hand on one of the medium-sized ranches just outside Railway Gorge, he had saved enough to buy a share in the Evenstar Bar. Now that plan was shot to pieces and he was a wanted man, an unlikely outlaw. Sherriff Brady was a decent, law abiding, God-fearing man and would most likely believe Emerson, but the bank manager, Bob McKinley, would rather see him hang. Emerson had less money than McKinley, but first dibs on the share in the bar because of a distant relative, that both the current owner of the bar and Emerson had in the family tree. And the fact of McKinley being as popular as a rattlesnake at a square dance.

Luckily, Randall's friends did not know about Emerson, so he would not have them on his tail when Randall didn't rendezvous with them in a week's time. Emerson counted the money and smiled. He would be able to make a fresh start in another state, maybe even buy a small bar outright. A good shave and haircut should disguise him from anyone who knew the rough and rugged cowboy he used to be.

"Just have to get far enough away from Railway Gorge and anyone that might recognise me," Emerson said to the horse.

The horse jittered and stepped backwards. Emerson leant over to pat her on the main when a shot rang out. He felt the bullet fly over his head, narrowly missing him. It would have hit him in the chest a second ago. Quickly, he turned to the direction of the rifle shot and saw two men with Winchesters pointed in his direction.

"Hiyah!" he yelled, kicking the horse onwards with two spurs to the ribs.

Another shot rang out, the bullet flying wild as Emerson made tracks quickly. He did not know the bounty hunter's horse and just hoped that it was fast, at least faster than the horses of the other two bounty hunters.

"I hope you can run girl," he said.

Multiple shots rang out and dirt flew from the bullets hitting the ground around the horse as Emerson pushed it on. A rocky outcrop a hundred yards away would give him enough cover to get off a couple of good shots before losing the advantage.

"Come on girl," he said. "You can do it."

He held on and pushed her forward again towards the outcrop and safety. As he got closer to the cover, he pulled the rifle from the saddle holster and cocked the lever. Once behind the rocks he pulled hard on the reins and turned the horse around. He leapt off and clambered up onto a ledge where he could see the two riders approaching.

"Just one good shot," he said and squeezed the trigger. The shot rang clear but the bullet whistled beside the front horse's head and it reared, tossing its rider from the saddle. The rider fell off from his horse and tumbled beneath the hooves of the other. Emerson didn't mean to kill the rider, but the fall would have killed him no doubt. Emerson cocked the rifle but his second shot also went wild as the bounty hunter's bullet hit the rock just above his head. Dirt and fragments landed to cover his face, but he fired off another couple of shots.

Emerson rubbed his eyes, cleared the dust out, and cocked the rifle again. The rider was not in view.

"Where did you go?" Emerson said.

A click behind him let him know where the other bounty hunter was.

"Toss your iron down, son. The game's over."

Emerson threw the rifle to the side and turned slowly.

"It's not what you think, Randall set me up."

"Everyone says that when they're caught. Never caught a guilty outlaw, only misunderstood."

"Honestly, I only went to the bank 'cause I owed Randall from a poker game. I had no idea he was going to rob the bank..."

More loose rocks crumbled and the bounty hunter fired blindly, narrowly missing Emerson as he dropped to the ground and drew his Colt .45.

"Sorry partner," Emerson said. "But I am innocent."

Emerson fired at a pile of loose rocks to make his point instead of shooting to kill. But this dislodged the old pile of stones, causing them to tumble onto the bounty hunter. As the man raised his arms to protect his head, Emerson leapt from the ledge just as it collapsed to cave in and bury the last obstacle to Emerson's escape.

"At least I'm still not a killer," Emerson said. "Though I'll probably be blamed for it."

Emerson took the bounty hunters guns and mounted his horse. He spurred the horse on not knowing exactly where he would go or what he would do. Emerson knew now that he would always be looking over his shoulder, never knowing whom to trust or if he was still a wanted man. Without making a conscious choice, Emerson had become the outlaw.



**** THE END ****

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Carmen

By James Newman

Synopsis: A life of frivolity, a night of passion.

About the Author: James Newman lives in Bangkok, Thailand. He lives in a townhouse with three lesbians, a gerbil and a transgender dog named Paws. He has written the classic pulp novel 'Bangkok Express' and the erotica coming of age novella 'A diary of Kim.' He is currently working on a Vampire novella entitled 'Suck'. Visit the website at www.jamesnewmanbooks.com.

In this mysterious adventure, a man will face the ghost of himself and his delinquent past.

Carmen

By James Newman

I met Carmen at one of those roadside bars that never seem to do any business. At least not any drinks business. There is drink in the bar but nobody ever seems to be drinking them. My kinda place. I was on the Spanish island of Ibiza driving some automatic piece of crap that could barely make the hills. I was thirsty so I stopped at this bar. It was just a shack really; just a simple wooden construction on the top of a hill with a view looking down onto the beach. A fridge rumbled in one corner. A transsexual slept on the floor under shade afforded by the wicker style roof. Sleeping off a drunken evening she looked like she needed a shave and to "put her face on". Now and again she huffed and rolled over. A heavily pregnant tail-less cat glanced up and then fell on its side panting. I took a seat and ordered a bottle of beer. It came out warm so I ordered some ice. There was no ice. I drank it warm. I gagged slightly. Perfect.

A local girl with long curly hair tied up in a bun came up and occupied the bar stool next to me. She had a slender body and flawless olive skin. I lit a cigarette. She looked over, eyes darting, the way a cat catches a glimpse of a mouse. Restrained stealth. Her shoulders moved up and down as she goes for the kill.

'You want to come to a party tonight?' She asked.

'What kind of party?'

'A swimming pool party.'

'I forgot to pack my speedos," I tell her.

'You wear speedos, those tight little things?'

'No.'

'Then how you forget to pack them?'

'I didn't; it - it was a joke.'

'Not very funny joke.'

'Speedos aren't funny either. They offend me.'

'I think you are a strange man.'

'Yeah. That's what they say.'

'Who say?'

'Everybody.'

'Why everybody say like that?'

'Listen baby, when everybody around you is saying that you are strange and you are thinking that you aren't strange then it doesn't take a genius to understand that you are the one that is strange and they are the ones that are alright.'

'You **are** a strange man.'

'That was the crux of my comment, baby.'

'Very strange.'

'Yeah. I can live with it. Normality bores me.'

'What is normality?'

'I consider it to be mainly a consensus.'

'What's a consensus?'

'A general opinion,'

'Do you want to come to a pool party?'

'Yeah,' I said.

And then silence. I finished the beer and went back to my bungalow. Read a detective novel took a shit and hit the shower. I slipped on a shirt and a pair of jeans. I walked out onto the veranda and waved at a bunch of backpackers. I had a hazy memory of making a move on one of them a couple of nights ago. A Finnish girl with a clear Scandinavian complexion and beautiful teeth. I got knocked back, of course. But no harm in trying, if you keep buying the lottery tickets...

Five hours later we made it to the swimming pool party. About two or three hundred kids dancing around in their underwear drinking buckets of booze and acting like fools. Sort of thing you see in Hollywood teen movies, you know, when the rich kid's parents are on vacation and the brats storm the palace.

There were two swimming pools and the beach was close by. Kids were puking and pissing on the beach. Real classy.

I normally hate parties but this one seemed different; watching the amateur twenty something's drink their chemical whiskey and dancing around half undressed. I was on the vodka. I know what that chemical whiskey shit can do to a man. I've lost a few days, a few good friends and a lot of self respect on that stuff. I was feeling sober but knew that tomorrow a hangover was in the post, even on the vodka. These kids were drunk out of their minds but tomorrow they will probably go scuba diving, hang-gliding or mountain biking and not have a touch of a hangover. Me, I only have to look at a beer and the old temples start throbbing. Well, I guess I had my turn of hangover free drinking and they will have their turn of hangovers one day.



Carmen was getting a lot of attention from the young tourists. She did look good in a red cocktail dress and hair made up well with a bright red summer flower in her hair. I would have been happy to let her go with one of them as she wasn't mine, but for some reason she wouldn't leave my side.

Sometimes these Spanish chicks can get so clingy. I thought for a moment that maybe she was a prostitute. I thought about asking her. And then I thought against it.

The night turned into early morning. The crowd began to thin out. We had a few more drinks and got out of there.

We hit another bar on the way back to my bungalow. By this time I was wanting to shake her. I made some excuse about the toilet and escaped through a back door. The motorbike started on the third attempt. For reasons best left alone I have had my fill of one night stands **unless** she had a catwalk figure, a European university doctorate degree in medicine, and a family close in with the generals and the politicians that run this world. Or to put it more simply; I had decided **not** to go with wayward girls anymore. Aim too high and you will never hit the target. It's a philosophy that kept me free and single throughout my early twenties. I thought I had problems then. I later discovered as Joseph Conrad once observed that 'women are the perfect curse'.

