

FREEDOM FICTION JOURNAL

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

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Editor's Note

Hello Freedom Friends,

We are back after a sabbatical in the late 2010. And our 2011 is off to a great start. Lot of new fiction from new authors. The blog format at our website keeps you entertained with new fiction every other week.

The PDF again has the similar look as before and is offered as a free download. It could be used on your mobile electronic reading devices or be printed out.

Lot more to come in 2011 so keep our website bookmarked in your browser. Keep checking the website and the Facebook page for updates and new fiction and comments are welcome of course.

Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

Ujjwal Dey

Editor for Issue 08, Vol 03.

Freedom Fiction Journal | <http://freedomfiction.com/>

“Trash*Can*Sam*” by Chris Castle

Synopsis: Teenage love. Murder mystery. Serial killer. Adventurous Summer. This is a gripping read from our favourite author Chris Castle.

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.

In this awesome adventure, a couple fights crime along with committing other social service.

Trash*Can*Sam*

By Chris Castle

There was a bad man in the neighbourhood. I found out about him the same time as I fell in love for the first time. There was Audrey and then there was the killer. It happened over a short period of time, to people no-one cared about. But Audrey cared and so did I. It began with a fight and ended with death. And in the middle was a great swathe of shadows; that was Trash* Can* Sam*.



I was lying on the dirt getting my ass kicked when I first met Audrey McPhee. The dirt and the kicks to my gut were a regular thing that year; a voice, and a girl's one at that, was not. Even as kick number three landed plumb in my ribs, I heard her calling out as clear as day. It was a tough voice, there was no disputing that, but it couldn't quite cover up the softness at the root of it. It was like hearing someone calling you a dummy but whispering 'I love you' under the surface. If my mouth wasn't full of blood, I might have smiled when I heard it, that first time.

From the dirt I saw what happened next. I felt kind of like a spy, as if this whole show was going on and me, the reason, was far removed from the whole thing. The three boys, big old bruisers, too, let me tell you that much, turned and faced up to the stranger. I just about managed to see the girl bunched in amongst the three of them; her arms were folded-not a good stance in a potential fight situation-her hair was tied back and hanging over her left shoulder. I tried to call out, but no words came out. Instead, I let out a chivalrous gurgle that made all of them briefly twitch and look back round to me, like a forgotten baby at a BBQ, then went back to the business at hand.

What did she say to them? I didn't hear then and Audrey never told me after. 'Between me and them,' was all she said, talking like a pint sized sheriff. All I do know was she spoke to them in a low voice and they listened; boy, did they listen! These three, who walked all over the teachers at school, who whipped their own ma's and pa's if stories were to be believed and near on pissed on the local preacher, listened close, like their lives depended on it. I rolled closer, trying to hear and not getting anything, but I took one thing out of the whole messed up, crazy scene: I saw Audrey McPhee's eyes that day and saw how they burned like she was set to commit sin; like it was just something she had to do, set in stone and out of her hands. A silence of a few seconds stretched out and then they stepped away and on down the gritted path. One by one they left, none of them daring to brush her shoulder in true punk fashion; not one of them calling back from a safe distance. I rolled onto my back and looked up at the sky. It was a blue, a perfect dream blue. I looked at it hard, swallowing blood and that was when, as I was tasting blood, that Audrey appeared overhead, looking squarely down on me. A part of me, a part of me that was a teenager and someday hoping to be a man, fell in love right there and then.

"Hello," she said, sounding oddly formal. Hell, with me looking up to her from the dirt and with the blue sky behind her, she sounded like God. I felt something tighten on my arm and I realised it was her hand pulling me up. She was stronger than she looked; even though I was only a piece of

string with knots in that day, I still weighed enough to warrant a struggle from her, a heave of air at least. Instead, she plucked me out of the dirt like a daisy.

"Hi," I said, mindful not to spray blood into her face as I spoke; it just didn't seem like the gentlemanly thing to do. "What...what did you say to those boys?"

"I told them to quit it," she said, letting go of me and flopping down in front of me on her knees. It reminded me of the way little kids drop down on the beach to make sandcastles. I almost smiled, but then remembered what we were talking about, i.e. my ass-whupping and subsequent rescue.

"It looked like you were saying more than that, and meaning a whole heap on top, too," I said. I guess I was in shock, if the truth was to be told. I didn't usually find more than two words to say to girls back then and those were either, 'sorry' or 'excuse me.' Hell, I pretty much didn't say more than that to anyone, boy or girl.

"Oh, I guess I said a little more. But they quit it, didn't they?" She had been looking down at the grass, picking the blades one by one, but after she spoke she looked up at me. Her eyes weren't burning anymore but they sure were bright; brown and dark, sure; but like they had something fuelling them, something deep. I swallowed before I answered and barely even tasted the clot of blood even as it rode down the back of my throat.

"They sure did at that!" I exclaimed. I never was much of a macho kid, that much was true and the fact I had been saved by a girl didn't rub me raw in the slightest. She wasn't a heroine to me, nothing like that; my mind was old in some respects and I understood real life didn't make heroes; that's why god created comic books. But I understood she had saved me; I wasn't bull headed or dumb and I knew that, as sure as night followed day.

"I'm Audrey. Audrey McPhee." She held her hand out, again oddly formal, like we were real people, not just a couple of teenagers lying in the dirt. I shook it back, grinning, faintly aware the blood round my mouth had given me a lipstick. Hell, the way out first meeting went, I may as well have pulled on a dress and curtsied.

"Amos. Amos Adams," I said. "Hey, we both have first names beginning with 'A!'" I went on. Like I said, I didn't have much experience talking to girls.

"We do, too," Audrey said back to me and smiled. But it wasn't a smile for a dummy, even though I was acting dumb. Later, when I got to know her better, I understood that she liked me just because I was too honest to be devious and too naïve to play tricks. Audrey had seen a lot of the dark before we met that day; that was what those three boys had seen in her eyes. We went on talking for a while; she held the blades of grass in-between her fingertips and twirled them as we did. It was only as we stood up to make out way home that I saw that each one she'd plucked were tipped with flecks of my blood.

For the next few weeks I thought about Audrey a lot. I thought about her the way teenagers thought about most girls, sure, but that was only part of it. She was petite and pretty but with that darkness too. Like looking at a doll in an old shop window, but only when the glass was worn and full of rain. But it was the way she talked that filled a lot of my mind, the words she said and the careful way she said them. A part of me felt that she had waited a long time to talk to someone and enjoyed the taste of the words as they came out. We were similar in that regard. We were close in other ways too; single parents, both of us and both damaged too. I had my ma; a tired woman who drank too much and rallied when she should have been at peace. Audrey had her

fallen pa; a stoke victim who sagged on the left side as if he was being pulled under; maybe he was. Audrey was on my mind, then, as luck would have it, one day, she landed on my toes.

Not Audrey herself, but a big thick tome of Edgar Allen Poe stories, which, looking back at it, probably weighed heavier than Audrey herself. I was in the library, searching for school books, when the aforementioned book introduced itself to three of my digits on my right foot. I yelped like a little girl seeing a spider and was suitably 'shushed' by the town librarian, a fierce woman by the name of Agnes Teabody. I meekly apologised and scooped up the book; for good measure, as I reared up I clunked straight into Audrey's head, just as she made to help.

After we checked out our books and apologised for the umpteenth time to the warrior-librarian, the two of us sat on the steps outside. It was a good day and, dazed by head-butting the girl I had almost fallen in love with and woozy from the pain I was feeling in my foot, I began to talk to Audrey just how I had done that day in the field. I talked for a while and she listened and then she talked for a while and I listened. Then we actually managed to weave what we said into conversations the way real people do and still it went along swimmingly. By the time we pulled ourselves off the steps-I had a numb ass to add to my war wound collection by then-I went swimming for the stars and asked her if she wanted to go for a milkshake. I waited, a temporary fear running down my spine as I realised she could actually say no. In fact, Audrey didn't answer at all. Instead, Audrey did what a lot of girls did when they had finally got the dumb-ass boy to get round to asking the question they've been waiting for them to ask for the longest time; she simply smiled.

In real life, as far as most of us know it, that would be the end of it, right? The boy and the girl would go for their milkshake-out of curiosity, I ordered chocolate, Audrey ordered chocolate and vanilla; a touch of class a girl could only ever come up with; even the waiter taking our order looked stunned-and life would take its course; they would fall in love or they would fall out of love. But Audrey was no ordinary girl and ours was no ordinary story. Instead, for a month or so, we did follow the patterns of every other teenage couple. But then came the summer, the soup kitchen and Sam.

Audrey had been working in the soup kitchen before I had met her. During school time, she had worked most weekends, when her aunt would visit and look after her pa. After school finished, she began to go there most evenings. She would serve the food for the first hour, then clean up for another hour. Sometimes she would go in early and prepare the vegetables, other times she would stay later, re-filling the coffee urn and talking to the men and women who wanted to share their stories.

Of course I ended up working there too. And yes, at first, I would say that I was roped into going there because of Audrey. I wanted to see as much of her as I could and there was a part of me, a part I was ashamed of, which was jealous of the time she was spending at the kitchen. I imagined handsome co-workers, hell, even dashing down and out's, all ready to steal away the one good thing in my life. So I went along and Audrey knew I was going for all the wrong reasons, but she hugged me anyway, because it made her happy.

And I loved it.

I made the mistakes a new worker makes; I dropped things, I pushed the wrong buttons, I was nervous when I should have been strong. I was too quiet-or, closer to the truth, how I had always been before I had met Audrey-and ran close to being swallowed up by the whole thing. I would walk home some nights and try to work out just how to say to Audrey that I wasn't coming back

without sounding like a complete loser; luckily for me, I didn't have the words to back up my cowardly thoughts. So instead, I toughed it out.

I got better. Audrey was a part of it, a huge part of it, but there were others, too. The woman in charge, Lesley, was like how I'd always hoped a teacher at the school would be and never was; open, a little tough and caring. She took me to one side and guided me back over all the things I had been screwing up; she did it with a smile and made me feel as if I was just remembering things, rather than being told. Other people worked there, too and we all got along fine, but Lesley was the glue of the operation, there was no doubt about it.

And then there were the guys and gals themselves. Now, when Audrey told me about the kitchen I immediately painted pictures in my head the way everyone, not just teenagers, does, about soup kitchens. That it was going to be stuffed full of angry boozers and strung out junkies, carrying blades and smashed bottles. It was nothing like that; most of them were quiet, smiling when they took their food, happy to be eating a hot meal. A few of them were talkers and the things they said were damn funny too. The best was a guy named Denis Cauley. Denis told stories that were impossible to follow, rude as hell and always finished with a neat punch-line. He managed to be charming to the women even as the filth rolled out of his mouth and full of winks and wide-eyes to the boys, as if he himself couldn't quite believe what he was saying. I was won over inside a minute.

Denis would roll up every night with two flowers in his lapel; one for Lesley and one for Audrey. When he saw me he always said he had something extra for me and patted his crotch in a way that should have been obscene but was instead just flat out funny. Audrey told me once that Denis had never told anyone his history; there was no back story, no lost family. There was regret, Audrey said, but it was a closed in type of sorrow, all packed in around the eyes and the corners of his lips when he was done telling his stories. Denis, Audrey said to me one night, while we were sitting on the swings of the park, looking up to the stars and cooling after a serious make-out session, was just about the saddest man she had ever met.

Denis Cauley was the first victim.

When he did not show up one night, I shrugged along with everyone else; there were no rules and as one woman, Gladys, was fond of saying, it was the only place in town where a reservation was strictly unnecessary. Gladys had once been a beautiful woman; she had a photo she showed me once, but I didn't need that to believe her. She had the bone structure in her face that rich men's wives would pay a million for. I saw Gladys die that summer and I still have that picture in my wallet, as much to remind me of the beauty in the world as the horror that surrounds it. After the third night, I grew worried, which was a day later than Lesley and especially Audrey. The two of them went to the police, who treated the report of a missing homeless man like it was a joke. It was a different time then and concern was still married to status. To put it another way, while we walked home that night, Audrey, angry and deflated on my arm, pointed out the posters for the local tycoon's cat plastered all over the telephone polls. We both had the feeling they had been distributed by the sheriff's department rather than the family.

A paperboy found Denis the next day. The boy had turned down a back alley to short cut to his next row of houses and pitched clear over the handlebars. He went back, a young boy's curiosity piqued to see the dead dog that he must have hit. What he saw made him faint dead away.

I found all this out from the local reporter who came down to the kitchen later that day. He replayed the story to the three of us-Lesley, Audrey and I-with no sort of relish or glee; like I said it was a different time then, when reporting was still a serious business and not a circus. The man,

whose name was Daniels-no first name, no mister, just Daniels-finished up and asked us a few questions. Lesley remarked later, as the three of us stood stunned around the coffee urn, that he had asked smarter questions and showed more concern than any of the cops and she was right. He flipped the notepad down and I could see he was struggling with something. I noticed it, but it was Audrey who spoke up; that summed the two of us up as neatly as anything, I suppose.

"What is it?" she asked. It was her turn to play reporter and then, in that moment as I looked at her, I had the idea she could have been a damn good one if she'd wanted to be and we all looked back to him. He drummed his finger on his notebook, as if it held all the answers; then he flipped it open, turned it to a page near the back and it turned out that he did. He spun it round and showed it to us, like the cops earlier in the day had shown us their badges. On it was a neatly drawn phrase, too specific to be done in the reporters own hand.

"We found it written above the body," he righted himself and looked up.

"Above Denis' body. His face...his face was wrapped up in one of those black liners, the vinyl looking ones." He tapered off and looked back down to the page, where the three of us were staring. After that night, I could never slip a vinyl record out of its case without my stomach rolling; I was not one of those who decried the arrival of CD's. On the page were three words; the three words that would define our summer, and really, our lives:

Trash*Can*Sam*

For the rest of the week we worked in a stunned silence. The story appeared in the newspaper, but it was not as sensational as Lesley had feared. It reported the murder but withheld the gruesome details. I read the story and felt a sick stab in my heart when I realised that if I had not been involved with the kitchen, I wouldn't have paid any attention to the story. I wondered if the information had been suppressed by the reporter or at the request of the police. As the days went on and Audrey and Lesley came back ashen face from the police station, it became clear that the police didn't care a damn; Audrey pointed out that the cat posters had all been taken down, so they obviously had been prioritising their cases. She said this and became someone I didn't know; I realised later, when she was like this, she was an adult; light years away from me in so many respects. In the way she understood the world, while I just lived in it. I held her when she was like this, and it seemed like it was enough, but there was a buzz in my gut that told me it was only the beginning.

Lesley told the others about Denis but did not reveal the details. She explained to me one night how telling the truth about it would be like tossing a grenade right in the centre of the feeding table.

"Half of them would go out and grab the nearest bottle. Some of them would spike up. But all of them would be scared," she explained to me. I had seen her warn the other workers to keep their traps shut, but I had the idea she was just telling me her fears, as much as anything right then.

