



sleepwalk

lurid tales of lust and mystery

| volume 3 issue 1

interesting things

In September, Sleepwalk magazine sent out an email with one question: What was the most interesting thing you saw today? To date, we've gotten over a hundred responses and they're still coming in. We've included some of our favorites, and hope that you'll drop us an email at sleepwalk@rcn.com if you see anything interesting today, anything new or beautiful or different. It's amazing what you see when you open your eyes to look.

My kid walked for the first time.

Little pink post-it notes left all over the kitchen, reminding a girl that her boyfriend loves her.

There was a fire on Chicago Avenue, East of Ashland. They closed off a block and had ladders going to the roof and everything.

Yesterday as I rode down the lakefront the sun was hot red blazing through the haze and an older woman, round and strong like she had really used her body to work hard in this life, dressed in a loose cotton blouse and long skirt sat in the dappled light under a tree by the harbor reading a paper. It was beautiful.

The most arresting thing I saw today: an epileptic seizure. It happened while I was eating lunch at a Thai place on 53rd with two friends of mine. Around 2:30 in the afternoon. A young man (I think he was Thai) with a long, shiny black pony tail was sitting at a small table folding take-out menus. Across from him was his friend, folding his own stack of menus and talking on his cell phone in between folds. They were both wearing t-shirts with the name of the restaurant written neatly in cursive on the back, over hot-hot plates of pad-Thai and pad see ew plus an icy coke for me, my friends and I were engrossed in a major rant about the hypocrisy and unfairness of our freelance artist lives, blabbering away about how the most insane people always seem to head up the best arts organizations and why is that? In the middle of all that, our heads were drawn toward these two guys, where the one with the pony-tail sat in the booth-seat while the other sat at a chair facing him, saying his name over and over again sharply, like the way a needle makes a stitch quick on a sewing machine. This got louder and louder until he was shouting the guy's name, and quickly stood up to slap him. He stuck what looked like a white, plastic tongue compressor in his mouth (can't say what it really was, a pen or something?) and started rattling it around in his mouth. The man with the black pony tail seized, his entire body became wiry and rigid like something had pulled too tight around his spine and was making him arch his back high like a cat. His arms folded in on his chest, hands limp like his wrists stopped working, and he started to fall over in the booth. We all watched until it dawned on me to call 9-1-1. It was a strange and difficult call—they could barely hear me or make out the address and I felt like I was in a communication warp for a second. Then, a woman with long, well-tended dreads sitting in the booth behind me called over to them and said, "stop slapping him, you know he's having a seizure don't you?" She got up from her seat and confidently walked over to the man who stood frantically over the other guy, slapping his face still and calling out his name. "You have to lay him down gently on the floor, lay him down and hold his head, find his tongue so he doesn't choke, but you can't keep slapping him like that." Somehow, the seizing man was lifted to the floor, where his arms stayed crossed rigidly across his chest. All the guys from the kitchen and the worried ladies from behind the counter circled around him, talking quietly, fidgeting with their aprons. Our waitress ran to get a cold, wet rag and leaned over him to lay it across his forehead. My friends and I were a little panicked and amazed but oddly enough, we kept eating and watching the

This guy, standing in the middle of the street with his arms raised to the heavens yelling "Why, Why, Why meeeee!"

Mars.

My girlfriend of two years has one green stripe in her eyes. I always thought they were just brown.

Yesterday as I was riding my bike home from work, I saw three brothers riding bikes through the park in single file, each about a foot shorter than the one in front of him. The oldest might have been about fifteen years old, the middle one maybe eleven or twelve, and the youngest might have been eight or nine. They each had the same jet-black hair and basically the same haircut, and while they weren't talking or laughing, it wasn't out of seriousness, it looked more to me like complete contentedness. Three little bikes, all in a height-descending row.

story unfold from the corner of our eyes at the same time. Right before the ambulance arrived, the seized man seemed to unfold and relax his body. It reminded me of a fish that'd been hooked and wriggled and was reeled but then was thrown back into the water. His friend slowly hoisted him back into the booth and I noticed how he pressed his hands into his armpits to grasp him firmly like he was an overgrown toddler. I noticed how the guy who'd had the seizure helped carry the weight of his own body by pushing his palms into the seat of the booth and I turned away when I saw that a smear of whitish throw-up outlined his lips, wiping it off with the back of his hand as he looked around in a daze. His pony tail had loosened and he raised both arms up to fix it back into a neat, tight tail. I kept staring at him, how he poked his tongue against the inside of cheek and stared off at nothingness in front of him while others continued to run around and make sure that he was alert and comfortable. He ran his hands over his eyes as if he were splashing invisible water on his face. One friend told me to stop staring, it was rude. I answered that I couldn't help it and that we were in a public place so it was sort of more okay to stare anyway. He rolled his eyes at me and my other friend laughed at both of us as she got up to go to the bathroom. Later that day, we kept talking about what had happened, how it was crazy and strange to watch someone so disconnected from their own bodies—we tried to summon any encyclopedic knowledge about seizures—the how and the why and the history of a more literal interpretation of carpe diem. Was it a misfiring of synapses in the brain? A visit from the devil? A momentary lapse in the ordinary? Why did it look so much like death? and what is a synapse anyway? This single event allowed us to spiral into many more fainting and flooding stories of our own—how another time, my friend fainted at a Thai restaurant at three in the morning (we actually did a reenactment of the event on the corner of 53rd and Harper) and how, when I was sixteen, a girl named Olga had an epileptic seizure in my humanities class and we all saw her underwear and we all thought she was definitely dying. I think you do catch a little bit of death when you watch someone have a seizure, or maybe it's just a little bit of extra life that makes you feel like you're waking up to something so close to the edge that you feel like you have stare in order to hold on. Excuse my long winded tale—it was a refreshing and irresistible question and one I believe that if we asked it every day, we'd have many, many fruitful tales to tell.

letter from editor:

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C. M. M. M. M. N. C.

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At the end of stories, there is always a kiss: which happens because there is some kind of trouble with a witch, or some other type of person who does bad black magic. There is something terrible, a menacing cloud maybe, a wailing ghost, or a necromancer, whatever that is, and it is evil, and the people in the town, they are under its spell. The people are feeling really bad, really awful about their situation. They are like: "This shit is not cool. Who needs this evil spell? Man, this is not what I thought being a grown-up would be like at all." Then, like that, someone rides in on a horse and they kiss somebody. In that kiss, everyone in the town is saved. The kiss is that good. So the spell is broken and the people are like, "Wow!" and "Excellent!" and things are OK again, maybe not totally, completely awesome, but at least OK again.

Why are we telling you this?

We are on a horse right now. This is our best kiss.

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For comments, questions and information, contact us at Sleepwalk@rcn.com

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Change the World next November

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Change the World this November

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FlashACTS/>

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THINK - ACT - REGISTER - VOTE

Sleepwalk Magazine would like to encourage your letters. Certainly, your letters to us (thank you Ed, who wrote that we should print on higher quality paper. We agree, Ed. Care to invest? And thank you Rebecca, for your kind suggestion that we publish more political manifestos. If there's a story somewhere in your manifesto, we'll give it a look. But most of all, Olivia, who sent that nice email inviting us to her tap dance recital. Sorry we missed it, Olivia, but we'll certainly be at the next one. With smiles and roses). We'll also give a look to those letters you wouldn't ever send, the ones that might otherwise ferment in a shoebox under your bed. If there's a story involved, we'll read it at Sleepwalk@rcn.com.

Dear Mosquitoes,

I beg you, get out of my bedroom. I'm supremely allergic and I have big red welts all over my body, not just my arms and legs but also areas that I'd never imagine a mosquito could get and they are not at all attractive and I get these looks on the street like oh my god does she have leprosy and don't even ask me about dating and some of the assumptions that've been made, it's certainly not very sexy to be itching in some of the places I've got to itch because of you and I've got pink goopy calamine stains on all my clothes including the Paper Denim and Cloth jeans I just bought at Saks which were pretty expensive. I'll be paying that credit card bill off for a while 'cause you know I'm a waitress, in a breakfast place, no less, and it's not like selling eggs equates the cash flow necessary to buy jeans like that every day, no sir, I really wanted those jeans and now they have pink spots on the thighs and I'm pretty angry about it, to be quite honest, I'm hanging on by a thread here so please, please, please go away. I've tried everything: citronella candles are burning as we speak and everything I own smells like Off—my food is starting to taste like Off. Off sandwiches Off popcorn off coffee—and I've tried sleeping with the windows closed so you can't get in but it's August in Chicago and it's really hot and I can't afford an air conditioner so please, please, please go away.

I don't want to get nasty.

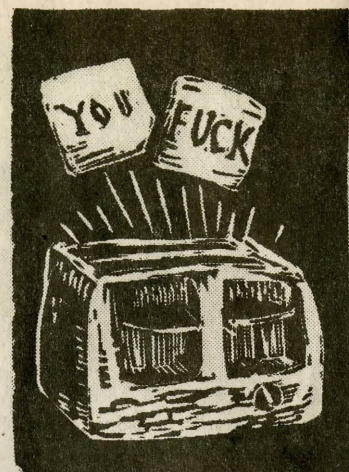
There are pesticides I can use, you know. Industrial ones, and I can take the dog and go stay at D'Nell's house until the fumes subside. And Sharon told me the way they used to do it when she was a kid in New Orleans: take a bucket, fill it with dish soap and water, put it in the middle of the room under a spotlight and apparently you get all crazy attracted and dive in and drown horribly. Horribly. She used to stand over the bucket and watch you writhe and twitch and the thing of it is, mosquitoes, I'm getting to the point where I'd take it that far. The threat of death. And that's hard for me, you know? I'm an environmentalist! I believe in celebrating life in all its forms—but, just so we're clear 'cause there's been confusion about this issue in the past, I am pro-choice, from a political standpoint. I mean, I'd choose life, you know, depending on the circumstance, but I need to have that choice. You know? I am constantly misunderstood on this issue. My boyfriend and I—ex-boyfriend and I—we're exes now, as of twenty minutes ago—argue about this all the time. How can you support life and be pro-choice blah blah and I'm like, are you even listening? And no, he's not, he's not a big listener, 'cause if he was he'd of realized that I've been trying to break up with him for about six months now.

He's a good guy and all, don't get me wrong. He's perfectly nice, and he does really sweet things like writing poetry on my stomach while I'm sleeping. He writes it backwards, so when I look in the mirror in the morning I can read it, and it's really beautiful. He's a really good writer and he reads good stuff, too, but his taste in poetry, good or bad, does not get to the heart of the issue which is this: we fight about silly stuff, like cheese graters and the meanings of films at Century Theater, when what we really want to fight about is the fact that he loves me more than I love him but I love him enough to not want to hurt him. But I do. Hurt him. Horribly. Yesterday he told me he loved me and you know what I said? I said, "Couldn't we just go see a movie?" I am a bitch, mosquitoes. I am a great big bitch.

So I started trying to break up with him. It'd be better, for him, 'cause of the aforementioned bitchy thing and who wants to be treated that way? and for me, 'cause the guilt of this whole thing is killing me, really, I mean, I'm hanging on by a thread. So I say to him, "Dave, we've got to talk," and immediately he looks at me all worried and pale, and he's got these really expressive eyes that can lift up or pull down and make you feel about a thousand things, and now I'm feeling like the angel of death and I want to cry 'cause I know how much this is going to hurt him, and as long as I'm being really honest, mosquitoes, I'll tell you: I really do care about this guy. It's just that he's not right for me. I wanted him to be. I tried, I really did. But there's something about his smell that rubs me the wrong way. He's clean, really clean, actually overly-hygienic to tell you the truth, but even after all the soap and oil and sprays everyone has their own particular smell and his involves woodchips. He smells woodchippy and that brings back this whole line of memories for me involving camping and my parents and nobody talking to one another, ever, just these icy cold silences around campfires and this is what love is supposed to be? so I know he isn't right I know he isn't right I know he isn't right but he's so wonderful in every other way besides not being right that if anyone were to hurt him, to lie to him or make him sad, I would crucify them. Seriously, I would level them, celebration of life be damned. And the fact that it's me who's hurting him? I should dump my own goddamn head in a bucket of dish soap, I'll tell you what.

So I say, "Dave, we've got to talk." And he gets this sad look, and then I want to cry 'cause of the sad look, and then he wants to make me feel better 'cause he hates seeing me cry, and then we end up hugging. And this has been going on for months now, this little song and dance, me as the bitch and him as the hugger and this morning it just exploded all over the place. I was still feeling like an asshole from yesterdays "go to the movies" follow-up to such a beautiful, wonderful statement as love, love, love, he loves me, shouldn't I want to be in love? And he was feeling bad 'cause I felt bad and we're lying there in bed and he's petting me, saying, "don't feel bad," and then I feel even badder [sic: more bad. I'm writing this on a typewriter so I can't go back and fix the grammar] that's he's comforting me when really he should be sticking pins under my fingernails for all these thoughts that keep pesteringspesteringspestering and I jump out of bed and say, "Dave, I've got something to say and I need you to listen to me," and his eyes pull down and he says, "Don't I always listen to you? Do you need me to listen more? I can be better, I can!" and then I want to cry again but instead I get dressed and go to work.

The restaurant was jam-packed this morning. All the tables and booths were filled and some people were waiting for them to open, hanging out in the aisles and blocking my through-way. We were one cook short in the kitchen and it was like an hour before whoever was working the short shift would show up, so Sharon and I are running our asses off. Bacon, eggs, pancakes, coffee—decaf or regular—multi grain or sourdough and it's real easy to take your mind off your problems when you've got to make nine soy vanilla decaf lattes. Like, the mindlessness of the work just numbs your whole brain and your body becomes a machine, almost. Pull the espresso, steam the milk, stack glasses and Dave, who? plus we were listening to some



PHILIP HARTIGAN

Eighties remix CD which was pretty comforting, you know? Eighties music can take you closer to home than home ever really was (assuming you grew up during the Eighties, which incidentally, mosquitoes, I did). So we're running around, taking orders, seating tables, and then Martin in the kitchen starts ringing the little bell 'cause we've let the food pile up and I go running back there and stack like six plates of pancakes on one arm and I'm going to table fifteen up near the front to drop them off and suddenly I stop dead in my tracks. I stop and I stand there holding all those plates, 'cause through the speakers came the opening piano bars and then her voice, all desperate and edgy, all exactly how I felt: Tuurn around every now and then I get a little bit lonely and you're never coming round Tuurn around every now and then I get a little bit tired of listening to the sound of my tears and I'm still not moving, there in the middle of the restaurant and all these feelings were bubbling up in my middle and Tuurn around bright eyes every now and then I fall apart and I thought yes, yes it's sooooo true! Every now and then I do fall apart! I do! And that's okay! It's okay to fall apart! Bonnie fell apart! And as I stand there I can feel the tears coming down my cheeks and I listened to the song and mouthed the words along with her and felt better, and stronger, and more in control, and when I looked up I saw some of my customers crying, too, and they were all singing along, quietly at first, a whisper, and by the time we got to I don't know what to do I'm always in the dark with all the cymbals crashing and the back-up choir, everybody was on their feet, faces tear-streaked, holding hands and singing at top volume.

Once upon a time I was falling in love

Now I'm only falling apart

There's nothing I can do

Total eclipse of the heart

Have you ever heard that song? No? You're kidding!

Seriously, you should go get the CD—it's Bonnie Tyler, *Faster Than the Speed of Night*, and the song's called *Total Eclipse of the Heart*, but she's remixed it on about a thousand Best Of albums—and it totally saved my life today. I came home after work and walked right up to him and shut my eyes tight so I wouldn't see his face and I said, "Dave, look. I don't want to hurt you, but I am. You're hurting, and I'm hurting and I need you to sit and think about it for a minute, okay? 'Cause if you think about it, if you really think hard, you'll see how unhappy we are, you're unhappy and I'm unhappy. I'm so unhappy with making you unhappy, and it's done, now. I'm stopping, now. I feel restless and I'm craving something wild, Dave, and if I have to hurt you big right now to make you hurt less later, so be it, and if you hurt big always I'm sorry but I need to save myself, Dave, I do, 'cause I'm hanging on by a thread!" And then I turned, came in here to my bedroom and locked the door behind me. The knocking started right away. "Megan, Megan, Megan," he's saying at the other side of the door. I can hear him and it breaks my heart, it's killing me and then—then, you fuckers—you start biting. You're all over me and I don't want to do it, I don't want to smack my arm and squash you, I don't want to see you on the wall and flatten you with a hardcover book. So I'm asking you, one last time, to go of your own accord. I've done everything I can.

I don't want to kill you, but I will.

knock & clap

by lott hill

My dad loves to tell the one about the summer his boys caught the clap. The "boys" he refers to are not me and my brothers—I was maybe eight, Lee, thirteen, and Sam was something like sixteen. The "boys" were his wards at Central State Juvenile Delinquent Home for boys, where Dad was superintendent for the year and a half we lived in Kentucky. At Central, he had an average of seventy-five boys between the ages of eleven and seventeen in his care at any given time, so it wasn't really a "home," but a large cinderblock institutional facility, built for function, not form, in the middle of a two hundred acre campus that was every inch surrounded by an eighteen foot chain-link fence topped with curled razor-wire.

"It was the damnest thing, Son," Dad's voice is all cigar smoke and Southern whisky. "Over half of them caught it, and I'll be damned if we could figure it out, son." My dad always calls me son, and though he doesn't normally swear, the word damn, and all of its forms, is a regular feature in his vocabulary. *Damn. Damndest. Damned. Damn it. Damnation. Damn you. God damn. Damnit to hell. Son.*

We lived on campus too, in a three-story brick house that looked out of place next to the sterile expanse of the main building behind all that chain-link and barbwire. Everyone referred to where we lived as the "house" and where the boys lived as the "home." If you could have erased the home, the fence, and the looming concrete slab jutting out of our front lawn with the inscription: Central State Juvenile Delinquent Home, you would get an image of a turn of the century Southern estate, complete with a barn, stables, fields and gardens, a library, scattered-out buildings, and our house, the master's house, unquestionably asserting the authority of the man who lived there.

"That damn summer is what made me give up corrections once and for all, Son." Dad will sometimes admit this when I bring it up.

It was the same summer that the knocking started, and even though my dad will never talk about that, the knocking is the only part I do remember.

While in his care, Dad made sure that the boys of Central State reaped the benefits of good honest work. After all these years, he still insists, "Hard work makes a man out of you," and I have to stop and think about how much of a man my brothers and I must be, and wonder if my sister is now a man, too.