With this in mind I returned to the bungalow and shut the door falling into a booze induced sleep. That no man's land separating drunken tiredness and fatigued wakefulness. The calm before the storm.

An hour or so later a knock at the door. Carmen stood there with a stormy expression. She had somehow found me. I was too tired to tell her to go away. I let her stay and told her she will not receive any money in the morning and I will not be performing any bedroom magic. She seemed pretty cool with that. I was tired.

'I don't need money,' she said 'only sleeping.'

She took off her dress to reveal a 30 cm scar running from her lower abdomen all the way up to between her breasts. I tried to ignore it. I couldn't. I looked again. The scar was deep and the stitches were not yet taken out. She had been taken apart and sewn back together again. I tried to look away but I kept returning to her disfigurement. She read my thoughts.

'I know I am ugly. I lost my baby. He died inside whist I was giving birth. They had to cut him out.'

'Jesus!'

Now I have seen the caesarian section before. This doctor must have either been drunk, drugged or unqualified.

'Do you think I am ugly?'

'No baby,' I told her. 'Just go to sleep'

'I can't she said.'

Just then I noticed something. The stitches seemed to be moving. I thought it was my imagination, or a trick of the light. I checked again. They were moving. They wriggled slightly under the dim light.



'It happens every night,' she told me.

I looked closer. I counted the stitches. There were eight in total, each about an inch apart.

'I don't like to be alone when it happens,' the stitches began to loosen from her skin.

Her abdomen began to swell outwards. She made a low grunting sound as the first stitch broke free and fell to the bed sheets where it wriggled like a small blind snake to the edge of the bed and then fell onto the terracotta tiles below. The second stitch followed, this time with more velocity. Her stomach continued to grow. Carmen looked across the bed at me with a sad expression. Her expression difficult to determine. Embarrassment, pride, shame?

My own mind was stuck at the crossroads between fascination and acute fear. My heart began to beat faster. The body was telling me to fight or fly but the spectacle in front of me was too fascinating to miss. The third stitch unstuck itself and wriggled away. She was now half open and I could see a small sliver of intestines begin to push outwards.

'Could you love a girl, like this?' She asked me.

I had no answer.

The fourth and fifth stitch came out simultaneously and now she was mostly open. A puss like fluid dripped slowly at first and then began to gush from her aperture. Then there was movement inside. Something was trying to get out, at first slowly and then more violently. A small hand, the hand of a baby reached out of her abdominal window and began to pick at the remaining stitches. Carmen's head was titled back as she groaned with the pain as a fully formed baby, umbilical cord attached, presented itself in the bed space between us. The baby was covered in red placenta. It was a boy, with a full growth of hair.

'Smack him.' Carmen demanded.

I hit the creature once and he let out an obscene shrill cry that rattled the bungalow.

Carmen smiled. 'Hold him,' she said, 'he likes to be held.'

I picked up the baby and studied it more carefully. It had small green eyes and an upturned nose. Then he opened his mouth. He had a tiny row of fully formed teeth on each gum. His finger nails were long.

Carmen sat opposite me smiling. She held a pillow to her stomach. Blood had begun to soak through the pillow. 'You don't remember do you?'

'Remember what?'

'Two year ago. It was at a club in San Antonio. You were drunk. I was also. You had sex with me that night. Dirty sex. Dirty ugly sex and I never knew your name. What is your name?'

I kept quite. My mind reeled back through years of clubs and drugs and girls. I couldn't place Carmen. That meant nothing. There were many I couldn't remember. The last few years had been a blur.

'The child is yours.' She smiled across the bed where she sat now with a handbag in her hand. She took out some thread and a needle and began to skillfully sew herself back up.

'But I can't...'

'Shhhhhh.' She put a finger to my lips and then finished sewing herself up. The baby looked up at me now making gurgling sounds and trying to touch my nose with tiny pink fingers.

'Take it back.' I protested.

'The baby is yours.' She repeated and wiping herself with a towel, she left the bungalow, leaving the door open. I sat with the baby in my arms for several hours, and then he slept. As did I. In the morning I left the child with a neighbor and tried to find Carmen. I tried all the bars, the discos, the shopping malls. Nobody had ever heard of her.

The weeks passed into months and I wandered aimlessly searching for that gal. To explain to her that I didn't mean any harm, that I was out of my mind, that I hardly knew myself not to mention anyone from the past. I was human. I know my mistakes but hell would freeze over before I would be made to feel guilty about some rave party where everyone fucked everyone. I cried in the streets, the baby mumbling with his head on my shoulders. I ran and I begged bar owners to tell me where Carmen was. But nothing seemed to fathom her mystery. She had disappeared, vaporised into thin air. And she had burdened me

with the responsibility of this unknown life drooling in my arms.

It was Wednesday when I woke up. The sterile surroundings I easily recognised as a hospital; a patient's chart at my feet. Apparently I was almost poisoned by the cheap booze of that party Carmen had taken me to. I looked around the room - no baby!

The doctor walked in, 'Hello! We were worried. You were delirious in your unconsciousness for over 5 days. We thought you would need psychotherapy. You are old enough to know about those parties Señor.'

I sat up on the bed and sighed, 'I could have sworn I went to sleep in my own bed!'

***** The End ******

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What lives among us

By Kristine Ong Muslim

Synopsis: A haunting tale of what is and what was.

About the Author: Kristine Ong Muslim's work has appeared or is forthcoming in more than three hundred publications worldwide, including *Aberrant Dreams*, *Farrago's Wainscot*, *GUD Magazine*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Labyrinth Inhabitant Magazine*, *Sounds of the Night*, and *Tales of the Talisman*. She was nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize and twice for the Rhysling Award.

In this horror fiction, a woman ponders what she sees and what remained unseen.

What lives among us

By Kristine Ong Muslim

The child had nothing to tell us. Except that he had been living beside the tracks of the subway train for as long as he could remember.

We came and went everyday without knowing that he was always watching us, wanting to follow us home but could not, for some reason, leave the site where he had died for the second time. He was right there at the sign which read Station 4. Overhead was a burned out halogen lamp.

People entered and left the train day after day, and the child watched them all, knew their secrets, and saw their memories. It would have hurt him to see so much about these strangers.

The ticket booth attendant told me his version of the story.

The child was going to be six years old forever, because his mother pushed him down the tracks seconds after the train moved in to the station.

"It happened about a year ago," Lawrence, the attendant, said. "Happened so fast, the security guard assisting the passengers was helpless to signal the train to stop. Kid was crushed beyond recognition. We had to shut down the electricity so he could be scraped off the tracks."

He sipped his tea and continued, "Never seen anything like it in my whole life. The kid's mother must be really crazy to do it." He looked as if he wanted to say more. Lawrence finally added what I already knew - that the story made front page on the national papers during that time.

"Thanks for your help," I said, seeing that an old woman was heading to Lawrence's booth to purchase a ticket stub.

When I rode the train at Station 4, I did not see the child. But I knew he was there, watching, knowing that I wanted to know why.

&&&

According to the papers, Cheryl Grange, the boy's mother, worked as a dance instructor for middle-aged clients in downtown Springville. For a year, she had been living alone and never socialized with the neighbors. No one saw the child's father. Cheryl Grange's parents swore that they never knew their daughter ever married, much more had a baby.

She hung herself in her bathroom after fleeing from the train station. She did not leave any note.

The case was closed.



&&&

At first, my interest in the case was purely academic. Eight months from now, I would deliver a lecture to an audience of forensic psychologists and profilers focusing on a hypothetical version of Cheryl Grange and her state of mind which drove her to kill her child. I was concerned about the exhaustive clinical symptoms, so I asked the people who knew her. There was some interest in the case back then, because her few close friends, who saw her almost once a month, reported that she had *never* been pregnant. Since her body was cremated the next day, no examination was ever made to establish whether she had been pregnant or not. But the DNA samples taken from the child's remains and Cheryl's parents were conclusive. *The murdered child was family.*

I thought the key was all with the mother and her sudden reclusive lifestyle during the year before she finally pushed her son down the tracks.

But everything changed when I saw the face of Cheryl's son grinning knowingly at me before I boarded the train. I recognized his mutilated face from the newspaper photos. The apparition disappeared before I was able to scream. Everyone aboard the train was looking at me. I was soaked in sweat and breathing rapidly.

Something was so wrong about it. The ghost of the child looked very malicious.

&&&

That night I reread all the notes I had gathered from Cheryl Grange's family and acquaintances.

