

# MACABRE CADAVER

Horror, Sci-Fi & Dark Fantasy Magazine

Spring 2011  
Issue 10  
\$7.95



0 74470 24986 3



Special thanks go out to David Misialowski and Awet Moges: to David for his awesome editorial devotion, and to Awet for the superb cover illustration. A million thanks to you both . . . without you this issue wouldn't have made it to the printer.

Thanks go out to the authors that contributed to this issue as well. Without you, there would be no stories to publish. Keep up the hard work and perseverance.

Most of all, I would like to thank the readers. Without you, there would be no reason to write stories and we would all be out of business.



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# THINGMAKER

A. A. Garrison

## I. Irish Elevator

**B**Y DARK THE ASSASSIN INVAD-  
ed the mansion on the hill,  
stealthy in his suit of blackest leath-  
ers. He traversed the stately lawn  
and made the house proper, there  
solving its many securities to en-  
ter undetected. He wore synthetic  
moccasins that made no sound.

There was tile then carpet then  
wood, then a great stairway that  
he ascended strictly along the wall.  
There followed a long hallway filled  
with flowers and breakables, and  
then more stairs that he scaled with-  
out creaking. Atop these was the  
bedroom door, beyond it somnolent  
noises of a moribund man. The as-  
sassin unlimbered a silenced pistol  
and breezed open the door and whis-  
pered through, but instead of the  
expected bedroom, there was only  
darkness and an absence of floor.  
The assassin fell headlong, mute  
even in flight.

The impact tore through his right  
flank and shoulder, red pain drench-

ing him. He lay still for seconds after,  
assessing his person, and then slow-  
ly rose and looked around. It was  
casket-dark, a floor cold and hard  
beneath him, with a sense of mag-  
nificent space like mountaintops he'd  
known. His eyes adjusted from the  
lesser darkness of the mansion, and  
he ascertained large columnar ob-  
jects to his left and right. He looked  
up and could just make out a door  
shape high above him. He cursed si-  
lently.

There was a noise and he intuitive-  
ly found cover among the columns,  
the gun raised and safety button de-  
pressed. The low *whum* murmured  
from deep in the labyrinth, and fol-  
lowing it was a bracelet of light, far  
away but nearing. He crouched and  
waited and soon the light found him,  
there a split second then gone, allow-  
ing a fulgurate blink before migrating  
purposefully down the stupendous  
corridor. It showed the columns to  
be tall clear tubes that held women  
undressed and moving.

The assassin gasped, sidling from

his endeared column. Inside it was a vague woman-like shape flailing with the facile unconstraint of a thing underwater. She was pretty and her mouth was working and she made declamatory thumps against the glass, hair haloing her head in a crazy spray. The assassin stood in stunned audience for a long time, during which the light made two more passes and he saw that each of the innumerable tubes contained a similar specimen. Then there was another noise, different from the glottal *whum* of the light, and the assassin crouched again. The woman thumped.

He peered around the tube and traced the noises to deep in the cavern, where could be seen a considerable form moving between the tube-prisons. Its locomotion demonstrated a kinetic removed from that of man or beast, its size that of a little god. The roaming light touched the creature several times, showing flecked gold, and limbs neither arm nor leg, and a metallic, segmented bulk that may have been armor. There was no head in evidence. The noises continued with *clip-clop* echoes reminiscent of footsteps.

The creature gained a row, and so the assassin moved down one. When he left, the woman gave several outraged thumps and then quieted. The creature continued gaining rows and

the assassin matched each, acquainting himself with more and more women. Some showed response to his presence and others didn't, all suspended buoyantly in their tubes and the eyes staring. Eventually the creature stopped and fussed with one of the abundant tubes. The assassin watched as the water drained and the shell lowered and the tenant was freed, clawing air and screaming. The dwarfed woman kicked and fought and yelled "No!" and then an antenna-like extremity appeared from the creature and extended intently forward. The woman cried louder and there followed a rhythmic movement the assassin likened to sexual penetration. This congress was still unfolding when a hand met his shoulder.

He turned and grabbed and twisted in his learned way, arresting the offender. Then the light passed and he saw he'd caught a filthy old man, the face blackened and bearded, so much a living bruise. The man flounced and jerked but did not shout.

"Friend, friend," he said, the mouth wanting for teeth. "Friend, friend."

The assassin stole another look at the hedonistic creature and turned loose the old man.

"What is this place?" the assassin said.



“You must come see,” the old man replied. “I found it, here, in the church. It makes things. You must see.” He was already turning.

The assassin voiced his confusion but the man didn’t stop. The assassin followed.

The old man carried a tiny flashlight and by it he led the assassin through the forest of tubes and, in time, to what looked to be a solid wall. There was a metal panel and the old man set it quietly aside, exposing ductwork that didn’t appear to be for air. The old man ducked inside and flicked his fingers and the assassin did the same, replacing the panel without being asked. They crawled.

The claustrophobic ductwork continued for what could have been a mile, the assassin trailing the small wandering circle of the old man’s flashlight. “Come, see,” the old man said throughout. “It makes things. See.” They incurred more turns than the assassin could count and he wondered if he wasn’t being led to his doom.

Darkness and contained movement and “Come, see,” and then they broke into open space. The assassin stood and stretched, his back cracking like toppling rocks. The chamber was pitch dark save for the old man’s flashlight. There was a smell.

“Here, see,” the old man said, and

went to his knees. A match struck and then lit a nursery of the smallest candles the assassin had ever seen. The flames stood straight up; there was no air flow to speak of.

“Where is this? Where are we?” the assassin asked again, and the old man said something that sounded like “Home.” He lit candles until the chamber was orange. The mellow light revealed an apartment-sized room and metal walls of strange manufacture, the floor a catastrophe of plates and wrappers and other things that didn’t belong here. The assassin retrieved a crumpled wad of plastic sporting the ensign of a popular fast-food franchise. His eyebrows rose, a bemused wrinkle on his brow.

“It makes things,” the old man said, sitting tailor-style over a mattress of dreck. “Here, see.” He produced a small teak box and extended it suggestively.

The assassin joined him over the floor, careful to avoid the myriad candles and more-questionable trash. “What makes things?” he indulged.

The old man answered by clutching the box to his chest and closing his eyes and then opening them. He unlatched the box and pulled from it a teeny coffee mug that he offered to the assassin. The assassin holstered his gun and took the mug and there was hot coffee inside. He nearly

dropped it.

He sat frozen with the mug as the old man closed the lid and repeated the magic, this time retrieving a fresh baked Danish from a plate just small enough to fit the box. He gave it to the assassin and then produced an identical pastry for himself. He ate and sipped, then gestured for the assassin to do the same. The assassin did and the food was good. He ate it all and drained the coffee. The old man smiled.

“It makes things,” the assassin said afterward, in a different voice. His eyes lit greedily over the box.

The old man nodded and dispensed with his cup and plate, looking pleased with himself. His nappy hair made wild shapes like the woman’s. “Now, you,” he said, and handed over the box.

The assassin looked for a place to put his cup and plate, then just tossed them as the old man had and accepted the box. It was light and hard, what might be birch, its joints dovetailed with precision. He unlatched it and squeaked its lid and it was empty.

“How does it work?” the assassin asked.

The old man shrugged.

“How did it . . . how do you *make* it work?” the assassin clarified.

“You tell it,” said the old man.

The assassin grew dubious. “You

said nothing.”

The old man smiled. “With your head, you tell it.” He pointed to his temple, the finger like a knotted old twig. “Think.”

The assassin paused, then hesitantly closed his eyes and cradled the box to his chest. He thought of a miniature flashlight like the old man’s, and no sooner had he done so than he felt the box grow heavy . . . barely perceptible, but somehow heavier. He unlatched it and there was a flashlight inside. He pressed its button and it worked. He joined the old man with a smile, the candlelight glittering on their sallow teeth.

“What is it, exactly?” the assassin asked, marveling at the contraption.

“It’s a box,” the old man replied. “It makes things.”

The assassin regarded the old man with new scrutiny, wondering how long the fellow had been here. There was a lot of trash. “Yes,” he said, noncommittally. He then clutched the box and closed his eyes and tried again, now thinking of a ladder, to send up to the door of his entry. Nothing happened.

He thought a moment and then said, “It has to fit in the box?”

The old man nodded with conviction, smiling wider as though a joke had been told. His hands played with each other.

The assassin tried again, but could think of nothing that fit this criterion yet was material to his situation. He thought of a rope, envisioning it paid out of the box like handkerchiefs from a magician's sleeve, but nothing happened. He grew frustrated and his mind wandered, and he absently thought of a poisonous snake. The box was suddenly heavier and the lid jumped against the latch.

The assassin grunted and his eyes flickered open, then he closed them again and thought the snake away, making the box lighter. He looked at it for a time, then set it on the floor and pushed it away from him some.

"We must leave here," he said to the old man, and wiped away sweat.

"Leave?"

"Yes, leave," the assassin deadpanned. "Go outside, to the world." He illustrated this by making legs of two fingers and walking them through the air.

"No one *leaves*," the old man said, and renewed his smile.

The assassin was unamused. "There's a door—*the* trapdoor. In the governor's house?"

The old man leaned airily against the wall. "There's no *door*," he said, and laughed, the note like wires strained.

"There *is*," the assassin came back. "But it's high. Can't reach? We

must get out, using *this*, somehow." He tapped the box. "And the women, in the tubes, we must free them—"

"This is home," the old man broke in, no longer smiling. "No one leaves home."

The two looked at each other without saying anything. After nearly a minute, the assassin narrowed his eyes and reached furtively for the box.

## II. Flood

In Arthur's large suburban house was a capacious living room, and in that a horsehair couch and a prodigious dovecote now empty and his many instruments and an ancient porthole television. On the day of the flood, the television showed pictures of ugly people as Arthur composed on his theremin, his hands cutting broad shapes.

He had been watching the grotesque slideshow for several hours when it abruptly blinked into a broadcast of an aircraft fuselage. The video-camera showed a passel of men and women, nude and in orgy. The containers of soul fornicated with abandon, none quiet, teeth bared, the thrusting injurious to all involved. Arthur watched and continued to play, the high notes whirring like

squeaked glass. Minutes passed, then the video frame registered turbulence within the depicted plane, the fornicates at once answering with anxious looks around, their world shaking tumultuously. The plane soon dipped and their moans became screams, the bodies tumbling, a furious rain of luggage and shed clothes, all seen members flaccid and forgotten. There followed a great crash bespeaking cataclysm, and then the reporting camera rocketed downward and into an unsmiling man's forehead, ending the phantom transmission. The lens cracked as it connected with the formidable bone, and this translated to the porthole television, shattering the bubbled glass.

Arthur stopped his music and approached the wounded television, at once smelling sea and sex and death. There were sounds from the darkened realm beyond, none from things living, and then water could be heard rushing. It filled the tube, then gushed forward in a terrible column that left the living room rich with seawater. Arthur unplugged the television and walked it delicately to the nearby bathroom, where he deposited the weeping appliance into the bathtub. The water gurgled down the drain.

\* \* \*

The next day, Arthur awoke and ate pemmican and then called Mr. Flood, a specialist in matters epithet. Mr. Flood said he would be there in an hour, and Arthur said that was fine. After hanging up the clock he used for a phone, Arthur checked the breached television and found it undisturbed in his bathtub, issuing a steady current of water, several runners of seaweed describing the flows. A tennis shoe protruded partially through, what may or may not have held foot. Arthur didn't move it. The bathroom smelled like ocean and jet fuel.

Before quitting the bathroom, he stole a string of seaweed and dried it in a towel, the verdant frond like any terrestrial specimen. He then carried it from the bathroom and through the hall and down cellar, to the shrine. The shrine was a room that had once been a larder, behind a locked and Z-battened door that Arthur alone saw passage, and there he kept the Concoction. He had for a year now retained his scabs, cuticles, eyelashes, and coffee-urine in a large mason jar, infrequently adding other objects of note, of which the peregrine seaweed was one. The Mason jar rested within a clinquant display constructed by Arthur personally, pasteboard cutouts elaborated with sequins and glitter and rhinestones.

He assumed the jar with both hands, and the evil contents shifted viscously, of no color describable. Carefully, he undid its gilded ring and added the seaweed and saw it subsumed by the wretched gruel. He then closed the jar and returned it to the shrine and went back upstairs to compose the day's music.

Mr. Flood arrived at the appointed time, a tall black man of no description. Arthur ushered him to the affected living room and resumed the theremin as the man appraised the damage.

"Where'd the water come from?" Mr. Flood asked, sloshing the marine carpet.

"TV."

"Ah."

The man poked around and eventually gave Arthur an estimate, which he approved.

"When can you start?" Arthur asked.

"Right now," said Mr. Flood. Then: "Got anything to drink?"

Arthur said that he did, then quit the living room and repeated his earlier walk: through the hall and down cellar and into the shrine. He approached the fantastic display where the Concoction was kept, then reached for its shelf, a funhouse reflection of him in the opaque substance. He then selected the mason

jar of spring water he kept just beside that containing the Concoction, and then went upstairs and decanted a serving in a clean glass and carried it back to the living room.

There, he found Mr. Flood operating the theremin, and with skill. Arthur waited several minutes for the man to finish, but then got tired of waiting and set the water down and assumed the harmonium nearby, striking up a three-four arabesque in the key of G. The two developed an interplay, and soon Arthur was singing:

*"Straw-w-w-w-mute! / Ain't that a piss-uh! / Straw-w-w-w-mute! / Woab-ob-obbbb-ob-ob! / Straw-w-w-w-mute . . . !"*

When an hour had passed and the energy died, the two abandoned their song and Mr. Flood resumed the requisite work.

\* \* \*

Mr. Flood finished the restoration in a heroic single day, thereby restoring the house to Arthur's satisfaction. Arthur paid from saved monies and sent the man on his way, then enjoyed his refurbished living room, humming "Strawmute" under his breath before performing the iconic song. He played until his body ached, and then retired to his couch, looking forward to The Ugly Channel—and that's when he remembered his lack

of a functional television set.

After pondering this for hours, he discerned it a sign that it was Time.

He sprung from the couch and down cellar and into the shrine, where waited that cloudy hellbroth so long in making. With ceremony he undid the two-part lid and wafted the unnamable odor to abundance, savoring its accumulated stinks as one would a wine. He then raised the tapered glass and drank it empty, leaving nary a drop. The unholy liquor burned going down, apocalyptic to his insides.

He belched afterward, and there came to him stirrings like no thing known or imagined: inner barriers tumbling, jnana undreamed, the Veil no longer upon him. And with that, transcendence bloomed, like fireworks in twilight. With one final cry of ecstasy, he then Zenned into nothingness, the mason jar clinking loudly to the floor.

### III. The Film

The man's name was Distant, and he lived alone and always would. He by choice knew no one in his neighborhood, so when he got a knock on his door, he gave pause. He opened it to find an envelope on his stoop. Inside was a note:

*Go to the church. Take the front pew. The hymnal there. The path leads.*

Distant considered the text and almost ignored it, but then drove the short distance to the church across town. It was a Wednesday afternoon, and the sanctuary was empty but for him and the silent fixtures where worship was made. He seated himself in the front pew, but there was no hymnal. He checked the under-seat slots and all around and there were no books to speak of, holy or otherwise. A woman appeared from behind, seemingly from nowhere.

"You're looking for something," she stated. She wore a red poplin dress inappropriate for her surroundings, her matching lips plush and accommodating.

Distant engaged her without warmth. "A hymnal," he said, contumely.

She nodded and raised one eyebrow and said: "There is a place, a brothel, for what dwells those foreign halls. There are women there, like me but not. The chosen."

Distant blinked, and then looked around at the nave and the transepts. They were alone.

"Go to the Lovers' Bridge, a message there," she finished, then left.

Distant watched the woman filter down the aisles and then through a door that didn't close. He soon followed her and made for his car.

\* \* \*

The Lovers' Bridge was a mile away and in a locale contrary to his last station, on a byroad that ran through a small tract of woods at the edge of town. The cobblestone bridge was a destination for the town's youth, a secluded place to enact their devilments, as reflected in the beer empties and condoms and poppers littering the area. Distant drove there and parked in a preceding gravel pit.

It was winter and cold and the naked trees swayed. He scoured a ten-foot radius of the bridge and found only the expected unpleasant-ries. He had nearly given up and returned to his empty home when he noticed the graffiti maculating the structure, the variegated markings in their hundreds. Most were illegible, but a prominent orange specimen instructed the viewer to visit the creek nearby. Distant visited the creek.

He followed it downstream for perhaps a quarter of a mile, and there found a garbage bag beneath the leafy water, its shape detailing something inside. He dredged it from the shallow drink and found it heavy

and substantial, as though filled with dumbbells or the innards of rock creatures. He set it over the bank and it stood upright.

He undid the garbage bag and peeled it down and found another garbage bag that he undressed similarly. Concealed inside was a film projector of some age. It was dry and intact and there was a note on it:

*True happiness doesn't make you smile. God has no eyes. Go home.*

He read the note and returned the way he'd come, the projector with him.

\* \* \*

It was dusk when he got home and on his doorstep was a canned reel of film with a garnish of watercress. He looked around and there was no one, nor was there a note. He took the film and left the watercress.

The projector had an outmoded three-prong plug but Distant had an adapter and it worked. He set it on a table in his parlor and installed the film and dimmed the lights and started it up, fashioning the far wall into a screen. A fan whirred to life and the reels made a *tata-tata-tata* noise like a spinning roulette wheel. He watched without sitting down, the flickering ghost lights playing off his front half.

The filmstrip started black and remained so for nearly five minutes, until a tiny paper-colored cone entered the frame, what might have been a flashlight. The cone bobbed and weaved in a gamely manner, hinting at surreptitious movement only glimpsed, and then another light opened, this one smaller and giving way to more lights. Candles.

More and more sighed to life and soon the scene resolved into an apartment-sized room peopled by two men. One man was old and ragged, with crazed hair that reached, and the other was younger, svelte in a black bodysuit of some kind. The film was not in color and there was no soundtrack, rendering the narrative cryptic in all manners. The angle was high and Godlike. Distant watched stolidly.