When Dad didn't have them working, the boys gathered in the rec room to play ping-pong and foosball or do homework for the three or four classes they attended each week. Dad didn't allow cards or television in his home or his house because they led even the cleanest minds astray. "It wasn't a damn vacation, son. Those boys were there to learn a lesson, and I'll be damned if I didn't do everything to make sure they learned it." In my dad's eyes, everyday was a step closer to these boys becoming men.

So when the county doctor, on his regular weekly visit, reported four cases of gonorrhea among the boys, Dad suspected that foul play and dirty deeds were taking place right under his nose. "I was damn sure I wasn't going to allow hanky panky or worse..." Dad never says whatever it is he imagines as "worse than hanky panky", but he shakes the image out of his head. "Not on my watch, damnit."

The four boys were put on indefinite lockdown, where who knows what happened to them, but they didn't have contact with each other, or

any of the other boys. Dad was sure that was the end of it, so the next week when seven more boys complained to the doctor, he hit the damn roof. The boys were undoubtedly in agony by then, and fearing my dad's wrath, had suffered until they could no longer stand the pain. When the fire in their pants was unbearable, they finally told the doctor and the doctor told my dad and all seventy-five boys were rounded up into the cafeteria where Dad lectured them on the price they would pay for dirty acts (he still couldn't bring himself to even say the word "sex," much less "sodomy"), and the doctor described the symptoms of the clap, right up to the point of losing one's mind, and my dad brought it all around to how the pain and burning they felt now was not even, "five percent of the pain and burning you will feel once you have been damned to hell for such disgusting acts." Dad was never that religious, hardly ever went to church when Mama would take us, but kept God in his pocket, selectively referencing heaven and hell when they served to back up whatever point he was trying to make.

The boys called my dad the "Catcher," which was a shorted version of "Child Catcher," his CB handle when he and security were hunting escapees. Dad still brags, "I never lost a boy," but as more boys kept coming up with the clap, he felt like he was about to lose them all. He put more boys on lockdown and kept the lights on all through the night and increased security and made damn sure that the boys couldn't even shower without a guard watching, and ordered that every last one of the seventy-five boys be tested. Twenty-five of them had gonorrhea. Dad went ballistic.

He leaves this part out, but my sister, once while trying to remind me what kind of a man our father is, told me that nearly all of the boys were strapped to their bunks at night. More security officers were added so that not one boy was ever out of sight. Doors from toilet stalls were removed and work details were increased and restructured so that there wasn't the remotest chance of even the most innocent contact between the boys. Dad was going to save their bodies and souls with hard work.

But nothing he did seemed to work. Every day new boys were infected with the clap, and others who had been treated continued to catch it again. Dad was beside himself. He spent every waking hour trying to figure out how this was happening right under his nose. Though he worked two hundred yards from our house, the only time we caught a glimpse of him was if Mama allowed us to stay up as late when he came home, and he was almost always gone to the main building by the time we woke.

This is the part I have never heard my dad talk about: around that same time, the knocking started. The knocking was in our house, in the basement, in a small space we called the utility room, behind the wood panel wall that separated the central air, water heater, and gas lines from the unfinished concrete expanse where I rode my big wheel in wide figure-eights and played basket ball with my brothers.

I don't remember how it started, but my mom and sister say that at first, it was just like someone knocking on a door. It wasn't even that loud, but we could hear it from our bedrooms on the top floor. Knocking. Consistent. Flesh on wood (knock, knock, knock, knock). Rhythmic. Continuous, but not urgent.

Dad went downstairs and checked the front door. He checked the back door while Mama looked into our rooms, making sure we were all in bed.

No one was at either door, and realizing that the knocking was coming from the basement, Dad peered down the dark stairs and called security from the phone in the kitchen. He got my brother's baseball bat and waited at the top of the basement stairs while Mom kept us in our rooms.

At some point, the knocking stopped, and when the captain of security, an old man who had spent his life guarding correctional facilities and who was called simply, "Cap," arrived, they searched the basement and found nothing or no one. The basement door was secure and Dad had been watching the only way out with the baseball bat, so whoever had been down there couldn't have slipped by without his notice. Dad ordered a head-count of the dorms, and though not one of the boys had slipped out of their now regular bed constraints, he was sure they, at least some of them, were responsible for waking his family.

The next night when it happened again, Dad ordered the head-count first, waited for security, and searched every corner of the basement. Nothing was found. Cap suggested that maybe it was the water heater or some loose part flapping against the wall of the utility room, but there was nothing within four feet of the thin wood paneling. There was nothing unusual in the basement, just my toys, my big wheel, a few basketballs and footballs, the evidence of our first snowy winter. We had moved there from Florida, and with what my dad referred to as "thin blood," Sam and Lee and I spent most of the countless winter hours down in the basement, safe from the cold and snow outside. Once spring started to warm things up, we hadn't played down there at all, and frightened of whoever or whatever was making the noise every night, Mama forbid any of us from setting foot in the basement.

The knocking continued, not always at the same time, or even every night, but it was regular enough that Dad stopped calling security every time it happened, probably because one night a sleepy-eyed Cap tilted his head at Dad and asked if he was sure he hadn't been dreaming it. The knocking always stopped before Cap could get to our house, and Dad waved his arm at the evidence of his wife and four kids, huddled wide-eyed on the couch, "No, I wasn't dreaming, Cap. It wakes up the whole damn family." But Dad always went to the basement, every night it happened, creeping down the stairs with that baseball bat while Mama made sure none of us left our beds. Dad even sat up some nights, waiting for it, but every time his fingers touched the door to that little room, the knocking would cease, but only until the next night.

The gonorrhea didn't stop either, and before long, Dad was at his wits end. If it had just been the clap or just the knocking, he might have been able to think straight, but faced with whatever dark deeds the boys were doing during the day, and with whatever dark force had snuck into our basement during the night, he was "all but ready to throw in the damn towel."

There was not a second when any of the boys were ever allowed even the briefest physical contact with each other. They slept, ate, showered, and shat under constant supervision. They worked all day long with officers at their sides, and in a last ditch effort to solve the mystery, Dad even ordered all of the officers tested. Cap's argument that testing his officers was outrageous was justified by the fact that none of the nearly thirty guards had the clap. But the outbreak continued among the boys, and there was no more of an explanation for the gonorrhea than there was for the nightly knocking in our basement.

Finally, after exhausting every other possible idea, the doctor suggested to Dad that they take matters into their own hands. They agreed that the

only way to reliably find out what was going on would be to personally watch the boys every move. Following all seventy-five boys around would have been nearly impossible, so they narrowed their suspects down to the boys who had first been treated, who continued to become re-infected. They imagined that these boys were either the source, or would lead them to the source. Dad continued full lockdown of the boys at night, each confined to his own private cell, and then for the next three days, Dad and the doctor followed these few boys and watched them through their daily tasks.

Everything seemed normal. They milked the cows and herded them out into the fields. They collected the eggs and fed the chickens. They slopped out the stalls and forked in fresh hay, only pausing from the more strenuous tasks to brush the thick white wool of the campus mascot, a sheep that was named Cindy long before we arrived at Central. They boys worked hard all day long without deviation from Dad's strict orders. By the third day, he and the doctor were completely stumped.

That evening in the main building, after all the boys had been safely strapped in their beds, they sat in Dad's office, sipping whisky from short glasses with no ice.

They retraced their steps from the last few days and simultaneously concluded that the only time any boy was ever not in direct sight of a guard was in the barn, and even then, no two boys were ever out of sight at the same time. It was only during "slop duty," or as the boys called it, "shit duty," that the guards couldn't see them at all times. And then it dawned on Dad that shit duty was not only the nastiest task in the daily work load, but that the boys had worked out a system of sharing that chore so that no one person was stuck with it. And, of course, the guards didn't follow each individual boy into the stalls as they one-by-one took their turns, because the smell only got worse the more the shit was stirred up.

"I still didn't want to believe what was before my damn eyes." Dad tells how they grabbed some flashlights and he and the doctor marched down the slopping drive, maybe still carrying those glasses of whisky. They crept into the barn—not sure what or whom they would find—and stayed close together, the flashlight beams questioning each corner of the barn, asking it to reveal the clues they were looking for. They searched each stall thinking they would find something hidden in the hay, their minds refusing to wrap around what they were about to discover, but then, as they opened the last stall door, stood side-by-side and peered in, both flashlight beams fell on the answer they were looking for: Cindy. The sheep. The campus mascot. The closest thing to a pet the boys were allowed to have at Central.

Dad still gets a big laugh when he exclaims, "No wonder those boys loved that sheep so damn much." The doctor immediately tested Cindy. Horrified, yet not surprised, they discovered that Cindy was indeed carrying the clap. They didn't hesitate to have the sheep removed and destroyed immediately. That dirty sheep, causing all of those damn problems.

Somewhere in there, the knocking stopped for a few days, and even though Dad couldn't explain why it wasn't happening any more than he could why it had been happening, he was beginning to feel like he was again in control of Central State. But then one night, it happened again, and this time, it wasn't just knocking, but banging. It sounded like



somebody was angry, and the pounding from the basement was accompanied by the screeching of our family cat. Dad rushed to the basement without remembering the baseball bat, and we all followed until Mama blocked the door to the basement with her body and refused to let us go any further. This time, the banging didn't stop when Dad got down there, and from the top of the stairs we could see him pause, not so sure if he should open the door while the thin paneled walls bowed with each bang. It looked like someone was hitting and kicking the wood from behind. That's the part that I remember: angry pounding, walls bowing, the cat screaming like he was being skinned.

And from the stairs, we watched Dad's back as he tugged on the door handle, but even though there was no lock, or even a latch, the door wouldn't budge. Mom called security, and Dad tugged and pulled and wrenched the door handle until it popped off in his hand. The cat screamed. The pounding got louder. Dad threw his weight against the door. His arm. His shoulder. His whole body. The door bowed in and the wall bowed out. Again and again, Dad tried to get in as whatever was in there with our cat tried to get out, and finally, the door gave with the crackling of wood, sending splinters exploding into the small utility room.

Suddenly there was silence, and our cat shot out of there, fur on absolute end, retreating all the way to the top floor and underneath my sister's bed where it would be weeks before he would venture out for more than a few minutes.

Cap came, scratched his head at the busted doorway, and agreed with Dad that something just wasn't right. As a last resort, Dad agreed to let Mama call the church she took us to most Sundays and forbade Cap to mention anything to anyone on or off campus. Dad seemed as embarrassed by whatever was happening in our basement as he was about half of his wards catching the clap from a sheep.

The next day, a priest came to our house. He assured Dad and Mom that he blessed many houses, and though he wasn't certain what was in our basement, or if it had anything to do with God or the devil, Mama was sure that the blessing wouldn't hurt.

And this, I remember: My brother Lee and I followed the priest all around the house as he chanted and sprinkled holy water in every corner of every room, with special emphasis on the basement. We echoed his chants, even though we understood very little of what he said. Most of it was in Latin. Then Lee folded a paper airplane to look like that pointy white hat that the pope wears, and I drew a smiley face on a tennis ball with a permanent marker, and the priest smiled and sprinkled that with his holy water, too, and we placed our tennis ball pope on top of the water heater, facing the broken door that my dad never replaced, with a sign that said, "Go away, bad thing, and don't come back."

And it didn't come back. I don't know if it was the chanting of the holy water or the tennis ball pope head, but we never heard the knocking again as long as we lived in that house. Eventually, the cat came out of my sister's bedroom, although he wouldn't even come close to the door that led to the basement stairs. Eventually, all of the boys were cured of the clap, though there was a general sadness for quite sometime at the loss of their favorite sheep. Just to be safe that nothing of the sort ever happened again, Dad made sure that any animal smaller than a horse and bigger than a chicken was removed from Central State.

The boys continued to do the work that would make men out of them, and my dad spent the next few months trying to save them from themselves until he finally gave up corrections altogether, because, as he tells it now, "the work was just too damn hard." *snw*

I ♥ the spirit world



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a mania for stones

by isaac adamson

As the boat nears the shore I can see them. Three old men huddled at the edge of the island, threadbare coats clinging like timid shadows, wool caps tight over their skulls as they peer into the fog. From the boat I can't see the expressions on these faces but I know them just the same. Watery eyes narrowed as they gaze into an invisible distance, pinched noses raw and red from the cold. These three old men are here because, like my father, they suffer a mania for stones.

'Mania for stones' is a phrase of my mother's, words she murmured until she became her own echo in our little house on the edge of the river. The river has suffered many names—the Twin Kings River, Glory to the Cabbage Picker River, the River of Equality, River of Tenfold Progress—but to us it has always been simply 'the river.' I would often accompany my mother to the edge of the river to do our Sunday wash, where she would exclaim, 'Your father's mania for stones will lead us to ruin as she dug stones from his pockets.' 'What does he find in this mania for stones?' she would mutter when discovering a collection of stones hidden in an old flowerpot or concealed beneath a loose floorboard. Late at night, when I was supposed to be sleeping, I would hear her pleading with him. *Do these stones mend your handkerchiefs, Duvek? Do they boil turnips for you? Do these stones feed that hungry little mouth in the next room?*

My father would remain silent. After a time, I would hear the floorboards groan as he rose from the bed and made his way to the den. In the morning I would find him sitting under the kitchen table, eyes dull and staring at his hands. *It's a fine morning Dmitre, he would say. Let us go to the river and gather stones.*

☆☆☆

And now as the boat nears the island I picture him with these men staring silently out over the water. In the old days, there would have been more men huddled on the shore, six or eight or maybe even a dozen. Unbeknownst to my mother, as a boy I would accompany him to these annual clandestine island meetings, yet it wasn't until much later that I appreciated their significance. My father and his comrades would stand at the edge of the river, shuffling from foot to foot, hands inside their coats, pockets filled with stones. Only now do I understand their frustration, their tightlipped rage at a world they couldn't change, for I knew nothing as a child. Back then I would only drink bitter fig tea and watch them through the steamed windows of the Blind Boatmen, a small cafe on the island run by my third cousin Mulva who had enormous breasts and was forever crossing herself.

There were never any customers in the Boatmen on the days when the meetings took place. I would sit at the long empty table with my fig tea and Mulva would inquire after my mother and little sister. I would tell her my mother was fine and remind her that I had no sister. Mulva would say *I'm glad they're both well* and watch the men standing on the shore, her eyebrows knit with worry. Then she would cross herself and scurry off to the kitchen.

After perhaps an hour my father and his friends would end their shore-side vigil and come into the Boatmen, cold and ruddy faced. They would empty their pockets upon the table until it was covered with stones they had collected over the previous twelve months. For an hour or so, they would carefully pick through them, condemning some as too heavy, some too round, others too light. Some were unmasked as not being stones at all,

but woodchips, bits of dull glass, shards of bone or fragments of brick. Mulva would hurry back and forth with fig tea and pine-seed biscuits and when they tired of sifting through the stones they'd talk.

Duvek, one man might say to my father—is it true about the Australian?

It shows promise, my father would say.

How many touches?

With practice, perhaps twelve touches. Maybe more.

Twelve touches! The other man would bellow. *Nonsense! The Australian is a waste of your talent, Duvek my friend. Better you should practice your Skinny Green Frog. The Frog was good enough for Ludvik, after all.*

Ludvik was a genius, another man would say.

To the genius of Ludvik, yet another would reply.

A chorus of similar pronouncements would erupt around the table and the men would raise their mugs and speak of this Ludvik's genius for some time, invoking strange names I only discovered the meanings behind much later. *A Gypsy Eating Rice. Sorrow of the Night Porter. The Hangman, The Haberdasher's Tooth.* The faults and merits of each would be debated at length, the discussion often growing so heated the men would thump their fists down upon the table and make the stones leap and rattle over its surface.

Still, my father would say in a hushed tone, there is something to this Australian. With practice, it may be possible to reach twelve touches.

Nonsense! the first man would bellow. *Show us!*

These words would hang frozen in the air and a pall would fall over the men as they gazed wistfully out the window to the river winding its silent way past our village or remained staring into their mugs and stroking their beards. When they eventually resumed speaking there would be no more talk of Ludvik or the Australian. The men would soon gather their stones and put on their coats and my father would order me to kiss third cousin Mulva. *Take care of your mother and little sister, Mulva would say.* Then the men would all crowd into the ferry boat for the short trip across the river and Mulva would stand at the window making signs of the cross over her enormous breasts until we were out of sight.

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My mother never understood the nature of my father's mania for stones until it was too late. As for myself, at first I knew only that he was very particular about the stones he gathered. He judged them according to strict criteria, caring nothing for a stone's color but clearly preferring small stones, ones that could fit in the palm of his hand, stones that were smooth and flat like coins. Soon I mastered his criteria and began my own collection, one I concealed in an old coffee can under my bed.

And still it came as a shock when I learned these stones had a covert purpose. My discovery came on the night of the Autumn Rations Festival, an annual celebration held in the village square. At that time the square was known as Triumph of the Wheat-Thresher Plaza, but like the river, it labored under so many names through the years that no one called it anything but 'the square.' All the village was gathered there that night, everyone but my mother who had no use for festivals. *Go to the square and fetch your father, my mother told me, wringing her hands on her apron. It's late and the turnip stew is going cold.*

And so off I went into the night. The square was ablaze with torches and crowded with tents where people sat drinking wormwood spirits and eat-

ing skewered parsnips and rabbit, the traditional fall celebration fare. When I found my father he swooped me up onto his lap and made me perform subtraction for his friends. They applauded heartily, asking him how it was such a simpleton had produced this subtracting machine of a boy. My father just laughed, eyes gleaming as he tussled my hair. He took one final swig of his wormwood and then we made our way from the square, walking along the riverbank toward our house.

My father was in fine spirits as we traveled through the gathering darkness. As we crossed Kosvar Street, he told me a funny story about my schoolteacher, Mr. Kujek. It was a story he enjoyed repeating, one which took on comical augmentations with each telling.

As a boy, my father said, Mr. Kujek once got his head stuck in the iron fence surrounding the statue of the Virtuous Milkmaid. No one knew how he managed it, but for hours he was left there with his head wedged between the bars while all the other children gathered and laughed and pelted him with rotten choke cherries. *Just imagine it!* my father would always say with a chuckle. *Mr. Kujek's head stuck in the fence!* I always joined in his laughter, but if I laughed too long or too loud he would suddenly grow stern and say, *But he is a good man, your teacher Mr. Kujek. You must respect and obey him.*

That night I was, as always, giggling at this image of Mr. Kujek's bespectacled head protruding between the metal bars, laughing at the notion he should be the target of hurled choke cherries (the 'rotten' part was this evenings particular embellishment) when my father suddenly stopped walking and put a hand to my shoulder. He looked around a moment to make sure we were alone and when he spoke it was not to tell me that Mr. Kujek was a good man and I should obey him.