"Not scared, terrified. A lot of the gang don't have places to sleep at the best of times; they pitch up in the park, the tunnels. If they got the idea someone was after them...paranoia's the one thing this place is fully stocked on, Amy, let me tell you that much." She shook her head and set down her polystyrene cup; she used the same one all through the day to save on waste; it was one of the things I loved about her; the same as calling the men and women, her 'gang' or me 'Amy'. In other people it could have been irritating, or affected; but with her it was just her way. A way full of warmth. Later, after meeting Sam, I realised she was the light to his darkness, like God had created a poison, but remembered an antidote at the last minute, too.

The second body showed up exactly a week after Denis. The woman's name was Sheila. She was a quiet, haunted woman, who tugged at her sleeves to make sure the needle tracks were covered at all times, as if she had only ended up at the kitchen by accident, somehow. It was the strangest thing, when we found out; there were not the same shockwaves as with Denis. In a terrible way, she was simply not as known to us as Denis; this was a shock to me, to think that death, or murder, had a way of making some people seem more important than others; it was as unsettling as it was a stark, ugly truth. But there was something else, a numbness that rode through the three of us as Daniels shambled down the road towards us, his notepad open, his eyes tired but still wide. And more; a knowledge that was as inescapable as it was terrible: We had been expecting it.

Before I had met Audrey, say in school, if a teacher, out of his gourd on drugs or booze, had posed the question; 'can you be braced for murder?', I think I would have burst out laughing. But, like I said, that was before Audrey, the kitchen and that summer. I guess you could say I was growing up, but it was not quite that. I think unless you ever, god forbid, come into contact with evil, you may never fully grow up. I don't mean cruelty, or spite - like the three boys and their steel-capped boots - but true darkness. A woozy feeling, like the world might have layers, curtains, which only some people get to peek behind, while everyone else wanders blithely on. That was how I felt then, on hearing about the second murder.

The police were back, their questions more serious, their tone affected as much by the possibility of the scandal as much as the poor people who'd died. Statements were taken, the kitchen given a swift, thorough sweep. Lesley looked at them with cold eyed contempt; coffee from the urn was not offered, while I looked on stunned, the naïve part of me that was still clinging on for dear life, was relieved that the police, people in charge, who stopped crimes, were now giving it their undivided attention. And Audrey? Audrey looked to me like the first time I had seen her in that field; as if she was looking at a pack of bullies who were not going to do anything now that they had been forced to look, unblinking, at the truth.

We tried to take precautions; none of us had any money, but by being poor, we were resourceful. Lesley scrambled up enough whistles to give to everyone who came in. Mace was a thing of the future, but Audrey-and I didn't ask-came up with the idea to supply each of them with a can of spray deodorant. For my part, I saw that everyone was wearing good strong work-a-day boots and held an impromptu demonstration of how to apply a good sharp kick to the shins-a remnant of my three boy bully past; a past that seemed not months but lifetimes ago-which garnered a brief volley of applause.

I'd heard of the term 'gallows humour' but never really understood the idea of it until that night; each member of the gang, clutching their spray cans and torches looked liked they were off to some lifeguard session in hell. One guy, Brian, had written a small perfect message on his Styrofoam cup; 'not homeless, just between mansions.' Even as the gang broke up, everyone huddled over the coffee urn until the last possible moments, someone blew on their whistle, which, after a few seconds, brought a low hum of laughter and then a burst of whistles from everyone; the noise was deafening and screechy, but everyone was smiling as they did it. Then it was over and everyone filtered off into the darkness of the night. My heart sank for every one of them. The noise of the whistles had subsided but there was another sound that was trapped in my head; the sound that came after the first whistle but before the laughter; the small, but clear, sound of whoever screamed.

The three of us collected up the rubbish; I held up the black bin liner-Lesley had contemplated banning them and using the smaller bags, but it was simply impossible to switch-the feel of it eating through the gloves I was now wearing and had never even contemplated wearing before

this all happened-while the girls pitched in the cups. They looked 'tired but wired', Audrey's phase for when someone exhausted themselves doing good work, and I felt it too. Lesley stepped away for a second, leaving Audrey to finish up. She returned clutching three more cans to her chest and three more whistles around her neck. She set them down on the table, one for each of us, and shrugged. *We're a part of it now*, I thought, looking at the cans. Lesley, wearing a grim smile I'd never seen before, went round to both of us and slipped the whistles over our necks. The strap felt cool around my neck and made me shiver, even though it was probably the warmest night of the year so far. Audrey looked at me and smiled; she looked so brave and so terrified I don't think I could have loved her more. It was a feeling of love that was so powerful that it nearly made my knees buckle. I looked away, afraid I might say the wrong thing, or cry even. I looked down to the black bag I was holding. There was a small white slip sellotaped to it in Brian's perfectly neat handwriting; it said, 'Sam was here!'

There was a third murder, a man called Bill who had loved playing cards, the following week and then, another, a woman, Brenda-'hey they both have first names beginning with 'B'-I thought bizarrely when I heard, the day after. The jolt of the forth murder, the speed of it, caught everyone out. In some sick way, we were all prepared for the third death, but to get the forth was...shocking. It was the kind of mindset that could only make sense after you lose your mind, which by then, a lot of people had. It was Brenda, poor Brenda, who had always asked for a second serving of food with flushed cheeks, as if she was being greedy, which tipped the town into something like madness.

The first shockwave came from the press. Daniels, who had done a good job, in my humble opinion, of reporting the facts and keeping a lid on the hysteria, was nudged to one side when the real circus came to town. The magic words, 'serial killer,' bloomed on the front page, almost lovingly in my opinion, unleashing the whole damn thing. Daniels actually came down one more time, the notepad nowhere to be seen, his eyes no longer wide, but instead, defeated. He shambled up to me and it almost felt like he was a friend readying to say goodbye. The newspaper was jammed under his arm and mine was on the table, next to my coffee.

"It's wide open now," he whispered and turned away, the newspaper almost like a crutch under his arm as he disappeared amongst the vultures.

As it turned out, he was right and he was wrong. The media, as it is wont to do, got their teeth into the story like nobodies business. The rumours flooded the market, the comparisons ran rife-Jack The Ripper was a popular, but nonsensical favourite-and the label-Trash Can Sam, was the icing on the cake. It felt unreal to me and I think a good deal of that came from the way they used his name, forgetting the all important asterisks. To me, they, from the very start, had unsettled me more than anything; it was an attention to detail that horrified me more than the name or the choice of letters, lower or capitals. That was what made it real to me and made the reports somehow unreal, fictitious almost. At night when I thought about what went on, the madness, the sheer wildness of what was happening around us; it was the asterisks that I kept coming back to. Those were the small details that coloured the nightmares that I had, giving them a flavour, a taste that the media could never provide.

And me and Audrey, in the middle of all this? Believe it or not, we got closer and closer. We were together and it was enough. It was something like a shield, what we had, keeping everything at bay. When it got too much for her, I held her in my arms. When I found tears running from my cheeks that I would be completely unaware of shedding, she would kiss me and whisper in my ear. At a push, I would say that death being around us, made us want to live more. Maybe. But really, there was no logic in it. There never is with love. And even when she asked me to risk my life, I didn't question her. What could I say? I was in love.

"We have to find him," Audrey said to me. We were sitting in the diner where we had once gone for milkshakes. In-front of us now was coffee, as if milkshakes were part of a frivolous past.

"Audrey..." I didn't ask any silly questions; I knew what she was talking about. I called her by her proper name, too; no 'Audes,' or 'babes,' for me; I always kind of hated pet names for lovers.

"What, are we going to trust the police? All they're going to do is cover their asses with the media and hope it dies down or he gets bored. I haven't heard one thing about them actually getting close to catching him." She sipped her coffee and frowned. If anyone was looking at us, it would look as if we were quarrelling about which movie to see, not tracking down a homicidal maniac.

"How do you know that?" I said. I hated to be the voice of reason, but there was no other choice in the matter. Somewhere the waitress dropped a cup and it smashed on the floor. There was a small, sardonic cheer; but we both flinched.

"We both know, Amos, come on! What they've said to us, their half-assed interviews. It's low scale murder, like Lesley said."

There was a truth in that. There was interest, sure, but no full blown frenzy, say, in the way there would have been, if the victims had a roof over their heads. Lesley had said as much, leading to the 'low scale' line which had sent one hardened detective scurrying away like a puppy. There was no direct link between money and murder, because there was no proof. But like we saw earlier; the rich man's cat was now safely tucked up back at the mansion, while the murdering went on down in the open air kitchen.

"What could we do, Audrey? This feels like some half-assed 'Scooby Doo,' except with a bucket of blood, or something." I took my own cup, trying not to notice how my hands were shaking. The 'something' in question was the part in the 'Scooby' episode where the male protagonist was apt to piss his pants at the first sight of the villain.

"So I should have walked by that day when you were in the dirt, then?" She said quietly. I looked up, too shocked to be sacred anymore. I could feel the blood drain out of my face, even as hers flushed. I put my cup down very carefully in the saucer, so as not to smash it down; I didn't think the poor waitress would be able to take two in two minutes.

"Amos,-" I cut her off by raising my hand. It was the only time I ever did something like that, but I was furious by then and maybe something else, too. Maybe a little ashamed, as well.

"I'm thinking about you, Audrey. If we get into this and something happened. I..." my words trailed off and my palm fell down between the cups. Audrey took it.

"I love you," I said. It wasn't romantic, under a field of stars; it was just a crappy little diner, with a floor full of broken china. She squeezed my hand and smiled like she did the first time I asked her out. Only this time, she spoke back and this time, it was the words I'd been waiting to hear since the first time we'd spoken.

And like most men who profess their love, the following action is one purely dictated by the woman. We began our investigation. We even used 'Scooby' as our code word for snooping, the way other people our age would use for a make-out place. It was that sort of summer. Our houses being out of the question, we decided on the library as our base. From there we pulled out all the information that we could and wrote it all down in a big folder. We scanned microfilm until our eyes

began to ache, went through every newspaper article, no matter how trashy or pointless. The formidable Ms. Teabody became our guardian angel, having heard from her sister that we worked at the kitchen, and provided us with as much information as we could ask for. We spent two days investigating.

And found nothing.

There were no 'breaks in the case' and we certainly didn't find some previously unseen shred of evidence that had gone unnoticed to policemen who had twenty years experience on us. We toyed with the idea of going to the police and threw it out as soon as we recalled our previous meetings. Instead, we settled on the reporter, Daniels, who seemed to understand more, even out of the loop, than those who claimed to be inside it. This was before the internet and cell phones; hell, the newspaper offices were a stones throw from the library. We simply walked in and looked for him at his desk.

We were ushered out and then promptly met by the man in question an hour later. We met back in the diner. Going against everything I had seen and heard, Daniels was a teetotal reporter who didn't drink or touch cigarettes. Instead, what the man did have was a sweet tooth; he ordered the milkshake sundae without batting an eyelid and smiled to the waitress, who he was on first name terms with. By the time we got to talking, we had to lean either side of the gigantic dessert, just to see his face.

Daniels looked over the file we had hastily created, nodding admiringly at the thoroughness of it and sighing at the uselessness of it. When he finished the mountain of ice cream, he delicately dabbed his mouth and ordered coffee. Out came the notepad and he turned to a fresh page, where he hastily wrote down six names. He turned them round and showed them to us. I recognised some of the names and Audrey knew the ones that were a mystery to me. I understood then, that I was looking at six names, all men, who could potentially be serial killers. Daniels calmly explained why he thought the men could be suspects; he reasoned it had to be someone local, to know where to leave the bodies. He explained the histories of the men, their criminal records, why what they had done in the past could lead them to 'push the boundaries.' Daniels had a way of speaking, as delicate as the way he dabbed his lips, as a way of almost side-stepping the blunt trauma of what he was discussing. I thought it was a smart play; that it probably stopped him from going mad.

"Personally, I think it's the heat sending him round the twist," he said, as he flagged the waitress, who we all now knew as Joanie. "I think the heat makes crazy people tip over into outright insane, but that's just my opinion." The bill came and he generously paid for our drinks, waving away the protests as if an imaginary fly had just started circling us.

"Or it could be one other man," he said, pushing the note under the cup, leaving a healthy tip, I noticed. He saw us looking at him, impatient. He smiled his sad smile.

"It could be a complete stranger."

Audrey copied out the names and handed me the original slip of paper. I put it in my pocket, feeling that same uneasy feeling as when I was holding the bin bag with Brian's message scrawled on it. I could have the name of a murderer in my pocket. Hell, a serial killer was practically tickling my balls. With that thought, I took it out and put it in my back pocket, the notion that the psycho was now cupping my ass somehow not as bad. Like I said, it was that kind of summer. We decided to look at the list in the morning, after we had taken a rest from the madness for a few hours. The murders, sorry, the 'killing spree,' as it was now known as, meant the kitchen had been shut down indefinitely. This, of course, had sent Lesley into a rage, and the cops had

come to a kind of compromise, allowing the three of us and a handful of cops to hand out food for exactly one hour each night.

The kitchen being shut meant we were strangely at odds with having free time; 'it's like we have to be like other teenagers' Audrey mock-gasped. We both laughed at that, but there was an element of truth to it. We went to the cinema holding hands, ate pizza by the slice at the hangouts. It was fine but there was a part of me that felt like a fake somehow. I confessed this to Audrey, hoping this wasn't going to torpedo what she might have been thinking were good times and she jumped into my arms and kissed me with a force that nearly knocked me off my feet. A man walked past us, shaking his head in what was meant to be disapproval but was clearly a bad case of jealousy, muttering about us getting a room. Instead, we went to the park.

It was early evening and still light when we wandered in. It was deserted, due to the craziness; even though it was 'only' the homeless being targeted, the fear factor meant families and kids were locked up at home. The rebels were in town for the state fair and the sports clubs were retired for summer vacation. We rested under our favourite oak tree and began to make out.

It was powerful in a way I had never known before. I had always been crazy for Audrey and that day was no different. But there was an intensity to the way we kissed, the way our hands moved over each other, that felt like it was from some other world. It was ecstasy, pure and simple, but with a dark edge running under it, like everything that summer. I felt desperation in us, as if we were trying to force the murders away with our fingertips, our lips. We almost clawed at each other, as if to make sure we were still alive and real. We filled the space of our unanswered questions with moans and cries. When it was over, we tumbled onto our backs, some of our clothes shed and our breathing laboured.

We didn't speak for a long time and that was okay. There was still a little light in the sky; we still had time. I pulled myself up onto my elbows, adjusting my clothes. I looked over and saw Audrey looking up at me, smiling. Despite everything that was happening, it was the happiest I'd ever felt in my whole life. I didn't want to spoil it by saying these things out loud, so instead I looked out to the park.

And saw Trash* Can* Sam*.

I rubbed my eyes, of course. After what I had just been through with Audrey, my mind was in a dozen different places and my heart was in happy, raw pieces. I blinked, not wanting to associate the stuff of my nightmare with this one, perfect moment. I looked back out and saw him still walking towards us, a black spike of ink against the breezy, fresh grass.

"Audrey," I managed to whisper, as every part of me went into a numb shock. She looked at me; I could feel that, even though I couldn't look away from the grasses. I heard her let out a gasp, the same quiet pitch as me, as if we were both scared of being heard by him. He stopped by the small playground and adjusted himself, as if readying himself for a date. Then he marched relentlessly on towards us, breaking any last hopes I had that he may not have seen us.