Who was the child then if Cheryl had never been pregnant? Nine months was a considerably long time for anyone not to notice her with a telltale bulge in her belly. She was still seeing clients during the time when she was supposed to carry the child to term. *None of them ever saw her pregnant.*

One account in particular hit me so hard that I was shaking with fear when understanding dawned on me. Her mother mentioned that Cheryl was born with a twin. A boy. Something had gone wrong and a cesarean section had to be made.

The boy was a stillbirth.

I theorized illogically...

What if, for some reason, Cheryl's twin never really went away? He had grown, in some unseen corner of the universe, but not fast enough to catch up with his twin so he remained a child. He could have presented herself to Cheryl one day, made her believe that he was just another homeless child, and played on her maternal instincts. Then he began to terrorize her. That might explain the sudden aloofness which her friends had noticed. Subtly at first, so she could not put it together for herself and realize what he was doing.

Only for spite. Because she survived and he did not.

Nobody would ever guess what really happened to her.

My imagination drove me crazy. I expected to see the boy's face in the mirror, so I covered it with a bed sheet.

I decided to throw away all my notes. I'd go with the alternate material which I had prepared in case the one concerning the Granges would not play out. I simply did not want to think about it at all. Objectivity was never an issue. I did not want to learn the truth if it would only scare me for the rest of my life, looking over my shoulder with the slightest noise and seeing things that were not supposed to be there.

I prayed that I was wrong about Cheryl's twin.

&&&

Days passed and life went on. I forgot about Cheryl Grange. I forgot about being scared. That was what the big city could do to you. In the grand scheme of things, we were basically very small fish trying to understand what lived among us.

One night, the terrible rush hour traffic gave me no choice but

to take the commuter train again. I saw the child's ghost. Same spot on Station 4. I saw him for a split-second, but that was enough.

I knew he was still there, if you only knew where to look. I... I was only a spectator. I knew his side of the story. I did not want to go any further than that.

****** THE END ******

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The Ride's End

By Robert Payette

Synopsis: Life is like a journey with no return ticket; a trip that goes forward without an option of starting over. A train journey by this protagonist will forever change his understanding of life's possibilities.

About the Author: Robert Payette was a contributing editor to *Chess then and now*, Vol 1 & 2, and the short story magazine *The Things People Do* by Carl Baxter. Robert's *Advent Now* (short fiction) was in the editor's choice Anthology of *Bewildering Stories* (2005 Third Anniversary Retrospective). Due to a renewed interest in fiction writing, he intends to rework and publish his stock of stories. One of his ongoing, life projects is a non-fiction book that challenges the mainstream view of time.

In this story, a man finds more than company in a long journey ahead.

The Ride's End

By Robert Payette

Twenty-four long hours after boarding Via's transcontinental from Winnipeg, I walked to the dome section at the rear of the train. The quick metronome of the metal wheels faded from my mind as I took in the panoramic view of huge silos and coloured patches of farmland, all receding into a single point against a brilliant blue sky. There would be a brief stop in Capreol, after which I would spend a few days flaunting my so-called merchandizing expertise in front of a bunch of money hungry store owners - most of whom were really just glorified managers. To think I'd dismissed my brother's career in palaeontology as boring! Here I was on my way to yet another dismal convention while he was soaking up the sun at some exotic excavation site. It brought to mind his remark about the swiftness of the dinosaurs' sudden disappearance: "a cataclysmic blip of their entire history", which pretty well summed up how I was feeling about myself.

A good gin and tonic, I thought, might improve my spirits. I felt a little woozy going down the small stairwell which led to the lounge, and for a minute I thought I was hallucinating when I saw this very strange-looking fellow leaning against the bar reading a book. He was a tall thin man with an unusual crop of poorly-trimmed, red hair. His complexion was pale. He appeared to have been awake for days.

While I was ordering my drink, I noted that he was on the last few pages of his book which was titled, of all things, 'Chaos'. Beside him on the bar lay a cup of coffee and a pack of cigarettes.

"A good book?" I asked.

"Yes, it is," he said, his attention still glued to the page. "It's about the fairly recent emergence of a scientific paradigm."

"You a scientist?"

He abruptly lifted his eyes toward mine. "No. Just a hobby of mine."

"I guess I forgot to introduce myself," I said, "My name is Pat Lauzon."

Without making any attempt to shake my hand, he muttered "Christopher Newsome", and began staring at me like a doctor

withholding a grim diagnosis. "Do you believe in the future, Mr. Lauzon?"

His question was as odd as his appearance. "Are you talking about hope for mankind?"

"No, no," he said, annoyed with himself, snapping his fingers to find the right words. "I mean future events: Do you believe they are somehow already set in stone?"

"I would have to say, no. Why do you ask?"

"I agree with you," he went on, "the future can't already be there. Only a madman would believe such nonsense. However, there is something I would like you to observe."

What he did next drew my undivided attention: he flipped to the front of his book and ripped out a page. Myself, a lover of books – he might as well have been maiming a small animal. "Excuse me," I said, "please don't do that on my account."

"Oh don't worry, Mr. Lauzon," he said, "this is only the preface."

He then crumpled up the page and rolled it into a ball. "I'm going to ask you, sir, at a given moment to predict the fate of this piece of paper, that is, where you think it is going to land."

"You're joking right?"

"Just humour me, please, for the hell of it."

A barman arrived with fresh coffee and handed Newsome some matches while refilling his cup. I thought of getting up and leaving – I had my drink, and the dome section awaited me with its sun-swept landscapes whizzing past. Newsome then threw the ball of paper into the waste-basket, and just before it fell in, he asked me to state the obvious, which I didn't bother doing.

"What has this got to do with anything?"

"I'm trying to show you that although a future event doesn't yet exist, certain ones can be seen as inevitable beyond a certain threshold in time. You just saw that the crumpled paper would end up in the garbage, you knew it would before it happened, therefore you saw a future event."

"Well I would hardly say that, and even if I did see one, may I ask why you are so preoccupied with my 'seeing' it?"

"I want to convince you that the difference between you and me is only a matter of degree. You see, Mr Lauzon, I have stood where you just did, many times. What I mean is: I, too, have seen future events unfolding, but on a much larger scale and over greater periods of time."

"What kind of events are we talking about?"

"Things like... for instance: a train derailment."

"I see," I said, chuckling, "I guess this is the part where you tell me we're all doomed."

He paused for a moment. "I suppose I could tell you that. But instead I've chosen to provide you with only a bit of a heads up: This train is not going to make it to its destination. Somewhere between the next stop and Toronto, something is going to go horribly wrong."

"Ok, now first of all: you're starting to freak me out. And secondly you need to know I don't believe in that sort of thing."

"Why not? Even a child could predict - in effect, could see - if his toy-truck were about to be crushed by a boulder rolling towards it from only a foot away."

"Oh come on! You're talking about a few seconds."

"One man's eternity is another man's moment. It's all a matter of differing vantage points." He took a sip of coffee, opened the pack of cigarettes and drew one. "The information you have depends on how and what you see, and from where; and these three are interrelated."

"Now right there: That's what I have a problem with. This so-called information of yours - where in the hell would it come from?"

He pitched his match into the ashtray and stood there with arms crossed, contemplating my question; cigarette smoke swirled past his face. "I can't really tell you that. I don't even know where it is I'm looking from when I receive the cues, or in what way they're transmitted. With the example of the child and his ill-fated toy, things are easy: we have the direction of the boulder, the position of the toy, and these are transmitted via light. But in my case...I suppose it would be like expecting a tiny insect, which occasionally becomes endowed with the vision of a child, to explain itself. Under ordinary

circumstances, it simply doesn't have the perceptual apparatus or any awareness of what light is."

"If you think I'm buying this."

"For your sake, I was hoping you might. Anyway, suit yourself."

Before ditching this odd fellow, I chose to ask him why he would even board the train, knowing of its demise.

"Fair enough." he answered. "I only envisioned the crash long after we'd left Winnipeg."

"So you had some kind of premonition, did you?"

"As a matter of fact I did. I was looking at a write-up of this very train in a newspaper clipping - it's framed right over there above the bar. The image of the train in the photo began to morph into something entirely different; the letters in the text became jumbled and blurred - a kind of dyslexia. When the transformation was complete, I realized I was visualising the full cover of a newspaper with a photo of the 13:35 from Winnipeg. It was an aerial shot showing the passenger-cars in disarray, some partially destroyed, others simply turned over on their sides. I felt as though I could have read the whole article, collecting all of the details about the accident, but within a blink I was once again looking at the original newspaper clipping. That's how it always is with these visions: they come and go in the most unexpected ways; sometimes through analogy or metaphor, hijacking whatever landscape you might be witnessing." He seemed to drift away momentarily before regaining his composure. "It was the day after tomorrow's date on that paper, Mr. Lauzon. But more importantly, there were few survivors, or rather, there will be few."