"I want to show you something," he said in a whisper.

He then reached into his pocket and withdrew a small, flat stone that shone glossy black under the moonlight like the eye of a horse. But before I could get a good look at this stone, my father's arm shot sideways and he tossed it into the river. I was confused at this, for it seemed a perfectly good stone according to his usual standards, indeed was one I would have been proud to add to my own growing collection.

"Look!" my father commanded, pointing into the darkness. I looked out over the river and saw ... a splash. I was wondering whether my father had perhaps enjoyed too many glasses of wormwood when a miracle occurred.

There was a second splash.

And a third, and a fourth, a whole series of tiny flowering white explosions springing from the surface of the river one after another in quickening succession. I could hardly believe my eyes. There must have been eight or even ten splashes before the stone sank into the river or was swallowed by the very night itself—I knew not which for suddenly everything seemed possible.

"Again!" I cheered. "Do it again!"

My father clapped me on the back and laughed, the sound echoing as there was another man on the other side of the river laughing back at him. This seemed to unnerve my father, for he suddenly stopped laughing, his expression curdling as he narrowed his eyes to peer into the darkness. The smile died on his lips and he grabbed me by the back of the neck.

"Dmitre," he said. "You must tell no one of this. Not even your mother. Especially not your mother! Do you understand?"

"But—" I began.

He slapped me across the face, hard. Tears welled up in my eyes, but I was too shocked to cry out. My father brought his face to mine and I could smell the wormwood on his breath. "Promise me, Dmitre," he said. "Promise me this will remain our little secret."

"I promise," I sniffed. "I promise."

My father nodded, glancing once more over his shoulder. He then released my neck and we continued walking along the riverbank. But he was in a foul mood all the way home and didn't utter a single word while we ate our cold turnip stew.

☆☆☆

Now I had a secret. And somehow I knew that, unlike other secrets, this was something truly unspeakable, a universe apart from the family scandals we children shamelessly exchanged. This was not like stories of what Kowalzik the Jellymaker and one-eared Ludmila did in the canning cellar, nor like rumors of crazy Uncle Luzjek and his covert acorn distillery. I thought about that black stone magically tracing a path across the surface of the river, and knew my secret was a real secret, something dark and mysterious, something to be protected. Yet somehow, the notion that someone could glimpse my collected stones and decipher their hidden, unrequited purpose never crossed my mind.

Every spring, just before flood season, we celebrated Collective Treasure Day, a time when each child would bring some cherished household item to be donated to the school in a show of communal solidarity. But everyone was so poor in those days that Collective Treasure Day was reduced to a grim charade. Each student would present their prized offering—an axe handle with a missing blade, a cracked teakettle, a tin cup half filled with rusted nails—and speak a few words about how the school might put it to use. *This pot is a good pot for boiling cabbage*, one pupil might say, holding a battered helmet left over from the last war.

With this shovel, another would announce upon presenting an oversized spoon, *the school can dig holes if it wants to.*

That year I anxiously awaited my turn, clutching my coffee can as I listened to my classmates detailing the merits of their bent forks and unhinged mousetraps, their broken corkscrews and stiffened shaving brushes.

When Mr. Kujek called me, I proudly marched to the front of the class, a look of triumph on my face as I emptied my collection on his desk, spreading the stones over its surface just like I'd seen the men do at the Blind Boatsmen. For a moment Mr. Kujek just stood transfixed, eyes wide and mouth agape in what I mistook for admiration. Then he cleared his throat and spoke.

"And what are these, Dmitre?"

"They're stones," I replied.

"You take us for idiots," stated Mr. Kujek. "Of course they're stones. But what use could the school possibly have for these stones of yours?"

"The school could throw them," I said.

"Throw them?" he repeated. "At what might the school throw these stones, I wonder? At a wall perhaps? Maybe at church windows? Perhaps we should pelt old people or hurl them at the tethered badgers outside the tannery?"

"The school could throw them at the river."

"Proper names, Dmitre!" he barked.

"The River of Tenfold Progress. The school could throw them at the River of—"

"Oh, well I suppose we could," said my teacher. "But that wouldn't be very clever would it? Because the stones would sink, wouldn't they, Dmitre? And then what would the school be left with?"

I struggled for an answer under the withering glare of Mr. Kujek while my classmates looked on with amusement. To give myself courage, I tried to picture Mr. Kujek with his head stuck in the iron fence surrounding the Virtuous Milkmaid, the sounds of laughter, the sight of choke cherries sail-



ing through the air. "Well," I began. "There's this way of throwing stones so they don't sink. Not right away."

Mr. Kujek raised an eyebrow in mock intrigue. "Pray tell, Dmitre! Are you claiming you've taught these stone of yours to *swim*?" The class began giggling but an angry glance from Mr. Kujek cut them short.

"No. But if you throw them just right, they can kind of bounce across—"

"That's quite enough," my teacher trumpeted, a note of pleasure in his voice as he told me to return to my desk. I started gathering my stones but he ordered me to leave them, reminding me that whether they could swim or not they were now part of the school's collective treasure, as was my coffee can, which, hopefully, they might even be able to utilize in some fashion or another. Mr. Kujek then told us to take out our red science manuals and reread the chapter titled '*Objects Known to Sink*' while he made a brief visit to the headmaster's office.

When I returned home that afternoon I found the door to our house wide open and my mother in a heap on the floor, crying. My father was gone.

☆☆☆

Now I stand with these men on the island and we gaze through the fog drifting above the surface of the river. In a moment we will go inside the Blind Boatmen and spread our stones upon the table. Third cousin Mulva will ask about my mother and younger sister and I will remind her that I have no sister and my mother has long since died. At mention of my mother's passing, Mulva will make the sign of the cross over her pendulous breasts and scurry off to fetch coffee and donuts; no one drinks bitter fig tea or eats pineseed biscuits anymore.

And when the coffee comes, the stonesskippers will speak of the genius

of Ludvik, of the Skinny Green Frog and the Haberdasher's Tooth. They will ask about my father, whether there really was anything to this Australian method he was pursuing. I never let on that I'm as ignorant of the Australian as they are, but only tell them that he might have developed it into a solid technique, given time. The men will then nod and gaze silently into their coffee mugs, thinking of lost days and years gone by.

These times are good times for our village, and though there is now nothing to prevent anyone skipping stones, nobody ever does. The old have grown weak and irresolute, while the young regard stonesskipping as a meaningless relic from a past they want only distance from. As for myself, I still gather stones, but would never dream of skipping them. I never learned the proper throwing technique, and fear my clumsy efforts would be disrespectful, a slap in the face to men so long forbidden from skipping stones. And in truth, I know that even should I master stonesskipping, nothing from my own hand could ever eclipse the magic my father created on that night so many years ago. The mysterious geometry of those splashes on the river's surface, the impossibility of the stone's repeated arc as it vanished in the fog. How much better to leave a memory unfettered, to let miracle remain just that.

Soon all the stonesskippers of my father's generation will have passed, and there shall be no new stonesskippers to replace them. Perhaps when this day arrives I shall dare to skip stones, or perhaps I will feel a burden has been lifted and give up stones altogether. But as long as men who remember my father still gather upon this island, I will return. I shall come and stand and gaze across the river, bracing myself against the cold, my pocketed fists clenching unhurled stones. *SW*

our first song about the moon

A short play to be performed in public places
by joe meno

Gort:

Our apologies, but if we may have your attention, kind people of Earth. We come from the moon. We mean you no harm. We are robots and have come here to learn how to sing. Though our world is far superior to your weak human world in many, many ways, on the moon there is no singing. On the moon, there is only an iron statue. The iron statue is of our ruler, a giant robot, with a giant pointed beard. His beard is combed and crusted with diamonds. There are bronze medals on his chest as large as saucers. He wears tall black boots. He has ways of listening to what we are thinking. He has a great weather machine that kills sunlight. Robot children born on his birthday always disappear. He has hands large enough to break open our robot hearts. He has seven castles each with its own robot wife. His robot wives are murdered if they ever look him in the eyes. Our moon trembles each time he breathes. He is the only one ever allowed to sing.

Kaylar:

Once my husband, Tareg, whistled out loud. For this, he lost both his robot legs.

Gort:

We have been willing to work on your planet to learn how to sing. We have gainful employment here already. We are maids. On the moon, there are no maids. We are all terribly poor on the moon and can not afford anyone else to do our cleaning.

Kaylar:

On the moon, we are so poor we share dust to eat and feel grateful for that much, truly.

Gort:

We've come here to learn how to sing so that we may compose a song about the moon. It will be a love song. The first of its kind.

Kaylar:

Since there is no singing on the moon, there are no love songs either.

Gort:

On the moon, there is no talk of love at all.

Kaylar:

On the moon, we have no use for love.

Gort:

On the moon, we talk of love the way we would talk of a shovel. Which is the reason we are now composing a love song.

Kaylar:

We have begun composing it already, while we've been cleaning your floors.

Gort:

You may have heard us whistling it while you stepped past us, ashamed by the sight of two robots on their knees scrubbing. We were not ashamed because the whole time we have been working, we were composing.

Kaylar:

Which is the reason our song is the longest song ever composed. It is not very good, but it is the longest song ever written.

Gort:

Our song has over one thousand different parts. It is sung differently each time.

Kaylar:

In this way, no one can ever sing it wrong. We think this is a clever idea.

Gort:

Our song is now almost completed. So soon we will be leaving. We would like to take this time to share some of it with you, as a sign of gratitude, for allowing us to learn to sing, simply from watching you.

Kaylar:

Our song begins like this:

Moon, moon, moon, moon

Moon, moon, moon

From here on earth

All of our friends' faces are far enough to be dead

Moon, moon, moon, moon

We love and hate the sight of you

Gort:

There is also a part of our song where we list the name of any robot who has ever lived on the moon.

Kaylar:

That part of our song begins like this:

Gorpek

Klon

Torg the First

The Lovely Miss Dori

Gort:

We are afraid we still have much to learn about singing and writing songs. Yet we must return soon if our plan is to work.

Kaylar:

Our plan, kind earth people, is to sing our song for all the inhabitants of the moon. They will be so moved that they will rise from their robot shackles.

Gort:

And a new era of robot prosperity will begin.

Kaylar:

An era of singing and song-writing.

Gort:

In which we will be the first.

Kaylar:

Someone may make a statue of us.

Gort:

That would be very considerate.

Kaylar:

But too much to wish for.

Gort:

Correct. We wish to live on the moon and sing together, altogether. That is our only wish. So we have made this announcement to thank you. Because of your singing, our dream has almost come true.

Kaylar:

A thousand thanks, earth people.

Gort:

We have composed a second song, as an everlasting symbol of our gratitude. It is much shorter than the first.

Kaylar:

Our second song is only this:

We the people of the moon

Moon, moon, moon

Thank you, thank you, thank you

Though, we have made friends here

We must leave soon

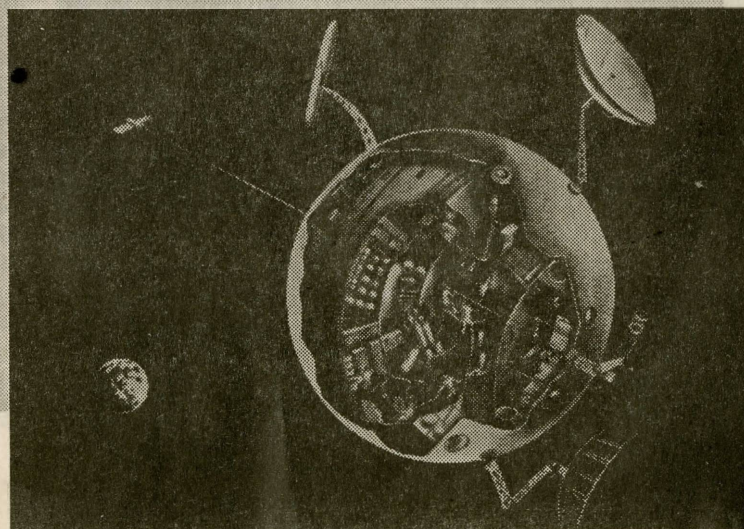
Gort:

If we have learned anything on our stay here, it is that each of you has a lovely voice. We envy this about you.

Kaylar:

Yes, earth people, you are all rich beyond measure because you can sing. The galaxy is yours for that reason alone. Please, please think of us, up there, trying our best to sing, dreaming of singing with you.

the end



urchin #2

by elizabeth crane

Margaret Ann Byers, age nine, gets off the 104 at 63rd and Broadway at dusk and descends the cement stairs to the stage entrance of the New York State Theater like she knows what she's doing, which she does, but only marginally, and any appearance of deliberation is only a lucky coincidence. Margaret Ann does know where she's going, but at this point, why is of no great concern. (Why, to Margaret Ann, being ostensibly due to her employment but motivated by other things entirely, some of which she's aware of and some of which it only looks like she's aware of.) Margaret Ann Byers is in the children's chorus in New York City Opera's fall production of *La Bohème*, for which she has been required to audition in spite of the fact that her mother is featured in the role of Musetta, the saucy tart who dares to remove her shoe out of doors at a crowded café on the Left Bank of Paris. (Any speculation about her mother's typecasting can be put to rest, which is not to say that Margaret Ann's mother is or is not saucy and/or a tart, but that unlike other theatrical fields of entertainment where one's apparent individual qualities such as saucy tartness might aid in their casting, in opera it helps to come to the table with some level of skill, and if Margaret Ann's mother let's say were of any formidable size, which she isn't, but for the sake of making this clear, if she were, it would not prevent her from being cast as a saucy tart if she could sing well enough, or possibly if she had modest talents, say if she had some training and maybe sang out of tune occasionally [in spite of the training] but slept with the right person, which Margaret Ann's mother never does, sleep with people for that purpose, and which, in any case, could just as easily result in her casting in some non-tarty role even though, clearly, a tartiness would be perpetuating itself in order to obtain the possibly non-tarty role.) It happens that Margaret Ann can also sing, and so impressed Miss Homan, the director of the children's chorus, with her rendition of *Go Tell Aunt Rhody*, that she was cast as *Urchin #2* and fitted for the green velvet costume, which Margaret Ann loved because it reminded her of Scarlett O'Hara's curtain dress. She had already seen *Gone With The Wind* three times, at the movies. If there is any suspicion of dubiousness regarding the matter of Margaret Ann's casting, it is not recognized by anyone as nepotism, more like a sort of carnival thing where the bearded lady's kids end up in the show because they have beards too. *Urchins #3, 4 and 6* are also children of those in the company, competent singers all.

A gift box of thin mints is passed around in the dressing room, let's say they're from the suitor of an attractive chorister, and tonight for some reason, Margaret Ann, who would eat sugar with a spoon if there were nothing else, doesn't feel like eating her chocolate-covered thin mint, and decides to save it for later in between the waistbands of her three petticoats. Margaret Ann Byers, still nine, is right this minute thinking she maybe doesn't want to add the extra calories on account of Dante DiMedici, the boys' soloist, having said "Hi Maggie," at yesterday's rehearsal not knowing that no one called her that ever, not having any way of knowing that she would occasionally ask to be called Maggie to no avail, particularly by her mother, who of course always called her Margaret Ann (leaving her mother no recourse, in the event of misbehavior, but to add "Byers" at the end, seeing as how the already formal-sounding "Margaret Ann" had the potential, every time, to inspire worry, in and of itself without the "Byers" at the end, although it wasn't too often that the full Margaret Ann Byers combination was necessary, which tended to be for situations in which Margaret Ann maybe spaced out [leaving something in

something else for too long/doing some thing without doing some other thing/leaving something on/off/open/out/somewhere], or acted like a nine-year-old, [touching/watching/seeing/looking at/saying/doing something she wasn't supposed to touch/watch/see/look at/say/do] which, don't forget she is, nine), and even though she wouldn't know that Dante DiMedici, at twelve, is thinking more about a sandwich than anything else right now, (and is not yet thinking even in broad terms about his preference in gender, let alone one specific person) such as expressing something above and beyond a greeting when he says the words "Hi, Maggie," and although Margaret Ann/Maggie suspects otherwise, Dante DiMedici is probably not at all meaning to convey any type of psychic connection by way of his calling her Maggie without having been asked, and by extension, via the psychic connection, saying to Margaret Ann/Maggie anything like, "I care about you enough to psychically intuit your wish to be called 'Maggie' and maybe you might like to go see *Love Story* with me sometime", which movie choice he would also have to have psychically intuited, seeing as how this is also a favorite of Margaret Ann's, even though she is, still, nine. Nine-year-old opera-singing *Gone-With-The-Wind/Love-Story*-watching Margaret Ann Byers may have a certain sophistication slightly above the average nine-year-old, but that may have no bearing on whether she is going to think through what might happen to a chocolate-covered thin mint situated between the waistbands of her three petticoats, and as such, this chocolate-covered thin mint is promptly forgotten about for the duration of her appearance in the second act, largely because of Dante DiMedici being the cutest thing ever, in spite of his undetermined gender preferences, the age difference, or the difference in their heights, which is not in his favor, which lack of height Margaret Ann's mother explains by way of saying that Dante had been castrated by his own mother (in order to preserve his glorious soprano), and even though Margaret Ann doesn't know what castrated is, and even though Margaret Ann would have no reason, even if she did, to rethink her crush on the basis of this information, seeing as how (one would hope) nine-year-old Margaret Ann would have no particular use for/cause to see/need to see such parts, at this time. Margaret Ann has only a peripheral awareness, at this time, that her mother is given to drama, (and therefore lending a lack of credibility, to any adult, to the castration theory, which Margaret Ann, at nine, wouldn't know was not currently in practice) and also does not know that her mother is carrying some unspecified resentment toward Dante DiMedici's mother, and thus, that the possibility is present that this accusation is of dubious origin at best. (It wouldn't be a year before Margaret Ann's mother would just come out and say that Dante DiMedici got his balls cut off, which, needless to say, even to *Gone-With-The-Wind/Love-Story*-watching, public transportation-taking Margaret Ann, is disturbing, naturally, since this explanation comes not very long at all after Margaret Ann finds out what balls even are, and at ten, with only a slightly more developed awareness of her mother's tendency toward drama, Margaret Ann is still likely to believe what her mother tells her.) Also, tonight is Margaret Ann's turn to exit the stage in the actual horse-drawn carriage, with her mother, the Rodolfo and Dante DiMedici in it, this combination of the short-statured, non-gender-choosing, possibly psychic DiMedici and the carriage ride (chaperoned and public as it was) being more than enough to distract her from the covert and irrevocable meltdown taking place in her bodice.