The two men made silent conversation in their candlelit grotto, and then the older of the two selected a small box from the floor. He held it to his chest and closed his mad eyes and then produced from it a cup and, later, a pastry of some persuasion. The other man took them and the old man prestidigitated more and the two ate. The old man smiled, and soon the other man did too. The scene was peaceful, like watching children play.

The younger man fussed with the

gifted box, periodically taking from it things made indiscernible by the film's antiquated emulsion. He and the old man conversed more, and then the old man's smile went away and the younger man sat holding the box.

Then, without warning, there materialized within the frame a third man, not there and then there, as though spliced in. He held what looked to be the lid of a mason jar.

The younger man crawfished backward in surprise, the box at his chest and his eyes widening; but the older man showed no appreciable response. The just-arrived third party at once sat and assumed a repose much like the older gentleman at his wing. The younger man's head took swift jerks between his fellows, his mouth moving and his eyes making appeals that went unanswered. The third man's mouth moved little, and the old man's didn't at all. The younger man gestured repeatedly to the box in his lap, stabbing it with one gloved finger and indicating the room at large.

The third man listened raptly, then assumed a lotus pose and closed his eyes and *O*'ed his fingers. He remained so for a time, then accepted the box and put it to his chest in the fashion seen previously. Moments later he opened it and shook



out a small black ring of electrician's tape. Then a doorknob. Then a tube of glue. Wielding these, he stood and employed the materials to construct a mock door over the wall, three lengths of tape with a stuck-on knob. He gestured to it afterward and said some things and then without prelude turned the knob. The door opened effortlessly, no longer mock.

Simultaneously, there erupted a plangent tearing sound from the wall at Distant's port, and he looked to find a door-like square of it peeling inward. Soft candlelight spilled through and he was soon met by two of the three men introduced by the filmstrip still running.

## IV. The Fob

With a strange detachment, the assassin watched the extemporaneous door open to A Place that was Not There. He stood studying the man named Arthur, and Arthur only extended a hand through the jamb, as to usher the assassin through. The assassin took one step, then more, moving in inches-long escapements.

The door led to a dark room familiar in carpentry to the world he knew, and he was struck with joy. There was an unhappy-looking man inside, standing beside a running film

projector that cast a staccato light. The assassin said "Hello" for want of something to say.

The other man nodded and returned the greeting. "My name is Distant," he said, and then looked back to the projected images. He saw himself now, through the doorway, blurry and grayscale with his head canted left. He could see the old man, too, sitting just inside the apartment.

Arthur followed the assassin into the parlor and genially introduced himself to Distant. "Sorry about your wall," he said.

Distant shrugged using his whole body. His knuckles were white and slick-looking and his eyes made quick passes at his two visitors.

Abruptly, the assassin drew his weapon and tendered it between both men, the teak box firmly in one elbow like a football. "I'll be taking this," he said, and sidled purposefully toward the exit, his head moving every which way. He disappeared into the connecting hall, and soon a door opened and closed.

Neither Arthur nor Distant replied.

A silence ensued, then Arthur said, "I suppose I'll be going too." With that, he laced his fingers and closed his eyes and blinked away as suddenly as he had arrived in the film. Distant jumped a little.

He sensed movement within the projector frame, and looked in time to see the old man stand up and rush the door and close it, with a desperation seen usually only in war. He heard the door's report, then nothing more from the other side. For a minute longer he could see the old man painted over the wall, huddled betwixt his candles like a creature in a cave, and then the film went flapping and there was only white.

Again alone, Distant checked the disrupted wall. There was some broken plaster and nothing more.

\* \* \*

It was late when the assassin found the nearest town, the stars high and winking. He got a paper and found the date to be two days prior to his departure, and his location four states over. He read the date three times and then licked his lips.

Standing on the orange-lighted streets, black in his leathers, he discarded the paper and went looking for appropriate lodgings. There was a questionable-looking motel operating out of a nearby brick building, and after making an amount of currency using the box, he entered and rented a room and ignored any received looks. The room was serviceable, and he slept through the night.

The next morning, he put his fire-

arm under the mattress and quit the room, the box not leaving his side. Using more made money, he then took breakfast and bought new clothes and wore them. He later bought a cushioned suitcase and stored in it the unknowable thing now his. Only as he passed an electronics store did he remember his obligation to execute the standing governor located four states away.

The besuited man was shown in simpatico triplicate over a pyramid of televisions dressing a display window, a bust of him as he addressed a gallery of press. The assassin watched for several minutes, then got an idea.

The pre-noon streets were empty, so he opened the suitcase and took out the box and held it to his chest and closed his eyes. He opened it a moment later and pulled out a black plastic box the approximate size and shape of a keychain fob, on it a red button that looked made for pushing. The assassin stood with it a moment, hefting it in his hand, and then took one last look around and aimed it at the appliances and depressed the button.

The governor was gesticulating, and he immediately stopped, his hands lowering. He took a muted step forward, then froze and grasped his lectern, as though caught in a mighty wind. His face colored an in-

carnadine blush, contorting in what could be pain or orgasm. His mouth opened in prelude for screaming, and then his head exploded in an efflorescent red plume, several rogue drops of blood misting the reporting camera. There were camera flashes and movement and general chaos, and then the feed went black.

The assassin deposited the fob back inside its birthplace and thought it gone and then walked away.

# BILL BAIT

Joel McCarthy

MORNING FOG HUNG JUST ABOVE the thick, lumpy ground beyond the front porch of Tim Heirbane's bait-and-tackle shop. The crescent moon dangled above the treetops like a dazzling illuminated fishing hook in want of bait. The sun would not come up for at least another half hour.

Tim was also in want of bait. He emerged, disconsolate, from the dew-covered bush, his tall rubber boots squeaking in the moist grass and his aluminum bucket thumping against his thigh as he trudged back toward his shop, which was also his home.

Since the wee hours of the morning he had been prowling the puddles of Elmer Road, hunting for inventory.

Tim's bucket was disappointingly light, and would bring only a few dollars' worth of business in the day ahead, assuming he had any customers at all besides Fat Bill.

The six or seven writhing night crawlers in his bucket would do lit-

tle to help replenish his dwindling bait stock. In fact, what he had found would probably only be good enough for one box, which he would be forced to mark up from three dollars to five, at least to salvage some semblance of profit.

He entered the small shop, which had two aisles. Fishing rods and tackle, covered with dust, hung like relics in some ancient tomb. He moved behind the counter, tracking mud along the yellowed vinyl floor.

Setting the bucket down next to the cash register, Tim flicked on a small light above his five-gallon aquarium. The Danios in the tank rushed toward the surface of the water, anticipating their morning meal. He appeased them with a pinch of fish flakes. "The Dirty Dozen" he called them, despite the fact that only seven were still alive.

He added a fistful of black soil to his bucket before gently placing it into a large, ancient refrigerator that would not close all the way. He didn't bother fighting with the door.

He just hoped the refrigerator would stay cold enough inside to keep the worms alive until daybreak. As was his custom, he set a stool against the refrigerator door so that it would not sway open when unattended.

He then went through a back door into the only other room in his shop. It was where he slept and ate. It consisted of little more than a thin green cot, a hot plate, a small pile of dirty clothing and stack of vintage 1980s pornography magazines. Apart from the porn, his most prized possessions were a fishing pole and tackle box mounted by hooks to the fake wood paneling of the wall.

He stretched out on his cot, hoping to sleep a few hours before opening the shop for business. But his eyes would not close. They were fixed on an unopened envelope atop the well-thumbed and dog-eared stacks of Swank and Penthouse. The envelope had arrived a week ago, but he had not opened it. He knew what it contained: A final notice message that if he didn't pay up soon, he would be killed.

The envelope bore no official markings, unlike those letters he had received a year ago from the I.R.S. and bank creditors. Those letters had stopped coming when he asked for help from the people who had sent him the envelope that he was looking

at now.

Tim never imagined that he'd have to solicit the aid of a criminal gang of bikers to save his shop. He had never been a model citizen, but had always made a point to stay away from the road gangs who claimed the North as their own. As a younger man he had feared them less, because they were less frightening. Back then, they were little more than a few tattooed, tough-talking hooligans claiming one bar or another as their personal fiefs. They'd start late-night brawls, crash their motorcycles or sell a few grams of coke to truckers passing through, but their petty crimes were never anything that the local authorities couldn't handle.

But eventually the gangs merged into one. They called their organization the Devlin Devils. They made more money, a lot of it in fact, and began bribing local police and politicians. They diversified into more profitable branches of crime, and soon acquired a monopoly on the drugs and firearms trades, and on prostitution. Tim knew that when he didn't have the money to keep his shop, the Devils would help him.

For a price.

After accepting their help, he not only had to pay them back with interest, but he also had to let them stash weapons, drugs, and other criminal

paraphernalia on his property. His business was supposed to pick up so he could repay his debt to them, but that never happened. With the fishing season coming to an end, in a few weeks the Devils would pay Tim a visit and redecorate Tim's bait-and-tackle shop with Tim's brains.

His meager supply of tackle, rods and other stock wasn't going to save him. Day after day the unsold stock rotted on the shelves, virgin hooks and bobbers coated in thick dust that kept their preposterous prices hidden. He couldn't afford new inventory and even if he could, customers could easily go somewhere else and spend less.

Yet every morning Tim would roll off his cot when the alarm clock went off in the wee hours of morning. He would squeeze into his tall rubber boots and hunt for bait until daybreak. When the sun rose, he would turn the "Closed" sign on the door window toward the inside of the store. Along with doom walking through that door any day now, he could also rely on Billy Arkham's fat ass waddling through it.

Like clockwork, just after six this very morning, Bill didn't disappoint. Tim could tell he was approaching the front door by the painful, protesting creaking sounds that the tortured porch steps made as Bill,

audibly huffing and puffing, slowly climbed them. The weathered planks struggled to stay nailed together as each footstep, bearing a load of more than three hundred pounds, drove down on them.

Strangely enough, Bill was the closest thing to a friend that Tim had.

Despite their friendship, Tim hated Bill to his suet-coated, butter-balled core. It didn't matter that on some days, Fat Bill was Tim's only customer. Bill seemed to patronize Tim's shop out of some warped sense of loyalty, a commitment to friendship that only Bill had.

At first Bill's idiosyncrasies merely annoyed Tim. It merely annoyed Tim that Big Bill bought only one box of worms a day. It merely annoyed him that he would tell the same tired, recycled pussy jokes dozens of times over. It merely annoyed him that he would always laugh the same phlegmy laugh at his own recycled pussy jokes.

Gradually, however, Bill Arkham became more than an irritant. He became a symbol of Tim's failures.

It seemed that Tim was condemned to spend the last few weeks of his life wallowing in the mud of Elmer Road like the accursed serpent in the Garden, searching for bait that only Bill would buy. He thought of this bait as "Bill Bait."

Tim also hated Bill's cologne. Evi-

dently he bathed in the stuff. The second he walked through the door with his cream-colored tackle box in hand, the shop immediately began smelling like a fogbank of cheap musty leather, and the rank odor would only wear off by the end of the day, if by then. Tim hated that odor.

Tim hated Bill, who was now in his store, leaning his massive girth over Tim's counter and giving off his patented odor while also getting ready to tell another recycled pussy joke.

"You know why I love to fish so much?" Bill asked, stinking of cologne.

"No," Tim replied coldly, already filling a Styrofoam box with the night crawlers, which didn't even seem to be alive.

"Cuz when I pull a big sumbitch out of the water, and I smell that smell comin' off it, it gets me harder'n algebra. Know why?"

"Nope."

"Smells like my ex-wife's pussy!"

"Here's your Bill Bait, Bill. I mean, here's your bait, Bill. Bill's five bucks."

"Five you say?"

"Yeah, five. Had to raise the price."

"Well no worries, no need to explain. You know I don't go anywhere else. Hell, you could raise em' to

twelve and I'd still be here, you know that. Everyone these days is hard up. You know what's a good way to make some cash?"

"How's that?"

"Well me, I'm gonna register in that tournament up at Fennel Lake this weekend. Top prize is five thousand dollars and best of all is it's live bait only. You know me; I don't fool with none of them Hula Poppers or nothin' so this is perfect."

"Well, that's something," Tim allowed, half listening.

"Sure is. You should join too. I'm sure you've fished Fennel enough to know where to find a pickerel or two." Bill was looking at the Danios in the fish tank. He dipped the sausage of his index finger into the tank.

"Shit, look at that," Bill marveled.

The fish frantically attacked Bill's finger, from which a murky opal cloud streamed into the water. The fish lightly pecked at the skin on it, unafraid even as Bill swayed it back and forth. They followed his finger as if it were a hypnotist's watch.

Tim was awestruck. The Danios were vegetarian, but they hungered after Bill's fat finger like Amazonian piranhas.

"I'd better join that tourney for sure," Bill said. "Just look at these little dudes. They love me! Hope all them bass in Fennel like me as much

as you guys. Look, little fish kisses.”

“Those ain’t kisses. They’re trying to eat you, but your finger is twice their size.”

“Well that’s too bad boys,” Bill said, removing his finger from inside the tank and drying it on the front of his sweater. “I got bigger fish to catch than all you put together. Hey Tim, you happen to see any of them Devlin boys in and around lately?” For some reason, Bill always found time to ask this question.

“No,” Tim lied. In fact, one of them had stopped by two weeks earlier to pick up a package of guns buried on Tim’s lot.

“Hmm,” Bill mused. “They’re some hard-ass fellas. You watch yourself if they do come by, okay? If you get mixed up with them boys I won’t have a place to buy worms. See you tomorrow, buddy.”

After Bill’s pickup pulled away, Tim dipped his own thin index finger into the tank. The fish scattered from it the moment it broke the surface, like cockroaches scrambling away from the glare of a strong light.

\* \* \*

That night he lay on his cot staring at the shadows dancing on the ceiling, shadows made by flickering candlelight. Distant bullfrogs thrummed a deep, rumbling reptil-

ian chant. Thoughts of his debt burrowed through his skull like fire ants. He drank until he passed out.

The bullfrogs’ chanting provided a soundtrack to a nightmare.

He was drowning in a deep, murky lake. He could feel the slimy tips of a weed bed tickling his toes. Suddenly the weeds turned to fish hooks. They tore into his feet and dragged him downward. His lungs filled with water. Panicked, he thrashed at the water, but the hooks pulled him down, down.

Just before his lungs gave out, he felt something peck his right elbow. Then something pierced his right palm. Next, he felt dozens of teeth rip into both of his forearms, which began moving in opposite directions. Then his arms were torn off.

He was being attacked by two sharks. One shark was named “Devlin,” and the other was named “Devils.”

He felt no pain. In his nightmare, he was now observing the victim. He couldn’t make out a face, but a murky opal cloud filled the water along with the blood, and that cloud carried the unmistakable scent of Fat Billy Arkham’s cologne.

He shot awake, heart hammering in his chest. Outside the bullfrogs chanted a dirge.

He considered what Bill had told



him about the Fennel tournament. Tim knew it well, but had never signed up for it. Fifty or more anglers competed for the most fish by mass. This meant that one could fish for quantity or for size. The anglers were required to use live bait.

Most contestants would snub the standard worms, frogs or minnows, instead preparing their own homemade bait about which they boasted. One fisherman bred worms in soil mixed with green and yellow food coloring so that the worms would glow underwater. Another angler fried bits of hot dogs in fish oil. Sometimes these strategies worked and sometimes they didn't. Life below the water was unpredictable, and the minuscule minds of the fish were frequently as inscrutable as the infinite mind of God.

Tim thought about the way that the Danios had attacked Fat Bill's fat finger. He thought about how five thousand dollars could save his life. Little fish, he philosophized, exist as food for big fish, and big fish exist as food for bigger fish. But when the biggest fish dies, its remains become food for even the smallest fish. Tim knew the biggest fish of all. Its name was Billy Arkham.

\* \* \*

Tim stood over Bill's body, gasp-

ing for air. Blood was everywhere.

Nothing had gone according to plan.

Naively, he had thought all it would take to kill a man of Bill's size would be a stiff knock to the temple with a heavy piece of wood. Tim had used a branch from a birch tree out back on his lot.

But it had taken about five shots to the head just to drive Bill to the floor, and then only after Bill had landed several defensive blows with his fists to Tim's head.

And Bill still wasn't finished off. Here he was, thrashing around on the floor like a fish out of water.

From a counter, Tim grabbed his six-inch fillet knife.

He then mashed Bill's face to the floor while Bill howled in protest amid dazed mumbling. Tim clutched the birch handle of the knife and drove its blade between two fat folds of flesh at the back of Bill's head. He pushed all six inches inside, and then plunged the knife downward, producing a ripping sound. Bill screamed and gagged, his eyes popping out of his head. The blade broke off and got lost somewhere inside that wilderness of blubber.

Bill bucked spasmodically like a freshly culled fish flopping around on the floor of a boat. Then he died.

Tim locked the deadbolt on the

front door, flipped the “Closed” sign toward the outside and pulled down the shade.

He considered how he would go about turning Bill’s body into Bill Bait. There was a lot of meat to choose from, but first he wanted to make sure that it was worth the trouble of carving him up.

With a second knife he shaved a small flake of skin off of Bill’s finger. He flicked the sample into the fish tank. The Dirty Dozen (all seven of them) pounced on the specimen like vultures on carrion.

Tim pondered how to proceed.

He wouldn’t need much meat for the tournament, maybe just a calf or love handle, but he’d be sure to keep plenty of Bill Bait on hand for after the tournament was over.

Bill Bait was miracle bait. After Tim won the tournament, every fisherman within a hundred miles would come flocking to his shop to buy that bait. He would charge them fifteen bucks a box. Because Bill weighed more than three hundred pounds, his carcass represented a near-lifetime supply of bait that would pay back his debt in no time. Hell, there was at least a year’s supply of Bill Bait on Bill’s wide-load ass alone.

He worked far into the night, carving Bill up into little pieces that he stacked in Styrofoam boxes. He

blended Bill’s bits in a food processor, mixing them with egg and flour and producing Bill balls the size of mini-meatballs. Each box contained a hundred balls, and he stacked the boxes inside the refrigerator until they made a pyramid that reached almost to the top of the refrigerator. All that was left intact of Bill was his head. Bill’s eyes goggled like those of a dead fish.