Audrey was the first to react of course. It was a simple gesture, pulling on her clothes, but an essential one. I did the same, the monster coming near. I was readying to run when Audrey grabbed my hand. I looked around to her, managing to break away from him just long enough to ask, impolitely, if she was losing her mind. She fixed me with a stare, something like I saw with the three boys. I stopped because I loved her.

"Let's hear what he has to say," she said in a flinty voice that I did not know. I swallowed and if I could, I would have pleaded, but instead I simply gripped her hand tighter. I forced myself to look away, out to the park, and by then he was only a few feet way from us.

I can describe the way he looked now; if I had been asked that day or the next, I would not have been able to; the fear was still too strong. He was dressed almost casually; trousers, boots, a grey jumper. The only thing that gave him his identity was the bin liner; it was tapped over his face, the sellotape shiny against the black bag; there were two jagged holes where his eyes poked out; I didn't remember the colour, blue, but Audrey did. It was the sort of get up that should have looked ridiculous, but didn't. Instead it looked truly horrifying.

"You think these things only happened in daylight?" he said in a monotone voice. If there was interest in his voice, it didn't come through. It was deadened and I imagined how so much of his life must be dull, apart from the one terrible thing he chose to do.

In his hand was a bag; in the bag was the head of poor Gladys. I knew she was dead, a fool would have known that, but it was only the gesture of what he did next, that brought it home that she was truly gone. He reached down and gently pushed her eyelids, which had been raised in shock, down. It was like he was killing her twice-for our benefit? I couldn't be sure. For his, I think yes. Then he set it down and walked away. There was no need for a signature, I thought later, when I was capable of rational thought; he had an audience.

We sat in the police interview room together; it wasn't allowed, but like I said, it was a different time, and these were most certainly exceptional circumstances. Audrey talked and I listened. Though it was a terrible thing to do, it didn't feel like that; Audrey wanted to guide the situation, I was sure of it and it wasn't until she began to tell the second part of the story; the part when the moment turned from the finest to the most god-awful in our lives, that I understood why.

Audrey didn't tell them we had seen Trash* Can* Sam*.

We had, according to her, finished our time together and found the victims head in the bushes. If I flinched, the cop didn't notice; he was too rapt by Audrey's story to notice. Pieces fell into place in my head; the vague salaciousness of the way Audrey told the story to the cop, to lead him off the track of the sudden blunt show and tell of the grisly discovery. It worked; a light grilling and no more than that and then we were free.

"We know the colour of his eyes," she said and then took my hand. I waited for more but instead she led me to the diner, a place full of bright lights, crowds and safety. I couldn't help notice the parallels between the short sentence of the killer in the afternoon and Audrey now, in the evening. Both of them had a world more to tell and both of them said nothing more, as if loaded with secrets and worse, solutions.

Audrey told me why; she didn't trust the cops with the information, it would help us with our 'Scooby' investigation, it was a secret worth keeping. Plus, she didn't want cops tailing us for protection. *God no*, I thought sadly. The next day, she said, we would collect photos of the six men on Daniels list and look for blue eyes. Now that she had told me what colour they were, I couldn't get the image out of my head.

"Sure, we could snoop some more," I began to say, feeling my voice clang back into something like it's old self. I swallowed and a crazy sensation followed; I finally felt that clog of coppery blood that I tasted before I spoke to Audrey on the first day that we met. It was a dank, metallic feeling.

"But Audrey, what are we going to do?" I asked. I said 'we' out of duty, although now I felt as if I was running after the answer, willing but clueless. She took my hand, the same way she had when I first told her I was in love with her. She didn't speak and neither did I, but I had the idea that somewhere, inside ourselves, we were silently making a promise all the same.

The next day we sat in the library, hunting for the six photos. It took us the whole day to finally get them; some of the photos were in black and white and we had to pull hospital records for eye colour. We went on, my mind reasoning that at some stage we were going to finish this up and speak to the police even though Audrey had lied to them.

We left the library with one name. Harry Jenkins had lived in the town his whole life. He was a middle aged man, whose wife had died of cancer and he had wonderfully blue eyes. He lived alone and worked as a vet. I wondered, amongst all the madness, if he had ever treated the rich guy's cat. I remembered what Daniels had told us that day in the diner. That he had a history of mental illness and had been up on a few charges before getting married. His sheet alone seemed, not exactly harmless, but weak, Daniels all too readily admitted. But he had been close to being pulled up for serious crimes that never quite stuck and most importantly, Daniels, when talking face to face with the guy, had felt an edge to him, that simmering under the surface feeling, that some people carry.

We stood outside the library knowing the name of the man who could have murdered those poor people. I sat down on the steps and Audrey sat down next to me. What we had between us was bubbling and close to the surface and I wanted to talk about it before it simply descended into a shouting match.

"What are we going to do, Audrey?" I said quietly. Around us, people went on with their lives, oblivious.

"I'm going to his house," she said. Her eyes were burning again, that same flinty way that came to her when she stood up to the bullies, to the man himself.

"What are you going to do?" I said. If I spoke it out loud, maybe she would understand how bad this could all end up. I looked over, hopeful. I felt how wide my eyes were and thought I must have looked like Bambi's mom in the crosshairs.

"I'm going to his house, now," she said. After all of it, I suddenly didn't feel scared. Instead, I just felt a sudden wave of tiredness, a wish for this to all be finally over.

She began to walk away but I snagged her hand and locked it in mine; it was a smart move, one of the few I made. I didn't grab her, or stop her; instead I joined her.

"We're going to his house," I said and from out of nowhere, I smiled. "You haven't got your whistle." Insanely, we both laughed.

While we didn't have our whistles, we did grab gloves and our 'tool kit'. The tool kit consisted of everything you needed to pick a lock and get inside a house. It was something Lesley kept, a long standing joke that the boss had the equipment but no houses to break into. She had showed both of us how to get in as quickly as possible. The madness of what we were doing gave way to the sheer excitement of it; any weariness had slipped away by then, replaced by a final hurdle of insanity that I think was part blessing, part curse. I looked over and saw the same wild eyed look in Audrey's eyes that I felt. We headed to the address, our hearts beating, the same feeling of

disconnection jarring through me as we walked past people on their way home from work, on their way to the closest bar.

The heat was tremendous; as we walked the stairs to the apartment, I was aware of sweating and saw thin beads draw over Audrey's forehead too. It was well into the night now as we reached his door. Audrey picked the lock and I watched the corridor for unwelcome attention. And what if he was not there? Would we leave a message? If he was there, would we...do what exactly? Nothing came into my mind then, only the one mission of praying we would not be seen. I mean, god, when you're breaking into a killer's room, the last thing you want around are people who could raise the alarm, right? It was that kind of summer. The lock jarred open. Audrey looked up to me, smiling wildly; I didn't want to think anymore; I was the one who pushed the door open, wanting it to be over.

There was a hall light on and a stronger light burning in the kitchen. To this day, I'll never know if he heard us open the door. I walked down the corridor, hearing my soft footsteps as if they were Keith Moon drum solos and felt something brush against my shoulder; it was Audrey. She wanted to be by my side. On a tactical front, it was probably the dumbest thing we could have done, but it settled my heart down enough to only be fit to bursting. We stepped into the too bright light of the kitchen, the naked bulb overhead burning.

We've all seen the movies, right? The killer comes out swinging, the axe sails an inch over the heroine's head and embeds itself in the wall. She runs, jiggling away in a white vest, into the final act. None of that happened here. We stepped into the kitchen and came face to face with the killer. The black bin liners were spread out over the kitchen table. Instead of an axe in his hands, he held a needle and thread, where he was sowing the mask together. He was balding and plain looking, the thick glasses he wore magnifying the evidence of his blue eyes.

"I was going to finish with you," he said matter-of-factly, as if we were two meter maids come to collect the bill. He finally looked up from what he was doing and nodded to us; there was no wild eyed hysteria, no gritted teeth. Again, I had the same feeling I had when I first heard his voice; the mundane nature of him, the boredom. What he did to escape it and the jail of what he returned to when he was done.

In the corner of the kitchen was a tool box. It looked like your common garden variety car kit, but for the blades jutting out of the side. It dawned on me that the kit was his murder box. A vision came into my head, him lunging wildly and chaos flaring. I edged towards it, waiting for him to react, but instead he set down the needle and thread, as if preparing himself to make tea and very slowly, very carefully clutched his chest. I shuddered regardless, ready for movement but none as slow and as steady as that. He slipped down from where he was standing, clawing at the oily bin liners and fell to the floor.

I knew what was happening and Audrey did too. As he lay there, his face plunging into a violent red, she watched him. He didn't make a sound and that made it worse; there was the quiet of the room, punctuated by the scratching of his nails against the material. It's funny what you remember about terrible situations; I remember he had incredibly well kept fingernails. I thought of them brushing against Gladys's eyelashes and almost threw up. I looked at the too bright light above us and then back over to Audrey.

"Audrey..." I said and then could not really think of anything else to say. There was time, I knew that. There was a telephone a few feet away, we stood in a building full of people. I was the one who shuffled, who made noises to move, or pretended I was going to act. But Audrey stood perfectly still. If her eyes were flint before, they were burning stones in those few minutes. She did

not blink, she did not breathe. Instead she simply waited; waited for the man to die so that the terrible things could be brought to a close. The man's feet kicked out, not in defence, or despair, but simply as a human reflex. There was a low gurgling sound and then nothing. He was dead.

So what did that make us? We did not kill anyone but we let a man die. Did we set out to kill him; could we have killed him? I don't know if I could have done, but I know Audrey could've. We didn't set out to kill him but he sure was dead. After a few moments I took her hand and led her away. We walked back down the corridor and opened the door. No-one saw us leave. I drew it gently and saw Audrey steal a final glance back, as if to make sure he wasn't faking. She looked away and I stole a look myself; his feet were pointing up to heaven, though his path was meant for elsewhere, I was pretty sure. I closed the door. It was over.

The news of his death was reported by Daniels in the paper the next day. In amongst all the Trash Can Sam-still no asterisks-a small article reported of the death of one Harry Jenkins. The death was caused by a massive heart attack. Police noted the door had been disturbed and he possibly was party to a burglary gone wrong, even though nothing was stolen. I nodded at the article; it contained nothing but the facts. I waited for the police to come and question us but everyone was still too tied up on Sam to take much notice. It was over.

The summer came to an end one explosive night around the end of August. The storm which had been threatening for so long finally came and it went in the record books and then some. People said it washed away a lot of the blood from the summer, though by then the killings had abruptly come to a standstill. The park had become a folklore spot-read make-out place-and the police had kept an open file, even as the story slipped further and further back in the papers. The kitchen reopened with a minimal amount of fuss and Lesley kept photos of every one of the victims in her wallet; she managed to get the mayor to erect a small plaque in the library to remember the dead.

I sat with Audrey and together we watched the storm. We caught it early and watched as it snaked across the sky in stages, reminding me eerily of the day when the killer walked like a black spike across the dusk lit park. I shuddered and I felt Audrey tremble too. We didn't talk about what had happened; we found more to occupy us; the world was always changing and lovers can always find things to argue about. We would have more time; not the rest of our lives, but a good stretch. I reached over and held her hand; her grip was strong in mine and felt as good as anything I'd known, before or since. The lightning jagged, the thunder clapped and we readied ourselves for the autumn, as the summer died before us.

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

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“Without a Trace” by Michele A. Pultz

Synopsis: A woman wakes to find her most prized possession stolen. And finds the loss is minor compared to the greater loss of trust and loyalty she encounters when she realizes the truth.

About the Author: Michele has had a “real job” in graphic design for the past 20 years. The writing bug bit at an early age and just won’t go away no matter how hard she tries to squash it. She lives with her husband Les in West Virginia. She is a graduate of The Institute of Children’s Literature, Redding, CT.

In this story, a betrayal dawns on a friend.

Without a Trace

By Michele A. Pultz

A thick mist swirled around dark curls as she stepped out of the car. She removed the gold watch and placed it in the plastic bag which contained the wallet and dental plate and twisted the key in the trunk.

Prying open the mouth of a decaying corpse wasn't going to be easy. Sure, she had to actually lift the body and move it around but that seemed mild compared to staring into the blank face of a once living, breathing human being. She wondered if the mortician really did sew the mouth shut or was that just a myth. She'd find out soon enough.



Pushing the can of kerosene to the side she grabbed for the pick and shovel. Darkness had begun to fall, a full moon would soon be all the light she'd have as a guide. The recent rains had softened the ground nicely. Walking silently through the dew covered grass to the chosen spot, she let the shovel flop to the ground and stood for a moment staring at the wilting flowers atop the fresh mound of earth.

"Trust me babe, it'll work," she remembered him saying.

"It won't be long now," she reminded herself.

"Sorry," she whispered quietly.

Kicking away the mound of flowers, she jammed the pick into the soft earth. Perfect.

She dug furiously for nearly an hour before deciding she needed a break when a voice from the shadows startled her. "Put your back into it Babe, or you'll be here all night," he smiled, swaggering to take the shovel from her dirty hands.

She smiled with relief. She knew everything would be all right now.

It was a beautiful, quiet morning. It finally felt like summer again, the warm sun peering through the kitchen window as I sipped my coffee. The curtains fluttered inward bringing with it the scent of purple lavender growing in my flower bed below. I glanced up at the clock, eight-fifteen, time to get going.

I had planned on driving the Corvette to work today, it needed the dust blown off it and today was the perfect day for it. I rinsed my cup, placed it in the sink and headed for the door.

Grabbing my keys, I punched the opener as I entered the garage. I nearly tumbled down the steps when I noticed it was gone. My 1975 metallic blue Corvette. I scanned the garage a second then back to the empty spot where it usually sat. I collected my thoughts for a moment, then looked for anything that appeared to be out of place. Nothing. How could I not have heard the door open in the night. I fumbled through my purse for the phone as my thoughts replayed the evening before. I must have slept like a log after Terri stopped with a few bottles of wine to celebrate...what was it?

Something about her husband closing a big real estate deal and an exotic vacation he had surprised her with. I guess it was a bit of a blur now.

"Whitesboro police, officer Gray may I help you," an irritated voice repeated as I was jolted from my daydream.

"I'd like to report a stolen vehicle," I said to the uninterested voice on the other end.

As I tried to tell the officer about my missing car I could hear the muffled voice of a hysterical woman in the background, "He's never done this before," and "Girlfriend, I don't think so."

"My name is Jessica Scott," I finally managed, "I need to report my car stolen."

It took awhile to get my information across. The woman in the background was clearly upset and seemed to be disrupting the whole station.

"We'll send someone over as soon as possible," the officer said finally.

I paced the floor for a nail biting hour or more before a policeman knocked at my door.

"Ms. Scott," he said. "I'm officer Lowry."

During my wait I had thought to lay out all the necessary papers and several photos. The officer seemed unimpressed by my resourcefulness as I repeated my story once again.

"Let's take a look in the garage now," he said.

I lead him through the kitchen as the phone began ringing.

"Please," motioning for him to continue as I flipped on the garage light and excused myself.

"Jess, thank God," the same hysterical voice from the station. "Steve didn't come home last night and I'm scared to death something's happened to him."

"Terri, just calm down and tell me what's going on," I said.