I forced a smile, but couldn't illicit even a smirk from the man. "So presumably you'll be getting off at the Capreol connection which is in... about ten minutes."

"Uh uh," he said, exhaling a long stream of smoke after which he added, "I could have got off at the Sioux Lookout, or in Hornepayne for that matter."

"Well then why didn't you?"

"Because, I decided it was time to move on."

"Move on eh? You know what I think? I think you're nuts"

"I'm not." He said gravely. "I have had glimpses - things you only dreamed of and forgot: I say that because I believe my

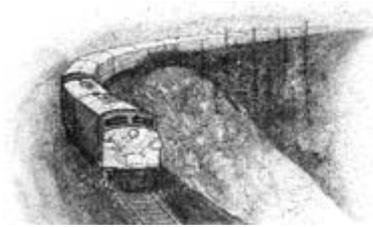
'privileged' point of reference is from a place we all venture to regularly in sleep, and then one day permanently when we die. I'm ready for it now."

The palms of my hands were moist, and my stomach wasn't doing all that well. I put my drink aside. "Well sir, this is all very interesting, but I think I've had my fill. If you'll excuse me..."

"So I guess you won't be getting off at Capreol?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I see a lot of other people around: If you were that sure about this, you wouldn't just be telling me about it; you'd be running around like a lunatic trying to get this train stopped." I then rose to my feet and shouted: "Hey everybody! This guy thinks our train is going to crash!"

No one found it funny.



"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Newsome said calmly, "It's a good way to get our heads pounded in." He tapped away a long stem of ashes. "All rides must come to an end, Mr Lauzon, one way or another. You've been given the option to get off this one before it does. There will come a time when such an option no longer exists for anyone."

"OoooKay then," I said, saluting him, "it was certainly a pleasure meeting you. Take care, and have yourself a good evening."

With the nasty looks I was getting in the dome section, I decided I might be better off taking a nap.

I finally reached my "deluxe" bedroom which was much smaller than the images in the VIA brochures would have me believe; and right then it seemed even more confining than ever. I took several deep breaths and lay down, hoping to relax, now that I wasn't around Newsome. I was relieved when I felt the train gradually come to a halt in Capreol. I sat up and took note of my possessions; most were still packed in my suitcase, ready to be whisked away.

I couldn't stop thinking about Newsome: What if he was completely insane, and he himself intended to keep the train from reaching Toronto? I couldn't bring myself to believe it. On the other hand, what was I to make of this talk about future events?

By the time the train left Capreol, I managed to calm down and settle my thoughts. This had to be some kind of practical-joke: An eccentric who plays gags on unsuspecting passengers, just to cope with the boredom of frequent long trips. What else could it be? "That bastard", I mumbled to myself. I pictured him still sitting at the bar indulging in the two habits which were probably his only forms of sustenance. I closed my eyes and drifted off. The last thing I remembered from that night was this dream about being slammed into the closet opposite my bed and hearing the sound of metal scraping against metal. There were screams too.

The morning after, I found myself looking down at what indeed would have made a fine photo for the cover of a newspaper. I saw the flashing lights of fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars. There were people roped-off from various parts of the scattered wreckage, watching in fascination as bodies were collected.

I observed the spectacle for some time before I was drawn to the figure of a man heading east, not far away. I followed from above as he staggered down a dusty, dirt road. He didn't seem to know who he was or where he was going. What was left of his hair was singed as was his clothes which seemed to stick to the bloodied surfaces of his flesh.

The man abruptly stopped when he became captivated by the motion of a small stone he kicked in his path. He stumbled toward it as though it might hold some clue to his salvation. After squatting to pick it up, the man awkwardly rose to his feet, scrutinizing his find. I was beginning to recognize his face just as he appeared to come to a shocking realization. Newsome's grip on the small rock weakened.

While it fell to the ground, I was inexorably drawn into the rock's wake, as though it were a massive body dragging me along with the pull of its gravity. The rock's surface now appeared vast, covered with sharp hills, ridges, and ravines, all coloured in various patches of icy grey and black. The scenery around it seemed to evaporate, and it now travelled against a background of star-filled space. Among the stars ahead in the distance, a familiar, blue planet moved on a trajectory which was clearly...

The stone struck the ground near Newsome's feet. I saw tiny plumes of sand and dirt rise in slow motion above the earth, temporarily blocking out a minute portion of the sun's nurturing rays.

"All rides must come to an end..." Newsome had said.

I knew he still stood below me, watching the wreckage; and yet, at the same time, I could clearly see him hobbling toward a steep precipice and then swiftly falling from it, having barely escaped the clutches of rescuers who tried in vain to stop him.

****** THE END ******

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Curse and Council on Kell Island

By Martin Murphy

Synopsis: An epic saga of sorcery and mystery, this fantasy tale seeks a worthy warrior to defend its realms.

About the Author: Martin Murphy is 35 years old and lives in Cork in the south of Ireland. He has only been writing seriously since last August but has about 15 pieces in fiction and non-fiction. The fiction is mainly sci-fi but he is working on some fantasy as well. His non-fiction is a bit philosophical sometimes and is his two cents on certain issues.

In this magnificent adventure, the men venture into adversity to bring hope.

Curse and Council on Kell Island

By Martin Murphy

The company reached the dock called Jenna where one could get a boat to the island of the sorceress. As the captain and Sirvan began to row and soon got into a steady rhythm Conn reflected on the events of the last few weeks. First the news of a sickness and plague that had struck Teddim in the east and that would undoubtedly spread to the rest of the realm. Then the special council of the lords was called and they discovered that the plague was a curse devised by the evil wizard Sentis who hadn't been heard of in an age. He had been living, it was thought, as a recluse for centuries. But he must have been planning this curse for a long time and when Conn had stolen one of his magic bracelets after being insulted by him, it had spurred the wizard into action and he had struck Conn's homeland first. It was decided by the council that a small company would be sent south to Kell Island to seek the counsel and aid of the sorceress Mariella. She was the only white magician they knew of in a world that had all but forgotten magic. They had had some adventures on the way too including meeting a mysterious hermit called Mellichem who apparently knew Mariella. And that was where they were now; he and his six companions approaching the island, which was their objective, after five or six weeks travelling through many lands. He wondered what this woman would have to say and if she could help.



The boat reached the shore of the island after about an hour and luckily they had found one that was big enough to hold the seven of them and their few supplies. It was a dull, overcast afternoon typical of the time of year and especially this part of the world. Noticing a circular dwelling in the distance they wondered if that was where Mariella lived. They gathered their packs and headed up the beach in that direction. The building had only one level but it covered a large circular area and could have contained many rooms or chambers.

Just then a striking woman came to the door and beckoned to them as if she was expecting them. She looked no more than 30 and they all wondered if this was Mariella or one of her servants if she had any. Captain Fairshields thought that the woman could have been his daughter. They reached the dwelling in ten minutes but were slow to enter, standing outside the door, not sure what the proper thing was to be done. Conn just walked up to the wooden door that was half ajar and rapped on it.

"Yes, yes, do come in all of you, I've just made some tea," a woman's voice said. They looked at each other surprised and filed in walking to the kitchen which was at the end of the corridor. The same striking woman was seated and there were seven mugs of hot cinnamon tea on the table. Again they were a bit taken aback until she finally put them at ease and said, "Please, do sit, we have much to discuss."

"You were expecting us?" asked the Captain disbelieving.

"Yes, of course. There was a very destructive vibration in the ether about two moons ago and I knew the Council would seek me out."

"You know of the Council meeting too?" asked the captain.

"I know of the Council but not the actual meeting. I presumed the Council would meet to discuss the crisis in Teddim and how to counter Sentis, the cause of all this. My name may have come up."

The men around the table were dumbfounded and wondered how she could know so much and also how she had put them all at ease within minutes and made them feel they could trust her and just talk to her like a friend. It was Conn who snapped out of this warm glow first and asked her the most pertinent question, the only question, "Mariella, you seem to know our predicament - can you help us?"

Mariella looked deep into the young man's eyes and seemed to recognize something for an instant and then it was gone and she brought herself back to the present. Conn also was trying to stay focused rather than enchanted and waited for her to answer. The others too stared at her thinking of their long journey to get to this point.

"Yes I can," she said, "but not directly. I can't intervene personally but I can tell you what to do. What's your name, young man?"

"You mean you don't know?" asked Conn.

"Of course not, that would be silly." She laughed and winked almost imperceptibly at him.

"My name is Conn," he said and then returning to the business at hand he said, "Now, tell us, how do we counter Sentis?"

"For a start I'll need that bracelet you're wearing under your sleeve."