Tim, tuckered out, decided to cut up the head later. He stashed it on the top rack of the refrigerator, above the pyramid of boxes. Then he closed the door, and set the stool against it so it would not swing open.

Tim noticed Bill’s tackle box, toppled over, leaning against the legs of the aquarium. He picked it up and tossed it into his back room.

\* \* \*

A cool breeze rustled the leaves of the trees as a flock of black-capped chickadees peppered the gray afternoon sky.

Tim trudged up his driveway toward his home. His shoulders were slumped, his eyes cast down. He looked like a man on his way to a date with the electric chair—which, in a sense, he was.

The Fennel fishing derby was over. Tim’s final catch weight after endless hours scouring the weed

banks was: Zero.

He had not caught a single fish.

His bait, which he had ripped from the bones of his only customer and sort-of best (only) friend, had been as worthless as bits of hotdog. Actually, the guy using hotdogs had finished a respectable fourth place.

Tim hadn't stayed to watch the first-place angler receive the five thousand dollars that was supposed to save Tim's life.

It was now a waiting game. All he wanted to do was lie on his cot, drunk, and wait for death to knock at his door.

The sealed envelope that sat atop the stacked porn magazines, wedged between the glossy cleavage of a model like a love note from hell, had sealed his fate.

If there was one lesson he had learned in his long life, it was this: never trust your pet fish.

It really was true that the minuscule minds of fish were as inscrutable as the infinite mind of God.

The realization that the seven remaining members of the Dirty Dozen would probably outlive him made him chuckle bitterly.

His radio was on. Neil Young sang "Deep Forbidden Lake." Periodic bursts of static washed out the song like sheets of rain lashing against the corrugated tin roof of his shop.

"Here is a bulletin from CBHL News."

Tim sat up.

"Earlier today, the local police made mass arrests of members of the organized crime gang known as 'The Devlin Devils.' Six high-ranking members of the gang and many lower-ranking figures were detained on a long list of charges, including drug trafficking, embezzlement, bribery and murder. An eight-month federal investigation known as 'Operation Pitchfork' led to the today's arrests. Police sources say that as a result of the arrests, the gang's grip on the region has been broken."

Tim felt like a man strapped to the electric chair, ready to feel the juice when the governor calls with a pardon.

But before he could revel in this feeling, he heard a sharp rap at the front door of his shop, and the fear returned.

Another knock.

He rose unsteadily from his cot, left his room and approached the front door. He flicked on a light switch, but the overhead bulb flashed and died in an instant, giving off a burst of blue-white light like a fork of lightning that left a menacing afterimage of dark veins on his retinas.

"Mr. Heirbane? Anyone home?"

Tim opened the door a crack, not

lifting the chain.

“Mr. Heirbane?” the man outside asked. He wore sunglasses, even though it was not sunny.

“Who wants to know?”

“Sir, my name is Detective Julian Dumphry. If you are Tim Heirbane, I was wondering if I could steal a moment of your time.”

Tim thought about this.

“O.K. Sure. It’s me.”

“May I come in?”

“Yes, please come in.” Tim lifted the door chain.

“Thanks.”

The Detective entered the store, and removed his sunglasses. “Pretty dark in here, isn’t it? Guess you’re closed?”

“Lights just burned out.”

“No problem. I guess as long as the customers can still see the merchandise, eh?”

Tim took his place behind the counter, trying not to show the fear that he felt. He said cautiously, “So what can I help you with today, Detective Dumphry?” He added, in his best business-as-usual tone of voice, “Are you in the market for some bait, Detective?” He keenly felt the inanity of the question even as it was leaving his lips.

The detective offered a small, inscrutable grin, and then shook his head.

“No, no bait. I don’t fish. Not exactly. Mr. Heirbane, I have a few questions for you. Nothing huge. I’m sure you’re familiar with the Devlin gang up here?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hear that we made a few arrests against them today?”

“Just heard it on the radio. Congrats.”

“We’ve pretty much wrapped up the investigation, but there are a few loose ends we’re trying to tie up.”

“Loose ends,” Tim echoed dryly, with a stiff nod.

“We understand members of the gang stopped by your shop from time to time.” The detective pulled a pen and pad from his pocket.

“I suppose so.”

“You suppose so? Well, we’ve been keeping pretty close tabs on your property for some time now, Mr. Heirbane. Can you tell me if they ever asked you for use of your lot for anything?”

Tim weighed his response. Finally he said, “I don’t recall.”

“You don’t recall.” The detective wrote this down.

Then he went on: “It struck us as a bit strange for them to visit you specifically. The Devlins aren’t exactly avid fisherman, and you aren’t exactly the cheapest shop in town, now are you?”

“Maybe I do recall one guy coming in here,” Tim said hoarsely. “He wanted me to bury something out back. I told him I couldn’t because I was having a well dug out there, and whatever he wanted to bury wouldn’t stay buried for long.”

“So that was it? You weren’t asked again?”

“That was the only time.”

“Let me be honest with you, Mr. Heirbane. You seem a little nervous. You’re not in any trouble. We’re just trying to clear up some loose ends, particularly with respect to one of our undercovers.”

“Undercover officer?”

“Yes. We used him quite a bit in this area, but just before we made the arrests, we stopped hearing from him. He was a big guy, posing as a fisherman. Here’s a photograph of him. I’m sure you know him. He’s the reason we know the Devlins were here asking about your property.” The detective slid the photograph across the counter toward Tim.

Tim looked down at it. His teeth clenched, and his jaws worked.

“Know him, Mr. Heirbane?” the detective asked. His voice was almost gentle.

“Yeah” Tim nodded, still staring down at the photo of Big Fat Billy Arkham. “I know him.”

Tim thought: so all this time, Big

Fat Billy Arkham, bless his butterball ass, was working undercover to save my ass. And I showed my gratitude by killing him and cutting up his own ass into Bill Bait. And to make matters worse, the bait wasn’t worth a damn.

“Mr. Heirbane? You O.K.?”

What’s that word for situations like this? Tim thought raggedly. It’s on the tip of my tongue. Sounds like “ironing.”

“Pussy jokes,” Tim suddenly muttered under his breath, staring wildly down at the photo. “Bad cologne. Phlegmy laugh. Big, fat ass. Bill Bait.”

“Sir?”

Tim looked up at the detective, as in a daze.

“I’m O.K., detective. Really, I’m fine.”

“You’re white as a sheet, sir. I can see that even in the darkness of this place.” Then the detective put his sunglasses back on, hiding his eyes. This worried Tim. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me, Mr. Heirbane?”

“No!” Tim blurted. “I don’t need to tell you anything.”

Detective Dumphry nodded solemnly, his evaluating eyes now hidden from view.

“Mr. Heirbane, we know from our last communication with Bill that he came in here on the—” the detective paused to check his notes—“that

he came in here three days ago. Can you confirm this?”

“Yeah, I think . . . I think he did,” Tim said, swallowing with difficulty.

“Did he buy anything?”

“Box of worms.”

“I see. Do you happen to have a receipt of that transaction? I’m just trying to compile a record of his last known whereabouts.”

“Sure. I think I got it in the back. Give me a sec.” Tim turned away.

As he walked, Tim stared at the floor, thinking hard. He did not notice his shoe bump against the leg of the stool that was propped against the refrigerator door to keep the door shut. The stool moved.

So did the door.

In his room, Tim rummaged through his records and found the receipt.

“Oh, Mr. Heirbane,” a voice sang out. “Could you step back out here, please?”

Turning to leave, Tim’s shoe kicked something else and it popped open.

“Mr. Heirbane,” called the detective from the other room. His voice was sad. “Your refrigerator, sir.”

Tim sniffed at the air.

The leathery musk of Bill Arkham had returned in full force.

How? Why?

Tim looked down at what he had

kicked open. It was Bill’s cream-colored tackle box. A small flask of fluid had rolled out of its compartment. It was missing its cap.

“I guess the refrigerator door is broken,” the detective observed from the other room. “Pity.”

In wonderment, Tim crouched down and picked up the flask. He could just make out the label in the darkness:

“Angler Grade Fishing Scent,” the label said. And in smaller words: “Apply to lures and bait for best results.”

He sniffed the nozzle and then it hit him: Bill didn’t wear cologne. That maddening scent had followed him because the bottle was always rolling around, slightly open, in his tackle box. It must have been on Bill’s finger when he dipped it into the Danio tank, which was why the fish went crazy.

Now Tim knew why Bill Bait had been a failure in the Fennel tournament. It hadn’t been marinated in the fishing scent.

There was no miracle bait after all. Never had been.

Holding the receipt, Tim returned to face the detective. But he stopped.

The room, previously dark because of the burned-out light bulb, was filled with a cold blue light.

The detective, still wearing his sunglasses, faced the light, his hands

in his pockets. He looked like some graven stone figure bathed in moonlight. His shadow hooded him, running far up the wall behind him.

Tim looked into the open refrigerator, at the pyramid of boxes full of Bill Bait. Bill Arkham's head was still on the top rack, eyes goggling like those of a dead fish.

"You're in a lot of trouble, Mr. Heirbane," the detective said quietly.

The two men faced each other silently. The silence was broken only by the gentle trickling of the fish tank filters, and by the faint buzzing of the open refrigerator.

# THE FLESH MADE WORD

David Misialowski

## BOOKS

THE WORD, IN ALL-CAPITAL ANTIQUE serif letters, made a graceful arc across the rain-streaked display window. It was painted in gold gilt that had flaked and chipped away in places.

Above it, in smaller letters, upper and lower case, were the words, *Tree of Life*.

Below the arc, in smaller letters yet, were more words: *New! Used! Rare! Out of Print! Never Before in Print! Imaginary!*

And finally at the very bottom, in tiny lettering like the fine print of a contract, was this intelligence: *World's Biggest Bookstore*.

I smiled dubiously at these outlandish claims.

Clutching my suitcase, I descended a short flight of steps and entered the store. A bell atop the door tinkled as I opened it, and when I shut the door behind me, my mouth fell ajar.

"What can I do for you, young man? I am the bookseller."

He sat immobile behind a coun-

ter, under a blazing cone of light that shone down on him from a lamp inches above his head and made skull sockets of his eyes. His skin was old parchment, and it was covered with letters and words. These symbols were difficult to interpret, however, for they were like washed-out old sailor tattoos from some nightmarish skid row in yesterhell.

I timidly approached him, shaking the early morning rain off my Army surplus jacket the way a homeless, drenched mongrel would shake the rain off its fur. The pockets of my jeans jangled with my life's savings.

"I might like to take a look at your books."

"Well, take a look, then, but be careful. I've had customers who went in, got lost and never came back. That's the God's truth!"

I laughed weakly at the lame joke. But I stole an awed glance at this cavernous underground bookstore. Lights strung up in the rafters cast a dim, livid glow over towering shelves that went on as far as the eye could see.



“It’s *big*,” I breathed.

“Indeed, it’s *very big*.”

I studied the old man. “Beated and hatched with tann’d antiquity,” came to my literary turn of man.

The bookseller picked up a quill pen, and dipped it into a jar of ink. He began making notations in a large, leather-bound black book that was open before him to about middle pages.

I looked at the cash register behind the counter. It was open, and full of money: moolah, bread, lettuce, cash. It even looked like lettuce, green and crisp and new. Edible.

I was trying to recall the last time that I had eaten a real meal. My guts audibly growled, humiliating me. But the bookseller did not seem to notice or care.

I could hear the quill pen scratching in the book. It was a disturbing sound, like mice feet skittering on a hardwood floor. Behind the proprietor was a wall calendar, April 14, with a picture of President Eisenhower.

Mustering my courage, I cleared my throat with a rattling cough and assayed as follows: “Look, you don’t happen to have . . . uh, any spare change, do you? Maybe even a dollar, or two?”

The old man noticed me eyeing the money. He frowned, shut the

cash register and shook his head.

“How ’bout a job, then? Bookstore this big . . .”

“Not hiring,” he cut in coldly. “Sorry.”

“How about a bite to eat, then? Food!”

“Food!”

The bookseller exploded to life, suddenly positively radiating benevolence. He swept a hand toward the depths of the bookstore, inadvertently knocking over the jar of ink. The ink spilled onto the book in which he had been writing.

“There’s your food—thought for food!”

“What?”

“My accounts ledger,” the old man mumbled distractedly, looking down at his sullied book. “Tsk!”

He shook his blackened fingers, flinging dots of ink onto my face, and then he began mopping up the mess with a blotter, saying, “That’s the food you need. It will sustain you. How old are you, anyway?”

“Twenty.”

“Wet behind the ears! Where’d you come from?”

“I took the Greyhound bus all the way from the East Coast to the West Coast. Coast to coast on a piece of toast.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Running away from something?”

“Is this an interrogation? Yes, from my life.”

“Well, now you’ve found it. These books”—he gestured grandly at them—“are what’s real. That out there”—he nodded with a grimace at the shut door, beyond which was the street—“is delusion. Are you religious?”

“Not anymore. I gave that up for Lent.”

“Christ was the Word made flesh, but that’s just it: He was a Word. The Logos. Everything is just a Word. Do you see? A language game, a contrived story of the mind. Life is nothing but the stories well tell one another, and beyond that there literally is nothing. ‘Whereof one cannot speak, one must remain silent.’”

“Hunger is not just a word, old man. Nor a game. I can speak of hunger. Listen: *Hunger*.”

“You have no money?”

“I thought I could find a job here in San Francisco, but . . .” Despite my best efforts to hold them back, tears started to my eyes.

“The money has run out.” His voice was almost gentle.

“Yes.” With a strangled sob, I held up my battered suitcase. “This is all I have, and the clothes on my back. Seventy-eight cents in my pocket, if you must know, and eleven cigarettes

left. I’m rationing them. Look, I’m dying.”

“Why don’t you have a look around? If you see something you like, maybe I’ll let you have it on credit.”

“You don’t understand, old man. I just skipped out on five days’ worth of back bills at the YMCA up on Turk Street. I have nothing!”

“Well, you’re still welcome to have a look around. You seem to have potential. You can kill some time here. Maybe even inherit the place someday.”

I gazed wonderingly at the terrifying number of books.

“It’s the Tree of Life,” the old man rhapsodized. “Good luck in finding what you need, though; nothing is organized alphabetically. Everything is random. Total chaos. Long ago things were different, but in my old age I’ve lost control of the place, of its inventory. In fact, let’s be honest: most of the books are trash. But there are diamonds in the rough. Well, I did the best I could with it. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I turned to go, eager to be on with my journey. I was sick of the old idiot and his pretentious pseudo-philosophizing.

“One more thing.”

“What?”

“You can kill some time here,

but don't lose track of it. It's easy to do, in a place like this. That's the romance of a big bookstore. Before you know it . . ."

"I'll be careful. It's not like I haven't got time to kill anyway."

I entered an aisle, flanked by towering shelves crammed with books.

It did not end.

PHILOSOPHY OF LAMPS. FROMMER'S GUIDE TO JAPANESE BROTHELS. THE BIG BOOK OF BIG BOOKS. SCHOPENHAUER VS. GODZILLA (A JAPANESE GRAPHIC NOVEL). NARCISSISM: WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

Obscure titles, bad novels, dime-store paperback Westerns. Trash. Just like the man had said. The musty, acidic odor of old paper was palpable. Mice gamboled about the ruins. I was growing impatient, looking for something decent to read. And I was so hungry. But I knew from experience that browsing in a good bookstore can still hunger pangs, at least for awhile.

With a prickle of interest, I extracted a thick book from under a pile of sci-fi paperbacks. It was a Civil-War-era journal. Its author was a New York copperhead who deprecated Lincoln, opposed the Civil War and supported slavery. It looked authentic, a real book from the 1860s.

I had always been interested in the Civil War.

A sticker on the cover said, 41 cents. Forty-one cents! It occurred to me that this book might have substantial resale value.

*If you see something you like, maybe I'll let you have it on credit*, the bookseller had said.

"Sure, Pops," I announced cynically.

I set down my suitcase, opened it, and then yanked out his clothes and tossed them aside. I dropped the Civil War journal into the empty suitcase, and then snapped it shut.

"The old man will never know," I rationalized. "I've already shown him the suitcase, and he'll have no need to check it. Besides, he'll never miss it." I looked around. "How could he!"

I excavated from another book-crammed shelf a telephone directory for Cambridge, Massachusetts, dated 1978: nearly two decades in the future. My name was listed in it. I was boggled. Who would go through the trouble of concocting a phony phone book for a future year? With my name in it, no less, and a phony phone number and address. It too went into the suitcase.

Later, in a cul-de-sac, a dead end, I encountered bookends: a biology text labeled "Athens" and a bible labeled "Jerusalem."

In Athens I found a glossy center-fold that depicted the phylogenetic tree of life.

In Jerusalem I read about God introducing cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way to the Edenic tree of life.

Athens and Jerusalem were facing each other like two pugilists waiting for the bell to ring.

Forty-one cents. Athens was forty-one cents, and so was Jerusalem. Cheap!

Into the suitcase they went.

Eventually I came across a massive coffee-table art book and when I opened it, I saw her portrait: she of the enigmatic smile. I fell in love with her at first sight. Can you fall in love with a picture in a book? Well, I did. I kissed her hungrily, and then imprisoned her in the valise.

But then like a recurring nightmare the other hunger came vividly back to me. I felt light-headed and weak-kneed; the now-heavy suitcase was becoming a burden.

Shuffling along, the suitcase weighing me down like a ball and chain, I tripped over two striped projections jutting out across the aisle and stumbled forward headlong toward a railing.

I shot out my hands to brace myself, and the suitcase flew out of my grasp. I slammed into the railing,

clutching it with both hands. I had nearly gone over it.

Clutching the railing I stared down, stunned, as the suitcase vanished into an impossibly steep drop. I could not hear it hit the floor.

This space, apparently an airshaft, was hexagonal, the six walls delimiting it consisting of terrifying numbers of books packed tightly together like bricks. Two interlocking spiral staircases, a wrought-iron double helix, ran right down the center of it. I looked down: A doomsday death spiral toward nowhere. I looked up: a frightening heightening toward forever. I imagined it to be a stairway connecting heaven to hell.