Onstage, Dante DiMedici pushes his way upstage through the Urchins

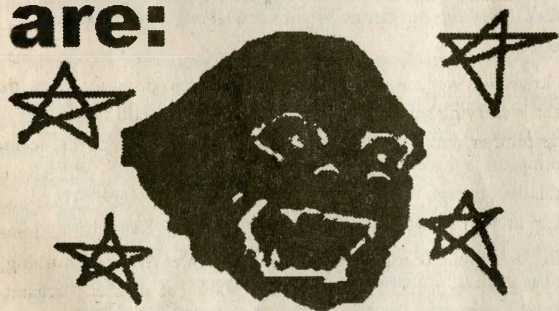
(ever so slightly brushing against Margaret Ann in the process, which brushing Margaret Ann will interpret through the end of fourth grade) for his solo. Margaret Ann imagines that Dante DiMedici is dedicating his solo to her ("Vo' la tromba, il cavalin!" Roughly: "Want a trumpet, want a drum!"), that Dante may be expressing, via the superficial desire of his character ("Ragazzo"), his own secret passion for Margaret Ann, that he is, in a way, publicly acknowledging his tenderness for her, and that the audience present at the New York State Theater tonight is able to perceive this subtle message of love and therefore collectively experiences this performance of *La Bohème* as having particular depth and significance. At no time during this solo does Dante DiMedici actually look at Margaret Ann, but due to her growing certainty about their psychic connection, she does not find this troubling. As they exit in the carriage, Margaret Ann pictures around her a sea of bleeding soldiers amid the burning of Atlanta as she descends the buggy, nobly tearing off her green velvet costume and its petticoats to fashion into bandages (for the briefest moment in this fantasy there is no chocolate-covered thin-mint stain, or if there is, the bleeding soldiers seem to pay it no mind) and therefore, making more than a good impression upon Dante DiMedici, still in the carriage in imaginary war-torn Atlanta, awestruck at Margaret Ann's Scarlett O'Hara-like heroic actions. In reality, what happens with Margaret Ann's petticoats is that they spill over into Dante DiMedici's lap, and as she tries to contain the wayward garments into her own lap, (even though it's a small carriage and Margaret Ann, her mother, the Rodolfo and Dante DiMedici are squeezed together in a way that certainly doesn't trouble Margaret Ann at all [and seems not to be troubling to the Rodolfo either, similarly pressed against Margaret Ann's mother] even though she cannot actually feel the contact between Dante and herself, the knowledge of the contact is enough for her) Dante whispers to Margaret Ann, "It's okay," as the carriage moves off-stage, confirming in her mind all earlier suspicions as to any possible feelings/psychic connection taking place.

The melted thin mint is finally discovered, of course, as Margaret Ann changes back into her own dress, and an attempt is made to wash off the offending deep brown stain with cold water and a goeey, gray, communal bar of soap, to little avail, so the soiled undergarments are hung folded

underneath the remaining stain-free slip and left next to a brown velvet costume on the rack in the hope that it might be associated with the brown-velvet-wearing urchin (#5) and not herself. (Margaret Ann has no particular bad feelings for Urchin #5 or anyone, really, for that matter, but is so unprepared for any possible consequences of having stained the petticoats, having an exaggerated fear of getting in trouble wildly disproportionate to the amount of trouble she actually gets in, ever, causing her to worry less about any possible trouble brought about by getting someone else in trouble, in the hope that that person does not have any similarly overexaggerated fear of getting, or being, in trouble, and of course also, that the extent of the trouble would be limited to some appropriate punishment here at the opera house and not both here at the opera house and at home; it's a long way from Margaret Ann's mind to think of suggesting that she dry-clean something [she knows what a dry cleaner is, to be sure, but will grow up and still never find out what "Martinizing" means], because, again, she's nine, and this is the sort of logical thing that you figure out with time and experience, and think is an unsolvable problem when you are only nine.) The dresser will make a disdainful comment at a later performance upon noticing the stain, but as it turns out, accusations are never made because of the rotating casts and also the rotating petticoats. Margaret Ann, age nine, concerned about castration, thumbs through a tattered Good Housekeeping during the brief speculation about the chocolate-covered thin mint stain, and the speculation turns to boisterous gossip about "someone's" mother "getting it on" with the Rodolfo, which thankfully goes far and above over Margaret Ann's head, not only because she's nine but because she's still thinking about Dante and the chocolate-covered thin mint. *SW*



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a week of hanks

by *todd dille*

21 DEC 2001: have you ever been told that you resemble Tom Hanks, the actor? It is humiliating. I left my extremely low-paying, phone-pumping job en route to the airport in order that I might be with my wondrous family at that oh-so-fat-dumb-and-happy Yuletide time. I left my job at Noon. On the way out, my coworker, passing me in the hallway, turned 180 degrees and latched on to my shoulder, saying, "I've got it!" eyes going wide and happy wrinkles forming in her forehead. "Oh yeh?" I said. "Yeh," she said. "You look exactly like Tom Hanks! I mean, well, the resemblance is totally uncanny." Just then my boss walked by and pursed his lips, nodded in agreement. "She's right, man," he said. I nodded dumbly at them. How does one go about responding to such a statement?

You look like Tom Hanks!

Thank you.

No way.

You look like Tom Hanks!

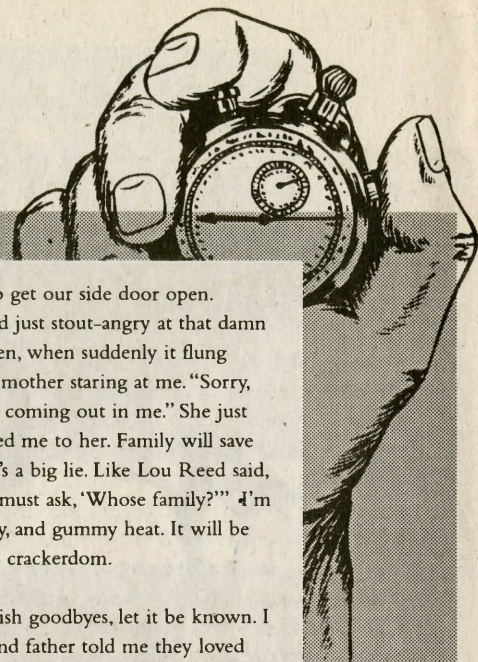
Oh yeh? I have a Ford Taurus too! It's true! It's falling apart!

Suffice it to say that I have been thinking about it ever since. The landing was swift and smooth. Oh! sweet, sweet Charlotte! How big you have become in my absence! My brother met me just outside security. Behind himself and rolling hills in the foreground, skyscrapers loomed. We slipped back through security by taking a hallway marked 'PERSONNEL ONLY' and had a beer in the wonderful 'Meet Me at Cheers Charlotte,' a bar with many pictures of the actor Ted Danson adorning its walls. Soldiers with M-16 rifles posed outside the bar's doors. Leaving, I looked toward one of the soldiers, and written across his left breast was just the single word: 'Hanks.'

22 DEC 2001: my cousin married a naval officer today. His name is Hank. My cousin is happy and distant at the post-nuptial reception, an up-country-SC-Bible-Belt classic of barbecued chicken and spare Ribs and hashed pork in a fellowship hall attendant to the Baptist Church where Hank's brother is Minister. No beer in sight. Consequently, me and my brother sit in a corner and sulk. Of this white passel of relatives, only Uncle Jim-Bob has the courage to meet our eyes. "Well boys," he says. He wears a bright yellow tie with his black suit. He carries a yellow plastic plate piled high with meat. "Your cousin has done done it," he says, forking a ball of hash. We shrug. He chews. But I love Jim-Bob. I do. An hour or so later he motioned us outside where sat empty the nuptial chariot (an old bucket of a now-pristine white '67 Mustang Mr. Hank had fixed up himself over the years into a glistening Southern rocket) covered in paper streamers and silly foam-written slogans. Jim-Bob motioned our sulking shapes then again around the corner of the fellowship hall into a small, shaded stand of trees. He pulled from some inner pocket a glistening chrome flask. "You boys looked like you needed a little cheering up." God bless you, Jim-Bob. God bless you. He poured liberally into our Pepsis. Go Hank! we screamed, when finally the bride and groom roared off in that fine automobile. We raised our plastic cups and winked at Uncle Jim-Bob, who then raised his. My parents eyed the three of us suspiciously, and on the way home me and my brother got a damned fine lecture.

23 DEC 2001: let the Christmas proceedings begin. Me and my brother were carted off this morning to a church to which we haven't been in damn near forever. Three old women who hadn't seen me in 10 years or more (you'd think, though in reality this happened last year as well) literally pinched my cheeks with their stubby old fingers and then set to arguing about who I looked more like, that actor who played Gump or the old Luke Duke fellow. I stood and stared blankly at them as they chortled and whined. They decided, of course, on Gump, and I was then forced into a humiliating recitation of 'Life is like a box of chocolates,' forced into it again and again as the old women turned back and motioned to their old friends to come and hear. My brother stood in back of them the entire time, pointing and laughing like a twelve-year-old. I blanked every vestige of emotion from my face. "Life is like a box of chocolates," I said, deadpan, over and over and over. It kills them, I swear. A girl I once had sex with in the church sanctuary (and who now is married to a New York City lawyer, ach) witnessed the whole thing as well. "They're right," she told me. "You look just like him." It was humiliating. "Serves you right," my mother told me later, as I complained about it over a post-Church lunch of bulbous, glistening pork chops and heaped-up string beans and creamed corn and bread and broccoli casserole. I assumed she was referring to my and my brother's brief escapade with Jim-Bob. I quit talking then, shoving forkful after forkful of meat and heavy veggies into my mouth. I then made plans with my brother to spend at least five hours of each day for the rest of my stay in the only bar in town that is open on Sundays. Today we spent ten. A not-so-elaborate front for a cocaine-trafficking operation, the Silver Dollar circumvents South Carolina's liquor laws by calling itself a 'private club,' membership to which seems contingent normally on only whether or not the man at the door knows you or someone you're with. Today it's a black guy who was on my baseball team in junior high. Back from Chicago? Indeed. My brother and I talked all night of Chicago and Columbia and New York. Anything but family. We drank \$1 Red Dogs until our heads exploded.

24 DEC 2001: I figure Christmas is the only thing that will ever bring us together. I thought this—thought it hard—in the crowded confines of my Grandmother's trailer. Five cousins, four Uncles and two Aunts, my mother, father, myself, my brother and Grandma and all crowded inside. All of us were there in the trailer, again, minus my particular cousin with her Hank. And for once it felt a little right, family. Jim-Bob sat on the edge of the couch and his gut bounced as he told a stupid story about a man who bought his twelve-year-old daughter a Corvette. Jim-Bob spun the tale wild and high and got us all hopping mad at the man, jealous of his little girl who! Chrissakes! couldn't even have driven a Corvette to save her life, much less be said to have deserved to own such an automobile. Turns out of course Jim-Bob's talking about a Barbie corvette and we couldn't be angrier with him, that is until me and my brother broke away from the other passel of younger cousins and busted outside for a quick nip. Then we were just very shy of being in love with old Jim-Bob as he rested his arms across the top of his gut, leaned way back against the railing by the wooden front steps and told a big loose one about a three-legged Blue-Tic



Walker dog that he knew, back when a kid, could outrun every dog on the coon hunt. I nearly died laughing.

We all got shitty presents and it was wonderful. My brother is twenty-two years old and he got a copy of one of those Nancy Drew detective books. I got an old video of Hazard episodes, which, I thought, suited. The older I get, the more videos. It's like a default gift for the man in his mid-twenties. You'll need them, son, trust me, they seem to be saying. I think it was Barry Hannah who said there was nothing more lonely, yet soothingly beautiful, than an old man surviving on saltines afloat in his living room on a worn-out couch and with a bunch of videos. I have decided, this will, one day, be me.

Back home, my mother and father and brother and I exchanged gifts. I got a copy of Castaway, the film, from my father. "Tom Hanks is in it," he said. I shot him the evil eye, though I felt bad about it later and made like to apologize. I approached him and he was holding the video a full arm's length away from his face, eyeing the shot of the full-gutted, bearded Hanks on the cover. "Hey Pop," I said. And he said, "You know, those women were right. You look just like him. You know we almost named you Hank? Except that your mother wouldn't have it. She figured you'd grow up mean as hell if we did. So we decided on..."

Me and my brother made the Silver Dollar for the end of this Eve's party. I cried with an old friend over a lost love. I kissed briefly with a lost love in the women's bathroom, before getting kicked out.

25 DEC 2001: Silver Dollar dreams, once more. Every jackass I knew in High School is in the bar by 5PM on this sunny Christmas day. Me and my brother got here at 3PM. The party lasts well into the morning hours, a hometown Christmas tradition. Having deemed itself a private club, the Dollar can leave her doors open just as long as she wants.

When finally we stumbled home the sun was nearly up. I figured aloud to my brother that we were just crackers, all of us, me and him and my old girlfriends and Jim-Bob and father and mother and the aunts and uncles and military men and those shadowy terrorists out there, if they're out there. And even the blacks, though they'd go by a different name, surely. My brother laughed.

"We're not humans," I said. "Who has the time to be human? We're all dodging bullshit all the time..." ...work, play, bills, love, hate, everything evening out into what that other person over there thinks about your shoes, or who you look like, certainly. "Because," I told him, "we don't have the memories to be human anymore, none of us. Just crackers, all of us. Can you remember being a child?" I asked him. I mean it's Christmas, it's Christmas for Chrissakes and what did we used to do when we were little white children?

He wasn't really laughing anymore. "Last year we did the same shit we just did," he said, meaning we went to the bar and stumbled home like this and I very-well-nearly had said the same thing.

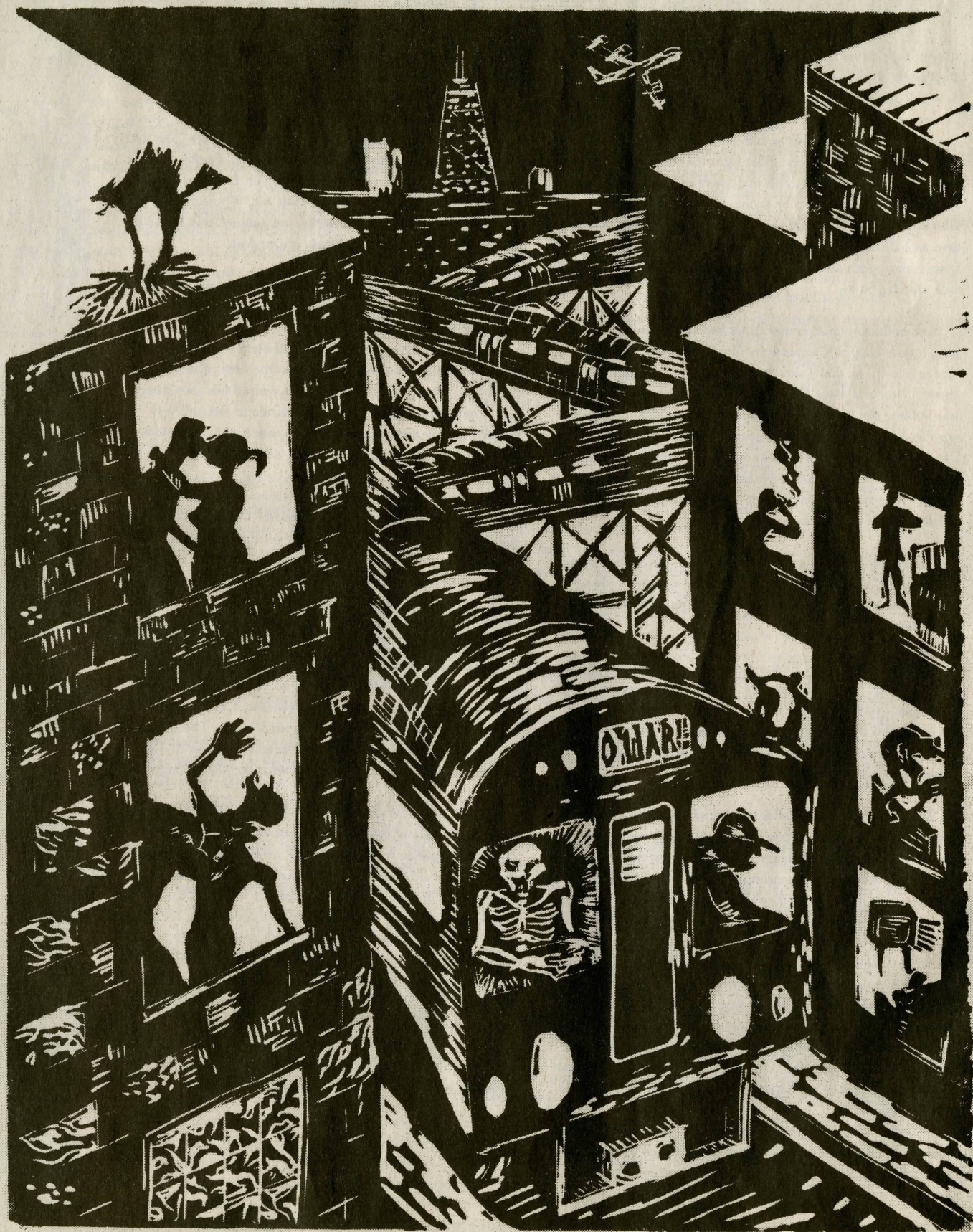
I had a damn time of it trying to get our side door open. Somehow it was stuck. And I blazed just stout-angry at that damn door. I kicked it like to break it, then, when suddenly it flung open and there was my poor short mother staring at me. "Sorry, mom," I said. "I guess it's the Hank coming out in me." She just shrugged and then smiled and pulled me to her. Family will save us, after all. Not family values. That's a big lie. Like Lou Reed said, "In the name of Family Values, we must ask, 'Whose family?'" I'm talking Family in its very real, sticky, and gummy heat. It will be the redeemer that will save us from crackerdom.

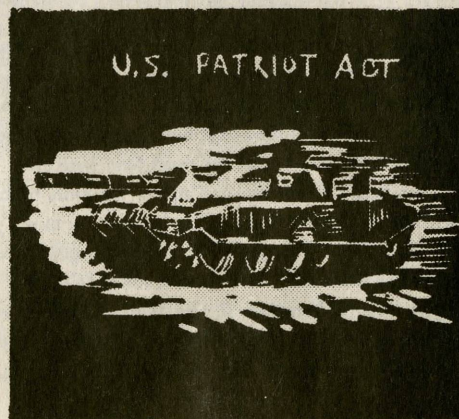
26 DEC 2001: I am full of foolish goodbyes, let it be known. I did not answer when my mother and father told me they loved their poor little child. I do not know why, except that maybe I'm just too damned hungover to think, and there was a gorgeous blonde standing about four feet away, at the back of the security-check line. "Bye," I said. Both my folks winced like they'd been kidney-punched. I stood behind the blonde in line and very quickly lost any sort of courage I may have had and turned back to where my folks had been. Yes, they were gone. Alas.