"How did ...?" Conn began and let the question go, exasperated. The others just laughed. Mariella laughed to herself and then regaining some seriousness said, without explaining, "That bracelet has an energy signature I can pick up and I can feel or intuit quiet clearly whose it is if I have encountered that wizard or sorcerer before. It's like sensing different colours or fragrances. In this case it is foul indeed, a dark magic and a practitioner that belongs in a sewer."

"What must we do?" asked Conn, for now putting the mission before his growing attraction to this woman who could make them all laugh in this time of grave peril. She wasn't just beautiful she was strong and cool-headed. "I will modify the bracelet and you must return it to him in his fortress on Prostima in the Frozen Northern Ridges. He will not suspect anything until it is too late. You must approach him in a friendly, open way and say '*Here is your bracelet. I apologise for taking it. You must verify that it works.*' Remember the last part especially. He will do as you say because, as you know, the wearer of the bracelet is always believed. When he checks it my spell will be activated, his magic will be broken and the curse will be lifted; the lands will be restored."

There was an audible gasp from the group - could this be true, so easy?

Conn just then remembered Mellichem and said to Mariella "We met an old man on the banks of the Sylph who seemed to know you. And he guessed our mission."

"Really?" Mariella said "what is his name?"

"He called himself 'Mellichem' and he is quite old."

"You're sure he said 'Mellichem'?" she asked, suddenly interested.

"Yes," Conn said, "it is an unusual name. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I do," she laughed, "He was Principal of the Academy of Celestos when I was an instructor there. Of course he knew of your mission, he felt the vibration as I did and worked out the rest. How is dear old Mellichem, did he look well?"

The Captain interjected that he looked old but healthy and still had all his faculties, not realizing that this was how many would also describe him.

"But," he asked "what was your relationship with Sentis back in the Age of the Fish. Did you know him?"

"Yes, I knew him, Captain. I was a teacher at Celestos and he was one of my pupils. This was an Age of Magic before the sacking of the Holy City. We still had the library and archives that dated back to the mystical Age of the Owl and which had much of the wisdom and lore of the Ancients. When all that was destroyed at the end of the age, magicians lost their home and became wandering vagrants or went into seclusion and voluntary isolation like Mellichem and me and, to an extent, Sentis, but he seems to crop up every few centuries with a new evil to inflict on people. In this Age of the Ox magic is not valued and scarcely believed in. Men now pursue power and material progress and care nothing for even truth and knowledge which go with magic. Only the scholars of Pindar care about such things in this Age. But, I'm going off the point, you asked if I knew Sentis and I told you he was a pupil. Back then he was young and gifted but also proud and a little perverse which I put down to immaturity. He was quick to mock those students who had little ability or facility with magic. He himself although very proficient and diligent with his own studies, was essentially a technical magician and would never have the creativity and intuition needed for sorcery which some of the best wizards aspire to. I think he knew this and became bitter about it. He dropped out at the end of the final year of level five and after he had taken his exams and passed them. He was then a Fire Wizard which takes about twenty years of study but unlike all the others he did not take part in the Wizards' Tournament at the end of the summer. The prize was the coveted Wizard's Ring and apprenticeship to a Sorcerer for a year if they so wished or, if they did not wish for further studies and training, they could take a seat on the Wizard's Council and a post for teaching apprentices. That's what most do."

She took a slow deep breath and continued, "Sentis took a much more dangerous path and decided to go east and pursue esoteric magic which was forbidden by the academy and would have seen him expelled if he was found out but at that stage he didn't care, he was going his own way. He had also refused a crucial test that any who aspired to Sorcery must take. Before he left he came to me - I had been his mentor for his first five years at the Academy, well before he started to go off the rails. He told me of his troubles and how he had always thought of me with great affection and admiration. He said he was older now and more mature and then he implored me to go to Andax with him and maybe discover new paths in magic. I refused point blank and told him to reconsider his plan and that there was still much he could do here. He then flew into a rage and said I would regret spurning him and that he would see me suffer and this Academy become rubble and a bonfire before he was done. He never overpowered me nor could he but he did with a lot of effort and some dastardly luck bring about the destruction of

the Academy and then later bring the plague to Pindar and now this curse to Teddim. He must be stopped because he won't be happy until the whole realm is destroyed."

The men at the table were amazed at all the history and lore that this woman had known and lived through over a thousand years before they were born.



"How did Sentis go blind?" asked Sirvan out of curiosity.

"He was greedy for power," answered Mariella, "Every sorcerer has a master's wand which is very powerful. We don't leave them hanging around but sometimes we'll put a decoy in a private place and see if any will try and steal them. This, to us magicians, is very serious and a breach of all the ethics that magicians have learned since their apprenticeship and the penalty is severe. As soon as Sentis touched the wand in my study among my things, there was a great flash of heat and light and he was permanently blinded, my last lesson to him and one reason why he hates me."

"Do you hate him?" asked Sirvan.

"No, I pity him because I knew him as he once was. Now he is lost. But I do hate the suffering he brings to people."

"Then you are more enlightened than many I know who do hate him."

Mariella stared off into the distance and then stood up and said, "Please, gentlemen, have something to eat. I must go and find a formula I need for the bracelet. It will disguise my modification." Mariella knew the bracelet had to be used one more time to activate her neutralising modification, that is, when he checked it. It would be safe for Conn then. Sentis would undoubtedly do something trivial to amuse himself like get Conn to bark like a dog but this would wear off and Conn would be on his way; Sentis would be neutralised and his curse broken.

The company put down a hearty meal in the adjoining room where everything had been laid. There was a lot of talking and a cheerful atmosphere and they were all more hopeful. Sirvan and the captain enjoyed some tobacco after their meal. Mariella had been gone an hour and then appeared at the door looking vexed.

"This is most embarrassing. I can't find the formula I need anywhere. It must be complex - that's rare."

Then Conn remembered the strange line of symbols Mellichem had given him back at the hut saying, "Mariella will know..."

He removed the piece of paper from his tunic and said "Will this help?" and added "Mellichem said you would know what to do with it."

Mariella took the piece of paper and scanned the formula. "Of course, she said, two 'e' over 'pi' squared. I'm still learning from that man. I can make the modification now. By the way I prepared a simple desert for you - sweetened fruit salad and maple syrup." This was unexpected but welcome, their first treat in weeks, and she gave out the bowls helped by Conn and the Captain.

As they ate, she asked "Do you have anymore questions for me?"

Tim and Scott wondered about something basic and eventually Scott asked "What's the difference between magicians and wizards and sorcerers?"

Mariella looked at the young soldier and said "Good question. All who practice magic are magicians, at least those who practice white magic. Those who pursue the dark path are accurately called witches - male and female although they are still sometimes called Black Wizards, etc. But, back to magicians; as I said before there are levels. For the first five years you are an apprentice 3rd class, for the next five

you are an apprentice 2nd class and for the final three years of this stage you are an apprentice 1st class. We sometimes refer to them as silver, gold and platinum wands but those are just the metal rings at the top that identify them. In the final year after their exams, they are platinums, and there's usually about forty or fifty of them who compete for the coveted Diamond wand. The winner, historically, has usually gone onto great achievements and success in the magic arts, some to the highest degree. After apprenticeship, many having got a good education, go into normal life and make their way in the world. But if you want, you can go on to the study of higher magic and train to become a wizard - water or fire levels. These levels four and five take a further seven years - four and three respectively - and most people stop there and become members of the Wizard Council, also called the Order of Fire. Some choose teaching or pursue research and other things. A few decide to aim for the last, most elite and the most difficult stage of the magician's path: Sorcery. But only if they display a perfect score on the Wizard trials are they approved for the arduous discipline required by the School of Sorcery, which is also known as the Order of Light."

"What is this discipline?" asked Sirvan, curious and skeptical.

"At the Sun-level it is the heightening, then consuming or burning of the passions which is extremely painful because for most of us our passions are disordered. Then the candidate endures months of solitude without any guide so that he is forced to confront himself or herself. Then there is the exposure of the suffering self to the Cosmic Energy Field, whereupon after a short time if done right, there is an enlightenment or an awakening. This confers, among other things, the perfect perception of reality as it is, undimmed by the veil of the senses or the interruption of random thought processes. The mind of the newly elevated Sorcerer and reality are in harmony and he or she is now sensitive to any vibration in the Energy field. They can transcend time and space, thought and action are merged and what is willed is done with no consideration for effort, telepathy is possible between Sorcerers who are friends and it is at this stage that the definitive choice between white and black magic is made and it is virtually irrevocable. Esoteric magic is dangerous because it doesn't distinguish between the two - it is ambiguous and amoral. Most don't apply for sorcery hearing of its high failure rate and its reputation as voluntary torture but even those who do not succeed become better wizards for the honest attempt. So, to answer your question, you may think of magicians as all on the white magic path, witches as black magicians, apprentices as just that, wizards as proficient and sorcerers as masters."