Then I recalled what I had lost. A wave of despair hit me, and I slumped down on some books that had tumbled from a shelf.

Looking down, I saw two legs in striped pajama bottoms and slippers on the feet thrusting out across the aisle: what I had tripped over. Above the waist, the body was buried under a pile of books.

Suddenly a hand shot straight up from under the pile, knocking the books at the top of it to the floor. The fingers clenched a few times, and then the hand curled into a claw.

I gasped, scrambled to my feet and swiftly backpedaled away from that hand. A muffled but familiar

voice, from under the pile, began calling my name, over and over in a heart-rending way.

I blundered into a shelf that nearly toppled. I hugged it to steady it. Then I looked around in genuine and growing fear, seeing bookcases and shelves everywhere, in every direction, an endless maze in which apparently I was the lab rat. But who was the mad scientist? The bookseller?

“Hello!” I called out. My voice echoed and died.

“Is anyone out there?” Echoes. Silence.

I screamed as loudly as I could: “IS ANYONE HOME?”

Nothing. Just the papyrus-infested gloom under the livid light, and the diminuendo of my dying voice.

Where was the entrance? Where was the exit? I could no longer even see the walls!

Good God, I thought, I’m lost in here.

At the end of an aisle I saw a very large hill of books. I wondered what was over that rise. Perhaps the way out.

I scrambled up it, and when I had mounted it I gazed out at a breathtaking vista that simply staggered me: No more shelves. Just mountains of books, Himalayas of books, armies and oceans and continents of books, millions and millions of books,

mountains as high as the Rockies, mountains of books that rolled away as far as the eye could see, rolling away toward the wastelands of infinity.

I could just make out, in the far distance, a line of moving dots, barely bigger than ants on a sidewalk. They trundled carts piled high with books. They tottered forth in robes and hoods, bearing wood staffs and hand-held lights, creeping out of a valley of paper and beginning to negotiate the treacherous incline of a book mountain. The truth-seekers, I thought dimly, with a frisson of awe. The bearers of the light. Seeking the summits. I knew that they would fail in their quest, just as I would fail in mine; and mine was so much more meager.

I scrambled down from the hill. When I regained the floor I was stunned to see an old woman squatting over a book. Cloaked in musty shrouds, she held up a spyglass to one eye through which she was peering down at her book. I bent toward her and whispered: “We’ve got to get out of here. Let me help you. Let’s find our way out together.”

She did not respond; did not move. So I lightly touched her shoulder. Insubstantial as a paper doll, she fell over on her side. Her flesh was the color of the papyrus that she had

been reading, the Dead Sea Scrolls. I swept aside the dead woman's veil, and then I understood.

It meandered almost underfoot, driving up my pant cuff. I shot erect. My skin crawled. I looked down. It was weaving erratically on the floor on its many little legs, a wound in its shell in which a spherical projectile was lodged. It left behind a trail of slime on the floorboards.

Folding its black, papery wings with a stiff rattling noise, it scuttled away under a book that had my name on it, as the author.

A flock of books wheeled overhead, beating their covers for lift. From a nearby shelf I heard the sound of pages rattling and book covers thumping. Two books were copulating. For are not all books ultimately made of other books? I thought: no wonder there are so many books in this place!

I feared, then, for my sanity.

I clapped at my pockets, and found my cigarettes along with the one book that could do me some good: the matchbook. My hands were shaking almost uncontrollably as I lighted the cigarette, hoping that a smoke would soothe my nerves, and absentmindedly I tossed aside the match without fully shaking it out. I heard a loud hiss, and then saw a bright flare of orange light.

The fire raced through the tinder of paper like a wildfire feeding on dry grass after a long drought. It made a noise like locusts devouring crops. I screamed.

"What's going on in there? What's that racket?"

"Help me! For God's sake, help me!" I thoughtlessly tossed away the burning cigarette, adding more fuel to the fire.

"Don't panic. Follow my words."

I rushed with balled fists toward the bookseller, feeling fury, as if the old man had been to blame for this fiasco. But then I stopped, stunned: the bookseller looked much older than before, and he was sightlessly patting at the air. He was blind.

But the proprietor's leathery, tattooed facial flesh flushed with the heat of the approaching fire, and then that parchment curled and browned. His ears pricked redly at its rising roar.

"What have you done?" he cried in terror.

Streamers of fire raced across the floor. The old man was plucking up his pant legs, trying to keep them from catching fire. He danced madly about, stamping blindly at the unseen flames. Then, stopping, he said, "You came here when you were young—ignorant and presumptuous!—and even after all your time here, you

have learned nothing, and destroyed everything!”

He stamped at the fire again. He was about to resume his bitter lecture, when I lost my temper and shoved him. The old bungler landed on the floor with a grunt; the flames raced up his pants and leapt onto his suit coat and shirt. His tie burned away like a fuse.

While the incandescent idiot rolled around on the floor howling for help, I jimmied open the cash register and grabbed the goods, shoving as much money as I could into my pockets until they bulged. Greedily I even scooped up the coins. One of them, twinkling, caught my eye: 20 centavos. I considered this foreign coin for a moment and then, deeming it worthless, I cast it into the flames. The odor of burning flesh mingled with that of burning books.

I looked down at the old man’s accounts ledger. It consisted of names, page after page of names, names, names. Mine wasn’t in it. An ink stain from the fallen jar had blotted it out. I shuddered. The pages of the book curled and browned. Pursued by fire I ran out the door and it banged shut behind me, the bell above it tinkling merrily over the garish roar of this underground holocaust.

I leaned back against the shut door, drenched in sweat and gasp-

ing for breath. Looking up the flight of stairs, I was shocked to see that it was already dusk. The rain still came down. I thought resignedly: Let it come down. So I had wasted a whole day in this dump. Art is long, I thought, yes, but life is too short for this crap.

Then and there I swore off literature and even thinking, and hustled up the steps.

The streetlights had come on. I sensed that something was deeply amiss. I had the impression of looking at an unfamiliar familiar photograph. It was San Francisco, but it wasn’t. It seemed different; the cars were strange, some of the buildings unfamiliar.

I had money now, so I ate at the usual diner. It, too, was odd; even the menu was different. I was growing very nervous.

When I left the diner, I happened to look north, toward Telegraph Hill and North Beach. I saw a slender, lighted white pyramid stabbing at the turbulent sky.

I seized a passer-by by the elbow, pointed at the pyramid and demanded, “What the hell is *that*?”

He gave me a pitying look, saying, “That’s the Transamerica Tower, you idiot.”

“I’ve never seen it before!” But the man had passed on.

With nowhere else to go and with my free-floating anxiety now rising to a fever pitch, I decided to return to the YMCA that I had quit that morning. I was surprised to see that it had been refurbished, and that a different clerk presided over the front desk. On it was something that I had never seen before, a slim flat TV screen, I thought, which was connected to a stylized typewriter keyboard.

“Here.” I waved money at this new man, while stealing mystified glances at the futuristic device at the clerk’s elbow. “I pay my debts.” I explained that I had skipped out on my bill, and felt guilty about doing so.

The clerk whistled: “That’s one old debt, old man.”

I saw the wall calendar behind the clerk. April 14. Just that morning, I had picked up from the clerk my benefits check, along with the rest of my meager mail, most of it junk, which had been pigeonholed in a mail slot behind the front desk. I saw the front page of a newspaper sprawled over a chair, the Chronicle. The president’s picture was on it. I looked numbly at that shocking photo. Then I went upstairs.

It was the same room.

A brash and cocksure young man only slightly humbled by poverty paused in front of the mirror over the desk, but a squelched and defeat-

ed old man stared back at me: white hair dusted with black ash, sunken cheeks, eyes like skull sockets. “Beaten and hatched with tann’d antiquity,” came to my literary turn of mind.

In my youth, I had wanted to be a writer. The crazy dreams of youth. My face was covered with soot, and the rags that I wore stank of smoke. I bent over the sink and splashed cold water on my face. When I looked again in the mirror, I saw that my face was covered with tattooed letters. Then I broke down and wept.

After composing myself, I stripped to my underwear. All my flesh was covered with the tattoos, those letters, words, sentences, stories, novels, libraries, infinities. “I was supposed to write you,” I mumbled apathetically, vaguely addressing something like life itself. “Not you, me.” I tumbled into bed. I dozed off but woke with a start a few minutes later, slathered with sweat in the turmoil of my bed sheets. The light had almost failed in the window. I smelled cancer.

I lay dying.

When I had run out on the bill that morning the date had been April 14, 1960. I distinctly recalled seeing that date on the calendar at the bookstore, the one with the picture of Ike on it. I had been twenty years old.

But according to the calendar



downstairs, today was April 14, 2010. The picture in the Chronicle, of the president, was not of Ike, but, amazingly, of a black man. I closed his eyes. I was seventy years old.

I was forced to conclude that I had been browsing inside the world's biggest bookstore for the last fifty years, over a subjective period of time that had lasted perhaps several hours.

I had wasted, not a day, but my *whole life*, in that Godforsaken hole!

I shook my head, violently resisting this insanity-inducing conclusion. Had I not picked up my benefits check that very morning from the clerk at the front desk? Or had I been talking to the old bookseller?

Did it really matter, now?

I pushed off the covers, and sat up in bed. I switched on an overhead light, reached for my Army surplus jacket that I had flung across a chair and took some of the stolen money out of the pockets. The soiled and crumpled bills were more brown than green, like lettuce gone bad. I studied the dates on the money. None was older than 1960. You can kill some time in here, the bookseller had said. Just don't lose track of it.

I put the money away, turned off the light and then retreated back under the covers. I dozed fitfully.

I felt something stirring under

the covers, and my eyes opened. It mounted my chest. I threw off the sheet, and a scream caught in my throat.

"So!" I finally managed to cry. "You've got me at last!"

In the darkness it reared up on its many little legs, and spread its long, papery black wings. A moist and rotted spherical projectile was lodged in a wound in its side. It peered down at me with bloodshot eyes, and it stank of curdled milk and corrupted slops.

"This is nothing personal," it said in a reedy, piping voice that caught me off guard. "It's just what I do, sooner or later, to everyone. Now it's your turn."

"My turn."

"You made quite a tour of the place, although of course you didn't even scratch the surface of it."

I recalled, guiltily, robbing the old man who ran that bookstore, so many years ago, and the terrible accident. Yet I *was* him, now; or, more precisely, I was his successor and heir; but the profound legacy, the vast treasure that he had bequeathed me had gone up in smoke, and it was my fault.

"It *was* an accident," I groaned. "You must believe me. You —"

It cut me off: "Nothing special, here. I have another appointment in a few minutes, and you have terminal

cancer, and so—”

I laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s hard to take you seriously, with your squeaky voice. It should be low, menacing, you know?”

I tried to remember something, anything, which I had learned in life. Then, while my tormenter continued to crouch on my chest like some demonic insectoid succubus, I raised my tattooed arms and read off of the palms of my hands the stories of my life: an old address in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I had lived briefly in the late 70s; a biology class that I had once taken; my desultory studies of the American Civil War, which had petered out to nothing: cul-de-sacs. Dead ends. My renunciation of religious truth, with no other truth to replace it. The many books that I had not read or written, even though I had intended to read and write them. My every failure engraved upon my skin like stigma, like the mark on Cain from the tattoo parlor of God.

Father, the eccentric and emotionally vacant professor of eschatology, experiencing his own end time alone in a hospital bed and, as I had later learned, calling my name and reaching out for me with a claw-like hand, but I had not been at his bedside. Instead, I had been killing a lifetime

inside the infinite bookstore.

Mother, the frosty and punctilious scholar of hermeneutics, found dead over her endless translations and interpretations, her specialty the Dead Sea Scrolls.

And she of the enigmatic smile. One summer we had lingered at the Louvre, in Paris . . . Mona. Her name had been Mona. She had abandoned me long ago. Or had I cast her aside? I couldn’t recall what had happened to us. Now, like everything, it meant nothing.

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“What I learned from all the books.”

It leaned toward me.

“You’re nothing,” I told it, in a confidential whisper.

“Exactly. Where I am, you’re not. Where I’m not, you are.”

“You’re just a story,” I scoffed. “In fact, you’re a story I made up as a kid: It was the book I wrote. The only one. I saw it in the bookstore. I guess I peaked too soon.”

“So you were thinking of me even then.”

“Come to think of it, I believe I may even have stolen you from another book. So you’re twice removed from reality.”

The old dung beetle rolled off my chest, leaving behind on it a puddle

of slime, and hit the floor with a moist plop. It lay on its back, its legs pointing rigidly upward, unmoving. The impact of the fall dislodged the rotted apple from the wound in its shell; it rolled across the floor and came to a stop below the sink.

\* \* \*

He lay with his arms stretched out from side to side and his legs crossed at the ankles. He saw the cross slats of the room's only window. Brilliant white light swelled up behind them—maybe the full moon, maybe light from the neighboring building—and shined down on him and the bed. The shadow of the slats fell upon him. He reached for that tree and that light and then left his body and flew up toward them, and that was one story that people told. But he also fell back, raging, into the dying of the light, and that was another that they told, the opposite of the first.

# THE CHAINSAW KILLER

Brian Rowe

ONLY ONE STANDING OVATION? The horror-movie director waved at the crowd and took a seat on the stage. The theater in Santa Monica was packed.

He crossed his right leg over his left and settled in for another night with the fans. The fans who still remembered, still endearingly remembered, still obsessively remembered, his 1975 slasher classic, “The Chainsaw Killer.” It was the only film on his résumé that was still being shown in the new century. This would be his third Q&A of the month, following his appearances in Hollywood and Century City. It was a busy time for Theo Hauser. It *was* October, after all.

The peppy, youthful moderator looked as if he belonged behind the concession stand, wearing a paper hat and doling out sacks of popcorn.

“Mr. Hauser,” he began, “we are so happy to welcome you to our screening tonight, and to give the audience an opportunity to meet one of their favorite filmmakers. How

does it feel to be here talking about a film you made thirty-five years ago?”

The director laughed and started scratching the few sparse hairs on his otherwise bald head. He was close to seventy. “It makes me feel *old*.”

Most of the audience laughed. The crowd was a mix of all ages, from pre-teens to centenarians.

“No, honestly, it’s a joy and a privilege,” the director said. “When we made ‘Chainsaw Killer’ back in ’75, we shot it in sixteen days. We had no money, no experience. Youthful enthusiasm got us through.”

“And the film wasn’t a success right away, is that correct?”

“Yes,” the director continued. “It took a couple years for the film to develop a cult following. It wasn’t until it started playing in drive-ins that people started talking about it, and it wasn’t until the critics started praising it in the early 1980s that people started approaching me to talk about it, and talk about it, and talk about it, and ...”

And on and on they went, the

director trying not to bore himself with the same old stories, jokes, and life lessons connected with his hoary old horror masterpiece. He had gone on to make five more movies after “Chainsaw Killer,” but none of them had made a dent at the box office.

When his controversial 2002 feature about the Columbine High massacre went straight to DVD, only to be pulled from shelves days later because of customer complaints, he knew his days as a horror flick director were numbered. The older he got, the more he wondered if he’d ever be able to get another film off the ground.

And so the director spent the latter part of his career traveling the country attending horror conventions, film festivals, and small-town screenings. And everywhere he went, nobody ever wanted to talk about his other movies. They all wanted to talk about “Chainsaw Killer.” Sometimes he felt like a one-trick pony, a creative visionary who once had had a shot at a memorable career but had failed miserably.

But then he remembered that it could be worse.

*Better one classic than none.*

“O.K. then,” the moderator said. “Now we’re going to open the floor to questions.” At least twenty hands shot up.

“Yes,” the moderator said. “You, with the orange shirt.”

The first fan sat in the second row. He was so fat the director wondered how he had managed to physically enter the theater. Bizarrely, he wore a beanie with a plastic chainsaw protruding from the top of it. It made the director shudder. He thought about those people who, instead of having lives, attended Star Trek conventions wearing fake Spock ears and Captain Kirk masks.

“Yes, hi, Mr. Hauser, this is a real honor,” Beanie Head said. “I’m sure you get this question a lot, but I was wondering if you are ever going to make a sequel to “The Chainsaw Killers.”

The director had fielded this question so many times that he had exhausted his reservoir of answers. Sometimes he would respond wittily and sometimes bitterly. Occasionally he would delve into a long story about the years he had spent writing a sequel that in the end proved to have too high a budget for any studio head to sign off on.

“No,” the director said.

The second question concerned the casting, the third concentrated on his use of music, and the fourth dealt with his rumored romantic relationship with the film’s leading lady.

“We slept together once,” the di-

rector said.

There was some mild laughter scattered throughout the audience.

“OK, fine, twice. What can I say? She was hot.”

A lot of the younger boys in the audience applauded. Even the moderator shared in their enthusiasm.

“Thanks for clearing that up, Mr. Hauser,” he said. “Another question?”

A few timid hands popped up, but it was a man in the center of the room who raised his hand highest of all.

“Yes, you,” the moderator said. “The one with the lumberjack jacket.”

The man in the green-and-black plaid lumberjack jacket nodded and shot to his feet. He wore baggy cargo pants and work boots. He had short curly black hair slick with mousse and a pale, pedestrian face, though his eyes were dark and muddy, like a couple of Hershey’s kisses. He flaunted a fawning, crooked grin that would have been more noticeable if it weren’t for the tears flooding his eyes, whether of ecstasy, agony or insanity, one could not immediately say.

“Mr. *Hauser*,” he gushed, “I just wanted to thank you *so much* for gracing us with your presence this evening and I wanted to congratulate you on the *thirty-fifth* anniversary of

not just one of the finest horror films ever made but one of the *greatest* motion pictures *of all time!*”

This fan had a weird, piping voice and an even weirder rhythm to his speaking, verbally italicizing specific words and phrases in unpredictable and inappropriate ways. An aura of awkwardness quickly settled over the room. The director fought down an impulse to bolt for the emergency exit.

“... I have seen this film *well* over fifty *times* and every time I see it I find myself just *glued* to the screen and captivated by every single *shot* and *moment* that resulted from the creative wonderland that is *your brain!*”

The guy wasn’t stopping. Worse, there didn’t seem to be a question in sight.