"The police aren't any help, they think he ran off with some woman, no way," she cried. "He went to work as usual yesterday morning. He wasn't here when I got back from your place, I thought he was just working late. But, no calls. Nothing!"

"Try not to panic, I'm sure there's a logical explanation," I said, trying to reassure my friend.

I remembered the policeman in my garage.

"Listen, stay calm and I'll be right over," I said, not mentioning my stolen car.

"I'm sorry officer. Have you found anything," I asked entering the garage.

"No signs of forced entry. Does this belong to you, he asked holding up a gold locket he'd picked up off the floor.

"No, I don't recognize it," I answered.

He placed the locket in a plastic bag, wrote something on the outside and shoved it into his pocket.

"Have you noticed anything else missing?" he asked.

"No, nothing," I said glancing around. "Wait," I said. "I keep my gardening tools hanging here," pointing to the wall next to the door. "A pick and shovel are missing."

"Are you sure you didn't leave them outside?" he questioned.

"No, I'm sure they were here last night," I said confidently.

"Ok, is that it?" he asked.

"It seems so," I said, glancing around once more.

"Ok we'll let you know if anything turns up," he said, heading out the open garage door as I trailed behind. "Honestly though Ms. Scott, chances are slim, with this kind of vehicle," he shrugged. "Probably long gone by now".

"Just one more thing," he said. "Does anyone have an extra set of keys to your house or garage or know the code for this here keypad?" he asked.

"My friend Terri Barber has a spare set of house keys," I said. "But she's like a sister, we've known each other since grade school," I said.

"Barber? Thanks then, I'll be in touch," he said.

That's it. He was gone. No APB, no tri-state manhunt. I watched blankly as taillights faded down the elm-lined street.

Terri. I suddenly remembered. I had to get over there.

I grabbed my keys, backed my sedan out of the driveway and headed to Terri's house.

Nearly a month had passed and no word from officer Lowry on my missing car. And no sign of Terri's missing husband. I had begun to believe the other woman theory. I had always had an uneasy feeling around Steve. Had always thought he was a bit full of himself. Flashing jewelry, puffing cigars like a big shot and flirting endlessly, even in front of his wife. Terri was blind when it came to his behavior and would do anything for the jerk so I was careful to keep my feelings to myself.

The phone startled me from my thoughts.

"Hello, Ms. Scott, officer Lowry. Some kids were swimming in Lake May and came across a car in the shallows. We're going to fish it out, you might want to come and take a look," he said.

"Yes, I'll be right there, thank you," I said.

I watched the tow truck hoist the car from the water in response to the diver's thumbs up. Sawgrass fluttered at the stirring and it rose with ease, water gushing from its open windows along

with a few comfortable fish who had called it home this past month.

Plain clothes and uniformed police were milling around the car like vultures, chattering, snapping pictures, taking notes.

It was a few minutes before officer Lowry motioned for me to come closer.

"Can you identify this vehicle," the voice of officer Lowry startled me from my trance and I stumbled toward the dripping car.

"Yeah, that's my car," I said with disgust.

"And how about this?" he said opening the door to a charred, bloated corpse slumped in the driver seat.

I looked on in horror at the blackened figure in front of me. The gold watch shone bright against the charred body and I reluctantly moved in for a closer look.

"Oh my God, Steve," I said, a sick feeling churning in my stomach.

"The watch, it's identical to the one my friend Terri's husband wears, she had them custom made," I said.

"Can you explain why your best friend's husband's body is in your stolen car?" asked officer Lowry.

I had no explanation.

"Perhaps you'd like to get your friend and we'll sort this out at the station," he said.

I drove to Terri's house with a million questions running through my head. What would I tell her?

Before I realized it I was ringing the doorbell.

"Jess, uh, hi," Terri said nervously.

"I have to talk to you, its about Steve," I said, looking past Terri to the suitcases at the end of the hall.

"Are you going somewhere," I asked, nodding toward the living room.

She shifted restlessly in the doorway, blocking my entry.

"Well, I thought I'd get away for a few days," she said. "You know I've been a complete wreck here in this big house all alone."

"They found my car," I blurted out. "In Lake May and there was a body inside," I hesitated.

"And it had a watch on identical to the matching ones that Steve wears. There's no confirmation yet, of course but..."

"Oh my God," she said, finally stepping out of my path.

She dropped to the bench in the entry way.

"Officer Lowry wants us to come to the station, he's got a few of questions," I said. "Come on, I'll drive."

"No," she said abruptly, scooting me back to the open door. "You go ahead, I'll meet you there, I've got something to take care of first."

"But..." I protested as the door closed in my face.

&&&

Her legs looked like pretzel sticks dipped in chocolate. That's what I thought as I helped her off the ground. Her black curly hair looked like a birds nest soaked in oil.

"What are you doing laying in the mud?" I asked as she half smiled with a toothless grin.

"That toad Lee Wilkes thought I'd look funny layin' in the mud, her friends thought it was funny too," she said.

"Come on, I just live up the street, we'll get out the hose and clean you off," I said grabbing her hand. "You're new here, what's your name?" I asked.

"Terri," she replied, wiping a hand across her dirty face.

&&&

Ever since that day we were never apart for very long. We had wiped a lot of mud off of each other in the past 20 years. No matter what the crisis, we always turned to each other and somehow survived.

I remembered that first day now. A lifelong friendship of trust and loyalty had turned into chaos in just a few short months.

I didn't know what the hell was going on.

I reported to the station as officer Lowry requested.

He was hanging up the receiver as I entered his office.

"Ah, Ms. Scott, have a seat," he motioned to the chair in front of his desk. "That was the county coroner on the phone, it seems that the body in your car was actually that of a woman, and not Steve Barber as you originally thought," he said, watching for my reaction.

"What? You're sure?" I said, stunned and relieved at the same time. "But the watch, I'm sure its..."

He opened a tan folder on the desk in front of him not taking his eyes off of my face.

"A woman who, strangely enough died a few months ago and was resting comfortably in Whitegate Cemetery before she mysteriously emerged in the driver seat of your car wearing Steve Barber's watch and dental plate and carrying his wallet," he said sarcastically.

"As it turns out Mr. Barber is wanted out west for arson and murder, a pretty good reason to want to disappear, don't you think? He was able to stay under the radar for quite some time. And then we have this interesting item. The locket I found on your garage floor, which, by the way had your DNA on it" he opened his hand and the locket dangled lifelessly from his fingers.

"Always in our hearts, Aunt Sophia," he read the inscription on the back with a grin. "Poor Aunt Sophia, what was she doing in your car, Ms. Scott?" He watched once again for my reaction.

"Mrs. Barber also mentioned how you flirted constantly with her husband and she had suspected something was going on between you two for months now. I'm guessing you both hatched this scheme together; fake his death, he's gone and soon forgotten, you meet him later, once everything has died down at a chosen spot in some foreign country were the two of you will never be noticed, never to be seen again."

"Officer, really, there's got to be some misunderstanding here, I..."

"Your digging tools left in the trunk," he interrupted. "The locket on your garage floor and a body in your stolen car, really Ms. Scott, you've got some explaining to do."

I replayed Terri's odd behavior over again in my head. Her uneasiness when I stopped this morning, not wanting me in the house, the suitcases, the wine she brought the night before my car went missing. And just now remembering a faint smell of cigar smoke in the house. I couldn't allow myself to believe what I thought might be happening. Surely there had to be some mistake.

Officer Lowry's voice startled me back to the present.
"Jessica Scott, you have the right to remain silent..."

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

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“Aujourd’hui” by KJ Hannah Greenberg

Synopsis: A woman’s desire to go beyond the usual chores materialises sooner than later

About the Author: KJ Hannah Greenberg is usually too busy parenting her teenage sons and daughters to contemplate her navel. If she had five extra minutes, she would bake quinoa pie and feed it to her imaginary hedgehogs. Meanwhile, she steals time by sleeping a little less and laughing a little more. On rare, alternate Tuesdays, Hannah and the hedgies fly the galaxy in search of gelatinous monsters and assistant bank managers. Sometimes, they even catch a few. Read more about her at <http://www.kjhannahgreenberg.net/> .

In this story, the woman makes hay and sunshine.

Aujourd'hui

By KJ Hannah Greenberg

Dark patches of corn and lighter clumps of soy waved salutations to the speeding bus. I smiled, noting where the fields ended against strong fences. Bits and pieces of industrial parks came within view. Near those steel and cinderblock geometrics, nothing but hay grew; we were only an hour away from the Chicago station.

I turned my head to count the last discernable patches of maize and of beans. I remembered my first such transport, a trek in the opposite direction, across the plenty of Illinois into the plenty of Iowa. Then, when the bus's hold safeguarded my trunk and overstuffed suitcase, farmlands were novel. An explorer from the Northeast, I had never seen so many acres of commodities nor ever imagined I'd move thousands of miles away from my fiancé. In those years, there were city folk and country folk. In those years, there was no Internet or cell phones.

That trip, a Washington State native, who sat beside me, named each crop and described each one's growing season. From her window, she could discern among hybrids meant for sweeteners, for cattle food, and for supermarket offerings. She remarked about the ageless beauty of the region's elders, about the area's lack of spring and autumn seasons, and about the sleep habits of undergraduates raised on farms. She had adopted the Midwest, choosing to stay years past her university funding, to settle in a quiet, breadbasket town.

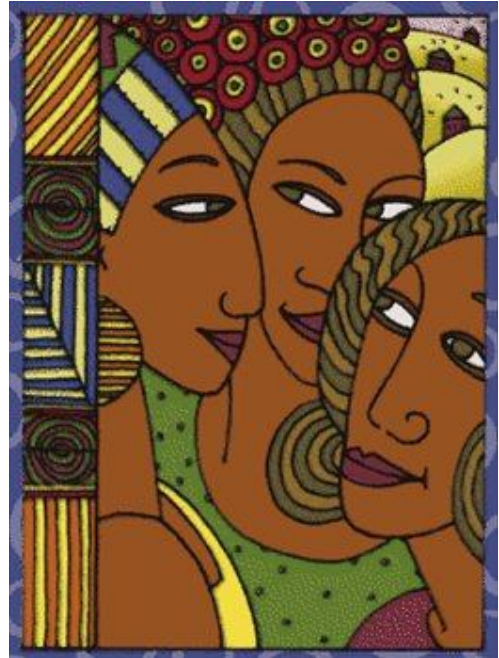
I nodded, with increasing anxiety, wondering how the dreams of an eclectic, but important, group of scholars and their graduate students had come together in such a rural place. Somehow, class by class, workshop by workshop, a reputation had been spun, which garlanded "The University of Corn."

Arrived, I mused little; classes were intense. Expectations were that much more rigorous. I only saw the fields on holiday. I only saw my friends after papers were submitted.

Those relatively free nights, we'd hitch rides with Charlie and drive to nowhere. At nature's edge, we'd openly admired the green and gold horizons and spout poetry about cow pastures or shooting stars.

Other times, we'd patronize the town's spaghetti house. Amateurs performed country Monday nights. We northerners would alternate between reminiscing about department stores, about movie houses and about general urban amenities and about admiring, a loud, the local, dust-covered homesteads or the grape-stomping professors we had in common.

Above the sound of banjos and guitars, Charlie, Sandy from the writer's workshop, and Dani, the published poet, would shoot whiskey sours and dive for the crumbs of our communal garlic bread. Usually, Sandy and Charlie would smile at each other over their glasses, Dani would wax on about his newest writing project and I would moan the miles that separated me from my true love.



Only some of us left our nation's heart with a degree. Dani's assistantship ran out before he completed his final year. Sandy dropped out of the program when her mother died. I took a master's, instead of a doctorate, in order to get married.

Back East, I attended bridal showers, finessed last minute reservations, and hunted for our first apartment. Thank-you notes, florists and fittings completed transported me from the moundless landscapes I had sculpted just months earlier out of the stuff of professional ambition.

I meant to earn a prodigious salary as a science writer. I intended to sit behind a wood-hewn desk and be attended by an amiable secretary. In remembering the joy inherent in fancy cars, in fancy clothes, and in fancy parties, I contacted all of the nodes of my network. The results are poor.

"The urban economy tanked," they said. "We're moving west," they said. "Alfalfa is the next big investment," they said.

"Work's not everything," the man-who-would-be my husband said as he sipped his wine and chewed prime rib. Hours earlier, he looked buff in a showroom tuxedo. "Jobs are for money. Money is for happiness. You're already are happy. Why worry?"

I dialed more numbers. "We saved your file," they said. "You'll fit right in," they said. "Let's do lunch," they said.

One contact, who I met in an upscale eatery, left me and the bill behind. Another refused to talk to me upon realizing I wouldn't relocate to California. The third and fourth promised to respond to me by snail mail. I collected and sorted, by color, many impersonal rejection letters.

The most promising student, in my community education painting class, told me motherhood is the optimal career. My former best told me to push ahead with my schooling; she was studying medicine. Other buddies encouraged me to smoke weed and to enjoy the dole.

Meanwhile, I married.

The islands were beautiful. We returned home with suitcases full of dirty laundry, of seashells and of foreign wine. Our first night back, my new husband sleeps soundly, his arm wrapped securely around my back and his shoulder pillowed beneath my head. Later in the week, he'll return to his research position.

I run errands. Groceries, dry cleaning and trash take up a few hours.

When living among the corn, doing laundry meant hauling whatever I could fit into a pillowcase onto two buses. I'd insert nickels and dimes, and leave my loads while I adventured. I'd stare at a nearby florist's window, sniff my way through a soap "bar," and hobnob with the other customers at the area's "haberdashery." Best, I'd peruse the hardware store, admiring all manners of lawnmowers, chainsaws, and light fixtures. Sometimes, I'd buy a package of waxy, off brand crayons. Other times, I'd let my fingers walk over the variegated textures of the dog collars.

My spouse would return home smiling. His days were spent completing cutting edge explorations. Mine were occupied with emptying boxes, writing more thank-you notes, and counting dust bunnies.

"Housewifery is emancipating," he'd smile as he reached to kiss the top of my head. "You glow," he'd offer.

The local paper advertises a clerking position at a card store. I applied and was hired.

When, for three consecutive days, the manager was out, I assigned myself the tasks of rearranging the plush toys and of hand lettering a "for sale" sign. I arranged bright orange and green stuffed parrots, velvet puppies, and purple rhinos around my announcement and rescued a pink and yellow striped tiger, which had fallen to the floor.

The doorbell jingled when a customer entered. She wanted to see special occasion cards. Her son-in-law received a promotion and needed recognition for his success. If promoted, I would have been able to work sorting birthday greetings, intended for juveniles, full-time and not have to content myself with limited hours of placing envelopes behind stray card faces.

I told the tiger that I ought to have been busied with editing and writing and that I ought to have a brimming letter file, not a basket for misplaced anniversary salutations. My secretary is supposed to be stylish, with carefully arranged hair and with outfits that were both tailored and fashionable. Since my documents would take up my time, her beauty would have to suffice as façade enough for both of us.

Instead of apple and carrot sticks, tucked into a paper bag, I am supposed to have chicken breast and green beans in an executive dining room, paid for, from tax to tip, by my expense account. No germ-imbued paper money, inconvenient credit cards, or unworthy distractions are supposed to clutter my life.