"Does that mean that you and Mellichem are really the same, being Sorcerers?" asked Scott.

"No, like the other stages there are levels of Sorcery, two in this case. They are the Moon Sorcerer and the Sun Sorcerer. These are loosely connected to male and female but there are many exceptions. The Sun Sorcerer is the highest and exceedingly rare and is what I just described although Moon Sorcery is rare too but has been achieved by a few women like me. We face the Mirror of Celestos and learn the truth about ourselves and then spend two years studying. The Sun level is the final three years which end in the process described. I know of one female sorcerer who reached the Sun-level and there have been a few male Moon Sorcerers - it's more your energy, your essential personality, than your gender that's important. And there you have the seven levels of magic. Is that ok?"

"Fascinating." said Sirvan. The other men indicated their approval by echoing what Sirvan said.

"Thank you," said Mariella "for a while I felt I was back in Celestos lecturing and I just noticed that I spoke to you in the present tense as if this was the Age of the Fish - how odd."

She then stood up and said "Now, my friends," bringing the discussion back to the here and now, "There is one thing you should know - the magic energy of the bracelet changes itself over time, you might say it degrades until it is neutral again. Without Sentis' personal energy signature on the bracelet I can't counter his magic or break the curse."

"How long have we got?" asked the captain.

"I would estimate about six weeks, definitely not more than seven." She said gravely.

"We must depart soon so", said Fairshields, "we have little margin for error."

"One last thing," said Conn "why can't you come with us and defeat him yourself."

"One wizard may not kill another. It is one of our most important rules. And two magicians fighting, especially me and him because of our rank could bring great destruction to a place and kill many around us. The most we can do, and it is difficult, is to neutralize his evil, hopefully for good. He has done enough damage."

"Why do you have such a rule when black wizards or worse cause so much suffering?"

"We are a dying race as the Ages wear on. To kill another of our kind is a grave evil. There is always the hope of redemption. But I feel no regret or remorse in this bracelet just naked hate."

"Then we must end this now," said the Captain.

Although Conn, the Captain and the others would have loved to stay longer and listen to more history and magical lore from this fascinating woman they all knew the mission came first and that time was against them. But, at least they had gotten their solution. They got up to leave.

The small band of men walked down to the beach with their few belongings, pushed the boat out and jumped in. Two others, Krit and Vinse, started to row and they moved smoothly through the calm water reaching Jenna on the mainland before evening set in. They decided to keep going until it got dark. Their mission party now had purpose and urgency and they were more focused. Hope had been kindled on Kell Island.

&&&

Three years since, Conn sat in deep meditation as the great teacher Mariella gazed out into the breaking dawn. Conn had requested private study of the craft of magic - an unacceptable informal tutelage. But Mariella knew the past and sensed the future. Sentis had fled but not been eliminated; his body weakened but burning with fury. And she needed not just a brave warrior but one who could be resilient to all odds. The realm will not bow to the Dark Lords.

****** THE END ******

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Queen of buttons

By Chris Castle

Synopsis: The pain of a woman turns her away from her present, to seek a future which seems unable to rid her of her past.

About the Author: Chris Castle lives and works outside London. His primary influences include Ray Carver, Bill Murray, the films of PT Anderson and the Y: The Last Man graphic novels. He can be reached at chriscastle76@hotmail.com.

In this melancholic tale, the life that never was, changes irrevocably the life that could have been.

Queen of buttons

By Chris Castle

Every story about birth has to have a little death inside. That was what Marie's ma used to say and so it came to pass. Marie's baby lived and breathed in her but could not survive in the outside world. Some things are complicated, but this was simple. The baby died and a little of Marie passed along with it.

Marie had to stay in the hospital a little while after it happened. They said it was for her own good. Marie cried and cried; she figured she was kept in to cry out all her tears before she was set back out into the world. After five nights and a thousand tears they set her free. She stepped back out into the world on a Thursday morning, her body changed and her heart missing.

The tears must have changed her. When she reached for her husband's hand it was always out of reach. When her friends came to visit, they would not look Marie in the eye. By the end of the day, she walked each room of the house and did not recognise the home she had left; all the baby things, the details, were stripped bare and taken someplace out of reach. She was living in a stranger's house.

Her husband told her they were having a yard sale. He brought down the boxes and started to unpack them on the end of the street. Lots of families walked through the street on the way to the park. The mothers and the fathers stopped and held up toys, books, complemented her on how fresh they seemed. She heard her husband lie and say they were good at keeping things. Marie looked at him when he said this; we lost our baby she felt herself say. She felt her lips move, she was sure, but the family still smiled, her husband took their money.

Marie sat back and closed her eyes. When she opened them, everything was gone. Even her husband had disappeared. All that was left was Marie and the chair she was sitting on. Slowly she stood and walked back to the house; she left the chair where it was; she knew by the morning that would be gone too.

Her husband packed more things and organised a house sale. Marie left in the middle of the night holding a single box and headed for the train station. It was her secret box. Before the yard sale and after everything else, Marie had stored the baby's things; things she could not bare to lose. Bits and pieces she had shown to her baby through her belly, had felt kicks of approval and shakes of giggles. Parts and pieces the two of them had shared. In amongst the fog of everything else,

she knew that they belonged together. She climbed aboard the bus.

The apartment she found was little bigger than the box she held in her hands. She kept no phone and bought only what was needed. She found a job working in an office where quiet people could be left alone. In the evenings she read and listened to a small radio. And each night she went through the box, picking out one item and spent the night wrapped tight around it, so the piece could feel her heart, feel how steady and so strong it made it beat, all the way through 'til next morning.

She took home men to her apartment. She thought the silence should be stilled from time to time, but no man was a match for her radio or her box of secrets. The men lied or said nothing at all once they got what they came for. Hearts were quick and weak; their hands were greedy and eager. If Marie ever looked to them, they shrank like little boys in a tough class. Nothing matched the solace of reaching out into the night and turning the dial on the radio, or holding one of her toys.

Then one night a man walked into her apartment at her request but did not make his way to the bed. Instead he sat on the chair, a little away from her. She waited for him to move towards her but instead he was still and simply smiled. Marie looked to him and he did not look away.

"What do you want?" She said.

"To help you." He said. Now she was listening to him, she realised what a soft voice he had. She shook her head and tried to look away but she could not manage it. She watched as he walked over to the toy box, crouched down and turned the lid.

"That's not for you." She said. She wasn't sure if they were the right words or not, but he pulled himself up and turned back to face her.

"But this is for you." He said, holding out a coin in-between his fingers. Not a coin, a button.

"This belonged to my pa. The last thing I ever kept of his. Means more to me than all the money in the world." He sat back down in the chair. His chair. He was still looking at her but now she forced herself to look back.

"You should keep it." Marie said. She held it in her hand but she made no attempt to give it back. She liked the way it felt on her skin. Then she flinched back, realising she felt something, anything, for the first time since.

"I'm done, now. It's yours. When you're done, you'll know. Keep it until then." He said, rising off his chair. He walked to her side, put his fingers on her chin, "You'll know." He said and walked to the door and slipped out of the room.

Marie sat on the end of the bed for a long time, until it was light outside. She readied herself for work, patted down her skirt and without realising it, pushed the button into the pocket of her blouse, next to her heart.



That night she reached into the bottom of the box. She pulled out a doll. It was a simple doll, one given to her by ma. It was plain and beautiful and made Marie's heart creak and ache just to hold it. She put the doll into the corner chair where the man had sat. She walked back to the box, emptied it and climbed inside it. It was big enough to fit her in just so. She brought down the lid and in the dark, the box felt as sprawling and deep as a mansion. The traces of all those things, lost things, swelled around her, gathered and pushed her deeper into the dark. It was only the button against her

heart that made her reach out, breaking the lid and bringing the world back onto her breath.

She walked over to the doll, trying to smooth the darkness off of her. She held it up in her hands; it was a loose thing, filled with sand, the limbs stretching and sagging. Marie turned it round and pulled on the back, felt the fabric tear, tugged at it a little more. She felt nothing but a lightness when she reached inside and dropped the button inside. When she pulled it out, her fingers felt clean and light. For the first time in her new life, Marie smiled.

It was not as if the doll moved on it's own accord. And yet, and yet. When she placed it in different spots, whether the light, the angles, the doll took on a new expression, held slightly thicker fingers on the end of her arms. The hair on her head did not grow when she held it close up, but it seemed to stream and layer and rest over her ear, onto her chest, whenever she sat at a distance from her. Marie sometimes held

it's hand and felt the slight dig of small nails on her palm. When she let go to sleep, she would see marks on her skin. She pulled it close to her in the dark and felt it's button heart beat next to hers.