I was two hours early. And this is neither New York nor Chicago, let it be known. This is Charlotte-Douglas International, and it took me a mere ten minutes to get through the check, so I went back to the well-guarded and famous Meet Me at Cheers Charlotte, the bar with many pictures of Ted Danson adorning its walls. I nodded to Corporal Hanks with his M-16 as I entered, proceeded to down two of the biggest draft beers I've ever seen. 32oz of piss-colored liquid in each, bubbling like mad. I got into a conversation with the Editor of the Florida University student newspaper. She was on her way back to Gainesville and couldn't wait to get there. The conversation was dead. Completely, I'm from here. I'm from this other place. Oh yeh? Oh yeh. Then she told me I looked like the singer from the band Matchbox 20. I did not respond, for I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

27 DEC 2001: what am I looking for? What, in this huge, dirty, disgusting city, can I possibly want or need? At present, I have no idea. My phone is ringing, people are talking to me through the receiver, I am responding, and then I am hanging up. Like clockwork. I do not know why, any of it. I went to a bar and the people were there. As was I. We talked and got drunk. It's doubtful I will remember what was said, as I don't remember it now. Suffice it to say that there is a roach on my desk. He is crawling up my beer can, into my beer. I think I will drink him. I have a box of chocolates in my luggage somewhere, still unpacked, from one of the old church-women. I love that old lady right now, I do. I think I will find the chocolates and, well, I will eat them. I will turn on the T.V. and prop my legs up on the little stand. I'll maybe pop in some of my new video tapes. I will really eat them. *sn*

Sleepwalk presents woodcuts from Philip Hartigan
philiphartigan@aol.com





peacock alley

by john mcnelly

My friend Ralph wanted me to meet him later that night at Ford City Shopping Center. "The entrance to Peacock Alley," he added. "You think you can do that? Can you handle it?"

"Sure," I said.

We were waiting for the crossing guard, a kid nobody liked, to blow his whistle and wave us across. It was the last day of school before Christmas break. We wanted to cross that street. We *needed* to cross it. Christmas break wouldn't officially start until we had made it safely to the other side.

"Why *couldn't* I handle it?" I added.

"Just asking," Ralph said. "Don't get all bent out of shape."

For Ralph, who had failed both the third and fifth grades, and who was the oldest eighth-grader in the history of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Grade School, the walk to Ford City would be a cinch. It wasn't so easy for me, but I wasn't going to tell this to Ralph.

Unexpectedly, before the crossing guard gave us the go-ahead, Ralph stepped into the street, grabbed hold of the rear bumper of a moving car, and, knees bent, began to skeech home. Everyone, including the crossing guard, stopped what they were doing to watch him. He made it an entire three blocks, longer than anyone we'd ever seen, before the driver slammed on the brakes, jumped out, and yelled at him. After regaining his balance, Ralph waved at the man, then took off running down a side-street. I had meant to ask him a few more details about the trip to Ford City, but it was too late. Ralph, in a mere matter of seconds, was already long gone.

☆☆☆

It was the dead of winter, and Ford City was a good hike from where I lived. Even when it wasn't skull-numbing cold outside, walking to Ford City was dicey. Part of the way you followed a fence that separated you from several factories. Attack dogs—Dobermans and Rottweilers—bared their teeth and trailed you from their side of the fence, growling the whole way. Eventually, you'd cross over into another grade school's territory, where kids would crouch between hedges for the sole purpose of jumping those not from around there. To make matters worse, high school boys and girls were always walking to and from Ford City, and sometimes this meant having to cross all four busy lanes of State Street to avoid running into a group of infamous thugs who hadn't had their day's fill of pummeling. If all of this wasn't enough, you still had to cross Cicero Avenue, an eight-lane road that separated Ford City from my neighborhood. Sometimes the traffic was so bad you'd end up stranded on the ridged island, fearful that two semis heading in opposite directions might crush you. There were dozens of factories up and down Cicero, and semis sped by all day long. I'd like to think that arriving at Ford City was like stepping into Oz or some other promised land, but in truth it presented a whole new batch of problems, namely that the thugs here were even tougher and that the landscape of concrete and asphalt was more brutal.

My father liked telling the history of Ford City because, for him, a person who'd spent his entire life in Chicago, it was hard to imagine what Ford City had become. We lived only a few miles south of Midway Airport, and during the start of World War II, Ford City had been a government building, where Chrysler made B-29s, something called "The Superfortress," and engines for bombers. After the war, sometime in the

late '40s, a man named Tucker made automobiles there, the Tucker Torpedo, but that didn't last very long. A few years later, during the Korean War, the Ford Motor Company moved in and manufactured jet engines. Not until the early 1960s did a man named Harry Chaddick buy the property and turn it into what it was today: Ford City Shopping Center. It opened on August 12, 1965, a week before I was born, and my father took my mother, who was full-to-bursting with me inside, and my sister, only two-years-old at the time, to join more than 200,000 other people who had gone there to watch the Grand Opening Ribbon Cutting Ceremony and, more importantly, to catch a glimpse of Mayor Richard J. Daley, a man as famous in Chicago as the Pope.

My father didn't see Daley that day, and he took it personally, holding his grudge against Ford City Shopping Center itself. Each time we drove by, he'd say, "If you ask me—and, mind you, nobody has—the damned place still looks like a factory," or "Talk about your eyesores," or "One big red pimple on the ass of our fine city!"

He was right: It *did* still look like a factory. Even though names like Wieboldt's and Montgomery Ward adorned the building's various entrances, you could easily imagine those names gone, and instead of shoppers there would be streams of women with goggles pushed up onto their heads and lunch pails tapping against their thighs, all filing inside for a day of work on the assembly line, probably already waiting for the shrill whistle when they could finally take a lunch break.

During the summer months, the parking lot, with its long jagged cracks and poked-up dandelions, reminded me of an abandoned airport runway, and if a plane happened to be overhead while I was crossing the lot, I pretended that it was a Japanese fighter jet with blazing red suns painted on either side, a kamikaze pilot inside, spinning the plane toward the mall, spinning like a gyroscope, prepared to take out the entire bomber assembly line. Sometimes, when I was alone, I would even yell, "Bonsai!" and then whistle the plane's dark descent, ending with a muffled explosion: "Kuh-pkkkkkkkkkkkk."

Ford City Shopping Center was divided into two sections: the main building, with its dozens of stores inside, and then another strip of buildings, all the way across the parking lot, with several more businesses, each of which you could only enter from outside: the General Cinema movie theater, the bowling alley and pool hall, a fabric store that only old ladies went into, and a few other stores that no one could ever remember because they looked so dull.

I headed for the main building today, the *indoor* part of Ford City.

Certain stores fascinated me. The store that sold Wurlitzer organs, for instance. I always peeked inside because there were never any customers and because the salesman, bored, could be found playing "When the Saints Go Marching In" with a Rumba backbeat. Late at night, with the hope of luring in some of the younger kids, he'd play Yes's "Roundabout" or the Doors' "Light My Fire." It never worked, though. Instead, he was greeted by confused looks and the occasional insult. The organist, tall and bony, wore a white short-sleeved shirt, black slacks, and a long, skinny black tie that made him look like a preacher from one of the fuzzy UHF stations I'd flip past on Sunday mornings in desperate search of cartoons. I was fascinated with the organ store because I'd never seen a customer pushing one out to their pick-up truck, and so I couldn't imagine how they stayed in business.

Woolworth's was another place. It had an oval-shaped diner that took up a good part of the corridor just outside the store itself. It was an old diner with old people working there and old people eating there, and it wouldn't have seemed any more foreign to me if a spaceship had landed inside the mall. I'd never eaten at a diner, *ever*, but I was spellbound by this one—the long steaming grill, the dozen hamburgers sizzling at once, the outrageous mountain of hash browns. Old men with fedoras sat at the counter and read the newspaper. Since none of my friends' fathers wore fedoras, I wondered where these men came from and why they read their newspaper here rather than at home. I asked my father once about the newspapers, and he said, "Don't get me wrong, I love your mother, but let's just say it's nice to go somewhere where no one's riding your *ass* all day long," and then he winked at me. Each time I walked by the old men at Woolworth's, I imagined old women at their homes chasing them around with brooms, sweeping them from room to room, accusing them of this or that, until they couldn't take it anymore and rode the city bus down to Woolworth's. Since these were their few precious moments of peace, I always tiptoed by and tried not to stare too long.

Today, I walked over to the entrance for Peacock Alley. Peacock Alley was an underground mall that you entered from a dank stairwell in the main mall. Painted on the stairwell's walls were the names of various businesses that were supposed to be in Peacock Alley, but I recognized only a few of them. The rest, like Chuck's Fine Photos or Betty's Boutique, were long gone. Since Ford City had been a factory before it was a mall, it was hard to say what Peacock Alley used to be. It was dimly lit, the hallway was narrow, and it twisted all the way beneath the long parking lot to the other buildings—the movie theater and the bowling alley. The rumor was that a tunnel ran from Ford City to Midway Airport, several miles north, and that this was how the engineers and mechanics transported important parts for their bombers during wartime. I always looked for secret entrances or walled-up corridors but couldn't find any. In places, the hallway did in fact thin into a tunnel where there were no stores, and if a large enough family was walking toward you, you'd have to suck in your gut and turn sideways to let them pass.

It was in one of the tunnels that I once saw a high school boy kicking another boy in the stomach with his steel-toed boot. This was two years ago; I was in sixth grade. My parents and my sister were shopping upstairs. It was almost closing time, so not many people were left in Peacock Alley. I needed to walk through the tunnel in order to get back to the entrance that led into the mall itself, but I didn't want to walk by the boy with the steel-toed boots, so I turned around and took the other way out of the Peacock Alley, the exit that led outside. The only thing more dangerous than one of the Peacock Alley tunnels was the Ford City Shopping Center parking lot at night, but I didn't have a choice: I needed to get back to the mall. I never knew what happened to the high school boy with the boots or the boy who was getting kicked, but I made it safely across the dark parking lot, entered Montgomery Ward from outside, and found my parents in the large home appliance section where my father was arguing with the salesman about the prices being jacked up and about how he was getting *dicked* over. "When it comes to my hard-earned money," he said, "I hate getting *dicked* over." My mother was tugging his elbow, trying to get him to drop it. I was dripping sweat, but no one noticed, not even my sister, Kelly, who

had stuck her entire head inside one of the ovens, and who, when she saw me out of the corner of her eye, said, "A twelve-year-old girl with her head in a gas oven and nobody cares." She reached out of the oven and turned one of the knobs higher. I peeked behind the oven. "It's electric," I said, "and it's not plugged in." Kelly emerged, her face red as though she'd been holding her breath, and said, "That's not the point," and walked over to a deep-freeze, into which I imagined she might crawl and then shut herself.

I waited a good twenty minutes today for Ralph before heading down into Peacock Alley to look for him. The deeper down you went into Peacock Alley, the dizzier you got from the incense that burned in about a third of the stores, incense with names like Jasmine, Funky Cherry, or the Sea of Tranquility. Some stores used strobe lights to lure customers inside. Down here, teenage girls still wore leather vests with long leather fringe circling their soft bellies. If you looked closely, you might even see a belly button, and although I tried not to give away that I was looking, I always checked to see if it was an in-ie or an out-ie. For reasons I couldn't quite put into words, my favorites were the out-ies, though maybe this was because mine was an in-ie. On no fewer than five nights I had fallen asleep to the thought of a girl pressing her out-ie into my in-ie.

The first store at the bottom of the stairs sold nothing but wicker furniture. I looked but couldn't see Ralph in there. The next store was what my mother called a "head shop." Teenagers hung out there, slumped at the counter, sometimes smoking cigarettes or looking, as my mother liked to put it, "doped up." Dad told me that if he ever caught me in there, he'd skin me alive. My father had never hit me—not really—but the punishments that he threatened me with varied in their degree of severity depending upon the offense. *I'll whup your butt so hard, you won't be able to sit down for a week* was the least serious, probably because of the words "whup" and "butt," but also because my dad usually said this without any emotion whatsoever, sometimes not even looking up from whatever he was doing. Next in seriousness was *How'd you like the belt?* Only once did he go so far as to unbuckle it, jerk it from his pants, and double it up, but that was enough to send me running and screaming, as if it were an ax he'd revealed and not the belt I'd bought for him at Kmart for Father's Day. Finally, there was the threat of being skinned alive, which scared me for three reasons. Number one: He'd threatened me with it only four times in my life, and *less* carried more power than *more*. Number two: He always looked me in the eye when he said it, and since he almost never looked me in the eye, this scared the wits out of me. Number three: I'd read a Scholastics book about Indians skinning their enemies, and so I knew how much pain my father was talking about. I imagined him going so far as to bury me up to my neck in the dirt on a hot day and then pouring honey over my skinned head, letting ants and wasps have a field day with me. The result of the threat was that I wouldn't even look at the head shop today, let alone step inside. The first place of business that I *would* step inside, however, was the record shop, which was blocked off from the hallway not by walls but by a wrought-iron fence that was as high as my hip.

In the record store, where they burned incense not so much by the stick as by the pound, I looked at the Roxy Music album covers because there were naked women on them. I also looked at the Rolling Stones *Sticky Fingers* album because it had a real zipper on

the front of it. In addition to being one of the strangest things I'd ever seen, it was the first time I saw how two things that weren't alike at all could come together to surprise everyone who came into contact with it. An

album cover with a zipper! Who'd have thought it was possible? I looked at Linda Ronstadt and Olivia Newton John albums because I had crushes on both of them, and then I looked at Styx albums because they were from the South Side of Chicago. I loved flipping through the record store's display of posters, too. One of my favorites was of W. C. Fields wearing a stovepipe hat and peeking up from a handful of fanned cards. I also liked the one from *Easy Rider* with some guy riding a chopper. I liked how choppers looked and wanted to turn my three-speed bicycle into a chopper, but when I asked my father if I could use his blowtorch, he asked me how I'd like his belt. The poster that I saved for last was Farrah Fawcett-Majors in a red swimsuit, her white teeth practically glowing, her loopy signature in the bottom right-hand corner. I didn't look at any of these things, though, until I had studied, with my forehead almost touching the poster itself, Farrah Fawcett-Major's nipples, the way you could see them in amazing detail through her swimsuit. They seemed to be an optical illusion, a trick of the eye, and it was for this reason and this reason alone that I studied them so closely and for so long, a sincere attempt to determine if they were real or if the photo had been tampered with. I couldn't ever come to a satisfying conclusion and so was forced to continue my investigations each time I visited Ford City. I never bought anything from the record store because I never had any money, but looking was good enough. Sometimes looking seemed like getting something for free.

After the record store came Nickelodeon Pizza, where high school boys sat at the counter and flirted with the waitresses. It was a different planet, a different *solar system*, from the Woolworth's diner upstairs, and I wondered if the customers of one place even knew about the existence of the other. I doubted it. Beyond Nickelodeon Pizza was a gag shop that sold rubber masks of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter. My father once suggested that the four of us go as presidents for Halloween one year.

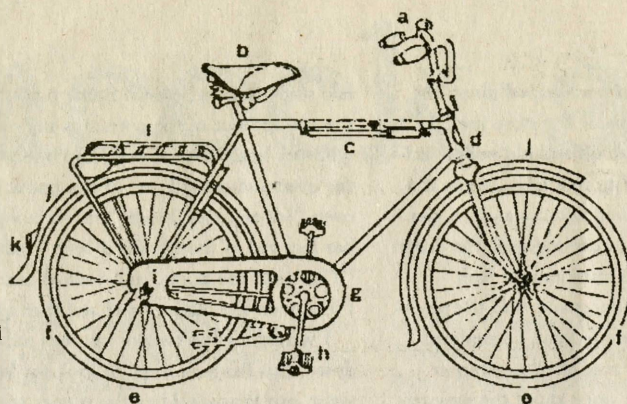
"But I see only three presidents," I'd said.

My father shrugged. "One of us could go as the Wolfman, I suppose."

The masks were expensive, and I knew that my father would never fork over that kind of money for four rubber masks, but it bothered me for days on end that he couldn't see how wrong it would be for only *three* of us to be presidents while one of us went as a monster. Why couldn't he see the problem with that?

I sauntered through the tunnel, still hoping to bump into Ralph, but the longer I went without seeing him, the less likely it was that we were going to meet up. Maybe I had the wrong time. Maybe we were supposed to have met tomorrow.

The end of the tunnel meant that the smell of incense would be replaced by the rich stench of perm solution. Ford City Beauty School was where my mother took me for haircuts. They charged half of what other places charged so that the girls, who weren't yet licensed to cut hair, could experiment on a bunch of different



cheapskates' heads. Sometimes it looked pretty good when they were done, but more often than not one of my ears looked higher than it should have, or I appeared to be in the first stages of going bald, or, thanks to crooked bangs, one eye seemed an inch lower than my

other eye. I didn't mind because the girls, who weren't much older than me, only four or five years older, would press into me while they snipped away, and I had to be careful not to think about Farrah Fawcett-Majors and, failing that, not to let the girl cutting my hair see the rising drop-cloth on my lap. The few times this had happened, I was reminded of magicians who made blanketed girls levitate, but this was an image that only made matters worse.

I loved the beauty school. I'd never been to a funhouse, but I suspected that getting my hair cut wasn't so different: I was strapped in a chair, raised and lowered, tilted back, and so many mirrors surrounded me that I could look nearly anywhere and see myself disappearing into infinity. I always left the beauty school knock-kneed—the lights had been so bright, the perm solution dizzying, the beautician's body so warm that my own temperature raised a few notches—and the whole time I wouldn't say a word. I'd just sit there, breathing heavier and heavier, until the girl I had fallen in love with, whichever girl happened to be cutting my hair, untied the drop-cloth and set me free.

Ford City Beauty School was the end of the road, the last main attraction of Peacock Alley, and then came the stairwell going up into the parking lot, into the first shaft of either daylight or parking lot lights. Climbing the stairs, I imagined that I was a coal miner who'd spent the better part of my day underground, eager to see all my loved ones again. I took the steps two at a time, sometimes three, straining, making a bigger production than necessary, until I reached the top, where, shivering, I had to shade my eyes from the blinding piles of snow and wait for everything to come back into focus.