The director glanced briefly at the moderator, who seemed at a loss for what to do.

“... and you are so well-regarded for “The Chainsaw Killer” that many neglect your other truly *terrific* films including “Row Boat,” “The Millennium Killers,” “Sick Sassafras,” and “Columbine: A Day in *History*,” the latter of which may be one of the most *underrated* films in the *history* of the cinema . . .”

“Question!” a young woman coughed behind the man.

“Ask a question!” an old guy

shouted crankily from the back of the theater.

The moderator forced a smile and turned to his left. "All right, let's open the floor to some other people . . ."

"... *And in conclusion,*" the man babbled on, "I think I speak for *everyone* in this room in saying that we could not have been treated tonight to a more talented, spectacular *genius* of a filmmaker than our very own Theo Hauser, a man who will continue to make *incredible* motion pictures for many more decades to come. Mr. Hauser, I would like to take this opportunity to say that I *consider* you *my friend!* Thank you and *God bless!*"

The man finally took a seat and the whole room burst into sustained applause, even greater than the ovation that the director and received upon his introduction. The man smiled winningly, evidently oblivious to the fact that they were not cheering his speech, but cheering because he had finally shut up.

The moderator immediately fielded the next question, but the director couldn't keep his eyes off the weirdo. A big, brown-leather briefcase rested on his knees, and what looked like a very large guitar case was in the aisle next to his seat. The director wondered whether this goofball behaved weirdly with lots of directors at a multitude of venues, or just with

him.

"Mr. Hauser? Did you get that?"

The director glanced at the moderator. "Excuse me?"

"This young woman in the front here just asked if you had any projects in development."

He looked down to see a pretty girl no older than twenty waving at him.

"Oh, yes, hi there," the director said, trying to blink himself back to normality. "I've been doing a lot of writing lately. Currently I'm working on a new screenplay."

"So we'll be seeing a new film of yours soon?" the girl asked in a genuinely hopeful tone.

"Honey, as soon as I can find my ending."

Laughter erupted from the entire audience, which included a number of jaded screenwriters.

"Well, on that note," the moderator said, "I wanted to thank you all for coming out tonight for this thirty-fifth anniversary screening of 'The Chainsaw Killer!'"

Everyone started clapping, and the director began the ordeal of waving and nodding and waving and nodding.

"And I especially wanted to thank Mr. Hauser for making his way out to Santa Monica tonight," the moderator concluded. "Sir, this was a real

treat.”

The director shook the moderator’s hand while his eyes darted to the side exit, beyond which a limousine awaited him. He yearned to make his getaway.

He was about halfway to the door when a group of fans charged up to him so ferociously that he momentarily feared for his life.

“One at a time, please,” the director pleaded, backing away from the onrushing mob and raising his hands to ward them off.

Fans were pushing items at him to sign that were mostly related to “The Chainsaw Killer,” but a VHS of “Row Boat” happily surprised him and one of the masks from “The Millennium Killers” made him smile.

After a few minutes, the group dwindled to just two or three people. He wanted to leave. He wanted to go home to work on his new script.

“Mr. Hauser, *sir?*”

Somebody pushed an old laser-disc box set of “Chainsaw Killer” in the director’s face. He did a double take.

“Oh, wow,” the director said. “The three-disc set! Where did you find this—”

He looked up and was greeted by a plaid lumberjack jacket, cargo pants, work boots, curly black hair, muddy brown eyes and a goofy grin.

In one hand the man held the briefcase. The guitar case was slung over his shoulder.

“I’ve had it for *years*, Mr. Hauser. Still in its original *wrapping!* I’ve *never* allowed myself to open it.”

The director politely nodded and glanced behind the man to see whether he was the last of the auto-graph hounds. He was.

He signed his name in the center of the box and started making his way to the exit.

“Oh, Mr. Hauser! Can you sign *another?*”

“No, sorry, I can’t,” the director said curtly. “I’m late for another function.”

“Oh, *please!*” The man rushed up to him just a few feet away from the beckoning exit sign.

The director turned around, suppressing a sigh. “Well, O.K. One more.”

The man opened his briefcase and handed the director a screenplay. But it wasn’t just any screenplay.

“You must be joking,” the director said, flipping through the eighty-six pages, which were covered with lots of cramped, nearly illegible pen-written scrawl. He was aghast. “These are *my* notes!”

“Yes, sir. That’s your *personal* script from the 1975 shoot. Some guy in New York auctioned it off in the



1990s. I paid *top* dollar for it.”

The director shook his head in amazement and signed his name above the title on the script’s cover. “Well, thanks for the support,” he said, handing the script back to his No. 1 fan.

He walked out the door.

His biggest fan followed him.

“But *wait*,” his biggest fan pleaded. “I just have *one more* thing for you to sign.”

The director turned the corner outside to find his limo driver enjoying a cigarette. “Please get in the car,” he told the driver, brushing past him. “I need to get the hell out of here.”

“Sure thing,” the driver said, tossing aside the cigarette.

The driver started making his way to the left side of the limo. The director pulled on the door handle.

“Mr. Hauser! *Theo!*”

The lumberjack, the cargo pants, the suitcase, the guitar case, the muddy brown eyes and the big goofy grin literally skipped up to the director, like a child in a grown man’s body.

“I’m sorry,” the director said firmly. He was putting his foot down, now. “I *have to go*,” he said emphatically. “Good *night!*” It was the director’s turn, now, to verbally italicize key words and phrases.

“Oh, but I just have *one more* thing for you to sign, it’s the last thing, I

*promise!*”

He set down his briefcase and unslung the guitar case from around his shoulder. He was opening it just as the door of the limo was opening and then slamming shut.

From the backseat the director rolled up the window and said in a peremptory way: “Goodbye!”

“No! *Wait!*”

“Go!” the director shouted at his driver.

As the limousine rolled forward, the director’s No. 1 fan chased it, the straps of the briefcase and the guitar case dangling from one hand.

He pressed the palm of his free hand against the side window, directly in front of the director, who looked at that palm in horror. No. 1 fan lost his grip, but only for a moment. He then took a great bounding leap upward and disappeared from view.

Theo assumed that the man had fallen down, but when he turned his head back to look, he didn’t see him sprawled on the ground. Instead, he saw a sidewalk that looked as quiet and empty as a desolate outdoor movie soundstage after the props had been struck.

The director looked back over his shoulder to make sure the man wasn’t doing anything crazy, like running after the limo. He wasn’t.

Theo faced forward, and let his head fall back on the top of the seat. He let out a sigh of relief.

*Another crazy fan evaded.*

The director closed his eyes and didn't open them again until he was out of Santa Monica and back on the freeway, speeding toward his home in the San Fernando Valley.

When the limo pulled off Highway 405 onto Highway 101, Theo heard queer tapping noises directly overhead. It sounded like rain, or even hail, tapping on the roof of the limo.

But when he rolled down his side window and looked upward, a cloudless October night, sprawling with stars, greeted his gaze.

Baffled, he craned his head out the window and gazed upward, toward the top of the car.

He did not see the plaid lumberjack jacket, the cargo pants, the briefcase or the guitar case. But, weirdly, he thought he glimpsed, just for a moment, the toe of a boot hanging off the left side of the limo's roof.

He blinked in confusion, and looked back at the place where he thought he had spied that boot toe. Now he saw nothing but the road receding behind and the headlights of trailing cars.

He pulled his head back into the window, thought for a moment, and

then, shaking his head, he said with a laugh, "Nah!"

He rolled down the window, and settled back in his seat. *Say, did I just catch a fleeting glimpse of a black auto-graph pen dangling between two fingers and tapping on the top left of the windshield, just above my driver's head?* Nah. Not possible.

A half hour later, the director arrived at his upscale Studio City home. He tipped the driver, and then got out of the car. He practically ran to the front door, so glad he was to be home. Unlocking the door but neglecting to lock it behind him, he hurried to the kitchen.

Some whiskey on the rocks helped ease the pain.

His third wife had just left him, and his son, his only child, was studying political science in China. He was alone in the big house for the first time in years, and the loneliness was eating away at him.

The director set the drink down and made his way to his study. He turned on his laptop to see a cursor blinking on a blank white page.

He drummed his fingers on his desk and rested his thumb against his chin. He cracked his knuckles and stretched out his stiff back. As usual, he had nothing to say.

He sighed and closed the laptop. The director hadn't been able to write

a word in six months.

*Maybe later.*

He returned to the kitchen, this time to pour himself a special XO brandy. He started opening the liquor cabinet when a large, black, unfamiliar object on the counter caught his eye.

The director took five slow steps forward and turned on the overhead lights.

It was a guitar case. It was open, and it was empty.

It was *the* guitar case.

He goggled at it, too stunned to utter a sound.

From behind him, he heard a snapping sound, like the pulling of a cord. He was just starting to turn when he heard a “whup-whup-whup-whup!” noise. And then:

“BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ-ZAT!”

A searing pain smashed into his back and then flashed outward all over his body.

*What is it what is it what is it AHH-HHHHHHHHHHH!*

The chainsaw smashed straight through the front of his belly. His guts exploded outward in a sickening scarlet fan of blood and jelly.

“Whup-whup-whup-whup . . .”  
The saw fell silent.

*That was no guitar case.*

The director, split nearly in two by the chainsaw, which remained inside

of him and protruding outward from where his belly used to be, clung with white-knuckled fervor to the countertop to keep from falling to the floor. Turning his head in agony, he saw the plaid lumberjack jacket, the cargo pants, the boots ...

And a hand holding an autograph pen.

“As I was trying to tell you at the *theater*, Mr. Hauser, I have in my possession the last known *chainsaw* used in your film. It appears at the end when the sadistic killer *finally* meets his match. Can you believe, Mr. Hauser, that the chainsaw still works after *all these years*?”

The director started slumping to the floor, the chainsaw still protruding through his stomach.

As he began fading away, his No. 1 fan pressed the autograph pen into his hand and assisted him with his signature.

“Just *here*.”

The director finished signing his name on the chainsaw’s blade, just beyond the cavernous hole that it had carved out of his belly, and then, as he breathed his final breath, the chainsaw roared to life again.

It tore upward through his chest and throat and then ripped up through his brain, sawing it in two. It then roared out of the top of his head.

# GODFREY

*Dave Taylor*

**D**ID I EVER TELL YOU ABOUT the time an acquaintance of mine witnessed an egotistical bully commit several acts of murder?

No?

Well, while you have nothing better to do, read on, but be aware that the crimes committed in this account are of such a nature as to shock a morally upstanding human being like yourself, who would never consider the killing of any person to be worthy of praise, admiration, or even light entertainment.

In that case, dear reader, please enjoy what I am about to tell you, for I do not want you to become bored and forget the details. The veracity of this text is (and I swear this with my hand on my heart and anywhere else necessary) the closest to absolute truth one may hope to reach in one's lifetime, at least according to my acquaintance. It is of the utmost importance that you remember the villain I shall soon describe, lest he takes your life, too.

First, allow me to introduce my-

self:

I am a brick.

I am in the wall of the living room. The house is enormous, though evidently not infinite. Also, it is expanding. Every day, it gets a bit bigger, and new rooms are added. Construction never stops. But almost all the rooms are uninhabited and even unfurnished, rendering the majority of the house totally pointless and practically ridiculous. It is the most ostentatious display of wealth ever conceived.

Its sole occupant, aside from the hired help like Jobar the handyman, who is constantly puttering about, is named Godfrey. He is an enormously wealthy movie producer and an insufferable egotist. Although unmarried, he is rumored to have a son. This, then, is the house of Godfrey.

The incident in question occurred at an irrelevant time of year during the night. The night was neither stormy nor (thanks to electricity and my willingness to stay as far away from that cliché as possible) dark.

I was brushing shoulders with a

fireplace that, although usually dull, was somewhat hot-tempered that night. It is inhabited by a troll named The Fireman, so named because he has a beard made of flame.

I shall spare you the details of the vulgarities that escaped the Fireman's mouth that night, because I doubt you want to be shocked by such obscenities, especially when there are exciting multiple murders to talk about.

Elsewhere in the room lived my acquaintance, another brick in the wall. Besides that, chairs, sofa, television, and anything else you want to imagine. Put in a DVD player if it makes you feel better, but I don't think there ever was one there.

One whole wall of the room is lined with mirrors, so that Godfrey might better admire his reflection: His cravat, his sweeping silver locks and his stately gray beard greased with pomade.

At this point, dearest reader, I know what you're thinking: "This story is preposterous! How could a brick possibly observe the bloody and violent events occurring in a living room one horrid night?"

Well, my dear pedant, allow me to remind you that I never said I "observed" these events. Being a brick, I cannot "observe" anything, because I have no eyes. I can describe the

room and the scene I hope to get to without any more interruptions, because I heard it all, and because my fellow (aforementioned) brick saw the whole thing and told me all about it later.

Now, where was I? Ah, yes, the house.

Known occupants: one, plus the hired help; known rooms: indefinite, though not infinite.

It was during one of those times when I'm feeling a bit shit (as we bricks sometimes do, which is why people often claim to be have excreted us) that I heard a door open. I also heard chattering voices. I recognized the voice of the movie producer, and the other voice was feminine. It belonged to somebody who, as my fellow brick has told me, had either blonde or ginger hair. His memory isn't perfect, so you might want to just alter a few of the details in this story whenever you feel like doing so. Fuck it; rewrite the whole thing if you want to. I don't care.

As they were entering Jobar the handyman was in an adjoining room, puttering about as always. He is constantly unclogging drains, cleaning toilets, fixing door jambs and making a general nuisance of himself. Godfrey and his date were conversing.

Besides the usual nonsense that humans say to each other, I caught

an interesting snippet that sums up part of the character of our dashing yet daring antagonist.

“There’s probably no point in me calling you after tonight, is there, love?” Godfrey said. “That meal was a disaster!”

For legal reasons, the restaurant will remain nameless.

“Well, it wasn’t too bad. I just wish you’d have not walked out after starters. I’m still hungry, y’know.”

Good, I thought, it will be easier for Godfrey to get you drunk.

“I know; I go there all the time, and the food is usually great, but tonight it was just awful. Listen, love,” Godfrey added, in the way people say “love” to people whom they really could not care less about, “I don’t want one of us to be sick tonight. I think you’re a nice person, very attractive, and I deeply respect you, but I’m going to bang you tonight, and it’s going to put me off if you vomit down me when I’m trying to get it up.”

How wonderful! Why he didn’t just tell her she’d be gone as soon as he came, I have no idea. I am a brick, and therefore have no brain. The subtle lies were poking through as well, although the blonde/ginger (or whatever suits you) with borborrygmus was failing to spot them.

“Godfrey, about the script . . .”

“Why don’t we lie down, love? Don’t worry, you’re my leading lady.”

“But I really think the script needs some changes!”

“Dear, as I’ve explained, you can do anything you want in the movie, just so long as you follow the script to the letter.”

This patter was unexpectedly interrupted by the unexpected sound of a doorbell, unless you skipped ahead (as is the wont of some readers), in which case you expected it entirely. Good for you; let me know what happens in the sequel, if there is one.

Pick A Hair Color expressed her exasperation with a barely audible sigh. Godfrey ignored her and left the room to answer the front door.

At this point in the story, my informant becomes quite useless, being unable to see into other rooms.

However, as luck or a convenient plot element would have it, the new arrival was a lady from America. An angry lady from America. An angry, loud lady from America.

I didn’t catch everything said, but I caught enough to work out what was going on. Amid her screams of rage, the movie producer was countering with pathetic excuses and the oh-so-persuasive “shhh!”

“Hell, Godfrey, what the fuck am I to you and who the fuck is she?”

You're sex on tap and she's a spare keg.

"Like hell you're just friends! Sandra told me you were taking her to dinner at . . ."

My acquaintance noticed the original female looking nervous, and conveyed this information to me.

"You told me that *I* was your leading lady, Godfrey, damn it!"

"Now, dear . . ."

"Godfrey, we've fucked each other so many times in this house! How many more women have you slept with since we met? I'm so pissed off with you, I just wanna. . ."

More pathetic excuses followed, none of them worth mentioning.

"Bull . . ."

"Shhh!"

" . . . it to the ground!"

Being an inexplicably sentient brick in the aforementioned house of Godfrey, I didn't really like the idea of the structure I was part of meeting the unfortunate fate of obliteration by bulldozer. I decided that I would have preferred to have misheard that part of the tirade. Yes, that's it, I misheard; the cursing American didn't say anything about a bulldozer; she made a threat involving a sharp implement and my owner's genitalia.

The door to my room swung open as if making way for a very fast

juggernaut. Godfrey and the American banshee entered.

Pick A Hair Color, wide-eyed, fingers fidgeting, mouth moving but no sound emerging, looked hopefully toward the entrance that was her only exit.

With her eyes fixed on the harpy before her, Pick a Hair Color backed away to the far side of the sofa. Her only consolation was that her date was standing between the two rivals—both of whom, it had transpired, the producer had promised the role of Leading Lady in his newest film, a film in which the characters could do just exactly as they pleased provided that they stuck exactly to the script.

At this point Jobar the Handyman rushed into the room, evidently alarmed by all the commotion.

"Master Godfrey! Is everything O.K., sir?"

Jobar had been with Godfrey his whole life. At one time he had a big family, all of them crammed into a tiny room in the indefinitely large house, even though much more spacious rooms were untenanted and therefore presumably available. Moreover the room in which Jobar and his family lived did not meet building code. One day when Jobar was away, the ceiling of the room collapsed, killing his entire family.

Deprived of his family by Godfrey's neglect of infrastructure, Jobar responded by redoubling his labors on behalf of his boss, since, after all, without a family he had more free time.

At least, this is what my acquaintance, the other brick, tells me.

"Get out, Jobar!" Godfrey raged. "You have dreadful boils all over your body! Don't you ever bathe?"

Seeing the two women—Jobar had been without female companionship for some time—the handyman suddenly stripped off his clothes and declared: "Naked came I into the world!" Both women backed away, aghast.