The men she brought back served a purpose now. As they dozed or tore at her or drank, she slipped things from their wallets. Nothing as simple as money, but what they treasured; photo's of children, an old ticket stub, once a lock of hair perfectly preserved in the clear plastic square. Things that mattered. And she waited patiently until they left and then she gently fed the doll her meals and watched her wax skin grow fresher, meatier than the day before.

Marie took from work, too. Photos from cubicles, love notes between office romancers, a favourite given on a birthday. She tempered the sadness of her workers faces when they realised what they'd lost with the happiness of the doll as it was fed. Soon she ran light fingers over shop aisles, jewellery stores, stalls set on the weekend streets.

The doll slept beside her, her button heart beating stronger than her own. They listened to the radio shows and Marie's laughter filled the room, knowing she was not alone. She read from books out loud and balled the pages and fed them to her doll when they were done. Marie sat in a house that once more was a home.

It was a Thursday when her husband found her. He knocked on the door and stepped into her room and a few seconds later she was lying on the floor. He had never raised a hand to her, had never smelled of drink before; in fact he was as much a mystery as the doll was then. She put her hand to her lip and let the blood trickle onto it and pulled herself upright to face him; but she only did this to make sure the doll was safe from what glances she could steal from her one good eye.

Her husband spoke for a long time and sometimes it was about the past and other times it was about the here and now. But nothing of the future. He was in turn angry and sad, violent and pathetic, but still nothing like the man she knew before. When he rose to leave he looked around the small apartment and shook his head as if he was readying to condemn the place. For all Marie knew he held matches and was ready to do just that. He looked back and tried to smile at her but something stuck in his eye; it was the doll.

Marie clamboured to her feet, feeling the blood drain out of her lip, her heart. He pushed her away and he kicked the toy box over with one sweep of his foot; everything sprayed out of the box like a splash of spilled coffee. He picked up the doll

and looked in it's eyes. He spoke, but Marie couldn't hear what he was saying; all sound had poured out of her life. He looked at the poor doll accusingly and then to Marie with the same burning look in his eyes. Then he threw the doll against the wall, Marie watching her in horror as she smashed against the wall. Then there was nothing until he left the room and the slamming door brought sound back into her ears with a roar.

She sat for a long time, cradling the doll in her arms. The eye was hanging loose where he had prised it with his thumb, the skin scuffed and waxy once more, returned to sadness. Marie sat, for the first time since it began, not knowing what to do and felt tears fall from her eyes once again. They fell on the doll's cheek and she wiped them away. But something in the teardrop left a streak; it energised the skin, bringing back the lightness, the flesh. The more she cried, the more the falling drops brought back the doll's complexion. She began to laugh, watching life return.

She knew what had to be done. After the tears dried she ran her fingers to the blood that was on her and brought it to the doll. The colour, the heat, the texture of it all made the doll something more, something closer to Marie herself. She placed her hand on her heart and felt it pound; put her other hand down and felt the button heart drum in unison. But Marie knew the violence had shattered many parts of her and needed more. It was not over.

Marie did what she could until her working week was over. Then she packed a bag and left for the place her husband now lived; he had told her on Thursday whether he meant to or not. Her bag was heavy but she held it well on her shoulder and she looked back once to the doll and then left.

It was dark when she arrived back and her bag was still heavy though none of what she left with remained. Instead she sat the doll in the chair and brought what she had up to her lips, her eyes. When her face was restored she turned her round and undid the back of her dress and fed the rest of what was left around the button heart. Marie rose, walked to the sink and washed her hands and then laid the doll on the bed, making more decisions.

Marie sowed a new dress for the doll as she lay on the bed recovering; it seemed too large but when she lifted her, it seemed to fit just right. Marie smiled and shook her head, thinking the dress was not far short of what she could wear herself. The day past and the next and she called in sick to work the day after, knowing she was never going back.

Her husband was not enough, Marie had known that, even though she tried to fool herself for a little while. Instead she knew

what had to happen next. She took the knife out of the bag and cleaned it, set it down on the bed next to the doll. She smiled to it, knowing it smiled back and before she had time to think, to draw breath she collected the knife up in her hands. Each time she pressed onto herself she felt herself grow weaker. As she grew weaker she held onto the doll for strength. She felt herself slip away and then felt the pulse of the doll as it tightened its grip on her skin. There was blood but none seeped onto the sheets, the floor, but channelled into the doll, flowing like air from one to the other.

Marie took a breath, another and then it was too hard and so she stopped. The knife was too heavy now, so she let it slip from her fingers. The day was too bright so the night stepped into her window. And finally she felt the dolls grip loosen on her arm, letting Marie rest on the bed. She sighed and closed her eyes and when she opened them again she saw the doll rise from the bed. It was not a doll at all now, of course, but a living thing, a vision in a light summer dress. It walked away from the bed and over to the radio and her long slender arm turned the dial on the radio, sending music into the air. Then it returned to the bed, to Marie and lay back down by her side. And Marie smiled, looking from her to the ceiling, feeling nothing but the light touch of her daughter's fingers as she pushed her button heart back between Marie's fingers to hold for one final time.

****** THE END ******

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The Martian and the Potter

By KJ Hannah Greenberg

Synopsis: A world as we see it, a world of our perception. Is there more than what most can appreciate? Is sanity just an excuse to be imprisoned by fate?

About the Author: Abetted by her hibernaculum of imaginary hedgehogs, KJ Hannah Greenberg tramps across literary themes and genres. Although she devotes her eclectic writing to lovers of slipstream fiction and to oboe players who never got past the second orchestral chair, she also writes for mothers who are too busy mopping carpets, diapering doll bottoms, and chopping beans to think clearly.

A grateful recipient of an assortment of literary honors, Hannah's most happy when her children correctly sort the laundry or when her hedgies wipe all of the marshmallow fluff off their feet. Her work can be found in print and online in European, North American, Middle Eastern and Oceanic venues. Hannah can be found at a local, women's gym, doing bench presses, or at her keyboard, matchmaking words like "twaddle" and "xylophone".

In this mesmerising tale, we delve into the psychological depths of a lady who can shape more than just clay.

**The Martian and the Potter
Cat in the Hat for Grownups**
By KJ Hannah Greenberg

Carefully, I set my sculpted hydroid next to my feet as I latched my studio's shutters, pushing first one key and then another into the locks. I face not so much as a door as a carbon-based carton. A bandit would have had to have a higher understanding of math for the mechanisms that truss this place in order to rob from me.

On the passerelle below, dumpster cats sing in perfect discord. Around them, broken glass, both clear and green, and serrated bits of pressed metal identify the loading docks. Restaurant hopefuls and chic-chic bakeries squat nearby, sharing space with the authentic leave-takings of busted storefronts, compromised offices, and a lovingly run workshop for adults with cognitive differences.

I'm alarming, too. It's not so much that my works of clay skip ceramics' attendant technology as it is that I have become addicted to slurry, to that goop leftover from wheel-throwing. I've come to adore, as advertised by the parcel at my feet, the potential of very wet clay to taint organic forms.

Val said my affliction, including my altered vision, stems from neuroses, from the sort of mental imbalance that causes throbbing in my hands. He shouldn't have labeled the issue "hysteria," though; the politically correct reference to my trouble is "conversion disorder."

Specifically, Val ascribed my problems to my love of slip. He urged me to replace that wet stuff with grog, with those myriad ground particles of fired clay and to otherwise dry out.

I smiled at him when we argued. Wet clay was my means of getting beyond "properly formulated" ceramic bodies, of reaching otherworldly compositions. I answered that he, among all of my associates, for obvious reasons, should adore my water-based antics.

He knew that I had been amenable to working with precious metal clay, with phyllosilicate minerals augmented by microscopic particles of silver, but that I could not since I lacked funds for such materials. Similarly, he knew that I would have been content to integrate glass and rummaged wood into my clay had my phantom pains not interfered with my scavenging. Perhaps our relationship would have ended differently had he not refused to

collect those bits for me and had he stopped claiming that his body was more extensively limited than mine.

As per my investigation into geometrics, it was the clay's existential pliability that deterred me. It's understood among potters that malleability is incongruous with the purity of shape required by designs made up of straight lines.

Val got mad. He said he was tired of eating the Ramen noodles I bought when I stopped supplying inventory to downtown florists and to owners of household goods boutiques. He wanted me to return to my small production approach to pottery. He understood how to market flawless shapes, but was mystified by organics.

My love called for my taking back my practice of machining clay similar to the way in which bugle corps members machine music. He thrived on precision and in perfunctory yields and told me that it was my work's predictability and consistency that had charmed him.