Returned from sick leave, my boss offered me the position of buyer. I could attend industry shows to select his inventory of get well cards and stationary kits. I could work full-time and even select gift wrap. Meanwhile, given the Thanksgiving rush, I'd serve customers in search of napkins emblazoned with orange and brown turkeys and place cards adorned with prints of pilgrim muskets.

At home, I flipped through the human services pages before I made dinner. By the time my husband returned, the meatloaf was raspberry in color, the potatoes were golden and the peas were gently steamed.

"Life is okay," my husband gushed as he hugged me.

I filled out few more applications in between processing orders for April Fool's cards. I'd begun to work nights; the winter holiday season is relentless.

My husband suggests we host a party.

I smiled in answer. I remember when Sandi, Charlie, Dani and I tasted Dr. Achim's homemade malt. The faculty, who were already acquainted with the stuff, tried not to smirk as they captured, with their small, brown cameras, the contorted faces on their most senior students. Only minutes later, the rhetorical criticism professor and the Language and Literature Department's chair argued about Bertrand Russell Rita, the department's administrative assistant, cute in shorts and a summer sweater, route us, insisting we befriend the other newbies. I returned home queasy from bathtub mash, contract bridge and a long debate about the relative merits of Kenneth Burke.

In my new life, parties are not jeans and t-shirts, but silk blouses and woolen skirts. I am my husband's ambassador. "A pleasure to meet you," I nod to my spouse's boss, to his coworkers,

and to his assorted associates. I pass chips, cheese dip, crudités, and pickled fish. I fill the ice bucket at the bar and snag empty bottles.

My husband remains engaged with an older man, whose face radiates the comfort of a well paying job and a tidy litter of children. I lean in to listen, having tired of a comptroller's tirade about bubble gum economics and of a junior draftsman's lament over his wife's collection of shoes.

The radiant man needs a writer. He's got software, but he also has a client who insists on a users' manual. Only three schools, nation-wide, are granting degrees in technical writing. Such professionals are not easily hired.

Monday, I drive, with my husband, to his place of work for an interview. Tuesday, my stylish secretary brings a significant stack of papers to my mahogany desk.

I plan to interview the project's engineers one at a time, to hire a college friend to design the binder and section tabs, and to eat lunch, at a cute, local steak house with the marketing vice president. I forget Iowa City's fresh grown dreams.

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

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“Ravana” by James Newman

Synopsis: What do the ancient texts and codexes foretell? Let’s find out.

About the Author: James Newman is the author of several works of fiction and non-fiction including the detective novel Bangkok Express and Buddhist book Thai Meditations. He lives in Bangkok where he is currently working on a novel based on the Indian Ramayana epic. Visit the author at jamesnewmanfiction.blogspot.com .

In this horrific tale, a man meets his demonic destiny

Ravana

By James Newman



The sounds on the street outside tell the Professor all he needs to know.

Just like the prophecy, the apocalypse has begun.

His papers on the desk in front of him. He lies back on his couch. Translations of the ancient Indian epic *The Ramayana*. The great story that Western philosophers dismissed as the ramblings of the outlaw poet *Valmiki*. The Professor had issued warnings, but like all his warnings, they went unheard. Just a crazy old Professor scratching around in the dirt of the Mumbai metropolis. The professor harboured illusions of grandeur, narcissistically penned papers, overcooked ideas. He had cultivated an undesirable reputation as charlatan of eastern mysticisms, a goofball not to be trusted. Indian academia saw him for what he was: a wise old wash-out, a has-been, a failure, and a believer in the faiths that had long since been abandoned by the new breed of Western apologists. The Eastern thinkers had allowed him to progress with his studies to a certain point, comfortable in their womb of pseudo-western thinking. What harm could it do?

Until now...

Out in the streets of Mumbai *Ravana* ruler of the city of demons has, as predicted by the Professor, ordered his disciples forward in a wave of destruction. Green rain floods the city. Fires lit as good battles with evil. Those that have not changed have formed small pockets of resistance, vigilante groups throw petrol bombs and battle with ancient fire-arms, samurai swords, walking sticks. Outside the Professor's fourth-floor window a pregnant *Pure* woman lies in the street, stripped to the waist, a demon suckling at her breast. Milking her of the goodness, her essence, her being, her *her*. Atrocities play out as predicted in the ancient scrolls, *The Day of Darkness*, *The Final Reckoning*. These demons are taking over the city just as the old book had said they would. A demon woman bends over a naked corpse and sucks out his eyeball, she swishes the orb around her mouth and then swallows it with a satisfied smile.

It was written: so it shall happen.

The professor walks over to a display cabinet, opens it, and takes out a package wrapped in buffalo hide. He opens it. Inside is a set of works from a 1920's maritime survival kit. A block of H. The old Professor cooks up a shot over the flame of a bunsen burner and considers the dilemma. His colleagues at the university had mocked his studies. The tropical heat, cheap rum and a

rumoured opiate dependency had finally gotten to the old man. The Professor knew differently. He selects a vein in his forearm and pushes the plunger down, waves of freedom move up the old man's thighs and then up his spine and then a sudden sense of urgency hits him.

With a jolt of realization the Professor stands up.

He has to *do* something.

His mobile telephone still works. The Professor calls a colleague from the university. The other end of the line the academic speaks in the dull dead tones of the terminally condemned: 'The Demons begun looting and destroying the city since noon. We have photographs. Their bodies are hideous, green in colour, long mouths snapping and biting. The citizens who haven't changed have formed small vigilante squadrons in the city. We have little in the way of support. There's helicopters circling the city. But they are armed with cameras, not guns. How are we supposed to stop this?'

The professor speaks, "The authorities have, it seems, decided that they cannot stop it. They wish to contain *it* instead. These metal birds are documenting the rise and fall of a great city. From what you say the army have enclosed the city and let citizens neither in nor out of the perimeter? 'Let the dead bury the dead' and, 'Fuck em,' is the general message. Do you concur?"

"Professor, the situation is volatile."

"Daresay."

"We are all going to die!"

"Probably," the Professor says. "That is to say, death is a very probable prognosis . The only variables are the how and why. There is only so long we can hide. I hate to say I told you so. But I did and now we must all perish."

"But this is the end!"

It was and it had been for some time, the Professor figures, bored, turns off the mobile. He had been preparing for this for a long time. It comes almost as a relief. Whilst the city panics he has little left to consider. He knows he is right. He knows he is dead. The past months had been a blur of skipped lectures, pipes, injections, dreams, the *Ramayana* and the theory that had come to him in a dream. The theory that now plays in front of him in grotesque reality. The twelfth day of the twelfth month was easy enough to determine from the scriptures. The year was one that had to be calculated by looking through the ancient *Pali* calendars, along with astrological charts and clues within the epic, penned by *Valmiki* the forest poet who had predicted the beginning of the end.

For the Professor, the image of hell had come as a vision, during snatches of opium delirium. A city in flames, fires, the transformations. He had woken up fully clothed with something gripping his hand. It was his other hand.

The beginning of the end.

Above him the ceiling fan slows down, and then spins its final resolutions. The power is down. The Professor glances out of the window of his fourth floor apartment, and with a shudder he returns to his desk and his books. Everything will soon be dust, he thinks calmly.

It shall end as it began.

In the epic *Ravana* the demon king is defeated by *Rama*, a prince warrior. But there are no prince warriors in the city today. Today those that have turned into demons are the ones that lie, hold secrets, gamble and partake in dishonourable sexual activities. Those that live their life purely remain human. The Professor is surprised that he hasn't changed. In a way he wishes that he had. To be on the winning side is always advantageous at the end of the epic.

He bolts the door shut and pushes up a wooden vanity unit against it. In his desk drawer lays a revolver. He picks it up and fills the chamber. He looks out the window again. The demon lizards walking erect on hind feet. Like the epic predicted they have long elongated reptile mouths and sharp teeth, like that of a monitor lizard. They have long tails and short arms with long talons. Moving slowly with drunken evil. Across the street they have cornered a citizen, they attack, as a pack, ripping the man limb by limb and eating the carcass. The demons gurgle and hiss as they lick the man's bones dry. A demon catches the professor's eye, observing from the window. The demon smiles and advances towards the apartment block.

The Professor considers his options and then decides he has none. He writes a simple note and then encloses it in a metal cylinder. A time capsule. He takes one more shot and then puts the capsule in his desk drawer. He is ready to die. Everything, he realizes, has been predetermined.

A sound. A knocking turns into a banging and then a reptilian howling outside the apartment door. The scraping of lizard claws on the door, and then a blast as the wood splinters. The vanity unit tumbles over onto its side. A flash of green. A lizard claw breaks through the wood, scraping on the wall. And then the rest of the door breaks free. The figure breaks through into the apartment.

A large alpha demon flanked by three disciples stand at the entrance, their bodies quivering with malicious intent. The alpha's hideous green body sways with the intoxication of past atrocities. Red eyes blinking with shameless evil. A pink tongue whips out of the reptiles mouth and licks at the remains of a bloody meal around his lips. The Professor knows from the texts that these animals enjoy the taste of infant blood. They entertain the nightmares of children, soaking up their fears with long tendrils depositing childhood anxieties in small camel-like humps on their backs. These demons inhabit the worlds of dreams, prayer and imagination. Ghosts that flutter around in the half-thought ideas of artists, these demons latch onto the dreams of youth and corrupt them. The Professor is safe. His thoughts are tarnished with academia. The cold blank reality of universal thought. The greyiness of dull imagination

The alpha demon extends his arm and beckons with a claw, for the Professor to advance. The professor steps forward, slowly, and hands the revolver to the alpha male. The demon picks up the gun and looks at it. He smiles as he examines the weapon. Saliva and blood drips from his lips.

"You may be needing this," The professor speaks.

The demon speaks in a low guttural tone. "Welcome *Ravana*, we shall claim this city for you as prophesised by the great Valmiki. Without you we are nothing."

The Professor smiles. "I know you will my son, I know you will. I am here to help."

"You have faith in us?"

"Of course. Otherwise I would not have summoned you. May the dead triumph once again," the old man says referring to the ancient epic, and the new events about to unfold in his adopted city.

The demons leave the apartment room back through the broken door. The Professor sits down at his desk and thinks about cooking up another shot. Just a small one, it wouldn't be greedy, celebrate the victory. He lights the bunsen burner and looks out of the window with the cool displacement of a cattle trader he heats the spoon and gazes outside at the city burning with a red glow. Like Pieter Brueghel's painting *The Triumph of the Dead*.

Just like the prophecy, the Professor concludes with a smile and injects the poison into the mainline. He lies back on the couch and smiles. As the plunger drops the city explodes into the darkness of eternal damnation.

Just like the prophecy

**** THE END ****

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“Cleaning Man” by Tom Larsen

Synopsis: A cleaning man sweeps away his problems in this drama.

About the Author: Tom Larsen has been a fiction writer for twenty years and his work has appeared in Newsday, New Millennium Writing, Puerto del Sol and Antietam Review. Tom’s short story “Lids” was included in Best American Mystery Stories – 2004. His novel FLAWED was released in October.

In this story, a janitor finds his luck changed by chance.

Cleaning Man

By Tom Larsen

Mindy watches him, skin and bones, really. And the way he moves, languid... is that the word? More like lazy, working the vacuum over the same few feet, flirting with Sharon of the idiot grin. Must speak to her about that. And his sullen way with her, Mindy, the crackling between them since their last go round. Janitor. What a thing for a man his age! A loser if she ever saw one. Just the sort of waste the city budget needs to trim. And the pay rate! Nearly fifteen dollars an hour when she could have a crew of Mexicans in here for half that, city charter be damned! And what does he do besides run the vacuum? The bathrooms are so shabby you can't tell if they've been touched. And even with all that vacuuming she's seen dust bunnies the size of tumbleweeds rolling down the hallway. Well he may not know it yet, but Cleaning Man is history.



"You see what I'm saying, Mindy?"

"I'm sorry Pete," she snaps out of it. Pete Driscoll, public works manager, always hovering. "I'm in a daze this morning."

"About the tree lighting ceremony?" Pete repeats. "Dan wants to move it up."

"That's fine," she warms to the sound, his name. Dan. The man.

"So I'm thinking maybe 3:00, 3:30?"

"That works for me," Mindy flutters her lashes. "Oh and would you tell Dan to wear that camel hair coat? The mayor should look the part."

"Will do," Pete flashes a grin then turns to go. "Morning, Ted."

"Hey Pete," the janitor shoots a wave, ignores her completely. Oh yes, he *will* rue the day.

"Morning Mindy," Babs shuffles in. Should speak to her about that coffee mug, "Bitch, Bitch, Bitch" in jagged red letters, very unprofessional. The whole staff, if Mindy's honest with herself, dressed any old way, schmoozing at the drop of a hat. Since taking over as city clerk Mindy's first order of business has been to tighten things up around here. And to a great extent she has, defining duties, updating forms and trimming waste, always waste. And things do seem to move more briskly, but the general appearance hasn't changed much. Would it kill them to wear something nice?

"Sharon?" she calls over the vacuum, louder than she meant to.

Sharon looks up and now it's up to Mindy to shout.

"Can I see you for a minute?" But Sharon can't hear and then Pete's back, picking through his mailbox and Mindy sits seething. Be damned if she'll scream over that damnable vacuum, damn him. Sharon starts over but the phone rings and she stops to answer, looks to *him* and the vacuum fall silent.

"Hi Dan," Sharon smiles. "Yeah, she's here, hold-"

Mindy picks up in time to hear, "... bother, just tell her McGillen won't budge. Tell her she can reach him at home."

"But she's-"

"Really don't have time for her right now. You'll tell her for me, woncha, Snooks? Thanks." Click.

Sharon looks to Mindy and shrugs. "... Dan said-"

"I heard what Dan said," sharper than she meant to. Thinks to add something soft but the goddamn vacuum revs up again.

"One more thing," Pete startles her again. "Here's the invoice I was telling you about."

He hands a bill for \$48 dollars, Miller Brothers Masonary. Masonary?

"For the basement?" Pete looks at her funny.

"I'll take care of it," she smooths the bill on her desk. The vacuum thuds the baseboards, six, seven, eight times.

"OK. I'm off then."

"Could you wait a minute, Pete? I'd like you to cover something for me."

"Sure Mindy, what's up?"

"Ted?" she yells. The vacuum stops. "Could I speak with you for a moment?"

There he goes, rolling his eyes, tossing Sharon a wince, sauntering, no other word for it, sauntering over like here we go again.

"Yes Mindy?"

"I've gotten some complaints about the bathrooms. The floor behind the toilets are a disgrace," she'd bet her life. "And there's an inch of dust under the radiators."

Ted looks at her, then at Pete, all the while reeling in the vacuum cord.

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yeah I heard."

"... And?"

"And ... it's no wonder nobody likes you."

Two hours now and she's still in a state, still feels the blow. Oh, Pete came to her defense, not exactly leaping but taking her side, for the most part, in that smarmy way of his. The nerve, a fucking *janitor*! No one's spoken to her like that in years. Not even the roofer who sued and lost. Not even her ex! She can't be expected to take that kind of abuse, and she won't take it. On the

phone with the cleaning service before he's out the door, then the library, courthouse, police station, all the other places he cleans. And, of course they said they'd had no problem with him, but she could hear a note of uncertainty, the suck of apprehension. They would not want to come down on the wrong side of this. Except *his* boss, Mindy knew better than expect much from *that* one after their run-ins when she was on the council. Two of a kind, as far as she's concerned.