"Get *out!*" Godfrey reiterated, giving Jobar a swift kick in the arse that propelled him stumbling and staggering out of the room. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Jobar could be heard saying, the volume of his praise diminishing as he grew farther away until the crash of him falling down a staircase silenced him utterly.

With that unpleasantness over, the Main Event got under way in earnest: the catfight between the two leading ladies. The angry American lady attacked Pick A Hair Color.

At this point, reader, you would expect the gentleman to restrain her and do what he could to calm the situation.

Godfrey did restrain her, but he was no gentleman.

Hair Color's eyes plotted a path from the sofa to the doorway that circumvented the banshee wailing in Godfrey's lax grasp; the banshee's eyes, accompanied by a face twisted in a horrifying scowl, focused on the chest of her adversary, a chest that contained a heart that was beating like that of a mouse between a cat's paws.

Godfrey's eyes roamed from Leading Lady to Leading Lady, and then settled on the fireplace, which he could turn on or off by remote control. The Fireman in the fireplace, with its beard made of flame, was happy to add its own heat to the tension.

Godfrey casually inspected his pristine fingernails. Then he abruptly let go of the banshee, who charged screaming at her rival.

Pick A Hair Color dived off the sofa seconds before a fist with a ring on it brutalized one of the cushions. The attacker swung round and advanced as the other backed away, with nowhere to go but the corner in which the DVD player may or may not have existed. It was like a cougar advancing on a pussycat.

The sound of a crack like a whip accompanied a slap, which almost knocked the pussycat into the wall.



She steadied herself against the windowsill, but was yanked backwards by her hair, the color of which I still can't remember.

"Bitch!" hissed the American into her ear before spitting in her face and throwing her into a wall. I think that must have been the point when I felt something solid strike me. The pussycat lay curled up by the fire, sobbing pathetically. The cougar, arms akimbo, loomed over her victim, smelling the blood that trickled down the side of the pussycat's head.

While the rivalry between the two mammals escalated, Godfrey stood with arms folded and a bored expression on his face. Once or twice he scrutinized his reflection in the mirror-lined wall, adjusting his cravat and smoothing his perfect hair. He responded to the madness before his eyes imperturbably, showing no willingness to intervene, almost as though he were enjoying the whole spectacle, even if he showed no emotion toward it. One of the creatures in front of him was shedding the blood of the other. One of these human beings was literally killing the other, and all for *him*; the one who had manipulated them both for his own callous pleasure.

As I listened to the screams of pain and rage, the gnashing of teeth, the lamentations and the rending

of garments, I wondered how these two impressionable fools could think Godfrey was worth fighting over. Perhaps the fact that he had declared that he loved them (though with no real conviction) and had made each of them his Leading Lady in his new film (though there could only be one such star) was enough for them to abandon all reason and do anything for him. Perhaps they were intimidated. If I could tell you the answer, curious reader, I could explain much about humanity. As it is, I am a brick.

With a tragedy unfolding and Godfrey unwilling to intervene despite the fact that he had the power to do so, my fellow brick and I anticipated with a fearful suspense what undoubtedly would be the first murder in this story, although my companion later admitted to me that he took a shameful delight in the show.

Part of me wanted to call out, to beg them to stop; another part of me reminded myself that I have no mouth.

The cougar was strangling the pussycat now; slowly cutting off the vessels that supplied blood and air to her brain. The latter struggled frantically, but such a creature was no match for the raging beast that was determined to destroy her.

"Erm, excuse me," someone at the entrance to the room said timidly.

All action stopped, as if time itself had been so startled at this unexpected arrival that it forgot to tick.

The American released Pick A Hair Color and looked with curiosity at the trespasser. I saw nothing, of course, having no eyes, and Pick A Hair Color saw dark, swirling shapes owing to oxygen deprivation.

My companion brick, who saw everything, informed me that he, Godfrey, and the American saw Godfrey's neighbor. Her name was Hannah. She had a habit of taking her significant other's empty alcohol bottles to her garage in the early hours of the morning, although she never drinks herself. All this I know, because I overheard Godfrey talking to her last week when they were both taking the rubbish out. We bricks, being unable to communicate, are good listeners.

When the American had entered like a hurricane, Godfrey had forgotten to close the door behind her. The noise of the battle had caught the attention of Hannah as she took her empties to the garage.

Being, as is necessary for this tale, a curious sort, Hannah had abandoned the bottles and entered the venerable House of Godfrey in the hope of calming things down.

Godfrey was the first to move.

With the detached demeanor that

he had displayed since the struggle started, he strolled out of the room, shut the door through which Hannah had entered and locked it. He then returned to the living room, calmly moved the sofa forward, reached into a box that was behind it, and pulled out a gun.

From what my acquaintance tells me, Godfrey's eyes betrayed a sort of wrath that could send shivers through the bravest brick. But then again, my acquaintance shivered more than was necessary during the 2009 English earthquake, in which nobody was injured, much less killed.

"I have watched all of you, and I believe I know you all quite well," Godfrey announced in a voice that reminded me of a frozen millpond. "Two of you have claimed to love me, and one of you has nearly killed the other in my name; one of you all but ignores me except when I take out the garbage, but seems like a very nice person."

The speech seemed oddly formal for such an occasion. Godfrey looked at his neighbor and said, "I would like to know if anybody here really does love me."

Brilliant! He's insecure!

His neighbor blinked a couple of times, licked her lips repeatedly, and looked longingly at the doorway, which, as fate and the plot insisted

on, was blocked by the psychotic being standing before her in all his wrathful glory.

Concluding that there was no way out of the room, Hannah planted her feet, held her chin high, and bravely stammered, “I d-don’t know why y-you think you need such reassurance, G . . . God . . .”

“Answer the question!”

Godfrey’s voice hit me hard and bounced right off; the echo reverberated around the room, accompanied by a gasp that might have been an attempt at a shriek.

“*Love* you?” Hannah blurted out. I . . . I don’t even *know* you!”

BANG!

I couldn’t see, but I knew what had just happened.

I had expected Godfrey to fire the bullet between Hannah’s eyes, thus exterminating her instantly, but that would have taken a tincture of kindness, which he didn’t have.

I heard a smash of glass as Hannah’s head hit the fireplace. I awaited a scream, but got only a groan. The poor woman had been shot in the stomach, and was kneeling before the hot-tempered fireplace, clutching her midsection.

Godfrey kicked her in the face, sending her sprawling into the fireplace, where the aforementioned resident of that abode, the troll named

Mr. Fireman, wrapped her up in the flames of his beard and cackled while she died, strangled by the inferno.

And so Hannah died there in the fireplace, as Godfrey had decreed.

He then trained the gun on Pick A Hair Color, who took a few seconds to realize that she could not walk backward through the wall. I admit that I am glad that she could not, for I could feel her arse in my face, and I could smell the piss of her terror.

“Godfrey,” she pleaded “Y’know I love you. I’m your *leading lady!*”

But Godfrey angrily cut her off.

“Love me!” he sneered. “You *love* me, and yet when challenged, you would not even *fight* for me! There is one standing next to you who was ready to kill you, and all because of me! What did *you* do?”

“I’m sorry, but I am not prepared to hurt somebody for your sake, God—” The crack of a bullet cut off her words, and she screamed as a bullet shattered her kneecap. (I forget which one.)

“You fool,” Godfrey ranted, “You little *hypocrite!* You do not want to hurt anybody, yet you are ready to break my heart and deny me the love that I deserve—the greatest hurt of all! How *dare* you!”

“But—but what about Jobar?” Pick A Hair Color protested. “He *surely* loves you! You killed his whole

family and he loves you more than ever!”

“Pah! Jobar’s love is that of a loyal and mindless dog!”

BANG!

This time she was wounded in the face, and Godfrey’s latest victim was propelled backward into the fireplace, where the Fireman wrapped his long flaming beard around her head, and her sightless eyes sizzled in his fiery embrace.

One left: the American banshee who had tried to murder her rival for Godfrey’s love. How many bullets would she take?

Godfrey, perhaps worrying about the Fireman getting out of his control, switched the troll off.

The survivor knelt before the killer, who held the gun to her throat.

“If you are determined to kill me,” she said stoically, “I am prepared to die.”

Godfrey hesitated, willing to let her finish her spiel before finishing her off.

“Continue,” he said with vast, airy conceit.

“I love you, Godfrey, I really, *honestly* love you. I would kill anybody who tried to take you from me, and if you thought I wasn’t fit to live, I would gladly die.”

Godfrey smiled and removed the gun from her throat. She gazed up at

him, and her face seemed to glow as though he were a light shining down on her. While she remained kneeling, Godfrey unzipped his fly. I won’t tell you what happened next, but I imagine that you can guess.

And that’s where I’m going to leave this twisted tale. I am ending the story of this cruel being and his pathetic lover locked in limbo, with one fixed in perpetual oral worship and adoration of the other. You might say that this story is ridiculous, that there is no way it could have possibly happened, nor ever could happen, but you’ve already heard a story similar to this, just in another form. You probably believed that one. So be it.

# FLIES

*Sarah Gunn*

**M**Y DAUGHTER, HEATHER, DIED three weeks ago.

She had a brain tumor. The doctors kept telling me how unusual it was for a seven-year-old to have a brain tumour, as if knowing that she had won the oncological lottery should have made me feel better.

We ran from it, my husband and I. David drank. To his credit, he never did when he was looking after her. But he stank of whisky constantly for the last few weeks of Heather's life. I should have talked to him about it, but I was busy running too.

I started running on a warm Sunday morning in June. Heather was sitting at the kitchen table, legs dangling from a chair that she would never grow into. She was sorting her pills by size, as she did every morning when she could concentrate. I was washing the breakfast dishes. She had left most of her breakfast untouched again. By then she was so thin that her cheeks were hollow, and I could almost see her skin tightening over her bones.

"Are these going to make me better?" she asked suddenly, rolling the pills around her place mat.

"You'll get sicker if you don't take them, sweetheart," I said. I didn't know how to tell her the truth.

"Okay," she said apathetically. Her voice was tired and I felt a miserable cramp in my gut, but I said nothing as she swallowed her pills one after the other. She went to the fridge to tick her chart and dragged herself back upstairs to bed.

I looked at the chart, ignoring the suds dripping onto the floor from my yellow-gloved hands. We drew a new chart for her medicine every week, and every week I wondered if it would be the last one.

She had drawn a little smiley face in the "a" in "Heather" at the top.

I ran out of the house.

\* \* \*

I could hear the kids next door playing football, enjoying their summer holiday while my little girl was

dying.

I ran until my heart thudded in my ears, until the houses peeled back beside me and I was surrounded by hedged fields.

There was a stile in the hedge. I clambered over it, then realized that I was still wearing my bright yellow gloves. I took them off and stuffed them into my pockets.

As I did, a car blasted past me and nearly hit me. Maybe it should have hit me; I ought to have been at home with my daughter, not out in the pleasant sunshine.

I wandered over to the far side of the field and lay in the long grass by the hedge. I tried not to think about Heather, but I ended up following the same miserable little mental paths as I did in the wee hours every morning.

What if I hadn't let her watch TV? What if I hadn't let her play on the computer? What if I hadn't let her near the microwave?

*What if, what if.* The saddest two words in the English language. I thought "What if" until I fell asleep on the grass, and then I heard those words in my dreams.

\* \* \*

When I woke up, a nearby dog was whining urgently. I looked around and spotted black fur, just

visible through the hedge. The dog barked, and I wondered if it might be hurt. But the sun had moved since I fell asleep and I didn't want to be away from Heather any longer.

Still, I hesitated. I wanted to help the dog, as if doing so could somehow make up for my terrible failure to save my daughter. If I just checked on the dog quickly, then I could go home. I nodded, decision made.

I stood up with difficulty; my back was sore from lying on the ground. There was another stile in this hedge, so I climbed over it stiffly.

I saw the dog: a collie slumped on the ground with its head trapped between two strands of barbed wire. It whined with pain.

"Don't worry, I'm coming," I said, hurrying toward it.

As I got closer, I saw the blood on its fur. Then I smelled it.

It was dead.

*Heather will smell like that after a few days in her coffin.*

I shook my head to push that grim thought away, and went to the collie. Despite the odor of decay it gave off, it had to be alive, because it was barking again. But, kneeling down beside it, I saw midges drinking from its glassy eyes.

I took a closer look at the dog. It really was dead. It had torn open its throat trying to free itself from the

barbed wire. Then noticed a spider's web strung in the hedge over the dog's head.

A little patch of gray mist was trapped in the gossamer web. I leaned closer and saw pretty shapes and colors forming and dissolving in the mist. When I blew on it gently the web rippled but the mist remained, and the dog's barking became more frantic.

The barking was coming from the mist in the web.

Suddenly it seemed very important that I break the web and let the mist escape. I remembered that Heather used to do the same for flies trapped in webs in the garden, years ago when her death sentence was far away and her eyes could still bear the sunlight.

Thinking about her, I reached out and ripped the web apart.

Something happened. It felt like the rollercoaster ride I had taken Heather on once. We sat in a log boat that plunged into a pool, and the water roared upward all around us. With the web torn, the mist shot upward like the water did and the barking stopped.

I don't know why, but I suddenly felt free.

\* \* \*

I lingered for a while in the sun.

The dog didn't bark again, but that didn't surprise me; I had already concluded that by breaking the web, I had freed its soul.

I concluded that the collie's soul had fled its body after the dog had died, but that the web had trapped the fleeing soul. It made no sense, but neither did Heather's tumor. I didn't trust the world to make sense any more.

The sun was setting. I walked home along the darkening street. I kept an eye out for spider webs on the way, and now that I was looking for them, I saw them everywhere. Only two of them held trapped souls: one held the soul of a dead mole, the other the soul of a dead sparrow. I broke both webs, and those souls, those mists, flew away. Then I hurried home.

David was sprawled on the sofa in the living room. He didn't ask where I'd been, and I heard the rattle of ice in a drinking glass as I went upstairs. I would be alone again tonight, staring at the ceiling.

Heather was sleeping, curled up like a fetus under her duvet. I thought *I love you* at her — she was such a light sleeper that I couldn't risk saying it out loud—and then I patrolled the house and destroyed every spider web I could find.

\* \* \*

I started patrolling the neighborhood every evening, after David got home from work. I think my behavior angered him, but I needed to break as many webs and free as many souls as possible. The thought of innocent animal souls suffering in spider webs sickened me.

Each day I found a half-dozen or so webs spun over the corpses of animals, their souls misted in the webs. I could hear their distant cries of distress. Clearly, the spiders were trapping the souls on purpose. I didn't know why they did it, but that was okay—I didn't need to understand to do my job.

I felt guilty about being away from Heather, but I was sure she would have understood. She used to save flies, after all.

\* \* \*

She collapsed when I was out one evening.

I found a note on the kitchen table when I returned home—*Gone with Heather to hospital. Come soon. D*—and my mind went blank.

When I recovered my wits, I tried to call David's mobile phone, but for some reason he had turned it off. Maybe he was punishing me for my absence.

I searched frantically for my car keys. Heather might be dead by now.

Maybe she even died on the way to the hospital. I had no way of knowing and I hated David for his stupid, useless note.

After awhile, I remembered how to drive.

Heather lay in a white bed.

The only color was Mr. Dibs, her red teddy bear. Someone had tucked him under her arm. It might have been David, but only his jacket, draped across the back of a chair, was in the room when I got there.

I collapsed into one of the chairs by the bed, gently sobbing, and took Heather's hand. She looked so fragile and distant, tied tenuously to the world by a web of wires while her blood raged with chemicals.

I watched her for a long time, hating myself for not being at her side when she collapsed. Why had I placed the souls of animals above the health of my daughter? I vowed never to do that again. When she came home, I would stay with her always.

David returned and, as if having anticipated my presence, brought me bitter coffee. Then a doctor arrived, hiding behind his clipboard, and told us that Heather wouldn't make it this time.

I rested my head on the bed beside Heather, too numb to cry anymore. It was too late to make amends to her.



I must have fallen asleep, because the window was dark when I woke up. The room light was on.

A fat black spider was on the ceiling. Its eight-legged shadow stretched across the ceiling, giving it a grisly appearance.

My heart hitched with terror. And then I grew enraged.

I sprang to my feet and swiped at with my hand. But I wasn't tall enough to reach it, so I picked up a chair and prodded the spider with the chair's leg. It began falling down, down, on a long strand of silk, its eight legs waving crazily. When it lighted on the floor, I pounced on it.

David had been asleep in his chair, and now he awoke.

"What are you doing?" he asked, startled.

"Trapping a spider," I said, standing up with it inside my cupped hands. *See how you like it*, I thought.

I ignored David's bewildered expression and hurried out the door, feeling the spider's legs skittering on my palms. It was running around in frantic circles in its circular prison.

I trotted down a long antiseptic hall until I reached an exit, and then, standing outside, I opened my hands. The spider sat still, as if it knew the game was up.

"Stay away from her," I hissed at it, "or I'll kill you." I then flung it

into a flowerbed. I went back into the hospital, slamming shut the door behind me.

My hands felt prickly and dirty, so I purged them in a washroom.

Suddenly I heard a groan that resounded in my head, and my guts got slippery with nausea. It was a human groan. A *person* was groaning. This was too much, especially now.

But I couldn't ignore it.

The web was in a room that had the air of just having been emptied after the patient inside had died. The web was directly over the empty bed. I walked toward the bed, looking up in awe at the ceiling. I saw the dead patient's mist in the web.

And heard the groaning coming out of it.

I jumped on the bed, reached for the ceiling and ripped the web apart. The mist vanished upward in an instant, and the awful groaning stopped.

Suddenly a chorus of groans, cries, screams and laments rose all around me. I was terrified. The mourning of the dead in their prisons of silk was deafening.

I hunted down the spider webs throughout the hospital, obliterating them one by one. The cries of distress gradually fell completely silent.

I returned to Heather's room. David was sprawled in his chair, his

eyes swollen shut. I tucked his jacket around him carefully, trying not to wake him, and he mumbled and reached for my hand in his sleep.

Misery settled over me as I looked at my ruined family. I turned off the light, sat down and took their hands. Heather's machines beeped and wheezed quietly in the dim room.