During that awful period, I tried to please Val since I wanted to keep his adoration. Val was easy to care for. He had few hobbies and even fewer distractions. Val was aesthetically pleasing, too, being colorfully distinct in his physicality.

I forced myself back to my potter's wheel. I strained myself to return to simultaneously pulling and pushing clay, to using my

entire body to pat it and to shape it. I slammed down on it and drew up on it. I stuck first a single thumb and eventually both hands into it. I incised, I narrowed, and I widened. I became more familiar with the clay than with Val. My mistake, though, was not that intimacy, but telling Val about it.

Val slanted his eyes at me when I disclosed that the clay had said I ought not to fashion regular pots but to embrace contemporary ceramics' multi-valve horns, wide-ranging tempos, and intricate asymmetries. He turned away from me when I reported the clay's questioning of my fidelity to classic, athletic ceramic traditions and restrictions. Hel told me that I had become more unwell and prescribed seawater therapy.

I'm glad I didn't reveal everything. I didn't share how the silicon had whispered about sea life or show him the lumps I had transformed into the repetitions, rhythms, and proportions of symbiotic organisms, which occupy sinuous habitats beyond the mundane realm.

Nonetheless, Val got more and more annoying. Whereas he eventually stopped dwelling on my need for professional help, he wouldn't shut up about the urgency with which I ought to drink a solution ripe with salts. He harped repeatedly at me to take the blue-green algae cure. He remained adamant that I drench my innards in the liquid, which he believed, contained everything needed for sustaining life and that was sister to mammalian plasma.

I neither increased my number of appointments nor made saline cocktails. I became as bold as to defend my work to Val, too, telling him that I hated constructing silicon similitude, vessel-formed objects, or figurative images, that I loathed working with extruder-yielded or hand-formed coils, and that I had begun experiencing an unspecified terror whenever I acted on clay with a fettling knife.

Val told me it didn't matter if my work felt so regular as to be boring. It didn't matter if I was disinterested in making conspicuous wares for less than grateful shopkeepers. The dole was not for us. Financial responsibility didn't have to be exciting. He told me to concentrate on paying the electric bill and that it was his province to think great things as he completed his daily circuits. Val continued to press me, as well, to join him in drinking sea water.

Worn from his rhetorical pummeling, I returned to my potter's wheel, and to its concomitant drying, glazing, firing and finishing. I gave up slush, electing instead, to cross-hatch and to moisten. I likewise began to rent out my space, on

scheduled mornings, to noxious, chit-chatty housewives who lacked talent, but who were rich with time.

As for the briny stuff, I carried cups of it around my studio, sipping when Val was looking and spitting when he wasn't, until I had the flash that I could do away with that liquid by mixing it into my clay. I had become hopelessly involved with my organic shapes, with silicon expressions that approximated life visa, via their adulterated structural details and their exploitation of ductile limits. I even pretended I was incubating an alien seed, which would one day aggressively metabolize Earth's resources, altering the environment to suit its colonists. Such conquerors would be unable to breathe atmospheric air as Val and I do.

Meanwhile, on scheduled afternoons, I also began to open my studio to juveniles. Supervising those children paid better than the other kinds of babysitting had provided. Supervising those payees, though, resulted in more hours of drudgery. Those kids could glaze a small bowl or assemble a simple coil vase. However, the rest of their ceramics processes, the firing and the sanding, for instance, were mine to complete. I spent a lot of time wedging for them.

As I kneaded out air and lumps, I listened to the clay talk crudely about how my studio's abundant pools of silence constituted an ideal milieu for breeding. Their generations would be more sophisticated than bacteria or slime mold or even than photobiotics combined with fungi. They would be extremophiles, and as such, would be resistant to radiation, stellar winds, remote temperatures and drought. It was useful to be able to alternate between vibrant and dormant states.

Eventually, Val exposed my secret spawning of alternate creatures. It remained immaterial to him that I disdained pinching pots with thin, consistent walls, vacant of discovery, but it bothered him that I continued to mess around with abstracted forms.

He blew at me in angry puffs and indulged in a tirade. In his esteem, I cared nothing about his confinement or social life, nothing about earning a living wage, and only about discharging my anxieties into my ceramics. Val shrieked that I was no creative genius and that my newest work was absurd.

I think I cried. I know I implored Val to let me try again to make him happy, to let me try again to bring stability to our union. I made a show of reaching to kiss him, but he circling round and telegraphed that he wanted no warmth from me, just lunch.

I stopped visiting him and I stopped feeding him. I used my newfound time to fashion more organic forms. My white earthenware came alive as my ball clay, as my fire clay, and as my slip clay. Its feldspar and filler, gray sand, and seawater expiated the exactitudes I deemed necessary in my progressively personal art.

At first, without Val to monitor me, I worried I'd become manic. Over time, though, since the clay failed to pronounce me as such, I realized that I had not transformed toward insanity, but toward a fresh type of sensitivity.

Instead of yet more tea pots, I cultivated ceramic cnidarians. I built a colony of thousands of individual organisms linked by their shared genetic disposition. By eye, it was hard to tell that my hydroids were interconnected through an intricate, well-developed system of gastrovascular canals, but in my mind, I could tell that their buds shared nutrients.

I even began to tint my sacred slip. I worked with that invigorated hubris like an expert scientist might work with questionable technology. Both the scientist with her saline tanks, and me with my light colored, fine-grained silicon, was capable of creating panspermia.

Val did what he could to get my attention. He missed my care.

Ever gullible, I began to share my meals with him yet again and to spend late hours with him. Once more, I took up cleaning his home. I regretted my emotional weakening, all the same, since in no time Val resumed his habit of lecturing at me.

Val told me, while he fidgeted, turning round and round, that drinking seawater had given me a healing crisis, a corporeal casting off of my toxins and of their residuals. He told me that restoration does not occur without repercussions. He added that my worsening mood swings could be understood as birthed by my inner cleansing. Val told me not to suppress my symptoms. If anything, I ought to drink more brine.

I shrugged off his advice, took up smoking and bought only Swiss chocolate. What's more, I deigned to supplement, with sludge, a piece that had already hardened. That suspension of clay in water, with which I appended my piece, felt, as I worked it, like the electric current of diathermy. My illicit mix, however, was not intended to fill an incision in someone's infected mouth or to cure tumor, but to morph into a small, bimorphic sea being possessed of polyyps and hallows.

Initially I was very pleased with that coral-looking work and with the illusion that it gave of quaking. As I continued to

poke and pinch it though, the clay seemed wrong. Some of my altered form's tubes looked too long. Some of its spaces appeared too shallow. It was as though my innate polyp colony was transforming into a vital medusa.

Also, that creature was off in color. I had built from white clay, but my piece reflected a brownish hue. What's more, the tincture, which I had added to my beloved slurry, had been a salubrious blue, not a miserable russet; I consider the complexions of iron-enriched compounds to be too artificial for use with vitrified stoneware. Heat fusion ought to bring about a glazed, not a pigmented look.

Because I cared for that piece, I tried to augment it rather than to destroy it. My intention was to line its innards, following its initial firing, with bits of broken glass. My cephalopodae would reflect light.

I toiled to no avail. The more that I worked on that piece, the more alien-looking my art became. In the end, I returned its moist form to my recycling bin, to the pail from which I draw the lumps and bits I wedge.

I continued to avoid talking to Val though he persisted in hanging around my shop.

I felt a little bad about ignoring him since he was becoming sickly from my inattention.

More and more, I lived with the clay. It filled my waking moments and my imaginings. The night after I discarded my sea creature, for instance, I dreamt that I had become capable of spraying slush, at the tensile strengths and widths of my desire, from tentacles. As a silicon cuttlefish, I possessed suckers on my limbs and had the power to influence the hue of light which reflected off my skin. In my trance my camouflage effectively enabled me to avoid Val, the middle-aged matrons, and the clamorous children.

The day after that dream, when I returned to my studio, Val looked poorly. Worse, though, the hydroid that I had broken had somehow been reconstituted and it had been reassembled with a difference.

That silent statue was not the green-ware I had smashed, but a piece of Bisque-ware redolent in its porous state. Someone had flung my piece back together and had fired it at a temperature high enough to remove all of its moisture. In that hardened form, my cnidarians' colony spoke to me. Those voices were both unified and mesmerizing.

No longer compromised by moisture, that organic form was sultrier than had been the raw clay and altogether more authoritative than Val. I had no choice but to comply with its demands.

Immediately, I tossed Val, my Beta fish, into my kiln, cleaned up, and went outside. As I step away from my workshop's doors, a colony of the life form's offspring safely tucked in my package, I wish only that I had listened to my lover and had drunk the seawater.

****** THE END ******

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