"Where the hell have you been?" a voice asked. I heard him before I saw him, but when I turned around, there he stood. Ralph! Arms crossed, eyes narrowed, he was waiting for an answer.

"Where've I been?" I said. "I was looking for you."

"Me? I've been *here* the whole time."

"*Here?*" I said. "Why *here?* You told me to meet you at the entrance, not the exit."

"This is the entrance," he said, and we both looked toward it for an answer, as if a sign might be posted, proving one of us right, but there was no sign. "Ah, forget it," he said. "It's not worth arguing about." He unfolded his arms and walked toward me. "I just don't know about you, Hank."

"Me?" I said. "What about you?"

Ralph, ignoring my question, started down the stairs. I was about to tell him that I'd already seen everything that I needed to see, but then the smell of perm solution hit me again, and I suddenly didn't mind working my way backward. I knew that every minute I lived was one less minute I'd be alive, but returning to Peacock Alley was different: It was like stealing time, getting back what I'd lost. It was quite a feeling, really, being thirteen years old and cheating death. *END*

the blindfolded twins and the silent house

by Teresa weed

Ruth and Sarah were the twin children of a very old and wealthy family. Dark velvet carpets absorbed every sound in the house where they lived with their mother and a cook. The voice of a falling arc of water in the fishpond in the garden stayed with the girls, after the house rolled itself away into the past.

A pair of mute deer lived in the garden, and once there had been a pigny hippo. The hippo hated all human beings, especially children, and would rush up the riverbank with its huge pink maw open wide. The stinking river at the bottom of the garden was the same river that ran through the city, and the hippo eventually died of an accumulation of toxins. Many of these toxins were generated by the upriver steel mill owned by Ruth and Sara's mother. Their father sold diamonds, and telephoned from Egypt, South Africa, Chile, and China in the middle of the night.

Their mother was an old fashioned woman. She paid a man to run the steel mill, and another man to manage the money it made. She stayed behind the heavy velvet curtains in the dark house with her dark-eyed daughters, who had never been to school. Their mother was lean and beautiful. She tucked up her curly black, curly hair, which had never been cut, under an expensive short platinum blonde wig. She had a disorder, which caused, at certain phases of her hormonal cycle, festering lust, which turned up higher and higher until it blew into rage. Knickknacks were smashed against the wall, servants attacked. Ruth and Sarah, very young, hid under the wardrobe in their mother's room, because it was too frightening to take their eyes off of her.

When the rages cooled, with the shifting of her hormones, their mother wept and prayed, facedown in the deep bear rug by her bed. Their father called, in the middle of the night, and their mother spoke to him in the sweet, cool voice of a girl Ruth and Sarah's own age. The twins were growing all of the time, and could now fit under the wardrobe only if tightly spooned together and breathing in tandem. When their father rang off, their mother piled up her pillows, spread her legs, and appeared to beat herself between the thighs with her fist, grunting like the hippo, until she wept again. The stilled breathing under the wardrobe began again, and both pairs of great dark eyes undilated.

In the mornings, their mother chased away the cook, and made tiny pancakes or grilled marmalade sandwiches for Sarah and Ruth. The long, disorganized breakfasts lasted well into the afternoon. They practiced Chinese, Swahili, Farsi, and Spanish, amid much hilarity, played old maid and war amongst the jelly pots and crusts.

When the girls were thirteen, they had cycles of their own, and began to be sullen and sharp to their mother at certain times. They were such gentle, dependant girls. All of the sharpness and silliness they could produce would have been unnoticeable to anyone from the world outside of the muted velvet

rooms. Unfortunately, all of the cycles in the household synchronized. Their mother actually beat them badly, with a golden belt, and a small embroidered footstool, two months in succession.

The girls healed and forgave her, in the manner of children. They knew the voice she used when she spoke to their father on the telephone, the voice of a girl their own age, to be her true voice. In her heart, they knew well, she was not so much older than they were.

Their mother was damaged irrevocably by the incidents of violence. She no longer held her head high in the golden wig, and her hands trembled so that she could not cut the cards. When the fierce time of her cycle came around again, she took the man she paid to manage the steel mill into her bed, and then the man she paid to manage the money.

The twins could no longer fit under the wardrobe. They kept watch from inside, through the crack between doors, with their mother's evening gowns crushed around them, and her perfume laying over their noses and mouths like a silken veil.

They noted coolly that the mill boss, a heavy man with a bald head and a drooping black mustache, was a one-note brute, who lifted their mother off of the bed with his thrusts, and seemed to prefer the hole in her bottom. They saw their mother cry out in pain, they saw tears run down her cheeks, but she never opened her eyes or lost her dreamy smile.

The money man was entirely different, the twins noted with interest. He kissed their mother with as much concentration and variation as if he were playing the trumpet. All the while, his money-counting hands moved over her squirming naked body. They watched with amazement as he kissed her, ferociously, between the legs, until she appeared to fall into a faint. He never would cover her and thrust, as the mill boss did, until he had put all of his finger, and then his whole hand, inside of her. This went on for so long that the girls were obliged to try the same thing with one another, inside of the wardrobe, under their nighties. Neither one could manage more than a finger apiece. They stayed that way, Siamese twins, struggling not to gasp or laugh. The money man never heard the panting and rustling amongst the silk gowns, because he had his ear to their mother's back, gauging the pounding of her heart, and she sounded like she was pleading for her life without words.

For a time, the household ran splendidly. Their mother was calm and playful. To the great relief of the twins she was able to break up their small spats, order meals, and even hire a governess, with something like authority. The girls began to regard the mill boss and the money man, neither of whom they had ever actually met, with great affection, and a tremulous feeling of dependence.

One night, due to a scheduling miscommunication, the money man paced the deep velvet silence of the downstairs sitting room, smoking one of his small marijuana cigars. He was mildly aggravated, having shown up for a tryst and found no-one to greet him

except the servant who let him in. The truth of the matter was that his employer was sporting with the mill boss upstairs on the bathroom rug.

The twins heard the bell, and instantly realized the situation. They saw the wonderful, healthy order, which had come so lately in their short lives, falling to ruin.

A few moments later, Ruth and Sarah, dressed in dragging gowns they had taken from the wardrobe, and scented with their mother's perfume, entered the hazy, lamp lit room. The money man was astonished. He did not even know that children lived in the house, and considered that they might be a hallucination. The girls knew his style of lovemaking as well as if they'd been married to him for thirty years, and approached him fearlessly. They introduced tricks of the mill boss' as well, when they were tired of finesse. The lamp was knocked over and smashed in the night. Both girls conceived.

When the condition of the twins became obvious, their mother left a tender note of apology, and disappeared. An ugly scene occurred when the money man dropped by and found the two children, wan and red-eyed, curled up together on the very sofa on which they had all ravished one another several months before. He had seen them only once, on the night they appeared in their mother's gowns, and had since convinced himself that they were not real. He was not fond of children at all. The girls, silently staring at him with stricken eyes, and chapped noses and mouths from days of weeping, were horribly unappealing and tangible.

"We're going to have babies," Ruth said.

"Neither one of us has eaten anything strange, or for that matter left the house," said Sarah, "Do you think a person could have a baby from the things we did that night?"

The money man was green in the face. He tried to speak, but all that came out were little drops of flying spittle.

"Oh dear," said Ruth, "Really, we meant no offense."

The money man looked into both pairs of great dark eyes, and knew that he had lost his legal rights and stood in danger of prison.

He leapt out of the open window, landed in the fish pond, struggled out of the water lilies and mud, ran for his car, and crossed several state lines before nightfall.

At the moment he leapt, Ruth and Sarah's father was kicked to death by a mule in a mountain mine he was touring in South America. The mill boss had a wife and twelve children. When the summons ceased, he never appeared again.

It was the cook who finally blindfolded the twins, and bundled them into her old car. She took them to a state-sponsored village of sheet-metal shacks in a ruined bean field, where unwed mothers could stay for free. She put Ruth and Sarah out by the side of the road. 570

this one thing

by seth harwood

"These here are ten, and these are ten and up."

My father's new wife Janice, my step-mother, held the two trays of cheap rings over what was left of the salmon, passed the "ten and up" tray to my aunt.

My father dropped his fork.

"These are my newest," Janice said. "I just got them in." She produced a smaller tray of rings, set it down in front of me. "Take a look, Adam," she said. "Maybe there's a girl back at school you're thinking of?"

"If I never saw this junk again, I wouldn't mind," my dad said, and laughed. He meant it, I thought, but I couldn't believe he'd said it. My father and Janice had been married since February, when they'd had their "Las Vegas Special," as my mother called it.

"I mean it," he said. "I could do without all of this."

Janice laughed. What else could she do? If it wasn't funny then maybe it wasn't a joke. "How about some rings for you to take back to that girl, Adam?" she said.

"What?" I said. I shook my head. "No."

My dad said, "The girls have a thing against jewelry where he goes to college."

"It's not a thing," I said. "It's more an awareness of the roles that women play in our society and how the media controls what we think of their image."

"I like this one," my aunt said. She was pointing to something with a big white face.

Janice said, "That's real enamel, you know?"

My father smiled. "Enamel, is it?"

Janice popped the ring out of its holder and presented it. "I can give this to you for wholesale," she said. "Ten dollars. That's a good deal, really. It's more than fair." She put both her hands out on the table. There was a ring on almost every finger.

My mother never wore much jewelry. She lived in Cambridge now, by herself, and always wanted me to come over.

"But choose a few to think about," Janice said. "Here, let me show you more product."

My aunt picked at the tray of rings.

"What do you think of this one?" Janice said. "Wouldn't it look great with that Zirconia you're wearing?"

My dad started coughing like he had a fishbone stuck in his throat. "Oh, this," said my aunt, raising her hand to a pendant passed down from my grandmother. "This is a diamond."

My father stood and excused himself. "You kids can handle the shopping club without me." My father looked at me and then he nodded at Janice. I started clearing my place.

"Have I showed you the clocks that play sounds from a different national park every hour?" Janice said.

In the kitchen, my father stood bent over with his hands on the sink. "Are you all right?" I asked.

He stood up. The lights were off, but sunlight came in through

the windows on the other side of the room. It shone onto the table where we ate our breakfasts, most of the meals that didn't involve company.

"I'm O.K.," he said. "It's just— It's been a long day."

"Did you have enough to eat?" I asked.

"Did I?" he said, putting his hands on his stomach.

For dinner we'd had poached salmon, grilled vegetables on the side. Everyone commented on how good it was, including my father, but it wasn't. It was store-bought. Janice bought food ready-made from a big supermarket out by the highway. Our dinner had come in metal trays that she popped into the oven and then spooned onto platters that had once held my real mother's real cooking.

"I don't know how she does it," my father said. "Your step-mother. All that cooking."

I turned to face the windows. The light on the table was pale, broken into boxes by the window frames. The side of the kitchen where we stood—where the sink faced the stove and the cabinets—held shadows in the afternoon quiet.

"She just had some new flowers put in," my father said. He started toward the door. "When I was outside earlier, I thought I could smell them."

We went outside and I pointed to the three even rows of tulips.

"Aren't those nice?"

"They look good," I said. "Who planted them?"

"I don't know. She has someone who comes in." My father walked back toward the house and put his foot on the bottom step.

"I took some pretty cool classes this semester," I said.

A soft breeze came through the yard. Our shadows were long, bending up the house toward the windows.

"That must have been nice."

"They were hard."

I wanted to talk to him, tell him things about what I'd learned, ask him things; there was a lot I wondered about, places I wasn't supposed to mention: Atlantic City and Foxwood's, Jujut and the Alley Cat. My mother had told me these names over the phone but I wanted to hear from my father what he's been doing. I wanted to know why he married this woman, where he found her.

"What's been going on with you?" I said.

"Larry!" Janice called, from inside. She called his name, and my father started talking about the tulips, but Janice kept yelling, getting closer. He was saying how a man had planted in the garden for a whole morning; how'd planted the tulips, where he'd put them, how many rows. We could hear her in the kitchen. I pretended I didn't, that I was listening to my father.

Then, when her face was at the door and she could see us, my father stopped talking. "Where did you go?" Janice said.

"We came outside."

I said, "I thought we could smell the flowers."

"Go back inside, Janice," he said.

Then it was quiet. Janice watched us through the screen, the house dark behind her. Her face looked pale, her head too big for her shoulders, like it was ready to fall off at any moment. She had on dark glasses that made her eyes look deep-set inside their sockets. Her hair shot out at all angles, like a kindergarten drawing of the sun.

My father stood still, looking down at our welcome mat.

I counted three breaths as she stood in the doorway. Then she was gone and the door was just dark.

My father put one hand in his pocket and started jangling something. He leaned the other hand on his knee. I could feel him studying my face.

In the garden there were pink tulips and red ones in nice even rows leading up toward the house. Over by the fence, my father had put in one of those wooden ducks on a pole, the kind with wings that spin in the wind.

"So tell me about your first year of college," he said.

"It was good," I said. I wanted to tell him everything I'd learned in Professor Thompson's class on 20th Century thought, how everything had seemed so clear-cut the way he explained what was wrong with our country, how it was all due to the hegemonic powers of the media.

"Did you learn anything?"

"I had a great class where we learned about society, and about how the media manipulates us to—"

"Did Janice tell you about her winning streak in Las Vegas?" My father asked. "Or our trip to Alaska?"

"No," I said. I shook my head and he started talking to me about their flight to Vancouver and their cruise up the Pacific Corridor to the Glacier National Land Trust. He said they'd seen ice floes hanging huge as buildings and frozen turquoise ponds. As he started in about Fairbanks, I heard Janice clomping through the kitchen. She came out onto the porch with her hands raised.

"Larry, she's buying the rings in there," she said. "She really likes them!" Her mouth opened wide when she talked and I could see she was excited. She pointed to the rings on her fingers. "I gave her one like this for ten but the one like this I had to ask fifteen for."

My father shook his head. "You don't charge my sister, Janice. Those should be gifts," he said. "Our gifts to her, Janice."

"But Larry," she said. "It's like I'm not even charging her."

My father shook his head. "No, Janice."

"But those are good deals," she said. "The same prices I paid."

My father brought his hand up and pointed back to the house. "You go back in there—" He started to say something else, but then Janice tilted her head, just slightly, looking at him. She looked at him, and then she looked at his hand, the outstretched finger. I heard a car drive by. My father lowered his arm, put his hand in his pocket.

I turned toward the garage, away from the house, and walked onto the lawn. The grass was still wet from my father running the sprinkler and I could see the water making dark spots on my sneakers. I put my hands on the back of a folding chair. Along the top of the garage was the new gutter that my father had added since I broke off the old one. Below that the wall was blank. All through high school, the garage had been one big cube of green leaves—a wall of concrete covered with ivy—but then last summer my father had had it stripped clean. He said the vines were tearing apart the garage.

"Are you going to pay me for those rings?" Janice said, behind me. "Or are you going to say you will now but then try to start a whole other argument about it later?"

Around the base of the garage the gardener's ivy-killer had burned away the grass. A yellow strip stretched onto the lawn for maybe a foot of ruined, destroyed grass. Perhaps nothing would ever grow back there.

"Janice," my father said. I turned around in time to see him close his eyes and pass his hand over his face. "For me," he said, "Right now. Can you just do this one thing?"

Then Janice was quiet and I heard the wind blow through the backyard and the wings on my father's wooden duck start to spinning. They sounded like a kid's bike with cards in the spokes of the tires.

It seemed as if something sorry passed between them. Then Janice nodded and started up the stairs again, her shoes striking the hollow wood as she went.

My father produced a pack of cigarettes and started slapping it against his palm. He came onto the lawn to stand next to me.

"So tell me more about school," he said, taking out a cigarette.

I turned to look at him. It had been a long time since I'd seen my father smoking. I couldn't remember the last time. With the cigarette in his mouth, my father looked like someone I didn't know. In the way he was dressed he resembled my father, he stood the same way: hands on his waist and pants pulled up over his hips. But this was somebody different, someone who haggled over prices with this woman, Janice, someone who had shown up in a house where my father'd once lived.

"I thought I learned a lot this year in my classes," I said. "Toward the end I thought I had it all figured out."

He nodded, took another drag.

"I got good grades."

My father's eyes were dull, something going on behind them that didn't involve me, this lawn, or our garden.

I turned back to the garage, trying to remember anything from Professor Thompson's lectures to tell my father: how the media was ruining our lives, or who wrote our book about the destructive nature of television, but I couldn't think of them. The garage wall had marks on it, like tan-lines, left behind from where the ivy had attached itself. They angled across the wall in odd patterns, making jagged lines without any order.

"I have to go inside," I said. "I think there's something I need to go look at."

My father nodded. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and waved toward the house. "I'll just stay out here for a few minutes," he said.

I went inside and up the back stairs to my room, and closed the door. Janice was still talking in the dining room, but with the door closed I couldn't hear her words, just sounds. I could see my father through the window, still standing on the lawn, smoking his cigarette. He looked up at our house, but I don't think he could see in.

On my desk, the textbooks I'd brought back from school stood in a column. I sat down in front of them, read the titles on the spines. They seemed like things from a foreign place now, a place where there'd never been a time when I rode on my father's shoulders, or we did abdominal exercises together in the hall. But here they were in my old room, on a desk next to the life-sized poster of Kevin McHale. He stood with a stupid grin, holding a little, lunch-room-sized carton of milk, looking like an idiot, framed by my old NFL wallpaper. I could smell my father's cigarette smoke coming in through the window.

I was home. *///*

can't you see this my way?

by megan stielstra

Ellie couldn't stop crying.

There were used tissues balled-up everywhere and empty Kleenx boxes stacked at the back door, waiting to be taken to the dumpster. Her eyes were raw and swollen from so much wiping and the skin on her face was prune-dried, like when you spend too much time in the bathtub. The tears on the floor were ankle-deep, so she splashed around the house in duck boots, constantly tossing soaked shirts in the dryer until finally she gave up, put on her waterproof wind-breaker, sat on the soggy couch and cried her eyes out over that day two weeks before when Donny told her he didn't feel the same.

In Ellie's mind, it was perfect. Two months of dating, of movies and dinners and late night telephone calls and she thought it was time to seal the deal. She cooked pasta, chose music, poured wine. The outfit was new and strategically chosen: short skirt, thigh-high black stockings. After dinner, they would move to the couch for a drink. When she sat, the skirt would accidentally drape too high and expose a line of smooth bare skin. He'd stare. Utterly hypnotized. This was the moment. "Donny," she'd say, her voice all smoky like Kathleen Turner, and she'd slowly reach down and stick her two thumbs under the elastic band that held the nylon to her thigh. He'd take in a quick breath and slowly, slowly, she'd peel down the stocking, knee, calf, tip of toe and she'd say, "touch me," and there'd be such heat the whole scene would melt away.