The night dragged on. Rain splattered the window, then stopped. Later, the moon came out and its light shone off an empty spider's web strung above the bed. My heart stopped in my chest. I had no doubt: The spider that I had captured and evicted had made this web. It had spun this web specially to trap Heather's soul.

It knew that she was going to die, and it had been waiting for her.

I stared at that web for a long time, knowing that I should break it.

But then I thought about my little girl.

I thought about getting one more chance to tell her that I was sorry that I wasn't with her when she collapsed. One more chance to tell her that I was sorry that I had let her down.

One more chance to tell her that I loved her.

And I didn't break the web.

\* \* \*

My daughter died at four o'clock

in the morning on her third day in the hospital. I didn't look up at the web for almost half an hour after the doctor left the room. I was sobbing uncontrollably.

I stared at Heather's still, empty face and into her blank eyes.

David was sobbing into his hands beside me, but I barely noticed. I kept thinking about the web strung above my daughter's bed, that sinister soul trap.

My desperation eventually overcame my dread, and I looked up.

She was there!

I felt my chest would burst with joy; I hadn't lost her after all!

I turned and touched David's shoulder. He was shaking terribly and I wished so badly that I could tell him Heather was okay, that she was still with us, but I knew he wouldn't believe me.

"What do we do now?" I asked. I fought to keep the relief I felt out of my voice. David would think I had gone mad.

"I'll go and ask them," he said apathetically, referring to no one in particular. He rose to his feet like man a stricken, and staggered out into the corridor.

I could hear Heather's cries, trapped in her web, the web that had the spider had spun specially to seize her soul.

I quickly dug in my bag for the box of chocolates I had brought yesterday for her, all of them uneaten, and threw out the candies.

I climbed up on Heather's bed, and very gently detached the misty web from the ceiling.

A thin, keening cry burst from the web in my hand and I nearly dropped it from shock.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I gently reassured her. "Mummy's got you."

Folding the web like a delicate handkerchief, I carefully laid it inside the emptied box of chocolates, and then replaced the cover. I put the box in my handbag.

From inside of it, her trapped soul keened.

\* \* \*

Heather died three weeks ago.

She is with me now, beside my bed, in her web.

I keep her in a clean jam jar.

She hasn't stopped crying.

Sometimes she groans, as if she is in terrible pain.

She won't talk to me, so I don't know if she is.

I think the web might hurt her.

I know I must let her go, but I need to know that she knows that I'm sorry.

Sorry I left her alone.

Sorry I wasn't there when she col-

lapsed.

And I have to tell her, one last time, that I love her.

I love you, Heather.

She is making noise again.

Was that a shriek?

I think it was a shriek.

I can't let her suffer forever.

But I can't let her go, either.

Not yet.

I'll keep her a little while longer.

# A WINDOW SHATTERS

Pedro Iniguez

*A window shatters.*

*Bludgeon of a hammer. Like a fallen ax in silhouette, the hammer stands out sharply in the room, black against the misty cold light filtering into the house and glittering off the glass shards on the tiled floor.*

\* \* \*

HARVEY REITMAN STOOD SHIVERING in the gloomy winter cold as the boy approached the broken window. Thank God the wind was not blowing.

“All right,” Harvey said through chattering teeth, “hurry up.” His breath steamed. “And take this just in case.” He handed the boy the hammer that he had just used to break the window. Harvey could not fit through the window, and he wanted the boy to unlock the front door.

“I hope there aren’t any zombies in there,” the boy said as he began clambering into the house. “When they bite you, you turn into one of them.”

“You’ve watched too much TV.

There ain’t no such thing as zombies.”

“What’s TV?”

“Just go, will you?”

The boy crawled through the jagged mouth of the broken window. His thick goose-down jacket prevented the glass fangs from sawing through his skin.

He stood in a kitchen. Torn trash bags were strewn across the floor, their innards scattered along glossy white tiles. The trail of garbage led down a darkened hall.

Harvey saw the boy crinkle his nose; something in the air had disturbed him. The boy jerked his head around and began looking wildly about.

Then Harvey distinctly heard a growl from one of the unlighted rooms inside, and his guts curdled. Peering through the broken window, he saw a sinister head pop up out of the shadows like a jack-in-the-box head. Its blank mad eyes and salivating, dagger-lined jaws testified to countless days of hunger and want.

The boy screamed.

“Kid, get out of there! *Get the hell out of there now!*” But the boy was frozen with terror.

Harvey couldn’t fit through the window. Panicked, he bolted for the front of the house and pounded on the front door, knocking snow loose from the roof. It shrouded him in a nun-like habit of white.

The boy’s shrieks echoed down the long, empty streets of suburbia under a ruddy sun in a misty gray sky. Harvey slammed a shoulder into the oak-wood door, but it held fast. He then raised his right knee to his chest and let the kicks fly, but the door did not yield. The screaming intensified. Harvey slammed a heel into the door again. No luck.

The sound of flesh being smacked slithered under the door and crawled up into Harvey’s ears, sickening him. He was sure the boy was dead.

*Chuck. Chuck. Chuck.*

“Kid?” Harvey yelled, frantically pounding on the invincible door. “Kid, *what the hell is going on in there?*”

No answer.

But moments later a muffled voice came through the door. Harvey heard chains rattling and bolts popping. He clenched his fists. Slowly, the door creaked open. Harvey held his breath.

It was the boy.

Blood seeped down his right leg, where his pants were torn open.

Harvey exhaled a vast sigh of relief, his breath pluming frostily in the air.

“Kid, are you all right? Christ, you scared me to death! What the hell happened in there?”

“I killed it, Mister Harvey,” the boy said gravely. Tears were in his eyes, but he was calm, even stoic.

“Killed what, kid?”

“The zombie.”

Harvey snatched the bloody hammer from the boy and cautiously entered the house, leading the boy by the hand.

The stench of mold and feces was sickening. Turning into the living room, Harvey saw it. Its rib cage bulged out of its tissue-thin gray skin, resembling the curved slats of a disintegrated boat. Blood pooled under its head. Its eyes goggled madly and deadly, and its tongue lolled out of its mouth, leaking a bubbling saliva.

Harvey whistled in admiration.

“You did good, kid.”

“You have to hit the zombies in the head. That’s how you kill them.”

“It’s not a zombie, kid. It’s a rottweiler. A dog.”

“A zombie,” the boy insisted, voice still grave.

“Whoever lived here must have owned it. It’s probably been living

off the garbage.”

Harvey studied the little boy, whose small, shivering body was starting to succumb to his wounds and to the bitter cold.

“We gotta clean your wounds. Where else are you bit?”

“The zombie bit me here and here,” the boy said, pointing to his leg and hand.

“You’re pretty brave, you know that? Let’s see if they got anything in the bathroom medicine cabinet.”

Cautiously leading the way upstairs, Harvey gripped the hammer tightly. The boy followed close behind, wrapping his small, cold fingers around Harvey’s warm, gloved hand. Harvey looked down in wonderment at the courageous kid. They’d kept each other company through many dark days. Today, he’d almost lost the kid. The thought of losing another loved one was unbearable.

“We’ll get those taken care of soon.” Harvey assured the boy, eyeing his wounds. “But first I gotta make sure there’s no more dogs inside the house.”

“Zombies.”

“OK, then. Zombies.”

Reaching the hallway upstairs, Harvey turned the knob on the first door. The bathroom’s sterile white floor and clean, naked walls disheartened him. The room was lonely, anti-

septic and strangely alien.

“Stay in here. I’ll be back to check on your wounds. I’ve gotta make sure the house is safe.”

The boy nodded.

Closing the door behind him, he was instantly on alert again, the hairs prickling on the back of his neck. He walked practically on tip-toes. He edged down a hall along the wall to keep the wood floor from creaking. After a while he saw two doors.

Standing outside the first door, Harvey clutched the hammer and slowly and quietly turned the door-knob. He peeked through the door crack. Then, summoning all his courage, he slammed open the door and rushed headlong into the room in a violent, screaming frenzy, waving the hammer.

No one was there. No person, no dog.

He stopped dead still, heart pounding.

Posters depicting long-dead pop icons were plastered on walls painted a shocking pink. Like deformed sentinels, stuffed dolls with button smiles kept silent watch over rainbow-striped bedsheets. But no little girl was under the sheets. Harvey even pulled them back to check. Nothing.

The next bedroom was the master bedroom. He stormed it, too. No

enemies were inside.

The tension gradually drained out of him, replaced by relief. No one was home. No more danger. But this fact also meant that the house was no longer a home. It was just a house.

For some reason, he wept.

\* \* \*

He rummaged through the house for useful items and for food, biting his lip to beat back the pain inside of him.

Inspecting a closet, he came across an old, yellowed shoebox with a black swoosh branded on its side. Reaching inside, he gripped cold metal.

The small revolver fit comfortably in his hand. A box of ammunition was also inside the shoebox, undisturbed and unopened.

Harvey loaded six rounds into the hollow steel chambers and tucked the gun under his belt.

Finding nothing else of interest, he made his way back to the hall. Opening the door to the bathroom, he noticed the sharp contrast that the dark crimson of the boy's blood made with the white tiled floor.

"Sorry I took so long, kid. The house is safe. Let's get a look at you."

"Does that mean we're gonna live here?"

"Let's talk about that after we fix

you up, OK?"

The boy nodded.

Harvey found bandages and a half-empty bottle of rubbing alcohol in the medicine cabinet. Eventually he stopped the bleeding and bandaged the boy.

He remembered his promise to him.

"Your own room, kid."

The boy looked up at the man in awe-struck disbelief.

"Your own room. The pink one. I think you can handle sleeping alone, right?"

"Yes, Mister Harvey. Yes, I can."

"I've told you, don't call me 'Mister.'"

"OK, Harvey."

"Better."

Harvey looked out the bathroom window. The sky was red, the sun sinking below the tree tops.

"Time for bed, kid."

\* \* \*

Harvey made his way downstairs from the girl's room after tucking the child in. He idly picked up some of the garbage strewn across the floors and tossed them outside. He broke a small, wood coffee table into boards. He found a box of nails in a kitchen drawer.

Pausing from his labors, he gazed out the broken kitchen window.

The air was dead calm and the frosty-white veil of snow hugged every house in a seemingly warm embrace. The clouds had cleared, and the snowy street and sidewalks were deep blue in the twilight. The houses looked simple and homely as they lined up one after the other, flanking an ice-clogged road. He envisioned how pleasant they would look during the summer. He imagined smooth, wood plaques with family names engraved on them in front of every house: The Ingersons. The Perdomskis. The Parkers. It was too bad that each house was now a tombstone, and the suburban town a graveyard.

The sun had set.

He looked up at the stars, those scintillating gems. They had never looked so bright. He had forgotten the last time he had looked at them.

He sealed the window, hammering the nails into the boards. He wanted desperately to settle in here. His legs ached from wandering from town to town in search of food and rest. His hands had become like dried leather, his face like cracked concrete.

Outside, the air remained still.

But he knew.

In months, weeks, maybe even days, he and the boy would have to leave again with the wind at their heels.

It was winter. But it wasn't like

the winters of his childhood. These winters brought death on the wind. The Nuclear Winter they called it. The winds carried the fallout. It was the same poison that had powdered the world after the bombs had fallen. The same soot that had sullied the sun.

When the winds came, it was time to leave. Fast.

He finished boarding up the window, and remembered to dispose of the dog's body.

Crouching down next to it, he examined its wounds: Deep puncture marks on the top of its skull, still exuding blood. The boy had smashed the hammer's claws on its skull, probably killing it instantly. But the boy had been damned lucky that the dog was frail from near-starvation.

He was peering down at its yellow teeth and dark lips when he noticed it. A sudden shock coursed down his spine, and his body shuddered with terrible realization.

The white foam dribbled down from the black rubbery lips, dripping onto the floor and staining the carpet. Harvey almost thought he could hear it hissing like acid.

The sharp creak of a door broke his train of thought. The little boy stood at the top of the stairs, staring down at him.

"You should be sleeping!" Harvey



cried angrily.

"I can't," the boy said in a dull voice. His gaze seemed fogged.

"Why not?"

"It was loud."

"What do you mean?"

"There was a lot of noise."

"Go back to your room. I'll be right there."

Harvey lugged the carcass outside and heaved it into a Dumpster. After securing the locks to the front and back doors, he shambled across the living room. He couldn't believe it was happening all over again. *When they bite you, you turn into one of them*, the kid had said.

It wasn't a zombie, but rabies, Harry allowed bitterly, would do the job just as well.

He trudged dejectedly up the creaking stairs. He grasped the stair rail as tightly as he could, as if he believed that his grip could somehow crush the truth out of existence.

He entered the pink room and sat on the edge of the boy's bed. Taking off his gloves, he could feel the rigid night chill in his hands. Anarchy swirled through his mind as he tried desperately to find the right words.

The boy made it easy for him.

"What happened to your wife?"

"What?" Harvey was startled.

"You have a ring on your finger. That means you're married, right?"

"Yeah," Harvey said hesitantly, looking at the ring. He had almost forgotten that it was there. "I guess it does."

"Where is she?"

"Kid . . ." Harvey hesitated as he searched for the words. "Kid, she's gone."

"Aren't you going to find her?"

"No, you don't understand. She's dead."

"Oh." After a short pause the boy asked, "How did she die?"

"Kid, you get straight to the point, don't you?" He paused, then went on: "I'm not quite sure how to tell you. She became very sick. She lived out the last weeks of her life in terrible pain."

"Why was she sick?"

"Well, the same reason we try to stay away from the winds. The winds carry poison that makes everyone sick. So, she became sick and lived in pain until she passed. But she's in a better place now."

"Like my parents?"

"Like your parents?"

"Did you try to help her?"

"Well . . . sometimes when someone gets sick, there's nothing anyone can do. And sometimes people don't know what to do and get scared."

"Were you scared?"

"Yes. I was scared."

"Scared of what?"

“Losing her.”

“And there was nothing you could do?”

“Well . . . there was one thing.”

The boy stared hard at Harvey.

“You’re too young to hear this. Go to sleep.”

“Can I please know, Mr. Harvey?”

“She asked me to kill her,” Harvey said abruptly and bluntly. “To make it stop. The pain. But I was scared. I couldn’t bring myself to snap her neck, or find a rock big enough to bash her head in, or find a rag to suffocate her with.” The tears started down from Harvey’s eyes.

“I was selfish,” he went on, choking back his sobs. “I couldn’t let her go. Instead, I stood by her side as she withered away. I still remember how her skin started to peel and turn red, how she would vomit blood, when she started losing her hair. But, no matter what happened to her, her eyes were always so full of love. Those eyes never judged me or made me feel guilty about not going through with what she wanted. I remember when I woke up that day and found her body so still, so calm. She was staring upward, and I could see the small, golden slivers of light from the sun reflected in her eyes. That image still runs through my head every damn day.”

“Second chances.”

“What?”

“My older brother used to say that we all deserve second chances. Don’t you think so?”

Harvey wiped away his tears with the back of his hand. “Nowadays those are hard to come by, kid. Know what I mean?”

“Maybe you have to go out and find them.”

Harvey knew the truth was hard to swallow, but the boy was right. He had a second chance.

*When they bite you, you turn into one of them.*

“Yeah, kid. Everyone deserves second chances. And you deserve a chance to get some sleep. Goodnight, kid.”

“Goodnight, Harvey.”

Harvey closed the door behind him and sat at the door. For two hours he waited in silence.

Then he went inside the pink room and listened.

No sound except for the boy’s harsh, labored breathing. He was asleep.

Harvey quietly walked up to the bed and picked up a pillow and gently laid it on the boy’s face.

*You have to hit the zombies in the head. That’s how you kill them.*

He pulled the cold revolver from his waistband and pressed it against the soft pillow. After a long moment,

he pulled the trigger. A window shattered.

Harvey Reitman stood silently among the shadows in a house that was no longer a home. After awhile, the gun slipped from his grasp and hit the floor with a thud.

\* \* \*

*In the peace and tranquillity of the winter morning, down the lengths of silent streets, a window shatters.*

# POSER IN BLUE

Rob E. Boley

*A good story ends with death . . .*

\* \* \*

THOSE WERE MY FATHER'S WORDS, and they occur to me for no apparent reason as I enter the coffee shop just a few miles from my house.

I had jogged here, so I'm covered with a thin sheen of sweat. This is a national chain coffee shop, but the walls are filled with art by local artists. When the barista hands me an iced coffee, I walk over to the closest painting: a blue candle melting into a rippling puddle. Endorphins tingle beneath my skin as I put the plastic cup to my forehead.

"What do you think?" These are the stranger's first words to me. He's a young man with a well-trimmed beard and a charming grin. The sort of lips made for kissing and lying.

I wrinkle my nose. "It makes me sad. It reminds me of death."

He frowns. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"What do you see?"

"Hopefully a prospective buyer. I'm the artist."

Today started like any other, except Alan was gone. I got out of bed, made myself a protein shake, took a handful of supplements, and walked into the Museum—that's what Alan and I called my workout room.

I put on "my uniform," as Alan would have called it: a glass-blue, ribbed tank top made of dry-fit microfiber, and a matching pair of pants.

On the walls were several framed works of art, mostly Alan's paintings of me. Other than that, the room is filled with a long rack of free weights, an elliptical, a stationary bike, a couple of weight-lifting machines, other equipment, and, of course, the Statue.

\* \* \*

The stranger, Bill, invites me to sit with him. Over our table is a painting of a navy-blue hummingbird drawn in a vaguely Japanese style. The whole painting is done in slashes of blues.

Bill's initials and the date—B.S.07—are painted in the bottom right corner in a navy blue. He's here to watch the customers look at his art.

"My boyfriend moved out yesterday," I say. "He just got in the car and left. Didn't even take any paint or supplies. He even left behind his art." The stranger raises his eyebrows, so I clarify. "He's an artist, too."

"That's the sort of thing," says the stranger, "that gives us artists a bad name."

"My dad was an artist, so I know you're not all jerks."

"What kind of artist?"

"He drew comic books. Wrote some, too. It used to drive my mom crazy, Dad making a living making 'funny books.' She would always introduce him as a graphic artist or an illustrator."

"What types of comics did he draw?"