The day running away and the effort to shake herself out of it, get something done, McGillen, must call him. Bought in on the farmer's market but was threatening to pull out, as if losing *both* supermarkets wasn't embarrassing enough. Call him at home, work her charms, as Dan would say, but Mindy's feeling less than charming. Punches the number anyway, sweet talks the Misses, Christ the crap she has to-

"Hello Jack? Mindy over at city hall. How are you Jack?"

But he's surly and not charmed in the least, pissing and moaning until Mindy just wants to hang up. But shoulders on, for Dan and city council, and the whole damn town by extension, as if they give a damn. Her job, damn it, and no malnourished mop pusher is going to rattle her. But the best she can do is talk McGillen into meeting this afternoon. 3:00 3:00, why does that ring

Dan, the tree lighting, oh *God damn it!!*

Really hits her on the drive home. Babs with that look and Sharon hardly saying a word all day and then McGillen taking a hard line, demanding assurances, as if they were swimming in surplus instead of robbing Peter to pay Paul. By the time she made the tree lighting Dan had left and she had to endure Bob Welch and Pete, for Christ sake, and she could swear she caught a tone, especially from Welch who heard it from Pete, no doubt, like an old lady with his gossip. And what did Pete mean "the new gun in town" when he introduced her. She's been city clerk for three months, or close. New gun, like she was what?

Then running that stop light with the cop *right there!* Flustered as a teenage girl, fumbling for the registration, who knows where Ray keeps it? And she could swear she saw the cop smirk. Ted cleans there, pictures them laughing it over with the director, Mr. New York cop and all the problems that go with *that!*

Home now and two drinks later it's even worse. No mail, no messages except from her mother, his words echoing like a cheap horror movie.

"No one likes you."

"No one likes you."

She watches TV but can't concentrate. Nothing of interest, but she can't face the silence so she leaves it on. Ray's still at his lodge meeting. She'd told him, of course, and he seemed unusually attentive. Said not to let it "get inside her head", which means what, exactly? But she knows what it means, anyone would. Don't obsess. That's just what the janitor wants you to do. What he said was meant to fester and that's what's happening. Next she'll be counting the people who like her.

The bartender at the Swan, always a big hello, but that might be just for the tip. Make him a probable, under the bank teller, Margie or Maggie, whatever her name is. Maggie, she's sure. And then her brain just stops, no more names come to mind, though she knows that's absurd, a bartender and bank teller? What about neighbors, friends, relatives? ... Well, life is long and differences arise, can she help that? Friends go through ups and downs. Families drift apart. It

happens to everyone. And she's been so busy she doesn't see many people outside work anymore. Work! There you go, let's see now ...

And the next day, still out of sorts, the whole feel of things. Sharon ignoring her, pretending to be – Oh STOP! This is nonsense. The man's a nobody! OK, they're never going to be chummy here, like a TV show, but these people don't dislike her. It isn't an issue. This is work and Mindy's not running a popularity contest. Oh God how she wished she'd said that. How you never think of the perfect comeback until it's too late.

Dan calls to tell her she missed the public works meeting and she simply can't believe it, had her dates wrong, a capitol sin. And here she's the most visible board member, especially in her low cut Danskin. Quoted extensively in the Beacon and a key cog in Dan's machine. She thinks of it as a machine, a giant steamroller or something, a thresher, that's it. Tries to picture one, as if that might fix it. Missed a meeting. Missed a key vote on the farmer's market and worst of all, Dan's unhappy with her.

This Ted, she finds out all she can about him, just calls around, asks point blank. Not that there's much to tell, married thirty years, Democrat, clean slate top to bottom. Drives past his house and is stunned to see it's one she's always fancied, rustic and cozy. Hard to picture him ... then there he is, sweeping the sidewalk. Rail thin, obnoxiously thin and she looks away before he spots her.

And it just gets worse as the day drags on. Grating on her nerves instead of fading, wearing her brain out, that's how it feels, until she can't focus, makes stupid mistakes and forgets things. "Nobody likes you", or was it "no one likes you", either way it scares her to think she can't let it go, that it's affecting her work. Must speak to Dan about it, claim the man's unstable, possibly dangerous, though it sounds a bit hysterical, even she can see.

"Mindy?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'm sorry Babs. I'm ... just trying to decipher this ..." she picks up a paper. "masonry invoice."

"Telephone," Babs points with the coffee mug. "Line two."

"Yes, thank you Babs," she picks up and pushes the button.

"Mindy speak-"

"Have you seen it? The Beacon?" Dan cuts her off.

"... What? No why, what's wrong."

"The fucker backed out! Front Page. McGillen Severs Ties."

"I haven't had a chance-"

"You said you were making progress, the old bastard was coming around."

"Well I thought he-"

"You thought?" Dan's voice goes funny. "Look, Mindy, I called in a lot of favors to get you on board. I knew McGillen would be a tough nut but I've gotta have a feel for what's going on."

Mindy can think of nothing to say.

Finally Wednesday, cleaning day, but he doesn't come, instead his boss, the owner. Ted's in the islands, he explains and she feels the air go out of her. The islands, sprawled on some beach while she's left to suffer the looks and whispers. No one even posing as a friend, an ally against this, this, *janitor!!*

Sharon at the front counter blabbing up the postman when she hasn't said ten words to Mindy all week. Work piling up, look at this desk, stacks of applications, half answered letters, legal notices and hardly anything in the out-box. Secretly relieved she didn't have to deal with Ted but dreading another week, the problem unresolved, the words still echoing.

Friday she drops a vase of flowers and no one helps her clean up the mess. Oh, they offer, but in that half hearted, smirky way they do everything around here, Babs pretending not to see the dust she pointed out in the corners, bending closer, as if it weren't plainly visible from across the room. Then that trucker stirring things up, refusing to use the back entrance and leaving the whole load in the front hallway, cartons of paper, file folders, ink jet cartridges, and then Brenda getting huffy when Mindy asked her to take care of it. What she's here for, to assign and delegate.

Bad as her days go, the nights are worse. Ray snoring. So tense she can't sleep, worried about everything, Dan's change in attitude, not quite disapproving but not nearly as chummy, the pats and winks, those late lunches. So wrong, the whole thing and she'd started out so well and she just can't believe it. How something so stupid could derail her, three little words, the spew of a bitter old man.

"Nobody likes you," not "I don't like you", or even "people don't like you". His words chosen for effect, you don't draw blood like that without giving it some thought. Their little tiff some weeks back gave him plenty of time. She thinks of him, right now, laying awake just blocks away, the smug smile as he savors his revenge. Oh, he planned this all right. Never figured him for clever but she has to concede. A cruel trick, that's all it is. Sew the seed and see if it grows. A trick, that's all, a distortion, as if saying something ever makes it so. And she clings to that thought and she feels herself relax ... and drift ... off ...

...*Nobody?* You couldn't prove such a thing. That it's unanimous, the lowest blow and he had to know it. Even Hitler had friends, Charles Manson, but not you. And he doesn't even know her, that's what so infuriating. A vicious slur, meant to undermine, unless he was right. What would be worse, knowing no one likes you or not knowing? Her thoughts tie in knots and the cat starts to stir, 4:30, God help her.

By the weekend she's exhausted and Ray pouts when she begs off his mother's. Worst week of her life and Grammy is the last thing she needs. Mindy drives to the market but forgets her list then tries to wing it. Except her brain won't work and she misses things, has to go back, but she can't bring herself. Wanders the house in her coat, takes a drink to calm her nerves, then another when the first one works. And with her stomach empty it hits hard, braced in the doorway, jumping out of her skin when the doorbell rings. Thinks not to answer but it keeps ringing so she turns the knob and pulls the door open.

"Dan! What a surprise," she pulls it wider. "Come in, come in."

He brushes past and she feels the cold wake.

"This janitor thing," he comes right to the point. "Why didn't you come to me?"

Oh no no no no.

"It's nothing, Dan. I'm taking care of it." she stumbles backward.

"Well, I gotta tell you it's burning up the grapevine. I mean really, Mindy, if you can't handle the cleaning staff, what can I expect from you?"

"Wh? ... I'm perfectly capable-"

"With this market deal going south and all the law suits what I don't need is another image problem."

"I don't see how a jan-"

"We went over this, don't you remember? Townies are trouble. This is just the sort of thing that works against us in the campaign. Believe me this back fence stuff spreads like wildfire."

"I'm sorry Dan. I didn't think it was important enough to-"

"Probably related to half the rednecks on the hill."

She watches him pace, one shoe creaking, bald spot catching the light. He keeps talking but Mindy doesn't hear, suspended in a dream, her living room, Dan's shoe, the open bottle on the sideboard. Caught in the rush of her own unraveling.

At first she can't be sure, but then he turns and it's him, Ted, all smiles from some banter with the pool players. Mindy steps closer to the window, let's a couple pass then trails them to the door. This time she pushes it open and loses herself in the jumble by the coat rack. He's with someone, young kid, tattoos. She takes the one empty booth, keeps her coat on. The place is noisy and smells of cigarettes, though they've been banned for years.

"What can I get you?" the barmaid smiles.

"Oh, uh ..." Mindy tries to think. "Red wine, please."

Years since she's been in here, back when she and Ray were first married. A few familiar faces she can't put names to, townies, barflies, tourists, no one from her circle. And she has a circle, damn it, wider than his she'd bet the ranch. No one could spend as much time on the phone as she does without a circle. Friends, by God, though she won't do the checklist thing.

"Here we are," barmaid sets down her burgundy. "Can I get you something to eat?"

"No. Thank you"

"Enjoy."

Loud laughs from his end of the bar, heads bob in boozy agreement. And she knows she hasn't thought this through, what she'll do and say. Watches through gaps in the crowd, his movements slow and easy, like an exotic bird, a flamingo. In thick with the barmaid now, hand to her hip as

she sidles up. Mindy watches the hand, feels the wine warm her though she's hardly touched it, thinks of Dan and that night at Odette's ...

Back in the car and losing ground with every move. Couldn't go through with it, slipped, out without even paying. Now she's cowering in the dark like ... what? Like a man, half drunk and pitiful, stalker, pervert. She'd meant to go home but couldn't face it, bad getting worse with no end in sight. Talk to him. Try to reason somehow, but she can't even imagine it. What she's seen in his eyes is non negotiable.

Ted steps out and she slouches low, staring at his face as he lights a cigarette. The tattooed kid right behind, offers a ride but Ted says he'll walk. They smoke and talk then head off in opposite directions. She waits until he makes the corner, pulling out with her lights off. Turns in after him, Wilson Street sound asleep

&&&

Babs sets her mug on the desk and flips through the stack of bills, most overdue. If that pea-brained mayor thinks she's gonna grovel with creditors he's got his head farther up his ass than she thought. Even Mindy couldn't wring an extension from the Miller boys, and she was good, Babs will give her that, nutty as a fruitcake, but good with the runaround. About the only thing she was good at, except maybe diddling the pea-brain. Reap what you sow, Babs grunts, though three years for a hit and run seems a tad stiff.

"May as well throw these in the mix," Sharon waves today's mail, at the bottom, a postcard, Ted on the beach with his leg in a cast. Babs flips it over.

A million thanks.
1.5 to be exact.

Yeah, she's gonna miss that Ted.

**** THE END ****

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“Playmates” by Thomas Cannon

Synopsis: The future holds many promises, and one may keep those of a relationship intact in old-world style

About the Author: Thomas' story about his son is the lead story in the anthology Cup of Comfort for Parents of Children with Autism. He also has poems and short stories published in literary magazines and on websites. Thomas lives in Oshkosh, WI with his wife and three children. He is a writer, but wants to keep his day job as a special education teacher too. Shouldn't be a choice he has to make in the near future.

In this futuristic tale, a man finds ancient way to love

Playmates

By Thomas Cannon

Barkley Laforde Binet kissed his friend good morning and looked at her long, naked body. He admired her nearly perfected body as if she was a work of art in a museum. He venerated her mounds of blond hair that cascaded down onto the bed; gave adulation to her perfectly symmetrical breasts. He admired the way the thickness of her tummy raised only inches up out of the bed like a well-prepared pancake. Inviting without being fluffy.

The sheet was draped over her legs and he tugged at it, but found resistance. Without opening her eyes, she clenched the sheet and held it from going any lower. She was always careful to keep covered that part of her body that made her self-conscious.

But he kept at the sheet resolutely because he found that more than anything; he enjoyed her chubby legs that lay on his bed like two loaves of bread dough ready for baking.

He was about to knead them when Burgundy Smirknov Bernstein kissed him and pulled the sheet back over those legs inherited by her mother and resistant to Pilate's. She kissed him again before she rolled over and buried her face in her pillow. Barkley snuggled against her and tickled his hand down her arm. He took her fingers into his hand and turned her wrist to see that it was ten thirty by her watch.

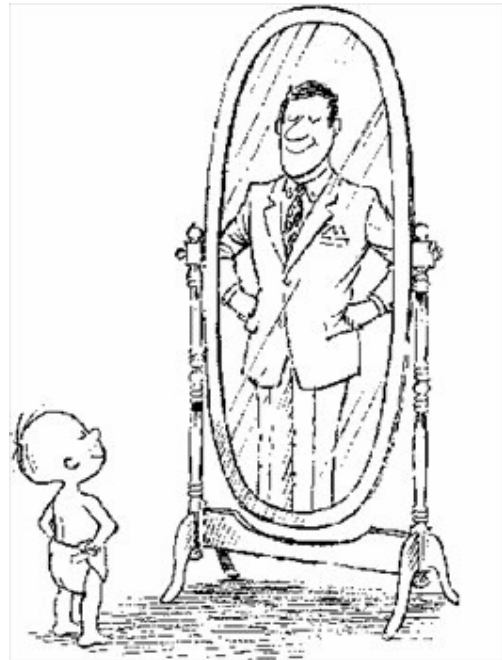
"Really, Burgundy," Barkley said. "I know you're not a morning person, but why don't you get up and get work over with. Then you can meet the rest of us for drinks at The New Athens'."

When she did not stir, he grabbed the main console for his apartment off the nightstand and set the blinds to lighten the room, yet not have the mid-morning sunshine into her eyes. He hit the preset button that switched on the coffee maker to grind the beans into the basket and heat the water. It also switched the microwave from freeze to defrost and in ten minutes it would begin to cook his breakfast of a bran muffin and a non-fat, egg white omelet. He hit another preset button that heated his whirlpool for a quick power spa before work.

"You look fu-bo," she said, as she came down the spiral staircase from his bedroom loft and into the kitchen where Barkley sat at the counter eating and reading the monitor of his newspaper. She sat down on the stool next to him wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of sweats, her hair half-tamed in a clip, but with her makeup on.

Barkley glanced at his reflection in the full-length mirror he had by his front door and concurred that his blond, curly hair, light-blue eyes, and full collagen lips were, in fact, beautiful. He re-approved of his favorite pair of jeans and his San Diego Bears jersey that exhibited his tone body.