That was the fantasy, anyhow. What really happened was this: she reached down with her thumbs and he put his hand over hers, stopping her movements before she embarrassed herself further. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't feel what you're feeling."

What Ellie had been feeling was beautiful, that sexy confidence you get when you're in love that makes you think peeling off your stockings in front of someone is a good idea, when under normal circumstances—when you're NOT in love—you might weigh that decision against such factors as how long it's been since you've been to the gym, and those elastic tops on thigh-highs leave nasty red imprints all over your skin. Such is the difference in how we see ourselves: feeling beautiful one second and a mess the next. That's when Ellie started to cry, and she hadn't stopped since. She hadn't done anything, no work, no friends, no leaving the house even. She couldn't. You don't want to be seen when you're like that, unable to control your breathing or the down-turned corners of your mouth. You can't speak properly, all your words come out in blubbers, like, "I do-do-do—" gulp, gasp— "do-do-don't—" twitching eyes, chin shaking and the dialogue in your head goes like this: *don't cry don't cry don't cry* repetitive, a chant, and with the proper focus the tears won't fall, you can regain composure and with it control, you can take a deep breath and say it: "I don't want to feel anymore!" and Ellie, finally fed up and hating the whiny, watery gushing of tears all the time, decided she needed a new pair of eyes.

She found the store in the yellow pages. The ad said: *Want a new outlook? Want to see the world in a different light? We've got just what you need at EYE AM. All shapes, all colors, all major credit cards accepted, trade-ins negotiable.* Ellie ripped the page out, put it in the pocket of her windbreaker with fistfuls of tissue, and left the house, still crying and wiping at her nose.

On the walk to the store, she got lots of looks. There was the pity look, and the *oh my god what happened to you* look, and *back away* and lots of sympathy—three times she was approached by people asking if she needed assistance—all these eyes that stared and judged and she was embarrassed and mortified and wanted to go hide in the nearest public restroom, but she knew that wouldn't help. The only thing that would help was getting up off her butt and actively seeking a change in perspective, and here she was, walking into EYE AM with the blind faith that she'd walk back out and see the world in a different way.

The store was small—the size of a bedroom—and the only furniture was a display counter right in the center. The walls were papered with posters of eyes, all different colors, all staring straight at her. Ellie saw this slightly blurry through her tears, like when you look out the window when it's raining. You can see the shapes of things, and colors, but as the water runs downward there's a layer of goop between you and what you're looking at. She saw something bright red getting bigger as it got nearer, it was very close, it was saying, "Hi, can I help you?" and then it said, "Oh, I see," and she felt a hand on her arm.

It was the salesgirl, and she said, "It's okay," and patted Ellie's shoulder. "We can help." *pat pat*. "We can make it better." *pat pat*. "That's why we're here," *pat pat*. She guided them both to the display case and asked, "Are you looking for something specific?"

Ellie moved closer and looked into the case. Inside were four shelves and on those were the eyes. They were all different shapes and sizes and colors, lined up in pairs maybe a hundred total, and Ellie didn't know where to begin. She felt suddenly panicked, the pressure of the decision bringing a fresh round of tears. "I don't want to feel this way anymore!" she sobbed, pulling tissues out of her pockets. "I don't want to feel anything at all!"

"I understand completely," said the salesgirl. "I know just what you need." She knelt down in front of the display case, opened it, and took out a shelf of eyes. They were placed in symmetrical lines, each labeled with a little sticker that read **TESTER**. "Try these on," said the salesgirl, handing over a blue pair. "You can leave yours here."

Ellie took out her eyes and put them on the counter as the salesgirl directed. Then she took the blue ones, popped them into her sockets, wiggled them around until they fit right, and opened her new eyes.

She had never seen a place like this. The angles connecting walls to ceiling to floor were perfectly crafted! The eyes on the posters were so beautiful! Each looked at her with love and admiration, and Ellie wanted to thank each poster personally. Hug them, even. But you can't hug a wall, no, that's silly, so instead she hugged the salesgirl, felt her long lovely cornsilk hair and her soft red sweater. She was so warm and sweet and nice, and Ellie loved her. She was lovely, this girl, this everything, everything was lovely and Ellie loved everything and she said, "They're wonderful! I'll take them!" She marveled at the sound of her own voice, so sonorous, like crystal!

She and the salesgirl agreed on an exchange of eyes plus a little extra, and Ellie thanked her, and hugged her, and walked out of the store skipping. The sun was shining brightly and birds were singing. The people who walked by were lovely! And they looked at her, eyes wide, mouths open, and they fed off her joy! You could give people joy, just walking down the street! There, a lady holding a little baby! And there, a young couple, hand in hand, all happy and in love! And there, a man in a hat, hitting another man in the face! And such a lovely red, the blood! And how graceful their movements, just like dancers! Ellie skipped down the road. *Skip skip skip* and then she started to think *skip skip* what was that *skip* what did I just see? *Skip skip stop slow to a walk* and then she turned around and there on the ground was the man. Was he sleeping? No, no that's not sleep, and she walked back to the store.

"Hello, again," she said to the lovely wonderful salesgirl. "I'm sorry to bother you, but ... " and she explained the situation.

"I understand completely," said the girl. "Do you want to try some others?"

"Yes, please," Ellie said, taking off the blue eyes and setting them on the counter. "And this time I won't be so hasty."

The salesgirl handed her another pair, brown ones this time with black stripes. They were a little too big so Ellie had to shove, but finally she got them in and gave things a look. The salesgirl watched her face change from its big smile to a cheek-to-cheek scowl, her eyebrows raised almost to her hairline, and then she asked, "What do you think about those?"

"What do I think?" Ellie said. "What do I THINK? I think they SUCK. I think they ITCH. Poor craftsmanship and faulty merchandising and I can't believe you can even show your FACE what with selling such garbage."

"But—" the salesgirl started. She didn't get very far.

"You think you can let me finish? You're always DOING that! I mean, who the fuck do you think you are?"

The girl opened her mouth.

"No, I'll tell you who," Ellie went on. "You're just like every fucking body. You take and you take and you take and—"

"Give me the eyes back," the salesgirl said. "Those aren't for you."

"FUCK you," said Ellie.

"Fine," said the salesgirl quickly. "You're right. Those are perfect. You have to take them."

"I don't HAVE to do anything," said Ellie. "Fuck your fucking eyes!" and with that she ripped them off and pulled her arm back behind her head as though she were about to throw them like a softball, then caught herself mid-gesture and froze. "Whoah," she said, hand suspended in the air for a beat or two, and then she dropped the eyes. "These are horrible!" she said. "Do people actually buy them?"

"Lots," said the salesgirl. "They're a bestseller, actually."

"Why on Earth?" said Ellie, amazed.

"I've no idea," said the salesgirl. "I think some people are happy being angry."

"Well," said Ellie. "I am not one of those people."

"Good," said the salesgirl. "Try these," and she passed over a new pair of eyes.

As soon as Ellie put them on, she noticed that all the posters around the store were looking at her. She turned around, and there were more posters, and more eyes on the posters, and they were looking at her, all of them. She went to the front window and peered out at the street. It seemed as though all the pedestrians passing by were all looking at her. She turned away from their eyes, and there were more eyes, there, on the wall, more, and more, all looking, all judging, all—"What are you looking at!" she yelled finally, bringing her hands up to the sides of her face. "What do you want from me, what do you want!"

"Wrong ones!" the salesgirl said quickly, grabbing at Ellie's face. "Try these," and she handed over some green eyes with very dark lashes. Ellie put them in and felt suddenly warm. She noticed that the salesgirl had very full breasts the bubbled up and over the edge of her bra, pink lace that peeked out just slightly from the second undone button of her blouse. She stared for a moment, admiring how the milky skin quivered with every breath, and then followed the line of the girl's body down to her tight little waist, hips that curved over into blue jeans, tight blue jeans, tight to her ass, tight to her thighs and Ellie felt the heat hotter then, like someone had one hand on her thermometer and was turning higher, hotter, it was hot, isn't it hot in here? and she put her hand to her own chest, felt the sweat moistening her skin, moving her hand up to her neck and behind her head, everything so hot, and the salesgirl's lips were full and red and coming closer and quivering and they said, "do you like those eyes?" the voice like melting butter. "You *know* I like 'em," said Ellie, and there was tingling happening everywhere and the salesgirl said, "do you *want* those eyes?" and Ellie said, "you *know* I do," all sensual and liting, hinging on the pornographic but not quite there yet, not quite there, not yet, not yet but close, close, sooooo close and suddenly, the salesgirl straightened up, smoothed her hair and said, "I can't."

"What?" Ellie said. What had just happened? So mush soft, warm flesh and now—

"I just can't," said the girl. She searched for her buttons. "It's too soon. Anyone can walk in, and—"

A siren screamed in Ellie's mind. "Please," she said.

The girl shook her head. "I can't."

The ache of it was a punch to Ellie's gut, her center so heavy she thought she'd tip right over. She didn't know it was possible to feel so right one second and so wrong the next, but, she had to save face. Had to keep it together, c'mon, girl, keep it together. "S'alright," she said, shaking her head, shaking it off. "Whatever," and she took off the eyes and handed them back to the girl.

The sudden absence was too much emptiness. "I need more," she said.

"I'm sorry," said the girl, and handed over pair of gray ones. Dark gray, like wet stone.

Ellie put them on, blinked a few times, and then leaned onto the counter and shook her head back and forth.

"What is it?" the girl asked.

"There's just so much!" Ellie started. "There's this whole big world out there, and so many people in need." She was tearing up. The new eyes had a layer of wet film over them. "And I've been wasting all this time crying over some guy when there's so many more important things to do!" she went on. "I'm healthy. I have good friends, and a family that loves me and I never even tell them." She looked up suddenly and asked, "Do you have a phone back there?"

"Sure," said the salesgirl. "But try these on first."

Out with the old and in with the new, blue ones this time, and Ellie put her hands on her hips and said, "But it wasn't a waste, you know? How can love ever be a waste? What's the point of me trying to do all stuff for other people if I'm not fulfilling what I need? And I need Donny, I love him! I never told him that! I just started crying, and he got up and left my apartment and I didn't even try to tell him how I felt!" Ellie turned suddenly towards the door and said, "I'll be back later."



"Hey!" called the girl. "That's great! Try these!" and she held out a new pair of eyes. Ellie swapped them, blues for browns, and then she turned around and pointed a finger at the salesgirl. "But one person can't make us happy!" she said. "I've been reading the Dali Lama—"

The girl held out a green pair and Ellie switched again. "I've been reading Emerson, and he says—"

Green for Black and, "But what matters most is what Descartes says" she stared, and then stopped.

Black for hazel and it was, "What I say! What I say is what matters most!"

Switch. "What I *think* matters most!"

"What I *feel* matters most!"

Switch. "I just feel so ... so ..." and she stopped talking and started jumping up and down, and then she ran around in a circle, and then she ran right out of the store and the salesgirl counted *one, two, three* and Ellie ran back in, shook her whole body like the hokey poky, then stopped, out of breath, and said, "You know what I mean?"

"I do exactly," said the salesgirl. "Try these," and she handed Ellie a set of yellow eyes, a color usually reserved for cats or spooky things in the dead of the night. Ellie put them on and immediately slumped down, resting all her weight on her hips. She stayed that way for a long time, saying nothing. Her face showed nothing.

"Are you alright?" said the salesgirl.

Ellie said nothing.

The salesgirl walked around the display case and over to where Ellie stood. She held up her hand an inch from Ellie's face and waved it back and forth.

Nothing.

The salesgirl snapped her fingers, a whip crack.

Nothing.

The sales girl clapped her hands together, almost catching Ellie's nose.

Nothing.

The salesgirl nodded, went back behind the display case, and put the shelf of eyes back in their place. Then she took out a file folder, opened it up, and stared busywork. Inventory, advertising, accounting and whatnot. A couple of times as the day went on, she looked up at Ellie standing in the middle of the room, every eye on the wall locked on her frozen, immobile face. When the salesgirl saw that nothing had changed, she went back to her work. Five o'clock came and the salesgirl got up and replaced the file folder. Then she went over to Ellie, held one hand palm up in front of her nose and with the other, reached around Ellie's back and whacked her upside the head. The yellow eyes fell out and salesgirl caught them, took them back to the display case and locked them away. Then she took Ellie's own eyes—which were perfectly nice, greenish-brown,—lifted each in its turn between her thumb and forefinger and stuck them back where they belonged. Almost immediately, the tears started, pouring out first as a dribble and then steadier, heavier, like a faucet, down Ellie's cheeks, over her windbreaker, and onto the floor.

"How are you?" asked the salesgirl.

Ellie blinked, testing out her own eyes. The corners of her mouth twitched and she broke into a big smile, ear to ear, and then she laughed. She laughed and laughed as she cried and cried, and she looked into all those eyes around her and said, "It's just so good to feel!" *SVU*

NATIVE BREAKFAST

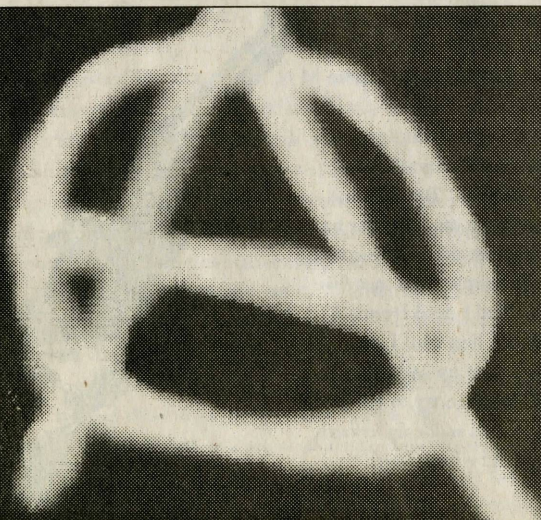
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your heart is mashed

by joe meno

1

It got be all I had, the thought of it: *My heart is mashed.*

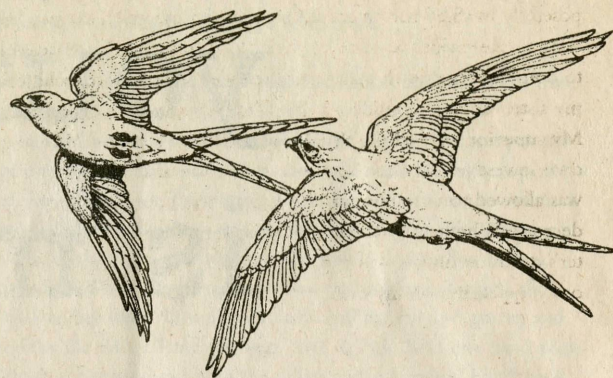
There were those bad feelings for a long while after the automobile accident in which my sister died and it was right around then that I developed what was to be the very bad, bad habit that once or twice, got my nose bloodied: I began to kiss strangers on the street, anyone who was nice enough to smile back at me. Women, but then once or twice, a man, though women mostly, people I had never seen before and probably would never see again, people in starchy business attire, people with briefcases on unlit corners or walking home alone or sometimes, I'd be riding the subway in the rain, biting what was left of my nails to do something to keep myself from crying, the tips of my fingers would taste awful, like paste, and there would be tiny single letters in black ink right along the pink skin and nails, sometimes entire words inked from the mimeograph machine, words like "a most awful malignancy" and "fatal convivial deformity" and "sadly, no, the patient could not be revived" phrases from the endless gray medical documents which I had to file in order to issue the endless number of new death certificates called for each day, and it would get so bad that I would almost begin sobbing, right there, in the middle of that rush hour, everyone professional and getting nervous around me, shuffling their wet newspapers and shiny bags and damp feet: well-groomed young men who looked like advertisements for shaving razors would cough uncomfortably into their hands and spotless secretaries in brown business attire and white sneakers would look away scared that somehow seeing me carry on would force them into some kind of uncontrollable empathetic crying, and so I would stand up, shaking my hands nervously, looking for someone, anyone to make eye contact with me. Usually, like I said, it would be a woman, some young woman who saw in my look the way she had been feeling all her life, the dreary horror of it, the endless, un-welcomed going away parade, a face, a blink, a turn, some woman who was too short, not too attractive, perhaps the younger sister of somebody better-looking, the first person who did not look away. I would rush towards them, kiss whatever part of their face I could reach, their cheeks, ears, foreheads, chins, anything, and then as they were shouting in alarm, I'd hurry off at the next stop, my heart pounding, breathing so hard as I bent over ready to vomit, and for a moment, for one brief moment, for one instant on the inconsolable earth, I would be too busy to be grieving.

2

It got to be all I thought about all day then. I would be at work, making my way through the endless piles of bloodless medical files, a whole sentence transferred in wet ink along the palms of my hands, "*the victim's head was tore completely asunder,*" and I would begin to plan out how I would do it that evening. I would devise a scenario. I would decide on what part of the body I would kiss beforehand, so I could avoid getting flustered, so I wouldn't just stand there staring back, which I had done, many, many times before. I would make elaborate excuses and loopholes as part of the scenario, like only *If she has brown hair*, and only *If her shoes are brown*, then I will kiss her chin, *If she is wearing sneakers*, then I will only blow her a kiss, to try as hard as I could to keep myself from doing what I knew I wanted to do, but nothing worked. If I thought about it at my job all day, developed as many excuses as possible, I would see the exact woman, the one out of hundreds of scenarios and she, of course, would be the one nice enough to smile at me, and I would kind of pardon myself with my eyes, blinking, saying, *I am so sorry, I am so sorry, but please*, and then I would reach down and cup her chin and kiss her forehead quick. Once, some fucking do-gooder, some former track star, some high school athlete, with a blonde crew cut and a ledge of a fore brow, caught the back of my neck as the girl started screaming and I was making for the subway door, and he started punching me in the eye, and I think I would have been arrested if when the train pulled to a stop he hadn't rolled off of me. When I got in front of a mirror, I saw my eye was soft and wet like putty. It stung badly when the tears came on later.

3

● In my apartment were all of my sister, Darla's things and I would sort through them, night and night after, not getting anywhere, blurry pictures of us at Halloween, her dressed as a cowgirl, and me an Indian, or a black and white snapshot from some piano recital when she was eight and me six maybe, where I could almost hear the wrong note she hit, and her still smiling, games, bracelets, telephone answering machine messages in which she made typically compassionate comments like, "*That job is only a temporary setback,*" all of these things, all of these things, and none of it, not one of them really mattering to me. I had a television but the picture did not work and I would sit very close, listening to it, these voices, these lives I could not see, hoping one was the voice of my sister, somehow mysteriously reaching out to me. For an instant, once, I thought I heard her, her voice, and I placed my ear against the television



set to hear more, but then the sound of it began to wander and then all I could hear was a list of very strange ingredients for preparing blood sausages and realized I had only recognized Madame Avery, the frugal television chef. I would then switch off the set and begin thinking of how tomorrow, someone, some girl might be the one to save me.