"Mostly superheroes. You know, scantily-clad crimefighters in fishnet stockings with breasts out to here." I hold my cupped hands several inches away from my own B-cup chest.

"What about you? Are you an artist?"

"I'm a personal trainer. My clients' bodies are my canvasses."

"Looks to me like you're your own masterpiece," he says with a flirty smile.

\* \* \*

The Statue is my dad's old wooden artist model—a 10-inch wooden figure with working joints that Dad used as a reference for drawing. On the chest, you can still see the dried residue where he'd once glued two blue marbles for the boobs. I scraped them off when I inherited the model.

Like me, the Statue is hard and lean—not bulky and unfeminine but not dainty and girlish. This morning, it was still in yesterday's pose—standing on one leg with the arms widespread like a bird's wings.

The daily posing was one of our routines. Since Alan stayed up late to work on his paintings and I got up early to work out, he'd put the Statue in a new pose before going to bed. Sometimes it'd be an action pose, like a kick or a punch. Other times it'd be a complicated yoga posture. Other times, something more risqué. When I woke up in the morning and went to the Museum for my morning workout, I'd set the digital camera's timer and mimic the Statue's pose.

It was just something we did to stay close to each other.

Obviously, it didn't work.

\* \* \*

"So, how did you get the bird to hold that pose for so long?" I ask,

pointing at the blue hummingbird.

Bill laughs. “You know how photographers used to keep ducks in place for a photo shoot?”

“Do tell.”

“They nailed their webbed feet to the floor.”

“That’s terrible.”

“For chickens, they’d just shake them real hard—” Bill holds an imaginary chicken in his hands and shakes it like he’s mixing a martini. “—and put them back down again. The chickens would be stunned long enough to snap a picture.”

“My dad always told me that you shouldn’t draw from a picture, that the picture stole the depth, the life, out of the subject.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Bill says. “I mostly draw from what’s in here.” He taps on his temple with one finger. I can’t help noticing that his fingers are stained blue, either from paint or ink.

“Where do you get your inspiration?” I ask.

“It’s not hard. There’s plenty of beauty in the world. Sometimes it finds you. Sometimes you have to look for it. And sometimes it’s standing next to you in line, waiting for coffee.”

\* \* \*

“I can’t wait any longer,” Alan said last night. “Things aren’t getting

any better, not my work and not . . . I don’t feel anything. It’s like the paint just bruises the canvas. And you, you don’t love me anymore.”

He was talking to me in the Museum, while I was running on the treadmill, despite the fact that he knew how much I hated to talk while I was working out. I was covered in sweat, all of my muscles and joints warm and functioning smoothly.

“Since your Dad died, there’s been something raw between us. I mean, don’t you ever feel like we’ve come to the end of the road? I mean, Christ, look at you. You’re going nowhere. You’re just running in place.”

I stepped off the treadmill, grabbed some light free weights, lay back on the weight bench, and began benchpressing.

“I’m just . . . tired,” said Alan. “Like I’m trapped. I feel like a bird trying to fly, but one foot is anchored to the ground. And . . . and I don’t know how to sever those roots. I mean, I’m sick of flapping my wings. Doesn’t it all ever seem like too much? Don’t you ever get to the point where you can’t do another rep? Where it’s just too heavy?”

I allowed the dumbbells to come down to my chest and made eye contact with Alan for the first time since he entered the room. He almost had me, too. I could have dived into those

twin steel-blue pools. But as I lifted the weights, I shook my head.

“Fine,” he said. “I’m leaving. I’m not coming back.”

I kept pressing the weights off of my chest, listening as Alan stomped around the house, slammed the back door, opened the garage door, and started the car’s engine. Then I turned up the music and finished my workout.

\* \* \*

“I’ve always admired birds,” I tell Bill. “Did you know that their pectoral muscles make up about a quarter of their total body mass? I mean, just imagine the discipline and perseverance it takes to fly mile after endless mile, to migrate each year.”

“I think they’re just pretty to look at,” says Bill, gesturing tiredly at his painting. “The male birds have the most brilliant colors—teal, cyan, powder, cobalt—mostly just to attract a mate. I guess that’s what life’s all about, huh? Finding someone else. Looking good.”

“I guess. I don’t know. I like to think it goes deeper than that.” I take one last sip of coffee, letting the bitterness slide over my tongue.

“Can I buy you another cup?” asks Bill.

“Another cup, and I’ll be shaking as fast as that hummingbird.”

“Now that’s something I’d like to draw.”

\* \* \*

The last time I saw my father, he was selling all of his original comic book art on eBay, and he wanted me to choose something before he posted the collection online. These were his original drawings on bristol board, before the text or word balloons had been added.

“Are you sure you want to get rid of this stuff, Dad? I mean, this is some of your best work.”

“Hon, the older I get, the more I realize . . . my best work is the stuff that happens in here.” He taps a crooked, ink-stained finger against my temple. “The real art, the real magic . . . it’s in the reader’s head. It happens off the page. That’s where time passes, action occurs, love blossoms . . . off the page. That’s where life is lived. All I do, I just give the real art a launching pad.” Dad waved a hand in the air, as if he were swatting a gnat. “I’m sure your boyfriend would see things differently.”

“You don’t like Alan, do you?”

“It doesn’t matter if I like him, hon, so long as he makes you happy.”

“I’ll take this one,” I say, pointing at a three-panel page of a superheroine in flight. In the first panel, she’s flying upward through a thick

patch of clouds. In the middle panel, she pierces the clouds, her royal-blue cape billowing behind her. In the final panel, she's framed majestically by a deep blue sky. The sun shines on her face and her eyes are closed, as serene as a kitten's. "I've always liked it."

\* \* \*

"Wow, this is something," says Bill, pointing at the same page, now matted and framed on the wall of the Museum.

"Yeah, I've always liked it."

Bill had just given me a ride home from the coffee shop. On the way, I flipped through his sketchbook. It was filled with scenes of life around town, sketches of birds, and even a few nude and semi-nude sketches—all women, some faces I recognized from around town. When he pulled into my driveway, I asked him if he'd like me to pose.

Now, Bill leans in and examines the framed picture closer. "Wow," he says, pointing at the busty woman. "She's defying gravity in more ways than one."

"Yeah. That was Dad." I take off my jacket, fold it neatly, and place it next to the wooden figurine. "So, where are we going to do this?"

"Wherever you're comfortable. Wherever you feel natural."

I sit on the weight bench and begin to untie a shoe. Bill sits on the floor, his back propped against the wall, and opens his sketchbook.

"Earlier, you asked me how I get birds to hold a pose. Really, it's simple. I just feed them."

"We have a birdfeeder in the backyard," I say, untying the next shoe. "I haven't fed the birds in months because they made too much of a racket in the morning. It used to drive Alan crazy while he was painting."

"The birds will come back. You just have to feed them."

"So, how are you going to make me hold a pose?" I ask, yanking off my shirt. "What treats are you going to feed me?"

\* \* \*

Alan and Dad only met once—over dinner at my favorite Italian restaurant on my thirtieth birthday. We sat at a square table in the corner of the restaurant. The table was covered with a sheet of white paper. Alan and Dad sat across from each other and I spent most of the dinner feeling like a tennis net.

"I just don't see why art has to be taken so . . . seriously," said Dad.

"Because without art, the world is a flat, ugly place."

"But a world filled with art is bloated, hollow, and ridiculous."



“What does that even mean?” said Alan, with a dismissive wave.

“It means that art isn’t enough. You can’t live on art, and you certainly can’t feed a baby on art.”

“Whoa,” I said. “Who said anything about a baby?”

“Your father’s obviously very concerned about feeding babies,” said Alan. “After all, he equips all of his female characters with such ample supplies of milk.”

“My lovely men,” I say, placing a hand on each of their forearms, “can’t we just enjoy dinner?”

By the end of dinner, they weren’t talking to each other. Instead, they were each sketching our waitress, a pretty young thing with skinny legs, short, black hair, and a weak smile.

“So, tell me, hon,” said Dad, while Alan was in the bathroom. “Which of us better captured her beauty?” Dad gestured at his cartoonish, busy crayon sketch of the waitress and Alan’s more refined pencil drawing.

“I don’t think beauty is something that can be captured, Dad.”

He raised his glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

\* \* \*

After Bill leaves, I place the sketch on the fridge. Munching on a handful of almonds, I wander into the backyard and examine the empty bird-

feeder. The sun is high in the bright, blue sky, smothering my shadow beneath my feet.

The bin with the birdseed is in the garage, and that’s where I start to walk. But after just a few steps, I know something’s wrong. The garage window is dark and misty. I open the garage door and take a few steps back.

The garage reeks of car exhaust. Alan’s car is parked inside, and he’s slumped in the driver’s seat. He never went anywhere. He spent the whole night driving in place. Going nowhere.

I take a few deep breaths of fresh air before sprinting into the garage. All the windows of the car are open, and they break down my view of Alan as if he were within the panels of a comic book: the wide shot through the back window, the awkward angle of the rear driver’s-side window, and finally the close-up through the driver’s window. I open the door, reach inside and place two fingers against Alan’s throat. His skin is cool to the touch, like a piece of fruit. The skin is blue, almost purple. All the depth, all the life, is obviously gone.

Still holding my breath, I drag the birdseed bin out into the driveway and collapse. After several deep, retching breaths, I pop open the bin and grab two handfuls of seed.

Crossing the backyard, I lay down in the grass, scattering the seed around me.

In this moment, I'm bait. I'm a hunk of wood. I'm beauty. I'm a bloody nail. A stained hand. The sky is a blue canvas, and I am at once patron, muse, and artist. The sun shines solely on me, so dazzling that I can only close my eyes, desperate to hear the birds' greedy song.

# CHUNK! CHUNK! CHUNK!

Bruce Memblatt

*Chunk! Chunk! Chunk! . . .*

CHRISTOPHER COULD HEAR them from above. He was cringing in the basement. He never left it.

The marching never stopped.

*. . . Chunk! Chunk! Chunk! . . .*

The endless bootfalls.

Everything changed when they arrived.

He had been quietly reading a book to try to take his mind off the marching. Quietly turning the pages, quietly.

He now quietly—oh, so quietly!—closed the book and gently stashed it under the false plank of wood in the floorboard.

It was the worst book. It was a music book. They would not tolerate music, or anything associated with rhythm. Oh, no. They, they wanted the whole world to be as empty and quiet as outer space, save only for the constant, monotonous, repetitive sound of their boots striking the ground: *. . . Chunk! Chunk! Chunk! . . .*

Christopher was fifteen years old

when they arrived.

They marched from over the hills to the east, and from over the hills to the west. They marched from the north, and from the south. Each marching line started branching, and then the branches branched and the branching branches branched.

First hundreds of them. Then thousands. Then millions. Then billions. Then trillions! Marching in lockstep. Within a few years they had covered the whole world, every square foot of it, marching shoulder to shoulder in ranks and files stretching as far as the eye could see. They had ground down the entire planet underfoot, had made it as smooth as polished metal under their relentless monotonous bootfalls: *. . . Chunk! Chunk! Chunk! . . .*

Every one of them stood exactly six feet, two inches tall. They were identical in every respect. They were painted red and blue, except their boots were black and their faces flesh-colored. Each had a rifle slung over its shoulder. They had empty,

staring soulless eyes and stern slots for mouths. They were soldiers, and they marched in perfect lockstep. They marched all the time. They never stopped. Ever. Discipline!

Three days earlier, one of the soldiers had trampled to death his best friend, Eric.

The boot had come down on the back of Eric's head, smashing his face into the floor. He had died instantly.

There was a little window at the very top of the room that was level with the ground outside. Very quietly, so as not to draw the attention of the soldiers who hated all sounds except the monotonous crunching of their own boots, Christopher stole up a stack of boxes and peered out the little window, milky with sunlight that was constantly blinking because the soldiers were marching past, the line endless, endless! He saw the boots just inches away on the other side of the window, landing, landing, landing in lockstep: March march march!

All the people had retreated into the cellars, years ago. The houses above had been crushed flat, like every other structure on earth; even the mountains had been smashed flat. His best friend had lived in the cellar next door.

He looked around for some trace of his friend, some artifact or memo-

ry, but there was none. He was dead.

His parents sat side by side on overturned crates, mute with fear. No one dared make a sound. Not a peep! The soldiers might crush them underfoot, as they had done to Eric. Eric had made a sound that they did not like and they had stomped him to death.

Christopher couldn't understand why Eric didn't hate him. He couldn't remember what occurred the night the soldiers arrived, but he knew that something bad had happened, and that he had had something to do with it. He tried to remember his crime, but couldn't.

As Christopher quietly lowered himself from the window, he remembered what his father had told him. He had said that the sounds that the soldiers hated the most were the sounds of movement. His father had surmised that it was all about control. The sound of movement meant that other beings had wills of their own. His father guessed that the soldiers didn't like to be reminded that they had been made by superior beings.

But Christopher thought the answer was simpler. He speculated that sounds intensified in their hollow ears. A pin drop, he believed, reverberated inside their heads like a steel girder crashing to the ground. He didn't believe that the soldiers' rea-

soning abilities were much more sophisticated than those of a common insect. But they were as powerful as Superman.

As soon as his battered sneakers touched the floor he heard their grunts outside. He waited for what he knew would come next.

“Feed feed feed feed feed!” they babbled. Moments later a trapdoor in the ceiling sprang open, and potatoes rained to the floor of the basement.

Christopher pounced on one of the potatoes that rolled across the floor. He peeled it with a small pocket knife, and then sank his teeth into it. After taking a few ravenous swallows, he gathered up a handful of the potatoes and laid them on the small makeshift table next to his mute and rigid parents with their horror-stunted expressions.

If he could only remember what had happened that night, the bad thing that had happened, the bad thing that *he* had done. Maybe if he could remember, he could make the soldiers go away and bring back the world.

“You can’t raise the dead.”

Christopher jumped, the potato falling from his grasp. He shouted, “God, Eric, how are you here?”

“You can’t help me. It’s too late, now.” Then Eric was gone again.

From seemingly nowhere, a

crumpled, empty wrapper fell to the floor at his feet. He smoothed it out, and read the label:

## CHUNKY CHOCOLATE

Where on earth had it come from? Outside the marching grew louder:

... *Chunk! Chunk! Chunk!* ...

Panicked, he ran into a ladder that toppled into a shelf. Screwdrivers, hammers, nails, a paint tray and a paint can rained down onto the floor, crashing and clattering.

“Christopher” his father pleaded in an intense, frightened whisper, “you’ve got to be quiet! They’ll come, Christopher, they’ll *come!* *Please* don’t make any more noise!”

Christopher gazed into his father’s terrified eyes. How he longed to turn back time and see his father throwing a baseball in the yard again, the sun shining. His dad once had a baseball trophy on the mantle in the living from the days when he was in the Minors. Those days must have been a million years ago.

“I’m sorry, Dad, but something is going on out there. The marching is getting louder. And I think I saw Eric.”

“You didn’t see Eric. Eric is dead. Dead. Do you understand?”

“Can’t you hear it, Dad? The

marching is getting louder.”

... *CHUNK! CHUNK! CHUNK!*

...

Suddenly a boot crashed through the window at the top of the wall, above the stack of boxes. The soldier burst into the cellar room.

Christopher fell to the floor.

The soldier said: “Get up Get up Get up Get up!”

Christopher writhed around on the floor in horror as the soldier towered above him.

”You’re making too much noise,” it said. “You know we don’t want noise noise noise!” The sunlight streamed in through the broken window and blazed off of the wood soldier’s shellacked red-and-blue uniform.

“Speak boy. Speak. Speak. Speak. Speak!”

But Eric was mute with terror.

“Trying to fool me me me? We’re looking for the cause of the noise. We’re looking for you you you.”

The soldier raised a foot. Its boot sole hovered inches above Christopher’s face.

Then it came down.

Christopher rolled swiftly away on his side, and the boot crashed down, missing his head by an inch. The *crunch* sound of the boot hitting the floor reverberated in his ear.

“Want a piece of chocolate,

Christopher? Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate?”

He saw the candy wrapper: **CHUNKY CHOCOLATE**. Underneath in smaller letters the label said, “Chunk-chunk-chunk good!”

“Want chocolate, chocolate, chocolate, Christopher?”

“I’ll take it,” Christopher whimpered.

“Shouldn’t you give it to Eric Eric Eric instead?”

He stared up at the soldier, momentarily too stunned to speak. Then he managed to say: “Okay, I’ll give it to Eric.”

The boot crashed down.

Christopher rolled away, screaming. The boot came down again and again, Christopher rolling frantically around on the floor to prevent the soldier’s boot from crushing his skull.

The boot came down again and again, and then it wasn’t a boot. It was Eric’s foot, and then his feet.

*My god, Eric hadn’t been trampled by the soldiers after all.*

“Eric! Eric! Stop!”

He tried grabbing Eric’s legs to make them stop thrashing, but the thrashing, the kicking went on and on.

“Why didn’t you give me the Chunky Chocolate bar, Christopher? I told you I needed it. My blood sugar was very low.”

“God, what have I done? I’m so sorry Eric! I thought it was a game. I thought you were trying to steal my candy bar! I didn’t know you really had diabetes!”

“I told you I couldn’t find my insulin, Christopher. My blood sugar was low. I needed that candy bar, Christopher, and you didn’t give it to me. I went into a diabetic coma and I died, you son of a bitch.” Eric’s feet kicked and thrashed again, and they knocked open Christopher’s box of toy soldiers.

The soldiers began marching out of the box.

And they never stopped.

“I know what happened!” Christopher yelled up at the soldier who was trying to smash his head in with its boot. “I remember! Now you can all go away! I know what I did, and I faced it! For God’s sake, disappear like the nightmare you are, and let the world come back!”

But they did not go away.

Instead, the marching grew louder still.

... *CHUNK! CHUNK! CHUNK!*

...

“We’re never going away, Christopher,” the soldier said. “Never. The sounds will never end end end. Never Never Never.”

The boot came crashing down again.

\* \* \*

A nurse entered Christopher’s room. She shined a small flashlight into his pupils. His staring eyes didn’t blink. She scribbled in her chart the same notation that she made every day, then left the room. Christopher had not moved, or made a sound, in fifteen years.







# MIC

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