"You're joining me for breakfast? What a treat," he replied as she turned away from the mirror and got up to put her favorite coffee beans into the decaffeinator. "I'm sure lucky to have you as a friend."



"Mmm,yes," she said being sexy.

Barkley poured her a cappuccino and split his omelet with her. He turned down the sound on the Wall Street Journal. "So does this mean you will get done in time to come for a Diet Ice?"

Burgundy shook her head. "By the time I log on and e-mail my students their final exams, it will be late. I'm teaching three sections of The Romance Novels of Danielle Steele this semester. Then I suppose I better work on my article for Reader's Digest Teaching Journal."

Barkley gave her a pouty frown. "Awh. Jasmine is bringing our daughter. I'm pretty excited that Stone is coming from her grandparents."

"Oh, is it your mom's turn to have her already?" Burgundy said picking at her omelet.

"Time flies," he said peering into his coffee cup. "I can't believe she's already five."

"She's six, honey."

"Oh. Really?"

"So, I suppose after dinner, you are doing something with Jasmine?" She asked grabbing his arm.

"Yeah. We're taking Stone to the Mall of America for the grand opening of Universal Studios, then we'll visit with my mom and her boyfriend for a while, and then I'll stay at Jasmine's."

Burgundy stood up and crossed her arms.

"What? What's the matter?"

"You know what. What did you just say?"

Barkley shrugged his shoulders.

"You never take me to visit with your mom and Jasmine has been there lots of times. Tiffany and Cody don't approve of me. That's it, isn't it?"

"No. You know, it just works out that way," he said, feeling a tightness he felt every time he had to lie about Burgundy and his mother meeting. "It just works out that Jasmine goes with me because they are Stone's grandparents." He put his plate and cup in the dish-machine and picked up his shoulder tote. "Besides, what do you care? My mom has let me pick my own friends since I turned eight."

"Because it matters to me. It just does."

"That doesn't make any sense." Burgundy was his favorite of his favorites, but he was starting to understand why his mom thought Burgundy was strange.

"It doesn't have to." she retorted, running back upstairs to bed.

&&&

Barkley bicycled in the underground tunnel system to his office in the center of Saint Paul. He worked for the federal government programming polling computers. These computers took the voters opinions through automated telephone calls and put them in a formula that Congress used to determine what action they should take. Barkley's job was quite important because all policies were dictated by the formulas, so that the politicians never became unpopular. His job was also quite easy. The formulas changed only slightly with the issues.

Barkley logged on to his terminal and read the issue for which he needed to create a program. "Should United Earth Troops be sent in to Antarctica?" Barkley quickly made some modifications to the formula and sent it to the phone bank. But by one o' clock, he was stressed out.

"Gobsmack," he cursed in a short teleconference with his boss, "The formula won't work because after the computer asks the initial question of 'Do you know where Antarctica is?' too many people are answering 'no' or clicking off."

"Do people really need to know where it is to answer the question?" his boss answered.

Foregoing the question, solved the problem, but the whole process took up more than Barkley's entire day and he ended up working six hours.

Barkley could have filed a lawsuit against the government for his overtime, but instead counted himself lucky. Before he left for the day, he had taken a look at tomorrow's issue. His heart had raced as he read, "Should children of married couples be placed in a special program to increase their socialization skills?" He put some perspective on his overtime as he read some statistics attached to his issue for tomorrow. He figured staying six hours was a hassle and he would not have time for his workout before meeting his friends, but at least he was meeting them instead of going home to a person that at best would grow indifferent to you. He couldn't believe that over four percent of the population still lived that way.

When he finally made it to the café, Burgundy came up and hugged him. She had her hair in a ponytail and wore a yellow denim dress and white Nikeboks. He hugged her, kissed her neck and said, "I see you had dressed to go to work, but you must've changed your mind."

"I'm sorry I was so moody this morning," she said in his ear. She went back and stood behind Dakota Freedom Winston to give him some neck squeezes as a tease for the erotic massage she was going to give him later. Barkley stopped at the counter and ordered a Grapefruit with Raspberry Vita-J.

At their usual table, everyone was talking at once. Wyoming Wang Arhad was pounding his fist into his open hand as he talked with Mauve Juscinsky White Cloud. Wyoming was forty-years old and had thick long hair braided down his back. Mauve was thirty-eight. She wore a green, baggy jumper and moccasins. Tim Allen Ginsberg sat listening to their conversation. He was the youngest of Barkley's friends at twenty-six and still lived with his maternal grandmother.

The café was small and crowded, but they had saved Barkley a seat next to his daughter, Stone. He bent forward to catch her attention. She wasn't much taller than the last time he had seen her, but her crimson hair was now past her shoulders and surrounded her face. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes and then turned to see him. "Barkley Daddy," she yelled as she stood up on the booth seat. He picked her up and swung her around in a big hug.

Burgundy observed the reunion of father and daughter with a smile and returned her attention to Dakota's focal point. Dakota was small with a full, bushy mustache and at the moment looked like

he was being choked to death while a kitten slept on his face. It was no wonder why everyone loved Dakota.

Jasmine kissed Barkley as he took her hand in his. Jasmine's hair was a few shades lighter than Stone's and she wore it short. She had dark intense eyes that she had passed onto their daughter. "How ya doing, buddy?"

"Good. Great, in fact. Boy, Stone is getting to be so grown up." He patted his daughter on her head, and then got caught up in Wyoming and Mauve's discussion on what shape Wyoming should build his swimming pool.

The debate had narrowed to oval, kidney or manatee when Stone stood on the booth seat and tapped Jasmine on the shoulder. "Jasmine, Mommy, why don't you live with a boyfriend like my grandmommies?" she asked and caused everyone to break up into laughter. Stone frowned and put down her iPad she had been using to color.

Barkley recovered from laughing and sweetly told her, "You won't understand until you are older, but you don't want to settle down with a boyfriend until you are Grandma and Grandpa's age."

Stone stared at him.

"We have something better. Look how many friends Mommy has. Isn't that awesome?"

Stone crossed her arms a little tighter.

"And don't your grandmas and grandpas sometimes fight?"

Stone nodded. "They yell at each other about who has to make me dinner and pick me up from school."

"We never argue like that with each other, Stone. Not daddy or mommy or Uncle Tim or Aunt Mauve or any of us. Doesn't that sound like a fun time?"

"Not to me, I'm ready to settle down," Tim said, making everyone laugh again.

Barkley and Jasmine got re-acquainted with their child at his mom's apartment. Then they left Stone with her grandparents and went back to Jasmine's. They made love until dawn and caught a couple of hours of sleep.

In the afternoon, Barkley called Tim at Mauve's house. "Don't tell Wyoming," Tim sang into the receiver, "but we stayed up all night talking."

"Well, why didn't you call him over. Hell, why didn't you call us all over. It's been weeks since we all spent the night together."

"We were talking about having a child, Barkley. You and Jasmine seem to get so much enjoyment from Stone."

"Oh," Barkley said. "I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions. I hope you two have a baby. It will be Suri-cute." Barkley dressed as he talked. "But," he said as he looked at himself in Jasmine's mirror, "Don't your parents live in Colorado, and hers live in Maine? Won't the switching of custody every month be hard?"

"Yes. Absolutely difficult. But, Mauve and I are willing to deal with it."

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Barkley flipped through the movie channels and the walls changed with the different images. His large living room seemed transformed into the scenes of the movies, as if the actors and the things they were shooting at were right in the room.

A message flashed on the main wall screen that someone was at the door. He turned the sound off and opened the door for his mother and his daughter.

"Tiffany. Stone, honey. I can't believe you're here. Uninvited like this." His mother pushed past him with Stone in tow. She was a trim woman of sixty-three and, in fact, in better shape than Barkley. Her tight, skirted jumpsuit exposed her flat, hard stomach and her legs of molded muscle and tanned silkiness.

"Is this Barkley Daddy's house?" Stone asked to which Tiffany responded by shrugging her shoulders.

Tiffany looked up toward the bedroom loft. "This is the address directory gave me. Barkley, I hope your nutty friend isn't here. That teacher." Tiffany threw herself onto one of the kitchen stools. "And I thought the university was going fully automated. Your polls showed that that what people want."

Tiffany stared at Stone for a while, and then said, "Well, anyway, we have split up."

Barkley assumed that she meant herself and Cody, her boyfriend, but couldn't see why that would prompt her to show up unannounced. "Oh," Barkley said.

"You're wondering what I am doing here, huh, Kiddo?" She motioned Stone to come to her and took off the child's jacket. Barkley stood by the still-open door. "I am here because I have to talk to you. I need something from you actually." She stopped talking and looked at her son. Barkley squinted back at her and then looked over to Stone as she stood fidgeting with crossed legs. "You know, you could probably show Stone where your bathroom was before she pees her pants."

Stone walked over to Barkley and took his hand. After Stone shut the door for him, he took her upstairs and showed her his bathroom. Waiting for her, he peered over his balcony to find a clue from his mother on what he should do next, but she was talking on her phone.

Through the closed door, Stone chatted to him about her school and her friends in Saint Paul that she had only talked to through email for the last month and whatever else was important to her at that moment. Stone continued to talk as he followed her back down to the kitchen. "...Jordan keeps emailing me, but I am so over him."

"Barkley, you have to take Stone," Tiffany said, looking at him. He still had his daughter by the hand.

"Where now?"

"I have decided I am too young to be tied down. I want to travel around and meet new people. Long term relationships and raising kids are just not for me." She stood up and paced the kitchen.

"I know this sounds radical, but I want to spend the rest of my life traveling and writing brochures for the travel agency I work for."

"So where do you want me to take Stone?" Barkley asked, looking at his mother like she had just pasted a headline from the USA Inquirer on her face. "To the airport?"

Tiffany laughed and patted his shoulder. "Barkley, I want you to keep her. I want you to take custody of her every other month."

"Can I do that? You want me to take care of Stone? I can't do that. I still don't understand, Mother. Can't you take your trip next month?" Barkley sat down on one of the stools and Stone ran to her grandmother as soon as he let go of her hand.

"I know when you get to be my age you're supposed to settle down and raise grandkids. But I've got to be true to myself and I want to travel."

"Well, you should have thought of that before I had sex and made this baby."

"I'm doing this, Barkley. Hate me if you want, but I hope you don't. There are just too many hassles and responsibilities in my life now." Tiffany looked at her watch. "I got a flight to catch so, bye, Barkley. Good-bye Stone. I already told you I love you." She went to the door. "Barkley, all of her stuff is out here in the hall." She gave a back handed wave as she went through the door and disappeared.

For the first time in her six years, Stone was alone with her dad. She looked down at her feet and frowned. Barkley smiled at his daughter and bent down to look at her freckled face.

Then he called Jasmine.

Jasmine was on the dance floor of a nightclub with Tim when she answered his call and could barely hear him as he begged her to come over. "Jasmine, we have a problem with Stone." He let the statement sink in. "I have Stone; my mother has run away."

"Is Stone all right?"

Barkley looked over to Stone who was in the living room, standing next to the main TV wall and reprogramming his presets to the cartoon channels. "Well, for now. Listen, Jasmine, you have to come over and help me. Your mother has to take her."

"Barkley, I love you and Stone," she yelled over the music, "But I have promised Tim a night on the town. You'll be fine. She can pretty much take care of herself. She is five now."

"She's six. You should know that."

"Even better. And after all, it is your side's month to have her." Jasmine touched the off to her phone and the line went dead.

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Barkley held up an offering of food to his bedroom balcony where Stone was. "Burgundy, just stay alone with her a little while. I need time to get my head together and think and she won't be quiet for two minutes."

Stone frowned.

Burgundy didn't think that Barkley should be trying to feed Stone a cappuccino and prune jam on a bran cracker. "I don't know how to care for a child. What if it gets hurt?"

"I'm a she, not an it," Stone yelled as she threw the knickknacks from the top of Barkley's dresser down into the kitchen. Barkley, standing in the kitchen, still holding up the cappuccino, decided he needed to go out and buy some toys. "And I'm too young to drink coffee."

Burgundy dodged Barkley's incoming soccer cleats. "I would like to let you go out, Barkley. Really I would. But I'm scared." Then she looked up to Stone. "Do you have any homework, honey?"

Stone screamed. "Don't bring my suitcase in. I'm leaving."

"I can drop you," Barkley answered. He then had to dodge his Zen meditation garden and its small rakes as they came flying from his bedroom.

"Where am I going to go? I'm six." There was silence for a moment. Then she screamed again.

"But honey, you said you were leaving."

"So?"

Barkley mimicked her, but then had to duck as his hand mirror, a present from Burgundy, came flying at him. "Burgundy, do something."

"Stone, you can't stay up there and throw things all night."

"Yes I can," she said throwing Barkley's Feng Shui Singing Bowl at her. "I'm not even to his closet yet." She then screamed in short, high pitch blasts while throwing pair after pair of Nikebok's over the railing.

"Would you like some candy?" Burgundy said during a slight lull in the screaming and the throwing.

Stone peered over the railing. "What do ya got?"

Barkley didn't really want to share the gourmet chocolate Burgundy got him for Sweetest Day, but Stone did come down from the loft. She even stopped screaming so that she could eat. And though she had been washing her face by herself for a long time, when she finished eating, she let Burgundy wipe the chocolate off her face with a warm washcloth. Burgundy took a swipe at the chocolate on Barkley's face, too.

"That was good," Barkley said. "What did I get you for Sweetest Day?"

"You took me to see the Timberwolves."

"You like basketball?" Barkley asked.

Burgundy closed the box of chocolate and then tossed the washcloth into the sink. Stone leaned on her, tired. "No." She gave him a look when he asked why he would take her then.

"Look at your daughter, Barkley. She's exhausted. Carry her up to bed."

Barkley lifted Stone and felt her arm go around his neck. "This is why I wanted to come live with you, Daddy," she said.

Burgundy changed Stone into one of Barkley's T-shirts and then tucked her into bed. "Goodnight, Stone honey."

"Goodnight, Auntie Burgundy. Thank you for not making me sleep out in the hallway with my stuff."

Barkley was sitting on the couch with two glasses of wine and the lights set at reduced wattage when Burgundy came downstairs. He handed a glass of wine to Burgundy. "You know, you are really good with her," he said.

"You are not leaving, Barkley."

"Okay, I'll stay. Why don't you take Stone home with you?"

"Damn it, Barkley. I'm getting sick of this. I said 'no.' You're trying to take advantage of me. As always. Our whole relationship is me giving and you taking. You never think of me and I am tired of it. But most of all, I am sick of believing you're perfect. If it wasn't for that little girl, I would leave." Burgundy stood up and splashed her glass of wine into his lap.

Barkley jumped up. "What are you doing? Why are you being so irrational?"

"Increase wattage," Burgundy commanded. The room grew brighter. "Do you think I'm stupid? Do you? God. I will stay and help you with Stone, but I am not doing everything on my own. You're just going to have to grow up."

Barkley peeled off his wet shirt and undid his pants. Burgundy turned around and crossed her arms. "You're the one being as prudish as a child. I am grown up. But name someone my age that has to take care of his kid."

"That doesn't make what you're doing right, you jerk."

Barkley gathered up his clothes, but then flung them to the floor and stormed to the whirlpool room for his bathrobe. He was tying as he came back. "See? This is making us fight." Barkley yelled. "We may as well completely ruin our lives and get married."