4

It was how I met Jean. It was raining as usual and I was riding the subway home and there were the sounds of the drops against the windows and the storm in the sky blooming with the train lights and I was watching a very short woman with chin-length brown hair, in a brown business suit and brown business skirt, hoping she would look up at me, so that I could charge across and plant a kiss on her right ear, all of the details I had already coordinated at work, and as I stared, I saw her slide her hand into another woman's purse, very quickly, secretly, finding something, then slipping her hand back into her pocket with it, smiling very nervously. I kind of smiled to myself in response and stepped closer to follow as she climbed off the train, her white cheeks blushing, the rain sweeping in as she wrapped a purple scarf around her head. As soon as the train car had pulled away, I grabbed the woman's right hand and whispered, "I saw you take something from that woman's purse," and she began to shout, and so I let go and she ran off and I followed her down, and under their umbrellas, people were staring and we were out on the street and she was leaning against a parked car, her face wet from the rain or from crying, and I walked up to her and grabbed her hand again and shook it and said, "You did take something, didn't you?" and she nodded and said:

"You. You scared me. You scared me," in the meekest voice I'd ever heard. She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out a cheap black plastic pen, then dropped it in a puddle at her feet, and in that particular moment, I realized I was still holding her wrist because I had maybe met someone as lost as me.

5

It was how we would spend our time together then, riding on the subway train. We hardly ever spoke to each other. We would meet each evening at the Monroe stop. We would ride, side by side, our hands almost touching, like adolescents who had only ever heard of kissing, and I would watch as she would cross to an empty seat and quickly steal other people's things. A handkerchief, a cheap rubber stamp, a four-leaf clover sealed in plastic, a letter, some sheet music, which had been pok-

ing out of a cellist's bag, I would watch her take these things, hide them under her dark brown coat, and dart off the train at the next stop, following her, chasing her down to the street, and trying to kiss her as quickly as I could, but failing, as she got nervous and pulled away, like a very small, wet bird, her eyelashes soft and weakly fluttering.

6

I found out she had been married to a naval officer and her husband had been decapitated in an automobile accident. Another woman, a woman she did not know was in the passenger seat when it happened. The woman also died. That her husband was with another woman in his final moments caused Jean such great pain, that those last moments in which he should have been uttering her name had been taken, stolen from her, somehow caused her to act the way she did, batty, taking useless objects from her fellow women in a gesture that could only be understood as survival perhaps. It was how I came to understand it. A part of my life had been amputated when my sister died, and likewise a part of Jean, and, like the many victims in the narratives of my job, all we could do was wait to expire or do whatever we could to stop the bleeding.

7

We were as awkward as the deaf. Afterwards we would sometimes sit in the windows of a café and drink coffee, watching the rain. We would be silent a very long time and then we would burst out with some extraneous knowledge about ourselves, which afterwards seemed very personal, too personal perhaps, something like:

"I do not own a bit of red clothing."

Or

"I went four days without speaking to anyone this week."

Or

"My sister was a pianist and named her dog after me."

More often, we would just sit and stare, sit very closely, our knees touching, because that was all we would allow ourselves, that kind of proximity. I would get fresh sometimes and place my bare hand on her bare knee and she would blush and sweep my fingers away, and I would imagine elaborate scenarios in which I would say something very thoughtful, very personal and true, and then she would look at me with the eyes of love, and we would spend the night together and it would be perfect, but we never did because I could not ever get the courage and lacked the imagination to decide what words to say properly.

At my job I grew more and more distracted until a negative evaluation was filled out in my name. There were rumors I had purposefully misfiled my sister's information in my grief, thereby preventing the proper issue of her death certificate, which was needed to complete the death certification process. As it stood, technically my sister was still considered alive. This was totally unacceptable. My superior warned me that I was no longer even working at my own lowest potential. So although it was humiliating, gratefully, I was allowed to continue on at the same post at a drastic pay decrease. Whether it had been grief or simply an accident, my sister's death certificate was then finally filed, a carbon copy mysteriously appearing on my desk.

It was said out loud that night as we were sitting in the window watching the rain and sipping small chipped cups of coffee. "I think I would like it if you would come to my place with me."

"You would?" I asked. The tip of her nose was wet with a drop of rain. Jean nodded and the droplet fell directly into the cup of her coffee.

"I am having a hard time concentrating anymore," she said, brushing her damp forehead with the back of her hand. "I was reprimanded at work for daydreaming," she said. "So I think you should come over with me. Tonight."

"All right," I said, now nervous of what would be expected of me. We walked towards her apartment in the rain, not very close, her slightly ahead of me, the sound of her shoes on the wet pavement like a great faceless clock ticking off somewhere. We stood at the brown stone steps of her place and stared at one another for a moment and then she shook her head, looked down and said, "I'm

sorry. I...I thought I was ready." In that moment, her brown eyes doubled with tears. She kissed my cheek very briefly and then ran up, closing the door so quick that all I could see was the white flash of her bare ankle before I could think to even shout out her name.

Our knees were once again touching and it was raining and we were aboard the night time train and I was watching as Jean stood suddenly, and began reaching into some matronly woman's handbag and I could see her holding a pair of great purple cat's eye glasses and working to hide them in her sleeve and then some man in a black suit stood up and pointed, saying, "Thief, stop, thief!" and Jean panicked and began to run but the train had not yet pulled into the station and the man, who was tall and handsome, was holding her arm behind her back, and someone else was shouting, and a police officer was blowing a whistle and I saw Jean was terrified and crying, the purple eyeglasses being trampled as she was tossed about, and I thought, *This is our heart, those glasses are all of our hearts, and broken but not yet useless altogether*, and I was terrified, and for the first time, not just afraid for myself or for my safety, or afraid of being left alone, or of having to travel on any farther on my own, but for her, for that face, for the face she was making, and so I rushed the man from behind, knocking him against the doors of the train, and as it arrived at the station, we hurried down the platform stairs and out into the street and were running hand in hand and it was then that I made up a special scenario, just for her, just for Jean: *If she bites her lip, or If she makes that clucking sound just once or If she pushes that one strand of hair behind her ear, yes, I will ask her to please kiss me.*



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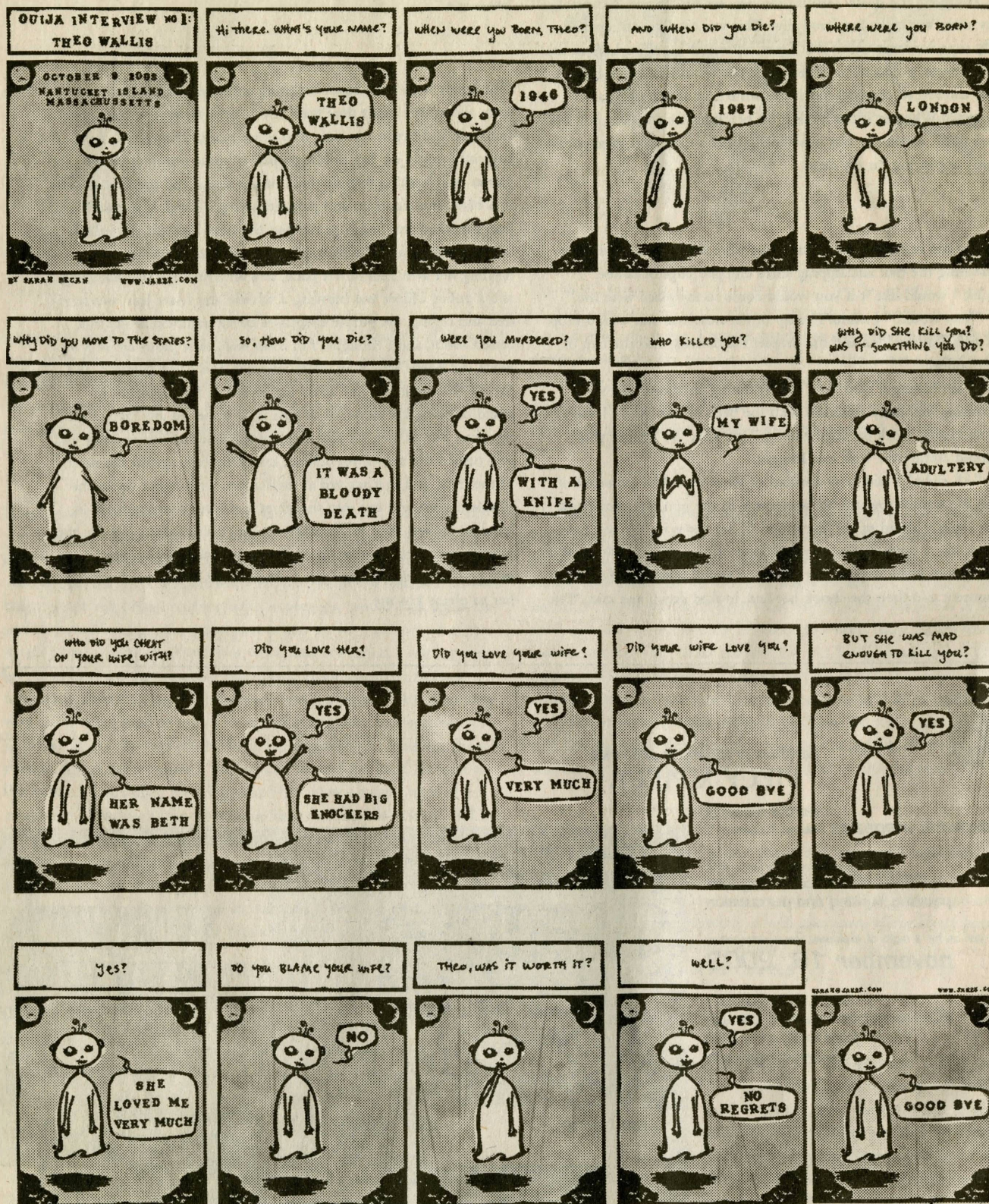
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teresa weed

joe dank

shawn reddy, stefan brun,
jenny magnus



interesting things

Watching my roommate surf the **ONION** personals for interesting people and reading the profile of a guy I dated five years ago who totally lied about everything, his job and height, the music he listened to, etc. Unless it's possible for someone to change so utterly and completely in five years. Is it, do you think? Possible for someone to change so much in five years?

A baby observing everybody, and everybody observing the baby. It was a little thing, with very bright blue-green eyes and olive skin, Pakistani, Middle Eastern, something, like the cover shot on National Geographic last month. So everyone's staring at the kid and the kid is staring at everyone, going around the room, and when he looked at me I felt suddenly uncomfortable, like a light was shining on my naked body.

Bryan had sprinkled this *Eat My Carpet* carpet cleaner all over everything 'cause the cat had peed somewhere, and my karate suit was on the bed and this shit was all over my karate suit. I put the thing on and it looked like I was covered in incense dust.

I was riding bike this morning at 5:30 a.m. through the silent, dark streets of Oak Park, thinking of a friend who will die this week of liver cancer and savoring the warm breeze against my skin that told me I was still alive. Watching my friend—a lively soul with a wife and a young daughter just beginning high school, a man who was a radical pastor in the Sixties and who loves all things political and poetic—waste away under the under the wall of pain that has risen up on his body, I have been hungry for life, even hungrier than usual, which is considerable. Reading a lot of poetry in addition to the normal run of fiction. Spending a lot of time talking with friends. Writing. Dancing. Sleeping little. Caught up again, as I once was and sometimes forget now, in staying awake, alert, centered. And so this morning, I was riding, as I have been most mornings, at top speed through the nearly pitch black, and as I turned a corner, I was greeted by a waning moon hanging just above the treetops. The shock nearly caused me to run into a parked car, which suddenly loomed out of the night, and I slowed to enjoy it. And I thought of three nights ago, when the moon, nearly full, had been hanging there, accompanied on its left side by a shimmering Mars. And then, two nights ago, when, suddenly, Mars had leaped to the moon's right side, as if by magic. And I thought that if the universe could spin around like that in one night, why should it be so hard to do a little thing like change your life, like stay awake instead of succumb to the distractions that blunt consciousness and lull you into somnolence? And this morning, I rode for another few minutes when, just as suddenly, just as magically, the darkness fled and light bloomed all around, as if a switch had been flipped in some cosmic power plant. By the time I rolled back toward home, the sun was rising, a perfectly defined, blood-red ball just above the Sears Tower, way down Madison. And I thought about how hard it is to look up in the city and how I had to remember to raise my eyes from the thousand-thousand distractions in the streets all day to find a moment of peace, a ray of hope, and one more strain of the tune that will set me dancing again in the face of death.

An old man with a long gray ponytail riding a little kid's bike.

Riding the bus to work, I read the word "shit" in Newsweek.

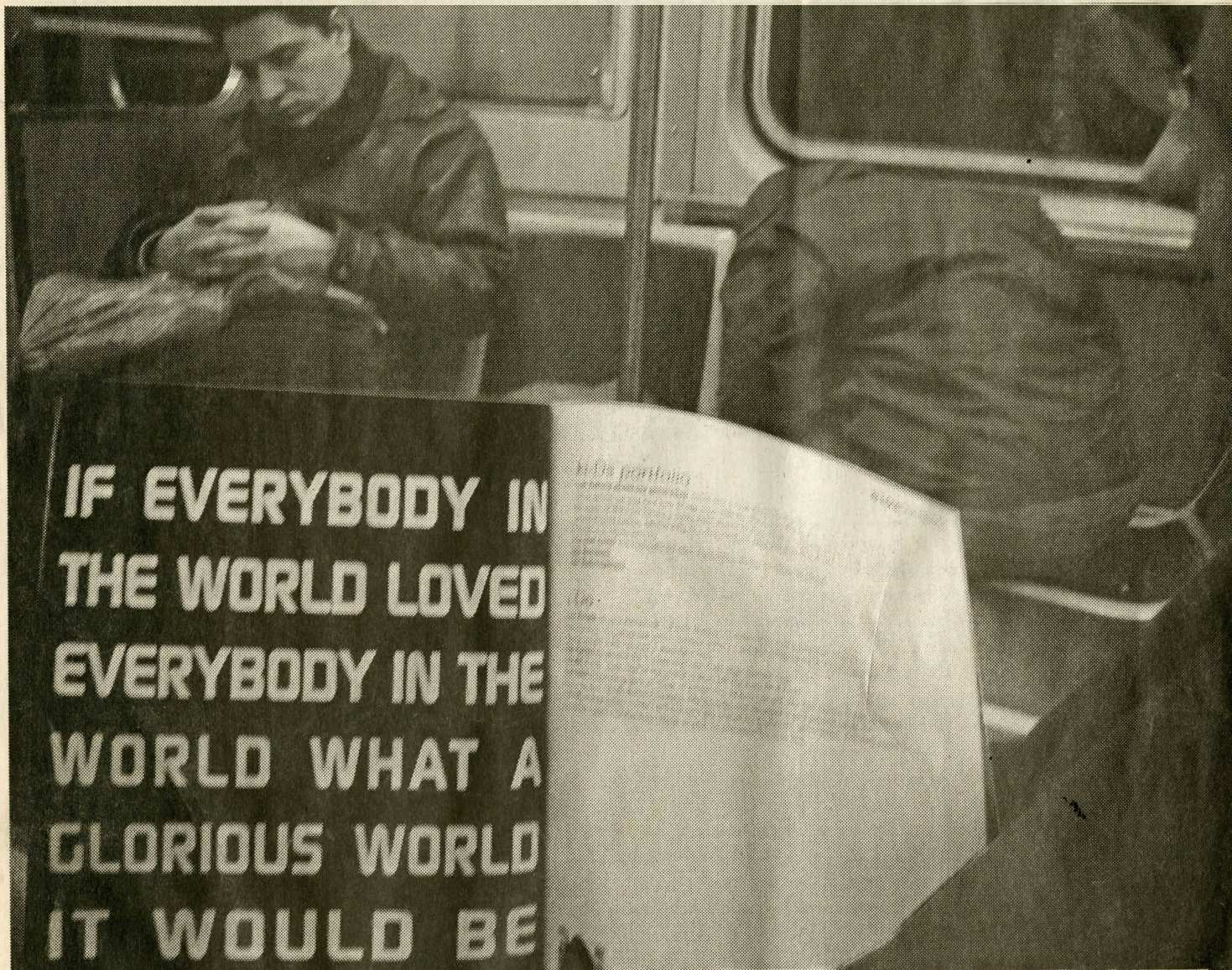
I woke up, hit the snooze, lay back down and for the next seven minutes, my brain just flowed with long verses of poetry, and it's been a loooooong time since that has happened.

I was walking down Damen in Wicker Park during rush hour, when I noticed this Mercedes slam on his brakes and pull over. I thought, 'what a dick', as he parked his car in front of a fire hydrant and partly blocking off a side-street. I kept walking, then realized he was chasing after me. He asked me where I bought my shoes. They are pretty fancy, red sandals, but I had to tell him that I bought them at a thrift store. He asked if he could buy them from me for whatever I would ask for! That made them seem even more valuable to me, so I declined. As I did, he raised his arm and spoke into his cell phone, "she said no".

My office is right next to the Francisco el stop and the tracks run on the street. As I was crossing the tracks to get a cup of coffee, I looked down and saw an egg nestled between two rails. It was not a chicken egg but about two or three times larger. Poking it gently I saw that it was cracked on the bottom but still heavy with child. What kind of egg was it and how did it get there?

A woman slapping her child on the train. I'm still wrestling in my brain if it was my place to do anything or not.

I should explain that I am a Case Manager for elderly in need. Today I visited a new client after receiving a referral made by the client's landlord. I will call her Phyllis. The condition of both Phyllis and her tiny apartment were nothing less than shocking. Phyllis is blind, about 95 pounds, and has no family or support system. Her apartment's appearance was not suitable habitation for even an animal, and she had only a couple rotten containers of food in her refrigerator. After several phone calls, it was determined that Phyllis would go to a retirement community. As I helped Phyllis out the door of her apartment that she would never visit again, she held my hand in both of hers and said, "your hands are so soft. Mine were this soft once."



IF EVERYBODY IN
THE WORLD LOVED
EVERYBODY IN THE
WORLD WHAT A
GLORIOUS WORLD
IT WOULD BE

STREET WORLD