Burgundy looked at him, making him raise his eyebrows. "That was a joke. You know, smooth things over by goofing around." He put his hands on her shoulders and then slid them along her arm until he was holding her hands. "Imagine us. In a church, holding hands and lighting candles. We could go Catholic. Kneel. Stand. Sit. Squat thr-

Burgundy whispered, "I kind of like that idea."

Barkley stopped and raised his eyebrows again. He cocked his head to one side. "What?" He threw her hands out of his.

Burgundy walked up to Barkley. She grabbed him by his bathrobe and gave him a hard, long kiss. "I wish I was married to you."

"You think I am a selfish jerk."

"Okay, but I still love you."

"I love you too, Burgundy. You know that. But you didn't look like you were joking when, you know, when you said, what you said."

"I never told anyone this, but my parents are married."

"I am so sorry, Burgundy. I didn't know."

"Don't be sorry. I am glad they're married. They are glad they are married. And their relationship is what led me to study Danielle Steele. I want my life to be like my old romance novels, and I want you to be my only love."

Barkley stumbled for a seat on the couch. She sat on his lap. "I have wanted to tell you this for a long time. I want to marry you, Barkley." She glanced into the kitchen and saw Stone standing on one of the lower stairs. She waved for Stone to come to them.

"I am so tired of hanging around with loving friends. I want to be with you. Think of it, Barkley. Marriage. We could buy a house and have children together."

"Great, Burgundy. That's the solution to my problem. Have more children I have no place to send." Barkley turned to Stone who had rested her hands on his leg. She looked up to her dad. Barkley turned to Burgundy. "Have you completely flaked out?"

Burgundy stood up and walked to the other side of the room. With her back to Barkley, she cried. Silently, she let the tears come. Stone, not silently, was crying too. "Gobsmack," Barkley said.

And like a twentieth century husband, he reluctantly got up and put his arms around Burgundy, willing to do anything to make her stop crying. She turned her head slightly. He kissed her cheek.

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

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“Over Easy” by Ken Goldman

Synopsis: Do you wonder if there is more to what is going on with you everyday?

About the Author: Former teacher Ken Goldman has homes in both Penn Valley Pennsylvania and the South Jersey shore, depending upon the track of the sun. His stories appear in over 525 publications in the U.S. and Canada, the UK, Ireland, and Australia. He has received honorable mentions in Ellen Datlow & Terry Windling's The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror #7, #9, #16, and Ellen Datlow and Kelly Link & Gavin J. Grant's YBF&H #17, #20, and #21. A paperback of his short stories, "You Had Me At ARRGH!: Five Uneasy Pieces by Ken Goldman" (with six stories... Go figure) has been published by Sam's Dot Publishing. Among The Genre Mall's all-time top ten best sellers, it is available at their site. A film based on his story "The Keeper" has been contracted by Australia's Precision Pictures, and his novella "Desiree" will be published by Damnation Books during 2010.

In this twisted tale, we find a writer write himself a known scene

Over Easy

By Ken Goldman

Travis turned to Ann and forced a smile, but he was unable to completely stifle his yawn. "I love you," he managed to say to her. Trying not to make the words sound completely hokey, he went for the save. "... but you already know that, don't you?"

He hoped the sentiment had come across as something more than the correct buzzwords meant for the correct moment, but there was not a whole lot he could do about the distraction. You can't swat a flea that has decided to fly up your ass, so you just try to get on with whatever it is you're supposed to be doing. Even if what you're supposed to be doing is saying 'I love you' with that flea up your ass.



He felt like adding a shade of subtext to his words, something simple like 'Yabba Dabba Doo' just for a little variety this time. Travis remembered the words he was *supposed* to say, but the words he had *wanted* to say were a different matter, and they did not come. He was not sure if they ever would again.

"Yes," Ann finally answered. "I know you do. I've always known." Without the slightest change in her expression she added, "So of course you know that I love you too." Until that moment the woman had not even looked in Travis' direction, pretending instead to be absorbed in watching the pigeons pecking at the scraps of food someone had left near the park bench that adjoined theirs.

When her eyes finally met his, Travis read uncertainty in them. "I said that right this time, didn't I?"

A park, two lovers seated on a bench on a warm Sunday afternoon, and pigeons. That made for one hell of a cliché.

"You said the words," Travis reassured her. He brushed a rogue curl from her forehead with a semblance of emotion that might have passed for tenderness at some other time. "It doesn't make much difference *how* you said them, does it? So, do you want to kiss now? That is, if you can tear yourself away from those goddamned pigeons."

His brief display of tenderness had vanished like the thin facade of spontaneity the couple had tried to reassemble to get themselves through this moment. Travis hadn't meant to sound so cold, but this whole charade had gone beyond tedious a long time ago.

They kissed, but it was a dry and joyless effort that seemed poorly scripted and just as poorly executed. Like their words, the kiss had been bled of passion. Together the couple sat silently waiting for the sky to explode. It always had erupted right about this time.

Nothing happened. Nothing at all. Someone had screwed up.

"Where is it?" Ann asked. "Damn it! I hate when this happens. You just wind up having to put everything on hold until they get it right. Where the hell is--?"

A thunderclap suddenly detonated above them and the world went grey. As the sun disappeared behind a misshapen thunderhead, the grumbling sky caused a dozen feeding pigeons to scatter.

The rumbles of thunder were the young man's cue. Travis took the woman who sat at his side slowly - almost sluggishly - into his arms.

"The rain can't touch you now," he whispered to her, but what he was thinking was *This is bullshit*. In the earlier times he had held Ann so much tighter on this park bench, but that memory had gone as cloudy as the sky. Physically the young woman had not changed much since those first times. In fact she was every bit as lovely as she had been then, her hair still cascading down her shoulders like a golden waterfall, although that hair had once been raven black. And the current flowery print sun dress had also changed colors since those earlier incarnations. The first time her outfit had been a simple pair of jeans with a pink blouse that had a button missing near her collar. Travis remembered all that nonsense with an approximation of fondness, remembered every bit of the minutia perfectly. He knew it in the same way he knew that he took his coffee black and preferred his eggs over easy, or like he knew that Springsteen's "Thunder Road" was the best kick-ass three minutes ever pressed on vinyl.

But there were some things he did not know, some things he *should* have known . . . Like the name of his best buddy in high school, or maybe the first time he had gotten laid. Or the date of his birth, what his mother looked like, or maybe even *her* name?

One filthy looking pigeon had lagged behind the rest, tugging at what looked like a loose strip of baloney wrapped in tin foil. It was the same fat and ugly bird with the same mottled feathers that always pulled at the same sickly slab of lunch meat.

"Did you really expect this time would be different?" Travis whispered to Ann, his tone more reprimanding than soothing. The words came out all wrong. That was happening a lot lately because he had lost patience with having to go through the motions with such infuriating exactness. He had learned the rules well enough, but he could stretch them a little. Ann didn't always like when he did that, but her feelings were just one less thing that mattered to him. Travis knew she didn't much like that either.

And Travis didn't much care.

Funny the way things sometimes just snowballed, he thought. You keep at something long enough, and sooner or later it gets to you; it gets to you real bad. A pretty girl smiles at a guy in that funny way she has, and a man thinks he will love that crooked little smile until the day he dies. He is certain that smile will inspire him to climb mountains, maybe compose a few sonnets. But of course none of that happens and one day the poor jerk just wants to smash his fist into every tooth behind that same crooked smile.

"I've always been scared to death when it thunders like this," Ann said right on cue. "I had this dog - a little black cocker spaniel named Shadow - and one afternoon we got caught in a storm like this while we were in the park. Shadow became so frightened--"

"---that she ran in front of a 'Jack and Jill' ice cream truck. Yes, I know. I *know*, Ann. I've heard the same story a dozen times. Maybe two dozen. Do you think you could at least change some words?"

"Well, maybe it wasn't an ice cream truck," she said. "Maybe it wasn't a truck at all. Maybe she just ran away. I'm not sure any more. And I'm not so sure about *you* either."

"I love you, so be sure of *that*," Travis said, then wondered why he had said it. His words and thoughts did not correspond, as if neither were really his, and the resulting insincerity leaked

through like sludge in a paper bag. That kind of disjointed response had been happening a lot, and Ann wasn't buying it. He didn't blame her. His lovespeak was getting pretty lame.

"Travis, cut the crap and tell me what's eating at you. I think we've pretty much blown it this time anyway. Shoo!" Ann kicked at the pigeon near her foot and it flew off. For a moment Travis thought that this variation on routine had been a nice touch for her. It was different, anyway.

"Aren't we supposed to get caught in the rain right about now?" he asked. "Where's that romantic downpour in which we kiss while shimmering beads of rain drip down our faces because we're too much in love to get out of the storm? I was sort of looking forward to this part."

"It'll wait until you tell me about this beehive you're sitting on. Talk to me, okay? This is hard enough without you taking it out on me." Ann's words sounded more genuine than anything he had heard her say in a long time. And she was right, of course, just like she was right about the downpour waiting for them to finish. He leaned toward her and looked directly into her eyes.

"Tell me what's going to happen next," he asked.

"You know what's going to happen next," she answered. "We've been through--"

"Tell me anyway."

For a moment she closed her eyes, rewinding a videotape inside her head. When she reopened them she was almost smiling.

"Well, we kiss. Lightly at first, then we go full tilt boogie. We promise to love each other forever. We talk about how long we've each waited for this moment, waited our whole lives for each other."

"And then . . .?"

Ann sighed deeply and smiled her crooked smile as if fortifying herself for what came next.

" . . . and then a bolt of lightning strikes me, and I go into a coma. For days you sit by my hospital bed, and you make this little pact with God about how you'll change if He allows me to pull through, how you won't drink or chase women and - - Damn you, Travis! You know all this. What are you trying to--?"

"Now tell me your mother's maiden name."

"What?"

"Your mother's maiden name," he repeated. "Dammit, Ann. Who doesn't know their mother's maiden name, for Chrissakes?"

She looked at him as if he had just asked her about the last time the Pope had masturbated.

"I don't know," she finally admitted.

"And that little dog you mentioned, that Shadow mutt who has been crunched by the ice cream truck at least six times today? Where did you get her? Tell me, did you find her at the kennel? Was she a gift from your father? And speaking of the old man, just what did your father do for a living? Do you remember once in his entire life when he acted less than perfect?" Ann's lip quivered, a

sure sign that tears would follow soon if Travis kept this interrogation going.

"I remember what he looked like--"

"No, Ann. I don't want to hear any of that crap about how handsome a man your father was, or the way he knew how to treat his little girl, or how you hoped you would someday marry a man just like him. That's all bullshit, Ann, a syrupy fairy tale. It's like all the really important information has been completely erased . . . or maybe it was never *there*."

Travis reached for the woman's hand and this time the spontaneity spilled from him with an urgency that felt alien and outlandish. "Ann, how long do we have to pretend that we can't remember anything important about our lives? Have you ever considered the possibility that maybe *nothing* of what we think we know about ourselves is real? That maybe all this is some madman fantasy that is only as real as the moment we're in right now because it's been filled in *for* us, here on this idiot park bench that exists only because we're sitting on it?"

"That doesn't make any sense, Travis," she said. "How can two people be having the same fantasy? I'm here too, in case you haven't noticed. So what if I don't remember all those things? I remember meeting you at that bus stop on the corner of 5th and Main last summer and talking with you for so long on that afternoon that I missed my bus. And I remember--"

-- You remember the same things that I remember, Ann. Things about us as a couple. But what about *before* we met? What about our lives, our whole lives as separate individuals? Dammit, I feel like the two of us are trapped inside some insipid Barry Manilow song and all we know to say to each other are the lyrics. I'm sorry, Ann, but I know my life did *not* begin the day I met you! So how come I can't remember anything about my life without you except a few fragments of irrelevant bullshit?"

Ann's lip was quivering again. "You're scaring me, Travis. Please, don't say any more, please don't--"

"Ann, wake up! We've been playing this sappy scene over and over today. Sometimes the words change, sometimes your clothes are different, but the pigeons, the thunderstorm . . . It's like we're goddamned puppets being pulled across someone's stage. In a minute that lightning will strike, there'll be an ugly black smear across your forehead, and then you'll go into shock. I'll fall on my knees and curse at the sky, and then I'll suddenly find myself at your side holding your hand in some hospital room I could describe right now with my eyes closed. Jesus, don't you think there's something a little screwy going on here? Don't you think--?"

"This is all wrong! You're ruining everything!" Ann screamed. And now she was crying for real, crying and shaking like a little girl who had just lost her pet cocker spaniel. Or maybe like a woman who had met a man whom she thought she had loved because he reminded her of the handsome father who had loved her so very much, a lover who had greatly disappointed her because he was not really like her father at all, and that made her cry even harder.

He wanted to stop her tears, so he kissed her with the rain splashing on their faces. He kissed her lightly at first. Then he kissed her hard.

But she was still crying when the lightning struck . . .

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"This is all wrong!" Nancy said to her husband, handing him back his manuscript. "Damn it, David! You were only supposed to write a simple romantic television screenplay and you went and turned it into another one of your pulp horror stories."

"I can't get a handle on this, Nance," David replied, defending himself from behind his keyboard. "I must have rewritten this park bench scene a dozen times this morning and the sucker just won't come out right. The studio wants this lame sudser from me by tomorrow, but ever since they turned the Travis/Ann storyline over to me it's like these characters have minds of their own. At least this guy Travis does."

"It seems to me more like they have minds like yours," Nancy added. "Well, maybe so. But look at the cornball lines those boardroom bozos told me they want Travis to say in this scene, for Chrissakes. '*The rain can't touch you now.*' Jesus, Nance! Add that to the pigeons in the park, the runaway puppy, and that stupid bolt of lightning and we've got five minutes of pure polyester. I can't believe people really watch this kind of shit."

"Believe it. Every afternoon and by the millions." Nancy forced a crooked smile and tousled her husband's hair. "And just as long as someone keeps writing it, they'll keep watching it, thereby keeping the feminine hygiene industry in the black. Lover, that's why any writer who intends to eat pushes himself into doing this sort of thing. Just think of it as stretching yourself, okay?"

Of course the woman had a point. David had not sold a horror script in over a year. The networks were a mite uneasy about all that blood n' guts stuff running during prime time, what with the FCC breathing down their corporate necks about violence on television. But love and romance in the afternoon, maybe a little healthy titillation? Now *there* was a market that was alive and kicking.

How hard could it be to write page after page of mindless clichés? *June, moon, spoon* . . . Hell, if it opened a few doors, what could it hurt to let the mundanes win this round? A writer writes. A television writer rewrites. A good television writer eats.

Stretch yourself, Nancy had told him. Yeah, and that's what they probably used to tell those guys on the rack during the Spanish Inquisition. Smile, pal, this won't hurt a bit.

Nancy kissed David lightly on his cheek and brushing her lips against his ear, she whispered into it. "I'll fix you some breakfast and you can get back to that park bench again with your pals Ann and Travis. You want 'em over easy, as usual?"

David turned to his wife and forced a smile, but he was unable to completely stifle his yawn. "I love you," he said to her. ". . . but you already know that, don't you?"

**** THE END ****

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